

# ‘NO ROOM FOR TRUTH’: ON THE PRECARIOUSNESS OF LIFE AND NARRATIVE IN *THE LAST OF THE JUST*

Josh Cohen\*

## Abstract

This article explores André Schwarz-Bart’s famous novel, *The Last of the Just*, as the expression of twin crises in literary and religious representation. Ernie Levy’s words, ‘there is no room for truth here’, spoken on the transport to Auschwitz as he cradles and comforts a dying child with stories of an idyllic afterlife, become the point of departure for a reading of the novel in terms of the loss of just this ‘room for truth’. The article considers the novel’s reimagining of the legend of the *Lamed Vav* in the light of Gershom Scholem’s criticism that Schwarz-Bart compromises the legend’s ‘moral anarchy’ before casting the novel in the light of Freud’s remarks on traumatic dreams in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, as well as Emmanuel Levinas’ ideas on ‘useless suffering’. The last part of the article reads the novel’s anguished theological motifs alongside Paul Celan’s poem ‘Psalm’.

‘Madame . . . there is no room for truth here’ (366).<sup>1</sup> Thus Ernie Levy’s response to the enraged reproach of the doctor on the transport to Auschwitz, ‘How can you tell them it’s only a dream?’ The children dying in the fetid, freezing, corpse-strewn car grope desperately for the comfort of Ernie’s reassurance that they are approaching the ‘Kingdom of Israel’, where ‘the sun never sets, and you can eat anything that comes to mind. . . . Happiness and joy will come to you, and pain and lamentation will flee’ (365). The doctor’s response to Ernie closes the sub-chapter. ‘Then you don’t believe what you’re saying? Not at all?’, she asks rhetorically before releasing ‘a short, terrified, demented laugh’ (366).

The movement of this brief and terrible exchange is entropic. It begins with a redemptive fantasy offered to bind the terrifying incoherence of the dying child’s inner experience, to offer it the comforts of some rudimentary narrative shape. It ends with the doctor’s ‘short, terrified, demented laugh’; that is, with the wordless noise of meaning itself falling into the abyss.

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\***Josh Cohen** is Professor of Modern Literary Theory at Goldsmiths, University of London and a psychoanalyst in private practice. He is the author of many books and articles on literature, aesthetic theory and psychoanalysis, including *Interrupting Auschwitz* (2003) and *The Private Life* (2013).

Between the reassuring story and the demented laugh, the already precarious binding of mind and spirit decisively falls away.

Perhaps this is an implicit representation of the predicament of the novel itself. Its narrative vehicle, after all, is a religious legend which imagines thirty-six Just Men as the fragile membrane barely separating the world from its own collapse. The doctor's demented laugh is the sound of this membrane dissolving, of the mind losing the binding force that holds it together. Meaning and coherence in the Auschwitz railcar are possible only in the form a fanciful, brazenly fabricated children's story.

What Gershom Scholem calls the 'anarchic morality' of the original conception of the hidden Just Men is linked, I think, to this fragility. Scholem, however, is rather sceptical of the novel's use of the legend. 'The hidden just man', he writes, '– if he is anything at all – is your neighbour and mine whose true nature we can never fathom' (Scholem 1995: 256). Justice, in this conception, has no determinate place or embodiment. It is not so much a substantial reality as a spectral, fleeting possibility, at once everywhere and nowhere. Schwarz-Bart's imaginative rewriting of the tradition as one of paternal inheritance – 'and conscious at that!' – suggests Scholem in a subtly implicit reproach, rather compromises this anarchic morality.

On the face of it, Scholem is surely right on this point. Where the sources of the legend suggest that the status of Just Man is unknown even to the *lamedvovniks* themselves, Schwarz-Bart's version has it transmitted knowingly down the generations of a single family. But moral anarchy and ambiguity do not quite disappear with this new rendering. On the contrary, in limiting the candidates for Just Man status, Schwarz-Bart opens up new vistas of doubt.

The arrival of Chaim Levy in eighteenth-century Zemyock will lead to widespread scepticism towards the claims of the Levy dynasty when he fails to honour the tradition of the *Lamed Vav* siring a single son before dutifully passing away. His wife's second pregnancy raises doubts, in others as to which of his two sons 'will be the Lamed-Vovnik', and in himself as to whether he himself is one at all: 'I have never received any confirmation from within, not the least sign, no voice telling me that I am a Lamed-Vovnik. . . . Have I accomplished miracles for you? All I wanted was a wheelbarrow' (29).

If this were not enough, Chaim adds 'a few daughters' and three more sons to his legacy, the last of which, 'a pagan, an imbecile, an authentic *slemazl*' (30) known as Brother Beast, he will announce with a certain vindictive irony on his deathbed as the next Just Man. And so Scholem's suggestion that Schwarz-Bart divests the legend of its moral anarchy becomes a little less clear-cut. The effect of localizing the transmission of the title in a family is more ambiguous than Scholem implies. Yes, it means the loss of the enigma conferred by the hiddenness of the Just Men. But in making the title a

conscious inheritance, Schwarz-Bart opens up a more radical doubt: if Chaim and Brother Beast seem so brazenly to contradict the terms of the inheritance, perhaps there is no inheritance, nor any Just Man.

The moral anarchy of the original sources as traced by Scholem – the Just Man as at once everywhere and nowhere – is consistent with a particular strain in monotheistic theology. The Just Man's presence, like God's, is revealed in remaining concealed. The hidden Just Man clearly evokes the concealment of God in the world – the susceptibility of each to doubt, we might say, is a paradoxical guarantee of their ultimate truth – whereas Schwarz-Bart's Just Man is more vulnerable to the threat of atheism, to scepticism regarding any founding justice, to the blasphemous whisper that all this is just a story desperate people tell themselves when there's no 'room for truth'.

Schwarz-Bart's novel explores the predicament of finding, and not finding, 'room for truth', the ways religious tradition seeks to and fails to bind the incomprehension induced by human experience. This is what makes it so interesting for psychoanalysis, which is also concerned with the devices we resort to when our experience becomes obscure to us; when self-knowledge fails us.

From the very beginning of the novel, in other words, we are alerted to a kind of dissonance between experience and the stories with which we seek to organize it. By casting into doubt the very notion of the transmission of justice it ostensibly narrates, the novel raises the question of whether experience does not always exceed the forms we seek to impose on it.

This, surely, is what Adorno is gesturing towards in his well-worn and misunderstood dictum that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' (Adorno 1983: 34). With this statement Adorno announces not an interdiction on art, but the imperative for art to incorporate into itself a consciousness of its own barbarism. Put another way, there is a kind of obscenity in any claim to have found an adequate form, aesthetic or religious, for the extremities of human cruelty and suffering. There is no room for the truth of Auschwitz in the fixed forms of religious or literary tradition.

In this sense the novel is a risky choice, and a brave one I think, for a dialogue between literature, religion and psychotherapy, insofar as it threatens to exhaust or exceed the resources of all of them; to put in question the capacity of any of these modes of thinking and practice to say anything about them at all. It is a form that seems to employ traditions of literary and religious representation, but that puts unbearable strain on both these traditions.

And what of psychoanalysis? We are all aware of the hubris of which psychoanalysis is accused, not always unjustifiably, when it seeks to 'explain' works of art in terms of psychobiography, symptomatology or psychic mechanisms. How much more vulnerable is it to such charges, then, in the face of a novel giving voice to experiences which radically defy explanation?

On the other hand, if psychoanalysis has anything to say here, it is because it is a theory and practice that begins from its own limits. At its centre, to state the obvious, is the phenomenon of unconscious life, a force which withdraws from all attempts to subject it to the discipline of concepts. This, perhaps, is its deepest affinity with its interlocutors in this dialogue. Literature, religion and psychoanalysis all live in the painful consciousness that the experiences they seek to represent, to confer symbolic, narrative and conceptual meanings upon, are liable to corrode all such attempts.

Suffering is, of course, the exemplary problem here. We subject it to psychoanalytic inquiry, literary representation or religious reflection as though it could yield some meaning; as though we could find the forms to make room for its truth. But what if its truth is that it is, to invoke both an essay by Emmanuel Levinas and the words of Mordecai Levy in the novel, *useless*, unassimilable to any religious or historical narrative that could redeem it? 'What good', demands the anguished Mordecai, 'is suffering that does not glorify the name? Why all the *useless* persecutions?' (267). Useless suffering, writes Levinas in his essay of that title (2006), is suffering which refuses to be redeemed, that cannot be made the object of some sacrificial calculus. It is, you could say, the source of the doctor's demented laughter at the end of the novel, the realization that the outer edges psychic and physical pain exhaust all the stories we can tell about it, 'bringing about', in the words of Elaine Scarry (1988), 'an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned'.

Psychoanalysis has its own language for useless suffering, which first finds explicit expression in Freud's famous theory of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud 2001a), and in particular his insights into the dreams of traumatized war veterans. Psychoanalysis is founded, of course, on a theory of dreaming. Dreams, Freud posits in the foundational text of psychoanalytic theory, are hallucinatory fulfilments of unconscious wishes. Put another way, dreams give form to the internal forces that threaten to disturb us, to undo our psychic equilibrium, and the primary function of these forms is to protect the state of sleep. Dreams give rudimentary narrative and pictorial form to thoughts and feelings which, in the absence of such forms, might break the barrier separating sleep from wakefulness.

Lindsey Stonebridge's resonant notion of a 'novel that makes us dream', however, points both to this protective function of dreams and to a different, later sense of the dream in Freud as a traumatic intrusion into the sleeper's psychic space. Certainly, and inevitably, the conversations and discussions I have heard and participated in over the course of the dialogue have confirmed this disturbing experience of the novel.

Instead of providing the sleeping mind with an adequate representation of the traumatic experience, says Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*,

‘dreams in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright’ (Freud 2001: 18). This phenomenon, in which the dream tasked with guarding sleep instead destroys it, continues Freud, ‘astonishes people far too little’ (Freud 2001: 13).

But what is it that is so astonishing here? It is that trauma has the capacity to disable and invert the very function of dreams. Dreams protect sleep by finding adequate unconscious forms for the most disturbing extremities of our psychic reality. Traumatic dreams reveal that there are experiences for which no adequate unconscious form can be found. It is hard not to associate here to the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard’s famous figuring of Auschwitz as an earthquake that destroys all instruments of measurement (Lyotard 1989: 56).

But Lyotard’s figure provokes in turn another association which might at first seem peculiarly oblique, to the French Psychosomatic School whose first major contributions, by the likes of Michel Fain, Pierre Marty and Michel de M’Uzan, were published during the 1960s. Rooted in the clinical treatment of patients who expressed themselves through disturbingly inarticulate somatic phenomena, the theories of the Psychosomatic School pose a major challenge to traditional psychoanalytic theory.

Psychoanalysis, as its name intimates, assumes that the psyche being analysed has found some representational form, however rudimentary, for its suffering, whether in the form of a dream, a symptom or some other form of mental or bodily activity. In his brief but very densely concentrated essay of 1968 on ‘Progressive Disorganization’, Pierre Marty describes a form of somatizing activity in which the body is forced to take on the burden of what the psyche is unable to process. This psyche has been subjected to traumas in its earliest life that have destroyed its ‘libidinal defences’, that is, its basic investments in the life process. The result is a psyche that has no capacity to bind its experiences in meaningful representations, a task which falls by default to the body, which thereby becomes subject to a ‘progressive disorganization’ which ‘removes the delicate libidinal systems which precede it, giving way to the functional destruction of the subject. The unconscious becomes practically isolated, cut off from preconscious activities as well as from manifest behaviour’ (Marty 1968: 248).

What makes Marty’s reflections relevant here, I suggest, is their description of what happens when experience falls out of the range of psychic representation, when it is drained of even the most basic psychic meaning – this, surely, is the predicament Ernie is left with in the car to Auschwitz. And is this not what Mordecai is alluding to when he laments ‘such *useless* persecutions’, ‘suffering that does not serve to glorify the Name’? (267). In very different words, suffering that destroys the very libidinal defences that

would invest them with meaning, and so can find no psychic form to contain it.

One objection that immediately comes to mind here is that Schwarz-Bart's novel can hardly be described in these terms, teeming so richly and expansively in representations, and especially in figures from nature and religion. Schwarz-Bart is hardly Beckett or Celan, poets of the imagination's radical exhaustion, of poetry's impossibility. Nonetheless, the most striking aspect of the novel's imagery and narrative motifs is that they stage a kind of perpetual struggle to preserve the capacity of an imagination which is increasingly under threat of 'disorganization' in precisely Marty's sense of 'the functional destruction of the subject'.

I want to digress briefly into a poem by Paul Celan. More than any other poet, Celan sounds the abyssal depths of the survivor's traumatized inner landscape, and of the shattering of the religious imagination. The poem I want to cite is called 'Psalm' (Celan 1996: 179):

No one moulds us again out of earth and clay,  
no one conjures our dust.

No one.

Praised be your name, no one.

For your sake  
we shall flower.

Towards you.

'The negative of him is more real than the positive of you', a war-traumatized patient tells Donald Winnicott (1971: 23), suggesting her previous analyst's absence is more palpable than his living presence. You can hear the echo of her plaintive, melancholy rage, transposed to the cosmic plane of theology, in these opening stanzas of Celan's 1963 poem. If the Biblical Psalmist is a flower reaching out of the dark in certain hope of finding the infinitely nourishing and protective light of Someone, Celan's Psalmist gropes instead in the blind despair of a fall into the void of No one. Perhaps this is the state of 'unthinkable anxiety' into which, according to Winnicott, the youngest infant is thrown when made to experience her own helplessness. The more she intuits the absence of a mother's form-giving psychic and bodily hold, the more she is liable to internal disintegration, experienced as a fatally vertiginous 'falling for ever' (Winnicott 1962: 58).

'A nothing / we were, are, shall / remain, flowering: / the nothing-, the / no one's rose', runs Celan's next stanza. To be held by the void is to be voided, drained of substance, a nothing-flower (*Die Niemandrose* is the volume in which 'Psalm' appears) raised and cultivated by 'no one'. And yet this 'no

one's rose' flowers nonetheless, like an infant consigned to seek and find only 'no one', to an eternal reiteration of her own helplessness.

The function of religion, writes Freud in his most polemical treatment of the subject, *The Future of an Illusion*, is to arm a human being with 'a store of ideas . . . built up from the material and memories of the helplessness of . . . childhood', against the terrifying anonymity and indifference of the universe, and so 'to make his helplessness tolerable' (Freud 2001b: 18).

There is an obvious way in which Freud anticipates here the New Atheist assault on religion as infantile consolation, a clinging to magical thinking in defiance of the intolerably harsh truths of the external (or grown-up) world. And yet, there is an important difference between Richard Dawkins' 'delusional' and Freud's 'illusory' religion. A delusion is a wholesale and systematic distortion, a screen of untruth blocking the mind's capacity to perceive reality. An illusion, on the other hand, is an essential element in apprehending reality. Religious illusion, Freud is suggesting, is psychically if not externally real, an organic outgrowth of the experience of childhood helplessness, rather than an elaborate contrivance aimed at shielding you from it.

Which is not, of course, to deny that religion has a lion's share in the store of omnipotent fantasies through which the self seeks to conjure away its original helplessness. But is there a more compelling attestation to Winnicott's insight into the secret, collusive intimacy between omnipotence and helplessness than the great texts of religious tradition? The Biblical Psalmist calls *min hametzar, de profundis*, 'out of the depths', with the loved child's untroubled faith in finding the infinitely protective hand of Someone: 'The LORD is for me among those who help me', declares Psalm 118. But is not this anticipation of divine help tacitly conditioned and forever haunted by the spectre of helplessness, by the abyssal terror of reaching out and finding only nothingness, of 'flowering towards no one'? Apparently opposed, the Biblical Psalmist and Celan are precariously close to one another. The positive religious scenario of the creature under the protection of a loving God has a clandestine companion in its own negative, the Protector turned Abandoner, Torturer and Destroyer.

In a brief essay from his collection *Other People's Trades* called 'On Obscure Writing', Primo Levi takes Celan as an exemplar of a tendency, indicated in his title, that he ordinarily deplors. 'We must not write as if we were living alone', writes Levi (1989: 174), suggesting the obscure writer has sunk irresponsibly into the hermetic retreat of his private self. The essay is a caution to his fellow writers against this kind of descent into obscurity, and an appeal to preserve the humanist project of shared understanding.

However, there are times, Levi concedes, when obscurity is less the effect of wilful mystification than that of irreparable damage. Celan, his contemporary,

writes out of the shadows of ‘German slaughter’ and his lyric obscurity must be ascribed neither to contempt nor to ineptitude, but to ‘the obscurity of his fate and generation’, which ‘grows ever denser around the reader’. Celan, Levi concludes, must be pitied rather than imitated, as one stripped of the faculty of communicative language and left with its exhausted husk, ‘a dark and truncated language like that of a person who is about to die and is alone, as we all will be at the point of death’ (Levi 1989: 173–174). Do we not find here an evocation of Celan’s helplessly abandoned Psalmist?

Levi is writing out of a barely concealed rage and terror, a presentiment of a self imprisoned in its own private language, closed off to the world, a state of being that evokes what the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, in his *Remnants of Auschwitz*, calls ‘bare life’ (Agamben 1999). Bare life, a concept he introduces in his earlier work *Homo Sacer*, is life reduced to its elemental biological facticity, deprived of the basic forms that would make it *life* in the ordinary sense. It is life stripped of the possibility of thought, a destruction of the mind’s investment in itself and the world. ‘Thought’, Agamben writes in a short essay called ‘Form-of Life’, ‘is “form-of-life”, life that cannot be segregated from its forms’ (Agamben 2000: 10).

For Agamben, Auschwitz is the devastation of life as form-of-life, insofar as its project is precisely to segregate life from its forms; to expose the helpless bareness of life. ‘Auschwitz’, he writes, ‘is the site of an experiment that remains unthought today, an experiment beyond life and death in which the Jew is transformed into a *Musselman* and the human being into a non-human’ (Agamben 1999: 52). In other words, the categories that endow the human with her humanity are forcibly and sadistically removed in the camps. The human being is reduced to a kind of zero state, a living death, in which terms such as dignity and respect and the very notion of an ethical limit lose their meaning.

Returning to *The Last of the Just* in the light of these reflections, I am struck by how insistently the novel evokes the threshold of this zero state. Life is increasingly experienced by Ernie as a progressive deprivation of its basic forms. Perhaps this is why motifs of animal life are so pervasive in the novel.

We can think in this regard of the terrible ‘fly’ passage so powerfully discussed by Michael Parsons in his opening address. Enclosed in the hollow of his hand, the fly discloses itself to Ernie from the depths of its precarious life:

He felt sympathy for the jolts and jerks convulsing that small particle of existence. . . . Bringing the miserable jewel closer to his eyes, the child was ravished by the minute arrangement of the antennae, which he was noticing for the first time. Those fine filaments, they too were trembling in the gusts of the interior storm. Ernie shivered in grief. (195)

Ernie's encounter with the trembling filaments of the fly's physical and interior life, with its irreducible fear of death, is a kind of melancholy epiphany, a revelation of himself as a 'Just Man for the flies' – that is, for the terrorized lives trembling at the threshold of existence and non-existence; for those deprived of the capacity to represent their terror in a language which would confer the comfort of intelligibility.

Is it not the wordless voice of this terrorized life we hear in the howl, 'the beast-a-booming' rising 'to the little boy's throat' (234) at the moment the Pimpfe's ringleader Hans Schliemann jerks down Ernie's pants and uncovers his sex – removing the boundary between, to invoke Agamben once more, formed life and bare life, or more simply, human and animal life – anticipating those piled corpses, perhaps, whose nakedness has been ripped out of the opposition between the clothed and the naked.

The moment anticipates not only the sequence of insect 'murders' and attempted suicide, but the moment of waking from his near death, seeing from only one eye, through which he finds himself discovering

not only the forms and colours of the world but also its eminent cruelty. In his initial surprise, Ernie thought that God had withdrawn himself from things, all of which now stood colourless, dimensionless, like cast-off clothing thrown at random into the halls of the hospital. Then he understood that he was no longer seeing them with the lying eyes of the soul. (256)

Notice, then, the rhyme of Ernie's humiliation, the casting-off of his underwear, with the universal casting-off of the world's forms. Seen through this one pitiless eye, the world is a repository of naked life, a cosmic reflection of his proclamation as he sets about killing the insects: 'I am nothing' (239).

We are inside the darkness of Celan's Psalm: 'A nothing / we were, are, shall / remain, flowering: the nothing-, the / no one's rose', a God-forsaken world whose forms are thereby revealed as a kind of obscenely comic trompe l'oeil – a cheating of the eye that would prefer to die than be cheated.

What I have been trying to do here is ask what narrative options we have in the face of life reduced to the attenuated pulsation of the caught fly – whose 'jolts and jerks' will come to be rhymed later on with the 'spasms' of the dying children in the car to Auschwitz. Schwarz-Bart's novel can be read as an anguished, unresolved response to this question; a struggle to find a religious, aesthetic and emotional form for the pitiless formlessness of naked life. All narrative forms seem to unravel under the unbearable strain of this attenuated pulsation, in short to fail. And yet in this necessary failure, this life reduced to animal formlessness is made visible and audible to us through what the last words of the novel name as 'only a presence' (379). This presence is imperceptible, even in the form of a 'breeze in the air' or a 'cloud in the sky'

– and yet it is also palpable if we are prepared to listen attentively to what usually passes our ears – the buzz of a fly, for example.

It is this formless presence of naked life that should be recalled, which Emmanuel Levinas associates with the human face – with the Other in her absolute, commanding vulnerability, the Other to whom I'm infinitely obliged precisely because I can murder her. The face in Levinas has in this sense much in common with Ernie's fly – the precariousness of life without form. This of course is what the analyst is always listening for, regardless of what he might think he is listening for – the silent presence of a suffering that lurks inside the patient's words; a silence that so disturbs Levi and all of us. If this novel communicates to psychoanalysis and to psychotherapy, it is not so much because of its specific content as in the way it teaches us – and Lyndsey Stonebridge's words regarding the excruciating slowness of the prose's texture come to mind here – to listen to that presence. 'Only a presence'.

## Note

1. All page references are to Schwarz-Bart (2001).

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