
The Ethical Break: Marguerite Duras, Jorie Graham, and M. NourbeSe Philip

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Abstract: In addition to positing a historical, traumatic, and representational break relative to the end of World War II in Europe, this essay posits the idea of an ethical break concerning the abrogation of the right to life as figured in three texts: *La Douleur*, a memoir by Marguerite Duras; *Overlord*, lyrical poetry by Jorie Graham; and *Zong!*, a conceptual poem by M. NourbeSe Philip. Conceptually all four breaks converge synchronically as the instantiation of an event everyone has experienced as catastrophic, but diachronically history, trauma, representation, and ethics may not be recognized simultaneously, since it may take years for society to accept social trauma or ethical fault, not to mention finding adequate means of representing catastrophe, or accepting the verdicts of history and the changes they have required. The three literary works that concern a historical break inherently reveal both the simultaneity and asymmetry of ethics, representation, and trauma.

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In addressing the Zero Hour of the Nazi collapse in 1945, I have argued that one ought to be thinking in terms of three breaks: historical, traumatic, and representational (Rapaport). After the end of the Second World War, an Allied focus on war crimes enabled the imposition of a period of normalization that assumed a firm historical break with the past. Denazification in West Germany, for example, represented a repudiation of views and activities deemed unacceptable within the new social, political, and economic order the Allies had been trying to establish. This encouraged a strategic negating and forgetting of the immediate past in order that history “move forward” and not repeat itself. In *The Inability to Mourn* (1967) Margarete Mitscherlich observed that West Germany’s first priority following twelve years of dictatorship and terror was that of rebuilding a functioning economy and not a democratic state. Along with her husband, Alexander Mitscherlich, she held the view that in the postwar period, a majority of Germans, whether in the West or the East, were nationalistically self-centered and either unwilling or incapable of feeling guilt for the crimes of the National Socialists.

Of course, Germans, like so many others, experienced the historical break with National Socialism in physical terms, given the immense destruction and human suffering that had been experienced by the end of the war. Although psychological trauma was widespread, the historical acknowledgement of the traumatic sufferings of victims of persecution and war were not necessarily immediate, even in countries outside of Germany, given the exigencies of survival in the social-political collapse of nations. As Mitscherlich observed, West Germans quickly put their energy into economic rebuilding that by just 1950 would be called the *Wirtschaftswunder*, hence putting the collapse of the Third Reich behind them. In contrast the traumatic break experienced by Holocaust victims required events such as a series of public trials—from the Nuremberg Trials (1945-1946) to the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem (1961) and the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials (1963-1965)—to become publicly recognized and accepted on a wide scale. The term *Holocaust* itself wasn't even in use generally as a way of marking the horrors of the death camps until the 1960s. Various other traumatic events, such as the mass rape of German women in the aftermath of the war by Allied troops, took many years to become widely recognized, let alone viewed as having long-range psychological effects on the families these women had or would have through marriage. Evidently, the historical break, which was quite immediate as a material condition of general collapse that occurred at a specific moment in time, and the experience of a traumatic break did not fully coincide, given that the latter could be suppressed, either through denial or postponement, until a much later time when the realities of trauma could be recognized and treated by those willing to acknowledge them.

What I call the representational break concerns what Dominick La Capra in *Representing the Holocaust* (1994) has recognized as the aporia of recounting a history containing traumatic elements that, strictly speaking, cannot be adequately understood or figured. La Capra has argued that a strictly factual approach to recounting history leaves one with countless questions that the facts themselves cannot answer, given that the facts are the consequence of individual and collective human behavior requiring interpretation. In the case of Nazi Germany, those facts exceed comprehension in terms of an institutionalized irrationality and cruelty that enlisted the participation of ordinary Germans who, if left to themselves, would never have imagined persecuting the innocent. Klaus Theweleit has explored this aspect of German behavior in *Male Fantasies* (1987). Of course, analysts who try to represent the past—whether historians, psychologists, sociologists, or anyone else—will run into the aporia of the hermeneutic circle whereby the more true one is to the totality of historical interrelations, the less true one will be to the historical particulars that make up the whole, and vice versa. Representation, in that context, is inherently inadequate, just as a matter of hermeneutical accountability. As to coinciding with the Zero Hour of a historical break such as the demise of the Third Reich, representation also lags behind, given that historical accounts often require sufficient time for even crucial facts to surface. Of course, this is not to say that those who experienced the war and its end haven't carried forward mental representations of what happened, representations they could narrate even in great detail, as has been done for documentaries.

In addition to there being a historical, traumatic, and representational break, I am suggesting that one can also think in terms of there being an ethical break, by which I mean the perception of a divide or gap across which one has to reconsider and reevaluate the ethical underpinnings of the civilization in which one finds oneself. Events such as the Nuremberg Trials (a military tribunal conducted from

November 1945 to October 1946) and the United Nation's *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1946) were clearly attempts at resetting ethical and moral norms that over time were to have the effect of international law, but that, in the short run, were supposed to educate (or reeducate) various publics about what constituted civilized collective and individual behavior, to say nothing of taking responsibility for one's actions. America's hand in writing a Japanese Constitution in the aftermath of Japan's defeat served a similar purpose.

Of course, the difficulty in speaking of an ethical break concerns the fact that the West's reset was predicated on Enlightenment values regarding human rights. The break, therefore, refers to abrogation of Enlightenment values under the rise of fascism that went on long enough to establish a new transformative order throughout much of Europe. Ethics, we recall, concerns the regulation of human behavior directed toward others according to principles and rules deemed mutually beneficial and transcendentally good (hence talk of the theologico-political in this regard). Permission or what is permissible to do is central to such a definition and not surprisingly applies to human rights that in democratic societies are supposed to apply to all citizens equally. Nazism, of course, denied rights of citizenship and eventually even the right to life to what Hannah Arendt called people deemed to be "pariahs." It was especially the appalling abrogation of the "right to life" outside the conventions of war that struck the enemies of fascism as the manifestation of a catastrophic break with ethical values that had been associated with Western civilization, not that, as we will see, the West had ever consistently maintained the value of a "right to life" in its dealings with all peoples, particularly those outside the West.

In what follows, I will take up three disparate writers: the novelist, playwright, and filmmaker Marguerite Duras, the lyric poet Jorie Graham, and the conceptual poet M. NourbeSe Philip. Each represents an aspect of what I have called the ethical break. For Duras this break was lived contemporaneously with the events of the end of World War II, including the Zero Hour of Germany's collapse; as such, the break concerned a rupturing of personal ethical experience as chronicled in the text *La Douleur* (1985). Jorie Graham's *Overlord* (2005) is a gathering of poems that recollect D-Day by someone who could not have experienced it directly but who reconstructs scenes and experiences of the event both in terms of poetizing firsthand documentary accounts and by advancing autobiographical reflection. In *Overlord* the experience of decisive ethical breaks either before and after Liberation is eroded and effaced to some great extent. NourbeSe Philip's conceptual poem *Zong!* posits a major ethical break, concerning the West's suspensions of "the right to life," in the historical context of African slavery, an on-going activity of human exploitation and decimation over a period of hundreds of years. In terms of the Black Atlantic, this amounted to a historical break for the peoples who were exploited, but whether that obtained for Westerners, who like Mitscherlich's Germans couldn't feel guilt for what had happened, is less certain. *Zong!*, I am arguing, makes the case for not only an ethical break with human rights but a historical and representational break, as well.

Where the historical break is most viscerally immediate, of course, is in the story Duras tells in the first person about the return of Robert Anthelme, who was a political prisoner in the German concentration camp Dachau. Anthelme was Duras's husband. A French novelist, dramatist, and filmmaker, Duras herself had been in the French Resistance and witnessed the torturing of German captives with a certain pleasure. She thus provides, as it happens, a case study in the aporias of ethics

that occur across various breaks—mental, historical, cultural, criminal. In *La Douleur*, translated into English as *The War*, and recently made into a well-received film directed by Emmanuel Finkiel (2018), Duras revised her diary in which she records, with what Finkiel calls an “icy violence,” the anguish of figuring out whether Anthelme, whom she calls Robert L., was on various lists of returning death camp survivors. Duras obsessively imagines that he is either returning or has already been dead for two weeks, lying in a black ditch. He may have a bullet in the back of the neck, in the heart, between the eyes. His pale lips are pressed against the German earth,

And me still waiting because it's not quite certain, perhaps it'll take another second. Because it may be that he'll die from one second to the next, but that it hasn't happened yet. So second by second our life ebbs away too, every possibility vanishes; or equally well, life returns to us, every possibility revives. Perhaps he's in a column on the march, perhaps he's moving along one step at a time, head bowed, perhaps he won't take the next step. (Duras 35)

As Duras writes, “You can't call this thinking, everything's in a state of suspended animation. Madame Bordes [a neighbor] and I exist only in the present. We can think in terms of one more day to live. We can't think in terms of three more days” (34). This, then, is how the Zero Hour of liberation from the camps was experienced in Paris where Duras and others she knows are in a state where, as Duras puts it, “words don't connect with one another,” where time is riveted to the now, where “you'll have uttered every possible stupidity” (34).

Such a condition of existing in suspense is mentioned as well by Victor Klemperer, a German Jew, in *To the Bitter End*, his diary of February 1945 that chronicles his survival of the Dresden bombing with his wife Eva, whom he keeps losing and refinding in the firestorm that has forced them outside their “Judenkeller,” or so-called Jewish basement, where they have been living through numerous aerial attacks. Much like Duras, they have been living out their lives on the basis of wild rumors, among them of future deportations and reports of mass murder in Poland. By February 1945 everyone knows they are living in the end times and that their fate is unknowable. Once Klemperer and his wife flee into the crowd along the bank of the Elbe, they know he can remove his yellow star and blend in, that persecution is at an end, though their lives are still at every moment in danger. Klemperer, in fact, is fleeing with his diary on his person, the text in flight as a testimony to come in order to bear witness to events no one can believe even while they are occurring. Duras speaks to the unbelievability of events when she invokes the imperative that “we must think through what's happening,” despite not being able to, because even the smallest day to day events often do not connect. The truth, Duras says, is the here and now, but how is that to be thought? For Klemperer, record keeping is the imperative. The here and now has to be told faithfully. Thought comes later. Thought is for academicians in comfortable seminar settings.

As for Robert L., he will return, but only because the resistance fighter known as Morland—real name, François Mitterand—has driven to Dachau with an accomplice (a certain man Duras only calls “D” [Dionys Mascolo]) in a Citroën where he finds Robert L. in the forbidden section of the camp, where inmates are left to die by American soldiers wearing gas masks in the guard houses for fear of infection by typhus. This speaks to an ethics of human rights that impels people to act or, more

precisely, react. Resistance, after all, is a reaction. Anthelme, a French political prisoner, was sent to Dachau not only because he reacted to fascism by opposing it, but because the Germans reacted to his reaction. Duras's diary is characteristically reactive, as well, something that characterizes all of her literary writings, given that they are all predicated on not being able to bear one's existence such as it is socially and politically determined by the world in which one lives.

The recounting of Robert L.'s return is an ethical reaction to the appalling history of France's defeat and occupation, to say nothing of how she considers the Germans. "Today . . . I must buy a paper. Another photograph of Belsen, a long pit with rows of corpses in it, bodies thinner than anyone has ever seen before" (Duras 30). This is but one among a myriad of facts the French public is told about *The War* just before Berlin falls. "We shall never forgive," Duras writes. But what does that reaction mean in the midst of a situation in which "fifty bombers take off every minute. Here they're busy with local elections. And with repatriating prisoners of war" (32). And what about living in the midst of hectoring rumors, talk of authorities commandeering civilian cars and apartments, or of hearing about the progress of the war as rumor and speculation. In that sense, the war is what one can or can't imagine. Speaking of Robert L.:

Another period of torture begins. Germany is in flames. He's inside Germany. It's not quite certain. Not quite. But you can say this: if he hasn't been shot, if he stayed in the column, he's inside the conflagration that is Germany. (42)

All of these reports drive people to react, sometimes inexplicably. "D. is playing the piano. He has always played the piano, whatever happened" (32).

In the aftermath of war, Duras writes, "peace is visible already. It's like a great darkness falling, it's the beginning of forgetting" (47). Peace, in that sense, isn't reactive. It isn't a good thing in a historico-ethical sense, if instead coming to terms with the grotesque injustices of the immediate past, society immediately turns the page of history as if the rows of corpses at Belsen had no ethical significance. Here again Margarete Mitscherlich's point about an inability for society to mourn becomes apposite.

Robert L., as it happens, is not forgotten. "They wrapped him up in a sheet, as people wrap up a dead body, and took him out of the prohibited part of the camp, and laid him down by a hut in the survivor's part. . . . They were able to do so because there were no American soldiers around. They were all in the guardroom, scared of the typhus" (51). This, then, is the heroic rescue Duras narrates in which the Americans are cowards in comparison with the French. But is this fantasy or reality? Could French resistance fighters after the war drive to the north of Munich, where Dachau is located, and collect their comrades who had been left for dead? Was hell harrowed in this way? If Duras hasn't forgotten Robert L., has she remembered his return without fictionalizing something about it?

Robert L. returns but he is unrecognizable. To Duras he is less a husband than a total stranger. She says that looking at him is like looking at someone at the other end of a tunnel. He is too weak to eat, but in danger of starving in the absence of food. He has to be under a doctor's care, therefore. Nursing Robert L. to health takes over a year and Duras goes into great detail about not only what goes in the survivor's mouth but of the horror of what he excretes. "For [the first] seventeen days the shit looked

the same. It was inhuman. It separated him from us more than the fever, the thinness, the nailless fingers, the marks of the SS blows. We gave him gruel” (58). Robert L. learns of the death of his sister, Marie Louise L., who was evacuated from Ravensbrück to Copenhagen only to die there. Duras is horrified by not only of what she has learned about German inhumanity, but by Robert L.’s response, which is characterized by silence. Can one have a relationship with this silence? Duras asks.

The day will come when Robert L. regains his strength, a day when Duras will inform him that, despite what has happened, she wants a divorce. “Another day I told him we had to get a divorce, that I wanted a child by D., that it was because of the name the child would bear. He asked if one day we might get together again. I said no, that I hadn’t changed my mind since two years ago, since I’d met D.” (63). What we witness is that Robert L. survives the camp, but the marriage doesn’t survive his return. The excuse Duras gives is shockingly banal. I fell in love with someone else, she says. That too is a sort of Zero Hour in which everything is suspended, conflicted, undetermined. Duras doesn’t ask whether for Anthelme this is experienced as a betrayal—as something *unethical*. Having made up her mind to distance herself, Duras writes, incongruously,

At the name Robert L., I weep. I still weep. I shall weep all my life. Ginetta apologizes and is silent. Every day she thinks I’m going to be able to talk about him, and still I can’t. But that day I tell her I think I shall be able to one day. And that I’ve already written something about that return. Tried to say something about that love. That it was then, by his deathbed, that I knew him, Robert L., best, that I understood forever what made him himself, himself alone and nothing and no one else in the world. (67)

These remarks, of course, speak to being-with, or (if one prefers) living with. *La Douleur* is about living with or within the ruins of a collapse of civilization, a collapse that Robert L. embodies and through which Duras understands what made Robert L. himself. This is the understanding of something both very particular but also universal that in Derridean parlance is called *survivance*, a living beyond that is a living over. Duras’s story is also that of a posthumous passion: the raging passion for someone who has both died and survived, someone whom one accompanies in the aftermath of a life together in the world of the living, a life in which one’s existence is taken for granted as the precondition for doing all the things ordinary people do: make money, have children, go on vacation, and so on. Sitting on a beach in Italy, Duras says of Robert L. who is sitting next to her. “We still can’t hear him. It’s in that silence that the war’s still there, flowing across the sand and through the wind” (67). Robert L. is there, but as an absence within which the war rages on.

If in Duras’s view Robert L. is a posthumous being, one who lives on despite being someone whose life in France was as much terminated as interrupted, the two being undecidably related, Duras to the contrary is looking ahead, putting the war behind her, breaking with the past. The desire to be with Robert L. is that of an ethical commitment to some form of reparative justice, of a duty to make things right, at least as much as possible. The repatriation of Robert L. has a general political motive, which is to reassert France’s honor as a nation by welcoming him back as a son of France; however, specifically political is the repudiation of Gen. Charles De Gaulle, who “has declared a day of national mourning for the death of Roosevelt. No national mourning for the dead deportees” (34). *La Douleur*,

in that sense, is a reaction to and protest of the government that could so quickly move on and forget that “those strangely identical skeletons [at Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald] belong to one European family” (47).

By way of a dissonant juxtaposition, in terms of national literary histories, genre, and world historical subject positioning, I turn now to *Overlord* by poet Jorie Graham, since it is written at a distance from World War II by someone who could not have experienced it. *Overlord* lacks the passionate immediacy of *La Douleur* and reads at times like a film script by Ken Burns, given that in certain sections Graham attempts to poetize first-person witness accounts of D-Day, something that presupposes the necessity of doing archival documentary research in order to recreate historical events as they were experienced and later recounted. Characteristic of *Overlord* is that Graham does not attempt to become the figures she cites: she does not attempt to recreate a historical person’s subjectivity and act it out the way authors of the historical novel typically do. Instead, she operationalizes what in the epic tradition is known as elevated language, in which the diction rises above ordinary language, for example, by way of incantation: “of the missing limbs, the missing, the starlings, the prayers, the individual secrets. . . .” (11). These lines conclude the poem “Praying (attempt of June 8, 03).” One has to ask: What sort of historical distance is required for praying to be a meaningful reaction? Duras, for example, is not praying for Robert L. or for the dead in general, because she is undergoing so much shock and outrage. Religion, in her day-to-day historical context, makes no sense. That aside, prayer requires mindfulness, and in the midst of a terrifying war that lasts for years, it is quite impossible to be mindful and reflective as opposed to, say, anxious, frightened, and morally outraged.

Graham’s work is known for what has been called an ecstatic and irregular form that was derived from Gerard Manley Hopkins’s long lines with their outrides and sprung rhythms. Her poetry is notable for being one of excess in which the lines push beyond the breath and performatively create a sense of dissolution or erosion of meaning. Helen Vendler has noticed a propensity for “deliberative investigation” in Graham that leads to points of suspension and intellectual unintelligibility (309). In fact, *Overlord* subsumes these characteristics within lengthy eyewitness accounts that enumerate punctual observations and stimuli that, at times, break with the longish style of Hopkins. “Crates of grenades. / Yet the weather over the Channel very good” (Graham 37). Such telegraphic statements convey the sense that history exists within a timeframe of the immediate or now. “Equipment tears into bodies” (38).

Such presentism of the now that was June 6, 1944 merges into quotidian postwar experiences and events retrieved or imagined by the poet that are retroactively put into correspondence with D-Day, though the relationships are obscure enough to require footnotes. Does this efface any sense of there being a break or Zero Hour? In “Disenchantment (Gerhard Richter),” Graham quotes Michael Kimmelman’s “The Enigma: An Artist Beyond Isms,” an essay published in the *New York Times Magazine*, as well as lines from Goethe’s *Faust*, and mentions that the poem was commissioned by the San Francisco Art Museum for a book on Gerhard Richter (fig.1). Of course, what is the connection of “Disenchantment” with D-Day, given that it actually references the Baader/Meinhof group of the later 1970s? “You can look for instance in [Gudrun] Ensslin’s corpse, at [Andreas] Baader’s bookshelves” (Graham 43). Are Richter’s well-known historical paintings of the Baader/Meinhof group and

DISENCHANTMENT

(Gerhard Richter)

*

How one wants to be other than "being." How one wants to be a kind of
 flagellation—a
 genuine hearing—listen—that whisper, that whistling "over there"—are we just in time?
 So blank. So open to the brushwork of
 the given.
 That it spill its strokes onto us—build itself upon us—holy garment—"a life".
 Is it all coming nearer? Are we ripening?
 Is this, finally, the hoped-for undrowning of the self—a final "yes"—awash in childhood
 (whizzing past),
 and silence [so intense] and us no wiser for it,
 and the new feeling of *the thing* inside one—
 flooded with duration—sort of silvery...
 Then it was time to go to the opening.
 That was the end of the first day.

*

"I want this to be seen—listen to me—always—as a narrative—
 even if it is a narrative of nothingness—nothing is something—you might
 say, no?—
 as you might say these are photographs of nothing."
 You can look for instance in Ensslin's corpse,
 at Baader's bookshelves, the ones in prison,
 or the phonograph in which Baader was said to have hidden the gun
 with which he killed himself—here: Meins surrendering

[43]

Fig. 1 Jorie Graham, *Overlord*, reproduction of p. 43.

Graham's depiction of D-Day parallel endeavors? Mention is made of Richter's father who joined "the Party," fought with the Wehrmacht, was captured by American forces, and so on. However, Graham's "Disenchantment" mainly has the function of metacritique, of the poet assuming the identity of the painter as fellow traveler, artistically speaking. Does this not efface rather than expose the historical break that was 1945?

A contemporary contrast with *Overlord* that operationalizes confession quite differently is *Zong!* by NourbeSe Philip, a book-length poem that has become a much better known example of poetic historical reconstruction. Archival research is also central to *Zong!*, which appropriates the discourses of whites who participated in murdering enslaved people on board the *Zong!*, a slave ship from Africa to the New World that suffered damage en route and that happened to have been insured. A hundred and fifty captives were thrown overboard in order to collect the insurance monies that, at the end of a court trial, were not awarded. The text itself is a creative reworking of the British court testimony, a dismantling of its sentences whose words are disseminated across the poem's many pages.

Both *Overlord* and *Zong!* can be read as protests: as ethical reactions to what has happened in the historical past by writers who were not direct witnesses. *Overlord* recalls the past in terms of life in the present—the poet's life—and as such deemphasizes a Zero Hour, despite its having been culturally experienced as a major rupture. *Zong!* inversely tries to produce a sense of historical rupture. In *Zong!* emphasis falls on a traumatic break that occurred historically as part of a continuous slave trade that from its inception practiced the exception to “the right to life,” an exception that marks the sustaining of an ethical break over considerable historical time. This recalls what Fred Moten has plurisignatiously called “the break,” by which he has meant a cut that is an-archic—metaphorically, the cut John Coltrane made with Elvin Jones and others called *Ascension* in which there is nothing to break with at the same time that everything is breaking up *in the break*. In this context, the break is not merely a separation from but an existential condition of the an-archic as violence, disorientation, dissemination, catastrophe (a word Moten often uses), but it is also fusion, commingling, combining, improvising, and so on. In that sense an ethical break is not just an abrogation of humane behavior but something an-archically experienced as a deconstitution of what subtends ethics: the difference between the human and the inhuman. *Zong!* aspires to perform a break, not so much unlike what Moten discusses, in which language as a *human* discourse (what Ferdinand de Saussure called *parole* or speech) literally becomes concretized as thingly part-objects that have been ejected out of continuous speech conducted by addressers and addressees.

Zong! is a concrete or conceptual poem in which the meaning of the signifier is constituted largely in terms how it appears within an overall visual structure made up of other signifiers whose relation to one another floats an-archically within an ethical break with the right to life (fig. 2). Mimetically, the visual design of the pages metaphorizes both the sea and drowning, just as the splitting up and isolation of words metaphorizes suffocation. *Overlord*, by contrast, emphasizes the lyrical addresser or voice and preserves long lines and recognizable stanzaic forms while, at the same time, introducing linguistic break-up and its effects of communicative attenuation. *Overlord*, in that sense, is more conventional, though it has the advantage of operating on different discursive registers, among them, an interplay of voices as well as the presentation of the poet as historian or detached observer, on the one hand, and meditative consciousness, on the other. *Zong!*, for its part, performs an event buried in the annals of history that had been largely overlooked or forgotten and whose recovery has had to occur indirectly through the words of perpetrators that are the historical traces of a catastrophe. The slaves in *Zong!* have no voice, no presence other than the report of their extermination, not that Philip doesn't attempt to simulate or recover those voices.

Not to be overlooked is that testimony is very relevant to *Zong!* In fact, the poem is said to be



Fig. 2 M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*, reproduction of p. 61.

“as told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng.” In a seminar on testimony and secrecy given in the early 1990s, called *Répondre du secret* (1991-1993), Jacques Derrida, whom NourbeSe Philip acknowledges, began with the observation that in testimony something secret is always held back, whether on purpose or not. Testimony and the secret are not dissociable. The secret is not simply about content, but about response, the act of refusing to say everything about what is asked, either because someone does not want to say everything or because there are things that must not or cannot be said (remembered, accounted for, logically extrapolated, admitted, and so on). In testifying, Derrida notes, something is always held back in the sense that speaking “the whole truth” is an impossibility, since there is no formal communicative means whereby *everything* can be said comprehensibly. Something, therefore, will always have to be left out simply as a matter of selection, order, logic, and so on. Then,

too, there is the matter of keeping something to the side, in reserve, either because it cannot be recalled, cannot be put into words, or must not be shared for whatever personal reasons. From the addressee's point of view, the logocentric imperative of the whole truth is impossible, if only because in terms of questioning there is no end to the truth's completion, given that there is always the sense of there always being something more that can be admitted to or said. This is a matter of the "not all" that stalks testimony as always already deficient, as inherently incomplete no matter how much has been said.

The sense that there is always "something more" to be said is structurally a part of testimony. It is this "something more" that offers literature the attempt to fill in the unsaid retroactively, stepping in to animate and represent the "not all" as absent-something-to-be-said, represented, confessed, spoken out loud. As "not all," therefore, the undisclosed is an opening or offering that enables the possibility of a promise or hope that one day something more can or will be said, hence expunging the secret in bringing what it hides to light even if it cannot account for the all or everything in terms of the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Literature, in fact, even recognizes the fallacious logocentricism of telling the whole truth given that it is a fiction, a representation that doesn't correlate to an absolute truth, but imagines "what could have been said" or "what is still to come" of what must be said. Moreover, in literature, as in the case of testimony, if everything has been said, it is only "for now" (for this moment, this occasion, this sitting) that it has been said, meaning that later there will always be yet more to be said. Derrida reminds us that every psychoanalysis proceeds on the basis of the assumption that "for now" what is disclosed may be enough, even more than enough, though by no means exhaustive in its revelations.

Is *Zong!* a text that has said everything "for now," for this moment, this occasion, this sitting, this audience (whatever and wherever it might be)? Does it not present us with considerable instances of gaps that presuppose that later there will always be yet more to be said, that there will never be enough that can be said about this incident and its historical significance? As literature does *Zong!* not imagine what could have been said and what must be said at the same time that it recognizes what cannot be said and will never be said? And are these not inherently ethical questions? Certainly, *Zong!*'s considerable length suggests to us that "for now" this representation by way of a concrete or conceptual poem "is enough," by which is meant enough until others discuss and interpret the text.

Graham also accepts the "not all" that inheres in testimony, though in *Overlord* the eyewitness accounts are selectively intended to give us a sense of the whole. Her poetic technique is the classical one of metonymy, of sampling "representative" accounts with the proviso that they will have to serve as "enough for now." The same can be said for her omniscient narration, that by way of editorializing it advances confidence in what Jacques Lacan called "the subject who is supposed to know," someone who knows enough to play master of historical ceremonies: the producer of a sort of theater in which the testimony of characters emerge and disappear within shifting scenes that are framed by the documentary truth of omniscient historical narration informed by an ethical imperative. That, of course, is a risky tactic in an age where the modernist preference for mimesis (showing) over diegesis (telling) obtains. Commentary, however, helps to subordinate and coordinate the parts, to gather the bits together by making sense in the form of truth claims, conceptual propositions, and metaphysical explanations in the name of revealing truths. Indeed, even in *Zong!* the author provides a lengthy historical editorialized commentary in an appendix in order to disclose something of "the whole truth"

of what happened at sea. “The poems,” Philip writes, “resist my attempts at meaning or coherence and, at times, I too approach the irrationality and confusion, if not madness (madness is outside the box of order), of a system that could enable, encourage even, a man to drown 150 people as a way to maximize profits...” (195).

Of course, Philip’s putting her editorial comment *hors texte*, as the deconstructionists might say, may speak volumes about what is and isn’t proper to literature in the eyes of the author. However, both within the poem and out of it, Philip is keen on establishing that the story of the Zong represents the kind of historical break that Thucydides noted in *The Peloponnesian War* when the Athenians overreached and mass murdered the Melians. Such a break concerns an ethical understanding of history, both in antiquity and today about the right to life. Graham, by contrast, appears to be quite interested in eroding the historical break of 1945 even as she includes witness accounts of D-Day that factor into *Overlord*’s prayers, which of course are ethically motivated. Finally, Duras revises her diaries in order to relive the ethical outrages she experienced in the spring of 1945 as a reality when a world at war seemed to have stopped. In these three authors, we have seen three decidedly different approaches to there being not only a historical break and its ethical significance, but matters pertaining to trauma and representation, as well.

Can the ethical be disentangled from history, trauma, and representation? I suggest in closing that they are strands of a topological knot akin to those Lacan used to discuss at great length (Lacan 23), wherein each strand is the intermediary of the other. But what happens once a cut is introduced? In such a case, our knowledge is no longer supported by the knot’s continuity. One can no longer expect to find explanations of why something is the case, given that elucidation requires each term to be read through each of the others as a matter of consistency and continuity. That, of course, speaks to a synchronic axis—of multiple terms for meaning.

In terms of a diachronic axis, there is no reason to insist that all four terms should coincide *at the same moment*. In fact, they arrive, if one can put it this way, at different times. Consider the belatedness of *Zong!* As a representation of history it arrives very late—in the twenty-first century—and trauma, in that case, has to be reimagined and reconstructed compositionally, as strictly speaking it is inaccessible and remains secret. The ethical break with right to life is also taken in after the fact of its historical enactment by a society that didn’t reserve the right to life for everyone equally.

In *La Douleur* history, ethics, trauma, and representation converge far more synchronically, though there too the text arrives forty years late as a representation laced with fictional elements and an alignment with works written in the 1950s and after in which a woman obsessively focuses her attentions on a man. As Francine Du Plessix Gray has concisely written,

[Duras’s] central theme is that the power of our obsessions vastly supersedes our fidelity to the remembered object of our obsessions. Duras’s characteristic heroine is driven to neurosis by her obsessive memory of a lost love (usually a feckless, inconsequential man) who might return to offer her some form of liberation, and for whom she is willing to wait indefinitely. One recalls “Hiroshima Mon Amour,” “The Ravishing of Lol Stein,” “Ten-Thirty on a Summer Night,” “Moderato Cantabile,” “The Sailor From Gibraltar” and “The Lover....” [Duras’s] women identify so totally with the male object of their obsessions that their loyalty is ultimately a form of fidelity to the self.

That *La Douleur* fulfills this *idée fixe* suggests that the memoir is the depiction of a passion that orchestrates how we are to experience history, trauma, ethics, and representation *as if* they coincided within someone's obsessive fidelity.

In *Overlord*, the disparities of everyday experience mediate how history, trauma, ethics, and representations are gathered and put into juxtaposition in a manner somewhat reminiscent of collage or assemblage. Graham moves back and forth among a great diversity of materials that ultimately concern her as a self-conscious subject who is attempting to mentally process—that is, represent—history, trauma, and ethics not as a unity but more as a disunified field in which elements, some historical, others ethical and so on, come into temporary relation. Depicting a conversation about the identification of fallen American soldiers, Graham writes with a nod to the circumstantial contingency of moral awareness: “Where there are teeth too it is good— / we will be able to notify the family” (13). In such cases, the ethical is thrown in for good measure by someone who is callously doing his job, its convergence with history being almost accidental. Of course, this is just a very small detail, but it could well point to the possibility of reading *Overlord* as performing the an-archic in Moten's sense of disorientatedness and the improvisatory in which contingency and accident are perforating the strictures of necessity. Contrary to what has been claimed above, one would now have to reconsider the whole of *Overlord* as “in the break,” appearances and evidence to the contrary. From a Lacanian perspective one would claim it is this paradox of eliding the break while being caught up in it that constitutes the knot that supports the kind of thinking Lacan called “the writing of the Ego,” wherein the Ego disappears as the price for being entitled to sign its manuscripts.

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