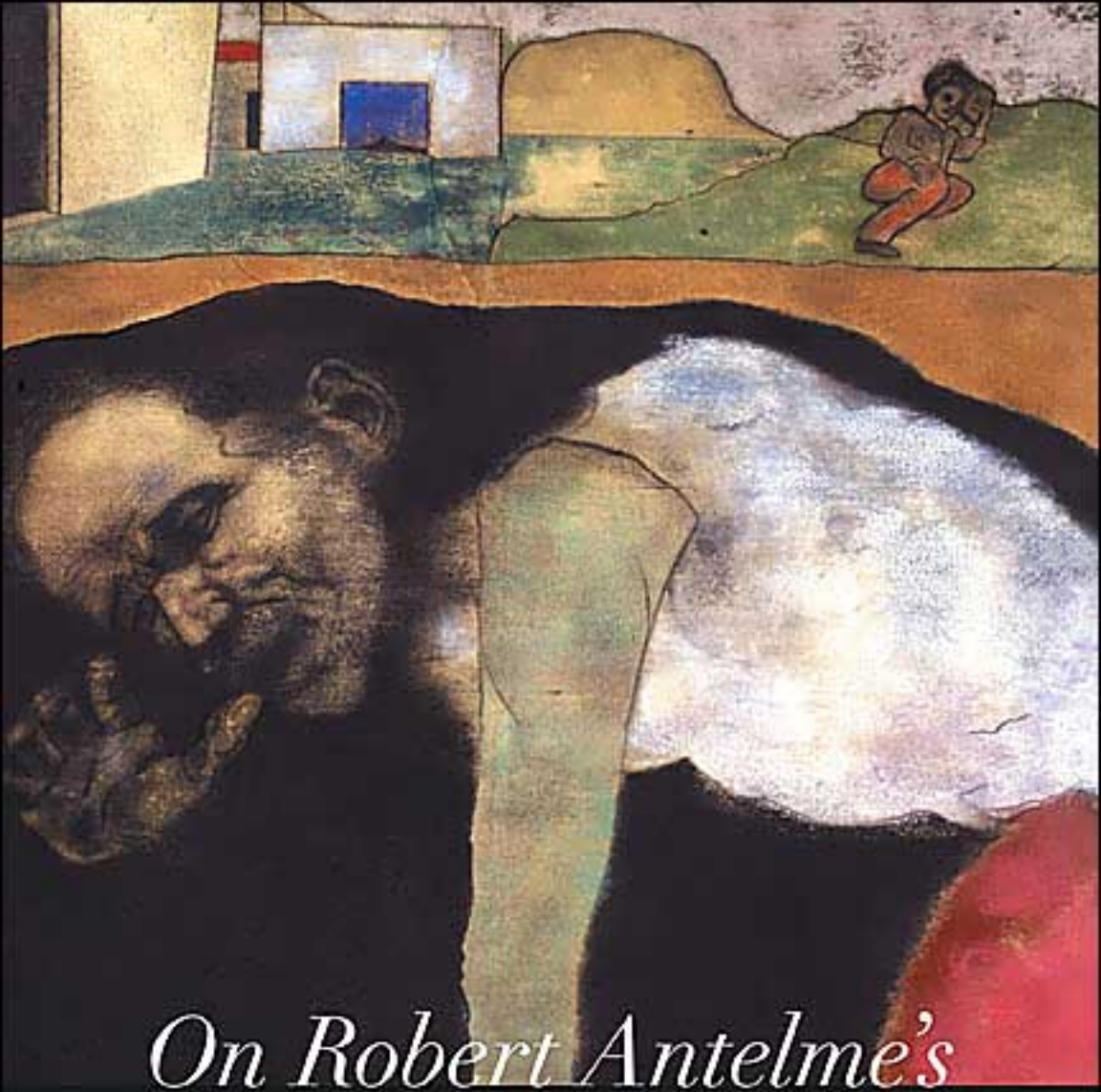

On Robert Antelme's THE HUMAN RACE

ESSAYS & COMMENTARY

Edited by Daniel Dobbels • Translated from the French by Jeffrey Haight

On Robert Antelme's *The Human Race*

Essays and Commentary

Edited by Daniel Dobbels
Translated from the French by Jeffrey Haight

The Marlboro Press/Northwestern
Northwestern University Press
Evanston, Illinois

The Marlboro Press/Northwestern
Northwestern University Press
Evanston, Illinois 60208-4210

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 0-8101-6063-3 (cloth)
ISBN 0-8101-6064-1 (paper)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Antelme, Robert.
[Espèce humaine. English]
On Robert Antelme's the human race : essays and commentary / edited by Daniel Dobbels ; translated from the French by Jeffrey Haight.
p. cm.
ISBN 0-8101-6063-3 (cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 0-8101-6064-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Antelme, Robert. Espèce humaine. 2. Buchenwald (Concentration camp) 3. World War, 1939–1945—Prisoners and prisons, German. 4. Prisoners of war—Germany—Biography. 5. France—Politics and government—1945– I. Dobbels, Daniel. II. Title.
D805.G3A7513 2003
940.54'7243'0943224—dc21

2003007117

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

Contents

Part 3
Discussions, Interviews, Testimonials

Translator's Acknowledgments

I wish to express my gratitude to Austryn Wainhouse, Camille and Charles Chutczer, Danielle Connolly, and Sarah MacMillin for their assistance at various stages in the preparation of this translation.

On Robert Antelme's *The Human Race*

Introduction

DANIEL DOBBELS

"Each time the question: Who is 'the Other'? occurs in our talk, I think of Robert Antelme's book [*The Human Race*]. For not only does this book attest to the society of the camps; it also leads us to some essential thinking. I do not say that an answer is spelled out there in so many words, but rather that, quite apart from the times and circumstances surrounding it (yet considering them, too), what imposes this work upon us is the underlying interrogative power contained in this question. Through such a reading, we begin to understand that man is indestructible, and that he can however be destroyed."[1]

Responding to the impulse that "imposes this work upon us," the present book seeks to pose that question yet again, the question that was lifted to such an unprecedented level of sobriety, of simplicity, and of openness in the thinking, the life, the few rare texts, and this one book of Robert Antelme;[2] to pose it again in its nakedness, its harshness, its extreme and almost unimaginable gentleness and, finally, its inalienable urgency; to pose it again, not without fear and trembling, that it let itself be heard and approached yet another time and recognized in its purest and its most shared strengths and weaknesses. Pose that question such as it was uttered, then written, such as Robert Antelme succeeded in reporting it to us, as a basis and a condition of interrogation that do not present themselves straight on, that is to say, brutally, but rather as the

heart and the heartbeat of a closeness in which we would like to hope we shall never find ourselves wanting; a closeness, a recognition of the Other, to which, with a kind of intransigence, Robert Antelme gave the name "friendship." He had written as much to Dionys Mascolo around 1950: "I would tell you that I don't think of friendship as something positive, as a value I mean; but instead I think of it far more as a state, as an identification, a multiplication of death, a multiplication of questioning, as the miraculously most neutral of places from which to grasp and to feel the constant of unknown, the place where difference at its keenest only exists (as we would understand it at 'the end of history'), only flourishes at the very heart of its opposite, the proximity of death. . . . It is of the questioning that I think first of all, or of the cry of the impossible. . . ."[3]

To be open to this way of speaking, to receive it and communicate its tone and timbre, to remember (especially today, despite different times and circumstances) its meaning, its depth, and its truth, all so naturally permeated by a concern for others: to do all this is to bring ourselves to a level of understanding in which our deepest certainties are disarmed, to grasp this fragile evidence as the shadow of ourselves, though indestructible—present in us as a truly communicative force. This force is what Robert Antelme never forgot—a force wrested from the very worst of circumstances, then laid bare and reaffirmed by its absolute opposite, Nazism. This force never left him, never abandoned him. For him, and for those who knew and loved him, "that ultimate feeling of belonging to the human race," which the deportation exposed as a kind of revelation, was the unforgettable fact during the years following his return from the camp; it was the attention—always primary, but never forced—that he paid to "the unknown as a constant," that he liberated in everyone he encountered. A liberation so discreet, so intangible that it was experienced as an unexpected blessing; so light that it created bonds beyond the self, beyond the gestures and expressions of friendship of which we all feel capable. Marguerite Duras in *The War,* Dionys Mascolo in *Autour d'un effort de mémoire,* and Sarah Kofman in *Smothered Words* have borne witness to it. All the essays published here also suggest it or point to it with a discretion befitting its tenor and intensity and its characteristically unchanging force.

"He would talk hardly at all, and he would be talking. He didn't give advice, and nothing could be done without his advice. He was

intelligence itself, and he detested intelligent talk. I don't know what to call it: grace, maybe," Marguerite Duras said in an interview. This grace did not weigh down on or upset the man or the woman who experienced its sharing; rather, it opened up that "miraculously most neutral of places" where differences of thought, rhythm, or time acknowledge each other through what they possess that is unique and irreducible and common. This grace was the unalterable consciousness of a bond preceding and exceeding all judgment so that it manifested itself even as a need, as a desire for justice lying at the root of all speech.

It is often said that *The Human Race* is a unique book, maybe even one without equal. As such, it makes no claim to be the book that tells the truth about the camps or, by contrast, our own society, and so it exposes itself almost without recourse. It offers itself to everyone's reading, becomes intermingled with it, even becomes part of its own proliferation and dissemination. Though something infinitely common, its being read is the condition of its having been written—for, by being read, it finds the force to avoid being erased, to avoid that absence of perception that is another form of oblivion.

The Human Race lends itself to being read, silently invoking the shadow of the other who is every reader. In the end, *The Human Race* is this state of friendship. Inseparable from the life that accompanies its development, this book suspends the violence of judgment. It profoundly corresponds to what Gilles Deleuze in *Critique et clinique* presents as a kind of waiting:

> What troubled us was that, in renouncing judgment, we felt that we were depriving ourselves of any means of differentiating between beings, between modes of existence, as though everything henceforth was worth the same. . . . Judgment prevents any new mode of existence from appearing, since such a mode creates itself by its own power, by power that it knows how to draw upon; and by itself it is a value, from the fact that it makes a new combination exist. This perhaps is its secret: to make something exist, not to judge.[4]

Let us remember this:

> The SS who view us all as one and the same cannot induce us to see ourselves that way. . . . The more the SS believe us reduced to the indistinct-

> ness and to the irresponsibility whereof we do certainly present the appearance—the more distinctions our community does in fact contain, and the stricter these distinctions are. The inhabitant of the camps is not the abolition of these differences; on the contrary, he is their effective realization.[5]

It is from passages such as this that each voice that finds expression in this book acknowledges that its most secret timbre reverberates in the voices of the others.

PART I

"Mankind Never Abandoned": Writings by Robert Antelme

The Smiling Angel: Rheims Cathedral

Like other Gothic cathedrals, Rheims cathedral is a city in itself: sublimated rigor, disorder, and Romanesque passion. Of the city it possesses the city's completion, the vibrancy of human faces, those faces' strength and tolerance, the shining gaze Malraux noted in their eyes, the rhythm. Disorder is integrated there: the Gothic statues possess the idea's suppleness; they are acquainted with one another; not one figure is closed up inside its own solitary passion. This is an edifice begot of lyricism, and also of a society that holds and maintains itself in it: a sublime edifice of power that soars and spreads as though it existed alone.

Off by itself is this angel who is smiling, its head tilted to one side. It does not belong to the world it adjoins, this world of statues that are caryatids—serene, certainly, since the truth they express is so well affirmed, less heavy to support, familiar, but still caryatids of this ensemble, of this body that together, unchanging, they comprise. This statue supports nothing. Of all the angels in Christendom, this is doubtless the only one that does not belong to this story. Women's tears do not surprise it, neither does it participate in common joys or shared glories, nor does it join in the crowd of charming music makers, nor does it triumph over any evil: in no way does it share in Power. It does not reign.

The smile of Rheims causes us to grasp just how much the smile of the Buddha, of the Far East, is the smile of authority. Everything is

referred back to a weighty equality; essentially everything exists within the vanity of everything else, and without doubt this movement of referral could only find embodiment in a smile, and without doubt too this smile could only be the smile of authority.

If the smile of Rheims is not that of authority, it is because the angel is inside the city—the only one you see, yet seemingly lost. It is not the stone with which the other stones bear up that entire close-knit family, a huge, diverse, righteous family where everyone preserves a name and that has crowned so much of posterity with those names. What it is . . . is crushed. But not crushed by this building, or by that event, or by some power. It has always been crushed, crushed forever.

Its essence is to be powerless. Its smile cannot be a smile of dominion. To always have been, but above all *to have forever to be.* And this smile cannot be the smile of irony.

The slight inclination of the head, bespeaking knowledge, obedience, and custom. The commandment that he obeys is the regard; no matter which regard, upon no matter what. From plant to man, from man to man, from man to what is absent, what is there is his face. Radiant or hidden, inevitably it is there. Word, image, music: everything expresses it, and nothing. It lies at the heart of that realm where all relations are born. Forever starting anew. Possessing nothing, capable of nothing, it must be there, forever. And should it be said, "The only transcendence is the relation between beings." It is he whom we see, in joy or in sadness. Permanent hostage of this prodigious fortress, neither master nor brother, he is in whatever happens, whatever we cannot fail to acknowledge.

Revenge?

There is no problem here: the prisoner is a sacred being because he is a defenseless being and because his luck has come to an end. If this man has been personally responsible for criminal deeds, he should be judged. And should he be condemned to death, he has the prescribed rights of those condemned to death. Execution being properly a clean-cut, outright act, the direct consequence of the judgment, nothing can be added to it, and the condemned should not be made to suffer anything over and above what they have been sentenced to. Barbarity is what anyone whomsoever makes him endure additionally.

The great majority of German prisoners of war are not criminals; not liable to any special judgment, theirs is simply the legal status of prisoners that is recognized by all nations, and for this very reason they risk being subjected to additional abuse. This has happened in France, and that we absolutely condemn it must not be doubted for one second.

The full meaning of this condemnation is not simple, and we would like to provide an explanation of its complexity.

We do not wish to write a single line that would not be understood by all our deportee comrades; we wish to take the most widely dispersed instincts into account—indeed all the difficulties that arise naturally for these comrades. In short, we hope that our position might seem

just as valid to those who would instinctively reject it as it does to those to whom it appears obvious.

If we do not succeed, if our attitude must remain militant, if, in good faith, divisions on a subject so grave have become established, then not only has the war and captivity been good for nothing, but it is also possible that neither one nor the other was lived fully.

On the contrary, a true awareness of the conditions of captivity has to carry with it a complete refusal to admit these charges.

More generally, that same indignation, hidden or expressed, that animated the French against Nazi barbarism must be expressed now, just as covertly or just as openly, against the attitude taken by some of the French. We speak of it, not simply to declare that it is ignoble to have allowed certain groups of German prisoners to starve, or to have shot some of them quietly, under cover of night in the corner of some camp; we speak of it above all to affirm that far from avenging us anyone who strikes or shoots a German prisoner insults us by associating us with his consciousness—should, indeed, any clarity of revenge reign here, not simply that thickheadedness of hidden motives that finds satisfaction in a shot in the back. We strongly doubt that there are any deportees among those who have mistreated these Germans—although, if there were any, this would be a more serious case still, for it might appear to be less exceptional. This appearance is what we have to obliterate.

Though there is no way to speak of the crimes of Nazism, they do belong to a type that is humanly possible. We have experienced what was possible, and the Lilliputian caricature of this great "example" fills us with contempt and disgust. Only the world in its life from day to day can avenge those who died, for these were not ordinary deaths; only the victory of the ideals and behavior for which they died can possess some sense of revenge. A death such as this cannot be weighed against some new death; only the coming and the development of a new society, and of a certain inner world, can answer for it. These dead are not present at all in the manifestations that could disfigure those who think themselves just, but they are present in those moments when, "thinking" about them no longer, society tries to integrate the meaning of their sacrifice.

Anything more is a blemish. Just writing this, we remember those German women who laughed at the herd of us during our evacuation, and the women who laughed in the factory, the day the *Meister* (fore-

man) kicked and punched a poor Italian who hadn't the strength anymore to lift a heavy part. We see again that German civilian, so like so many other Germans in his speech, his back, his neck, who couldn't resist raining blows down on our heads as he passed by us in the factory. We think of our hatred, which extended to almost everyone, since almost everyone kept on wanting us dead, or at least accepted our obvious misfortune. To be sure, some of them didn't approve, even felt sorry for us; but they lived in fear of the *Lager.* Our hatred extended to everything: to houses, to the way somebody walked. So we couldn't easily feel the charm of the little blond child we saw on Sundays, standing in front of the farm next to the *Kommando.* We didn't have the impression that a punishment was being imposed on us for which only those who inspired and executed it could be held responsible; we felt, rather, that we were experiencing a condition beyond all laws, where our fears could find no object, where no respite existed, where anything was always possible at any moment; we felt, in sum, that such a life could not be contained within boundaries fixed by ideas of crime or punishment, but rather that it proceeded from an absolute absence of ideas about relationships between human beings. This taste for disrupting life, this surrender to a logic that led to the gas chambers was naturally so profound that we could not avoid the temptation to see it in other Germans. We sensed a widespread responsibility, because we felt that, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, "the leaders are taken in by their own myths and the troops are half accomplices, that no one is absolutely in command and no one absolutely obeys."

This German attitude appeared crushing to us. And we do not want to discover its shadow in France now, in a situation infinitely more mitigated, one that is by its nature essentially different. No, I do not dismiss the sort of horror and terror I felt, returning from Dachau, at the sight of a young man who looked German, in a café in a village in Alsace; nor the instant revulsion I felt recently at the movies during the showing of an old German film hearing sounds that brought back the *Kapo* talking. Nor so many other hallucinations; for we returned hallucinated, and even now we still have those necks and those backs before our eyes, and when we see German prisoners we rediscover the same necks and backs. It would be false to assert that we're indifferent to that; but it would be stupid to think that we have the slightest temptation to take revenge on them, above all idiotic to believe that we might have that

temptation more than others. We maintain a kind of stupor that can't be translated into any deed; we are just as alien and uncomprehending faced with any deed directed against German prisoners as we were faced with the laughter of those German women. To think that a deportee could delight in the fact that some German prisoners in France were themselves about to become "deportees" too, that he could even tolerate such a thing, is to think that because we were thoroughly beaten up in Germany we're delighted now that those we're holding are getting it back. To think that we might be a part of all that, to do such things while claiming to think of us, is to think that "morals" from our time over there have taken hold of us, that by some sort of infernal mimicry we've even acquired a taste for them: this is to comprehend nothing of what we experienced there. Above all, it is to fail to understand that by taking it out on German prisoners we perpetuate the hell.

Hundreds of thousands of comrades died in German camps for the victory of simple ideas of justice, liberty, and respect for human beings. Can we hope that it is not already too late to believe in that victory? By mistreating prisoners of war, by letting them die quietly of starvation, we betray those very ideas that are the most valuable content of victory. We hold both our dead and ourselves up to ridicule. How can we accept that? Why, once back in France, should we have changed our views? In things like this, there is not one morality for going over there and another for coming back.

We have seen those things that men ought not to have seen, things that could not be put into words, things not addressed either by hatred or by forgiveness. Once out of there, whatever our situation, we wanted to believe in our freedom, we were giddy about it. While we were still skeletons, this belief would have provoked us to violence against any arbitrary personal humiliation and we cannot allow it to weaken or abate now that we have some flesh on our bones.

I remember Good Friday in 1945. We were still prisoners, and we joined with several comrades in a completely nonsectarian spirit. Christ's passion, I must say, suggested no more to us than simply what we were living through; he assumed his responsibility, and we certainly never ceased to claim ours, too. Faced with these mistreated German prisoners, we feel the need to defend the same endangered values, even though we're placed on the opposite side now.

Of course, the truth over there was simple; next to it, all other hostile images seemed a tangled maze. That is what makes it so difficult to return to a life in which truth never appears alone, but is always diluted in the midst of all life's adventures.

But it isn't within our control to feel free of involvement when respect for human beings is at issue. Our experience made us physically sensitive to the man deprived of freedom. Henceforth, an imprisoned man is a man we think about; we are inside his innermost being. We draw no childish conclusions from that, but we affirm that in his situation, given what he can be subjected to, the prisoner is always right.

Being deprived of freedom is already punishment, quite apart from death. Anything else is the stuff of the barbarians.

Nothing I say would be worth a thing if I thought I had unconsciously distanced myself from what I believe to be our comrades' profound consciousness. But should the mother whom I know of a woman friend who died at Ravensbruck happen to see this, she would, I think, be appalled, she would even want to insult me. In it she would find blasphemy, even treason. Yet I know that it is to our friend that I am being faithful.

Also there are those, individuals and families, who, given the impossibility of compensating by any act for the burden of their sorrow, simply remain silent. But to withdraw like this is a certain way to remain in hell, and one has to get out of there.

We don't want to "toy" with people anymore. Anything that even distantly resembles what we saw over there literally tears us apart.

In all likelihood, part of popular opinion considers it perfectly natural for us to sustain our hatred and even tries to keep us in it by reminding us of what we experienced, and would even reproach us for trying to go beyond it.

But we are free not to let ourselves remain locked in a prison which is—alas!—so easy to enter, free not to remain indifferent when some Frenchmen, without gas chambers or crematoria, make pathetic attempts to play the barbarian.

There are some fatalities that we refuse to accept, because they would lead us back to war, to Buchenwald, to Dachau.

So to the follies of revenge we say no. No to the secret avoidance of involvement. No to the cowardice of the unscathed.

NOVEMBER 1945

Poor Man—Proletarian—Deportee

"Blessed are the poor . . ." Was it inevitable that, by pointing this way to those whom he preferred, by investing all goodness in them—by, in short, consecrating this condition by implying the "evil" of riches through this consecration, implying that evil arose within a certain type of relationship between men, creating rich and poor thereby (for he was talking about rich and poor)—was it inevitable that Christ would see his message slowly turned upside down? That the idea of the greatness of poverty would gradually become preferred to that of the "evil" of riches, oft-cited though it was? Was it inevitable that, faced with this consecrated victim fixed like some eternal value, the position of the rich would in practice find itself recognized in the name of Christ? That over time its position would be tolerated, would even benefit, as the counterweight to the eternal nature of poverty's greatness? And that henceforth these two opposites, one sacred, the other damned, would progressively find themselves acknowledged as natural and complementary truths? Above all, was it inevitable that the rich man, the oppressor, who, in the cult of the poor, enjoyed the sacred value of the victim, would be allowed to find the path of salvation? That he would become so convinced that this path is the most unquestionable of paths that he would need absolutely to be surrounded by the poor? That life's necessity for the rich man would be that both rich and poor coexist, but that

the antidote to this necessity—charity—would also exist, in the cult of the poor man, with its own condemnation of the rich man?

And was the corollary foreseeable? That the poor man is destined for blessedness, and that, in the end, he becomes convinced that he will find his chance for this blessedness only in his condition as victim, as a person who is exploited, in his predetermined, sacred place within the linked couple of rich/poor?

This couple has become progressively anonymous in history, but the two partners remained closely linked for a long time. The poor man has tended to hide for more than a century, however, and if he hides as the poor man, he is no longer the bearer of truth. The rich man needs him no longer and he is going to become an animal, another wolf. He loses his human appearance. But the rich man does not grow weary; he seeks his poor men, and so some still remain. The teaching can still be verified. It was true. You can still be saved. Sheep are in the world still.

This sheep, this poor man, this outstretched hand ("Thank you very much, sir"), this half-extinguished heart, this crooked smile, this lowered glance: on whom does all this cast light, if not the rich? Christ spoke for everyone, but not *specially* for these, for "these poor people, here." The time has come when the poor man hears the message of the poor only from the mouth of the rich. And this poor man lowers his eyes, and he agrees. "The gentleman is very kind."

But was this risk not contained in the message that consecrated the value of the poor?

The poor man was a truth himself. He was the possibility of redemption made real. His relationship to the rich man placed him in the surest relationship to God. But this relationship was fixed, was in some sense an obligation. Salvation and *real damnation* were linked. He surpassed the rich man before God, but he relied on him, they were linked. No *truth* existed that *separated* the poor man from the rich man in this world; he did not envelop the rich man in this world but existed instead within his universe.

For centuries morality has gravitated about this situation.

But Christ's message certainly did condemn injustice; and, in our view, nowhere does it deprive the poor of consciousness. . . .

And this consciousness had to manifest itself. Its appearance, its development as class consciousness, as the poor man's consciousness of his condition as a man who is exploited, will express *the truth that separates* the poor man from the rich man. And this man—conscious that absolute wrong is done to him and to his brothers, because his work is exploited, conscious that this exploitation *is* injustice, conscious that one can speak of values, and especially of justice as a value only when the major cause of the major injustice will have been diminished—this man, who will fight so that values are realized as human values, this man is called a proletarian. In him the poor man disappears. The concept of the poor man tends to become an empty concept. The rich/poor couple breaks apart. A truth now separates them, and it is the proletarian—who certainly didn't invent it—who wants to realize it. From a poor man who is a totally destitute being, he wants to erect a totally free man who is recognized as such by everyone. And he wants to universalize this value.

The value of the poor man was realized only in God. The value of the rich man was a permanent value that assured the poor man's being saved in God.

The proletarian (also a destitute man) will realize the value of the poor man (also an exploited man) in another value: simply man. And this implies the disappearance of the rich man as rich man, the disappearance of "evil" in the sense of the message.

Separate but related values—crabbed values, if you like—such as rich and poor disappear, slowly, brutally, through struggle, to the benefit of a universal value, man—which the proletarian wishes to realize and in which he too will disappear.

Triumph of "the good," if you wish. The Message, at least, is restored in its essence. The absolute wrong that it implies, in the name of which the poor man was consecrated, that was smothered for centuries—this wrong is not merely qualified but also mended. Now may man aim toward his likeness—the *Image of God.* Now it can be talked about, nobody suffers from it, no further mystification is possible.

We have located this passage from poor man to proletarian within history; that is, though we do not forget those immediately stifled expressions

of a dawning consciousness of the condition of oppression, we consider the proletarian at the moment when, as part of the proletariat, he is an objective force.

But, though he is consciousness become a material force, he obviously remains destitute, he remains rooted in the poor man. It is because he is a poor man that he can be a proletarian. But as long as the regime of exploitation remains the rule, at any moment he can become just a poor man again. This is the risk he runs, should his consciousness weaken or grow dim; but this risk progressively diminishes to the extent that he does not remain alone in his situation, that he is not only supported by his class but that this class also develops a morality embodied in its forms of behavior.

But the risk exists nevertheless, and it exists for every man. Everyone can find himself in the poor man's situation. But now everyone can always remain, or become, a proletarian.

In the Nazi camps we were in a situation of total dependence and oppression—in the situation, physically, of the absolute poor. Yet it would be superficial to try to assimilate the deportee to the proletarian, to the rich/poor couple. Whatever else he was, the deportee was already an enemy for the rich SS. An historic enemy. Collapsed or courageous, bled to death or still alive, the deportee embodied the negation, the rejection of the SS order; you could say that, for the SS, he was a priori a proletarian. So he was not a "man," and the more oppressed he was the less chance he had of being a man. We are familiar with SS logic.

So the deportee was not a naked slave. He was an enslaved enemy, and through this commodity-slave the SS was able to give concrete justification to their myth: "This clearly could not be a man, because he was our enemy. And here's the proof . . ." and so on.

From the beginning, no mere naked slave of the SS, the deportee could at no time separate himself from what the SS represented for him or what he represented for the SS. This double connection was experienced at all times. So the deportee had little chance of getting lost inside the SS—of justifying, that is, the SS in relation to himself. He could only do so by betrayal. And yet he had to betray; he had to serve the SS. Obviously, he was not in the situation of the poor man who puts the rich man under an obligation and offers him the path of salvation, since the

SS wanted to kill all their *poor men.* He was in the situation of a servant, and he tended to justify the SS in his universality as rich man against all these poor men—and so he stopped being a poor man himself.

In light of this extreme situation in the link between rich and poor, we understand how impossible it is to fill in the concept of the "poor man" from any point of view that is not strictly phenomenological. From the moment, in fact, when the couple rich/poor, exploiter/exploited, protector/protected—whatever you like—is broken apart by the awakening of consciousness in the exploited, the poor man has ceased to exist as such, except as the enemy of all poor men. When the poor man has become a proletarian, the rich man has become the SS. And when the rich man has become the SS, the poor man, who remained a *poor man, cannot* remain in the situation of poor man; he has become an enemy of the proletariat, or else he has immediately agreed to his own death.

The man we have called the deportee, who remained a deportee, was indeed the most destitute of men, but he was never *the poor man.* Merely to wish to live—but standing side by side with the deportees—was enough to make a proletarian, a man who actively refused the SS project to make him die, a proletarian on the same level as the universal, because the freedom of all men was tied to his victory, to his survival.

A believer, in his relationship with God, could accept his state; in his relationship with the SS, no. No believer could have recognized before God that his situation vis-à-vis the SS was a predestined one, that it was all right that way, that nothing could be done. There did not exist a single believing deportee who, on again hearing Christ's message—"Blessed are the poor"—did not think, did not immediately cry out, the complete, the true meaning of that message: that the SS order, the order of the rich, represented the negation of man, and that it had to be combated. There was not, in other words, a single poor man–deportee, believer or nonbeliever, who was not a proletarian. Not a single believer who did not see that SS charity was a police method, a perfect opportunity for oppression.

Not a single deportee existed who did not, in the course of his ordeal, follow the path of the poor man's awakening of consciousness, of the slave facing his master; who did not swear amidst the barbed wire to

subordinate everything to the recognition of man as the universal value and did not experience thereby his own power.

Faced with this poor man who arrived at consciousness, the rich man goes crazy. The object of charity gives way; humanity, for him, is transformed. The proletarian haunts the world, and the world is defiled: yellow, black, Jews, communists, Christians, those never before *seen,* pour forth—men who say no, *subhumans.* They must be killed; they must disappear. But some of them are still there. The work becomes specialized: the police, the camps. But they're condemned to more and more of them, they're locked up with them behind the barbed wire. The universe of the rich, the SS universe, is reduced, and soon there exists only the proletariat that haunts them in a world where, among all the nations of the poor, there slowly spreads the consciousness that the proletarian has gained of his power and the vocation that gives form to that power: to make of every man a value truly recognized by all men.

We have used the example of the camps because there one experienced in all their purity the rich man's power and morality: the contempt that that power implies, the resources and the extreme limit of that contempt, the dreams stemming from it in the oppressors, their brief success, and then their final failure. And also the poor man's situation, and the proletarian's, and the mingling of the poor man's dream and the proletarian's concern.

We believe that we have revealed, or recognized, that there is no inherent difference between the "normal" system of man's exploitation and that of the camps. That the camps are simply a sharpened image of the more-or-less hidden hell in which most people still live.

That the "morality" that covers exploitation camouflages the contempt that is the true motivating force of that exploitation. And that, because of this, we cannot accept any morality or any value if it cannot be made concretely universal—if, that is, it does not, first and foremost, imply that the conditions of man's exploitation of man disappear.

Principles Put to the Test

At present, reason prompts that temptation to let go of everything, to say no more, to renounce all our usual criteria of truth. Yet reason also analyzes, has never stopped analyzing; it imposes its criticism, and even now it conjures up amidst the ruins a mirage of reconstruction. It says that everything is still possible, although today it says that nothing is possible. The idea that nothing is possible is certainly what prompts most of us to write, and it is this obvious fact that prompts the need to refute. Overwhelmed as it is by theoretical disorder, mesmerized by what Morin calls the "social monsters" taking shape, powerless in the face of crimes, progressively exhausted from anticipating and from hoping—our thinking finds itself today at a kind of final moment, and it is forced to rebuild itself from nothing. But, faced with what most denies it, it finds itself whole once again, however exhausted it may be. It is as though it had said or imagined nothing before; it demands the equivalent of a first look at things. It is in that vision that we shall put our trust.

The war waged against the Algerian people is really, as François Mauriac says, a "massacre of the poor." Our ideals, our institutions, our works—all that is ours that is beautiful, our whole national patrimony, our very trials and tribulations even—is reduced to nothing if we fail to recognize that the soul of the Algerian people today, whether they

remain silent or struggle, is part of the very being of those works, part of our very own being.

It must not be forgotten that each person's history unfolds through the need to be recognized, and recognized without reservation. Friendship demonstrates this infinite capacity for recognition. We must realize that others always have this need, that they are in thrall to its demands and, just like ourselves, are bent on receiving satisfaction; that they are consumed by it, that they are like wild animals, that life is a hell when that satisfaction is not given, when it is wanting. The path of recognition seems infinite. We take a couple steps, then hesitate, since "we-can't-do-everything"; but only petty cynicism would justify drawing back before such a task.

Recognizing the other is a sovereign good, not a half-measure. Philosophy and world literature are largely the spectrum of this movement of recognition, which they comprise. This, not its opposite, is what is tacit in the human universe—tacit, however, to the extent that this universe is constructed as a caricature of recognition. This caricature is called "understanding." The Europeans, who are the fiercest about Algeria, say that they alone know the Arabs and that we cannot understand them. The Arabs are supposed to have lived in some sort of "accord" with those who "understood" that they did not need to be treated like men. The Europeans could not do without that accord, since it ensured their comfort, and anything apart from it was . . . war. The Algerian War is the rupture of this accord, the end of this comedy. In one corner of the universe, the tacit accord—the hoax, that is—has been shattered, and only could have been through arms. The Algerians decided to take not only France and its principles but also the whole world at their word, as they talked and as they behaved; to take at their word not only those who directly oppressed them, with whom they'd decided to stop talking, but also everyone in the world who talked about the freedom and independence of peoples. Hence the mixture of admiration, dread, and discomfort expressed by these latter; hence, also, the admiration of the ex-colonial peoples for those today who alone attempt "the impossible."

The most rigorous and generous currents of thought had been no more especially aroused by the scandal of this colonization than they ordinarily were by the world's usual scandals. The liberating work of writers continued—a time-honored, infinite work of explaining, survey-

ing, questioning the world, a work achieved through each word. In deciding to wage war, the Algerians occupy a territory enlightened by philosophy; but they blindly and fiercely anticipate the philosophers, because they want to be chosen, they want to decide their own fate, they want to have an experience of the infinite that is different from their prayers. They want "the impossible," our everyday life *and* what we might call a different understanding of the world.

This thing that they anticipate, which they demand of others, is the thing that is best: it is the faculty that is never completely separated from looking upon the other, at some point, as oneself. This war is the response of violence to violence; but what gives it its meaning is that, to end it, the adversary demands of the French forces their virtue, not their baseness. Who would claim that the war waged by the French forces against the Algerians calls upon the Algerians' virtues in order to end it? No one has dared maintain that the war would end not from weariness but from free consent by the Algerians if they are unable to win their objective.

This war waged by proletarians as pale as death has been supported only by the brothers who share their fate, nameless men only yesterday—the formerly colonized. Those men and women from our side who have died or been imprisoned along with them are heroes.

But the international Communist movement—whose motto is "Workers of the world, unite!"—did not mobilize its forces in this battle. It did not think that being involved in this battle at this time was facing up to its reason for existing. It did not believe a Communist Party existing within a country that wages a colonial war could tolerate that war. On this question precisely, the French Communist Party has permitted compromises that should not be permitted: all the opportunism—at the expense of the Algerian combatants—in order to follow the sinister SFIO (the French Socialist Party) toward some mythic popular front, all the "rigor" to justify the crushing of Budapest in defiance of that popular front.

The cries of the Algerian people in arms, and of the Hungarian people, are lost in the deserts of various Soviet agencies.

Today, on the eve of French fascism,[1] people are again being hanged in Budapest. And people are lying, and everything begins all over again. And the Chinese leaders are delighted. And here what Budapest says is rigorously reproduced.

The party in Algiers[2] inspires horror. And the Communist Party inspires horror. And what can be said of the bottomless swamp?[3] This link produces a terror-stricken feeling, and this very special feeling gives some measure of the extent of the danger. The forces that surround us are neither weak nor innocent. What a multitude, what lucidity, what determination will be required to overcome them!

May 28 in France was a day stolen by the people from its official rulers who were there but who did not count, about whom nobody thought, about whom the people tried to forget.[4] A grave day, but so new that it seemed light, beyond time, a Sunday in a year of Communist aspirations. Just and fraternal ("Peace in Algeria"). Nonbelligerent ("Put de Gaulle in a museum"). Not cruel ("Put the paratroopers in a factory"). Aware ("The International," "Le Chant du Départ," and also "La Marseillaise" for everybody). The best of everybody, perhaps. Communism was something of a new idea. But this day vanished with the wave of a hand. And then the regime we were living under disappeared without a cry.[5] This dreadful and tender image of defeat remains.

The worst is not impossible tomorrow.

To the workers of the world who are not crushed by their police, the Algerians who have taken the day off—some against the advice of their own organizations, though today they number hundreds of thousands—demonstrate that a people can always take affairs into their own hands. This war has that virtue. The lesson shall not be lost.

Communism today is smothered, disfigured, covered with the blood of its crimes. But the ideal remains. Latent and immobile, the forces of the universal republic are there. The need for this republic will assert itself.

The workers of our countries are in a privileged situation. But if they become aware of the resources offered by such a situation, if they too decide, by their own means, to take affairs in their own hands, it is they—and today, one is tempted to say they alone—who, through the huge consequences of their actions, can put an end to the imposture, the lie, and the crime.

"Man as the Basis of Right"

As a friend of Bernard Rémy, I appear here to testify to the respect that I have for the prisoner, to my friendship with him, to the kinship of thought that unites us, and to my admiration for him.

The civilizing of human societies is the idea, the essential preoccupation, that stands at the center of everything that Bernard Rémy has said, written, and done: the realization, that is, of a generalized communication between people, the end of the barbarism in which, in varying degrees, our societies exist. Its first condition is that, throughout his life, each man on the planet be recognized as a person, as a basis for rights, whatever may be the time and circumstances of that life, and especially his military life. Before his name, before his appearance, before being named, he is a basis for rights—something we all recognize in ourselves. Every institution exercising power over men—the state first of all, and the army as one of its principle organs—must abide by this rule. Although the motto of the Republic—liberty, equality, fraternity—implies this recognition, we know that in reality this amounts to nothing, as colonial wars have shown until recently, along with the fate of immigrants and, more generally, that law of supply and demand that regulates the fate and status of the worker who exists primarily, often exclusively, for the power of the work that is bought from him.

This observation does not lead us far from the case at hand. In effect, in progressively urbanized industrial societies like France, with their excessive technology and with the force of the media (radio, television, advertising) that produces uniformity, the lives of people become burdened, sad even; they tend to be conditioned, narrow, and anonymous to such an extent that we no longer hold up as we should the idea of the person nor the rights of this person in the face of public power. We tend instead to value the idea of the person in direct regard to others, to those close to us, through the pressure of the basest sort of competition—a wretched competition, deadly sometimes, in a life of the jungle. Man as the basis of right has become the man of the jungle. Obviously he is not the cause, but rather the product of this hell. This is true, with some variation, of the great industrialized countries; it is true, in any case, of our own. Now, what is taking shape in this society marked by a crazed technology and the crushing effects of advertising (by a language, that is, reduced and shaped by men who are the products and agents of these very social structures)—what is taking shape at the summit of this generalized technocracy, what surrounds and guarantees and protects it, is an army that by itself is already the extreme form of technology, to the extent that its language is reduced to orders and to a code; an army which, as a result of the complexity of nuclear armaments and of all the surveillance systems that are certain to proliferate, is increasingly intrusive. So seen, it is a fearsome institution for all of society. How, then, can one permit things to develop this way? How can this man, Bernard Rémy, this person who is the basis of right—who wants to see, to hear, to speak to a brother on this planet, to try to live in peace with him—how can any man, if he still is truly alive, if he still *desires* something, desires above all to speak and to live with the other, since in no man does he recognize a *natural enemy;* how can he not reject this society taking shape, which is already here, a society haunted by suspicion and fear, its language repetitive and stereotyped, a society greedy to the point of self-destruction? And it is this very man who so ardently desires friendship, this man devoid of hatred, whom you are going to name—whom you have already named—the *enemy within.*

Hating only every sort of tyranny, the writer and militant Bernard Rémy evokes such friendship. The generosity, the richness, the imagination that are the very stuff of Bernard Rémy's thought, and that he offers with what I would call joyfulness, are the things our world is in

need of. I repeat: these are glad thoughts, without hatred; they call for the erasing of national borders, for the destruction of what separates men and, above all, of that baleful property that enslaves both those who enjoy it and those who suffer from it; they call for knowing the other, this unknown someone against whom the world's peoples will refuse to fight; they call for the civilizing of society—that is, for making it civil. Finally, they call upon soldiers—all soldiers—to agree, as a friend put it, to recognize that they are civilians first, and that this be central to their thinking. To such an attitude, some military leaders often reply, "Let others begin, let them disarm; let other armies fade away," and we are thrown back on never-ending discussions. But men must not let themselves be buried in their bloody past. One day they will have to begin to talk; one day something different, something new and true, will have to be said on this planet. And in fact things today are new. That soldiers want to be recognized as citizens, as the basis of rights, is not the simple result of a crisis, of agitation. There are no ringleaders. Something is speaking and calling for freedom the world over, and from this who can suffer, except a few people grown sick with power, a few fanatical property owners, a few groups of bureaucrats? No one is excluded from the society evoked by Bernard Rémy's ideas. It is an open society in which everyone recognizes everyone else, in which all work together, help each other, greet each other, know each other, understand each other. There I know that the other exists, and that he is my brother.

The proclamation of such a world and of such means of attaining it—the proclamation, for example, of the process of disarmament, of restoring a civil society in our terrorized, deaf, official world, with its nullity of language, where everyone fears his own shadow and the activities of everyone else, a world blanketed with weapons—is the proclamation of initiatives that will be liberating for everyone, including those who oppose these ideas. Especially, I am thinking of those in the military, for in them also the desire for such initiatives is present, although buried. Against every form of tyranny the best defense lies not in the proliferation of military institutions but in a truly free society in which each man exists *as a man* for every other man, exists as an end in himself. This is why I take the time to repeat to this tribunal that Bernard Rémy's words and his acts—for the two are inseparable—are benefits for all mankind.

As a former deportee, I humbly submit that I live and identify with these ideas, and that they are at one with what arises from my personal experience.

Finally, I would like to attest to the general truth and the hope that burns in Bernard Rémy's words, words of a truly universal peace and fraternity.

Poetry and the Testimony of the Camps, Followed by Two Poems by Maurice Honel

Upon returning, each of us tried to say what the time spent in the camps in Germany was like, and the cover of silence over those years has been somewhat pushed back by books. Books, conversations, reunions. Everything everyone has said. All that is not simply the cry of life victorious, not simply the biological need to experience freedom, not simply the desire, from this ordeal, to make others aware of things that can be helpful in organizing human affairs.

The veritable hemorrhaging of expression—experienced by everyone, whether or not he was a writer—expresses one truth that encompasses all the others: namely, that each of us wants to put his entire effort into recognizing himself in that time now past and that each wants to make it understood that the man speaking now and the man who was over there are one and the same.

Described this way, the effort might seem superfluous. Clearly it's the same man, the one who's speaking and the one who was over there. We know that, you say, and that's why we are speaking of deportees.

But the Pharisaism of forgetting and of silence is precisely this, because you can easily recognize that it's the same man, yet you prefer not to recognize that this man might speak like a deportee. You don't talk about both going over there and returning; you talk about the baggage that accompanies returning. And you implore us: "That wasn't real

life! Forget it! You've got a false idea of things now. That was a false time. Forget it. And don't forget only the horror and the evil, don't throw away only the memories, throw away what you think are truths, too. It was a parenthetical time." Then, after recognizing that it really was the same man, soon you're saying, "But you couldn't have been the same man. You're crazy, you're dangerous. If you think that you've seen that the causes of the evil you experienced are what you say they are, and that we must lessen these causes; if you say that by talking like this you're simply someone whose eyes are open—when in fact you're hallucinating—then you're a threat to mankind, you're not human, and we won't recognize you as human any longer."

And so we come full circle. But since there aren't many of us, we can talk, and we're left alone. To the SS, the Jew or the antifascist who was in each of us had corrupted the man in each of us, and so the man had to be rejected. Should the deportee "corrupt" that man in turn—should he, that is, most decidedly wish to realize truths that have become clear to him through the mechanics of history and through the penal servitude over which so many precious words have been uttered—then here also the man would be rejected. But there aren't many of us, and we're left alone.

To the extent that his testimony might become an alibi for those who do not in the least wish to understand or to learn, perhaps each of us should address this criticism to himself—this criticism of what is most obvious in his daily life. But it could hardly be otherwise, of course. We would *first of all* have to describe things, then (or, preferably, at the same time) try to explain and comment on them. But by the mere fact of describing them we're condemned to putting them in parentheses *for others,* and to putting the man of that time in them, too.

It seems clear now that we let ourselves be carried away by the illusion that society could not easily assimilate and then digest the phenomenon. But the phenomena to which some people want to assimilate the camps—to things like hail, or natural cataclysms—are really what society digests most easily. This is even the function of forgetting—which may be acrimonious or tearful, angry or vindictive, depending on the case. The sign of all this is all too visible now. Testimony is not even supposed to serve as an alibi anymore. It is spit upon, rejected. The digesting has taken place.

In fact, the men who returned wanted to demonstrate what they had seen, in complete confidence. They did not think that because they had done so, someone would say to them, "It was fate," or "It was a natural monstrosity." Still less did they think that they would be told, more or less authoritatively, that they too had to think of the camps as just a natural monstrosity and that, if they didn't want to be considered bad citizens, they mustn't draw any conclusions from this.

Their testimony has been seized upon, mystified, then buried. Phenomena may be swallowed but consciousness doesn't go down so easily. However obscure, it can always be reawakened; however mystified, it cannot be made to say that it hasn't understood what it has understood, that the savagery inflicted upon it by a particular system wasn't inflicted upon it by that system but by something else—by some sort of malediction.

And this is why these men go on talking, but with greater and greater force and awareness.

At this point we would like to mention the collection of poems by Maurice Honel, *Prophétie des accouchements* (*Prophecy of Births*). Poetry did not, surely, run so great a risk of creating that naked, "objective" testimony, that kind of abstract accusation, that photograph that only frightens us without explicitly teaching anything. It could, on the contrary, risk fleeing the reality of the camps, letting that reality be glimpsed only through a melodic counterpoint, through themes of nostalgia that surround but never penetrate this reality of fog and words—the sun, laughter, color, and so on.

Honel's poems, on the other hand, seem to provide a rare example of the power of poetry as the evocation of one's situation in the camps and as an expression of their meaning. Almost never is the poet released from, nor does he let go of, the object or the fact, and both impose themselves in an almost mythological reality; and yet neither object nor fact ever springs up outside time, never is it a pure phenomenon. In "The Soup," for example, the mess cup is all-powerful, as is "thickness." The man is almost completely bewitched by hunger, but the protest against that hunger is also there, as is that consciousness that does not bend beneath oppression. This double movement is almost always found in these poems: the suggestion of fact as something that takes hold over everything, and also the contrary, insistent reflex in the

demand of the oppressed man who does not flee the fact, who accepts it but strives ceaselessly to overcome it. Hence we almost always find both the movement that endows the evoked moment with all its surrealistic possibilities and the opposite movement that integrates this moment in consciousness of life in the camps and in ongoing time.

It is the essence of poetry to express experience, to express reality as it is constantly lived, contested, and assumed. This description summarizes and defines what is called the "experience" of the camps quite well. Just to use this expression suggests that consciousness was probably never put to such a test, nor were received ideas ever so thoroughly called into question, to be reaffirmed subsequently as certainties or cast aside as lies.

Honel's poetry represents in a concrete sense a complete form of the growth of consciousness among the men in the camps. It achieves this especially through the jerky rhythm found in almost every poem, rhythm as hard as a kick. This rhythm contributes to sustaining a stifled humor that sometimes crops up suddenly, an irrepressible humor that is apprehended not as a kind of "everything is contemptible," but rather as the most advanced leap of consciousness, the final point in the effort to maintain one's resistance within the heart of the horror.

The poems that have been published about the camps need to be studied more profoundly. All of them express the prisoner's determination to present clearly the most oppressive reality, or at least to uphold the tireless life of consciousness within the camps, often while trying to flee that reality. Whether testimony or prophecy, the poetry of the camps has the greatest chance of being the poetry of truth.

DANCE IN THE HOLTZMANN *KOMMANDO*

In September fog
The thick fog of evening.

In the cement dust
The tired eyes of men
With useless faces.

In the projector's fixed eye
The fifty kilos carried on
Indispensable backs.

Dry cold, teeth-chattering,
Stomach-yawning hunger,
Remembering those
Still walking, carrying
The reserve tank
Certainty of honest
Confusion shovels for
The bottomless pits
The dredging crane
The ore cars always moving
The *Kapo* smoking
Our bread for four
Coal freed from the mine
Staying in the camp's
Electrified depths
The world of so many
Per hundred we are
Twenty per thousand
Still alive
But worth less
Worthless
Cracked.

Dancing
In the September fog
In eternal coal
In the circus
Of the crematoria.

THE SOUP

Four steps to go
But no no luck
To the kettle
Four steps but four
Before me the one
Before me the lucky one
The one for the bottom of the kettle

The ladle balances Fate
Is taken first off the top
It's all clear
It's all water
In unstirred soup thickness
Is at the bottom thickness hanging
Four steps to go
But no no luck the *Kapo*
Doesn't stretch it's
Too far to go
So he starts
A new kettle and
The world doesn't end.

Poems

Robert Antelme wrote these poems before June 1944, the date of his arrest, most certainly during 1943. They were published in the first trimester of 1944 in the fourth issue of *Littérature.* They retain their secret and are unadorned and given over to their time, but an unsuspected form of foreboding resides in and survives from that time: "This rumble is the wailings / Of the neighborhoods and the names effaced" read two lines from "The Train," with this unimaginable echo in the following line: "The howling train prays for those forsaken."

Here we might well recall this passage from *The Human Race:*

> The SS believe that in the portion of mankind they have chosen love must rot, because it cannot be anything but an aping of the love between real men, because it cannot really exist. But the extraordinary stupidity of this myth is obvious here, on the floor of this railroad car. For us, the old Spaniard may have become transparent; but not for the boy. In his view, the wrinkled yellow face on the floor is yet the face of his father, and stamped upon it is his mother's face, and through it, every possible bit of the mystery of filiation. For the son, the father's language and transparency remain as immeasurably profound as they were when the father was still fully sovereign.[1]

THE TRAIN

The train's noise consumes the night,
Earth groans gently beneath its passage,
Noise paints the blue sight
Of death's mask on the faces.
This rumble is the wind
Along the roads that flee
The cathedrals' penumbral shade.
The train rumbles, rumbles on,
Through the night and silent wheat.
And we are the passengers:
Beneath the lids—the broken man's, across the way—
Beneath our friendships' swollen folds,
At our idiocies' crossings,
This rumble is the wailings
Of the neighborhoods and the names effaced.
The howling train prays for those forsaken.
Its furious noise, against each passing house,
Stands guard over those who are lost.

THE BLOOD'S MONOLOGUE

I'm a river
With nothing in it.
I roll on
Like a train in a mine,
Blood, I'm called.

Certainly
I was born in the sea
Which taught me to flow forcefully;
I'm a raging fury unfolding
Placidly.

I have a change of soul every thousand years,
And maybe I'm a wildcat now,
Whose tremblings are looked out for.
I'm in hiding,

And when I show myself
I make all the passersby scatter,

Though it's said that some who run off
Really delight in seeing me.
And whoever sees me concerns me
And I tie him to his father,
And I show him a tribe of slaves.

Whatever's heard is what I am;
This skin is my paradise,
Where everything calls out—
And this night that their mouths give to me.

The sky is my enemy,
The sky names me nothingness.
But in tears we meet,
And the sky, called so pure,
Mingles with the blood.

I'm half the earth,
Of nothingness I know nothing,
Because I belong,
And I'm watched over:
Maybe I'm something alive.

I was peaceful in my prison,
Then one day there was a man
Who delved into my whole name

To show to others another man.
I barely remember him:
Out of prison, they say I gained
Freedom. So I flowed, then.
I only knew how to flow.
That was my toughest trial.
Later on, still other men . . .
But always I get revenge.
Don't accuse the blood,
It's not a sin; only
Let's hide it from the light,
They hurt each other, it and the sky.

BOTH OF THEM

They walk, she and he,
Preferences that are strange
Are in their eyes. The world bleeds gently
From their looks. When they take
Each other's hands, they are strangling
Hands. On their necks
Traces of their fingers.
A calm curtain is always drawn
By their sentences over some
Baleful corpse that their voice
Barely hides. The city is streaked
Sometimes, with these barbarous couples;
It is known that they die every night.

FOREST

I dragged about naked
five years in the city.
When I'd go through doors
They watched this man
Who'd gone out.
The sky still marked out steps
On the way past the cemetery,
Then nothing more.
The forest ahead smothers the earth,
I'd bring thirst to the sick forest,
I'd open my arms to brown, long animals,
I'd lay my body down,
Which won't weigh a thing.
On his last step I carry the man
to the forest. I hear the city howl
And the mad sea hides huge gods
And the echo sends back the echo to me
And the echo of the last step.
The forest is stained with my inert gaze,
The deer closes its eyes with my first look.

I'd fill this overfull forest with wonder,
I'd light it up where I won't be.
In my depths I hear a law beginning,
A shadow beginning I'd have overspread me,
I'd steal from the sky my only indifference,
I'd steal from the sky my error preferred,
I'd steal up to the sky to choose it for me,
I'd fly up to the sky to stop believing in me.
Then will I drink down the forest's blood.

Somebody Stole My Bread!

It was mid-December. When I came back from the factory at noon I opened the box where I'd left a piece of bread from the morning's ration. The bread wasn't there anymore.

For quite a while now, you'd hear guys saying, "Somebody stole my bread!" The guys were screwed, but you couldn't do anything about it. This time it was my bread that had been stolen.

I closed the box, sat down on the pallet, and waited for it to pass.

I'd thought about it in the factory, that piece of bread. At about ten o'clock, when it seemed that noon would never come, that the war would never end, that piece of bread was everything. I could see it between me and that moment, between me and the end of the war. I wouldn't be alone when I got back from the factory; I'd find it there too—mine, for me. It wouldn't be all emptiness after the soup. I'd open the box behind the pallet, and the piece of bread would be there—alive, a treasure that I'd created for myself by the effort I'd made not to eat the whole morning ration.

It had to pass. But it had happened to me. Right away I thought that this hadn't come down on me by chance, that I'd been hit on purpose.

I opened the box again, and I poked around; there wasn't anything. It had to pass. Next to me, René said, "That's crap!" But he couldn't know. And the guy next to the blind guy, he wasn't saying anything.

As for me, I was a lot emptier than the guys who hadn't saved anything from the morning's ration. The guys weren't saying anything. They respected the pain of the guy who'd been robbed and didn't want to make it worse, but they must have thought that all I had to do was to eat my ration all at once, as they had.

The box was empty. I was sitting on the pallet and I was eating the soup without feeling it; the soup was spoiled, too, because I'd wanted more than soup. It was really a disaster; it consumed the end of the war. Who'd done it? There wasn't any more bread, anyway; it didn't exist anymore, but you could find out who hit you. Having to know took the place of having the bread. It seemed to me that if I knew who'd robbed me I wouldn't be absolutely robbed anymore. To know who'd stolen it would get me halfway out of the disaster.

The guys around me were flat pictures, like on a screen. Robbers. Because I looked longer at one guy, *he* was the one, not the guy I wasn't looking at. The blind guy couldn't have picked out anybody; he just had a bunch of bastards surrounding him in the dark.

René was beside me. Why not René? And why not that Auvergnat face that was looking at me from the next pallet? It's disgusting, to poke around in faces like this. The guy who was robbed becomes a hyena; deceitful, like some feeble animal, more deceitful than the robber. Yes, I want to know, and those who need to know are a bunch of deceitful animals.

Some thieves are barefaced. One day we got one of them to confess, one who'd stolen some bread. Some of the guys had said, "It's Napoleon." (They called him that because he wore his cap sideways.) He was blond, and he had a nice smile. We wanted to apply some sanction to him. At soup time, we made him climb up on a bin of peelings that was in the corner of the church. We'd pinned a label on his chest with this inscription: "I stole a comrade's bread." He had his cap on sideways. He lowered his head. That was all. Mostly, he was standing on the bin.

The *Kapos* were joking, with their clear consciences; they were laughing for all clear consciences. It went on for a while. Napoleon was standing up, and he couldn't lift his head. If he'd lifted it that would have meant: "Yeah, I'm the one who did this shitty thing. You saw me, it was me. What more do you want me to say?" But we let him stand there. We could see everything—his jacket, his ears, the position of his feet, the feet of a thief, the shoulders of a thief, the hands that had

opened the box of somebody else and taken the bread. After a while, we didn't even look at him anymore, he became like us again. At last he got down. That evening his soup wasn't given to him.

For a few days, when the guys met him, he was Napoleon-who'd-stolen-the-bread; he produced a wake behind him. But we saw Napoleon every day; some guys worked with him. When he was eating his bread, they were watching his piece with a different attention, maybe. And then, since he had the same bread, the same bony hands, the same striped outfit, since he'd taken as many blows as the rest of us, Napoleon became one of the bunch again.

Maybe the guy who stole my bread is a Napoleon. Should he come to tell me, "It's me," that would fix nothing between him and me. It isn't something between him and me. That he might not have done it doesn't depend on me. I've already become a possible witness now. But a moment ago, the bread was my body. Of course an act rarely seemed this irrevocable over there. You ask a murderer whether he's sorry for his crime, but the question can't even be posed to somebody who's stolen bread. If stealing bread were to spread, the life of our entire society would immediately be threatened. Here each theft of bread really seems like one of the gravest deeds a prisoner can commit. This is the law of our actual existence. It's not a law of convention; on the contrary, it merely expresses the inexorable character of the human condition.

This other Napoleon has become isolated. No one will understand him, even if he's a wretched skeleton. This will be the immediate, initial reaction. The deed is all-powerful, and nobody has the power to decide that it hadn't happened.

If I knew the guy who'd stolen my bread, I'd search in vain for a sign that would distinguish him from me. I know only those who might have stolen. Me, the others. I'll also know guys who have stolen. But I don't know who those who will steal are.

The day after the day my bread was stolen. Noon. Half the *Kommando* had come back from the factory. The other half was waiting for us to get back to have its turn at the soup.

René and I were sitting on the pallet as usual.

Behind his bed, the blind guy poked around in his box. He took the piece of bread and the piece of margarine he'd saved from the morning.

He fingered the margarine, then he stopped and raised his head; he seemed to be trying to remember something. Again he fingered the margarine, poking in every direction.

"I think I had more margarine than this," he said.

We looked at him. He was motionless and was still trying to remember. Then he took the bread again, and he fingered it in turn. He stopped, and again he raised his head; then, again, he turned the piece every which way; his fingers worked the soft part and the crust.

"Who took some of my bread? Some of my margarine and bread's been taken."

"You're sure you had more than that?" René asked him.

Again he poked his bread.

"I still had a big piece. Almost nothing's left," said the blind guy.

He was sitting down heavily on his pallet, his cap pulled down around his head. He was turning his head to the right, then to the left. Dark glasses hid his eyes.

"There're guys who say 'A buddy's bread is sacred,' but I don't say that. I'd rather die than touch a buddy's bread."

The blind guy spoke quietly, without anger. Nobody answered him. He was alone. He wasn't eating the bread he still had. He was still fingering it and didn't recognize it. He still had to hold it for a while in his hands, to be sure that there really wasn't more than that, that he shouldn't expect his piece to become again what he'd left there.

An old Spaniard who was stretched out on the pallet next to the blind guy's called to René. He spoke to him quietly.

René came back, his face shattered. He sat down on the pallet, and he looked at the blind guy, who'd put the bread and margarine down on the pallet and was holding his head in his hands, his elbows resting on his knees.

At first, René didn't answer me when I asked him why the Spaniard had called to him. I asked him again. Then he leaned toward me.

"It's Simon who swiped his bread."

He spoke in a low voice. The blind guy couldn't have understood. Simon was his neighbor. He was also his buddy. René and I understood, too. A buddy.

We looked differently at the blind guy. He still hadn't started eating. Simon's place on the pallet was empty; he was at the factory. He

would come back; maybe he'd joke. Pretty soon the blind guy would say to him, "Some of my bread and margarine were stolen." Simon would get mad. We wouldn't say anything in front of the blind guy; later, we'd try to explain to Simon that he had to sleep someplace else. That's what was ahead of us. Our hands were sweaty. And already we remembered having been untroubled before. We got along happily in our corner, we repeated the same dumb jokes, coming back in the evening; we were at peace.

We already were "remembering" Simon. This evening René is going to talk to him like anybody else. We're going to bump into him. We don't know anything, not the blind guy, not René, not me; we didn't see anything. The Spaniard saw it, he'd told us what he'd seen, something we hadn't seen. We had to believe what he'd said. All of us were floored, and all of us were screwed—liberation together, our shared language.

How to restore Simon's innocence? Simon was defined by the theft now. We had to accept the crushing, crappy truth. The truth was that by the camp's morality, Simon was a bastard now. There was no letting him escape the fact.

What Simon had done frightened us. It was as though he'd tried to kill himself, or had gone mad. We feared for everybody, for ourselves; more than we would have feared suicide or madness, we feared the truth that could be expressed just as irrevocably in a single act and that constantly threatened all of us.

The Germans know that stealing takes place among us. For them, it's simple. "*Alles Schiesse.*" It's natural. We're filthy, we fight over the soup, we're skinny. Guys like us steal from each other. "*Alles Schiesse.*"

If we were freed now, only our mass would be visible. They'd shake hands with each of us, and, for them, we'd all be innocent.

Then, some guys might take the liberator aside and tell him, "That guy over there's a bastard. For a bowl of soup he kissed Fritz's ass, and Fritz beat the shit out of us. This guy over here's a bastard. He shit on us to look good to the SS and remain a *Stubendiest,* and he stuffed his face. That Polish *Kapo* is a bastard. He's a prisoner like us, and to be able to eat he took to hitting us, and the SS saw him and made him a *Kapo.* Then he hit us all the more, and he denounced guys to the SS, and he laughed when the SS hit us."

The liberator wouldn't understand any of this. He'd only see the shaved heads and the bastard's head, decent, delighted at being free, and Jacques's head, exhausted, and all the others', all alike. . . .

When we got back from the factory that evening, we got hold of some boiled potatoes and went back into the church. René and I sat down on the pallet. We didn't peel them, we just cut them into slices, as slowly as bread.

Simon was relaxed, like other evenings. He recounted his day; we watched him busily fill the silence in our corner all by himself. We would have liked to listen to and answer him like the night before; we'd have given a lot for it to have been the night before, or the night before that, even a roll-call night, any previous night, but not that night.

He stopped, and since we weren't saying anything, we thought he was going to talk about that. He was finishing his last potato.

The guys were eating, sitting on their pallets; the church was quiet. For the three of us that evening, the church was a new concentration camp within the other one, and we were waiting for the new barbed wire to fall, for Simon to talk, for us to become free again like this morning. René and I were thinking the same thing since morning: so it's false to think that it's enough to hang on to life, that as long as you're alive here they haven't gotten to you. Simon was alive, and he was absolutely like other evenings; but he'd been gotten to, they'd gotten to him.

Simon was finishing his potato. The camp had closed down upon the three of us. Guys near us could move about, stretch out on their pallets, relax; they seemed to be outside the barbed wire, free.

"So you stole some bread," René said in a low voice.

It's out in the open. Two butchers, facing Simon. He gave a start. His face was young.

"You're crazy," Simon cried, in a low voice.

"You stole some bread, Simon," said René, who leaned forward, his head bent toward him.

"It's not true, it's not true," Simon cried.

He was twenty. He was trying to look at us like before. His face was shattered. He was getting old.

"I know it," René said slowly.

Simon shut up. He leaned his elbows on his thighs. René didn't look at him anymore. He was holding his head in his hands. No one moved

anymore. Around us the guys were beginning to go to bed. They hadn't heard anything. A moment went by this way. Then, without looking at him, René said slowly, "You mustn't sleep here anymore."

The silence became unbearable.

"You guys are pricks," Simon said in a low voice.

He waited a moment, then he took his blanket and he left.

A few days later, Simon came back to sleep in our corner. It all happened naturally. We were happy to have him back. Everybody there only wanted to make him forget it. As his deterioration progressed more rapidly, René did what he could to get him a little more soup now and then. But it was hard, and anyway it was too late. Simon became stooped, his voice grew weak, and the skin on his hollow face became like ivory. He couldn't get into the *Revier* (infirmary) because he didn't have a fever; his temperature was barely eighty-eight degrees in the evening. But one day he caught cold; then he had the fever he needed to get into the *Revier.* And one night a little later he died.

On Maurice Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster*

The impulse toward the recognition of the other, of the infinite other, the nature of this thought—its servitude. Mankind never abandoned. Thought accompanied. It bears the other's shadow, it wants to be silence, the reader's "mute speech."

Thought accompanied, which does not have the heaviness of a resolutely solitary approach. Thought never for itself. Without "dynamism," you might say. . . . Beyond reasons, inside despair, on the verge of disaster; the absence of prophecy; friendship . . . the recognition of what is most fragile; in our reading the author remains henceforth and forever in this month of May, the time in fact of this recognition, when history as recounted was thought.

The most withdrawn life, thought nearest to each of us, the least turned toward self, self always as self and other.

Friendship of the critic; the other's work never abandoned to its loneliness, to a literalness; the gravity and gentleness of this place of twofold hospitality, always the place of first questioning.

Maurice Blanchot's writing carries and is carried by the silence of mute humanity, is its "beating heart"; all of us are there, in the story, dis-

closed/secret, elusive, motionless, giddy, in this ceremony of one's presence to the other, in the everyday that is always the last moment; all of us, inspired, drunk, in distress, borne up as unto death, or bent low; each turned toward the other in an inexhaustible respect, spoken, read; inseparable persons, ultimate stories; sublime persons, impossible metamorphosis. Our beauty.

The immensity of this unarmed speech. The dawn of "human weakness," sovereign.

PART 2

The Presence of *The Human Race*

In the Night That Is Watched Over

MAURICE BLANCHOT

Slowly, during those nights when I sleep without sleeping, I become aware—the word's not right—of your proximity, which yet is distant. And then I convinced myself that you were there. Not you, but this repeated statement: "I'm going away, I'm going away."

And suddenly I understood that Robert, who was so generous, so little concerned about himself, wasn't speaking to me about himself, nor for himself, but about all the extermination sites—if it was he who was speaking. He listed some of them. "Listen to them, listen to their names: Treblinka, Chelmno, Belzec, Maidanek, Auschwitz, Sobibor, Birkenau, Ravensbruck, Dachau."

"But," I say, speaking, not speaking, "do we forget?"

"Yes, you forget, the more because you remember. Your remembering does not keep you from living, from surviving, even from loving me. But one doesn't love a dead man, because then you escape meaning and the impossibility of meaning, non-being and the impossibility of non-being."

Rereading these lines, I realize that I have already lost sight of Robert Antelme, of the incomparable friend I had known. He was so simple and at the same time so rich in a knowledge that is lacking to the greatest minds. In the experience of servitude that was his, even though

he shared it with others, he retained that true humanity from which he knew not to exclude those who were oppressing him.

But he went even further. Not recognizing, in the *Revier,* a companion he had come to see, who was still alive, he understood that even in life there is nothingness, an unfathomable emptiness against which we must defend ourselves even while being aware of its approach; we have to learn to live with this emptiness. We shall maintain our fullness, even in nothingness.

This is why, Robert, I still have my place beside you, and this watched-over night where you just saw me is not an illusion where everything disappears, but my right to make you live even in that nothingness I feel approaching.

NOVEMBER 1993

FROM *THE HUMAN RACE*

Two extracts from *The Human Race* are reprinted here, in accordance with the wish of Maurice Blanchot.

A burst of gunfire. It's always the same, a deluge of shots like a dump truck unloading; then isolated shots. A terrible sound. It enters our backs, it shoves us ahead. Silence of a silent wood. It's not the sound of hunting, or the sound of war; it's the sound of solitary fear and nocturnal, diabolical terror. The final, isolated shot is for the eye that still glistens.

Terror grows within the column, which is still silent, still moving at the same speed. Nobody turns around; everything transpires behind our backs. We keep on walking. We have no idea what's happening, and we wait. They could kill fifty more that way, then another fifty, maybe they'll kill us all; but so long as any of us are left, the column still exists and, backs bent, it walks on. There's nothing else we can do. Even when only twenty are left, they'll still wait, still keep going forward, until the SS have no more column to lead. It's as though we were in league with them. There were something over four hundred of us when we set out, and the SS men will arrive by themselves, with only the *Kapos* and the Poles, probably. We saw the effect death had upon the Italian. He turned pink after the SS man said to him, "*Du, komm hier!*" He must have glanced about him before he flushed; but yes, it was he who had been picked, and when he doubted it no longer, he turned pink. The SS who was looking

for a man, any man, to kill, had found him. And having found him, he looked no further. He didn't ask himself: Why him, instead of someone else? And the Italian, having understood that it was really him, accepted this chance selection. He didn't wonder: Why me instead of someone else? The guy next to him must have felt half of his body stripped naked.

We don't talk. We each try to be ready. Each is afraid for himself, but we probably have never felt such solidarity with each other, never felt so replaceable by absolutely anybody at all. We prepare ourselves. That consists in repeating: "We're going to get it, small group by small group," in seeing ourselves in front of the machine pistol. Ready to die—that, I think, we are; ready to be chosen at random for death—no.[1]

"K. is going to die," I had been told. He'd been in the *Revier* for a week. . . .

I went to the *Revier* to see K. . . .

I looked for K., first on this bed, then on the next. I recognized a few faces, we exchanged nods. Without making any noise, I walked down the row of beds, looking for K.

I asked the nurse by the stove where K. was.

"But you passed him," he replied, surprised. "He's over there."

He pointed to one of the beds near the door; I had in fact passed in front of it. I retraced my steps, and I looked at each face on the pillows on the beds near the door. I didn't see K. When I got close to the door, I turned around and saw a guy who'd been lying down when I had passed the first time and who had just raised himself up and was supporting himself on his elbows. He had a long nose and hollows instead of cheeks, eyes almost without expression, and for a mouth a line that was perhaps curled into a smile.

I went toward him, thinking he was looking at me. I got very close to him, then turned my head to one side; his head didn't move, and the mouth retained its curl.

I went over to the next bed and asked the guy lying on it, "Where's K.?"

He turned his head and with it motioned towards the person propped on his elbows.

I looked at the person who was K. I became afraid—afraid of myself—and I looked at the other faces, seeking reassurance. I recognized them clearly enough. I wasn't wrong; I still knew who they were. The

other person was still leaning on his elbows, head down, mouth halfway open. Again, I got close. I leaned over him and looked into his blue eyes for a long time; then I moved aside. His eyes didn't move.

I looked at the others. They were quiet. I still recognized them, and, certain that I did still recognize them, I at once turned back towards him.

I looked at him from below. I examined him. Finally, to see what would happen, I spoke to him, in a low voice and from very close by. I said: "Hello, old man."

He didn't stir. There was no way I could make myself more visible. He kept that appearance of a smile on his face.

I didn't recognize anything.

So I concentrated on his nose. You ought to be able to recognize a nose. I latched on to the nose, but it didn't suggest anything. I couldn't find anything. I didn't know what to do.

I moved away from the bed. Several times I turned around, hoping each time that the face I knew would appear; but I couldn't find even so much as its nose. Still nothing but the drooping head and the half-opened mouth of nobody in particular. I left the *Revier.*

It happened in just one week.

This man whose wife had watched him leave had become one of us, and a stranger for her. But now there existed the possibility for another double for K., one we ourselves didn't know, wouldn't recognize. Though some guys still did recognize him. So what had come about hadn't happened without witnesses. Those in the adjoining beds still recognized him. No way that you'd ever really become nobody for everybody. When I had asked, "Where's K.?" his neighbor had pointed him out right away. For him, K. was still that person.

Now the name remained: K. It floated above the man I was visualizing in the factory. Yet I hadn't been able to say "This is K." when I was looking at him in the *Revier.* Death itself contains no greater mystery.

K. was going to die that night. Which meant that he wasn't dead yet; that we'd have to wait before declaring dead the man I'd known, of whom I still had a picture in my head, of whom his friend had a still older picture; we had to wait until this man here, whom neither of us knew, was dead.

That had happened while K. was alive; it was the living K. in whom I hadn't found anybody. Because I no longer found the man I'd known, and because he didn't recognize me, I'd had doubts about myself for a

minute. It was to reassure myself that I was still me that I'd looked at the other guys as though to recover my breath.

Just as the stable faces of the other guys had reassured me, so, in death, the dead K. was going to reassure, restoring this man's oneness. Yet it would remain true that between the man I'd known and the dead K., whom we all know, this nothingness had existed.[2]

The Human Race

MAURICE BLANCHOT

Each time the question Who is "the Other"? occurs in our talk, I think of Robert Antelme's book [*The Human Race*]. For not only does this book attest to the society of the camps; it also leads us to some essential thinking. I do not say that an answer is spelled out there in so many words, but rather that, quite apart from the times and circumstances surrounding it (yet considering them, too), what imposes this work upon us is the underlying interrogative power contained in this question. Through such a reading, we begin to understand that man is indestructible, and that he can however be destroyed. This happens in affliction. In affliction, we approach that limit where, deprived of the power to say "I," deprived also of the world, we cannot be anything but that Other which we are not.

Man is the indestructible who can be destroyed. This resounds as a truth, and yet we cannot know it as we know some preconceived truth. Is it not merely an attractive formula?

I think Robert Antelme's book helps us progress in this knowledge. But we must understand what such knowledge carries with it. That man can be destroyed is certainly not reassuring; but that, despite this and because of this, and in this very impulse, man remains indestructible—*this* is what is truly crushing, because no longer do we have any chance of ever seeing ourselves unburdened of ourselves or of our responsibility.

As though the inexorable affirmation in man that always keeps him standing were more terrible than the universal disaster. But why indestructible? Why can he be destroyed? What is the connection between these two words?

I read in Antelme's book: "Yet there is no ambiguity: we're still men, and we shall not end otherwise than as men. . . . It's because we're men like them that in the end the SS will finally prove powerless before us. . . . [The hangman] can kill a man, but he can't change him into something else."[1] A first response here. Man's power is capable of everything. That means that he has power over what concerns everything, and over the power in myself, that is, over the Self-Subject itself. Alienation, in this sense, goes much further than is asserted by those who, needing logical security, grasp on to the ego cogito (understood as the inalienable foundation of any possibility of being alienated). Man is capable of everything, and first of all of taking me out of myself, of taking from me the power to say "I." In affliction—and, for our society, affliction is always first and foremost social decline—man, when struck by men, is altered radically; he no longer exists in his personal identity; he has fallen not only below personhood but also below every class and every real collective tie. In this sense, he is already outside the world, a being without horizon. And he is not a thing: a thing, even useless, is precious. The deportee is not the thing of the SS; when he is still working as a worker, his work somewhat returns the price of exploited man to him; but the work imposed upon the essential deportee, who no longer has a face or a voice, is destined only to exhaust his strength to live and to deliver him over to the vast insecurity of the elements. No longer any recourse anywhere: the cold outside, hunger inside, everywhere indiscriminate violence. "The cold, the SS," Antelme says, profoundly. And thereby he clearly frustrates the enemy's endeavor. What power wanted was to go beyond the limits of power: to elevate itself to the dimension of the faceless gods, to speak as fate, yet dominate as men. With a sure instinct, Antelme kept his distance from everything tied to nature, carefully guarding against seeking consolation in a serene night or beautiful light or the splendor of a tree: "After gazing for a time at the sky, everywhere dark, at the SS barracks, at the mass of the church, at the farmhouse, you could wonder whether, within the overspreading night, it all didn't blend into one and the same thing. . . . History cares not a fig for the night that would do away with contradictions in an instant. History

hounds our footsteps more closely than any God; its are the more terrible exigencies. In no case does it serve to put the conscience at peace with itself."[2] And in another passage: "Francis wanted to talk about the sea. I resisted. . . . When your body was rotting, *the sea, water, sunshine* could make you suffocate. With these words, . . . you were in danger of not wanting to take another step, not wanting to get up again."[3] Here is what must be pondered: when man, through oppression and terror, falls, as it were, outside himself, to that point where he loses all perspective, all reference and all discrimination; when he is given over to a time without end that he bears as the eternity of an indifferent present; at the moment when he becomes the unknown and the stranger—becomes, that is, destiny for himself—then his last resort is to know that he has been struck down not by the elements but by men, and to give the name "man" to everything that strikes him.

"Anthropomorphism" is understood as the ultimate echo of the truth, when everything ceases to be true. Such that we should complete the *pensée* of Pascal and say that, crushed by the universe, man must know that in the last resort it is not the universe, it is man alone who kills him. But precisely in affliction man has always already disappeared: the peculiarity of affliction is that there is no longer anyone either to cause it or to suffer it. It is as though the sufferer never exists, he doesn't really appear; he no longer has any identity other than his own situation, with which he merges and which never lets him be himself, because, as a situation of affliction, it ceaselessly tends to be dislocated, to be dissolved in the void of a nowhere without foundation.

This is the trap of affliction. But here Antelme's book teaches us a great deal. The man of the camps is closest to powerlessness. All human power is beyond him, just as existence in the first person, individual sovereignty, speech that says "I," is beyond him. It is truly as though there no longer existed any Self other than that of the rulers to whom he was delivered without appeal, hence as though his own self, having deserted and betrayed him, ruled over there along with the powers-that-be, abandoning him to an anonymous presence without speech and without dignity. And yet this power capable of everything has a limit; and he who can literally do nothing more still asserts himself at this limit where possibility ceases: in poverty, the simplicity of a presence that is the infinite of human presence. The Powerful is master of the possible, but he is not master of the relationship that does not arise from mastery

and that power does not measure, the relationship without relationship, where the other is revealed: where, if you will, the relationship of the torturer to his victim is not simply a dialectical relationship, and what limits his domination is not primarily that need that he has of the one whom he tortures, if only to torture him, but much more that relationship without power that always brings forth, face-to-face and yet infinitely, the presence of Another as that of the Other. Hence the furious impulse of the inquisitor who, through force, wants to obtain a scrap of language in order to pull all speech down to the level of force. To require speaking—and by torture, even—is to try to make oneself master of infinite distance by reducing expression to that language of power through which the one who does the talking gives rise to power once more, and the one who is tortured refuses to talk in order not only not to join, through extorted words, in the game of opposing violence, but also in order to preserve the true speech that he realizes is easily confused in that moment with his silent presence, which really is that of the Other in him. A presence that no power, even the most formidable, will be able to get at unless by eliminating it. It is this presence that bears by itself and is the final affirmation of what Robert Antelme calls *the ultimate feeling of belonging to the race.*

Deprived of myself, a stranger to myself, what is asserted in my place is the strangeness of the other—man as absolutely other, the stranger and the unknown, the dispossessed and the wanderer—or as René Char says, the unimaginable man through whose presence the affirmation of an infinite demand is passed.

"Our horror, our stupor," says Antelme, "was our lucidity."

Yet what happens to someone who is no longer a presence in the first person, a terrible transformation? How, destroyed as Subject—that is, essentially destroyed in this sense—can he respond to this demand, the demand for presence in himself?

Here again Antelme's book gives us the proper response, a response that is, in fact, the strongest truth in the book. When man has been reduced to the extremity of need, when he becomes "somebody who eats peelings," we realize that he is reduced to himself; he reveals himself as someone who needs nothing other than need in order to maintain, by denying what denies him, the human connection in its primacy. One must add that need changes now, that it becomes radical in the strict sense, that it is no longer an arid need, without enjoyment, with-

out content; it is naked connection and naked life, and the bread one eats responds immediately to the demand of need, just as need is immediately the need to live. Levinas, in different analyses, has shown that need was always enjoyment at the same time; that by eating I not only nourish myself in order to live but also to enjoy life already, asserting myself, identifying myself with myself in this first enjoyment. But what we now encounter in Antelme's experience, the experience of man reduced to the irreducible, is radical need, which no longer connects me to myself, to satisfaction with myself, but to human experience pure and simple experienced as lack at the level of need. Once again it is certainly a question of a kind of egoism, even the most terrible egoism, but an *egoism without ego:* the man furious to survive, attached in a way that must be called abject to living, always to living, bears this attachment as the impersonal attachment to life, and bears this need as the need that no longer is exclusively his but is in some way empty and neutral and therefore virtually that of everyone. "To live," he almost says, "is all that is sacred."

Thus one can say that when through oppression and affliction my relationship with myself is lost and distorted, making me into that stranger, that unknown from which I am separated by infinite distance, making me into infinite separation itself, need becomes that radical need, without satisfaction, without value, which is naked connection with naked existence that also becomes the impersonal demand that alone bears the future and the meaning of all values or, to put it more accurately, of all human relationships. The infinite that is the impulse of desire passes through need. Need is desire and desire merges with need. It is as though by eating I were not nourishing myself, as though I were receiving the Other not as my host but as the unknown's, the stranger's.

But do not believe that with need everything is already preserved. With need everything is at risk. First of all, man can fall below it, he can be deprived of this lack, dispossessed of dispossession. More, even at the sustained level of need without enjoyment—where, instead of a specific will what exists in me is a quasi-impersonal affirmation that alone supports the fact of being dispossessed, and, hence, when my relationship with myself makes me the absolutely Other whose presence calls the power of the Powerful radically into question—this shift still signifies only the defeat of power, but not "my" victory, still less "my" salvation. For such a shift to begin really to assert itself, outside this self that I have

ceased to be, the authority of a Self-Subject must be restored within the anonymous community, no longer as the dominating or oppressing power erected against others, but as something able to receive the unknown and the stranger, to receive them within the justice of a true *speech.* Moreover, beginning with this attention to affliction without which all relationships return to darkness, another possibility must arise; a Self beyond myself must not only become aware of affliction as though it were in my place but must also take responsibility for it by recognizing in it an injustice committed against everyone, that is, by finding in it the starting point of a *common demand.*

In other words, through the intermediary of an exterior Subject, which now asserts itself as representing a collective structure[4] (for example, class consciousness), the dispossessed must not only be received as "other" in the justice of speech, but must also be restored to a situation of dialectical struggle so that he may once again think of himself as a force too[5]—the force that is possessed by the man in need and, finally, the "proletarian." Thus do we always return to the requirement of this double relationship.

Yes, and this is what Antelme's book expresses explicitly in several pages that could be cited, were it not preferable to preserve their full meaning by keeping them within the overall movement of the reading. I should add that at present the significance of *The Human Race* ought to appear more clearly to us. As I've said, it is not just an account of the reality of the camps, nor an historical report, nor an autobiographical narrative. It is clear that for Robert Antelme, and certainly for many others, what is at issue is not telling one's story or bearing witness, but essentially *speaking.* Expressing what speech? Precisely that just speech through which the Other, kept from revealing itself during the time in the camps, was alone able in the end to be received and brought within human hearing.

Once again, let us remember that throughout that time, each man felt himself (in an impulse necessarily unhappy, partial, unfulfilled, impossible to fulfill) as though deprived of himself and constrained to be another for himself. Doubtless there were still some relationships among the deportees that allowed the reestablishing of an appearance of society and that thereby provided each man the occasion to feel himself momentarily a self in relation to someone else, even to maintain a semblance of power in the face of the Powerful (if only because, in the rest

of the world, political struggle still went on, preparing a new day). Had it been otherwise, everything would have immediately sunk into a dying without end. But essential to the situation, its truth, really remains this: the camp no longer holds anything but a tangled, disconnected mass of men, each Another, a jumble of others facing the power of the Self as killer, which represents nothing other than the unwearying power to kill. Between these men as Another and this Self as Power, no language is possible, nor between themselves is there the slightest possibility of expression. What is said is essential, but in *truth* heard by no one. There is no one—apart from momentary exchanges in which, through camaraderie, a self comes back to life—to receive, as speech, the infinite and infinitely silent presence of others. Hence, each person no longer has any relationship with words except for that reservoir of speech that he must live in alone, and each person must preserve by refusing any bond of false language with the Powerful, a bond that could only compromise the future of communication.

Speaking by refusing, while storing up speaking.

Well, we understand it now, that stored-up speech of others, unheard, inexpressible but incessant, silently asserting that just at the place where all bonds are lacking there still exists, there is already beginning, the human relationship in its primacy. It is that truly infinite speech, which everyone who had been handed over to that impossible experience of being "other" for himself felt called upon, when back in the world, to represent to us by talking—for the first time, without stopping, endlessly. From the first words of his book, Antelme says the essential right away: ". . . during the first days after our return, I think we were all prey to a genuine delirium. We wanted at last to speak, to be heard."[6]

Yes, to speak was necessary: to give speech its due by answering the silent presence of others. The unique authority of that speech came directly from the very demand therefor.

It was, in effect, the most immediate demand possible. I must talk. Infinite demand that imposes itself with an irrepressible force. And it was also an overwhelming discovery, a very painful surprise: I'm talking, am I talking? So could I really talk? Nothing graver than this power-to-speak, starting with the impossible, the infinite distance to be filled in by language itself. "And even so," says Robert Antelme, "it was impossible. No sooner would we begin to tell our story than we would be choking over it."[7]

Why this wrenching feeling? Why this ever-present pain, and not only here in this extreme reaction, but already, it seems to me, in the simplest speech?

Perhaps because as soon as two people draw near to each other, some powerful formula exists between them, of the sort that we expressed at the beginning, and they talk to forget it or to deny it or to represent it.

That man is the indestructible who can be destroyed? I continue to mistrust this formula.

How could it be otherwise? Still, even if we have to erase it, let us agree to keep what it so manifestly taught us. Yes, I believe that we have to say it and keep it for a moment: man is the indestructible, and that means that there is no limit to man's destruction.

Does this not express a radical nihilism?

So be it—for perhaps to express it would already also be to overturn it. But I doubt that nihilism can be dealt with so easily.[8]

Hollows in the Faces

JEAN-PIERRE FAYE

"Where is K.?"

Robert Antelme's question was posed in the last days of the camp at Gandersheim.

"K. is going to die," he was told. But it has become almost impossible to recognize K. In the room at the infirmary, the *Revier,* the motionless heads have "shadows in the hollows of their faces." The description of K. suggests hollows where cheeks should be. When the narrator looks at him, K.'s open eyes do not move; he lies leaning on his elbows. Yet K. is alive. "It was the living K. in whom I hadn't found anyone."[1]

With the portrait of K. and with K.'s death culminates the description of the *huge machine of destruction* that the SS regime built within the circle of hate. Education in hate is imposed upon the *Kapo,* the oppressor-terrorizer; the whole "aristocracy of the *Kommando*" reproduces—with swollen features, within a narrow circle—the dangerous history of human hierarchies. "With this aristocracy—as with all others, moreover—the criterion is disdain." Because "disdain—then, when they express demands, hatred—for those who are thin and who stagger about with sickly bodies racked with deficiencies, those who have been forced into presenting such an image of the human person as must give endless rise to detestation . . . is a class phenomenon in its initial stage." Meaning

what? A class ". . . manifests itself through a community of situations having to be defended." But the *Kapo's* disdain "cannot be a supreme disdain, as is the disdain inhabiting the SS, for this particular aristocracy must struggle in order to maintain itself."[2] What aristocracy, then? Which *Meister?* Look at Flatfeet, "a real bastard, he belongs to the Nazi Party . . . his red, hairy, powerful hands . . . red face, yellow hair."[3]

In Antelme, I hear the hidden irony of narrative. We are reminded of the references to sovereignty in Bataille around 1950 as one "aspect opposed to the servile life." But the entire hierarchy of the SS regime is bent down with servility. At the top, Himmler threatens the SS with reprisals and punishments after the war because they ate some chocolate in Belgium; while *he* trembles before his *Führer,* before the *Führer* of the *Reich,* because he is only *Reichsführer;* and this reversal of words will allow the leader to dismiss and degrade Himmler at the last minute for "treason" and for an attempt at a final negotiation; while Hitler himself, the highest tip of the pyramid, is trembling in the depths of his bunker.

Narrative in Robert Antelme is what reaches to the very depths of that concept. Precisely because the SS regime and its hierarchy of servilities, he says, will *finally be crushed.* The SS will "finally prove powerless before us . . . because they shall have sought to call the unity of the human race into question."[4] But "there are not several human races, there is one human race." A truth, says Antelme, which appears with absolute clarity here, "where we approach our limits."[5]

The clear truth, the approach to the limit, reaches its greatest cruelty in the experience on the road, the fleeing SS carrying with them their pyramid of servile killers and their starving slaves who are weakened to the point of death yet before whom [the SS] "are powerless." Metamorphosis at the last minute. The *Kapos,* for the road, are suddenly put in uniforms and armed, machine guns or rifles on their shoulders. For "come what may, we have to be kept, or else killed. Everything is precise, now."[6]

Man's Property/Propriety

FETHI BENSLAMA

"He can kill a man, but he can't change him into something else."[1] This sentence, cited by Maurice Blanchot, led me not long ago to read *The Human Race.* What was at first striking in this statement was not the assertion of an impossible limit—which seemed to me, reading the book, the most powerful ethical formulation of our time—but the question underlying that assertion, the claim of a destructive power in man going beyond murder. In the course of an effort of reflection upon the demands of identity and the acts of violence associated with identity in today's world, I continued to encounter this power that haunts numerous conflicts where the exaggerated passions of collective identity lead to the worst extremes. Yet thought remains disconcerted, cut off from the meaning of these exactions and of the speeches that accompany them; it comes up against a cycle of renewed collapses that keep it at a distance, consign it to the litany of the horrible and the constant of man's cruelty, or to facile allegations of an evil which, it is claimed, is the generating source of the misfortune. Slowly, simply, through a discourse that remains close to the body that risks annihilation at any moment, what Robert Antelme allows us to approach is that unthinkable something that lies at the center of human identity's machinations. Stepping beyond the circle of the unspeakable, of the unimaginable, of the absence of language that the executioners erected along with their

barbed wire, the voice that comes to us through *The Human Race* calls to us over and beyond the experience of the camps to pledge our thought to what at this moment never fails to bring about a nameless devastation.

Whoever has a close interest in violence related to identity, whether committed in the name of a demand that is racial, ethnic, religious, national, or even scientific, realizes that in all of them what is at stake is something perceived as an inestimable good that corresponds to the idea of a property/propriety of the being. The property/propriety, understood in the double sense of what is exclusive and what is immaculate, is in action a basic category in every similar formulation, one through which life and death are adapted to a Self, to a We. Outside this adaptation, life appears unlivable and death inaccessible. This is why the property/propriety, which is at the same time body and a fiction of a body, represents what every identity believes itself obliged to protect, to defend, and to shelter from foreign intrusion in order to endure forever. Conversely, violence, in its most destructive intent, attacks the immunity of another's property/propriety to infect or annihilate it to the extent that it is identical with itself. So the course taken by the ethnic cleansing by Serb militiamen demonstrates these things in action when they undertake to rape Muslim women systematically: not simply because such a thing happens in war—when, we have to recognize, crimes of this sort are often commonplace—but so that these women will be pregnant, and their pregnancies well advanced before they are released. We sensed that a new limit in human destruction was surpassed here, but we did not understand why the cleanser accepted impregnating his enemy at the very moment when he hoped for his extermination. But depropriating here consists of wanting to embed oneself as an unassimilable foreigner in the very body of the other, after the example of what he supposes the other to have been in himself. It is the attack on the property/propriety as the nucleus where what is living—biological, blood, ancestral substance, and so on—and what gives identity commingle, and it is intended to annihilate the other. Hence, extreme violence consists not only in putting the other to death, but also in his depropriation, his de-identification, his distortion into a foreigner to himself in order to abandon him to his destitution and adapt him to it.

It is a fact that what constitutes the property/propriety of human violence in its radicalness is this will to depropriate man in his life and

in his death. Killing is insufficient; travesty is what is wanted. Hence depropriation seems more imperious than death. Is not the order under which such acts are arranged what one might call metaphysical violence? This violence is so called not because it is more abstract or less physical; it is not more spiritual or more moral; it is that hyperphysical violence in which destructive intent by priority turns toward identity, impelled by it and impelled toward it to the point that death is no longer simply that which fixes a term to one's existence, is no longer sufficient as the removal of his identity in order to lead him, by being killed, to something he is not. What is wanted is not making the other die, but making him die improperly.

"He can kill a man, but he can't change him into something else." The statement enfolds the thing against which it would set itself up, namely, the temptation to go beyond murder and change man into something else. This is why we suggested above that depropriation was more imperious than death. The imperious is that which controls, pressingly, irrepressibly, which compels. . . . And what is the force that the quitting of life does not assuage but that desires man's expulsion from the property/propriety of his being? Might it be something like an urge to depropriation, in the view of which the urge to die would appear somewhat appropriating, since death is always someone's death, the death of an individual, of a singularity, which death attacks in what it is itself, and not another? Should we not think of depropriation as something stemming from the urge toward death that strives to go beyond death, or, perhaps, as a still fiercer urge, insofar as depropriation does not stop at reducing life to the inanimate, but attempts to destroy all mediation between difference and likeness, strives even to eliminate the possibility of difference between life and death? Depropriation as the property/propriety of human violence: we must try to perceive this depropriation as propriety.

This paradoxical formulation undoubtedly complicates our approach; but it is inevitable, and irremovable, and what it signifies can be expressed only in the form of paradox. We might try saying it differently by beginning, as an experiment, with the first definition of property/propriety (*propre*) offered by E. Littré: "what belongs exclusively to a person, to a thing." Notice what a new twist we might give to the paradox: that which is specific to the extremism of human violence is wishing to despecify man, to exclude him from what belongs to him as an

exclusive identity. Rather than making it less dizzying, this reformulation makes it irrepressible. Exclusive: that which creates an inside closed around a singularity, around a single person, around a single group, placing the rest outside. For example, the idea of the human race defines an exclusive category of everything that is not man. Now there has to be, inside that category that determines the property/propriety of man, a desire, a wish, a will to unmake that which properly makes man. The problem is really that the negation of property/propriety is inside the category of property/propriety. Inside the enclosure of humanity's circle, inside the circle itself, there has to be something remaining, something that has to be improper, something outside humanity that is properly human. In other words, what is outside humanity is not provided simply by what is outside the circle of the human race, the other animal species, for example, but also by an outside that is inside this circle, in the very act of forming the circle. That is why some men can, without departing from humanity, want to hurl other men into the outside-inside of humanity.

To me, the outside-inside, or the improper, is what Robert Antelme designates by the expression "something else." The sentence "He can kill a man, but he can't change him into something else" comprises two facets. The first says that killing is possible. It is in relation to this possibility that the ethical foundations of humanity have been formulated in the mode of prohibitions, like "thou shalt not kill." But the second facet of the sentence shows us an entirely different foundation. The "he can't" designates not prohibition and the possibility of its transgression but rather the impossible; "he can't change him into something else" means that, whatever man's temptation or effort, it is impossible to change a man into something other than a man. Yet we know that this impossible thing has been desired, that it has been proclaimed in speeches and been made actual in numerous experiments in the history of humanity, to such an extent that we could say that this desire for the impossible, this possibility of the impossible, belongs universally to humanity.

It was the Nazi experiment that revealed the full extent of the desire for depropriation against which Robert Antelme's statement rises up. "Yet there is no ambiguity: we're still men, and we shall not end otherwise than as men. The distance separating us from other species is still intact. It is not historical."[2] If it was necessary to assert that we are all

men and will end as men, it is because the opposite fantasy took root among men. "It's an SS fantasy to believe that we have an historical mission to change species, and as this mutation is occurring slowly, they kill. No, this extraordinary sickness is nothing other than a culminating moment in man's history."[3] The "it's our . . . mission" here includes everyone. It is not only a question of the executioner and his victims, between whom the temptation of the impossible is played out as a joint project in which the victim's consent to his human depropriation is sought after; it is also all of humanity that is concerned, because it seems to be attracted by this impossibility.

For, though the men in the camps were united to suffer the afflictions of the impossible, this design extends far beyond the camps' universe. "Yet their behavior, and our situation, are only a magnification, an extreme caricature—in which nobody wants or is perhaps able to recognize himself—of forms of behavior and of situations that exist in the world, that even make up the existence of that older 'real world' we dream about."[4] The camps are not the only place where the dream of the impossible change of man "into something else" appears; it is the entire world which, in its truth, constitutes the temptation of this impossibility. "For in fact everything happens in that world as though there were a number of human species, or, rather, as though belonging to a single human species wasn't certain, as though you could join the species or leave it, could be halfway in it or belong to it fully, or never belong to it, try though you might for generations, divisions into races and classes being the canon of the species and sustaining the axiom we're always prepared to use, the ultimate line of defense: 'They aren't people like us.'"[5] What the experience of the camps reveals, therefore, is that the world was only a vast field of communities given over to the desire for the impossible, founded on negation and generalized human depropriation, as though in its social modalities all humanity had been founded upon this improper part of man, upon repeated depropriation.

"As though belonging to a single human race wasn't certain, as though you could join it or leave it." Robert Antelme's ethical assertion seeks precisely to produce a declaration that demonstrates that belonging to the race is certain, that once you are within humanity you are there entirely, totally, without any way out; in short, he wants to return the impossible to the impossible. But then where can he look for such a declaration? He finds it, he believes, at the very heart of the disaster.

"And if, at that moment, we believe what, here, is certainly that which requires the most considerable effort to believe, that 'The SS are only men like ourselves'; if, at the moment when the distance between beings is at its greatest, at the moment when the subjugation of some and the power of others have attained such limits as to seem frozen into some supernatural distinction; if, facing nature, or facing death, we can perceive no substantial difference between the SS and ourselves, then we have to say that there is only one human race."[6] The impossibility of depropriation is revealed in depropriation itself. In the extreme experiment of wanting to change man "into something else" is seen man's "indepropriability"; in other words, it is in desiring the improper that man's property/propriety is asserted. After that, the only thing left to the executioner is the possibility of murder ("the power of murder," Antelme says). "He can kill a man, but he can't change him into something else."

Thus, starting with the proposition: depropriation is the property/propriety of human violence, we have come, with Robert Antelme, to almost the opposite declaration. It is in the violence of depropriation that the property/propriety of man is revealed. This passage of the improper within property/propriety to the property/propriety within the improper is not a chance reversal. To be sure, it represents the impulse of paradox itself as the limitless interchange between opposites, perpetuating the irresolution between what is and what is not. But is not this paradox, this irresolution, the basis of the uncertainty of human identity?

Robert Antelme's ethical declaration seeks precisely to give a foundation of certainty to this identity by drawing a double affirmation from the experience of depropriation in the camps: first, that of the separation between killing a man and changing him into something else (the forbidden and the impossible); and second, the demonstration that there is nothing beyond murder, that killing a man is the limit of what he can be made to suffer, and that wanting to change him into something else encounters a resistance, an impenetrable reality, since at the very moment when his change is desired he shows that he is unchangeable. Man is irreversibly man.

But this affirmation of the certainty of man's humanity at the heart of Nazi negation, this uplifting act, in the midst of the camps' dark night, harbors its antinomy nonetheless; for, if murder continues to be the law of the human race, the "he can't change him into something

else" reveals, through negation, the unwanted interference of something beyond murder through which man shows himself antinomic to his species, since he apprehends his category as unsewn; and so it occurs to him that it can be entered or be left, that some are only half there; and he invents, in speech and in reality, the most infernal devices to achieve extreme depropriation. In other words, not only is belonging to the human race not always certain, but it is also at the very moment when the categorical affirmation of man's property/propriety is enunciated that the risk of reaching the stitch where the category comes unsewn is encountered, the stitch through which "man" communicates with "non-man" as an inner edge of the species-category, not as an exclusive limit in relation to other species.

The intensity of this fact is illustrated through the thought of man's property/propriety. Everywhere, the thought of man's humanity would essentially be the thought of property/propriety. As soon as man thinks of his being, just so soon does property/propriety present itself as its original and its final element, the quintessence of his humanity both thinking and thought. And as soon as he gives himself this property/propriety, he cannot avoid tossing other men into depropriation. This is true of the smallest Amazonian tribe, whose members give themselves the name "men" to the exclusion of the rest of the people who surround them; it is equally the case in the historic societies of Europe, which declared themselves possessors of what is universal in man, with all that this attitude authorized in their colonial past. Likewise, "the Islamic declaration of the rights of man," promulgated in 1990, stipulates in its Article 10 that "Islam is the natural (*fitra*) religion of man"! Whether through the exclusive appropriation to oneself of the quality of man, or through ideas of universality or of naturalness, the thought of property/propriety appears first of all to want to exclude others of the same species. As though the category of the human race was not applicable in distinguishing between those who are men and those who are not, but rather between those who are men and those who are men and who move about in a fog, from the fact that one group applies the category only to itself. As soon as a group of men says, "We are men," it wants to approach that unsewn spot of human identity through which it would hurl other men . . . into something else. Through the affirmation of property/propriety, human identity takes flight toward the impossible that borders it.

In sum, the uncertainty about belonging to the human race finds its cause in the opening, at some place, in the category of the human species-identity; from this comes the insistent call for the impossible, the call, that is, for the violent deforming of the human face. Every religious, national, ethnic identity, the least statement asserting identity is the effort at a stitch which, aimed necessarily at that unstitched spacing in the category of the race, carries with it the appeal to the impossible, the test of depropriation—and to a certain extent it conceals the fear of it, even the marks of it. The question is always one of knowing how, and to what extent, an assertion of identity takes hold of this fear and propagates it. Not a single human group exists that is in a position to produce an open-and-shut determination of its belonging to its own identity and to human identity; this is why everyone exerts so much effort in claiming to be men, human, humanists, humanitarians, in taking humanity unto itself, and, with just as much rage, refusing it to others to the point of wanting to exclude them most cruelly from it by exterminating them. And then it is discovered that they want to make their ethnic, religious, national, tribal identity pass for the race itself, of which humanity is only the genus. The desire of property/propriety goes so far as to want to swallow up the race. In this sense, man is not fully in his own species. To be sure, for the naturalist busy with his classifications, preoccupied with seeking out the most distant animal mutations, man is a clearly established species. But in the mind of man himself, he is not in possession of a stable representation of his belonging to the human race. And one may add that man is that animal species whose species is never given all at once and once and for all. Man is not entirely man. He thinks himself a man, and the time will arrive when he loses his taste for it. From the perspective of identity's logic, man is a possibility . . . that comes up against his impossibility.

The spacing (the nonstitching) of the category of the human race governs collective identities as much as individual identities. Hence, no singularity is, in conditions of peace, in total adherence to property/propriety itself, or to the appropriating order it gives itself, because its representation acquired from property/propriety remains inwardly open to its human impropriety. Every singularity is not, in principle, glued to the statement of its identity; the viable statement of an identity integrates within its folds its ungluing, its spacing in relation to its property/propriety, and it does not in the least annul that stitch of irresolution

that lies at the edge of its identity and of the category of all human identity. It is through this irresolution that one singularity is able to identify with another singularity; it is through this spacing, where men are not completely what they are, that they can identify with one another. Men come together around the irresolute in their humanity, or even in their impossible humanity.

Hence one understands that the irresolute or the impossible in human identity should be the very object of politics. What governs the human passion of property/propriety and the confusion of the improper is a matter for political affirmation; nothing could illustrate it in a more striking way than the course of movements proclaiming identity in the world today. It shows that political sovereignty is based upon the identifying uncertainty that it manipulates in order to arrive at a more-or-less viable assertion of self. This is the same as saying that the sovereignty of the political hangs entirely upon a relationship to the identifying irresolute, against which and with which it builds its representation of the entire being. But where does this representation come from, and how is it linked to the irresolute?

". . . As though belonging to a single human species wasn't certain." Robert Antelme, let us remember, is not speaking of the camps here, but of the situation in the world, or of what he calls "that older 'real world'" in contrast to the artifice of the camps' world. What does he say? That "belonging to the human race is certain," but that things there are "as if." And a good many "as ifs" are scattered throughout *The Human Race;* every time, they occur to indicate the sham men practice about the certainty of their species-identity. Thus, the "as if" locates their actions on the side of a fiction consisting of wanting to change men into something else. The possibility of the impossible through which the category of the species remains open (in order to "join the species or leave it, . . . be halfway in it or belong to it fully, or never belong to it") must in its essence be fictional. In other words, the real world is the scene of a theater where men play a cruel representation that denies the unity and the irreversibility of their status in the human race.

It should perhaps be thought that the fictionality locates itself in the unsewn part of the category of the species; or, perhaps better, the spacing of the species' human identity is the location of the representation. Not spacing as representation, but as the open and unrepresentable origin of the identity in which the theatricality and cruelty involved in human

identity unfold. Cruelty is the work of identity through representation; what is unsewn in identity is the very theater of cruelty. In a sense, fiction is the enemy of the human race, since through it men expose themselves as negators of their belonging to the race, falsifiers of their unity, inventors of infernal machines of depropriation. Were not the Nazi extermination camps, in fiction, work camps, as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe remembers it? Fiction is the demon of the human race. Humanity is denied by representation which is, in its origin, depropriation.

But identity denied through its own representation (re)gains the denied property/propriety through representation. Representation is at once the loss and the reconstitution of the irreparably lost property/propriety. Hence representation possesses the privilege of being bifrontal: depropriating with one face, appropriating with the other. The duplicitous energy of representation is the source of original drama. The drama of all identity is to be originally undone (broken up) by a fiction that restores itself as the fiction of the sovereignty of the same identity. If the fiction is not negating, but restoring, the representation nevertheless demands all the paradox of the glorious, defeated identity. That is, the self—individual or communal—although making the choice of property/propriety, does not interrupt the relationship between the improper and the proper. The self is the theater of depropriating/appropriating incitements between which mediation is necessary.

The question of mediation is the following: how to make endurable the opposition between the improper and the proper, the dramatic contradiction of the glorious and defeated identity. And this is a question of politics, as that which governs the theater of identity and its cruelty. Governing does not consist in making oneself the director or the prompter of the drama of identity, as we see in action in the nationalist, religious, ethnic ideologies that are exploding throughout the world. Nor does the mediation of politics in the face of the paradox of identity arise from the power to resolve, save at the cost of a catastrophe, but from the maintenance of an unlimited alternation and exchange between the proper and the improper. Perhaps this function should be called transpropriation, but on the condition of it being clear that it is neither synthesis, nor compromise, nor catharsis (purification), nor true surpassing of proper and improper. It is in part their dialectical relationship, in part their integration, in part their complementarity, in part their coupling. Transpropriation arises from a function of local breaks of proper and

improper, of regional and differential organizations of these effects of these breaks on human identity, without which the city could not exist and men would be absorbed within the infinite whirl of the paradox of identity. But this control function would be inadequate were it not upheld by a relationship of sovereignty.

Sovereignty is the irresolute in human identity toward which the depropriating and appropriating urges bend in order, in their different ways, to seize hold of it, but which politics (in an essential sense) must watch over carefully to maintain effective intervention. The irresolute is nowhere, and spreads about everywhere; neither immanence, nor transcendence (neither nothingness nor uniqueness); it is infinite indifference, the vanishing point of what is most interior and most exterior to human identity. Perhaps it is occasionally perceived through the ultimate feeling that each person can experience in complete tranquility, the feeling of belonging to the night. The night here is not the metaphor for the action of negativity and death, of anguish and destruction; quite the contrary, it should be considered the serene night that, in an instant, hands us over to the temptation of indifferentiation. A sentence of *The Human Race* evokes it in order to revoke it afterward. "After gazing for a time at the sky, everywhere dark, at the SS barracks, at the mass of the church, at the farmhouse, you could wonder whether, within the overspreading night, it all didn't blend into one and the same thing . . ."[7]

Belonging to the night does not specifically compete with any ethnic, religious, national, or humanist belonging. Still, all these together compete with it, all identities acquired and constructed historically threaten it and desire its disappearance. Robert Antelme: "History cares not a fig for the night that would do away with contradictions in an instant. History hounds our footsteps more closely than God; its are the more terrible exigencies. In no case does it serve to put the conscience at peace with itself."[8]

There is never a complete rupture with the nonself; there is a proper feature borne by dizzying irresolution. There is no absolute certainty about human identity; in the beginning, nobody knows whether he is himself or someone else. It is only through a fiction that each person is supposed to be the someone in question. "Nobody"—Ulysses's reply to Polyphemus—therefore remains every man's name, his improper name, his core that interposes itself between himself and his consummation

within property/propriety. As long as singularity—individual or community—retains an inner relationship with the irresolution of identity, it is sheltered from the devastating fantasy of the assault on property/propriety, and of property/propriety depropriated.

Thinking Death

LESLIE KAPLAN

Those who read Robert Antelme's *The Human Race* are given the gift of living the greatest of paradoxes—the feeling of despair in the presence of the existence of a true hell, and of joy at the same time in the presence of the power of the active working of thought. Feeling, because it is a question of a physical feeling, which affects one's entire being.

Thinking and thinking and thinking. For those who accomplish this work, and for those to whom the experience of it is transmitted, there is not the slightest doubt that they are dealing with a victory. A particular victory. A victory of thought.

Image of this victory:

> We believe that what we'd like to be able to kill is this SS man. But, if we think about it a little, we see that we are mistaken. It isn't so simple. What we would like is to start by turning him upside down, to fix him with his feet in the air. And then to laugh and laugh. Since we are men, since we are human beings, we'd also like to play a little. We'd quickly get tired of it; but that's it, that's what we'd like: his head down, his feet in the air. That's what we'd like to do to the gods.[1]

Thinking. Keeping what should be thought. Keeping it at the right distance, head down, sometimes, in order to think it; without turning it down, without turning it aside.

Without turning aside or turning down. Without being intimidated, that is, or shoved, or identified. Yet being precise, as precise as possible; violent certainly, a little "playful"; and, above all, putting some play into what is presented as massive, dense, total. In *The Human Race,* Robert Antelme provides the most fully developed portrait of thought in all its forms, but thinking is always dismissing confusion, trying to get away from the horror, defined as "darkness, absolute lack of any kind of landmark, solitude, unending oppression, slow annihilation."[2] This "absolute lack of any kind of landmark," where even in sleep "I am nowhere." "I'm neither here nor at home, nor before the ditch, nor in sleep, all places are imaginary. I am nowhere."[3] This is confusion carried to its extreme, to its naked essence, the confusion of life and death. Buchenwald: "Death here stood cheek to jowl with life—and at every moment. The chimney from the crematorium smoked alongside the one from the kitchen. Before we had arrived, bones of the dead had been served in the soup of the living."[4] When thought cannot think, this is only the reflection of hell. "Hell," Antelme says, would be "a place where everything that's said, everything that's expressed, comes forth equalized with everything else, homogenized, like a drunkard's puke."[5]

Faced with the horror, you can give up. Say, "*Frightful, yes frightful.* Yes, truly frightful . . . *Unimaginable:* a world that doesn't divide, doesn't restrict. The most convenient word. When you walk around with this word as your shield, this word for emptiness, your step becomes better assured, more resolute, your conscience pulls itself together."[6]

But this act, thinking. Saying, "Nights were calm at Buchenwald,"[7] rendering forever separate, forever suspect, the word "nights" and the word "calm." Taking all words, dividing them, separating them, making them understood differently, like strange things. That calm "voice [that] comes out of a loudspeaker" was "the voice of the SS conscience, reigning absolutely over the camp."[8] The word "conscience."

Describing the "perfect hatred" of the German political prisoner who has been at Buchenwald eleven years, and noticing the defect of this perfect hatred: he does not feel what cannot be experienced. For this, he is unable to escape from the SS, despite his hatred; he's been swallowed up.

Calling the roll, and "laughter when my name is called." That "I was damned well I, and that this nothing that bore the name that had

been read out was damned well me."[9] The name became one of the forms of anonymity.

Surviving the *Kapo's* birth, his blossoming. When he manages to attract the SS man's half-smile, he's a *Kapo.*

Knowing that sleep is not a respite but a concession.

Knowing also what the SS does not know, that pissing is not simply a requirement but also an evasion.

Naming "the things the SS cannot contest," like "the wind which wafts the west into our faces," or "the four letters *SNCF*" on the railway car going by. These things are "royal."[10] And saying of the soup that it isn't good, it's "beautiful." Giving detail, detail, detail. Every time, the word that fits—that surprises, that is. A word that names and surprises. We have the impression of grasping the fact of survival in action. Thought itself is present as an act; it truly cuts through the murderous reality; it clears things up.

Making the difference between thought and "the sorcery" of language that can evoke everything but that here can be dangerous, deceiving.

Knowing that thought includes nonthought, that "the most violent thought does not budge a pebble."[11]

Talking of the mirror, how on "that particular Sunday, I looked at length at my face in the mirror," and that face, "neither beautiful nor ugly . . . was dazzling. It had accompanied me here."[12]

Expressing sarcasm. "So everybody [*Kapo* as well as prisoner] can enjoy himself." But also adding that their "real work . . . is the work of making us die."[13]

Hearing the SS say "sadly" (that is the adverb), "*Scheisse.*"

Seeing the Nazi civilian who hits and hollers, "his face turning red." Seeing him as "an amateur," a "virgin Nazi."[14]

Grasping how a prisoner who is sweeping can "unsettle" a German woman who is supervising him simply by his presence ("extraordinary power of the shorn head and the striped clothes") and how the sweeper can play; "the German moved his foot the way you brush a fly away from your forehead when you're asleep. . . . If I chose I could make them move their feet. . . ."[15] Seeing it, this ballet with the broom; detaching oneself, as in a play, as though one could grasp everything, before and after, *also* as in a play. Having the freedom to see it.

Thinking. Robert Antelme transmits its experience; in the final analysis, it is thinking death. And first of all thinking murder; not turning away from it.

Grasping the logic of murder, "the form of their tactics," which is "starving a man so as to have to punish him . . . for stealing from a garbage can."[16]

And the other, complementary logic. "The cold suffices."

A very organized organization of murder; the simplicity of doing nothing, relying on "nature," snow, wind, or heat, lice. Leave nature alone; it kills very well by itself.

And at the same time grasping the failure of this logic. At the worst moments, during the torture of exercise, for example, the SS man "can't get away from it." "He's the strongest, but there they [the prisoners] are, and they have to be there in order that he be the strongest. He can't get away from it."[17] The torture is not described from the victim's viewpoint, the viewpoint of blows and humiliation; it is described from the viewpoint of murder, the murderer's viewpoint, and this is why we can grasp its failure. The SS's nightmare: "ceaselessly denied, we're still there." And yet, despite the failure of this logic, never forgetting that what the SS wants is that we should die, never forgetting the SS man's smile when he's told of the death of a comrade he's beaten. The victory is not in the denial, nor in the illusion, but in the thought that at the same time thinks both the failure of murder's logic and the real murder that is always possible, and that keeps bridging the gap. The victory is being able to think this absolute thought:

> [E]verything in the world that masks . . . unity, everything that places beings in situations of exploitation and subjugation and thereby implies the existence of various species of mankind, is false and mad; and that we have proof of this here, the most irrefutable proof, since the worst of victims cannot do otherwise than establish that, in its worst exercise, the executioner's power cannot be other than one of the powers that men have, the power of murder. He can kill a man, but he can't change him into something else.[18]

"He can kill a man, but he can't change him into something else." Therein lies the limit. Being able to think it. The strongest thought is in the image of the man who eats peelings and distances himself from the

peelings he's eating, who is able eat them without becoming something other than what he is, a man, and not a pig or a peeling, as the SS man or the *Kapo* believe, believing what they want to believe, illusion, confusion, and jumble, and remaining glued to the tautological shit they have in their heads. As for me, I'm me, and as for you, shut up. Through this extreme point, Robert Antelme re-creates and transmits the experience of the thought of death, which is indissolubly tied thereby to the thought of the other, a thought that takes the other into account, the absolutely not-me, that which is my limit and which, paradoxically, allows me, if I take it into account, to be most myself. And which, at the same time, grasps the mortifying character of nonthought, which is what thought becomes the moment it draws back in the face of its limit.

As for the *Kapo* Ernst, "that fat shit," Antelme sees him eat "lugubriously," this man who "despised those who didn't eat and who were thin."[19] Just as Robert Antelme did not show torture only from the victim's viewpoint, so he does not show the *Kapo* only in the process of eating while others suffer hunger, injustice, oppression. He shows him eating and despising those who don't eat. Lugubrious Ernst, "even more lugubrious . . . because he wasn't anxious," as he chewed and swallowed his pieces of bread; the effort, painful effort (not work: effort), "*essen, essen.*" Maintaining this absurdity, that a man is despicable because he's thin. You can kill a man, but you can't change him into something else; this is what Ernst chews and chews again, chewing his bread. But he doesn't think about it, he only chews his cud. The limit he rejects comes back, steals over him, fills him. Swallowing and rejecting, sinister ogre, old sewer guts.

The link to ordinary disdain, the ordinary way of cementing exploitation and oppression. "Disdain—then, when they express demands, hatred—for those who are thin and who stagger about with sickly bodies racked with deficiencies, those who have been forced into presenting such an image of the human person as must give endless rise to detestation."[20] And, in effect, ordinary rumination that relies on this state of affairs in order to award merit and virtue and to contrast them to weakness and vice goes no further than tautology, and it is better to be rich and healthy than poor and sick. A ridiculous and foolish repetition, which is the very point at which stupidity becomes crime, support for the "banality of evil." The "poor," the "thin," the "dirty," and the "sick" are unpleasant, are painful

to think about. Remove them from our thought; but also be sure to get them out of our presence.

"I don't want you to be."[21] This is the SS phrase that expresses their "derisory, asshole wish"; it is the phrase of every murderer, and there are many of them, of various types, in *The Human Race.* The SS, the *Kapos,* the quack doctor who refuses to give work releases to the sick, the Nazi civilians, and so on. But this phrase can also and at the same time be understood in another way. It is not only that "I don't want you to be"; it is also that "I have no particular desire in relation to you." In order to think murder and the failure of murder, and to keep them in your thought ("He can kill a man, but he can't change him into something else"), you must have thought, and kept in your thought, an other who is simply indifferent; or, if you prefer, no other is an ultimate origin, a god, whether a dream or a nightmare. Thinking death; getting rid of the reassuring idea that I am here because I was wanted. The other is not my creation, my creature, nor is he my beginning. Feeling oneself, living, alone in the world, suspended. And then the world unfurls, gives itself back in the way in which the subject encounters it in his radical solitude, when he takes the other into account, his limited limit. Then the world opens up, detail after detail; it is there, and it can be thought. Then everything becomes distinct, detached, and out of order, strange; everything becomes the object of thought. This wind that passes, what is it, and this soup, and this bread, and this woman? The repetitious hours in the factory. Thought makes them different, delves the differences, just as it makes the abnormal normal, the banal extraordinary. If *The Human Race* gives the world back, it does so by starting from a frightful solitude that is not just frightful, and to be able to think this an unbelievable power is necessary:

> You can burn children without disturbing the night. The night is unmovable around us, who are enclosed in the church. Above us, the stars too are calm. But this calm, this immobility are neither the essence nor the symbol of a preferable truth; they are the scandal of nature's ultimate indifference. More than other nights, this night was frightening. I was alone, between the wall of the church and the SS barracks; urine steamed; I was alive. It had to be believed. Once again I looked up at the sky. I wondered if perhaps I was the only one to be looking up into the night

> this way. Beneath the emptiness, in the steam of the urine, amidst the dread, this was happiness. And it is doubtless thus that I must say that the night was beautiful.[22]

This narrative, which cannot end and will never end, concludes in pure suspense, and from there we always leave to try our turn at thinking. An exchange in the dark, an open question, sharing, in which each addresses the other, in which each needs the other in order to think—this suspense is a dialogue.

—*Wir sind frei.* We are free.

—*Ja.*[23]

Dead End

MICHEL SURYA

The year 1947. Articles in the press; discussions after the publication of *The Human Race* . . . Robert Antelme is preparing another book. At least, so he says several times to different questioners. Yet there was none; there was no other book. Others instead will write the books that he will not write; others, Duras, for example, will draw upon the language of *The Human Race* to make themselves writers. Antelme the writer will be no more because he could not be, because *no more than once* could literature suffice for what he wanted it to say. *The Human Race* belongs to literature of a type that condemns literature, that leaves it to those who only have it.

What did he want literature to say? Everything. It should be everything that literature has to say in order not to betray. What it shouldn't betray without shame, but what it betrays every time. A shame to which it agrees every time only by ceasing to be literature anymore, at least ceasing to be it as Antelme imagined it when he returned from the camps. (Although it is also certainly true that, when he returned from the camps, Antelme was not imagining anything; he was literature, as he should have been, given the facts. All at once, and just this once, he was everything literature could and should have said. Everything.)

Several writers later imagined what a literature that did not betray might be—did not betray the camps, the anonymity, the death. Jean

Cayrol, in "For a Lazarian Writing,"[1] then in *Lazarus.* Georges Perec, in "Title to Be Recovered." But in vain. The literature born of the deportation did not create the conditions that allowed the deportation to give birth to any literature. Nor did it provide that the insufficiency that characterizes literature (which keeps it from saying everything) should henceforth cease, since, were it to cease, we would be dealing with something other than literature. This insufficiency did not cease—without literature being in any way threatened.

The insufficiency of literature, its inability to *say everything,* is exactly what *The Human Race* seemed to put an end to (though in fact only provisionally; it merely suspended it). But precisely this is what all those who possess only literature also did not want revealed—that they derived their authority from this insufficiency, from not saying everything.

Antelme probably had a grasp of more than literature, although, even if he had, he would have done so in a way we cannot know, since we don't know whether he placed literature above everything else.

Either way, in addition to those cases in which its insufficiency did not bring about renunciation, it is to one case—also involving the silence Antelme subsequently held himself to (after this book, that is)—the case against literature, that *The Human Race* bore witness with unequaled purity.

The case against its author, as well. I am sure that Antelme felt himself accused by the admiration that *The Human Race* aroused. He was thinking of a literature that would cut short any possibility of admiration.

The Human Race is not something through which, in the name of the person who wrote it, who is its author, we might today identify one of literature's most important moments; it is, on the contrary, something through which someone whose name was doomed to totally disappear derived strength from an affirmation, and this affirmation would serve as the means by which literature would surrender all authority.

As the book proves, Antelme certainly thought of a literature that would make authority impossible, or present an authority that would have no *author.* And certainly he accused himself of not being able not to be an author, even of this admirable book, one in which he would seek to admire the *victim.* Perhaps he was seeking a way to do justice to a memory that he held on to as his own without taking it away from

those who could not hold on to it because they had not survived him. He had to be the same as all those who had died; and he had to see to it that those who died had not died without a witness; he had, in a sense, to survive no more than was necessary in order to provide that witness, to be no more a writer than was necessary for those who were not writers, so that their death would not disappear absolutely. He had, that is, to be just this absolutely a writer, a writer in a way that would make him not entirely one of those deportees who died nor entirely one of those writers who survived but that would make him one of those writers who are dead, those authors of a single book, of just the book that would make him the same as the deportees without ever making him the same as other writers.

Literature did not withdraw from anything, nor shrink from anything. *The Human Race* could hardly claim to be an *anonymous* book; it could only claim this anonymity after the fact, at the price of its author not writing another book. Robert Antelme was not the author of any other book, because he wanted *The Human Race* to remain a book absolutely without authority. This book had to remain without authority in order not to betray the possibility to which it alone was equal, the possibility of saying everything and saying it for everyone.

In a way probably not yet measured—whose impact, at least, has not yet been measured—Antelme's rejection of authority (of Stalinism, of the army, and so on) is owing to his initial rejection of literature, of the deception that constitutes literary authority, not the opposite, as is more readily believed.

In the same way, practically nothing has been understood about what Adorno once remarked about Auschwitz, poetry, and so on, though it is cited everywhere and is understood morally as a prescription, whereas he said it in the most distant, most technical way. He said it in this sense: *Literature is impossible.* This means practically nothing to those who still claim to write. (It was already impossible, in effect, with Flaubert, with Mallarmé, and the like. In what is it more so now? How have the deportation, the extermination, made it more impossible?) But which certainly said everything for Antelme, who understood it. Who understood it well enough to hold fast to it in the only book he wrote, which he denounced, in a way, with all those that he did not write. Literature is impossible except by making it something other than what it has to be. In Antelme himself, the utopian component remains

the largest, despite the deportation, despite the liberation and the revenge that made him feel ashamed—a Christly component that he never completely repudiated.

"*Literature is impossible*" speaks only of technique; it says nothing of morality, nothing of metaphysics. In other words, it does not attain; it is powerless to attain what it nonetheless claims to attain. Literature, but by the same measure, philosophy: neither attains. Bataille adds, terribly (that is, laughing): And even this powerlessness is beyond their attaining.

Setting itself apart from literature, from philosophy, *The Human Race* does attain. Attains what? A point of no return, certainly. *The Human Race* is that impulse of impossible return to such a point; or to that point of impossible return from death. "*On n'en revient pas,*" as the expression has it.[2] *The Human Race* is made up of this *not getting back,* to which, as a result, there could be no sequel, even though Antelme thought about it, promised it. It is because you do not get back from such a point that for once literature agreed to the loss to which Antelme brought it. (We become confused: literature is lost just a few times in this century, with Kafka, with Bataille, and so on.)

Adorno writes: Poetry is impossible. Bataille writes: It is hateful. *The Hatred of Poetry* (1947), revised by Bataille a few months before his death, became, significantly, *The Impossible.*

Robert Antelme is perhaps the only writer to whom literature has not given a name but gave one back:

> The passageway under the tower has been lighted up. The SS arrive. Two of them wear garrison caps; the others, sentries, wear forage caps and carry rifles. They count. A *Lagerschutz* calls out the names, butchering them. In among them, amidst Polish and Russian names, is my name. Laughter when my name is called, and I reply: "Present." It sounded outlandish in my ear; but I recognized it. And so for one brief instant I had been directly designated here, I and no other had been addressed. I had been specially solicited—I, myself, irreplaceable! And there I was. Someone turned up to say yes to this sound, which was at least as much my name as I was myself in this place. And you had to say yes in order to return into the night, into the stone that bore the nameless face.[3]

The stone that bore the nameless face: *defacing.*

Jean Cayrol dreamed of the possibility of this defacing—postcamp, as he calls it himself. "A man has just been killed; he's on the floor, covered with blood. The murderer approaches him, leans over his face, and, with patient hands, begins defacing him; he kneads his features, hollows out his wrinkles, enlarges his mouth, so that the victim will have the same head as his murderer and in death will bear the full weight of his crime."[4]

A defaced literature: a literature that would be the same as that which was killing it (which would make of it not a victim but guilt itself), which *The Human Race* was, but without Antelme's being able to do it more than once. Because literature can but rarely suffice more than once for what is has to express: innocence and guilt. What is exceptional about *The Human Race* is its having, in a single movement, carried this innocence and guilt to their highest point.

Rising Up against What Is There . . .

CLAUDE RABAUT

Rising up against what is there, making ourselves guardians of the awakened living and of the dead.

Heraclitus, fragment 63

(The camps shook the here and the now, definitively, our body as it is written down, its symbolic appearance. They destroyed the ground of a certitude, a coinciding—even a sorrowful one—of man with himself. For we had believed that we knew the place . . . of language and of thought)

The fact is that Robert Antelme knew as early as 1947 how to make sense of the experience of the camps.

Make sense of an unimaginable but not unthinkable event.

Not radically different from nor opposed to a human "nature" that he would definitively contravene, since here it's not a question of "nature." Species is not nature. The scandal is not in the contravening nature through an event that would deny it wholly, but in the very possibility of such an event within humanity as a species.

The species of the living and of the dead.

(A strange weakness.) A strange weakness in the face of the writing that constitutes the species.

How is such an event possible within the human race *itself?* How is it possible that such an event, more than does any other, exhibits it stripped bare? How is it possible that, far from destroying it, it should, in an absolute way, give rise to the solidarity, singularity, and unity of the human race?

(How thought was not only possible then but a matter of survival—reason itself a matter of survival. "Here, the course of the militant is to struggle rationally against death."[1] Reason accompanies Robert Antelme's writing step by step. As a result, a break, absolutely, with all sadomasochistic complicity, with any ambiguous shadow of enjoyment. In this sense, *The Human Race* was and remains a militant book.)

Nor is it an event that could be judged an incomprehensible aberration in the eyes of history's "laws." Unique and incommensurable though it is, the event of the camps nevertheless belongs to human history as such, to the metaphysical history of the race, a history without teleology, without providence, without theodicy. The question of providence, of teleology, of theodicy does not even arise. Evil *is,* once and for all. This time, for all time. Evil is not even an object of astonishment, which would still be a hesitation, but only of a confrontation, which is an instantaneous, definitive decision. In the end, the evidence of evil may be what sustained Robert Antelme—the undeniable, intrinsic evidence of evil. Not the sickness unto death, but death as absolute evil, evil *rendered* absolute. The human race discovers its final unity in the face of the absolute evil of death, an unprecedented kind of evil and death, a kind that only the human race could create for itself, that only the human race could bring to light in a way at once historical and ahistorical, contravening all pathologies. The camps do not arise from an ascribable pathology, be it what it may. They are not a stage of evil, they are the unique and definitive (infinite) emergence of absolute evil. And hence neither do they arise from any pathos, from any strategy of separation, exclusion, or removal. What we are facing is the absolute evil of death; that is what is there.

This is why, properly speaking, the experience of the camps is unimaginable, which means: immediately destructive of the here and of the now. Man lives because he imagines himself inscribed in the here and the now that carry him along, that surround him. He does not know

that he is imagining himself; yet this is what makes him live, gives him his consistency, his complicity with himself. From the absolute position of evil, to kill a man is to make "here" and "now" and his own life unimaginable, to destroy precisely this "here" and "now" where he exists.

> Do you feel pretty good here? Calm can reach unto here as well, an effort becomes necessary in order that I verify that I am really here, exclusively here, not somewhere else. I shall forever be trying to reconstruct the same principle of identity the SS sought to establish yesterday in making me reply yes to my name, to assure myself that it is indeed me who is actually here. But the evidentness of this fact will continually slip away, just as it slips away now.[2]

Each moment becomes an (unimaginable) effort to verify that I really am "here," that this "here" constitutes the "now" that unfolds in the form of my identity. This identity slips away, the cogito slips away, along with the possibility of identifying the place, of identifying oneself with the place and of identifying the place with the now. The camps not only destroy the present image of the here and now that supports identity but also cut it off from any other possible image, past or future, and shatter it into its elsewhere (its "over-there"). It is not just after the fact that such an event *becomes* unimaginable; it is so in its being experienced, there, impossible to imagine at the very moment when it takes place, to imagine that it should take place, that it should place itself in the "present." In this sense (its proper sense, its sense of absolute evil), it is an event without a present, one in which it is impossible to be present.

Thus the absolute evil of death consists in this: the impossibility of being present at death itself, at my own as at another's, whatever it may be. Death is no longer a signal, no longer directs life toward an outside. And in the camps everything moved toward that, toward taking, absolutely, from each prisoner (caught up in numbers, a nameless element amidst numbers) the instant and the instance of his death, walking away absolutely from the moment of death. The Nazi programming of death was this very theft—the most unimaginable possible. (The illusion in which people were kept until the last moment, the prohibition of any talk proclaiming the imminent fate: these were the ultimate logic of this destruction of identity.) "And if someone had to stay distinguishable,

the *Kapos,* so as not to lose him, would draw a red and a white circle on the back of his striped jacket."[3] All cultures have taken life, and will continue to do so (it is by so doing that they fabricate their "meaning"), but none before had conceived of taking death, and the mark of identity, the face, along with it. As though, in order to conceive this, death had to kill death, to start killing the meaning and the mark of death everywhere, to grind down numberless deaths in order to destroy itself as mark and as fate, parading itself, mounting and preserving itself in its true size. Making itself appear as the horizon of an absolute nature, almost without form or content, but absolutely full, an autophageous substance, with no meaning other than its own designification. Robert Antelme says that bodies become "SS material." SS here is the signifier itself of this absolute evil of death: bodies have become *death material.* Death, in the moment when it reigns absolutely, repudiates itself absolutely as meaning and fate, to become an endless autophagy.

The essence of fascism is not to sacrifice life but to kill death, to bring about the rule of death's death, to infest life with it so that it loses any meaning except pure force.[4]

What is naked force, brute force? A repetitive atom of negation: "I don't want you to be." This makes no sense, denies its own sense; such a statement undermines its own grounds. For meaning exists only with a minimum of otherness. Herein is the contradiction: brute force ceaselessly renounces the condition making possible its own minimal meaning, and this minimal meaning ceaselessly renounces it. It always remains itself on the mortal, self-destructive side, but that does not form a state. SS law does not move toward state power nor proceed from it; it remains totally mechanical, atomized, atomizing; it creates atoms of violence that sink and scatter while fragmenting in matter; it creates the arbitrary beneath the rule, the immeasurable within the organizational ("Leaving aside the different types of organization that existed among certain camps, different ways of applying a given rule could immeasurably increase or reduce the chances of survival").[5] It does not try to win over a conscience, a vow, a signature, an annihilated but gratefully bowing subject, does not turn toward potential legitimacy. It is directed at bodies, at the annihilation of bodies (absolute illegitimacy). The destruction of shelter, of the womb; not guilty being, but becoming-nothingness. Thus involuted, death can no longer have a name, a meaning, a place, a

moment. The name of death is tied to the name and the meaning of the human being. In a death so involuted, so unimaginable, there is no more awakening, either to life or to death. To rise up, to rebel against this is truly to make oneself the guardian of the living and the dead, the vigilant guardian of the awakened living and the sleeping dead, of their separation and their antithesis that causes our world to hold together.

"The antithesis of the *awakened living and the dead* encompasses the entire world of being through the strongest of oppositions: the living absolutely alive and active, and the dead absolutely dead and reduced to the state of corpses. . . . The corpses (*nekroi*) are to the living dead what the sleeping wakeful are to the vigilant."[6] The breathing of thought in separation.

A decision must be opposed to the unimaginable, a choice, which is the imagination itself. To rise up, face forward; to face what has no face, to rebel. "We rebel against the opaqueness of the real and against the fictitious partiality of the facts."[7] The imagination is vigilance itself: to imagine, to force oneself to imagine, in order to be able to think the unimaginable, to recover a vigilant body. A choice that could be called, beyond all fictitious partiality, a style; but reduced to its simplest expression, to the hesitant construction of a facial expression that raises up and etches its wrinkles in the process of making its own flesh, which gropingly reconstructs the face's place of belonging and uprising, its own facial uprising, prolegomena to speech. "It became clear henceforth that only through a sifting, that is only through that self-same imagining could there be any attempting to tell something about it."[8] The piece of mirror; the gold of lost time; a piece of lost time, imaginable, is the most precious of goods, at the center of becoming-nothingness. A nugget. Life itself ("The music, the music—that was life," says Greta Hoffmeister).[9] The existence of over-there. To be "here," you must be able to imagine yourself in an over-there. "That particular Sunday, I looked at length at my face in the mirror. It was neither beautiful nor ugly; it was dazzling. It had accompanied me here, here it was on the loose. It was without employment now, but it was still itself, the machine for expression."[10] Returned from the camps, the phenomenon is almost the reverse. Once again, you had to extract the "machine for expression" from an over-there that was not here; force a new face to be born from the negation of all human form.[11] To live again, to reinsert this unimaginable into a framework, a

semblance of a framework, or simply a semblance, making a time for it in what had no time, no present, no face. A choice. Simply the choice: not the choice of repeating, restating—in the sense in which Dante scattered this phrase throughout his poem: *io non so ben ridir.* I would not know how to restate the vision, the place passed through, the existence already traversed, according to the (occidental) essence of the narrative, with its ever-present beyond, present with that presence that guides the text, that directs it even in its weaknesses and its imperfections, produces it according to the rhythm of song and of memory, of the initiatory voyage and the return. Distance from the times of the narrative and the rapidity of recovery. It must be said that the return from the camps is not a return, has no rapidity. Nor does the text of Robert Antelme *restate* it; it is neither a song nor an evocation. It attempts to produce for the first time the here and the now that had no place, that were gradually abolished through their unsuitability, became immobile in their unsuitability. But choice was already what permitted holding on, permitted being a singularity that set itself up against the confusion of numbers:

> The SS who view us all as one and the same cannot induce us to see ourselves that way. They cannot prevent us from choosing. On the contrary: here the need to choose is constant and immeasurably greater. . . . The inhabitant of the camps is not the abolition of these differences; on the contrary, he is their effective realization.[12]

He produces a narrative in order to state, without restating, the machination of an absence of narrative that gives rise to its own negation (we know today to what extent the Nazis had structured the camps to result in a definitive absence of narrative, a silencing of death). He bores speech out of an immeasurable default of language from which a form of writing is created.

This default bears the name "suffocation." Syncope of the very place from which speech can rush forward, a frightening narrowing of its birthplace, its first breath, its forging. "No sooner would we begin to tell our story than we would be choking on it."[13] It is impossible to forge speech with which to recount the story; it crashes against the wall of a lack of language.

That is why the narrative becomes a necessary choice, an absolute *decision,* a willed confrontation with radical evil itself, though from a will

deprived of its free glory. The choice of extreme particularity. "In extreme particularity, they [the rebels] *become* (the verb contrasts with the fixed nature of something labeled by the verb 'to be there') capable of distinguishing what they have to conserve while throwing off the yoke of presence."[14] Imagination takes back from the unimaginable the right and the will to think, reconquers the here and the now from an unrested body, in accordance with a will that is its own law, is the incision of a present within a state of becoming that dehallucinates the frenzy of the impossible need to talk. Thus it is not a language that presents a scene (such unbearable scenes), but words that directly create their own exterior according to their own becoming, that directly expose their lack-of-talking in order to think it, think it anew with the human race's relationship to itself. Hence, in choice, extreme particularity comes to coincide with the extreme unity and singularity of the human race and opens itself to them; this is why the narrative is immediately its own meaning and its own ground, its own will, its own awakening, telling the story only in an attempt to grasp some significance there where otherwise there would be only the nothingness and the opaqueness of delirium. It is not even an emergency, but the indefeasible necessity of remaking destiny and division where destiny and division had been destroyed. Of rebelling, so that, once again, the human face might rebel against the partiality of things—"things themselves, taken where they are, on the world's surface, far from the tendrils which root them in the unseen."[15]

(It is the face itself that causes being to be what we can rise up against, stand up against, in order to be a "we.")

So to breathe is to think. Breath is thought, the renewal of thought. Breath is separation.

Hence the tenses of the narrative, above all that nearly inflexible imperfect, marking down what comes apart next to that simple past that conveys more present than the present, that startles with a touch of the untouchable, that opens the text with quiet breathing: "I went outside to take a piss. It wasn't yet daylight. Beside me others were pissing too; nobody spoke."[16] It is not the words that sketch, but the body, the ultimate gestures that open the night upon its lack of repose: "It wasn't dark; it never got to be completely dark here."[17] *Abort:* Life folded over its nonplace, isolated in the body's evacuation of itself, getting away toward its freedom in distress and diarrhea ("the SS do not know that, by pissing, you get away").[18]

And then, once we are occupied in these narrows, in these bowels of hell, this fissure in the "here" squeezes toward nothingness, the present explodes in a "now" that will not let us go anymore, that tries ceaselessly to overtake the "here" slipping away, that will not let go of the narrative anymore to make it be once and for all the place where one cannot be. "We left the block, and we went up the slope that leads to the square where roll call was held, which is where we are now."[19]

"Hell is here," Marlowe said in his *Faust,* but here hell is not a here anymore. No longer can it be a question of the diabolical or of a signature, of blood or a pact. Only of this now in which the past itself is destroyed.

It is this irremovable "now" that makes us enter the "we" of the ultimate belonging to the human race, belonging to its unity and its singularity. This "we" is an absolute, irreducible border that isolates us in being, confines us at the edge of nature, prohibits us from being anything other than rebels, prohibits us from being religious, from being linked, that is, by a prescribed, coherent pact to the Other, even if this is a diabolical providence extorting our signature with a view to our own execution. (In this sense, Nazism has nothing to do with Stalinist totalitarianism, the violence of which, from a certain point of view, did not come from a pact exhorting consent and signature, consciousness and guilt, on the brink of an execution decided upon and ideologically justified in advance in the name of the greater whole.) Here there is nothing but the dust of the nameless and of the bodies-corpses, where even the corpse is done away with. Not in view of a whole but in view of nothingness (even the word "nothingness" is too much; there is no word to express obliteration and at the same time the abyss into which sight is plunged).

"We are numbers, nothing but numbers. . . ."[20] The number of matter returning to the inert, the dissolution of the face that forgets its shape, unrecognizable amidst them all. The crack in the ass, the stream of fecal matter that we are in the last remaining moments of life, the last service that defeated, violated death permits us. This is the being that now *we are:*

> Something on the blanket came into view. Grey-black skin clinging to bones: his face. Two purple sticks protruding from his nightshirt: his legs. He wasn't saying anything. Two hands rose from the blanket, and the two men each grabbed a hand and pulled; the two sticks were now standing.

> His back was toward us. He bent forward and we saw a wide black crack between two bones. A steam of liquid shit shot in our direction. A thousand guys standing there had seen that black crack, the curve of that stream . . . It was from the shit that we'd known he was alive.[21]

Death not only cannot be told but also becomes indiscernible, no longer has any moment, any scansion of its own, no longer splits into the last moment or the one before that; it remains glued in sight like that face of grey-black skin clinging to bones. Life has no more face, just a crack in the ass; death, henceforth our entire skin, no longer breathes through life, to lift it off the ground, to tear a final breath from it. There is no final breath here. No breath of death. No expiring life. Only suffocation until the ultimate sight of the black crack.

The imagining of this never-seen reality, of this collective view of the abyss ("No assembly of a thousand men had ever seen that before") [22] obliges us to think of death beyond the corpse, beyond "this something which no longer has a name in any language" of which Bossuet spoke in his *Sermon on Death,* for can there be a corpse without human form to offer death as an individual tribute to its collective devastation? Without an otherness that welcomes it to some repose? Without the metaphor of the tomb? Here the devastation takes place ceaselessly; it is "life" that thrusts the collective into the individual, thrusts death into breathing. No one has anything more to offer death except the already-dead; nothing falls over, since everything is forever falling over; the corpse has become law. The corpse is the law itself, beyond the antithesis of the living and the dead. There are no more corpses to hold a wake with the vigilant, because the corpse has become the law.

Such is "the square where roll call is held," the place of communication where a name no longer exists to sustain the sign nor a sign to imprint the name, where the roll call is immediately bent on the destruction and the negation of the statement, the annihilation of the signifiers. An abominable, infested election.

—accursed precincts.

(Not even sheltered, in Robert Antelme, by the Jewish signifier. "We are becoming ugly to behold. For this the fault lies in us. It's because

we are a human pestilence. Around here the SS don't have any Jews to hand. We take their place. They are too used to dealing with people guilty by birth. If we weren't pestilential we wouldn't be violet and grey.")[23]

The "SS law." Evil's community with itself—"the cold, the SS." A law that removes and destroys every metaphor, every "proper" signifier, to make a pestilence of it. A law that, like a fragmentation bomb, blows away the possibility, the reality of metaphor. Robert Antelme does not restore a metaphor; he shows what, beyond all metaphor, cannot be destroyed, what absolutely resists—the human will. "Will alone remains at the core, a disconsolate will, but only through it can we hold on. We have to have the will to wait."[24] The human race is not a metaphor. It cannot be moved or removed (nor does it join, nor is it religious). Sunk in the depths of nothingness, it remains material, unalterable, the final bone that our death picks clean. While yet in the charnel house, the race, the common name struggles fiercely on.

An essence, a fragment of an essence, a cold fragment of law was thus revealed, unveiled, pared to the bone. Since the SS law came to be, it belongs in a certain way to the essence of law. It is not possible to say that it did not exist as law or that it was only a piece of nonlaw, a nonhumanity: it designates evil as law. Since the SS existed, they belong, once and for all, to what is; they are a party to the human race, to its becoming (to its future perfect).

> But we cannot have it that the SS does not exist or has not existed. They shall have burned children, they shall have done it willingly. We cannot have it that they did not wish to do it. They are a force, just as the man walking along the road is one. And as we are too; for even now they cannot stop us from exerting our power.[25]

This unimaginable law is a part of the hidden force of law, a power that still belongs to "us" as the human race, will against will; and it is precisely because of this that we can turn it around, can rise up against it. It is because it is still and is only human will that finally it is powerless against us. It can only bow down and deny itself before us, when we force it to face up to and to renounce and destroy its own myth.

This myth is what sustains and destroys the SS man at the same time. A blaze of light. A fragment of sun, of myth, annihilating the very thing that transmits it, stupefying it. Handing him over like an animal, an asshole, to the need that the other exist in order to recognize him, even to the act of effacing that other: "*Weg!*" A metaphysical powerlessness, born of a metaphysical constraint: "A silence he has brought about. He shakes his head. He's the strongest; but there they are, and they have to be there in order that he be the strongest. He can't get away from it."[26] The effacing (*no-facing*) cannot totally annihilate the existence, the face of what is effaced, silence cannot totally silence the being: "The insults of these people are no more able to reach us than they are able to get their hands on the nightmare we have become in their brains: for all their denying of us we are still there."[27] Such is the last resort of reason, the resistance to effacement of the will to exist: the source and the power of the writing itself, at once its straight and its crooked way.

> The reign of man, man who acts or invests things with meaning, does not cease. The SS cannot alter our species. They are themselves enclosed within the same humankind and the same history. *Thou shalt not be:* upon that ludicrous wish an enormous machine has been built. They have burned men, and tons of ashes exist, they can weigh out that neutral substance by the ton. *Thou shalt not be:* but, in the man's stead who shall soon be ashes, they cannot decide that he not be. They must take account of us so long as we are *alive,* and it still depends upon us, upon our tenacious hold upon being, whether at the moment they come to kill us they are made to feel utterly certain they have been cheated. Nor can they check the history that will make those dry ashes more fruitful than the *Lagerführer's* meaty remains.[28]

History proceeds from a will that *becomes,* a drive toward being that infinitely surpasses and defies all humiliation, all slow annihilation, all sentence of death. The inviolable remainder of particularity (this "now" that no one can tear from me) leaps over death, robs the predator of his prey at the very moment when he thinks he has annihilated it. What is neutral in the species, what lies beyond all local and determined signifiers (religions, peoples, classes) resists destruction and sows the fruitful discord of irreducible singularities, of novel distinctions that deny indistinctness. "The more transformed we become, the farther we

retreat from back home, the more the SS believe us reduced to the indistinctness and the irresponsibility whereof we do certainly present the appearance—the more distinctions our community does in fact contain, and the stricter those distinctions are."[29]

A trans-Hegelian, meta-Hegelian dialectic in one stroke reduces the entire Nazi mythology to nothing, through the affirmation of this irreducible "we" (which becomes the clandestine community of extreme particularities), annihilates it beneath the seal of a certitude that includes the conjunction within the now of what is neutral and irreducibly singular in the race with the totality of all particularities and of all the differences this totality contains. The Nazi machine, myth made real, is a monster animated by a pathetic soul, by a stupid will—an enormous machine that the human face, this "expressing machine," can stand up to by itself, with its inviolable language, its clandestine will, its inestimable particularity, reducing the SS man to a tiny point: "he too shut up within the barbed wire, condemned to us, enclosed within the machinery of his own myth."[30]

The sacred, from the power of blasphemy, of clandestine desire, from waiting for inalienable signs, lives on, indestructible as human will. In one stroke, in a single leap, will goes beyond the simple view of the will to survive; it discovers, as though for the very first time, the common name of the race, its badge that falls short of every disaster, in the "historical objects" that we have become; it produces this reversal of the dry ash into fecundity, of destruction into the determination to be; grasps the sacred from the dark gods, takes it definitively from them, to entrust it to the species, to the "ultimate feeling of belonging," to the history that cannot be stopped.

> The human race—unique and seamless and torn—texture of law.
>
> No, this extraordinary sickness is nothing other than a culminating moment in man's history. And that means two things. First, that the solidity and stability of the species is being put to the test. Next, that the variety of the relationships between men, their color, their customs, the classes they are formed into mask a truth that here, at the boundary of nature, at the point where we approach our limits, appears with absolute clarity: namely, that there are not several human races, there is only one human race. It's because we're men like them that the SS will finally prove pow-

> erless before us. It's because they have sought to call the unity of this human race into question that they'll finally be crushed. Yet their behavior, and our situation, are only a magnification, an extreme caricature—in which nobody wants or is perhaps able to recognize himself—of forms of behavior and of situations that exist in the world, that even make up the existence of that older "real world" we dream about.[31]

Linnaeus against Darwin—such is reason here. The fixed nature of the species creates the unity of history. The uniqueness and singularity of the specific boundary proclaim an ethic that can be generalized in the face of the crushing of man, a global position of conscience before the variations of historical becoming. But also, in a choice, extreme particularity draws a clandestine consciousness, a consciousness of the tearing up of the law, of intractable fragility, of the suffocated letter.

Law, species: atheistic substance of man, fixed, soundproof, hardly visible, blank, like a blank gun hidden under a coat, like the letter before it rushes at, plunges into breath, forms, voice, word, writing, action, the moment of history, the violence of becoming. Suffocated letter, pure act in breathing, unimaginable diaphragm, midbody tract, checking of exhalation upon inhalation, of inhalation upon exhalation, suddenly making an incision, with a single blade of time, two movements, one within the other. Asthma of the letter. Asthma/atheism. Sacred value of the creature (of literature). Death become absolute evil opens an unnoticed space of religion, an indelible limit this side of devotion in a subjection to the Other. A limit that is the body, that is our body. A breach in Platonism. "That liberation which back home the Christian could think vouchsafed by death, he can here find only in the material deliverance of his imprisoned body."[32] Asthma like atheism, atheism like asthma. Isthmus, oral, inaugural. Kafka. Suffocation that cuts into the entrance of the narration—the rim of the narration of the law, the recitation of the Torah. The narration turned into a wide-open door of law, abysmally free. "It is undeniable that there is a certain happiness in being able to write tranquilly: *The horror of asphyxiation is inconceivable.* Inconceivable, no doubt, so that everything happens as though I'd written nothing."[33] Inconceivable like erasure itself, asphyxiation by erasure, of writing erased to nothing (like a bloodless body), open, free even of breathing, on its outside. Something other than the death of God—the creature, the

sole horizon, the sacred limit that the "real world," the one we dream of daily in ordinary unconsciousness, the one of the blood, of the pact, of the signature and of guilt, will once again come to conceal and deny, to skew.

> And if the Christian behaves here as though to persist in living were a sacred task, that's because the human creature has never been so close to beholding itself as a sacred value . . .
>
> Thus the Christian here substitutes the creature for God until the moment when, free, with some flesh on his bones, he will be able to recover his subjection again. So it is that, his head clipped smooth, negated as a man by the SS, the man within the Christian will be found to have taken the place of God in importance.
>
> But later on, when his blood will fashion his guilt for him anew, he will not acknowledge the revolution of the human creature's reigning position that forces itself on him here every day.[34]

Engraved memory of an unprecedented revolution, without God, bearing witness in advance against all denials. A lesson against all return of religion. Appeal to all blasphemies. Appeal to all the vigilant and all the insurgents against the recovery of culpabilities in preparation.

The SS, a signifier produced or reproduced ("you need more than a couple of days to become an SS")[35] according to a mechanical production. A signifier that might be denied, barred, made tiny in accordance with a negation that is humanization itself and the naked essence of reason, a radical will, stripped of all theology, even of all hope other than the affirmation that it releases and that remains, beyond expectation, final, absolute.

> For it to be shown that we are in the right we no more count on our bodies' liberation than on their resurrection. It's now, alive and wasted as we are, that our righteousness triumphs. True, this can't be seen; but the less it is visible, the greater our righteousness is; the less your chances of seeing anything at all, the more in the right we are. Not only are right and reason on our side, but we are the very righteousness that you have banished to a clandestine existence. And so less than ever can we bow before seeming triumphs. Let this be well understood: owing to what you have

> done, right-thinking transforms itself into consciousness. You have restored the unity of man; you have made consciousness irreducible. No longer can you ever hope that we be at once in your place and in our own skin, condemning ourselves. Never will anyone here become to himself his own SS.[36]

This absolute clandestinity, desired, decided, carries out the separation. Breaks with all forms of sadomasochism, that adoration of the SS within us. Sets out the irreducible, universal consciousness of the unity of the human race, enveloping all differences and particularities.

> And we have to say that everything in the world that masks this unity, everything that places beings in situations of exploitation and subjugation and thereby implies the existence of various species of mankind, is false and mad; and that we have proof of this here, the most irrefutable proof, since the worst of victims cannot do otherwise than establish that, in its worst exercise, the executioner's power cannot be other than one of the powers that men have, the power of murder. He can kill a man, but he can't change him into something else.[37]

Thus does a radical rationalism assert itself, one that at the same time rejects all forms of totalitarianism and does not compromise with any religion, with any weakening, any interference with the sacred limit of which it is the guardian.

What requires our consciousness, demands our awakening, is still now, here.

Us, here.

Robert Antelme's Two Sentences

JEAN-LUC NANCY

For me, as certainly for many others, Robert Antelme's name is not the name of a "writer," and it is not affixed to a body of work. This is not due to the few articles that he published or left behind; it is due to what, for want of a better term, I shall call a different posture, or a different form of expression from that of the "writer." I should put it this way: Robert Antelme pronounced only two sentences, from which it results, also, that his name is not that of an "author" or of a "signer"; in this sense, the name "Robert Antelme" is hardly a name at all. It merges with a (toneless) voice that enunciates these two sentences. When "Robert Antelme" is spoken, these two sentence are heard; that is all.

The first sentence declares that "man" (which constitutes his *species,* what is *special* to him) is nothing other than an absolute, impenetrable resistance to annihilation; that man, through whom annihilation enters the world, is nothing other than the absolute affirmation of being; more precisely, he is being, or existence, as absolute affirmation. This affirmation is sufficient; it is the affirmation of nothing outside itself. It is sufficient "unto itself," although in itself it has no "self."

This sentence defines an ontology and an ethic: an ontology without substance or subject, an ethic without morality or right. It defines

the *ethos* of being in the face of the nothingness that it is itself. Its *ethos:* its manner, its bearing, its behavior, even its rage.

The other sentence of Robert Antelme is here, in the letter written upon his return from the camps to Dionys Mascolo, who has published it: "To have been able to free words that were barely formed and in any case hadn't aged . . . but were shaped upon my breath alone: that, you see—that happiness—wounded me definitively. . . ."[1]

This sentence expresses the arrival of the new sentence, new speech, the entrance into the whirl of meaning, into its collapse. It defines a poetics—without poetry and without charm, but not without song. A poetics of being, or of what exists, newly born to the sense that it is, newly born to the feeling of absenting itself, thrust up from nothing, for nothing, a poetics that engages the praxis of the same *ethos.*

Robert Antelme pronounced only these two sentences. His *ethos* and his *pathos*—his manner and his suffering—were to pronounce them, and only them.

I would prefer for now to add nothing more. Not be silent, but to let these two sentences do their work, to become understood (which is the meaning of the word *phrasis*).[2] For here we find ourselves unwearyingly back at the beginning again, where the words are barely formed. In any case they haven't aged.

OCTOBER 1993

Man Naked

MYRIAM REVAULT D'ALLONNES

For some, like Primo Levi, fiction was the means to build a bridge between the inhumanity of the camp world, *over there* (*here,* to be precise) and our daily world *here* (*over there,* in other words). Talking, telling the story, telling one's story and then telling *several* stories: this is trying to conquer the incessantly repeated scene of the narrative that the other does not want to hear. It is also to attempt to overcome the irreparable separation between the person who has sojourned in hell and the *other,* the "innocent" who did not descend there. In addition, to the shame of having lived as ignoble, enslaved animals, the shame of having been occupied from morning until night with the stupor of hunger, cold, and fear, of having been reduced to the lowest common denominator of organic life—to that shame was added, for the survivors, "the shame of the world," the shame "felt by the just man faced with the offense committed by others, tortured by the idea that this offense exists, that it was irrevocably introduced into the world of existing things and that his own good will have appeared good for nothing, or inadequate and totally ineffective."[1]

Antelme shared this experience of shame, but for him the shame was not the indelible offense against the victim's fallen body that became, as the executioners wanted, an abject body. Quite the contrary, the shame was that of the shape, the human appearance that was no longer anything but a *lie,* that trim exterior retained by the well-fed

masters with pink skins and clean hands, whose "intact skin . . . was going to cling to a woman's skin tonight." Far from adhering to that stoic height that would have us not give way to the repulsive drift of our bodies, would have us keep our distance from those who (as we cannot avoid thinking) have quite shamelessly become animals (the most frequent illusion of new arrivals was to see an unbridgeable gulf between themselves and those whom they judged this way),[2] Antelme brings out, in the exhausted mortal who is here *in order* to die, the ultimate resistance that consists of *keeping himself from dying.* In this extreme situation, to be doomed to death is something very different from the abstract knowledge of being-for-death, which always allows us to act in spite of death. Hence, the final struggle is the one that delivers up the living animal, the member of the human race who has renounced the illusion that death is the beginning of immortality. Then concern for propriety, for discretion, for dignity, is of no use and produces no feeling of shame, because to persist in this concern would inevitably turn the executioners' gaze back upon you, to make you an accomplice of their disdain, to consent to their negation and their burial of humanity. Therefore you *must* eat—even if it means eating peelings, or lapping the bottom of the bowl without a spoon; you *must* protect yourself against the cold, *must* conserve your strength while working. But what Antelme shows is that "hunger," "cold," and "pain" have nothing in common with the experience we can have of them, nor with our language, the language of free men, woven of free words "created by and for free men who live in their houses and experience joy and sorrow."[3]

What remains for us, then—we who come after—of this teaching that sought to extract from shame a fierce attachment to life, that defined powerlessness as the inability "to create something which can be eaten," that maintained that you can "recognize yourself by seeing yourself again rummaging like a dog through rotten peelings," but that it was harder to bear the memory of the piece of bread or the swallow of water you hadn't shared? This teaching comes to us from another world, because we have no idea of the way in which hunger, thirst, and cold can be the very foundation of human existence, even though this other world is near to us. But, to those who will come after us, we can still repeat that you cannot make an animal out of someone who insists upon the affirmation of life, and at the price of life alone.

The Interruption—the Interminable

ROGER LAPORTE

For a long time I read a great deal; for at least fifteen years, I read between 120 and 140 books a year. During that now-distant period, the *Remembrance*[1] was published in fifteen volumes; I read it in fifteen days. I readily admit that I found having to close a book, or not knowing whether I'd be able to get back to reading again, a deeply disturbing event. The feeling "I will not read it any further" has happened to me only twice in my life: while reading *The 120 Days of Sodom* of the divine Marquis,[2] and while reading *The Human Race* by Robert Antelme.

I had almost finished reading it—at least its darkest pages, so I thought. Was not deliverance close at hand? The Allied troops would still have to reach the concentration camps in time, but the SS were fleeing, driving before them a horde of wretched deportees, starved, exhausted, often sick. During the halts at night, some of them, too weak to get up, defecated where they lay. To reduce a grown man to the shit of his earliest infancy: a sadistic humiliation such as this is ignominious. The final pages of *The Human Race* are "too long," because the exhausting march is too long. One has the feeling that this forced and utterly insane march will never end, except for those (many of them) who are delivered by death.

A modern theologian said that Sartre's *No Exit* was the best way to

represent hell to oneself. It is true that the world of Gercin, of Estelle, of Inès is without love—that, their life now forever acted out, they will make each other suffer through all eternity; but what is this closed door, this imaginary place, this dismal living room (but just a living room) next to the real and barbarous world that Robert Antelme describes for us! I could not endure reading *The Human Race.* I closed the book for several hours, because Robert Antelme shows us the hell where he lived, the real one, which exists here below, the hell that, miraculously, he passed through.

Never have I reread *The Human Race,* nor will I ever reread it. A single reading leaves an indelible mark.

Antelme's "Hands": Postscript to *Smothered Words*

SARAH KOFMAN

In fact, it was not necessary to speak the French language, or even to speak, for a true exchange, a relation without relation, to be established. It was enough to be offered a back on which to lean, an arm to support you when your legs could no longer walk, or a helping hand when you couldn't climb up to your own mattress, when you could no longer be yourself and needed a fraternal other to supplement your own "I" that could no longer be an "I." Even if someone who one day held out his hand to you and smiled shouted at you the next because you were taking up too much room; even if each of them was often alone, ate for himself alone, alone felt his legs, his thighs, and his lice, and could pass four hours in front of the other without speaking or making the slightest gesture, these ties of solidarity existed. They made it possible to maintain within himself, in spite of everything, the presence of the other (*autrui*), the responsibility within each for the other's will to stay alive; they made it possible for each of them to rediscover the meaning of the pronoun "*we,*" which in Antelme's text rivals and often supplants the indefinite and anonymous "*one,*" and that of the word "*companion,*" which Antelme uses a lot, even if in this camp vigilantly ruled by hunger, where night and day one's only thought was of eating, for there is nothing to eat, and it was "impossible that it be otherwise," there was scarcely any bread to share, at the most a few grains of wheat, a few scrapings.

A few looks. A few handshakes. The German conscientious objector, an evangelical, and Robert Antelme couldn't say anything to each other, yet they understood each other because there was nothing to explain. Their silent faces spoke constantly, signaling to each other in a silent language that kept them from feeling the cold, hunger, the SS, which went unnoticed by those who were busy parading their death's heads upon the field, because it was not of the order of power, but that which made them want to shout for joy as they never had before. Against the word *langsam,* muttered by the Rhinelander to silently express his desire to slow down the demented and deadly rhythm of work, and to show his complicity with the detainees; against the words *nicht sagen* whispered by the German woman as she gave white bread; against the glances and handshakes that shared in the power of powerlessness, nothing could prevail, "neither the barking of thousands of SS troops, nor . . . barbed wire, nor famine, nor lice."[1] Human signs diverted from the system of death and power, which, offered in this most aporetic of situations, lost their private character and took on the status of sublime, historical acts. It is not by accident that Antelme's book ends, magnificently, with the account of a silent relation of this kind: an exchange with a young Russian, in a low voice, in the dark; with a man he doesn't know, can't even see, who offers him a cigarette, whose shoulder he touches and whose hand he shakes; with a man whose language he doesn't know and with whom he can only share a few words in the language of the SS. It is as though Antelme wanted to erase the betrayal of this language, to rehabilitate the language of the other by giving it the last word; by making this language that had ridiculed and insulted them affirm, by this final *Ja,* the restoration of human liberty and solidarity, the unity of the victim and the torturer beyond the division of languages, and above all, beyond the SS's desire to divide the human race, to reduce to ashes its indestructible unity.

> The light is out now. I can't lie down on the bench either, for some other guys are also sitting on it.
>
> There's a shadow next to me, and the red tip of a cigarette. From time to time the tip glows brighter, and a mouth and nose are lit up as if by a distant beacon.
>
> The ember has moved away from the mouth, which has now been reclaimed by darkness. The ember comes towards me. I am not paying

attention. An elbow pokes my arm. The ember gets closer. I take the cigarette, take a couple of drags. A hand takes it back.

"Thanks."

The first word. I'd been alone, and I hadn't even known he existed. Why this cigarette extended in my direction?

I don't know who he is. Again the ember glows before his mouth, then moves away and back toward me. I take a drag. The two of us are together now, he and I: we're taking drags from the same cigarette.

"*Franzose?*"

And I answer, "*Ja.*"

He draws on the cigarette. It's late. There's no more noise in the room. The guys on the bench aren't sleeping, but they are quiet. In my turn I ask:

"*Rusky?*"

"*Ja.*"

He speaks softly. His voice sounds young. I cannot see him.

"*Wie alt?*"

"*Achtzehn.*"

He rolls his r's a little. Now there is silence while he takes a drag.

Then he holds the cigarette out to me, and again disappears in the darkness. I ask him where he's from.

"*Sebastopol.*"

He answers willingly each time; here in the dark it's as if he were telling his life's story.

The cigarette's out and I can't see him. I won't recognize him tomorrow. The shadow of his body has leaned forward. A moment passes. Some snoring comes from the corner. I bend forward too. Nothing now exists but this man I cannot see. I put my hand on his shoulder.

In a low voice: "*Wir sind frei.*" We are free.

He straightens up. He tries to see me. He shakes my hand.

"*Ja.*"[2]

POSTSCRIPT TO *SMOTHERED WORDS*

For the past two years writing a book on Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo,* I have never stopped thinking of these final pages of Antelme's book. My reading of Nietzsche had been accompanied by a rereading of *The Human Race;* this became a necessity, an obligation. To the agonal formula that

ends *Ecce Homo*—"Dionysus versus the Crucified One"—I felt that I had to substitute this: "Antelme versus Nietzsche," as though Robert Antelme had become for me the figure of a necessary counterideal.

And this was not because he might have been the representative of an aesthetic ideal. Not at all! But because these handshakes that the power of powerlessness silently share appear irreducible to me, both toward the compassionate hands of the priests (and toward their grip on humanity) and toward the very proper hands of the surgeons who want to clean up humanity without pity. And Antelme's "hands"? Hands that end all manipulation and all "apartheid"; hands that are not afraid to dirty themselves shaking others' hands, which are no longer motivated by a will to dominate.

The will to power is incapable of being a good principle of intelligibility for this third kind of hands, even if it is not reduced to a technological will to domination. Will the model of *The Gay Science,* of the love dance of opposites who come together, tenderly holding hands but not being reconciled—will they be the preferred model? Or will the gesture of Antelme at the end of *The Human Race* locate itself beyond any principle of intelligibility, beyond any model?

DECEMBER 1993

Poems

MARTINE BRODA

To my mother, Helena Lewkowitz,
called Hélène Lacombe in the Resistance,
returned from Auschwitz
with her young sister at twenty

MARIANA S.

Mariana's memory lost

a sclerosis of commemorative plaques
of resisters murdered at the corner
of every street in Paris

sometimes a sad withered
red bouquet

ich sehe dich, du pfückst sie
mit meinen neuen Händen

in no one's hands, the dead
continue saving the living

memory
of the party
of Those Shot

o Psalm über
dem Dorn

her memory lost
against the red poster[1]
of her father's death

(*Sloma Sauber nigh unto* Paul Celan
of Chernivitzi nigh unto Paris)

Kaddisch

Dir entgegen

er stegt gegen
die Pest

ewig jung

gebentscht

you take her by the hand
Schwester
you both cross the line
blue like the sea
of her eyes
you make her
take the plane
of Liberation

Her memory lost
just to be young again
to rise glowing from the wave
so beautiful of body and soul
as always she was

CHARLES S.

This wildly innocent
reversible murder

crucifying

(daughter with father)
(Jew with German)

or else double murder

(you
and your own father)

always prophesying

your language of persecution
assailed

somber gilded
outpouring

life tormented you and
you returned due torment

I weep
for not having known
how to be upon your tongue

and the baume
of your complaints

a talking place

where we drank till
we were out of breath

love so musical
you resonate
like the first
maternal language

in me so secret

Meine schwarze sprachlose Muttersprache

exposed to the east wind as far as Chuvashia

with Celan's and Sachs's shadows
drüben

on the banks of the Limmat

Synagogue of all the Yids
blindfolded poets

blind like Oedipus and the first poet

limping Synagogue
or Communion of Saints

o love so musical
in me you are snowing
much further than childhood

only trembling
have I been able
to open you

Still do I blush from what

I could not share with you

a nuptial morning

you wrote:

"Since my suicide I'm different

I'm less unhappy"

and also

"I feel *ein Hauch* of happiness"

you're killed
in the place of language
crucified
on the literal place

WERNER SZ.

the German student
with the eyes
of his sensitive grace

on the memorial worn
clean by the wind

made of fields of
poppies red
not with blood shed
in the Crown

Kelchblut

but like the vivid joy
your mother wanted
you devoted to when
she dressed you in red

crumpled silken roses
carried away
by the wind of childhood

brilliant orange-colored
the red of childhood
springtime a vivace
March that is your name

poppies
crumpled silken dresses

Moscow, December 1 . . .

PHILIPPE LACOUE-LABARTHE

Moscow, December 1, 1993, nine in the morning, the sun barely up. Wet snow, black mud, poor light. Desolation. From Strasbourg, whence I came, to here, and from here to Siberia, one imagines, near or far, forbidden or inaccessible, at the end of each of these immense, deserted avenues that stretch out toward the east—this land, one cannot but think, this land for more than half a century was a land of camps. Here millions of human beings were deported, locked up, starved, exhausted, systematically exterminated. The same snow, the same mud, the same poor light. And the cold. From an office assuredly similar to the one where I am now was planned and carried out what our vaguely terrorized childhood identified as hell. But it has a name for adults: the horror. And imagining it is simply unbearable.

I was asked to write an article on Antelme. I left with this task, having accepted, having said yes. Above all, I didn't want to say no, if only because of the esteem that I have for those who asked me to do it, and the respect due this book [*The Human Race*]. But since last night, with the snow and the mud, the poor light, and the cold, I know that I won't write it. Many reasons converge, but I only cling to two. The first is that I am incapable of speaking, merely speaking, about such sorrow. There is nothing to say; it is infinitely too much. The second is that, when he returned, Antelme wrote this book, and only this book, nothing else. It

he bequeathed to us, and never can we possibly say that it is only a matter of "literature." This book, and nothing else. I do not feel that I have the right to add the slightest line of commentary. To do so would be indecent. He did not become silent in order to attain some kind of greatness; he did not refuse to speak, he simply stopped.

And to us he passed on this question, the most brutal imaginable (and can we ever answer it?): What is it, humanity? The human race?

The reply to this question is a poem—clean, clear-cut, but without the slightest allegiance to poetry. The poem of that time that knows nothing anymore of different times. For once, let us accept that there was witness (the martyr): snow, mud, poor light, the cold. Which means man, humiliated, deposed, sent back naked. And which *fundamentally* surpasses all our misfortunes.

In a Petrified World

GÉRARD RABINOVITCH

There is no History. What is human in man does not increase.
Vassili Grossman

I do not know whether you can still do something with me. Whether you have the courage to try.
Charlotte Delbo

The muted noise of our contemporary societies, more cacophonous than the night cries of troubling jungles. Crude compromises, corruption, crassness, cowardice, the fever of all-consuming pleasures, the permanent puke of hollow words, of puerile fables, of epics of entertainment, of insane acts of violence; the arrogance of folly, the fatuity of servitude, the seduction of falsifiers, the impunity of pillagers—all spread surreptitiously everywhere, no longer something contingent, but the standard of manners of a humanity in ruins. Progressively meeting no opposition, vulgarity flourishes with a calm constancy, forms attitudes, flatters impatient egos, sets up its own ways of seeing things as postulates in the organization of social exchange and its resulting bonds.

Is it so exaggerated to say that we can recognize in all this the *resurgence,* in integrated and ingratiating yet blatant form, of what the advent of Nazism had precipitated in a concentrated, feverish way in

democratic society,[1] without the mass terror, but not without diffuse intimidation and targeted murder, without the terror of the exterminations, but not without stunned and normative assent and mercenary crimes.

During its first quarter, the century lay in waiting, with both hope and dread, for the plebeians. It awaited the proletariat; what appeared was the political mob. The morals of hoodlums, an aesthetic of mobsters, the manners of criminals, the pleasures of scum. Nazism assembled, concentrated, and pieced together the disparate pieces of the mob's cultural puzzle. Nazism was this convergence. Not the generic name for a policy with criminal consequences, but the emergence, on the field of action, of the policy of the gangsters' modus operandi and their episteme. No longer mobsters moving about on the margins of politics, in the gray zone of low maneuvering, exchanging hidden favors, parceling out influence, but a mob installed at the center of politics, and becoming, in the end, the proprietor of the state.

Not the alliance of the outlaws,
But the company of the lawless.

Nazism was the condensed aggregate of everything that humanity carries within itself of villainies of every sort, to which it gave a legitimacy sui generis, finding in the backyard of a modernity seeking its identity the ideological hodgepodge with which to dress itself up, to deck itself out.

It will drag in—all attracted by obscure promises of a collective division of spoils, seduced by the glitter of the announced distractions[2]—the impoverished strata of society, university graduates and corrupt academics, artists hoping to storm the modern state to turn it into an instrument of chaos, death, and darkness. So much did it capture their approval, so hugely did it compromise their identity, that they no longer found in themselves even a spineless eleventh-hour burst of energy. The Germans did not revolt.

Not Tocqueville, not Quinet, not one of the analysts throughout the world of nascent democracy, not even the most clinical among them, Ostrogorski,[3] who pinpointed the fatal trap for democracy posed by the clientism of political parties, had, either from the depths of their skepticism or the furthest reaches of their pessimism, or in their prognosti-

cations, cautions, and warnings, anticipated the possibility of such an attack.

Still worse. Those who sensed immediately where the business was being staged were rare; and they were not followed. So, for example, Bertolt Brecht's very clinical intuition was not taken seriously enough. The transparent characters of Arturo Ui and his gang were believed to reinforce its distinguishing feature for the ends of agitprop, and its performance was recognized and praised from that angle, not for its truth. Yet in view of the actual reality Arturo Ui was still a sorry sight, one of small-time banditry when measured against Nazi gangsterism. But who would have been perverse enough to foresee for what atrocities this feature was good?

Hence, the rare attempts to analyze real Nazism have been ignored: those, that is, which take its doctrines into consideration less than its methods—or, still better, which understand its doctrines as an element of its method. Such was Franz Neumann, who first—and, for a long time, alone—revealed beneath Nazi discourse, beneath its proclaimed ideal of the total state, "a nonstate, a chaos, a regime of non-law and of anarchy that 'devoured' rights and human dignity and aimed at transforming the world into chaos."[4] In naming the Nazi order *Behemoth*—a reference to Jewish eschatology, to St. Augustine, and to Hobbes—Franz Neumann, through a sublime intuition, came closest to the reality of Nazism. Closer, even, than the later labels of "paganism," which sometimes gushed from the pens of certain theologians. Yet at the time of the writing of his essay and its completion in 1941, no one had as yet discovered the extent of the destruction, the devastation of which this "paganism" was capable.

Thus, the rebaptized "racial state," as an ignoble phantasmagory, was the semantic conjuring trick destined to subjugate the role as the instrument of Law that falls to the state in modern societies and to transform it into a machine of terror and plunder. The so-called total state hid general chaos, and the supposed *superman* a corrupt individual, an arrogant pillager. Franz Neumann was not the founder of a school.

As for the concentration and extermination camps, whose horrifying reality Neumann could not yet have known: today whoever is not afraid to know will know that they were not simply a frightful instrument of oppression and terror; they literally prefigured what, stratum after stratum, circle after circle, the world would become beneath the

Nazi domination of a thousand-year *Reich.* Not the arms of Leviathan but the lands of *Behemoth.* When the gangsters' world without Law becomes the dominant world, no brake exists to sadistic, death-dealing urges.

As the war drew to a close, the opportunity again arose to part that impenetrable veil that wakeful dreams, those that accompany humans in their sleepwalking distress, wear over disturbing realities.

Once again, the moment was not seized. What is confounding, though hardly surprising, is the *willful inattention,* a new sort of servitude that was opposed to the general warning of the deportees' narratives, and that all the writers of the deportation exemplified.[5] Not only did the latter have to face the disbelief, the impossibility of imagining what the camps were for someone who had not been thrown into them; or to confront each other again, in unanimity, with the pain and sorrow of the inexpressible. They had also to confront a general desire to discredit them for what, amidst the darkness, they had discerned about true humanity. A desire to contest the knowledge of which henceforth they were the bearers.[6]

Also confounding is this same *inattention* to the most revealing behavior of the Nazis once they were beaten and in the hands of the Allied troops, or during the various trials held after the war. Processions, snivelings, cowardice, mutual denunciations, and so on. A great many attitudes that observers generally did not fail to compare to those gangsters[7]—without provoking in the general public, until very recently, the slightest questioning, without awakening the least philosophical curiosity, without stimulating even one or two intellectual vocations, without causing the establishment of departments of "studies." It was generally preferred to comment on Nazism through the history of Ideas, rather than to investigate it through the anthropology of mores; in the process, its political ideology was credited with indeed being one—however revolting it seemed to its commentators. While Hillberg, for simply writing the history of the destruction of European Jews, or Simon Wiesenthal, for flushing out hidden Nazis legitimately, were, for their very enterprise, too long hopelessly alone.

Such blindness on the part of intellectuals as a group to the need for mending democratic thought, rent by its failure to check the rise of Nazism and to reclaim its original moral status; such evasion in the face of the unthinkable that the sudden appearance of Nazism constituted;

such an inability to recognize how much the "poison of the mob is horrifying, how much it corrupts everything human in man";[8] such a refusal to see that this poison constitutes the authentic and constant danger of democratic practice at its very core: all this could not be without consequences.

On this question the democracies missed the opportunity of the postwar period. We know the result. Fifty years later, the problem of cultural slumming and of widespread criminalization in democratic societies is more current than ever, and nothing has disappeared of the instruments of manipulation, subjugation, and corruption perfected by the Nazis. We are in a position to recognize the justice of what Simon Wiesenthal wrote several years ago: "We won the war, and we lost the post-war."

The Human Race could for a long time appear simply as an imposing contribution to the memory of the camps, as a work of witness and remembrance that picked up the challenge of forgetting thrown down to the survivors by their contemporaries. What was always praised by close admirers, with a kind of self-denying enjoyment and an unfawning reverence, were the immense literary talent and the moral grandeur brought together here for what is the only worthwhile artistic and creative task—that of disentangling reality.[9]

On the other hand, has it been sufficiently emphasized that Antelme's talent is a feature of the Law? That it is the obligation placed upon the writer of the deportation that his testimony not be engulfed in the sea of indifference and the rising tide of inattention; and that he draw out this talent in himself to the point of exhaustion, since he will constitute the unique and indispensable arm for what he has to defend? This is what that great writer of the deportation, Varlam Chalamov, had abruptly emphasized when he pointed out, about a number of Russian authors who undertook to narrate the Stalinist deportations: "They are exactly liars, because they are incompetents. . . . One does not fail to evoke the spirit of the deportees from a lack of personal experience but from a lack of talent."[10] The esteem and attention acquired by talent do credit to testimony, where testimony alone is exhausting. So it is that Robert Antelme and a few others (Primo Levi, Charlotte Delbo, Vassili Grossman, Elie Wiesel, Hermann Langbein) have upheld permanence in literature against forgetting, and that the fragile threads of other testimony, the suffocated words

of the survivors, have not been irreparably jettisoned by the collective consciousness.

Everything that happens in *The Human Race* depends on this same feature: its style, its sense of decency, its anthropology, its coarseness, its modesty, its intransigence, its poetry, its lucidity, the manner and purpose of the narration. Even, in this particular case, its character as the one book written by its author. This is why it immediately asserts its authority as a master book.

This would easily suffice for its influence, its role as a beacon of literature—and not only in the service of the memory of the camps. But this is not all. *The Human Race* extends beyond its calling as witness, to present itself as a meditation upon true humanity in the paroxysm of the camps. If Robert Antelme was one of those men who, in the expression of Emmanuel Levinas, hold fast beneath the Law, he was also a man who, as was fitting, fought from a just anger for the reaffirmation of the unity of the human race, and even more for the continuity of the man over there and the man here, for truth for the deportee who had come through, but, by extension, also for all humanity. The humanity glimpsed in the camps was nothing other than ordinary humanity; the paroxysmal character of the conditions of the camps served only to sharpen its features. And *The Human Race,* henceforth described in the conditions of the camps, goes beyond the "exceptional" situation, to become the polyptych of true humanity. So it was inevitable that, at this juncture, the description and interpretation of daily life in the camps become indirectly a description and interpretation of life outside the camps; that the book of witness reveal itself as a *book of resistance,* and that the real narrative of survival in the camps, though it remains that, be transformed into a metaphorical narrative of our ordinary life beyond the barbed wire. Taking us by the hand, it leads us across the Solomonic threshold of Proverbs and of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes).

Is there a direction where we can look and not recognize the dense masses—as in the serfs' dance of aspiring *Kapos,* which the author describes for us in a way that cannot be bettered? And in front of our mirror, if we but have the courage to look in it, do we not always recognize, beyond the illusion of what we might be, only faces of failures clinging to the shoreline of existence, castoffs along the pathways of liberty? Are we not still reduced constantly to the clandestinity of being? All made Marranos in this scene, stumbling in a darkness masked by the

neon lights of consumption. And when, in the night of a world in continual rout and improbable regroupments, we pass a comrade, a *buddy,* what do we have to share—so much do we lack language—but a ray of hope and a patience too dim, which warms no more than does the burning tip of a cigarette?[11] There is not a scene, of all those that make up the book, which does not find an echo of this sort in the ongoing events of our shared existence.

Yet perhaps the height of his struggle today is reached when it meets the troubling evolution of our ever-developing world.

> [I]t so happened that at Gandersheim the intermediary element was made up entirely of German common-law prisoners. Thus we were a group of about five hundred men who could not avoid contact with the SS, and who were supervised not by political prisoners, but by murderers, thieves, swindlers, sadists, and black marketeers. . . .
>
> It is important to stress that the power struggle between the political prisoners and the imprisoned criminals never took on the character of a struggle between two factions competing for leadership. It was the struggle between men whose aim was to establish some rule of law—insofar as any lawfulness was still possible in a society set up to be infernal—and those whose aim was at all costs to prevent the establishment of such a rule, since they could thrive only in a lawless society. Under them only the naked law of the SS could reign; in order to live—and to live rather well—there was nothing for it but that they aggravate SS law. Hence the role of *provocateurs* that they played. In a manner that was systematic and relentless they succeeded remarkably in provoking and maintaining among us the state of anarchy they needed. They played the game to perfection. Not only did they thus confirm themselves, in the view of the SS, as different from us in nature, but they were also seen by the SS as indispensable auxiliaries and—consequently—as deserving of a good life. Starving a man so as to have to punish him later on for stealing from a garbage can; by doing this earning a reward from the SS, then, for example, obtaining that reward in the form of some extra soup for want of which the man will be starved that much more: such was the form their tactics would take.[12]

Such is Antelme's lesson. A lesson for today, which accompanies us for tomorrow. By anticipation, a lesson about the price that one day we

shall have to pay for the fact that the postwar period did not want to look reality in the face and listen to the weighty knowledge that those impassioned porters, the deportees, brought back as their sole baggage.

We have almost reached that day. Already, trying to be a man has become untimely, and demanding it, subversive. Already, the alternative has become radicalized, and the intermediate way narrowed: either we are on the side of this inexhaustible book, standing firm in our turn; or we are part of its lesson. Or we may opt, whatever we may think we can maintain to the contrary, for the vulgarity that is advancing, converging, and spreading.

Robert Antelme, or the Truth of Literature

GEORGES PEREC

One does not attack the literature of the concentration camps. As soon as a book speaks of the camps, or even more generally, of Nazism, it is more or less assured of being welcomed with a certain sympathy everywhere. Even those who don't like it won't want to say anything bad about it. At worst, it won't be talked about. One has to be as far to the right as André Parinaud to go after André Schwartz-Bart[1] as he did. We might almost say, with, if needed, a slight touch of disdain, that it is indecent to connect the universe of the camps to what is called "literature."

Yet it seems that this attitude is often ambiguous. Camp literature is most often seen only as so many useful, even necessary, testimonies. Precious documents, certainly, indispensable, overwhelming, dealing with the period and its "atmosphere"; with the War, the Liberation, the "turning point" of our civilization. But it is clear that these books are carefully distinguished from "true" literature, such that one is no longer sure whether the basis of this attitude is an excessive respect for (or bad conscience about) the phenomenon of the camps, pushed to the extent of thinking that literature can never give anything other than an inauthentic and impotent expression of it, or the belief that a deportee's experience is in itself not capable of giving birth to a work of art. It is unclear, that is, whether literature is disdained in the name of the camps, or the camps in the name of literature. In any case, however, this double

attitude takes into account almost completely the real (superficial) audience and the real (falsified) scope of camp literature.

But literature is not an activity separated from life. We live in a world of speech, language, narrative. Writing is not the exclusive prerogative of someone who abstracts a brief hour of conscientious immortality from the century each evening, and, in the quiet of his study, lovingly fashions what others will later proclaim in all seriousness "the honor and probity of our letters." Literature exists, indissolubly tied to life, the necessary continuation of life—its obvious outcome, its indispensable complement. All experience is open to literature, and all literature to experience, and the path leading from one to the other, be it literary creation or reading, establishes that relationship between the fragmentary and the total, that passage from the anecdotal to the historical, that back-and-forth between the general and the particular, between sensibility and lucidity, which form the very thread of our consciousness.

Talking or writing is, for the returning deportee, a need as immediate, as strong as his need for calcium, sugar, sun, meat, sleep, silence. It is not true that he can shut up and forget. First of all, he must remember. He must explain, recount, control this world where he was a victim.

"During the first days after our return," writes Robert Antelme,

> I think we were all prey to a genuine delirium. We wanted at last to speak, to be heard. We were told that by itself our physical appearance was eloquent enough; but we had only just returned, with us we brought back our memory of our experience, an experience that was still very much alive, and we felt a frantic desire to describe it such as it had been.[2]

It is then that problems arise. It is a matter of testifying to the universe of the camps, but what constitutes a testimony? At the time when Robert Antelme set about writing, the tables of contents of practically every periodical contained an episode, a document, a testimony about the camps, and dozens of books were showing and recounting.

But it turns out that the testimonies are wrong, or miscarry, that toward the camp literature attitudes are the same as toward the camps' realities. Clenching of fists, indignation, distress, but no attempt either to understand or to look deeply. The Americans who liberated Robert Antelme at Dachau said, "Frightful," and went no further. And Micheline

Maurel, in *Un Camp très ordinaire*,[3] says that the question most frequently asked her upon her return was: "Were you raped?" This was the only question which really interested people, the only one which got inside the idea which they fabricated for themselves about the terror. Beyond that, there was nothing—no understanding, no imagining; inside it, a facile compassion. In every case, whether monotonous or spectacular, the horror was anesthetized. The testimonies were ineffective. Stupor, astonishment, or anger became the normal modes of reading. But that was not what one had wanted to achieve; no one wanted, by writing, to arouse pity, tenderness, rebellion, but rather to make understandable what could not be understood, to express what was inexpressible.

"As of those first days, however," Robert Antelme continues,

> we saw that it was impossible to bridge the gap we discovered opening up between the words at our disposal and that experience which, in the case of most of us, was still going forward within our bodies. How were we to resign ourselves to not trying to explain how we had got to the state we were in? For we were yet in that state. And even so it was impossible. No sooner would we begin to tell our story than we would be choking over it. And then, even to us, what we had to tell would start to seem *unimaginable.*
>
> This disproportion between the experience we had lived through and the account we were able to give of it would only be confirmed subsequently. We were indeed dealing then with one of those realities which cause one to say that they defy imagining. It became clear henceforth that only through a sifting, that is only through that selfsame imagining could there be any attempting to tell something about it.[4]

We think we know the camps because we've seen, or think we've seen, the towers, the barbed wire, the gas chambers, because we think we know the number of dead. But statistics never talk: a thousand dead, or a hundred thousand, makes no difference. The photographs, the recollections, the *steles* say nothing to us. In Munich, road signs for tourists suggest a visit to Dachau, but the barracks are empty and clean, and the lawns are growing.

We think we know what is terrible. It is a "terrible" event, a "terrible" story; there is a beginning, a culminating point, an end. But we don't understand anything: the absence of the body eaten away; the word "nothing." We don't know the camps.

Facts do not speak for themselves. It is a mistake to think they do, or, if they do, we have to make ourselves realize that we don't hear them, or, even worse, that we hear them the wrong way. Most of the time, the literature of the camps has made this mistake. Ceding to the naturalistic temptation which characterizes the historical-social novel, to the ambition of the "fresco," it has piled up facts, it has multiplied the exhaustive descriptions of episodes which it believes intrinsically significant. But they were not, because they were not for us, we were not concerned; because we remained foreign to that world, to that fragment of history which took place beyond us.

To make us sensitive to the camp universe, to make from what had struck him something which would strike us, so that his own experience could exhaust itself in ours, Robert Antelme elaborates and transforms the facts, the themes, and the conditions of his deportation—in contrast to other camp narratives which, with little variation, made use of the basic structures of the novel; and first of all he chooses to reject any appeal to the spectacular and to avoid any immediate emotion which might too easily stop the reader.

He is helped in this, certainly, by the particular circumstances of his experience, the major part of his detention having been in a *Kommando* of little importance. But his rejection of the gigantic and the apocalyptic is in fact part of a deliberate intention which governs the organization of his narrative even to the slightest details and gives it a specific coloration, a simplicity, a day-to-day quality—unknown till then—which goes as far as to *betray* "reality" in order to express it more effectively, to prevent us from finding it "unbearable." Hence, we know almost nothing, and then only very late in the book, of what it was for the still sturdy Antelme to discover those walking skeletons who were the (only slightly) longer-held deportees. This is a favorite passage in all the other camp literature, but this sudden, unlimited discovery of suffering and terror does not (as is commonly thought) reveal the camp as it did *effectively* for the new arrivals, and it can only arouse in the reader a false pity which barely conceals a rejection pure and simple.

This rejection of pity goes still further. The universe of the camps is distanced. Robert Antelme refuses to treat his experience as a whole, as something given once and for all, self-evident, eloquent in itself. He breaks it up. He questions it. It might have been enough for him to

evoke, just as it might have been enough for him to show his wounds without saying anything; instead, between his experience and us he interposes the entire grid of a discovery and a memory and a consciousness which carry things through to the end.

What is implicit in the other camp narratives is the *evidence* of the camp, and of the horror, the evidence of a complete world, closed in upon itself, to be reconstructed in one piece.

But in *The Human Race* the camp is never given. It compels recognition, it emerges slowly. It is mud; then hunger, then cold; then blows, then hunger again; then lice. Then everything at once. The waiting and the solitude. The neglect. The bodily misery, the insults. The barbed wire, the *Schlague*. The exhaustion. The SS man's face; the *Kapo's* face; the *Meister's* face. The whole of Germany, the whole horizon; the universe, eternity.

There are neither hangings nor crematoria. There are no fully formed images, reassuring in their very violence. In *The Human Race* there is not a single "horrific vision." But there is time which drags on, a halting chronology, a persistent present, hours which never end, moments of emptiness and unconsciousness, days without dates, brief moments of "individual destiny," hours of surrender. "It seemed as though noon would never come, as though the war would never end. . . ."

There are no *explanations*. But there is not one fact that does not go beyond itself, transform itself, integrate itself within a larger perspective. The event, whatever it may be, is always accompanied by the consciousness of it. The camp world is widened and revealed. There is not one fact which does not become exemplary. The narrative is interrupted at any moment; consciousness works its way into the anecdote and deepens it; and this moment of the camp becomes terribly heavy, changes meaning, exhausts the camp for an instant, then opens onto another memory.

This continual back-and-forth between memory and consciousness, between the experimental and the exemplary, between the anecdotal thread of an event and its global interpretation, between the description of a phenomenon and the analysis of a mechanism, this constant giving of perspective to memory, this projection of the particular into the general and of the general into the particular—all of which are specific methods of literary creation, insofar as they involve organization of sensible material, invention of a style, discovery of a certain type of relation

between the elements of the narrative: hierarchization, integration, progression—these techniques break up the immediate and inoperative image which we make for ourselves of the reality of the camps. Separated from its most conventional meanings, questioned and put in doubt, dispersed, revealed step by step through a series of meditations which go to the very heart of our sensibility, the universe of the camps appears for the first time without the possibility of our shrinking from it.

The essential principle of the camp system is everywhere the same: it is negation. It can be immediate extermination; but this is, in the final analysis, the simplest case. More often, it is slow destruction, elimination. The deportee must have no face, must be no more than skin stretched over protruding bones. Cold, fatigue, hunger, decrepitude must strike him; he must debase himself, must be diminished. He must offer the spectacle of a degenerate humanity, must forage in garbage cans, must eat peelings and grass. He must have lice and scabies, must be covered with vermin. He must be nothing but vermin. Then Germany will have the concrete proofs of its superiority.

All known means of oppression were used by the SS. The commonest and the most effective was to put together political deportees and common criminals—swindlers, murderers, sadists—so that enemies mixed in with "crooks" became "crooks" themselves.

The bureaucracy of the camps, hierarchization pushed to the extreme, the distribution of responsibilities which allowed a limited number of SS to rule over a mass of prisoners, assured a safe life for a certain number of intermediaries: *Lageraltester, Kapos, Vorarbeiter,* and so on. In a certain number of camps, and principally in the most important ones, the political deportees, because they were the most aware and the longest held, secured for themselves, after months, even years of struggle, control of the key posts. Inside the camp system they managed to institute a *legality,* a discipline, which contravened SS law, since it implied a total and effective solidarity among the prisoners: orders were not carried out, or their direction was changed; the most endangered prisoners were protected, the most dangerous were eliminated.

At Buchenwald, a city of forty thousand inhabitants, the clandestine international organization controlled the entire activity of the camp. At Gandersheim, a *Kommando* of five hundred men, as in the majority of small *Kommandos,* it was the common criminals who prevailed.

Control of a camp by common criminals means that SS law is aggravated instead of being countered. Discipline, for example, is made impossible, so that the *Kapo, reestablishing* it with blows from his truncheon, clearly demonstrates that he is essentially different from the man he is hitting, and hence, that he deserves to live, even to prosper. Another example: international solidarity is rendered impossible; on the contrary, nationalities are pitted against each other—French and Italians, Russians and Poles—since the resulting struggles make them lose the sense of a common enemy and serve the *Kapos'* maneuvers.

"At Gandersheim there was no gas chamber, no crematorium," writes Robert Antelme. "The horror . . . is not gigantic. . . . The horror there was darkness, absolute lack of any kind of landmark, solitude, unending oppression, slow annihilation."[5]

Thus is the typical camp defined. Here the mechanism of the camp is naked. Oppression knows no limits. The deportee knows no refuge.

Gandersheim is the most general of camps. The risks there are the humblest, the chances the smallest. There are no instruments of death, no hangings, no tortures. But nothing permits life. Political organization is the assumed safeguard of a certain percentage of the camp population; but the rule by the common criminals means the impossibility of all organization.

"It was to prove impossible to arrange for more food for guys who were weakening too rapidly. Impossible to secure some respite for those assigned to jobs that were too demanding. Impossible to make use of the *Revier* and of *Schonung* as was done in other camps."[6]

Solidarity is not something metaphysically obvious, nor a categorical imperative. It is tied to precise conditions. Necessary to the survival of the group, because it assures its cohesion, its prohibition suffices to bring out the universe of the camps in its purest logic.

So *The Human Race,* this description of daily life in a camp, is at the same time the most global description. The immediate and massive exterminations, the *selections* define the universe of the camps less than do the years, the months, the days of hunger, cold, and terror. The narratives of David Rousset[7] and of Jean Laffitte[8] were applicable to those metropolises, those immense sorting centers which Buchenwald, Dachau, and Mauthausen were, where organizations, sometimes all-powerful, were engaged in a real and effective clandestine combat. But the camp mechanism appears falsified here. We see it through privileged eyes. We know

nothing of its exact effect upon an isolated individual, and yet it is this effect alone which can concern us, which can be made sensible to us. The testimony of Jean Laffitte, in particular, while it remains valuable at the level of political experience—and in 1947 it was even indispensable for him to restore it to us—is constantly distorted by a populist and nationalistic glorification of combat, by a good-natured description of the camp, by a simplicity of vision which approaches mystification (one of the chapters is entitled "Horrific Visions," the one which follows "Beautiful Moments").

"The complete oppression, the complete misery," writes Robert Antelme,

> threatened to drive each of us back into a quasi-solitude. Class consciousness, the spirit of solidarity are the expressions of a certain healthiness that yet remains to the oppressed. In spite of some reawakenings, the political prisoners' consciousness here was very likely to turn into a solitary consciousness.
>
> Yet, though solitary, this consciousness' resistance went on. Deprived of others' bodies, progressively of his own, each of us still had a life to defend and to cleave to.[9]

Survival is, to be sure, a matter of chance. But chance finally explains nothing. During Robert Antelme's detention there were moments which he could not control, and it is to luck, or to automatic behavior pure and simple, or to some unhoped-for act by someone else, that he owed his not having died then. There were other moments over which he did remain the master. And so he triumphed over death.

The Human Race is the story of that triumph.

"Normal" life ignores death. "Everyone works and eats, realizing he's mortal; but the piece of bread isn't in an immediate sense that which makes death recede . . ."[10] But it is precisely here that the deportee is hit. Because everything is done to make him die, since this is the objective the SS has chosen for him, his life becomes indistinguishable from the effort he makes not to die. Surviving and living come together in the same bodily will not to give in.

Survival is first of all a phenomenon of consciousness. It is "an almost biological claim of belonging to the human race";[11] it is consciousness of one's body as an irreducible totality, a discovery of self as an indestructible singularity.[12]

To the omnipotent, omnipresent necessity of death must be opposed the necessity of life. Just as it is always and everywhere necessary to "watch over the moment of calm which comes . . . to establish itself anywhere, to install itself, if only for an instant," so always and everywhere is it necessary to "provoke," to "question" space, and things, and others. It is necessary to deny SS law, to show its mockery, its vanity, its immediate and complete impossibility, and its final death.

The SS man, "God with a re-up's mug," lives in a world where he is all-powerful. But this power is a delusion. The SS cannot do everything; as the deportee quickly discovers, he has real power only over the deportee; he remains without power over nature, over things. The railway car escapes him, and the bark of trees, and the clouds. The whistle of a locomotive is an order to which he, *like everybody,* must submit. He cannot escape it, he cannot impose his law upon it.

The SS man can do nothing to everything which is not man. But his power over man soon collapses:

> The SS stops; he's tired of it. The guys are standing. He goes up close to them, stares at them fixedly. He doesn't feel like making them do anything else; he looks at them narrowly, nothing else suggests itself to him. They had aroused him for a moment, and now they're still there in front of him, winded but intact. He hadn't made them disappear. In order that they cease looking at him he would have to take out his pistol and kill them. For a minute he remains looking at them. Nobody budges. A silence he has brought about. He shakes his head. He's the strongest; but there they are, and they have to be there in order that he be the strongest. He can't get away from it.[13]

Everything betrays the SS. His powerlessness explodes. Not being able to do everything, he can no longer do anything. He is possessed. He remains powerless in the face of language, in the face of memory. He cannot do anything about Sundays, nor about sleep. He cannot completely eliminate nights. He can do nothing against the wind from the west, against the West, against the airplanes flying over Germany, against the cannons' noise. He cannot stop History.

The "burning frontier" of barbed wire which separates the camp from the innocent space of the German countryside is believed to separate two worlds. There is the normal world, normal life, the life of houses, of chairs

and stores, the life where someone who says "I'm going out" actually goes out; and there is the other, forbidden world, the world of death, where the SS skull and crossbones emblem reigns, where wretched beings live—vermin, the enemies of Germany, "crooks," shit.

But these two worlds are a lie; they cannot be separated:

> The visible phoniness of everything in the countryside—so obvious during the trip from Buchenwald—was becoming provocative now. The lie of this man's honorableness, the lie of his ingratiating face and his civilized household—they were horrible. The revelation of the SS's fury, which was displayed with complete calm, probably gave rise to less hatred than the lie of this Nazi *bourgeoisie,* which fostered that fury and made it snug and tight and fed it with its blood and its "values."[14]

There are not two worlds, there are only men who attempt desperately to deny others. But that, above all, is what is impossible:

> . . . seen from here, luxuriousness is the property of the animal, and divineness is the property of trees, and we are unable to become either animals or trees. We were not able to, and the SS cannot make us succeed in it. And it is just when it has taken on the most hideous shape, it is just when it is about to become our own face—that is when the mask falls . . . since the worst of the victims cannot do otherwise than establish that, in its worst exercise, the executioner's power cannot be other than one of the powers that men have, the power of murder. He can kill a man, but he can't change him into something else.[15]

This demand of the human race and this primary consciousness of the SS's impossible questioning of man orient and direct and give meaning to the effort to survive. They call forth a new solidarity, no longer active (since the *Kapos'* role is to prohibit that) but implicit—a solidarity born of what the deportees suffer *together;* they establish a new relation between the deportee and his body, and with his singularity, with his individual history (his past and his memory, the present, his possible future), with the others. They project onto the camp system the clarity of a more global system, that of the exploitation of man by man, in which the meaning of the struggle and its effectiveness are regained:

> For the most despised proletarian there is the reassurance of reason. He is less alone than the person who despises him, whose position will become narrower and narrower and who will inevitably become more and more isolated and steadily weaker. The insults of these people are no more able to reach us than they are able to get their hands on the nightmare we have become in their brains: for all their denying of us we are still there.[16]

> But what he experiences who feeds on peelings is one of the ultimate situations of resistance. It is also nothing other than the experiencing of the proletarian's condition in its extreme form. Everything is there. Over there you have the disdain on the part of whoever has forced him into this state, and who does everything to keep him there, with the result that this state apparently accounts for the whole of the oppressed man's person and thereby justifies his oppressor. Over here you have the hungry man's invocation—as he struggles to get enough to eat to stay alive—of the highest of values. . . . A good many have eaten peelings. They were surely unaware, in most cases, of the greatness that may be found in their act; they were more conscious, rather, of the fallen condition it consecrated. But one isn't brought down by picking up peelings, any more than the proletarian, that "sordid materialist," can be brought down by his unending claim to, his ceaseless struggle for, his own freedom and the freedom of everyone else.[17]

It is within this unity, this consciousness, that the SS will get lost. This is what he cannot understand: that in this world which ought to consecrate degeneration, degeneration becomes human value. Whoever still has a face, whoever has muscles, whoever eats his fill, is and can only be a murderer. Never will the *human form* of the person who has retained a real face have concealed so gigantic a lie; never will the boils, the sores, the gray skulls have hidden such a force:

> It's now, alive and wasted as we are, that our righteousness triumphs. True, this can't be seen; but . . . the less your chances of seeing anything at all, the more in the right we are . . . Let this be well understood: owing to what you have done, right-thinking transforms itself into consciousness. You have restored the unity of man; you have made consciousness irreducible.[18]

The Human Race restores to us traces of the path traveled by Robert Antelme, a path which allowed him to survive while questioning and contesting the camp universe. Then events and facts came along which time ground down, which memory submerged, days and nights passed and became blurred, there were weeks, months, of sleepwalking.

When he returned, Robert Antelme set about writing. For his return to have meaning, for his survival to become victory, there had to emerge from this confused, undifferentiated, inaccessible mass—alternately vast mechanism and appalling day to day—a coherence which could bring the memories together and give them an order of importance, and provide to the experience its necessity.

This transformation of an experience into language, this possible relationship between our sensibility and a universe which destroys it, seems today the finest example in contemporary French writing of what literature can be.

More and more, writing today seems to believe that its true end is to mask, not to reveal. Always and everywhere we are invited to experience the mystery, the inexplicable. The inexpressible is a value. The unspeakable is a dogma. Hardly are daily acts described than they become lies. Words are traitors. We are asked to discover between the lines the inaccessible goal toward which every authentic author should be drawn: silence.

No one seeks to disentangle reality, to move forward, if only step-by-step, to understand. The world's abundance is a trap in which we let ourselves be taken. The mass of sensations exhausts the real; neither the world nor words have any meaning.

Literature has lost its power. It seeks throughout the world for signs of its defeat. Anguish oozes upon naked walls and wastelands, through corridors and petrified public buildings, over impossible memories and empty gazes. The world is congealed, put in parentheses.

But it is not possible to avoid the world. History is not, as Joyce said, "a nightmare from which I am trying to awake." We have no other life to live—even if, for Robert Antelme, this life was the life of the camps. It is more immediate to see in the camps a horrible world, the possible extreme of which we never really approach understanding. But it did exist. It is more immediate, more reassuring to see today's world as something which cannot be overcome. But this world exists. And that famous world labeled Kafkaesque, in which we are too quick to see an

inspired prefiguration of our great modern "cataclysms," does not account for it. We infer from it some eternal malediction, a metaphysical anguish, an interdict which weighs upon the human "condition"—but it is not a question of that.

It is not for us to disengage ourselves from the world, nor to wish it ungraspable, simply because we happen, in certain circumstances, in the history which is ours, to think that we will never be able to grasp it. A relatively privileged portion of our planet knows, or thinks it knows, the anguish of history, of these times which persist in not resembling the image which we persist in making for ourselves; and the anguish of a monstrous technology ("Will it kill man?"), the anguish of memory and of passing time. But the questions which must be posed we pose badly.

We are mistaken. We can overcome the world. Robert Antelme provides us an irrefutable example of this fact. This man who recounts and questions, who fights with the means left to him, who extracts their secrets from the events, who rejects their silence, who defines and opposes, who restores and who compensates—this man restores to literature a meaning which it had lost. At the center of *The Human Race,* the will to speak and to be heard, the will to explore and to know, leads to that unlimited confidence in language and in writing which is the foundation of all literature, even if, from its very plan, and from the fate our culture reserves to what are called "testimonies," *The Human Race* does not fully succeed in becoming part of that writing. For this expression of the inexpressible—which is also its surpassing—constitutes language which, by throwing a bridge between the world and ourselves, establishes that fundamental relationship between the individual and History which gives birth to our freedom.

At this level, language and signs become decipherable again. The world is no longer that chaos which words devoid of meaning despair of describing. It is a living and difficult reality which, little by little, is conquered by the power of words. Thus does literature begin, when, through language, in language—though hardly obvious, hardly immediate—this transformation begins, a transformation which allows the individual to become conscious by expressing the world, by speaking to others. Through its development, through its method, through its contents finally, *The Human Race* defines the truth of literature, and the truth of the world.

Truth as It Is . . .

FRANCIS MARMANDE

The Human Race is published in the Collection Blanche in 1957. But a book doesn't appear alone. In 1957, Beckett publishes *Fin de partie;* Céline, *D'un chateau à l'autre;* Butor, *La Modification;* Barthes, *Mythologies;* Saint-John Perse, *Amers;* Robbe-Grillet, *La Jalousie;* Claude Simon, *Le Vent;* Bataille, *Le Bleu du ciel;*[1] Kerouac, *On the Road;* Camus receives the Nobel prize for literature; Antonioni produces *The Outcry;* Fellini, *Nights of Cabiria;* Visconti, *White Nights;* Gil Evans and Miles Davis record *Miles Ahead.*

Facing life, the living recall the dead. *The Human Race*—the title—resonates like a program of empty hopes. It is dedicated to a dead woman: "To my sister Marie-Louise, deported, died in Germany." Wished by her. *Survival in Auschwitz* begins in a manner no less hard: "It was my good fortune"—these are Primo Levi's first words—"It was my good fortune to be deported to Auschwitz only in 1944."[2] In a recent stroke of vulgarity, they have been compared—which they can only be in the fact that they are worth reading. At this fin de siècle, the books most worth reading are here.

To go back to the delirium governing Antelme's book: "Two years ago, during the first days of our return, I think we were all prey to a genuine delirium."[3]

This delirium is wanting to talk, wanting to be heard, to tell the truth "such as it had been" (truth "such as it had been": not to be seen as a mistake). The experience is impossible to recover. Those returning confront this ordeal of impossible experience. This impossibility is the reason that books arising from it are worth reading. The feeling of not being able to reach the goal of speaking is what makes these narratives possible. Impossibility expressed this way is nothing compared to the frantic, solitary resilience which made it possible to remain men to the end, to that ultimate resistance, the final affirmation, which is not even the final one before death anymore, but is simply the final one, beyond the deaths already pronounced, carried out, or outstripped, in a night when men die one after the other, which is "an ultimate sense of belonging to the human race."[4]

The ultimate sense of belonging to the race is what sets this experience apart from the experience of those who people history or literature—whether "it was love they cried forth, or solitude, or vengeance, or the anguish of being or of non-being, whether it was humiliation they rose up against, or injustice . . ."[5] Even after Antelme, this must be repeated, to emphasize that commentary on his book implies, first of all, knowledge of it. It's a book which prevents the loss of knowledge.

It is not an issue of finding the words with which to speak of the camps, but of becoming free from literature itself, in order to approach them. Literature encumbers.

"One arrived in front of the church and let oneself be counted. One waited; one still had to get there, to the pallets and to Christmas Day."[6]

The power without virtue of something that's nothing. A saying tossed out in the boys' school yard, for anyone who won't name names to cringe behind, to take cover under—an informer, an habitual liar, sheltered under the "one," behind the "it's said," and the "I'm told," etc.—a saying which sticks idiotically in memory: *on est un con.*[7] One learns the line running from *hominem* to this "one" who is almost nobody. One justifies the camp's lack of existence: its organization, its morphology. One let oneself be counted. There's life, a suspended negation of death, but there's no existence. It's not even that *one* arrives in front of the church, or that *one* waits there. This could fundamentally guarantee the expression of a presence: it's true that *one has arrived there,* by a non-miracle, and that one waited (there). Past, passive. The nuclear core of

the sentence resides between this achieved arrival and this finite wait: one let oneself be counted. One does not even dare to hang on to the colloquial meaning which comes to mind: Don't count for nothing.[8] One let oneself be counted. The herd, its head elsewhere, but nowhere, underwent this constantly recommenced counting which is what can be made to weigh heavily on a group: not quite a roll call, just a census taking; the interminable verification of the numbers, the pure numbering of the herd in which the troops are humbled, the pure counting which forces bodies to remain immobile, in order that the same one not be counted twice, the counting which, just as it doesn't want to count anything twice, doesn't recognize any longer the cold, tiresome, deadly minimum sentence passed by the regard which others cast over the herd, those others who aren't reduced to an aggregate they want to be certain about. The monitor also counts, to be certain that no one's missing—a precautionary count, before naming names, since, if anyone's missing, who's he looking for? The accident victim makes sure he's still in one piece. But here? . . . All narratives of the camps, including sorting camps like Gars in the Basse-Pyrénées, speak of how the process of counting could count in the camp's organization.

The process is founded upon the culmination of obsessional behavior. Knowing what time is passed counting shadows, what one does when one lets oneself be counted, what one no longer does, to what authority one is subjected, to what one is reduced when time itself would have itself be counted once again by the master, executioner, fool, or murderer—worse still, by "common criminals," traffickers and killers, the real, direct, and absolute masters, these distraught flunkies who serve at the SS's command. The counting, the arithmetical ordering of the herd (one easier to control than animal herds, since *they* don't let themselves be counted, but shift and move about and run off), this calculation which bodies attached to themselves through minds, bodies riveted to a stake which lets them be counted. All this is one of the principles of the method.

What cuts through the sentence is obviously the "oneself" in "one lets oneself be counted."

> I'm going out," they are saying back home; and they go down the stairs, they're outside. "I'm going to sit down," they say; "we'll eat together," they say, and they do sit down, they do eat. "I," they say, and right away

> it's bread, or a bed, or the street for them. Here, all we can say is "I'm going to the latrine." Here that's what probably corresponds most closely to what's ordinarily called liberty back there.[9]

The narrative eliminates its gloss. The very basis of reading is knowing that there is nothing silent or inexpressible before, during, and after the narrative. It is true. What the narrative adds to the experience is that narrative precedes experience. All who passed through the camp lived the experience of it, but few in order to tell about it. This ordeal of aphasia, brought to light for those who were themselves brought back to the light, was the impossibility of talking, this impossible desire to talk. Again they find reality: this world where you go down stairs when you announce that you're going out; this world where you're outside; this world where you sit down right after saying that you're going to; this world where you say you're going and you go; this world where the I of the action projects itself and identifies itself with the bread, the bed, the street. . . .

Here it is something else. Here it is not reality. It is what? To elude the problem, or from philosophical cowardice, we grow accustomed to saying that it is something impossible (unreality), madness (loss of a sense of reality), dream (nightmare). Weak thinking is the force of inertia that "one" opposed to those who came out of the camps. Before, "one did not know." After—after the opening of Dachau and of Auschwitz—one does not want to know any more. One knows too much, by intuition. One knows, one knows, it is horrible; one does not want to know any more about it. What the Nazis conceived, produced, and organized—what represents a mental effort as powerful as painting *The Royal Family*[10] or building the pyramids—is precisely this, this invention: not reality, this world where you go out, where you go down stairs, where you sit down; not unreality, hell; but the real. The camp is the excess of the real—the world returned to the real, liberty reduced to the latrine.

The impossibility of making this heard by those who have not left reality. They have too much to do. While the Nazis are refining the machine of the purely real, they carried about the burden of reality. They are working. They were work's workhorses. Everything is achieved by succeeding in opposing this world of the purely real to the world of reality. When one reaches this point, one cuts speech off.

When the camps are liberated, everybody talks about: the first soldier, who saw those first survivors amidst the dead, in their pajamas, thin as rails, their noses and their ears protruding so far from their skinny heads, their hair like a clown's straw mat—those first soldiers burst out laughing. They were gripped by one of those mad fits of laughter the like of which one finds only in John Huston, and in the graveyards. They were the first, and the last, to behold the real with their own eyes.

> Félix, who had stayed by the stove, was mumbling, "Me, I don't take it in the ass, I've always been straight." Nobody was answering him . . .
>
> But the threat was weary, worn out along with them by the selfsame misery. The physical state their bodies were in, that was what prompted them to use the vilest expressions. Of these, "fuck-in-the-ass" was one of the most frequent, meant to be definitive.[11]

The defense attacks the defending body. We descend to the final stages of infancy's end, lacking grace and otherworldliness, this old man's infancy which is worn out in courtyards and stairwells.

They're reduced to this, these crooks, bastards, political prisoners, and common criminals, who had lives, and elegance, and faults, and who here are reduced, reduced to the condition of the minimum body of a dirty child who has only its dishonesty left for intelligence. They're skinny, they're liars, reduced to what's revolting, to what's most twisted, to what can injure, to the last extremity, to the final trimming away of the body. This expression, *fuck-in-the-ass,* whose raw vitality and misrepresented violence we know from Genet, is given here as the last word. As what is definitive. At what price does it become, fifty years later, a banal insult in the stairwell?

"April 30. Dachau lasted twelve years. When I was in high school the block where we are now was in existence, the electrified barbed wire fence also. For the first time since 1933 soldiers have entered here without harmful intent. They give out cigarettes and chocolate."[12]

This passage without reality of the innocent high school to Dachau peels time away. Dachau is what happens without one's knowing it, during one's school years. To think at every moment of what happens while one is elsewhere, in life's schools; to convene the unimaginable, to shape that imperfect simultaneity of the impossible: this is the beginning of consciousness and conscience. Most of us never leave high school.

Language reveals it. Coming back to earth, the guys who faced the soldiers sought words in English; they found them in German. When the soldiers asked them if they knew Paris, they said *ja,* meaning to answer yes. Then the guys laughed a little, and the soldiers, too. The English on the tips of their tongues turned into German. The war continues. It's still a camp.

One recalls negatively the reeducation campaign launched after the war by the American liberators, who wanted to scrub the Nazis' heads. The movies retain several images of it, as demonstrations: a few men whom Hitler's history had dragged beyond their moral limits, far into the human race, a few supermen reduced to the solitude of evil in the postwar, lined up like schoolboys in a classroom. Banal forty-year-olds in suits and ties, stiff, sad, ordinary good people, they apply themselves rhythmically there, on cue, in order to find the thread of democracy in themselves again, and to play the harmonica. Fifty family men, standing on their rostrums, busy passing from one harmonica to another like virtuosi, they could be buffoons. They are not funny. The harmonica of reeducation damages these repentant bodies.

It's the end. Soldiers with machine guns guard a strange city. Mute guys warm themselves by garbage-burners. Those sprawled on the ground, eyes wide open, don't see anything anymore. Some try to speak, to talk. The dead are there—here and there. The dead are there, and the guys, and the soldiers.

The guys want to recount things.

"The soldier listens at first, but then the guys go on and on, they talk and they talk, and pretty soon the soldier isn't listening anymore."[13]

All life's stories—and these more than all others, whatever really happened (and here the real reached perfection)—end in this fit of sulking and boredom.

In any case, the soldier knows. He says, "*Frightful, yes, frightful,*" and everything is said. Don't bother me with it, I know.

Readers of books are the only ones who reject the position of those who know. Not those who look at the words and sentences with their eyes; no, the rare readers of books, those who never know. The incentive to write comes from the impossibility of their knowing. Their expectation is what produces writing. In the case of the camps, this expectation

is intolerable; the call to write is weighed down with literature. But, on the whole, we are like the soldiers: we have better things to do, we have our preoccupations. We know, we know, it is horrible, yes, yes, *frightful.* Everything's been said, don't bother me. I know, I know as well as you do, I agree with you. I know even more than you do. Good-bye.

The ordeal remains intact, fifty years later. Should we attempt to reach this or that narrative, this or that knowledge, without the right to do so (we *were not* there, we were not Jewish, or homosexual, or gypsies, we do not, unlike Primo Levi, have the power to be worth reading, we were born in 1945), should we draw near, as toward an ordeal, to what still must be said about these books, we find ourselves rebuked, put in our place, as the price we must pay. Other soldiers stand guard. Always. A vast artifice is necessary to make the shadow of truth pass by. Everything is true, nothing is without importance.

"These soldiers are strolling about in a city where all the stories should be added end to end, and where nothing is negligible. But no listener has that vice."[14] So the soldiers end up patrolling "at ease," amidst the dead and dying, amidst the unimaginable which, as with everything, they too end up not seeing anymore.

Fitness

CLAUDE MINIÈRE

I suffered in both my head and my body when I was between roughly twelve and fifteen years old; that I want stated by the by, at the outset. I suffered from serious malnutrition, from social isolation, from cold, lack of privacy, disgrace—from a kind of penal servitude. And this suffering was all the more hopeless because before it, in my childhood, I'd been happy—completely happy and innocent, as in a golden age. But then I experienced a break, an inexplicable cutoff, a collapse; I felt myself at the bottom of a hole along with "those like me," or rather inside some space without form, some separation without destiny. I want to say all this as a sort of aside, before entering into the text. . . .

Visually speaking, these are barely images, yet they make up a persistent, undramatic hallucination: what lodged itself deep in my head after reading Robert Antelme was a noncoincidence of planes, a disarrangement of colors, an abyss of transparent screens.

Plus the writing. I had to return to *before,* since space was stopped, blocked; to before the disaster of the human race, far back, and pick my way carefully, asking myself *how* this notion of "race" or "species" came about, how this name was invented, how the term "human" was invented, the adjective "human"; and, still more, how the two became associated, how language itself had supported this concatenation. To question reality and virtuality with a concatenation, a series of exploits.

Here Robert Antelme saw with astonishing acuity, making these simple words (simple and violent) into his title, undramatic within the drama, terribly innocent, terribly "neutral"; into something to be pondered in its very formation, which was breaking up, not merely breaking up but now *barely* held on the page, where it lingered as a question, where it is questioned like a chain of thought to be worked through in exhaustion. These words were starting to pose the question anew, in the being's most distraught condition, and in the void, without direction.

The question seemed so stripped down because it was posed without any flourish, in a quasi scleroderma, an insensibility (brought on by suffering) to the gray, plastic drawing out of time. Something had no place being, and yet it was. Reflection was not a witness *about* life, but the abstract of an abstract life: human race, two words linked and separate, an abstract idea because concrete.

From the moment this middle term "species" was first uttered, a machine was constructed. And this machine positively produced nihilism. *On the Origin of Species,* more a closed-off war than an open belonging; *selection of species. . . .* Species without space, yet scattered (something not aided by the lack of a god). Here again the same machine is seen in action through Robert Antelme's narrative. The *machine* functioned, though in a debased way, slow and pale: the Work machine, which is not only a material but also an imaginary construction—that which is *systematic,* a machine for classifying, for producing its own areas of dematerialized shadow; errant and hard, heavy, massive and dull; against every idea of liberation; the worker's *face,* "Der Arbeiter" of Ernst Jünger, the machine man of the thirties, of Pound, of W[ynhdam] Lewis. . . . And yet we were in the human. Too human. We were *only in the human.*

The Human Race is a book I've kept as anchorage, not, paradoxically, for the misfortune, but for the tranquility that is worn away by seeing things transpire without passing. It was a case of accompanying the steps of the process as though in reverse. And Robert Antelme accompanied me constantly while I was writing *Glamour.* In that piece of writing I got my breath back, the breath of spirit and voice, breath in the heart that you hold when, incomprehensibly, *you're seen.* All language seems artificial then, but as a consequence it has at least the virtue of making an appearance through its very surpassing. There was also, from outraged

language, a cry for punishment, and what grammar could bear it? One of approach or retreat? So I lashed myself down to the writing, to the possibility of crossing over, of going and coming, and to the individual, to the excluded and his location without category; everything was carried away in an attack of vertigo, in a permanent fit of madness.

All writing is a struggle against benumbing, a quest for the sand and breath from which the body is made, the body that keeps in itself the crumbly experience of the grains of matter that (before) it felt become luminescent, at the heart of darkness, in itself and beyond itself—golden rain, a face, a gesture, a smile, the inflection of a word. "Man is man only to the extent that he consents to Being and corresponds to Being in the ecstatic dialogue," wrote Roger Munier, commenting on Heidegger in his preface to the *Letter on Humanism.*

The benumbing is at bottom the death of writing. All support of writing sooner or later stands in the raw light, even if its unbearable "origin" strays into the depths of yellow-gray shadow. . . . Another question comes to me (or perhaps the same) in order to escape from the machine, as from the benumbing. Not the question of technique—far from it—but the essential question, the question of "fitness." Neither a predicament, nor, properly, an ethic, it is the anxiety that bores within, the concern of the person who is *going* to write a book and is thus already writing, the question of what has to be said and how. It is after an unexpectedly strong shock or strain that this question is posed for you. Heidegger's personal response on this point (in the *Letter on Humanism*) is the rigor of the vigilant reflection/attention of the speaking/economy of words. There is another "response," that of John Donne, a Renaissance poet, of a moment, that is, when a scholastic machine of values and certitudes has broken down. This response focuses on time, on the breath that warms the body; it *comes* to those who are standing or recumbent; it gives itself to their very matter and goes beyond it, toward their uncertain, misguided, possibly common future. It is a fragile response, but a compelling one, no longer being that of a "subject." The immense, silent cry drawn out too far—the link glamour/grammar/writing. Besides the grief.

These questions are contained within a book, *The Human Race,* whenever you will come there. Whenever you will come there, "question" will not even be the word.

We Are Free . . .

FRANÇOIS DOMINIQUE

There are books whose benefit infinitely exceeds what one has the right to expect from a mere book. To run into and read these books often coincides with the end of childhood, and the powerful impression resulting from them lasts a lifetime.

But here I want to talk about a more serious experience—about a book, yes, but one far removed from the genteel tradition I just spoke of, far from this rite of passage, from any exemplary novel or sacred book. None of that is here.

How, tardily, should I talk about a violent reading twelve years ago, in August 1983? I was staying at my mother's house in the village of Aubignac. I went to Carpentras, and there, in an antique shop, I found, first of all, an old copy of *Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques,* followed by *The Reveries.*[1] Next to it was another paperback with a white and beige cover, its pages uncut—*The Human Race.* The name of its author, Robert Antelme, said nothing to me, nor did the name of the publisher, Robert Marin. This first edition of 1947 announced a series, the Universal City. I bought the book for its title—and for the "universal city."

I read all night, and arose from that reading terrorized and exhausted. Then this state gave way to mixed feelings of grief, anger, and joy. Yes, joy: that energetic, appalled, scandalous joy still carries me away.

Driven from My Former Knowledge

Grief. The feeling, first of all, of being lost or forsaken. That morning I stayed huddled in my tiny bedroom, paralyzed. In silence I called to my mother, hoping with all my heart that she would hear—and not hear—my grown-up moaning. She was making coffee and would soon call me. "What are you doing in bed? Are you sick? Should I call the doctor?" My own case is of absolutely no interest, but all readers of Antelme will understand. Grief, anger. The grief of someone whom the almost frivolous chance of reading a book confronted with an unknown horror, the anger against the teachers and writers and critics of all kinds who had told me nothing of this book, any more than they had told me about Primo Levi's book, *Survival in Auschwitz,* which I discovered the same year. Of course, I knew the facts and the figures, the millions of camp victims, the six million Jews exterminated. I was in the habit of connecting these staggering facts and figures with a series of disorders of rapine and conquest, from St. Bartholomew's Day and the wars of religion down to the Great War and the Second World War. In 1962, I didn't blink when an elderly professor of economic history skipped through the two world wars of this century—"just for the record, ladies and gentlemen; this doesn't concern political economy, these are great misfortunes."

Still, I learned to read outside class. As an adolescent, I saw Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog,* I read the historians, and I thought I knew what was at issue. Suddenly, I knew nothing. "Destabilized" hardly expresses it; I was driven from my former knowledge to the brink of an abyss—and, for this, language most of all bore the cost. It was impossible to find the words to designate the things that Robert Antelme had just spoken to me about.

Grief, anger, abiding joy. A thought that is solid and subtle reinforces the freedom to say no to the unacceptable, no to every system founded on religious or racial discrimination—redoubled negation of lies and forgetfulness—and no, finally (and here I weigh my words carefully, realizing that Antelme is not dictating them to me), to that spirit of sacrifice, that false teaching of consenting victims who sometimes fraternize with mottoes of extermination: "Love one another," something contrary to every heartfelt impulse.

The joy of sharing this sentence of Antelme's, when he is berating his executioners: "Let this be well understood: owing to what you have

done, right-thinking transforms itself into consciousness. You have restored the unity of man; you have made conscience irreducible."[2]

"The Betrayal of All Words"

Survival in Auschwitz had an effect on me similar to that of *The Human Race.* Neither of these two books directs the reader's thinking toward an "understanding" of events. It would be vulgar and reductionistic to call them chronicles of the camps, or literature of "witness." And the extreme precision of these narratives does not absolve us from reading the works of historians; rather, it incites us to do so from the force and the number of questions that rise to the reader's consciousness.

Neither a chronicle nor a testimony, in the usual sense. The author himself explained this in his foreword:

> As of those first days . . . we saw that it was impossible to bridge the gap we discovered opening up between the words at our disposal and that experience which, in the case of most of us, was still going forward within our bodies . . . What we had to tell would start to seem *unimaginable.*

Was this impossibility of "witnessing" the result of a still too recent pain? Would it give way over time? Antelme is clear: "This disproportion between the experience we had lived through and the account we were able to give of it would only be confirmed subsequently."[3]

Robert Antelme was not Jewish, and the camp at Gandersheim where he was interned had, in his words, "no gas chamber, no crematorium"; but his book, like Primo Levi's, touches on the same essential point, namely, that the entire Nazi system in the camps is directed toward the annihilation of the deportee. On the other hand, both narratives contain the "discovery," through an insurrection of language, of a movement in exactly the opposition direction; the SS's evil failed definitively, just when it appeared to triumph, because

> The calling into question of our quality as men provokes an almost biological claim of belonging to the human race. After that it serves to make us think about the limitations of that race, about its distance from "nature" and its relation to "nature"; that is, about a certain solitude that characterizes our

> race; and finally—above all—it brings us to a clear vision of its indivisible oneness.[4]

In every line, two contradictory movements exert an unbearable tension upon the reader's thinking. On one side, the detailed, scrupulous narration of corporal decline and persecution participates in the destruction of language and "the betrayal of all words." "You don't say, 'It's spring'; you don't say anything." "Francis wanted to talk about the sea. I resisted. Language acted like a sorcery. When your body was rotting, the *sea, water, sunshine* could make you suffocate."[5] On the other side—the side of insurrection—ruined language is saved by a few hurriedly exchanged words; betrayed language is restored by the *Langsam* of a German worker, or in Gilbert's mouth "served the guys as a shield."[6] And Antelme's writing glorifies to the highest those thin flakes of verbal gold tied to survival. We are sharply "reminded" that for hundreds of thousands of years language has constituted humankind, and that this source of energy contains within itself its true protection. Antelme appeals to the origin of memory and to the memory of origins in us.

"Consider from What Noble Seed You Spring"

Language destroyed, language saved. This frightening duality, tied to the slim chances of survival, haunts Robert Antelme's book as it does Primo Levi's. But no irrevocable fate. "Indestructible conscience": this is of a piece with the admirable page where Primo Levi, talking to Pikolo, vainly struggles to reconstruct a verse from *The Divine Comedy:* "I must tell him, I must explain to him about . . . something gigantic that I myself have only just seen, in a flash of intuition, perhaps the reason for our fate, for our being here today. . . ."[7] Primo Levi does not tell us what he suddenly saw, what hunger and exhaustion had revealed to his memory. But the serious reader will find, in canto twenty-six of *The Inferno,* in the eighth circle of hell, the circle of the Evil Counselors, that "the highest portion of that ancient flame" speaks "as though it were the flame's own tongue," and addresses us in these terms:

> Consider from what noble seed you spring;
> You were created not to live like beasts,
> But for pursuit of virtue and of knowledge.[8]

Language, knowledge, reason victorious—these are also Antelme's words. ORACLE-BROTHER, Mascolo will say, speaking of his friend's book.

Robert-Jacques; Primo-Pikolo. A community is formed—one that is open to us, the readers—in which rebellious speech recalls its birth.

Improper, Disfigured

Antelme's writing manifests a strange respect with regard to the reader, as though he were a wounded being who had to be treated with care, protected, to help him to imagine what people should never imagine, even in their nightmares. What is said is unbearable, yet any detachment is impossible; the reading must be confronted; it invites you into a system where speaking beings are denied as human beings. This is why there is neither "reality" nor "fiction" any longer, but a collusion between the unlivable and the improbable. The narrative is the anamnesis of this collusion in which the calm peace of the dead brings peace to no one and to nothing. This is the masterpiece that is *The Human Race,* a thesis that one must erase immediately—for *The Human Race* calls all literature into question. Robert Antelme obviously would have been able to do without such a book, had not criminal circumstances forced upon him first the necessity of surviving, and then of surviving again by writing it.

In a stroke, the problems that had haunted literature for a long time appeared distorted, twisted, or transformed, like old photographs thrown in a fire.

To me, reading *The Human Race* should, from the fifties on, have changed literature. After this book, can books be written as they had been written before? Is not the relationship between "reality" and "fiction" undermined by the disaster and by this speech that survives and that speaks for millions of absent mouths?

The question posed by Adorno about poetry after Auschwitz should be reformulated by taking the books of Antelme and Primo Levi into account. In *The Human Race* and *Survival in Auschwitz,* nothing is fictitious, but the status of the "reality" to which these narratives bear "witness" is unimaginable, because it goes beyond any previously known experience. Everything is real, but "out of this world," foreign to customary discourse about the world, foreign most of all to conventions

useful to the literature of witness. The task of speaking becomes so coarse and difficult that the majority of camp narratives only feebly succeed in conveying what these two books say.

Just what is going on, in the case of *The Human Race*? Robert Antelme speaks to us in his language, the French language, with an extreme care to be precise. He sets the "figurative" and the metaphoric aside. Yet the more precise he is, the less the things reported seem translatable from French into French. He places the harrowing experience of the *untranslatable* at the heart of his mother tongue. Not of the unspeakable, for he strives to say everything, to forget nothing. He goes through the experience of the untranslatable clear meaning, and overcomes this difficulty by relying, like Primo Levi, upon what he "discovers" at the heart of the camps—namely, that language is the only way out, the only recourse for surviving and, consequently, for saying what survives in language itself.

Anyone who can read can understand his narrative. No obscurity in the least. Yet it appears to me that *The Human Race* was in eclipse for a long time in the world of letters. Perhaps there is a particular reason for this scandalous eclipse, one that does not arise solely from the frivolousness of the marketplace and of criticism, and that might be explained thus:

We know that the narrative of tortures in Sade's *The 120 Days in Sodom* is intolerable. The book cannot be read; it demands to be thrown aside. Yet we clearly see that it is the fierce will to "say everything" that impels Sade's "mad urge to write." "To say everything" has become an outlook characteristic of modernity. Maurice Blanchot has provided the reason for it: "We forever live under a First Consul,[9] Sade forever is the object of pursuits, and always by reason of the same exigency: the exigency to say everything. One must say everything. Freedom is the freedom to say everything, a limitless movement that is the temptation of reason, its secret vow, its madness."[10] But Blanchot himself, in *The Limit-Experience*, speaking precisely of Robert Antelme, says something else: "Man is the indestructible, and that means that there is no limit to man's destruction."[11] And tyranny's "doing everything" engulfed art's "saying everything."

When the real surpasses saying's "everything," and when the real's "everything" surpasses the maddest imagination, what is happening, what does "literature" become? When the *Untermenschen* are struck from existence by the millions, and language must say it, what do the fine

performances of "saying everything" become? Literature: henceforth a word for what is improper and disfigured.

I reread *The 120 Days in Sodom,* sniggering. It is nothing more than the *Good Little Devil* and his spankings with imaginative developments that owe everything to rhetoric. Time has moved on, atrociously. The tyrants and executioners of this century have surpassed in action the wildest imagination, which imagined itself the extreme limit. The minutes from Nuremburg and the Eichmann trial show this well enough. The American poet Charles Reznikoff, in creating in *Holocaust* a series of montage-poems drawn from these minutes, shows in turn how the limits of horror are pushed to the infinite:

> The S. S. man took the baby from her arms
> and shot her twice,
> and then held the baby in his hands.
> The mother, bleeding but still alive, crawled up to his feet,
> The S. S. man laughed
> and tore the baby apart as one would tear a rag.
> Just then a stray dog passed
> and the S. S. man stooped to pat it
> and took a lump of sugar out of his pocket
> and gave it to the dog.[12]

Antelme's narrative includes few abominations of this order, but when he expresses the poverty of a hand extended toward the absence of bread, the writing is such that suddenly we are confronted with the limitless excess of the SS system. The concrete intuition that we have at that moment of the nonlife of the camps allows us to envisage each event as an instance of the same immoderate and criminal process.

Not one narrative of the past, not the Chinese maniples and their incredible tortures, not DeThou evoking the cannibalism during the repression of the revolt of the Gabelles, not Montaigne attacking the fanatical torture of a man obliged to drink his tortured brother's blood, not one of these earlier narratives tells us one-tenth of what Antelme was *compelled* to write—that it is humanity as a whole that is attacked and menaced by the "SS's evil."

Robert Antelme perceived the radical singularity of the book entitled *The Human Race* when he wrote in its foreword in 1947: "Of the

heroes we know about, from history or from literature . . . we do not believe that they were ever brought to the point of expressing as their last and only claim an ultimate sense of belonging to the human race."[13]

The Human Race changes literature. This certainly does not mean that therefore literature would be dedicated to commemoration and to the deportation. In *The Limit-Experience,* and equally in *The Writing of the Disaster,* Maurice Blanchot has taken the measure of this change; other directions are not excluded. But not to take this change into account is knowingly to devote oneself to an improper, disfigured literature.

It seems that the starting point of this change ought to be Robert Antelme's extraordinary thoughtfulness toward language, toward an original speech (a component of the biological species) that under compulsion becomes the speech of survival, actual speech. This thoughtfulness includes an essential courtesy toward the reader that does not arise from charity ("Should someone speak to me of Christian charity, I shall say Dachau") but from a corporal reappropriation—to live, to survive—of human language.

This relation between body and language is based on reason and an ultrasensitive perception. Nothings remains in the writing of Antelme of the old body-mind dualism. All the famous treasures of the soul are only so much smoke before words that say "hand," "face," "nakedness," "bread." This writing, torn forcibly from decay, invites us to the world's creation.

What Can Literature Achieve?

It is surprising for today's reader to realize that *The Human Race* had no place in the "great" literary debates of the fifties through the seventies. Thus, in 1965, the review *Clarté* asked Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, and other leading lights the question: What can literature achieve?[14] Some authors proposed "socialist realism" as an answer, either to set themselves apart from it at the moment when writers were rejecting it publicly in the USSR, or to adapt it to the small world of letters in France then agitated by the *nouveau roman.* To those who doubted the possibility of a "committed" literature, Simone de Beauvoir opposed the "slums of Mexico City." In the name of "relations with the world," Jean-Paul Sartre scolded the "alienated types" who claim that "the work [of art] is its own end" and who "marry literature and death." Believing that

"art is in a struggle against time," Yves Berger said that he read "ten, twenty, fifty books about the concentration camps," and that he had not died from it, because literature does not have the power that "people ascribe to it."

Not once were the works of Antelme and Primo Levi (who was not translated into French before the eighties) mentioned. They did not count. Undoubtedly, the poor children of Mexico City had their advocate for a day, but what weight does this heartfelt impulse have, when ten years earlier the crushing of the revolution in Budapest by Soviet tanks had been met with approval? All of this is nauseating, like the parliamentary scheming of old.

In 1964, Professor Leroi-Gourhan, a scientist, was writing *Gesture and Speech*,[15] giving to the words "language" and "memory" a material and spiritual density with which Antelme, from his enforced experience and his uncommon intuition, brilliantly concurred. The components of an exceedingly contemporary debate were available, but not among the stars of letters where cheating was going on.

Words, Hands, Faces

"The feeling of belonging to the human race." What does this mean for us today?

Within the SS system, the *Untermenschen* have hands only to bear burdens or wounds; the face is destined for blows, language for insults. Words, hands, face are not simply denied, they are tied to a human being designated as "pestilence," "scum," "parasite." And this is not enough. The object of SS hatred is neither someone nor something. "*Thou shalt not be.*"[16] This terrible sentence signifies not only casting a person outside of humanity, but also that he or she should have never existed. Your birth must be erased; you are literally less than nothing—neither man, nor animal, nor plant, nor thing. *Du bist entartet,* outside nature.

This impossibility is registered as a mad summons of the other to nonexistence. The "less than nothing" is named "Jew," and from this there follows step-by-step an entire hierarchy of denaturation that places the person outside the world. Eliminating the other is the dark aim of the system.

"All that is not of pure race in this world is a wisp of straw swept by the wind," and "he who is not physically and mentally healthy, and

consequently has no social worth, must not perpetuate his misery in the body of his children."[17] Thus reads *Mein Kampf,* twenty years earlier.

To scratch out the existence of the Jew, the gypsy, the Slav, the black is to scratch out the other, and this is the unprecedented nightmare of a Leviathan become autophagous, a monster feeding upon itself, food and feces of its own ruin. Death itself is gone after; the traces of its passage, and of its tortures, must be erased; it has to be more dead than dead. You are said to have never existed. Genocide is the initial form of this generalized hatred of all people. Negationism is a continuation of it. This is why both of them permanently soil the future.

The Human Race contains an affirmation that destroys the whole system:

> The SS cannot alter our species. They are themselves enclosed within the same humankind and the same history. *Thou shalt not be:* upon that ludicrous wish an enormous machine was built. They have burned men, and tons of ashes exist. . . . *Thou shalt not be:* but, in the man's stead who shall soon be ashes, they cannot decide that he not be.[18]

Antelme's reflections, always joined to the most precise experience, lead to what appears as the center of the work, "the highest point of that ancient flame" of Dante, which bursts forth "like the flame's own tongue"—the possibility of speaking to someone, in all tongues, the unique and constitutive gift of the human race:

> The distance separating us from another species is still intact. It is not historical. It's an SS fantasy to believe that we have an historical mission to change species, and as this mutation is occurring too slowly, they kill. No, this extraordinary sickness is nothing other than a culminating moment in man's history. And that means two things. First, that the solidity and stability of the species is being put to the test. Next, that the variety of the relationships between men, their color, their customs, the classes they are formed into mask a truth that here, at the boundary of nature, at the point where we approach our limits, appears with absolute clarity: namely, that there are not several human races, there is only one human race. It's because we're men like them that the SS will finally prove powerless before us. It's because they shall have sought to call the unity of this human race into question that they'll finally be crushed . . .

> And we have to say that everything in the world that masks this unity, everything that places beings in situations of exploitation and subjugation and thereby implies the existence of various species of mankind, is false and mad; and that we have proof of this here, the most irrefutable proof, since the worst of victims cannot do otherwise than establish that, in its worst exercise, the executioner's power cannot be other than one of the powers that men have, the power of murder. He can kill a man, but he can't change him into something else.[19]

We are reminded here of LaBoétie's lively clarity erected against the wars of religion. We have "the earth as a dwelling place" and "this great gift of voice and the word" that makes us free and "companions all." Antelme revives the thought that runs from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment and founds the right of resistance to oppression upon the free and public use of language. This is why Antelme can accept neither the spirit of sacrifice nor the Christian ideology of divine salvation, so close as it is to *raison d'état:*

> The fine story of a superman, a story buried beneath tons of ashes from Auschwitz. He was allowed to have a story.
>
> He spoke of love, and he was loved. The hair that wiped his feet. The nard. The disciple he loved. The wiped face . . .
>
> Here the dead aren't given to their mothers, the mothers are killed along with them, their bread is eaten, and gold is yanked from their mouths to get more bread. They make soap from their bodies; or they make their skin into lamp shades for the SS bitches. No nail-marks on these lamp shades; just artistic tattoos.

And that terrible sentence that turns the hateful page in the history of holy sacrifices:

> Father, why hast thou . . . ?
>
> Screams of suffocating children. Silence of ashes spread across a plain.[20]

Robert Antelme's narrative brings to the reader that flash of illumination that accompanies a discovery. Now we know what we had thought we knew but had remained unknown. Even though the horror

threatens us with aphasia, this book gives speech back to us, cleanses it, reinforces it.

> For it to be shown that we are in the right we no more count on our bodies' liberation than on their resurrection. It's now, alive and wasted as we are, that our righteousness triumphs. . . . Let this be well understood: owing to what you have done, right-thinking transforms itself into consciousness. You have restored the unity of man; you have made conscience irreducible.[21]

Hell More or Less Concealed

In one of the rare articles written after *The Human Race,* Robert Antelme again helps us to weigh words, to subject misfortune to the search for meaning.

In this time of fictitious capital, flabby consensus, of virtual zombies and false speech, Antelme helps us discern the origin of SS evil and the conditions of its gestation not in some mad exception, nor in the fate of a "guilty" nation, but in the banal tragedy of man's exploitation of man:

> Faced with this poor man arrived at consciousness, the rich man goes crazy. The object of charity gives way; humanity, for him, is "transformed." The proletarian haunts the world, and the world is "defiled": yellow, black, Jews, communists, Christians, those never before *seen,* pour forth—men who say no, *sub-humans.* They must be killed; they must disappear. But some of them are still there. The work becomes specialized: the police, the camps. But they're condemned to more and more of them, they're locked up with them behind the barbed wire. The universe of the rich, the SS universe, is reduced, and soon there exists only the proletariat that haunts them, in a world where, among all the nations of the poor, there slowly spreads not only the consciousness that the proletarian has gained of his power, but also the vocation that gives form to that power: to make of every man a value truly recognized by all men. . . .
>
> We believe that we have revealed, or recognized, that there is no inherent difference between the "normal" system of man's exploitation and that of the camps. That the camps are simply a sharpened image of the more-or-less hidden hell in which most people still live.

> That the "morality" which covers exploitation camouflages the contempt which is the true motivating force of that exploitation. And that, because of this, we cannot accept any morality or any value as such, if they cannot concretely be made universal; if, that is, they do not, first and foremost, imply that the conditions of man's exploitation of man disappear.[22]

Wir sind frei

Reading Antelme rubs off on the reader's life. The untranslatable is changed into sober clarity. The nearness of every human body that is talking to you takes on a hitherto unknown importance. Hands, gestures, words, and faces seem to be perceived differently. Every time, for the first time. Each being becomes worthy of attention that at the same time implies the putting aside of reserve, modesty, and silence.

You do not leave *The Human Race* by turning the last page. You carry the text inside yourself; you cannot erase from your memory its final, augural sentences. These sentences beckon to us, change us, and mark a new beginning, like Rilke's Orphic verse, "*Neuer Anfang, Wink und Wandlung.*" Rimbaud's "change life" will carry us toward an inhabitable world, even if it is never "Christmas on earth":

> Nothing exists now but this man I cannot see. I put my hand on his shoulder.
>
> In a low voice: "*Wir sind frei.*"
>
> He straightens up. He tries to see me. He shakes my hand.
>
> "*Ja.*"[23]

To see someone, hear him, speak to him becomes a major responsibility, sometimes frightening, as though each had to answer for each, always.

Holderlin's language and my native language mingle with the poetic courtesy of the absence of translation—yet another translation of "the highest flame."

"This man I cannot see." The phrase suddenly makes this book a wide-open book. And then the crystalline fragment of Kafka's journal comes back to me: "It is perfectly conceivable that the splendor of life stands ready beside each being and always in its plenitude, but that it is

concealed, buried in the depths, invisible, distant. Yet it is there, neither hostile nor malevolent. . . ."

Read Robert Antelme, and read him again, that this may resound throughout the real space of cities and revive the promise of the "universal city."

AUGUST 21, 1995

The Human Race

JEAN ROUDAUT

As with other subjects, speaking of the deportation raises the question of competence; but with this subject, a question of expectations is also raised. How can you talk about what you have discovered belatedly and with dread, as though, all of a sudden, what you had taken as imaginary, had misread, had poorly understood in the works of Virgil and Dante had taken shape; as though the dead and the shadows, frightening as ghosts, had settled among us with an insubstantial power? With their silences and their bulging eyes, they presented the delicate impression of not wishing to disturb. And yet they were talking to us of a new world: not of the horror from which they were returning, but of a new dawn. Robert Antelme's book does more than bear witness; it summons us to change.

For the deportees' impression as a walking nightmare to have been as strong as it was, their striped-suited resurrection must have been our immediate concern when they returned. Yet we saw their fate as the result of a social monstrosity, of the aberration of a racist conception of the human race, and we reexpelled them, we thought of them as foreign to our lives. And therein lies a new horror. For the extermination camp had not been imagined by beings different from ourselves; it was the very caricature of society built upon antagonisms, violence, exclusion.

Today we designate the places for our untouchables—outskirts or subway platforms—without putting up electric fences around them since,

by erecting a moral order, we do everything possible to instill in these untouchables a sense of limitation that they cannot transgress without endangering themselves. The camps are not aberrant creations; their organization is the symbolic representation of society's division. Compartmentalized as it is, our society multiplies thresholds that can be crossed only at the price of a rivalry that retains some while expelling others. Our spaces are organized as a hierarchy. Schooling, administrative offices, factory shops, locations of production and centers of command all multiply these incompatibilities and make differences tragic. The camps' violence without appeal allows us to perceive what is actually oppressive within the ostensible moderation of our own society, where selection continually goes on. Fortunately, it is certainly rare that someone is shot on the spot; but, from losing his job, his place, his ties, he wastes away little by little until he is picked up one morning, scrawny and withdrawn, from the cold.

Nazi command multiplied the distinctions: the distribution of different-colored stars made those in striped suits think that their interests differed. Direct confrontation between lords and serfs was also avoided by giving some powers to a select group of the enslaved. The behavior of the SS "and our situation are only a magnification, an extreme caricature—in which nobody wants or is perhaps able to recognize himself—of forms of behavior and of situations that exist in the world, that even make up the existence of that older 'real world' we dream about."[1] An older world that is always ours and from which we do not know how to free ourselves. For what we do not want to recognize is the enemy's presence in ourselves. "We believe that we have revealed, or recognized, that there is no inherent difference between the 'normal system' of man's exploitation and that of the camps. That the camps are simply a sharpened image of the more-or-less hidden hell in which so many people still live."[2]

The extraordinary virtue of Robert Antelme's book is due to the extreme loyalty of his speech. When he speaks, upon returning from beyond death, it is not with detachment; nor is it without the hope of seeing man give birth to another self which, by recognizing himself in his enemies, will no longer deny himself. What is human appears in the book all at once, not alternately: generous and selfish, greedy for power and wanting to let go, monster and victim. These contradictions do not allow us to separate good and evil, as the churches do, since they pretend to

know how to recognize the devil's presence when it is outside themselves. In a situation as extreme as that of the camps, where the sentence of death is inescapable, to recognize the enemy as another self provokes an unexpected outburst of laughter, the system of oppression having turned laughably against itself. The narrative by a slave of his terrifying enslavement constitutes a message of hope. Since we know that "we shall not be the last" (in the terrible expression of Zoran Music), how is it that, enslaved, we remain freer than the monsters who are enslaving us? To destroy what has been destroyed, to ruin the ruins, said *Ubu Enchained,*[3] we have to rebuild. I do not think it improper to evoke Jarry's spirit in reference to Antelme's work. For there is a terrible humor in his book: I can only call "humor" a capacity to interpret what wounds, tears, and kills as the image of the weakness, the debility of the person who is abusing and attacking, who is unable to recognize himself as mortal, who wants to instill fear in order not to perceive his own fear.

The time of the camps is a time outside time; and the time in the book is a present without recollections other than those aroused by hunger, without anticipation of a future. Whether related in the present or the imperfect, the experience is placed within an absolute time, without regret for time past, without imagination of survival, without spiritual or providential finality.

The camp is a machine that inconceivably operates for no purpose; it is the extreme limit of mechanistic utopia announced by Zola, Jarry, and Kafka in their great, celibate machines as though they had been given the gift of seeing the absurd perversity of a society founded upon profit instead of exchange and gratitude. People are the raw materials of the camps; the machine consumes lives. To rest is still to feed the system; to find refuge in sleep as quickly as possible "doesn't mean we've knocked off one day we owed the SS; it just means that we're preparing ourselves, through a task called sleep, to be more perfect prisoners."[4]

Recording the absurdity of the system, however horrible it might be, is not without spiritual joy; laughing at the machine is escaping it symbolically, so much so that unexpected expressions appear in the darkest part of the narrative, which relates the wandering of the column of deportees led by a few frantic and murderous SS men. "We were even laughing." "Then it strikes us as funny." "My gut is bothering me, and I venture into the field, laughing to myself. It's warming up for them. I'm laughing, looking back towards the last bend; it's going to end here,

with me squatting in the field." The discovery of freedom inside the absence of hope produces laughter. "We're not afraid; or if we are, it's a fear that makes us grin at the same time."[5]

The masters are slaves to their machinery; this doesn't mean anything to those who know that they're merchandise for death, but for those who identify with the power they're exercising, everything becomes a concern. In camps built to impose redemptive work upon a vile humanity, the scarcity of raw materials transforms the masters into scrap collectors. If work is lacking, the masters no longer have a reason for existing; to maintain their power, they resort to pretending. The function of the leaders—the SS and the *Kapos*—is to maintain order; but the deportees, lacking the means to revolt, have no interest in disorder. And so, in order to take repressive action, the guardians of order incite disorder. A comical revenge reveals both the weaknesses of the strong and, at the same time, their ignorance of this weakness in which they find themselves; the slave's wealth is in knowing himself a slave, though he would happily do without gaining this knowledge under these conditions.

That there is no expression of hatred in *The Human Race*—though there is certainly violence, to the point of wishing to kill—is due, I think, not to a consciousness of the reversibility of circumstances, such as what a turn of Fortune's Wheel might bring about, but to a consciousness of and a respect for the executioner himself as a member of the human community. The hope is not that the masters might one day become the slaves (Robert Antelme emphasizes the sacred character of the prisoner in "Revenge?" one of the noblest texts we can read about the possibility of going beyond suffering), but that they might see their own face in the face of the slave. Had the SS man known how to see the reflection of his own regard in the deportee's, he would have rediscovered the location of his humanity; but in seeing in the other only some nameless refuse, in making him a faceless being, he reduced himself to a killing machine.

Ignorance produces fear; laughter is linked to knowing. Beyond intelligence of the commonplace, mechanistic stupidity of the camp system is another, more poignant, more instructive consciousness. Eaten by lice, emptied of themselves by dysentery, reduced to the monstrous state of living corpses, the deportees deserve their state only because they represent "the quintessence of evil." It is not their person that is to be put to death but their humanity that is to be destroyed. To hate those

who hate them would be to give legitimacy to this hatred. Hence the duty of each is to survive in order to bear witness and also to remain human. Passing through German cities like some woeful horde, the deportees are ignored by populations that would prefer not to have to remember having seen them; but passersby would never be able to forget what they have seen. "Between them and us a relationship nevertheless exists that nothing can destroy. They know what they're doing, they know what's been done to us. They know it as well as if they were us. And they are. You are us."[6] It is not only a question of kicking, wounding, or destroying the body of the deportee, but also of reducing him to anonymity, of depriving him of his holy Face. Moments of remission were experienced in the camp: slowly chewing a scrap of bread, pissing and feeling a happy moment of warmth (whereas defecating is emptying oneself out). But most intense are the exchanges, the gifts of look and gesture. About to draw water from a fountain, the women draw back. "'*Bitte*,' I said," and things shattered: "In front of this woman I had for a moment behaved like a *normal* man. I couldn't see myself. But I realize that it was the human in me that made her back away. 'Please,' from one of us, must have been a diabolical sound."[7] In *The Human Race* there is a meditation upon the mystery of the face similar to that illustrated by the imposing painting of Zoran Music or the philosophical reflections of Emmanuel Levinas.

The laughter that Robert Antelme mentions, in a place where all is darkness, is the symbol of this sudden illumination: *I am also the other.* The descenders into hell represent what the living ought not see. To be human is also to recognize oneself capable of inhumanity; the deportees have seen what men ought not see. To write, in 1946 or 1947, was what the outburst of laughter briefly was, a means of reconstructing a face for oneself, of getting control of oneself at the limits of the impossible. "I shall forever be trying to reconstruct that same principle of identity that the SS sought to establish yesterday in making me reply yes to my name, to assure myself that it is indeed me who is actually here. But the evidentness of this fact will continually slip away, just as it slips away now."[8] The writing of this book is the pursuit of this effort; and it is to his own work that I would apply what Robert Antelme said of the "unbreakable" humor in the poems of Maurice Honel, published under the title *Prophesy of Births.* "It is apprehended not as a sort of 'everything is contemptible,' but rather as the most advanced leap of consciousness,

as the final point in the effort to maintain one's resistance at the heart of the horror."[9]

One must want to leave the prisons and be born. The cannon shots of the approaching liberators were heard by the prisoners as "the first kick inside the mother's belly."[10] Strange image, unless it was understood as the wish that the old world might give birth to a new one that would no longer have the concentration camps as a grotesque image of itself. The desired metamorphosis is not personal, as in the tales in which a knight encounters a monster, and, recognizing his own image in it, enters into combat with it (since recognizing its humanity does not preclude combating it, though as a loyal adversary). It is not even political. It involves an idea of man, of the new being who will conceive of himself as the equal of any other by virtue of being a member of the human race. I shall see this future man prefigured symbolically at the end of the book, in the pages that relate the long wandering through a devastated Germany. The menace of death is even more violent than in the camp. "We have sat down in the meadow, and we eat some biscuits. We are even laughing. They'll surely overtake us; they'll surround us, and we won't make our destination."[11] Even more present as the hope of liberation approaches. It is now that the world becomes radiant. "We feel as though all possible rottenness has been sucked up into ourselves."[12]

And from then on, as from an act of absolute confidence not in themselves but the future of the species, the prisoners breathed in from the countryside a promise of a human dawn, seeing in it an obvious clarity to come. "Never shall we have been so aware of nature's wholesome goodness; never so ready to behold as omnipotent the tree that will surely still be alive tomorrow. We have forgotten about everything that is dying and rotting in this powerful night, forgotten about the sick and isolated animals."[13] The feeling of beauty, in the worst state of despair, is what corresponds to the certainty of belonging to a community of equals. "To us who look so like animals any animal has taken on qualities of magnificence; to us who are so similar to any rotting plant, that plant's destiny seems as luxurious as a destiny that concludes with dying in bed."[14] Social fractures, human conflicts, inner divisions lose all reality: "the variety of the relationships between men, their color, their customs, the classes they are formed into mask a truth that here, at the boundary of nature, at the point where we approach our limits, appears with absolute clarity: namely, that there are not several human races,

there is only one human race."[15] The solidarity of men, which became established through mediation in God, is now founded upon their belonging to a common race, whatever they might be.

Yes. We hope for another world of which this world would only be the perverse womb. A new world that the sacrifice of those who, like Robert Antelme, help us to survive, will bring to pass— the world of a reconstructed human race. I shall die without knowing it, but I hope that I shall have lived in such a way that it may come about.

The Ultimate Common Thing We Possess

OLIVIER KAEPPELIN

The first word is the stripping bare. At this point, how is it possible to speak of the cruelest, most persistent suffering? The question paralyzes any wish to comment or analyze.

A question that discourages the text.

What is this suffering, this cement of Robert Antelme's book? The most common, the most ordinary suffering.

What do you say?

That it isn't a question of that but, on the contrary, of one of the most extreme acts of violence committed against the human race, and the one most precisely dated in history; of a wound that cannot be confused with any other: the wound inflicted by the Nazis, the unique will to destruction that expanded into the Holocaust.

Robert Antelme knows this; and yet his writing, born of this situation and absolutely individual, embodies all human suffering, the most archaic as well as the most contemporary. And so the desire arises to add our voice to his, to proclaim that we recognize ourselves. We signal, discreetly, as one does in a crowd, to indicate a clandestine alliance.

This solitary man, reduced to a mass of organs trying hopelessly to carry out its functions: this is the man broken by grief and exhaustion who lives throughout time, the man we see, whom we come to be. This

man still expects everything from the other, his fellow man, and every lost illusion relentlessly sows the inexhaustible capacity to love.

The other man tries to respond to the abyss through forms borrowed from love, love not for his executioners or for the guilty, but for those who, like himself at that moment, no longer have a name: me, you, the human race. "Nothing now exists but this man I cannot see," writes Robert Antelme.[1]

Here, pushed down into this pit, hands are extended in prayer or in offering to whoever comes. Here is the man who, through his presence, helps us understand that there is life in the world, just when life abandons us, just when we no longer know it.

This love alone can bless earth and time in all that they manifest of life. What matter then our fears and doubts, our learned suspicions! In order to survive, the only blessing to own is "the best of oneself," contradicting what is all around.

> We were about to leave each other and we had the feeling that we were going to tear pieces off each other. We didn't have the time for that, however. But for several seconds that's what it felt like, like being torn apart, and surely an impossible love is what we felt at work in us then. They wanted to keep us there, in life . . . But we were all wondering together, they and we, whether we'd always have the strength to want to keep hold of another, keeping him in life.[2]

Just when all seems written, when nothing provides evidence of our existence or our rebirth, Robert Antelme "breathes" that the only way is "to want to keep hold of another, keeping him in life."

Thus the most basic, the most selfish of desires is accomplished only through the most altruistic of plans. The "dead" are not forever dead if emotion becomes thought. This metamorphosis is born from what is most radically foreign to us: the material things that surround us and that contrast with the collapse of our own substance (some extermination camps were located in the heart of the most beautiful forests); the other, who faces up to things, and who, through his difference, provokes the desire to see, the desire for language, perhaps even the desire for a kiss.

Suffering delivers us over to solitude. And thereby it promises us an "open" heaven, it prompts us to imagine its opposite, the "wedding at

Cana," and it supposes the other's gesture toward us and prompts the idea of a gesture toward him.

In Robert Antelme, isolation and despair do not destroy; they make us discover that we are "together." Without consciousness of this the world becomes insignificant. His book teaches everyone (for it is addressed to everyone) that the other, if not unworthy, has the power to save us. The other, both inside and outside us, who, whatever the disorder and distress, prompts us to desire the world and not to stop desiring it.

Robert Antelme makes possible the understanding that this condition is sacred, that it is the foundation of space and movement. Those who, like him, know how through love and language to maintain this condition even at the heart of darkness always prevail against their executioners.

To achieve this, little is needed, but this little is precious in the extreme. In *The Human Race,* both the one and the other are put into practice, and in their dialogue, their listening, their will to exist, they speak the words and phrases of this engagement. Have you noticed that in this terrible book what is most alive, most solid, is always the most delicate?

"I always had the impression, the feeling, of the fragility of living beings, as though they required tremendous energy to be able to remain standing," writes Alberto Giacometti. *The Human Race* is the book of that energy.

The Body's Luck

DANIEL DOBBELS

We have seen those things which men ought not to have seen, things which could not be put into words, things not addressed either by hatred or by forgiveness. Once out of there, whatever our situation, we wanted to believe in our freedom, we were giddy about it. While we were still skeletons this belief would have provoked us to violence against any arbitrary personal humiliation, and we cannot allow it to weaken or abate now that we have some flesh on our bones.[1]

The idea that nothing is possible is certainly what most prompts us to write. . . . Overwhelmed by the theoretical disorder, mesmerized by what Morin calls the "social monsters" taking shape, powerless in the face of crimes, progressively exhausted from anticipating and hoping—our thinking finds itself today at a kind of final moment, and is forced to rebuild itself from nothing.[2]

The Human Race—inexhaustible . . . possessing an unnameable forethought and consideration. A book in which thought ceases to exhaust itself in anticipation, but instead turns in upon itself and opens up to that which remains in it as ultimate and unfathomable consideration.

> [The head of the block] knew that without budging we could watch a friend being beaten to the ground; and that along with the desire to smash the beater's face, teeth, nose under our feet, we would also feel, voiceless and deep within us, our own body's *luck:* "It's not me who's getting it."[3]

To be nothing but an unrecognizable shadow of oneself, obliterated from one's own sight though still recognized by those who were there, pushed up, like wilted grass, by the denseness of a text that should not, could not weigh more than that shadow itself. A weightless text, bearing up without weighing down. *The Human Race* is the least muffled text imaginable, the least tempted, the least fascinated by the unheard of. A text apparently streaked and battered from all sides, yet opposing its own quiet understanding to the most deafening of fates. A unique understanding of one man relying in everything upon the many. Speaking of Robert Antelme, Marguerite Duras writes in *The War:*

> It was then, by his deathbed, that I knew him, Robert L., best, that I understood forever what made him himself, himself alone and nothing and no one else in the world. Then I spoke of Robert L.'s special grace here below, of his own peculiar grace which carried him through the camps—the intelligence, the love, the reading, the politics, and all the inexpressible things of all the days; that grace peculiar to him but made up equally of the despair of all.[4]

An ageless mass, with an unwaning clarity, the text of *The Human Race* erects the frame of language and supports it, its reason for existing, its primal consideration.

And also to be the shadow of oneself and allow this shadow to draw close to this body, this body supporting itself on the shadow, is the most naked, most radical of importunities. Shadow that does not fall without some reprieve, some appeal, without blocking out the most indifferent of light. Axis of the body, ghostly pale, having all the traits of a hole in time, before all memory.

To the rhythm of a time that aspires absolutely to be the time of death, the time "of a world furiously erected against the living, calm and indifferent in the face of death," the body opposes but few strengths—indeed, almost none; but these few are separate, distinct, elective, and

ceaselessly they reconstitute what Georges Perec calls an organic totality. Few strengths, systematically contested and pursued, barely perceptible, counting for nothing, unnoticed (and thus resisting the executioners) but bonded to this mute, broken, rotten, decalcified skeleton—sometimes at the point of death, but still holding on to only one axiom: "We must not die."

Not die and not be silent so that the separation be maintained, be sustained as consciousness, recalled beyond all appeal, all exception (all projection, all eschatology). Separation of a text that, finally—as though implicitly, as though by necessity—forbids bodies, the pure and the impure, the healthy and the sick, to mingle, to be open to any kind of metamorphosis, ecstasy, or horror. No mutation: the ultimate feeling of belonging to the race breaks down here; the leper's embrace does not body forth into that starry clarity, that "superhuman joy" that floods the soul of St. Julian L'Hospitalier at the end of Flaubert's story.

"Should someone speak to me of Christian charity, I shall say Dachau" (Robert Antelme).

With each word, this framework of body and of language regains its breath, as if it had been lifted up a notch, carried up by an air striving to be the first, the only light—the light of those few words that suffocation does not kill, nor denature, nor repress. An infinite performance, though working though the body like a mole. The invisible reason behind this wreck: this vein running though the body is also the body's luck, and the luck of this moment in time, its essential rhythm, its punctuation (and also our legacy, our ballast).

To punctuate is to draw near the peak of the sentence and its mute ending, or its unexpected gesture.

> In a low voice: "*Wir sind frei.*" We are free.
>
> He straightens up. He tries to see me. He shakes my hand.
>
> "*Ja.*"[5]

The body's luck—which crushes not.

Luck, lucky vein opening to the apparition of this disconcerting figure for whom *The Human Race* was written, without whom it would not exist:

> Jacques, who was arrested in 1940 and whose body is rotting with boils, and who has never said, who will never say, "I've had enough," and who knows that if he doesn't figure out a way to eat a little more he'll die before we're through and who already walks around like a bony ghost and who scares the other guys, because in him they see the picture of what they will soon be themselves, and who has always refused, and always will refuse, to make the least deal with a *Kapo* in order to eat, and whom the *Kapos* and the medics are going to hate more and more, because he gets thinner and thinner and his blood is going to hell—Jacques is what in religion they call a saint. Nobody back home ever dreamed he could be a saint. They're not waiting for a saint to return, they're waiting for Jacques—the son, the fiancé. They're innocent. If he gets back, they'll respect him, respect him for-what-he's-suffered, for what all of us have suffered. They'll try to recuperate him, to make a husband out of him.[6]

The Human Race—text to keep irretrievable sainthood intact, unrescindable.

This isn't of our time anymore; or, should become the thought of our time, the meaning of our time—the condition of every friendship, the unknown in every friendship.

The unknown (that "constant") that not only stays at a distance but also maintains that distance, protects it, places it where it is impossible, strictly impossible, to hang on. There the body comes, as to its proper space. . . . One that death can neither erase entirely, nor fill.

The body comes from where? From a response given silently to what was not awaiting it, was not a priori leaning on it. And that? Precisely that condition of the body, that "ray of general light," Merleau-Ponty would say, that collective and anonymous face that the victims never really lose sight of. Denied by the SS from their desire not to be singled out by the prisoners themselves, the face dies to itself, remaining only as a trait common to everyone but that no one can sketch anymore:

> Denied, doubly denied, or else as laughable and as provocative as a mask—for indeed it was nothing else than to provoke scandal, this carrying of our one-time face, the mask of a human being—our face had, for

> us, finally become absent from our life. For even in our relations with other prisoners our life remained burdened by this absence; our life had almost become that absence. Of the same striped outfits, of the same shaved heads, of our progressive emaciation, of the rhythm of our life here, for each of us what finally appeared generally amounted to a collective, anonymous face.[7]

A face that took care so that no image of oneself return as a mirage, a past state, agonizing, exhausting, creating a space impossible to sustain here without opening upon despair. Absence is still felt, still weighs down on time and space, still opens the space of the strangest yet commonest of abstractions, the one that protects and shelters the most naked, the most disfigured of heads. Toward it the body moves, toward this vivid abstraction whose lucky streak no power dreams of.

Abstraction. "Miraculously, the most neutral place from which to perceive and feel the constant of the unknown. . . ."[8] Where the body, as though separated from fear, seems to follow the letter it alone knows how to read, a letter closed within the vein of the body, open in the very body of living time. Abstraction so like the fast that Kafka's character devoted himself to (and perhaps only Kafka's language remains up to the level of events to come, doubling as a second vein, as the pulsating of a book like *The Human Race*). Champion of fasting who, it should be remembered, would have fed himself like anybody else had he found "food" to his liking.[9]

Abstraction that would be like different foods, the nutrition the body consumes in order to decipher the letter that distinguishes it amidst its opposite, amidst a mass so dense, so ashen with meaning, that the Nazis could conceive it only as crushing, as a dead mass to be dissolved, gassed.

Abstraction covering and enveloping need, rigorously erasing branch, water, and sky; the café, the friend's voice, the beloved woman's body; everything alive "over there," so that negation does not mortally wound what this world also has that is elemental. The past, a memory not to be evoked on impulse (too suffocating), following an unspoken law that looks ahead to the recognition to come, the recognition of a life that the extreme character of imprisonment cannot condemn . . . as in "return."

The abstraction, which art adopts to create spaces, was perhaps the ultimate map, the face's final area of safety, its suspension, its preservation at the edge of every disappearance, its survival on the brink of oblivion. An indirect kindness, a reserve, reduced to a few traits, sometimes only a few spots so that the imagination might weave a few signs, a few lines of recognition, at just the place where the body emptied itself of itself, forced to the point of exhaustion.

In the article that he published in *Partisans* in February 1963, "Robert Antelme and the Truth of Literature," Georges Perec wrote:

> Survival is, to be sure, a matter of chance. But chance finally explains nothing. During Robert Antelme's detention there were moments which he could not control, and it is to luck, or to automatic behavior pure and simple, or to an unhoped-for act by someone else, that he owed his not having died then. There were other movements when he did remain the master. And so he triumphed over death. *The Human Race* is the story of that triumph. "Normal life" ignores death. "Everyone works and eats, realizing he's mortal; but the piece of bread isn't in an immediate sense that which makes death recede."[10] But it is precisely here that the deportee is hit. Because everything is done to make him die, since this is the objective the SS has chosen for him, his life becomes indistinguishable from the effort which he makes not to die. Surviving and living come together in the same bodily will not to give in. Survival is first of all a phenomenon of consciousness. It is "an almost biological claim to belonging to the human race";[11] it is consciousness of one's body as an irreducible totality, a discovery of self as an indestructible singularity.

At this point in his text, Perec adds in a footnote:

> And not, it seems to me, as the critic Jean-Louis Ferrier writes, in a study of the painter Lapoujade in *Les Temps modernes,* ". . . inertial impulses, *mild resistance* of our organs and our bones, to the degree that man himself is driven back towards the biological limits of his being." This interpretation of the demand appears to me as a misconception which takes into account only a minute part—though certainly the easiest, because the most passive—of the effort to survive. It is at the moment when the deportee knows and feels himself the most contested, when he believes

> that he has nothing more which is human, that protest appears glaring. Resistance is not psychological, it is organic, i.e., total.[12]

Organic, total. Startling, long.

Upon this framework, this cage of bones, the body's letter is spun out, is written in complete awareness: unspoken, deep vein, what Robert Antelme sometimes calls "the power of weakness." A letter wafting by like a rare breeze, intoxicating the rarefied air and the suffocating weather. A veined letter, clinging to the body as to this residue of language, the night of language, its dark thread (perhaps its consideration).

> Degradation, and flabbiness of language. Mouths whence nothing any longer ever came that was ordered, or strong enough to last. A weakly woven cloth fraying to bits. Sentences succeeded one another, contradicted one another, expressed a kind of belched up wretchedness; a bile of words. They were all jumbled together: the son of a bitch who'd done it, the wife left on her own, food, drink, the old lady's tears, the fuck-in-the-ass, and so on; the same mouth could say it all, one thing after the other. It came forth all by itself; the gut would empty. It only stopped at night. Hell must be like that, a place where everything that's said, everything that's expressed, comes forth equalized with everything else, homogenized, like a drunkard's puke.[13]

Robert Antelme says of this hell in a letter to Dionys Mascolo:

> In hell everything is said; and for us, that should be what we recognize. For myself, it's like that, most of all, that I had the revelation of it. . . . Well, in what in others was hell for me—saying everything—it's in that that I lived my paradise. . . . To have been able to free these barely formed words—which hadn't aged, anyway, which had no age, were only modeled on my breath: that, can't you see . . . that happiness hurt me definitively, and at that moment, even though I thought I was far from dying from ills—from typhus or fever, etc.—I thought of dying just from this happiness. . . .[14]

Beneath this chyle, this equality, the whole mass of language is "heightened," giving everything back, spoken as easily as breathing by everyone. Oppression tumbles into it, disintegrates, is purged of itself: an

unimaginable and absolute happiness that stops the night, the wish for death.

Heightening of insults, indecencies, indignities. Torrent of abuse, which collapses hatred, breaks it up, condemns it to immediate oblivion:

> We'd been hearing these threats for a long time. They were meant to make you believe that, with certain groups, hate was something else than the gripe of an empty stomach, that there was a chance it would be lasting. But the threat was weary, worn out along with them by the selfsame misery. The physical state their bodies were in, that was what prompted them to use the vilest expressions. Of these, "fuck-in-the-ass" was one of the most frequent . . . That was how Félix had just described the little *Stubendienst;* for that matter, he'd already said it to him to his face. But he would be able to repeat it to him and then crack jokes with him two days later.[15]

Heightening that dissolves the hateful mass and returns it to its indefiniteness, to that impossibility of choosing that at a certain point becomes unique, singular, an ineffaceable incision, the mark of a man rediscovering the use of words . . . and that vein in the body that precedes words.

> Then they made him undress. For fifteen minutes, Fritz hosed him with a stream of very cold water directed at Félix's heart. Fritz called him a bandit, a *franzosischer Schwein.* Now and then he would turn the jet aside and the *Polizei* would kick Félix in the shins. Then Fritz would come back with the water. Félix didn't move; but he yelled, "Fuck you, you bastards!" . . . Then the *Polizei* and Fritz took turns hammering his face and ribs with their fists.
>
> Félix couldn't hit back. He didn't want to be hanged. He was yelling, "You bastards! Dirty murderers! Fuck you! Fuck you, God damn it, fuck you!" He was howling. Against the blows and the stream of water he had but the resources of his tongue. "You don't know the fucking you're in for, you bastards!" To answer the stream of water, Félix dredged up every insult he could think of, every possible combination of words to produce the worst insults possible. He was daring them. Insults were the only resistance he could put up.[16]

For Félix, beneath the jet of cold water and the blows dealt to a body reduced to nothing but skin and the few unexpected strengths that

remained to it, and that resisted without thinking and without permission, "the resources of his tongue" were almost miraculously concentrated. Vain and sublime resource, naked resilience, suddenly puffed out like his skin itself, alert to its nerve ends. This language was reduced to a few words, a few coarse shouts, which the body opens up like streaks or veins of meaning, indecipherable at the moment and unforgettable in the others' words. A language driven back, compressed, stuck in his throat, which the killers can neither still nor stifle in some everlasting preliminary silence. They cannot, before acting, tie this tongue's equally invisible, mute vein; here, too, they will be outflanked before they understand, fucked ahead of time, ahead of what they wanted to be their time.

Something indestructible, unexpressed, even frantic exists that does not allow itself to be tortured to death. Expression will always manifest its result, its break-in (though it appears like a head drained of blood), even if heavy, condemned, even if unspoken, rendered speechless by what it cannot say. And it will always be cutting, even for indiscernible, incalculable, uncontrollable space. Language of space, skin of space: consideration that places belonging beyond the wound on the side of an inalienable amazement.

An untenable place, yet held from the start by the tie that binds the body to its tongue; an essential tie that bounds existence, which forms the unique archive, which, without jubilation and without condemnation projects an immediate and finely drawn memory of the past, of that part of itself that has come undone. A memory put on trial by the body: without lapse, when complete attention is paid to it; insensitive, infinitely insensitive, to the blows; returning to itself as everything returns; distracted, yet possessing a primary lucidity; giving place and body to "something which cannot possibly be reduced to silence, which insistently asks the name of the woman or the man who lived there, who is real there still, and who will never pass entirely into art," as Walter Benjamin writes of the Little Fisher of Newhaven, photographed by Hill.[17]

Insulted language that redoubles insults, that rebels, and, ceaselessly strict, risking hanging at any moment, watches over this one man's right—Félix's right—also to speak of death.

A naked right. And a language of absolute right, relying on the body to cut through the absence of appeal.

"The resources of his tongue," his language, everybody's language, language with the same words for everybody; resources of a language

that has always been offered as our appeal, as an open area to run to . . . like the child who looks one last time at the deserted courtyard where a few sad miracles still overtake time.

A naked right. And a language of absolute right, not separate from the body, that passes into it in silence beneath whatever it is in it that would pass through it in silence and bring down this right. Language that convenes, produces all possible words, that the body might stand and mark, here, in this (infernal) endless moment, a force that swears to everything, and swears in everything. A shrieked language that responds to the arbitrariness . . . to the most murderous, most brutal, most methodical of violations ever carried out against that "luck of the body" wherein everyone insists that his own existence be watched out for.

Lucky vein, vein of the body, vein of writing. Insensitive to attraction, to the work of each passing day, withdrawing from them—necessarily, cruelly—in order to be open to another ending. An instantaneous ending, an immediate memory in one stroke canceling oblivion, discovering the unthinkable power of speaking . . . of speaking from a (veined, bluish) point where the body perceives its dawn and dusk.

This point that divides—radical, memorable, distinctive, shattering the weakness that dies far from it. It combats; it ceaselessly returns from afar. It gets close to nothing. It watches over bodies, over their unnoticed death, beyond the pain that decomposes them. It is inflexible. Implacable. Irradiating. Yet sealed to that single, dead time that Martha Graham told us was "the incessant pulse of the absence of time which is also the death of time." A vein that does not extricate itself from the night, nor from the stone block engulfing it ("stone of the nameless face," says Robert Antelme).

Point that strikes the proof, but of which every work, every text, every spoken or retrieved truth unfailingly shows the mark, after the fact, always after the fact.

Félix's resistance will save him. His concentration will save him, in that mortal moment.

The Poem in Kind[18]

And the just remain standing in the dread
Bluishness of the grasses after the dead sun.

Rimbaud, *The Just Man*

Uprightness of language. Illumination at the center of the hell of a language that Rimbaud wanted to be "of the soul, for the soul, summarizing everything of thought that grasps on to thought and draws it out."

Ecstatic reason. Alliance infinitely undone, calamitous. Beyond tearing apart. Reason watched over by "scarcely formed words"; awakened, measured by the breathing of dead words of happiness, guarding in their "soul" this memory of the body that is their most profound, most inalienable revelation. Vein linking secretly the edges of the wound.

The meaning and the trait of poetry hang only on these breathings, this wounding happiness, unspecified and extraordinary. Breathings—rights within the unbreathable, air passages not closed off. The body gathers them up and alone creates the basal rhythm, the rhythm to which language yields without losing its sovereignty in order to carry it forward, ahead of us all, like a beat, like a pulse that death does not wipe away.

"If what [the poet] brings back from over there has form, it gives form; if it is non-form, it gives non-form."[19]

But from "over there," everything is brought back and thrown into the breach.

"We watch for the first purple glimmerings that will show between the drapes."[20]

A Letter to Daniel Dobbels

ANDRÉ DU BOUCHET

VANVES, FEBRUARY 1

Several attempts, my dear Daniel. But what I have here in front of me, Robert Antelme's book, breaks in upon the silence, and any renewed effort at speaking seems only a misguided dilution.

It seems to me that after pages such as these, any page that might leave me satisfied after I'd written it could only disgust me. And living as I do, under the pressure of writing, the misguided or totally failed line that would follow by default would leave me just as ashamed. There are pages that one cannot turn over. Adorno's famous line about poetry and the camps has always seemed revolting to me, to the extent that the generalization claims to be true for others. But there it is: I'm grasping for it, taking it over, myself. No writing about what still remains of this terrible thing, if I have not lived it myself. But I shall not forget the book you gave me to read.

YOUR FRIEND,
ANDRÉ DU BOUCHET

PART 3

Discussions, Interviews, Testimonials

Epigraph

MAURICE BLANCHOT

But I'd like to say that it was certainly then that I met Robert Antelme. I remember the circumstances. I was sitting in Dionys Mascolo's office at Gallimard. The door opened slowly, and a tall man appeared; he politely hesitated to enter, obviously so as not to disrupt our conversation. He was almost timid, but, even more, intimidating. He was simplicity itself, but also reserve, which extended to his speech, which was firm and authoritative. I won't say that from that moment I knew just how much his friendship would be precious to me. That would be romantic. I've always felt more unsettled than moved by Montaigne's thoughts on his sudden friendship with La Boétie: "Because it was him . . . because it was me." It is later, with the passage of time, when this same Montaigne decides not to put the *Discourse on Involuntary Servitude* in his writing, that he returns to truer, less exalted feelings, letting us understand the complexity of the friendship and the discretion required when speaking of it. . . .

In the Company of Robert Antelme: Interviews with Georges Beauchamp, Marguerite Duras, Dionys Mascolo, François Mitterrand, Edgar Morin, Maurice Nadeau, and Claude Roy

JEAN-PIERRE SAEZ

He is the man I've known who had the greatest impact upon the people whom he saw, whom he knew.

In all my life, he's the one who has been most important. For me, and for everyone else too. I don't know what to call it: a grace, maybe.

He would talk hardly at all, and he would be talking. He didn't give advice, and nothing could be done without knowing what he thought.

He was intelligence itself, and he detested intelligent talk.

He was also friends with Dionys [Mascolo]. But Dionys wasn't his child. I was his child.

I remember one sentence: he used to say that he could endure anything, except that evil be done to me. To me.

I was there, in all the relations he had with others, just as he too was there for me.

It's too bad that you did not have the chance to come to know him. Even once. Even for an hour. In a bistro. He was completely in life. He was full of joy. And what was miraculous in him was, I think, that he was completely unaware of that power of some sort that he had over others. He didn't know.

That's it. He didn't know.

He died without knowing.

Marguerite Duras

DIONYS MASCOLO: Marguerite Duras and Robert Antelme had married hurriedly the moment war was declared. They didn't constitute a couple. Each had liaisons on the outside. But they had a friendship for each other, a limitless admiration.

And very early on Marguerite had wanted me to undergo the experience of knowing Robert. She put us in contact, moving to one side herself in an admirably discreet way. To allow us really to get to know each other, completely. This attitude never faltered on her part. She never got between us in any way. She let us alone. . . . And the friendship between us became truly very fervent. He was immediately far and away my best friend, my only friend.

JEAN-PIERRE SAEZ: What was he like? How did he behave in everyday life?

D.M.: With the greatest simplicity, the greatest authenticity. He was without the slightest affectation of any sort, literary or intellectual. The most striking thing about this person, when I came to know him—and I should say that, without knowing it, he taught me—was that he was a flaneur, in Baudelaire's sense, a voyeuristic flaneur. And I caught it from him. That is, we would walk along side by side, chatting, all the while watching what was going on in the street. People would be idling about. He was the perfect flaneur, and he remained so until the end of his life.

J.-P.S.: How did the idea of involving yourself in the Resistance develop?

D.M.: I risk simplifying a little, but . . . this involvement in the Resistance didn't come about until September 1943, hence, somewhat late. In the meantime, I'd met Robert Antelme in the spring of 1943. He and Marguerite Duras were already living in the rue St. Benoit, and it was at this home that a Christian friend of Robert Antelme and François Mitterrand suggested to Robert that he join Mitterrand's Resistance movement, the "National Movement of Prisoners of War and Deportees." We joined together, Marguerite, Robert, and I, the same day, in this friend's presence and in Mitterrand's. . . . This memory of it comes back: the smell of English cigarette smoke was in the room. Mitterrand had only recently returned from England with a supply of cigarettes.

J.-P.S.: What were your motives?

D.M.: For myself . . . again I run the risk of being somewhat self-disparaging, but—it was a little like 1940: the war had provided me with the opportunity to experience my own cowardice. As for this decision, it may have been the taste for adventure, personal adventure more than any metaphysical, political, or moral reason.

J.-P.S.: How did you share the idea of joining the Resistance with Robert Antelme?

GEORGES BEAUCHAMP: We'd made a few efforts, with Resistance networks set up to recover parachutists. And Robert had had contacts with Jacques Bénet from the Écoles des chartes, a paleographer who later became one of the leaders of our Resistance movement. It was through Robert that I met Jacques Bénet, and through Jacques Bénet and Robert that I met Mitterrand.

J.-P.S.: Your first meeting with Robert Antelme, Marguerite Duras, and Dionys Mascolo, in the rue St. Benoit, was organized through the intermediacy of a common friend of Robert Antelme and yourself. At the time you were Morland, the head of a Resistance network. They were seeking specifically to join the Resistance. You came to the rue St. Benoit to see them. How did that meeting go?

FRANÇOIS MITTERRAND: Properly speaking, it wasn't an organized meeting. In fact there was not as yet any organized "group" from the rue St. Benoit. There was a group of friends, but it wasn't involved in the active life of the Resistance. Individually, each one had his own opinion, and they were, roughly, in the same camp—the one that was hard to please at the time.

J.-P.S.: Could you date this meeting precisely?

F.M.: Oh no. I think it took place just after I got back from London. I needed a safe apartment. It was then that Georges Beauchamp from the rue St. Benoit introduced me to Robert Antelme and the others. . . . And it was then that Robert Antelme steered me toward his sister so that she would offer me the room I needed. . . . It was in February . . . 1944, maybe. Maybe the beginning of March.

J.-P.S.: In the beginning, Marguerite Duras did not seem to be in on the objective of the meeting. And there was an odor of English cigarettes

hanging in the room. It's a cigarette that you smoked yourself when you came back from London. And by this sign she understood that they had joined the Resistance.

F.M.: For good reason, I had come back with very little in the way of baggage, the baggage entrusted to us when you came back from England during the war: a flask of alcohol, a pistol, a dose of cyanide. In addition, I'd bought a raincoat in London that I put over these other things inside the small suitcase I had. And there were some cigarettes there, too.

J.-P.S.: Do you remember the talk you gave and what you proposed to them?

F.M.: I didn't give a talk. I expressed my convictions. They were very receptive, very interested in that form of combat. Intellectually, they had an established position already, and it happened all by itself.

J.-P.S.: Did you propose concrete actions to them?

F.M.: No. They saw that at any given moment we would need to have friends available for modest but real missions. And I also think that the first arrests that occurred in our ranks induced them to step forward to fill in the gaps. There was no proselytizing. Each decided for himself, in his own way.

J.-P.S.: What memories do you have of Robert Antelme during this clandestine period?

F.M.: When I knew him, I was struck—as were all his friends, I believe—by his extreme gentleness, by his capacity for reflection, by a very great intellectual and emotional receptiveness. And as from the start he was in favor of our activities, he at once made himself useful through his advice. Robert Antelme was not by nature a man of action, but he was logical with himself, coherent. He would not have gone in search of a group or a circle, which wouldn't have been easy to find, moreover. For you mustn't think that in the France of that period there were groups of resisters everywhere. In reality they constituted a tiny minority. By chance it came out that he was in daily contact with some resisters. It resulted that he placed himself at their disposal out of a very great goodness and devotion, and at the same time with a kind of total ignorance of the danger.

J.-P.S.: And what, at the time, was the meaning for you of your involvement in the Resistance?

MARGUERITE DURAS: It was he, Mitterrand, one day he turned up here. . . . He was coming from London, and he was smoking an English cigarette. At one point I said to him, "Those cigarettes—be careful." That's how it happened. Evening came, and he was asleep at Robert's. He spent the night. That wasn't what we wanted. On these particular points, these details, I must be very strict. We weren't heroes. The Resistance had come to us, because we were decent people. I think that François had the feeling that Robert, Marie-Louise Antelme, and I were people you could have confidence in.

J.-P.S.: At the beginning of June 1944, the Gestapo discovered the hideout in the rue Dupin where you lived, and it set a trap that your Resistance companions fell into.

F.M.: That particular day there was a whole series of arrests of our people by the Gestapo in places we thought were secret. These arrests were due, of course, to a denunciation, to the tracing back of the elements of a network.

I wasn't at the rue Dupin address, where, in fact, no gathering had been scheduled. But our people were pretty much stunned by what had just happened; they felt the need to see each other and were rather neglectful of the rules of prudence. Five or six of them were there, and the Gestapo showed up and got hold of them. Who? Marie-Louise certainly, for it was her place. Also there was Paul Pilven, perhaps Philippe. . . . There was Jean Mugnier, too. Jean Mugnier reacted instinctively the moment it happened. Fists flying, he sailed into the little group that was in the midst of carrying out the arrest. They were caught off guard, and he dashed down the stairway. A shot was fired. The bullet grazed his hand and, having got outside, he gave the warning right away. I myself had come by, but before going up had telephoned from the post office in the rue Dupin, which is located just below the apartment. I phoned to ask if everything was all right. This was a routine precaution that that day proved useful. It was Marie-Louise who picked up the phone. I don't remember my exact words anymore, but she said to me, "You have the wrong number, sir." Then I had a most unfortunate reaction. Thinking that I had misdialed, I tried it again. A second time, in an irritated voice,

she said to me, "I've already told you that you have the wrong number." Later I learned that she was there at the phone with the Gestapo agent, revolver in hand, saying to her, "Tell him to come up." Not only did she not tell me to come up, but by repeating that I had the wrong number—when this time I was certain that I wasn't mistaken—she let me know that I mustn't come, and I didn't. At the other end of the street I ran into a comrade, Ferreol de Ferry, an archivist and paleographer. We consulted quickly. We placed two of our friends at either end of the street to intercept comrades who might arrive. . . . But, unfortunately, the catch was significant. After Jean Bertin that morning, five others had been arrested. The order was passed along to burn this address; we didn't go back there.

Here was several months' work completely wiped out in one stroke, because we'd been watched, and several of us arrested. There were other arrests that same day in another apartment—a young woman arrested, her husband shot. It was an extremely difficult day.

It was that day that Robert and Marie-Louise were arrested. At this point starts another story, which Marguerite—at that time Marguerite Antelme, today Marguerite Duras—has told in the book *The War*—another story in which I was involved but at something of a distance. It's a story that immediately involved Marguerite above all.

J.-P.S.: In late spring of 1944, Robert Antelme was arrested, interned at Fresnes, then deported. How did you experience this event?

D.M.: As you can well imagine. In *The War,* Marguerite recounted how she met the Gestapo agent who arrested Robert. As our intention was to kill that agent, Marguerite one day indicated to me the place where she was going to have lunch with him, and, along with a girlfriend, I went into the restaurant to determine how I could liquidate him later on with the help of some friends. Quite obviously, it was this arrest that engaged us most profoundly—if not in the ideological then at least in the existential sense. At last we had enemies to combat whom inwardly we took to be enemies. Hitherto, as I've told you, our activity was more or less random.

J.-P.S.: What memory have you retained of Marguerite Duras during the wait for Robert Antelme's return?

D.M.: Ah! [*Long silence.*] She was concerned only with that. I'll jump ahead quickly to after the Liberation. She would question certain

prisoners on their return home from Germany. I occasionally questioned some of them with her. She had a column in the newspaper of the MNPGD,[1] which for a time was called *Libres,* I think.

J.-P.S.: I would like to bring up the newspaper *Libres,* this organ of the MNPGD, your Resistance network that at the Liberation set up a service to try to locate prisoners and deportees. What was the exact function of this research service?

F.M.: Its name describes it quite exactly. We did not know where a great many prisoners were. Some had escaped, been recaptured, and put in extremely harsh camps, chiefly in Poland. Their families had stopped receiving either news or letters. At the Liberation of Paris in August 1944 and in the months that followed, all the way to April 1945, we were faced with one immense disorder.

J.-P.S.: At that time you became a member of the provisional government of France?

F.M.: Not exactly. There was a curious government, a government that didn't bear the name but which de Gaulle, then in Algiers, had designated as the embodiment of legality. Fifteen persons under the authority of Alexandre Parodi. I was among these fifteen named specifically by General de Gaulle. It was also we who had welcomed de Gaulle upon his arrival here and taken part in the first meetings of the Council of Ministers of liberated France held at the Defense ministry in the rue St.-Dominique. That lasted two weeks, just the time needed for de Gaulle to reconstitute a real government with two of our people, a further two drawn from these fifteen, and a sizable number of those who were on the Committee of Liberation, plus a few personalities like Bidault and Teitgen. So it was a brief episode, but important. It had only just concluded when General de Gaulle asked me to accompany General Lewis as France's representative at the opening of several camps. It was thus that we went to Landsberg, where we found no survivors. Hitler was interned for a time at Landsberg and it was there, I believe, that some chapters of *Mein Kampf* were written.

Then, Dachau. . . . A tragic and unforgettable sight. . . . That first hour of liberation . . . the German soldiers chased down, shot. . . . Those who were awaiting their fate . . . awaiting while their fate be decided. . . . The deportees on the central square of the camp, in front of the huge bar-

racks on whose roof in different-colored tiles were spelled out the words "*Arbeit macht frei.*" . . . And then the dying . . . the dead upon whom survivors were leaning on their elbows . . . the corpses strewn around the camp . . . the places of execution . . . the ovens of the crematoria which were still operating. . . . The bodies that were still being shoved into the furnaces. . . . But let's avoid this description, which has been provided by others.

I was there with one of the comrades from my movement whom I'd brought with me, Pierre Bugeaud. We were walking about this huge camp, witnesses to such scenes. . . . In a kind of field, a kind of open lot inside the camp, stepping over bodies, those of many dead, of many dying who'd been tossed there. Trying not to step on . . . We heard a voice, someone who said, "François." Pierre Bugeaud bent down; then I bent down. I didn't know from what source the call had come. We finally spotted the one who'd called, but we didn't recognize him. It was Robert Antelme.

An extraordinary coming back together! . . . Our last sight of him had been in June '44, and it was Bugeaud and I who found him again. I immediately asked General Lewis for authorization to take Robert Antelme back to Paris with us, which was refused. The administrative orders were very strict: there might be typhus about.

So I went back to Paris almost at once. I had a document that permitted me entrance to the camps. We went immediately to a printer—we were used to dealing with printers—and had false copies made. A team consisting of Jacques Bénet, Georges Beauchamp, Dionys Mascolo, a car. . . . They headed for Dachau.

D.M.: Mitterrand tells us that Robert is alive, at Dachau, but that it is impossible to get him out. The camp is quarantined; Robert Antelme has typhus. Mitterrand tells us that if we wait until the anticipated delays are up, there is no chance that he'll survive. That's when Georges Beauchamp, who'd been a school friend of Robert's and who'd also been my principal comrade during the Liberation of Paris, got his own car running. A few days later, thanks to Mitterrand, we were provided with papers from the intelligence service of the time. I don't remember what it was called. We were supposed to be French intelligence agents, uniformed ones, and we went back to Dachau, where, with considerable trouble, we got Robert Antelme out. I told the Americans that we were

intelligence agents, that this prisoner had information to give us about Gestapo services still active in France, and that we had to question him without witnesses. They let us leave the camp and walk just outside the barriers of wire fencing, which we did. After about twenty minutes we slipped away, to the car that was hidden on a nearby street. We got back to Paris in two days.

J.-P.S.: How did you identify Robert Antelme in the camp?

D.M.: He was completely unrecognizable. I went up and down the alleys between the blocks . . . It was good weather, a clear day. . . . The deportees, most of them dying, lay stretched out on the ground. . . . I heard a voice speak my name. . . . I approached. . . . I could tell it was Robert only by the space between his two upper front teeth. He was absolutely unrecognizable. He had lost . . . perhaps forty-five kilos. He couldn't have weighed more than thirty-five kilos, whereas before he'd been a corpulent man. He weighed about thirty-five kilos.[2]

J.-P.S.: How did the return trip in the car go?

D.M.: He talked the whole time; he didn't stop talking, recounting. . . . He knew he was near death, and perhaps he wanted to say as much as possible before dying. Day and night, he didn't stop talking. Maybe a few hours when he dozed off . . . We got to Paris completely exhausted.

J.-P.S.: In the car you were driving, bringing him back to Paris from Dachau, Robert Antelme seemed obsessed by one idea: to talk, to bear witness. Do you remember the account he gave to you? Did this account focus on the meaning of the experience he had just lived through, or on the experience itself?

G.B.: He did want to talk, needed to talk. He was tired, utterly exhausted, but he needed to talk. He said to us, "Whenever I hear someone speak of Christian charity, my reply will be Dachau." At work in him, plainly, was a backing away, a shrinking from faith, from religion. He had undergone something beyond the ordinary, and so his thinking focused more on explanation. It was the first stirrings of *The Human Race.* He talked and talked. A kind of fever that lasted until exhaustion. That evening we arrived in Alsace, I don't remember in what village anymore. He thought he was going to die. He asked to eat a trout, and we sought, Dionys and I, to oblige him. At a fish farm that was closed

for the day we found a woman who was moved by Robert's condition and managed to get us a trout. He ate it; put some in his mouth, then he dropped off to sleep. We stayed awake for a long time, watching over him, for we were afraid he wouldn't get through the night. He was very, very weak. But he held on, and the next day we set out again.

J.-P.S.: Faced with the sight offered by Dachau, or simply by Robert Antelme's emaciated body, were you sure you were witnessing the real world?

D.M.: The real world? It was certainly the real world, the real inhumanity that there is in man. But I have to say that what we beheld was not something for which we were all that unprepared. . . . For us it was no longer the unexpected. Of what horror is we by now had grasped just about everything. Concrete, real horror, not just the metaphysical horror of the absence of, the death of God . . . which was by and large what we had experienced up until then. No, here it was the absence of man in man, the absence of humanity in man. That is what was very vividly revealed to us.

J.-P.S.: You have written that the experience of Robert Antelme's deportation had in some way "permanently Judaized" you. But Robert Antelme was not Jewish. Could you explain this paradox?

D.M.: That became true over time, after we were really informed (which we weren't, as yet, at the time of Robert Antelme's return) of what had happened to the Jews—of, that is, their systematic extermination.

Robert was a member of the Resistance. He was an enemy. We were enemies of Nazi Germany. Jewish children were not members of the Resistance; they were not enemies. There was a difference there that has to be called metaphysical. And it is our shame not to have understood sooner. That is why we identified with their fate. We identified with it somewhat pretentiously, but at the same time not just pretentiously. It seemed to us that being Jewish guaranteed the Jews against a certain stupidity in which we were steeped, against a certain mindlessness. They, because of anti-Semitism, were advised of what the real world contained of the inhuman, whereas we were not alive to this. Stupidity, we may have perceived the stupidity in the world, but not the inhumanity, not the inhuman hatred. Do you know what I mean?

M.D.: To his thinking, he himself, who had lived through this thing, was nothing, because the thing he'd lived through was huge, unbelievable. It was a force man had not been known to possess. He stood before this phenomenon—of having been incidentally the object of this encounter.

EDGAR MORIN: A good many deportees' accounts are heavily rhetorical, written in a stereotyped language. Or else there are books that are quasi epics, for example Rousset's *Les Jours de notre mort,*[3] a kind of concentration camp Malraux. *The Human Race* was the first book—I would even say the only book—that stands firmly at the level of humanity, at the level of naked experience lived and expressed in the simplest, most adequate words there are. As a result, this book which, in a sense, is a work of antiliterature (since, very rightly, the author didn't want to make literature out of the camps) was a book of pure literature; in this sense, after it there was nothing more one could write. There's a book by Primo Levi [*Survival in Auschwitz*] that I find very outstanding. But for me, the book that speaks at this level of existence, of experience, and does so without any feeling of personal hatred, without any pettiness, obviously without any injustice—for me this remains *The Human Race.*

J.-P.S.: With *The Human Race,* Robert Antelme wrote his only book. Do you think he might have suffered from not having written another?

D.M.: I think so. Long afterward, he confided to me that he had tried to write something else and had given up because he found it derisory. The account he had achieved of something that exceeds the imagination—as he says it in the prefatory remarks to *The Human Race:* "What we had lived through, the recollection of it seems to ourselves unimaginable"—after that to resort to imagination surely seemed absurd to him, derisory. That in all likelihood is why he renounced pursuing what he had roughed out afterward.

J.-P.S.: What does *The Human Race* represent for you?

MAURICE NADEAU: It is one of the great books written about the camps. There were many books about the camps, but, in my opinion, there were only three important ones: *The Human Race* by Robert Antelme, *Survival in Auschwitz* by Primo Levi, and the book by David Rousset that I published, *Les Jours de notre mort.*

There are a good many others that are not negligible: for example, the book by Jean Cayrol, *Lazare parmi nous,* and then all of the accounts by witnesses. But opting for or against the literary mode, that's not what made the difference—not at all. We see the literary mode opted for by Rousset, who had wanted to write a novel à la Dos Passos based on his camp experience and the accounts by witnesses that he'd collected. Antelme's book is much more inward and poses far more fundamental questions. It's not for nothing that he entitled it *The Human Race.* It was striking at the time, and in the state of mind we were in—which rejected both the time and Nazism—it was striking to read in black and white that the camps' supervisors, the SS, were men like us, that they belonged to the same species. It was at once paradoxical and of a nature to give one pause. *The Human Race* also delivered this other lesson, that, whatever one might have done to them, to whatever degree of animality the prisoners might have been reduced, something remained that cannot be broken. One can go no further. Solzhenitsyn formulated the same idea later on; in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* there's this same idea that one can do everything, can go even to the point of killing, but something holds out before which everything resists. This conception, this consciousness, rather, of belonging to the same species—it was, I think, Robert Antelme who displayed it first.

J.-P.S.: *The Human Race* marked you profoundly. It even appears, from reading the articles you devoted to it when it came out, that it is one of the books to which you attach the greatest importance, one of those about which you have had the most to say, one that you have defended the most.

CLAUDE ROY: There exists another great book, which is its opposite; the book of freedom; the book about the world that one would like to call "normal": *À la recherche du temps perdu.*[4] It opens thus: "For a long time, I had gone to bed early." Robert Antelme's book begins, "I went outside to take a piss. It wasn't yet daylight." And throughout the whole book Antelme employs the most exact vocabulary, the words that adhere closest to things, and describes life, existence, survival in a ferocious world, but one where he covers up nothing, hides nothing, disguises nothing. He uses crude words. He does not say "excrement," he says "shit," and this exactness plays a great role in his book as it did in the deportees' lives. It is one of the most elemental of books in the rad-

ical sense, in the sense of the elements of life. It is one of those books where, beginning with this life stripped bare of everything that in appearance makes for its peace, charm, happiness, or the possibility of living, he goes on to deduce everything, to deduce the essential.

There are admirable pages about refuse, leftovers. Men are reduced to eating them, because they are being starved, because others are attempting to turn these men into misery itself, into wretches reduced to filching peelings from the waste bins in the kitchen and grilling them over the stoves. And Antelme says that it is not decadence to be reduced to eating garbage. The horror, the decadence consists in not sharing this garbage, in not giving to a comrade what one is able to give him. But eating the garbage is a kind of duty. You must try to live. Because they want you to die, you must try to survive.

The whole book has this tension. I know of no other book so pitched "at the level of the essential." Other great books have been written about the camps. I greatly admire the one by Primo Levi, or the one by David Rousset, and still others that are also very fine. But this one is the plainest, the most unadorned. Robert Antelme's voice has this evenness through the entire book. It hardly wavers, and his voice sounds tranquil, although he was not a tranquil man. On the contrary, he was a man who underwent great surges of anger and rage, but never of hatred. He always strove to surmount it. Five or six times in *The Human Race* he describes hatred, the hatred—that one wishes to call understandable, nay, legitimate—of those who hate their executioner, who want to see him dead. He describes it with a kind of distance, as though he were saying, "This temptation, banish it far from me."

There's the famous story of Jan Novak, the messenger of the Polish resistance who, at the price of unheard-of courage and effort, succeeded in exploring the Warsaw ghetto, getting past the frontier, reaching London, then New York. He is listened to. He is listened to, but not believed. He gains access to political figures in England and in America. In America, to an elderly Jewish justice of the Supreme Court, he tells him what he has seen, what he saw in the ghetto, the persecutions. And the old man said to him, "I don't believe you, young man." Jan Novak said to him, "But, Judge, do you think I am lying to you?" And the judge replied, "No, I think you're telling the truth, but I cannot believe it." Like the elderly judge, had I been told on the night before I went into the camp at Bergen-Belsen what I was going to see the next day, I

think I would have said, "I don't think you're lying, but I cannot believe it."

There's a passage in *The Human Race* that I think can sum up and condense the whole meaning of the book. I want to read it to you, because I believe that the essential meaning, perhaps the heart of the book, is in this passage:

> Were we to go and find an SS and show Jacques to him, to him we could say: "Have a look, you have turned him into this rotten, yellowish creature. You have succeeded in making him what you think he is by nature: waste, offal. Well, we can tell you this, which by all rights would flatten you for good if 'error' could kill: you have enabled him to make of himself the strongest, the most complete of men, the surest of his powers, of the resources of his conscience, of the scope of his actions. Not because the unhappiest are the strongest, nor because time is on our side. But because one day Jacques will cease running the risks you make him run because you'll cease exercising the power that you exercise now; because we can already provide an answer to the question of whether at some point it can be said that you have won. With Jacques, you never won. You wanted him to steal. He didn't steal. You wanted him to kiss the *Kapos'* asses in order to eat. He wouldn't do it. You wanted him to laugh in order to look good when a *Meister* was beating some guy up. He didn't laugh. Most of all you wanted him to doubt whether any cause was worth his rotting away like this. He didn't doubt. You get your rocks off looking at this wasted wreck that stands before you; but you're the one who's been had, fucked all the way up and down. We show you nothing but boils, sores, gray heads, leprosy; and that's what you believe in, the leprosy. You sink deeper and deeper. '*Jawohl!* We were right, *jawohl, alles Scheisse!*' Your conscience is at rest. 'We were right. Just look at them.' No one is so deluded as you, and you're deluded by us, who are leading you to the very end of your error. Calm yourself, we won't undeceive you; we'll bring you to the end of your enormity. We'll let ourselves be taken the whole way to death, and you'll only see the vermin who are dying.
>
> "For it to be shown that we are in the right we no more count on our bodies' liberation than on their resurrection. It's now, alive and wasted as we are, that our righteousness triumphs. True, this can't be

seen; but the less it is visible, the greater our righteousness is; the less your chances of seeing anything at all, the more in the right we are. Not only are right and reason on our side, but we are the very righteousness that you have banished to a clandestine existence. And so less than ever can we bow before seeming triumphs. Let this be well understood: owing to what you have done, right-thinking transforms itself into consciousness. You have restored the unity of man; you have made consciousness irreducible. No longer can you ever hope that we be at once in your place and in our own skin, condemning ourselves. Never will anyone here become to himself his own SS."[5]

Postscript by Claude Roy

The "seeming triumph" of misfortune and evil that Robert Antelme talks about on this admirable page of *The Human Race* seemed to take on added weight in June of 1983 when an operation left him paralyzed on one side. He had been released from the prison of the camps, and in 1945 he had again begun to live the life of a free man. Then another prison shut him in. From that point on he was held captive by his own body; largely immobile, able to speak only with great difficulty, Robert spent the last seven years of his life in the military hospital of the Invalides. Monique[6] was at his bedside every day, trying through tenderness and attentive care to offset the oppressive weight of his immobilized body. Except for outings that Monique and those around her organized as often as possible, Robert remained a patient at the Invalides until his death on October 26, 1990.

Thinking of our friend as he lay immured alive, have we the right to say that the victory of suffering and paralysis was only a "seeming triumph"? Can we, from outside the dungeon where Robert was confined for seven years, say of him what he said about Jacques in the face of the SS: "It's now, alive and wasted as we are, that our righteousness triumphs"? I think we can.

Every time we went to see Robert, we communicated with him as much through looks as through the words that he dragged one by one from his wounded body, as much through the pressure of a hand as through a smile, as much through a moment of silence as through the motions of feeding him spoonful by spoonful. Not for an instant during those years of life beyond life did Robert's suffering cease, did this

captivity of the flesh let itself be forgotten; not for an instant was this unjust punishment of the just truly suspended. Yet I think it can also be said that never for an instant was there any ceasing of that vigilance of the heart within Robert. What was wonderful about that awful imprisonment was that pain never distracted him from others, that even within the solitude where fate seemed to have immured him anew he remained constantly attentive to others. In those days in the hospital, when (too rarely, alas) we gathered at his bedside, there were fleeting bright moments, flickers of life's lightness, a sense of humor, a grace of laughter that never completely deserted him. Between us there were stories of survival from our shared passage through communism, a few key words to which Robert would respond with a laugh the moment he heard them. It sufficed to say, "Self-criticism, comrade," or "Georges Marchais,"[7] and for a moment a faintly somber butterfly of gaiety would flutter about the room. Best of all was that what little strength and means of communication were still at his disposal he placed in the service of his whispered and pensively heartfelt generosity. I remember a day with him and Monique. He'd just finished his meal, he was tired, his eyes were closed, and he lay still. Putting the plates and the dinner things away, Monique and I were chatting. Robert was far away—or so we thought. We were in the midst of some catty but not truly unkind observation about one of our mutual friends, one of those comments that isn't completely unwarranted and that affection rectifies. Suddenly we heard behind us Robert's soft, quietly struggling voice. "You're unfair to A.," he said with difficulty. "He doesn't deserve it."

Thus was Robert Antelme. Without a doubt the finest man I've ever known. At the end of those afternoons when I'd stop by to see him at the hospital, if I was alone with him as night approached, I would defer leaving as long as possible. Then I'd say, "Do you want me to turn the television on?" Robert would indicate yes. But I knew very well that he wouldn't watch it; that he only wanted me to turn it on so that he could look elsewhere, and perhaps so I wouldn't see that his eyes were filled with tears. I kissed him, and I left. I walked through the long halls of the Invalides to the boulevard now clothed in night, and I thought of Robert, clothed in night also, in solitude, and of that inexplicable thing inside the woe misfortune brings on that is called goodness.

Testimonials

Louis-René des Forêts[1]

I have, and I'm ashamed of it, a kind of deep-seated inaptitude for speaking of a close friend, and of Robert Antelme more than any other.

What fails me is not my memory, forever impressed and illuminated by his features, but the very terms themselves by which I would vainly seek to express what was unique about his friendship. To this is added the fear of being lacking in discretion. Robert Antelme was not among those who impose themselves on us; his was a sort of natural elegance, probably owing to the terrible ordeal that he went through—something of which he almost never spoke after describing it in that admirable book that is far more than a personal account of concentration camp life. It is a monument of thought: *The Human Race,* which each of us should read, reread, and reread again. So inexhaustible are its riches.

Robert Antelme preferred to remain in the background, which does not mean he backed away from community. Quite to the contrary, he did so out of the desire to participate in it fully by distinguishing himself in no way from other people, yet without playing down his own singularity or weakening his spoken presence—an expression I use here deliberately, for his spoken presence exercised itself in an incomparable manner, whatever the subject being addressed, from the gravest to the

most minute events of everyday life: always in depth, with a penetration that was sometimes mixed with a humorous quality belonging only to him. At such times his smile was a child's smile.

He also possessed an impressive capacity for silence. How many times after leaving the office did we walk through the streets side by side without exchanging a word; this twofold taciturnity, his and mine, had the sense—at least this is how I felt it—of an implicit understanding that was paradoxically reaffirmed and sharpened by the absence of speech. Marvelous moments.

We who have sadly survived him should remember that he could not abide making public what was properly private, that on this point he was absolutely intransigent. We would be unfaithful to him should we forget this today. Hence, any talk about him seems not only insufficient and reductive, but also undue.

JEAN-LOUIS SCHEFER

As with all of my great friends, I believe that Robert and I talked a good deal more about life, about things, than about ideas. I don't recall that, during those long years of friendship, interspersed with periods of silence, we ever engaged in a debate over ideas; perhaps I was too young, and Robert too respectful of others to risk humbling me.

I was twenty, or perhaps nineteen, when, through Roland Barthes and Claude Lafort, I first went to Robert and Monique's. For me, Robert was first of all that man of profound simplicity and poetic gravity who handed the bread around at the table. At the time, I was giving private Latin and German lessons to Nicolas, Monique's oldest son. Meals, the needs of the children, the concerns and the gaiety of the house: these two friends included me in all this, giving me their humanity with dignity and affection. It was this real grandeur, composed of simplicity and affection, and Monique's everlasting kindness that created this friendship. A harmoniousness that extended to everything, without speeches or arguments. I was moved by the weight injected into the words Robert used in conversation, words that demanded only truthfulness in return and a concern for justice: I felt I understood that he expected this from the young friend I then was. . . . I can testify to nothing else: Robert installed us firmly in the grace and the gravity of sharing.

One winter Sunday in 1960, after dinner, Robert took us—his family, my fiancée, and me—to a cat show. Awful odor of cat piss; frightful cats of every description. I even think—the height of agony—that we had tea. Robert was amused, even ecstatic, by the fact that the cats were unhappy balls of feeling, of nerves, suffering because of their limited consciousness. . . . That was it: the bread, the flowers, Robert's amusement as I told him about a trip of mine to Germany. Never a word about his book, nor about the camps. Extreme modesty, a horror of giving lessons. Robert's request, when I brought my first article to him: "Jean-Louis, I ask this of you, very seriously: never cite yourself, even in a footnote." And later (structuralism): "Jean-Louis, you're a writer. What are you doing with those engineers?" I did try to talk to him about the attraction of that intellectual adventure ("What counts in your articles is what won't stand still, what burns"). I owe a great deal to Robert, including a few affectionate outbursts of anger, for which he immediately apologized, lowering his head. I owe to him (what is a large part of my life) my first Italian friendships, Vittorini's friendly reception.

The modesty, the discretion, the moral violence of this friend, the long silences in our conversations, the open smile, the eyes. I read *The Human Race* a year after becoming close to Robert and Monique. I was impressed not by the impossibility of writing or of finishing something that he was suffering from, but by what I sensed was the difficulty of maintaining his sad decision not to write anymore. Robert, bumped into on the Boulevard St.-Germain, the first year of his retirement, said: "You write, Jean-Louis. I can't anymore. My only way of being somewhere else is to take the train. I take the train. It's almost [a smile] the same thing."

Always ready to go back into children's dreams. Worthy, simple, ceremonious, respectful, violent, delicate. I feel ashamed that today I do not know how to attain the distance from this friend that would permit me to speak of him. But the affection was, after all, so long standing and so distant; the laugh, the maternal gentleness of Monique; that so strangely sweet part of my life, without arguments over ideas (Monique, at the dinner table, and only once: "But come on, Jean-Louis. You *are* on the left, aren't you?"). Flowers, the pleasures afforded by light, dinners with them in Bry-sur-Marne in the rue des Saints-Pères; a truly evangelical peace (I think we were all more or less survivors of snobbish families). Time wasted together, often enough; sometimes too little time. The silences, the smiles.

It is about that something without much of the literary to it, that something essential to friendship that I can speak. Often we didn't say anything when I visited him in his office at Gallimard, but that didn't bother us. More visibly than anyone else, Robert was for me—with a forcefulness, a tormentedness—a calm (which others will certainly emphasize), the spirit, the soul of that so very special intellectual community that was so important to boys of my generation. Looking for true nourishment, we awaited—far from the modest promotional effects of the time—for the true books: the latest Bataille, the latest Blanchot. This community of men, with whom we contagiously shared friendship, comprised the milieu of our final moral education. There we learned the rigor of this impossible occupation (writing); there, more than from politics, we learned attentiveness to justice; more than thinking, or poetry, there, little by little, we learned the responsibility of our "work" (again, writing).

I know that Robert was the close and intimate friend of what we were trying to write. Giving a sometimes astonished welcome to our peregrinations; worrying about the needs, the distresses of each; a part of that world—through his voice, his look, the grace of his smile—that made of us the men we were trying to be. The hope, Robert, of a human world.

ROBERT GALLIMARD

To testify in writing to who Robert Antelme was—this is something I hardly feel capable of doing. Quite simply, because I am not a writer, and I would not want my clumsiness to distort the remembrance I provide of a man for whom I felt such friendship and esteem.

Our deceased friends are all unique and irreplaceable beings. Robert is certainly among them, and they are without faults: Robert had no faults—none, at least, that so struck me that I remember it today. Looking closely, I could say that he was lazy, but this seems almost a quality. Laziness on him was becoming; it aligned well with his kindness, his goodness, his attentive generosity. Courageous, honest, lucid, just, and good: he was these things more than anyone else, and probably exemplified them better than anyone else. But what characterized him most strongly in my eyes was his inexhaustible capacity for brotherhood. I have never encountered anyone who was fraternal to such an extent. He

knew how to listen to everyone who came to see him, wherever they came from, and he greeted them with that warm courtesy he had made us familiar with.

Robert liked to talk; he liked conversation. The exchange of ideas, words, and feelings was for him an essential activity. He thought, I believe, that talking was the strongest rampart against violence. Those who didn't consider it necessary to interrupt some activity, to stop in the street or in an office hallway to say a more-or-less lengthy hello, aroused his suspicion. Devoid of all vanity, he didn't understand that one might wish to be noticed, and in his view nothing was more contemptible than social ambition, the thirst for visibility, the need to dominate, to become the boss. He hated every form of oppression.

Robert always said that he was a communist and would remain one. A communist all by himself, very far from a party that had excluded him and whose dogmatism, authority, and hierarchy imposed slogans and clichés he no more accepted than he would have accepted them from any other source. He was a communist, and he thought freely. To save the world from that intolerance, that violence, that cruelty, that cupidity that always caused it to suffer, he saw no means other than sharing—sharing misfortune and joy, riches and poverty; sharing culture, knowledge, beauty.

For himself Robert asked only the right to live with those whom he loved; he asked of them only that they be attentive to others and be honest with everyone, with themselves, with life.

Robert knew how to laugh. He laughed well; his was a generous, large, communicative laugh that emanated from the depths of his being. Laughter pleased him, and his laughter was infectious. It was delightful to the point that you would forget that this man had known the inside of hell.

All those who have read *The Human Race* must have felt, as I did, how appalling, unjust, and unacceptable the last years of his life were—he who was happy to have entered his retirement, to be freed from the daily work that had weighed a little more heavily on him every day—years when Robert was deprived of speech and movement, virtually cut off from any communication with others.

The fraternal man condemned never more to express fraternity or to receive its expressions: what must he, this just man, have thought of such an injustice? What could he have thought about it?

I shall never know what response to give to this question I have so often and so pointlessly put to myself.

I still feel remorse over not having gone often enough to see him, immobile in his hospital bed. This man nearly without speech with whom I'd talked at length so often now left me speechless in my turn. And there was his look, in which I read an appeal to which I did not know how to reply. Others were able to, but not I; it was impossible, I felt dumbstruck, ashamed of this paralysis that prevented me from attempting to reach him in his dark night.

I prefer to remember his broad smile, his look overflowing with goodness, welcoming, lively, and gentle; evenings that often lasted well into the night, when we drank a good deal and talked too much, evenings he always tried to keep from coming to an end so as not to break the tie binding all of us tightly to each other, even in disagreement. To remember, too, Robert's lightness—and he was a big man—when he danced the "paso doble," or practiced soccer with his children.

I shall never forget the example he bequeathed us of modesty, courage, dignity, and fidelity. No: this is what all those who knew Robert will never forget.

Today it suffices me to know that I loved this man, and that I love him still.

JACQUES PIMPANEAU

I knew Robert Antelme when, still a student, I was working in the same office as he, preparing articles for Gallimard's *Encyclopedia of the Pléiade.* Indeed, it was partly thanks to him that I was given this remarkable opportunity, for Michel Gallimard had consulted him when I'd applied for a job. The conditions were unusual: it was a part-time job that was my responsibility to schedule, the one requirement being that I never come when I had a class to attend.

About seven in the evening, Beurey, who was working on the Universe of Forms series, would often stop in to chat about politics, about the news, and would provoke such pertinent responses from Robert Antelme that it was a true pleasure to listen in; and I would be a little disappointed when Beurey didn't turn up, for that meant Robert would remain buried in the manuscripts. After that it would be in the café across the street, in the Espérance, where friends such as Dionys Mascolo

would come to join him, or Saturday evenings at friends' houses in the country that I could profit from Robert's remarks. He is one of the people to whom I am most indebted. His conversations were my schooling in politics—the word "politics" of course meaning life in society in general, and not the narrow sense given it by the press. In this area, I have never since heard remarks so intelligent, so stamped with attentiveness to and understanding of others. I was invariably so struck by the soundness of his thinking that I wanted to have his point of view on every aspect of human relations; and, at twenty, I had no lack of questions. Other people always seemed to me shut up within a system, within a rigid framework; you knew in advance what they were going to say. Robert's words, on the contrary, seemed to be the product of personal reflection based on reality and guided uniquely by a profound respect for people. He was the complete opposite of an ideologue. What was also so seductive about him was his humor, his irony, in which there was no unkindness, an irony where drollness combined with generosity—something rare.

While his remarks were in themselves a stimulating education, there was never anything constraining about them. A good many people, without necessarily putting others down as fascists, communists, racists, and whatnot, nevertheless contrive to make them ill at ease, to give them a bad conscience in such a way as to constrain them. They know they haven't been convincing, but by proceeding this way they succeed in silencing criticism, rallying people to their viewpoint in spite of themselves—people they can also indulge themselves in despising, since they know that their forced allegiance was obtained through embarrassment. They're guilty of a kind of intellectual terrorism, just as those who don't send them to the devil are guilty of cowardice. What was marvelous with Robert was that you always felt yourself utterly free; with him, you breathed, you were completely at ease, you never felt uncomfortable if you thought differently. I owe him a great deal, but on certain questions I didn't share his opinions: he thought, for example, that you had to vote, and I've always refused to do so out of a distrust of politicians; I didn't always share his esteem for—or his reservations about—certain people; but it never crossed my mind that this could cloud our relations.

At the end of his life, during his long years in the hospital enclosed in silence, he often answered, "I don't know." One day, I was listening to a program in which someone made fashionable by the media was

questioned and forced to produce opinions about everything lest his reputation collapse. This person believed himself obliged to talk about books he had obviously not read and about subjects on which he seemed to know nothing. My thoughts went back to the "I don't know" that Robert used to repeat, and I said to myself that there again, even from where he lay in his bed, he was offering us a lesson in wisdom.

Indeed, it is of a wise man that he always makes me think, of one of those sages who have sown their riches broadcast without wanting to teach or even commit their thought to paper, and whose wisdom has made its way through their conduct and their words alone. Sometimes I feel regret that no one wrote down his remarks, that all that wisdom should have been blown away like thistledown. Sometimes I tell myself that it is well that it be so, when one sees what posterity deals to the thinkers of old; that something always remains of what was sown, even if its influence is unobtrusive, making its way underground for a long time.

And there remains his book. I remember having learned from him that a literary work, because it is a work of art, imposes certain ideas: Gide's "families, I hate you" won a hearing, because Gide was a great writer. Because *The Human Race* is above all a great literary work, better than any treatise, than any speech, this book reduces to nothing all pretension to succeed in depriving others of their dignity; thanks to it, the word "equality" has emerged from easily challenged, right-thinking discourse to take on a meaning that cannot be distorted.

Joe Downing

The frogs in the pond in front of his house were singing like so many nightingales, though in a different register. Night was coming on, and it was hot. Marguerite Donnadieu (*dite* Duras) was opening the door to welcome us—Robert and Monique Antelme, my friend Emmanuel Wardi, and me. Under her left arm she was holding a very large loaf of bread, buttered where its first slice was, and in her right hand, a knife. Not for the first time did I hail that practical spirit who had discovered, among so many obvious things that aren't all that self-evident, that it was more logical to butter a slice of bread before cutting it from the loaf. She looked up from what she was doing in order to exchange kisses and had us go into a country living room furnished with odds and ends, almost austere, but giving off that particular warmth that was hers. Immediately

and without speaking of anything else, before we'd sat down, she asked Robert, "Well?" I knew it was about us. Marguerite had asked Monique and Robert to pick us up and bring us to her house. We had not yet met the Antelmes. With the doubts and apprehensions that old friends have concerning new ones, they'd picked us up in front of our house on rue de Thorigny, and we all headed for Neauphle-le-Château. Through that strange alchemy by way of which an intimate understanding can come about between strangers, all four of us knew before we got there that we would not want to lose sight of each other after that evening. So it was that, in 1962, a powerful friendship began that did not die with Robert's death.

I find that there's a noun missing from the French language. Robert was a voluptuary. This man, who had known every privation, the worst possible fears and humiliations, loved good cooking, great wines, conversation, friendship, travel. And he revered women; the only times I saw him go white with rage were when the question of prostitution and procurers happened to come up. He loved to laugh and to make others laugh, and he didn't hold back. He was an avid soccer fan, and he was riveted body and soul to the tube when good matches were on. A strapping teenager, he'd played, and played well for his team at the *lycée* in Bayonne, where his father was the prefect. Known to the crowd, already in possession of that kindly and serene air, when he'd kick the ball and start running up the field, everyone would stand up and yell, "Easygoing is taking off!"

Robert would not have been Robert without Monique—who is a flame, as clear and transparent as crystal; like Robert, indignant at life's many injustices; like Robert, lover of the good life, good company, a good table, good wine; like Robert, filled with a thirst to know, to understand, curious about everything. They had this loveliest gift of fate: perfect complicity as a couple. She needed all her courage, all her tenacity when Robert was paralyzed after a carotid operation and for seven years was a patient in the hospital of the Invalides. Monique would go there every day, attentive to the least aberration in the care, gay with Robert, profoundly considerate. She got him to think, to talk, to laugh. Emmanuel and I went there regularly. In good weather I'd push his wheelchair through the gardens and along the lawns of the Invalides, and we were welcome in the gardens of the Rodin Museum, where you could go for the sake of a change. It was rare that our visits would end without Man

or me getting a laugh out of Robert, and though he had a hard time speaking, we managed to understand him.

Robert's death caused me enormous sorrow, but for Emmanuel the loss was a catastrophe. Very demanding in all domains, loving only with precaution, for Man, Robert was a being apart, to my knowledge the only being who had ever elicited his unreserved respect and admiration. A part of his world had collapsed.

Some Historical Footnotes

One summer I discovered that the pumpkin is the most satisfying of domestic plants. Growing in a red terra-cotta pot, the one I had begun to cultivate grew before my very eyes, producing a beautiful, velvety yellow flower every morning. We all drank pretty well in those days, and I had some chilled Pouilly-Fuissé, its emerald-colored bottle nicely clouded over. Robert and Monique would sometimes come on Sunday morning to have some wine with us and in what was almost silence to look at the pumpkin as it grew. It was peaceful, gentle, agreeable.

I'm going to pay a visit to Robert, almost hidden by the greenery at the far end of the garden at 17 rue de l'Université, in the two-story summer folly with a pointed roof that accommodates the people given over to the Gallimard Encyclopedia. It is a propitious spot for meditating and cogitating; the building is the crown personifying the spirit then reigning at the *Éditions de la NRF,* where a gasoline pump in the courtyard provided free fuel for the select few who possessed a key. Robert and I sat there quietly for some time, enjoying the summer light, the smell of a syringa in bloom, the proliferation of trees, leaves, shadows. Then he rummaged in his watch pocket and drew out a piece of paper folded in four, eight, sixteen—not much bigger than a couple of chickpeas. "Read this," he said. "It's a definition of the sea." I read: "*The sea:* The thin layer of very unequal thickness and arbitrary contour that constitutes the hydrosphere is the seat of innumerable movements whose amplitude is generally very weak in relation to its dimensions and its speeds slight in relation to the rotation of the earth."

Robert was delighted by these words, which stood in such opposition to received ideas and cheered the mind; he carried them around for a long time.

We had come down and joined up with Monique and Robert and their sons Nicolas and Frédéric on vacation in Menton. Robert introduced us to his mother, come from Corsica to spend a few days, tiny next to her son, wearing a dark dress with a lace collar, her hair in a chignon, parted in the middle. The impression created was of vigor and simplicity. We talked about cooking, and she advised me that a wine cork added to the pot would help make squid more tender. Later, his mother gone, we found ourselves sitting around a table on a café terrace. Robert told us about his last visit to Corsica. His mother, long a widow, saw a gentleman of her own age every day—a devoted and lively old friend. The day of Robert's arrival in Corsica, the entire family was on hand to embrace him. His mother's four brothers had summoned him into the dining room, where the curtains were drawn. Robert sat at the head of the table, two mustachioed uncles in white shirts and dark suits on either side. The eldest spoke, with great gravity: "You know, Robert, your mother is seeing a man." Robert said yes, he knew. The old gentleman put his hand in his pocket, deposited a heavy, bluish revolver on the polished surface of the table and slid it toward Robert. "You are aware, my boy, what remains for you to do." Robert didn't know whether he was going to burst out laughing or faint. Late that night, he buried the weapon under a lilac plant.

A painter by trade, I had never gone to a literary cocktail party, and I supposed that they were of a higher tone than those that brought plastic artists together. Thanks to Man, a reader at the publishing house, I was invited to the grand annual reception at Gallimard, where the hubbub and the density of bodies per square centimeter were equal to ours. I found myself beside Robert at the buffet. Two seventh arrondissement ladies—white hair, black dresses in the style admiral's widow, little fingers permanently fixed in a hook, went chattering past. Discreetly, dexterously, an astonishing quantity of canapés, minuscule sandwiches, and petits fours were transferred into the large black leather bags hanging from their left arms. "We call them 'the seagulls,'" Robert said with a smile.

The Human Race is one of those books that change those who read them. You are not entirely the same person on the last page as on the first. The force and the clarity of this great cry of distress and of compassion

are unique. Through all the years of our friendship, I was aware that, even during the moments of happiness that he sought for himself and those around him, Robert silently uttered that cry every day.

THOMAS REGNIER

The few memories that I am going to apply myself to writing down date from the already very distant period when I was living with my grandparents. They fall between my sixth and eleventh years, with some going back even farther. They are at once fresh in my memory and faded, polished by time.

One of the most sharply defined traits that I retain of Robert's personality is his faculty for listening, the attention he unfailingly gave to his fellow beings. During a vacation spent at our country house, he had become fond of a peasant living in the village. Imagine a gruff old man, deaf as a post, going back and forth in his garden, ruminating in a kind of eternal anthem about the profit he could derive from his rabbits and his chickens, and probably also about the few pennies he'd be obliged to sacrifice to keep himself alive. Well, for several days now, this unkempt old fellow had got into the habit, "while just passing by," of coming through the gate and knocking at the door, to talk a bit over a glass of wine. My grandfather took tea if it was five o'clock. His guest saw no reason to take part in this odd custom. "I'm not sick," he would observe—or something to that effect. I can still hear Monique whispering, "Oh, it's him again!" and it was with a certain dismay that my grandmother and I would sometimes watch the old man's inexorable advance from the gate through the unkempt garden. Or else there were a few knocks on the door, and his quivering voice would abruptly break in on our serenity. All through the afternoon (until nightfall, to be more exact), Robert and this guest would argue. The words exchanged were most often rather brief, the voices always thundering. Robert was altogether willing to repeat the same sentences several times; sometimes he even rose up, to shout a few syllables point-blank into that stubborn ear, until they were greeted by an interjection or a local oath, or by one of those onomatopoeias resembling a chortle and unfortunately impossible to translate.

His love of railroad trains and the nostalgia he felt for the *Midi* would lead him, within the hour, to board the train for Marseille. But in this one must

not, needless to say, see anything like caprice. An irrepressible, imperious desire, having everything to do with passion and nothing with reason, lay at the root of these decisions, whispering some faraway images to his soul, some words, some odors out of the past. He had to leave. Once there, he would go right away to the old section of Marseille, take a room there, and when evening came, head for the restaurant Chez Soi,[2] whose name all by itself suffices to describe the atmosphere of cordiality and good humor that reigned there. Unfortunately, the idyll he created for himself of this city proceeded more from dreams and from the past than from reality. Then he would get on the phone to Monique and tell her, "What a jerk I am! What a piece of craziness to have come to this town, to have made this whole trip!" He almost always came back the next morning, as soon as he'd downed his coffee and closed his suitcase. But this didn't stop him, a few weeks or months later, from repeating the same journey. For what credence can one give to the meager lessons of reality? What rebuttal can reality furnish to so vast and powerful a dream?

One day Robert wrote me a letter. I still have it. Actually, it's a postcard showing a goldfish with large fixed eyes against a background of green trees and blue ocean, all these things drawn and painted in a naive style. Five or six years old, I was living at the time in Brazil. Coming from France, the card therefore had to cross the entire ocean to reach its young addressee. It's as though Robert had taken this into account in his letter. In it he talked about our respective locations on earth, some of us in Europe, others in Latin America, about the vast ocean, the Atlantic Ocean, which separated the two continents, about the marine animals living in the ocean. "There are . . . ," he wrote to me several times on the back of that card, in his beautiful, fine handwriting. From being named, the things came to exist in a clearer, more tangible way. They also became more reassuring. The space was, so to speak, furnished. No longer was there any emptiness, any incomprehension. The whiteness seemed to become thinner; there only remained, separated by modest spaces, a blessed presence. The light of consciousness had risen a little more over the space that separated us; it was as though the immensity of darkness and fog had been cleared.

The interest that he felt for people in general sometimes manifested itself in a rather unusual way. He took keen interest in watching passersby

from a café table, and it even happened that he would prefer that occupation to reading a newspaper. We often came upon him standing in front of the kitchen window watching the bustling activity in the streets, but above all interesting himself in each individual, whose circumstances he quickly ended up knowing in a way that was very mysterious to us. Most of the passersby in rue de Verneuil, the entire length of which we could see from our apartment on rue des Saints-Pères, soon held no more secrets for him. He could recite without difficulty the name and trade of those silhouettes that could be seen advancing one by one in the street or were about to disappear around a corner, and a detective's perceptiveness seemed less, at any one of those moments, than that of this disinterested observer.

To be sure, there are many other memories. But I have found it advisable to confine myself to the things that I was able to get near, and perhaps also to understand more or less clearly, when very young. And could I have really retained, with sufficient color, those that did not strike me? When Robert was sick, I remember having read Baudelaire's poem "Recueillement"[3] to him (I think he knew it by heart)—and I remember his emotion, which I shared. He'd also given me, long before, a copy of LaFontaine's *Fables* that had been his when he was little. On the first page is the word "Robert," written in big, round letters. That especially moves me now as I write, and on that I wish to end.

Chronology

1917
Born on January 5 at Sartine in southern Corsica, where he resided until age four.

1919
Birth of his sister Marie-Louise, who was deported in 1944 and died during her deportation.

1923
Birth of his sister Alice at Oloron-Sainte-Marie.

1929
Arrived in Bayonne, where he passed his baccalaureate examination.

1936
Arrived in Paris. Law studies. Military service. War, 1939–40.

1943
Joined the Resistance. Member of the MNPGD group directed by François Mitterrand.

1944
Arrested by the Gestapo. Prison (Fresnes). Deportation (Buchenwald, Dachau).

1945
Returned from Germany (weighing eighty-four pounds).

1946
Joined the Communist Party.

1947
Publication of *The Human Race* by Éditions de la Cité universelle.

1950
Painful exclusion from the Communist Party.

1951
Birth of his son Frédéric.

1951–60
Critic for the French radio and television network.

1951–81
Reader for the *Encyclopedia of the Pléiade,* directed by Raymond Queneau (Éditions Gallimard).

1955–60
Cofounder of the Action Committee against pursuit of the war in North Africa.

1957
Reissue of *The Human Race* by Éditions Gallimard.

1958–59
Collaborated on the review *Le 14 Juillet* (*July 14*), founded by Dionys Mascolo and Jean Schuster to protest de Gaulle's taking power. Signatory of the declaration of the right to desertion in the war in Algeria.

1968
Active participant in the May Revolution. Member of the Writers and Students Action Committee.

1983
Underwent a carotid artery operation.

1990
Died October 26.

Notes

Introduction

1. Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard), 191–92.
2. Robert Antelme, *L'Espèce humaine* (Paris: Éditions de la Cité universelle, 1947; Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1957).
3. Dionys Mascolo, *Autour d'un effort de mémoire* (Paris: Éditions Maurice Nadeau, 1987), 23–24.
4. Gilles Deleuze, *Critique et clinique* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1993), 168–69. Translated into English as *Essays Critical and Clinical,* trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
5. Robert Antelme, *The Human Race,* trans. Jeffrey Haight and Annie Mahler (Marlboro: Marlboro Press, 1992; Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 88. All references to *The Human Race* are to the 1992 English edition.

Revenge?

This essay by Robert Antelme, in which he joins in the debate over conditions imposed on a number of German prisoners of war in France during the Liberation, first appeared in *Les Vivants,* second series, journals published by former prisoners and deportees (Boivins et Cie), preceded by the following clarification by the editors of *Les Vivants:* "This text was written in November 1945 by a comrade political deportee whose opinion we solicited after revelations in the press about a number of camps for German prisoners. It owes nothing to a certain softening towards

Germany which seems to be spreading at the moment. Whether or not it remains pertinent we cannot say; but as the testimony of a man who overcomes hatred, it deserves to be published."

Poor Man—Proletarian—Deportee

This essay appeared in *Jeunesse de l'église,* a review edited by progressive Christians, number 9 (special edition), "The Time of the Poor," September 1948.

Principles Put to the Test

This essay by Robert Antelme appeared in the first number of the review *Le 14 Juillet,* dated July 14, 1958, a review created by Dionys Mascolo and Jean Schuster to call for resistance to Charles de Gaulle's coming to power. Besides Robert Antelme, André Breton, Marguerite Duras, Jean Duvignaud, Louis-René des Forêts, Jean-Jacques Lebel, Claude Lefort, Edgar Morin, Maurice Nadeau, Brice Parain, Elio Vittorini, and others collaborated on this first number. See the facsimile reissue of the entire series of *Le 14 Juillet,* 1958 to 1959, with prefaces by Dionys Mascolo and Jean Schuster, *Lignes,* special number, Éditions Seguier, 1990, Paris.

1. Given General de Gaulle's well-known desire to replace the postwar Fourth Republic by a strong presidential regime, many opponents of his coming to power accused him of wanting to establish a form of French fascism.—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE
2. In the spring of 1958 in Algiers, diehard proponents of retaining France's colonial position in Algeria joined with disgruntled elements of the French army fighting the Algerian uprising against French rule to bring about the political crisis leading to de Gaulle's coming to power.—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE
3. Since the French Revolution, the term the "swamp" has been used to designate a large, but largely anonymous portion of politicians or the public that will shift course with each changing wind.—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE
4. In 1958, a day of major anti-Gaullist demonstrations in Paris.—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE
5. Once in power, de Gaulle immediately replaced the Fourth Republic with the Fifth, fashioned to suit his preference for a strong presidency.—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

"Man as the Basis of Right"

This essay is the text of a declaration made before the permanent tribunal of the armed forces of the Bordeaux-Aquitaine region in June 1974 during the trial of Bernard Rémy. Rémy was tried for desertion and sentenced to eighteen months of

prison without possibility of early release. Bernard Rémy was the organizer of the GIA (Groupe d'Information sur l'Armée), a group providing information about the army; he had previously published *The Man of the Barracks* with Éditions Maspero. The title *Lignes* gave the declaration is used again here.

Poetry and the Testimony of the Camps, Followed by Two Poems by Maurice Honel

This essay appeared in *Le Patriote résistant* 53 (May 15, 1948).

We are reprinting here "Dance in the Holtzmann *Kommando*" and "The Soup," written between 1943 and 1945 and published in Maurice Honel, *Prophétie des accouchements* (*Prophecy of Births*), Éditions FNDIRP. Robert Antelme refers to these poems in "Poetry and the Testimony of the Camps," writing "Almost never is the poet released from, nor does he let go of, the object or the fact, and both impose themselves in an almost mythological reality" (see above, p. 33).

Maurice Honel was born in Paris in 1903. In 1936, he was elected to the Chamber of Deputies as a Communist deputy from Clichy-Levallois. Arrested in 1943, he was deported to the camp of Yaworzno, a dependency of Auschwitz. While interned, he organized a French Solidarity Committee that was able to save a number of comrades who had been at the point of death. He escaped in January 1945. He later became the first president of the Auschwitz Association (*Amicale d'Auschwitz*). He died in 1977.

Poems

1. *The Human Race,* 263.

Somebody Stole My Bread!

This essay was part of the first edition of *The Human Race,* published in 1947 by Éditions de la Cité universelle. They were removed from the Gallimard edition of 1957 at the request of Robert Antelme because he feared that the person who stole the bread might be recognized. In its honesty, Antelme's concern suggests that we show a similar honesty now and republish the essay here. The title is our invention.

On Maurice Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster*

On the occasion of the publication of *L'Ecriture du désastre* by Maurice Blanchot (*The Writing of the Disaster,* trans. Ann Smock [University of Nebraska Press, 1995]), Maurice Nadeau organized a three-way conversation for *La Quinzaine littéraire* combining the voices of two of Maurice Blanchot's friends, Dionys Mascolo

and Robert Antelme, with his own. Since the results of this conversation did not satisfy any of them, Maurice Nadeau published the remarks of each participant that were prompted by their conversation in *La Quinzaine littéraire,* February 1–15, 1981. Robert Antelme's comments are reproduced here.

In the Night That Is Watched Over

1. *The Human Race,* 231–32.
2. Ibid., 171–73.

The Human Race

These pages on *The Human Race,* published in Maurice Blanchot's *L'Entretien infini,* Éditions Gallimard, 1969, are reprinted here in accordance with the wish of Blanchot.

1. *The Human Race,* 219–20.
2. Ibid., 110–11.
3. Ibid., 162.
4. Why collective? Because it is a question of coming back to truth as the affirmation and the questioning of the whole, and totality can only be posited, either in knowledge or in action, if the subject that posits it is movement toward the "totality" and already a form of the whole.
5. But—need it be said?—it is the most difficult, primarily because there exists a kind of irreducible opposition between man as Another, the absolutely destitute, and any form of power, even protective. Robert Antelme says this with decisive simplicity: "Here, suspicion always attaches to a man who is still strong. . . . [He] isn't defending us with our own means; he's using the strength of muscles that nobody here possesses. Of course, he's useful and effective; but, to us, he's not one of us" (*The Human Race,* 282).
6. Ibid., 3.
7. Ibid.
8. With the experience that he takes from himself and from his learning, Gershom Scholem said, talking of the relationship between Germans and Jews: "The abyss which events have opened between us is beyond measure. . . . For, in truth, it is impossible to grasp what has happened. The incomprehensible character stems from the very essence of the phenomenon: impossible to understand it perfectly, that is, to integrate it into our consciousness." Impossible, therefore, to forget it, impossible to remember it. Impossible, also, when speaking of it, to speak of it. And, finally, since there is nothing to say but this incomprehensible event, it must be borne by speech alone, without saying it.

Hollows in the Faces

1. *The Human Race*, 173.
2. Ibid., 169–70.
3. Ibid., 139–40.
4. Ibid., 219.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 211.

Man's Property/Propriety

The argument developed in this essay centers on the protean French word *propre* that as an adjective means, like its English relatives, both "own" and "proper" and, as a noun, "property" or "propriety." It suggests both possession and correctness and, as Fethi Benslama writes, can mean both "exclusive" and "immaculate." Rather than offering (and thus prescribing) one meaning or another each time the word appears, I have chosen to translate it as "property/propriety," allowing the context to suggest how it should be understood.—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

1. *The Human Race*, 220.
2. Ibid., 219.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 219–20.
7. Ibid., 110.
8. Ibid., 110–11.

Thinking Death

1. *The Human Race*, 79.
2. Ibid., 5.
3. Ibid., 249.
4. Ibid., 16.
5. Ibid., 135.
6. Ibid., 288–90.
7. Ibid., 10.
8. Ibid., 19.
9. Ibid., 21.
10. Ibid., 45.
11. Ibid., 24.

12. Ibid., 52.
13. Ibid., 99.
14. Ibid., 190.
15. Ibid., 50.
16. Ibid., 4–5.
17. Ibid., 36.
18. Ibid., 220.
19. Ibid., 67.
20. Ibid., 169.
21. Ibid., 74; quotation slightly altered by Kaplan.
22. Ibid., 111.
23. Ibid., 293.

Dead End

1. *Pour un romanesque lazarien.*
2. We can't get over it. Literally: We can't come back from it.—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE
3. *The Human Race,* 21.
4. *Les Temps modernes* 36 (October 1948).

Rising Up against What Is There

1. *The Human Race,* 40.
2. Ibid., 34.
3. Ibid., 52.
4. Jean-Jacques Moscovitz, in writings and reflections that have preceded us on the route we are borrowing here, has proposed this formula: "death's death."
5. Ibid., 4.
6. J. Bollack and H. Wismann, *Héraclite ou la séparation* (Paris: Éditions de Minuet, 1972), 213.
7. Ibid.
8. *The Human Race,* 4.
9. Joza Karas, *La Musique de Terezin, 1941–1945* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1993). Cited in "Terezin chantait," *Le Monde,* November 14–15, 1993. "'The music, the music—that was life,' Greta Hoffmeister asserts today, in a burst of laughter."
10. *The Human Race,* 52.
11. Dionys Mascolo, *Autour d'un effort de mémoire. Sur une lettre de Robert Antelme* (Paris: Éditions Maurice Nadeau, 1987), 14–17. In this letter, Antelme wrote, in particular: "So, will I have to 'reclassify' myself, trim myself down, be seen again

only as a sleek frame. . . . I have the feeling—which many of my comrades perhaps do not have—of being a new living being, not in Wells's sense of the term, not in the fantastic sense, but on the contrary in the most hidden sense. . . . Moreover, I have a fear, I would almost say a horror, of returning into that shell. . . . All my friends shower me with commendation filled with kindness for my resemblance to myself, and I seem to be living *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in reverse. I've experienced the extraordinary adventure of being able to prefer myself otherwise."

12. *The Human Race,* 88.
13. Ibid., 3.
14. Bollack and Wismann, *Héraclite,* 213.
15. Ibid.
16. *The Human Race,* 9.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 34.
19. Ibid., 19.
20. Ibid., 20.
21. Ibid., 29.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 76.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 74.
26. Ibid., 36.
27. Ibid., 51.
28. Ibid., 74.
29. Ibid., 88.
30. Ibid., 45.
31. Ibid., 219.
32. Ibid., 40.
33. Franz Kafka, *Journal,* 526.
34. *The Human Race,* 40.
35. Ibid., 25.
36. Ibid., 89.
37. Ibid., 220.

Robert Antelme's Two Sentences

1. Dionys Mascolo, *Autour d'un effort de mémoire.*
2. In Latin, "diction"; the root of the French *phrase:* sentence.—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Man Naked

1. Primo Levi, *The Truce.*
2. "When we arrived at Buchenwald and saw our first prisoners in stripes, who were carrying rocks or pulling a cart to which they were attached by a rope, their shorn heads bare under the August sun, we didn't expect that they'd be able to speak. We expected something else: a lowing maybe, or a chirping. Between them and us lay a distance we were unable to bridge, and that the SS had long been filling in with their disdain. We didn't think of approaching them. Looking at us, they would laugh; and we were not yet able to recognize it, or name it, that laughter.

   "But in the end we had to equate it with human laughter—it was that or else soon cease to recognize ourselves any more. The change took place gradually, as slowly we came to be like them" (*The Human Race,* 95).
3. Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz,* trans. Stuart Woolf (Simon and Schuster, 1996).

The Interruption—the Interminable

1. Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu,* published in English as *Remembrance of Things Past.*—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE
2. The Marquis de Sade.—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Antelme's "Hands": Postscript to *Smothered Words*

This text by Sarah Kofman is made up of three pages devoted to Robert Antelme from her book *Smothered Words* (French title: *Paroles suffoquées*). Sarah Kofman wished to add to those pages a postscript entitled "Antelme's 'Hands.'" At her request, a passage from *The Human Race* is placed between them.

Since then . . . another hand has let go. Sarah Kofman took her own life in 1994. May this book serve as a link to her thought, as a silent invocation of the words that she exchanged with Robert Antelme, so that the "power of powerlessness" might remain "irreducible."

The translation from *Smothered Words* is that of Madeleine Dobie, in Sarah Kofman, *Smothered Words,* Northwestern University Press, 1998, 53–56.

1. *The Human Race,* 75.
2. Ibid., 292–93.

Poems

A first poem, published by Maurice Broad in the special number of *Lignes* [devoted to Robert Antelme] is not reprinted here. The previously unpublished poems presented

here were written according to a silent and profound injunction over which the words of the *Shoah* brood unforgettingly.

1. In an effort to prove the "anti-French" activities of foreign-born members of the French Resistance, the collaborationist Vichy regime put up red posters with photographs of corpses of foreign Resistance fighters shot by the Vichy police or by the Germans.—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

In a Petrified World

1. Cf., for the pertinence and effectiveness of the labels "concentrated," "diffuse," and "integrated," the work of Guy Debord, especially *Commentaries sur la société du spectacle* (Éditions Lebovici) (*Comments on the Society of the Spectacle,* Verso Books, 1998).
2. See Peter Reichel, *La Fascination du nazisme* (Éditions Odile Jacob).
3. Moisei Ostrogorski, *La Democratie et les partis politiques* (Éditions Fayard) (*Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties,* Transactions Publications). The pessimism for which this author was reproached was justified beyond all imagining by the Nazi conquest of power.
4. Franz Neumann, *Béhémoth, structure et pratique du national-socialisme* (Éditions Payot) (*Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National-Socialism, 1934–1944*).
5. Robert Antelme, Charlotte Delbo, Primo Levi, and Hermann Langbein, from whom we cite this observation: "We thought confusedly that after Auschwitz everything ought to change, get better, that humanity would draw the lesson from our experience. Well, we have found that it was absolutely not interested in it. Instead, it gave evidence of a pitiful grasp of principle, ill-timed, often feigned." *Hommes et femmes à Auschwitz* (Éditions Fayard).
6. See Robert Antelme, "Poetry and the Testimony of the Camps," *Le Patriot résistant* 53 (May 15, 1948); reprinted in *Lignes* 21, and above, pp. 31–36.
7. See Samuel Fuller: "They were so false. I saw lamentable things. They could have covered for each other, but they denounced each other. They were what is called false. The way they ran away! The way they abandoned each other!" *Il etait une fois Samuel Fuller* (Édition Cahiers du Cinéma). Or again Hermann Langbein: "They weren't even capable of assuming their criminal past. They took cover behind the crudest evasions. . . . The complicity of the SS resembled the solidarity of gangsters, each of whom knows that the others may betray him at any moment" (op. cit.). In echo to which Hannah Arendt notes: "Not one had the courage to defend National-Socialist doctrines, when almost all knew very well that they had nothing to lose." *Eichmann in Jerusalem.* French translation: *Rapport sur la banalité du mal* (Éditions Gallimard).

8. Varlam Chalamov, *Essai sur le monde du crime* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard). In this collection, Chalamov raises fundamental questions about the damaging effects of the complaisance of literature toward the mob.
9. See the magnificent article by Georges Perec, "Robert Antelme, or the Truth of Literature," in *L. G. une aventure des années soixante* (Éditions du Seuil); reprinted below, pp. 139-51.
10. Varlam Chalamov, *Correspondence avec Alexandre Soljenitsyne et Nadijda Mandelstam* (Éditions Verdier).
11. Cf., *The Human Race,* 292–93.
12. Ibid., 4–5.

Robert Antelme, or the Truth of Literature

This article by Georges Perec, initially published in the review *Partisans* in 1963, was republished in *L. G. une aventure des années soixante,* collection La Librairie du XXe siecle, 1992.

Les Éditions du Seuil have kindly granted permission to reproduce it here, at the center of this book, where the effect of reading it takes on a more intense meaning. We extend our warmest thanks to Les Éditions du Seuil and the estate of Georges Perec.

Georges Perec had at first thought of entitling this article "Robert Antelme and the Birth of Literature."

1. Author of the Holocaust novel *The Last of the Just.*—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE
2. *The Human Race,* 3.
3. *A Very Ordinary Camp.*—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE
4. *The Human Race,* 3–4.
5. Ibid., 5.
6. Ibid., 128.
7. *Les Jours de notre mort* (*The Days of Our Death*).—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE
8. *Ceux qui vivent* (*Those Who Are Alive*).
9. *The Human Race,* 130.
10. Ibid., 39.
11. Ibid., 6.
12. And not, it seems to me, as the critic Jean-Louis Ferrier writes in a study of the painter Lapoujade in *Les Temps modernes,* "inertial impulses, *mild resistance* of our organs and our bones, to the degree that man finds himself driven back towards the biological limits of his being." This interpretation of the demand appears to me as a misconception that takes into account only a minute part—though certainly the easiest, because the most passive—of the effort to survive. It is at the moment when the deportee knows and feels himself most contested,

when he believes that he has nothing more that is human, that protest appears glaring. Resistance is not psychological, it is organic, that is, total.

13. *The Human Race,* 36.
14. Ibid., 190–91.
15. Ibid., 219–20.
16. Ibid., 51.
17. Ibid., 95–96.
18. Ibid., 89.

Truth as It Is . . .

1. Works cited that have appeared in English: Samuel Beckett, *Endgame;* Louis-Ferdinard Céline, *Castle to Castle;* Michel Butor, *A Change of Heart;* Roland Barthes, *Mythologies;* Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Jealousy;* Claude Simon, *Wind;* Georges Bataille, *Blue of Noon.* —TRANSLATOR'S NOTE
2. Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz,* 9.
3. *The Human Race,* 3.
4. Ibid., 5.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 104. The passage as it appears in *The Human Race* has been modified slightly to reflect the emphasis on the impersonal pronoun *on* (one) in the following paragraphs.—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE
7. "You're [one is] an asshole [literally: cunt]."—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE
8. Through the homonymous *compter* (to count) and *conter* (to tell a story), the phrase *on s'est laissé compter* (one let oneself [we let ourselves] be counted) suggests *qu'on ne s'en laisse pas conter* (one shouldn't believe everything one's told) to a French ear. I have tried to keep some of the wordplay without misconstruing the author's argument.—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE
9. *The Human Race,* 104.
10. A painting by Velazquez, also known as *The Maids of Honor.* —TRANSLATOR'S NOTE
11. *The Human Race,* 134–35.
12. Ibid., 287.
13. Ibid., 289.
14. Ibid.

We Are Free . . .

1. Two late autobiographical works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE
2. *The Human Race,* 89.

3. Ibid., 3–4.
4. Ibid., 5–6.
5. Ibid., 162.
6. Ibid., 58.
7. Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz,* 115.
8. Dante, *The Divine Comedy,* trans. Lawrence Grant White (Pantheon Books, 1948), 46.—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE
9. The title assumed by Napoleon Bonaparte after his coup d'état in 1799 establishing the dictatorial regime that took action against Sade.—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE
10. Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation,* trans. Susan Hanson (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 229.
11. See Blanchot's essay above on Antelme, p. 68.
12. Charles Reznikoff, *Holocaust* (Black Sparrow Press, 1975), 29.
13. *The Human Race,* 5.
14. *Que peut la littérature?* eds. J. E. Huller and M. C. Jalard (Éditions Bourgeois, collection 10/18).
15. Andre Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech,* trans. Anna Bostoch Berger (MIT Press, 1993).
16. *The Human Race,* 74.
17. Cf., Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Reynal and Hitchcock, 1940), 406, 608.—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE
18. *The Human Race,* 74.
19. Ibid., 219–20.
20. Ibid., 188.
21. Ibid., 89.
22. See above, p. 22.—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE
23. *The Human Race,* 293.

The Human Race

1. *The Human Race,* 219.
2. See above, "Poor Man—Proletarian—Deportee," p. 22.
3. Play by turn-of-the-century playwright and early absurdist author Alfred Jarry.—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE
4. *The Human Race,* 34.
5. Ibid., 221, 226, 250.
6. Ibid., 236.
7. Ibid., 244.
8. Ibid., 34.
9. See above, "Poetry and the Testimony of the Camps," 31.
10. *The Human Race,* 203.

11. Ibid., 221
12. Ibid., 218.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 219.

The Ultimate Common Thing We Possess

1. *The Human Race,* 293.
2. Ibid., 18.

The Body's Luck

Both the title and the development of this essay center on the double meaning of *la veine du corps,* which means both a vein in the body and "the body's luck" (much as a mine might contain a "lucky vein" of ore); the phrase connotes something that both exists physically and represents good luck.—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

1. See above, p. 14.
2. See above, p. 23.
3. *The Human Race,* 18.
4. Marguerite Duras, *The War: A Memoir,* trans. Barbara Bray (Pantheon Books, 1986), 67–68.
5. *The Human Race,* 293.
6. Ibid., 88.
7. Ibid., 52.
8. Mascolo, *Autour d'un effort de mémoire,* 23.
9. The allusion is to Kafka's short story "A Hunger Artist."—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE
10. *The Human Race,* 39.
11. Ibid., 6.
12. See above, p. 146n.
13. *The Human Race,* 135.
14. Mascolo, *Autour d'un effort de mémoire,* 14.
15. *The Human Race,* 134–35.
16. Ibid., 185.
17. *Poésie et révolution, la photographie,* 18.
18. "The Poem in Kind," in French "Le Poème en l'espèce." The French title of *The Human Race* is *L'Espèce humaine. Espèce* may be variously translated "kind" or "sort" as well as "species" or "race."—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE
19. Rimbaud, letter to Paul Demeny.
20. *The Human Race,* 97.

Epigraph

These lines by Maurice Blanchot are taken from "Pré-texte, *Pour l'amitié,*" prefacing Dionys Mascolo, *À la recherche d'communisme de pensée* (*In Search of a Communism of Thought*) (Fourbus, 1993).

In the Company of Robert Antelme

Under the title "In the Company of Robert Antelme," we reproduce the principal accounts brought together for the film of that name produced by Jean Mascolo and Jean-Marc Turine. In addition to the rough portrait of Robert Antelme that they provide, they make it possible to sketch the historical and political context surrounding *The Human Race.*

1. The French initials of Mitterrand's resistance group, Mouvement National des Prisonniers de Guerre et Déportés.—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE
2. Seventy-eight pounds.—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE
3. *The Days of Our Death.*
4. By Marcel Proust. English title: *Remembrance of Things Past.*—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE
5. *The Human Race,* 88–89.
6. Monique was Antelme's wife from the 1950s until his death.—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE
7. Long-time and hard-line head of the French Communist Party.—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Testimonials

1. The text reproduced here was taken by Louis-René des Forêts from his contribution to the program of France Culture entitled "Robert Antelme," broadcast on October 24, 1992. It appears here with the kind authorization of the program's producer, Anne-Brigitte Kerr, and of its director, Alain Trutat, whom we wish to thank.
2. "At home."—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE
3. "Meditation," from *Les Fleurs du mal.*—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Chronology

Biographical information provided by Monique Antelme.

Selected Bibliography

Antelme, Robert. *L'Espèce humaine.* Paris: Éditions de la Cité universelle, 1947.

——. *L'Espèce humaine.* New ed. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1957 (reprinted in the collection Tel, Éditions Gallimard, 1978).

——. *The Human Race.* Translated by Jeffrey Haight and Annie Mahler. Marlboro: Marlboro Press, 1992 (paperback edition, 1993; reprint by Northwestern University Press, 1998).

Duras, Marguerite. *La Douleur.* Paris: POL, 1985.

——. *The War: A Memoir.* Translated by Barbara Bray. New York: Pantheon Books, 1986.

Kofman, Sarah. *Paroles suffoquées.* Galilée, 1986.

——. *Smothered Words.* Translated by Madeleine Dobie. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998.

Mascolo, Dionys. *Autour d'un effort de mémoire. Sur une lettre de Robert Antelme.* Paris: Éditions Maurice Nadeau, 1987.

Perec, Georges. *L. G. une aventure des années soixante.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992.