

# Students, Teachers, and the Aftermath of the Horrors: Reflections on Teaching Martel's *Beatrice and Virgil*

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## Abstract

Despite the controversies surrounding Yann Martel's *Beatrice and Virgil*, I argue that Holocaust fiction in general, and this novel in particular, can be a fertile catalyst for dialogue in ways that historical treatments and survivor testimonies cannot be. My analysis of the novel comes from assigning it in an interdisciplinary, team-taught course on 20<sup>th</sup> century genocide. Martel's risky venture challenges many fundamental tenets: 1) that the Holocaust is unique to the point that it cannot be compared to any other event, 2) that truth is found primarily (or exclusively) in survivor testimonies and not in fiction, and 3) that language is an untrustworthy key to unlocking the Event. Using major elements of the novel—the flip book, the comparison of history with taxidermy, and the conversations between the two Henrys and two animals—I examine how Martel both represents the agony of “the Horrors” and engages his readers in an ongoing dialogue. What I offer, therefore, is a literary analysis as well as pedagogical reflections based on questions and interpretations raised by students and from conversations with my teaching team. *Beatrice and Virgil* is written by and written for those who “come after,” and has an important function in the ever-evolving fields of Holocaust studies and Holocaust education.

**Keywords:** Yann Martel, *Beatrice and Virgil*, Holocaust fiction, Holocaust studies, Holocaust education

*Hostage to every unpredictable hour of after—What Shall we call it, how shall we describe its Nature?*

— Ellen Hinsey

## 1. Introduction

After reading Yann Martel's *Beatrice and Virgil* for the first time, I was sure I would never assign the novel to my students. The final scenes involving the brutal death of the two protagonists challenged me on an emotional and intellectual level I had rarely experienced before. To require young readers to engage with this text, I reasoned, would hazard a traumatizing experience that should be a burden only for readers who engage with the book willingly—and cautiously. Never say never. I became part of a team of teachers offering a senior-level course in Genocide of the 20th Century, involving professors of Philosophy, Psychology, and myself, in the field of English. Previously in the same course, for my assignments I had opted for selections of Holocaust poetry. This second time I required *Beatrice and Virgil*.

I had several reasons. First, as a novel it might prove more accessible to non-English majors than poetry tends to be. Second, the novel addresses head on the issue of representing genocide in general (and the Holocaust in particular) in terms of the limits and capabilities of language, inviting a meta-cognitive analysis appropriate to the course. And thirdly, I knew from reading interviews that Martel had consciously and thematically positioned the wisdom of art against the facts of history, a controversial and compelling argument that I will explore presently.

What I realized, in the process of teaching the novel, is that *Beatrice and Virgil* places readers in the midst of fundamental issues that drive Holocaust studies—not only in terms of the subjects explicitly raised but also by what the novel has come to signify. Martel worked from a particular perspective, as pre- and post-publication interviews make clear. His rationale and apologetic for the novel run like this. Apart from some artists, historians, and survivors and their families, learning about the Holocaust is more of a “weary duty” than a part of “our daily way of being” (as cited in Sielke, 2003, p. 19). Think of how we have accommodated our lives to war, for

instance. World War II has generated histories, films, poems, novels, games, fantasies. No one suggests that this is too “touchy” an issue or too traumatic an event. War is, in Martel’s terms, “normalized.” Normalized does not mean trivialized or banalized. Normalized means approaching the subject with ease: “you talk to it, it replies to you, you are in dialogue with it” (as cited in Ghomeshi, 2010). In the case of the Holocaust, there isn’t such ease, comfort, or intimacy. Few of us have the time, expertise, or opportunity to devote our lives to examining the wealth of historical data now available. What might help us understand “the emotional essence” of the Event? Martel’s answer: art. Art is creative, insightful, and imaginative. It builds bridges between writer and reader, between subject and reader. Art doesn’t have to be perfect, Martel argues. “It just has to say, ‘Listen, this is what I’m saying; what do you think?’” (as cited in Ghomeshi, 2010).

But Martel is also writing out of a specific context: we are within only a few years of losing the generation of Holocaust survivors. This context marks a dramatic (and perhaps painful) turn in Holocaust scholarship, a field that has certainly taken many such turns in the last fifty years. Since the publication of Raul Hilberg’s *The Destruction of European Jews* in 1961, Holocaust historiography has been animated first and foremost by the testimony of direct witnesses. More recently, the fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent opening of archives in Eastern Europe have moved the issue of allocating responsibility away from the “top down” approach offered by Albert Speer at the Nuremberg trial to a focus on the role of municipalities and the culpability of “average” citizens in the persecution of Jews (Gruner, 2004). Holocaust history changes as new data emerge. Then historiography is shaped by new debates about that data, hence the eclipse of the functionalist/intentionalist debate about Hitler and his leadership to the animated exchanges between Christopher Browning and Daniel Goldhagen concerning the 101st Reserve Police Battalion in Poland.

The reality is this: how Holocaust history is written and taught reflects not simply the facts as we know them, but socio/political changes and cultural needs. We are familiar with E. H. Carr’s description of history as “a hard core of interpretation surrounded by a pulp of disputable facts” (1961, pp. 23-24). A deliberate overstatement on Carr’s part. But certainly in Holocaust studies there are ample examples of “facts of the past” (as yet uncited by historians) that emerge later as “facts of history.” Martel himself considers a philosophy of history in *Beatrice and Virgil*, and so we will continue this point in section 3.2. In addition to the nature and function of Holocaust history, the purpose and process of Holocaust education also must be addressed in this discussion of major shifts. Alexander Karn (among others) believes that Holocaust education is about the needs of those who study it (2012, p. 228). And those who study it are moving further and further away from the originary Event.

In the words of George Steiner: “We come after, and that is the name of our condition” (1998, p. 72). With fewer and fewer survivors and witnesses still with us, a new generation will assume the responsibility of understanding and dealing with the Holocaust in the years to come. This responsibility will impact not only Holocaust education but Holocaust studies. How will we talk about the Event if we do not have the authority of experience and the guidance of personal memory? How will we write about the Holocaust when we must depend upon accounts other than our own? Who will remain passionate about understanding the Holocaust, and what will instill their passion?

## 2. Navigating the Divided Critical Reception

In *Beatrice and Virgil*, Martel is attempting to open avenues for research, for imagination, and for empathy through art as well as history. But he goes even further. Martel positions imagined allegory written by (and for) those who “come after” as a necessary companion to historical efforts at preservation. His approach has proven to be a serious gauntlet for many scholars, as the critical reaction to *Beatrice and Virgil* makes clear.

Martel’s novel has certainly seen more than its share of rejection from reviewers unwilling to engage in the dialogue (or debate) that the author seeks with his readers. The most vitriolic comes from Edward Champion (2010), who objects to Martel’s style, likening the novel to “disgraceful offal,” and his reading experience as “being completely submerged into a vat of shit.” Not surprisingly, he judges Martel to be a “shitty writer.” Several reviewers deem the novel to be inferior to literary antecedents like Becket’s *Waiting for Godot*, Spiegelman’s *Maus*, Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello*, even Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated*. Many object to Martel’s unorthodox treatment of his subject. Michiko Kakutani (2010) calls it “misconceived and offensive.” Sam Munson (2010) finds the novel “dull, pretentious, fundamentally misconceived ... a crippling disservice to the subject Martel has chosen.” Ron Charles (2010) regards Martel’s allegory as “heavy-handed” with an “awkward mixture of realism and fairy-tale abstraction.” James Lasdun (2010) accuses Martel of dramatizing a “mythologizing and dehistoricizing impulse,” which renders his treatment “trivial and narcissistic.”

Even this quick gloss illustrates the quip by Brett Grubisic (2011) that *Beatrice and Virgil* has managed to

become “notorious for its reception rather than for its contents”(see note #1). The critical commotion is grounded, I believe, in the fact that Martel has challenged two of the most venerated and vested doctrines in Holocaust studies: 1) that the Holocaust is unique to the point that it cannot be compared to any other event, and 2) only survivor testimonies and memoirs enjoy full authority. They are “sacralized repositories” (J. Alexander, 2004, p. 259), whereas fiction about the Holocaust is a “transgressive act” (T. Rosenbaum, 2006, p. 490).

Let’s consider the issue of Holocaust uniqueness. In attempting to normalize his subject, Martel sought a new metaphor. His search is justified by the term “holocaust” itself—a metaphor to begin with, and a controversial one at that (see note #2). The novelist explains his decision to use animals facing “the Horrors” in this way:

The fable will be about how we understand evil, how we live with it, how we speak of it, how we remember it. The monkey [Virgil] and the donkey [Beatrice] try to find what I’m calling a portable metaphor, a metaphor that can be applied, not only to their situation, but to other situations that are Holocaust-like. (as cited in Sielke, 2003, p. 31)

If readers believe in “the empathetic imagination,” Martel argues, then we will be better able to understand ourselves by contemplating the Other, in this case, victims of calculated dehumanization, brutality, and murder (p. 20).

Objections to Martel’s use of metaphor and allegory are grounded in the tenet that the Holocaust is utterly unique in human history. Hannah Arendt (2006) believes that it is different not in seriousness or magnitude but in essence (p. 267). Eugene Borowitz (1991) affirms Emil Fackenheim’s position that the Holocaust is ““a qualitatively unique instance of evil”” (p. 392). To compare the Holocaust to other acts of genocide, Alan Rosenbaum (1996) believes, is to trivialize it (p. 3). There is simply no analogue or model of comparison, Thane Rosenbaum (2006) concludes (p. 491). If we use the Holocaust to “stand for” something else, Lawrence Langer (1998) warns, “then the intolerable might seem more tolerable through the sheer invocation of patterns or analogies” (p. 15). And it is precisely this impossibility of comparison that nullifies any metaphor, application, or allegorical representation (see note #3).

Another approach to the uniqueness of the Holocaust has emphasized the “sacredness” of the Event, which is often described as unspeakable, unimaginable, incomprehensible, ineffable (see note #4). Survivor testimony and memoirs signify “sacred ground” (Berlin, 2012, p. 406) and are approached with “hushed reverence” (Foley, 1982, p. 334). Courses in the Holocaust emphasize reverence and due diligence (Karn, 2012, p. 223). Again, to contaminate the subject by equating it to any other is tantamount to sacrilege (see note #5).

A corollary to the doctrine of uniqueness involves the question as to whether the Holocaust denotes only the persecution of Jews—not equally of disabled or mentally ill, Soviet prisoners, political and religious dissidents, the Sinti-Roma peoples, Jehovah Witnesses, etc. Langer (1998) asserts that to use the Holocaust as an illustration of universal suffering and evil, we would be dishonoring the unique Jewish features of the Event (p. 12). Hannah Arendt (2006) has pinpointed the Eichmann trial as the event that transformed the Final Solution from a crime against humanity (or in Arendt’s terms, a crime against the human status; p. 257) to genocide against Jews. As the term “holocaust” has evolved, it is common to find it defined as the Nazi genocide of the Jews, with other populations mentioned as asides, if included in the definition at all (see note #6).

This is what is at stake. To allegorize the Holocaust—to make the Event a larger metaphor for genocide, deliberate and extensive persecution, or unaccountable suffering—will denigrate the death of six million Jews and the torment of countless survivors, so as to victimize them yet again.

The second fundamental objection to Martel’s novel concerns representation of the Holocaust through art, in this case, fiction. There are two overarching issues here: whether language *should* be used to represent the Holocaust, and whether language *can* adequately represent the Holocaust. In terms of *should*, we must recall Theodor Adorno’s often quoted observation: “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” He explains further:

Squeeze aesthetic pleasure out of artistic representation of the naked bodily pain of those who have been mowed down by rifle butts....Through aesthetic principles of stylization...the unimaginable order still appears as if it had some ulterior purpose. It is transfigured and stripped of some of its horror, and with this, injustice is already done to the victims. (as cited in Vice, 2000, p. 5)

Brad Prager (2005) also wonders if writing creatively about the Event domesticates it, makes it familiar, to the point where we are no longer horrified by its monstrous evil (p. 80). But also implicit in this position is a distrust of how language was used by the Nazis. Peter Haidu (1992) offers an analysis of Himmler’s rhetoric: it is all there, “all the nuances and paradoxes in place, the discourses we know as the discourses of poetry and policy, of idealism and religion...the very qualities we admire and defend” (pp. 292-293). Language served the

perpetrators. How can it be a tool for the victims?

Whether language *can* adequately represent the Holocaust and the depth of its horror is also doubted. Survivor Primo Levi (1996) wrote: “For the first time we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man” (p. 26). George Steiner (1998) has expressed a similar view:

The world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason. To speak of the unspeakable is to risk the survivance of language as creator and bearer of humane, rational truth. Words that are saturated with lies or atrocity do not easily resume life. (p. 123; see note #7).

This mistrust of language is especially pronounced in the case of fictional representations of the Holocaust, and extends well beyond the case of *Beatrice and Virgil*. In his review of Jonathan Littell’s *The Kindly Ones*, for instance, James Lasdun (2009) writes:

One approaches the fictionalisation of any aspect of the Holocaust with suspicion. Art is always at some level entertainment, and the idea of being entertained, however skillfully [sic], by this particular set of horrors seems inherently objectionable.

This is perhaps why a newly published novel about the Holocaust is greeted with “a mixture of acclaim and dismay” (Vice, 2000, p. 1).

Fictionalization alone may not be the culprit. Especially mistrusted is fiction written by authors who have no direct connection with the subject and who therefore are “outsiders” with (perhaps) a revisionist agenda (Vice, 2000, p. 4). Fiction enables a writer to pass him/herself off as a survivor, when in fact what is published isn’t testimony at all but fabrication (see note #8). The fact is that unlike authentic testimony, fiction can be written by anyone, even by non-Jewish German writers. Can outsiders, descendants of perpetrators, or the second and now third generation, adequately represent the Holocaust? (Prager, 2005, p. 75).

The argument that fiction can tell no truths in the case of the Holocaust is a contended one. George Steiner (somewhat paradoxically) asserts: “‘We cannot pretend that Belsen is irrelevant to the responsible life of the imagination’” (as cited in Foley, 1982, p. 330; see note #9). The imagination, Thane Rosenbaum (2006) reflects, “may be the best way to speak to the post-Holocaust consciousness, a consciousness that “demands a vocabulary that only the imagination can supply” (pp. 482, 485.) Lawrence Langer (1995) urges Holocaust scholars to “find a way of restoring to the imagination of coming generations the depth and scope of the catastrophe” (pp. 180-181). In Holocaust education, we are asking our students to enter into the subject with “compassionate imagination” (Berlin, 2012, p. 401).

If there is a role for the imagination to play, there is a role for fiction. Wolfgang Iser (1993) sees the imaginary as “a featureless and inactive potential” (p. xvii). The fictive, however, crosses into two exclusive worlds, reality (or history) and the dream (or the imaginary). That is, the fictive deals with two versions of the world and—through the very act of writing—makes the imagined and improved world that much more real. Literary fictionality translates the real world into a language “through which the unspeakable is spoken” (p. 63). And what else is a writer called to do?

Reviewers who in essence are saying that Martel has gone into forbidden territory, are obviously free to say “I don’t like what he’s done.” But that is quite different from “he has no right to try this.” Indeed, Martel has attempted to transcend a devastating feature of genocide, which is so obviously the end of someone’s life, of someone’s experience, of someone’s childhood or adulthood, or someone’s ideas and hopes. There is no more plot; there are no more stories to tell. Genocide is the end. There is, Martel rightly observes, “‘something profoundly story-killing about mass murder’” (as cited in Brown, 2010). Story-killing. Story-defeating. *Beatrice and Virgil* is one author’s attempt to remedy this. At core, every book about the Holocaust ultimately is about aphasia (Martel, 2010, p. 20).

### 3. Discussion

The following sections exploring the material in *Beatrice and Virgil* should not be read as a typical literary analysis based on *reading* the novel, but rather reflections based on *teaching* the novel. Whatever insights I offer about Martel’s structure and theme, or about how the novel addresses fundamental debates in Holocaust studies, emerged first when our team of professors met to plan how to integrate the novel into the historical, psychological, philosophical, and linguistic facets of the course. Such discussions were analytic, certainly, but also imaginative: what does allegory allow Martel to achieve? Why does he select these two animals? What does the Dante reference add? Equally important were our four class discussions, with students bringing their questions and interpretations, with three teachers responding in class, and with those teachers meeting after class to explore the issues triggered by students’ comments. The result was a series of profound dialogues—teachers listening to each other and to

students, students listening to each other and to teachers—all playing off the knowledge, understanding, and imagination of others. Such dialogue is what happens in teaching, or should. But these particular dialogues also reflected what happens in the novel, which consists of on-going conversations between the two Henrys and the two animals. To a great extent, the novel examines what can be gained or achieved through dialogue. I would go one step further in my argument: dialogue can result from the novel precisely *because it is fiction* and not sacred, indisputable testimony that cannot be debated, questioned, or interpreted.

### 3.1 The Flip Book Principle

Because the main character in *Beatrice and Virgil*—Henry L'Hôte, or Henry I, as we called him—is a novelist, Martel is able to raise the issue of representation explicitly. Henry wrote his book about the Holocaust because “there was a hole in him that needed filling” (Martel, 2010, p. 4). That hole could be filled not by realism alone, and not by imagination alone. He thus produced his “flip book” consisting of a novel (read starting with the cover on the first or top side) and an essay (starting with the different cover on the back side). As a story, the fictional account stitched together “the disparate elements of human existence into a coherent whole” (p. 7). The essay is preoccupied with the same issue that dominates the fiction: “of being human and what it means” (p. 7). Whichever cover readers might start with, they would find the second half of the book upside down, which is appropriate since the subject itself turned the world upside down (p. 8). There would be no exit and no resolution in this flip book (p. 8). Is the fictional story as valid as the essay? Henry believed that it was, because the story is *true*. “A work of art works because it is true, not because it is real” (p. 10; see note #10).

Henry's publishers, however, did not see the point. How could they market such a product? Under what genre would it be stocked in bookstores? How would it attract readers when they wouldn't be able to understand what the publication was about? Henry loses heart, abandons the project, and moves with his wife, Sarah, to a different city (see note #11).

At this stage the plot takes an important turn, but it is worth considering here the principle of the flip book more deeply. In *Beatrice and Virgil*, the nature of the flip book—two views or versions of the same subject—becomes a pervasive structure, as students quickly recognized. Martel explicitly applies the flip-book principle through an extended discussion of Gustave Flaubert's short story, “The Legend of St. Julian Hospitator” (or alternately, “The Legend of St. Julian Hospitaller”). Upon giving birth, Flaubert writes, Julian's mother was visited by a hermit, who prophesized that her son would be a saint. The baby's father meets a gypsy who foretells that Julian would be a conqueror, the cause of much bloodshed and glory (Flaubert, pp. 32-33; see note #12). So which is the true Julian: the one who develops an insatiable appetite for slaughtering animals as a solitary hunter and who eventually murders his own parents? (See note #13). Or the penitent Julian, haunted by his act of patricide, isolated from others, penniless, homeless, but finally visited and redeemed by a leper who is Christ in disguise? (See note #14).

Henry L'Hôte reflects upon the story: “Two modes of seeing the world, one narrative, one religious, are juxtaposed by Flaubert” (Martel, 2010, p. 42). There is no bridge between those worlds. The religious storyline of damnation ending in salvation at the end of the story makes no place for the killing orgies in Julian's past. “This ending seals a reconciliation between Julian and God, but it leaves burning and unredeemed an outrage against animals” (p. 43). That binary is not solved by Flaubert, as Julian's savior “has not a single word to say” about the “senseless orgy” (p. 43).

A second flip scenario emerges in the novel with the two Henrys: Henry L'Hôte (or Henry I), and Henry II with the illegible last name, the author of the play about Beatrice and Virgil and an admiring reader of Henry I's earlier novel (see note #15). The Henrys are similar in several ways. They both labor in the throes of writer's block. Like Flaubert, they both appreciate finding the right word, the appropriate description. But Henry II is not simply Henry I's alter ego. The two Henrys prove to be very different readers of Flaubert's story about Julian. The copy Henry II mails to Henry I is selectively highlighted in neon yellow. The sections that have to do with Julian's slaughter of animals and the character's feelings about that captivating appetite are marked in yellow, as is Julian's dream about being the Adam who kills, not names, his animals. But Henry II leaves no traces of interest in other elements of the story: not the stag's prophecy, nothing about Julian's acts of penance and eventual redemption. The features of Julian's character that Henry I finds important, as well as the moral impasse between slaughter and redemption, do not arouse the curiosity of Henry II.

They also relate differently to the world around them. Henry I is a famous writer with a public following; he is also involved in family, theatre, and music. Henry II is unsociable, humorless, and silent, described by his neighbor as a “crazy old man. Gets into fights with the whole neighbourhood” (p. 85). As writers they disagree about their relationship with readers. Henry I finds encounters with readers pleasurable and even intimate because they were drawn together by the “external matter” of the novel, “a faith object that moved them both, so all barriers fell” (p.

3). Although the play is Henry II's "life work," it has remained uncirculated—more accurately, nearly untouched—as Henry II relegates Henry I to the role of listener, not reader.

As writers they also disagree about the interpretation of Henry II's play. Are Beatrice and Virgil changed through their travels, their conversations, their friendship, their suffering? Henry I argues that they would be. That is what stories are about, after all: the transformation of character. Henry II insists that they have no reason to change because "they've done nothing wrong" (p. 151). In fact, the playwright believes, "if Virgil and Beatrice have to change according to someone else's standards, they might as well give up and be extinct" (p. 152). To change would, in a sense, be an admission of guilt.

The flip structure is so pervasive that it is echoed in simple parallels and coincidences. For instance, Henry I looks up the word "Hospitator" from the title of Flaubert's story and finds this definition: "one who receives or entertains hospitably" (p. 31). The sender of the package (Henry II) is inviting Henry I to share in a reading experience. Henry I obliges, appropriately, it would seem, as his name—L'Hôte—means "host" in French. Certainly we have various shades of hospitality here with Julian (canonized with the title of Hospitator), Henry II (engaged as a guest approaching a host), and Henry I (a host in name and function). But the issue is further complicated if we analyze further the words "host" and "guest." Scholars who have traced the roots of the English words record an etymological history of intrinsic conflict. The Indo-European "ghostis" meant a stranger to be welcomed or feared, the Greek "xenos" a home host or alien guest, the Latin "hostis," a stranger or enemy and "hospes" a stranger or foreigner. To this day in French "host" and "guest" are conveyed by the same word, *hôte*. Thus Henry L'Hôte is both host and guest, Henry II fails at being a receptive guest, and Julian might host Christ as his guest but cannot assume the role of guest in the wild forest.

Two genres of writing. Two aspects of Julian. Two writers. Two Henrys. Two meanings of Henry I's name. Two ways of looking at things. What is Martel attempting with this structure, students wondered. Consider this: rather than being an either/or choice (Julian is either a killer or a saint; Henry L'Hôte is either host or guest), Martel is inviting us to think in both/and terms, as the word L'Hôte suggests. Or more accurately, we are placed in the liminal space between the two. If Martel were writing a simple, linear novel, we might see the two alternatives as exclusionary (killer, then saint), or alternately, as connected (host welcomes guest). Because Martel is asking us to read apparent binaries in relation to each other (thereby holding us in a cycle of alternating possibilities) he creates a space in between, with both versions existing simultaneously and meaning emerging with the thoughtful reflection of each one—not separately but together. A dialogue, if you will. The potential of such reflection is a "third term" or insight limited by neither first nor second possibilities. As Jeanette Winterson (1998) observes: *tertium non data*—the third is not given or stated by the author (see note #16). But it emerges with thoughtful consideration from the space in between.

Let us return once more to Martel's notion of two complementary genres. The controversy over fiction may be misguided, considering that representation of the Holocaust occurs in every act of speaking and writing about it. The genre most acceptable has been testimony of survivors. But an "axiom of the narrative mode," says Lawrence Langer (1982), "from which survivor memoirs are not exempt, is that *all telling modifies what is being told*" (p. xii; italics are mine. See note #17). Testimony marks the survivor's effort to tell his or her story, to narrate the experience. There are pressing reasons to testify. Survivors write in order "to gain greater awareness of the conditions and background to their detention" (Reiter, 2000, p. 12). They need to come to terms with what happened to them. They write to bear witness on behalf of those who are gone (p. 200). They write to pay a debt (p. 137). They *must* tell their story.

But there is a distinction between the event that is narrated (the Holocaust experience itself) and the narrating event—that moment when victims tell their stories (see note #18). Granted, this has been the century of testimony, as Elie Wiesel has called it (as cited in Felman, 1995, p. 17). And granted, the ethos of survivors is "unimpeachable" (Bernard-Donals, 2000, p. 565). But we also must concede that testimony creates difficulties for readers. In terms of the camp experience, testimonies tend to cover the same ground: arrival, release, death, and torture (Reiter, 2000, p. 23) so that if readers are not vigilant, survivors will seem to speak with one voice (the Holocaust victim and martyr) and the particular will be lost (Brenner, 1999, p. 18). There is a distance between the testifier and the listener, to the point that Michael Bernard-Donals (2000) wonders if we can access the circumstances and events at all since the survivor's words refer only to fragmented elements (pp. 572, 573). Insofar as testimony relies on memory, its reliability is open to question, since memory can be influenced by other accounts, by pictures, and by the act of writing itself (Blutinger, 2009, pp. 275-76). Historians dissect the testimony to glean facts but overlook "narrative truth"—or the "underlying strategy" that serves the survivor's goals "from his or her perspective" (Bar-On & Gilad, 1994, p. 87). If, as Gillian Banner (2000) has argued, it is narrative and not memory that is the source of cohesion and understanding (p. 33), then testimony is not so much

a method of representation as a path to understanding.

Given the distance between reader and survivor, and given the unimpeachable authority of the survivor, testimony leaves little room for give-and-take, for questioning, for attempts to bridge what seems an enormous gulf, for exploration, and for dialogue.

In distinguishing the levels of guilt that the German people should assume after the war ended—criminal political, moral, and metaphysical—Karl Jaspers (2000) made this observation: “This differentiation of concepts of guilt is to preserve us from the superficiality of talk about guilt that flattens everything out on a single plane” (p. 27). Past discussions of Holocaust representation has, to some extent, flattened everything out on a single plane, with the measure of veracity measured against, first, survivor memory and testimony, and second, against objective facts identified by historians. But there also can be truth in fiction. If authority is flattened to exclude the creative and imaginative, then all we will have left, once the last survivor dies, is the voice of the historian, which brings us to Yann Martel’s philosophy of history as explored in *Beatrice and Virgil*.

### 3.2 History as Taxidermy

Henry II refuses to entertain an alternate point of view, whether it be about his characters changing or the overall meaning of his play. Given that the setting of the play is a striped shirt (see note #19), like the ones worn in concentration camps, Henry I interprets the play about Beatrice and Virgil to be an allegory for the Holocaust. Certainly Henry II must be conscious of this, Henry I reasons. But the playwright insists that his work is about the animals that are two-thirds dead, “exterminated, wiped out forever...this irreparable abomination” (Martel, 2010, p. 135; see note #20). “I would never harm an animal,” Henry II insists. “They are my friends” (p. 96). Indeed, his career as a taxidermist stems from his desire to save something “once the irreparable had been done. That is why I became a taxidermist: to bear witness” (p. 98).

Is there really a connection between history and taxidermy, our students wondered. Is history akin to embalming? Gradually they traced the parallels that Martel has constructed. Skinning the animal is the first step, similar to “gathering evidence” for the historian. A mistake here could not be corrected later on. If the animal were spoiled in any way, “the evidence could be so ruined as to prevent a proper interpretation of the event” (pp. 93-94). One might view the mannequin (the form upon which the skin is placed) as the interpretive frame of the historian. What the animal looks like (or what the evidence appears to mean or resemble) depends on the form. The thread, the pose, the setting, the skull and tongue (which in some cases can be preserved and used) can either suggest that “the fact of death is accepted and the animal is simply waiting for time to end,” or that the animal (lively and animated in posture or expression) is caught in a moment when time stands still (p. 95). Henry II insists that his art is not barbarous: “What I am actually doing is extracting and refining memory from death. In that, I am no different from a historian” (p. 96).

If public memory / history is similar to taxidermy, then Henry II has saved Beatrice and Virgil by preserving them, suspending time around them (p. 66). And as more and more species disappear, it would be impossible to imagine them without the taxidermist’s art of “mounting” and “preparing” them (p. 92). But the comparison challenged our students, not necessarily to view taxidermy in a new light, but rather to regard history in an alternative way. The violence of the preservation process is enacted in a horrifying scene where Henry II works on a red fox. He lifts the skin off the body, literally slipping the skin inside out over the head, leaving “the flayed carcass, like a baby that has been taken out of its red pajamas,” leaving only the eyes and teeth (p. 155). To what extent are people and events from the past (prepared by the fact-finding historian) mounted like specimens, eviscerated of all living tissue, preserved but also emptied out, hollowed out, artificially posed, and reduced to dried-out skins? The historical fact, like the red fox, is preserved and frozen in time for viewing, but all the vitality, the shape, the inner workings, are gone. Violence is woven into the process of writing history.

This is not to say that there is no value to taxidermy / history. Walking through the numerous dioramas, Henry I sensed that each animal “had its own expression, its own personal situation, its own story” (p. 66; see note #21). But the playwright refuses to think of his specimens as being caught up in a story. This is particularly true of Beatrice and Virgil. Only “one thing really counts,” Henry II insists: the fact that someone had cut off Virgil’s tail (pp. 152-53; see note #22). The play thus enacts a violent end—the fact of a barbarous killing. The preserved shapes of Beatrice and Virgil provide the evidence of the deed (see note #23).

The rigid framework that supports the shape of the animals might be likened to the established perspectives or theoretical tools that historians often bring to their materials. Dan Bar-On and Noga Gilad (1994) have observed that researchers, “through their too-strong conceptual framework, may overshadow the fragile language structures that survivors developed to describe those events” (p. 87). If such frameworks are developed from what Barbara Foley (1982) calls “the normative ethics inherited from nineteenth-century liberalism” (p. 348),

then the ability to access and comprehend the Holocaust will prove impossible, because the ideology of liberalism—including liberal politics and the liberal imagination—cannot deal with the evil and brutality of the Holocaust (Kazin, 1973, p. 85). When operating out of the liberal framework, then, we cannot fit its view of human nature into the Event, and so generate terms such as unrepresentable, unspeakable, and unimaginable.

By the closing pages of the book, students distrust Henry II's character and thus his perspective. There are several reasons for their distrust beyond his inflexibility. For one, Henry II is not a friend of animals, at least not live ones. He doesn't smile, greet, or even glance at Henry I's dog Erasmus (Martel, 2010, p. 64). Second, there is Henry II's personality—he never smiles; his face is expressionless; he has no sense of humor; he is a control freak; one look from him “sucked the life out of laughter” (pp. 122, 143). More importantly, he is disingenuous about his fabricated address of 68 Nowolipki Street (p. 175).

“It's an imaginary address where every trace of the Horrors would be filed away and saved, every memoir, account and history, every photograph and film, every poem and novel, everything.” (p. 172)

In fact, at this actual address was housed metal containers preserving documents gathered by historian Emmanuel Ringelblum (photographs, testimonies, underground clippings, etc.) describing life in the Warsaw Ghetto between 1940 and 1943 (p. 173). But Henry II insists there is no significance to the address. Finally, Beatrice's torturer is described as “a tall, raw-boned man” (p. 175), an apt description of Henry II (a coincidence, Henry I wonders; pp. 180-181). The boy who kills Beatrice and Virgil at the end of the play—one of the “main instigators in some terrible deeds” p. (182)—is sixteen years old, the age that Henry II would have been at the end of World War II.

Ironically, despite Henry II's insistence on a single, correct interpretation of his story, Henry I believes that his counterpart has taken a similar road as himself. Both Henrys are representing the Holocaust “differently” (p. 174). The play, Henry I comes to realize, is a different kind of allegory, “using the Holocaust to speak of the extermination of animal life” (p. 173).

Doomed creatures that could not speak for themselves were being given the voice of a most articulate people who had been similarly doomed. He [Henry II] was seeing the tragic fate of animals through the tragic fate of Jews...Hence, Virgil's and Beatrice's incessant hunger and fear, their inability to decide where to go or what to do. (pp. 173-74)

What is significant about the play is its emphasis on the personal and singular, so often lost in public, historical discourse. What Martel has skillfully accomplished, without explicitly sermonizing, is to undercut any monolithic, immovable perspective (signified by Henry II's inflexible attitude). At the same time, he places his readers between two distinct ways of representing the Holocaust: the play “Beatrice and Virgil”—which embodies the personal and singular experiences of two victims—and recorded history, likened (by Henry II) to the craft of taxidermy.

### 3.3 *Language after the Event*

Perhaps Martel's most important point of inquiry concerns the power or failure of language to express the Holocaust versus the alternative of silence. Except for the violent deaths of Beatrice and Virgil at the end of the play and Henry II's attack on Henry I at the end of the novel, the only “action” occurs in dialogue between the two Henrys and animal characters. The monkey and the donkey seek to articulate their experiences for each other. The question posed by Virgil is one that Martel and his readers must thoughtfully consider: “*How are we going to talk about what happened to us one day when it's over*” (p. 112; see also p. 133; italics are mine). The “how” of the question illuminates the difficulty of finding the right words—the quandary that prompts the playwright to contact Henry L'Hôte in the first place. Henry II solicits help in describing the cry and the appearance of the howler monkey. He also needs help in writing “Games for Gustav.” Writer's block leaves him with empty sounds, with dead skins of words that have no life (p. 101). Does reality escape articulation? We can't even describe a simple pear, the taxidermist laments (p. 115). How then can we put pain, suffering, and death into words?

The animal characters take this question very seriously. Beatrice calls our attention to words used deceptively. The government's wanted posters describing Virgil use words like “surly,” “ugly,” “cunning,” “grotesque,” “harsh,” “disposed to dishonesty” (pp. 76-77). They are all lies, the donkey objects, “poison” for the heart and mind that work to the tongue (p. 79). She concludes: “Words are cold, muddy toads trying to understand sprites dancing in a field” (p. 88). The two friends even struggle to name their experience, looking for what Flaubert called the *mot juste*. Should they call it The Events? The Unthinkable? The Unimaginable? The Unnameable? The Deluge? The Catastrophe? The Searing? The Terror? The Tohu-bohu? They settle on “the Horrors,” plural, with “the curve of the *s* like a ladle in a soup from hell” (p. 136). Beatrice and Virgil are seeking, in short, a workable metaphor to express their experience (see note #24).



But still, so little precision, so much left unsaid. Is silence, then, a bearable alternative? Beatrice and Virgil try to enter into silence, but the birds, the squirrels, the frog, the dog, a falling leaf, distract them. You can only hear silence, they discover, when you make a lot of noise. Silence is like “thousands of shadows pressing on me,” Beatrice realizes. “They were lamenting the passing of their unfinished lives” (p. 141). What she hears is difficult to put into words. What they are living is difficult to put into words. What they have suffered is difficult to put into words (see note #25). “My tongue is tied,” Beatrice cries. “My pen is dry” (p. 141). Silence is yet another form of powerlessness. But before they die, Beatrice manages to tell Virgil about her torture in prison. “I should tell one person at least, so that the experience doesn’t vanish without having been put into words. And who else but you?” (p. 174). Talk will not save them, but words are all they have (pp. 88, 103).

The same condition applies to the playwright. Words are all he has to put together his life’s work (pp. 100-101). It makes sense, then, for Henry II to be most proud of the “sewing kit” that Beatrice and Virgil create for themselves. Henry II claims the sewing kit is his “greatest literary achievement” (p. 143) because through various linguistic devices, Beatrice and Virgil are able to capture, communicate, and code what life is like for them on the Shirt.

The purpose of the sewing kit is “to make things knowing” (p. 147; see note #26). It is a way they might talk about the Horrors in the future, “to remember and yet to go on living....to know and yet to be happy—or at least content, productive” (p. 137). The sewing kit/known kit consists of images (like a black cat), of sounds (a howl, a speech, a song) an ideal (plain truth common nouns like “murderers,” “killers,” “torturers,” “brutes,” and “defilers”), and a linguistic code heavy with meaning to these victims of trauma (pp. 138, 148-49). In this last category, there can be onelongword that they would agree would be about the Horrors, such as Thepityofitallwhensomuchwaspossible, or Evillivingroomanerroneously (p. 146). There is “aukitz,” a variation of onelongword, to

be printed in every book, magazine and newspaper, in a spot conspicuous or discreet, depending on the wishes of the author or publisher, to indicate that the language within is knowing of the Horrors. (p. 147)

There are [*sic*] dramas, with every word qualified by “[*sic*]” because after the Horrors, every word is erroneous (p. 151; see note #27).

What becomes the most important item on the list, a sort of refrain or chant throughout the last pages of the novel, is “empty good cheer expressed in extremis.” Beatrice wonders if “empty good cheer” is better than no cheer at all. What if it makes despair even worse? Virgil replies:

But if empty good cheer were expressed in extremis might the irony of it not push one to transcend despair and bring on genuine good cheer? At that critical moment, might empty good cheer not be the first rung on a philosophical ladder to complete cosmic realization? (p. 166)

Before long Virgil has an opportunity to test the possibility. When the two friends are finally caught by the boy and his gang, Virgil desperately addresses Beatrice: “Not a moment to be lost. Be happy right now. Be happy. I’m so happy with you, so very happy....I’m smiling and laughing and happy. I’m full of joy [*sic! sic! sic!*]” (pp. 182-83). The boy finds Virgil’s antics “crazy,” but they are reflected in a muted way in the final scene between the two Henrys, with Henry I stabbed and writhing in the street, and Henry II standing in the taxidermy window before he sets fire to his shop.

Their eyes met. He smiled at Henry [I]. It was a full smile that lit up his face. He had beautiful teeth. Henry barely recognized him. Was this the taxidermist’s version of empty good cheer expressed in extremis? (p. 193)

A person’s individual expression “in extremis” is no doubt an unpredictable occurrence. Whether instilled by panic, by rage, by reason, by faith, it is unreachable to an outsider. Martel, I think, leaves it a mystery. What our students were sure of, at the end of the novel, was the complex possibilities evoked by the author’s series of dualities: silence and language, art and history, even animals and human beings (see note #28)—how Martel seeks a direction away from either/or simplifications in our ways of understanding.

Obviously, knowing by reading and imagining is preferable to knowing by suffering and trauma. But as those who come after, we face Virgil and Beatrice’s grave challenge: “to remember and yet to go on living....to know and yet to be happy—or at least content” (p. 137). If Martel has succeeded, even minimally, to naturalize the Holocaust in his novel, we will reflect with sympathy upon individuals who endure violence and trauma—in the past and in our own day. “Life goes on” Virgil tells the non-existing audience of the play, “...until the day the red cloth flutters into your view and you realize it’s coming your way” (p. 165; see note #29). This brings us to the

core of Martel's message.

### 3.4 *Interpreting the Event in Allegorical Form*

It is one of the profound paradoxes of the novel that despite the obstinate and often blind perspective of the playwright about his own work (see note #30), the play itself succeeds in making the two animals come alive on individualized and personalized levels. For instance, we see Virgil on the morning he learns that the government has decreed howler monkeys are now part of a group of citizens (or non-citizens) who no longer have any rights or status. Realizing that he is the intended target of prejudice and persecution, Virgil experiences (in Henry II's words) "the expulsion from Eden. The Fall!...That's how the events entered his life" (p. 129). "In that moment the world shattered like a pane of glass, so that everything looked exactly as it had earlier, and yet was different, now clear and newly sharp with menace" (p. 129). After Virgil flees the city, he reflects on various forms of pain—of the knee or the back, of thirst and hunger, of the pain "that injures no particular organ yet kills the spirit that links them" (p. 128; see note #31). Pain in all its forms is signified by a red cloth that Virgil finds along the way (see note #32). In a powerful soliloquy, he reflects on the experience of death:

Someone is dying and as they are dying they grab at the red cloth of suffering...nothing before in their life has involved them so completely emotionally or overwhelmed them with such crushing intellectual totality...the red cloth of suffering clings to their body like clothing, only tighter, then clings like a shroud, only tighter, then clings like embalming bands, only tighter.... (pp. 164-65)

The resulting fear and isolation would have left Virgil "a wandering corpse" (p. 131) had he not met Beatrice.

As the names suggests, the donkey still harbors a sort of beatific vision, while Virgil is conscious only of the purgatorial or hellish conditions that engulf them. Beatrice advises Virgil not to think too much: "Or think in right measure...then break into prayer. And after you've prayed, get back to the building work of goodness" (p. 108). Amazing words, considering the torture that Beatrice has endured: battering, near-drowning, boiled water poured into her ear, an iron bar inserted into her rectum, her hoof nailed to the floor while her torturers pulled on her tail (pp. 177-79). But as Beatrice recounts her ordeal to Virgil, she remembers most clearly that first, casual violation:

I remember the first slap, just as I as being brought in. Already then something was lost forever, a basic trust...With that first blow, something akin to porcelain shattered in me...A single blow is a dot, meaningless. It's a line that is wanted, a connection between the dots that will give purpose and direction. (pp. 174-75)

As the two friends flee from known peril into the unknown, they find it difficult to keep track of time, for "there's evil every day of the week" (p. 107). Their emotional turmoil, their hunger, their fear, their growing affection, their memories and injuries, all come together in one site. As Henry II understands, "Life and death live and die in exactly the same spot, the body" (p. 96). But the play doesn't depict body in the abstract, but Beatrice's body and psyche...Virgil's body and psyche.

Is Martel asking readers to prefer public memory over private, or private memory over public? Because of the flip-book structure, the challenge to readers is to position ourselves in the liminal space between these two ways of understanding, and glean meaning with both in mind. Public memory provides the background, the broad picture, the panoramic results of the Holocaust. But private memory exposes what the Event meant to those who experienced it and perished in it. It is not accidental that the private emerges in art, the public in history; that is the nature of each discipline.

But Henry II's play poses serious issues for any reader. It isn't simply a ghoulish story of "Winnie the Pooh meets the Holocaust" (p. 117; see note #33). The complexity, the power, and the truth of the play stem in part from the animal characters themselves, who seek to articulate their experiences for each other. But the complexity, the power, and the truth of the play also and inevitably depend upon the identity of the playwright—an identity mystified from the novel's opening pages (see note #34). The description of the torturer, the evasion about the Nowolipki address, the keen interest in Julian as killer that would be attractive "to a man who had something to hide" (p. 189), all lead Henry I to conclude that the taxidermist is "a stinking old Nazi collaborator, now casting himself as the great defender of the innocent" (p. 190). Feeling tainted, Henry I attempts to leave the shop and refuses to take the play with him, as if the art itself is contaminated by the author's true identity.

Following as it does on the scene in the play when the animals are brutally murdered, this point is the climax of the novel in terms of tension and uncertainty. The majority of our students were convinced that the taxidermist was a collaborator if not a perpetrator—whatever identity can justly be applied to the boy who runs down the women

with their babies and who casually kills Beatrice and Virgil. But one of the students suggested another possibility. Could the same habits, the same expression, the same disruption of personality, be explained if Henry II were a victim? Might his professed loyalty to animals facing wholesale massacre and extinction stem from his sense of identification with them? Might his fascination with those who slaughter (like Julian) mark an attempt to understand those who caused him pain? Or is Martel challenging us not to think in terms of perpetrator or victim but perhaps something in between—perhaps a *Kapo* imprisoned by the Nazis but in a position of authority over other inmates?

Whatever Henry II's background, his final gesture of the novel borders on dumbfounding. When Henry I refuses to take the pages of the play with him, the taxidermist says: “Well, in exchange, take this,” then stabs his guest with a short, blunt knife (p. 191). As one of our students pointed out, with the arsenal of cutting instruments in the shop, the choice of weapon is significant. Henry II does not attempt to kill Henry I, but only to wound him. Why?

The answer, it would seem, is that the taxidermist wanted Henry I to experience the terror, the pain, the dismantling of trust, felt by Beatrice and Virgil (see note #35). And in fact, this is a consequence of the attack, since the quality of Henry I's life does indeed change.

Once you've been struck by violence, you acquire companions that never leave you entirely: Suspicion, Fear, Anxiety, Despair, Joylessness. The natural smile is taken from you and the natural pleasures you once enjoyed lose their appeal. (p. 193)

Such feelings explain why Henry I misses Beatrice and Virgil “with an ache that made itself felt even years later” (p. 194). Their experience has become his.

But what of Henry II's use of the word “exchange”—a knife wound instead of the play? There are two ways to know murderous violence like the Holocaust. The first way is through the imagination: engaging with a representation (be it artistic or historical). The second is to partake in such an experience first-hand. Since Henry I refused to read or keep the play, he needed to know by other means. In the same way, we can read or we can suffer. Two different ways of *knowing*.

While the identity of Henry II remains a mystery, the real author we are working with is, of course, Yann Martel. But Martel's mystification of Henry II draws us into yet another debate generated by trauma theorists: are we as readers dealing with a testifier (e.g., survivor) or are we really engaged with a *text* alone?

Trauma studies, burgeoning in the last decade, have tended to be text focused, in part because of its emphasis on the actual event as “never fully experienced at its occurrence” but only in its recitation (Caruth, 1995, pp. 7, 11). That is, neither knowledge of the event nor self knowledge happens except through testimony (Felman, 1995, p. 53). The text, then, becomes the witness. Emerging out of trauma studies is what Amy Hungerford (2003) calls the “personified text”—language as the receptor of a conscious and living being (p. 17). With this conflation of survivors and their texts, a reader actually encounters the actual traumatic experience *in the text*; writing or speaking “can come to embody and transmit the trauma of the actual life” (p. 109).

But as Hungerford rightly argues, this conflation of person and text is an injustice. If the trauma is in the text fully and exclusively, then trauma is available to anyone, “not just without recourse to painful experience but without recourse to experience as such,” only to language (p. 117). We must remember that there is a material difference between texts and persons, since only the person has a capacity for pain. “To personify texts,” Hungerford concludes, “assures us that we can assume or appropriate any experience we read about” (p. 157). Holocaust studies would then degenerate into a twisted sort of voyeurism, much like Guy Sajer comments about readers of war literature,

with no inconvenience to themselves. They read about Verdun or Stalingrad without comprehension, sitting in a comfortable armchair, with their feet beside the fire...One should read about war in the worst circumstances, when everything is going badly, remembering that the torments of peace are trivial, and not worth any white hairs. (as cited in Hynes, 1998, p. 285)

Perhaps this is why the Holocaust scholars cited earlier insist that the Event is ineffable, unspeakable, unimaginable. They are, in effect, affirming that the experience of the reader “will forever remain different” from the experience of the Holocaust victim (Brenner, 1999, p. 16), even when the reader is wholly caught up, engaged with, and absorbed by testimony.

But if there is a gulf, then why should teachers invite their students to study the Event, and what should we expect to happen in that experience?

#### 4. Conclusion: Reflections on Teaching *Beatrice and Virgil*

A great deal has been written about the purpose and nature of Holocaust education, but there seem to be more questions than answers in terms of our responsibilities to our students and our students' responsibility to the Event. Given the passing of time, will the ignorance of students give way to cynical indifference rather than moral outrage? Are students unable to generate an appropriate moral response without guidance? If students do respond empathetically, will they only sweeten the horrors of the Holocaust to suit their own "moral taste buds" (Langer, 1995, p. 183). And what about the issue of applicability: should the Holocaust be recast as a parallel from the past to current instances of genocide, hate crimes, and racial prejudice? If not, how will students be able to identify with the Event?

No surprise that in many ways, the issues dogging teachers who offer courses on the Holocaust are the same issues that animate debate in Holocaust scholarship. There are those teachers who encourage their students to see elements of the Holocaust in situations around them (attacks on gay rights activists, the genocide in Darfur; see note #36). There are those who urge their students to empathize with victims and survivors (see note #37). There are those who suggest pathways to moral conclusions stemming from the Event (see note #38). There are those who believe studying the Holocaust will give their students insight into human nature and human societies, but most especially into themselves and the choices they might have made and have yet to make (see note #39).

But the truth is, as Deborah Lipstadt (1995) has observed, that once given historical information about the Holocaust, students will make their own comparisons and "apply them to their own universe. They never fail to do so." And here the genius of Martel helps both teachers and students by his question: "Listen, this is what I'm saying; what do you think?" (as cited in Ghomeshi, 2010). Far too few scholars, far too few writers, ask their readers for their opinion, their view, their insight—and teachers their students. But if Martel seeks a dialogue, then his novel is the perfect vehicle to evoke an "exchange" with his readers.

Some of our students have extended that dialogue long after the class concluded. I offer two examples. Here is Jordan's reflection:

Martel's novel puts the reader in the position of the victim, a perpetrator and a novelist wanting readers to consider other layers of genocide. Being put in these positions forces the reader to consider a range of philosophical questions such as: How do genocide survivors cope in the aftermath of the genocide? How does their view of the world change? How does a genocidal perpetrator follow through with such actions? How does that perpetrator deal with the aftermath? How do you tell a story about such an atrocious topic?

Martel knows full well that there isn't one correct answer. As Jordan realized, such questions "require careful consideration and more than one perspective." But the novel allowed her to ask questions "in our own way," listen to the views of others, and then "ask new questions." The ultimate value in the novel for her was Martel's invitation that forced us outside the realm of facts and his challenge to "feel something for the characters, for the victims of genocide." They became more than a number, more than even a name, "but part of ourselves, a part of our own history." Clearly, being exposed to diverse perspectives and interpretations (in the novel and in the classroom) were for Jordan a valuable and lasting experience.

Jason also became very involved in the novel. Although he acknowledges that it is "a very slow boil," he appreciated Martel's complex structure and his use of multiple forms of storytelling because they "help illuminate the difficulty of telling the type of story he wants to tell," which for Jason "could be almost anyone's tribulations at trying to make sense of one of the darkest chapters in human history." Martel's use of first-person narrative and amorphous settings and dates helps the reader feel close to the story and allows "the reader's imagination to fill in the blanks." Jason continues:

As a tool to help people have a better understanding of the sheer horror that was brought against people; to illustrate the difficulty in speaking about that dark chapter in history; to enable people to reach their own understanding of what it was like to be a "them" to a powerful "us"; and to put voices to the victims of the Holocaust, *Beatrice and Virgil* is unique.

Jason's own interpretation of the novel was unique in the class, but months after the course ended he reiterated his position:

I firmly disagree with Martel/Henry I that Henry II is a Nazi collaborator. I feel there are many clues in the book that point to him being a survivor of the Holocaust and someone who was persecuted by the Nazis. I was the only person in the class who felt this way and after re-reading the book, I am even more convinced that Henry II is someone who felt he had no voice, so he allowed *Beatrice and Virgil* to

speak of his pain and suffering; of his lack of control; and of his confusion as to who and what he was.

What Jason and Jordan illustrate so well is that interpretations and assessments of the novel will vary as much as individual readers vary. In his attempt “to expand our range of possible responses to the Holocaust” (“A Conversation,” 2010), Martel refused to dispense moral lessons with a heavy hand. Subsequent ambiguity both complicates his encounters with readers and frees those readers to continue their own line of inquiry long after closing the book. Jordan and Jason will reflect on the Holocaust not only when a former teacher asks them later about their thoughts, but when they see a donkey, or eat a pear, or put on a shirt, or see a red cloth (see note #40).

The different views articulated by Jordan and Jason enriched the understanding of fellow students and their teachers. Herein is the very richness of Holocaust fiction versus Holocaust testimonies—those “sacralized repositories” that do not lend themselves to such exchanges. Dialogue is what is needed, now more than ever. How else will the generations that come after the Event formulate questions, encounter conundrums, struggle with moral impasses, deepen inquiry, if we do not let our minds and imaginations play off each others’?

Perhaps the ultimate criticism of *Beatrice and Virgil* is anticipated by Martel himself through Henry’s wife Sarah, who accuses her husband of seeing the Holocaust “in everything” (Martel, 2010, p. 116). But it wasn’t that. “It’s that he saw everything in the Holocaust”—an event that becomes a quintessential human experience (p. 116). Even if we don’t find the Holocaust in everything, as does Henry L’Hôte, we will one day experience what seems unspeakable. Then we, too, will laden upon language that awesome responsibility and expectation for the truth of our experiences.

Thane Rosenbaum (2006), a child of two survivors, has argued that it is

immoral to fictionalize and make art out of the camps themselves, to try to transport readers to the scene of the actual crime, to attempt to re-create all those layers of depravation and depravity, to express the ineffable, to describe the unimaginable. (p. 491)

The irony is that Rosenbaum published a novel called *The Golems of Gotham*, which starred the ghosts of Primo Levi, Jerzy Kosinski, Paul Celan, Jean Améry, Piotr Rawicz, and Tadeusz Borowski—all survivors who committed suicide. If Rosenbaum transgressed his own principle, he felt “that the risk was worth taking” (p. 490). The Holocaust itself is sacred and cannot be trampled upon. But the aftermath is different territory entirely. Unlike the Holocaust, the aftermath is still with us. It engulfs us. For writers who come after, their art is the only way they can bear witness. Rosenbaum concludes: “The freedoms that come with aesthetics also possess risks, but the post-Holocaust consciousness demands a vocabulary that only the imagination can supply” (p. 495).

Such is *our* ground.

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## Notes

Note 1. Not all reviewers were quick to condemn the book. Rebecca Rosenblum (2010) believes the novel "is above all for thinking about." Although Malcolm Jones (2010) finds the ending "melodramatic and obvious," he concludes that "by not writing about the Holocaust head on, Martel goes a long way toward reawakening our sense of the true enormity of the Final Solution." In one of the most thoughtful of Martel's initial reviews, Pasha Malla (2010) calls the novel "a complex and nuanced book" that focuses on "what the Holocaust represents" via a series of binaries (a point that I will take up in detail in section 3.1). Ultimately Martel succeeds, Malla believes, in rupturing "the division between worlds real and imagined" in such a way that readers can become active participants in the emotional and psychological truths of fiction.

Note 2. Because the original Greek meaning is "sacrifice by fire" or "burnt offering," many scholars object to the term's religious connotations. Alternate names commonly used are "Churban" (the Hebrew word for destruction), "Shoah" (from Yom Ha'shoah, meaning disaster or catastrophe), "Auschwitz" (using the camp name as an emblem for the Final Solution), and "the Event." There is also the Sinti-Roma term "Porrajmos" meaning the devouring (Blutinger, 2009, p. 272). In this essay I use the terms Holocaust and the Event interchangeably.



Note 3. While I am encapsulating the argument for uniqueness in the most succinct way possible, there are, of course, counter arguments. Historian Wolf Gruner (among others) has argued that the uniqueness argument cannot be supported without operating out of a Western bias. In terms of numbers of dead and percentage of the population, the genocide of Native Americans surpasses the genocide of Jews. In terms of radical elimination, the Sinti-Roma people lost more of their population. In terms of intent, the genocides in Rwanda and Armenia are comparable. In terms of modality, much of the killing of the Holocaust (carried out by a “civilized” and industrialized Germany) was in fact primitive and individualized. Factor in politics, ideology, and economics, the structures of the Holocaust are repeatable (Gruner, 2004).

Note 4. See for instance Langer (1998, p. 64), T. Rosenbaum (2006, p. 491), Berlin (2012, p. 402), Karn (2012, p. 228), and Naveh (2005, p. 29).

Note 5. There are many counter arguments to this position as well. To insist on the sacredness of the Holocaust is to mystify it (T. Rosenbaum, 2006, p. 3). Mystification can become an excuse for inaction by evoking a “new mythology of evil...so overwhelming that it will be ethically immobilizing” (Fasching, 1992, p. 132). To call the Holocaust “unspeakable,” Jenny Edkins (2003) argues, can become an excuse “to avoid the need to listen to what is being said” (p. 7). To call it “unimaginable” can allow our consciences the space to avoid facing the very issues of good and evil that the Holocaust poses (p. 176). The “hushed reverence” that accompanies allusions to the Holocaust may itself be problematic, for it is a reverence “that often masks an unwillingness to confront the full political and historical meaning of this event” (Foley, 1982, p. 334). It is a mistake, Peter Haidu (1992) cautions, to mystify the Event either through demonization or insistence that there is no parallel (p. 296). Hayden White (1992) would agree: the Holocaust is not “any more unrepresentable than any other event in human history” (p. 52).

James Berger (2004) insists that trauma is not sacred. It is “utterly secular” (p. 567). If we treat the Holocaust as solely a historical event, then the act of studying it does not place scholars, teachers, and students on sacred ground. Rather, we function on human ground. Thus Historian Saul Friedländer believes that Holocaust education should be “a means to understand the present in light of the past and to understand human society” (as cited in Brenner, 1999, p. 5). There can be parallels. There can be precedents. There can be comparisons and lessons applied to other situations.

The Holocaust can even be universal, according to philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1995). In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben argues that the camp experience as the most succinct expression, the logical end point, of a society in which the biocultural life (*bios*) of a person can be politicized into biopolitical, bare or “sacred life” (*homo sacer*)—“sacred” not in a religious or supernatural sense but in the sense of “a life that may be killed without the commission of homicide” (p. 159), e.g., a life controlled and destroyed at the will of the state. It is in the politicizing of life that Agamben locates the precise nature of evil revealed by the camps. Beginning as a space wherein the rule of law was temporarily suspended, it was later given a “permanent spatial arrangement,” becoming a “pure, absolute, and impassable biopolitical space” (pp. 169, 123). Thus the concentration camp is the “absolute space of exception” (p. 20).

Note 6. Arendt (2006) believed that one of the functions of the Eichmann trial was to show young Jews what it was like to live among non-Jews and that the state of Israel is important to the survival of Jews (p. 8). In arguing that Eichmann should have been tried in an international court because his crime was against the human status and not the Jewish people only (pp. 257, 269, 270), Arendt in fact refused “to treat anti-Semitism as either central to Jewish history or as the wellspring of genocide,” thereby challenging “certain basic tenets of modern Jewish historiography, notably the singularity of the Jewish experience and the necessity of Israel as a refuge from an eternal anti-Semitism” (Cesarani, 2012, p. 94). For additional discussion see Edkins, 2003, p. 117.

Note 7. In 1995 Steiner amended this position, explaining himself (and Adorno) in the following way:

So there was a nihilistic critique, which was Adorno's, or the formulation of Walter Benjamin: “at the base of every major work of art is a pile of barbarism.” You could take that line, as many in the Frankfurt school in a sense did, but take it a step further and say, “Let's shut up for a while.” I often had a dream of a moratorium on discussing these things at all—for ten years, fifteen, a hundred years—to try not to reduce them to articulate language, which in a curious way was to make them acceptable. That's what Adorno really meant: Careful! Even the greatest outcry if it is formalized, let's say, into verse or rhyme or stanzas, adds a **mystery of acceptability** to the phenomenon. (as cited in Sharpe, 1995)

Note 8. There are several examples of this, but the case that has evoked the most attention in recent years is Benjamin Wilkomirsky's memoir *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* (1995). The author was in fact

Bruno Dössekker of Switzerland (not Latvia), too young to have experienced the events described in his book. But the term “fiction” isn’t synonymous with fabrication. Martel’s novel is grounded in “sound knowledge.” The author read some eighty books, visited Auschwitz three times, and traveled to Yad Vashem in order to be “in the right place spiritually” (“A Conversation,” 2010).

Note 9. As a writer of fiction himself, Steiner believes he can “still convey, communicate something of the essential experience.” But only a few writers have succeeded, including Paul Celan and Primo Levi (as cited in Sharpe, 1995).

Note 10. As outlandish as this might sound, Henry’s need to deploy both non-fiction and fiction in his attempt to represent the Holocaust has validity. For instance, many scholars find the dichotomy between fact and fiction to be false. E. L. Doctorow observes that “there is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand the distinction: there is only narrative” (as cited in Foley, 1982, p. 331). Barbara Foley finds that realistic novels belie the Holocaust experience through endings that are “endurable” (p. 347). But unrealistic novels risk “specious universality” (p. 348). Far preferable, for Foley, is what she calls the pseudo-realistic novel (like Tadeusz Borowski’s *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*) because it can both generalize and particularize. It also can explore ethical considerations in ways that realistic fiction cannot, while avoiding heavy-handed moralism (pp. 351-359). If as Frances Rapport and Graham Hartill (2010) have argued, we “think within the medium we choose to use” (p. 25), then Henry I would offer multiple ways of thinking about the event to his readers—historical and imaginary.

Note 11. That city remains unidentified in the novel. Martel explains that if he set the book in (say) Berlin, he would distance his readers not in Berlin from the place and characters. “That specificity may be true of the actual Holocaust, but it’s not true of the origin of great evil, which can emerge anywhere” (“A Conversation,” 2010).

Note 12. In Flaubert’s text, this prophecy reads: “Ah! Ah! Thy son! —great bloodshed—great glory—happy always—an emperor’s family.”

Note 13. Julian’s lust for blood is a life-long attribute of his character. The mere prospect of carnage gave him pleasure, a “wild, tumultuous voluptuousness” (Flaubert). He spent so much time on the hunt that he grew to be like the beasts he slew. When a dying stag cursed Julian (“Some day, ferocious soul, thou wilt murder thy father and thy mother”) the hunter fled East, becoming a fearsome warrior, slaying mythic monsters, unjust monarchs, Scandanavians, “negroes,” “Indians,” “cannibals” and other savages. Finally freeing the Emperor of Occitania from the Spanish Muslims, Julian married the Emperor’s daughter. He still dreamed of killing, fancying himself “like Adam in the midst of Paradise, surrounded by all the beasts; by merely extending his arm, he was able to kill them.” Although he believed that “the fate of his parents depended on his refusal to slaughter animals,” he succumbed late one night to an unbearable temptation to hunt. But his attempts were foiled; he returned to the castle still lusting for blood. He spied two bodies in his bed and, thinking his wife was with a lover, Julian “sprang upon them with his drawn dagger, foaming, stamping and howling like a wild beast.” But in fact he had killed his parents, who had come searching for him. He fled the castle and began years of suffering and repentance.

Note 14. The leper sought food, water, and the warmth of Julian’s own body. When Julian generously accommodated all such needs, the leper’s true identity was revealed: “Julian ascended into infinity face to face with our Lord Jesus Christ, who bore him straight to heaven” (Flaubert).

Note 15. Martel explains his rationale for the two Henrys in this way: “I didn’t want distance between the subject (Henry the writer) and the object (Henry the taxidermist)” (“A Conversation,” 2010).

Note 16. This is an alchemical allusion, which Winterson (1998) further explains in this way:

The transformation from one element into another, from waste matter into best gold is a mystery, not a formula. No one can predict what will form out of the tensions of opposites and effect a healing change between them. And so it is with the mind that moves from its prison to a free and vast plain without any movement at all. Something new has entered the process. We can only guess. (p. 131).

This third term is not an abstract or inevitable one, as Hegel’s dialectic suggests. In our classroom, it emerged with close reading, extensive discussion, analytic questions, and collective and personal reflection.

Note 17. See also Anjie Krog (2000): “Telling is never neutral” (p. 107) and Andrea Reiter (2000): “Language stores meanings that modify what is being stated” (p. 2).

Note 18. As Langer (1991) points out, in the case of oral interviews the interviewer is “no more than an emissary of the outsider’s point of view,” yet often controls and shapes the content of each memory (p. 9). During such an

interview, the survivor is painfully aware of “the vast imaginative space separating what he or she has endured from our capacity to absorb it” (p. 19). Perhaps the sight of listeners’ faces frozen in horror, skepticism, shame, or fear forces the survivor’s “internal vision” to sacrifice its truth in the struggle “to find an idiom that will make the events of atrocity seem veracious to the outsider” (1982, p. 5).

What applies to oral interviews is even more pertinent to written testimony, which often is polished and highly structured insofar as the survivor is conscious of the need to connect with and communicate to readers. Written testimony uses literary tools to narrow the divide (tools such as style, chronology, analogy, imagery, dialogue, character, moral theme) and thereby eases us “into their unfamiliar world through familiar (and hence comforting?) literary devices” (1991, p. 19). That is, texts fall into formulaic or conventional storylines like dramatic tragedy and religious martyrdom—a world that the reader knows and finds familiar—and so the actual experience of annihilation is radically jeopardized in how it is represented.

Note 19. Henry II describes the setting in this way: “The province of Lower Back, in a country called the Shirt, a country like any other, neighbor to, bigger than, smaller than, Hat, Gloves, Jacket, Coat, Trousers, Socks, Boots, and so on” (p. 105). The articles of clothing are a way of mapping out space, much like “Poland,” “Germany,” and Hungary” are (p. 106).

Note 20. For Henry II the play is not an allegory at all, but rather a literal and factual depiction of the persecution and death of animals hunted to extinction. There are symbols, of course, such as the Shirt itself, as well as the connection between the names of the donkey and the monkey with Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, which gives the characters symbolic importance. They are, in Henry the playwright’s words, “my guides through hell” (p. 75).

Note 21. As *animals*, Beatrice and Virgil have a sort of biography. The howler monkey was captured in Bolivia by a scientific team but died in transit. The donkey was hit by a delivery truck while being transported to a church for a nativity scene (p. 75). They arrived at the taxidermist’s on the same day, “abandoned” by science and religion (p. 75).

Note 22. Henry II had once written: “My story has no story. It rests on the fact of murder” (pp. 167, 170). In terms of genre, Henry II is correct. Plays don’t have narrators. They are not stories because they are not narratives. There is no room for commentary, for explanation, for interpretation within the play itself. Action and dialogue are simply shown, not told.

Note 23. Thus Henry I’s wife Sarah remarks: “IT’S A FUCKING FUNERAL PARLOUR” (p. 117).

Note 24. There has been extensive discussion about the use of metaphor to express trauma. For instance, Rosemary Winslow (2004) explains that victims seek images of traumatic experience, images that the ordinary world cannot provide. The metaphors they grab hold of seem catachretic to an outsider, and certainly are internally created, individualized, and to a high degree visual and nonlinear (p. 614). Such images may emerge in “paracosms”: created worlds that for the long-term trauma victim allow a means of escape from the continuing experience. After a traumatic occurrence, these images are mentally captured and pieced together depending on how well they control or lessen the annihilating potential of the experience. Winslow argues that the metaphoric language used by trauma victims to describe their ordeal may be personalized but is nonetheless coherent. A trained professional can recognize the internal consistency and self-referentiality of these images, although to lay readers they might appear disorganized, fragmented, and meaningless, so that we feel incapable of *conceiving of* the trauma experience (p. 621). But in fact the victim is putting the trauma experience into words, which is therefore *speakable*. See also Jason D. Tougaw (2004): “Trauma...is absolutely full of metaphor” (p. 593).

Note 25. Recall in *Maus* Artie’s comment to Pavel: “Samuel Beckett once said: ‘Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness’....On the other hand, he SAID it” (Spiegelman, 1991, p. 45).

Note 26. The gerund form of “knowing” here is significant, pointing to an ongoing process or condition, a journey that never ends—the attempt to know and understand.

Note 27. By way of precedent, Henry II explains that “‘There’s a Hungarian writer who writes like that, in a way’” (p. 151). Reviewer Sam Munson (2010) notes that “the Hungarian writer” Henry II refers to is probably Nobel laureate and Auschwitz survivor Imre Kertész, whose work constitutes “one of the most important...acts of witness in modern literature....The work of this writer, Martel suggests, “masterfully enacts the unspeakability of its own subject.”

Note 28. Just as in the other “flip book” examples, there is no absolute boundary between animals and people in the novel. Henry I’s clarinet is “a wild animal that needed taming” (p. 168). In labor, Sarah was “reduced to a mucky animal who, after many whimpers and pants and screams, excreted from her body a pound of flesh....that was red, wrinkled, and slimy” (p. 168). After Henry I was stabbed, he was grunting, then screaming, “starting to

snort” (p. 192).

Note 29. In fact the projected audience of the play, and by extension, Martel’s readers, would be placed into the very diorama that engulfs the actors— immense blue and grey stripes running north and south: “the whole theatre will be printed in blue and grey stripes” (p. 111).

Note 30. The issue of authorship is not, of course clear cut, since the original (and only) copy of the play was lost in the fire at the taxidermist’s. The version provided in the novel is Henry I’s reconstruction of the play (p. 195).

Note 31. In these pages on pain, Martel uses another story as a springboard: Denis Diderot’s *Jacques the Fatalist and His Master*.

Note 32. The cloth probably belonged to the body of a dead boy, whom Virgil names Gustav. See p. 184.

Note 33. Sarah’s words after she goes with her husband to meet the taxidermist.

Note 34. True to form, Henry I’s identity is also a mystery to Henry II insofar as the taxidermist contacted and related to him under his pen name, and was offended to learn of Henry I’s real name.

Note 35. If this exchange reveals a twisted and perverted “gift” from Henry II, so too is his skinning of the red fox as Henry I watches. “I’ve done this for you,” the taxidermist tells his guest (p. 155).

Note 36. See Roberta R. Greene (2012) and Alon Lazar, Tal Litvak-Hirsch, Dan Bar-On, and Ruth Byth-Marom (2009) for recent examples.

Note 37. The subject of empathy isn’t straightforward. See discussions by Rachel Baum (1996), Jeffrey Berman (2001), Gail Ivy Berlin (2012), Rachel Feldhay Brenner (1999), Carolyn J. Dean (2004), Alexander Karn (2012), Matthew J. Newcomb (2004), and Laurie Vickroy (2002).

Note 38. See Michael Berenbaum (1993), Alexander Karn (2012), Geoffrey Short (2003), and especially Lissa Skitolsky (2012). The argument that Holocaust education will evoke heightened and clear moral direction is challenged by Hannah Arendt: “What has come to light is neither nihilism nor cynicism, as one might have expected, but a quite extraordinary confusion over elementary questions of morality—as if instinct in such matters were truly the last things to be taken for granted in our time” (as cited in Dimsdale, 1980, p. 326).

Note 39. For examples, see William Alexander (1978), Rachel Feldhay Brenner (1999), and David H. Lindquist (2011).

Note 40. I am using Martel’s own words from his explanation of his novel as mnemonic (“A Conversation,” 2010).

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