

Interior Freedom in the French-language  
Poetry Written in the Concentration Camps  
(1943-45)

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This thesis presents my own original research. All sources have been duly acknowledged. Except where acknowledged in the customary manner, the material presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge, original and has not been submitted in whole or part for a degree in any university.

Belle Joseph

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## Abstract

Adorno's controversial declaration that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' kindled debates on the Holocaust and literature that persist to this day. A number of critics, including Alvin Rosenfeld and Antony Rowland, have argued that conventional poetics and aesthetics are deeply problematised, even incapacitated, by the horrific nature of the concentration camps. Holocaust poetry, these commentators suggest, seeks self-effacement and silence, constantly drawing attention to its own inability to assume the horrors of the camps. My thesis challenges this paradigm, examining the little-studied corpus of French-language poetry written by Resistant and Jewish camp prisoners during their captivity. I argue that this poetry consistently articulates interior freedom, a freedom rooted in the enduring intellectual, philosophical, political and religious convictions of these poets. Far from representing a self-defeating project, poetry for these prisoners, I contend, was a vital means of uncovering a saving ethos under conditions of extreme deprivation and oppression. In this thesis, I focus on the poetry of five French prisoners, André Ulmann (Mauthausen), Gustave Leroy (Dora), Maurice Honel (Auschwitz), André Verdet (Buchenwald) and Jean Cayrol (Mauthausen). I bring out from close textual readings the distinctive nature of each author's understanding of freedom, discussing the poetic strategies, including metaphor and Surrealist imagery, that contribute to their elaboration of compelling visions of freedom and looking at the ways in which freedom becomes embodied in the aural dimension and formal structure of their poems. Notably, in my study of Jean Cayrol's extravagantly imaginative and mystical poems, I introduce the concept of 'imaginative translocation' to describe the author's unique narrative approach and particularly ambitious conception of interior freedom. Paying particular attention to the influence of key movements and belief-systems, most notably Communism, Catholicism and Personalism, I explore the nature of the beliefs that allowed these five prisoners to discover moral bearings, ethical purpose and interior freedom during their internment.

# Contents

List of abbreviations .....	2
Introduction .....	3
Chapter 1 ‘Nous qui sommes toujours vivants derrière nos visages d’hommes’: Embracing Life and Love, Affirming Selfhood and Self-Determination— André Ulmann’s <i>Poèmes du camp</i> .....	51
Chapter 2 ‘Nous sommes ici des hommes pendant que la mort fume’: Death and Transcendence in the Poetry of Maurice Honel and Gustave Leroy .....	82
Chapter 3 ‘Des hommes au cœur pur aux mains nues’: The Beautiful and the Good in André Verdet’s <i>Les jours les nuits et puis l’aurore</i> .....	116
Chapter 4 ‘Nous portons toute l’aventure de Dieu en nous’: Myth, Mysticism and Imaginative Translocation in Cayrol’s <i>Alerte aux ombres</i> .....	153
Conclusion .....	185
Bibliography .....	194
Appendix: List of French-language poets in the camps .....	203

## List of abbreviations

- ACD      Gustave Leroy, *A chacun son dû, Jedem das Seine* (publisher unknown, 1962)
- AO        Jean Cayrol, *Alerte aux ombres* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1997)
- JNA      André Verdet, *Les jours les nuits et puis l'aurore* (Paris: Editions FNDIRP, 1949)
- PA        Maurice Honel, *Prophéties des accouchements* (Paris: Editions FNDIRP, 1947)
- PC        André Ulmann, *Poèmes du camp* (Paris: Julliard, 1969)



## Introduction

Controversy beleaguers discussions of the relationship between literature and the Holocaust. Ever since Adorno's now-famous proclamation that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' gained notoriety in academic circles, debates have raged on the legitimacy of representing the Holocaust—and more generally the Nazi concentration camps—in literature, and on the limitations inherent in such an enterprise.<sup>1</sup> Following Adorno's lead, critical work in the field of Holocaust literature tends to emphasise the ways in which the Holocaust problematises traditional poetics, aesthetics and narrative. One of the first and most respected scholars of Holocaust literature, Lawrence Langer, argues that the horrific nature of the camps destroyed the values and norms implicit in inherited literary forms and necessitated utterly new modes of discourse. 'The universe of dying that was Auschwitz,' Langer writes, 'yearns for a language purified of the taint of normality.'<sup>2</sup> Another prominent critic, Berel Lang, suggests that conventional aesthetic forms, such as the 'predictability of prosody', are simply not up to the task of representing a catastrophe of such magnitude and enormity as the Holocaust.<sup>3</sup> Critics have posited the development of radically new literary paradigms in works about the camps, including the emergence of poetry that purposefully undermines its own pretensions to represent the camps and continually draws the reader's attention to its own powerlessness faced with the barbaric reality it attempts to describe. Inspired by Adorno's dictum about 'poetry after Auschwitz', Antony Rowland suggests that a new poetics is necessary for talking about the Holocaust, one 'in which art might register the worries that Adorno expounds within the texture of the artworks themselves.'<sup>4</sup> Rowland argues that Holocaust poetry adopts a self-conscious, self-inhibiting voice that foregrounds the profound resistance of the camps to literary representation. Poetry about the Holocaust and the camps is seen by critics like Langer, Rowland and Lang as deeply problematised and straitened by the very circumstances that it seeks to transcend.

Surprisingly, to date, almost all these debates on Holocaust poetry have neglected the poetry—including a large corpus of French poetry—that was written *in* the Nazi

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<sup>1</sup> See Theodor Adorno, 'Cultural Criticism,' in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Boston: MIT Press, 1981). Originally published in German as *Prismen* (1955). The essay 'Cultural Criticism' was first published in German in 1949.

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Langer, 'The Literature of Auschwitz', in *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 89-108, 93.

<sup>3</sup> Berel Lang, *Holocaust Representation: Art within the Limits of History and Ethics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 9-10.

<sup>4</sup> Antony Rowland, *Holocaust Poetry: Awkward Poetics in the Work of Sylvia Plath, Geoffrey Hill, Tony Harrison and Ted Hughes* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 10.

concentration camps. The now-prevalent rhetoric on Holocaust poetry, emphasising the essential incapacity of conventional poetics to assume the atrocious suffering and horrors of the camps, is of limited relevance in analysing this body of poetry. In this thesis, I propose, instead, a new conceptual paradigm for interpreting the French-language poetry written in the concentration camps. I argue that this poetry resolutely articulates interior freedom, a freedom which is profoundly rooted in the cultural, religious and philosophical formation experienced by prisoners before or even during their incarceration. Contrary to the widespread conception of the poem as severely restricted in its abilities, even self-defeating, when it comes to facing the barbarity of the concentration camps, I suggest that the text actually becomes a space of freedom, agency and plenitude, and reveals the authentic sense of empowerment experienced by many prisoners. What emerges repeatedly from prisoners' writings is that these individuals saw themselves as still free to choose and realise some genuine good, despite the apparent helplessness of their situation as victims of the brutal, crippling camp regime. Conscious of some redemptive dimension within their trials and open to the presence of the transcendent in unexpected places, these poets aspired to live in the camps, and even to be ready to die, with moral purpose, oriented towards a perceived good—whether this was the Marxist ideal of fraternity, the hope of eternal life promoted by Christian faith or humanist ideals such as courageous self-awareness and compassion for others. But this interior freedom is not confined to the thematic level. Not only does the poem express interior freedom, but it frequently mirrors that freedom in its architecture and its phonetic dimension: interior freedom can be heard in the rhythm, accents and sonorities of the poem spoken aloud. In this sense, these poems do not just thematise interior freedom, they actually *effect* this freedom in a purely formal sense through their sonorous, structural and rhythmic characteristics.

My primary concern throughout this study is to draw out meaning from close textual readings of the poems themselves, a rich and largely unexplored repository of formal and linguistic effects. Yet to grasp the full breadth and the distinctive character of the freedom embedded in this poetry, we need to appreciate the intellectual and spiritual factors that shaped the moral convictions of French prisoners in the camps and had a lasting impact on their works. For this reason, I seek to place these poems in context by drawing on biographical and historical detail, exploring the trajectories of authors before and during their deportation. Most of those who wrote poetry in the camps had been involved in a branch of the Resistance: the FTP (*Franc-tireurs et Partisans*), *Combat* or *Libération Sud*, later the *Armée secrète* and the FFI (*Forces françaises de l'intérieur*), or in smaller, independent networks. These organisations fostered attractive ideals of self-sacrifice and encouraged individual suffering

as an integral part of the collective work of liberating and restoring France. At the same time, it became evident from reading the poetry written in the camps that a wider survey of the cultural landscape in France, beyond the Resistance, was necessary in order to pinpoint the influences and movements that proved decisive in poets' intellectual and spiritual development and gave rise to the sense of interior freedom pervading their writings in captivity. These influences were many and diverse. Many poets had been active in intellectual circles in France before their arrest and had a keen interest in social renewal and political change. Numerous prisoners had been committed members of the French Communist party and long-standing anti-Fascist campaigners. Among established poets who had pursued a literary career and mingled in literary circles before their deportation, more than one was an enthusiastic adherent to Surrealism. Again, many prisoners had strong Catholic beliefs forged in the intensely pious culture of certain sectors of the population in pre-war France. While it might be thought that in the camps such influences were made irrelevant by the inhumane conditions and savage upheaval of the norms of civilised society, a close study of the poetry written in the camps shows, in fact, the overwhelming extent to which these authors retained during their internment the beliefs, motivations and worldviews which they had embraced prior to their deportation. Understanding these intellectual factors is indispensable to appreciating the visions of freedom which these writers present in their works.

An important part of my research has been locating previously unknown, unpublished poems written in the camps by French prisoners, as well as collecting new eyewitness testimonies through interviews with French survivors of the camps. While some of the poetry from the camps has been published in France, such publications have not benefited from a wide circulation and comprise only a small number of anthologies or single-author collections, usually edited by one of the French associations for returned *déportés*. Unlike the most famous Holocaust poetry, such as works by Paul Celan or Miklós Radnóti, which have been published widely and translated into English and other languages, this poetry remains almost totally unknown, even in France. I found, moreover, during my fieldwork that many extant poems, including some of the original manuscripts produced in captivity, were tucked away in archives or family collections and had never appeared in book form. Because I was above all interested in the subjective experience of prisoners during their captivity, I realised that it would be helpful to talk directly to survivors and listen to their recollections of their deportation. These interviews were enlightening. Camp survivors related the incidents and personal experiences during their deportation that had marked them most profoundly and the emotions that they remembered most vividly. What came out of these interviews both

confirmed published accounts of internment in the different camps and, on occasion, added vital new insights to our understanding of prisoners' experiences.

This fieldwork was all the more important because existing scholarly literature is, for the most part, silent on the whole topic of French poetry composed in the camps. Despite the weighty cultural and historical significance of this corpus, the French academic community has paid almost no attention to it. A single conference organised in Reims in 1995, devoted to the creation of literature and other forms of art in the camps, has been the sole exception to this trend in recent years.<sup>5</sup> This reflects the wider reality that French scholarship on the deportation of Jews and Resistants from France has been far less active than might be supposed in the light of the seminal nature of events in the concentration camps. Particularly in comparison to the United States, where the field of Holocaust studies has been well-established for nearly four decades, relatively little attention has been paid by the French academic community to the deportation and internment of Jews and Resistants from France.

This lacuna in French scholarship might in part be due to the long period of unease surrounding the historical narrative and collective memory of the war years, and particularly the Occupation, in France. After the war, as the Gaullist myth took hold of the public memory, promoting the image of an occupied France in which practically everyone was a Resistant, there was little discussion of the uncomfortable realities of collaboration. This situation began to change from the 1970s onwards. Robert Paxton and Michael Marrus's landmark studies on the Vichy regime, translated into French—Paxton's *La France de Vichy* (1973) and *Vichy et les Juifs* (1981), co-authored by Paxton and Marrus—brought to light Vichy's role in the deportation of Jews.<sup>6</sup> During the same era, Serge Klarsfeld carried out his landmark research on the Jewish deportation, establishing a comprehensive list of all the Jews deported from France.<sup>7</sup> Recognition in official discourse of the roles played by French citizens and the French state in the deportation came, however, more slowly. It was not until 1995 that President Jacques Chirac acknowledged officially that the Vichy regime had been guilty of actively collaborating with the German authorities in the deportation of Jews from

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<sup>5</sup> This conference, directed by Yves Ménager, was organised to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the liberation of the camps in 1945. The conference proceedings were published as *Créer pour survivre : actes du colloque international 'Écritures et pratiques artistiques dans les prisons et les camps de concentration nazis', organisé à Reims les 20, 21 et 22 septembre 1995 par l'Université de Reims Champagne Ardenne et la Fédération nationale des déportés et internés, résistants et patriotes* (Paris: FNDIRP, 1995). Both academic researchers and French camp survivors contributed talks and participated in discussions.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Paxton, *La France de Vichy*, trans. Claude Bertrand (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1973); Robert Paxton and Michael Marrus, *Vichy et les juifs*, trans. Marguerite Delmotte (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1981).

<sup>7</sup> See Serge Klarsfeld, *Mémorial de la déportation des Juifs de France* (Paris: Editions FFDJF, 1978). I cite from a revised edition of Klarsfeld's work later in my Introduction.

France. It was around the same time that Annette Wieviorka began to conduct research on the deportation of Jews and Resistants; her works remain the standard references on the topic.<sup>8</sup> Apart from Klarsfeld's and Wieviorka's work, historical research on the deportation remains scarce in France. Despite being among the last surviving French individuals to have been deported to the concentration camps, none of the former camp inmates to whom I spoke had ever been asked for his testimony by an academic researcher. The relative lack of interest in academic circles towards the subject is, perhaps, a legacy of the long period of silence in France with respect to the complexities of the war and the deportation.

Literary scholars in France have tended to devote more attention to the deportation than historians; French-language literature about the camps has been the focus of many studies in France. However, the vast majority of these studies are focused on classic testimonies like Robert Antelme's *L'Espèce humaine* and David Rousset's *L'Univers concentrationnaire* or other literary works written by prisoners after their liberation and repatriation, rather than texts written *in* the camps. Neglect of the French poetry from the camps in literary studies also applies to research in the English-speaking academic world, with only one notable exception, a 2002 study by Gary Mole.<sup>9</sup> My research on this poetry uncovers a side of the deportation from France that has been, on the whole, passed over in silence by scholars in France and elsewhere.

The paucity of critical work in this area has meant that theoretical foundations for studying the French-language poetry of the camps are largely lacking. The unusual circumstances in which this literary corpus was produced have key implications for the theoretical approach which might be adopted in studying these writings, compared to later testimonial, fictional and poetic works about the camps. Rather than being retrospective explorations of traumatic events, these poems were composed by prisoners experiencing all the horrors and deprivation of internment and striving, in response, to crystallise in their writings the motivations that held off despair and contributed to a sense of interior freedom. Radically implicated in day-to-day living in the camps, this poetry was therefore bound up with an urgent ethical imperative confronting the author. Existing critical theory on Holocaust literature, which has largely ignored the writings from the camps, provides no conceptual

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<sup>8</sup> Annette Wieviorka's 1992 study entitled *Déportation et génocide: entre la mémoire et l'oubli* (Paris: Plon, 1992) was one of her first major studies.

<sup>9</sup> Gary Mole, *Beyond the Limit-Experience, French Poetry of the Deportation 1940-1945* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002). I discuss the achievements and limitations of this work in some detail in a later section of this Introduction.

framework that can accommodate the peculiar nature of this literature, arising as it did out of an unfinished ordeal that might well end (as each prisoner was aware) only in death.

While I engage throughout this thesis with scholarly work in the field of Holocaust literature, I have refrained, therefore, from adopting the conceptual paradigms set up in these works. Instead, I have turned to the works of some 20th century theorists to help elucidate the ways in which poetry could become the saving expression of a personal ethos in the most dire of circumstances. Paul Ricœur's theory, particularly his poetics and his conception of human freedom, has proved especially helpful in explaining how poetry in the camps could participate in the individual's search for ethical meaning in life. Central to all of Ricœur's oeuvre is the question of finding transcendent meaning in human life in the face of the necessary limitations experienced by every person, particularly in the inevitable confrontation with suffering and death. Ricœur focuses on the key contribution that narrative can make to defining personal identity, understanding life-events and finding ethical purpose. As a form of narrative, poetry has an especially vital role to play in discerning the transcendent in events because poetic language, Ricœur contends, can open up unsuspected horizons of meaning in the world. My study is not a Ricœurian analysis properly speaking. Instead, Ricœur's theory provides first and foremost an invaluable point of reference for understanding the nature and function of this poetry. Poetry for these camp prisoners was a vehicle for discovering, within the horrendous circumstances of camp internment, transcendent meaning and ethical direction, with deep spiritual, intellectual and political principles informing their poetic visions at every level.

Before further exploring the function of this poetry through the lens of Ricœur's poetics, an overview of the existing body of scholarly work on Holocaust literature is necessary in order to bring out clearly the distinctive elements in my own theoretical approach. Because this poetry is so closely entwined with the bleak circumstances in which it was written, we also need to understand something of the deportation and internment of French camp prisoners, and explore why they composed poetry during their imprisonment. I will define the critical paradigms that have prevailed to date in academic work on Holocaust literature, compare the situations of Jewish and non-Jewish French prisoners (both represented in the corpus of poetry in question), and look at the crucial question of why poetry was so popular among camp inmates. First of all, however, a discussion of the meaning of interior freedom and how it was manifested in poetry is necessary.

## Interior freedom and poetic freedom

In what sense, precisely, can we talk about ‘interior freedom’ in the case of camp inmates living under the most extreme constraints? Admittedly, this concept is not the first that might spring to mind when considering the situation of the deportee. Quite apart from the external conditions—physical confinement and subjugation to a repressive regime that inflicted arbitrary punishment—that affected the range of actions realistically within prisoners’ capacities, the limitations with which camp prisoners were confronted within themselves could be crushing. Physically and mentally diminished and weakened, racked by both bodily and emotional suffering, camp inmates apparently had far less capacity to make free and positive choices compared to someone not in captivity, and many prisoners felt painfully aware of their moral failings under the ravages of desperate bodily needs. Looking for freedom demonstrated consistently in prisoners’ actions would likely be a fruitless task.

In the light of these facts, it is essential to properly define the character of the interior freedom which is at stake here. The concept of human freedom has been one of the most enduring and contentious topics of debate in philosophy. The idea of finding freedom in captivity is an idea that dates back to antiquity; the 2nd century Stoic philosopher Epictetus argued in his treatise on human freedom that a man in prison could be more truly free than another man outside the prison walls, so long as he took care to curb his desires and practise complete detachment.<sup>10</sup> In the 20th century, one of the most renowned philosophical studies on the theme of human freedom was Jean-Paul Sartre’s essay *L’Être et le Néant*, first published in 1943.<sup>11</sup> A key component of Sartre’s idea of freedom is the dualism between the *pour-soi* (pure consciousness) and the *en-soi* (the material realm). Freedom for Sartre is the ideal of reaching the *pour-soi* existing in nothingness, totally outside of the *en-soi*. Interestingly, the most celebrated of Holocaust poets, Paul Celan, seems to have been inspired by this vision. Celan conceived freedom as the end of the ideal (though unrealisable) poem—a freedom akin to emptiness, totally outside being. Poetry, Celan declares, moves ‘towards the otherness, which it can reach and be free.’<sup>12</sup> Although Sartre’s conception of freedom has been very influential, the Sartrean perspective did not seem to fit with the character of the freedom which emerged from the present corpus of poetry. While involving intense aspirations towards the transcendent, this freedom was manifestly realised *within*, not outside,

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<sup>10</sup> Epictetus, *Of Human Freedom* (London: Penguin, 2010). Treatise written in the 2nd century.

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *L’Être et le Néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1953).

<sup>12</sup> Cited in Gerald L. Bruns, *Maurice Blanchot: The Refusal of Philosophy* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 93.

the embodied self. For the same reason, the freedom manifested in the poems was emphatically not the Stoic freedom of disconnection from, and indifference to, the body and the world.

Instead, as I came to see through reading this poetry, the freedom in question was an interior orientation by which the individual became capable of actively assuming and living unwilled constraints and sufferings, imposed externally upon him or her, in pursuit of the goods he or she most valued, such as love or self-sacrifice—goods which included survival but went beyond mere survival at all costs. This was a freedom resolutely directed towards transcendent values, yet immanent within concrete, material reality. Ricœur's theory proved relevant to understanding the corpus of poetry written in the camps because Ricœur situates the human subject—and the freedom that this subject can exercise—firmly in the realm of being and nature. His most complete exposition of this theme can be found in *Le volontaire et l'involontaire*.<sup>13</sup> Human freedom, Ricœur argues in this work, is not a nihilating escape from being. Freedom involves definite motivations towards real goods and produces recognisable effects in the natural order.<sup>14</sup> Emphasising as it does the material domain and the importance of motivation, Ricœur's conception of freedom is invaluable for understanding in what the interior freedom experienced by camp inmates consisted.

An important component of this freedom, even perhaps the keystone upon which it depends, is *consent*. I was struck by how when we read much of this poetry, we find a basic acceptance and even *appropriation* of this imprisonment. It becomes evident that the poet lived his captivity not as an exclusively passive reality that must be rebelled against interiorly, but instead as events that, although unwilled, had become integrated into the fabric of his or her life and now formed a necessary part of it.<sup>15</sup> Ricœur's understanding of consent to involuntary events as a definite act of the will that changes the entire character of these events for the human subject is germane in this context:

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<sup>13</sup> Ricœur, *Philosophie de la volonté, tome 1 : Le volontaire et l'involontaire* (Paris: Aubier, 1949).

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of Ricœur's conception of being, see Matthew A. Daigler, 'Being as act and potency in the philosophy of Paul Ricœur,' *Philosophy Today* 42 (Winter 1998): 375-385.

<sup>15</sup> Consent, as I define it here, must be distinguished from the apathy, despair and indifference before the prospect of death which lead prisoners to cease any efforts to maintain their dignity or survive. This apathetic submission to captivity is what Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi designates as 'consent' in a famous passage from *If This is a Man* where he recounts the advice given by a friend in the camp: 'We are slaves, deprived of every right, exposed to every insult, condemned to certain death, but we still possess one power, and we must defend it with all our strength for it is our last—the power to refuse our consent.' Primo Levi, *If This is a Man, and The Truce*, trans. Stuart Woolf (London: Abacus, 2009), 47.



Le consentement cherche à [...] faire de la nécessité l'expression et comme l'aura' de la liberté. [...] Il peut s'exprimer par un impératif : que cela soit ; étrange impératif certes, puisqu'il se termine à l'inévitable ; du moins en voulant le pur fait, je le change pour moi à défaut de le changer en soi. [...] Consentir c'est moins constater la nécessité que l'adopter ; c'est dire oui à ce qui est déjà déterminé ; c'est convertir en soi l'hostilité de la nature, en liberté la nécessité.<sup>16</sup>

Ricœur stresses how transformative this act of volition can be. Through consent, the individual receives unwilled, imposed events in such a way as to 'domesticate' them, so that they are no longer hostile circumstances but actually become, in some strange way, expressions of personal freedom. Consent thus draws the involuntary into the sphere of human freedom. This component of interior freedom was pivotal for camp inmates as it was, in many ways, the necessary condition for seeking ethical meaning in their imprisonment. Consent was not the refusal of action but rather the condition for exercising agency under unwilled circumstances. If these poets were able to respond in productive ways to their atrocious ordeal, it was because they had first acquiesced to their internment and because this acceptance liberated them to pursue, within and even *through* their captivity, those goods that were most precious to them.

On a thematic level, poetry from the camps was about defining and affirming this freedom, a freedom originating in consent and realised in the pursuit of some good. But what became apparent with close readings of these poems was how often freedom was also present on a deeper level, encoded in the very form of the poem. A book by Jacques Philippe was helpful in directing me towards this formal enactment of freedom. Philippe's short treatise on interior freedom in the Christian perspective includes a passage in which he notes how a set of texts by a French saint is pervaded by a lexicon of freedom that contrasts sharply with the extremely confined circumstances in which the author lived.<sup>17</sup> This study first alerted me to

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<sup>16</sup> Ricœur, *Le volontaire et l'involontaire*, 322, 324.

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Philippe, *La Liberté intérieure* (Nouan-le-Fuzelier, France: Editions des Béatitudes, 2002), 18. Exploring the life and writings of St Thérèse of Lisieux (Thérèse Martin), he comments on the contrast between the smallness of the physical space (a convent) which she never left and the sense of freedom which emerges from her writings: 'Il y aurait une étude philologique à faire sur l'importance des termes qui chez Thérèse expriment la dimension illimitée de l'univers spirituel dans lequel elle se meut: "horizons infinis", "désirs immense", "océans de grâce", "abîmes d'amour", "torrents de miséricorde" et ainsi de suite.' Although I am not, of course, suggesting that the situation which Philippe is exploring here is analogous to the internment of French prisoners in concentration camps, Philippe's insights nonetheless point, in a general way, to the fact that freedom may be inscribed in the texts of an author living, in one way or another, in extreme physical confinement.

the possibility that a writer experiencing physical captivity might nonetheless produce texts crafted in such a way as to give a strong impression of interior freedom. Reading the poetry from the camps, I came to see that not only did we find in these poems a profusion of words suggesting freedom and space, reminiscent of the lexicon evoked by Philippe, but freedom was, in addition, very often *audible*, conveyed to the poem's listener by meaningful shifts in prosody and sound patterns. Poetry, as a genre of literature, is particularly oriented towards manifesting such freedom; in the first place, somewhat paradoxically, because it works under numerous technical constraints, such as defined syllabic patterns and limits on line length. Traditional French versification is governed by especially rigorous rules, to such an extent that 16th century poet Joachim Du Bellay labelled French verse 'cette étroite prison de rythme'<sup>18</sup>. But the very existence of these restraints has led poets to seek creative ways of pushing the boundaries of this 'prison' to achieve various effects, and even the traditionally inflexible alexandrine has been given varying rhythmic patterns, from the 19th century onwards. Secondly, as the acoustic qualities of a poem have a key role to play in creating meaning, shifts in sonorities can also hint at liberation from imprisonment. Playing with the limits of rhythmic schemes, varying the placement of metric accents and carefully crafting the soundscape of the poem are all techniques employed in this poetry which transmit an impression of freedom arising out of constraint. Freedom is not merely expressed in the semantic content of these poems; it is actually embodied in their form and aural dimension.

### **Critical paradigms in studies of Holocaust literature**

In the early stages of my research, alongside reading the poems themselves and noticing more and more the distinct impression of freedom created in these texts, I explored some of the most influential critical studies of Holocaust literature and sought to define how this poetic corpus in which I was interested might fit into, or contradict, existing conceptual paradigms. Commentaries on literature about the camps and the Holocaust were produced as early as just after the war, although it was only in the 1980s that the field of Holocaust literature began to emerge as a field of academic study properly speaking. Fuelled by renewed interest in the Holocaust and by the emergence of testimony and memory as a fertile area of research, studies on Holocaust literature became more and more abundant. In the beginning, critiques usually focused on literature produced by camp survivors: famous testimonies like Elie Wiesel's *La Nuit*, short stories like Tadeusz Borowski's and poetry such as Celan's.

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<sup>18</sup> Joachim Du Bellay, *La Deffence et Illustration de la Langue Française*, in *Œuvres choisies* (Paris: Larousse, 1934), 34. In context, the citation (with original spelling) reads: 'Nous avons un certain nombre de syllabes en chacun genre de poëme, par lesquelles, comme par chainons, le vers françois lié et enchainé est contraint de se rendre en ceste estroite prison de rythme.'

Increasingly, from the 1990s onwards, interest turned to works produced by the descendants of Holocaust survivors.<sup>19</sup> In spite of the fact that Holocaust literature has been a very active area of research for nearly 40 years, the French poetry from the camps remains little studied both in French and in English-language scholarship. For many years, the numerous poems composed by French-speaking camp inmates during their imprisonment received almost no critical attention. Critical work has concentrated almost exclusively on works written *after* the camps, a fact that has consequences for the paradigms chosen to study them.

Adorno's famous and oft-quoted statement that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' has exercised an immense influence on criticism of Holocaust literature. Yet his statements are less relevant to poetry written in the camps than might first appear. In fact, Adorno's recognition of the need for human suffering to have an outlet would eventually lead him to qualify his original statement on the barbarity of poetry 'after Auschwitz'. In *Negative Dialectics*, he wrote: 'Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man to scream, therefore I may have been wrong to say that to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.'<sup>20</sup> Had Adorno known of the poetry written by victims in the camps, it is unlikely he would have criticised it. In no way can Adorno's comments on 'poetry after Auschwitz' be interpreted as a restriction placed on poetry written by camp victims. If we read his strictures in the context of the entire essay 'Cultural Criticism', it becomes clear that the author is speaking about the compromised nature of art, notably literature, in post-war German society. 'Auschwitz' is a metonym for the Nazi crimes in the camps, including the Holocaust, and Adorno wants to show how this catastrophe is affecting *post-war* culture in Germany and, more widely, in Europe. The vast human disaster of the Holocaust and other Nazi atrocities, however, is not the sole factor responsible for the present lamentable state of culture. Humanity has been in a catastrophic state for some time caused by the advent of capitalism and its domination of every aspect of human endeavour. According to Adorno, a sordid capitalist and consumerist logic permeates the entire modern European social and cultural arena, contaminating traditional artistic modes of expression and rendering them unusable. In short, Adorno's notorious statement about 'poetry after Auschwitz' is more a

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<sup>19</sup> Marianne Hirsch's extremely influential 1992 study of Art Spiegelman's Holocaust memoir (*Maus*) and her innovative concept of 'postmemory' was one of the catalysts for this change in focus to take in the literature created by writers other than actual camp survivors. See Marianne Hirsch, 'Family Pictures: *Maus*, Mourning and Post-Memory,' *Discourse* 15, 2 (Winter 1992-93): 3-29.

<sup>20</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1966), 362.

Marxian critique of art in post-war, capitalist society than a commentary on poetry about the Holocaust.<sup>21</sup>

But although Adorno never spoke directly about Holocaust literature, his comments on ‘poetry after Auschwitz,’ and more generally his vision of the modern poem, have nonetheless been influential in studies of Holocaust poetry. Later critics would take inspiration from Adorno’s commentaries and emphasise the resistance of the Holocaust to linguistic representation. George Steiner was keenly interested in Adorno’s aesthetic and cultural theory, and took inspiration from his dictum on ‘poetry after Auschwitz’ in presenting his own analysis of language in a post-Holocaust world.<sup>22</sup> Steiner’s famous proclamation in an essay first published in 1959 posited the utter inability of received language to represent the Holocaust. The ‘world of Auschwitz’, Steiner maintained, could not be represented with conventional language, permeated as it was by the Western rationalist tradition:

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.<sup>23</sup>

Not surprisingly, these ideas soon found favour in post-structuralist intellectual circles increasingly preoccupied by the limitations of language (especially in regard to alterity), a theme found in the works of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Lévinas, among many others. Steiner’s rhetoric of the ‘unspeakable’ became well-known and, although much contested, the impact of his theories has lived on in the widespread preoccupation in the critical literature with the question of how (if at all) the horrors of the camps and the Holocaust can be represented in texts. For Lawrence Langer, this search for a language capable of conveying such atrocious realities is among the most difficult tasks faced by Holocaust writers. ‘One of

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<sup>21</sup> For discussions of Adorno’s famous sayings on poetry and Auschwitz in the scholarly literature, see David Miller, ‘After Epic: Adorno’s Scream and the Shadows of Lyric’, in Jenni Adams (ed.), *The Bloomsbury Companion to Holocaust Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 65-80; Michael Rothberg, ‘After Adorno: Culture in the Wake of Catastrophe’, *New German Critique*, 72 (Autumn 1997): 45-81; and Klaus Hofmann, ‘Poetry after Auschwitz—Adorno’s dictum’, *German Life and Letters* 58, 2 (2005): 182-194. Hofmann’s analysis is particularly insightful, as he traces the various (and erroneous) forms of Adorno’s dictum propagated in secondary literature over time.

<sup>22</sup> See Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minneapolis Press, 2000), 30-32, for a discussion of Steiner’s appropriation and adaptation of Adorno’s theories on this point.

<sup>23</sup> George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), 123.

the major challenges to Holocaust literature,' Langer writes, 'has been the quest for a language to express the ostensibly inexpressible.'<sup>24</sup> Adhering to the paradigm outlined by Langer, most scholars in the field adopt representational readings of Holocaust literature, studying the ways in which writers strive to communicate events so harrowing and gruesome as to seemingly defy transmission in 'ordinary' language.

Scholars of Holocaust literature identify a number of different strategies used by authors in their efforts to transmit the horrific events in question. Early critics of Holocaust literature emphasised the role of silence and self-effacement, particularly in Holocaust poetry. Alvin Rosenfeld argues in his seminal 1980 work on Holocaust literature, *A Double Dying*, that the poetics of silence reaches its apogee in Holocaust texts.<sup>25</sup> In their pursuit of language and form tending irrevocably towards emptiness and silence, Holocaust poets Paul Celan and Nelly Sachs create, Rosenfeld suggests, a 'poetics of expiration', (conceptualised as the opposite of a traditional 'poetics of inspiration') that is designed to reflect the terrible devastation of the Holocaust.<sup>26</sup> Rosenfeld's vision of the central role of self-negation and silence in expressing the Holocaust quickly gained traction in commentary on Holocaust literature, so much so that Raul Hilberg would suggest in 1988 that silence had acquired the status of an unwritten rule governing the writing of Holocaust literature.<sup>27</sup> A more recent critic who identifies silence as one of the main characteristics of Holocaust poetry is William Franke. Celan's poems, Franke writes, articulate the 'unspeakable' by subtly drawing attention to what has *not* been said; the Holocaust is 'indicated mutely, in a sort of pure, absolute reference.'<sup>28</sup> Analysing Dan Pagis's Holocaust poem 'Written in Pencil in the Sealed Rail-car', Victoria Aarons draws attention to the 'tropes of omission' that it contains and argues that through these tropes, the poem subverts and undermines its own linguistic content.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, in his 2005 study of Holocaust poetry, Antony Rowland emphasises the role of self-conscious poetic strategies that undermine the poem's very project and draw

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<sup>24</sup> Lawrence Langer, *Using and Abusing the Holocaust* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006), 34. Langer goes on to suggest that this project is less 'formidable' than has sometimes been assumed, and mentions the works of Celan and Charlotte Delbo as evidence for this fact.

<sup>25</sup> Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1980), 91.

<sup>26</sup> See Chapter 4, 'Poetics of Expiration' in Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying*, 82-95.

<sup>27</sup> Raul Hilberg, 'I Was Not There,' in *Writing and the Holocaust*, ed. Berel Lang (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988), 17-25, 23.

<sup>28</sup> William Franke, 'The Singular and the Other at the Limits of Language in the Apophatic Poetics of Edmond Jabès and Paul Celan', *New Literary History*, 36(4) (Autumn 2005), 621-638.

<sup>29</sup> Victoria Aarons, 'A Genre of Rupture: The Literary Language of the Holocaust', in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Holocaust Literature*, ed. Jenni Adams (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 27-46, 36.

attention to the unrepresentability of the atrocious events of the Holocaust.<sup>30</sup> Silence and other self-reflexive references to the incapacities of language in the face of atrocity are seen by Rosenfeld, Aarons, Franke and Rowland to be a central strategy in poetry about the camps and the Holocaust.

Critics of Holocaust literature have also portrayed the paradigm of traumatic disruption as a frequent element in authentic representations of the camps: the inscription in the text of fragmentation and confusion that mirror the trauma experienced by camp victims. To describe the aesthetics of key literary works written by camp survivors like Charlotte Delbo and Ruth Kluger, Michael Rothberg proposes the idea of ‘traumatic realism’: a range of techniques by which ‘the unsymbolizable real persists within and disrupts the mimetic narrative of everyday reality’.<sup>31</sup> Rothberg argues that the death camps contained a fundamental and traumatic tension between ordinary, everyday realities and extreme atrocities. ‘Traumatic realism’ allows the gulf between these two poles to be preserved and to be communicated to the reader. Rothberg’s analysis stresses the response of readers to Holocaust texts. The disruptions and discontinuities of traumatic realism seek to offer the reader access to the bizarre concentrationary universe and to provoke the reader to reflect on the extent of his or her own implication in post-traumatic reality. Similarly, Antony Rowland’s studies of Holocaust poetry and the wider field of testimonial poetry focus on the different kinds of disjunctions found in it, techniques that both mimic the trauma of camp victims and self-consciously draw attention to the inaccessibility of the events being described. Rowland coins the term ‘awkward poetics’ to describe the set of disruptive poetic strategies, including incongruity, distorted chronology and non-catharsis, characterising the works of post-Holocaust British poets. Trauma, according to both Rothberg and Rowland, is integral to the very fabric of Holocaust literature, manifesting itself in various kinds of breakage worked into the text.

Closely allied to the idea of traumatic disruption being inscribed in texts is the theory of a profound rupture between Holocaust literature and preceding literary tradition. Alvin Rosenfeld argues that rejection of the literary past is a characteristic of a large subsection of Holocaust literature; Rosenfeld affirms ‘the revisionary and essentially antithetical nature of so much of Holocaust writing, which not only mimics and parodies but finally refutes and

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<sup>30</sup> Antony Rowland, *Holocaust Poetry: Awkward Poetics in the Work of Sylvia Plath, Geoffrey Hill, Tony Harrison and Ted Hughes* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005).

<sup>31</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 144.

rejects its direct literary antecedents.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Rowland emphasises the stylistic novelty of much Holocaust poetry and its breakage with tradition. He sees it as part of a wider trend in modern poetry of testimony; the ‘discontinuities and ruptures in narrative form and traditional genres’<sup>33</sup> in late modernist and post-modernist poetry are, he suggests, particularly well-suited to grappling with chaotic, traumatic experiences. More specifically, Rowland contends that the Holocaust has deeply problematised traditional aesthetics. Concurring with Adorno’s views that post-war aesthetics must totally sever with the past, Rowland argues that Holocaust poets are forced, so to speak, to adopt new and daring strategies in order to communicate the unprecedented horrors of the events. Rothberg and Rowland stress the place of radically new aesthetics, very different from the inherited Western poetic traditions, in Holocaust literature.

How, if at all, have existing critical paradigms such as the ones just outlined been applied to the poetry written in the camps? There is only one full-length academic study on the French poetry from the camps: a 2002 work entitled *Beyond the Limit-Experience, French Poetry of the Deportation 1940-1945*, by a scholar in French literary studies, Gary Mole.<sup>34</sup> In his study, Mole seeks to give a comprehensive survey of the poetry written by French camp prisoners. Predominantly, this is a chronologically and, to a lesser extent, thematically organised study. Chronologically, the book traces the experience of French deportees from incarceration in French prisons all the way through deportation to the camps, analysing the poetics and thematic content of poems written in different situations and examining how the authors attempt to convey the horrors of their experience. Drawing his information from published anthologies, Mole presents a list of French deportees who wrote poetry in prison or in the camps. Although theory is not the primary consideration of his study, the idea of representation becomes an important point of reference in many of Mole’s readings of French camp poems. While expressing reservations about the theory that conventional language was severely hampered in the task of representing the camps, Mole follows the general critical trend by analysing the French poetry from the camps as attempts at representing the grim realities of camp internment.

Classifying this poetry according to a dualistic scheme, Mole makes an ongoing distinction in his work between poems that aim to represent the reality of the camps and those that turn

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<sup>32</sup> Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying*, 29.

<sup>33</sup> Antony Rowland, *Poetry as Testimony: Witnessing and Memory in Twentieth-century Poems* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 5.

<sup>34</sup> Gary Mole, *Beyond the Limit-Experience, French Poetry of the Deportation, 1940-1945* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002).

away from representing this reality. The latter category of poems, which include love-poems and fantastic visions, employ what Mole calls ‘negativity’, a technique defined as ‘the ways in which the processes of transformation operative in the poetic constantly lure absence into presence’.<sup>35</sup> By evoking what is absent (a loved one, for example), the poem ‘negates’ the present reality of the author. Such poems simply ‘elide the limits of representational language’.<sup>36</sup> These writers, Mole suggests, chose not to even attempt the formidable challenge of representing the camps with verisimilitude, instead turning towards the easier and more palatable enterprise of invoking dreams and memories in their poems. While conceding that immense difficulties were faced by authors trying to communicate the appalling novelty and magnitude of the events unfolding, Mole contests the supposed ‘unrepresentability’ of the camps in conventional language, rightly pointing out that many of these French poems show how language could be used in very effective ways to convey to the reader or listener something of the traumatic reality of being interned in a camp. Mole does not, therefore, adopt uncritically the established academic discourse on the resistance of the camps to textual representation. Nonetheless, by schematising this poetry according to the lesser or greater extent to which it represents the camps, his study remains, to a large extent, tethered to the prevalent critical rhetoric.

While I am greatly indebted to Mole’s thorough groundwork in collating French concentration camp poems from different sources and, moreover, draw periodically on his insights, I have adopted in the present study a very different theoretical and methodological paradigm, moving away from the widespread representational readings that dominate a large section of Holocaust studies. My approach has been to view the poetry written in the camps as an ethical project and as a space in which freedom could be expressed and enacted. Unlike camp survivors, who are concerned with transmitting their experiences to an audience unfamiliar with the camps, poets in the camps were not seeking effective, telling ways to represent a past experience, but searching urgently for ethical direction in their present ordeals. For this reason, I chose to pursue ethical readings of the poetry rather than representational readings.

Equally, my readings of the French poetry from the camps indicated that the critical discourses of rupture with literary precedent, textual silence and traumatic disruption adopted by Rosenfeld, Rothberg and other scholars were of limited applicability here. Poets in the camps did not reject the literary past as obsolete in the catastrophic circumstances. In

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<sup>35</sup> Mole, *Beyond the Limit-Experience*, 24.

<sup>36</sup> Mole, *Beyond the Limit-Experience*, 24.



the French poems written in the camps, we are dealing with poetry richly invested in tradition and existing genres and deploying the full range of inherited poetic techniques. We do not find silence and self-negation being used to throw doubt onto the capacities of poetic language to discover any meaning in the face of barbarism. Rather, poets use language in confident and resonating ways to uncover meaning in their ordeals. Finally, although various kinds of disjunctions reflective of trauma and violence are occasionally embedded in poems, especially in the poetry of Maurice Honel, traumatic disruption is never the primary poetic strategy in play. In short, poetic language and form, rather than *imitating* the traumatic experiences of camp prisoners, are being used to *work through* them.

The immense difference between texts written by victims during their internment and literature written by camp survivors after their deportation is, at first glance, disconcerting; why would trauma be *less* manifest in texts written in the camps compared to texts written by survivors after their liberation? A full discussion of this complex question is beyond the scope of this thesis; however, a few remarks are relevant here. Firstly, the difference reflects the open-ended and, in a certain sense, unresolvable nature of the anguish suffered by former camp interns after their release from the camps. As horrific as their circumstances were in the camps, camp victims continued to find consolation and hope in various ways, including through writing. But many of those same prisoners who had maintained hope throughout the horrors of their internment found little solace or joy in their return to ordinary life and remained haunted by their past anguish. Responding to the ongoing effects of trauma in their lives was no simple enterprise; writing about their experiences brought up as many new problems as it answered. Rosenfeld points out that the ‘radical self-estrangement’ experienced by survivors made writing about their memories a challenging, indeed almost impossible, task.<sup>37</sup> A second point to note is that post-war writing emerged within a distinct cultural and literary context. In the bleak post-war climate, disillusionment and pessimism set in quickly. The past was saturated with crimes, most notably the Holocaust; the forecast for humanity looked grim. In such a context, critics like Adorno began to deny that we should be getting any consolation from literature. ‘Poetry after Auschwitz’ became a fragile space of unresolvable trauma and questions left unanswered. Poetry *in* Auschwitz, in contrast, maintained more existential confidence and remained a search for ethical meaning.

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<sup>37</sup> Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying*, 55.

## The deportation from France: Jews and Resistants

It is vital to understand both the convergences and differences in the ordeals of Resistants and Jews in order to contextualise the writings of these two subsets of camp inmates. Deportations from France under the German occupation occurred from 1942 to 1944. Over 160,000 people were deported from France to Nazi concentration camps during this period. The first deportation from a transit camp on French territory took place on 27 March 1942 and deportations continued almost right up to the liberation of France in September 1944. Deportees from occupied France fall into two main categories: Jewish individuals deported *par mesure de persécution* and those deported *par mesure de répression*, a group that includes both Resistants (political deportees) and other individuals arrested for various crimes or misdemeanours.<sup>38</sup> The number of Jewish deportees is calculated to be 76,500, while the second group of persons deported *par mesure de répression* numbers 86,048 individuals.<sup>39</sup> Although it is uncertain exactly how many in this latter group were deported for actual Resistance activities against the Nazi occupiers, the historian Claire Andrieu cites a commonly accepted figure of 57,000.<sup>40</sup> There were some important differences in the deportation experience of Jews and that of Resistants, the most dramatic being the difference in survival rates. French Jewish deportees were almost always sent to death camps: the vast majority to one of the Auschwitz camps.<sup>41</sup> Many of those sent to the extermination camps—particularly young children and the elderly or frail—were gassed upon arrival. For those Jews who survived the initial selection, life in the camps was usually harsher compared to political deportees; Jewish deportees had fewer privileges than political deportees and did not have the right to send postcards or receive parcels. Only 3% of ‘racial’ deportees from France

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<sup>38</sup> These two groups of French deportees are official categories which were enshrined in French law in the 1990s. See discussion in Tal Bruttman, Laurent Joly and Annette Wiewiorka, eds., *Qu'est-ce qu'un déporté? Histoires et mémoires des déportations de la Seconde Guerre Mondiale* (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 2009).

<sup>39</sup> These figures are taken from two works. The number of Jewish deportees is taken from Serge Klarsfeld, *Mémorial de la déportation des Juifs de France*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Editions FFDJF, 2012). The number of individuals deported *par mesure de répression* has been taken from *Le Livre-Mémorial des déportés de France arrêtés par mesure de répression et dans certains cas par mesure de persécution 1940–1945*, [http://www.fmd.asso.fr/web/index.php?id\\_contenu=52?lang1](http://www.fmd.asso.fr/web/index.php?id_contenu=52?lang1). Retrieved 10 February 2014. This second figure (persons deported *par mesure de répression*) includes 13,128 deportees who were arrested not in France but in Germany (these were mostly French prisoners-of-war) but are still considered to be deportees ‘from France’. The *Livre-Mémorial* also includes 779 individuals deported from France for racial reasons, and I have added this figure to the numbers of Jewish deportees. It should be noted that the list of Jewish deportees does not include those who died in internment camps like Drancy on French territory.

<sup>40</sup> Claire Andrieu, ‘Réflexions sur la Résistance à travers l'exemple des Françaises à Ravensbrück’, *Histoire@politique* 2, 5 (May-August 2008). <http://cairn.info/revue-histoire-politique-2008-2-page-3.htm>. Retrieved 25 July 2016.

<sup>41</sup> Out of approximately 75 convoys from France which included Jewish victims arrested under racial persecution measures, only the second-last convoy, which departed 17 August 1944, was sent to a non-extermination camp (Buchenwald).

survived and returned to France after the liberation of the camps in 1945, compared to around 60% of political deportees.

The corpus of French-language poetry written in the camps includes both works by Jewish camp inmates and Resistants. However, no doubt mainly because of the low survival rates and harsher living conditions experienced in the case of Jewish deportees, there are far fewer extant writings produced by Jews in the concentration camps.<sup>42</sup> Among French-language poets in the camps, only four individuals out of 116 in total—Eva Golgevit, Pierre Créange, Maurice Honel and Moshe Rubinstein-Virolleaud—were Jewish prisoners deported *par mesure de persécution* to Auschwitz. Two others (B. Kryger and Henri Goldstuck) were deported in the convoy of so-called *demi-juifs et conjoints d'aryens*, sent to Aurigny (Alderney).<sup>43</sup> That said, it is crucial to note that these are not the only Jews represented in this group of poets: other poets were French Jews who were deported not for being Jews but for their participation in the Resistance. Because of the small number of camp poets who can be termed Holocaust victims, Mole argues that Adorno's dictum, and related debates about the ethical and aesthetic constraints that might apply to Holocaust literature, are of little relevance to the French poetry of the deportation. This poetry, Mole maintains, 'is simply not about the Shoah.'<sup>44</sup>

Contrary to Mole, I have chosen to treat *all* this poetry as Holocaust literature. There are compelling reasons for studying all texts composed by camp prisoners as a single corpus, regardless of whether the authors were Jews or non-Jews. The term 'Holocaust' is normally only applied to the deportation and genocide of the Jewish people, and I retain that sense in this thesis. The academic field of 'Holocaust literature', on the other hand, covers a broader spectrum and is usually understood as comprising works that deal not with the Holocaust *per se* but with what is often called in France the *univers concentrationnaire*.<sup>45</sup> This grim world showed many features in common across all the different camps: a punishing, dehumanising

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<sup>42</sup> Significantly, there are a considerable number of writings from French Jews which were produced in transit camps like Drancy, where the conditions of detention were less severe and where prisoners had more freedom and opportunities to write, even if it was simply by scratching graffiti on the plaster walls of the buildings. The *Archives nationales* have preserved many of the last messages engraved by Jews on the walls before their deportation from France, including a poem beginning 'Je m'en vais vers l'inconnu' and signed simply 'W.S.'.

<sup>43</sup> The camp at Aurigny, one of the Channel Islands, was technically a sub-camp of Mauthausen despite its geographical isolation from the main camp.

<sup>44</sup> Mole, *Beyond the Limit-Experience*, 23.

<sup>45</sup> To take just one recent example, in a choice of a hundred key works of 'Holocaust literature', David Roskies and Naomi Diamant present the testimonies of Robert Antelme and Charlotte Delbo, both Resistants. See David G. Roskies and Naomi Diamant, *Holocaust Literature: A History and Guide* (Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2012).

regime of near-starvation, forced labour, rampant disease, physical abuse, summary executions and, above all, the ever-present threat of imminent death. Of all the testimonies to come out of Auschwitz, Charlotte Delbo's trilogy (collectively entitled *Auschwitz et après*) remains one of the most read and has been cited in countless studies of Holocaust literature, including Lawrence Langer's influential 1991 work, *Holocaust Testimonies: the Ruins of Memory*.<sup>46</sup> Although a non-Jewish Resistant, Delbo's work gives unrivalled insight into captivity in Auschwitz and life after Auschwitz; the trauma she describes is echoed in the testimonies of Jewish survivors of the camps. As this example shows, texts written by Jewish and non-Jewish prisoners can mutually enlighten each other, providing complementary insights into the *univers concentrationnaire*.

The similarities in the ways in which Jewish and non-Jewish prisoners viewed their ordeals is evidenced in the fact that while only in death camps properly speaking (such as Birkenau (Auschwitz-II) and Treblinka) was deliberate extermination carried out on Jewish victims, the French survivors of other camps often called the camps in which they were interned *les camps de la mort*. In all concentration camps, death was an inescapable presence every day and many prisoners were convinced that death was the ultimate outcome planned by the Nazis for each one of them. Robert Antelme writes in *L'Espèce humaine* about the disturbing prevalence of death in the camps:

La mort était ici à plein-pied avec la vie, mais à toutes les secondes.  
La cheminée du crématoire fumait à côté de celle de la cuisine.  
Avant que nous soyons là, il y avait des os de morts dans la soupe  
des vivants, et l'or de la bouche des morts s'échangeait depuis  
longtemps contre le pain des vivants. La mort était formidablement  
entraînée dans le circuit de la vie quotidienne.<sup>47</sup>

This abnormal proximity with unnatural death on a mass scale was common to every camp and deeply affected the way that prisoners interpreted their captivity. The historian Annette Wieviorka suggests that we need to take seriously one contemporary belief held by many political prisoners in the camps: namely, the impression that they were victims of a slow but deliberate execution:

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<sup>46</sup> Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991).

<sup>47</sup> Robert Antelme, *L'Espèce humaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), 22.

Celui qui voit tomber quatre de ses camarades sur dix a le légitime sentiment d'une entreprise d'élimination en masse. [...] Il n'y a pas de hiérarchie dans la souffrance. Primo Levi, prisonnier 'racial' qui, quoique ayant été résistant, a choisi par son écriture d'assumer totalement le destin de ce qu'il appelle son peuple, n'a pas été moins marqué par sa détention en camp que Robert Antelme, pur 'déporté résistant' [...] ou que Charlotte Delbo<sup>48</sup>

As Wieviorka has noted, prisoners in all the camps, whether these were extermination camps or not, shared similar anguish faced with the looming prospect of death. While it is important to keep in mind some of the differences between the destinies of Holocaust victims and political deportees—the horrendous selection for the gas chambers was reserved for Jews—texts written by both Jewish and non-Jewish deportees provide, in general, equally valid and frequently converging outlooks on the death-ridden *univers concentrationnaire*.

A further key reason for treating French literature from the camps as a single group of texts is the fact that the boundaries between the two categories of deportees represented in this literature—Jewish camp victims and political victims—are more permeable than is sometimes supposed. A sizable number of French Jews—both French citizens and immigrants living in France—were active in the Resistance. Just like fellow non-Jewish comrades in the Resistance, they often had backgrounds in political activism. Specifically Jewish Communist networks were even set up in France to combat the German occupiers, including *Solidarité*, the Jewish branch of *Main d'œuvre immigré* (MOI).<sup>49</sup> Sometimes, a Resistant kept quiet about his or her Jewish heritage and was deported with other Resistants to a non-death camp. André Migdal, a young Communist Resistant, managed to conceal his Jewish identity and was therefore deported to Neuengamme instead of Auschwitz. Similarly, André Ulmann, from a non-practising Jewish family, did not reveal his Jewish background and was sent to Mauthausen. But often, the Jewish identity of a Resistant was discovered, in which case the individual was generally deported with other Jews to Auschwitz. This was the case for Maurice Honel, one of the main poets whose works are studied in this thesis. As a prominent Jewish political figure—he had been a deputy in the *Assemblée nationale*—he was

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<sup>48</sup> Annette Wieviorka, *Déportation et génocide* (Paris: Editions du Plon, 1994), 204.

<sup>49</sup> For histories of the Jewish Resistance in France, see Anne Grynberg, ed., *Les Juifs dans la Résistance et la Libération Histories, témoignages, débats* (Paris: Editions du Scribe, 1985) and Jacques Adler, *Face à la persécution : Les organisations juives à Paris de 1940-44* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1985). I am grateful to Dr Daniel Lerner for allowing me to read his unpublished paper, 'The Jewish Communist Resistance Organizations in Occupied France' in researching this topic.

deported in a convoy of mainly Jewish Resistants to Auschwitz. Some Jewish Resistants were immigrants to France, mostly from Eastern Europe: Eva Golgevit (born Chana Rozencwaig) was a young Polish immigrant to France who became involved in the 1930s in the Jewish branch of the Communist party and later joined *Solidarité* under the Occupation. She was deported with other Jewish Resistant women to Auschwitz in the convoy of 31 July 1943. Other Jewish Resistants were French citizens: Odette ‘Hélène’ Elina was a young French Jewish woman who became involved in the Resistance and was given positions of responsibility in the *Armée secrète*; she was denounced as a Jew and deported to Auschwitz in 1944.<sup>50</sup> Pierre Créange, deported to Auschwitz, was an intellectual, activist and author, involved in the SFIO (*Section française de l’Internationale ouvrière*) amongst other militant organisations and deeply implicated in anti-Fascist circles in the 1930s; his son, Robert Créange, remembers his father entertaining two anti-Fascist German Jews at their home before the outbreak of war.<sup>51</sup> Jewish and non-Jewish camp prisoners alike often shared, therefore, a common background in the Resistance and in Communist or anti-Fascist militancy.

Although these politically active Jews represent only one group out of all the Holocaust victims from France, their existence shows that there were convergences in the experiences of Jewish and Resistants. We risk obscuring these crucial intersections if the two experiences are studied separately. For this reason, it makes sense to study camp writings from Jewish and Resistant sources side by side.

### **The role of poetry in the camps**

Before formulating theories that would help to illuminate this poetry, I wanted to establish as comprehensive a survey as possible of the extent of poetry-writing in the camps. I was also keen to obtain first-hand accounts, where possible, from camp survivors, testimonies that might aid in providing sensitive readings of these poems. Reading Michel Reynaud’s excellent and wide-ranging collection of writings produced by camp inmates of many different nationalities, including a large number of French-language texts, I began to grasp just how many French-speaking deportees had pencilled literary works during their exile

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<sup>50</sup> Elina recounts her story in *Sans fleurs ni couronnes* (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2005). This testimony was first published in 1947.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Robert Créange, 11 November 2013.

from France.<sup>52</sup> I suspected that there might be further, undiscovered works from the camps in archives or in personal collections. With this goal in mind, I embarked on fieldwork in France from November to December 2013, conducting research in the archives of the Association Buchenwald-Dora and the Fédération nationale des déportés internés, résistants et patriotes (FNDIRP). In July 2015, I carried out further research in Paris in the Archives de France, where I located and read some of the original manuscripts written by French deportees in the camps: journals, poems and postcards. Building upon the list established by Mole, I have identified to date 116 deportees who wrote French-language poetry in the camps from 1943 to 1945.<sup>53</sup> My research in archives uncovered poems by previously unknown poets whose camp poems had either never been published or had benefited from only a small circulation, and whose names did not appear in any anthologies or scholarly literature. I also discovered unpublished poems by previously published writers, including Micheline Maurel (Ravensbrück), Gisèle Guillemot (Ravensbrück) and Pierre Genty (Neuengamme).

In addition to locating written sources, I interviewed several French concentration camp survivors: Dr Bernard Py (Dachau), Raymond Huard (Buchenwald), Bertrand Herz (Buchenwald) and Dr André Fournier (Buchenwald). I also talked or corresponded with the family members of a number of poets who wrote in the camps: relatives of Micheline Maurel (Ravensbrück), Gabriel Blanc (Dora), Pierre Créange (Auschwitz), André Ulmann (Mauthausen) and Jean Cayrol (Mauthausen). These family members shared stories about these poets and generously gave me access to their writings and other mementos. A number of extracts from these interviews appear in this thesis. In particular, I have drawn on an interview and subsequent correspondence with the former deportee Dr André Fournier, who, as a young medical student, was deported successively to Buchenwald, Natzweiler-Struthof and Dachau. Dr Fournier is one of the last surviving French poets from the camps and his testimony gives a privileged (and increasingly rare) insight into the genesis of poetry in the concentration camps.

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<sup>52</sup> Michel Reynaud, ed., *La Foire à l'homme*, 2 vols (Paris: Editions Tirésias, 1996). Other anthologies which I found very helpful were Yves Ménager, ed., *Paroles de déportés* (Paris: Editions de l'Atelier, 2001) and Henri Pouzol, ed., *La Poésie concentrationnaire* (Paris: Editions Seghers, 1975).

<sup>53</sup> See Appendix for a complete list of prisoners who composed poetry in French in the camps. Importantly, the writers listed do not account for all the French-language poetry from the camps; the authors of some extant French poems from the camps have never been identified. It should be noted that although most of these poets were French nationals, or French residents at the time of their deportation, several were Belgian and at least two were from Luxembourg (Lise London and Edouard Barbel).

My fieldwork in France brought out just how widespread an activity poetry-writing had been in the camps, among prisoners of many different backgrounds and professions. Most of those who wrote poetry in the camps were not published writers, although not surprisingly, they had often composed poetry before their deportation. Micheline Maurel wrote poetry from her childhood, according to her siblings, as did André Fournier.<sup>54</sup> Poetry was not the only literature to be composed in the camps: short stories, plays, even occasionally novels were also written by French deportees. However, poetry was by far the most common literary form adopted by writers in the concentration camps. The prevalence of this literary genre lead me to attempt to elucidate the role that poetry played for camp prisoners.

The sheer number of French camp inmates who wrote poetry during their internment, despite the notoriously harsh regime common to all concentration camps, and painstakingly guarded their writings throughout all the vicissitudes of camp existence, indicates that poetry represented something of great value to many prisoners, so valuable that they would expend considerable effort and even take great risks in order to enjoy it. In their testimonies about their camp experiences, numerous deportees recount the often ingenious (and hazardous) means they used to find the free time to write. In her testimony, Odile Arrighi-Roger (Ravensbrück) explains how writing, for her, was so necessary that she would even seize opportunities to write secretly during her working-hours in a factory:

Pour survivre, il me fallait écrire... A l'usine avec des bouts de papier et des crayons que je récupérais, que l'on me donnait parfois, cachée entre deux machines, j'écrivais des histoires, des lettres.<sup>55</sup>

Among the extensive writings Arrighi-Roger produced were a number of poems.<sup>56</sup> Arrighi-Roger was not alone in evading work in order to write; in a workshop in the Mauthausen sub-camp of Gusen, Jean Cayrol used to slip under the work-table and write poems. This urgent compulsion to write, in spite of the associated risks, helps to explain the large number of extant writings from the camps.

The extraordinary ubiquity of poetry in the camps appears to be derived, in part, from its particularities as a literary genre, easily enabling its reconstruction and composition under conditions of extreme deprivation, but also from its role as a powerful vehicle of emotion,

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<sup>54</sup> Interview with André Fournier, 14 December 2013.

<sup>55</sup> Odile Arrighi-Roger, *Testament pour vivre* (privately published memoir, 2005), 64.

<sup>56</sup> Today, the archives of the FNDIRP contains facsimiles of some of Arrighi-Roger's stories, poems, essays and letters.



making it a precious source of consolation for many imprisoned and suffering within the bleak boundaries of the camps. Part of the reason for the persistence of poetry in the camps can be traced to its unique property as an art that consists in wholly ‘reconstituting’ itself each time it is remembered. Don Paterson sums up eloquently this special capacity of poetry to be continually reactualised: ‘Our memory of the poem is the poem.’<sup>57</sup> Numerous camp interns emphasise the comfort and support that remembered poetry granted them in the camps. Recollection, recitation or transcription of classic French poems was common among French-speaking deportees. Men and women across different camps—Buchenwald, Dora, Ravensbrück, Dachau—wrote down remembered poems, often in hand-crafted notebooks. A journal kept by a French prisoner in Buchenwald, Frédéric Max, contains a carefully transcribed copy of Stéphane Mallarmé’s *Le tombeau d’Edgar Poe* on its first page.<sup>58</sup> Denise Vernay copied out poems in a hand-made notebook in Ravensbrück.<sup>59</sup> Violette Maurice recounts that reciting poetry to herself enabled her to bear the long hours of standing outside for the *Appel* (roll-call): ‘Chaque matin j’essayais de tenir le coup en regardant le ciel et en me répétant des poèmes. Puis [...] j’ai commencé à vouloir en composer aussi.’<sup>60</sup> Micheline Maurel’s family remembers that when, in later years, she used to make school visits to tell the story of her deportation, Maurel would urge the children to learn poetry by heart, because of the comfort it had given her and others when she was imprisoned in Ravensbrück.<sup>61</sup> Not only could favourite poems be reconstructed mentally, but the regularity of form inherent in certain types of poetry facilitated mental composition of original poems. Richard Ledoux (Buchenwald) explains that when he composed poetry in the camp, he usually chose the sonnet form, ‘parce que beaucoup de choses ne pouvaient être couchées sur le papier, cette forme-là était plus facile à retenir par la mémoire.’<sup>62</sup> Ledoux and his companions in Buchenwald had access to some French books. Poetry was, not surprisingly, Ledoux’s literature of choice:

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<sup>57</sup> Cited in Matthew Boswell, ‘Reading Holocaust Poetry: Genre, Authority and Identification,’ in *The Future of Memory*, ed. R. Cronshaw, J. Kilby and A. Rowland (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 170. This quote comes from D. Paterson, ‘Rhyme and Reason’ in *Guardian* (6 November 2004).

<sup>58</sup> Journal written by Frédéric Max in Buchenwald, Archives de France.

<sup>59</sup> In a video available online, Denise Vernay displays this notebook, bound with red, blue and white thread as a homage to the French colours.

<sup>60</sup> *Créer pour survivre : actes du colloque international ‘Écritures et pratiques artistiques dans les prisons et les camps de concentration nazis’, organisé à Reims les 20, 21 et 22 septembre 1995 par l’Université de Reims Champagne Ardenne et la Fédération nationale des déportés et internés, résistants et patriotes* (Paris: FNDIRP, 1995), 242. [Conference held at the Université de Reims in 1995.]

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Olivier Maurel, Charles Maurel, Geneviève Gil and Guylaine Gil, 19 November 2013.

<sup>62</sup> Richard Ledoux, ‘Mes souvenirs’, *Le Serment* 133: 19.

Je ne saurais dire de quel secours tous ces ouvrages—la poésie surtout—me furent dans les moments souvent tragiques que nous vivions.<sup>63</sup>

Just as did Maurice and Maurel in Ravensbrück, Ledoux found poetry to be a salutary antidote to the deep sadness, pain and hopelessness all too commonly engendered by the horrendous conditions in the camps.

One of the last surviving French poets of the camps, André Fournier (Natzweiler), confirms that he, like these other prisoners, found great comfort in mentally composing poetry and scribbling his verses on pieces of scrap paper when he could find the materials. In a letter written in 2014, reminiscing on his time in the camps, he remembered that some of the beautiful landscapes he saw during his imprisonment inspired him to compose verses:

Ce n'était pas le rythme de notre vie qui faisait naître les vers dans notre pauvre cerveau, mais le regret de la vie libre, bien sûr, et la beauté parfois des paysages rencontrés (de la neige des routes à Buchenwald) [ou les] tableaux parfois superbes de la campagne en vallée de Neckar plus tard, qui éveillaient en nous le désir (seul bien qui nous restait) de traduire notre pensée.<sup>64</sup>

Poetry was inspired by nostalgia for home and loved ones, but could also arise as a response to little glimpses of beauty encountered or moments of joy experienced within the camps. The ability to express these thoughts in verse was no slight consolation; it was treasured by Fournier and many other camp prisoners as a rare spark of pleasure and comfort in their bleak existence.

Poetry did not just provide emotional solace on an individual level. As Mole has noted, it frequently played a positive communal role in the camps. In numerous camps, French prisoners would gather during their free time to sing together and recite poetry. Through poetry, deportees could vocalise their shared heartache and their acute nostalgia for home and loved ones. They could temporarily lessen the pain of their grim exile by re-enacting the familiar cadences and sentiments of beloved poems so closely entwined with memories of their life back home in France. In an evocative vignette that is itself contained in a poem

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<sup>63</sup> Ledoux, 'Mes souvenirs'.

<sup>64</sup> Personal correspondence from André Fournier, 17 April 2014.

(dated 10 June 1944), Madeleine Rabjeau (Ravensbrück) describes the heartening effects of sharing French poetry and songs together with her comrades:

A Ravensbrück, malgré les coups et la mort même  
Nous chanterons toujours et dirons des poèmes  
[...]  
le cauchemar affreux qui nous encercle  
Par la douce magie de la fraternité  
S'atténue peu à peu, perd de son acuité,  
S'oublie dans les accents des chants de notre France.<sup>65</sup>

As this touching account shows, such gatherings were an opportunity to reinforce the *esprit de corps* among deportees. Occasionally, poetry recitation sessions took on a more structured character. In Buchenwald, which possessed a large community of French deportees, the *Comité des intérêts français*—a clandestine group of mainly Communist Resistants who aimed to promote the well-being and solidarity of the French prisoners—organised several poetry competitions and in one instance, secretly put on a *soirée* at which authors were invited to read their compositions aloud.<sup>66</sup> Some poets shared their compositions privately with their friends. This was the case with Gabriel Blanc (Dora); several of Blanc's poems celebrate the beauty of the landscapes of the Savoie region and must have struck a deep chord with his fellow Savoyards deported with him.<sup>67</sup> Another French poet of the camps whose works were appreciated by fellow deportees was Micheline Maurel. In her testimony *Un camp très ordinaire*, Maurel describes the popularity her poems attained among her peers. These verses, she writes self-deprecatingly, had no literary merit in her opinion but nonetheless served a purpose in giving words to the unarticulated sufferings of her companions:

Ces vers n'ont aucune valeur. Mais là-bas, ils en avaient une. Malgré leur maladresse, ils exprimaient sous forme rimée et rythmée ce que toutes les prisonnières éprouvaient.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Typewritten document, FNDIRP archives.

<sup>66</sup> A facsimile copy of a hand-drawn poster 'advertising' this event is contained in the digital archives of the Association Buchenwald-Dora.

<sup>67</sup> Personal correspondence from Dr Hubert Blanc (Gabriel Blanc's son). Dr Blanc generously gave me access to facsimiles of his father's notebook.

<sup>68</sup> Micheline Maurel, *Un camp très ordinaire* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1957), 113.

This passage, Mole comments, shows that poetry in the camps could truly give a ‘voice to the community’.<sup>69</sup> In more than one case, a deportee wrote and offered a special poem as a comforting gift for a fellow prisoner. A poignant anecdote in Maurel’s testimony describes the gratitude of a woman who had asked Maurel to write a poem about her love for her family: ‘Elle a pleuré sur son poème et m’a dit qu’il lui faisait du bien.’<sup>70</sup> This is not the only example of a poem being offered as a gift. As a present for a French comrade in Buchenwald, a Russian prisoner wrote a poem about the Frenchman’s absent little daughter.<sup>71</sup> In Mauthausen, André Ulmann composed a short but warmly affectionate poem for his friend, Abbé Jean Varnoux, which offers encouraging words and pays tribute to his friend’s religious faith; Ulmann accompanied the poem with an illustration of barbed-wire morphing into a crown of thorns.<sup>72</sup> These communal experiences of poetry, whether they consisted of a personal, empathic gift of words offered to a friend or involved the sharing of favourite French poems within a larger gathering, were deeply consoling moments for exiled prisoners, sorely missing their homes and their loved ones.

### **Poetry: an antidote to ideology**

Poetry found favour with camp prisoners as a genre of literature for its intrinsic qualities. It could easily be composed even if no writing materials were available, and it could be stored in the memory; it provided a saving outlet for emotions and lent itself to communal sharing. But studying this poetry, I began to see another, crucial reason for the attractiveness of poetry as a form of literary expression to camp inmates, a motivation that had not been touched upon in previous scholarship. Existing studies of poetry written in the camps had theorised that, for camp prisoners, poetry (especially when it employed traditional prosody) was valued because it was a means of imposing order and structure upon an eminently chaotic and disorienting experience. In his study of the German-language poetry written in concentration camps, Andrés Nader suggests that traditional poetic forms ‘became useful, or even necessary, as readily available shapes to constrain in some sense, and to become containers for, experiences that overwhelm the psyche.’<sup>73</sup> In a similar way, Mole argues that the use of conventional French versification brought a semblance of order and coherence to an

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<sup>69</sup> Mole, *Beyond the Limit-Experience*, 49.

<sup>70</sup> Maurel, *Un camp très ordinaire*, 113.

<sup>71</sup> Facsimile, archives of the Association Buchenwald-Dora (Document ABDK-II-12-7-1-003).

<sup>72</sup> Facsimile of manuscript in Michel Goldschmidt and Suzanne Tenand-Ulmann, *André Ulmann ou le juste combat* (Paris: Société des Editions Internationales, 1982), 165.

<sup>73</sup> Nader, ‘The Shock of Arrival: Poetry from the Nazi Camps at the End of the Century’, *Poetics Today* 21 (Spring 2000): 183.

experience ‘shapeless and confusing in the extreme’.<sup>74</sup> While it is certainly true to state that the use of traditional poetic forms provided an ordered framework in which to explore the reality of the camps, invoking the qualities of constraint and order to account for the popularity of poetry among camp inmates does not give the whole picture. We have to look at other qualities inherent to poetry to identify what made it so appealing a genre to these prisoners.

I suggest that if poetry was the literary medium of choice for these authors, it was to a large extent because the pliability, individuality and liveliness of poetic language made it a subversive corrective to the rigid frameworks of ideology and totalitarianism so despised by these prisoners. Poetry was a way of using language in idiosyncratic and covertly rebellious ways and thus challenging mendacious and dehumanising discourses promoted by authority. The widespread appeal of poetry to those living under totalitarian regimes and the innate capacity of poetry to undermine ideology is a topic that has been explored by Aleksandr Kushner, a modern Russian poet. Kushner, who managed to have his poems published at a time of strict Soviet censorship in the late 1960s despite the highly transgressive message these writings contained, has argued that the genius of poetry lies in its capacity to elude the clumsy grasp of the ideological mindset. ‘The nets of ideology,’ Kushner writes, ‘are not woven finely enough to catch [the poetic word] (it slips through the holes); it lives by its own rules.’<sup>75</sup> Poetic language wilfully breaks the rules governing everyday discourse, including those oppressive rules laid down by ideologues. Poetry is a form of discourse totally outside of the purview of ideology and, for this reason, Kushner goes so far as to identify poetry with freedom. For Kushner, the freedom innate to poetry—the independence it establishes with respect to received discourse—means that it is an artform that thrives under tyranny and oppression.

Kushner’s theories help to account for the remarkable predominance of poetry as a literary genre in the concentration camps, in a climate of intense and brutal repression. For committed Resistants living under captivity in a Nazi camp, unable to broadcast their passionate anti-Fascist sentiments in too public and direct a fashion yet still wanting to give voice to their inner rebellion against the totalitarian regime which had perpetrated so many evils and desiring to sketch out their own alternative vision of the world, poetry was a discreet but still boldly combative means of expression. I was struck by how in the poetry written in

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<sup>74</sup> Mole, *Beyond the Limit-Experience*, 135.

<sup>75</sup> Aleksandr Kushner, ‘Poetry and Freedom,’ trans. Emily Johnson, *World Literature Today* 77, 2 (July-September 2003): 40.

the camps, poets would use apparently innocuous words in such a way that, while superficially tame, these texts actually expressed vehement sentiments. For example, Maurice Honel (Auschwitz) frequently employs very simple words in his poems that in ordinary speech would be considered banal, but because of the way they are used in the context of the whole poem, these words take on anti-ideological resonance. A simple series of words like ‘Nous / Sommes / Cela / Des hommes / Comme vous’ becomes a damning indictment of the Nazi ideology.

The power of poetry to contest ideological principles also made it for some writers a tool of social renewal. Camp prisoners who had belonged to intellectual and literary circles and written extensively before their deportation saw poetry as a means of giving fresh vigour and clarity to language increasingly compromised by political misuse, conformity to harmful mentalities and the glib parroting of words, unaccompanied by any reflection. In the political and social climate of the 1930s, and into the 1940s, it seemed a more urgent necessity than ever to restore integrity to language. Words proliferated more than ever before through the rapid expansion of communication tools: the mass-circulation press, news-reels, motion pictures, radio and advertising. New technologies such as the radio allowed the widespread dissemination of political speeches and facilitated the feeding of propaganda to mass audiences. Intellectuals denounced the tendency of Fascist regimes to manipulate language to make their ideology more palatable to the public. In Germany, university professor Victor Klemperer made copious notes in his journal on the flagrant manipulation of language by the Third Reich.<sup>76</sup> French intellectuals were just as concerned about the degeneration of language in modern society. Although Sartre remains most well-known among French intellectuals in this realm, he was not the first to condemn the decline of language. Bergson’s writings, especially his concept of the *tout fait*, thinking and speaking in ‘ready-made’ terms, encouraged a whole generation of committed French intellectuals to critique the misuse of words.<sup>77</sup> Emmanuel Mounier, founder of the Personalist movement in the early 1930s, was one such figure; in his advocacy of a *révolution personaliste*, Mounier urged the rejection of ideological jargon and the easy path of linguistic conformity, asserting that it was up to each person to seek with diligence words congruent with his principles and expressive of his own distinctive understanding of the world. Mounier and numerous other French intellectuals of

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<sup>76</sup> The first volume of Klemperer’s diaries was published in English as *I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the Nazi Years, 1933-1941*, trans. Martin Chalmers (New York: The Modern Library, 1998).

<sup>77</sup> Charles Péguy, whose works enjoyed considerable influence in France during the period between the wars, argued that Bergson’s philosophy ‘veut que l’on pense sur mesure et que l’on ne pense pas tout fait.’ Cited in Glenn H. Roe, *The Passion of Péguy, Literature, Modernity and the Crisis of Historicism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 184. This quotation is taken from Charles Péguy’s 1914 work *Note sur M. Bergson et la philosophie bergsonienne*.

the era stressed the importance of truthful language in a society dominated by 'ready-made' words.

The outbreak of war did not make these concerns about language any less pressing for anti-Fascist intellectuals. In the wake of German domination in Europe and the devastation of war, the question of one day rebuilding European society on firm moral foundations became a vital one. Achieving this goal would require, first and foremost, rejecting the devious manipulation of words in the service of political ends and seeking instead a lucid, honest language freed from the dangerous influence of ideology. Towards the end of 1943, Albert Camus wrote:

Ce qui caractérise notre siècle, ce n'est peut-être pas tant d'avoir à reconstruire le monde que d'avoir à le repenser. Cela revient en fait à lui donner son langage. Ce qu'on peut apprendre de l'expérience qui nous est ici proposée, c'est à tourner le dos aux attitudes et aux discours pour porter avec scrupule le poids de notre vie quotidienne.<sup>78</sup>

Only when we fully assume the particular and peculiar reality of our daily existence, Camus argues here, can we hope to express the world in truthful terms. This new, authentic language, moreover, is not just of personal value; it will actually prove foundational to the reconstruction of a broken society. From the point of view of Camus and many other anti-Fascist intellectuals, the primary condition to be met before a genuine and lasting reconstruction of a devastated world could be achieved was a total renewal of language, starting at the individual level.

Writings from the camps suggest that a number of French poets, particularly those who were already established writers, maintained such concerns about language during their incarceration. For these writers, composing poetry was closely associated with the revitalisation of language: poetry was about reversing the corruption of language rife in the modern world. On occasion, this motivation for writing poetry is explicitly spelled out in camp poems themselves. We find self-reflexive passages in which the author stresses the ability of poetry to offer fresh and truthful words, words desperately needed in an atmosphere of ideology, war and oppression. Playing creatively with words, these poets strove to make language convey their own distinctive and anti-conformist vision of the

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<sup>78</sup> Albert Camus, 'Sur une philosophie de l'expression,' *Poésie* 44 17 (December 1943-February 1944), 22.

world. Literary theorist Maurice Blanchot has given a compelling account of the workings of poetic language which can illuminate what is going on in these poets' works. In his introduction to a collection of his essays published in 1943, Blanchot suggests that poetic language involved purposefully freeing words from the shackles of everyday usage in order to make them once again expressive of lived personal experience:

Les mots donnent à celui que les écrit l'impression de lui être dictés par l'usage, et il les reçoit avec le malaise d'y trouver un immense réservoir de facilité et d'effets tout montés—montés sans que sa puissance y ait eu de part. [...] Il lui semble alors nécessaire de reprendre les mots à son compte et, en les immolant dans leurs capacités serviles, exactement dans leur aptitude à être à son service, de retrouver, avec leur révolte, le pouvoir qu'il a d'en être le maître. L'idéal des 'mots en liberté' n'a pas pour objet de dégager les mots de toute règle, mais de les libérer d'une règle qu'on ne subit plus pour les soumettre à une loi qu'on sent vraiment.<sup>79</sup>

When the poet strives to give back to words a new, lived meaning, he recaptures, Blanchot contends, a lost ascendancy over language. It is significant that Blanchot employs the term 'revolt' to describe the shift in the roles played by words, a term that hints at how bold a change is at stake. For more than one writer in the camps, poetry was a means of subverting linguistic norms and thus contesting the supremacy of received (and especially ideological) discourses. Poetry was, therefore, much more than just a private intellectual activity or an emotional outlet in the camps. By its very nature, poetry, more than one writer believed, could become an antidote to ideology and could assist in restoring integrity to language corrupted by the ravages of Fascism.

### **Theorising the poetry of the camps**

Invested with emotional power and possessing formal qualities that made it extremely adaptable to conditions of extreme deprivation, poetry became extremely popular among French-speaking camp inmates. The ability of poetic language to subvert conventional discourse and undermine ideological principles also made this genre an attractive choice to committed anti-Fascists. Interestingly, despite the basic similarities in conditions that practically all camp interns suffered, prisoners responded to their ordeals with very different

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<sup>79</sup> Maurice Blanchot, 'Introduction' in *Faux pas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 22-3.



sorts of poetry, a fact which has crucial implications for how we theorise the corpus. This poetry spans practically the widest spectrum conceivable, from realistic poems that describe the horrors of the camps in graphic, unsparing detail, to melodious lyric poems permeated with nostalgia for loved ones at home, all the way through to highly fanciful poetic visions containing no explicit mention of the camps. Most critics, like Lawrence Langer, conceive the central problematic of Holocaust literature to be the difficult task of expressing barbaric and unthinkable events. Early in my research, however, the sheer diversity of genres, themes and styles that emerged from this corpus lead me to question whether this existing paradigm was applicable here.

Particularly intriguing was the role which imaginative visions and figurative language play in this poetry. For example, several poets, including André Ulmann and Jean Cayrol, make extensive use of Surrealist imagery. Following in the footsteps of André Breton and his fellow Surrealists, these writers employ dream-like, fluid sequences of apparently irrational images in their works. Although Surrealism was concerned with liberating the imagination and the unconscious from the repression exerted by reason and logic, this imagery, it seemed to me, was not just about exercising imagination gratuitously, seeking discursive freedom for its own sake, but was deeply involved in the crafting of meaning, in the elaboration of a much richer and more comprehensive vision of freedom. Or to take quite a different phenomenon: many of the poems about death contain striking metaphors that seemed to me to play a more important role than simply communicating reality effectively. I realised that I needed to elucidate a new conceptual framework which could satisfactorily accommodate the complex intersection and workings of concrete reality and imaginative visions within this poetry.

Reliance on somewhat narrow notions of representation seemed to be precisely the sticking point that had hampered Mole's efforts to conceptualise the French poetry from the camps. For Mole, the most imaginative poems in this corpus are not concerned at all with giving a truthful picture of the horrendous conditions of imprisonment. Such poems approach the camps only obliquely through figurative language or, turning to the consolations of the imagination, avoid engaging altogether with reality. In these texts, the camps are 'derealized in favour of escapist visions.'<sup>80</sup> Suggesting that these poems originated in an understandable need to escape mentally from terrible suffering, Mole believes, nonetheless, that such works constitute a retreat from the thorny task of representing the camps:

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<sup>80</sup> Mole, *Beyond the Limit-Experience*, 75.

The poetic negativity in which the absent and imaginary are used to seek solace for or even replace the present and real [...] is a considered reaction to the extremes of mental and physical suffering. But it brings us to pose a further question concerning the derealisation of allegorical distancing. By this I mean the extent to which the abstraction inherent in poems which consciously turn away from the real may be so great that the limits of representation have not been challenged by the concentration camp experience but merely elided.<sup>81</sup>

Obscured by a profusion of opaque metaphors and symbols, or even displaced by compensatory visions of love, goodness and beauty, the horrific reality of the concentration camps never emerges in these highly abstract poems, Mole argues. Discussing some enigmatic Symbolist-type lyric poems by Yves Darriet (Buchenwald), Mole suggests that the poet's enterprise is about abandoning altogether the representation of reality, in order to build a comforting, if fleeting, dream-world: 'In the oneiric world of the poem [...] the logic of the outside world has no hold: for that brief visionary moment, the poet is free.' Poetic freedom, for Mole, was achieved in the camps only at the price of jettisoning all connection to reality and taking refuge in illusory worlds of the imagination.

My own readings of this poetry, however, brought out the limitations of this dualistic scheme contrasting realistic and escapist texts. I became convinced, on the one hand, that this literature, even when it contained no transparent references to the harsh conditions of life in the camps, did not turn away from reality or abandon all representative pretensions—that many of the most extravagantly imaginative and oneiric poems in the corpus were still essentially 'about' the poet's experience in the camps. Simultaneously, I became aware that there was something more fundamental than the pursuit of rigorous testimonial fidelity going on in these texts. While a great deal of this poetry does represent with quite gripping clarity the terrible conditions prevalent in the camps, it seemed to me that even such realistic texts aspired to much more than simply a gut-wrenching transcription of facts and emotional states. Whether it was a case of graphic depictions of camp horrors or, instead, boldly imaginative visions, these poems were vitally connected to the poet's search for an overarching, saving ethos by which to live his or her life of captivity and suffering.

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<sup>81</sup> Mole, *Beyond the Limit-Experience*, 74.

For all the above reasons, I found in Ricœur's conception of narrative and poetics a rich and productive lens of interpretation to apply to the poetry from the camps. The search for ethical meaning in life, according to Ricœur's philosophy, is consistently mediated by narrative. Indeed, narrative, for Ricœur, has an indispensable function in achieving self-understanding and orienting the moral direction of a life. Ricœur's compelling insights into the pivotal role that imagination plays in the crafting of narrative allow us to accommodate the imaginative dimension of this poetry within the broader ethical project that each author's work constituted.

Mole's classification of imaginative poems from the camps as 'abstract' and as 'escapist visions' reflects a somewhat constricted understanding of how a text can represent personal experience. In contrast, Ricœur's conception of textual representation offers a more useful framework for analysing the relation between non-naturalistic poems and their author's experience of the camps. Acknowledging that the concept of representation can indeed be problematic if not properly theorised, Ricœur seeks to formulate a nuanced model of representation and narrative, a model which underscores all his work but is presented in its most complete form in the three volumes of *Temps et récit*. Narrative, for Ricœur, is not the reproduction of a static, factual reality; it is something much more dynamic. Although Ricœur retains the Aristotelian concept of *mimesis*, he understands this concept not as a slavish copy of some fixed natural order but rather as an essentially 'lively' phenomenon that depicts objective reality as it is grasped by subjective experience, that is, as a reality perpetually in act (*le Réel comme Acte*). 'L'expression *vive*,' Ricœur writes, 'est ce qui dit l'expérience *vive*.'<sup>82</sup>

Ricœur is sceptical of textual hermeneutic approaches that posit self-contained texts completely separated from real life. Taking Aristotle's idea of *mimesis* as a starting point for his theoretical reflections on representation in literature, Ricœur argues that literature is a phenomenon always contained in the realm of *l'être-au-monde*:

Toute *mimésis*, même créatrice, surtout créatrice, est dans l'horizon d'un être au monde [...] La vérité de l'imaginaire, la puissance de détection ontologique de la poésie, voilà ce que, pour ma part, je vois dans la *mimésis* d'Aristote.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Paul Ricœur, *La métaphore vive* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975), 61.

<sup>83</sup> Ricœur, *La métaphore vive*, 61.

For Ricœur, literature is not something that exists apart from the sphere of human acting. Rather, poetic texts are firmly anchored in the world, even when these are at their most creative. Poetry does not simply transmit a pre-determined reality; poetic language (and literature more generally) can engender utterly new ways of understanding our *être-au-monde* and thus powerfully influence the development of both individual lives and society. This understanding of poetry can be fittingly applied to the case of poetry written in the camps. Poetry in the camps was an avenue to explore the self and circumstances—as unpromising and desperate as these might seem on the surface—and a way of discovering, illuminating, clarifying and reinforcing some kind of interior freedom, freedom that conferred ongoing hopefulness and value upon life in captivity.

Ricœur’s sensitive understanding of narrative (a broad concept that includes poetry) as both reflecting the experience of its author and yet at the same time, invested with a living activeness of its own, allows us, moreover, to approach the poetry from the camps with sympathy and respect for these worlds that these texts enact. For Ricœur, narrative truly represents human experience but equally, it gives rise to a new world, dynamic and ‘lively’ (*vive*).<sup>84</sup> Poetry can project worlds that are imaginative, yet at the same time, coherent and credible. In contrast to Adorno, who is, on the whole, pessimistic about poetic discourse after Auschwitz, particularly its ability to exercise any real ethical impact, Ricœur holds that, in creating a new world, poetry can have powerful effects on the world outside the text:

The text speaks of a possible world and of a possible way of orientating oneself within it. The dimensions of this world are properly opened up by and disclosed by the text. [...] [Discourse] goes beyond the mere function of pointing out and showing what already exists, and in this sense, transcends the function of the ostensive reference linked to spoken language. Here showing is at the same time creating a new mode of being.<sup>85</sup>

For Ricœur, narrative is closely bound up with the enterprise of making sense of events in life. The ability to project oneself into this textual world (discovering ‘a possible way of orientating oneself within it’) means that narrative can play a key role in the formation of personal identity and in the search for moral and spiritual bearings. The power of poetic

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<sup>84</sup> See Ricœur’s discussion of the worlds that can be disclosed by poetry in *La métaphore vive*, 288.

<sup>85</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, The Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 88.

language lies in its capacity to not merely denote existing things, as ordinary speech does, but to effect a 'creative imitation' that delineates a world possessing its own distinct identity.

Ricœur's understanding of narrative and poetics allows us to address some of the suspicions about textual mediation of the camps that we find in Mole's work, and in other critical studies of Holocaust literature, particularly concerns that literary interpretations ignore or mask the rawness of reality. Strong reservations have been expressed by some critics on the use of literary devices in Holocaust literature. Lawrence Langer holds that, when employed in Holocaust memoirs, textual strategies such as metaphor or simile can have the problematic effect of softening and distorting reality. When authors resort to using metaphor or other imagery, they are, Langer declares, 'easing us into their unfamiliar world through familiar (and hence comforting?) literary devices.'<sup>86</sup> Langer continues: 'The impulse to *portray* (and thus refine) reality when we write about it seems irresistible.' For Langer, literary imagery in works on the camps is primarily about attempts to communicate what it was like to be a prisoner in the concentration camp, attempts that, paradoxically, end up deforming this reality to some extent.

But, in reading the French poetry from the camps, it became clear to me that imaginative elements and figurative language did not obscure the terrible suffering and evil of the camps, nor could their function be reduced to a matter of conveying the nature of the concentration camp. Instead, the imaginative strategies deployed by these prisoners in their poems served to uncover transcendent meaning in the heart of the ordeal. Metaphors used in this poetry to describe dead prisoners or the ashes from their incinerated bodies were compelling precisely because they brought to light some deep spiritual significance within these tragic sights. Ricœur's theory helps us to better understand and appreciate this creative capacity of poetic imagery. Not content with merely transmitting a given field of reality, poetic language, from Ricœur's point of view, actively opens up previously unimagined aspects of this reality. The special genius of poetic discourse is to bestow on referents 'un sens radicalement nouveau par rapport au langage ordinaire'<sup>87</sup>. Referents in poetic discourse thus appear in a novel light, not apparent in ordinary speech. Ricœur is particularly interested in the function of the metaphor, arguing that metaphor is not a linguistic *ornement* as some theorists maintain, but rather produces new meaning. Metaphor springs from an intense moment of intuition, an instinctive grasp of the resemblance (*le semblable*) between two things. Ricœur sees

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<sup>86</sup> Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, 19.

<sup>87</sup> Ricœur, *La métaphore vive*, 190.

metaphor as an inexhaustible source of new meaning, opening up previously undisclosed horizons in the world. '[La métaphore] contribue,' Ricœur writes, 'à ouvrir et à découvrir un autre champ de réalité.'<sup>88</sup> Authentic poetic discourse, Ricœur maintains, tells us something wholly new about the world. Ricœur's understanding of metaphor and other poetic imagery enables a better appreciation of how figurative language in the poetry from the camps could generate new meaning and throw light on the camp experience—not betray it.

However, there is one category of poems from the camps to which Ricœur's textual hermeneutics cannot easily be applied. The poems which Jean Cayrol wrote in Mauthausen, published as *Alerte aux ombres*, stand out from other imaginative poems in this corpus for the arresting immediacy of their mythic narratives and for the sheer breadth and prodigious ambition of the poetic worlds delineated in them. Oppression, suffering and redemption are recounted in these poems in such a way that, even though the camps are never explicitly mentioned in them, the texts clearly narrate Cayrol's experiences in a very direct way. The liveliness of these poems and the distinctive, compelling character of the Cayrol's poetic worlds strongly recall Ricœur's understanding of narrative as the creation of a new and dynamic world. But what differentiates these poems from Ricœur's hermeneutics is the nature of the imagery, which defies categorisation as symbols or metaphors. These narratives have a potent actuality that resists interpretations founded on metaphor and symbol.

Because the character of the narrative in these poems indicates that Cayrol is relating his true story quite directly, and yet the authorial perspective on this story has changed from an ordinary, naturalistic approach to a much more imaginative point of view, I have termed this technique 'imaginative translocation'. The poem is conceived not as an indirect, symbolic version of the author's story; but rather as the object of a shift or 'translocation' in the gaze that reveals precisely the same story on a different plane. The term 'imaginative translocation', I suggest, provides a more accurate alternative to the problematic term of 'allegory' used by Mole to conceptualise highly figurative poetry written in the camps. Jacob Emery's extremely precise definition of allegory illuminates the reason for the inadequacy of the notion here. Allegory is, Emery writes, 'an extended narrative metaphor mapping consistently onto a structure beyond the text'.<sup>89</sup> In the case of Cayrol's poetry, it is impossible to consistently 'map' the tropes and figures, one-on-one, onto external realities. The figures in this story are not symbols or metaphors, but possess an independent and dynamic

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<sup>88</sup> Ricœur, *La métaphore vive*, 191.

<sup>89</sup> Jacob Emery, 'Symbols taken for Signs: Symbols, Allegory, Mise en abyme,' *Comparative Literature*, 64, 4 (2012), 343-4.

existence. This poetry does not, therefore, allegorically encode the camps, but still less does it turn away from reality: these 'imaginative translocations' remain consistently anchored in the poet's circumstances. Imaginative translocation involves a particularly direct, vivid and dramatic portrayal of events that can be appreciated without the need to decode abstruse metaphorical references.

Marked out by their creation of a rich and expansive poetic world, Cayrol's poems are, in a sense, a heightened manifestation of the freedom underscoring so much of the wider corpus of poetry from the camps. But imaginative visions are equally important, if sometimes less striking, in the works of other poets. For camp prisoners, having recourse to the imagination was not just about seeking consolation, as Mole holds, although the consolatory role of this poetry was important. Imaginative elements in their poetry are not just vehicles employed to aptly convey some aspect of reality, nor are they decorative but essentially superfluous additions to texts. Instead, these elements are closely bound up with elaborating a particular vision of transcendent values, moral direction and enduring human freedom.

### **Political, religious and intellectual influences on camp writings**

In approaching the corpus of French poetry from the camps, I have chosen to focus on André Ulmann (Mauthausen), Gustave Leroy (Dora), Maurice Honel (Auschwitz), André Verdet (Buchenwald) and Jean Cayrol (Mauthausen). Each of these poets stands out for the sustained body of work he produced in the camps, the depth of thought demonstrated in his work and the strength and confidence of his poetic voice. While I draw from time to time in this thesis on works written by other prisoners, where such texts offer helpful insights, the corpus in question is so extensive that a rigorous selection proved necessary in order to allow in-depth analysis of texts. I selected these five poets because, in addition to the intrinsic interest of their works, they provide together a representative overview of the major political, philosophical and religious inputs which formed large numbers of French camp prisoners in the years leading up to their deportation. Communism, Personalism and Catholicism remained significant influences on these five poets during their captivity, as well as on many other French prisoners. It was the strong convictions fostered by such movements that, I suggest, provided moral strength and made interior freedom a real possibility for these camp inmates.

To understand the deepest sources of the freedom elaborated in the works of these five poets, we have to explore, therefore, the political, religious and intellectual movements which

flourished in France in the 1930s and look at the lasting ideals and principles which these movements engrained in followers. While Resistance movements had an important role to play in nourishing ideals, particularly in encouraging patriotism in their members, we have to go further back to identify some of the decisive influences on Ulmann, Leroy, Honel, Verdet, Cayrol and others who wrote poetry in the camps. The robustness of prisoners' convictions can only be understood by looking at the tumultuous cultural and political conditions in France during the previous decade, the era in which these individuals' moral and philosophical principles had been largely formed.

In the 1930s, the widespread impression that France and, more generally, Europe were going through a profound existential crisis fuelled vigorous debate among French intellectuals about the way forward, sparked the rapid expansion of en-masse political movements and stimulated the passionate social and political activism that characterised this decade. As early as the 1920s, prominent French intellectuals including Albert Demangeon and René Guénon were warning of the decline of Europe.<sup>90</sup> In the following decade, two events in particular intensified the feeling among intellectuals that the very foundations of European society were disintegrating: the economic crisis of the early 1930s in Europe and the rise of Fascism. For many French intellectuals, the apparent failure of current economic models and the disturbing rise of Fascism in Spain, Italy and Germany seemed to confirm that European society was at a critical turning-point and that an alternative social, economic and political model was desperately needed. This decade saw, in some ways, the high-point of the *intellectuel engagé* in France. Intellectual thought was not an ivory-tower activity: in the troubled social and political climate of the time, intellectuals saw it as part of their moral duty to engage in uncompromising militancy for their principles. Apathy, fence-sitting and paying lip-service alone to a cause were despised and condemned in no uncertain terms. Literature, moreover, was closely linked to political and social activism during this era: in the 1930s, Communist intellectuals in France, as elsewhere, began to write works of committed literature, works that they hoped could become real agents of change in the world. The 1930s in France was therefore a time when ideas and social concerns were almost universally translated into activism and militancy.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> See Albert Demangeon, *Le Déclin de l'Europe* (Paris: Payot, 1920) and René Guénon, *La Crise du monde moderne* (Paris: Editions Bossard, 1927).

<sup>91</sup> For studies of the social, intellectual and political history of the period in France, see Marc Simard, 'Intellectuels, fascisme et antimodernité dans la France des années trente', *Vingtième Siècle, Revue d'Histoire*, no. 18 (April-June 1988): 55-75; Eugen Weber, *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s* (New York: Norton, 1994); and Serge Bernstein, *La France des années 30* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1988). See also Joseph Amato, *Mounier and Maritain: A French Catholic Understanding of the Modern World* (Ypsilanti, Michigan: Sapientia Press, 1975), 110-117 for a



Political activism, moreover, was not the province of a select few: left-wing movements were able to attract large sectors of the French population. Communism, in particular, quickly gained momentum during this period and mobilised large numbers of enthusiastic followers in France. Communist circles recruited numerous members among the working classes and young people. New journals, such as the popular *Vendredi*, contributed to the rapid spread of socialist ideals. At a time when the USSR was held up by many intellectuals in the West as a beacon of Communist prosperity and success, Marxists saw their movement as a defender of liberty and as the sole bastion against social and economic exploitation, political oppression and the rise of Fascism. Indeed, the emergence of Fascist ideology across Europe gave fresh momentum to left-wing campaigners in France and anti-Fascist militancy often became the focus of their efforts. The Spanish Republicans attracted eager support from French left-wing activists, many of whom lent practical aid to the Republican cause by joining their armed combat against government forces or helping to smuggle anti-Franco combatants across the border into France.

Many of the French poets in the camps had a long history of involvement in anti-Fascist activism—often coupled with Communist militancy—pre-dating their participation in the Resistance. Both André Verdet and André Ulmann engaged in pro-Republican activities in the late 1930s. Verdet was a seasoned Communist activist, and just one of numerous Communists to be found among the French poets in the camps. Another was Maurice Honel, who had been an active member of the Communist Party and had been elected as a deputy to the French parliament. Verdet, Honel and their fellow Communists were ardently attached to the values of fraternity and solidarity and whole-heartedly committed to the ideal of the Communist revolution, convinced that the united struggle of the proletariat against tyranny would one day be victorious. Such deeply anchored ideals proved a significant source of motivation and encouragement throughout the painful months of their ordeal in the camps. Adhering to strong principles cemented by years of activism, Communists and anti-Fascists could take heart from the firm assurance that their incarceration was simply the next stage in their long-standing militancy for a beloved cause. Considering the important role that literature occupied at the time for many left-wing activists, it is not surprising that Communists like Verdet and Honel and veteran anti-Fascists like Ulmann turned to poetry in the camps as a vehicle for exploring, defining and re-affirming their moral and political beliefs.

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discussion of the growing sense of a crisis engulfing Europe that comes out of the writings of European intellectuals in the 1920s and 30s.

The 1930s also witnessed the rise of the *non-conformistes* in France, who denounced capitalism and Communism with equal vigour and sought to provide a *Troisième voie* ('Third Way') as an alternative to the politics of both left and right.<sup>92</sup> In 1930, Emmanuel Mounier founded the French Personalist movement, which affirmed the radical freedom innate to each person and condemned the subordination of the individual's freedoms to any collectivity, whether a Communist state, the liberal economic order or a Fascist dictatorship.<sup>93</sup> Other key *non-conformistes* included Robert Aron and Armand Dandieu, who shared some of Mounier's Personalist ideals and together with some collaborators, formed a new intellectual movement *L'Ordre nouveau* and a journal of the same name published from 1933 to 1938.<sup>94</sup> The profound influence which these schools of thought had on some Resistantists should not be underestimated. Most notably, André Ulmann's poetry consistently bears the imprint of Personalist thought in its repeated emphasis on the primacy of human freedom and the need to continually and courageously strive to realise the fullness of this freedom in the realms of self-awareness, language and action.

Political movements like Communism and philosophical schools such as Personalism were not the only sources of interior direction and purpose for French prisoners; the Christian faith, too, provided moral bearings and spiritual solace to numerous camp inmates. Catholicism in France was, in many ways, at a turning-point in the 1930s, and an understanding of both conservative and progressive currents within Catholic communities is necessary in order to understand the nature of the faith that sustained many prisoners and comes out clearly in their writings. On the one hand, despite being besieged by secularist and atheistic currents in France and experiencing an ongoing fall in the number of church-goers, the heritage of traditional French Catholic piety remained very strong in a sub-section of the population during this era. Influenced by the rigorous education in the faith that prevailed in early 20th century France, many Catholics held strongly to their religion and were guided by their religious principles in all areas of social and political activism, including, eventually, the Resistance. Many members of the *Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne* (JOC) and the *Jeunesse étudiante chrétienne* (JEC), two influential Catholic youth movements, would join diverse Resistant

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<sup>92</sup> The historian Jean Louis Loubet del Bayle was the first to name these groups of intellectuals the 'non-conformistes', in his book *Les non-conformistes des années 30 : une tentative de renouvellement de la pensée politique française* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1969).

<sup>93</sup> For a concise analysis of Mounier's Personalist thought, as well as an account of its beginnings, see Chapter VI ('A Revolution: To Remake the Renaissance') in Amato, *Mounier and Maritain*, 105-24.

<sup>94</sup> See Jean Jacob, *Le Retour de L'Ordre nouveau: les métamorphoses d'un fédéralisme européen* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2000), 115-18 for an account of the formation of this journal and an exploration of the principles espoused by Aron, Dandieu and their collaborators. *L'Ordre nouveau*, despite its professed independence from traditional left-right politics, would become increasingly allied with the right later in the 1930s, to such an extent that Mounier would accuse the group of having sympathies with Hitler.

groups under the Occupation. The ongoing influence of traditional Christian practice in France comes out very forcefully in much of the poetry written in the camp. Gustave Leroy consistently draws in his poems upon his Christian faith in his efforts to give meaning to his internment; Catholic doctrine on suffering, prayer and eternal life becomes a source of hope and interior freedom for him.

In the 1930s, traditional religious practice continued to be associated in France on the intellectual level with distrust of all modern philosophy and social theory and on a political level, with distrust of the *République* and nostalgia for the *Ancien régime*. In the years before the outbreak of war, alarmed by what they saw as the continued de-Christianisation of France and the rise of Communism, many devout French Catholics responded to these trends by condemning the *République*, seen as an immoral and anti-Christian institution, and insisting that a total re-Christianisation of politics and society was needed.<sup>95</sup> Yet alongside this suspicion of modernity in Catholic circles, new Christian intellectual movements were gaining traction, attempting to reconcile the Catholic religion with some elements of modern humanistic thinking. The revival of Christian intellectual thought in France in the early 20th century was crucial in providing the philosophical foundations for Catholics involved in political and social activism. In particular, the development of Christian humanism, represented by writers like Charles Péguy (a popular French Christian writer who died in the First World War), Paul Claudel and Jacques Maritain, promoted a positive vision of human fulfilment and freedom and accommodated new ways of understanding the aims of the political and social order, allowing room for democracy, pluralism and personal freedom to be supported by Catholics.

On occasion, French Christian intellectual circles provided Catholics with direct impetus for their involvement in the Resistance. Edmond Michelet organised a series of lectures on the dangers of Fascism from 1938 to 1939 for a small group of fellow Catholic intellectuals. Soon after learning of France's surrender to Germany, Michelet wrote on 17 June 1940 a pamphlet calling for resistance to the occupier, quoting these words from Péguy: 'En temps

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<sup>95</sup> Consequently, many Catholics were in favour—at least in the beginning—of the Vichy regime and welcomed Pétain's *Révolution nationale*. Bernard Py (Dachau) related that he and his staunchly Catholic family supported Vichy. (Interview with Dr Bernard Py, 13 November 2013) The Py family was not exceptional in its favourable attitude towards Vichy, and Bernard Py's story reveals some of the complexities of the political stances taken by Catholics during the Occupation; he, his father, brother and uncle would later join Resistance activities in support of the Allied landings, and were deported to Dachau for their involvement.

de guerre, celui qui ne se rend pas a toujours raison contre celui qui se rend.<sup>96</sup> Although appropriated by some Vichy supporters to defend their cause, the figure of Péguy was equally to inspire countless Resistants with his fervent patriotism and uncompromising insistence on the importance of heroism and resistance to injustice, as noted by Jacques Duquesne in his study on French Catholics under the Occupation.<sup>97</sup> French Christian activists often drew on these Péguyan ideals of heroism and self-sacrifice, and the influence of Péguy's writings, together with the works of other Christian humanists, is particularly evident in Jean Cayrol's poetry. Péguy's spiritual thought becomes an important beacon in the search for transcendence and freedom that Cayrol pursues through his poetry.

It might be thought that under the harshness of conditions in the camps, political and social concerns were made obsolete and camp inmates were solely preoccupied by the immediate problem of survival. In fact, however, extant writings from the camps reveal that prisoners often continued to nurture lively concerns and hopes about the future of society. Exposed to the full horrors of Fascist oppression, these individuals were more resolved than ever to reconstructing a free and just society after their liberation. A group of women prisoners of varying nationalities in Neubrandenburg, a sub-camp of Ravensbrück, collaborated in the spring of 1944 to outline their vision for post-war Europe in a written *Manifeste*.<sup>98</sup> Likewise, one of the first gestures made by prisoners after the liberation of Mauthausen was to collaborate on drawing up a similar manifesto, dated 16 May 1945, expressing their hope to build a European society of peace and justice. In Buchenwald, home to a large contingent of French intellectuals, discussions about the post-war reconstruction of France were frequent, especially as the end of the war approached. One prisoner, André Saladin, wrote on 1 January 1945 in his friend's memory album:

Quatorze mois à Buchenwald ! Une étude, et quelle étude ! Cette captivité n'aura pas été vaine : découvrir le vrai visage des hommes. Beaucoup ne sont pas beaux ! Les autres, sont ceux de cette énergique phalange, qui contribuent à libérer notre France et qui

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<sup>96</sup> Cited in Jacques Duquesne, *Les catholiques français sous l'Occupation* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1996), 131. First published in 1966, revised edition published in 1996. Translation: 'In time of war, the one who does not surrender is always right in comparison to the one who surrenders.'

<sup>97</sup> Duquesne, *Les catholiques français sous l'Occupation*, 131.

<sup>98</sup> This *Manifeste* was reproduced in the bulletin of the ADIR (*Anciennes déportées et internées de la Résistance, Voix et visages*) (November-December 2003).

demain redonneront à notre pays la place qu'il doit occuper dans le monde.<sup>99</sup>

Camp prisoners like Saladin looked forward keenly to a time when they would be able to help reform the French political and social order and restore France's national prestige after the humiliating defeat of 1940. Despite the personal fears and sufferings that oppressed them, many prisoners remained deeply committed to the social and political ideals which they had embraced before their deportation.

The political, religious and intellectual movements so strong in France before and during the war—Communism, Catholic groups, Personalism—engrained robust principles in many French men and women, convictions which would provide moral bearings, ethical purpose and interior freedom during these individuals' internment in the camps. If freedom remained for many French prisoners in the camps, it is partly because their beliefs allowed them to make some kind of free response to their circumstances. Accordingly, they were conscious of practising some genuine form of agency even if, externally, their freedom had been taken away. Some deportees offered their ordeal as a religious sacrifice, influenced by Catholic doctrines on suffering that were given great prominence at the time. Léon Leloir, a Belgian priest deported to Buchenwald, who composed many sonnets during his stay in the camps, wrote these words expressing his confidence that his sufferings were joined with Christ's:

Si je me réjouis d'endurer la souffrance  
Qui seule peut sauver la Belgique et la France  
C'est que je suis l'ami du Christ et que je crois  
—M'associant à celui qui périt sur le bois—  
Aux forces du salut de cette mort en croix.<sup>100</sup>

Leloir and his fellow Christians in the camps found comfort in the belief that the free acceptance and offering of their tribulations to God could engender some good. Christians were not alone in giving meaning and purpose to their deportation. Many prisoners found courage in drawing upon their Communist principles, seizing opportunities to exercise fraternity and solidarity in the camps and forming clandestine Communist networks. Some

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<sup>99</sup> Facsimile of original manuscript in Roger Foucher-Créteau, ed., *Écrit à Buchenwald 1944-1945* (Paris: Boutique de l'Histoire, 2001), 88. This book comprises facsimile reproductions and transcriptions of the album compiled by Foucher-Créteau in late 1944 and early 1945. Aware that the end of the war was near, Foucher-Créteau invited his comrades to inscribe in this album their thoughts and impressions, their sufferings and their hopes, so as to leave a record of their captivity for future years.

<sup>100</sup> Typewritten copy of Leloir's poems, Archives de France.

Jewish Communist deportees formed groups with their peers in the camps and continued to resist their persecutors in any small way they could. Eva Golgevit was one such prisoner; one of the few Jewish deportees from France to write in Auschwitz, she composed a song in Yiddish in 1943 that urges listeners not to forget their tenacity, their willingness to ‘fight for freedom’.<sup>101</sup> Like Christians, many Communist prisoners also believed that enduring the hardships of internment for the sake of their principles was in itself of inherent value. A committed Communist and patriot who used to sing the Marseillaise with his comrades in prison whenever one of their numbers was sent to his execution, Raymond Huard told me that he survived his 18 months in Buchenwald because he was fortified by the knowledge that he was suffering for a vital cause: ‘Je savais pourquoi j’étais là.’<sup>102</sup>

Other prisoners found consolation in their patriotism and saw their ordeal, even the prospect of imminent death, as a sacrifice made for their beloved France. Two young sisters, Marie and Simone Alizon, were deported in the infamous *convoi de janvier 1943*, the convoy of Resistance women sent to Auschwitz which included Charlotte Delbo. A note they wrote in pencil to their father and threw from the train was found and delivered and survives to this day in the Archives de France. In this note, the two young women reassure their father: ‘Sommes dans le train pour l’Allemagne, toutes les deux bonne santé bon moral. Ne t’inquiète pour nous.’ Scribbled at the end of the note is this message: ‘VIVE LA FRANCE!’<sup>103</sup> This love for France often continued to manifest itself even in the camps. Camp prisoners gathered on 14 July (the French national day) and other national celebrations; in a journal entry written in Buchenwald on 11 November 1944, a French prisoner in Buchenwald records assembling with his comrades for a minute of silence, to the fury of their overseers.<sup>104</sup> French Jewish prisoners shared in many cases these patriotic sentiments. As noted by the historian Annette Wieviorka, more than one convoy of Jewish prisoners from France sang the Marseillaise as their train drew out of the Gare de Lyon.<sup>105</sup> According to her friends, Ginette Hamelin (Ravensbrück), before her death in the camp, asked her comrades to tell her daughter back in France that she had given her life for her

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<sup>101</sup> Typewritten copy of song composed by Eva Golgevit in Auschwitz in 1943, Archives de France. Eva Golgevit was one of a group of Jewish women who formed a clandestine resistance organisation in Auschwitz.

<sup>102</sup> Interview with Raymond Huard, 7 December 2013.

<sup>103</sup> Original manuscript, Archives de France.

<sup>104</sup> Journal written by Jacques Vigny in Neu-Strassfurt (Buchenwald), reproduced in *Un pas, encore un pas ... pour survivre* (Amicale des Anciens Déportés à Neu-Strassfurt, 1996).

<sup>105</sup> Wieviorka, *Déportation et génocide*, 266.

country: 'Je suis morte pour que la France vive et que la liberté pour toujours nous survive.'<sup>106</sup> Patriotism and political commitment provided hope and moral direction in the camps.

Whether their Christian beliefs invited them to aim for heroism, or their love for France gave purpose to their captivity, whether Communism offered them the opportunity for self-sacrifice or some other, personal belief of their own gave them a motivation, many prisoners were able to make a free response to their captivity. Agency was still possible even with all the constraints imposed by camp existence. Even though so little freedom remained to them, prisoners could accept their ordeal, supported by their convictions, and find ways to appropriate it and make it productive of some good. If these poets could discover some measure of interior freedom and explore it in their poetry, it was ultimately because they were empowered by their enduring moral and philosophical convictions, finding liberation and salvation in them.

In the first chapter, I explore the poems written by André Ulmann in Mauthausen and later published as *Poèmes du camp*. My main interest here lies in the impassioned defence of autonomy, self-determination and freedom contained in these poems. I examine what influences in Ulmann's past as a committed intellectual and activist underpin this conception of human freedom, investigating in particular the impact of the Personalist movement on Ulmann's thought. In Chapter 2, I look at the poetry of Gustave Leroy, a devout Catholic, and Maurice Honel, a Jewish Communist. While from very different backgrounds, each composed numerous poems dealing with the brutal, physical side of camp existence and particularly with death in the camps. Highlighting the crucial role of metaphor in these poems, I bring out the ways in which both Leroy and Honel uncover transcendent and freeing significance within the figure of the grotesquely deformed, suffering body and within the physical appearance of death. I further explore the forms of agency that these poets become conscious of exercising even in the stark confrontation with mortality and death. Chapter 3 takes as its subject André Verdet's poetry from *Les jours les nuits et puis l'aurore*. I explore how Verdet's interior freedom is founded on his belief in the enduring primacy of the beautiful and the good, transcendent values that he finds within the camps themselves, and argue that the aesthetic and the lyric in Verdet's poetry are essentially an expression of this ethos. Finally, in Chapter 4, I look at Jean Cayrol's poems written in Mauthausen and published in 1997 as *Alerte aux ombres*. Both mystical and mythic, these poems express a brand of freedom so audacious that it requires its own theoretical framework to be fully

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<sup>106</sup> Typewritten testimony on Ginette Hamelin, written by her friend 'Myrtille', Archives de France.

appreciated. I elaborate the concept of ‘imaginative translocation’ to describe Cayrol’s narrative approach: an approach that involves shifting the focus of his story from the privations and constraints of captivity in Mauthausen onto a concurrent reality of freedom, abundance and redemption.

Among the French-language poets of the camps, there were a significant number of women: 26 out of the 116 poets were female. This is a surprisingly large figure considering that women represented only about 10% of political deportees from France. In researching this thesis, I read poetry written by many of these women, including Micheline Maurel’s *La Passion selon Ravensbrück* and numerous poems by Gisèle Guillemot, Françoise Babilot and Odile Arrighi-Roger. In the end, however, I selected only the five poets mentioned, judging by the criteria I have outlined. Although I do not explore any women poets in depth, I draw on their poems and other writings throughout this thesis. While these extracts cannot do justice to the richness and variety of the poetry written by women in the camps, I hope that these brief references will give the reader some sense of feminine literary responses to the camps.

For the most part, I have confined my study to the poetry that was written or composed in the concentration camps. The reason for this choice is that, from early on in my research, I saw special qualities in this poetry that set it apart from writings produced by deportees *after* liberation from the camps. I realised that the paradigms that tend to dominate studies of Holocaust literature (nearly always texts written by deportees after their liberation from the camps) were not applicable to this little-known corpus of texts written in the camps. Occasionally, however, I extend my analysis to include poems written before or after a poet’s deportation, where this helps to shed light on a particular facet of the poet’s works written in the camps.

The corpus of French-language poetry from the camps is diverse and complex—just as the reality of life in the different camps was—and I do not pretend that the paradigm that I have outlined applies to every single text. Nor can this study claim to have said the last word on any one of the poets from the camps. The aim of this thesis is simply to investigate one particularly striking facet possessed by a large number of the poems written in the concentration camps: the presence of interior freedom within texts composed in extreme captivity.



## Chapter 1

### ‘Nous qui sommes toujours vivants derrière nos visages d’hommes’: Embracing Life and Love, Affirming Selfhood and Self-Determination—André Ulmann’s *Poèmes du camp*

In a passage from *If This is a Man* which has become celebrated, Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi wrote of the moment, soon after his entry into the camp, when he and his comrades, showered, shaved all over and dressed in the ragged clothes given to them by camp officials, looked at each other’s strange transformed appearance: ‘Then for the first time we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man.’<sup>107</sup> The degradation of these initial rituals imposed on camp prisoners were just a foretaste of the indignities to follow—starvation, overwork, physical abuse, anonymity—that would perpetually undermine the prisoner’s sense of selfhood. Bernard Py (Dachau) recounts that one of the main fears that tormented him in the camp was the prospect of losing his identity: ‘Me voilà dans un univers tout à fait différent. Comment je vais réagir ? Est-ce que je vais garder ma personnalité ? Est-ce que je vais être admis comme normal ou est-ce que je vais m’écrouler ?’<sup>108</sup> Former deportees of different nationalities—Levi, Jean Améry, Tadeusz Borowski—have sought to analyse the dehumanising project of the camps and the way that it attacked the deportee’s very individuality and identity. Their accounts are widely known and have been extensively analysed by scholars. Contemporary poems written by prisoners in the camps and addressing this prospect of existential disintegration remain, however, to be studied. Much of the French poetry written in the camps did not just represent this dehumanisation, as later testimonies did, but instead became a means by which the prisoner could combat this threat, re-asserting his personhood, volition and interior freedom.

Among the French poets of the camps, André Ulmann is remarkable for the consistency and conviction with which he articulates a counter-vision to the programmed dehumanisation of the camps. The major theme in his *Poèmes des camps*, written in Mauthausen but not published until 1969, is the primacy of self-determination and the absolute necessity of choosing a free, personal response to adversity—in Ulmann’s case, war, oppression and captivity.<sup>109</sup> Ulmann associated with the Surrealist group of poets in the late 1930s and it is the Surrealist poetic,

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<sup>107</sup> Primo Levi, *If This is a Man, and The Truce*, trans. Stuart Woolf (London: Abacus, 2009), 32. *Se questo è un uomo* was first published in Italy in 1958.

<sup>108</sup> Interview with Bernard Py, 13 November 2013.

<sup>109</sup> André Ulmann, *Poèmes du camp* (Paris: Julliard, 1969). The text is hereafter referred to for citational purposes as PC followed by the page number of the citation.

with its emphasis on the dream as an unjustly neglected gateway to understanding the self and reality, that is employed in these poems. Furthermore, to fully understand the exceptional thought crafted in these poems, it is necessary to grasp the particular brand of humanism that Ulmann professed and to understand, above all, the enduring influence which the Personalist philosophy exercised on the author. Ulmann was closely associated with this movement in the early 1930s, and although he did not retain his formal ties with the movement after this period, the impact of Personalist ideas is clearly present in Ulmann's poems written in Mauthausen. When Ulmann's poetry decries unthinking submission to circumstances and fatalism and actually asserts that, on some level, the human person is still free even in the camps, this conception of interior freedom has its roots in Personalist thought.

Personalism emerged in France in the early 1930s as a humanist philosophy which united a broad spectrum of political, social and religious thinkers. It was the brain-child of a 27-year-old French Catholic, Emmanuel Mounier; essentially, Mounier sought to propose an alternative to the collectivist ideas of both Marxism and Fascism, which were spreading with such rapidity over Europe. Disillusioned with what he saw as the destructive and conformist bourgeois mentalities of a decrepit French (and more generally European) society and spurred on by the sight of the economic crisis of 1929, which to commentators at the time seemed to mark the death-knell of the Western political and economic systems, Mounier was convinced that a comprehensive 'revolution' was needed on every level: personal, spiritual, social, economic and political. Mounier maintained that the individual person could never be subjugated to the demands of a collectivity, as, in his eyes, Communist and Fascist ideas taught; nor were man and his actions simply a product of the social and economic forces of the time. Rather, the human person retained a very real capacity to respond—not just to react—to the circumstances of his age and to freely choose his course.

The Personalist ideal required that the individual recognise and consciously assert and practise his birth-right of radical freedom. In Emmanuel Mounier's own words, the primary tenet of Personalism was 'l'existence de personnes libres et créatrices'.<sup>110</sup> But this freedom was not a licence for unrestrained individualism; instead, it was to be exercised with responsibility for the good of society—thus Personalism particularly stressed the importance of *l'engagement*. Mounier formed a group with others who had similar concerns and hopes for a different society, and with these men he founded the review *Esprit*, but the Personalist

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<sup>110</sup> Emmanuel Mounier, *Qu'est-ce que le personnalisme ?* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1970), 4. First published in 1949.

project was essentially of his own making. In an age where Western society seemed to be crumbling, the ideas of Personalism represented an appealing alternative to the Fascist and Communist worldviews currently in vogue. The Personalist movement was never uniform; Mounier's collaborators occupied different places on the political spectrum, but broadly speaking, they all took the primordial freedom of the human person as the corner-stone that must underpin any plans for social regeneration.

Into this energetic intellectual circle that challenged both the established order and the claims of extreme left and right, and maintained freedom as the only true basis for a new society, came the young André Ulmann, only 19 years old, a student in law at the Sorbonne. Born into a Jewish family—'la bourgeoisie juive française à Paris' according to Ulmann's daughter Caroline—he displayed an avid intellectual curiosity from a young age.<sup>111</sup> Around 1930, he became friends with Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain and briefly attended meetings of his philosophy circle. Although it seems Maritain may have hoped to convert the young man to Catholicism, Ulmann remained an atheist all his life. His encounter with Maritain was nonetheless to prove decisive in his intellectual development, as it was Maritain who introduced him to Mounier. Ulmann became one of the earliest members of Mounier's Personalist circle and in 1932, he became *secrétaire de rédaction* to Mounier's new review, *Esprit*. Over the next few years, he contributed several articles to the review *Esprit*, denouncing the police-state and sketching his vision for a new Europe.

Although after the early 1930s Ulmann no longer frequented Mounier's group, he remained deeply committed to the ideal of the 'free and creative person' proposed by the Personalist philosophy throughout all the many forms of activism he embraced in later years. He was a vehement opponent of Fascism in all its forms and became active in helping the Republicans during the Spanish Civil War. In Ulmann's thought, it is the behaviour and choices of individuals that underpin the functioning of society; in turn, political systems must foster individual freedom. A constant leitmotif in Ulmann's writings, both private and published, is the need to seek answers to social and economic crises and other catastrophes not simply in the collective or the institution, but ultimately in the *individual*. The roots of social decline are to be found in the ensemble of personal choices that prove destructive, as this quote from Ulmann (written in 1932, at the height of the economic crisis in France) shows:

Les institutions existent, pèsent leur poids. Mais ce sont les hommes  
qui les faussent. Ce qu'on appelle crise économique, ou crise sociale,

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<sup>111</sup> Interview with Caroline Ulmann, 7 December 2013.

ou crise financière, sont une seule et même chose : des hommes qui ont détourné le bon usage d'un outil.<sup>112</sup>

In the turbulent political and economic conditions of his time, Ulmann always sought, therefore, answers in the individual, rather than exclusively in the institution. At the same time, Ulmann advocated wholesale social and political reform and his sympathies came to lie more and more with the Marxist agenda. He became an enthusiastic supporter of the socialist *Front Populaire* and was a member of the inaugural editorial board for the highly influential *Vendredi*. He became increasingly allied with the Communist cause over time and on several occasions attacked critics of the USSR. Yet, in conformity with the first principles of Personalism, Ulmann always maintained that a revolution aimed at institutions on its own was not sufficient; a *personal* revolution was needed first and foremost. Any attempt at reform, Ulmann was convinced, required people who were radically committed to living and acting as free persons. This focus on the central role played by the individual in the germination of war and catastrophes and in the degeneration of political and social systems helps us understand why Ulmann constantly focuses in his camp poems on the human person and his interior life, proclaiming that man must live up to his dignity as a free person.

Central to Ulmann's notions of an authentic humanism is the idea of fully accepting the 'expérience' with which the person is confronted by 'le destin', an idea Ulmann seems to have found in Péguy's writings, a favourite source of inspiration for him as for others in the Personalist movement. Before his arrest and deportation, Ulmann had begun work on compiling and editing a selection of extracts from humanist philosophers, a book entitled *L'Humanisme du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*. In 1946, in the year following his repatriation from Mauthausen, he completed this work and it was finally published. In his own commentary in the preface to the book, he criticises those who, he believes, assumed a purely passive role in 'la guerre et la captivité', which would seem to include the camps:

J'ai connu, dans la guerre et la captivité, dans les pires conditions donc, des hommes qui subissaient cette vie comme un vrai soulagement, comme une échappatoire—précisément à cause des conditions mécaniques et fatales dans lesquelles ils se trouvaient brusquement. Ils n'avaient plus d'effort à faire pour 'prendre conscience' de conditions infiniment plus complexes, ils n'avaient plus besoin de mémoire, ils pouvaient oublier chaque instant car—

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<sup>112</sup> Ulmann, 'Notes sur le Commandement,' *Esprit* (October 1932).

croyaient-ils—ils étaient conduits plutôt qu'ils n'avaient à se conduire.<sup>113</sup>

These men, Ulmann maintains, abrogated their human powers of self-determination, their freedom as persons. He singles out three human capacities in this passage: awareness or consciousness, memory and free will. Even in 'les pires conditions'—conditions that are impossible to escape—man is still the ultimate arbiter of his own destiny in the sense that he can choose his response to these conditions, freely and consciously choosing his own actions. This choice extends even to 'choosing' his own death in the sense of accepting it. In a counter-example to the one just mentioned, Ulmann praises in another passage his fellow combatants for choosing a life that would end in 'la mort consentie'. For Ulmann this is the highest form of humanism, one that is, he declares, 'totalement assumée'.<sup>114</sup> Ulmann's conception of humanism—actually lived, practised with passion—entails becoming fully conscious of the experience, the conditions in which one finds oneself, however appalling, and exercising the personal birth-right of freedom to choose. 'Regarder l'expérience en face' ('looking the experience in the face') is a phrase that occurs in his diary of 1939 and which Ulmann took up again in *L'Humanisme du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Just before the outbreak of the war, Ulmann wrote these words, words that sum up his philosophy of what we might call 'conscious acceptance' in the face of external conditions imposed on the person:

Ce que nous enseigne les défaites et les victoires, nous ne cesserons pas à l'apprendre. Pour nous préparer à mieux vivre, tout en vivant ; à mieux agir, tout en agissant. Sans choisir ce que nous donne la vie, mais en choisissant la manière de la recevoir. Dans notre dignité d'homme, c'est-à-dire, aussi conscients que possible.<sup>115</sup>

For Ulmann, therefore, interior freedom is expressed in the effort of facing 'l'expérience', becoming aware of it in all its complexity with the total consciousness that is proper to humanity, and taking on what is inevitable.

Ulmann considered even his deportation to be such an 'expérience': he could choose the way that he received it and actively live it as an opportunity for personal growth. Ulmann's

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<sup>113</sup> Ulmann, ed., *L'Humanisme du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Editions à l'enfant poète, 1946), 25.

<sup>114</sup> Ulmann, *L'Humanisme du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 22.

<sup>115</sup> Cited in Goldschmidt and Tenand-Ulmann, *André Ulmann ou le juste combat*, 80. These words come from an article by Ulmann entitled 'Tout nous fait signe...' in the first (and only) edition of the periodical *Courrier de Paris et de la Province*, dated 20 July 1939, the creation of Ulmann and his friend Armand Petitjean.

daughter, Caroline Ulmann, remembers that her father used to say, referring to his time in Mauthausen: ‘C’est mon expérience prolétarienne.’<sup>116</sup> As astonishing as it might seem, Ulmann looked back on his captivity in Mauthausen as a necessary interlude in his life, allowing him to personally experience the lot of the oppressed masses. With his deep sympathy for his fellow man and his growing adherence to Communist principles, Ulmann saw the extreme proximity of all social and economic classes in Mauthausen as an opportunity to live the proletarian ideal. More generally, his writings consistently show that he really considered the war and his captivity as ‘expériences’ that he would freely choose to accept in a manner worthy of his human dignity and in which he hoped to mature and learn to ‘mieux vivre’. Ulmann’s poems show that the writer freely accepted his captivity, not in the sense of practising total passivity but rather in the sense of maintaining a basic disposition of consent to inevitable events. Consent to events was thus foundational for Ulmann, as for other French poets in the camps, and was the basis of the interior freedom that subsisted for him.

In 1938, as war with Germany began to seem inevitable, Ulmann wrote in his diary that he wished, throughout the coming war, to learn to better carry out his ‘métier d’homme’.<sup>117</sup> The gruelling ordeals he was to undergo during the war would give him many opportunities to prove his commitment to this project. Mobilised into the French army at the beginning of the war, he was made a prisoner of war following France’s defeat in May 1940 and imprisoned in a *Stalag* in Germany. During his time there, he helped to establish an escape network for his fellow prisoners and continued to pursue his intellectual interests, writing poetry and organising lectures and cultural activities together with his comrades. Eventually, in early 1943, he was repatriated to France on health grounds. Immediately, he joined the Resistance under the strange alias of ‘Antonin Pichon’—perhaps a joking reference to the Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius, called in French ‘Antonin Pie’, a historical figure whose Stoic doctrines might well have attracted Ulmann. Ulmann was arrested in September 1943 and deported to Mauthausen several months later. He was assigned to the sub-camp of Melk and, thanks to his knowledge of German, was put in charge of the office responsible for assigning prisoners to the different work details. Administrative positions were coveted roles for camp prisoners, and some prisoners in these roles became unpopular among their fellow deportees for making self-serving decisions, but there is ample evidence from the testimonies written by other Frenchmen in Melk that many prisoners were grateful for support provided

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<sup>116</sup> Interview with Caroline Ulmann, 7 December 2013.

<sup>117</sup> Cited in Goldschmidt and Tenand-Ulmann, *André Ulmann ou le juste combat*, 76.

by Ulmann in his official capacity. As a camp official, Ulmann had access to paper and writing materials, allowing him to continue to write poetry. Ulmann's zeal for activism did not flag during captivity: following the liberation of Mauthausen in 1945, he wrote a letter to a friend back in France, urging him to do all he could to speed up his repatriation to France, because, he declared, 'j'ai à faire'.<sup>118</sup>

Personalism was not the only movement to influence Ulmann and shape his poetry; the influence of the Surrealist school can be seen clearly throughout the *Poèmes du camp*. Ulmann embraced the movement in the 1930s and mixed with other Surrealist devotees, becoming friends with one of the most prominent Surrealist poets, Robert Desnos. It is difficult to overstate the force and impact with which André Breton's *révolution surréaliste* broke onto the literary scene in France in the 1920s; it appeared to offer a completely new way of knowing, far removed from the materialism and positivism of the 19th century. For Ulmann, as for so many of his contemporaries, the esoteric and dream-like Surrealist poetic was a tool in achieving a profound and comprehensive awareness of the self and circumstances. A fervent disciple of Freud's theories, like many Surrealists, Ulmann saw night-time dreams as an unequalled point of access into the unconscious. Curiously, Ulmann always remained attached to the philosophy of Descartes, considering his works the pinnacle of philosophy in the West, and saw no contradiction between rationalism and Surrealism. Ulmann's Mauthausen poems show all the characteristics of Surrealist poetry: alliteration and assonance used to produce series of often bizarre images, deliberately oxymoronic images, and the creation of fluid dream-like panoramas.

The emergence of Surrealism—a literary school that put great emphasis on dreams and the unconscious as a source of knowledge—within camp literature has a strange aptness, from several points of view. On the one hand, the camps themselves were in many ways so absurdly barbaric that they resembled dreams. One French prisoner in the camp of Dora, Jean Dive, wrote that when he witnessed a hanging in the camp, to the accompaniment of an orchestra, his first thought was that he must be dreaming.<sup>119</sup> In addition, some prisoners found that their unconscious life and dreams began to take on a far more 'real' character than camp existence. In his famous essay 'Les rêves concentrationnaires', Jean Cayrol described his sense of leading a dream-like existence in the camps:

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<sup>118</sup> Cited in Goldschmidt and Tenand-Ulmann, *André Ulmann ou le juste combat*, 175.

<sup>119</sup> Typewritten document, FNDIRP archives. In the FNDIRP archives, accession numbers are not assigned to archival documents.

De la vie qu'on voulait bien nous laisser, on ne nous faisait vivre qu'une certaine hallucination, un dépaysement savamment entretenu soit par les appels, soit par les cérémonies expiatoires, soit par les scènes de désinfection où le grotesque, l'effrayant, l'absurde se mêlaient ; nous entrions dans une féerie noire et nous portions en nous la seule réalité rayonnante : la réalité de nos rêves.<sup>120</sup>

These testimonies raise the question of how Surrealism, predicated on liberation through night-time dreams and other forays into the realm of the unconscious, transplanted to the concentration camp, an environment that was intrinsically oneiric and which, at the same time, tended to invest the prisoner's unconscious life with a potent realism. We have to ask whether Surrealism might have worked in the camps in the same direction as the instinctive retreat into dreams to which Cayrol refers—engendering visions utterly removed from the oppressive reality of bodily existence. I suggest that in fact, the Surrealist aspect of Ulmann's poetry is very much connected to his ongoing efforts to live ethically and consciously during his imprisonment, in a way consistent with his political, social and spiritual beliefs. We can note clear convergences between Ulmann's poetry and Ricœur's understanding of narrative: closely linked to real personal experience, narrative simultaneously creates a distinct, dynamic world in which potential ways of navigating difficult life-events can be imagined and tested. In the *Poèmes du camp*, Ulmann is seeking not just to put his experiences into words but also to discover, define and clarify his ethical response to the demeaning imprisonment to which he is subjected. Surrealism is a vital tool in this search. If Ulmann chooses to pass through the unconscious, it is as a stepping-stone to free, conscious action in the material world. Surrealism proved of real value to Ulmann during his internment in Mauthausen in discovering freedom in the embodied, temporally situated self.

The extraordinary nature of Ulmann's outlook which pervades his camp poems—his desire to become more fully human through the trials imposed on him—can only be appreciated in the light of the extreme physical and interior transformations that the camp prisoner experienced and the ensuing precarity of a secure awareness of selfhood. Intellectual effort was in itself a challenge for many prisoners, exhausted and malnourished. Claude-Francis Bœuf and Yves Darriet (Buchenwald) testify that the prisoner's thoughts were typically limited to a very small number of matters: 'Manger. Dormir. La fin de la guerre. Et, très loin,

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<sup>120</sup> Jean Cayrol, 'Les rêves lazaréens' in *Œuvre lazaréenne* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2007), 773. This essay was first published as 'Les Rêves concentrationnaires' in *Les Temps Modernes* 36 (September 1948).



dans le brouillard, la famille.<sup>121</sup> The emotional life, too, often practically disappeared in the camps. Victor Frankl analysed this deadening of the emotional life as an adaptation that facilitated survival in the camps:

Apathy, the main symptom of the second phase, was a necessary mechanism of self-defence. Reality dimmed and all efforts and all emotions were centred on one task: preserving one's life and that of the other fellow.<sup>122</sup>

As many deportees have written in their testimonies, the prisoner often experienced a disconcerting sense of separation from his or her own body. Henri Pouzol recounts that in a moment of great tension in the camp, he experienced a sort of alienation from his body:

Bien éveillé, je demeure pourtant étrangement lointain, comme si ce corps souffrant, le mien, était un autre corps<sup>123</sup>

Similarly, Elie Wiesel writes that during evacuation from Auschwitz at the end of the war (the 'death march'), he had at one point the impression of being cut off from his body: 'j'avais continué de courir [...] sans me rendre compte même que je courais, sans avoir conscience de posséder un corps qui galopait là sur la route au milieu de milliers d'autres.'<sup>124</sup> It was a struggle simply to 'be', or to 'not choose not to be' in the words of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. Auschwitz survivor Charlotte Delbo wrote that she felt her very being was slipping away from her and that she needed to actively grasp onto existence itself:

Pendant des jours et des nuits, j'ai dû m'acharner à affirmer mon être, à me saisir dans un effort extrême de conscience pour m'assurer de mon existence en face des fantômes qui voulaient l'absorber, l'engloutir.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Cited in Reynaud, *La Foire à l'homme* (vol. 1), 119. The quotation is taken from a testimony co-written by Yves Darriet and Claude Francis-Bœuf, entitled *Intermède* (J. Susse, 1946).

<sup>122</sup> Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1992), 40.

<sup>123</sup> Pouzol, *La Poésie concentrationnaire*, 85.

<sup>124</sup> Elie Wiesel, *La Nuit* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 2007), 157-8. First published in 1958.

<sup>125</sup> Charlotte Delbo, *Spectres mes compagnons* (Paris: Berg International, 1995), 15. First published in 1972.

Prisoners experienced, therefore, a deadening of their interior life, and often, as well, a kind of exile from the body. Some also felt their being and selfhood to be not only fundamentally altered by the trauma suffered but eminently fragile, threatened with impending annihilation.

This question of the perceived continuity or rupture of selfhood and human identity in the camps is one that has been addressed by a number of critics. One of the first and most famous was Maurice Blanchot. Blanchot was intrigued by a certain passage from the testimony of French prisoner Robert Antelme, *L'Espèce humaine*. In this passage, Antelme argued that in the perpetrator–victim situation in the camps, the perpetrator could never succeed in his goal of ‘dehumanising’ the victim because he could not effect any change in the human identity of this victim:

C'est parce que nous sommes des hommes comme eux que les SS seront en définitive impuissants devant nous. [...] [Le bourreau] peut tuer un homme, il ne peut pas le changer en autre chose...<sup>126</sup>

The perpetrator’s humanness constantly pointed to the same identity present in his victim, thwarting his attempts to compromise the human character of the latter. This awareness of the shared humanity of perpetrator and victim brought, Antelme further argued, ‘le sentiment ultime d’appartenance à l’espèce’. Blanchot enlarged on this theme, asserting that the phenomenon described by Antelme was a matter of the victim being deprived of a sense of selfhood:

Nous commençons de comprendre que l’homme est l’indestructible et que pourtant il peut être détruit [...] L’homme peut tout, et d’abord m’ôter à moi-même, me retirer le pouvoir de dire ‘Je’.<sup>127</sup>

Yet, at the same time, Blanchot continues, there exists the presence of *Autrui* (the Other) in himself, and it is this presence that incontrovertibly establishes the knowledge of belonging to the human race. Blanchot’s reading of Antelme—particularly his idea of the presence of *Autrui* in the self—has been disputed by scholars, but it remains an influential document in the history of scholarship on the concentration camps. Some more recent commentators have supported Blanchot’s notions of this assault on the victim’s ability to feel or act as an autonomous ‘I’. The philosopher Jean-François Bossy asserts that the concentration camps

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<sup>126</sup> Robert Antelme, *L'Espèce humaine*, 229.

<sup>127</sup> Maurice Blanchot, ‘L’Espèce humaine,’ in *Robert Antelme : Textes inédits sur L’Espèce humaine, Essais et témoignages* (Paris, Gallimard, 1996), 78. First published in *L’Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969).

brought about 'l'impossibilité d'énoncer et de vivre les événements au nom d'un Je.'<sup>128</sup> Bossy suggests that the loss of the integrity of one's selfhood was caused primarily by the conditions of mass internment:

Vivre la masse, c'est enregistrer l'abolition de son intimité,  
l'effacement des frontières entre le moi et le toi, c'est éprouver sa  
perte dans le mouvement d'une vie anonyme.<sup>129</sup>

This collectivist existence enforced by the camps was another factor which undermined the prisoner's sense of autonomous selfhood. The disintegration and precarity of the self in the camps was so extreme that it is astonishing that any literary work from a concentration camp would maintain the possibility of fully exercising human freedom under such conditions. Ulmann's persistent emphasis in his camp poetry on 'looking the experience in the face' with the full consciousness befitting human dignity, and asserting the essential *continuity* of his self, is an extraordinarily lofty goal in the circumstances.

But in addition to seeking to reaffirm the integrity of his selfhood, Ulmann pursues a further ambition through his poetry. If Ulmann chose poetry as his means of expression in Mauthausen, it was not an arbitrary choice. As comes through in the *Poèmes du camp*, this author is deeply concerned about language. Like the other French poets in the camps, Ulmann desires to invest words with new force, truthfulness and clarity through his poetry. Creating poetry, for this author, is about revitalising words by 'playing' with them. Ready-made words are seen as enslaved by ideology and by conformist and harmful attitudes. Renewal of language is thus an indispensable step towards liberating thinking from ideological traps and developing a mature, autonomous and humane thought instead.

Gary Mole correctly highlights that Ulmann is preoccupied by the corruption of language in his camp poems. But Mole further argues that this perspective reveals 'a self-reflexive hesitancy, a lack of self-assurance as a poet to find the words necessary to fit his situation as a deportee.'<sup>130</sup> In other words, Mole relates Ulmann's preoccupation with the inadequacy of language to the limits of representation confronted by Holocaust writers. In fact, Ulmann's approach to language in his *Poèmes du camp* is much more confident and assured than Mole realises. If a negative depiction of language characterises some of the *Poèmes du camp*, this

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<sup>128</sup> Jean-François Bossy, *La Philosophie à l'épreuve d'Auschwitz: Les camps nazis, entre mémoire et histoire*, (Paris: Ellipses, 2004).

<sup>129</sup> Bossy, *La Philosophie à l'épreuve d'Auschwitz*, 94.

<sup>130</sup> Mole, *Beyond the Limit-Experience*, 54.

mainly reflects Ulmann's critical attitude towards the misuse of language in modern society, an attitude that was part of the author's worldview long before he was imprisoned in Mauthausen. The quest for a clear and truthful language was a key concern of the Personalist movement and became an enduring preoccupation for Ulmann throughout his life.

Ulmann's Personalist-inspired convictions are illuminated in all the twenty poems written in the camps, from February 1944 to May 1945; his humanist vision includes three main components. Man must first choose to *see* clearly, to see the truth despite the opacity and lies of the time, and knowing this truth, act as a free and conscious person. Secondly, he must speak clearly and articulate the truth—and this, Ulmann stresses, is the special role of the poet in these times of war. Lastly, man finds salvation and interior freedom in love. In this chapter, I explore each of these themes in turn.

### **Consciousness and self-determination**

The Personalist emphasis that Ulmann places, throughout his *Poèmes du camp*, on rigorous self-awareness and achieving a truthful, lucid and unflinching consciousness of reality is truly remarkable when we consider the mentalities and common wisdom which prevailed in the camps in general. The temptation in the camps, as many deportees testified, was to lie low to avoid punishment and to avert one's eyes from any uncomfortable truths which might morally demand a difficult course of action in response. In a short text written in Buchenwald, Eugène Thomas describes ironically the best attitude to adopt if the prisoner wished to safeguard his personal interests: 'Alors un seul principe, une seule règle... ne rien voir, ne rien dire, fermer les yeux, fermer la bouche, ne pas s'indigner devant un spectacle indigne, ne plus bondir devant l'injustice, bref se faire mouton docile dans le troupeau servile.'<sup>131</sup> In Ravensbrück, Odile Arrighi-Roger denounced 'l'indifférence' as the most insidious of evils, and wrote scathingly about the widespread tendency to take refuge in deliberate ignorance and self-interest:

Tout coûte. '[O]n a compris'—c'est la phrase convenue et chacun s'enfoncé, tête baissée, 'comme les autres », cherchant ses petits intérêts coûte que coûte.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Facsimile of original manuscript in Roger-Foucher Créteau, ed., *Écrit à Buchenwald 1945-1945* (Paris: Boutique de l'Histoire, 2001).

<sup>132</sup> Facsimile of original manuscript, FNDIRP archives.

Full consciousness was not an easy task when a prisoner's survival instincts tended to focus attention solely on pressing, personal needs. Yet 'prendre conscience' is the act that is at the heart of Ulmann's creed. His emphasis on the importance of consciousness is somewhat reminiscent of Lockian and Kantian concepts of personhood, which are both underpinned by self-consciousness.<sup>133</sup> Ultimately, man still retains autonomy and possesses one last freedom even in captivity. Conscious acceptance, and the act of freely 'taking on' (*assumer*) the circumstances imposed from the outside is in itself a praiseworthy act, an act of the will which means that the person retains his subjectivity while living the state of a victim.

This freedom begins with the interior movement of 'becoming conscious'—in other words, attaining a profound and truthful knowledge of the 'expérience' that was so enduring an aim for Ulmann. It is not a peripheral concern but is absolutely foundational, with ramifications on every level of human organisation and society. In the words written in 1939 and already cited, Ulmann stressed the importance of receiving and assuming the experience 'dans notre dignité d'hommes, c'est-à-dire aussi conscients que possible.' Striving purposefully to become aware is to behave in a manner worthy of human dignity. On an individual level, making the choice to attempt to truthfully perceive and understand circumstances is the cornerstone and *sine qua non* for the formation of a truly just society. Conversely, systems and ideologies like Fascism arise because of the cleft that has opened up between the individual's conception of the world and the actual reality. Wider societal evils and the corruption of institutions begins with the individual's blind and unconscious attitude. Therefore, to come to awareness is nothing banal, it is a ground-breaking act. It is with such a seminal moment of consciousness and revelation that the poem *Le prisonnier* opens:

Il reconnut le goût de la soupe étrangère  
Tant les ciels sont ressemblants  
Ses yeux voyaient l'imperceptible fumée mensongère  
La métamorphose des hommes en enfants  
Se moucher dans ses doigts et les larmes  
Derrière la joue en forme d'abcès. (PC 15)

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<sup>133</sup> Locke wrote in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*: "To find wherein personal identity consists, we must consider what person stands for, which, I think is a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places, which it does only by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking." John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Project Gutenberg, 2004), book 2, chapter 27, section 10. <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/10615/pg10615-images.html>.

In this instant of piercing clarity, the prisoner perceives the ‘lying smoke’—the deceptive veil that might blur his vision and prevent him from seeing and recognising. He perceives that he is in exile, eating ‘foreign’ food in an alien land. The idea of ‘l’étranger’ is not simply a geographical or ethnic concept in Ulmann’s poetry. Instead, it holds a very specific meaning in Ulmann’s understanding of humanism: man must identify and foster what is ‘native’ to him and conversely, recognise and shun what is ‘foreign’. Hence the importance of the act of perception and recognition described in the first line of *Le prisonnier*. The same moment of sudden revelation, bringing an epiphany of truth, opens another of Ulmann’s poems, *Douce amère*:

Il trempe deux doigts de cœur  
Dans la soupe au vinaigre  
Trois éléphants un chien hurleur  
Avec les loups maigres  
Les seuls trésors qu’il calcule de tête (PC 17)

The poem’s title (‘Douce amère’) indicates that Ulmann desires to see and experience life truthfully, which for him means to take both the ‘bitter’ and the ‘sweet’ of the truth. In a later poem, *Encore autre chose*, written after the liberation of the camps but before his repatriation, Ulmann uses a related image in speaking of truth: ‘La vérité a toujours ce goût de miel.’ This imagery has multiple implications. In Ulmann’s poetic, the truth becomes something almost physical, real and accessible to the senses. Becoming conscious of the truth is not an elusive, purely intellectual process. Instead, it is a quasi-sensual experience akin to touching, tasting and seeing. The truth, moreover, is not entirely bitter but brings delight as well. Patience and time, however, is needed to fully enjoy this delight, just as honey requires a slow and painstaking process of formation and maturation before it is ready to be tasted. These poems suggest that Ulmann’s avid and persistent thirst for fully encountering the ‘expérience’ in all its plenitude—expressed with so much fervour in his pre-camp writings—was well and truly sustained throughout his captivity.

Surrealism played a key role for Ulmann in this quest for full consciousness and knowledge of the self and experience. Surrealist technique in these poems is much more than just eccentric imagery used for provocative or aesthetic effect. It opens up unsuspected dimensions of reality—fulfilling the function that Ricœur defined as the very essence of poetic language—and brings to light the hidden interworkings of the rational and the conscious. In the two poems just discussed, *Le prisonnier* and *Douce amère*, the interior drama

and the physical reality of the concentration camp are conflated, morphing into an ever-changing Surrealist dreamscape. Within this dreamscape, the protagonist sees with sharpened clarity; he tastes and touches the fullness of reality. The images of soup, smoke and abscesses in the first lines of *Le prisonnier* are drawn from camp existence. Soup was a ubiquitous element of life in the concentration camps; smoke recalls the burnt remains of corpses expelled from the *Krematorium*, and the abscess was a common complaint in malnourished and ill prisoners. But Ulmann does not use these elements in a literal fashion. Instead, he incorporates them into oneiric sequences filled with hallucinatory images like elephants and ‘metamorphosing’ humans. Physical and intangible elements are mixed to disconcerting effect: in *Douce amère*, ‘deux doigts de cœur’ are dipped into soup, as if the heart were tentatively reaching out to find something to clasp and to love. In Ulmann’s poetry, truthful knowledge of the world is often mediated by ‘touch’: close, quasi-tactile contact with a peculiar melding of interior and exterior realities. Hands and fingers are, indeed, a recurrent motif throughout *Poèmes du camp*. In *Iris mandragore étonnée d’être au monde*, the poet addresses his beloved with these words:

Je reconnais toutes tes images  
 Que roulait au printemps ton souffle sur mon cou  
 Ma main les lisait aux formes de ton corsage (PC 30)

Here it is the hand, rather than the eye, that ‘reads’ and ‘recognises’; it is with the hand that man makes that illuminating contact with the real. This very concrete imagery reflects Ulmann’s intuition that consciousness can never be a purely abstract and rational mental process, but passes by a visceral, whole-of-self encounter with the world and includes excursions into the unconscious. Reality is not just the world accessible to rational thought but encompasses as well the more elusive territory of the unconscious. As these poems illustrate, Ulmann continued to see Surrealism as a privileged way into the fullness of consciousness during his imprisonment in Mauthausen.

With its capacity for nurturing absurdity and paradox, Surrealism could be seen as an especially appropriate literary movement to survive in the concentration camps, an environment characterised by ridiculous rituals and senseless, nightmarish barbarities. Did Ulmann ever reflect on the dream-like absurdity manifested in Mauthausen and the odd parallels between this setting where he had ended up and the Surrealist poetic he had adopted? Many inmates were acutely conscious of the absurdity that surrounded them in the camps. Asked by Roger Foucher-Créteau to record his ‘impressions’ of Buchenwald, one

prisoner pointed out that this was a difficult task, given the extreme and gruesome contrasts that co-existed so often in the camps, adding: ‘J’ai souvent baptisé ce camp: “le pays du paradoxe”’.<sup>134</sup> In a similar way, Ulmann’s writings from Mauthausen show that he did consider that the camps enacted a mad dream, in comparison to which his own dreams as expressed in his works possess much more sense and intelligibility. In the passage from *Douce amère* already cited, Ulmann proclaims that the dream, in which is contained and preserved all that is most precious to him, is ‘not more absurd’ than the futile rituals and contradictions of the camps: being woken up in the middle of the night on the point of a revolver, given orders and counter-orders. Three times the poet repeats, with emphasis: ‘guère plus absurde’. In an exquisite irony, the events playing out around him are so nonsensical that his interior dream-world displays far greater lucidity and coherence. Nothing in his unconscious, Ulmann comes to realise, can out-do the outrageous and tragic absurdity in Mauthausen in these last days of the war.

The nightmarish circus of chaos and absurdity generated by war furnishes a constant theme in Ulmann’s poems from the camps. A poem written in Mauthausen on 3 December 1944, with the ironic title of *Entretien dans un salon*, harks back to his arrest and interrogation in 1943, and portrays the everyday world cohabiting with strange and disquieting signs:

Je ne reconnais ces paysages clandestins  
 qui passent sous la lune de l’absence  
 montures découronnées d’une  
 Apocalypse attelée  
 au boulevard Saint-Germain (PC 29)

The poet cannot recognise this new world in which horrifying chaos strikes humanity on a mundane street; in which the white horse of the Apocalypse is ‘harnessed’ to the ‘boulevard Saint-Germain’. This incongruous image conveys all the cruel madness of arrest and deportation, an absurdity that is explicitly articulated in later lines of the poem:

Assis à la table de bois du glacier blanche craquelée  
 La peinture pleure par plaques de vieillesse  
 nous regardons courir un monde

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<sup>134</sup> Note written by Serge Rousseau, dated 1 January 1945, in Roger Foucher-Créteau’s *cahier-souvenirs*. Facsimile of original manuscript in Foucher-Créteau, *Écrit à Buchenwald*, 91.



sans qu'il puisse plus nous étonner  
adossés à l'absurde mon amour

(PC 30)

Watching the frenzied and senseless course of events unfold before his eyes, Ulmann wishes to resist being drawn into this crazy spectacle. 'Adossés à l'absurde' alongside his wife, he deliberately seeks to avoid being fixated on the pointless cruelty and violence playing out all around him. His response is to draw even more deeply on the creative resources of Surrealism, resources which allow him to elaborate interior fortifications against the madness of the war and the camps. Surrealism promised a freeing passage-way into a deeper and fuller reality through its exploration of the dream and the unconscious. Confronted with the absurdity of the events unfolding around him, Ulmann appears to feel more intensely than ever that the path to lucid and even rational consciousness is through the unconscious.

The profound and dynamic act of consciousness depicted in these poems should be followed, Ulmann implies, by active acceptance of the 'expérience'. In accord with his human dignity as an autonomous being and subject, the individual can freely choose to embrace life as it is, with all its deprivations. Man can and must 'lead himself' ('se conduire') rather than simply 'be led' ('être conduit'), to use again Ulmann's words quoted earlier. In *Le prisonnier*, Ulmann draws a bleak picture of men who submit passively to captivity (as children are led by others) instead of exercising their will. The danger of imprisonment is that men may lose their adult capacities in a sort of regression. Ulmann presents an image of grown men with child-like grief, wiping their noses with their hands, yet perhaps, too, repressing their tears behind their starved sunken cheeks. Transforming this tragic image into the 'metamorphosis' of men into children appears somewhat harsh and unpitiful, but conveys all the unbending commitment that Ulmann holds to personal agency and self-determination. In the concluding lines of this poem, Ulmann extols human autonomy and resistance:

Vivant de dignité de douleurs et d'alarmes  
Dans les baraques où se répriment les accès  
de fleurs de printemps de douceurs de souvenance  
De mots rares comme ceux qu'aimait  
La femme de sa ressemblance  
Il perdu Il au trésor Il qu'animait  
Les esprits Il à la découverte  
Il voulait vivre Il pour les enfants

Il comme une tour sur la mer

Il fortifié IL EST VIVANT

(PC 16)

The pronoun ‘il’ returns again and again with deliberate force and emphasis, sometimes in mid-line; decidedly, this man is not an object or victim, but a fully conscious *agent and subject*. In a play on words, ‘il’ becomes its homophone ‘île’ (‘island’). In this way, Ulmann places emphasis on his conception of man as an autonomous being who may decide his own destiny. This vision of the essential autonomy of the human person is further emphasised by the use of the image of the ‘tour sur la mer’. Man becomes a fortress; and if not unassailable, then at least capable of asserting his own personhood and essential independence when circumstances place him in apparent helplessness. In a poem written just after the liberation of Mauthausen, Ulmann composed a poem beginning with the lines ‘Nous qui sommes toujours vivants / derrière nos visages d’hommes’. ‘Living’ in a full and purposeful way is possible in Ulmann’s eyes even when the individual experiences both exterior oppression and interior disintegration. If a man cannot live on ‘spring flowers’ and ‘sweet memories’, then he may consciously choose to live instead on ‘dignity on pains and on alarms’. If he is ‘lost’, then there is all the more reason to go on a journey in search of meaning.

Not only do language, imagery and word-play contribute to portraits of Ulmann’s autonomous man, capable of consciousness and agency, but interior freedom is often expressed in the very rhythm and architecture of his poems. In the last stanza of *Le Prisonnier*, there is a beautiful play going on between repression and freedom. We start with a fairly conventional (though non-classical) alexandrine (‘Vivant de dignité de douleurs et d’alarmes’) and the next two verses are also twelve-syllable. Subsequently, however, the poet abandons the alexandrine. It is as if the poet were not able to contain his emotion within the bounds of this prosodic form; the words fairly tumble out now, almost exuberantly. The twin appearances of the word ‘vivant’ enclose this stanza like an embodiment of the barbed wire fences that literally enclose the poet; but in the heart of this ‘imprisonment’, the very poetic structure intrinsically echoes the interior freedom expressed in the content.

Prosody is also integral to the creation of meaning in the last stanza of *Douce mère*. The epiphany of self-knowledge and the intense encounter with truth recounted in the opening stanza culminates in a wilful act of defiance echoed in resounding formal effects:

Il hisse une figure de panorama

Pour emporter les paysages le monde les bêtes

Ce qu’il aime ce qu’il aimait ce qu’il aime

Dans la retraite pas plus absurde que  
 Le monde avec lui  
 Avec lui pas plus absurde que  
 Les réveils au revolver la nuit  
 Guère  
 Plus absurde ordre et contrordre au petit jour  
 Les départs guère plus absurdes que cette fin de guerre  
 A cache-cache pour  
 Se mieux laisser voir. Le monde de porcelaine  
 Qu'il emporte avec lui (PC 18)

Reading this poem aloud brings out loud and clear its combative, emphatic accents. Accented syllables are even juxtaposed, as in the tenth line with the last two syllables of 'les départs guère'. Wildly see-sawing line lengths and extreme enjambments add to the impression of impassioned bursts of emotion of such intensity that they spill out of conventional prosodic structures. Fittingly, in a poem that comes close to being a battle-cry, the unisyllabic line 'guère' evokes its homophone 'guerre', lending even more impact to an already forceful line. In a positive gesture, the man 'hoists a figure' (perhaps 'une figure de proue', a figurehead on a ship) to carry away with him these treasures: the 'porcelain' of his interior life in all its delicate beauty and fragility. Emphatically, the man of this poem is not a passive victim of circumstance; he is someone who freely chooses his course of action. This impression is created partly by the fact that although the poem evokes an interior world, most of the verbs convey decidedly *physical* actions: 'tremper', 'hisser', 'emporter' and, later in the same poem, 'creuser', 'mâcher' and 'cacher'. Man remains a free actor in his own destiny under the most extreme constraints and oppression. Even in captivity and deprivation, Ulmann suggests, man retains his essential and unassailable autonomy, his status as subject and his capacity to choose his response to circumstances.

### **Language and truth in a war-ridden world**

In Personalist doctrine, consciousness necessarily imposes, in turn, the use of a language that is truthful and transparent. Ulmann's preoccupation with the degeneration of language is the theme of many of his camp poems, but this concern pre-dates his captivity and must be placed in the context of the Personalist emphasis on the crucial role of language in either forming a just society or contributing to its decline. Like many intellectuals in France before the war, the Personalists saw one of the primary crises in modern civilisation as being a crisis

of language: the widespread use of propaganda, empty clichés and euphemism cloaked injustice and lies in a palatable form, it was argued, and contributed to the spread of these harms. Language was considered to be the victim of a profound catastrophe in the modern world, exacerbated by progress in technology and communications that meant that more words than ever before were being disseminated. The modern world was characterised, Mounier asserted, by a constantly growing surfeit of corrupted words, detached from personal reflection and obscuring the truth rather than revealing it:

La lumière de la nue vérité, la présence concrète et exigeante de l'esprit, s'est peu à peu retirée de notre monde. Sur cette épaisseur de mots décharnés et d'habitudes étrangères, où perceront nos regards et les tentatives de nos cœurs ? [...] Refaire notre amour du monde avec les mots, avec les gestes, avec les mœurs qui sont là tout autour, autant combiner des opacités pour faire de la lumière.<sup>135</sup>

Words, gestures and habits, as suggested in this passage, were intimately connected in Personalist thought. The pursuit of truthful language was not, therefore, a secondary problem for Mounier and his fellow Personalists, but one absolutely crucial to imagining the rebuilding of society. A renewal of language starting at the individual level would be vital to an authentic transformation of society.

This view was one fully shared by Ulmann, and indeed, his poems of the camps use imagery and ideas on language akin to Mounier's: the accumulation and decay of words, the notion of 'foreignness' and of words which are alien. The theme of linguistic decay and revival in *Poèmes du camp* forms part of the larger narrative on social disintegration and rebirth inherited from the Personalist movement. But Ulmann does not just describe the break-down of language—he also sketches out his vision of how this damaged language can be restored to wholeness, assisting in the reconstruction of a devastated world.

There is a self-referential component in the way Ulmann treats this theme, for he sees the role of a poet as central to the reformation and liberation of language. The poet models language that is not foreign but 'native', language that is not simply slavishly imbibed and reused but, rather, arises freely and spontaneously from the depth of the person. For Ulmann, the Surrealist poetic is an especially effective tool in finding such words, because it

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<sup>135</sup> Cited in Pierre de Senarclens, *Le mouvement Esprit 1931-1941* (Lausanne: Editions L'Age d'homme, 1974), 38.

overturns the conventions of language in particularly lively, inventive and disconcerting ways. ‘Playing’ and ‘games’ are tropes which appear often in Ulmann’s poems, both those written in the camps and those composed before his deportation. In a poem dating from his captivity in Germany as a prisoner-of-war, *Le bon usage de la fatalité*, Ulmann both evokes games and actually plays on words within the poem:

Il joue comme les enfants  
Jeux de doigts  
Je n’ai pas volé le vent  
Jeux de mains  
Je n’y vois pas  
Jeux de feu  
Je joue des mots humains  
Jeux d’énervement  
Je je je jeux<sup>136</sup>

The word-play on ‘je’ and ‘jeux’, and the repetition of ‘je’, is not just a neat pun, nor does it appear so much a sort of egotistical self-obsession but rather a realisation by the poet that in ‘playing’ outside the accepted wisdom, he finds himself in the deepest sense. The anarchic, Surrealist ‘games’ that Ulmann plays with human words are meant to generate a truly personal language, one that is the polar opposite of the ideologically charged language all too pervasive in the world.

Even though literal human death is ever-present in the conditions of Mauthausen, Ulmann’s first interest in his poems is not in physical death but in the ‘death’ of language: a catastrophic degeneration and weakening of language—a crisis that, in the view of Ulmann and the other Personalists, had been initiated long before the war. Language is so critical a component of human identity for Ulmann that its decomposition is, we could almost say, on the same plane as physical death and decay. Similar to Mounier’s ‘mots décharnés’, the ‘words’ figuring in Ulmann’s poems are weakened, frail, powerless or broken entities. Physical corpses become illustrative of the paralysis of language in *Pont au change*:

Le poète demeurerait seul entre des cadavres  
De mots des mots paralysés  
La soif la faim la peur même le courage

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<sup>136</sup> Poem cited in Goldschmidt and Tenand-Ulmann, *André Ulmann ou le juste combat*, 104-5.

Se comprenaient encore dans ce bruit  
 De machine de gorge et de geste  
 Gloutonnement d'une espèce de nuit  
 Avec encore la force de rire  
 Dans les poitrines plates. (PC 25)

These images might be meant in part to evoke the mental deterioration of the starving, weakened prisoner and the loss of the vast bulk of language from his lexicon, as he becomes so obsessed with basic physical needs that only a handful of words (like 'la faim') retain any power. Yet, because Ulmann's Mauthausen poetry is generally concerned not just with his own immediate circumstances but with the state of humanity as a whole, it is clear that the poet is also denouncing here the wilful misuse and corruption of language in the wider world. Nowhere else in Ulmann's poems can we find so graphic and nightmarish a depiction of the contemporary world, devastated as it has been by war and oppression. Man reverts to some primitive state in which he can no longer speak a coherent language; or alternatively, becomes a machine-like automaton. The use of 'gorge' suggests a throaty animal-like gurgle, and indeed the alliterative use of 'gloutonnement' in the following line reinforces this image. Literally, it is an adverb meaning 'gluttonously' but it strongly suggests the onomatopoeic word *glouglouter*, which refers either to the gurgle of liquid, or to the harsh cry of a turkey. This literally inhuman panorama paints a brutal and almost cataclysmic picture of the language, so altered that it can hardly be recognised as human. A similar image of wounded or dead language is found in *Sur*:

Les mots troués comme de vieilles tuniques  
 Pendent aux bouches désabusées  
 Matière unique  
 A remâcher mots images usées  
 A force de faire signe les chevaux  
 S'arrêtent de boire pour marcher encore  
 La plaine est sèche  
 Les paroles n'y poussent plus (PC 33)

Words have become useless, worn-out things like old tunics, suspended from mouths as if they were being chewed but also as if they had been hanged on a gibbet. There is some ambivalence here in this devastating scene for even if only a few words are still 'alive', they

are far from being unimportant. The beginning of *Pont au change* enumerates a list of elemental words which retain clarity and integrity:

Tellement étrangers ces hommes  
A force de souffrir  
Ne parlaient plus une langue connue  
On en peut reconnaître Offrir  
De vrais mots les oranges le soleil la forêt  
Enlevé l'usage  
Du langage (PC 25)

The notion of 'foreignness' is a key component of Ulmann's humanism. As already discussed, this 'foreignness' has nothing to do with national or ethnic divisions; instead, it may be understood here more in the etymological sense of *étranger*, that is as simply 'extraneous', outside the self. Language should not be imported or grafted from the 'outside' but arise organically from the interior of the person. Internal rhyme links the two most important words in the third line: 'plus' and 'connue'. No longer recognisable, language has fragmented, broken by the experience of human suffering. Something remains, it is true; the poet lists with emphasis 'real words', words that contain something trustworthy, in which the relationship between word and reality is still uncomplicated. But for the most part, it is a catastrophe of human language of huge proportions, almost a linguistic apocalypse.

The answer to this crisis of language—which might have reached its apogee in the concentration camps but is found everywhere in the modern war-ridden world—is the renewal offered by the poet; a renewal that Ulmann attempts to *enact* within his poems themselves at the same time as he describes it. For Ulmann, it is the poet who revives language, and in doing so, will restore order to this broken world, as described in *Pont au change*:

Le poète alors recomposa le désordre  
Avec ses mains  
Ses mains de chien  
Il joue on croit mais il est toujours prêt à mordre (PC 26)

Again, Ulmann evokes the idea of playfulness and child-like mischief and rebelliousness concealing an eminently serious and essential quest. What might appear a futile pursuit, a mere game, is in fact a vital and fruitful activity, and a gesture of interior resistance. This

poem attempts to put into practice what it evokes: verse that crafts order out of chaos. Written in free verse for the most part, it is only at the end that the alexandrine resurges:

Danseur parmi les arbres bleus de son langage  
Le lierre la femme couronnent sa patience  
Un monde repeuplé est sa nouvelle science  
Un monde libéré comme son premier gage (PC 28)

The leisured—almost stately—pace of these lines, the elegance of the alexandrines and the ordered rhyme scheme aptly mirror the graceful and harmonising linguistic ‘dance’ evoked here. The renewal and liberation invoked here is not limited to language but embraces the ‘world’ itself, even ‘repeopling’ it, forming individuals who are fully human. This image of the ‘saviour poet’, who by his gifts, offers redemption to the world, is far from new. But the circumstances of this self-proclaimed ‘saviour poet’ are, in many ways, unique. Although imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp, he does not focus on the Nazi regime and ideology as the exclusive nexus of evil in the world. Defeat of the Germans will not automatically bring full freedom. For Ulmann, what needs to be saved is human consciousness and language. Only when these two human capacities are realised will man be free.

This unique perspective that Ulmann brings from the depths of the concentration camps can be gauged by the deliberately subversive ways in which, in his poetry, he turns negative features of the camps, usually feared and hated by deportees, into instruments for his own purposes. The ‘mains de chien’ in *Pont au change* are a typically Surrealist image, a self-contradictory pairing of words springing from rhyme. Ulmann appropriates for himself this image of a ‘dog’ several times in his poems. It is, however, a strange image to find in a concentration camp; firstly, because the guard-dogs of the camps were dreaded creatures who often bit prisoners, and secondly, because deportees felt in humiliation and distress that they were treated like animals. In fact, very commonly in poems from the camps, prisoners compare themselves to dogs or other animals in a negative way to convey the degradation and dehumanisation they are experiencing: a poem by Micheline Maurel (Ravensbrück) refers to ‘cette existence de chien’.<sup>137</sup> In a sense, Ulmann turns this image on its head; if he *is* a dog, then he has all the ferocity and single-mindedness of a dog. He searches for the truth with the same unrelenting determination as a dog searches, and proclaims the truth as loud as a dog barking, to use an image from a later poem, *Le Voyage*:

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<sup>137</sup> Micheline Maurel, *La Passion selon Ravensbrück* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1965), 21.



Rien à faire pour le faire taire

Aboie à pleine voix rien pour rien

(PC 51)

Even faced with ‘nothingness’, Ulmann implies, even if all around him try to silence his discomfiting and unwelcome voice, the poet must continue to speak his protest, in this obstinate proclamation of truth. The dehumanising aspects of the camps are seized on by Ulmann and inverted to his own ends, serving to illustrate his designs for a ‘rehumanisation’ of language and society.

### **Love as a source of salvation and freedom**

Ulmann’s humanism, which for him constitutes the antidote to ideology—particularly Fascism—and war, begins with ‘la prise de conscience’ and continues in the conscious use of language but must ultimately translate into action and into compassion for *others*, concrete and caring gestures towards other people. Self-awareness and lucidity of thought and language must flow into taking action. The self is not the be-all and end-all. Ulmann defines humanism as ‘passion et compassion pour les hommes, que Descartes a si bien nommées la générosité.’<sup>138</sup> Militancy, action, combat: all these are necessary correlates to the project of becoming ‘more human’. In Ulmann’s poems of the camps, there is, therefore, a third crucial component to striving to live the fullness of human identity: love and compassion for others. There are two aspects to this opening to the other person: the poet’s love for his wife and the love he receives from her, and the ‘passion and compassion’ that he believes are so desperately needed in a war-ravaged world.

The ‘dream’ once again takes centre stage in Surrealist panoramas, evoking memories of the beloved; love provides the human person with an interior space of liberty in a captive, bloody and often absurd world. Ulmann’s abiding penchant for dreams, his confidence in the intuitive sense encoded in the apparently senseless dream, is expressed time and time again in these fluid and oneiric love poems in *Poèmes du camp*. In *Matin du monde*, Ulmann draws a dreamscape where even if everything else seems chaotic, the beloved provides an anchor, a point of reference. The title seems to be taken from a poem of the same name by Jules Supervielle, which presents a beautiful and harmonious world in which the earth turns around man, where everything has its reflection, where noise is balanced by silence, shadow

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<sup>138</sup> Ulmann, *L’Humanisme du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 33.

by light. Ulmann's poem reuses some of the imagery of Supervielle's—for example, a white horse appears in the first stanza:

L'archet est à présent une queue de cheval  
Blanche qui frappe l'air  
Impatiente des combats  
Le monde n'a plus de centre  
Que ces os sous la peau  
Blanche et douce  
Que je cherche dans mon rêve (PC 7)

The line 'Le monde n'a plus de centre / Que ces os sous la peau' could be read as a contradiction of Supervielle's portrait of an equilibrated, harmonious world. Now, Ulmann implies, the sounds of the world are battle-sounds; now, the white horse from Supervielle's poem is a war-horse, impatient for battle. In this war-stricken, chaotic world, the poet is sustained by dreams in which his wife appears:

Loin du monde où par le jeu  
Des mots les contraires se boivent  
Loin du monde que nous cherchons  
Et ta peau douce et blanche dans  
Mon rêve me nourrit tout le jour  
Et la nuit suivante coulent les sources  
Où j'ai posé ma tête. (PC 7)

The love shared with his wife is a beautiful, pure life-giving spring which provides a sure hope for the poet in the camps; it is an anchor and an abiding point of reference in an otherwise disordered world.

A similarly dream-like picture is contained in the poem beginning *Iris mandragore étonnée d'être au monde*, already cited. Against a landscape of a turgid marsh-like entrapment that is war, Ulmann, once again, places the joy and interior freedom that together his wife and he share:

Les champs où l'on s'est battu sentent le moisi  
On tient fermées les fenêtres de la terre  
Ton œil voit entre les saisons ces temps choisis  
Pour les étoiles sur les vitres pour mettre

Les poings à travers les carreaux éblouis  
 Nos têtes à la fenêtre  
 L'air le grand air à tes images oui  
 Iris mandragore apaisée d'être au monde  
 Sur mon épaule elle roule sa tête ronde. (PC 31)

Contrasted are the staleness and disintegration of a war-ridden world, reeking of mould, and this picture of the poet and his wife escaping from this imprisonment. Breaking a window, they can breathe the fresh air and see the stars clearly. Formal elements beautifully echo the freedom expressed in the poem's content. Following several fairly conventional alexandrines, the line 'Les poings à travers les carreaux éblouis' omits a syllable in the first three-syllable group, so that the forceful gesture of escape implied by 'les poings' is made audible in the deviation from established prosodic form. The two stresses on the line being on 'têtes' and 'fenêtres', and the assonance of these two words, so typical of Ulmann's style, both lend here special resonance to this triumphant expression of their escape. Similarly, 'l'air' is stressed at the beginning of the next line (the only line-initial stress in the poem), and then repeated, as if a single enunciation were not enough to express the marvellous elation that this freedom produces. The mutual love of the spouses constitutes a partition at a time when good and evil are blurred, as demonstrated in the conclusion of *Entretien au salon*:

mais notre amour partage encore  
 deux mondes où les contraires  
 se sont éteints dans la guerre  
 pétales usés au frottement  
 de l'air acide (PC 30)

Love provides clarity of vision and purpose in the poisonous, consuming 'acid air' of the times. Their love is, moreover, almost a weapon against a hostile world; because of their love, they will never be overcome or defeated. In *Matin du monde*, Ulmann employs the imagery of royalty, depicting himself and his wife as sovereigns:

[...] ma femme et mon fils  
 M'attendent à l'ombre de la patrie  
 Et veillent sur les sources où je bois  
 Zone occupée par notre amour  
 Impériale jusqu'à subjuguier les prairies (PC 8)

In this panorama, their ‘empire’ remains sovereign territory, sheltered from the ravages of war. Protected, they can look forward to freedom:

[...] Et nous sortirons des écoutilles  
Rouges d’avoir vécu renfermés  
Enfermés martins pêcheurs  
Enfin à l’air libre sous une couronne  
De mitraillettes inutiles  
Panoplie du monde  
Que nous avons vaincu  
Mon amour. (PC 8)

‘Martin pêcheurs’ is a play on two words: ‘martin-pêcheur’ means ‘kingfisher’ and ‘pêcheur’ means ‘preacher’. Ulmann unites his wife to himself in the role he has given himself to proclaim truth, and at the same time, draws an image of emerging from darkness and shadows and imprisonment to fly away into ‘l’air libre’. The very weapons of war become their triumph, transformed into ‘une couronne’ for them both. Ulmann’s advocacy of consciousness and language throughout his poems from the camps, as the source of true salvation for man, is resolute and bold; but only in the poems on his love for his wife does a joyful and positive sense of victory and deliverance emerge.

Indeed, in Ulmann’s vision, the healing of the world, at present devastated by war, will only be realised through acts of compassion and love practised by individuals. This love, though, presupposes the willingness to first ‘see’ clearly, to see where the wounds of the war have been inflicted. The poem *Sur* presents a hidden and discomfiting reality which (it is implied) is not immediately visible to ordinary unaided ‘sight’:

La grande armée traîne avec elle  
Des milliers de cadavres invisibles à l’œil nu  
  
La neige sur les blessures du canon sur la terre  
L’oxyde de zinc sur les gueules de soldats  
Noyées de suie de boue (PC 34)

In this deeply pessimistic vision, there seems, at first, no redemption. The repetition of the preposition *sur* accentuates the layers upon layers—snow on craters, mud and soot on soldiers’ faces. What will clear away these impurities, this accumulated grime? When will

spring come and renew a wounded earth? For Ulmann, it is in the intimacy and love which the human being may express through the hands—small, loving and peculiarly human gestures—that the world will find salvation and redemption. It is ultimately hands that bring healing to the world:

La main sur l'épaule d'un enfant  
Pense avec tes mains  
Panse les blessures de la terre  
Panse les blessures de la guerre (PC 35)

This very personal image contrasts sharply with the anonymity of the picture sketched earlier in the poem: an army moving ever on with an impersonal will, a sort of amorphous body of dead men walking. This small tender gesture—placing a hand on a child's shoulder—takes on a larger importance. With his usual Surrealist penchant for striking word-play, Ulmann plays on the homophony of *pense* ('think') and *panse* ('bandage'). Thought must not remain barren but should give rise to acts of compassion; thought and act should be so closely united that it was as if hands could 'think'. As always, Ulmann's outlook does not limit itself to the camps but extends to the wider context of the war and a post-war world.

Ulmann's poetry has, indeed, a very extensive project at its centre, far more ambitious than has been realised to date. The small body of work dedicated to Ulmann's poetry has approached it through the conventional paradigm of the struggle to represent the unrepresentable of the camps. But these poems are much more than simple representations of Ulmann's captivity in Mauthausen. These poems express and reinforce the freedom that can still be exercised even in conditions of radical deprivation. Ulmann's wish to better fulfil his *métier d'homme* ('human profession'), a desire he articulated just before the outbreak of war, comes out strongly in all the poems which he wrote in Mauthausen. Ulmann's poems are not just about surviving the camps in any way possible but instead express the author's efforts to mature in his chosen *métier* and to hold onto his interior freedom while in captivity. The Ricœurian model of narrative and poetry, emphasising the unequalled capacity of narrative and poetry to reveal, in Ricœur's words, 'a new mode of being' and thus open up possible ethical avenues to be followed in life, can be usefully applied to Ulmann's *Poèmes du camp*. In his poems, Ulmann re-imagines his *être-au-monde* in radically transformative ways, applying his distinctive Surrealist outlook to exploring his internment in Mauthausen, and uncovering, in the light of his philosophical principles and beliefs, an ethos for his time in captivity based on unwavering self-awareness and commitment to truth, integrity and love.

What these poems consistently show is the lasting impact Personalism had on Ulmann's thought and particularly on his conception of freedom. The Personalist creed of the dignity of the individual and his inalienable freedom and agency became a tenet that Ulmann strove to integrate into his whole way of life. Although Personalism emerged in intellectual circles in peacetime France, a setting far removed from the chaos and horrors of a concentration camp, it would nonetheless prove of great value in providing ethical meaning in Ulmann's day-to-day struggles in the camps, as these poems show. The ongoing role of Personalist thought in Ulmann's works points to how existing value-systems and beliefs were not necessarily displaced or made redundant by the prisoner's brutal immersion into the *univers concentrationnaire*. The extent to which French camp prisoners continued to draw meaning during their captivity from their pre-war philosophical or intellectual formation has not been recognised to date. Thanks in part to his Personalist formation, Ulmann is able to assert in these poems his freedom and self-determination, and to affirm the ongoing purpose that his life holds for himself and for others.

The persistence of Surrealism in Ulmann's works further illuminates the cultural and literary continuity revealed in the writings of French prisoners, while also adding an intriguing post-script to the history of Surrealism, at its height in the early 1930s but by the 1940s, no longer an avant-garde movement. A literary medium that elevated the dream and the unconscious as a source of knowledge resurfaced in a place where daily events were so atrocious and bizarre as to be reminiscent of dreams, and whose inhabitants could fall into a dream-like state. Acutely aware of this strange congruency, Ulmann continued to use his Surrealist poetic as a way of delving into the unconscious and seeking truth there. Surrealism took on a very original form, as Ulmann incorporated elements of the camp into his poems. Rather than being used literally, these elements are placed in fluid and oneiric scenes, assuming a more extensive meaning. On occasion, Ulmann even converts images with negative and degrading connotations into combative and defiant figures. As these poems show, established literary forms could be taken and adapted in striking ways in poems about the camps.

In Ulmann's *Poèmes du camp*, we are looking at an example of Holocaust poetry which, decidedly, does not fit into the paradigm of silence and self-effacement found in the works of critics like Alvin Rosenfeld and Antony Rowland. There is little evidence of intrinsic self-negation to be found in these poems. Ulmann does not appear at all preoccupied by the limitations of poetic language in the face of the atrocious realities of Mauthausen. Rather, he plays with language and crafts the prosody in his poems in supremely confident and

expressive ways. On a formal level, this poetry mirrors the freedom and defiance present in the content. Hearing the prosodic variations in these poems, an auditor does not receive the impression of constriction and incapacitation but rather, one of bold self-assurance, forcefulness and expansiveness. The poem itself, in this sense, is transformed into a space of freedom.

Ulmann's poems convey his determination to realise the fullness of his autonomy as a subject and person, and in doing so be able to contribute to the renewal of society. But poetry was not just an *expression* of these aims; Ulmann wanted his poetry to effect *in itself* a sort of revival of language, restoring integrity and truthfulness to words ever more corrupted by the ravages of ideology and war. Poetry, for Ulmann, offers an authentically personal and truthful language springing from the richness and clarity of vision contained in deep consciousness. Writing poetry in Mauthausen is thus an integral part of his efforts to contribute to a true rehumanisation of society.

Indeed, one of the most surprising aspects of Ulmann's Mauthausen poems is the lively concerns for the good of society that emerge alongside more personal hopes. Despite his incarceration in the highly confined world of the camps, the evidence of his poems suggests that Ulmann lost none of his keen hopes for the healing and reconstruction of a post-war world, remaining a true *intellectuel engagé* during his captivity. Thinking, speaking and doing must form, Ulmann believed, an integrated and consistent whole. The interior freedom he discovered in captivity was not purely self-oriented. Rather, this freedom was directed towards helping in the renewal of the wider world. 'La guerre n'a pas le droit,' Ulmann had written in his diary in September 1938, as the outbreak of war began to seem increasingly likely, 'de boucler notre horizon.'<sup>139</sup> As this poetry shows, Ulmann's intellectual horizons and moral aims remained truly vast during his imprisonment in Mauthausen.

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<sup>139</sup> Cited in Goldschmidt and Tenand-Ulmann, *André Ulmann ou le juste combat*, 77.

## Chapter 2

### ‘Nous sommes ici des hommes pendant que la mort fume’: Death and Transcendence in the Poetry of Maurice Honel and Gustave Leroy

For Lawrence Langer, death in the camps exposed the total futility of the linguistic apparatus belonging to religious or cultural traditions. His essay ‘The Literature of Auschwitz’ proposes that most literary works about Auschwitz are characterised by a disconcerting lack of meaning discovered in the traumatic events described. In support of this thesis, Langer cites a passage from Jean Améry’s Auschwitz memoir *At The Mind’s Limits* in which Améry talks about how ‘the aesthetic view of death’, an elevating vision propagated by philosophy, literature and art, proved completely meaningless in Auschwitz. Using Améry’s testimony as evidence, Langer argues that existing cultural and spiritual approaches to death became totally obsolete in the world of the camps, particularly the death camps. The devastating upheaval of moral norms undermined, moreover, ‘the traditional power of language and the meaning it is accustomed to serve.’<sup>140</sup> Langer discounts the possibility that received language and inherited literary forms might have continued to serve a function for camp victims facing the trauma of the deaths of their comrades and the prospect of their own death. Langer is not the only critic to assert that the camps problematised the language of spiritual and literary tradition. In a similar vein, George Steiner contends that the Holocaust (‘Auschwitz’ in shorthand) irrevocably wounded and altered language:

Where the language is still humane, in the root sense of that word, it is being spoken by survivors, remembrancers and ghosts. Its haunted music is that of the embers that continue to crackle in a cooling ash of a dead fire. Eloquence after Auschwitz would be a kind of obscenity (this is the meaning of Theodor Adorno’s so often misunderstood call for ‘no poetry after Auschwitz’).<sup>141</sup>

Language, according to this schematic, disintegrated in the camps alongside human ashes. Moreover, in the wake of the Holocaust, figurative language could no longer hint at spiritual or divine realities. ‘It may be,’ Steiner writes, ‘that after the Shoah, those metaphors, those

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<sup>140</sup> Lawrence Langer, ‘The Literature of Auschwitz’, in *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 94.

<sup>141</sup> George Steiner, ‘The Long Life of Metaphor: An Approach to the “Shoah”’ in Berel Lang (ed.), *Writing and the Holocaust* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988), 156.



projections and sublimations which made it possible for human words and human syntax to talk about God are no longer available to us.<sup>142</sup> Language after Auschwitz, Steiner suggests, can no longer serve to point towards the transcendent.

I suggest that Steiner's and Langer's ideas need to be revisited and re-evaluated in the light of the poetry about death written *in* the concentration camps. Contrary to what the theories of these critics might lead us to expect, the texts written by Jewish and non-Jewish camp prisoners alike draw on existing spiritual frameworks to give meaning to death. A cataclysmic and spiritually empty form of language, totally rupturing with the past, is not in evidence here. Rather, poets use figurative language, particularly metaphor, in order to bring out the small glimpses of redemption in the dark scenes around them. Ricœur's conception of metaphor as a creative technique disclosing new meaning is applicable here. Metaphor serves as a powerful tool for discovering hidden transcendent meaning in the suffering, dying body and in death.

Gustave Leroy (Dora) and Maurice Honel (Auschwitz) are particularly noteworthy examples of French camp poets whose literary responses to death in the camps, although on one level dark and graphic, evoke transcendence and even freedom. I have chosen to focus on Leroy and Honel because, aside from the inherent quality and strength of their writing, the transcendent visions that they propose illustrate, respectively, the Christian and Communist influences so prevalent among Resistants. In this chapter, I argue that because of their philosophical or religious convictions and their transcendent outlook on death, these poets retain some kind of agency and interior freedom, and that the poems themselves consistently embody the freedom that subsists for them. In their different ways, Honel and Leroy believe that some freedom remains for them, even under all the distressing limitations of captivity and in their stark confrontation with mortality.

The question of the suffering body as it was experienced in the camps, and the camp prisoner's relationship to his or her own disintegrating and slowly dying body, is a crucial one. Prisoners often experienced extreme bodily decomposition, due to starvation, overwork and sickness. Dysentery was rife and caused extreme weakness. Progressively losing control over his own body, the prisoner became more and more robbed of bodily agency. Bernard Py (Dachau) remembers feeling deeply ashamed of the physical and mental weakness and sluggishness he experienced in the camp: 'Je suis le dernier, je suis l'inférieur. Je ne peux pas

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<sup>142</sup> Steiner, 'The Long Life of Metaphor', 156.

me laver, je ne peux pas prier, je ne peux pas avoir une activité intellectuelle.<sup>143</sup> This powerlessness felt in the vulnerable body could be a source of great pain and even shame.

It might be asked how there could be any freedom or agency for prisoners hampered by a body so radically diminished and weakened, and haunted by the close prospect of death—the ultimate limit-experience that always constrains personal freedom. Extreme disempowerment, in the body and often in the mind as well, would seem to problematise the very notion of agency. Death was a constant spectacle in the camps: piles of bodies were regularly carted off to the *Krematorium* for incineration. The sight of death in so bleak a form, a reminder for the spectator of the fate that might await him or her as well, might also seem to rudely expose the illusions of human freedom. But this is not the conclusion reached by either Leroy or Honel. Both poets are convinced that they have a real capacity to pursue a good. Honel expresses this confidence when he affirms in a poem: ‘Nous sommes ici des hommes / Pendant que la mort fume’. The fullness of human potential, Honel implies—including agency—is retained by him and his comrades in Auschwitz.

My analysis of Leroy and Honel breaks with previous scholarship in the sense that the idea of salvation is usually not seen as compatible with death in the camps, whether in the death camps properly speaking where Jews were exterminated or in other concentration camps. Academic discussions tend to view with suspicion texts that could be seen as imposing metaphysical or religious explanations upon the Holocaust. Lawrence Langer, one of the most influential scholars in the field of Holocaust literature and who began writing on the theme in the 1970s, has consistently argued that the very idea of redemption is inconsistent with Holocaust literature. He acclaims literature that refuses the easy path of salvation or consolation, and criticises texts like Victor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*, which, he argues, draw on earlier religious and metaphysical paradigms no longer applicable in the world of Auschwitz.<sup>144</sup> Scholarship on the literary interpretation of death and extermination in the camps has been dominated by the discourse of Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel’s seminal testimony *La Nuit*. Holocaust scholar Irving Greenberg has called *La Nuit* the ‘classic phenomenology of the Shoah’, one that ‘shatter[s] the redemption paradigm’.<sup>145</sup> In the most

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<sup>143</sup> Interview with Bernard Py, 13 November 2013.

<sup>144</sup> See, for example, Langer’s comments on this point in the essay ‘Interpreting Survivor Testimony’ in *Writing and the Holocaust*, ed. Berel Lang (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988), 26-40.

<sup>145</sup> Irving Greenberg, ‘Dialectic Living and Thinking: Wiesel as Storyteller and Interpreter of the Shoah’ in *Elie Wiesel: Jewish, Literary and Moral Perspectives*, ed. Steven T. Katz and Alan Rosen (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2014), 176-7.

widely-quoted passage from this work, the author recounts the trauma and loss of faith he experienced as a young boy, the night of a selection in Birkenau:

Jamais je n'oublierai cette fumée.

Jamais je n'oublierai les petits visages des enfants dont j'avais vu les corps se transformer en volutes sous un azur muet.

Jamais je n'oublierai ces flammes qui consumèrent pour toujours ma foi.<sup>146</sup>

In Wiesel's powerful dramaturgy, the fire and smoke of the *Krematorium* become interiorised as the destruction of faith. But the texts written by French Resistant prisoners in the camps, by and large, offer a different—not necessarily competing—narrative that interprets the flames and ashes produced from the incineration of bodies in a salvific way. Resistants who could still find fortitude in their spiritual and philosophical beliefs often assigned redemptive meaning to the deaths of their friends and comrades. Louis Martin-Chauffier (Neuengamme) wrote that Marxists and Christians benefited from belief systems solid and comprehensive enough to be able to give meaning to their ordeal:

Pour que fût possible le refus total de l'univers où nous étions plongés, il était nécessaire de trouver refuge, de s'enfermer solidement dans un univers intérieur sans fissure [...] La plupart de ceux—non les seuls—que j'ai vus résister dans ces 'châteaux de Dieu' étaient, ou bien de vrais chrétiens ou bien des marxistes fortement assurés dans une explication cohérente.<sup>147</sup>

These prisoners, Martin-Chauffier affirms, were able to resist discouragement by drawing on the interior resources instilled by their Christian or Marxist formation. The poetry of Leroy and Honel offer compelling contemporary evidence of the phenomenon Martin-Chauffier describes. Redemption, for these poets, was possible even in the ugly face of death in the camps. Confronted with the deaths of their comrades, Leroy and Honel put their hopes in the salvation promised by their Christian and Marxist convictions respectively.

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<sup>146</sup> Wiesel, *La Nuit*, 78-9.

<sup>147</sup> Louis Martin-Chauffier, *L'Homme et la bête* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 121. First published in 1947.

Leroy's poetry on death in the camps must be understood in the context of the Christian faith that he professed and, more specifically, the fervent French Catholic culture that had nourished him—a culture that, despite ongoing conflicts with secular elements in French society, retained considerable influence at the time in France. Leroy was far from being alone in the Resistance when it came to finding solace and encouragement in his religion. In his analysis of the sociologies found in the Resistance, the historian Olivier Wieviorka suggests that the particular characteristics of pre-war French Catholic culture contributed to a certain group of Catholics being willing to 'accepter de perdre leur vie' as Resistants.<sup>148</sup> Having received an education that stressed the importance of duty and heroic commitment, the value of sacrifice and a strong 'sens d'abnégation', Catholic Resistants were, in a sense, Wieviorka argues, equipped with the necessary framework to lay down their lives. This rally-cry from the first edition of the Resistance journal *Combat* is a typical expression of the creed of Christian Resistants:

Organisons ensemble la croisade de la Vérité contre le Mensonge,  
du Bien contre le Mal, du Christianisme contre le Paganisme, de la  
Liberté contre l'Esclavage.<sup>149</sup>

Self-sacrifice to further this cause was exalted, and Resistants executed by the German occupiers were termed 'martyrs'.<sup>150</sup> In the camps themselves, French Catholic prisoners sometimes called the deaths of their peers a martyrdom. Christian beliefs could provide, on occasion, a way of conferring meaning on death even when it took on so very grim and hopeless an appearance as in the camps.

As far as can be ascertained from the scant biographical details available, Leroy does not appear to have had strong affiliations with political, literary or social movements, unlike the other major poets of the camps. Instead, his poetry seems chiefly informed by the intense French Catholic piety of the era. Catholic doctrine taught hope in eternal life, communion of the living with the dead, and the dignity of the human person even in the worst suffering and disfigurement. This triple axis of hope in heaven, prayers for the dead and the inalienability of human dignity lies at the centre of Leroy's poetic vision.

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<sup>148</sup> Olivier Wieviorka, *Histoire de la Résistance, 1940-1945* (Paris: Perrin, 2013).

<sup>149</sup> Editorial of *Combat*, no. 1, 1941 [first issue]. *Combat* was the official journal of the *Mouvement de libération française* (French Liberation Movement).

<sup>150</sup> For just one typical example among countless to be found in contemporary Resistance writings, public and private, see *Combat*, no. 11 (June 1942), 3, in which 'nos martyrs fusillés' are listed.

A Commander in the French *Armée de l'Air*, Leroy continued his service under the Vichy administration while secretly acting as the head of the *Armée secrète*, which was to provide assistance to the Allies upon their invasion. He was arrested for his Resistance involvement and deported to Buchenwald by the transport of 17 January 1944, before being transferred to Dora on 11 February. There he remained until 4 April 1945, when he was evacuated to Bergen-Belsen. He was finally liberated on 15 April 1945. Towards the end of his stay in Dora (Christmas 1944), Leroy was transferred from heavy outdoor labour to a much easier assignment. It was at this point that that his physical sufferings were diminished enough to allow the intellectual effort of creating poetry and, he explains in the preface to his collection of poems, 'sa souffrance morale' led him to seek an outlet by composing poems. The original manuscripts were published in facsimile in 1962, probably privately, as *A chacun son dû, Jedem das Seine* ('To each his own' in French and German respectively).<sup>151</sup> Copies of this collection are not readily available outside archival collections and Leroy's poetry has never been the subject of academic study.

As for Honel, his poetry gives a rare and valuable insight into the experiences of French Jewish Communists deported to Auschwitz. An ardent French patriot and Communist, Honel formed close bonds with his comrades during his deportation and organised support networks for French prisoners. Born in 1903, Honel was, from a young age, actively engaged in the Party and in the 1930s became a Communist deputy in the French parliament. He was arrested for Resistance activities in 1943 and deported to Auschwitz-II in the *convoi des Juifs Résistants*. His wife Mira Honel was also deported to Auschwitz in a separate transport. In Auschwitz, he was assigned to the sub-camp of Yaworzno. In Yaworzno, Honel formed a *Comité français de solidarité* (French Committee of Solidarity), which aimed to assist fellow prisoners. He was liberated on 27 January 1945. Both during his time in Auschwitz and after his liberation, he composed numerous poems, which were published by the FNDIRP in 1947 as *Prophéties des accouchements*.<sup>152</sup> The book consists of three sections: 'Les camps de la mort'—containing poems composed in Auschwitz—and two other sections, 'Le retour' and 'Prophéties des accouchements', consisting of poems Honel wrote after his liberation.

While apparently deeply affected by the fate of his fellow Jews—he refers several times in his poems to the extermination of children or the elderly and frail in Auschwitz—Honel

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<sup>151</sup> Gustave Leroy, *A chacun son dû, Jedem das Seine* (publisher unknown, 1962). Facsimile from the archives of the Association Buchenwald-Dora, documents ABDK-II-12-6-2-0-03 to ABDK-II-12-6-2-0-58. The text is hereafter referred to for citational purposes as ACD followed by the page number of the citation.

<sup>152</sup> Maurice Honel, *Prophéties des accouchements* (Paris: Editions FNDIRP, 1947). This text is hereafter referred to for citational purposes as PA, followed by the page number of the citation.

seems much less influenced by Jewish faith and culture than by his strong and active faith in Communist principles. For Honel, as for so many of his contemporaries in France, Communism offered not simply the promise of political and social reform but an entire rule of life: an intellectual and moral sense of commitment, direction and purpose that impacted every area of personal development. The qualities most applauded were commitment, fraternity, solidarity and integrity—values which Honel evidently strove to put into practice, as revealed by his efforts to establish a network of solidarity for his fellow prisoners in Yaworzno. In his Auschwitz poems, moreover, he places a great deal of emphasis on the crucial importance of fraternity and mutual support between deportees. These poems throw into relief the persistence of the Communist ethic within certain groups of French prisoners in Auschwitz. While it might seem surprising that Communism, usually considered a materialist worldview, could be associated with transcendence, Honel's ongoing adherence to the values promoted by Communism is actually one of the reasons that he can find transcendent meaning in self-sacrifice and death.

Apart from a few poems reproduced in some recent anthologies, the poetry in *Prophéties des accouchements* has never been republished since 1947 and remains almost unknown in scholarly work. Critical attention is limited to contemporary reviews, including a review by Robert Antelme, and some comments in Mole's study of the poetry of the camps, supplemented by a later 2008 article by the same author. These critiques of his poetry have focused on the blunt, aggressive style and Honel's use of dark humour and irony. Antelme praises Honel's ability to transcribe faithfully the raw physical facts of the camps while simultaneously achieving ascendancy over these facts through humour:

Presque jamais ici le poète ne lâche (ou n'est lâché par) l'objet, le fait, qui s'imposent dans leur réalité presque mythologique. Mais jamais pourtant l'objet ou le fait ne surgissent hors du temps, ne sont un phénomène pur. [...] On retrouve presque toujours dans ces poèmes ce double mouvement : la suggestion du fait comme chose qui happe, qui va tout absorber et aussi le flux contraire, lancinant, de la revendication de l'opprimé qui ne fuit pas le fait, mais qui l'assume et s'exerce sans cesse à le surmonter.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Robert Antelme, 'Témoignage du camp et de poésie', in *Robert Antelme : Textes inédits sur L'Espèce humaine, Essais et témoignages*, 47. Article first published in *Le Patriote résistant*, no. 53 (15 May 1948).

The genius of Honel's poetry, Antelme suggests, lies in its two-fold character: it vividly evokes camp life but at the same time displays a conscious insubordination to the very facts described. Agreeing with this assessment, Mole investigates in more detail the poetic techniques characterising Honel's poetry: the conscious exploitation of sonority and rhythm, a rhythm both 'harmonious and jerky', the sequences of hermetic, disjointed images, and the often crude and violent imagery.

I provide a new reading here of Honel's Auschwitz poetry, a reading that does not contradict Antelme's and Mole's interpretations but instead complements their insights by further elaborating the nature of Honel's poetics. I probe the transcendent meaning contained in his often esoteric and original imagery. Reverence for the suffering human body, a fervent Communist ethic and a deep esteem for self-sacrifice infuse Honel's poetry. The form of these poems, moreover, plays an essential part in the articulation of Honel's liberating vision, and I look at the ways in which rhythm and sound are intrinsically expressive of interior resistance and autonomy. Building on Antelme's suggestion that Honel both records and 'assumes' the painful facts through his poetry, I am interested in exactly how Honel takes on the burden of his own suffering body and even discerns a transcendent dimension within it.

A common adjective in accounts of their deportation written by prisoners when describing the appearance that the prisoner's starved body assumed over time is *grotesque*. The body of the deportee—emaciated, skeletal, often covered with vermin-infested sores—became a highly grotesque figure. A question which has not yet been addressed is how the grotesque character of the prisoner's suffering body might compare to the grotesque as usually portrayed in literary works and scholarly criticism. The grotesque has been a fertile area of research since the 1950s, when Wolfgang Kayser produced his famous definition of the grotesque as 'the expression of the estranged or alienated world'.<sup>154</sup> For Kayser, the grotesque consists in a sudden encounter with the familiar world that reveals this hitherto familiar world under a new and disturbing light. More specifically, the grotesque may arise when there is the perception of an unsettling conflict of the human and the non-human, or the animate and the inanimate, a conflict that Philip Thomson identifies as one of the possible characteristics defining the grotesque.<sup>155</sup> Confronted with the alien faces of long-term

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<sup>154</sup> Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (Bloomington, 1963). Originally published in German in 1957.

<sup>155</sup> Philip Thomson, *The grotesque* (London: Methuen, 1972).

prisoners upon her arrival in Ravensbrück, Denise Dufournier felt she was beholding monstrous amorphous beings:

Les corps informes, si maigres, évoquaient [...] les statues du Moyen Age qui ornent les portails de nos cathédrales. J'en vis qui nous montraient du doigt en grimaçant un rire diabolique.

Je sentis naître en moi la panique, une sorte de terreur comme celle que causent aux enfants les récits des légendes nordiques peuplées d'être fantastiques qui tiennent à la fois des dieux, des hommes et des bêtes.<sup>156</sup>

These grotesque figures, 'diabolical' and gargoyle-like, appeared so deformed to the newly arrived prisoners that they no longer seemed fully human, but rather resembled the quasi-human characters of fantasy and children's nightmares. It is telling that Dufournier has to call upon memories of legendary stories to find an apt description for the figures she beheld—the grotesque seems to belong by its nature to the literary sphere. But the grotesque encountered in the camps differed in some key respects from the grotesque in literature. The grotesque in literary works is usually about deliberately fantastic scenarios, or else describes a fleeting encounter with disturbing realities in an otherwise sane world. We are a far cry here, too, from Mikhail Bakhtin's positive conception of the grotesque as the joyous exorcism of elements repressed by society.<sup>157</sup> In the camps, the grotesque was a real, enduring and pervasive day-to-day phenomenon. The prisoner was surrounded by tragically altered human figures and was often quite aware that he or she bore a similar stamp.

This reality has fundamental implications for the way Honel and Leroy portray the grotesque in the camps. The grotesque is not portrayed in poems with any cruelty, nor is it presented as repugnant. In Leroy's poems, the disfigured and grotesque body is viewed through a prism of saving compassion and solidarity which is deeply transformative in ways I will outline. Honel's portrayals of the tortured, dying body of the camp prisoner are almost desperately bleak on one level. But through the very brutality of these portrayals, Honel uncovers a freeing and salvific truth contained within the oppressed body.

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<sup>156</sup> Cited in Reynaud, *La Foire à l'homme* (vol. 1), 200. The quote is taken from Denise Dufournier, *Souvenirs de la maison des mortes* (Paris: Hachette, 1945).

<sup>157</sup> See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984). First published in Russian in 1965.



In Honel and Leroy's poems, metaphor has a key role to play in transfiguring the often gruesome materiality of life and death in Dora and Auschwitz. The very idea of metaphor and other literary devices in a work on the Holocaust and the camps has been a subject of academic dispute. One school of thought holds that figurative language has a positive role to play in representing the camps. Buchenwald survivor and author Jorge Semprun famously wrote that in order to convey the lived experience of the camps, a testimony must be 'un objet artistique, un espace de création, ou de récréation. Seul l'artifice d'un récit maîtrisé parviendra à transmettre partiellement la réalité du témoignage.'<sup>158</sup> Again, one scholar of Holocaust literature, Elizabeth Scheiber, suggests that in works about the concentration camps, metaphor may function as a 'bridge' between normal experience and the abnormal reality of the camps, by employing 'clue[s] from the normal world that allows the viewer/reader to penetrate atrocity.'<sup>159</sup> But this positive view of the role of metaphor in literary representations of the camps is far from being universal. Other scholars have contended that the grisly physical effects of death in the camps are so inflexibly concrete that they resist metaphorical representation. Alvin Rosenfeld argues that death as inflicted in the concentration camps is fundamentally incompatible with metaphor:

[...] there are no metaphors for Auschwitz, just as Auschwitz is not a metaphor for anything else. Why is that the case? Because the flames were real flames, the ashes only ashes, the smoke always and only smoke<sup>160</sup>

The plain details of the mass incineration of bodies in the *Krematorium*, according to this viewpoint, are so gruesomely and unescapably physical that the use of figurative language to describe them is precluded. Implicit in Rosenfeld's declaration is the understanding that metaphor would attempt to camouflage the stark materiality of death in Auschwitz. These signs of annihilation (flames, ashes and smoke) impose, for Rosenfeld, a kind of terrible finality that forbids the outlet of metaphor.

Despite such critical reservations on the use of literary devices in Holocaust texts, the fact remains that much of the surviving poetry written in the camps *does* use metaphor, and I argue that there is something much more fundamental and more radical going on with

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<sup>158</sup> Jorge Semprun, *L'Écriture ou la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994).

<sup>159</sup> Scheiber, Elizabeth. 'Figurative Language in Delbo's *Auschwitz et après*,' *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 11, 1 (2009): <http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1415>. Retrieved 29 May 2014.

<sup>160</sup> Alvin Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 27.

metaphor in this poetry than the theories of any of these critics would indicate. These images do not, for the most part, serve to communicate more evocatively an atrocious reality, as suggested by Semprun's and Scheiber's comments; in most cases, the intended audience for these poems consisted of fellow prisoners who were quite as familiar as the author with the grim facts in question. Rather, it became evident from my readings of these poems that metaphor was an integral part of the ethical project that this poetry constitutes and that its primary role was to actively generate salvific meaning.

The oral testimony of André Fournier, who composed a poem entitled *Moriturus* (Latin for 'About to die') in Buchenwald and shared with me the account of how this poem originated, confirms this understanding of the function of metaphor in camp poetry. Fournier told me that he conceived his poem one evening in Buchenwald when returning to his *Block*:

Un jour j'ai considéré que j'étais un condamné à mort parmi les condamnés à morts. Et il y avait une raison très simple. Il y avait eu [...] beaucoup de morts au cours d'une épidémie ou je ne sais quoi. Et on avait brûlé beaucoup de cadavres, donc le crématoire avait craché comme une énorme cheminée, cheminée d'usine qui crachait de la fumée noire quand [...] on brûlait des morts. Ce jour-là le vent en plus portait sur notre *Block* et il descendait sur la tête des petits fragments qui avaient été humains [...] C'est ça qui m'avait un petit peu secoué ce jour-là. Je me demandais ce que devenaient tous ces pauvres types quelque part dans l'azur. Que devenaient-ils ?<sup>161</sup>

Despite Fournier's distress at seeing the remains of his fellow prisoners, the poem he wrote makes the ashes into something deeply spiritual and even redemptive. The white ashes descending from the sky are called *une manne*, identified with the white bread that, according to the book of Exodus, fell from heaven to feed the Israelites. When I asked him about his use of the term *manne* in describing the ashes, Fournier replied:

Ah oui, c'est une 'manne' parce que ce sont, pas des saints, mais ils ont été transfigurés par la mort. Donc c'est une 'manne', c'est-à-dire quelque chose de bénéfique.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Interview with André Fournier, 14 December 2013.

<sup>162</sup> Interview with André Fournier, 14 December 2013.

As Fournier's testimony shows, the image of 'manna' used to describe the ashes was not chosen simply because it aptly evoked the descent of small white particles from the heavens. Instead, this metaphor arose from Fournier's intuition that this physical convergence was deeply meaningful on a metaphysical level. The physical transformation that the bodies of these men had undergone suggested an accompanying spiritual 'transfiguration'. Fournier was not alone in perceiving transcendent meaning in such harrowing sights: similar metaphors are applied to the external realities of death (ashes or corpses) in numerous other poems by French prisoners. Metaphor in this poetry invests the cruel physicality of death with transcendent significance.

Ricœur's hermeneutics can illuminate the workings of metaphor in this poetry. Metaphor, for Ricœur, is a dynamic and fertile process that is, in itself, genuinely *iconographique*, producing novel images. Metaphor is not a pure *ornement*, nor a simple place-holder in discourse, but creates completely new meaning of the kind that we are dealing with in the poetry from the camps. Moreover, from Ricœur's point of view, although metaphor necessarily entails installing a sort of preliminary semantic distance between the subject and the predicate being used to describe it (*une déviation*), the final step in the metaphorical process actually draws together these two components. 'La métaphore,' Ricœur writes, 'n'est pas l'écart lui-même mais la réduction de l'écart.'<sup>163</sup> This understanding of metaphor assists in addressing the suspicions of the technique evident in Alvin Rosenfeld's words cited earlier, a distrust linked to the implicit assumption that metaphor involves simply moving away from the initial, factual reality. Understood from the point of view of Ricœur's theory, metaphorical descriptions of the physical elements connected with death in the camps—fire, ashes, smoke—do not abandon objective truth but instead introduce crucial new meaning.

With this in mind, I first look at the ways in which the material reality of death is presented and transfigured in Leroy's and Honel's poetry. I examine the portrayals of the grotesque body in this poetry, briefly comparing these descriptions to analogous depictions in women's poetry from the camps. Subsequently, I discuss poems by Leroy and other camp poets about the burning of corpses in the *Krematorium*, looking at the transcendent meaning that these poets confer on the remains of the dead. Finally, I look at the ideas of martyrdom, self-sacrifice and communion between the living and the dead that emerge in both Leroy's and Honel's work and that allow for some measure of agency faced with death in the camps.

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<sup>163</sup> Ricœur, *La métaphore vive*, 195.

## The grotesque and suffering body in Leroy's and Honel's poetry

From December 1944 to March 1945, Leroy wrote 20 poems. These include nostalgic love poems, poems about his two children and a couple of light-hearted, humorous songs. But a significant portion of these poems evoke death in the camps in different situations—the death of a prisoner during a roll-call, executions by hanging and deaths in the *Revier* (infirmary). The spectacle of piles of corpses being loaded into a wagon is described, as well as the burning of human remains in the *Krematorium*. The subject-matter of Leroy's poetry reflects the soaring death rate in many concentration camps towards the end of the war due to starvation and epidemics. With their detailed realism, these poems prefigure the famous photographs of corpses and skeletal camp survivors that would show the world the horror of the concentration camps. But these texts are not just photo-realistic depictions of tragic sights. The grotesque human body is portrayed with respect, even tenderness. Leroy's poetic descriptions of death in the camps are graphic, yet inherently compassionate as well. Leroy finds a transcendent dimension within the deeply inhuman nature of death in the camps.

Contorted, emaciated and limp, the body of the dying or dead prisoner is called a 'puppet' in several of Leroy's poems. Joining a pseudo-human appearance with non-human characteristics, the anthropomorphic puppet is an inherently grotesque figure. But this metaphor is, I suggest, much less brutal and negative than it might at first seem. Interestingly, the puppet metaphor would later be used by Primo Levi in *If This is a Man*. This image introduces Levi's celebrated statement about the dehumanising Nazi project of the camps, quoted earlier:

There is nowhere to look in a mirror, but our appearance stands in front of us, reflected in a hundred livid faces, in a hundred miserable and sordid puppets. We are transformed into the phantoms glimpsed yesterday evening.

Then for the first time we become aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Levi, *If This is a Man*, 32.

The connotations of the puppet image here are wholly negative. Levi identifies the prisoner with a puppet in order to capture the assault on the deportee's humanity. In appearance, each individual presents only a deformed and caricatural humanity, just as the puppet does.

In Leroy's poetry, however, the image of the puppet calls up gentler associations for the reader. Puppets may be grotesque objects, but they also bear connotations of littleness and helplessness. It is these connotations which are most noticeable in the last two stanzas of *L'appel des robots*. Here, Leroy depicts a dying prisoner struggling through roll-call. So weak that, like a marionette, he is powerless to stand upright, he finally collapses and dies:

'Hartung' ['Achtung'] c'est le SS qui passe...

Mais qu'as-tu donc, mon pauvre vieux,

A t'effondrer comme une masse

A trembler, à fermer les yeux ?

Hélas ! Adieu, mon camarade,

Toi qui as juste trépassé.

Tu n'iras plus à la parade :

On brûle les pantins cassés.

(ACD XXII)

Leroy does not use this puppet imagery in a detached or impersonal way, as is shown by the tenderness of the goodbye he addresses to the anonymous comrade in the last stanza. The compassionate voice addressing the 'camarade', noting his pitiful weakness, invites sympathy for the dying man. The poet's empathic, intimate voice means that the puppet metaphor does not come across as a pejorative image. Instead, this metaphor can be read as a tender insight into the smallness and defencelessness of the dying man and as a surge of pity for his vulnerability. *L'appel des robots* transforms the spectacle of the grotesque body through the application of a compassionate lens.

A similarly compassionate portrayal of the grotesque body can be found in further poems by Leroy. In *Le camion d'Ellich*, written in January 1945, Leroy describes piles of human corpses being unloaded from a wagon. Deportees struggled to find metaphors later to convey the grotesque appearance of dead bodies in the camps: skeletal, contorted and, in winter, frozen. Violette Maurice (Ravensbrück) uses the two images of 'folles' and 'moulins à vent' to describe the flailing, gesticulating arms of dead women whom she saw in Ravensbrück:

Les mortes de la vie courante ont l'air sage avec leurs bras le long  
du corps et leurs yeux clos ; les mortes de Ravensbrück ont l'air de  
folles avec leurs bras dans toutes les directions comme des moulins  
à vents.<sup>165</sup>

Inanimate objects also feature in Charlotte Delbo's description of piles of dead women in Birkenau. Delbo employs the imagery of shop mannequins to convey the disturbing appearance of these corpses.<sup>166</sup> Maxim Silverman has pointed out that it is basically the blurring of boundaries between the living and the dead body, the animate and the inanimate, that makes this encounter so profoundly troubling for Delbo. 'This moment', Silverman writes, 'leaves the narrator (and the reader) in a strange in-between state as she tries to comprehend the dividing line between living and dead bodies, the one haunting the other.'<sup>167</sup> The corpses witnessed by Delbo are grotesque because, while still possessing the features of a living human body, their appearance recalls a pseudo-human, inanimate artefact (a mannequin). Like Maurice and Delbo, Leroy also calls upon the image of a lifeless object to evoke the warped human appearance of the corpses of camp prisoners in *Le camion d'Elrich*, once again using the metaphor of the puppet:

Raidis, ces pauvres pantins,  
Dans leur chute, gesticulent  
Et les chocs désarticulent  
Leurs membres presque'enfantins.

Les numéros des proscrits  
Sont griffonnés sur leurs ventres  
Et leurs bouches sont des antres  
Qu'ont tordus leurs derniers cris. (ACD XXIV)

Like puppets, these corpses are inanimate and unwieldy objects with distorted human features. Their broken, dislocated limbs dangle from them like puppet limbs. Their camp numbers are penned on their stomachs, like graffiti. The disintegrating and grotesque body tells the story of starvation and extreme suffering. But to Leroy, the vulnerability contained

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<sup>165</sup> Violette Maurice, *N.N.* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2009), 32. First published 1946.

<sup>166</sup> Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz et après, Aucun de nous ne reviendra* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1970), 30. See Scheiber, 'Figurative Language in Delbo's *Auschwitz et après*', for an insightful analysis of Delbo's use of this image.

<sup>167</sup> Maxim Silverman, *Palimpsestic Memory: The Holocaust and Colonialism in French and Francophone Literature* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), 98.

in the grotesque body invites tenderness rather than repulsion, as can be seen in his reference to the ‘membres enfantins’ of the corpses. The smallness of the emaciated body and its puppet-like dependency makes it akin to a child’s body. As a child’s powerlessness always calls out for help and compassion, in the same way these lifeless bodies by their very nature draw mercy onto themselves. The grotesque body becomes a sign of pathos and humanity, invoking mercy by its very being. On one level, the image of the puppet that Leroy repeatedly uses to describe prisoners’ bodies suggests the partial loss of humanity. Paradoxically, however, this same metaphor actually succeeds in rehumanising these disfigured bodies to a certain extent.

At first sight, Honel’s aggressive and sometimes crude portrayal of the disintegrating body of the Auschwitz prisoner presents a marked contrast to Leroy’s gentler depictions. The grotesque figures in Honel’s poetry are much less obviously permeated with compassion than in Leroy’s poetry. Strewn with deliberately bizarre images and extravagant word-play, some of these portrayals of camp inmates in Honel’s poetry even show what Mole calls a ‘black grotesque humour’.<sup>168</sup> These depictions are more than merely humorous, however. Honel’s purpose is hinted at in the titles of two of his poems: a poem written in Auschwitz, simply called *Ce que nous sommes* and a post-liberation poem entitled *Ce que nous sommes restés*. As these titles suggest, the depiction of the tormented, dying body in *Prophéties des accouchements* carries profound ontological significance. Honel’s poems illuminate his deep reverence for the suffering human body. The very qualities of crudity and brutality characterising some of Honel’s descriptions are meant to bring out the vulnerable yet unimpaired humanity of the victim. Violence and obscenity, it is sometimes argued, serve in deportee testimonies to shock the reader into understanding the full horror of camp existence. Alain Parrau, for instance, asserts that this violence is intended to jolt the reader out of complacency and illusions, immersing him or her in ‘la cruauté même du vrai’.<sup>169</sup> In a more general sense, Langer sees the main purpose of inventive imagery in survivors’ written testimonies as attempts to make the reader understand a totally foreign reality. ‘Written accounts of victim experience’, Langer writes, ‘prod the imagination in ways that speech cannot, striving for analogies to initiate the reader into the particularities of their grim world.’<sup>170</sup> But penetrating the imagined reader’s apathy or incomprehension is not the main

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<sup>168</sup> Gary Mole, “‘The poet remained alone amidst the corpses of words’: The Deportation Poetry of André Ulmann and Maurice Honel,” *Critical Survey* 20, 2 (2008), 84.

<sup>169</sup> Alain Parrau, *Ecrire les camps* (Paris: Belin, 1995), 153.

<sup>170</sup> Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, 18.

objective of the brutal pictures in Honel's poetry. Instead, Honel's poems seek to discover the full humanity contained within the dying body.

Honel is always searching for the underlying metaphysical reality contained in the prisoner's suffering body. Some of his poems are almost hyper-sensitive accounts, recording every distinct sensation experienced, each physical fact registered in his body. Such is the attentive, minute precision of these descriptions that the reader receives the impression that, for Honel, there is some foundational existential truth encapsulated in these data which he must capture urgently. *Le froid* describes the agony of the freezing cold, which completely numbs the limbs:

Se sentir mourir  
Les pieds  
Sont froids

Pourtant le cœur nous bat.

Se sentir mourir  
Au bord  
Des doigts.

Ne plus sentir  
Les choses  
Qu'on voit.

(PA 31)

These raw facts are couched in short, aphoristic lines—a clue indicating that these simple observations contain some vital truth for Honel. As this fatal cold creeps into the body through hands and feet, removing all sensation, the poet's attention is drawn towards the one moving reality, the one unmistakable sign of life which can be felt in the otherwise insentient body. The half-alexandrine 'Pourtant le cœur nous bat' interrupts the three-verse regularity and rhyme scheme of the other stanzas—as if it belonged to a different poem but had forced its way into this text. This line stands on its own, emphasising the literal singularity of this stubborn heart, which against all odds continues to keep the body alive. The torment of exposure to the cold leads the poet towards a heightened consciousness of where his existence is localised. As the prisoner ceases to feel anything in his extremities, he becomes more and more acutely conscious of his physical heart as the centre of not just his body but



his whole being.<sup>171</sup> As shown in *Le froid*, there is no fracture between the self and the body for Honel. *Man is his suffering body*, Honel suggests.

Strangely, this realisation of human identity with the body imposes itself with more and more clarity as the body progressively breaks down. In *Ce que nous sommes*, the poet lists a series of grossly disconnected body parts mixed with other, oddly chosen images:

Voici ce que nous sommes :

Des os ! Des trous d'ombre !

Des plans sans surprise

Des pieds hagards

Des bouches molles

Des yeux sans voir

Des jeunes et des vieux numéros

Des têtes sans cheveux

Des têtes molles

Des cous sans couilles

Des mange la terre

Des meurt partout

(PA 14)

The crazy imagery and frenetic word-play, the sequence of disjointed body parts and the distorted syntax in such expressions as ‘Des mange la terre’ mirror the decomposition of the prisoner’s body, while the vigorous rhythm, accentuating each second syllable in the verse, and the almost feverish pace of the lines lend aggressiveness to the tone of the poem. Honel has a bold and insistent point of view to express here. His statement ‘voici ce que nous sommes’ needs to be read literally. Grotesque and deformed, the body remains nonetheless the locus of the prisoners’ human identity. These men, Honel implies, are inescapably their bodies. Superficially flippant and darkly humorous, the poem *La dysenterie* makes a similar point:

Un homme est ça, qui ça ?

Un trou on n’y voit pas

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<sup>171</sup> Honel’s perspective here is reminiscent of Maurice Blanchot’s understanding of the suffering body, particularly his discussion of how extreme suffering inevitably brings about an attentiveness to the self. See, for example, Blanchot’s exploration of this theme in *Le Pas au-delà* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973). For a discussion of Blanchot’s thought on suffering in conversation with the works of his contemporaries, see Smadar Bustan, ‘L’ambiguïté de l’éthique dans la pensée française contemporaine’, in *Maurice Blanchot et la philosophie*, ed. Eric Hoppenot and Alain Milot (Paris: Presses universitaires de Paris Ouest, 2010), 179-198.

[...]

Un trou la la la la

Un trou la la

Pour chier.

(PA 32)

The apparently uncontrollable repetition of the inane chant ('la la') seems almost to mimic the uncontrollable function of the 'trou'. The words 'Un homme est ça' are a grimly humorous commentary on the bodily dysfunction that reduces existence to unbearable physical sensations. Equally, however, these words mark a genuine epiphany. The intense corporal pain of dysentery does not let the camp prisoner forget his body; ceaselessly, Honel suggests, it induces an awareness that he *is* his body. Honel pursues this concept further, even more explicitly, in the concluding lines of *Ce que nous sommes*:

Nous

Sommes

Cela

Nous

Des hommes

Comme vous

Nous sommes cela

Des hommes porteurs de briques

Purement anatomiques.

(PA 14-15)

From the utter and extreme desolation of the human body in the camps—skeletal, weakened, shrunken—Honel derives a truth that he enunciates truculently, emphatically: 'nous sommes des hommes'. The single-word lines give concentrated accentuation and strength to each pivotal word in this axiom, audibly underlining the importance of the profound existential truth expressed in the simple words. Literally, these men are 'purement anatomiques'. The self is not alienated from the body; rather, for Honel, man *is* body. Even when powerless and transformed into a grotesque caricature of itself, the body remains a pure, transparent and enduring sign of human identity.

While poems like *Ce que nous sommes* and *La dysenterie* mime the decomposition and lack of agency characterising the camp victim's body, these texts also bring out the dignity inherent in the suffering body from Honel's perspective. Antelme felt that each object and each fact in Honel's poetry emerged clearly in 'leur réalité presque mythologique'. This is certainly the

case with the human body as it appears in *Prophéties des accouchements*. The diminished body is given almost mythological dimensions in these poems; it takes on a savage and towering intensity. Like Leroy's works, Honel's poems draw out the inalienable humanity of the deformed body.

Since Honel's and Leroy's poems give a uniquely male perspective, the question arises as to how female camp prisoners perceived their own, deteriorating bodies. The self-portraits contained in poems from Ravensbrück are often grim. Women describe their own decaying bodies with brutal frankness. For instance, Violette Maurice's poem *Appel* depicts women transformed into deformed and unrecognisable figures consumed by 'la mort lente'. Gaunt, haggard silhouettes, they no longer appear fully human. Even the usually welcome spectacle of daylight—signalling that the end of the *Appel* is near—evokes only further tragic associations:

Le jour se lève lentement  
Un jour jaunâtre qui avorte  
Morne parmi les âmes mortes.<sup>172</sup>

The ideas of sickness and miscarriage projected onto the cheerless daylight only adds to the sombre portrait of these women's bodies. Maurice, evidently, was acutely sensitive to the bodily transformations that she and her comrades experienced during their captivity. Micheline Maurel, too, often describes her appearance in a negative way in her poems, calling herself pest-ridden and ugly. An accomplished drawer, she sketched numerous pictures in the camps, sparing neither herself nor her fellow prisoners—these drawings are peopled by skeletal caricatures of herself and her comrades. In one poem, she imagines the confusion of coming face to face with her fiancé as she is now 'avec mon front de vieille et mon regard de morte'.<sup>173</sup> More than one of the French women poets in the camps experienced their bodily deterioration as extremely distressing and humiliating to bear.

Yet occasionally we find a poem that expresses a more hopeful vision of the suffering and wasted female body. In a poem written on 17 December 1944, Maurel recorded a moment when she acutely felt a sort of beauty, freedom and immanence intrinsic to the body. In this poem, she describes a real incident: a young Czech deportee, Kvieta, dances for her comrades

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<sup>172</sup> Reproduced in Reynaud, *La Foire à l'Homme* (vol. 2), 116-17. This poem was written in April 1944.

<sup>173</sup> Maurel, *La Passion selon Ravensbrück*, 20.

in the camp. The following stanzas from the poem concern Maurel's reflections on the meaning of this dance:

Danseuse, dis, lorsque tu dances  
Ne serait-ce pour délivrer  
Quelque chose en prison dans ce corps de souffrance  
Quelque chose qui chante et qui voudrait pleurer ?  
Danseuse, en admirant la grâce de tes gestes,  
Je songeais que la danse est peut-être un effort  
Pour libérer l'esprit de ce carcan funeste  
Où l'emprisonne notre corps ?  
  
Mais le corps est si beau et la joie est si pure  
Quand on le voit ainsi défier la gravité  
Que je comprends comment le corps se transfigure  
Et la chair doit ressusciter !<sup>174</sup>

At first, the suffering body is visualised as a 'prison'; the dance permits the spirit to escape from the body's confines. Yet immediately, the poet amends this thought. This body is not a prison but so beautiful and liberated that it foreshadows its future resurrection and transfiguration. The dancer's very body contains and radiates its eternal destiny. The poem as a structure reconstitutes this freedom within boundaries. The epiphany experienced by the watcher—the sudden joyful awareness of the beauty intrinsic to the body—occurs within the inflexible bounds of the classical alexandrine ('Mais le corps est si beau et la joie est si pure') but the evocation of the hoped-for resurrection springs up 'outside' the alexandrine ('Et la chair doit ressusciter !'), enacting a joyous 'upsurge' out of captivity. This text shows how on occasion in the women's poetry from the camps, redemptive meaning is inscribed within the tormented body, just as in Honel and Leroy's poetry.

### **The ashes of the dead: eschatological interpretations**

The grotesque body was not the only disturbing transformation of the human witnessed in the camps. In all concentration camps, the *Krematorium* was used to cremate the large numbers of dead prisoners. As Fournier's testimony, cited earlier, indicates, prisoners could

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<sup>174</sup> Facsimile of a type-written copy of poem written in Ravensbrück, Maurel family collection. The document has an annotation penned by Micheline Maurel herself, addressed to her sister Geneviève and explaining the circumstances of the writing of this poem.

see, touch and smell the burnt remains of their fellow inmates in the smoke coming out of the *Krematorium* chimney. This proximity to human remains was a sobering reminder of mortality to the camp prisoner and of the callous indifference shown towards the dead, denied funeral rites as well as a burial place. But such encounters with the ashes could also elicit more hope-filled associations.

These flurries of intermingled human remains become a deeply salvific sign in the works of numerous poets in the camps. In poems by Leroy, Fournier and others, we find that the ascent of human ashes and smoke into the heavens is invested with eschatological meaning. Poets link the rising of material human remains into the sky with the entry of the human soul into heaven. The cremation and dispersal of human remains, although still a bleak reminder of the indignities of death in the camps, points, therefore, towards a redemptive spiritual reality.

In this respect, I differ from Mole's interpretation of such poems in his 2002 critical study of the French poetry written in the camps. In discussing poems in which the ascent of ashes carries religious connotations, Mole argues that this religious imagery is used ironically and with a dark, biting humour, describing one such poem (Paul Goyard's poem *Dessin*) as an 'ironic religious revolt' and a 'parody'.<sup>175</sup> Mole is right in pointing out that the imagery contains irony: spontaneously, independently of each other, poets across diverse camps were evidently struck by the irony of individuals being carried literally into the heavens (or heaven) through the incineration of their bodies. But I suggest that this irony is usually not so much bitter as imbued with pathos and even reverence. Leroy's poem *Krematorium*, written in January 1945, transfigures something in the gritty physicality of the ashes from an anonymous prisoner's body being burned with hundreds of others. This compact text twists together intricately, through rhyme-links, the gruesome physical spectacle with the spiritual ascent it signifies within its materiality:

Une brume infime  
S'effiloche au ciel  
Ultimes adieux  
D'un mort anonyme

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<sup>175</sup> Mole, *Beyond the Limit-Experience*, 58.

Aucun geste pieux  
N'a fermé ses yeux  
Au bord de l'abîme

Nuage anonyme  
Sublimes adieux

Une âme est aux cieux

(ACD XXV)

The rhyme sequence of 'anonyme', 'ultime', 'infime' and 'abîme' is a bleak assessment; suggesting that the lot of the victim, denied a peaceful and pious death, a name in death, and a final resting-place in the earth, is total annihilation. But the dark negativity of these words undergoes a radical transformation as a last rhyme is added to this sequence: 'sublime'. The rising of ashes and smoke into the sky becomes the sublime ascent of the soul into heaven, and the *adieux* are not simply words of farewell, but intended to evoke the destination of the soul: *à Dieu*, to God. On a formal level, the rhyme-links intimately associate the material annihilation of the body with the eternal survival of the soul. Leroy's text turns a literally impious scandal into a transcendent and reverent drama in miniature.

Leroy is not alone in seeing an intrinsic spiritual meaning in the dispersal of human ashes. Similarly to Leroy's poem, *Sanguis Martyrum* ('The Blood of the Martyrs' in Latin), a poem written in 1944 by Daniel Chlique in Gusen (a sub-camp of Mauthausen), interprets the ascent of smoke and ashes from the *Krematorium* as the passage of the soul of a French patriot into heaven:

L'azur est calme en ce début de matinée  
Le soleil filtre au ras des toits un feu partiel  
Fume noir, et tremblant l'odieuse cheminée  
Seigneur l'âme d'un fils de France monte au ciel.<sup>176</sup>

Aesthetic lenition is achieved through the double filtering of the scene so that it is only perceived indistinctly: smoke is filtered through sunlight, and in turn the image of the chimney trembles behind the filter of smoke. Chlique's interpretation of the ascent of smoke and human ashes as suggestive of the eternal destiny of the 'martyr' is a heartfelt intuition, rather than a bitter comment on the disfiguration of traditional religious imagery. Likewise,

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<sup>176</sup> Typewritten copy of poem written by Daniel Chlique in Mauthausen, FNDIRP archives. In the FNDIRP archives, accession numbers are not assigned to archival documents.

in his poem *Moriturus*, André Fournier finds a transcendent meaning in the ashes carried by the wind towards his Block and falling around him, calling these fragments ‘une manne’ and ‘étoiles’:

De ces corps consumés dans les flammes

Que sont-elles devenues les âmes ?

J’ai peur de cette manne

Tombée du ciel

J’ai peur de ces fragments de vous

Ames immortelles

Petites âmes, petites étoiles,

Semées par Dieu dans son ciel.<sup>177</sup>

While there is some ambivalence in Fournier’s gaze—his encounter with these fragments of human corpses remains unsettling, to say the least—the metaphors in this poem nonetheless invest the descent of these ashes with deeply redemptive meaning. We are reminded here of Ricœur’s insight that metaphor is not a superficial and essentially arbitrary coupling of terms, but rather arises from the perception of a meaningful proximity between the objects in question. Struck by the resemblance between the bright white ashes and the legendary white bread falling from heaven, the author finds evidence in the physical resemblance of a shared spiritual character between these two phenomena. Fournier’s vision transforms the ashes into something beautiful and pure, a luminous sign of the soul’s survival. As surprising as it might appear, the merciless dispersal of these anonymous human remains on the wind could be given a redeeming, spiritual interpretation. Rosenfeld’s assertion that metaphor is impossible in connection with Auschwitz—because the inexorably stark and final physical reality of human annihilation in the camps forbids it—comes up against the profusion of poems from the camps in which transcendent significance is ascribed to the physical evidence of death.

### **Death, self-sacrifice and the possibility of agency**

Alongside this discernment of humanity, transcendence and hope in the suffering body and in death, comes an awareness on the part of the poet that he genuinely disposes of agency. Death, particularly in such appalling and inhuman circumstances, might seem to expose

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<sup>177</sup> Poem reproduced in André Fournier, *Hommes 40 chevaux 8 : La guerre sans uniforme* (Paris: L’Odéon, 2007), 100-1.

human freedom as a delusion, serving as a reminder of the prisoner's utter helplessness and vulnerability in captivity. But this is not the case for either Honel or Leroy. Instead, both poets are firmly convinced that there is some free, worthwhile gesture they can make when confronted by the dark reality of death and by the possibility of a like death for themselves in the near future. For Leroy, this freedom consists mainly in being able to pray for the dead. Leroy sees prayer as a way to genuinely assist his fellow prisoners who had died. Striving to practise the virtues exalted by Communism, especially fraternity and solidarity, is Honel's response. Willing self-sacrifice gives meaning to his imprisonment and to that of his comrades; death itself can be freely accepted as a sacrifice offered for others.

One of Leroy's poems, *Le camion d'Ellich*, two stanzas of which were earlier cited, does not just evoke intercessory prayer for the deceased but actually *becomes* this prayer. This poem incorporates the traditional Latin prayer for the dead, *Requiescant in pace* ('May they rest in peace'). The ashes of the dead serve, in Leroy's devout Catholic anthropology, as a reminder to pray that their souls may not suffer the same fate as their bodies:

Prions pour ces trépassés  
 Que leur âme ne se brise  
 Comme leur corps sur la brise  
 Requiescant in pace (ACD XXIV)

This invocation relies on the Catholic belief that the dead can be assisted by the prayers of the living. The prayer in the last line is, in fact, the keystone of the entire poem, in the sense that the heptasyllabic structure is determined by the seven syllables of this formulaic invocation. Interestingly, the formal dimension of the poem seems to contradict the thematic content. Leroy's graphic portrayal of a chaotic *mêlée* of bodies and of ashes dispersed on the wind, emphasises breakage and fragmentation: both the literal fracturing of these dead men's bodies and, on a figurative level, the rupture of human connections with the dead. Yet, in response, Leroy creates a poem that is not chaotic but rather supremely controlled and structured. Thus, we see that for Leroy the chaos and disintegration characterising death does not need to have the last word. In his exhortation to the living community to make a gesture of compassion towards the dead in prayer, Leroy is envisaging a kind of restoration of the severed links between the dead and the living. In fact, the words of the poem are intended to be efficacious, to achieve the very purpose which they invoke. This poem does not just evoke communion between the living and the dead—from the poet's point of view, the final line of prayer for the dead actualises this communion



Leroy's poems usually throw a compassionate light on the utterly frail and helpless camp victim. Occasionally, however, the victim portrayed in the poem is not so passive and meets death with stoicism and nobility, assuming death as martyrdom and purposely refusing to 'act' in the voyeuristic spectacle of execution put on by the Nazis. In *Les pendus*, written in February 1945, Leroy employs the sustained metaphor of executions as a nightmarish performance acted for the benefit of a sadistic audience (the SS). Other camp prisoners besides Leroy had this impression that the bizarre and cruel rituals organised by camp authorities resembled grisly entertainment spectacle. Primo Levi wrote in *If This is a Man* that the absurd initiation rites in the camps (shaving, disinfection) gave him and his comrades the impression of 'watching some mad play'.<sup>178</sup> It is exactly this idea of a 'mad play' that governs *Les pendus*:

Le soleil hivernal simule un lavis d'or  
 La fanfare flonflonne un air de bal champêtre  
 Chacun de nous se dit : 'Bientôt mon tour peut-être'  
 Et le public SS rit dans les miradors.

Soudain, les condamnés paraissent,  
 Tout environnés de gardiens  
 Conduisant chacun leur grand chien  
 Arquebouté sur une laisse. (ACD XXIII)

Painted background, band, laughing audience, and the sudden appearance of the actors: the grotesque theatricality of the situation is fully exploited. Death itself becomes staged entertainment. But this is a play where some of the actors will not play their allotted parts. Although the stage is set for a dramatic and emotional 'performance' from the victims, this is not what ends up happening:

Le 'dolmetscher' lit la sentence :  
 'Périront par strangulation'  
 Eux, vont sans peur, sans émotion,  
 Martyrs vainqueurs, à la potence.

Autour des cous  
 Les nœuds se tendent...

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<sup>178</sup> Levi, *If This Is a Man*, 31.

Un faible à-coup

Et les corps pendent.

(ACD XXIII)

In showing no emotion, the victims *refuse to perform* for their executioners. With dignity, the victims accept their death. They refrain from displays of emotion, remaining impassive on the centre stage as the gruesome spectacle unfolds around them and culminates in their execution. They are the conquerors, Leroy suggests, because there is worth and value in their death, and especially in their quiet and unemotional dignity as they go to be hanged. Their very submission becomes a sort of *insubmission*. Just as the central figures on the ‘stage’ eschew emotion, the poem itself adopts a spare, minimalist approach. The hanging itself is represented with mimetic realism. The staccato rhythm of the fourth stanza mimics the jerk of the body on the end of the rope as the knot is tightened, while in the very last line, the heaviness produced by the two adjacent accented syllables (‘corps pendent’) echoes the weight of the pitiful limp body. The restrained tone and clipped, laconic style adopted by the poet, as well as the remarkably measured versification in alexandrines that characterises the first stanza, do not come across so much as insensitivity or apathy faced with the executions, but as a purposeful literary choice that counters the dramatic, elaborate *mise en scène* devised by the Nazis and that offers instead a reserved, deliberately anti-histrionic commentary. In the middle of this extravagant, even boisterously sadistic ‘play’, the silent courage of the men who are to be hanged allows them to withdraw themselves from the engineered, calculated dramatics put in motion by the SS. The text in its sparing restraint embodies the restraint of the final, negative gesture carried out by these men—the last possibility for them to make a free act.

Much more than Leroy, Honel extols the value of self-giving in turning the unwilling ordeal of imprisonment—and even death—into a freely chosen sacrifice. Honel’s poetry describes the forging of a transcendent communion of persons in the shadow of imminent death, each one freely giving to the other. Captivity in Auschwitz, for Honel, fosters a communal life of self-offering. He and his comrades share life so closely—by force initially but subsequently voluntarily, impelled by solidarity—that it is as if they were welded together. The pronoun ‘je’ rarely appears in Honel’s poems, instead it is ‘nous’ that is almost always the subject. The common suffering shared by deportees forms a deep communion of brothers; the self is not erased but is instead bonded with others into a ‘we’. In *L’Aurore au fond des nuits*—the last poem in the section of Auschwitz poems and perhaps, given its hopeful title, written on the eve of liberation—Honel pursues this idea of a close-knit union binding the prisoners

together in solidarity. Their mutual interchange of hope, encouragement and sharing makes them a 'luminous' sign, as described in the first two stanzas of the poem:

Au fond de ce malheur inouï  
Sombre comme la nuit  
Réunis, lumineux comme un rêve  
Nous échangeons enfin la paix des coups  
Contre l'appel des nuits amies verseuses de trêve  
Et nous mettions nos bras nos cous  
Enlacés à l'abri sous nos fièvres

Nous sommes ici des hommes  
Pendant que la mort fume  
Nous partageons le pain  
Celui de l'amertume

(PA 37)

As always, the metre has a crucial role in creating meaning. Short, punchy lines at the beginning of the second stanza lend extra forcefulness to the poet's declarations. The sequence of four half-alexandrines (allowing for the suppression of an *e muet* in the first line) makes a suggestive contrast with the preceding free verse, producing here an internal order and unity that subtly embody the interpersonal union invoked. Reciprocal gestures of solidarity form an almost substantial union between these comrades. Despite their infirmity and despite the prospect of imminent death, these prisoners, Honel declares, choose to support each other, sharing the little they have with their companions. This mutual self-giving reveals the integrity of their human qualities. When Honel makes the apparently self-evident statement about himself and his fellow inmates, 'Nous sommes ici des hommes', he is actually saying something profound about their continued ability, against all odds, to freely choose the good. In spite of the degradation to which they are subjected, these individuals are still fully human and able to exercise the agency this humanity implies

The prospect of death itself in the camps does not cancel out this agency. Death can be faced with ethical purpose, to Honel's mind, if it is understood as a self-gift to others. Honel sees the deaths of his comrades in the camps as a powerful sacrifice that will bring good to France and to the world. Although this vision is grounded in Honel's Communist convictions, the transcendent significance with which he invests these deaths is so original and counter-intuitive as to be almost mystical. Such is the case in *Présents*, in which Honel pays tribute to his fellow comrades who had died in the camps, affirming that they have given their lives for

their country and for humanity. As each prisoner is called during the daily *Appel*, the narrator's thoughts pass to his dead comrades:

Vous êtes tous présents  
Dans ma mémoire  
Vous vos souffrances  
Qui doivent s'inscrire  
Dans la mémoire de France  
Et de tous les hommes sans visage  
Qui ferment les yeux pour voir et pouvoir  
Rendre vie  
Aux souvenirs ensevelis  
Pour rendre vie à la vie  
Sang à l'humanité  
Jour à l'espoir  
Jeunesse au monde (PA 28)

Here, Honel exploits the double meaning of 'présents', which simply means 'present' in its common adjectival use, but archaically also denotes 'gifts'. Honel conceives the death of these men as an authentic gift of the most fundamental kind. All the men, including those 'sans visage', the anonymous dead, have accomplished a precious sacrifice for the good of humanity. Paradoxically, these men give life to others through their deaths. The same hopeful vision of death as a sacrifice is evident in the last stanza of *L'Aurore au fond des nuits*, which describes the creative capacities of sacrifice and love in highly figurative terms:

Et le vrai pain qui lève  
Soulève nos poitrines  
Celui dont le fournil  
Ne s'est jamais éteint  
Qui rejaillit des eaux, redécouvre la mine  
Et referme en son sein  
Tous les amours immenses où germent à jamais  
Les frais vrais lendemains (PA 37)

There is something quite literally 'elemental' in this passage: it is from an oven's fire, from water and from the earth that redemption arises. Elsewhere in Honel's poems, these elements inflict only destruction or pain: fire is the fire in the *Krematorium*, water is associated with the

agony of digging a canal in a freezing river (*Tod Kommando*) or with the ‘pluies de printemps’ (*Le pire*) that soak the thin prison uniform. But here, these elements are assigned a positive spiritual value. The material ‘bread of bitterness’ described earlier in the poem, the bread of which Honel and his comrades partake in Auschwitz, has become a spiritual bread. Again, metaphor is key in the creation of transcendent meaning. What is particularly striking here is the way in which the concrete, physical elements in Auschwitz are not metaphorised, but instead become themselves metaphors for mystical realities. Honel appropriates and transfigures the very causes of his suffering, making them a part of his transcendent vision of sacrifice, death and the mystical fruits borne by complete self-gift.

Motherhood is the most perfect sign and model of this total self-gift advocated by Honel. The germ of Honel’s thought in this regard is already present in his Auschwitz poems, but only fully comes to maturity in his post-liberation poems. Surprisingly, this vital theme in Honel’s work has been neglected by existing critical studies. Neither Antelme nor Mole, in their commentaries on Honel’s poetry, takes notice of the mystical portent of the collection’s title: *Prophéties des accouchements*. In a work that uses so much polysemy and play on words, it is probably not coincidental that within the *accouchements* of the title can be found the syllable *cou*, a homophone of *coup* (‘blow’). Throughout this poetry collection, ‘les coups’ make a constant appearance. Honel returns often to the spectacle of repeated blows raining down on the prisoners at the hands of the *Kapos*, as described here in *Le pire*:

Le pire c’est les coups  
 Les coups dans les reins  
 C’est aux reins que les genoux s’articulent  
 Douleur des coups des corps sans genoux  
 Douleur aux reins après 2 heures d’appel  
 Coups au réveil. (PA 12)

With his usual meticulous attentiveness to bodily experience, Honel vividly describes the convulsive, debilitating pains caused by the blows, couching his observations in such terse, understated formulas that each sensation—knees buckling under the impact of blows, feeble muscles straining to keep the body upright—emerges with devastating clarity. On a formal level, repetition of key words (‘coups’, ‘genoux’, ‘reins’ and ‘douleur’) mimes the repeated blows sending reverberating pains deep into the body. As always, bodily sensations conceal a deep meaning for Honel. If he records these pains with such precision, it is because he is convinced that there is an absolutely fundamental purpose inscribed in them that can

illuminate his whole ordeal. Elsewhere in Honel's poems, there are clues to what this meaning might be. In *L'arrivée*, written after his return to France, Honel describes the pain of childbirth in terms recalling the language from *Le pire*:

Maux essentiels des mères  
Reins meurtris  
[...]  
Cris essentiels des mères  
Des douleurs  
Atteintes (PA 61)

As odd as it might seem, Honel's poetry compares the crippling pains suffered by prisoners to the pangs of childbirth suffered by the mother. For Honel, the birth-giving female body has a universal and foundational significance. It is a sign to both women *and* men of self-sacrifice. Just as a mother 'gives' her body to her child in an intimate and life-giving act, so the total sacrifice that these prisoners make of themselves offers life to others. The image of motherhood is subtly present throughout *Prophéties*. A subtle phonetic linkage between 'la mort fume' and 'l'amertume' in one of the stanzas of *L'Aurore au fond des nuits*, already quoted, suggests the presence of the words *la mère* in the first two syllables of *l'amertume*. Similarly, the words 'en son sein' in the same text introduce mystical connotations of motherhood into the renewal of humanity envisaged by the poet. Again, the 'sang' gifted to humanity by self-sacrifice in *Présents* can be read as the blood with which the mother nourishes the child in her womb. For Honel, the bodily sufferings he describes with such gripping verisimilitude are deeply expressive of the self-offering enacted by himself and his comrades—a self-offering akin to the gift of life expressed in the mother's suffering body during childbirth. As Ross Chambers has pointed out, the metaphor of childbirth applied to war is a long-standing one, harking back to ancient times; and it has also been appropriated more recently, Chambers shows, as an evocative metaphor for the age-old masculine 'ordeal of pain' by which a man proves his endurance and heroism.<sup>179</sup> There are similar connotations in the metaphor of childbirth as it is used in *Prophéties des accouchements*, in that this particular ordeal of pain is seen as a test of the prisoners' humanity and, more specifically, their manhood (witness Honel's declaration 'Nous sommes ici des hommes'). However, on the whole, the image is more suggestive here of the life-giving function of childbirth than of an initiating rite of pain proving heroism and accomplishing self-transcendence. Honel maintains that in

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<sup>179</sup> Ross Chambers, 'Ordeals of Pain (Concerning Henri Alleg's *La question*)' in *Entre Hommes*, ed. Todd W. Reeser and Lewis C. Seifert (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008).

some mystical way the captivity he and his comrades are enduring in Auschwitz will be generative of life. A prophetic event, it foreshadows and announces a future good not yet apparent.

A discreet but persistent presence in the poems written in Auschwitz, the mother-figure takes centre stage in Honel's post-liberation poems. Many of the poems written after liberation are dedicated to motherhood and childbirth. The last poem in the collection, written after Honel's return to France, explicitly allies the sufferings of the camp prisoners with the sufferings of the mother giving birth:

Sur nous les souffrances  
Toutes  
Ont posé leur crucifixion  
Comme aux mères elles ont ouvert nos bouches  
Pour que nous criions. (PA 77)

The cries coming from the prisoners are associated with the mother's cries in childbirth. Honel sees parallels between the torment of the prisoner, battered under constant blows, and the mother's body, repeatedly suffering pangs in giving birth. By its very extremity, the camp inmate's agony and death approaches something life-giving and nourishing. Honel desires to live his captivity in Auschwitz not as a useless ordeal but as a freely accepted and creative gesture. The tormented and slowly dying body is inscribed with the same self-gift proper to the mother's body. In a post-liberation poem, *Dites oui*, Honel stressed the importance of this radical self-gift:

Articulez-le mieux le don  
De vous-mêmes (PA 75)

Self-giving is fundamental to Honel's humanistic vision and this is why the figure of the mother takes on such crucial importance in *Prophéties des accouchements*. Motherhood, for Honel, is a powerful sign of the life-generating capacities of voluntary self-offering. Through the networks of images intricately woven throughout, suggesting a life-giving dimension to the death of victims, these poems bring death itself into the realm of agency: for Honel, death becomes a freely chosen and creative sacrifice, rather than a pitiless fate imposed on the prisoner.

'La mort à Auschwitz,' French philosopher, Sarah Kofman, writes, 'était rendue indifférente et banale, anonyme et publique.'<sup>180</sup> Death was a common, everyday affair in the camps; death was often preceded by a slow descent into weakness and helplessness as the body became progressively diminished and grotesquely deformed. Scant dignity or respect was accorded to dead camp victims; corpses were loaded onto wagons in heaps and carted off to be cremated. Death took on an atrocious, even inhuman appearance in the camps. To understand Honel and Leroy's surprising outlook on death in the camps and why they can retain hope in the face of death in so chilling a guise, we have to first appreciate the way they look at the suffering or deformed human body. In Leroy's case, it is his compassionate gaze that rehumanises the disfigured and grotesque bodies of victims. His hope-filled perspective is supported by his Catholic understanding of the dignity of their bodies and by his faith in eternal life. Importantly, the grotesque in Leroy's poems does not display the usual associations tied to this concept. While the label of 'grotesque' has almost exclusively been considered as synonymous with fundamentally repellent, voyeuristic and inhuman, the grotesque as it is described in these poems is actually compatible with pity and humanity. The qualities of tenderness and empathy conveyed here in relation to the grotesque show to just what extent readings of the poetry written in the camps can reveal unexpected attitudes and reactions on the part of camp prisoners and make us re-evaluate conventional categories.

Like Leroy's poems, Honel's Auschwitz poems also rehumanise the tormented and disempowered body, though in a quite distinct way. Honel refuses the outlet of enmity with the suffering body, repeatedly stressing that man *is* his body and that the fullness of human identity resides in this body. I suggest that this understanding of the human body which gradually unfolds throughout the poems is pivotal in giving ethical meaning to the ordeal of Honel and his companions. The realisation proves a very liberating truth, because Honel discovers in his suffering body a capacity for an offering of the complete self. It is only *in* the body and *through* the body, Honel comes to believe, that the individual can give completely of his or her self, in ways reminiscent of the gift a mother makes of her body to her child.

The poems in *Jedem das Seine* reveal that Leroy, like Honel, is conscious of his ongoing agency and freedom to pursue some good despite the desperate circumstances of his imprisonment and the ominous presence of death around him. For Leroy, prayer for the dead is an efficacious act, a way of aiding the eternal salvation of his dead comrades. Prayer is a

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<sup>180</sup> Sarah Kofman, *Paroles suffoquées* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1987), 70. Kofman's father, a rabbi, died in Auschwitz.



powerful means of assisting the dead, beyond any other help. Leroy's prayer-poem *Le camion d'Ellich* constitutes a particularly striking example of a text which is intended to operate as a fruitful act of invocation and supplication. Leroy's poetry, like Honel's, highlights the forms of agency still possible for camp inmates even when confronted by death in all its distressing manifestations in the camps and by the imminent prospect of death for themselves. As these works show, poetry for camp inmates could be a powerful means of discovering ethical meaning not just in life but in death as well.

George Steiner's negative assessment of language 'after Auschwitz' posited the end of transcendent meaning being located in language. These poems, written as an immediate response to death in the camps, suggest a much more vibrant conception of figurative language as it was used in the camps and, on occasion, in Auschwitz itself. As the works of Leroy and Honel show, prisoners from totally different backgrounds, religious and non-religious alike, might be impelled to seek a transcendent dimension in the physical face of death in the camps. Poetic language, moreover, had a crucial function in drawing out this dimension. Metaphor, in particular, operates in this poetry in ways reminiscent of Ricoeur's account of metaphorical function, disclosing transcendent qualities and telling signs of an eternal destiny within corpses, dying prisoners and human ashes. Poetry written in the camps gives quite a different picture of language in the wake of atrocity compared to Steiner's views. Language *in* Auschwitz proved itself, in some cases, capable of continuing to encode transcendence even in the midst of annihilation.

What this poetry reveals is a truth that is startling, to say the least: that in spite of being apparently poles apart, separated by a vast ideological divide, Christianity and Marxism could give rise to complementary, if not identical, visions of human dignity and freedom. Catholicism and Communism in the France of the 1930s and 1940s might not seem to have very much in common, but what both these belief-systems could and did nourish was strong, resilient principles that could provide interior reference-points for understanding and working through, even if only partially, the terrible pain and brutality of death in the camps. Gustave Leroy and Maurice Honel may have subscribed to some quite different ideas about the ultimate goals of human life (and life after death), but on a number of key points the views presented in their poems are convergent: the human body retains its essential dignity however oppressed and deformed it is, there is transcendent meaning in death, and the camp prisoner could remain a radically free agent even when facing the deaths of others and his own prospective death.

## Chapter 3

### ‘Des hommes au cœur pur aux mains nues’: The Beautiful and the Good in André Verdet’s *Les jours les nuits et puis l’aurore*

The ethical dimension of Holocaust literature—what an ethically engaged work of literature about the camps should look like—has been a common theme in scholarly debates. A notion that has proved particularly contentious in such debates is the legitimacy of the aesthetic. Some critics have shown suspicion towards the aesthetic in works about the camps, seeing voyeuristic, sentimentalising or trivialising tendencies in artistic strategies and concerned that the aesthetic masks the horrific truth of the atrocities that occurred in the camps. For example, Lawrence Langer takes the case of a written testimony by a Holocaust survivor in which the camp searchlights are described with the metaphor of a rainbow, and goes on to argue that this aesthetic image is utterly incongruous with the brutal reality it purports to describe. Artistic devices like these, Langer maintains, have the effect of glossing over the horrific nature of the camps.<sup>181</sup> Likewise, Saul Friedlander, in his influential work *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*, condemns the aestheticism evident in certain Holocaust works (none produced by camp victims), portraying it as a phantasmic obsession disturbingly close to the dark, mythologising impulses at the origins of Fascism.<sup>182</sup> Such negative views of the aesthetic in Holocaust works are not universal, however. Brett Kaplan has gone against the grain of much previous criticism, defending the role of beauty in Holocaust literature and artworks. Kaplan argues that the aesthetic was a survival strategy for camp victims and that it also serves a memorial function in Holocaust art and literature, prompting the viewer or reader to confront the traumatic events depicted artistically.<sup>183</sup>

The intersection of the lyric genre with Holocaust literature has also been a topic of debate in scholarly criticism. Some critics of Holocaust literature have argued that as an anachronistic genre tied to earlier, obsolete cultural mindsets, lyricism is no longer ‘useable’ in its pure form. Where scholars have analysed Holocaust poetry and its relation to lyricism, it has usually been to explore the perversion and disintegration of the lyric genre rather than its continuation properly speaking. In an article exploring Adorno’s critiques of ‘poetry after

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<sup>181</sup> Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, 18-19.

<sup>182</sup> Saul Friedlander, *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993). First published in 1984.

<sup>183</sup> Brett Kaplan, *Unwanted Beauty: Aesthetic Pleasure in Holocaust Representation* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

Auschwitz', David Miller contends that lyricism after the Holocaust is made problematic by its connections with the oppressive cultural, political and religious systems that allowed the catastrophe to happen. Celan's poems, including his famous Holocaust poem *Todesfuge*, 'seem to cling to lyric language while acknowledging the historical and political "blood" that is inherent in the linguistic and cultural system of which they are a part.'<sup>184</sup> For Miller, the lyric genre in Holocaust poetry (and more generally, in a post-Auschwitz world) only becomes relevant when it is turned against itself, when the lyric language in question exposes its own brokenness. In a similar way, other scholars have brought to light the subversive twists on traditional lyricism in some Holocaust poetry. Matthew Boswell has explored the satirical perversions of the love-poetry we find in Sylvia Plath's Holocaust writings, in works such as 'Lady Lazarus', for example.<sup>185</sup> In critiques of Holocaust literature, therefore, the focus is squarely on the deformation and subversion of lyricism. One dissenting voice in the critical literature has been that of Sara Guyer, who identifies continuities between lyric romanticism and Holocaust testimony. Tracing the continuation of the lyric tradition in texts by Primo Levi and Robert Antelme, among others, Guyer argues that lyricism and Holocaust testimony share a 'rhetoric of survival', notably encapsulated in the lyric device of prosopopoeia (giving voice to the dead).<sup>186</sup> Guyer's analysis is persuasive but limited in scope; she focuses principally on the lyric trope of prosopoeia, and moreover has quite a narrow view of its role in Holocaust testimony. It 'does not serve a redemptive, organicist or triumphalist rhetoric, does not sustain the life and power of a masculine lyric subject, but rather [...] bears the life of survival'.<sup>187</sup> Guyer minimises, in other words, the traditional subjectivity inherent in the lyric genre and its capacity to serve a redemptive or cathartic role. A certain unease with the lyric genre is evident across the scholarly literature; critics have tended to be at pains to distance Holocaust poetry from the traditional concerns and aims of lyric poetry.

When we turn from post-war Holocaust testimony to texts written in the camps, a very different picture of lyricism and the aesthetic emerges. Lyric forms and aesthetic tropes are used without any trace of the self-consciousness critics have noted in post-Holocaust texts,

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<sup>184</sup> David Miller, 'After Epic: Adorno's Scream and the Shadows of Lyric', in Jenni Adams (ed.), *The Bloomsbury Companion to Holocaust Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 65-80. For Adorno's most well-known critique of lyric poetry in the modern world, see Theodor Adorno, 'On Lyric Poetry and Society,' in *Notes to Literature* (vol. 1), ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

<sup>185</sup> See Matthew Boswell, 'Black Phones: Postmodern Poetics in the Holocaust Poetry of Sylvia Plath', *Critical Survey* 20, 2 (2008), 53-64.

<sup>186</sup> Sara Guyer, *Romanticism after Auschwitz* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

<sup>187</sup> Guyer, *Romanticism after Auschwitz*, 13.

and leave the reader with no sense that these forms are inappropriate or problematic. This difference may stem from the peculiar characteristics of writing in the camps. The problematic status of the individual voice in society was not a major concern for poets in the camps, as it would prove for post-war poets; nor did camp prisoners have to contend with the fear that the aesthetic might exploit suffering for a voyeuristic audience. Poetry was, rather, a collective response to the urgent ethical imperative of finding transcendent meaning in an ongoing ordeal. As much for the auditors or readers in the camps as for the poet, poetry was a cathartic expression of shared suffering and a means of rekindling hope. We cannot assume that lyricism and the aesthetic are fulfilling the same role in the poetry of the camps as in other Holocaust texts. Given the ongoing presence of traditional poetic forms in French poems from the camps and the lack of the ironic or self-consciously anachronistic overtones found in later Holocaust poetry, I suggest that the functions of the lyric and the aesthetic in Holocaust poetry need to be re-evaluated.

The poems of André Verdet, written mainly in Buchenwald from May 1944 to April 1945 and published as *Les jours les nuits et puis l'aurore* in 1947, represent an intriguing example of lyric poems, unashamedly aesthetic and romantic, which, while not ignoring the evil of the camps, are a self-proclaimed witness to the continued existence and primacy of the beautiful and the good.<sup>188</sup> Although these texts do describe the concrete reality of the camps, we are dealing with much more than simple representations of camp internment here. The author is not just concerned with leaving an evocative testimony of his imprisonment in the concentration camps. Instead, these poems have much in common with the Ricœurian vision of narrative: a dynamic world in which present and future possibilities, directions and aims can be imagined and that can therefore contribute to crafting a personal ethos for life. Poetry for Verdet is a medium for exploring, defining and holding fast to his strong political and personal convictions during his ordeal. Buoyed by his Communist principles and by his own distinctive philosophical outlook on the world, Verdet refuses to be cowed or confined by the external evils to which he is subjected and strives, through his poetry, to adhere to his core values with hope and moral purpose.

What strikes the first-time reader as unusual in this corpus is the predominance of imaginative narratives incorporating elements from legend and fairy-tales, the large number of love-poems (the collection is dedicated to his wife Camille), the use of rich, sensuous imagery and, above all, the constant celebration of beauty and goodness, whether found in

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<sup>188</sup> André Verdet, *Les jours les nuits et puis l'aurore* (Paris: Editions FNDIRP, 1949). The text is hereafter referred to for citational purposes as JNA followed by the page number of the citation.

nature, in children, or in the beloved woman. Despite writing these poems in a setting that manifested evil just as much as extreme ugliness (both in the physical and in the moral sense), Verdet gives an extremely prominent place in his works to the beautiful and the good. Indeed, when introducing a collection of poems written by himself and by comrades in Buchenwald, Verdet characterised this corpus of poetry in its entirety as an expression of the faith that the camp prisoner retained in the transcendentals:

Malgré l'enfer sur la terre, des hommes ont pensé [...] que quelque part, hors de cet enfer, le monde conservait encore une part immense de beauté et de bonté.<sup>189</sup>

This comment is revealing because it shows how deeply Verdet was attached to the idea of beauty and goodness as universal values and to what extent he saw these values as central to the poetry he and others had written in the camps. However, I suggest that, actually, his own poems conceive the beautiful and the good not as distant, elusive concepts but as tangible and accessible realities within Buchenwald itself. Poetry for Verdet is, in large part, a means of uncovering the transcendent in his bleak circumstances.

Although Verdet published numerous collections of poetry over his lifetime, the first in 1941 and the last in 2003, his works never achieved a success comparable to the poems of his close friend Jacques Prévert. While his poetry still has its admirers today, there are few scholarly studies of his work, and even fewer explorations of the poetry he wrote in the camps. These few critiques of Verdet's camp poetry, moreover, have been quite limited in scope. In particular, none of these existing studies has been fully successful in accounting for the significance of the poet's use of lyricism and the aesthetic in such an apparently incongruous setting.<sup>190</sup> Mole sees the lyric and imaginative qualities of this poetry as evidence that Verdet is avoiding direct engagement with the dark realities of the camp and finding refuge, instead, in escapist dreams. Poems like Verdet's involve, Mole argues, 'suppressing

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<sup>189</sup> André Verdet, ed., *Poèmes de Buchenwald* (Paris: Editions du FNDIRP, 1946).

<sup>190</sup> The idea of the lyric genre is surrounded by much controversy and a detailed investigation of the debate around lyricism is beyond the scope of this chapter. For the purposes of this chapter, I have adopted Northrop Frye's conception of the lyric poem. Frye saw the defining feature of the lyric poem as being the distinctive 'radical of presentation' that characterises it – rather than speaking to his listeners, the lyric poet addresses either himself or someone else. 'The lyric poet,' Frye writes, 'normally pretends to be talking to himself or someone else a spirit of nature, a muse, a personal friend, a lover, a god, a personified abstraction or a natural object [...] The poet, so to speak, turns his back on his listeners, though he may speak for them and though they may repeat some of his words after him.' Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 247. See Jonathan Culler, 'Lyric History and Genre', *New Literary History* 40 (Autumn 2009): 879-899, for a discussion of Frye's views on the lyric.

the real altogether by giving full vent to the imagination's irrepressible capacity to escape.<sup>191</sup> In contrast, French academic Françoise Armengaud, who has produced a number of critical studies of Verdet's œuvre, allows that Verdet's captivity poems retain some connection to reality, but does not outline how this engagement with contemporary events is manifested in these works. In her book *Du multiple au singulier*, a critical appreciation of Verdet's prolific literary output over the course of his lifetime, Armengaud writes:

Un tournant s'amorce après l'arrestation d'André Verdet en février 1944 : les poèmes auront en quelque sorte le nez sur l'événement, une dure réalité qui s'imposera, sans que toutefois le poète ne tire jamais ou presque jamais son lyrisme de l'horreur. Il y a toujours chez lui une distanciation, ainsi qu'une qualité toute particulière de recours à l'imaginaire, laquelle ne rompt pas le contact avec le réel mais exerce une sorte d'allégorisation de ce réel.<sup>192</sup>

This passage reveals Armengaud's somewhat ambivalent point of view on the extent to which Verdet's poems are representational rather than entirely fanciful. On the one hand, Armengaud suggests that the lyricism of Verdet's prison and camp poems practically never arises from the grim reality of his captivity. At the same time, she raises the possibility, tentatively, without elaborating on the idea, that the imaginative dimension of the poems might 'allegorise' Verdet's experiences. Neither Mole nor Armengaud fully appreciate the roles that lyricism, aesthetic imagery and imaginative richness are playing in Verdet's poetry. Rather than entailing an escape from the darkness of the camps, these lyric poetic forms, fantastic elements and beautiful imagery are actually closely linked to Verdet's experience of captivity and moreover play an important part in his efforts to comprehend on some level the evil events he is witnessing.

Indeed, these poems showcase the inherent plasticity of genre. The lyric genre as it is found in Verdet's poems is not just one more expression of a stale tradition but, rather, a radically inflected and evolving form that can be understood through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of genre. In comparison to assumptions about the essential immutability of genre, assumptions implicit in the commentaries of writers like David Miller, Bakhtin's conception of genre provides more leeway for creative adaptations of genres to different times and places. Genre, for Bakhtin, is not a static, set form; instead, it is a tradition possessing its

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<sup>191</sup> Mole, *Beyond the Limit-Experience*, 70.

<sup>192</sup> Françoise Armengaud, *Du multiple au singulier* (Paris: Harmattan, 2003), 11.

own fundamental ‘organic logic’ and highly amenable to change and adaptation. The specific authors, works or images that influence a writer are less important, Bakhtin suggested, than ‘the influence of the *generic tradition itself* which was transmitted through the particular authors’.<sup>193</sup> What Bakhtin calls ‘generic potential’ means that the possibilities for re-appropriation and development are virtually inexhaustible—the genre can be taken up in different eras and places and previously hidden capacities of the genre be brought to light. If lyricism is considered a static collection of literary conventions tied to the outlook of a past society and era, then it is understandable that it might be rendered irrelevant by modern circumstances, which, in effect, is Miller’s conclusion. But if we adopt Bakhtin’s more nuanced vision of genre, then we can better appreciate how the age-old lyric genre could be taken up by camp prisoners like Verdet and refashioned in original and sensitive ways to respond to brutal, unprecedented realities far removed from those circumstances in which the genre originated.

Verdet’s distinctive ethos was shaped by several movements and intellectual currents. His deeply-engrained allegiance to the Communist creed, which he brought to his participation in the Resistance and maintained in Buchenwald, exerted an enduring influence on his artistic, political and philosophical outlook. Like Honel, whose poetry was discussed in the previous chapter, Verdet retained his ardent Communist beliefs within the camps. He worked closely with the *Comité des intérêts français*, the clandestine Communist-led resistance movement directed by Marcel Paul, and carried out sabotage on the German military instruments being manufactured in the Buchenwald factories wherever possible. Verdet’s poetry exalts the virtuous and fully human life: one of his camp poems begins with the line ‘Ma vie à hauteur d’homme’—a revealing turn of phrase that points to the rigorous personal discipline espoused by the author. The passionate expressions of hope for a better society and the unwavering moral outlook that transpire in his camp poetry are the legacy of Verdet’s Communist formation.

As well as possessing firm Communist convictions, Verdet embraced the intuitive and contemplative pursuit of the transcendent in the world. Even during his internment, this quest remained integral to his poetry. Verdet’s poetry was frequently an epistemological search, dedicated to the contemplation of nature and the cosmos. The foundations of this philosophical outlook can be traced back in part to Henri Bergson’s revolutionary theories at the turn of the century, which were to have such a powerful influence on the next

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<sup>193</sup> Cited in Gary Saul Morson and Cary Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 296.

generation of French intellectuals. According to Bergson, man can truly come to a knowledge and consciousness of his own self and of the universe (what is outside himself). The idea of *l'intuition* was central to Bergson's understanding of the nature of human experience. Bergson conceived *l'intuition* as a means by which man 'se transporte à l'intérieur d'un objet pour coïncider avec ce qu'il a d'unique et par conséquent d'inexprimable.'<sup>194</sup> Contrary to many of his predecessors, who had expressed scepticism about the extent to which the human subject could ever apprehend the uniqueness of an object, Bergson maintained that authentic insights into the special character of an object were indeed possible. Verdet's works are imbued with just this confidence that the individuality of something can be grasped in a very direct way. In this enterprise, Verdet often employed a spare, aphoristic poetic (also used by his friend Jacques Prévert), a style owing much to Apollinaire's ground-breaking works early in the century and that aimed to condense the essence of a natural scene or an emotion into brief and telling lines. It might be thought that inspiration for such poems in the camps would be conspicuously lacking. In fact, the poems from *Les jours les nuits et puis l'aurore* reveal that Verdet was, on more than one occasion during his internment, enthralled by the distinctive loveliness and goodness of something (or someone) he encountered and strove to capture these transcendent qualities in verse.

In particular, the little glimpses of natural beauty he obtained during his internment were evidently a source of great comfort to Verdet. This might seem surprising given the stark, industrialised character of the concentration camps. Yet the natural environment could not be entirely excluded, even in such a grim setting. In a 2002 documentary on Verdet, *Seul l'espace s'éternise*, Verdet speaks of the consolation that his contemplation of the stars lent him in Buchenwald:

[Les étoiles] étaient vivantes, quoi. Il y avait tellement de morts autour de nous qu'elles étaient vivantes. Et je nichais mon espoir en elles. Elles m'ont aidé à me sauver parce qu'elles sont devenues présentes, devenues presque charnelles.<sup>195</sup>

Verdet was not the only prisoner to find poetic inspiration in some beautiful scene. Witnessing a beautiful view, more than one French prisoner was prompted to record such

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<sup>194</sup> Henri Bergson, 'Introduction à la métaphysique,' in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 7 (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1959), 1395. The essay 'Introduction à la métaphysique' first appeared in 1903 and was later modified by Bergson.

<sup>195</sup> André Verdet, interviewed in the documentary by Daniel Ziv, *André Verdet, Seul l'espace s'éternise* (2002): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=siAOrLCJHGQ>. Retrieved 14 July 2016.



moments in a poem. In Buchenwald, the writer and artist Paul Goyard wrote poignantly in a poem about 'le spectacle féérique de l'aurore', a heartening sight for exhausted and cold prisoners standing during the *Appel*.<sup>196</sup> On occasion, it was a searing impression of beauty that impelled artistic creation in the camps. The aesthetic component of prisoners' poetry was not, therefore, necessarily drawn from memories of a happier past. Rather, some of the imagery in this poetry, including Verdet's works, originated in a beautiful concrete reality encountered, even if only momentarily, in the camps themselves.

For all his emphasis on the beautiful and the good, Verdet does not adopt a head-in-the-sand attitude to evil in these poems. His poems attempt to grapple with the problem of evil and with the sufferings of innocent victims, especially children. Verdet's poems, together with the writings of other French prisoners in the camps, provide unparalleled insight into how prisoners came to terms with not just their own victimhood but with the apparent power and invincibility of evil amid the unchecked proliferation of atrocities. Confronted with the extraordinary vigour of evil, these prisoners desperately needed to accommodate this reality within a tenable moral and spiritual framework. The prevalence of extreme cruelties and atrocities could not help but elicit uneasy questions, even in those most strongly anchored in religious or political convictions, about whether goodness could ever prove stronger than evil. For more than one prisoner, poetry was a way to reach towards at least a partial answer to this question.

Verdet is, however, the only French poet from the camps who makes a serious attempt in his works to understand the conscience and motivations of the perpetrators. Self-censorship may account partially for this caesura; prisoners were understandably reluctant to write anything overtly accusatory for fear of punishment if their writings were discovered. Another reason might be the hierarchical distance between the SS officer and the camp interns, which would have made achieving empathy with them a difficult task, even if the prisoner had a mind to it. The SS authorities rarely even spoke to camp inmates, leaving most communication to the *Kapos*. Bertrand Herz (Buchenwald) remembers a short verbal exchange between him and a young SS officer during a 'death march' evacuation. Herz remarked that he hoped the war would end soon and the officer responded in kind. But this kind of encounter was extremely rare, and Herz explains that he recalls this incident precisely because any kind of communication with the camp authorities was so infrequent.<sup>197</sup> Prisoners

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<sup>196</sup> Poem reproduced in Verdet, *Poèmes de Buchenwald*, 24.

<sup>197</sup> Interview with Bertrand Herz, 18 November 2013.

often did not even know the names of the SS officers in charge of their *Block*. Possessing no name or identity for the prisoners, the SS officers tended to remain, from the point of view of camp inmates, hated but anonymous figures, one blending into the other. Verdet is alone, among the poets of the camps, in making an effort to enter into the consciousness of the Nazi perpetrators.

In this chapter, I first look at how beauty and lyricism are used in Verdet's poetry and delineate the ways in which this aesthetic and lyric dimension is affected by the sombre circumstances of writing. I go on to explore Verdet's conception of goodness and evil and draw attention to the continuing sense of interior freedom that emerges from his poems, a freedom deriving ultimately from the strong moral purpose the author retained during his internment. Finally, I explore the meaning of Verdet's poems about the deaths of innocent victims he witnessed in Auschwitz and Buchenwald and look at the sometimes confronting ways in which Verdet finds remnants of the beautiful and the good in the wake of the most abhorrent events.

### **Beauty and lyricism in the love-poems of *Les jours les nuits et puis l'aurore***

The intersection of lyric romanticism with Holocaust poetry is perhaps most famously emblematised by Celan's *Todesfuge* ('Death Fugue'), a haunting picture of death in the camps that employs the stock imagery and sensual language of romantic poetry.<sup>198</sup> Celan's poem uses elements of lyric poetry, notably apostrophe, and employs romantic, aesthetic imagery such as 'dein goldenes Haar Margarete' ('your golden hair Margarete') to evoke two archetypal female figures, Margarete and Sulamith. There has been dispute among scholars over the nature of the lyricism in *Todesfuge*: is Celan deliberately perverting love-poetry to bring out more starkly the horrifying atrocity of the Holocaust, or is this poem, at least partially, a straightforward example of lyricism? Some scholars consider Celan's poem to be a continuation of the broad lyric tradition and interpret the romantic imagery in *Todesfuge* as symbolic of the redemptive role of love in the face of death. Leonard Duroche, for example, affirms that *Todesfuge* is a 'lovesong', suggesting that the figures of Margarete and Sulamith 'remind us of the overwhelming force of woman's love'.<sup>199</sup> Brett Kaplan takes a more nuanced approach. For Kaplan, the 'bold mixture of sensuality and death' characterising

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<sup>198</sup> For an English-language study of Celan's most famous poem, see John Felstiner, 'Translating Paul Celan's *Todesfuge*: rhythm and repetition as metaphor' in Saul Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'final solution'* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>199</sup> Leonard L. Duroche, 'Paul Celan's "Todesfuge": A New Interpretation,' *MLN* 82 (October 1967), 477.

*Todesfuge* is not so much about evoking the saving power of love as about conjuring up the chilling spectre of executions in the camps to the accompaniment of beautiful music. Celan's poem 'invokes the sensual as a reproduction of the sick melange of music and death that the SS revealed in.'<sup>200</sup>

Verdet's poems, and other French lyric poetry actually written in the camps, present fewer ambiguities when it comes to their interpretation; these lyric poems, many of them love-poems, express the writer's emotions with sincerity. Among the lyric poems Verdet wrote in the camps, the love-poems dedicated to his wife are particularly interesting to study because of the striking ways in which these poems appropriate and adapt the lyric genre. Verdet would later consider love to have been the primary focus of his poems written in Buchenwald: in an autographed copy of *Les jours les nuits et puis l'aurore*, Verdet terms his collection of poems 'ce livre de mon espoir et de mon amour'.<sup>201</sup> Verdet was just one among many French prisoners who expressed their intense longings for their loved ones in poetry. Spontaneously, across every camp to which prisoners from France were deported, even Auschwitz, the same genre arose. Prisoners wrote with love, tenderness and deep nostalgia about their absent husbands, wives, children or parents.

It might be thought that such aesthetic poetry has little to tell us about the camps, and this is indeed the conclusion reached by Mole. For Mole, romantic poetry from the camps invariably means escapist poetry that spurns realism. Love is used, Mole argues, as 'a conscious means of turning away from any attempt to represent camp reality.'<sup>202</sup> Even in those love-poems in which the camps are explicitly mentioned, Mole considers that the objective reality evoked in the poem is 'secondary in importance to the effort made to think of the beloved and of the return to the family hearth and home.'<sup>203</sup> Through such poetry, Mole suggests, camp inmates could take temporary respite from their ordeals by resorting to consoling memories. Poetic aestheticism, Mole suggests, was equivalent to deliberately turning away from the harsh reality of the camps. The beautiful and consoling images we find in these poems constitute a retreat into a past or forthcoming state of happiness, security and freedom. This is an important point to explore: we need to make a clear distinction

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<sup>200</sup> Brett Kaplan, *Unwanted Beauty*, 33.

<sup>201</sup> Personal collection. The inscription reads: 'Pour [excised] en haute sympathie sincère ce livre de mon espoir et de mon amour, A. Verdet Novembre 49'.

<sup>202</sup> Mole, *Beyond the Limit-Experience*, 69-70.

<sup>203</sup> Mole, *Beyond the Limit-Experience*, 67-68.

between freedom attained through fleeing from current bodily reality and the freedom found *within* this experience, which is the freedom I am talking about in the present study.

While Verdet draws in his poems on the time-honoured lyric tradition of invoking the absent loved one, discovering genuine beauty and hope in her, the lyricism that emerges here is nonetheless subtly altered by the context in which these poems were written. An attentive reading of these poems shows that in fact the traumatic physical reality of the poet's imprisonment is constantly suggested alongside, or even within, the beautiful imagery and references to the beloved woman. Somewhat hackneyed lyric conventions are invested with sinister meaning by the brutal setting in which these poems were composed. Importantly, these alterations do not change the fundamental sincerity of the romantic feelings expressed. Unlike *Todesfuge*, in which references to the romantic and the sensual are ambivalent and open to widely divergent interpretations, Verdet's poems remain quite clearly genuine, heartfelt love-poems, addressed to an identifiable woman. However, in other respects, Verdet's poems show similarities with Celan's *Todesfuge*, in that conventional aesthetic and romantic images acquire disturbing resonances from the context. Verdet seeks beauty, tenderness and solace in memories of his wife, but at the same time, never lets his poetic gaze stray too far from his dark circumstances, continually inscribing in his texts the acute tensions between the spiritual presence of the beloved woman and the grim physical reality of camp internment.

On occasion, moreover, the beautiful in Verdet's poems actually reflects an encounter with some beautiful sight within the camp itself. Verdet describes a haunting glimpse of beauty that has caught his attention within Buchenwald. Rather than originating solely in the imagination and the memory, therefore Verdet's vision of the beautiful springs from the fullness of both his sensory and emotional experience in Buchenwald.

Ardent and nostalgic, the love-poems written by Verdet in Buchenwald recall in many ways the long tradition of French romantic poetry, particularly the Romantic poets and the Symbolists. Yet the dark reality of the camps repeatedly intervenes within these poems, intruding upon traditional romantic images. Familiar tropes are subtly infiltrated by new connotations or alternatively, appear alongside more disturbing and original figures. Verdet thus alters what Bakhtin calls the 'stylistic aura' of words, the connotations acquired by these words from the contexts in which they habitually appear in the genre in question. Evolutions in the lyric genre are particularly arresting in *Rose du cœur romantique*. Roses, shadows, sighs and night—all staple tropes of romantic poetry—figure prominently in this poem and the

rich, sensuous and somewhat obscure picture sketched in the first stanza is reminiscent of Symbolist poetry:

Rose portant son fruit quand tu songes dans l'ombre  
Qu'aux revers de tes nuits brûlent tes longs soupirs  
Se répète ma voix dans le vide des nombres  
Pour mieux pouvoir t'aimer n'eussé-je dû mourir (JNA 45)

The evocation of the poet's disembodied 'voix' points self-consciously to the lyric dimension of the poem, while the traditional incantatory aspirations of the love-song emerge in the faithful, repeated invocation of the beloved. So far, we are in familiar lyric territory. But this particular incantation takes place in the 'vide des nombres': far from being innocuous, these 'numbers' form part of the chilling auditory landscape of the camps—the morning *Appel* in which each prisoner's camp number is called. The motif of repetition, which would normally be read in lyric poetry as exemplifying the poet's desire to speak his beloved into presence, is tainted here by its association with the repetition of prisoners' numbers during roll-call. Even the beautiful classical alexandrine in the third line ('Se répète ma voix dans le vide des nombres'), perfectly divided into four accent-groups with a neat caesura in the centre, bears faintly troubling associations in this context—the regular accent almost seems to simulate the monotonous chanting of numbers.

But Verdet is not content to simply reproduce the chilling atmosphere of the camps, he wants to undercut its dominance by summoning up all the strength and ardour of his love. What is dark and insidious in the metric repetition characterising the third line, and the demeaning ritual it evokes, is counteracted in the following line ('Pour mieux pouvoir t'aimer n'eussé-je dû mourir'). Gone is the rather languid rhythm and the drowsy tone accompanying the 'longs soupirs' and the dreaming lover. Now, the rhythm is jerkier, less soporific. The mellifluous sonorities and liquid consonants of the first three lines are abandoned for much crisper, more abrupt consonants (p, d) in the last line. The words 'n'eussé-je dû mourir' are no insipid poetic cliché. These words represent a daring and confrontational speech act—boldly invoking death when death is an all-too-close reality for the prisoner in the camps. The poet draws on the lyric tradition but the stock elements and words characteristic of lyricism acquire new resonances. Verdet skilfully layers the romantic evocation of the beloved woman against the austere background of the camps. Beautiful and musical, the poem is not just about a retreat into a happier past. It tries to evoke the sense experience of being imprisoned in Buchenwald. In its prosody and sonorous qualities, the poem

simultaneously re-enacts the numbing repetitiveness of camp existence and addresses a resounding challenge to it.

In a similar way, *Aurores* also transforms the melancholic trope of death. It begins as quite a traditional love-lyric, describing memories of daybreak in Nice that change into rhapsodies on the beauty of the beloved. But ‘death’ is transformed so that it is no longer imprinted with melancholy and sentiment. While in the penultimate stanza death is used only in an allusive, figurative sense, it is a question of literal death in the final stanza:

Et souriantes dans tes yeux  
Les violettes de la mort  
Délicieuse au bleu des bois  
Ensoleillés de la mémoire

A Buchenwald l'aurore  
N'est plus qu'un souvenir  
Qui se lève au ciel futur  
Comme une fleur sur un charnier (JNA 31)

Although it would seem more logical for the adjective ‘délicieux’ to apply to ‘les violettes’, the word appears in feminine singular form and therefore clearly qualifies the ‘mort’ of the previous line. The suggestion of a kind of melancholic attraction in death that this adjective evokes, harking back to Baudelaire’s *spleen*, is distinctly jarring, and in fact, the poem underlines the incongruity between Romantic portrayals of death and death in Buchenwald. The harsh image of a mass of indiscriminate dead bodies that closes the poem transforms the trope of death, so that it no longer melancholic and beautiful but instead brutal and horrifying. But this is not to say that the poem completely nullifies the aesthetic. Even in Buchenwald, the sunrise retains its beauty and becomes a single, small remnant of loveliness amid scenes of carnage. Verdet’s poetry takes up somewhat hackneyed lyric forms and tropes but they resonate in fresh ways; and there is no self-consciousness or satirical tendency at work here when Verdet resurrects the aesthetic in such an atrocious setting. Rather, somewhat paradoxically, the aesthetic is revitalised precisely because of the desperately cruel and dark setting in which it is recreated, and because death in the camps is no longer a metaphor but so imminent and so insistent every single day that its presence unavoidably infiltrates the most beautiful imagery.

Other love-poems from the camps, although less sophisticated examples of this interweaving of lyric romanticism and grim realism, exhibit a similar coupling of traditional romantic tropes and images with stark cameos of camp existence. *Exil*, written by Jewish deportee Pierre Créange, is a love-poem, all the more striking for having been written in an Auschwitz work-camp. The poem is addressed to his absent wife, Raymonde, who had been deported separately to Auschwitz and, unbeknownst to her husband, probably gassed upon her arrival. Simpler than Verdet's poem, it yet juxtaposes, to moving effect, beautiful and nostalgic imagery with a background of the poet's grim exile in Auschwitz. The poem opens with a bleak, telling picture of captivity:

Horizons fermés  
Fils barbelés  
Banales baraques interchangeable  
Travail morne qui ne console pas  
Frères de misère  
Qui parfois à nos misères ajoutez...  
Solitude dans la multitude  
Langue étrangère  
Paysages et visages hostiles  
Ou fermés.<sup>204</sup>

At this point, the poet's attention moves to thoughts of his wife. In musical cadences and understated language, Créange muses on the tragic destiny that holds them both in its grip:

Notre destin nous est rivé  
A toi, mon aimée,  
Comme à moi,  
Pour des jours et des jours  
Longs à traîner.

The wistful tone and simple but eloquent words combine to create a love-poem steeped in the tradition of French romantic poetry. The melancholic sentiments in this poem would not be out of place in a work by Rimbaud or Verlaine, two of Créange's favourite poets, according to his son.<sup>205</sup> Going even further back, the poet carries on a tradition of nostalgic

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<sup>204</sup> Pierre Créange, *Exil* (Paris: Editions Caractères, 1993), 121-3.

<sup>205</sup> Interview with Robert Créange, 11 November 2013.

poems written in exile by Renaissance poets like Joachim Du Bellay. Citing this passage from *Exil*, one commentator, Roy Rosenstein, speculates that the poem is underscored by the subtext of the troubadour Jaufrè Rudel's love-songs.<sup>206</sup> In studies of Holocaust literature, the traditional love-poem is assigned very little importance. Usually the focus is on the deformation and the subversion of romantic poetry in accord with the vicious and inhuman conditions prevailing in the camps. Créange's poem shows that the love-poem survived in Auschwitz and that nostalgia, romantic sentiments and melancholic yearnings emerged in such poetry in conjunction with evocations of the concrete reality of the camps.

Nostalgic, melancholic and beautifully musical, Verdet's lyric poems from Buchenwald owe a great deal to classic French poetry but contain a novel dimension as well. His poems always involve a subtle intersection of the stock traditions of lyric poetry with disturbing new images drawn from the dark background of the camps. This encounter between past and present is clearly evident in *Automne*, which shows a traditional melancholic lyricism beloved of generations of French poets and even uses the classic lyric convention of apostrophe. The theme of autumn was a particular favourite for poets writing in the Romantic tradition; season of regret and nostalgia, it echoed the unfulfilled aspirations of the soul and acted as a reminder of mortality. Baudelaire, Verlaine and Apollinaire all composed poems conjuring up the sadness of autumn.<sup>207</sup> But the melancholic atmosphere created here in Verdet's *Automne* is quite distinct from a Baudelairian obsession with death or the anguished pessimism of the *fin-de-siècle* poets. There is a definite intersection here of past and present, and traditional metaphors take on a sinister and literal meaning:

Voici l'automne dans ces bois  
Où le sourire de la nymphe  
N'a jamais fait l'arbre frémir  
Voici l'automne dans ce ciel  
Où des squelettes gris sanglotent  
Dans un vent noir de fouets secs  
  
Automne d'ici je ne veux pas  
Entendre pâle et m'attristant  
Le cor funèbre de tes soirs  
Je ne veux pas tirer les cloches

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<sup>206</sup> Roy Rosenstein, 'A Medieval Troubadour Mobilized in the French Resistance,' *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59 (July 1998), 512.

<sup>207</sup> See, for example, Baudelaire's *Chant d'automne*, Verlaine's *Chanson d'automne* and Apollinaire's *Automne malade*.



Rouille de la mélancolie  
Je ne veux pas mourir ici

(JNA 53)

Resonances of the works of earlier poets can be heard in much of this imagery. The image of ‘squelettes’ was used by Apollinaire in one of his mournful romantic poems. But here they are not just a poetic metaphor used to concretise a depressed state of soul but a much more literal picture of the camp prisoner’s starved, skeletal body. ‘Le cor funèbre’ is a suitably dirge-like accompaniment to this sombre landscape; but pronouncing the word ‘cor’ inevitably evokes its homophone ‘corps’, thus implicitly alluding to the literally funereal spectacle of the bodies of deceased prisoners being hauled off for cremation. The ‘vent noir’ is not just an imaginative and fanciful picture to showcase the mournful nature of the wind but conjures up the ashes blown onto the camp out of the *Krematorium*. Instead of merely suggesting thoughts of death, autumn brings the ominous and dreaded spectacle of winter that can literally kill the prisoner constantly exposed to the cold. These tropes are all traditional devices but they are also startlingly novel because of the literality with which they can be used in the fantastically dark and grotesque cadre of the concentration camp. The poem thus sets up a network of aesthetic images with a double function: they recall the Romantic tradition and at the very same time paint with realism the grim sights of Buchenwald.

In fact, the melancholy feelings elicited by autumn are invoked only to be soundly dismissed. The ‘cors’ and ‘la rouille’ are images that appear in Jules Laforgue’s 1886 poem *L’Hiver qui vient*. But in *Automne*, Verdet vehemently rejects the morbid beauty of the ‘cors funèbres’, the ‘cloches’ and the ‘rouille de la mélancolie’. Three times, he repeats a wilful and uncompromising ‘je ne veux pas’. Melancholy is not an option for this poet because he senses the ease with which he could die if he succumbed to the temptation of sadness and regret. This poem enlists well-worn romantic tropes but these images become inescapably coloured by the context in which they are used. This poem is, therefore, no self-indulgent, escapist anachronism but, like the other lyric poems discussed, invests romantic images with suggestions of darker realities. Expertly playing with these contrasting elements, the author expresses in these poems his firm resolution not to let himself either be subsumed under the waves of nostalgia or crushed by the harshness of his captivity.

## Good and evil, captivity and freedom

The corpus in *Les jours les nuits et puis l'aurore* is not limited to love-poems of the kind mentioned. In several poems written in Buchenwald, Verdet seeks to articulate his vision of the good. Verdet's ideas on the nature of the good are closely bound up with his conception of interior freedom. Striving for justice and goodness, he and his comrades, Verdet asserts, are more truly free in their hearts than those who practise evil. The poet maintains that, despite the cruel captivity they are experiencing, he and his fellow prisoners enjoy a more authentic liberty than their tormenters.

Verdet is not content, though, just to extol goodness in his poetry; he also wants to answer the question of why evil seems to have taken hold of so many people in these times and how, if at all, this evil will be punished. Attempting to understand what is driving the Nazi perpetrators to act with such callousness and inhumanity, the poet tries to probe the conscience and consciousness of the SS officer. The conclusions Verdet reaches regarding the genesis of evil and the reasons for the behaviour of the perpetrators are somewhat surprising, but, interestingly, show some intersection with the conclusions reached by much later scholarship on the same question.

Academic studies on the question of how individuals could have perpetrated such heinous atrocities on their fellow human beings are numerous.<sup>208</sup> Arendt's writings, particularly her concept of the 'banality of evil', although much critiqued, have left an indelible mark on all debates regarding the moral status of the Nazi perpetrators. In a series of articles originally published in the *New Yorker* and later published as *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Arendt argued that Eichmann and other Nazi officials who engineered the Holocaust were not motivated by an insane hatred of the Jewish people, nor by sadistic impulses, as was commonly assumed. Instead, she contended, they carried out the acts they did in simple obedience to their superiors. The reason they were able to perpetrate such atrocities without compunction was their fundamental inability to consider the consequence of their actions on others and their supreme indifference to the fate of their victims. Arendt's

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<sup>208</sup> In addition to the works I cite here, other studies from some influential commentators on this topic include Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 3rd ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), first published in 1961, and Lawrence Langer, 'Understanding Atrocity: Killers and Victims in the Holocaust,' in *Admitting the Holocaust: collected essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

polemical thesis challenged the more widespread idea of the racist and fanatical Nazi ideology as being the exclusive cause of the Holocaust.<sup>209</sup>

In a similar vein, one of the most respected theorists to have studied the question of the genesis of the Holocaust, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, has argued in *Modernity and the Holocaust* that if ordinary people were able to quell their moral inhibitions and participate in the genocide of the Jews, it was in large part due to modern bureaucratic ideals of discipline and unquestioning service to their organisation, ideals that took precedence over private moral scruples. ‘SS administration,’ Bauman writes, ‘transformed everything which had come into its orbit – including its victims – into an integral part of the chain of command, an area subject to the strictly disciplinary rules and freed from moral judgment.’<sup>210</sup> Furthermore, like Arendt, Bauman sees indifference to their victims as another key factor that allowed perpetrators to carry out the cruelties that they did. Conditioned to believe that camp inmates were either an inferior group of people (such as the Jews) or ‘terrorists’ (in the case of Resistant prisoners), officials did not experience normal human repugnance faced with the suffering of their victims. The Nazi perpetrators, both Arendt and Bauman conclude, were on the whole driven not by hatred or sadism but by rigorous, unquestioning obedience to authority, and their carrying out of orders was facilitated by their utter apathy towards their victims.

Verdet’s own thinking on the perpetrators can only be properly appreciated in relation to his very distinctive understanding of the good and how goodness is manifested in the human person. The good, for Verdet, is far more real and substantial than evil. Virtue and goodness appear, accordingly, in very concrete manifestations in his poems. In *Bel avenir*, written during his incarceration in the prison of Fresnes, Verdet expresses a sort of manifesto for his life:

Je vivrai pour nous dans la lumière  
Je vivrai de nous pour la lumière (JNA 13)

The enduring quest of his life is, thus, to seek ‘la lumière’. Verdet’s ‘lumière’ cannot be interpreted in a unitary fashion—it remains a somewhat mysterious and elusive concept—but this image seems to encompass all the transcendentals so valued by the poet: beauty, goodness and the purity and clarity of truth. In *Liberté égalité fraternité*, the just and truthful

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<sup>209</sup> See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963).

<sup>210</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2000), 22. This work was first published in 1989.

man is the one whose gaze is always turned towards this ‘lumière’. He possesses a deep and lucid knowledge of the world and can therefore judge with integrity:

D’un côté des hommes au cœur pur aux mains nues  
Qui savent le poids du pain le poids du vin  
Sur la table de qui  
Les a justement gagnés  
Des hommes aux yeux droits justes  
Comme une balance de lumière (JNA 47)

This ‘cœur pur’ brings us to the crux of Verdet’s philosophical outlook. Even though Verdet embraced the collectivist ideals of Marxism, it is evident from his poetry that he saw the individual heart—not external institutions or collectives—as the space where the good could be fostered or, alternatively, rejected. The reference to the ‘mains nues’ cannot help but evoke the extreme deprivation suffered by the camp prisoner. But Verdet boldly turns this reminder of dispossession and loss into an image of freedom, depicting hands that are completely free and open for an enriching encounter with the world. In a similar way, the ‘cœur pur’ of the virtuous man, for Verdet, is an open heart that can both perceive and receive the good. Being open to the good and to the beautiful in the world, having a ‘cœur pur’ that seeks truth, in Verdet’s thought, is the key to the virtuous and compassionate life.

In Verdet’s thought, as in a long philosophical tradition beginning with Socrates, evil is not a positive force but rather a *negative* one, consisting in an absence of the good. In conceptual terms, Verdet recognises a dichotomy of good and evil as absolute concepts, and often evil is accorded a very substantial and vivid incarnation—figures of evil in his poetry include ‘les monstres’, ‘l’Ogre’ and ‘le Masque’. But the most common image he uses to describe evil is ‘l’Ombre’ (‘the shadow’). As the shadow only exists in relation to light, in the same way evil exists exclusively in relation to the good. Verdet brings this conception of evil to his poems dealing with the perpetrators and their evil acts in the Nazi camps. In *Les bourreaux* (‘The perpetrators’), he describes their actions as empty, insubstantial and futile gestures:

Le miroir dans leur chambre a honte de lui-même  
Leurs mots sont-ce des mots ce qui fuit de leur bouche  
Leur geste n’inscrit rien au cahier de l’espace  
Tout leur échappe et l’air la lumière et le son (JNA 35)

For Verdet, evil is a negative concept, a subtraction, which can effect no lasting, creative change in the world. The *bourreaux* can only live a suffocated, darkened and muffled existence, as though in a vacuum. They can establish no saving contact with the world or with the other. In *Liberté égalité fraternité*, Verdet compares the free, open heart of the just man to the imprisoned heart of the perpetrator:

De l'autre des hommes au visage trompé  
Pareils à des chiens de garde battus  
Des hommes qui ne savent plus rien sinon  
Que le soleil doit encore luire  
Quelque part sur la terre et dans le cœur des autres  
Des hommes aux yeux fuyants  
Et leurs dompteurs aux lèvres mauvaises  
Comme la tradition du mal  
Des hommes armés jusqu'au cœur (JNA 65)

Cowed, fearful and cheated figures, the first set of figures has succumbed to hopelessness. These men can no longer see the truth, nor are they capable of truly encountering others; their eyes 'flee' from meeting another's gaze. They remain mired and trapped in themselves. Other men (the 'dompteurs') have more deliberately barricaded their hearts against the goodness around themselves. In both cases, Verdet sees the basic inability to receive and welcome the good as being at the root of evil actions. This lack of reciprocity possible between such individuals and the good around them is also explored in *La Corne d'abondance*. Verdet remembers with nostalgia all the treasures and natural beauties of France, listing each one in turn, and then goes on to say:

O vaste Corne d'Abondance  
Meurtrie pillée et dévastée  
Par les mains dures du SS  
Qui ne sait et ne saura jamais  
Tout ce qu'un fruit ce qu'une fleur  
Ce qu'un regard ce qu'un sourire  
Peut de tendresse contenir  
Ce que de pur et de meilleur  
Peut se lever vers l'avenir  
Dans la rencontre de deux hommes (JNA 33)

Here, natural beauty is associated and linked with the goodness of tenderness and empathy. Curiously, there is no reference to the camps in this poem; only to the devastation of the Nazi occupation in France. Perhaps even more surprisingly, Verdet seems to throw on the Nazis an almost pitying perspective: how can they practise simple compassion? They have never ‘known’, never experienced the goodness inherent in the natural world, nor the goodness possible in human relationships. From Verdet’s point of view, the perpetrator is not someone who has actively chosen evil but first and foremost someone whose heart is closed to the good.

What is interesting is that despite witnessing and experiencing the cruellest of treatments during his internment in a concentration camp, Verdet does not stress in his poetry such concepts as hatred, malice or sadism in accounting for the behaviour of the perpetrators. Instead, he highlights the key role of indifference in paving the way for evil acts; this attitude closes off the heart and provides a breeding-ground for evil acts to flourish. In this sense, Verdet’s poems written in the camps reveal ideas about evil that bear some similarity to the perspectives of Arendt and Bauman. Like these two theorists, Verdet regarded indifference as a major, and insidious, factor in the spread of evil. Quite possibly, Verdet was influenced by contemporary Communist thought, which labelled indifference as one of the most dangerous of all faults for society. Certainly, this point of view was shared by other Communist Resistant prisoners. In a text she wrote in Ravensbrück, Odile Arrighi-Roger condemned indifference as more of a trap than hate and greed:

La nuit devient plus dense, heurtée par d’innombrables turpitudes :  
le vol, le crime, la haine, l’hypocrisie, la cupidité, l’égoïsme, que sais-  
je encore... et cette tare plus visqueuse que tout : l’indifférence.<sup>211</sup>

Indifference, not just for Verdet but for other camp prisoners as well, was the real culprit responsible for the heartless actions of the perpetrators.

For Verdet, ‘goodness’ is a fundamental human quality that exists in the depths of the heart of each person. In Verdet’s eyes, each human being possesses innate impulses of goodness and compassion. These impulses can be stifled but not destroyed; Verdet strongly believes that some good exists in every individual, even if it lies dormant. An unusual incident recounted by Verdet in the film *Seul l’espace s’éternise* sheds light on his attitude in this regard. Upon his arrival in Auschwitz-Birkenau, Verdet was put in a notorious invalid *Block* known

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<sup>211</sup> Facsimile of original manuscript, FNDIRP archives.

for a high mortality rate. He was summoned before the infamous SS officer Josef Mengele, who asked what his profession was; Verdet answered in German that he was a poet. Mengele immediately began to ask him questions on his tastes in poetry, on his favourite poets, on music. Finally, he told the doctor in charge of the *Block* to let Verdet go back to the main camp. Recalling this incident, Verdet said:

J'ai été sauvé par Mengele. C'est un cas unique. [...] A cause de la poésie. Donc, au fond de l'être le plus vil [...] il y a toujours une petite parcelle d'humanité qui est là qui va surgir. Et ça c'est vrai. Et pourtant, c'était un monstre.<sup>212</sup>

This same outlook, foregrounding the persistent and universal presence of small impulses of humanity, even sometimes in those people who perpetrate evil and inhuman acts, characterises much of Verdet's œuvre. A story Verdet wrote shortly after the war, entitled *Le mauvais voyage*, fictionalising his own experience, describes the arrival of a convoy of French deportees at Weimar station on the way to Buchenwald and highlights one single, merciful gesture in the face of suffering. Famished and burning with thirst, the prisoners fantasise about receiving a few drops of water or some food. Seeing ordinary German civilians and soldiers on the platform, most of whom ignore the obvious plight of the prisoners being transported, one of the deportees wonders:

Cette indifférence ne cacherait-elle pas une pensée profonde qui serait chez certains une pensée de bonté ou de pitié et qui n'attendrait qu'une occasion de liberté pour se dévoiler au grand jour et avec sincérité.<sup>213</sup>

Eventually, this thought is proved true when a lone German woman brings a piece of bread to the prisoners. Compassionate instincts, Verdet implies, can re-emerge even in the most unpromising of circumstances, in the midst of indifference.

Where is the place for judgment, if at all, in Verdet's perspective on evil? In these poems, judgment from the outside is absent because judgment is self-inflicted. The perpetrator's destiny is catastrophic, as depicted in the third stanza of *Les bourreaux*:

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<sup>212</sup> Interview with Verdet in the documentary *André Verdet, Seul l'espace s'éternise*.

<sup>213</sup> André Verdet, 'Le mauvais voyage', *Europe* (1 October 1947), 30.

La nuit et le silence et l'aurore et le bruit  
Mis à nu ça craquera voilà ça s'écroule  
Un fatras de vieilleries puantes Voyez  
Les courir Où se terrer Tout leur est hostile

La grand'peur de mourir au cœur des forêts noires. (JNA 35)

In a contemptuous gesture, Verdet uses the pejorative 'ça' in the second line instead of 'ils' for the pronoun 'they'. Ultimately, Verdet declares, although the *bourreaux* now have the upper hand, they will flee in terror at the end of the 'night'. Their appearance of strength is a façade. Similarly, in *Une chanson est née*, Verdet's imagines 'tyrants' recoiling from the song of the people. All beauty is anathema to them:

Au fil clair des armes du peuple  
Il naît une chanson dont le refrain  
Toujours pareil jamais le même  
Glace le cou des tyrans  
Fait se tordre leur poitrine

La lune pour eux comme un billot  
Les étoiles comme des balles (JNA 34)

The beautiful actually becomes something threatening to the evil-doer. In this sense, in Verdet's conception, the tyrant can only find hostility outside himself. The spontaneous birth of a song issued by the people with one voice (a textbook image from the Communist vision) is a literally chilling sound for him. Nothing can offer solace or refuge because of the tyrant's basic enmity towards the world outside himself. Within himself, therefore, the evil-doer creates his own punishment.

Evil in Verdet's view, is subordinate to the much more foundational, substantial reality of the good. This conception of evil, understanding it as a phenomenon that is essentially subjugated to the good, is not limited to Verdet's poems but can also be observed in the works of other poets from the camps. Gabriel Blanc (Dora) composed a number of poems and inscribed them in a small notebook he made himself, salvaging metal from the factory in which he worked in order to fashion book-covers. The last two stanzas of *Les autres conquérants*, written in February 1945, suggests that the greatest strength does not belong, in the end, to the rulers or dominating forces of the age:



Messagers de l'amour au milieu de la haine  
Ils n'ont livré combat qu'à la misère humaine  
Sous l'étendard sanglant du plus puissant des rois.

Glorieux conquérants du signe de la croix  
Ils ont choisi pour eux la gloire plus féconde  
D'agrandir un pays qui n'est pas de ce monde.<sup>214</sup>

This poem is dedicated to 'Rév. Saloir', a member of the *Pères Blancs*, a religious community to which Blanc was very close. Blanc is probably thinking of these priests in the poem, but on a deeper level, it is a poem about power and domination, skilfully sustaining a play on earthly and spiritual conquest. The conquests these men accomplish are not physical lands; rather, these warriors build a kingdom 'qui n'est pas de ce monde' (a quote from John 18:36 where Jesus describes his kingdom). The greatest power, Blanc implies, belongs to 'Christ's army', not to the rulers of the era.

The problem of evil also constitutes the theme of the one surviving poetic fragment written in Sachsenhausen by Pierre Cayrol, the brother of Jean Cayrol, whose poems are discussed in the following chapter. Addressing the sombre pine trees that surround the Sachsenhausen camp, which become a personification of evil, Pierre Cayrol adopts a tone of derision. Just as Verdet sees the good as being more substantial and more real than evil, so too does Cayrol contrast the presence and fullness that grace comprises with the absence and emptiness characterising evil, even when the latter takes on a façade of domination, oppression and power.

Pins prisonniers, de quelle ouverture êtes-vous les barreaux?  
De quelle obsession soudainement figée?  
Arbres de ma mémoire et du temps dérobé  
Soutenez-vous ce mirage créé  
Au vent qui vous agite, matière inerte et sans profondeur?  
Vous si proche bordure de la mort si familière  
Comme une pulpe sèche à nos doigts  
Pins rigides, vous avez l'âpre discipline de la faute  
Et, présents, vous m'êtes comme l'absence même de la grâce

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<sup>214</sup> Original manuscript in the personal collection of Dr Hubert Blanc.

De mon âme, je vous vois, et non plus de mes yeux  
Et c'est pourquoi vous m'êtes à peine signalés.<sup>215</sup>

Accusatory and scornfully defiant, the first line effectively employs four plosive consonants (p, d, k and b) so that the verse almost gives the impression of being spat out. Questions are rapped out like accusations, the stressed line-initial 'pins' and 'vous' adding extra emphasis to these indictments. Perhaps it is deliberate that the poem is not contained in a single prosodic style, its prosodic variations counteracting 'l'âpre discipline' so despised by the poet. At any rate, the alexandrine in the second-last line beautifully draws attention to the transformative gaze that exposes the emptiness of this grand show of power. These pine trees, looming above the camp and representing the poet's dark prison, are in fact far less significant than they might at first appear. Contemptuously terming them a 'matière inerte et sans profondeur', Cayrol implies that the seeming strength and domination of these trees is an illusion. Perceived with the soul, they become something insubstantial, an emptiness. Again, we see the same Socratic idea of evil that characterises Verdet's poems; evil has no depth, no richness and no movement, it is an absence rather than a presence. But there is another meaning to this image. Because the poet perceives the nothingness of this barrier, it is as if the barrier has dissolved. This refusal to see evil as anything other than a transitory and shallow phenomenon means that the poet enjoys some measure of freedom despite his imprisonment. Most studies on the ethical problems raised by the Holocaust and the Nazi ideology have treated the evil of the camps as an almost insuperable obstacle that ultimately defies comprehension on some level. Here, if only momentarily, one victim sees a fault-line in the edifice of power and evil that surrounds him.

Because evil, Verdet maintains, is a negative phenomenon and less powerful, despite all appearances to the contrary, than the good, it cannot ultimately impinge on the author's own freedom at the most fundamental level. The poem *A l'oiseau imaginaire qui passe* expresses this idea of freedom discovered within imprisonment in a particularly arresting and imaginative way. Borrowing the persona of an exiled troubadour, Verdet re-imagines his captivity in a highly romantic narrative:

Bel oiseau file-azur bel oiseau porte-espoir  
Oiseau qui ourles droit vers l'Ouest et la France  
Apporte à mon aimée mon souhait du matin

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<sup>215</sup> Untitled poem reproduced in Michael Pateau, *Jean Cayrol : une vie en poésie* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2012), 168-9.

Dis-lui que je l'aimais et toujours la chéris  
 Que mes jours et mes nuits ne forment qu'une aurore  
 Ouverte sans nuage au soleil de demain  
 Que toujours je l'attends dans l'humaine durée  
 Et lui baise les mains de toujours accourir  
 Dis-lui que l'Oiseleur n'a pu rompre le charme  
 Que ses lacs n'ont pas su trancher l'aile et la patte  
 Ni sa cage empêcher l'aile battre et l'envol (JNA 51)

We are dealing here with one of the clearest expressions of the personal ethos that sustained Verdet in captivity, and the imagery here has a key role to play in illuminating this ethos. On its simplest level, the homely sight of a bird flying towards the west is just a poetic device inviting the poet to send a message back to his homeland and his wife. But from this picture Verdet derives another, more profound image: that of an imprisoned bird who somehow succeeds, despite its captivity, in evading its captor's hold and cannot be pinned down or disempowered. This image becomes a telling, even graphic metaphor for the poet's own interior resistance, for his dogged refusal to be confined and oppressed by the imprisonment to which he is subjected. His autonomy, his will and his resolute combativeness have not been broken by the brutal captivity inflicted upon him, Verdet declares.

Formal characteristics and lexical choices contribute in important ways to the aura of freedom this poem exudes. An impression of openness and even abundance is given by the rapid accumulation of succeeding wishes that the poet entrusts to the 'bel oiseau' and the profusion of words evoking movement and flight. On the prosodic level, the theme of freedom within captivity is delightfully mirrored in the poem's lively pace and the sprightly, almost effervescent rhythm paired with the constrictions of the alexandrine. While we might expect the confinement and privation of the author's situation to give rise to corresponding qualities in the prosody and in the author's choice of words, the opposite is true. The dynamic acoustics of the poem, the effect of augmentation and intensity created by the sequence of joyous aspirations, and the frequency of words describing movement convey a great sense of fulfilment, freedom and plentifulness and imply that the author fundamentally experiences no real diminishment or deprivation. Decidedly, this 'trouvère' is free despite his physical imprisonment.

This poem offers a compelling example of how Verdet uses the lyric genre in defining an ethos for living his internment in Buchenwald. This poem in many ways epitomises all that

is characteristic of the lyric genre: emotional intensity, use of apostrophe and personification. Yet, despite the traditional genre, romantic theme and the imaginative, aesthetic imagery at work here, this is no nostalgic flashback to a gentler, more comfortable reality outside of the concentration camps. Instead, Verdet is resoundingly defending his interior freedom and expressing his faithfulness to his principles. The line ‘mes jours et mes nuits ne forment qu’une aurore’ would provide the title for Verdet’s collection of poems from the camps, hinting at how crucial these words are for understanding Verdet’s philosophy. Verdet’s moral goals include more than simply surviving the camps, or personal fulfilment. Subscribing to Marxist ideals, Verdet is convinced that a more just and compassionate world lies ahead, and he wants his life in its totality, including his witness to transcendent values during this painful time of internment, to contribute to the realisation of this ‘aurore sans nuage’. The freedom found in Verdet’s poems and enacted here in an especially striking way is not, therefore, I argue, a product of the ‘imagination’s irrepressible capacity to escape’, as Mole suggests. Rather, it is freedom found *within* captivity in every sense.

Verdet saw his poetry-writing as an important component of the ethical path that he was striving to follow during his internment. He aims to write in the service of liberation, reconciliation and fraternity. Writing poetry in Buchenwald, for Verdet, was not just about searching for personal consolation. This undertaking was also about creating truthful, ‘pure’ words that would be an antidote to the perverted language spread by the ideologues and tyrants of the world and their lackeys. In a number of his poems, Verdet actually talks explicitly about the role he wants his writings to perform; some of his texts comprise a reflection on the act of writing itself. This metatextual dimension is particularly apparent in *A l’oiseau imaginaire qui passe*, which invokes the troubadour’s song:

Redis-lui la merveille impossible à chanter  
 Car son chant se défait à mesure qu’il monte  
 Pour renaître plus beau et mourir plus vivant  
 Redis-lui les mots purs du trouvère enfermé  
 Et traçant de son sang sur la pierre des murs  
 Un nom qui fait venir aux barreaux de la fente  
 L’Oiseau d’Or file-joie l’Oiseau d’Or porte-amour (JNA 52)

The text evokes the ‘mots purs’ of the troubadour, but it also *contains* these very words. Verdet’s ‘mots purs’ are a necessary correlate of the ‘cœur pur’ that he so earnestly advocates and pursues. The man with a pure heart sees and discerns the world with clarity; in turn he

must relay this purity and lucidity of vision to others through words. These fresh, unclouded and truthful words are the exact opposite of the perpetrator's corrupt words, which Verdet denounces with such scorn in *Les bourreaux* ('Leurs mots sont-ce des mots ce qui fuit de leur bouche'). In a poem written after his liberation from the camps and entitled *Demain* ('Tomorrow') Verdet evoked the hopeful prospect of a future in which 'De tout peuple l'union fera pourtant plus libres / les actes et les mots sans barbelés autour' (JNA 76). As he makes clear in this 'meta-poetry', Verdet believes that true words must ring out clear and free for everyone to hear. Poetry fulfils an irreplaceable ethical function and is indissociable from the other forms of militancy, combat and resistance.

While the perfect fulfilment of these 'mots purs' is an unattainable goal, the poet must nevertheless, Verdet suggests, continue to reach towards this summit. Beautiful, vital and indestructible, the troubadour's song aspires to perfection even if it always falls short of this ideal; the antithesis at play in the line 'Pour renaître plus beau / et mourir plus vivant' simulates the repeated upswelling of the song and its decline. The crucial function of this defiant 'chant' is evoked in numerous other poems, including *Liberté Égalité Fraternité*. The bird's song acts as an inspiring rally-cry for the 'hommes au cœur pur' mentioned earlier in the poem; its song speaks of human dignity and reconciliation:

Un bruit de gâchette  
L'oiseau jeta son cri de triomphe et d'espoir

Alors un chant bourgeonne et c'est un chant de liberté  
Alors un chant fleurit et c'est un chant d'égalité  
Alors un chant mûrit et c'est un chant de fraternité (JNA 47-8)

Just as this song develops in an organic fashion, budding and maturing like a flower, so genuine poetry, in Verdet's eyes, must arise naturally, springing from a personal, intuitive encounter with the transcendent in the world. Moreover, just as the song is initiated here by the 'oiseau' but is taken up by the united voice of the people, so too poetry can act as a powerful source of inspiration for those who listen to it. Although Verdet's Communist beliefs are clearly at work in *Liberté Égalité Fraternité*, the optimistic scenario sketched here also reflects, more generally, the author's faith in the transformative effects that authentic poetry can bring about in the world of human action. We are reminded of Ricœur's conception of literature as a 'new mode of being', which through its imagination of innovative possibilities and horizons, can exercise significant impact on readers and ultimately on society as well. Throughout his poems, Verdet describes the ideal of artistic

creation and the vision of writing and language that inspires him in captivity. In a sense, he really does envisage himself as a latter-day *trouvère*, a poet whose works are intended to be heard attentively by an audience. This troubadour offers to the people new, ‘pure’ words arising spontaneously from his lived experience and serving the cause of freedom and human dignity. His creation of poetry in captivity is an integral part of his quest to remain faithful to the good and to the beautiful.

### **The deaths of the innocent and the survival of goodness**

As well as writing in general terms about the perpetrator and evil, Verdet writes in some of his poems about the mass deaths of innocent victims in the camps. *Les Enfants* and *Impression vraie* are two especially noteworthy examples of poetic responses to these tragic deaths. *Les Enfants*, which Verdet composed in Auschwitz during his brief stay in transit to Buchenwald, is a tribute to the child victims of Auschwitz. Instead of using a realistic approach, Verdet employs his distinctive fanciful poetic, reminiscent of fairy-tales. *Impression vraie*, on the other hand, evokes in chilling detail the gruesome, sensual experience of encountering the physical remains of corpses emitted in smoke from the *Krematorium*, yet the text is not without some redemptive glimpse of beauty. The two poems are very different, but equally audacious in two respects: firstly, in the manner in which they create an aesthetic framework around the atrocious deaths of the camps and secondly, in the implication that goodness and innocence will have the last word even in the wake of the murder of innocents. The Socratic conception of evil is very much in evidence here. Goodness, for Verdet, is the primary reality, while evil has no substance in its own right, existing only as the absence of the good.

In the poem *Les Enfants*, the fate of children in Auschwitz is described almost as if their deaths belonged to a fairy-tale. Fanciful (though sometimes violent) images seem to belong to a long-past, fantastic story, and the killing of these children is narrated with the temporal distance inherent in fairy-tales:

Des poignards vous perçaient  
La flamme vous dévorait  
Et l'eau noire s'apprêtait  
  
C'était le massacre des innocents  
  
Enfants mes chéris vous ressuscitez  
Dans le palais rose de vos sourires

Et à vos lucarnes étoilées

Vous sembliez dire Est-ce possible

(JNA 26)

One reason behind the component of fantasy in this poem is conveyed in the final words 'Est-ce possible'. So incomprehensible is the death of innocent children in the camps that the tragedy assumes all the fantastic grisliness and darkness of a folk-tale. But the imaginative dimension of the poem is also deeply rooted in the way the author perceives these children. Verdet's choice to render these events imaginatively stems from his intuitive belief in the pure goodness incarnate in children, a goodness that is indestructible. Elsewhere in his poetry, Verdet writes with special affection about children; to his way of thinking, children embody goodness in a particularly pure and transparent way. Windows and stars, two favourite tropes often used in Verdet's works, converge here into a concentrated image ('lucarnes étoilées') that evokes both the artless openness of children and the clarity with which they emanate goodness. Children, in Verdet's eyes, are beings so marvellous and beautiful that they contain all the wonder of fairy-tales. Like fairy-tale figures, they are not subject to decay. Their pure essence is in some sense eternal. Adopting the story-telling tense of the *imparfait*, Verdet situates the child victims in an eternal, never-changing moment contained in a story-book past.

Verdet's imaginative vision of these Holocaust victims contravenes the established ethical limits construed as applying to Holocaust artworks in a large portion of the scholarly literature. Any literary or artistic approach other than strict realism in representing the Holocaust has attracted censure from critics. In particular, many commentators have viewed with suspicion attempts to introduce an element of redemption into a Holocaust narrative. Enormous controversy was sparked, for instance, by the release of the 1998 Italian film *La vita è bella* ('Life is Beautiful'). The film was criticised for its humour and whimsicality, qualities seen as incompatible with a representation of Auschwitz, and condemned for the redemptive ending invented for its characters. One of the most respected academics in the field of Holocaust studies, Lawrence Langer, has critiqued, more generally, the tendency of artistic and literary representations to impose moral coherency or redemptive narratives upon the traumatic, unescapable facts of the Holocaust. Langer contends that written narratives of the Holocaust are almost always filtered through the falsifying lens of redemptive outlooks, moral certainties or literary artifice. Spoken narratives from survivors, on the other hand, bring the listener closer to 'a kind of unshielded truth', because these testimonies are not distorted by being made to fit literary, moral or religious paradigms. 'The raw material of oral Holocaust narratives, in content and manner of presentation,' Langer argues, 'resists

the organizing impulse of moral theory and art.<sup>216</sup> For Langer, artistic representations of the Holocaust risk overlaying totally catastrophic events with a veneer of salvific finality that, given the brutal historical facts, is inadmissible.

Verdet's poetry does not in itself, of course, disprove Langer's thesis about the inappropriateness of applying salvific closure to a Holocaust narrative. Nor can it entirely dispel the reservations a modern reader might have about a viewpoint that discerns survival and redemption in the deaths of children in Auschwitz. What it shows is simply that—contrary to what we might expect—the aesthetic and the fantastic had a genuine and meaningful role to play in texts written in the camps. *Les Enfants* is not a trivialising or gratuitously aesthetic response to the deaths of children in Auschwitz but, rather, reflects Verdet's firm belief in the survival of the beautiful and the good. Furthermore, the fairy-tale is a more applicable literary genre than might first appear when it comes to the concentration camps. The novelist Joseph Skibell, author of the Holocaust novel *A Blessing on the Moon*, once commented that the Holocaust seemed to enact some gruesome incidents that had previously been confined to folk-tales:

[It] always struck me how much the Holocaust [...] seemed foreshadowed in the tales of the Brothers Grimm: the oven in Hansel and Gretl becomes the ovens of Auschwitz<sup>217</sup>

In *Les Enfants*, Verdet's imaginative imagery introduces similar overtones of sombre folk-tales. Although 'la flamme' inevitably invokes the flames of the *Krematorium*, the two images of 'les poignards' and 'l'eau noire' move squarely into the realm of dark fantasy. If Verdet presents these child victims of Auschwitz as magical characters in a fairy-tale who cannot be vanquished, it is primarily because he is convinced that their pure goodness cannot, in the end, be annihilated. Recalling well-known folk-tales and fairy-tales, Verdet's imaginative approach therefore both captures something of the chilling grisliness of the *massacre des innocents* in Auschwitz, and at the same time, invests the tragic figures of the dead children with a kind of immortal beauty.

After his liberation and return to France, Verdet wrote a second poem about the children of Auschwitz. His choice to come back to the theme suggests that he must have been deeply

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<sup>216</sup> Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, 204.

<sup>217</sup> Cited in Jenni Adams, *Magic Realism in Holocaust Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 178. The citation is taken from 'An Interview with Joseph Skibell' in *A Blessing on the Moon* (New York: Berkley, 1999), 271-4.



affected by his encounter, however fleeting, with these small victims of the camps. The same connotations of fairy-tales found in *Les Enfants* return in his later poem *Enfants d'Auschwitz et ailleurs*:

La criminelle ardeur ne vous efface point  
De la carte du monde enfants de Birkenau  
D'Auschwitz de Maidenek de Rostov et d'ailleurs  
Contes du méchant loup les histoires en cendres  
La honte du brasier et le pleur des étoiles  
La flamme vous dévore Au travers je vous vois  
Etrangement immobiles terriblement  
Lucides vivants lumignons de ma mémoire  
Devant les gestes laids l'assassinat les hommes

Il nous faut modeler la forme du langage  
Il nous faut parler clair pour ne pas altérer  
L'eau pure de vos yeux qui éteint l'incendie

(JNA 74)

With the appearance of a villain borrowed from a children's bed-time story—the 'méchant loup'—and the reference to 'les histoires en cendres', this poem evokes once again a fairy-tale narrative. Fantastic imagery lends a magical aura to the children of the poem. Just as in *Les Enfants*, tense is used to suggest the suspension of time. Here, the present tense vividly evokes the motionless, somewhat spectral image of children surrounded by flames. These child-figures are arrested and fixed in time, in the very act of being consumed in fire. The transcendent light radiated by these pure 'lumignons' overpowers and survives the evil acts that destroyed them. For Verdet, the goodness embodied in children cannot be eradicated.

Neither of these two poems attempts to represent the full horror of the murder of children in the camps. The beautiful, poignant, sometimes marvellous imagery does not convey the hideous physical reality of extermination. We have only to contrast these poems with the stark image of children being thrown live into the flames in Auschwitz during selection in Wiesel's *La Nuit*, the sickening darkness of this infamous scene unrelieved by any redemptive light. But Verdet's response to children's deaths in the camps does not aim to sketch graphically the horrors of their death. Rather, *Les Enfants* seeks to express the translucent beauty and innocent goodness of the child victims themselves. In this case, Verdet remains as though transfixed not so much by the killings in Auschwitz but by the final, beautiful, unforgettable gaze of the children he encountered in this camp. For Verdet, human

goodness—especially as it is embodied in the child—is truly more real, more present and more enduring than evil.

*Impression vraie* employs a very different aesthetic, and evokes the deaths of the camps in a more concrete fashion. Yet here too, Verdet is just as insistent on the eternal quality of goodness, which outlives evil and murder. The crimes perpetrated in the camps are seen to be subordinate to the more persistent continuity of goodness through the ages. This is despite the fact that the poem depicts a horrific, sensory experience of death in Buchenwald, beginning with the intense smell of burnt flesh emerging from the crematoria:

Il flotte sur le camp une odeur de grill-room  
Etrange comme dans la cuisine à Landru  
Il flotte sur leurs mains un relent de chair fraîche  
Ainsi que sur les mains de Hartmann le Boucher  
  
Il flambe dans le soir un ardent feu de crime  
Qui projette son sang sur la neige des toits  
Il passe contre un block une ombre matricule  
Qui hausse les épaules et dit Krematorium (JNA 65)

These stanzas evoke a phenomenon that did indeed impress itself strongly on many deportees. Dr Paulette Don Zimmet-Gazel, a deportee to Ravensbrück, wrote:

La nuit, nous rêvions que nous faisons cuire des côtelettes et nous nous réveillions en sentant l'odeur du crématoire, qui, en effet, répandait dans l'air une odeur de côtelette oublié sur le gril.<sup>218</sup>

Verdet's poem corroborates this testimony and paints a grisly, repellent and deeply shocking scene of the mass human death in the camps and the incineration of corpses in the *Krematorium*. In this 'grill-room', it is human flesh that is being prepared. The words in French ('chair fraîche') mimics with its fricatives—'sh' in *chair*, 'F' in *fraîche*—the hissing and sizzling of meat on a grill, with macabre effect. An extraordinarily vivid image is drawn in the second stanza with the words 'its blood on the snow of the roofs'. We can picture glowing, blood-like embers settling on the snow. There are few poems from the camps that depict the gruesome

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<sup>218</sup> Cited in Reynaud, *La Foire à l'homme* (vol. 1), 193. The quotation is taken from Dr Paulette Don Zimmet-Gazel, *Les conditions d'existence et l'état sanitaire dans les camps de concentration de femmes déportées en Allemagne* (Annemasse, 1949).

encounter with the remains of the dead in a more physical and sensual way. But the poem ends with a very aesthetic, even sublime image. Quite suddenly in the fourth stanza, the tone of the poem softens, becoming less harsh:

Il descend dans la brume une angoisse semblable  
A celle qui hantait les couloirs des Borgias  
Il monte dans la nuit une étoile pareille  
A celle que fixait le fou du Golgotha (JNA 65)

The first image in this poem was one of absurdity and madness: unthinkable and sickening mass annihilation of human bodies in a common oven. And it is with ‘madness’, too, that the poem concludes, but this time, it is a madness that is redemptive. The star he sees is the same as another victim of atrocious sufferings—that is, Christ—looked upon years before. The poet finds a transcendent meaning in the beauty of the night sky.

Once again, Verdet emphasises the essentially transitory nature of evil. In juxtaposing the movements of descent and rising in the last stanza of the poem, he does not just conjure up the hopeful associations borne by the idea of ascent but, additionally, invokes the continual rising and setting of the stars in the celestial sphere, continually re-enacted throughout every era. It is as though Verdet wishes to relativise the ugliness and evil of the camp by focusing on the eternal movement of the *étoiles vivantes*, which, he would declare years later, sustained his spirits in Buchenwald. Here the perpetrators are not even dignified by being named—the impersonal ‘il’ functions in lieu of a definite agent. This omission of references to the perpetrators of this carnage is not a denial of their guilt, which is clearly acknowledged elsewhere in this corpus of poems. Instead, this lack of specificity, coupled with references to crimes from history, merges the atrocities committed in Buchenwald into a historical continuum that includes repeated instances of the rise and fall of evil throughout the ages. For Verdet, evil is, in some sense, a passing phenomenon while only the beautiful and the good are timeless and enduring realities, and the aesthetic image of the star evoked here is expressing precisely this conviction.

Combining vivid, brutal evocations of death in the camps with beautiful, consoling images, *Impression vraie*, like other poems from *Les jours, les nuits et puis l'aurore*, shows us that—contrary to the critical position of Langer and other commentators—the aesthetic had a legitimate and important role to play in literary responses to the horrors of the camps. Part of the limitation inherent in existing scholarly critiques on the aesthetic and the camps is the exclusive focus on the texts written by victims *after* their liberation from the camps.

Understandably, the presence of the aesthetic in works about the Holocaust written after the war and destined for mass audiences, particularly those written by non-survivors, may raise questions about its appropriateness. But the beauty that characterises these poems has nothing in common with the unethical, voyeuristic aesthetic which Saul Friedlander has denounced. Poetry in the camps emerged within a literary community of camp inmates who shared, on the whole, a common ordeal. In this context, the aesthetic cannot be interpreted as an exploitative literary strategy, insensitive to the suffering of victims. In fact, it fulfils an important role that, to date, has remained unexplored in critical studies of Verdet's poetry.

Close readings of Verdet's poetry show that, in fact, the aesthetic dimension of this poetry is an integral part of the poet's efforts to come to terms with the harrowing reality of camp internment. These readings have called into question Mole's classification of Verdet's poetry as 'escapist' and indicated that the beautiful imagery in Verdet's poetry is not so far removed from the reality of the camps as we might at first assume. As shown by the poems presented in this chapter, the aesthetic and imaginative dimension in Verdet's poetry is closely bound up with the author's personal ethos, particularly his determination to uncover the beautiful and the good in the darkest of circumstances. In part, it is Verdet's memories of his wife, Camille, that provide the inspiration for the beautiful imagery of these poems, but not exclusively. Verdet also finds lingering traces of beauty within the boundaries of the camp itself; he sees arresting examples of beauty in a sunrise, in a star over Buchenwald and in the eyes of children in Auschwitz. These images, incorporated into his poems alongside darker images, become an expression of the author's faith in the ongoing presence of beauty and goodness, even in the face of systematic murder. The aesthetic in Verdet's poetry is not, therefore, so much an escapist refuge from the evils of the camps as a medium for *confronting* them, allowing the author to represent the painful realities of life and death in the camps while at the same time uncovering surviving remnants of goodness and beauty.

The persistence of the lyric genre in these poems challenges the common notion that only a fragmented and radically anti-lyrical poetry could effectively confront and express the camps. While some Holocaust poetry has deliberately subverted the lyric genre for the purposes of bringing out the perverse, warped logic of events in the camps, that is not the case with the French-language poems written in the camps. Instead, prisoners express with sincerity their emotions and longings in these lyric poems. At the same time, the traditional elements of the lyric genre undergo definite transformations—sometimes in quite radical ways, as Verdet's poems demonstrate—taking on novel associations and meanings. In a curious way, the ambiance of the camps breathed new life into the conventions of lyric poetry, injecting the

aesthetic imagery belonging to the lyric poem with particular force. Aesthetic images in these poems take on a new and chilling significance assigned by the historical circumstances. The lyric genre proved surprisingly resilient in camp literature, and the poems written by Verdet and others in the camp showcase the inherent capacity of the genre to reinvent itself under novel, even unprecedented circumstances. Although echoes of previous eras can be heard in Verdet's camp poems, from Renaissance poetry and Romanticism all the way through to the modernist poetics of Apollinaire, these poems are not just moribund pastiches of lyric poems in the French tradition but vital pieces of writings, sensitive and responsive to the circumstances of time and place. Critics like David Miller have drawn attention to the weakened, self-questioning form of lyricism found in Holocaust poetry like that of Celan. But the poetry written *in* the camps exemplifies not the feebleness of the lyric voice but rather its strength and continued relevance under the impact of the brutal forces of the time. These texts from Auschwitz and Buchenwald illustrate both Verdet's desire to understand the hearts and mentalities of the perpetrators, and his conviction that goodness will prove far more tenacious and long-lived than the evil acts committed by these individuals. Unusual in providing contemporary perspectives from camp victims towards the perpetrators, the poems from *Les jours les nuits et puis l'aurore*, together with poems by other deportees, make an important contribution to long-standing debates regarding the problem of evil in the camps. In particular, exploration of these texts suggests that poetry was of real value to some camp inmates seeking to grapple with the reality of the barbaric events taking place around them. Despite the magnitude of the evil that confronted these prisoners, literature continued to prove in the camps a key means of finding ethical bearings in life, reminding us of Ricoeur's understanding of the vital ethical function of narrative. Finding reassurance and strength in their religious or moral principles, prisoners like Verdet, Gabriel Blanc and Pierre Cayrol express in their writings a definite confidence and trust in the power of goodness. Such moral confidence as is displayed in Verdet's poems can be partly traced back to the author's firm adherence to Communist precepts and his resulting faith in the ultimate victory of the people against tyranny. But to these principles are allied other, more spiritual values: an intense aspiration towards the transcendental and an enduring quest for the absolute. Both these factors contribute to Verdet's distinctive moral outlook.

In both thematic and prosodic terms, the poems in *Les jours les nuits et puis l'aurore* testify to the ongoing sense of interior freedom Verdet experienced during his long months of captivity. His poems reveal that Verdet did not just believe in the survival of the beautiful and the good 'quelque part', as his words in the preface to *Poèmes de Buchenwald* might suggest, but, in some sense, found these qualities while he was still imprisoned in the camp itself. His

reference to 'les hommes au cœur pur aux mains nues' is telling because in this image is epitomised the moral ideal that sustained him during his captivity: a heart that is free to discern and pursue the good. Interior freedom is thus at the core of Verdet's ethos, and it is expressed not just in the words but in the rhythmic structure of the poems. Prosody is beautifully crafted in such a way as to give the listener an impression of freedom arising out of constraint. Playing with the constraints of the alexandrine, Verdet shifts between rhythms in ways that make audible the very freedom he is describing.

It is clear from these poems that for Verdet, writing in the camps was no trivial activity. Nor, despite the fact that poetry evidently gave him great consolation during his internment, was it a purely personal undertaking with no relevance for others. Rather, Verdet saw himself as a dedicated 'trouvère' whose works aspired to encapsulate beauty and embody freedom, as a creator of 'mots purs' whose lyric poems should witness to truth and to the survival of goodness within a world racked by atrocities. Passionately committed to his Communist principles, convinced of the enduring primacy of the good and the beautiful even in the face of violence and evil, Verdet crystallised his moral, aesthetic and philosophical ideals into a couplet written in Fresnes prison before his deportation: 'Je vivrai pour nous dans la lumière / Je vivrai de nous pour la lumière'. These ardent and idealistic aims would turn out to be extraordinarily robust under the harsh regime of Buchenwald, as the lyric poems in *Les jours les nuits et puis l'aurore*, by turns tender and forceful, show so compellingly.

## Chapter 4

### ‘Nous portons toute l’aventure de Dieu en nous’: Myth, Mysticism and Imaginative Translocation in Cayrol’s *Alerte aux ombres*

In 1945, Mauthausen survivor and author Jean Cayrol, later to become celebrated for his screenplay of the seminal Holocaust documentary *Nuit et brouillard*, wrote his first letter upon his return to France following his liberation from the camp, addressing it to his friend Jean Ballard. Deported under the infamous NN (*Nacht und Nebel*) protocol—which meant that he was deprived of all contact with the outside world and for all intents and purposes disappeared without a trace—Cayrol attributed a deep meaning to the ominous name of this regime. Already in this first letter written post-liberation, he was describing his captivity with the image of *la nuit et le brouillard*:

Me voici vivant du retour de ce voyage en enfer où pendant trois  
ans j’ai marché à tâtons sans savoir quel serait le visage de ma mort.  
[...] Je t’envoie trois poèmes écrits dans ‘la nuit et le brouillard’  
(nacht und nebel).<sup>219</sup>

The three poems mentioned here are just a handful of more than 150 poems which Cayrol wrote in secret in the Mauthausen sub-camp of Gusen. Cayrol was already an established poet and had published several volumes of verse before his deportation. During the early months of his captivity in Gusen, assigned to hard physical labour in a quarry, Cayrol was too exhausted and depressed to think of writing. Thanks to the intervention of some friends, he was later re-assigned to lighter duties in a work-shop. At this point, encouraged by his friend and fellow camp inmate Père Jacques, Cayrol began to write again. Hiding under the work-table, Cayrol wrote rapidly in a stream-of-consciousness style—he averred later that he never re-read or altered what he had written—inventing mystical panoramas set in Surrealist landscapes.

These poems were to have a strange destiny. Cayrol managed to salvage only a few of his writings and bring them back to France. Several were published in 1946 under the title *Poèmes de la nuit et du brouillard*. But in 1955, incredibly, the remaining poems were restored to Cayrol in a parcel dispatched from Germany by an anonymous person. Cayrol always believed that

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<sup>219</sup> Cited in Pateau, *Jean Cayrol*, 170.

this individual was an SS officer in Mauthausen who had caught him writing poetry and had confiscated his poems, reading them silently before walking away with them. Although Cayrol went on to have a successful literary career, gaining critical acclaim for his essays, novels and *Nuit et brouillard* screenplay, for many years he did not seek to have these poems published, perhaps feeling that the French public had had enough of testimonies on the concentration camps. Finally, the poems were published in 1997 under the title of *Alerte aux ombres*.<sup>220</sup> Despite the exceptional nature of these writings, there has been very little analysis devoted to them in the 20 years since their publication.

I argue that no study to date has fully appreciated the complex layers of meaning and the mystical, salvific vision, in all its contradictions and paradoxes, contained in these poems. Like the works of other French prisoner-poets already discussed—Ulmann, Honel, Leroy and Verdet—Cayrol's poems convey a sense of freedom truly remarkable when we take into account the captivity which the author was experiencing at the time of writing. But here we have a particularly striking manifestation of interior freedom which, in some ways, is more expansive than the visions of freedom found in the poetry of the other poets whose works I have explored. Cayrol enacts in these texts a world with neither temporal nor spatial limits. While the freedom marking this world might seem far removed from the situation of a camp prisoner, Cayrol's writings show that he believed he genuinely experienced such freedom during the cruel internment he was enduring. What becomes clear both from close readings of the poems and from contextual evidence is that despite the extravagant imagination at work here, Cayrol is faithfully representing his imprisonment in Mauthausen as he lived it: a time characterised by the realities of acute suffering and, at times, despair, but equally by an intense experience of love (both human and divine), a strong hopefulness stemming from his Catholic religion and, crucially, an ongoing awareness of an interior 'space' extending into the dimensions of infinity and eternity.

The way that Cayrol recounts his deportation, however, is so intensely original that no existing conceptual framework seemed adequate to fully explain it. This is why I introduce in this chapter the term of 'imaginative translocation' to describe his narratology. Cayrol 'translocates' the focus of his story from the confinement and deprivation of imprisonment in Mauthausen into a mystical place of freedom, grace and fullness—a place imagined not as separate from this imprisonment but genuinely contained within it. Always guided by his deeply mystical understanding of human existence, the poet views the happenings in his life

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<sup>220</sup> Jean Cayrol, *Alerte aux ombres* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1997). Hereafter the collection is referred to for citational purposes as AO, followed by the page number of the citation.



through a riotously imaginative lens. These poems evoke a dynamic world bearing a distinct character all of its own and, in this sense, bear similarities with Ricœur's conception of the text as productive of an internally coherent world possessing its own vitality. However, where Cayrol's works diverge from Ricœurian hermeneutics is in the nature of the poetic imagery: these images are not the metaphors and symbols in which Ricœur took so much interest. Rather than using carefully selected metaphor in these poems to represent discrete elements of his experience, the author recounts his story in a spontaneous, holistic fashion, deploying a lively cast of ever-morphing figures in fluid sequences. Each character and image in this story has a rich life of its own which cannot be reduced to straightforward metaphorical significance. In using this technique of 'imaginative translocation', Cayrol narrates his experiences in a very direct way yet simultaneously is able to cast a mystical and redemptive light on the dark circumstances of his captivity.

Although Cayrol's narrative technique is highly original, his spirituality and his compelling vision of freedom owe much to the influence of Christian literary culture in France in that era. The poetry in *Alerte aux ombres* throws light upon the ongoing impact exercised into the 1940s by key Christian thinkers active at the turn of the century, especially Charles Péguy. Cayrol's conception of time and eternity appears to owe a great deal, directly or indirectly, to Péguy, who saw the present as a privileged moment of encounter with the eternal. To use Nicolas Faguer's words, Péguy conceives the present as 'ce point axial où l'éternel peut s'inscrire dans le temporel et le spirituel imprégner le charnel'.<sup>221</sup> This vision of time and eternity was, of course, not limited to Péguy; Claudel's aspirations to 'remettre le temps dans l'éternité' was cherished by Cayrol all his life.<sup>222</sup> But it is Péguy's distinctive understanding of the meeting of human and divine, time and eternity within humanity which emerges with the most clarity from Cayrol's poetry. Cayrol envisaged interior reality as an infinite space, as his own definition of his poetic, articulated in 1968, shows:

C'est cela pour moi avoir le sentiment poétique de sa vie ; le monde est compris dans un espace illimité ; au moment où je vis, j'ai le droit de vivre tout ; je n'accepte pas de vivre un morceau, une parcelle ; tout vivre même si je le vis mal.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Nicolas Faguer, *Un constant approfondissement du cœur : L'unité de l'œuvre de Péguy selon Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Berlin: LIT-Verlag, 2013), 195.

<sup>222</sup> As recounted by Cayrol's friend Claude Durand in the preface of Pateau, *Jean Cayrol*, 17. This quote is taken from Paul Claudel, *Art poétique* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1913).

<sup>223</sup> Interview with Jean Cayrol in *La Presse nouvelle hebdomadaire*, 8 November 1968. Facsimile, FNDIRP archives.

The Mauthausen poems reflect this ambitious and very positive conception of the interior space. Cayrol's Mauthausen poems consistently suggest this 'espace illimité' in which the temporal and the eternal meet. The lexicon evokes freedom, breadth and profusion. On a formal level, skilful variations in metre suggest the interaction between time and eternity. Dramatic shifts in stresses and line length make audible the intense drama of redemption recounted in the poems. In both form and language, these poems reflect the freedom in time and space which Cayrol believes he retains in captivity.

Cayrol's poetry is shaped by an intriguing mix of other literary sources and movements. The poems draw upon multiple Christian sources, including the Old and New Testaments and Western European mystical poetry. The contribution of the works of the 16th century Spanish Carmelite St John of the Cross to Cayrol's imaginative aesthetic is particularly evident.<sup>224</sup> But influences on Cayrol's poetry are not limited to Christian works. In the 1930s, Cayrol's discovery of Surrealism had represented an epiphany for him—a revelation of the power of spontaneous language. Like André Ulmann, Cayrol was enamoured of Surrealist anarchic games with language and imagery. Cayrol was moreover a self-confessed practitioner of the writing technique championed by the Surrealists, *l'écriture automatique*. However, in one respect, Cayrol uses Surrealism here quite differently from Ulmann, in his *Poèmes du camp*. Whereas for Ulmann, Surrealism is primarily about accessing and uncovering the depths of the self, unknowable through reason and conscious reflection alone, Cayrol finds in Surrealism a means of exploring his relationship with God and bringing out forcefully the counter-intuitive twists and turns of the Christian journey. Alongside Surrealist imagery, we also find in this poetry a profusion of mythical images and figures, including, on occasion, explicit allusions to classical myth. The sheer diversity of literary styles and prototypes informing the poetry in *Alerte aux ombres* might suggest a lack of clarity and definition in Cayrol's thought. In fact, however, all these elements—mythical, Surrealist and religious images—converge in the texts to elaborate a coherent vision of freedom and salvation discovered within captivity

I argue, in fact, that this poetry has a distinctly mythic character which we need to understand in order to grasp Cayrol's mystical outlook. It is mythic because its scenes unfold outside modernity and conventional temporality and because the narrator figures in a primal drama, the origins of which go far back in time. The significance of this mythic dimension of Cayrol's poetry has not always been appreciated. Noting the prominence of mythical

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<sup>224</sup> Cayrol's nephew, Michel Pateau, confirms Cayrol's admiration for the poetry of St John of the Cross. (Personal correspondence, 22 November 2014.)

elements and figures in *Alerte aux ombres*, Elodie Bouygues, one of the few critics to have studied Cayrol's poetry from the camps, speculates that Cayrol is torn between his Christian faith and a nostalgia for pagan myth.<sup>225</sup> In fact, in Cayrol's poetic, the human person's experience, seen from a Christian perspective, *is* myth. Each individual's life enacts an age-old, eternal human story. Cayrol's mythic conception of the nature of human existence is reminiscent of the new Christian humanism, particularly of Péguy's thought, which developed in the early part of the 20th century in France. In his famous 1912 work entitled *Véronique: Dialogue de l'âme et de l'histoire charnelle*, Péguy asserts that, thanks to the incarnation of Christ, who reconciled time and eternity within himself, the whole of humanity has become the stage for the timeless drama of redemption: 'L'homme, l'humanité, l'homme demeure donc bien le théâtre, la résidence, le siège, le lieu d'élection singulière, unique, d'une histoire extraordinaire, invraisemblable, impossible: arrivée.'<sup>226</sup> Cayrol whole-heartedly subscribed to this vision of the individual human life. 'Nous portons toute l'aventure de Dieu en nous', Cayrol writes in one of the poems in *Alerte aux ombres* (AO 105). Cayrol understood the tumultuous events unfolding in his life as part of an eternal, divine story originating in the distant reaches of the past yet re-actualised throughout the ages of humanity.

Given the originality and the literary significance of these writings and Cayrol's status as a well-known author in France, it could be asked why Cayrol's poetry written in Mauthausen has attracted so little critical attention. Cayrol's literary career began very early in his life and continued into the 1980s. Born in 1910, he wrote extensively from an early age. In his teenage years, he founded a literary review, *Abeilles et pensées*—a title drawn from Claudel's poetry—and started a correspondence with many of the leading literary figures of the time in France, including Jean Cocteau, Max Jacob, Jules Supervielle and Paul Valéry. Several volumes of his poetry were published before and during the war. In 1942, he was arrested for Resistance activities. On 25 March 1943, he was deported from Compiègne to Mauthausen and put in the sub-camp of Gusen. Mauthausen was liberated on 5 May 1945 and Cayrol was repatriated to France on 22 May of that year. After the war, he began to write novels and in the 1950s he was invited by the film-maker Alain Resnais to provide the screenplay for his film *Nuit et brouillard*. His prolific corpus of post-war novels and his screenplay for *Nuit et brouillard* promoted his reputation as a talented writer and have been the subject of numerous academic

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<sup>225</sup> Elodie Bouygues, "Etre poète à Mauthausen" : figurations du sujet lyrique', in *Les mots sont aussi des demeures' : Poétiques de Jean Cayrol*, ed. Peter Kuon (Bordeaux: Presses universitaires de l'Université de Bordeaux, 2009), 15-27.

<sup>226</sup> Péguy, *Véronique : Dialogue de l'âme et de l'histoire charnelle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 268. First published in 1912.

studies. But his poetic work, including his writings from Mauthausen, has received very little critical attention. I propose several reasons for the neglect of the poetry in *Alerte aux ombres*.

In the first place, Cayrol became known, above all, not for what he said about the camps themselves, but for what he said about life and literature *after* the camps. His invention of the term *lazaréen* ('Lazarene') to describe the survivor of the camps and his advocacy of the *roman lazaréen*, in conjunction with the publication of his own novels, brought him to prominence. Cayrol first publically expounded his Lazarene theory in two essays, the first a 1949 essay which appeared in *Esprit*, 'D'un romanesque concentrationnaire'.<sup>227</sup> The camp survivor is the figure of Lazarus, who is miraculously brought back to life by Jesus in the Gospel of John. It is not generally realised how soon after his liberation Cayrol formulated this idea. In essence, Cayrol's Lazarene theory dates from a letter written in July 1945—about a month after his return to Paris. His friend Jean Carrive had written an affectionate letter to Cayrol in which he expressed his joy at the return of the Jean 'd'avant'. Cayrol responded at length, emphatically rejecting the idea that he was the same Jean as before:

Mais ne comprenez-vous pas que je ne suis *même plus* d'AVANT, que je suis à tout jamais défiguré, à tout jamais sans espoir de cicatrices par cette rafale des 'noires années' ?

Ne comprenez-vous pas [...] qu'il n'est pas possible ou permis de me rattacher à AVANT et que ces trois années ont brouillé comme une pierre l'eau calme d'AVANT ?

Ne comprenez-vous pas que je n'ai plus de racines, qu'on a déterré mes racines ?

On ne parle plus de Lazare dans les Evangiles, ou très peu, après sa résurrection, parce que si Lazare pouvait revenir sur terre comme un 'miracle', il ne pouvait pas revenir en tant qu'"homme" ; c'était un survivant. Le silence de la mort l'accompagnait.<sup>228</sup>

The survivor's symptoms—an impression of solitude and alienation, a sense of an impassable rift between former and present selves—are all expressed in the compact and eloquent image of Lazarus. Lazarus, in Cayrol's interpretation, is forever separated from his

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<sup>227</sup> Later republished as 'Pour un romanesque lazaréen' and mainly known by this title.

<sup>228</sup> Cited in Pateau, *Jean Cayrol*, 172-3.

previous self by the chasm of his death; he is set apart from his companions because he has passed through death. Cayrol did not limit his theorisation to the particular state of the *ancien déporté*. He further suggested that the Lazarene figure could be a telling portrait of modern man in general, in his own *univers concentrationnaire*. The profoundly fractured identity and the traumatic experience of alienation and disconnection which the camp survivor suffered were, increasingly, Cayrol speculated, becoming the lot of those who had never been deported.

Not only, therefore, did Cayrol identify the widespread human crisis in modern society, but he proposed a new novel which might be capable of expressing this splintered and disjointed reality. Cayrol's theories struck a deep chord in literary circles. The literary theorist Roland Barthes called it 'l'œuvre qui opère la première jonction entre l'expérience des camps et la réflexion littéraire'.<sup>229</sup> Other contemporary literary critics, even some outside France, reacted enthusiastically to Cayrol's theories.<sup>230</sup> Today, Cayrol's Lazarene theories of the novel, and the influence that these ideas exercised in literature, as well as his *Nuit et brouillard* screenplay are still the subject of critical study. In a sense, therefore, Cayrol's poetry of the camps has fallen victim to the success of his post-camp theorisation and his influence on fiction and film. So well-known did his post-Mauthausen literary contributions become that the result has been to obscure and silence Cayrol's considerable literary output from the camps themselves.

But a further, and more fundamental, reason why Cayrol's poems from the camps has been neglected might be the intrinsic problem which they pose for the critic if we consider this literature as a 'literature of the camps'. Although these poems do contain violent scenes, they do not speak directly of the cruelties of the camp. Moreover, these texts are strewn with images of grace and salvation. The rare critics to study Cayrol's poems from the camps have dealt with this apparent incongruity between experience and text in different but not wholly satisfactory ways. In her essay on Cayrol's poetry from the camps, Ethel Tolansky suggests that through these texts, the poet re-creates beautiful and consoling memories to compensate for the appalling horror of the present: 'Memory retrieves a past not touched by the "univers concentrationnaire", in order to survive a present contaminated by evil.'<sup>231</sup> In other words,

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<sup>229</sup> Roland Barthes, 'La rature,' afterword to *Les corps étrangers* (Paris: UGE, 1964).

<sup>230</sup> See, for example, Carlos Lynes Jr., 'Jean Cayrol and "Le Romanesque Lazaréen"', *Yale French Studies* 8 (1951). Lynes praised Cayrol's novels and essays, calling them 'a profound vision of man's condition in our contemporary "univers concentrationnaire"—a poetic vision far more shattering than the documentary records of concentration camp horrors but at the same time pregnant with the promise of resurrection implicit in the name Lazarus.'

<sup>231</sup> Ethel Tolansky, 'Jean Cayrol: Writing and Survival,' in *Six Authors in Captivity, Literary Responses to the Occupation of France during World War II* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), 84.

Cayrol's poems are essentially about the past, a time *before* imprisonment, and this explains, in Tolansky's view, the absence of references to the horror of the camps. In contrast, Bouygues asserts that the poems of *Alerte aux ombres* have a more direct link with the camps, 'metaphorising' the poet's experience of self-disintegration in the camps. These texts, Bouygues suggests, already recount a crisis of identity and thus *prefigure* the Lazarene post-camp writings; this poetry 'apparaît surtout comme le lieu d'un questionnement du moi'.<sup>232</sup> Bouygues's essay provides a sympathetic and nuanced reading of Cayrol's camp poems; in particular, her characterisation of Cayrol's imagery as *janusien* captures in a particularly beautiful and apt way the double-sided, paradoxical nature of Cayrol's writing. The limitation of her analysis is to take the Lazarene framework of Cayrol's post-war writings as the exclusive point of departure for talking about Cayrol's writings produced in the camp itself. Neither Tolansky's nor Bouygues's theories fully account for the deep sense of hope which pervades these poems. Characterised by a recurrent story-line of salvation and reconciliation, Cayrol's Mauthausen poems do not readily fit into the post-liberation 'Lazarene' paradigm, nor can they be easily interpreted as memories of life before captivity.

There is, I contend, a radically different literary dynamic at work here, namely the technique I have termed 'imaginative translocation'. Cayrol's outlook, at once mystical and mythic, transforms and vivifies all the events that he narrates. Neither re-actualisations of the past nor metaphorical representations of the present, these texts are intended to project a faithful picture of the poet's experience and reflect Cayrol's distinctly mystical and mythic understanding of his life, so reminiscent of Péguy's conception of human existence. To answer the question of why the poems speak so consistently of salvation and hope, we have to consider the two contrasting perspectives from which Cayrol viewed his deportation. On the one hand, he looked back on his time in Mauthausen as 'une mort' and as 'un enfer', one which left him deeply traumatised and suffering all his life from recurrent nightmares. Yet, on a number of occasions, he left indications that he also saw his imprisonment in the camps as a time of closeness to God and as an experience of divine grace, grace mediated particularly by the two priests in Mauthausen to whom he became very close, Père Jacques and an Austrian priest, Antoine Grüber. In 1949, he wrote to his friend Louis Aragon:

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<sup>232</sup> Bouygues, 'Être poète à Mauthausen,' 24.

Je suis un homme très moyen qui connaît ses faiblesses et aussi, parfois, ses richesses spirituelles, et tout particulièrement de 1942 à 1945, j'ai été riche.<sup>233</sup>

These words suggest that, notwithstanding the extremely sombre impression left by his later writings on the camps—particularly the harrowing screenplay of *Nuit et brouillard*—Cayrol found spiritual meaning in his ordeal. His discovery of grace and some measure of salvation in Mauthausen becomes an important strand in the poetic story recounted in *Alerte aux ombres*.

It might seem counter-intuitive that during his imprisonment, Cayrol's works follow a salvific narrative, while his post-liberation works recount a darker 'Lazarene' story. In fact, this illuminates the marked difference between the state of the camp prisoner, who, for all the trauma and agony he or she suffered, nonetheless was often able to find comfort and hope in the company of comrades sharing a common ordeal, and that of the camp survivor who sought consolation and re-integration into human society with little success, alienated (apparently permanently) both from self and from others. Adorno's discourse on 'poetry after Auschwitz' actually shares something with Cayrol's vision of the Lazarene. Adorno believed consolation from literature had become impossible for modern man, wounded irredeemably by the catastrophes of present times. Celan's poetry emblematised for Adorno the radically new language that refused traditional forms of consolation. In Celan's poetry, Adorno writes, 'the language of the lifeless is the only form of comfort in a world where death has lost all meaning.'<sup>234</sup> In a similar way, Cayrol's Lazarene novel exposes the impossibility of resolution and healing for the survivor, 'défiguré à jamais'. Cayrol's post-war works thus display the same sombre vision of humanity as the writings of Adorno and other commentators of the post-war era. His poetry in the camps, on the other hand, reflects a more traditional redemptive scheme.

In its mythic dimension, breadth of scope, rich and profuse Surrealist imagery and verbal audacity, Cayrol's poetic has something in common with Blanchot's concept of the 'création mythique pure'. Blanchot defined this concept in an essay on the poetry of Léon-Paul Fargue. What constitutes the special character of Fargue's poetry for Blanchot is the gratuitous, extravagant development of the imagery—the apparent absence of logic overseeing or restraining the generous outpouring of images. Words in this poetry appear to generate their

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<sup>233</sup> Letter to Louis Aragon, cited in Pateau, *Jean Cayrol*, 225.

<sup>234</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 444.

own self-sustaining power. Fargue's poetry, Blanchot declares in this essay, is a 'un théâtre pur où les métaphores donnent le spectacle du drame de leur composition, où elles s'appellent et se repoussent sans souci des objets qu'elles comparent et représentent.'<sup>235</sup> To a certain extent, this assessment holds true for Cayrol's poems in *Alerte aux ombres*: the fluid sequences of Surrealist images, each engendering the next in a kind of organic, self-perpetuating process, testify to the spontaneous writing process which Cayrol practised and conjure up a poetic world of mythic freedom. But Cayrol's poetic differs in one marked respect from the theoretical category proposed by Blanchot: the mythic drama which Cayrol narrates always seeks to represent and discover reality. Blanchot's 'création mythique pure' does not contain any substantial meaning outside the text; ultimately, such poetry is characterised, Blanchot writes, by its complete 'absence de but'.<sup>236</sup> What defines Cayrol's poetry as a distinct form of poetic discourse which I have called 'imaginative translocation', and not as the 'création mythique pure' which Blanchot described, is the fact that it is not about the creation of a self-contained imaginative poetic world. It is about narrating real-world experience from an imaginative viewpoint, and although the way that imagination is deployed may be very free, nonetheless the imagery is not gratuitously aesthetic: it is meaningful and seeks to uncover some transcendent truth in events.

In this chapter, I look first at the mythic world in *Alerte aux ombres*, exploring what the nature of this poetic world reveals about Cayrol's conception of human life and freedom and about the action of God. Subsequently, I discuss the salvific function which Cayrol assigns to human love, with particular emphasis on the role that 'la bien-aimée' plays in these poems. Finally, I explore the mystical figures which lie at the centre of the story, notably the cross of Christ and the fruit-bearing tree, and explore how through these figures the poet sees his passivity transformed into saving activity. My concern throughout this chapter is to understand Cayrol's complex, mystical conception of his life in Mauthausen in the light of the diverse influences which infuse his work: Carmelite mysticism, Surrealism and the crucial influence of Péguy's thinking, most notably in defining the freedom and essential grandeur of human life.

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<sup>235</sup> Maurice Blanchot, 'Léon-Paul Fargue et la création poétique' in *Faux pas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 172.

<sup>236</sup> Blanchot, 'Léon-Paul Fargue', 150.



## Grace, eternity and the greatness of the human vocation

In some ways, mythic narrative seems an unlikely choice for recounting the concentration camps. Reliant on the organisational and technological apparatus of post-industrialised society, the camps could not have been further removed from the unspoiled, primitive world of myth. Cayrol himself was acutely sensitive to the chilling, inhuman industrial rigour which operated in the camps. Shortly after his return to France, he wrote a reflection on his deportation in which he referred to the horribly depersonalised species of death which reigned in the camps: ‘une mort “technicisée”, si j’ose dire, une mort pour personne sans âme, sans demeure.’<sup>237</sup> Life and death in the camps were robbed, in a sense, of their human face. These dehumanising conditions of the camps left, moreover, few apparent opportunities for heroism or combat. Camp inmates experienced extreme physical confinement and oppression; the torturous camp regime kept inmates trapped in a soul-destroying and seemingly futile routine. Cayrol wrote his poems in circumstances which could aptly be described as *anti-mythic* on a number of fronts.

To understand the origins of the mythic story in *Alerte aux ombres*, we have to look at the growing popularity of mythic narratives in European literature in the 1930s, when Cayrol’s predilection for myth first developed (his pre-captivity poetry collections like *Le Hollondais volant* already contain mythic elements). This resurgence in myth had begun earlier but became increasingly pronounced in the pre-war climate of intense disillusion with modernity. By the 1930s, many intellectuals were voicing concerns about the fate of European society: a society which was technically sophisticated but increasingly lacking in moral direction and existential purpose. European civilisation, many critics argued, was undergoing a deep existential crisis and was even destroying itself. The German philosopher Karl Jaspers denounced the mentality which he termed the ‘epochal consciousness’ of modern Western society and which consisted in a conviction of the ‘nullity’ of human endeavour. Jaspers suggested that it was this essentially suicidal ‘consciousness’ which was bringing about civilisation’s demise.<sup>238</sup> In a technocratic society which appeared more and more uprooted from human history, myth seemed to many contemporary observers to carry vital insights into the essence of human nature and the human vocation. The mythic dimension of Cayrol’s

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<sup>237</sup> Cited in Pateau, *Jean Cayrol*, 171. This reflection first appeared in the 26 June 1945 edition of *Les Etoiles*, a weekly publication edited by the poet Pierre Emmanuel.

<sup>238</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1951), 15. First published in German as *Die Geistige Situation der Zeit* in 1931.

Mauthausen poems fits into the wider trend among his contemporaries towards using myth in fresh and inventive ways.

But in addition to reflecting this general renaissance of myth at that time, and perhaps more importantly, Cayrol's mythic outlook can be traced back to the Christian humanism of the era. Cayrol was part of a circle of poets of his generation who, broadly speaking, embraced the new Christian humanism which had emerged in France at the beginning of the 20th century. This humanist thought was expounded by such philosophers as Jacques Maritain and epitomised in the works of writers Claudel and Péguy. This new school of thought attempted to address the critique of Christianity led by 19th century philosophers like Nietzsche, who argued that the Christian religion stifled or stunted human potential. In contrast to earlier Christian philosophy and theology which had tended to emphasise the corrupt nature of man, the new Christian school of humanism sought to redress the balance and to establish a more positive view of the human person. The figure of the incarnate God—Christ—was seen to confirm and illuminate the inherent greatness of human nature. The Christian life did not exclude, therefore, the full development of human potentiality, these commentators argued, but rather fostered such development.

Cayrol's stay in Mauthausen enhanced the Christian humanist perspective that he had adopted in his formative years, in the sense that he was deeply edified by a number of friends and comrades surrounding him in the camps whom he considered to be saints and who, for him, exemplified the fulfilment of human potential. At the beginning of *Poèmes de la nuit et du brouillard*, Cayrol inserted these words from one of Shakespeare's sonnets: 'Who will believe me in times to come / if it were fill'd with your most high deserts?' Similar sentiments are expressed in these words from St François de Sales which Cayrol cited in the dedication preceding his poem on Père Jacques: 'Je suis tant homme que rien de plus.'<sup>239</sup> Péguy saw heroism (in his eyes most perfectly represented in Joan of Arc) as more timely and necessary than ever in the modern age, and Cayrol shared this perspective. For Cayrol, the heroic witness given by his peers in the camps was an indication of the heights which humanity could reach, and a reminder of the dignity of the human calling.

Anchored in this Christian humanist perspective, and adhering particularly to the Péguyan vision of human life as an encounter between time and eternity, Cayrol created a mythic story in *Alerte aux ombres* set in infinite landscapes and manifesting an intensely dramatic and

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<sup>239</sup> Jean Cayrol, *Poèmes de la nuit et du brouillard* (Paris: Editions Seghers, 1946), 86.

ambitious conception of human life. The interior, mythic world in which the heroic journey unfolds in *Alerte aux ombres* is characterised above all by space and timelessness. The lexical field of the poems is dominated by words denoting distance, breadth and atemporality, and, in particular, the words *profond, infini, loin* or *lointain* and *éternel* constantly recur throughout the poems. The first poem in the collection introduces a boundless world of fantastic landscapes:

Aperçois-tu les draperies sanglantes de la terre qui sèchent  
au moindre vent,  
  
les lauriers brûlants, les temples  
où meurent les dieux dans leurs propres secrets  
sur le sol rocailleux d'une Grèce infinie ? (AO 13)

A far cry from literal, everyday earth, this mythic earth is peopled by gods and extends into infinity. Yet, for all its fanciful character, the world of these poems is intended as a faithful picture of the 'stage' on which human life plays out. In these lines, we see the scope and grandeur which Cayrol attributes to human existence. The interior world of these poems is a reflection of the 'espace illimité' which Cayrol would later describe, this boundless and all-encompassing space which is accessible to him at each moment.

Within this space, the poet is not just freed from spatial constraints but also freed from the constraints of time, becoming conscious of experiencing within himself very directly the eternity in which his Christian faith impels him to hope. Throughout these poems, eternity is portrayed as entering into time, as in this poem written in October 1944:

Doucement l'éternité  
grimpe au mur de nos vies  
mes souvenirs ont dépassé l'été  
comme un enfant qui fut ravi (AO 34)

Eternity here has unobtrusively, almost imperceptibly slipped over into the bounds of human time, an image enhanced by the double meaning of the word 'été', both the past participle of *être* and a noun denoting 'summer'. His memories, Cayrol implies, no longer simply come from the *été*—from what has been. No longer limited to the past, these mystical 'memories' unite the temporal and the eternal. But eternity is not just experienced as a distant state of

atemporality which occasionally makes itself felt within time. Eternity, the poet suggests, is present within his very self, as this stanza from a later poem shows:

Qui me cherche me trouve et qui cherche me fuit  
qui m'espère en ces lieux est un dieu qui s'éteint  
qui m'appelle se tait qui me blesse retient  
l'éternité en moi comme un grand fruit qui vit. (AO 55)

While the repeated use of antithesis in the first three lines gives the sense of a series of frustrated hopes, the last line ('l'éternité en moi comme un grand fruit qui vit') provides a resolution to this apparent impasse, with its reference to the maturation of eternity, ripening within the narrator in a manner analogous to the quiet imperceptible growth of organic life. On the formal level, the enjambment of 'retient / l'éternité' and the distinct change in rhythm marking the last line both draw attention to this gentle yet powerful blossoming of eternity within the bounds of human existence.

This idea of maturing and fruitfulness is also evident in plays on words within the October 1944 poem. 'Mur' recalls its homophone *mûr* ('mature')—a word which incidentally often recurs in *Alerte aux ombres*—hinting at a time of ripening and fulfilment. Taken in conjunction with the reference to going beyond 'l'été', the words point towards a kind of autumnal fruitfulness and plenitude being enacted in his life. This imagery is extremely significant in terms of understanding Cayrol's vision of his life in captivity, because it shows how in spite of the extreme deprivation in which he wrote these words, the author was conscious, nonetheless, of some kind of abundance in his interior life. Encountering the eternal within himself, in ways reminiscent of Péguy's conception of temporality, the poet becomes aware of the ongoing maturation and fulfilment of his life being directed by God.

The familiarity and intimacy which characterise Cayrol's depictions of his relationship with God show the influence of the highly mystical spirituality of the Carmelite order on his thinking, an influence which came to him in two principal ways. Firstly, in the shape of the poetry of St John of the Cross and secondly, in the person of the Carmelite Père Jacques. The parallels between St John of the Cross's poetry—particularly the *Spiritual Canticle*—and Cayrol's poems of the camps are numerous. The *Spiritual Canticle*, considered one of the highpoints of Western mystical poetry, recounts the love between the Bridegroom (Christ) and his Beloved (the soul). Cayrol's poems from Mauthausen show the same extremely visual and highly coloured style of recounting the interior life, filled with dramatic momentum. The second source of Carmelite spirituality for Cayrol was his friendship with Père Jacques,

whose thought and example played a crucial and far-reaching role in Cayrol's spiritual life in Mauthausen. A number of the distinctive characteristics of Carmelite spirituality emerge throughout Cayrol's poems of the camps: emphasis on child-like surrender to God; belief in the intimate and loving relationship between God and the soul; an ardent sacrificial dimension; and finally, a highly vivid and sensual way of envisaging the interior life.

The same visual intensity and liveliness that characterises St John of the Cross's poetry is employed by Cayrol in describing his relations with God, particularly in depicting the manifestations of divine grace in his painful circumstances. God's presence is made visible in the twin forces of 'wind' and 'breath' which move through the mystical landscapes of these poems. Motions generated by wind and breath occur repeatedly in countless forms, and the poems abound in evocations of trembling and shivering, as in these lines from Cayrol's October 1944 poem:

Feuilles furieuses qui tombez  
A chaque frisson de la nuit (AO 35)

Similar images include a child trembling with cold (AO 57), wings fluttering (AO 62), a dress rustling (AO 63) and a sheaf waving in the wind (AO 33). God is portrayed as breathing life and movement into humanity in a gesture that recalls the account of the creation of the first man in the book of Genesis:

Carillon lointain de nos larmes  
Dieu respire notre destin  
dans le froid aigre de nos armes  
comme une fleur dans ses mains. (AO 61)

Cayrol imagines the breath of God impelling his life in ever-new (and sometimes unwelcome) directions. God's presence can take on a hostile guise:

Mon Dieu qui pouvez me rejoindre  
Comme le vin de l'ennemi  
Mon Dieu fut le regard et la parole  
Sur l'eau calme d'une vie (AO 78)

In these lines we are given a picture of God stirring and directing human life like wind on still water. The uneven lines (*vers impairs*) in the second half of the quatrain interject a jarring

and unexpected note into the tempo of the poem, mirroring the disturbance caused by grace. What comes out of these poems is that Cayrol does not see his destiny as something imposed by other human beings. His deportation and camp internment are not the primary forces causing the turbulence, upheaval and drama recounted in these poems. Rather, as indicated by his ongoing recourse to the imagery of wind and breath throughout his work, Cayrol sees divine grace as the major force persistently directing and shaping his life, even during his harsh captivity.

Alongside this idea of the primacy of grace, receptivity to the intimate presence of God is another important strand in the story recounted in *Alerte aux ombres*. In Cayrol's poems as in the poems of St John of the Cross, the emphasis is on a close and personal love between God and the soul. This love is sometimes depicted in unusual and strikingly intimate ways in *Alerte aux ombres*. The conventional rhyme-pair of 'aube' and 'robe' is given a new twist when the narrator discovers himself swaddled in God's robe like a child wrapped by its mother:

Premières étincelles de l'aube  
Sur nos pas que vous comptez  
Mon Dieu qui m'avez réveillé dans les plis de votre robe (AO 58)

This tender image of motherhood is very revealing of the way that Cayrol views his relationship with God at certain moments during his ordeal: as a trustful and close bond comparable to that of a child and parent. A similarly protective and loving image of parenthood is conveyed elsewhere in these poems:

Mon Dieu vous êtes si calme auprès de moi  
De mon âme qui vous chante et rougit d'être vue.  
Mon Dieu vous êtes là dormant auprès de moi  
arbre qui m'abrite du vent qui ne joue plus. (AO 51)

In chaos and tumult, God remains a faithful presence enveloping the narrator. As these verses show, the Carmelite conception of mystical childhood before God, comprising a willingness to accept divine love and follow the course set by grace, is fundamental to Cayrol's outlook. Just as in the works of other poets, we find evidence of a kind of consent being made by the poet to his ordeal, an acceptance which allows him to retain freedom and agency in some domains. For Cayrol, this consent is possible primarily because he sees divine love at work in himself. In turn, this disposition of consent will allow him to make a free and

meaningful response to his captivity. Receptivity and interior surrender to God form the basis of the spiritual and ethical path which Cayrol sketches out in these poems.

Although these poems bring out consistently the action of God directing the poet's life, the narrator does not have a purely passive role; indeed, he has a task so burdensome to fulfil that it seems at times beyond his limited human capacities. The new Christian humanism, with its emphasis on the grandeur of the human calling, is evident here, and Cayrol's vision of the sheer momentousness of human destiny is particularly reminiscent of Péguy's thought. The mystical journey assigned to the narrator and his beloved is portrayed as a weighty undertaking and as an encounter with hostile forces:

Ma bien-aimée, je te suis dans les nuées féroces de la mort ;  
le monde est sauvé à l'horizon  
mais près de nous il meurt encore  
car nous sommes d'un voyage  
dont nous gardons le lourd secret  
venus du proche amour et de l'extrême amour. (AO 23)

With his characteristic love of word-play, the poet takes inspiration from the twin terms of 'le Proche Orient' and 'l'Extrême Orient' to delineate two spaces—'le proche amour' and 'l'extrême amour'—in his poetic landscapes. This 'love' as Cayrol understands it is nothing trivial; it entails fierce resistance and courageous perseverance. At times, the commission entrusted to the lovers appears so forbidding as to be impossible, as if no one could assume such a heavy burden. Cayrol describes his 'night' in one place as a sword impossible to lift:

Elle se dressait comme une épée si lourde  
que nous ne pouvions la saisir (AO 15)

So overwhelming is the task with which God entrusts them that in one place, Cayrol reverses the usual roles of God and man, and imagines the voice of God expresses *his* faith in man, telling the narrator and his beloved 'Je vous crois'. Elsewhere, Cayrol writes: 'Depuis longtemps je marche au-delà de ma course' (AO 23). The heroic destiny bestowed upon the poet persistently raises him above his human limitations. What is remarkable is that Cayrol, despite his inability to engage in any overtly heroic action under the repressive conditions of camp internment, repeatedly draws out in his poems the awe-inspiring (and daunting) greatness of his spiritual vocation in captivity, as he perceives it.

This apparent disjunction brings us to the heart of Cayrol's existential outlook. The mythic dimension of Cayrol's work, seemingly diametrically opposed to the restriction and enforced passivity of his circumstances, comes back to the author's notions about the vast scope and inalienable freedom of human life. Drawn into eternity through the salvific action of Christ, human existence, Cayrol believes, fundamentally plays out in boundless spatial and temporal dimensions. Cayrol envisages the whole story of his captivity and suffering from a distinctly mystical and mythic perspective. 'Translocating' his gaze from the external appearances of his captivity to the spiritual realities he believes he is living, Cayrol strives to unveil through his poetry the intimate presence of God and eternity within his confined circumstances. What emerges from these poems is that in spite of the dire captivity he is experiencing, Cayrol feels himself to be living on one level such abundance and freedom that only the grand horizons of myth can adequately convey the divine story unfolding within him.

### **Cayrol's night and the prophetic role of human love**

Cayrol sees himself as going to God with and *through* others, confident that even during his exile in the concentration camp, his absent loved ones are present with him. This belief in the intimate companionship and nearness of his loved ones seems to be rooted in the Catholic doctrine of the 'communion of saints': a mystical communion linking all those redeemed by Christ. Cayrol's ideas in this area, again, are very reminiscent of Péguy's. Péguy saw each person as being joined to Christ by 'des fils éternels, des fils infinis' and through him to others, each individual interwoven into a saving communion which ultimately embraced the whole of humanity.<sup>240</sup> Cayrol's own vision of interpersonal communion—stressing the indispensable presence of others along the personal, spiritual journey and the role that others can play in dispensing grace and illuminating interior darkness—bears remarkable similarities to Péguy's. In the first letter that he sent to his parents after his liberation from Mauthausen, he wrote:

Mes chéris, je ne peux croire aujourd'hui à mon bonheur après une telle angoisse, une telle misère, une telle nuit. Le cauchemar s'est dissipé ; le Miracle s'est accompli. Comme je vous presse sur mon cœur ! Vous ne m'avez jamais abandonné, vous avez lutté avec moi

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<sup>240</sup> Péguy, *Véronique*, 268.



et vous m'avez sauvé tous les trois [Cayrol's mother, father and brother] par votre présence fervente.<sup>241</sup>

As this passage indicates, Cayrol believed his loved ones were united to him during his internment in a kind of mystical communion despite their physical separation from him; and not only closely united with him but actively helping him in his struggles. Throughout these poems, we get a sense of how vital this presence was for Cayrol in helping him through the frightening ordeal of what he calls repeatedly his 'nuit'. At times, the narrator cannot discern on his own the promise of eternity within himself. It is at these moments that he needs another person to draw out, in a sense, the shadowy spectre of eternity concealed in his night. Salvation, in Cayrol's eyes, must often be mediated by human love.

The 'nuit' which Cayrol refers to in this letter to his parents is a central figure in *Alerte aux ombres*. To understand this decidedly complex and often contradictory figure, we have to first realise that here, as elsewhere, we are not dealing with a metaphor or a symbol. Rather, Cayrol is describing a phenomenon so real from his mystical outlook that it seems to be almost his companion, a companion having its own distinct (though fluctuating) character and dynamic existence. Although associated with the suffering, vulnerability and, to a certain extent, the self-eclipse which Cayrol is enduring in his captivity, it is nonetheless an ambivalent figure. On the one hand, in places, night is portrayed as a hostile force which is associated with defencelessness and the submersion of personal identity:

Quand la nuit parut si froide à notre cou  
qui peut se souvenir du nom qu'on lui donnait  
quand nous n'aurons plus rien qu'un peu d'eau sur la lèvre  
quand nous n'aurons plus rien qu'un peu de vent sur nous ? (AO 56)

But, as other images in this poetry show, Cayrol's 'nuit' is not an alien, external ordeal from which he simply wants to be released once and for all. Rather, night is his 'plus fidèle ennemi' (AO 64), a figure which accompanies him closely and indeed is inextricably bonded to him. Cayrol aspires to a time when his 'vraie nuit' will appear clearly to his eyes:

A nos pieds venir  
de notre dernier geste  
cueillir sur une branche qui marque encore l'entrée du

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<sup>241</sup> Cited in Pateau, *Jean Cayrol*, 159.

crépuscule  
nous verrons enfin, ma bien-aimée,  
notre nuit en plein visage  
comme un aveugle marchant  
dans le vent si mince de ton manteau. (AO 47)

His night, Cayrol implies, only imperfectly known and so intense a source of pain at present, will be fully disclosed and transfigured in the after-life.<sup>242</sup> Cayrol's 'nuit' is not just an oppressive and suffocating reality; it actually opens onto the horizons of eternity.

Throughout these poems, it is 'la bien-aimée' who unveils the eternal dimension hidden within the poet's night. Undoubtedly, the inspiration for the beloved woman of the poems was the young woman to whom Cayrol had become engaged before his arrest, Noémie, even though this identity was never explicitly spelled out by Cayrol.<sup>243</sup> Although her romantic feelings for Cayrol do not ever seem to have been very strong, Noémie encouraged her fiancé's poetic efforts and fervently believed in his poetic vocation. In an undated letter composed prior to Cayrol's arrest, she wrote to him with these words:

Vous êtes un grand, un très grand poète ; un de ceux qui portent les clés de la promesse. Je crois que c'est ça qui nous sauvera. Je crois en l'immense rôle prophétique et vivant du poète [...]. Vous avez choisi la porte étroite où on se blesse tous les jours à sa vie, mais ce n'est qu'avec des habits déchirés et des épaules blessées qu'on arrive jusqu'à Dieu, je crois.<sup>244</sup>

As these words suggest, Noémie seems to have acted as a spiritual beacon for Cayrol, as well as a poetic muse, and the beloved in *Alerte aux ombres* is an almost Beatrice-like figure. There is, however, an extratextual complication for the modern reader in identifying the beloved with Noémie, because the reader might be aware (as Cayrol was not when he wrote these poems) that Noémie had married another man during Cayrol's deportation. Never having received her letter telling him that she was breaking their engagement, Cayrol was heartbroken when he returned from the camps to find that, in his words, 'celle à qui j'avais donné le meilleur de moi-même n'était plus là.'<sup>245</sup> In reality, there was, then, a bitter twist on

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<sup>242</sup> There are clear overtones here of a famous passage from the Epistles of St Paul that compares seeing in earthly life 'through a mirror darkly' to seeing 'face to face' after death (1 Corinthians 13:12).

<sup>243</sup> Noémie's family name is not given in Michael Pateau's biography of Cayrol.

<sup>244</sup> Undated letter, cited in Pateau, *Jean Cayrol*, 113.

<sup>245</sup> Letter to Jean Ballard, cited in Pateau, *Jean Cayrol*, 170.

the beloved's faithfulness as depicted in these poems. The presence of the beloved woman in these poems remains nonetheless crucial, as it reveals to how great an extent Cayrol drew comfort and strength from his consciousness of the proximity of his loved ones during his ordeals.

The central role which the beloved woman plays here also illustrates how more generally, Cayrol saw the prerogative of human love to be its *prophetic* role; the ability of the loving gaze to discern glimpses of eternity in the loved one's life, unsuspected by the person in question. Only the beloved woman is able to pierce through the forbidding exterior of what the poet is living and find cause for hope within:

Comme je te vois bien dans ta nuit, me disais-tu,  
jamais je n'ai retrouvé la route aussi claire  
que dans cette ombre,  
jamais je n'ai retrouvé paysage plus fidèle  
que dans ces ténèbres. (AO 15)

The poet's night and shadows enclose a mystical light, only visible to the one who loves him. Cayrol imagines that he carries within himself a sort of pledge of future redemption. On a formal level, the changing line lengths embody these outbursts of clarity within night, with the presence of (rather unconventional) alexandrines playing a key role; Cayrol often stretches the syllabic count in his alexandrines so that some lines require the suppression of an *e muet* to be read as 12 syllables, and that is the case here in the fourth line with 'paysage'. The alexandrines in the second and fourth lines suggest forays into the fullness of eternity, while reversion to shorter lines marks a return to the opacity of ordinary time. Eternal redemption and liberation, the poet suggests, are concealed within the oppressed human person but needs the loving gaze of another person to divulge its presence.

According to Cayrol's mystical and salvific conception of human love, this gaze is always reciprocal, each lover enlightening the other. This mutual enlightenment is recounted in a particularly vivid fashion through a retelling of the Eden myth from the book of Genesis in the first poem of *Alerte aux ombres*, dating from February 1944. Cayrol's fascination with this mythic story—particularly with its theme of exile and loss—predates his imprisonment and detention in the camps; he had already explored the Eden story in a collection of poems entitled *Miroir de la rédemption*, completed just before his arrest in 1942. In his fresh interpretation of the story, Cayrol is not concerned so much with the ideas of tragedy and original sin which usually govern Christian interpretations of the Genesis account. Instead,

Cayrol emphasises the companionship and even salvation which Adam and Eve offer to each other, when, banished from the garden of Eden, they must begin their long wanderings together in their 'night'. Within the darkness, Eve looks to her companion for bearings and finds her own life reflected and clarified in him:

Comme elle voit luire sa vie dans le visage obscur  
de son époux,  
comme le matin lui semble proche et discret  
sur ses cheveux encore dénoués. (AO 17)

Adam becomes here the visible reflection of the hidden light in Eve's own self. The lover, the poet suggests, can become a kind of mirror, capturing and transfusing with light the darkness of the beloved. Adam, too, sees his 'night' reflected and transformed on Eve's face:

Avance, ma nuit, possession ancienne d'un dieu,  
ma douce nuit perdue au cœur d'un homme.  
Ma bien-aimée, elle est déjà sur ta joue  
comme une larme. (AO 18)

In other places, the transformative role of love is depicted with slightly different imagery. Love, Cayrol suggests, enables prophetic insights into the beloved's 'night', insights which the beloved cannot obtain himself or herself. Thus, Eve alone discerns the light present within Adam's night:

Eve regarde la tunique écarlate de son époux  
sa tunique de feu qui brûle à pleine éternité  
Il porte sur lui le jour triomphant  
mais elle seule le sait  
car les jardins nouveaux verdissent à son  
approche,  
le jour dans toute sa gloire qui se livre à la porte de Dieu.  
Il marche comme une flamme dans une forêt d'été  
l'Aveugle aux main liées  
l'Angoisse à la tête d'or. (AO 18)

Adam carries on himself an invincible fire which prefigures the fullness of salvation to come. But he himself cannot discern its light; this eternal flame which he bears is visible only to

Eve. For Cayrol, it is the prerogative and genius of love to discern redemption in the life of the loved one. We often need another person, Cayrol implies, to reveal the workings of eternity within ourselves.

These lines depicting the two lovers exemplify in a particularly arresting way the mythic narrative adopted throughout *Alerte aux ombres* and bring to light the unique, mystical way in which Cayrol viewed his life in Mauthausen. Alongside the primeval figures of Adam and Eve, other figures with a mythic cast are evoked; the character of the ‘Aveugle’ in these lines just cited is invested with mythic stature and dignity by echoes of legendary prototypes, including an exiled Oedipus and a blinded, bound Samson. By using such figures, Cayrol is stressing the dramatic and mythic nature of the journey on which man and woman embark together in suffering and exile; this is a story which plays out in eternal dimensions, and the loving intervention of each person assists in drawing out the presence of the eternal within the other’s life. Believing himself to be mystically accompanied by his beloved, Cayrol sees her love as a constant source of encouragement and illumination, uncovering the saving promise of eternity within the painful limitations of his captivity.

### **Sacrifice and redemption**

The discernment of eternity within his circumstances is integral, for Cayrol, to the discovery of salvation and freedom within his ordeal. On this point, my reading of the poems diverges from Bouygues’s interpretation. Bouygues suggests that salvation exists only in the future, in prospective liberation from the camps:

Il ne fait pas de doute que la ‘vallée perdue’ dans laquelle les concentrationnaires sont destinés à errer a un sens, bien que celui-ci leur demeure caché (ce que dit l’allusion récurrente au ‘lourd secret des dieux’) : pour Cayrol, Dieu n’est pas absent, il est simplement mort aux yeux des hommes, et toute la durée de l’emprisonnement se condense pour former la parenthèse d’un Samedi Saint, à la veille de Pâques.<sup>246</sup>

For this critic, Cayrol’s narrative remains suspended between the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, in the grief and incomprehension of the day following Good Friday. God is, for the most part, invisible and silent, entombed like Christ, ‘présent seulement par

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<sup>246</sup> Bouygues, ‘Etre poète à Mauthausen,’ 22.

intermittences', Bouygues writes.<sup>247</sup> In contrast to Bouygues, I suggest that God is a constant presence throughout these poems and that, furthermore, resurrection is not a future event for Cayrol, anticipated according to linear chronology. Rather, the re-birth, fulfilment and perfection of earthly life is already contained in the present moment, thanks to a mystical encounter between time and eternity.

By living freely the sufferings imposed on him, Cayrol aspires to make them an active and creative gesture in union with Christ's sacrifice. Like Péguy, Cayrol is convinced that his personal sufferings can be joined to Christ's Passion and become redemptive. This redemption is not purely a future state; Cayrol believes that within his ordeal can already be discerned eternal 'resurrection'. Using the two motifs of the fruit-giving tree and the cross, Cayrol explores the hidden, salvific dimension within the events of his life. Cayrol's deep attachment to the figure of Christ's cross and his belief that his own ordeal could be accepted and transformed into a participation in Christ's death may well have been inspired by the teachings of his friend and mentor Père Jacques. Père Jacques firmly believed that the sufferings endured by himself and his companions were a sharing in Christ's Passion, writing in Latin on a comrade's notebook in Mauthausen in March 1945:

Through the Cross to the light!  
Without blood there is no redemption!  
Whoever accomplishes the truth comes to the light.<sup>248</sup>

As this quote indicates, the idea of self-sacrifice as a participation in the redemptive work of Christ's crucifixion was a key component of Père Jacques's spirituality. Given the high regard in which Cayrol held his friend and the great value he placed on his spiritual example in the camps, it is likely that the author's redemptive vision in these poems, particularly his emphasis on the figure of the cross, was derived at least in part from Père Jacques's teachings.

Like the other characters in the drama, both the cross and the fruit-bearing tree undergo numerous, Surrealist-type transformations. Cayrol uses Surrealist techniques to expose the interior drama which is being enacted and to draw out what he sees as the central paradoxes of the Christian life. Surrealism generates the counter-intuitive relationships and the mystical convergences that for Cayrol contain the essence of the Christian message of sacrifice and

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<sup>247</sup> Bouygues, 'Être poète à Mauthausen,' 22.

<sup>248</sup> Facsimile of original manuscript: <http://www.carmel.asso.fr/Son-testament-spirituel.html>. Retrieved 12 July 2016. Original in Latin: 'Per crucem ad lucem!—Sine sanguine non fit redemptio! Qui facit veritatem venit ad lucem.'

redemption. The intricate and frequently oxymoronic character of Surrealist imagery thus performs a key function in *Alerte aux ombres*. The dream-like sequences, the metamorphosis of the ‘actors’ in the drama in often startling ways, the deliberately counter-intuitive images, jarring juxtapositions of terms and the use of alliteration and assonance to engender unexpected images: all these characteristics of Cayrol’s camp poetry arise from the Surrealist school and establish intimate connections between figures or elements in surprising and meaningful ways. One particularly telling example is found in the following lines. In a poem written in January 1945, the crown of thorns is used in an odd and complex image which elides bloodied thorns with snow crystals:

La neige est rouge sur nos fronts  
de tant d’épines de cristal  
Nos pas résonnent sur les dalles  
où tombent tant de larrons.

Rouge des fruits qui sont mûrs  
rouge d’un couchant qui s’endort  
rouge du feu de l’armure  
qui lèvera le voile sur notre mort.

(AO 61)

The Surrealist imagery of these lines is so dense and fluid that it sets up a whole network of conceptual relationships which end up connecting death with sacrifice. The coupling of *mûr* (‘ripe’) and *mort* (‘death’) occurs elsewhere in these poems, and highlights the link between sacrifice and fruitfulness. The image of the thieves falling from the cross (a reference to the thieves crucified next to Christ in the Gospel account of the crucifixion) suggests the image of ripe fruit falling from a tree. The link between the trees of the Garden of Eden and the ‘tree’ of the cross is one that has been made since early Christian times. But Cayrol takes this idea and integrates it into a highly coloured, dramatic, even flamboyant vision, one in which the blood of the cross morphs into the juice of the new ‘fruits’. The line ‘La neige est rouge sur nos fronts’ recalls perhaps the most celebrated line of all Surrealist poetry—the first line from Paul Eluard’s 1929 poem: ‘La terre est bleue comme une orange’. This ‘neige rouge’ is a textbook example of the ‘negation of an elementary physical property’ from André Breton’s list of Surrealist images in the *Manifeste du surréalisme* of 1924.<sup>249</sup> For Cayrol, if snow can be red in this mystical interior world, this apparently nonsensical image mirrors the Christian paradox: the blood of the cross becomes a saving force and that death can contain new life.

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<sup>249</sup> André Breton, *Manifestes du surréalisme* (Paris: Editions Pauvert, 1972).

Surrealist imagery is, therefore, not used purely as a rhetorical or aesthetic technique, but is pivotal to Cayrol's redemptive drama.

The re-living of the cross is so real in Cayrol's eyes that, like the figure of night, this cross takes on an independent existence, becoming an actual character in his story, an inseparable companion who alternately attracts and repels him. We are dealing with something more than a metaphor or analogy. The poet's night becomes deeply identified, merged with Christ's agony. Like the Eucharist, it re-actualises the past event of the Passion, so that the hero of the poems actually participates in the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. In a poem written in March 1945, two contrasting crosses are described, the first one gentle, non-threatening, and pulsing with life:

c'est une croix tranquille pour tout le monde  
même un enfant pourrait la tenir dans ses bras ;  
aujourd'hui elle est sans danger,  
battant comme une veine aux tempes même  
de la terre. (AO 91)

It is easy to embrace the 'cross' when it appears beautiful and life-giving. But there is a second cross depicted in this poem: a shameful, dying cross which is a source only of pain and torment. At first this cross seems to be an enemy, but it metamorphoses in these lines into a pitiful, dying and rejected figure. It becomes a starved animal, an autumn leaf caught up in a hurricane, a carcass picked at by birds of prey and, finally, a frozen corpse:

morte, les bras raides et glacées  
rongée comme une souche ancienne dans les forêts,  
qui te prendra tendrement dans l'ombre basse ?  
Qui relira son propre nom gravé à ta tête ? (AO 93)

Like the beginnings of the 'souche ancienne', the origins of this cross go back into a distant age, so distant as to be an ageless reality. For Cayrol, the drama of the cross is eternal, re-emerging in individual lives. The Surrealist-style alliterative pairing of 'raide' and 'rongée' intertwines the two images of the stiff frozen corpse and the decaying tree-stump, the 'tree' of the cross and the body of the victim. In this way, the cross ceases to be an aggressor and takes on the appearance of the camp inmate: cold, starved and finally abandoned and shunned in death. The poet comes to an awareness that these two crosses—one so beautiful and the other so repugnant—are one and the same:



Ma croix comme un manteau en lambeaux  
 dont la doublure est blanche et parfumée  
 Ma croix au double visage  
     dont le regard est le même,  
 Jean qui rit et Jean qui pleure.  
 Ma croix qui t'étends près de moi,  
 qui me prends tout la place pour être réchauffée  
 comme un ami de passage,  
 croix de demain, ayez pitié de moi. (AO 94)

This passage is particularly noteworthy because it is the only place in *Alerte aux ombres* where Cayrol introduces his given name. There are at least two reasons for this inclusion. Firstly, Cayrol is laying emphasis on the very personal nature of the cross that bears his name, just as the cross of Christ was marked with his name. Secondly, the use of the name recalls the figure of John, the only apostle to stay with his friend during the crucifixion. The cross, in some mysterious way, is an intimate companion for Cayrol—one whom he addresses as 'tu'. The joyous and glorious cross cannot be detached from the suffering and vulnerable cross—the one cross draws together pain and joy, death and life. This cross for Cayrol is, therefore, a sign of both contradiction and reconciliation. The figure of the cross in Cayrol's poetic brings together the agony of the camp prisoner and the deliverance he longs for into a single, eternal and saving union.

The cross is not, however, the only sign of redemption and reconciliation in *Alerte aux ombres*. The mystical garden or orchard, in which the poet and his Beloved tend and cultivate a 'fruit', also plays an important role. Nurtured with sacrifice and self-gift, this fruit slowly ripens and will be 'plucked' in the new garden at the end of time. This idea of a mystical garden yet to be fully revealed is partly an imaginative extension of the Eden story already discussed; the lost garden and the forbidden fruit are restored to the exiled lovers in a more perfect form. Their 'blood and sweat' waters these fruit-trees:

Ma bien-aimée, le jour erre dans le jardin refusé  
 [...]
 Peut-être allons-nous lui remettre  
 le panier chargé des derniers fruits de la nuit,  
 nos vergers arrosés de sueur et de sang

car nous sommes nous-mêmes la graine qui va éclore,  
la faim noire de la terre nous dévore. (AO 26)

Not only do the poet and his beloved create these fruits through their self-giving, but in this vision they actually *become* the dying seed of the gospels which ‘bears much fruit’ (John 12:24). Sometimes, as here, this fruit is shown as tinged with blood; but in another poem, the ‘neiges de décembre’ (probably a reference to the birth of Christ) form an immaculate white fruit:

Le jardin de Dieu dans un seul fruit si blanc  
qui s’étend sur la branche et ne mûrira plus.  
Ne sois pas le verger où l’aurore est en sang  
où le ciel est sonnante de l’argent du refus. (AO 87)

In this depiction of a garden with a single, pristine fruit, Cayrol describes a mystical place of perfect fulfilment. This ‘fruit’ is not seen as a product of the future; it already exists in the enigmatic, Péguyan intersection of time and eternity which characterises the events of *Alerte aux ombres*. Redemption is not purely a future happy state which the poet anticipates, as Bouygues’s analysis would suggest; in fact, it is present in a very palpable way in Cayrol’s mystical world.

But the hero and the beloved participate in an even more substantial and fundamental way in the sacrificial and Eucharistic wedding-feast of Christ. The clearest exposition of their central ‘part’ in the Eucharistic feast can be found in the last poem of *Alerte aux ombres*. This poem was written in April 1945, and surely some of the joyous tone which marks this poem stems from the poet’s anticipation of liberation from the camps. Now, there is almost a glad sense of privilege as the poet contemplates the mystical divine story which is unfolding within him and his beloved:

Ma bien-aimée qui sommes-nous  
Pour que toute la terre s’appuie sur nous avec autant de hâte ?  
[...]  
Nous portons toute l’aventure de Dieu en nous.  
Nous sommes le pain qu’il garde pour la  
grande faim de midi.  
Nous sommes le vin versé à ses prochaines noces.  
Nous sommes l’angoisse elle-même  
l’angoisse immaculée. (AO 105-6)

Crushed, tormented, the poet and his beloved *become* the wine for the heavenly marriage-feast. They are the grains of wheat or seeds which are ground to become sacramental bread; purely through their very being, they have become sacrifice and sacrament. In subsequent lines, the salvific, sacramental identity of the hero and his beloved is further clarified:

Tout est sauvé, ma bien-aimée, puisque nous délivrons  
à mesure que nous sommes livrés,  
puisque Dieu nous a réunis pour que nous puissions  
vivre à nouveau dans le jardin si fleuri des oliviers. (AO 106)

The active-passive symmetry established in the first two lines between ‘nous délivrons’ and ‘nous sommes livrés’ provides the key to Cayrol’s spirituality. Through this paradox, Cayrol transforms the passivity and victimhood of the camp experience into salvific liberation. His disposition of acceptance and receptivity to divine grace transfigures his sufferings and makes him a participant in Christ’s redemptive sacrifice and Eucharistic meal.

The salvific drama in *Alerte aux ombres* represents a fusion of diverse religious and literary currents active in early 20th century France. Carmelite mysticism and Christian humanism join in Cayrol’s poems to construct a redemptive path through—and within—interior darkness. Surrealism, too, is closely bound up with the Christian narrative thread in *Alerte aux ombres*, forging paradoxical connections which reflect a mystical Christian outlook on death and salvation. In keeping with the new Christian humanism of the time, Cayrol sees a greatness in humanity’s calling which mirrors the greatness epitomised in Christ. Carmelite spirituality, especially the value it places on willing self-sacrifice in union with Christ and on the personal, mystical relationship between God and soul, is central to Cayrol’s poetry. In particular, the highly expressive and pictorial mysticism of the Carmelite St John of the Cross’s poetry is very clearly present. The apparent incompatibility between the passive state of victimhood and the fulfilment of the human desire for liberation and salvation is finally resolved definitively for the poet through the promise of the cross. For Cayrol, if ‘tout est sauvé’, it is because he shares in Christ’s redemptive Passion. This participation in Christ’s sufferings allows the poet to uncover saving activity and freedom at the heart of his helplessness and captivity.

Myth is equally vital to Cayrol’s poetic—a dimension of his œuvre which leads us into the sometimes polemical area of myth and its conversation with the events of the era. The idea of myth in connection with the concentration camps has been tainted by the Nazi obsession

with particular myths. In addition, the systematic, mass-scale exploitation of human beings, facilitated by the technological advances of modernity, could not be further removed from the mythical world. Cayrol's mythic literary framework contrasts sharply with the context in which these texts were composed. The camp inmate was immersed in a machine-like system which harnessed scientific progress and administrative efficiency to pursue a deliberate project of dehumanisation. But the poems which he wrote in Mauthausen describe a world which—unlike the industrialised, repressive creation in which he is submerged—is mythic, grand and dramatic. Cayrol's Mauthausen poems offer compelling evidence that mythic narrative is not as incompatible with the camps as might be supposed.

If Cayrol employs the grandeur and drama of myth, it is because the interior life for him is never static or mundane but is a truly heroic experience, placing the human person, even in physical captivity, at the centre of a primal struggle of epic proportions. Cayrol's viewpoint was deeply informed by the Christian humanist ideas of the era; the co-existence of time with eternity, a vision originating in Péguy's writings, is the idea underpinning the whole mythic narrative of these poems. The atemporality of myth allows the author to join together time and eternity, and thus becomes a key framework for the eternal story Cayrol wants to recount. The poems of *Alerte aux ombres* bring a fresh perspective to the literary history of the 1940s, revealing that the mythic narrative style so much in vogue at the time found its way into the unlikeliest of settings: the concentration camp.

The atemporality and dream-like aspects of Cayrol's mystical and mythic world do raise questions about the creative genesis of the poems. Swiftly shifting from one landscape to another, lacking ordinary chronological sequencing, the narrative in *Alerte aux ombres* often takes on an oneiric character. The reader with some knowledge of Cayrol's later works has to ask whether this oneiric side to the poetry has any roots in Cayrol's *rêves concentrationnaires* ('concentration camp dreams'), a subject which Cayrol dissected in a 1948 essay of that name.<sup>250</sup> In this essay, Cayrol drew attention to the extraordinary intensity and hyper-realism which night-time dreams acquired in the camps and to the fact that simultaneously the daytime existence of the deportee came to seem more and more unreal and disconnected from the passage of time. In Cayrol's thought, the camp inmate experienced two distinct dream-worlds—literal, night-time dreams and the oddly unreal and atemporal day-time

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<sup>250</sup> Jean Cayrol, 'Les Rêves concentrationnaires,' *Les Temps Modernes* 36 (September 1948).

existence.<sup>251</sup> The prisoner was thus ‘jour et nuit dans un état de rêve’.<sup>252</sup> The poet’s vivid night-time dreams may well have nourished some of the poetic visions in *Alerte aux ombres*. But the interior world of *Alerte aux ombres* is quite a different kind of universe from the day-time dream-world of Mauthausen. There is no trace in these poems of this uncanny, hermetic separation from time and space felt by the camp prisoner. Ultimately, the temporal freedom characterising the world of this poetry is, I suggest, much more derived from Cayrol’s unique outlook on the interconnection of time and eternity than from his *rêves concentrationnaires*. Perhaps, however, the experience of feeling deeply alienated from ordinary time and space drew Cayrol more than ever towards delineating a mythic world similarly liberated from temporal and physical constraints but, unlike the *univers concentrationnaire*, opening onto the hopeful vistas of eternity.

To date, the critical literature on Cayrol has focused almost exclusively on his contribution to the novel, to literary theory and to film, in the form of his screenplay for *Nuit et brouillard*. I suggest that his little-known poems written in Mauthausen must radically affect the way we think about Cayrol’s œuvre. These ‘pre-Lazarene’ poems do not hinge on the interior disintegration of the camp victim, as Cayrol’s novels do. Nor do they seek to convey the forbidding and austere atmosphere of the concentration camp, as the voice-over text of *Nuit et brouillard* does. Instead, these poems narrate a vast, mythic story of love and redemption. These poems illuminate a new and intriguing side to Cayrol as an author, uncovering the paradox that some of his most hopeful and mystical words were written during his living ‘death’ in Mauthausen.

On a more general level, these texts also contest the established wisdom about Holocaust poetry, providing a ringing counter-example to the widespread vision of the ideal Holocaust poem as a self-defeating project, which must be purposely constructed so as to undermine its own aims. Rather than giving such an impression of constriction and frustration, Cayrol’s poems convey a consistent sense of freedom and plenitude. If Cayrol’s poetry differs so markedly from other examples of Holocaust poetry, this difference can be traced back to the way that Cayrol ‘translocates’ his outlook, adopting a singularly mystical outlook upon the dark circumstances of his ordeal and imaginatively recounting the eternal story of grace and salvation which he becomes conscious of living during his captivity. Perhaps the real

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<sup>251</sup> For an insightful discussion of the way in which Cayrol understands the camps as a distinctly oneiric world, see Silke Segler-Messner, ‘Pour une esthétique de l’imaginaire dans l’œuvre de Jean Cayrol,’ in *Les mots sont aussi des demeures*: *Poétiques de Jean Cayrol*, ed. Peter Kuon, 109.

<sup>252</sup> Cayrol, ‘Les Rêves concentrationnaires,’ 523.

singularity of Cayrol's achievement in *Alerte aux ombres* is to have drawn a story of such dramatic breadth from the oppressive and confined world of Mauthausen.

## Conclusion

Jean Cayrol's mystical and mythic optic, imaginatively 'translocating' his present captivity in the camps and situating his tribulations within the horizons of eternity, is in some ways the most arresting manifestation of interior freedom to be found in this corpus of French-language poetry written in the camps. Yet, essentially, Cayrol's freedom shares much in common with the freedom expressed in the works of the other poets I have explored (André Ulmann, Maurice Honel, Gustave Leroy and André Verdet). In the case of all these poets, interior freedom originated in their enduring core beliefs, whether philosophical, political or religious. This freedom, moreover, was not the freedom of disconnection from the reality of internment, a freedom found purely through immersion in memories, for instance, but was rather experienced by these authors in their present, concrete circumstances. Each of these poets sought to freely assume and accept his ordeal and to identify some good which he could continue to actively pursue despite the repressive captivity and extreme deprivation in which he found himself. Poetry became for these prisoners a means of discovering a guiding ethos for their lives in captivity, and the extent to which this enterprise was successful can be judged by the profound sense of freedom, agency and even, at times, abundance that emerges from these poems.

What has come out of my readings of this neglected corpus of Holocaust poetry has challenged the long-lived conception of the Holocaust poem as necessarily a space of incapacitation and silence. Alvin Rosenfeld, Antony Rowland and other critics have stressed the limitations and ineffectualness of the poetic word when it comes to grappling with the horrific events of the camps. By these standards, the Holocaust poem needs to perform a sort of ontological self-denial, deliberately undermining its linguistic content and drawing attention, instead, to the places where words are absent. But, as attentive textual analysis of these poems has shown, much of the poetry that French prisoners wrote in the camps does not fit into this scheme of reticent, self-inhibiting poetry. Nor does this poetry conform to the scheme proposed by Lawrence Langer, which emphasises the inability of language to ascribe any transcendent or redemptive meaning to the world of the camps. Instead, it is evident that these prisoners found in poetry a very real and constructive means of defining, articulating and reinforcing a personal ethos by which to live their gruelling ordeal. Consequently, as I have discussed, this poetry shows more convergences with Paul Ricœur's views on poetics than with existing models of Holocaust poetry. Defining narrative as the creation of a 'possible world' grounded in personal experience yet also opening up new possibilities and directions in life, Ricœur stresses the central role that literature can play in

the search for ethical aims in life. The poetry from the camps bears out Ricœur's understanding of the transformative powers of narrative. Reading this corpus, we discover poems which have little in common with the consciously ineffectual poetry expounded by Rosenfeld and others; this poetry is in fact playing an indispensable role in prisoners' efforts to live with integrity and purpose during their internment. In form as well, the French poetry written in the camps departs radically from the outlook found in much of the critical literature on Holocaust poetry. Instead of exposing the futility of the aspirations expressed in these poems, the formal and sonorous dimensions of these poems tend to act in unison with the thematic content, making audible the very freedom the poet is seeking to express. Poetry was, emphatically, not rendered powerless by the savage events that these prisoners were facing; rather, it could genuinely contribute to opening up an ethical path for these poets in their ordeals and, crucially, illuminate the authentic freedom that remained to them.

The origins of this freedom, as I have shown throughout this study, can be located in the strong, resilient convictions cemented in these prisoners during their formative years. The vibrant movements which characterised 1930s France—fiercely combative social and political movements like Communism, dynamic intellectual circles like Personalism and the active Catholic sub-culture—promoted fervent commitment from individuals, forming men and women so rooted in their beliefs that their interior freedom abided even when their external freedom was taken away. Such was the case even with members of the Communist Party, a movement not usually associated nowadays with freedom of any sort. As the poems of both Maurice Honel and André Verdet reveal, more than one prisoner relied on his Communist principles for solid ethical foundations and an unwavering moral compass in the tumultuous and inhuman conditions of camp internment. A passionate adherent to Communist ideals of fraternity and self-sacrifice for the common good, Honel joined to these ideals his own deeply spiritual outlook, and these values allowed him to find ethical purpose in his ordeal in Auschwitz. Similarly, Verdet drew on his Communist beliefs in confidently envisaging in his poems the triumph of the people against tyranny and the emergence of a better world out of the present devastation. Personalism was another movement that proved influential among camp prisoners; André Ulmann's involvement with this movement in the early 1930s fostered a life-long sense of the primordial importance and inalienability of human freedom and self-determination. Ulmann's poetry witness to his rigorous efforts to live up to these ideals and fully exercise his autonomy even as a prisoner in Mauthausen. In terms of religious influences, the Catholic faith was a major source of inspiration to both Gustave Leroy and Jean Cayrol. As we can see from their poems, both Leroy and Cayrol drew strength during their deportation from the Catholic beliefs in eternal



life and in the communion of persons; Cayrol's poetry, however, is considerably more mystical than Leroy's and draws on the intellectual heritage of French Christian humanists, especially Péguy.

We should not, naturally, reduce any of this literature simply to the product of all these cultural factors mentioned; to take such an approach would impoverish the distinct, unmistakable individuality of each author's poetry. But it is nonetheless vital to recognise the ongoing impact of all these movements on camp prisoners' day-to-day existence, not least because the continuity of prisoners' belief-systems during their internment calls into question the very widespread critical discourse on the Nazi concentration camps, found in the works of scholars like Lawrence Langer, which casts this historical phenomenon as a devastating rupture with preceding intellectual and spiritual frameworks. The evidence of these poems suggests that this rhetoric does not tell the whole story and that inherited belief-systems sometimes proved highly resilient even in the brutal conditions of camp internment.

The freedom that comes out of this poetry is one found in the embodied self and rooted in (often oppressive) material reality. In contrast to what has been suggested by some commentators, this poetry is not usually about mental escape from the camps. What comes out consistently of this poetry is the hope and purpose that these prisoners were able to discover *within* their broken bodies and their vulnerable circumstances. This fact is illustrated in a particularly striking way in Honel's and Leroy's portrayals of the prisoner's deformed, grotesque body. While the grotesque has often been considered a disturbing and only partially human characteristic, the figure of the grotesque body is actually invested with humanity and even dignity in the works of both these poets, although in different ways. Leroy sees the emaciated, disfigured body from a compassionate perspective and brings out its childlike character. Honel, on the other hand, describes his own disintegrating body in graphic, even savage terms. In doing so, he refuses the temptation of alienation from his suffering body, choosing instead to fully assume it and even finding, ultimately, a freeing truth contained within this oppressed body. Freedom in the writings of the other poets is similarly based in the material realm. Whether it is a matter of confronting one's own bodily, sensory reality with unflinching consciousness, as Ulmann strives to do, or looking for evidence of surviving beauty and goodness in his dark circumstances, as Verdet does, freedom as these poets discover it is embedded in the fullness of their bodily experience in captivity.

Closely linked to the impression of freedom arising out of this poetry is the accompanying sense of *abundance* that emerges on occasion. In marked contrast not only with the external privations and restrictions inflicted upon camp inmates, but with the physical and interior diminishment experienced as an inevitable consequence of starvation and exhaustion, some poems actually indicate that the author is still experiencing a kind of fullness and richness. In one of his Buchenwald poems, Verdet imagines himself sending a message to his beloved, telling her that 'l'Oiseleur' has not able to take anything away from him: 'ses lacs', Verdet writes, 'n'ont pas su trancher l'aile et la patte / Ni sa cage empêcher l'aile battre et l'envol'. Temporarily at least, Verdet has apparently become conscious of having all that he needs (his unbroken will, his love for his wife and his firm hopes for the future), and in the progressive, joyful intensification of the poem's structure, we actually hear the plentifulness he is describing. Similarly, Cayrol's poems convey a definite impression of plenitude. His distinctive narrative approach, which I have called imaginative translocation, brings out the essential vastness and richness of his life in captivity as he envisages it. 'Nous portons,' Cayrol declares in one poem, 'toute l'aventure de Dieu en nous.' Despite the great suffering and physical confinement he is undergoing, Cayrol does not, in one sense at least, see himself as living a depleted, narrow existence; instead, he perceives a momentous story being enacted within himself by an abundance of divine grace. Not one of the least surprising revelations to come out of the French poetry from the camps is that prisoners might not only feel interior freedom but also could at times become aware of living in plenitude on some level.

Agency, in diverse forms, was an important component of this interior freedom. These inmates had little power to change or palliate their brutal captivity, but they could nonetheless choose to accept their internment and discover within it opportunities for pursuing some good. A basic consent to their unwilling ordeal was foundational to achieving agency, and this consent comes out particularly strongly from Ulmann's poetry. Agency resides in his efforts to come to full consciousness of his situation and to accept it, acting upon the manifesto that he had set himself before the outbreak of war: 'mieux vivre, tout en vivant ; mieux agir, tout en agissant. Sans choisir ce que nous donne la vie, mais en choisissant la manière de la recevoir.' Ulmann strives to make a free and conscious response to his circumstances, accepting them but not submitting himself fatalistically to them. Vehemently repeating *Il* throughout the poem *Le prisonnier*, Ulmann gives voice to his wish to remain a free actor in his imprisonment. Agency for Honel could also be said to begin in his pursuit of deliberate consciousness. Seeking to deepen through his poetry his profound awareness of his suffering body, Honel comes to identify in this afflicted body a potential for generous self-giving, reminiscent of the mother's gift of life to her child. True to his Communist

formation, Honel finds in his captivity an opportunity for brands of self-sacrifice and fraternity so radical that they can become just such a gift of life; even death itself from Honel's perspective can be assumed as a productive sacrifice for the good of humanity. Like Honel, Leroy sees a real possibility for courageous and free acceptance of death in the camps, but additionally, he stresses the crucial importance of prayer for the souls of his dead comrades. Confronted by the grim spectacle of piles of corpses, Leroy believes he can assist the souls of these dead prisoners by his prayers. His beliefs in the communion of saints and the efficacy of intercessory prayer thus enable him to discover ongoing agency even in a tragic situation where, it might be thought, he is powerless to do any good. As this comparison of the works of Ulmann, Honel and Leroy—three prisoners from widely diverging backgrounds—shows, camp prisoners with very different intellectual and spiritual formations could find ways of appropriating their ordeals and making them creative of some good.

Interior freedom was not just a theme in the literary work of these prisoners. It was often inscribed in the very form of the text: sounds, rhythm, accents and metric shifts enacted spaces of freedom within the poem. Expressive changes in rhythm define Ulmann's poems on a formal level as spaces of freedom within boundaries. Similarly, Verdet's masterly exploitation of the alexandrine makes freedom conspicuously audible in the very structure and rhythm of his poems. A vigorous, even aggressive metre, framing aphoristic declarations in short, pithy, heavily accented lines, lend Honel's poetry in *Prophéties des accouchements* an active, pugnacious quality. Through its formal construction and aural qualities, this poetry embodies freedom. While the performative function of this poetry never takes precedence over the semantic content, form still plays a significant and indispensable role in generating meaning in much of this poetry. Especially given that the idea of the Holocaust poem found in the work of critics like Rosenfeld and Rowland would suggest the emergence of a much more self-diminishing poetry from the camps, its form constrained by contemporary events, we cannot help but be struck by the fact that these poems as audible performances are so emphatic and forceful, transmitting so resounding an impression of freedom.

In the poetic language used in these texts, too, we are a far cry from Langer's cataclysmic language 'purified of the taint of normality' and George Steiner's 'post-human' language, incapable of hinting at the transcendent. Instead of crafting language in such a way as to expose its utter dysfunctionality, poets use language in constructive and inventive ways to uncover the transcendent realities that, they believe, are still accessible to them. Metaphor is one of the most important techniques in achieving this aim. Original metaphors play a crucial

role in both Honel's and Leroy's poetry, investing spectacles of death with transcendent meaning. This use of metaphor to bring to light salvific meaning contradicts not only Langer's and Steiner's framework, but also the prevalent opinion expressed in much of the scholarly criticism, which holds that metaphor in Holocaust literature is predominantly a means of representing gruesome realities in ways accessible to a reader having no first-hand knowledge of the *univers concentrationnaire*. As Honel and Leroy's poetry indicates, metaphor in this particular corpus of Holocaust literature plays a far more active and role than this widespread view would suggest, and Ricœur's poetic theory, as I have discussed, provides a helpful framework for understanding the function of this figure of speech in this context. A creative and iconographic technique, metaphor, for Ricœur, unveils completely new horizons of meaning in the world. In the poetry from the camps, metaphor is fulfilling precisely this function. Poetic language has a genuinely productive function, engendering new, redemptive meaning out of harrowing sights that, on the surface, could only provoke despair.

Other kinds of poetic language, besides metaphor, could also open up completely new vistas of meaning in the unprecedented circumstances into which these prisoners were plunged. Surrealism (used by both Cayrol and Ulmann) is perhaps the most intriguing of the poetic strategies which we find in this poetry. A privileged avenue leading into the resources of the unconscious, Surrealism becomes a means of illuminating these poets' experiences in the camps and disclosing profound existential and ethical truths. When Ulmann moves in two succeeding lines from *pense* to its homophone *panse*, coupling words on the basis of a purely formal link in the best Surrealist tradition, we can see what a flash of insight this seemingly arbitrary pairing contains for the poet: thought should be so intimately linked to compassionate action that it actually begins to participate in the healing of 'les blessures de la guerre'. In a similar way, Cayrol's repeated juxtaposition of *mûr* and *mort* is an important piece of Surrealist word-coupling, suggesting that death is closely connected to maturing and fruitfulness. Surrealism, with its capacity for nurturing antithesis and oxymoron, enables Cayrol to keep bringing out the tensions and paradoxes of Christian salvation that he sees at work in his ordeal. The resurgence of Surrealism, a movement associated with the creation of bizarre, disconcerting dreamscapes, in an environment so hideously strange and barbaric that it resembled nothing so much as a nightmare possesses a certain aptness. Yet it is perhaps equally remarkable that, despite its anarchic character, Surrealism could prove so effective a tool for both Ulmann and Cayrol in delineating a coherent and persuasive conception of freedom.

The ongoing presence of Surrealism in camp poetry, moreover, is illustrative of the way in which existing literary genres and movements converged to shape the poetry of the camps. While commentary on Holocaust literature by critics like Berel Lang and Michael Rothberg has stressed the rupture with the literary past that characterises this literature, the French poetry from the camps actually overwhelmingly follows in the steps of its literary predecessors. At the same time, inherited genres and styles are affected by the dark circumstances, evolving in sometimes quite dramatic ways. Verdet's adaptation of the lyric genre in his Auschwitz and Buchenwald poems is an especially interesting case in point. This poet's skill in weaving suggestions of the dark camp environment into a fabric of traditional lyric conventions creates texts that join the beautiful sonorities and imagery of the French lyric poem with more disturbing echoes of camp reality. In choosing this approach, the poet faces up to the horrific events around him while at the same time bringing out the endurance of beauty and goodness in a landscape of pervasive (but ultimately transient) evil. Likewise, Ulmann finds in Surrealism a means of both confronting and resisting the reality in which he finds himself. Integrating sinister elements of the camp environment into the Surrealist dreamscapes of his poems, Ulmann playfully inverts the portent of these distasteful elements so that they actually become expressive of his defiance and interior freedom. As shown by the works of these poets, literary tradition was not made obsolete by the barbaric novelty of the camps. Existing literary styles could be used and adapted in creative ways, leaving room for suggestions of the unprecedented horrors of the camps to be incorporated into texts, yet at the same time contributing to the elaboration of a compelling vision of freedom.

In the light of what my explorations of this poetry have uncovered, I want to return now to the question I raised at the beginning of this study: why did these five camp prisoners, and so many others, chose poetry as their favoured medium of expression? What could poetry 'do' that other literary genres could not? I have pointed to several key characteristics of poetry that made it so attractive a genre to these prisoners. Poetry was, firstly, a privileged means of disclosing ethical meaning in the poet's dark circumstances. Whether it was a case of metaphor transfiguring grotesque figures, as in Leroy's poetry, or a question of a deeply imaginative and mystical gaze bringing out the workings of divine grace in the poet's life, as in Cayrol's, poetry could cast a transformative light on a desperate ordeal. Furthermore, poetry had a capacity unequalled by other genres to express freedom in its very form. As a space governed by rules and boundaries but allowing deviations from these constraints, poetry could become a bold assertion of freedom and resistance in audible form. The great value many camp inmates attached to poetry in their desperate circumstances has, perhaps, something profound to tell us today about the important role that poetry can serve in

navigating and working through experiences of suffering, vulnerability and subjection to extreme limitations. The popularity that poetry attained in the camps challenges widespread notions of poetry as an arcane artform removed from the struggles and hopes of real life. With its capacity to uncover a guiding ethos in the midst of traumatic events and to give voice to freedom in its form, poetry can become, I suggest, a genuine means of reclaiming purpose and agency under conditions of extreme powerlessness.

But perhaps just as important as these factors, given the writers' imprisonment in a Nazi camp and their ardent anti-Fascist sentiments, was the fact that poetry *in itself* offered a resounding challenge to ideological discourse. With its genius for subverting linguistic conventions, lending to words hitherto unimagined meanings and even nurturing paradox, poetry might be said to inherently contest the hegemony of totalitarian thought and speech. Sometimes, this defining feature of poetry (its capacity to renew language, refashioning it in fresh and creative ways) was actually a major motivation for prisoners in writing poetry. Self-reflexive passages in their poetry indicate that some French prisoners were consciously striving to contribute through their poetry-writing to the regeneration of language, profoundly degraded as it had been by the ideologies of the era. Verdet's panegyric on the 'mots purs' of the poet and Ulmann's emphasis on the poet's vocation of reviving language point to the serious objective that these particular authors assigned to their poetry-writing in captivity. In a more general way, the febrile linguistic inventiveness, exploitation of polysemy and bold plays on words, techniques so widespread throughout this entire corpus, constitute a rejection of received discourses and propose alternative (and often audacious) visions of the world. The use of lively Surrealist word-play found in Ulmann's and Cayrol's poetry, the networks of words set up in Verdet's poetry coupling romantic and sinister associations, Honel's tendency to employ disconcerting and superficially irrational imagery and the novel metaphors that Leroy finds for the tragic sights around him: all these poetic strategies were a refutation of conformist thinking and especially of rigid ideological philosophy.

The power of poetry to undermine ideological discourse is not just something that was relevant to the prisoners in Nazi camps; this is a facet of poetry which has ongoing relevance today. While we might not be facing the same horrors which marked the era of the Second World War, recent years have witnessed the emergence of new ideologies in the Western world. Poetry has, I suggest, a real contribution to make to resisting such ideologies, precisely because it is 'l'expression vive de l'expérience vive', to use Ricœur's words. The poetic register offers a combination of dynamism, individuality and freshness that is truly exceptional among linguistic registers and gives it special force in subverting ideological

tenets. Hannah Arendt suggests that the essence of totalitarian ideology is its basic hostility to reality and to lived experience.<sup>253</sup> If this is so, then there could be no more potent antidote to intransigent ideological discourse today than the bold poetic voice of the individual, articulating his or her resolutely personal experience in all its complexities, nuances and contradictions.

Given these inherent characteristics of poetry which make it so powerful an anti-ideological tool, we might conjecture that, quite apart from the freedom which can be articulated in its thematic content and formal dimension, poetry is the literary genre of freedom *par excellence*. Such freedom inherent in poetry would decidedly help to explain the appeal that it held to so many French prisoners suffering captivity in the camps. When André Fournier wrote in 2014 that the compelling desire that seized him and his fellow camp inmates to put their thoughts into poetry was '[le] seul bien qui nous restait', he was expressing an intuition common to men and women across many different camps. Poetry in the concentration camps was a rare and deeply precious opportunity for discovering enduring freedom, agency and hope. Yet perhaps we could also say that the poetic word itself, by its very nature, broke free of the confines of the camps. An autonomous space not subject to the manifold restrictions in force in the camps, it lived, to use Aleksandr Kushner's words, 'by its own rules'. It drew on the ambient conditions, but also transcended them. It actualised freedom.

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<sup>253</sup> See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 3rd ed. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1967).

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- Collection of poems, stories and reflections written by Odile Arrighi-Roger in Ravensbrück, facsimiles of original manuscripts. FNDIRP archives.
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- Facsimile of a typewritten copy of poem written by Micheline Maurel in Ravensbrück, annotated by the author. Maurel family collection.
- Original manuscripts of poems written by Gabriel Blanc in Dora. Personal collection of Dr Hubert Blanc.
- Autographed copy of André Verdet, *Les jours les nuits et puis l'aurore*. Author's personal collection.
- Facsimile of interview with Jean Cayrol in *La Presse nouvelle hebdomadaire* (8 November 1968). FNDIRP archives.
- Facsimile of original manuscript written by Père Jacques (Lucien Brunel) in Mauthausen: <http://www.carmel.asso.fr/Son-testament-spirituel.html> Retrieved 12 July 2016.
- Original manuscripts of letters written by Marie and Simone Alizon to their father during their train journey to Auschwitz. Archives de France.

## **Interviews and personal correspondence**

Interview with Robert Créange, 11 November 2013.

Interview with Dr Bernard Py, 13 November 2013.

Interview with Olivier Maurel, Charles Maurel, Geneviève Gil and Guylaine Gil,  
19 November 2013.

Interview with Raymond Huard, 7 December 2013.

Interview with Dr André Fournier, 14 December 2013.

Interview with Caroline Ulmann and Daniel Simon, 7 December 2013.

Personal correspondence from Dr Hubert Blanc, 10 July 2014.

Personal correspondence from Dr André Fournier, 17 April 2014.

Personal correspondence from Michel Pateau, 22 November 2014.



## Appendix: List of French-language poets in the camps

### Poets whose works exist only in archives or private collections

I located the works of most the following poets in the archives of the FNDIRP and the Association Buchenwald-Dora. Claudine Fourel's poetry is from the archives of the Association de Ravensbrück, while Gabriel Blanc's poetry is held in Dr Hubert Blanc's private collection.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Camp</i>
Odile Arrighi-Roger	Ravensbrück
Gabriel Blanc	Dora
Gérard Blochet	Buchenwald (Laura)
Daniel Chlique	Mauthausen
Jean Dive	Buchenwald
Paul Fort	Buchenwald
Claudine Fourel	Ravensbrück
Henri Goldstuck	Aurigny
B. Kryger	Aurigny
Gustave Leroy	Dora
F. H. Manhès	Buchenwald
J. Pige	Buchenwald
Jean Salmsay	Buchenwald
'Thiarko'	Buchenwald

## Poets whose works have been published

The works of the following French-language poets from the camps have been published in single-volume collections or anthologies. The main anthologies I drew upon to establish this list were Michel Reynaud, ed., *La Foire à l'homme* (2 vols) (Paris: Editions Tirésias, 1996); André Verdet, ed., *Poèmes de Buchenwald* (Paris: Editions du FNDIRP, 1946); Yves Ménager, ed., *Paroles de déportés* (Paris: Editions de l'Atelier, 2001); and Henri Pouzol, ed., *La Poésie concentrationnaire* (Paris: Editions Seghers, 1975). I am also indebted to the list of the French poets of the deportation provided in an Appendix in Gary Mole, *Beyond the Limit-Experience* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002). While I give, wherever possible, the poet's full name, a number of surviving poems from the camps are signed only by a single name, probably either a nickname or the alias that the writer adopted in the Resistance.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Camp</i>
Luisa Aslanian	Ravensbrück
Françoise Babillot	Ravensbrück
Edouard Barbel	Natzweiler-Struthof
Anne-Marie Bauer	Ravensbrück
Maurice Beaufrère	Buchenwald
Jean Bezaut	Dachau, Sachsenhausen
Marius Biosca	Dachau
René Blicck	Neungamme
Maggy Bonnacaze ('Cigarette')	Ravensbrück
Roger Bonsirvent	Dachau
Pierre-Yves Boulogne	Buchenwald
Claude Bourdet	Buchenwald
Maurice Bourdet	Neungamme
Léon Boutbien	Natzweiler-Struthof
Maurice Braun	Buchenwald
Ady Brille	Buchenwald
Jacky Brun	Ravensbrück
François Camaret	Buchenwald
Jean Cayrol	Mauthausen
Pierre Cayrol	Sachsenhausen
Gérard-Martin Cendrier	Buchenwald
Louis Challier	Sachsenhausen
Gaston Charlet	Mauthausen
Denyse Clairouin	Ravensbrück, Mauthausen

Auguste Clary	Buchenwald
Pierre Créange	Auschwitz
Yves Darriet	Buchenwald
Gilbert Dreyfus (alias Debrise)	Mauthausen
Jacques Degrancourt	Natzweiler-Struthof
Jean Dive	Buchenwald
Guy Du Costal	Buchenwald
Pierre Durand	Buchenwald
Georges Duret	Sachsenhausen
Homère Fonteneau	Mauthausen
'Fosty'	Buchenwald
Claudine Fourel	Ravensbrück
André Fournier	Dachau, Buchenwald, Natzweiler-Struthof
Roger François	Dachau
J. Garric	Buchenwald
Pierre Genty	Neungamme, Sachsenhausen
Eva Golgevit	Auschwitz
Paul Goyard	Buchenwald
Gisèle Guillemot	Ravensbrück, Mauthausen
A. Hochmann	Mauthausen
Maurice Honel	Auschwitz
Michel Jacques	Dachau
'Jardu'	Ravensbrück
Pierre Kouyoumdjian	Mauthausen
Jacques Lamy	Buchenwald
Jean Lastennet	Buchenwald
Lucienne Laurentie	Ravensbrück
Claude Lauth	Buchenwald, Dora
Richard Ledoux	Buchenwald
'Legoff'	Buchenwald
Léon Leloir	Buchenwald
Louis Loison	Mauthausen
Lise London	Ravensbrück
J.-B. Loupia	Dachau
Pierre Macaire	Mauthausen
Eugène Malzac	Dachau
F. H. Manhès	Buchenwald
André Marie	Buchenwald
Michel Martin	Buchenwald

André Mas	Dachau
J. Mauduit	Dachau
Jean Maupoint	Mauthausen, Dora
Micheline Maurel	Ravensbrück
Violette Maurice	Ravensbrück
Félicie Mertens	Ravensbrück
Renée Mirande	Ravensbrück
André Nain	Buchenwald
'Nicole'	Ravensbrück
Joseph Onfray	Buchenwald
Anne-Marie Parent	Ravensbrück
Christian Pineau	Buchenwald
Vincent Planque	Buchenwald
Jan Pol	Dora
Henri Pouzol	Dachau
Jean Puissant	Buchenwald
Madeleine Rabjeau	Ravensbrück
Marcel Rabjeau	Buchenwald
Jean-Paul Renard	Dora
Anne-Marie Renaud de St Georges	Ravensbrück
'Richard'	Buchenwald
Jacques Richard-Mounet	Buchenwald
Catherine Roux	Ravensbrück
Moshe Rubinstein-Virolleaud	Auschwitz
Alary Saint	Buchenwald
René Salme	Buchenwald
Paul Segrétain	Buchenwald
Jorge Semprun	Buchenwald
Jo Sentenac	Buchenwald
Charlotte Serre	Ravensbrück
Marie Skobtsov	Ravensbrück
Pierre Templier	Buchenwald
Jean-Marc Théolleyre	Buchenwald
André Ulmann	Mauthausen
Lily Unden	Ravensbrück
André Verdet	Buchenwald
François Vernet	Dachau
Jean-Pierre Voidies	Neungamme
François Wetterwald	Mauthausen