Embodied Memory, Transcendence, and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Re-establishing the Self

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Memory and Silence

Naive public conceptions of memory, and the attendant assumption that memory takes certain forms and not others, contribute to a curious circumstance surrounding the victimized survivor of violence. The survivor most often, nearly invariably, becomes silent about his victimization, though the experience nevertheless in every case remains somehow fundamental to his existence, and to his unfolding or enfolded conception of himself. This silence is an internal one in which the victim attempts to suppress what is recalled (so as not to relive the victimization countless times), or finds it repressed by some part of himself which functions as a stranger, hiding self from the self's experience according to unfathomable criteria and requirements. It is external as well: the victim does not tell what she recalls, in part because others do not seem to hear what is said, partly out of a conviction that she will not be believed, and more basically because she simply cannot make the leap to words: "If you were not there, it is difficult to describe or say how it was. It sounds very, very, very, . . . I don't know if there is [a] word to describe the nightmare one go through . . . how men function under such a stress is one thing, and then how you communicate and express [to] somebody who never knew that such a degree of brutality [is] existing seems like a fantasy." ¹

Yet despite this silence, the momentous nature of threats and harm to the body dictates that violence and trauma nevertheless leave the survivor preoccupied with the memory of it, which itself seems both absent and entirely too present. Most disturbingly, bits of memory, flashing like clipped pieces of film held to the light, appear unbidden and in surprising ways, as if possessed of a life independent of will or consciousness. These undeniable presences nevertheless have an aura of unbelievability: though presenting themselves as clearly past, real, and fully embodied, they appear in nonnarrative forms that seem to meet no standard test for truth or comprehensibility. Survivor writings make it clear that to be a survivor of one's violation [End Page 169] is precisely this: to live with the paradox of silence and the present but unreachable force of memory, and a concomitant need to tell what seems untellable. ² The paradox is based in more than simply the difficulty of reporting events that listeners would rather not hear or believe, or which are too different to be grasped. It is the paradox of a known and felt truth that unfortunately obeys the logic of dreams rather than of speech and so seems as unreachable, as other, as these, and as difficult to communicate and interpret, even to oneself. It is a paradox of the distance of one's own experience.

No experience is more one's own than harm to one's own skin, but none is more locked within that skin, played out within it in actions other than words, in patterns of consciousness below the everyday and the constructions of language. Trapped there, the violation seems to continue in a reverberating present that belies the supposed linearity of time and the possibility of endings. It at once has a certain pastness, is a sort of "memory-knowledge" as Mary Warnock would call it, and is not past, not "memory"--that is, a personal, narrated account of something completed, locatable in time--at all. Perhaps it is not even remembered, but only felt as a presence, or perhaps it shapes current events according to its template, itself unrecognized. ³

The demands of narrative for their part operate in fact as cultural silencers to this sort of memory, descending immediately upon an experience to shape notions of legitimate memory, and silencing the sort of proto-memory described. We lose sight of the body's own recall of its response to threat and pain, and of the ways in which it "speaks" this pain, because this wordless language is unintelligible to one whose body is not similarly affected, and because without words the experience has a certain shadowy quality, a paradoxical unreality. Charlotte Delbo draws the distinction similarly, separating "sense memory" from "thinking memory." Delbo also asks us not to confuse her
descriptions of her holocaust memories—rational, ordered, and clear—with what she calls "deep memory," the persistence of the past in its own perpetual present: "I feel it again, through my whole body, which becomes a block of pain, and I feel death seizing me, I feel myself die. . . . The cry awakens me, and I emerge from the nightmare, exhausted. It takes days for everything to return to normal. . . . I become myself again, the one you know, who can speak to you of Auschwitz without showing any sign of distress or emotion."  

The one who speaks without emotion presents only what Delbo calls an "external" memory—socially constructed, skating along the surface of words and engaging the intellect—not the body's reexperience, which because it is a recapitulation of the past, cannot be spoken about or related at the moment, just as it could not be originally. It is not known in words, but in the body. [End Page 170]

Violence, Violation, and Disappearance

In short, violence, violation, and trauma, however horrific in their midst, live on in the victim survivor in ways that confound ordinary notions of memory and narrative, or to which ordinary narrative is simply inadequate. The effect can be that the memories take on a cast of unreality; however deeply known, they are also disbelieved, seem unbelievable, even to the survivor who knows quite well the truth, in his body if not in words.

I refer here to "violation" and not merely to violence. There is a difference, as the words and their meanings suggest. "Violence" has no locus of action; "violation" targets the violated. The violence of a fistfight between two angry people and the experience of violence at the hands of an overwhelmingly powerful aggressor share some commonalities, including the possibility of injury and the relevance of context. But the experience of violation, violence from which there is no escape or recourse because one's body and one's repertoire of responses are quite simply overpowered from the outset, poses a central existential dilemma precisely because it is different, involving not a contesting of hierarchy or power but its full, primary assertion, and the threatened, even actual, dissolution of the self in the midst of it.

Szeman's protagonist Rachel in The Kommandant's Mistress makes it clear in her description of a rape by the Kommandant within hours of her arrival at a concentration camp that in such violence and violation one's life is no longer one's own in a most fundamental way. One's response to this truth is often a sort of occultation of the self, which is reduced to pure body, and thence to a certain blankness:

Then his shoulders jammed against my chin, my cheek. My head roared with the rattle of machine guns, with the barking of dogs. . . . I couldn't breathe. When he released my shoulders to grab my hips, to lift me so he could shove himself tighter deeper faster, I turned my face. Then I could breathe.

I stared out the grimy window. I clutched the sides of the table so my head wouldn't hit the wall as often, but his weight was too much for me. . . . The weapons rattled, his gun bruised my ribs, his fingers burned my thighs, his medals cut, the babies wailed, the coat slid, faster deeper harder.  

In this sort of violation one is not merely invaded by another, but literally taken; the wounding in this sort of circumstance becomes a physical marker of one's clear permeability, one's flowing into the world, and one's being entered by it. Rachel survives by reducing that flow to a series of sharp, concrete difficulties and discomforts, by finding life in the body, but in a severely truncated way, akin to the way in fact that the Kommandant sees her. This becomes the basis of an abiding horror; the persistence of his sense of her as what she knew herself to be then, her self in extremity. To recall this nearly-lost self in its bodily presence is the essence of tortured memory.

Later, trapped between the need to tell and the intense pressure of silence, Rachel is flung back to this truncated self again and again, as if another part of her wishes to reconnect her soul to that remembered and persisting body, however penetrated and controlled, to reestablish a fuller self over the survivor self. To do so, she is compelled to tell, to counter her disappearance and rendering into pure body tortured at the hands of the Kommandant, by defining the event in her terms. She must set her boundaries again, reassert herself as a social reality not flowing out or possessed. Rachel falls short of the required effort; she goes so far as to write her story, to detail her experiences, but only finally as poetry or fiction, swearing publicly after the war that she was never in any camp at all. The denial only contributes to her continued disappearance and her perpetual haunting; she finds herself empty, stuck, unable to maintain a relationship that requires her to be a "self." She cannot, it seems, make the leap to her own words without simultaneously disowning them, a sort of approach-avoidance that is a hallmark of survival. This is a function not only of the Kommandant's own enforced social definition of her, which "disappears" her (as the Argentines so aptly put it), but also of her body's response to the physical and psychic reality of her wounding.

Wounding

Violence is always and necessarily about wounding—physical harm which is often permanent—even when this is only implied or threatened.  

Wounding, the penetration of the skin, is the baseline, the reference point, of all violence, and of all power relationships sustained by violence. Wounding is itself partly about neurologically-registered pain—searing,
quick, causing the body to recognize harm and a threat to its existence. It is, as Rachel describes, the medals and the
hardness of the table. It is an intensely social act as well, in which the carrier of the weapon is also the carrier of
subtle and not-so-subtle cultural messages. The victim encounters these as soon as she responds to the realities of
the body and its physiology, to the wounding itself. But the two—pain and social memory—are inextricably intertwined.
Rachel feels the Kommandant's gun, his medals, hears the sounds of her circumstances. She feels the wounds made
by these social markers more than she feels the wounds of the rape itself, though we should be careful as we hazard
why. The rape, however born of the Kommandant's own internal needs, whatever its intimate social
content, is also about something much larger, about a system of power in which Rachel has absolutely none, not
even the power to stay alive except by disappearing into the event, by becoming an extension of the Kommandant.

Rachel's focus not on the rape, not on that part of her anatomy, but on what is outside, on managing as much of her
own comfort as she can, might be seen as her own social, retaliatory act. But is it? Perhaps it is instead the body's
effort to protect itself in the midst of intense pain, much as it releases endorphins at the time of a major wound to the
flesh. Rachel focuses on physical circumstances to which she must respond as body, almost without the need of will.
She turns her head; then she can breathe.

Thus wounding exposes the root of the problematic nexus of the cultural and the experiential, the biological and the
social, in the memory of violence, making it clear that violence is about pain and wounding and dissolution, and that
communication about it happens between the poles of body and culture, themselves wrapped in the meanings created
or destroyed in the moment of harm. Delbo's distinctions between external and deep memory, between sense and
thinking memory, are grounded in this physical wounding of the body as it occurs in a thick nest of competing and
threatened meanings.

Wounding begins the memory of the survivor, is its occasion and essence. It simultaneously launches one into a
social recognition and explanation of it; it poses what must be explained. Any explanation is subject to a host of
limitations, which have their origins outside and within the body. Rachel was silenced first at the camp by what was
external, by her circumstances. The social system in which she found herself required her silence in large part
because its members—guards and prisoners alike—had no intention of listening; she was voiceless. She was silenced
internally as well, however, by the response of her body and psyche, by the experience of threat to life—a wound as
real as her bruises and connected to them. Finally free, she was silenced by her own memory; or more precisely, by
the loss of the self who might communicate, by the continuing concomitant bodily reality of her wounding and her
memories of it, and by the persistence of a limited survivor self.

The dissolution of the self threatened by wounding results in a dissolution of the experience, which seems to
accomplish what is feared, but actually does not. Wounding occasions a separation of its elements into neural
pathways unconnected somehow to the locale of the self. When such things happen continuously, the surviving self
may be all that remains in consciousness. For survivors of less continuous and unrelenting traumas, this surviving self
may surface to differing degrees, at different times, replacing the other, recognized self less continuously. In either case, however, the experience that dissolved as it occurred is nevertheless present in its
components; the knitting together of these comprises the body's psychic healing quite literally, the reweaving of body,
mind, and cultural context from a point of unravelling or rupture.

**Body Memories**

Wounding produces in the body particular neurological responses; these are retained as the memory of the event—
largely as it was experienced and responded to, whether understood or not. Such a memory is generally full of
fleeting images, the percussion of blows, sounds, and movements of the body—disconnected, cacophonous, the cells
suffused with the active power of adrenaline, or coated with the anesthetizing numbness of noradrenalin. The action
of adrenalin and noradrenalin at the time of traumatic events functions to make the event a certain sort of experience (in
which one fled or went numb or fought back) which may later be recalled. It also makes the experience qualitatively
different, limiting it sometimes merely to the reflexes; siphoning senses of fear and panic off into other parts of the
brain so as not to destroy the potential for action as required. Thus events and feelings are simply not registered, but
this does not mean they are forgotten; they are located in other parts of the mind and the parts of the body affected as
well, though separated from the continuing integrated story of the self. Such memories—of abject fear, pain, anguish—are
left apart from the story of the self because if included in it they would destroy it, being so counter to the self's
conception of itself as whole as to be inimical and threatening to it. Thus the body and mind conspire to protect the
self from overwhelming awareness of its permeability, to deny in important ways the terror of the experience. This
does not necessarily suggest some ulterior altruism of the mind or some sort of super-knowledge of harm. It may
simply be the consequence of the body's purpose—to sustain the body at nearly all costs. The body is designed to
focus in extremity on what can be done, or how best to avoid injury—the rest of what remains a human experience is
cut off or not processed by the brain otherwise engaged. Such defenses may continue, even though, like much
healing, they may ultimately be incomplete or even likely to result in more harm to the body.

Rachel does not recall, however much she may know, her experiences in their fullness; these remain repressed, cut
out of her consciousness as they were at the time. One memory is abiding, that of the truncated self she was then, the
surviving self. Even so, Rachel is not as blank as she [End Page 174] feels or seems; this contributes to her pain. She knows much more is there, but to know it fully is to suffer again what her body worked so hard to protect her from before: the experience of her near dissolution and the pain associated with it. Then it would have killed her, or let her act in a way that would have gotten her killed. Now she fears it still might.

Repressed memories are nevertheless memories; they are not circumstances of what "never happened" or what has been "forgotten." They are, at worst, temporal blanks, as if the mind recorded as it continuously does the passage of time, but left a particular stretch simply open, the images and experience elsewhere, not accessible to the normal process of constructing a narrative of one's life. Those who find themselves now and again having "gone blank," particularly after a triggering event of some sort, might indeed be having a memory, revisiting a time in which they "went blank" in the midst of terror, entered another level of experience retained elsewhere in the mind and triggered by other stimuli. A Cambodian refugee riding in a car sees an American homeowner working in his garden with a hoe, and stares out the window rather like a catatonic for several minutes. Shaking himself now, sweating, he recounts that he buried bodies in this way in Democratic Kampuchea. He will recount something along these lines. But this recounting is not the memory. The blank period is, and whatever other elements of recall crossed his mind and body in those few still moments. The account is a pale, telegraphed version of what is actually recalled. 8

More commonly, such slivered memories take on various lives of their own, perhaps altering behavior, working out as templates for response to current life circumstances. Violence is about survival, and the body is designed to take the lessons of violence seriously. To do so, it need not, perhaps best not, recall the violence itself, but rather must merely arrange to avoid it in the future, using whatever cues can be stored and maintained from before. This is not memory to be told, not memory to be analyzed, but memory to be used for purposes of survival.

Nevertheless, beneath the functional patterns provided by memories for action in the everyday, memories do persist, like the materials of dreams inaccessible to the normal waking state. Such memories, it seems, possess an energy of flow that leads to their movement from whatever locked places, whatever traumatized neural pathways they inhabit, into the interstices of the everyday: into the moments of daydream, of highway hypnosis, into the open field of images before sleep, into dreams themselves. Once the flow has begun, they become difficult to stop, as if the self wished to reconstitute itself according to a biological scheme akin to the healing of wounds, or as if it had to rid itself of toxic energy, and could only do so through its passing out of the [End Page 175] body in the same form in which it entered. Charlotte Delbo refers to the "skin of memory" which encapsulates such energies, and through which they occasionally and unexpectedly burst into the present, full and real, as if played again. 9

Extremity and Experiences of Transcendence

I am a princess lying on a bier in the forest. Aunt Estelle cuts a swatch of my hair and presents it to my father. Now I am standing beside the bier, holding the blond hair, looking at the princess. Through the glass floor of the forest I see a ticktacktoe game, marked with Xs and Os. Pointing to the princess, Aunt Estelle announces: "She is not dead yet, but she is dying." 10

More difficult still for a calm and ordered life in the present, pain and extremity often lead to an experience of transcendence, of levels of experience beyond the ordinary, as if the victim had been removed at some point in the experience from direct knowledge of the acts perpetrated on the body. Rachel does not describe such an experience, but others do--most often, though by no means exclusively, abused children, who describe being in a golden light, in forests and castles, floating above themselves, being among the stars.

Extremity and danger place the body in a circumstance that feels close to death, as if the body feared more, and more intensely, than the observing mind seeking to cope and place the body out of harm. Perhaps the cells respond to the danger which the mind, functioning for survival, cannot. In this place of near-death, experiences taking place beyond the normal, in the realm of the nonordinary, the mystical, Bergson's "pure duration" and the supranormal, are not uncommon, though they are not often discussed. They seem, after all, crazy. They are remembered at the level of the body and the uncalculating mind, not at the level of the everyday, functioning, speaking self. Thus the memory of trauma, or the knowledge of things past, is not merely of a wild and skewed time inaccessible except on its own terms, either in "flashbacks" or "neuroses" or in the form of the numb survivor self, but also the memory of other levels of reality, sensed not even by the five senses, but by the body itself, or by the spiritual mind, the interior of the body. This sort of memory is without language, perhaps without image. When such gross tools as language are brought to bear on the experience, the result appears to be metaphor, but it is not. As Terrence Des Pres says, in circumstances of extremity, "symbols tend to actualize." 11 The world [End Page 176] appears a different place, stuff and substance with a decidedly metaphorical quality. Was there a high mountain with trees? Yes, and no. The geographical qualities of the metaphysical landscape have an intangibility to them, but a rootedness as well--more expansive, more brightly colored or darker perhaps than the world, but similar to it.

Whatever form they take, such memories beg description in the aftermath. The commonality between victims' experiences of extremity and ascetics' or mystics' accounts of their experiences, and accounts of shamanic journeying, make it clear that there are similarities here with the experiences of survivors. 12 If we note that the
experience of wounding at the hands of another raises fundamental questions about the boundaries of the self, then it makes sense that experiences which are essentially about transcending such boundaries as sadhus, shamans, mystics, and others report them might in fact occur simultaneously—might in fact be another fork or parallel road on the route to survival. A Cambodian woman dying of starvation and torture wounds in the jungle while escaping soldiers of the Pol Pot regime is visited by a man who appears bearing a loaf of bread (not common in Cambodia in the dark days of the Pol Pot regime), saying "Take, eat, and go on. The border is not far." Having eaten that bread and survived, she is not sure whether the man might have been "real" and the food "real" food: it was real to her as a substance crossing the line between the sacred and the mundane, as she herself was about to do, though in the opposite direction. It held her here. 13

The survival experience is in important ways then a mystical one, in that it involves states of consciousness, reported experiences, and visions that parallel those reported by mystics. But this dimension of the experience, like the body memories that accompany it, is to the unsuspecting initiate sufficiently incomprehensible to be recalled in any way that admits of context or understanding; it simply has no narrative frame. It is not constructed, merely present; haphazardly rooted in cultural elements because the experience and its context are unlearned, spontaneous. As the survivor begins to supply narrative frames, in fact, the experiences come to seem outlandish, broadly general perhaps, surrounded most often by narrative disclaimers, as if they should be disbelieved: "I know this sounds crazy but. . . ." Transcendent experiences may for this reason seem forgotten because unsaid, though the survivor lives with a sense of homesickness for an experience, even a place (as mystics and shamans often report on a "geography" of the metaphysical) that cannot be otherwise explained. The survivor reports a sense of depression and confusion that is perhaps the suppressed experience of this other reality, this suppression of a desire to reenter in the body what is, whatever else one may call it, clearly another state of consciousness. In short, survivors are unwilling, uninitiated, unprepared, unschooled mystics, and to them, the transcendent may appear pathological. 14

Thus we have exploded the notion of memory into a series of "body memories." Chronologically, from the time of violation to after, they might be arranged in this way: first, the compression of the self in the experience of physical distress or numbness at the time of victimization, in part the absorbed message of the perpetrator, and in part the reductionism of survival. Then, the breakup of elements of the experience into body memories unconnected to the present or the self and undiminished by the passage of time. Then the simultaneous presence of a more or less functional self and the truncated, surviving self, each functioning in part through behaviors emerging from the templates of memories which themselves are hidden. These memories of the body's response to events are primary, prior to any narrative, and they may well surpass the victim's narrative ability because they pass beyond his knowledge. Memories of these split bits of experience are for this reason intrusive and incomprehensible when they reappear—there is nothing to be done with them. They obey none of the standard rules of discourse: they are the self's discourse with itself and so occupy that channel between the conscious and unconscious that speaks a body language. They appear at first only when the chatter dies down, then more and more forcefully, as if they will come out, will be eliminated by the body. But they are fragments, not something told. They make one appear crazy, because there is no temporal, single self, but an asynchronous mass of firing images, randomly (it seems) breaking through the dull film of the surviving self, or the slightly brighter film of the self reconstituted beyond survival.

Violence, Memory, and Communication

These facts of survival of violence—that it is about the body, that it twists the concept of the self, and that it includes experiences of trans-scendence—confound the effort to communicate it, and hence to un-derstand its nature as an experience of the always problematic interweaving of body/mind/culture, the connections and discontinuities between them thrown into relief by extremity.

Because victimization is communicated, if at all, only in the most primitive ways when it is occurring (as in cries of pain), any discussion of violence is always, whatever the problems, a discussion based on memory, in that it is about a kind of past knowledge. But if violence leaves memories of wounding and transcendence that for different reasons have little connection with language, then how can this so-called memory be communicated? How can we—survivors and nonsurvivors alike—come to know anything about violence and its effects if we encounter fundamental difficulties in describing those effects?

In honoring and comprehending memory's own unique recapitulations of such events, we can, as the psychologist says, integrate them, filling out the notion of the self. But how to reconstitute that self taken away by the violator? Is the recollecting of memory enough? It is not; for the destruction of the self is a social act, most fundamentally pushing the self back into its cellular, nonsocial, surviving self, and at the same time fusing the self with that of a demanding and destroying other. To return fully to the self as socially defined, to establish a relationship again with the world, the survivor must tell what happened. This is the function of narrative. The task then is to render body memories tellable, which means to order and arrange them in the form of a story, linking emotion with event, event with event, and so on. In so doing it becomes possible to return the self to its legitimate social status as something separate, something that tells, that recounts its own biography, undoing the grasp of the perpetrator and reestablishing the social dimension of the self lost in the midst of violation. Central to the task is the substitution of the protolanguage of violation, the voiced
cries of anguish, with words heard and understood, at least as far as they can be. Telling, in short, is a process of disemboweling memory, demystifying it, a process which can only begin after memories have been re-membered and the mystical touched by a buried self seeking its own healing. Here mind and body are the same, the healing essentially physiological and energetic, moving finally, as in all good healing, to reintegration with a community of others. How is this accomplished?

What we normally call memory is not the remembered at all of course, but a socially accepted fabrication, a weaving together of the thin, sometimes delicate and intertwined threads of true memory, the re-membered, so that these might be told. Memory is always in the end subjected to those conventions which define the believable. Often then there is a divide—between what is known and what can be said, or if said, made sense of, legitimated as a part of a story. Tashi in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is haunted suddenly by the image of a chicken, which she must paint, it seems, until it threatens to overwhelm her, drives her insane, the chicken being a screen memory for the foot that slowly appears in the corner of her drawing, holding, as she finally sees, the horror of her experience. None of the chicken painting makes sense, as if the memories occur in reverse; the details before the story. Yet her apparent insanity is misunderstood; it is a process of recall and repair. Tashi passes in the course of the story between the two sorts of [End Page 179] selves I discuss—one numb, and one slightly more functional. The haunting of her memories places her at the edge of and then into a third self perhaps, one riddled with what appears to be madness. But madness in this case is simply the unbidden arrival of memories, or the deadness of their repression and the abiding presence of the survivor self. When Tashi finally knows the story and can recount it in the "external" language Delbo describes, it gives her peace, because it has lost its roundness, its power. But she is frustrated as well in her efforts to expand the words her American therapist hears to the words she says as she feels them. This disempowering of her story—its rendering in a few words as if seen from a distance by a third party—is both good and bad, then. The divide works both ways—healing through the communicative and distancing power of naming, but also separating the victim from her experience, and from others who see only the final accounting of memory, not the bodily recollection of events, which, unfortunately, they would likely not understand at any rate. Ironically, while the violator can enter the body of the violated, the rest of us, in trying to grasp the experience, are shut out. 

Violence, Culture, Communication, and the Child

A critical element in the crossing of the divide between known and said is clearly the availability in the cultural repertoire of explanations and language describing the events of memory, and legitimating their fragmentary, body-based, metaphorical, and even mystical, other-worldly forms. Robert Desjarlais, in his experiences with nonordinary states of consciousness in Nepal, discovered that the more he internalized Nepalese culture, the more his nonordinary experiences paralleled those of his hosts, suggesting a significant link between culture and the experience of the metaphysical. But what if culture is itself problematic, only recently and tenuously grasped? What if violation occurs to the body of a child? What is it then? How is it told?

The question posed in the beginning here, about the intersection and interweaving of body/mind and culture in the midst and aftermath of an experience or experiences of violation, is perhaps well served by an examination of memories with an added layer of inconvenience, of silence, as it were: childhood memories of trauma.

The child is an important case for the pursuit of such a question because her sense of self and its embeddedness in an awareness of cultural realities is new, relatively primitive perhaps, while her resistance to violence and survival trances is low. The child is likely to see much as violent and threatening, and to feel more often than the adult (who has more knowledge of what the body can take and what it cannot) that he [End Page 180] is on the brink of death. Children, it is reported, are suggestible, and as anyone who has watched a child playing can attest, their ability to enter a world that is separate from the one in which they reside, a world in which boxes become cars and carrots guns or knives, is significant. What then can be said about childhood memories of violence recalled in adulthood? Here the problem of body/mind and culture is written largely—and rather messily—in the language of confused memories, assumptions of falsehood and fantasy, and the blending of child realities with adult ones. To narrate a child's memory is not only to confront the confusions of violence in the mind/body, but to construct a culturally acceptable narrative unavailable to the child, to create in some sense then, a fiction, a story the child never knew, from a perspective that was not part of the original scene or experience. To understand, that is, a third-person narrative, when the event or events happened with only two, or at least with no omniscient observers. In the process of doing so, the problematical limitations of any narrative, child's or adult's, about the experience of violence become clear.

I refer to particular childhood memories here because they are my own, allowing me to speak about them and their presence, and the process of deconstructing/reconstructing them. Childhood memories are difficult for the adult to comprehend because they are of what the child experienced, without benefit of adult knowledge, and in a body different from that of an adult. For a child, especially a young one, the lines between life and death, ordinary and nonordinary reality or states of consciousness, and the inner and the outer dimensions of existence are all more fluid than they become in later life. We know violation leads to a splitting of the various components of the event into separate bits of memory in the mind and that these memories are not only of the event, but of the body's responses to it. In the child, these mix with his generally incomplete information about the ordinary, and with his often nonverbal knowledge of the transcendent, to create memories of terror and powerlessness that are at once disgusting and
arresting, banal and transcendent. Thus for the memories of a child's trauma to become "memory" in any socially recognized, narrative sense, the leap from the known to the said is large, and the chance of missing the other side of the divide, great.

The Route to Narrative--A Child's Recollections in Reverse

I begin then below a series of narratives, proceeding from "external" to "sensory," showing in each case the movement from one sort of truth to another, as it were, backwards, from the adult's to the child's truth. [End Page 181]

From, in other words, reconstructed memory to true memory, to fragments without meaning, or with meaning layered on only in the telling. In so doing, I describe the process of reconstructing the self, recognizing body memories as the branching veins that feed the self.

The first is an introduction to the whole scheme, to the need for the reconstruction of memory, and the interplay of body, mind, and culture in the construction of a fiction that feels sufficiently like truth to be believed, to substitute for the complexity that, however real, feels inhuman, crazy, and untrue.

1. The "Pure" Accounting of Truth

As a child I inhabited three worlds running at once in parallel. Each was alarmingly different from the other. Like most lucky children, I knew the everyday world of a relatively pleasant childhood, in which my parents did what they should and things were largely as they were observed. But from time to time I was swooped into another, inhabited by monsters who looked curiously like my parents' friends. They professed to be stronger than my mother and father. For a time, they seemed more powerful than even God. The world they set around me like a cage felt far away from my home but often was not, its events occurring in one room while my normal life proceeded without me in another. I found myself often in the arms or hands of people who gave the lie to everything my parents told me, and who told me to lie to them.

In that world of well-dressed, sophisticated pedophiles, I was different than I was in my family world. I knew that what I learned there would frighten my parents. I knew that they could not protect me when I was there, and that they could not stop that world from reaching into the safe places they had tried to create for their children. I knew that it is better for bad things to happen to someone else. I knew that sex is painful, and that the lines between pleasure and pain can be easily blurred, as in a watercolor. I knew what it meant to feel dirty and look clean. I learned about the changing viscosities of the hours in an afternoon or a night, how the friction of certain events can slow and swirl time. Time moved differently in that world, slowly and cruelly but sharply too, like time must seem to a mouse played with by a cat.

Gliding in my uncomprehending mind like a little specter between these opposing worlds, by myself I found a third, to which I could fly while my body stayed behind. This world was one of fantasy and imagination that nevertheless was and is quite real to me, though apparently to no one else. It was built from the raw materials of the other two, and from my own dreams, story books, and spidery hopes, spun together in the wide space just beyond perception.

In my middle age now, I have been trying to reconstruct those parallel worlds of the child me, to find the words for them. They and the events that happened in them are part of me; in some measure, they define me. They lie within me, though like anything inside the body, they are hard to see or know.

In the process I have found myself engaged in a sort of archaeology of memory, a reconstruction and reinterpretation of some complicated leftovers. Archaeological, because for every bit of the baby's truth then, there must be some theorizing and filling in now, some sense today given to an old feeling or visual fragment from forty years ago. I am aware that my childhood memories may have been refigured over time, reshaped, embellished by subsequent memories gathering on them like dust from then to now. But however this might be, I find in myself nevertheless original bits and pieces which are pure, which have broken off from the jumble of the subsequent. Some feelings, smells, sounds, movements, images are at once so familiar, so embodied, and yet so distant as clearly to be part of the original scattered settlements of my mind. Set down by a child unsure of where to put them, sometimes lost, or hidden, but present as a pot. I remember.

Still, they tell no story; they are wordless. Without words, the shapes and jutttings of those other worlds I knew and what happened there trap me in a reverberating, outwardly silent childhood. They make me doubt the reality of then, and so who I am now, because in the important realm of truth, one only believes what can be said, heard, written down.

It is odd, but throughout this time of reconstruction, it has seemed very much that in fact the memories of that time have been forming themselves into a story independent of me, insisting on telling
themselves, asking the me now to check facts like an assistant, and to pay attention. They demand now the words I did not have then. They want to be gone, I think, to ride the truth out of me on a long line of letters, energy as wave, believed and let go.

Clearly, however the child's memory is felt or re-membered, the demands of the adult in whom such memories appear to reside require that they be bundled into narratives constructed from chaotic and branching sets of facts, essentially as fiction masquerading as objective truth, rather than recounted as truth finally set down. This is the case because memory and language are essentially uncomfortably intertwined, and yet each needs the other for the hope of any sense, any universalization of experience, any sense of the continuity of self, even of community, of hearers. As in all biography, the truth recalled is finally subordinate to the truth that can be heard, the truth which responds to certain expectations of genre and structure. If it is the case that trauma must in essence be fictionalized, deconstructed as it were, in order to become true, part of one's continuing account of one's self, then this explains the difficulty in doing so; for the events themselves fight to be told as they will. They are simply there. To frame and order them, this is the task of the adult, wishing to place her life in the midst of others, to reclaim a sense of her whole self. It is a task of confronting the confusion of the social self, substance, and transcendence, recognizing Rachel's dilemma, but with less culturally given comprehension of the events at the time, with the added complication of nearly losing a self just barely formed. [End Page 183]

In order to frame anything of this particular child's traumatic memories, to return or supply sufficient knowledge to allow reconstruction of that self, we must touch on context, not from the limited perspective of the child, but from that of an adult. This context is called "objectivity" or "reality," however fictional it may in fact be. This is because the self to be reestablished, filled out, reinflated, is a self now, in need of interpretation of what is in the body, being the experience of the body then.

In the places I was harmed, there were no omniscient observers, only me and the perpetrators. Nevertheless, it is the establishment of this observer that gives me a sense of what was happening in a way that frames my actual memories of events, and the remembering itself, that creates a "me," finally, rather than a disembodied, confused recipient of harm.

In short, I am forced by my own demands--I live here too, after all--to learn and recount "what happened."

2. A Bit of Background

My father had joined the ranks of that most secretive of armies, the warriors of the Cold War. Hobnobbing with the rich and powerful, and with access to anyone, his friends and colleagues turned their skills to odd and violent sorts of personal pursuits. So I went to children's parties that were not parties at all, at least not for the children. To this day, the words "party" and "panties" are interchangeable to me, and they both make me vaguely sick.

At these parties, and at other more somber events hedged about with ritual and dress-up that would have been funny if it had not been so sinister, with the knocks and calls of sex magic and the exciting teachings of Aleister Crowley, the creeds of the Order of the Golden Dawn and the Gardnerians, and other delights of parlor occultism, these men found ways to use children.

Should I elaborate? We danced. We disrobed. We played with one anothers' privates. We lay on the big men. We were taken by them. We were hurt by them, penetrated with objects and rubbed with their body parts. We knew orgasm and ejaculation operatively before we knew the words. We watched, and we did. I did these things. And then I forgot them; no, I transformed them. They have always and always are with me. They are me.

About this narrative, I would make the following observations. First, it reads like a number of testimonies; it describes what happened, and with the conviction of injustice. Something wrong happened, it says; I know it, and I expect the reader to know it as well. But most intriguing, these words assume, rather than plainly articulate, that I remember these things. The fact is that what I remember is much less organized. It is, for [End Page 184] me, not quite true, because I never knew it in this way. But it is what others need. And so it is what I need to be believed, even to understand, if not believe, myself. But it is not my memory, it is not remembrance. It is a social construction of a reality that is more crucial to me in the other forms it takes, at least until the final step of the reintegration of my self and these remembered, stored times of existential threat. At that last step, this account of things again becomes crucial, because it is about seeing the self--whole, acted upon, not destroyed from within.

To step back a bit to a more embodied memory:

3. A Slice of Plot

Lebanon, 1954. Telephone and electrical wires run parallel outside the window, against a blue-white sky. I am playing in my room. Sounds in the hall. I look toward the door. The light in my room, off the
balcony and with a dark floor, is brown-yellow, with sunbeams. Suddenly four legs in olive green at eye level. I am holding a toy, a windup bear in a rocking chair, pink and white. Now I stop and sit very still.

I don't look up. I don't want to see. Hands under my armpits. I feel them again as I write this, and prickling, and the need to go the bathroom.

Picked up.

Down the hall, quickly. Rustles and snapping sounds. Click of heavy shoes on terrazzo.

Toward the door of the apartment. The sun streams in the windows. The walls, white, glow with a tinge of sunshine yellow in window patterns. A maid, no, two, are by the door. Both wringing their hands, putting them to their mouths, talking quickly in high-pitched voices, arguing, pleading with the men. I don't remember the pleading as that; I remember the sounds, the high staccato of rapid-fire Arabic and the laconic replies of the men. Just sounds to me. Now I see them and can tell it was pleading.

But the pleading changes to crying and their hands go up and down rapidly, loosely, like Howdy Doody. I see their faces quickly as I go by them in one of the men's arms. Their faces are pulled down at the mouth.

Out the door.

This memory did not occur first on the written page; nor did it appear so literarily. It was essentially enacted by me, as a series of sounds and movements. The visual images came in the slightly altered state I entered (very concentrated, still, alone, only a sort of deafness to ambient sounds in the ears) when writing down what I had reheard, refelt (we might say re-membered), and refreated. I heard the shoes, felt and spoke the sounds made by the maids, shook my hands.

What can we say about this memory? First, it is of a very short space of [End Page 185] time, a minute or two at the most. Sometimes memories are only seconds long. Sometimes they are longer. But never does a memory as I define it span years, or more than a single episode, or bits of several similar episodes. Memories are self-limiting, and in real time. Narratives of the first sort described are not. They are the real returned, in some stored form: the fragmentary scenes, the sounds, the smells, the touch on skin, return as if they are happening again.

Second, it reflects the effects of the adrenaline rush that may accompany trauma or threat: the heightened awareness of the smallest details, and the laying down in memory of these. The noradrenaline rush is also evident—the freeze response—in my shutdown, the focusing on something small, the dissociation from the circumstances.

Third, my childhood confusion about what is happening is evident. It seems that my cognitive, analytical faculties cease quite quickly; I do not think about what is happening. I am instead a sponge for the stimuli activating my senses.

Fourth, there is little affect in this memory. Theory has it that I indeed was afraid, and that that memory resides somewhere else in the mind, perhaps set to vibrating by this, but not necessarily connected to it in a way I will grasp or be able to connect in the present. Like Rachel, I am an observer of my own distress, and not distressed as a true witness might be. I occupy a nether world neither in my body nor in the body of another. Generally, I have found that the emotional memory associated with this sensory one will arrive in disguise—generally a depression or anger, and about nothing in particular—several hours later. But if left to its own expression, this associated memory will take a most interesting and powerful form, reflected in the memory below:

4. Body and Transcendent Memory

Sometimes it comes quickly, as if I were standing at the end of a tunnel. There is a hard wind, but a sucking too, a strange smell, that makes you turn and look. I see in black and gray in the half-light of the tunnel mouth myself, much younger, running toward me.

"Promise not to tell."

This is what I see, with some eye that resides simultaneously in the very middle of my head and in my feet and hands and subtly, like a pair of tight pants, in my vulva: my own Alice-down-the-rabbit-hole, running, down, down, into a swallowing darkness. In this place things are backwards, inside out, layered, kaleidoscopic. Now I see her hair sticky with sweat, the dress too clean now, covering something that is not, and I hear the tap, tap, tap of little party shoes in the long, hollow space; a splash of water dirties the white anklets.

My heart beats so fast I can feel it. Deep in my ears a high pitched sound gives way to a deadening, as if I were coming down out of mountains. [End Page 186]
Dreams paralyze the dreamer: memories paralyze and then animate in useless, inappropriate ways. I scrabble about on the floor, hiding and crying. I hide my hands, cover my orifices. And yet it is not the me you would see if you happened to look in on this scene. It is a small me. I have become the memory--re-enactment, re-living, re-membering, pure and simple.

It feels like this: Alice comes to get me and takes me down to see. The rocking becomes rhythmic with a thrusting motion, and sounds that sound like a mixture of keening and heavy breathing come out of me. Then, in about twenty minutes, it is over, sometimes with a climactic set of actions, sometimes with just a winding down into sobbing as if I were very small and caught in the hiccupping final stage of tears. This time there is much light, golden-hued; sometimes there is a red-black as if I am deep inside myself seeing the colors of my own interior. This time I feel another presence--arms around me from behind, big skirts surrounding me and a sense of skimming just above the ground, or a gray sea. Sometimes there is a feeling of total abandonment and powerlessness, of complete, existential separation and helplessness, and I feel my arms outstretched, or hear my voice, far away, begging, then just crying. In such cases, it is clear to me then that there must be some other force beyond my own body which keeps me alive, to which I belong, or I would be dead.

Throughout such memories I am there, not here, not thinking, not feeling as me now, just participating, reliving something clearly not understood, not given meaning--just lived and recorded, as if in amber, now cracked open.

The memory embedded in the above description is not as wild as some, and it includes a brief description of the process of getting to and entering a memory, when it describes the rushing dimension of it, the transporting quality of it. The recall was not this writing, but its own several active times on the floor of my living room. But writing the above was itself a memory-event, spinning out onto the computer screen without editing, simply there while I was immobilized except for my fingers, as in a state of dream-paralysis. Perhaps the computer, requiring so little physical effort, makes such concentration possible, reduces the difficulty of making the unconscious conscious. It has always seemed to me that writing has helped me to manage the memories, squeezing them out into lines, a sort of discipline or control. That aside, the details themselves, all I knew at first, are my most basic and concrete sorts of memories, which were clearly in my body, and of a place I did not inhabit normally. They record a version of the "survival mystery" as well--the experience of the nonordinary, of the transcendent, in the midst of what was perhaps an overload of ordinary, real world stimuli.

These images appeared more vividly and in less organized fashion than they are presented here, more--or other--than seen: felt, reenacted. They show that more than the event as an objective observer might describe it, or even than the emotions surrounding the event is recorded, remembered, experienced at the time of a traumatic event. [End Page 187] This is not particularly pretty in this memory, but it is momentous, different, and clearly not of the ordinary. It is a jumble of experiences, suffused with emotion, heading to what is really another place, a nonordinary reality that has its own landscape, its own apparently metaphorical reality that is in fact not metaphorical at all.

Here is what happened, perhaps: there was in this case, as I perceived it, a near-death experience. At the point of a full and total realization of the absolute quality of my powerlessness, my apparently inevitable slippage from life to death, I found myself saved at the last moment by something beyond this world. Perhaps I felt transported to some saving place. Perhaps I focused on a bit of sky or ground and found myself there, or somewhere else apart from my body. This is what I recall.

Memories of this sort are generally discounted as crazy, or at best, uninformative in the course of the everyday--certainly, for the most part, not memories. They reflect, perhaps, Bergson's distinction between habit and spontaneous memory--being a part of the memory that understands and records pure duration, the pure intuition of how things are. Such intuition, unfortunately, seems to be irrelevant to the process of living in the present. Yet however thwarted by practicality, they appear nevertheless time and again, in their more subtle forms: dissociation; long, impenetrable daydreams; disturbing dreams or nightmares; numbness. These are seen as pathological detachments from the real, rather than as remembered flights into the super-real, which is, of course, what they are.

Second, I was confronted at the time of my violation with the banality of it: sex of this sort is terrifying, but it is also disgusting. As adults mercifully in control of our bodily functions and boundaries, we forget the power of disgust, and of shame. Torturers, however, and those who operate other institutions of total control, know it well, using it to good effect as a tool. To the child, who is barely gaining control of bodily functions, barely setting up the limits between self and other and the legitimate and illegitimate, improper breaches of those limits, it is palpable, making her sick. She sees grown people losing control of their bodies and literally leaking; likewise, she sees herself unable to control those body parts which her parents have spent a good deal of effort teaching her have something mysterious to do with her identity, her growing up, her definition of herself. She is, she understands, the one who controls these orifices. They define the world within and the world without. The attacker makes a mockery of this control, and the parents' disgust at lack of control on the potty becomes the child's disgust at penetration. More basically, she sees in her own loss of control, and in whatever wounds she may sustain, the seemingly real possibility of simply leaking out
There was however, an option. Perhaps I could not tolerate the real men I saw and what they did, the sounds they made; I certainly could not stop them. I could not change them, but I could transform them into something I could battle with my own forces ranged and at my command on my battlefield, in the realm of the nonordinary. I resided at those times at least in part in a world of what some would call fantasy, though this erroneously implies that it was not real, which at least to me it was. So not flesh and pink skin and hair but black cloaks and talons and knives and witches and my own white knights. Not fat and small but darkness and light. Fairy tales, as it were, my own, became my truth, my experience, and the places in which I won. Titanic battles, monsters, became as much my memory as any grunting or any crying, as simple and graphic in their own way as the other. Now, these are as much my memories as any objective accounting of events that I might do in the present, assembling facts. In fact, they are more truly my memories, because they do not admit of facile explanation, or easy description, because they are descriptive of an internal state, of a child's internal state. They are of the events as I experienced them. These along with the reenactments of the cries I heard, the ways my body was moved and moves now as if on its own, and as if it were quite small, are what I remember.

This brings me up short, however, face to face with the challenges of falsehood and confusion. These memories were the first to make themselves literally felt. When they emerged, they lacked the context of the first and second memory narratives here, which came years later, and were essentially constructed by the grown-up me. These early memories, literally made early in my life and appearing early in my process of recall, were the uneducated, compensating recalled experiences of a child, a child experiencing among other things transcendence. As such, without even this meta-context which at least defines them as memories, they were unbelievable, incomprehensible. They contributed to, rather than reduced, my survivor's silence.

In telling such things, I was invariably asked to say "what happened." "But this is what happened, as I knew it," I replied at first, except when I disbelieved they were memories myself. Somehow the words would seem to turn to lies in the throat, or upon hitting the ears of whomever might be listening. Whatever I said, I finally recognized, would indeed be untrue because it would not be what I knew/felt; this had no words. I detected in myself in sideways glances in mirrors and windows the wild eyes and slightly overdone gesticulations we associate with those who are mad, or at least a bit unbalanced.

There is, empirically, only one other answer to the question of what happened: that of the perpetrators; no one else was there. Undoubtedly their story would be quite different from mine; the legal system hinges on constructing a "really true" story from such conflicting accounts, and in general we assume the existence of such a story. But of course it does not exist, at least it did not then, however it may be created now. Then, in the language of telling, is finally, centrally, not important, though we so easily miss this fact. Now is. So we hee ourselves to a third story, that of the omniscient but nonexistent--at the time--observer/narrator, actually, to a story about now. As if one might find the real me there, the one squeezed out of my body by the perpetrator. But what me? Clearly not the child. Clearly a newly constructed me. We come here to the function of narrative for the survivor, and for the listener.

In time I put a story together, residing in the place of the omniscient narrator, constructing this conventional accounting of something far from what I first knew and then recalled. Oddly, in doing so, in creating a context, I created an explanation for myself, and hence, quite literally, a self--one not predisposed to disorder and chaos, to wild bodily recall understood only half-heartedly as the meanderings of fantasy. One not particularly dead or empty. Instead this new narrator, this new rememberer, was capable of logic and rationality, of giving in Delbo's "external" way time-ordered, storylike narratives. I was now this--the storyteller, actor, one with a past visible and organized on paper and in the long lines of words that flow like water out of my mind. The memories now all seem real, even the odd memory of something far from what I first knew and then recalled. Oddly, in doing so, in creating a context, I created an explanation for myself, and hence, quite literally, a self--one not predisposed to disorder and chaos, to wild bodily recall understood only half-heartedly as the meanderings of fantasy. One not particularly dead or empty. Instead this new narrator, this new rememberer, was capable of logic and rationality, of giving in Delbo's "external" way time-ordered, storylike narratives. I was now this--the storyteller, actor, one with a past visible and organized on paper and in the long lines of words that flow like water out of my mind. The memories now all seem real, even the odd memories, and they are allowed to stay because they are nestled into a context of a socially constructed (or at least recognized) reality. So the final construction gives back the self--dissolved before, somewhat like a watercolor wash, in the midst of threat and the survival strategy of leaving the body--establishing the outlines of the new self as contiguous with the body seen in the mirror now. The body memories reside in the midst of a story of myself, which has by its telling redefined me. The body telling is the body then and the body now as well, the passage of events and time not clear at first, but established in the course of creating the story. I am the one in the mirror now, without and within the same, returned from a literal experience of looking at a stranger, of feeling at best as if there were a double image there, linking the survivor and everyday selves with the aid of a self largely defined as one who tells.

Narrative in all of this is processual, an active and continuous denial and reassertion of memory, in a slow process of building a story of loss and recovery, of placing body and mind in a cultural narrative that recognizes certain things as truth, and the body's language as always in need of translation. It gives an adult's interpretation of a child's knowledge, being a kind of education across time.

What can be said then of narrative and memory and of the naïveté of much discussion of memory? First, narrative, as simply an accounting in time of events in time, limits what can be told, indeed making the truth of body recall appear unintelligible and false, because too disjointed and without context. Second, narrative points up the essential problematic of violence. Narrative requires a narrator, but the destruction of the self at the root of much violence makes this narrative nearly impossible by definition. The question is not only "what is there to say," but "who
is there to talk?" The answer comes perhaps in the course of the body's own healing of itself, of which speaking is a part. Taking the "I" now as speaker, recognizing that the self to be reconstituted is a self now and only now, the teller builds a past around the known, embodied memories; a story is created. Fictional perhaps, in this or that element, as connections between the bits of embodied story are made. But real nevertheless, allowing in the telling the rebirth of the injured self. Survival stories are in the classic sense religious stories of death and rebirth, as much as they are often nearly technically such stories at the time of the survival itself. The survivor survives twice: survives the violation; and survives the death that follows it, reborn as a new person, the one who tells the story. Hence the compulsion to tell.

What is lost in such a story even so, in the creation of self as teller of a story reaching from then to now? The reclaiming of the self comes at a price—the transcendent, the wild power of the body do not precisely yield up their secrets: they are tamed. We lose, in other words, certain dimensions of the truth in the telling of it. Perhaps this is why Rachel insists on retaining the notion of her story as fiction—so as to protect her other, unspeakable knowledge of the event. However terrible, it is somehow compelling; if for no other reason than its firm rooting in the body, and in the transcendent. Like sex, it has a certain presence; like the reach for metaphysical explanation, it has power. The choice perhaps has to be made; self and identity versus intensity, and in place of transcendence. Not the choice of the mystic perhaps, but a choice, an embracing of normalcy.

Notes

1. I am indebted to Lawrence Langer's Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory (New Haven, 1991), for a good deal of insight into notions of memory and telling. His work largely and continuously informs my own. The quotation comes from pages 21 and 22; it is a statement by a member of the Polish underground. I am in no way suggesting that the experiences of other survivors are the same as those of holocaust survivors. But there are unavoidable similarities, and the struggles of holocaust survivors pave the way for others along the continuum of survival. I might argue elsewhere that the power of certain abusive family systems is absolute in ways that survivors of political repression know, but I will not do so here. We might note in this regard, however, incest survivors' fascination with holocaust literature. See, for example, Sylvia Fraser's use of Nazis in her memoir, My Father's House: A Memoir of Incest and Healing (New York, 1987).

2. Langer's work makes this abundantly clear for holocaust survivors, but it is found elsewhere as well. In my several years of work with survivors of Democratic Kampuchea, I have consistently felt in survivors the tension between telling and the fear of not being believed. Some resolve this tension by refusing to speak, going so far as to say, "That was then, this is now." Others suggest that they must carefully cultivate an ability not to remember, not only because memories are actually relivings of terrible events, but because they are not wanted or accepted in the present, causing people to turn away or reject those who speak them. Nevertheless, given a small window of opportunity, many survivors will tell their story, however it undoes them, or they will tell it with a certain degree of humor or formality. Still others will tell with passion, stopping rather often to comment on the paucity of words: "How can I tell you what is in my heart?" These tellers seem at other times the most settled and comfortable with life as it is. While an incestuous family is not the holocaust or Pol Pot's Cambodia, perhaps from the perspective of the child there are indeed similarities: total powerlessness, secrecy, and wounding being part of both. Similarly, survivors of incest report their unwillingness to tell, for fear of not being believed or of being considered bad themselves. Judith Lewis Herman's Trauma and Recovery (New York, 1992) compares various experiences of violence from war to incest, noting that the power of the "unspeakability" of crimes, rooted in social desires to deny their existence, haunts all survivors.

3. I found Mary Warnock's short book Memory (London, 1987) a useful summary of English and French attempts to deal with memory, and I have found some of her terminology useful as well. Perhaps her greatest contribution to my thinking in this piece is her discussion of the simultaneously body/mind nature of memory: "I believe that mental events and events in the brain are in some sense identical events, not that one kind causes the other, nor that each happens coincidentally or in parallel with the other, but that they are the same happening" (p. 3). Warnock's discussion of memory as a form of knowledge is also helpful. Working with Sartre's discussion of imagination and memory she summarizes: "Consciousness of reality is knowledge, and so memory is a kind of knowledge. Despite the fourth characteristic of images in general, specified at the beginning of the book (their spontaneity), it now seems that, insofar as memory consists of images, these are not wholly created by ourselves, or rather, we cannot create them in any way we like. Being concerned with the real, memory images dictate to us" (p. 35). Warnock also realizes that memories are not, finally, simply about images: "It seems, then, that the alternative to defining recollection in terms of images with a particular flavour is to define it as a kind of knowledge, knowledge, that is, with a particular meaning or sense of its own" (p. 27). What Warnock does not address is the reality and differences of traumatic memories, in which what is recalled is, like the experience itself, different, torn from the fabric of ordinary recall and ordinary
Charlotte Delbo, quoted in Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies* (p. 7). Delbo’s various notions of memory and her descriptions of their operation are the clearest and most unstinting I have found. To quote further: “When I speak to you of Auschwitz, my words don’t come from deep memory; they come, so to speak, from external memory [*memoire externe*], intellectual memory, reflective memory” (p. 7). Langer notes (p. 7) that Delbo’s “thinking” and “sense” memory interweave, particularly in oral testimonies. I think this is the case, but while Langer suggests that the reader/listener must “recognize and interpret” these shifts, I don’t think the survivor can count on this. Langer argues for a way to read narratives which simply defy the normal structure of narrative and experience. I argue as well for the process by which the survivor comes to tell the narrative that will be heard--however incomplete—and becomes able to explain the process of getting there. I say this, I suppose, because I do not have a great deal of hope that nonsurvivors will be able to learn to listen differently. The questions of the interviewers in some of Langer’s transcriptions suggest that even these theoretically sensitive people have little idea of what they are hearing (see p. 63 for an example). Whether things can be so terrible as to make this empowerment of the narrator, this voice, impossible is of course the question raised by Langer and by Alec Wilkinson, who raises it with respect to Cambodian refugees (“A Changed Vision of God,” *The New Yorker*, 24 January 1994, 52-68). I cannot speak for these sorts of experiences, though I hazard to guess that in some Cambodian cases, I have seen that telling does make a difference, does give one back oneself, even if it is a wounded self. For myself, developing the proper narrative has had a salutary effect, though at a price.

Sherri Szeman, *The Kommandant’s Mistress* (New York, 1993), pp. 139-40. This novel is based upon the real characters Maximilian Ernst Von Walther, concentration camp commandant and protege of Himmler, tried at the Nuremburg Trials and executed in 1947, and Leah Sarah Abramson, never found after her removal to a concentration camp in 1943. Known before and during the war as a poet, Abramson may have written, rumor suggests, the poems found under the floorboards of the Kommandant’s office. The poems were published in two volumes: *The Dead Bodies That Line the Streets* and *Survivor: One Who Survives*. Whether these are indeed the work of Abramson remains in doubt, though they do reflect her style. Whether she was the Kommandant’s mistress likewise remains a matter of speculation. Szeman has clearly taken some liberties with her novelization of a rumored affair. She captures, however, a sense of nonlinearity of memory in the basic style of the novel, which manages to maintain a certain forward movement while jumping about in time.

For more information on wounding and the effects of violence, see Henry Krystal’s *Integration and Self-Healing: Affect, Trauma, and Alexithymia* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1988), and Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery*. Herman’s careful clinical account of the aftermath of violation and the cultural predilection not to hear are central to this paper. Herman is exact in her understanding of the nature of traumatic memories. A particular emphasis on the importance of physical wounding is less often discussed in the literature. I think it is critical, reflecting again the primal connection of mind and body. It is touched on in discussions of pain, particularly in Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York, 1985) and David Morris’s *The Culture of Pain* (New York, 1991). Both Scarry and Morris address the problem of language and pain, and the importance of finding meaning for the experience of undoing. Clearly, wounding results in pain, and so the two are intimately related; they differ in that pain is only sometimes a result of the eminently social process of wounding, and that wounding always causes some sort of pain, even if, as in the deep wounding of soldiers in the heat of battle, it might not be sensed at the moment. More simply, wounding is, as I use the term, a social act; pain is a state of being, an experience.

This discussion likewise relies on the work of psychologists and psychiatrists. Esther Rashkin’s work on literary analysis and the psychoanalysis of narrative in *Family Secrets and the Psychoanalysis of Narrative* (Princeton, 1992) summarizes other work in the field, including the work of Abraham and Torok on intergenerational “phantoms” and “cryptonymy.” This is perhaps where the work done here should go next, to the processes of “encryption” completed by the narrator. These are both socially given and required, and undoubtedly used to hide the psychically intolerable as well, but I am not ready yet to undertake the sort of analysis Rashkin brings to bear, being not a psychologist but a survivor and anthropologist.

This story was told to me by a refugee resettlement worker, who witnessed the memory as she took the man to a job interview, sometime in 1985.

Delbo, quoted in Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies* (pp. 6-7). Compare Wilkinson’s summation of Mrs. Im Cheann’s difficulty (“A Changed Vision of God,” 53): “Mrs. Im Cheann sometimes wonders if she is really alive or if she died in the rice fields; that is, she feels that the beatings she received caused her soul to be driven from her body, and she sometimes believes that it is back there [in Cambodia].” Delbo’s discussion of her memory of Auschwitz as continuing in parallel, held back only by a skin that threatens to break, is echoed by Cambodian survivors and survivors of incest with whom I have worked. Some of Delbo’s work is available in translation; Rosette Lamont has recently translated *Days and Memory* (Marlboro, Vt., 1990). The translation here is Langer’s.

Fraser, *My Father’s House*, p. 205. Popular psychology books for survivors generally gloss over this dimension of the experience; the classic in the field, Ellen Bass and Laura David, *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* (New York, 1988), mentions it only briefly. However, stories abound, and this
quotation from Fraser's book makes it clear that the line between dreaming and memory, particularly in the child, is
difficult to draw. This quotation, having much to do with reality couched in the symbolism of fantasy, is but one of
several creating a landscape of castles and forests (p. 205). An understanding of these reveries, which are more than
encryptions, probably would explain a good deal of the current hullabaloo around quoted "cult abuse," which in some
cases (by no means all) may be other forms of abuse encoded (Rashkin might say "encrypted") in more nonordinary
language. Bergson's notion of "pure duration" is well described by Warnock; see n. 15 below.

the death camps is still, to my mind, among the clearest accounts of meaning in extremity as I have heard it
articulated by Cambodian survivors, however he has been criticized for making too much of the survivor as hero.

12. Two good accounts of shamanic journeying and out-of-body experiences are Edith Turner's Experiencing Ritual
(Philadelphia, 1993), and Robert Desjarlais's Body and Emotion: The Aesthetics of Illness and Healing in the Nepal
Himalayas (Philadelphia, 1992). These make it clear that experiences are culturally connected and shaped, and
shaped as well by the movements of the body in the landscape. Such experiences are perceived to be about more
than everyday reality, to be real in a crucial and meaningful way, and not merely fanciful representations of hard
reality.

13. I was told this story by the woman described, as we sat in an American restaurant and she tried to eat a huge
salad, with, of course, bread. She became agitated and then animated, and told the story for approximately one hour,
without interruption. When she stopped, the whole table of listeners was in tears, as was she. But as she herself said,
holding her thumb and forefinger about an inch apart, "you know only a little bit."

14. There is a good deal of discussion these days about "multiple personalities." My discussion of selves does not
relate directly to this debate, although one can see how the concept would work, in the splitting into multiple selves
which hold the multiple strands of memory. I am more simply making the case for a survivor self and another self, an
existential division. A practical working out of this way of surviving, which rather grounds the notion of multiple
personalities, is recorded in Fraser's My Father's House, in which she says, "When the conflict caused by my sexual
relationship with my father became too acute to bear, I created a secret accomplice for my daddy by splitting my
personality in two. Thus, somewhere around the age of seven, I acquired another self with memories and experiences
separate from mine, whose existence was unknown to me. My loss of memory was retroactive" (p. 15).

15. Alice Walker, Possessing the Secret of Joy (New York, 1992). Walker's character captures quite well the
experience of recall, and the issue of integration (pp. 72-75). Interestingly, she does not appear to carry the notion of
telling to the conclusion I describe, however. She instead kills the perpetrator, which while seemingly an empowering
act, is in fact to be expected in the tradition. Tashi resolves to remain, I would say, with the power of embodied
memories and their mystical connections, to remain separate, though in the end she is at least partially foiled. The pull
to do so is strong, though the effect is dangerous and difficult, looking a bit like illness.


17. Mary Warnock's summary of Bergson is particularly helpful in making the distinction between a memory useful in
the everyday and the mind's comprehension of "pure duration": "As soon as we form distinct memory images these
are infected by perception. The divisive, space-dominated nature of our bodies, and the space-dominated conception
of time, takes over and controls us. Within pure duration, on the other hand, we are free: our spirit, the medium of this
kind of memory, is indeterminate, released from the causal necessities of both space and time" (Memory, p. 29).

18. Des Pres in The Survivor devotes an entire chapter to the notion of "excremental assault" at Auschwitz and the
Gulag. While I of course was not in similar circumstances, Des Pres makes useful arguments and comparisons
concerning this often-neglected emotion. I was struck recently by my young daughter's frequent reference to things as
"disgusting," even things which I found disturbing or violent rather than disgusting, such as road kill. At first, I
considered her insensitive, and then wondered if the concept were not perhaps a little more real to her than it has
become to me.