Hope and Memory

LESSONS FROM THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

By Tzvetan Todorov

Translated by David Bellos

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

AFP	Agence France-Presse
Cheka	Soviet political police, 1917–1922 (later, GPU, 1922–1934)
CNRS	Centre national de la recherche scientifique (French Science Research Council)
EU	European Union
FLN	Front de libération nationale (Algerian National Independence movement, 1954–62)
FN	Front national (French extreme right-wing party)
GIA	Groupe islamique armée (Algerian terrorist group)
FYROM	Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia
Gestapo	Geheime Staatspolizei (German political police, 1933–45)
gulag	Glavnoye Upravlenie Lagerey (Soviet labor camp organization)
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICTY	International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia
KGB	Soviet political police, 1953–91
KLA	Kosovo Liberation Army
MSF	Médecins sans frontières
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	nongovernmental organization
NKVD	People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, incorporating the political police, 1934–1953
NSDAP	Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (Nazi Party)
OAS	Organisation de l'armée secrète (French settler terrorist group, Algeria 1958–60s)
OAU	Organization of African Unity
OCSE	Organization for Co-operation and Security in Europe
PCF	Parti communiste français (French Communist Party)
POW	prisoner of war
RPF	Rwandan Patriotic Front
SS	Schutzstaffel (Nazi military police)

mation was given high priority by Nazis and Communists, their enemies put immense effort into countering it. Spreading awareness and understanding of totalitarianism and, in particular, of its worst excess, the camp system, was, in the first place, the inmates' only survival mechanism. But that was not all: telling the world about the camps was the best means of combating them, and it was worth making sacrifices to achieve this end. That is no doubt why forced laborers in Siberia cut off their own fingers and tied them to the logs that were floated down-river: gruesome bottles cast in the sea, these messages told whomever found them by what sort of worker the log had been felled. Information that leaked out did save lives. One of the reasons why the deportations of Hungarian Jews were stopped in summer 1944 was because Vrba and Wetzler had managed to escape from Auschwitz and to pass on a message about what was going on there. Obviously, actions of this kind were extremely dangerous. Anatolii Marchenko, who had done time in the gulag, managed to publish his testimony, but it earned him a new sentence, and he ended up dying in detention.

In this context it is easy to understand why memory has acquired an aura of prestige among the enemies of totalitarianism, why even the humblest act of recollection has been assimilated to antitotalitarian resistance. (Before it was appropriated by an anti-Semitic organization, the Russian word *pamyat'*, "memory," was used as the series title for a remarkable samizdat collection when recollection of the past still counted as an act of opposition against the authorities.) Free access to the past unfettered by centralized control is one of the fundamental, inalienable freedoms of democratic countries, alongside freedom of expression and freedom of thought. It is particularly useful for the darkest episodes in those countries' own history. For instance, there is perhaps no fully adequate account of France's colonial history, but in principle no obstacle stands in the way of such an account being written. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the role of Vichy was certainly presented in an attenuated and prettified manner, but nowadays the study and analysis of that period can be conducted without any political opposition. By the same token, research on the past history of totalitarian regimes is also unconstrained. Nazi crimes are amongst the best-documented facts in the history of the twentieth century. The offenses

committed under Communist regimes are less prominent in collective memory, but they can hardly be said to be unknown, as they were in the years after 1945. The *Black Book of Communism*, edited by Stéphane Courtois, was a bestseller in several European countries.

All the same, the status of memory in democratic societies does not seem to be guaranteed for all time. Perhaps because of the standing of some talented writers having lived under totalitarian regimes, the valuation of memory (together with its corollary, an attack on forgetting) has been applied in recent years far beyond its original context. We often hear the liberal democracies of Western Europe and North America reproached for aiding and abetting the decline of memory and installing a reign of forgetting. As we drown in an ever growing flood of information, we are accused of being destined to evacuate it at the same speed. We have been cut off from our traditions, such critics say; we have been dumbed down by the leisure society; we have lost our spiritual curiosity and no longer know the great works of the past; and so we are condemned to the vain pleasures of the instant and to the crime of forgetting. By this argument, democratic states would be leading people along the same path as totalitarian ones—less roughly, to be sure, but actually more effectively, because their techniques provoke no resistance and make us all consenting participants in the long march to obliviousness.

When applied in such broad and general terms, however, unconditional support of memory and the ritual disparagement of forgetting themselves become problematic positions. The emotional charge of everything related to the totalitarian past is huge, and people who are subject to it mistrust all attempts at clarification, all calls for analysis prior to the making of judgments. But the stakes of memory are too high for us to allow them to be dictated by enthusiasm or anger. We must begin by acknowledging the main features of a complex field—the ways in which the past lives on in the present.

The Three Stages

Past events leave two kinds of trace: "mnesic" traces in people's minds; and material ones in the outside world, such as a foot-

print, a vestige, a letter or a decree (for words are also facts). These kinds of traces have much in common with each other. First, they are only small parts of past events, the remainder having been lost forever; second, they are usually not voluntary traces but the result of chance events or of unconscious drives. For most historical traces, no one decided that they should survive—the great exceptions being, of course, those ancient and modern tyrants who tried to preselect what would survive them. The eruption of Vesuvius killed all living things in some of the towns and villages close to the volcano, but by the same token it preserved them under ash for all eternity; it spared other nearby towns, which as a result have been entirely lost to memory. It is the same at the individual level; whether we like it or not, we can't choose what to forget or to remember. Some memories we would rather be without, but they come back to haunt us night after night. The Greeks were well aware that memory could not be tamed by the will; according to Cicero, Themistocles, who was famous for his powers of recall, complained: "Nam memini etiam quae nolo, oblivisci non possum quae volo" (I remember even what I do not want to remember, and I cannot forget what I wish to forget; quoted in Weinrich, 25).

But if we want to make the past live on in the present, we have to work through three stages. In practice these three levels of memory-work overlap and may occur in any order; I lay them out as stages for the sake of clarity.

Establishing the Facts

Everything has to rely on this groundwork, without which we cannot even really talk about working on the past. Before asking any other questions we need to know: where did Captain Dreyfus's famous "slip" come from? And was Dreyfus a traitor or not? Was it the Germans or the Russians who gave the order to shoot in Katyn forest? Were the gas chambers of Auschwitz intended for men or for lice? This is where we must draw the line between historians and frauds. It's just the same in daily life: we have to make discriminations between reliable witnesses and mythomaniacs. In the private as in the public sphere, lies, misrepresentations, and pure fictions have to be mercilessly rooted out if

we really wish to resurrect the past and not just confirm our own prejudices.

Seeking out the past does not automatically make it alive in the present. Only a few mental and material traces of what was are available to us; a process of selection, over which we have no control, has already occurred between the facts of the past and the traces they have left. But now there has to be a second selection procedure, which is conscious and voluntary: we have to choose which of the surviving traces of the past to use, which of them we judge, for one reason or another, to be worthy of perpetuation. As we make such choices, we also discriminate between traces and rank them in terms of their importance: some will seem central and others only marginal to the work of memory.

In some cases the recovery of the past may be halted at this stage. An outstanding example of this kind of memory can be seen in Serge Klarsfeld's *Memorial of the Deportation*. Nazi executioners wanted to annihilate their victims without leaving any trace: with moving simplicity, the *Memorial* lists the names of all French Jewish deportees together with their place and date of birth, and the date of their departure to the extermination camps. In this way Klarsfeld restores human dignity to the dead. Life lost out to death, but memory has won a victory here in its battle against oblivion. A monument of like kind was the publication in 1997 of documents relating to the so-called Katyn massacre, when all Polish POWs of officer rank were shot without trial in 1940 (Pikhoia and Geishtor, *Katyn*). Promoted by Aleksandr Yakovlev, the former aide to Mikhail Gorbachev, the Katyn volume establishes the facts, independently of all questions concerning the ultimate meaning of the event or the use that was made of it. Establishing the facts is a worthy end in itself.

As we have seen, in democracies no constraint should be placed on this first phase of working on the past. There should be no higher authority in the state that can say, you don't have the right to look for the truth on your own, or, people who don't accept the official version of the past will be punished. Autonomy of judgment is the very lifeblood of democracy: individuals and groups have a right to knowledge, and consequently a right to know their own history and to make it known to others, and the state has no business forbidding or permitting such actions. But

when individuals or groups have experienced extreme or tragic events, their right is also a duty—the duty of remembering and bearing witness.

A minor consequence of this requirement is that it is wrong to legislate on the facts of history. Even though it was passed with the best of intentions, the recent French law making Holocaust denial an offense is inappropriate. Existing legislation allows charges of libel and of incitement to racial hatred to be brought to protect individuals affected by negationist nonsense; but lawcourts are not the right places to establish historical facts, however grave.

Construction of Meaning

The difference between the first and second stages in the appropriation of the past is the same as the distinction between constituting an archive and writing history in the proper sense. In working with the past, construction of meaning has to follow the establishment of the facts. Facts, once known, have to be interpreted—they have to be fitted together, strung out along the line of cause and effect, compared with each other, distinguished from each other, and set against each other. Selection and combination are once again the primary tools. But the criteria by which we judge the writing of history are different from those that apply to the first stage of factual research. Facts are subject to the test of truthfulness (did these things take place?), and the results of the test sort historians from charlatans, and testimony from eyewash. But a different kind of distinction is needed to separate good historians from bad ones, outstanding witnesses from mediocre ones. "Truth" remains a relevant concept but with a rather different meaning. In establishing facts, we use "truth" to mean *equivalence* or *correspondence* between an assertion and the thing that happened ("4,400 Polish officers shot by NKVD troops in Katyn forest in 1940"). But in judging a work of history, we use "truth" to signify the power to unveil the underlying meaning of an event. A great work of history does not just give us reliable information; it also teaches us about the workings of human psychology and social life. Obviously, these two kinds of truth are not opposite but complementary.

This second kind of truth cannot be measured like the first. Facts can be right or wrong, but meanings are constructed by the writing subject and may change. A given interpretation may be untenable, that is, it may be refuted, but there is no absolute degree of truthfulness at the other end of the scale. Deciding whether Stalin was a genius, or a tyrant, or a warped mind is not like finding out a fact. A brilliant interpretation may be superseded some day by an even more brilliant one; no impersonal yardstick can measure the "brilliance" of any given historical interpretation. Historians are really in the same boat as novelists and poets: the only real proof that they have unveiled a deeper level of underlying meaning is their success in persuading their readers that they have done so—and that may happen in their own immediate circles or in far distant ones, it may happen in their own time or many years later. The ultimate criterion of "unveiled" truthfulness is intersubjective, not referential. All the same, the absence of absolute truth in the domain of meaning does not mean that any interpretation is as good as any other.

The construction of meaning aims to understand the past; and the wish to understand—to understand the past as well as the present—is a defining characteristic of humanity. What allows us to say it is a species-specific trait? Unlike all other animals, humans have self-awareness; that means that they are constitutionally double, since there is always a part of the human mind that is reflecting on the rest of it and thus not subject to that same reflection. This is what makes people able to act freely, and it is also the basis for the human drive toward interpretation. Humans fulfill themselves as humans by developing their powers of interpretation. The more they try to understand the world, the more they understand themselves, and the more fully human they are.

It might be thought that when the object of knowledge consists of such extreme forms of evil as the twentieth century has known, understanding is not a particularly desirable aim. Trying to understand evil could make it seem almost ordinary. Even Primo Levi, an unimpeachably scrupulous witness of history, suggested that "one cannot, what is more one must not, understand what happened [at Auschwitz], because to understand is almost to justify" (*If This Is a Man*, 395). We cannot sweep aside this warn-

ing, coming from a writer as upright as Levi was. However, it did not stop Levi himself from spending much of his life trying to understand and draw lessons from what he had experienced at Auschwitz. He often said so quite forcefully: "I think that for a nonreligious person like myself the main thing is to understand and to make others understand. And also to seek to put down the Manichaean representation of the world as black and white" (*Conversazioni*, 248). On the other hand we have to wonder for whom the warning was mainly intended. It would be perfectly justifiable if it was addressed to Levi himself or to other camp survivors, for it is not the task of victims to try to understand their executioners, just as women who have been raped are not the right people to unravel the psychology of sexual aggression. Understanding relies on some degree of identification with the perpetrator (be it partial and temporary), and that could be highly damaging for a victim.

But we are not camp survivors, and we cannot but ask ourselves whether we should hold back from even trying to understand the greatest evil. Nor can we accept without question the automatic equivalence that Levi apparently asserts between "understanding" and "justifying." The whole apparatus of modern criminal justice is based on a quite different premise. Murderers, torturers, and rapists must pay for their crimes, to be sure. But society does not only punish the criminals; it also seeks to understand why the crimes were committed and to take appropriate action to prevent their recurrence. Such an aim is not easily achieved, but the point is that the aim exists within our societies. Where poverty is seen to be a contributory factor in a crime, then the causes of poverty need to be addressed; where emotional deprivation in infancy seems to be a cause of later crimes, then greater attention needs to be paid to repressing cruelty to children. The law has not abandoned the concept of the freedom of the individual, however, and, save in cases of mental illness, it continues to recognize personal responsibility. No crime is ever the automatic consequence of a cause. Understanding evil is not to justify it, but the means of preventing it from occurring again.

A special difficulty arises when we seek both to *understand* and to *judge*. Making a judgment involves drawing a line between the judging subject and the object to be judged; whereas understanding implies recognizing our common humanity. These two types

of mental action don't belong to the same field. What we seek to understand are human beings, capable of a great variety of different acts; what we seek to judge are specific acts carried out at particular times and places. The fact that all humans are made of the same stuff should not be allowed to obscure the gulf between what could have been done and what was actually done. Probably all of us are selfish; but not all of us become racists; and among racists, only the Nazis went to the extreme of racial extermination. People are all *potentially* criminal, but they are not all *actually* so, for they have not all lived the same lives. Some have been able to develop and cultivate their capacity for love, compassion, moral judgment; in others these capacities have been suppressed and killed off.

That is the difference between Pola Lifszyc, a girl living in the Warsaw ghetto who voluntarily boarded the train to Treblinka so as to stay with her mother (see Krall), and Franz Stangl, the camp commandant, whose exclusive concern was to carry out his job and not to think about its ultimate purpose (see Sereny). Some people can kill and torture, others can't, and that is why we will avoid the term "banality of evil" that Hannah Arendt used in her essays on the Eichmann trial. The evil that Eichmann and Stangl did was not ordinary, and when these men were putting thousands to death, they were not ordinary men either. There really is a difference, a quite decisive difference that justifies Primo Levi's whole career in public action and education. People may be made from the same mold, but events are singular. Those are what we must ponder and judge, because history consists of events.

Moral and legal responsibility should not be our only concern, however. We must recognize our shared humanity and question what that means. From this perspective, and even while we retain our autonomy as subjects, we must grant that there is no radical discontinuity between the self and the other (since others live in us, and we live in and through others), or between the camps' extreme form of evil and the ordinary forms of evil we encounter in everyday life. We positively need a double vision of this kind; we have to constantly switch between the role of judge, with respect to individuals, and the role of advocate with respect to the human race.

What is it exactly that we should try to understand when faced with an evil as fearful as that of the twentieth century? What we

need to understand are the political, social, and psychological processes that allowed it to happen. Victims whose willpower was taken from them do not require understanding of that kind. We can pity, comfort, protect, and love a woman who has been assaulted—but there is nothing much to understand about the behavior of a person subjected to an assault. The same can be said of whole peoples. There is nothing to "understand" about the sufferings of the Ukrainian peasants who were starved or the Jewish children and old folk who were thrown into gas chambers: compassion, not comprehension, is the appropriate response. But this is not true if the aim is to resist evil. In that case, it is better not to avoid the specifically political issues "by putting the spectacle of misfortune in the place of thinking about evil," as Rony Brauman says (Brauman and Sivan, 100). What we need to understand are not what people were forced to submit to, but what they sought to do—not only as perpetrators of evil, but also as fighters against evil, as resisters, and as rescuers of human lives.

Understanding is never complete, can never be absolutely "final." We are limited by the innate ability of the human species to act freely, beyond the determination of causes and beyond all probability. There is an irreducible element of mystery in human conduct—which is what makes it human. And that is true of acts with consequences at the individual level as well as acts that affect entire nations. Today's newspaper has a report about a suburban housewife who drugged her husband and two sons, cut their throats, then hanged herself. There had been no clues at all that such a tragedy was brewing in a family that everyone else thought completely contented and successful. Unthinkable, incomprehensible are the words that come to mind to describe a mother slitting the throats of her children. On a different scale, the same issue arises for the millions of deaths at Auschwitz. How can we "understand" that, or Stalin's ironhearted decision that millions of Ukrainians deserved to die? As we have seen, these macabre consequences derive from acts that were not in themselves irrational; but nothing we know about human individuals and human societies would allow us to "generate" these events, that is to say to assemble all the factors that would necessarily produce such results.

This consideration of the first two stages of the work of memory leads us to another conclusion, which is that remembering is not the opposite of forgetting. The two opposing terms are *destruction* and *preservation* (or "wiping" and "saving"): memory can only ever be the result of their interaction. It is impossible to recover all of the past—and if it were possible, it would be a terrifying thing indeed, as Borges has shown in his story "Funes the Memorious." Memory has to be a selection; only some features of an event are preserved, and others are dropped and forgotten, either straightaway or little by little. This makes it unsettling to see computers' information storage capacity described as "memory," since one of the constitutive features of human memory, forgetting, is quite absent from the electronic kind.

Preserving without making choices falls short of being memory work. What is objectionable about Nazi and Communist murderers is not that they selected those parts of the past that they wished to preserve—I'll be doing exactly the same—but that they granted themselves the right to decide what would be available to others. Paradoxically, you could say that memory, far from being its opposite, is a forgetting: a *partial* forgetting, in both senses of the word, that is indispensable to making sense of the past.

Application

The third stage in the life of the past in the present is its instrumentalization in terms of present aims, its *application* to the here and now. After *establishing* the facts and *interpreting* them, we can now *use* the past. This is what people do when they want to serve their present aims by reference to the past, and it is how politicians work too.

Professional historians do not like to admit that they have anything to do with the third stage. They prefer to consider their work done once they have thrown new light on what happened and on what it meant. It is of course possible to exclude application of historical knowledge, but I think it happens very seldom. A historian's work is hard to imagine unless it refers at some level to values, and these values determine the historian's own approach to his material. The questions and topics on which a historian focuses can only be ones that strike him or her as being useful, important, in need of urgent inquiry. Depending on the

aim of the study, the historian picks out from all the data that are available from archives, testimonies, and other sources those elements which seem most revealing. These must then be knitted together to support an argument and to show the lesson that can be drawn from the chosen fragment of history, even if the "moral of the tale" is not stated as explicitly as it would be in a fable. Values are everywhere, and that doesn't upset anyone. But values can't be separated from the wish not just to know the world, but to act on it, and to change it in the here and now.

Putting the past into service in the present is quite obvious in politics, but it is far from absent from activities clothed in the garb of science. The historian's trade differs from so many others in its rock-bottom criterion of truthfulness, which obliges historians to be scrupulous in gathering information; but that does not prevent the knowledge thus gained from being put to use. It is a naive illusion to believe that use can be kept out of history; to think that knowledge and its application can be insulated from each other is just a fantasy. "Superficially neutral language doesn't add anything to knowledge" wrote David Rousset when he was collecting documents on the concentration camps (*Lignes*, 206). Writing history, like any work on the past, never consists of establishing facts and nothing more. It always also involves selecting those facts that are more salient or significant than others and making connections between them. Selection and combination cannot only be directed toward truth; they must also always strive toward a good. Scholarship is obviously not the same thing as politics, but scholarship, being a human activity, has a political finality, which may be for good or bad.

In practice the three phases I have distinguished always coexist. Most often, you begin with an idea for the application of knowledge before you start impartially collecting facts. We only look to the past for examples to make some planned present action legitimate when we have just such a plan. Memory being selective by nature, there have to be criteria that allow it to choose what it retains from the great mass of information received; and those very criteria, conscious or unconscious as they may be, are most likely to be the main guide to the uses we make of the past.

Testimony, History, and Commemoration

The traces of the past that live on in the present fall into a variety of different kinds of language, of which I concentrate on three: the language of *testimony*, the language of *history*, and the language of *commemoration*.

Testimony is the type of discourse that arises when we summon up memories and, by shaping them, give meaning to our life and construct our identity. Each of us is the witness of our own life, and we build our picture of it by suppressing some of its events, by retaining others, and reshaping or adjusting yet more. Such memory-work may make use of documents (material traces), but by definition it is solitary work—we owe no account for the picture we have of ourselves. There are of course risks in memory-work: intentional forgetting can lead to remorse, suppressing particular memories can cause neuroses. The beneficiary of such work is the individual: memory helps us to live a little less badly and adds to our mental comfort and sense of well-being. Nobody else has a right to tell us what image to have of our own past, even if many try to do so. In a sense, our own memories are irrefutable because they have substance by the mere fact of their existence, irrespective of their relationship to reality.

A historian is someone attached to the discipline whose aim is to recover and analyze the past; or, more generally, anyone who seeks the same end and accepts impersonal truth, not individual interest, as the ground rule of such activity. Over the past few hundred years, historians as well as philosophers have subjected such a notion of truth to far-reaching and often justified criticism, for our instruments of knowledge are blunt ones and the search for truth cannot but reflect the subjectivity of the seeker to some degree. Even making due allowance for the imperfections of historical research and researchers, however, we must still draw a line between the language of truth and the language of fiction. Otherwise it really would be the end of history.

This is very obvious if we look at things in practice. A historian may be fallible, since he or she is human, and may likewise be influenced in some degree by his or her historical and geographical circumstances. But a historian has one distinctive feature—to seek to establish as far as possible what she or he considers, in all

honesty, to be the truth. This is the truth of correspondence, but it is also, despite the greater difficulty of proving it, a truth of unveiling. It is not possible to be "relativistic" at this level. A historian has only to invent one fact or falsify one document to be dismissed, defrocked, and hounded out of the profession. It would be the same for a biologist or physicist who fabricates results. These aren't just less respectable scholars than others or scholars with unacceptable opinions: they are completely and irretrievably beyond the pale of scientific and scholarly endeavor. A historian who fails the test of truthfulness does not belong to the profession and can be counted at best a propagandist.

There would seem to be a complete contrast between *testimony* (of one's own life) and *history* (of the world of others), with the former serving an individual interest, and the latter serving the quest for truth. However, a witness may consider that his or her own memories merit a place in the public realm, because they may contribute not simply to his or her own development but also to the education of others. At this point there arises a "document," which may compete for public attention with historical texts proper. Historians often have reservations about testimonial literature. Not only do they attract lots of readers, but until they have been examined with the tools of historical scholarship (which often proves to be impossible), they have little truth value. Witnesses, for their part, mistrust the historians—because they weren't there, they didn't suffer physically, they were still in short pants or not even born when the events took place. This undeclared war could be settled, all the same, if we could grant that testimony, even if does not respect the criterion of truth in the way that history must, nonetheless enriches historical discourse.

The complementarity of history and testimony can be illustrated by examples taken from my investigation of daily life under extreme conditions during the German occupation of France (1940–44) (Todorov and Jacquet). History tells us that France was defeated when its army stopped fighting, causing widespread panic. More detailed histories record that on 17 June, 1940, the seventh Army Corps retreated south of Bourges and that one of its companies of Senegalese infantry spent the night in the woods before moving on the next day. But when Mme Y. B. recalled those days, she told the story quite differently. During the night, she says, the soldiers bivouacking in the woods used up all their

live ammunition. The noise terrified her neighbors, who were driven out of their minds. "They spent three days and three nights hugging each other. We worried they were going to hurt themselves, suffocate each other. We separated them and put them in different rooms, but, guess what, in the evening they got back together. They just stayed in each others' arms. They had an eight-year-old niece staying with them for a holiday, they stuffed her under a mattress, so the Germans wouldn't get her. The girl was suffocating." A story of that kind, fragmentary as it is, seems to me just as eloquent and revealing of people's state of mind at that time as any historical generalization.

History books tell us that Resisters who were caught by the enemy suffered mightily. For witnesses, though, the Resistance was not a general entity, but specific groups and individuals who suffered concretely in their prison cells, from thirst, for example. "We urinated into a broken bottle and wetted our lips with the liquid," one witness recalls. Another added: "At 9 A.M. the Germans took us down to the urinals, and though they were green with mould, we licked them straight away. When the Germans saw that, they gave us a cup of water each." Details like these make abstractions more palpable; they seem to bring us much closer to the truth of the experience.

Returning deportees often found it difficult to readapt, historians tell us in a general way. Mr. R. M. remembers one specific returnee. "He had already been in hospital, in a therapeutic center, because for days and nights he had been having nightmares, remembering the torture he'd been through. He was frighteningly thin. He said almost nothing about having been deported. He didn't seem to hate Germans or the minority of Frenchmen who had cooperated with them. He had a shaved head, and he came to a dance with his girlfriend's sister, who'd had her head shaved at the Liberation. So there they were, dancing together, one shaved head with another." These two shaven heads—one shaved by the Germans as an enemy, the other shaved by the French for having had relations with the enemy—give us a snapshot of two humiliated individuals supporting each other without regard for the "sides" each was supposed to be on. This single image is as powerful as any long and reasoned argument.

That does not mean that memoirs and testimonials should always be given precedence over historical writing. The two types

of approach to the past are complementary, not contradictory. To understand the inner workings of the minds of supporters of opposite ideologies, we should listen, for instance, to what former members of the collaborationist *milice* and of the Resistance have to say. But to get a grasp of the values of each of these two positions, to understand their practical consequences, the relationship between their words and their acts, we should rather turn to the works of historians. For dates, numbers, and names, we look to historical research; but for sharing the experience of the people involved, memoirs are irreplaceable. If we wish to understand the fate of the Kolyma deportees, we do not have to choose between Robert Conquest's historical analysis and the autobiography of Evgenia Ginzburg; nor do we have to choose Raul Hilberg against Primo Levi when we study Auschwitz.

The past lives in the present not only through testimonial literature and historical inquiry but also through commemoration. Like the witness, the commemorator is pursuing his or her personal interest; but in common with professional historians, celebrants operate in the public sphere and aspire to irrefutable truthfulness, as far removed as possible from the unreliability of personal accounts. Commemorative writing has sometimes been referred to as an expression of "collective memory," but as Alfred Grosser has pointed out, the term is very dubious (see *Les Identités difficiles*). Memory, in the sense of mental traces, only ever belongs to an individual; collective memory is not memory at all, but a variety of discourse used in the public arena. It serves to reflect the image that a society, or one of its constituent groups, wishes to give of itself.

Commemoration—the discourse of celebrants—can be found in obvious places: schools impart a common image of the past to children; historical movies and television documentaries offer images of the past to a broader public; and organizations like the British Legion and U.S. veterans' clubs also serve to maintain a group vision of the past. In politics, commemorative discourse can be found in speeches made at every level, from White House to Borough Hall, as well as in parliamentary debate and in newspaper articles. Commemorative discourse obviously makes use of material supplied by historians and witnesses, but it does not respect the test of truth that these latter forms must pass. It is partly a matter of pragmatic circumstance. The schoolteacher

knows, and pupils are there to learn; television audiences can't ask questions, and no one challenges the mayor when he's making a speech. In parliament, opposition members aren't necessarily forewarned that the prime minister is going to refer to such and such a piece of history, and as they haven't been able to check up in advance, they let the reference pass.

Historians and witnesses may easily complement each other, as I have suggested, but a fundamental difference of aims and methods between historians and celebrants makes them pretty much incompatible. This contrast needs to be stressed most especially because celebrants seek to use impersonality (they are not speaking about themselves, after all) to suggest objectivity, and thus truthfulness. But the discourse of commemoration is not objective at all. While history makes the past more complicated, commemoration makes it simpler, since it seeks most often to supply us with heroes to worship or with enemies to detest; it deals in desecration and consecration. A recent example of the effects of consecration on our knowledge of the past was the ceremonial reburying of the remains of André Malraux in the Pantheon, the French national mausoleum for the "great men" of its Republican history. The event unleashed great waves of ink from the pens of politicians and journalists, who outdid each other in singing the praises of the novelist turned minister of culture. The result was that several rather important facts about Malraux (such as his involvement with Stalinist propaganda in the 1930s) were not even mentioned, and the whole existential and ideological complexity of the person was grossly simplified. *Re*memoration is to try to grasp the truth of the past. *Com*memoration is to adapt the past to the needs of the present.

The term *revisionism* has come to mean the same thing as *negationism*, the politically motivated claim that the gas chambers in German concentration camps did not exist. It's a great pity that the term has thus been lost for a better use. Historical truth—truth unveiled—is always, fortunately, subject to revision, and every historical advance is "revisionist" in the real sense of the word. This kind of revisionism stands opposed to pious or sanctified history, which is precisely what the discourse of commemoration is made of.

Commemoration may be inevitable, but it is not the best way to make the past live on in the present: in a democracy we need

something other than sanitized and sanctified images of the past. We can be pretty sure that commemoration serves celebrants' personal or collective interests rather than their moral elevation when it becomes so fixed in form that any deviation provokes cries of outrage. Shortly before he died in 1995, the German playwright Heiner Müller was invited to oversee the production of one of his plays in the municipal theater at Verdun, the site of a particularly bloody French victory in 1917. While there, he went to see the war memorial and answered journalists' questions on his impressions. "The artificial set that's been made out of the place leaves me cold. These memorials belong to an art of the dead, a monumental art, to be sure, but a worthless one. Real art is art made for the living" (see Sadowska-Guillon, 106–9). His statement raised the ire of the organizations responsible for the upkeep of these national shrines, and the town council of Verdun threatened to cut the theater's funding and to close it down unless it broke off all relations with Müller. I've never been to see the Verdun memorial and so I have no view of its aesthetic worth, but I know that Müller was, in principle, quite right. In our world, human values, not monuments, should be holy.

Moral Judgment

To put the past in the service of the present is an act. To judge such an act, we require it to have more than a truth of correspondence (as for historical facts) and a truth of unveiling (as for historical interpretation), for we must evaluate it in terms of good and evil, that is to say, by political and moral criteria. It is obvious that not all uses of the past are good, and no less obvious that the same past event can give rise to very different lessons. For example, in *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* (1933) the Austrian writer Franz Werfel told the story of the Armenian genocide and of those who resisted it; one of his aims was to encourage resistance to Nazi anti-Semitism. But at much the same time, Hitler is said to have chatted over dinner about the same crime, which gave him some hope of impunity if he were to do something similar: "Who remembers the Armenian massacre nowadays?" The same event, and two quite different uses of it.

The first question we have to ask in this context is whether it is legitimate to make judgments about the past. In fact, historians practically never fail to do so. But are they right?

We could question the legitimacy of moral judgments about the past in several ways. If we were to believe that human beings are not at all free, that all our acts obey an iron law of necessity whether we know it or not, then it would indeed be fatuous to praise or to blame the past. An act has a moral value only insofar as it might not have been committed. For this reason physicists and biologists don't make judgments about the objects of their study, for they deal only with the realm of necessity.

Imitation of the natural sciences has been a widely shared tendency in history, anthropology, psychology, sociology, and the human sciences in general. Since the early nineteenth century scholars have tried to show that humans are affected by causes of a higher order, causes more concrete than the harmony of the cosmos or the divine intervention which justified the fatalism of antiquity. History itself, in the sense of an irreversible sequence of events—or, to say it another way, the social context—is the prime mover here. In the early 1800s, Benjamin Constant wrote: "A century is the necessary product of those that went before. A century can only ever be what it is." So it would be pointless to pass judgment on the past. "There is nothing to be censured and nothing to be praised. . . . The spirit of an age is a necessary fact, a physical fact. A physical fact can be stated but not judged" (*Œuvres complètes*, III.1, 528). A hundred years later, in 1914, Nikolay Bukharin, the theorist of Communism, claimed that "there is nothing more ridiculous . . . than the attempt to make Marx's theory an 'ethical' theory. Marx's theory knows no other natural law than that of cause and effect, and can admit no other such law" (quoted in Cohen, 167–68).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, biological causality was added to social determinism. If we act as we do because we are of a certain race, can we reasonably be held responsible? Maurice Barrès campaigned for Dreyfus to be found guilty, but he did so in a way that cast little moral blame on the alleged traitor. "We are asking this child of Sem to have the fine features of the Indo-European race. . . . If we had truly disinterested minds, we would not judge Dreyfus by French morality and

French laws, as if he were our equal; we would see in him a representative of a different species" (Barrès, 153, 167). For Barrès the Jewish soldier Dreyfus was more a zoological specimen than a defendant, because he displayed the behavior of a different human species that Aryans had no real right to judge. And finally, in the early years of the twentieth century, a third kind of causality was added to social and biological determinism, or else sought to supersede them as explanations for an individual's behavior—the belief that very early childhood and the infant's relationship with its parents determines the nature of unconscious drives. We do not ask our psychoanalyst for moral judgments, but for help in developing self-understanding.

What is common to these three forms of determinism (whose historical order is not entirely illogical) is that they all seek totalizing explanations that leave no space for moral judgment. If humans are like ants in all respects, then we should not judge them, but only try to explain. However, this extrapolation did not satisfy even those who laid bare the various determining forces of human existence, because they too could only admit the obvious fact that no unified causal explanation allows the actions of individuals to be predicted (or "generated"); some degree of freedom always seems to escape the grip of causality. Benjamin Constant thus added to the passage I have just quoted that even when historical circumstances determine the general trend, they still leave individuals with a wide margin of freedom. "Everything is moral for individuals, but for the masses, everything is physical. . . . Every individual is free as an individual since he or she has only to deal with himself or with forces that are no greater than his own. But as a member of a group, the individual is no longer free." An individual acting in accordance with his or her own free will performs acts that can be given a moral value. Whatever philosophical form may be given to this argument, it has to be granted that we all behave on the presupposition that all individuals have a margin of freedom, because nobody fails to judge the acts of others by a moral yardstick.

There is nonetheless another way of questioning the validity of moral judgments in historical matters. This consists not of denying their right to exist, but of recognizing their multiplicity and seeing this as proof of their arbitrariness. In Nietzsche's terms, this is called "perspectivism." If one judgment is as good as another, why bother with judgments at all, since the facts belong to the past? Morality and justice are in this argument mere masks for desire and the will to power; historians may write about these values, but there is no way of discussing them rationally. Relativists do not dispute the existence of values that are more than personal, but they always relate them to a specific time and place. Values, they say, are exclusively the product of historical and cultural circumstance.

This seems all the more plausible when we realize that we are, necessarily, always dealing with language, as we are reminded by the deconstructionists. To take one example from the many that are possible, a recent commentator asked why he should respect critics who support the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam in his conflict with Joseph Stalin when, in the language they use, each of the two parties represents the other as the devil. Similarly, since Solzhenitsyn is as intolerant as the head of the KGB, what is the value of a judgment that elevates one above the other? Soviet dissidents imprisoned in psychiatric wards treated their doctors as impostors: the language they used was thus just as intolerant as the language of the psychiatrists. Everyone makes judgments from his or her own position; such judgments are arbitrary; and so it would be better to eliminate them from discourse about the past.

I don't think this relativistic argument—even if it is quite widely expressed nowadays—should be taken completely seriously. It could only be entertained if we took the prior step of disconnecting language from the world in which the language is used. Let's say that Stalin and Mandelstam hated each other equally; but only the general secretary sent fifteen million people to the gulag, among them the poor poet, who died from exhaustion as soon as he got there. Neither Solzhenitsyn nor the other dissidents sent anyone to prison or to a lunatic asylum. Those are the reasons why most of us condemn Stalin and feel sympathy for his victims. Uttering insults is not a good action, but to inflict endless suffering by deporting people, by starving and humiliating them before having them killed, is infinitely worse.

Moreover, it is far from obvious that all values are relative. While granting that many values are culturally and historically determined, we also possess the feeling and the intuition, I believe, that other values are not so determined, and cannot be justifiably overturned by any historical or cultural specificity. That is

why we have no difficulty in understanding intuitively the moral teachings of figures far distant from us in time and place, such as Buddha, Socrates, or Jesus. Some people may wish to dispute this point, but in practice we all behave in accordance with it. We do not allow human sacrifice, genocide, enslavement, or torture to be excused on grounds of the historical context in which they occur. But that obviously does not free us from seeking to understand why and how such actions seemed to be acceptable or even praiseworthy to whole nations.

Consciously or not, everyone relies on criteria that permit distinctions to be made not so much between good and evil absolutely as between more and less good, more and less evil. What are these criteria? To answer that question we must briefly discuss moral judgment itself.

Within the European tradition, the concept of good underwent substantial transformation over the centuries, and that is why it is not easy to answer our question simply; but a comparison of our moral ideas with those of the ancient world ought to make it easier to pinpoint our own, more or less conscious, criteria. In Kantian terms the first point of contrast is between the heteronomy of the ancients and the autonomy of the moderns, that is to say, the development over the centuries from submission to a law that originates elsewhere to a state where humans make the laws they live by. The ancients would have thought it absurd for men to make the law, for the law was inscribed in the order of the cosmos, or else it was God's revelation. Greeks and Hebrews alike thus held virtue to be measured by conformity to a law which came from "outside." But for modern humanity, there is no moral merit in merely submitting to the law; merit begins with freedom and can only be earned by actions which involve the exercise of free will.

The second feature that separates these two ideas of goodness involves the transition from objectivity to intersubjectivity. The ancients' ideal of the good life did not exclude relations with the other, but it did not focus on them. The classical sage withdraws from society and keeps at a distance from other people. Christianity marked the beginning of the transition. "All the Law," said Christ, hangs on the two commandments: to "love the Lord thy God" and to "love thy neighbor as thyself" (Matthew 22.37–40). God is in every person, however humble, and "inasmuch as

ye have done [good] unto the least of my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25.40). For Saint Paul this meant that loving God was nothing other than loving one's neighbor: "[T]herefore love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13.10). God manifests himself to humans through other people. The new ideal is not to excel or to perfect the self, but to exercise charity, which is necessarily an intersubjective value.

From a religious point of view the love of other beings is meritorious only insofar as it reflects or increases the love of God. However, the whole development of Western humanism from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment consisted of shedding the divine guarantee while maintaining the ideals of goodwill and charity, which it initially protected. For humanists, good exists only within human society, not in an individual seen in isolation from others. "It is only in becoming a social being that man becomes a moral being," noted Jean-Jacques Rousseau, despite his own taste for solitude (*Fragments politiques*, in *Œuvres complètes*, 3:477). In addition, the other must be put above the self. "The more his cares are consecrated to the happiness of others, (. . .) the less he will be deceived about what is good or bad" (*Émile*, 252). This is why Kant, in later years, insisted that it was not possible to switch around the elements of what he called the "moral ends" of humankind, namely "my own perfection" and "the happiness of others." Individuals who seek only their own happiness are just selfish; those who seek only the perfection of others are unbearable preachers who see the mote in the other's eye without noticing the beam in their own. We would add that to treat your neighbor as you would treat yourself is a question of justice (since we all obey the same laws), but to put your neighbor above yourself—from love or from a sense of duty—is to enter the domain of morality. That is how we should understand Levinas's reference to a "humanism of thinking-of-the-other," which is a way of saying that in the modern world a moral act is necessarily disinterested. "The only absolute value is the human possibility of giving the other priority over oneself" (Levinas, 109).

This is still not an adequate description of moral judgment. Let's imagine a public figure who sets himself up as the permanent defender of others, and as a systematic critic of his own community. The moral stock of such a person would certainly not seem very high. And why not? Well, we have long known

people of that sort, from biblical prophets who lambasted their people for living sinfully to travelers who glorified distant peoples—"noble savages"—so as to criticize their own. In our own time, we have seen writers assuming the mantle of national conscience and flagellating themselves for the guilt they share for their own people's crimes: German writers who make out that Germans are the worst people on earth, Americans who see the history of the United States as an unbroken chain of imperialist aggression and racial injustice. But the position of *moral censor* also excludes any self-appointed holder from the domain of morality.

Another attitude full of good intentions similarly excludes authentically moral gestures, one that could be called *reflex compassion*. The way news is circulated nowadays makes this a universal temptation. Wars, massacres, famines, and natural disasters now unleash ubiquitous images of corpses, of wounded dying without medical assistance, of weeping adults and skeletal children, which make us shout "This must stop!" at our television screens. So we donate a bag of rice or a handful of dollars to the cause of good. Compassion is better than indifference, to be sure, but it also has secondary effects we would be better without. As Brauman says, reflex compassion turns evil into a mere misfortune, it substitutes a gush of feeling for "cold" political analysis, and in so doing it gives us all a good conscience by making us valiant victims by adoption. My brief exposition of modern ethics is therefore quite inadequate: it is not enough to say that the other must be put above the self, and it is even less satisfactory to assume the mantle of a teacher of moral lessons. We need to revisit the concept of a moral act.

The crucial episode in infantile development is the acquisition of an ability to distinguish between good and bad, to which the child is led by the pleasure it experiences from the love and attention of carers and the displeasure it feels at their absence. These affective experiences carry the seed of ethical categories: good is what is good for the infant, and, similarly, bad is what is bad for it. The significance of this first step should not be underestimated. If deprived of primary love or of the certainty that it is cared for, a child may grow up in a state of ethical atrophy and radical *nihilism*. It may turn into an adult capable of doing evil without being aware of it at all.

However, this first step in the acquisition of a moral sense, the distinction between good and bad based on love, is only a beginning. As the child grows and acquires friends of the same age, it makes a second and sometimes painful discovery. The equation of "good and bad" with "me and other" has to be broken, just as, when applied to groups, it has be disconnected from "us and them." The child learns that it is not necessarily the incarnation of good, and that others are not necessarily bad; and at that point it begins to outgrow infantile *egocentrism*.

Then and only then can the third stage commence, although there are few who manage it. The third stage involves abandoning all exclusive or definitive ways of apportioning good and bad without ceasing to make a distinction between them. In the third stage, with nihilism and egocentrism vanquished, the obstacle to be surmounted is Manichaeism. To always see evil in oneself (or in one's own group) and good in others would be just as harmful as the reverse. The fact that an action serves our own interest in no way enables us to know whether it is morally "good" or "bad."

It is now easier to grasp why we are reluctant to grant moral credit to someone who systematically excoriates his own group and favors the other, because we know instinctively that the role of moral conscience is actually quite comforting to its holder. He or she becomes the virtuous one, as the keeper of values and guide to the strait and narrow. When said by such a public figure, "We are all guilty" actually means "I'm rather less guilty than you are, because I'm the one who's saying so." Such a person cannot be accused of being ethnocentric or xenophobic—but he or she acquires a rewarding role in the community as the guardian of its values.

Merely inverting the equations of "us = good" and "the other = bad" does not allow the public scourge to rise above the domain of moral Manichaeism. The flaw in the role of permanent critic of one's own community is that it takes for granted where good and evil are to be found. You can only avoid that trap if you are able to take equal distance from your own group *and* from its opponents.

It is essential to understand that this third stage of development must be completed. Let us here recall that the underlying premise of totalitarianism is the simplified division of the world into good people and bad people, people to be promoted and those to be

eliminated. Auschwitz and Kolyma represent extreme but logical extensions of the initial black-and-white division of the world, and we too are tainted with it whenever we see perpetrators of evil only as enemies to be overcome and put down. If we have to become totalitarian in order to crush totalitarianism, then totalitarianism has won.

All that may be very well in abstract, but it is very hard to put into daily practice. And that is natural enough, for the illusion of a world that revolves around our own self, and the temptation to see everything in terms of black and white, are related to some of our deepest drives; most of our spontaneous reactions to adversity are prompted by them. And so it is hardly surprising that the same illusions and temptations are to be found in various ideological movements of our recent history.

Master Narratives

We have our criteria, but we now have to find to what we should apply them. The facts of the past do not come raw; they always reach us as part of a story.

The historical narrative of an act that is not morally neutral is always slanted, toward good or toward evil; and it always involves at least two protagonists, the subject (or actor) and the object (or acted-upon). There are thus four roles in any historical narrative with an ethical dimension: benefactor, beneficiary, malefactor, and victim. At first sight only two of these roles—benefactor and malefactor—are marked for value, while the other two, being passive, seem morally neutral. In reality, however, the passive roles, by the fact of being connected to the active ones, have moral connotations. To be the beneficiary of an act is less glorious than being its agent, because the fact of receiving constitutes a mark of our own need or powerlessness; to be the victim of a misdeed, on the other hand, is more respectable than being its agent. In this distribution we can already see the two main forms of historical narration: the heroic narrative, which lauds the triumph of "our side." and the victim narrative, which relates its sufferings.

Why put victims alongside the heroes whom we all admire? Is there anything pleasant about being a victim? Surely not. But although nobody wants to be a victim in the present, many would like to have been one in the past. Victim status is indeed something to which people aspire. Families are full of people playing victim so as to give others the far less enviable role of persecutor. Victimhood gives you grounds to complain, to protest, to make demands, and others just have to respond, or else cut off relations entirely. It is also more advantageous to remain in the victim role than to obtain reparation for the ill that has been done (if there ever was real harm caused), because reparation is once and for all, whereas a victim can rely on the recognition and attention that his status provides more or less indefinitely. At another level entirely, we can see how powerful victim-stories are in the passion of Christ, the keystone of the Christian religion.

What works for individuals works even better for groups. If some community can claim convincingly to have been the victim of injustice in the past, then it acquires an inexhaustible line of credit in the present. If in that society groups and not only individuals are granted rights, then such a victim community can make good use of its status; and the greater the past offense, the greater are the rights in the present. Members of the group don't have to struggle to acquire privileges, they have them automatically, just by belonging to the formerly underprivileged. And that gives rise to rivalry for the status of the "most unfavored," in a mirror image of the international competition for "most-favored nation" status.

African Americans provide a classic example of such a development. They protest the indisputable injustices of slavery and racial discrimination but have no intention of losing the lasting moral and political advantages that the history of their community gives them. Louis Farrakhan, the leader of the "Nation of Islam," took this position to an outrageous extreme when he declared: "What's six million dead Jews, outside America? The black holocaust was a hundred times worse than the Jewish holocaust." Victims beware! Your sympathy card can be trumped! But we may well doubt the desirability of what Chaumont calls "victim rivalry." It has been convincingly argued that many of the problems of the African American community derive not from current discrimination but from its inability to overcome the traumas of its past history, and from the consequent temptation, as Shelby Steele puts it, "to exploit their own past suffering as a source of power and privilege" (118).

The rewards of victimhood don't need to be material ones. The debt to be paid is symbolic; tangible reparations would be trivial, for the advantages granted to members of groups enjoying victim status are of a different order. As the French Jewish writer Alain Finkielkraut quickly realized when he was young: "Others had suffered and I, because I was their descendant, harvested all the moral advantage. . . . Lineage made me genocide's huckster, the witness and practically its victim. . . . With this sort of investiture, any other title seemed wretched or ridiculous to me" (11–12).

Of the four roles in moral historical narratives, then, two can be filled to personal advantage (the beneficent hero, the innocent victim), and two bring no advantage (the malefactor and the passive beneficiary). When we identify our own group with one of the positive roles in its past history, we gratify ourselves by so doing; and we may also be gratified by giving to others the role of passive beneficiary of heroic actions, or else of perpetrator of evil ones. To describe the past in this way obviously produces no moral benefit for whoever indulges in such ritual and agreeable behavior.

History has always been written by the victors. What you used to win by winning was a right over the past, but in the twentieth century people have campaigned for a history of the losers, the victims, the subjected, and the vanquished, to take its rightful place alongside the victors' history. On historical grounds, the claim is absolutely legitimate, since it invites us to learn about whole aspects of the past that had previously been neglected. In ethical terms, however, to identify with victims does not make us more meritorious. There really is no moral difference between identification with the bomber pilots who ended the Second World War and identification with the passive population that suffered nuclear annihilation, since in both cases we place ourselves in the position of the "good" and the "innocent."

The only chance we might have of climbing a moral rung would be to recognize the evil in ourselves and to struggle against it. You gain no direct benefit from discussing the evil that your "own side" might have done, or the help it may have gained from the heroic actions of the "other side," just as you draw no gratification from seeing the other side as victim or benefactor—but that is the only way you can undertake a critical examination of your own collective identity, the only way you can put the perfection of the self and the happiness of others above your own interests, and thus be engaged in moral action when studying the past. Revisiting historical episodes in which one's own group was neither 100 percent heroic nor the complete victim would be an act of higher moral value for writers of historical narratives. No moral benefit can accrue from always identifying with the "right side" of history; it can only arise when writing history makes the writer more aware of the weaknesses and wrong turns of his or her own community. Morality is by definition disinterested.

As my classification of roles and their moral effects may seem rather abstract, I would like to give some concrete examples in order to explore whether or not it is true that people gain pleasure from adopting the two roles of hero and victim.

For Russians, 9 May, 1945 is the date of their final victory over Nazism and the end of a war in which they lost more than twenty-five million dead. Most Russians are therefore perfectly happy to take part in commemorations of their own heroic role. For Central Europeans, however, the same date symbolizes the start of Soviet rule, marking not their liberation but their enslavement.

The events of the past have indeterminate meanings, and they acquire firm value only through present action. The French see 8 May, 1945 as a day to be proud of, because French generals stood alongside American, British, and Soviet representatives at the signing of the German surrender. But during celebrations of 8 May people do not like to recall that it is also the anniversary of the massacre at Sétif, in Algeria. The Algerians had naively thought that as France had at last freed itself from the Germans, they would now be able to free themselves from the French. But at the end of the war France saw itself as a world power under threat and was more determined than ever to hang on to its global empire. Their initial defeat in 1940 was what made the French so unyielding toward the Algerians, and they put down a pro-independence demonstration in the town of Sétif with uncommon violence. The number of dead and wounded has never been established: estimates range from 1,500 to 45,000.

The same configuration can be illustrated by another episode in modern history (on which I will say more later), the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the controversy aroused by plans to exhibit *Enola Gay* (the aircraft that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima) at the Smithsonian. John Dower, an

American specialist in modern Japanese history, has written with insight about the sharp difference between American and Japanese presentations of the episode, even while both sides acknowledge and use exactly the same well-established facts.

Americans conventionally provide "a triumphal or heroic narrative in which the A-bombs represent the coup de grace administered to an aggressive, fanatical and savage enemy"; for the Japanese, however, the dominant story is a "victim narrative" in which "atomic bombs symbolize a specific form of suffering—rather like the Holocaust for the Jews" (Dower, "Three Narratives," 65, 66). The Hiroshima museum is itself entirely given over to the victim role; there is not the slightest mention of the Japanese government's possible responsibility for starting and pursuing the war, or for the inhuman treatment of POWs and civilians by Japanese soldiers. Each year, 1.5 million people visit the Hiroshima museum in its grand park, which also contains a memorial to the 176,964 victims of the bomb. However, a memorial to the 20,000 Korean forced laborers who were in Hiroshima and who died just the same as the Japanese has been erected elsewhere, outside the sanctified grounds. Hiroshima was a mainly military town before the war, but there is nothing to recall the 1938 Nanking Massacre, carried out mostly by troops from the Hiroshima garrison of the Japanese army, who slaughtered around 300,000 Chinese. So we can see that American partisans of the "heroic narrative" and Japanese defenders of the "victim story" are equally happy to promote their "own side."

The difference between the two stories came to the boil in 1995, during the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the atomic bomb. The aircraft that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, *Enola Gay*, was supposed to be the centerpiece of a Washington, D.C., exhibition designed to present the event in all its complexity. But war veterans and other patriotic groups raised political support to campaign against the exhibition, which they considered offensive because it did not show the United States exclusively as hero and benefactor triumphing over Japanese militarism but suggested that America was responsible for a massacre that could not be entirely justified.

How can you write a narrative of history without identifying with either hero or victim? John Dower's study of U.S. and Japanese reactions to the Hiroshima anniversary might be a model to

follow. He divides it into three parts: "Hiroshima as Victimization" (for the Japanese approach); "Hiroshima as Triumph" (for the U.S. reaction); and "Hiroshima as Tragedy."

Happiness does not make the news, and idylls rarely figure in history books. History tends toward the grave, and toward tragedy, where good and evil are never entirely separate from one another. The Second World War (unlike the First) might look like an exception, since Hitler was indisputably the face of evil, and every battle to defeat him was thus in the service of good. But to argue along those lines we have to accept that ends justify means, and that it is permissible to imitate the enemy in order to overcome it. Until 1942 the British and American governments considered attacks on civilians as barbarous acts; but from then on, they used the same tactics. In February 1945, forty thousand civilians died in the fire-bombing of Dresden; and in March, the Tokyo blitz slaughtered one hundred thousand. (Hiroshima and Nagasaki were still to come.) The soldiers who did these things, Dower argues, "became heroes with the blood of women and children on their hands, and in this regard protagonists in a tragic rather than triumphal narrative" (Dower, "Three Narratives," 95). Former victims copied earlier acts of atrocity.

What is tragedy? Not just a story of suffering and wretchedness, not just the absence of good, out of which a victim story can also be made. Tragedy is the impossibility of good: a place whence every path leads to tears and to death. The Allied cause was, unarguably, a better cause than the Nazis' or the Japanese, and the war against them was just and necessary; but it brought about miseries that cannot be dismissed with a wave of the hand on the grounds that they happened to "them" not to "us." A carbonized bowl of rice and peas that belonged to a twelve-year-old girl who was vaporized by the Hiroshima bomb can have almost as much weight as the flying fortress called *Enola Gay*. In fact, it was the plan to display the bowl, on loan from the Hiroshima Museum, which made the whole Washington project unacceptable to U.S. veterans. If you are brave enough to think simultaneously of the bomber crew and of the bowl, then you cannot avoid seeing history as tragedy.