

PART III

Bearing Witness III Literature and Memory

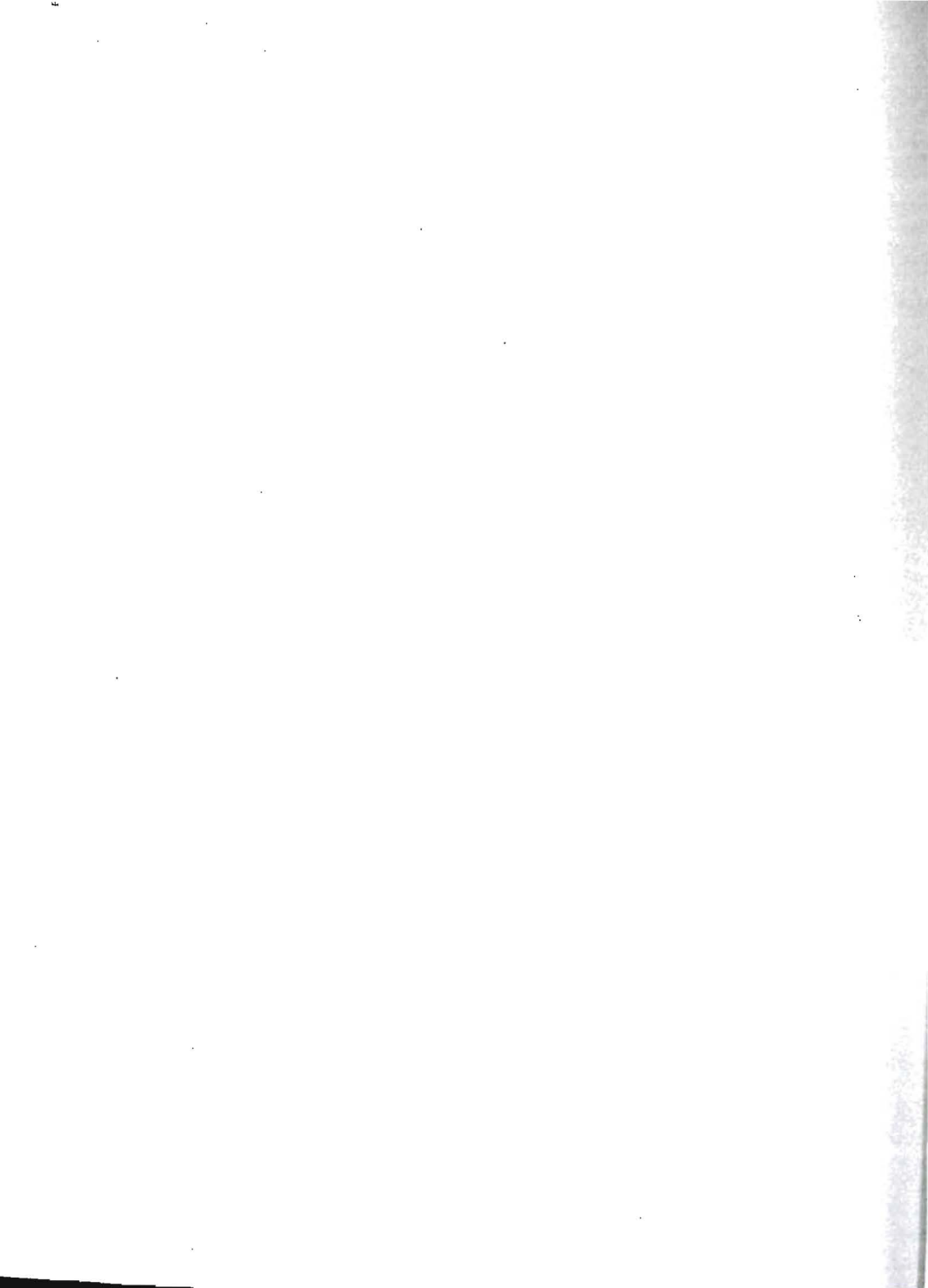
Introduction

'Cultural Memory in the Present' – this phrase, which provides the title for an influential book series published by Stanford University Press in the area of the theoretical humanities – insists, through the almost redundant use of 'in the present,' that it is at least as much what is current as what is recalled that is at issue when we reflect on cultural memory. The three essays in this section are all keenly aware of that. They understand that memory – whether private, collective, or cultural – is never innocent, and that it is subject to processes that can involve distortion, selectiveness, repression, and trauma. It is also true that memory can choose to dwell on certain experiences rather than others, glorifying certain incidents while downplaying certain episodes. For that reason, it is opportune to bear in mind that there has never been any process of cultural memory without an attendant operation in cultural amnesia. What this alerts us to is that what is remembered should always be related to reflection on how it is remembered, because a number of interesting conclusions may then be reached on those aspects which spur recollection and those which motivate repression. Memory, we therefore realise, is as conscious as it is unconscious. More importantly, it can be shaped.

It is that shaping that might be said to mark out cultural memory from collective memory. The former is more conditioned by such shaping than the latter. Literature has a particularly crucial role to play in that shaping. It can, after all, determine contemporary mythologies. Other parts of this book have considered the importance of such contributions to the shaping of cultural memory of the Malta War as private collections, memoirs, transcribed reminiscences, museums, and the practice of historiography. It would be a pity to exclude literature from that list, and the three essays here therefore provide some important reflections on the way in which the war is recalled in fiction.

Fiction, by its very nature, takes liberties with the truth and with reality. This leads to a paradox. The paradox arises because what fiction recalls of the war is likely to be, always already, selective, distorted, slanted, fantasised, reimagined, so that one ought perhaps not to speak so much of memory as 'rememory' (if we may here adapt an important term employed by Toni Morrison in *Beloved*

(1987)); yet, because of fiction's more immediate claim on the popular imagination than the labours of historians, curators, and private collectors, fiction can then take on a singular relation with fact or what might come to be taken for fact. In the case of the war in Malta this is a particularly tricky issue, because wartime Malta has provided the backdrop to a number of powerful and, in some cases, internationally famous novels, as these essays show. Literature therefore shapes cultural memory of wartime Malta in ways that are arguably more lastingly and popularly influential than many other texts and artifacts, especially when it does so through a novel as prominent as Thomas Pynchon's *V* (1963). At the same time, it should be recalled that the literature prompting the cultural memory of the war in Malta is always overwritten by alterity, with almost all of it being produced by those who did not directly experience it. The essays in this section are sensitive to that too, and show yet again the timeliness of reflecting on the fact that the experiences of the traumatised often live on in culture and memory only to the extent that they are recalled by the other.



Memory as Protagonist in Thomas Pynchon, Anthony Burgess and Nicholas Monsarrat

Clare Thake Vassallo

Three novels,¹ each of which depict, describe, in some way tell of the events of the Second World War, each from a particular point of view. Yet, all make use of the same trope or technique of looking back some years after the events had occurred, once the actual horror of the lived experience of war was at a safe distance in time. The notion of recalling, re-living, and re-telling relies on memory as the guiding principle, and the form of presentation is inevitably the past tense. This stratagem parallels reality to the extent that the phenomenon of the testimonies of the survivors of the Holocaust only came to be told some years after the events.² This suggests that the first reaction of the survivors was to try to forget, while came only later the need to try to remember, as the fear of forgetting threatened to dishonour the memory of the millions who were killed. The greater part of the testimonies are written or told by survivors³ and they may carry, to

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1. The three novels discussed in this paper are, Thomas Pynchon *V*, (1961), Vintage, London, 1993, Nicholas Monsarrat *The Kapillan of Malta* (London: Cassell, 1973), and Anthony Burgess *Earthly Powers*, (1980) Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1981. All page number correspond to these editions. References to these books will make use of the following abbreviations, *V*, *KOM*, and *EP*, respectively.
 2. Rossella Ropa, 'Preserving and Teaching Memory: WW1 and WW2 in Italian Schools', ACUME Conference on *Bearing Witness*, Bologna, September, 2003.
 3. One might remember a different form of testimony, such as *The Diary of Anne Frank*, which is both the voice of the events as they were perceived, and the poignant voice of one who was to become an eventual victim of the Holocaust.

varying degrees, elements of guilt associated with their having survived while others perished. These survivors become the witnesses, etymologically, the martyrs, of what they had seen and known, long tortured by the memory of those events.

In Thomas Pynchon's *V*, the interweaving of events that precede and follow the Second World War flow through the whole of the novel. Chapter Eleven, 'Confessions of Fausto Maijstral', however, deals with the particular reminiscences of a single character. This Maltese character, Fausto Maijstral, is an aspiring poet before the war breaks out. He works therefore, with words creating, forming, and building poems which, we are told, were strongly influenced by T. S. Eliot. Later, looking back on the events of the bombings in Malta he moves away from using words in order to create new images, to re-using words to re-create those images of destruction and death that he had witnessed. The chapter opens with a paragraph drawing together the notion of looking back as an act of coming to terms with the events of the past and those actions committed in the past:

It takes, unhappily, no more than a desk and writing supplies to turn any room into a confessional. This may have nothing to do with the acts we have committed, or the humours we do go in and out of. It may be only the room – a cube – having no persuasive powers of its own. The room simply is. To occupy it, and find a metaphor there for memory, is our own fault. (*V*: 304)

The initial connection between memoir and confession is indicated in the title of the chapter and also implicated within the genre of the memoir and of the autobiography. Illustrious precedents such as the *Confessions* of St Augustine, and Cardinal Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, briefly alluded to, set the tone for the blending of the religious, specifically Catholic, aspect of the sacrament of confession with the literary one of a first person narrative. Both the religious and the literary depend on the use of the past tense to tell of acts that have been committed or omitted, and on the memory of the individual to guide the narrative through those past events, to supply the context or the 'form and order' of memory, as Hume describes it. The intention of the narrative excursus into the past is ostensibly to obtain pardon or catharsis in the present.

Occupying a prime position in the context of the confessional is the feeling of guilt. The use of confession as a deliberate strategy for remembering while simultaneously coming to terms with one's guilt is implied equally in the religious associations as well as in the psychological condition of 'survivor's guilt'. It is not only the confessional which provides a healing process in the act of remembering. Freudian psychoanalysis makes a similar claim that the act of looking back functions as a means of therapy, providing an understanding of the past as a cause of the conscious and unconscious present, and in a way coming to terms with those events of the past which are responsible for making us who we are.

There is an undoubtedly fundamental overlap between the individual and the collective acts of recollection. The history of war in the twentieth century has not only shaped, marked and scarred individual lives, but lives of whole communities, and of countries. It is directly responsible and connected with the formation of the political and economic bloc that is the European Union, and with the particular brand of trans-Atlantic relations, as well as with the continued unrest in areas such as the Near East. Just as the repercussions of colonialism are the shaping forces of parts of the world today, so the repercussions of the Second World War are still present in regions, communities and individuals.

Like religion and psychoanalysis, literature partakes of this overall act of looking back and dealing with trauma. The literary text, created in solitude, based on fact as much as fiction, especially the fiction of individual lives as they make their way through the historically accurate reconstructions of the past, eventually becomes part of collective consciousness. As novels are read they come to form part of the reader's memory, as an individual and as part of a collective culture. The cultural memory of a group is formed as much by individual experiences as by shared historical and cultural memory.

Fausto Majestral describes the room within which he sits and writes:

The facts are history, and only men have histories. The facts call up emotional responses, which no inert room has ever showed us.

The room is in a building which had nine such rooms before the war. Now there are three. The building is on an escarpment above the Dockyard. The room is stacked atop two others - the other two-thirds of the building were removed by bombing sometime during the winter of 1942-43. (V: 305)

Objects, like rooms, are not only inert: they are also innocent. The emotional responses which objects used during the war might evoke are entirely our own responsibility, Fausto seems to suggest. To make of a room an empty, inert space, a metaphor for memory, or to turn objects into an *aide memoire*, is entirely 'our own fault'. 'Why?', he asks his implied reader, 'Why use the room as an introduction to an apologia?' (V: 305). Perhaps, simply because we can, because any object can be put to whatever use. Conversely, the objects that once filled rooms during the war are now used as triggers to set off the memories of those who had been there, or to create, often narratologically, a reconstruction of those times through the particular 'feel' of the objects that shared that time.⁴

The parallel Fausto draws, comparing his mind to a room occupied by memory, forms part of a long tradition. The mind had previously been compared to a room, a space filled with ideas, images or pictures, by Plato, for instance, who describes memory as a 'storehouse' in his *Theaetetus* and St Augustine in *Confessions* X, 13, as 'the great cave of memory' within which images are laid away, to be 'brought forth when there is need for them.' For Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, memory is 'as it were the storehouse of our ideas,' in which ideas are, 'as it were laid out of sight'. Hume, in *Treatise of Human Nature*, claims that 'when any impression has been present with the mind, it again makes its appearance there as an idea'. Therefore, Fausto Maijstral's metaphor of the room compared to the mind full of memories is hardly as innocent or new as he makes it seem, having, as it does, a long philosophical shadow in the debate on the nature of representation of memory and knowledge in that room, that 'storehouse' or hothouse, of the mind.

Fausto's addressee is his daughter, Paola, a name she shares, in female version, with St Paul who brought Christianity to the Maltese islands in the first century, making it, as Anthony Burgess states, 'St. Paul's holy island' (EP: 8). In Nicholas Monsarrat's second

4. A full discussion and particular examples of objects associated with the war in Malta, in both public museums and private collections, is carried through the three papers in this volume by Patricia Camilleri, Clare Thake Vassallo and Charles Thake.

'Hexameron' chapter, 'In the Year of Our Lord, 60. An Illustrious Gift from the Sea', he tells the events of St Paul's arrival by shipwreck to the shores of Malta. The little detail in the title word 'Illustrious' links St Paul's ship to the aircraft carrier of that name, deployed in the effort to liberate Malta from hunger and bringing much needed supplies. This event in 1942 proved not only to be a turning point in the war, but it took on the intensity of a miracle. Culturally it partly supplanted the cult of the male figure of St Paul while firmly installing the maternal figure of Our Lady as liberator of the islands.⁵ The tankers and aircraft carriers which made up Operation Pedestal arrived broken and bleeding, on the 15th August, the much celebrated feast of Santa Maria. Appropriately, therefore, the last of Monsarrat's inserted chapters, is 'Hexameron!: The Dawning Day of Father Salvatore: 15th August, 1942', signalling the Madonna as the figure of liberation from hunger, surrender and, ultimately, the bringer of Victory, as in the past.

Monsarrat makes use of the religious patterning firmly embedded within the cultural self-identity of the islands as a structuring device against which to plot the unfolding story of his protagonist, Father Salvatore: the son of a noble family living in a great house in Valletta, whose father had died and whose mother, Baroness Santo-Nobile, was a woman who was highly regarded and influential in society, familiar with bishops, Governors and politicians. The backdrop of a long series of historical events, from the arrival of the temple builders in Malta's pre-history to the liberating miracle of 1942, link Malta's

5. The religious repercussions of this event are connected to other similar occurrences in Malta's past. The 8th September, for instance, Feast of Our Lady of Victories, was the day on which, the Turks withdrew from Malta bringing the Great Siege of the 16th century to an end. The French Occupation of Malta also came to an end in the first week of September, 1800. An event cited by many as a miracle occurred on 9th April 1942 at Mosta Church, dedicated to Santa Maria, when a bomb fell through its dome, slid across the floor of the Church, which was filled with a congregation of close to 300, and did not explode. These events, and others as witnessed by the votive offerings in churches across the island, are culturally and religiously perceived as the direct intervention of Our Lady, protecting the citizens of the island during the Second World War and other difficult times.

cultural identity to its varied stages of acquiring a faith, specifically Roman Catholicism, which has become a firmly entrenched aspect of Maltese identity.⁶ These historical and cultural events are shared with the inhabitants of the shelter, the Kappillan's congregation, as a means of escape from the horrors of bombardment. The religious sermon is supplanted and transformed into an act of edifying and entertaining storytelling, just as the religious sacrament of confession is transformed into the profane act of auto-biography in Pynchon's *V*.

Monsarrat uses the device of the inserted story at regular intervals, thereby incorporating a different form and time of narrative into the main chronological plot, breaking down its steady rhythm. The textual insertions are written in a style that contrasts with the main narrative, often falling into the first person narrative voice of the teller of these tales, who is the educated Kappillan talking to his, mostly illiterate, flock. There is another noticeable narrative parallel with Pynchon's *V* here, in that Chapter Eleven is itself constructed as an insertion in a first person narrative voice. It breaks from the narrative movement of the whole novel, and it deliberately recalls Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* in its construction, making deliberate use of parody, which is a central theme in Mann's work, most noticeably in calling attention to the in the name of the main character, Fausto, and thus intertextually drawing on the vast literature on the theme of Faust in European, specifically German, literature.⁷

The main chronological narrative of *The Kappillan of Malta*, on the other hand, covers the period from 11 June 1940, the day of the first bombing, to 15 August 1942, with the arrival of what has come

6. Sixty years later it is the Maltese language that has taken the place of religion in defining what it means to be Maltese, or rather, as the defining principle of Maltese cultural identity. This point was raised in conversation with Rev. Joe Borg S.J. who succinctly suggested that the Maltese language has become an 'idol' for the people, in the old biblical sense in which Moses used the term.

7. Burgess makes one passing reference to Faust in *Earthly Powers* when his characters are in Germany at the time of Britain's declaration of war, and the war is described as 'sufficient testimony to German Faustianism, or soulselling for secular power', p. 378.

to be known as the 'Santa Maria Convoy'.⁸ These years cover the most intense and prolonged bombing ever experienced by a civilian population. The years 1940-1942 correspond to the events of the Kappillan's life which the narrator, whom the reader meets in the first and the last chapters of the novel entitled, 'Memoirs of a Day-Tripper' 1 and 2 respectively, is most interested in. The narrator discovers that immediately after the war the Kappillan moved to a monastery in Gozo, never to be seen alive again. The reasons were partly guilt of a sexual nature after he encountered a woman inevitably named Maddelena, and the guilt associated with the cult of personality that had been constructed around him as the 'Kappillan of the Catacombs' in Cospicua, the same town, incidentally, in which Fausto Majjestral is busy writing his own memoirs in another novel.

Religion, either in terms of faith, or in terms of ritual, is an important theme in all three of these novels, and a priest as a central character features in each of them. Whereas in Pynchon's Chapter Eleven we saw how the genre of the memoir is deliberately associated and blended with the attitude of the confessional, in Burgess and Monsarrat the religious theme is clearly announced in the titles of the novels. *Earthly Powers* which begins and ends with chapters set in Malta, uses the island as a frame and a point of departure for the grand, lifelong, autobiographical reminiscence. The protagonist, Kenneth M. Toomey, is given a quest, by none other than the Archbishop of Malta, to investigate and ascertain the saintliness of a recently deceased Pope who happened to be related to him through marriage and whom he had known for many years:

Now, having remembered so much, often accurately, but memory as a human faculty is subject to human limitations, we are condemned to invent so much of the past, I must prepare to remember, as accurately as is at all humanly possible the thing I was enjoined by His Grace of Malta to remember. (EP: 289)

It is against the personal anguish of the acceptance of the protagonist's own homosexuality and its unacceptance by the Church

8. Officially, this convoy was named Operation Pedestal, but locally it tends to be referred to as the 'Santa Maria Convoy'.

of Rome, driving a wedge between him and his church, that the long-winded recollection from 1917 to 1980 takes place. Through the brilliantly conceived battle between the devil and the Pope, which provides the climax to the quest, Toomey finally understands that the devil has won through appropriately subversive means, by manipulating an apparent miracle. The two world wars and Toomey's inability to participate as a soldier in either also feature as an instance of guilt and shame in the novel, whereas the wars themselves seem to be the work of the devil dominating the twentieth century, and getting stronger.

The Devil has his work to do. God permits him to do his work. [...] It is all in your English Bible. In Genesis. The fallen Lucifer was permitted to implant the spirit of evil in the souls of men. Where is evil? Not in God's creation. There is a great mystery but the mystery sometimes becomes less of a mystery. For the devil brings war, and out of the war comes goodness. (EP: 111)

Or so claims the Monsignor Carlo Campanati some years before he was made Pope.

Pynchon, Monsarrat, and the Rock

Pynchon and Monsarrat both take their protagonists down into the rock, into the hewn center of inert rock of which the island is composed. Monsarrat's Kappillan takes his flock into the already cut catacombs. The word 'catacombs' immediately brings to mind the underground warrens and burial places in which St Paul preached to the first converts on the Roman island of Melita, and the catacombs of the early Christians in Rome, the first witnesses of the faith, persecuted and martyred for their beliefs.

Monsarrat plays on a double notion, the contradiction and inversion of the sites of life and death. During aerial bombardments to be above ground was to court death, whereas to be tucked away below the earth in places more suited to burial was to protect life. Observations such as, 'He had forgotten the enormous vitality of this tomb,' (KOM: 405) accentuate this inverted relation. In addition, Monsarrat associates the idea of eternal life through religious faith

turning the catacombs, just as St Paul had done, into a surrogate church where 'mass was said twice a day'. The subterranean catacombs are equated with a vital force in both physical and spiritual terms: 'The nearer he got to the catacombs, the more his spirit revived. He felt that he was at last moving towards something real: something which lived, and had refused to die. . . . In the Cottonera Lines, which he had grown to love, there was still a living faith to be found.' (KOM: 405)

The rock is crucial in Pynchon's eleventh chapter where it has become the central metaphor and point of reference. Like Monsarrat, he also intertwines the apparent opposites of life and death together in phrases such as 'the womb of rock' (V: 320), blending the inert with the life-giving, and as an ultimate survivor 'the immortality of rock. Plausible. But apostasy.' (V: 340). Fausto, the narrator in this chapter draws a picture of Malta in terms of a rock:

Malta, and her inhabitants, stood like an immovable rock in the river Fortune, now at war's flood. The same motives which cause us to populate a dream-street also cause us to apply to a rock human qualities like 'invincibility', 'tenacity', 'perseverance', etc. More than metaphor, it is delusion. But on the strength of this delusion Malta survived.' (V: 325)

A comparison, in terms of resemblance, is also drawn between the substances of living bone and inert rock in the following passage written as an entry in the diary of Fausto II, also blends these apparent opposites of life and death, or rather, life and non-life:

Don't touch them, these walls. They carry the explosions for miles. The rock hears everything, and brings it to the bone, up the fingers and arm, down through the bone-cage and bone-sticks and out again through the bone-webs. Its little passage through you is accident, merely in the nature of rock and bone: but it's as if you were given a reminder. (V: 319)

Chapter Eleven is written entirely in a first person narrative style making use of the norms of auto-biographical writing. It is complicated by the fact that this single voice is fragmented into many voices which all belong to the same person. This polyphony within a single

voice is achieved through the incorporation of inserts from a diary written at earlier stages in Fausto's life. The tone of these entries is often made to seem self-consciously embarrassing to the narrator of the chapter whose voice strings the entries together through a linking narrative. The autobiographer is, in a sense, writing against time. He faces the past in the same way as one faces a mirror: that which is reflected both is and is not himself. A mirror presents and distorts depending on the viewpoint of the observer. A division of self, of the 'I' that writes and the 'I' that is the subject of the writing occurs. This is the minimal possible division. In Fausto's case this division is multiplied. In the mirror of the past he does not see one self, one life, but a multiplicity of identities, each different and particular to itself. The life of a person, he feels, can only be defined as a 'successive rejection of personalities', a continuous discontinuity. He is aware that an autobiographical text is not a 'true' reflection of a real life as it was lived:

no apologia is any more than a romance - half a fiction - in which all the successive identities taken on and rejected by the writer as a function of linear time are treated as separate characters. (*V*: p. 306)

as he writes, the author is taking on another role, that of narrator, which constitutes another character within the text whose life and death coincide with the text itself.

Fausto divides himself into four successive identities in his 'Confessions', which he names in chronological order from Fausto I to IV. Fausto V, not only is the implied voice of the narrator, a voice constructed by the text, but is also one of the many reflections of the mysterious title *V* scattered through the novel. The whole of his Confession is a complex textual fabric woven with the threads of these five voices from different moments in time who all speak in the first person. The notorious ambiguity and the deceptive transparency of the pronoun 'I' is in this manner highlighted. All the uses of the personal pronoun suggest the myth of single identity as we listen to it fractured into many parts.

These five identities represent stages in his life in Malta in the years immediately preceding the Second World War, during the war, and Malta in its aftermath. The different identities which populate

Fausto's mind are: Fausto I's ambition to become a poet within the 'grand school of Anglo-Maltese poetry', a name which also reveals the divided self in terms of a bi-lingual consciousness, typified by the Roman god, Janus.⁹ He also intended to become a Roman Catholic priest. Fausto II however, unexpectedly became a father and a husband. His daughter Paola being born on the day war was declared in Malta, 8th of June. The poetic destiny of the group of university poets 'was replaced by the discovery of an aristocracy deeper and older. We were builders'. The inert stone came to replace words as their preferred material means of construction. Fausto III was born 'on the Day of the 13 Raids' and the day his wife, Elena Xemxi, was killed. This central Fausto escapes the net of autobiography because after the trauma of his 'birth' the journal contains nothing but gibberish. He escaped from language and from humanity:

Fausto III is the closest any of the characters comes to non-humanity. Not 'inhumanity', which means bestiality; beasts are still animate. Fausto III had taken on much of the non-humanity of the debris, crushed stone, broken masonry, destroyed churches and auberges of his city. (V: 306-7)

Fausto IV was produced gradually as Fausto III 'passed a certain level in his slow return to consciousness.'

The progression of these identities is a movement from a position of close contact with language, Fausto I the aspiring poet, who used words as his raw material, to gradual and total loss of contact with language, which is the retreat of Fausto III. Language, like laughter, is a typical and defining quality of the human. This non-human Faust represents a retreat from life into a state of being inanimate, a state which most closely resembles that of the rock. In Pynchon's Malta, everything is hollow stone, the mind and the womb are two hollow stony shells where memory and language may be discerned. The only means by which to overcome the suffocating inanimateness

9. This double-faced Roman god, typically found at the keystone of arched entrances and gates, was a favourite of the Maltese writer, Francis Ebejer, who used it as a figure for the bilingual writer. This is discussed in some detail in Stella Borg Barthe's paper in this volume.

is through the human construction of language which Fausto begins to return to and which ultimately saves him. Peter Serracino Inglott points out the parallel in Goethe's *Faust* in that Fausto's descent 'recalls the famous descent towards the Mothers in Goethe's *Faust*, an excursion into hell, in the depths of which a reversal occurs, and out of total disintegration there re-emerges a kind of recovered unity.'¹⁰

The movement away from language and his return to it, can be seen against the mythological prototype turned archetype of Orpheus. The also descent into the underworld of Hades is paralleled both by the Renaissance Faust, who descended into hell but was unable to return since he had given his soul, and the descent into the hellish world of war and the non-human world of the rock by Fausto. This Fausto returns claiming both his soul and language back from the grasp of the Devil. The poet, as suggested by the Orphic myth, descends into the depths of life to experience the totality of living and dying, thereafter to return and through language share his knowledge. The experience of war is that of loss and death, of the brutish and the inhuman. It is also part of life and therefore part of the raw material that the poet must work with. Fausto V describes how the poet must face that nightmarish world:

But in dream there are two worlds: the street and under the street. One is the kingdom of death and one of life. And how can a poet live without exploring the other kingdom, even if only as a kind of tourist? A poet feeds on dream. If no convoys come what else is there to feed on? (V: 325)

Furthermore, it is in 'feeding' off this world of nightmare and its sub-conscious fears and desires, and their eventual transformation into fictional worlds of words, or lies, that the function of poet resides:

Poets have been at this for centuries. It is the only useful purpose they do serve in society: and if every poet were to vanish tomorrow, society would live no longer than the quick memories and dead books of their poetry.

It is the role of the poet in the 20th Century. To lie. (V: 325-326)

10. Rev. Prof. Peter Serracino Inglott, in 'The Faustus of Malta: An Interface of Fact and Fiction in Pynchon's *V*', in *Individual and Community in Commonwealth Literature*, Daniel Massa, ed. (Msida: Malta University Press, 1979, p. 233.

The parallel levels in life is one of the major themes developed in *V*, it is suggestive of the underlying meaninglessness of the brute reality of which our lives are composed but which we must ignore as a strategy for survival. It is only the heroes in the novel who descend into the sewers of New York or the rock shelters of Malta, where they fully discover the total lack of meaning and the 'innate mindlessness' present in a 'universe of things'.

The retreat into the rock shelters is an important element in novels that deal specifically with the war in Malta, as well as emerging as a central topic in the oral testimonies of survivors of the war in Malta, many of whom were children or young adults at the time:¹¹

The vibration is impossible to talk about. Felt sound. Buzzing. The teeth buzz: pain, a numb prickling along the jawbone, stifling concussion at the eardrums. Over and over. Mallet-blows as long as the raid, raids as long as the day. You never get used to it. You'd think we'd all have gone mad by now. What keeps me standing erect and away from the walls? And silent. A brute clinging to awareness, nothing else. Pure Maltese. Perhaps it is meant to go on forever. If "forever" still has any meaning. (*V*: 319-320)

This description, with its detailed evocation of sensory detail, rings so true to the reader's ears that it could easily have been taken from one of the testimonies at the first part of this volume. In fact, the sensory detail evoked coupled with the writing style of a diary, blurs the distinction between fact and fiction stylistically creating a feeling of the authentic even in imaginative descriptions.

Memory and Betrayal

Towards the end of *Earthly Powers*, the protagonist Kenneth Toomey considers the writing of his own autobiography. He discusses his proposed title, *Confabulations*, with his sister, Hortense, who greets it as 'a wet sort of title'. Toomey defends his choice, saying that:

11. Memories of life in the shelters loom large in the oral testimonies archived by the OHC discussed in the paper by John Chircop and specifically in the testimonies provided in this volume.

In psychiatry, according to this dictionary here, it means the replacement of the gaps left by a disordered memory with imaginary remembered experiences believed to be true. Not that I see the difference. All memories are disordered. The truth, if not mathematical, is what we think we remember. (EP: 645)

What we think we remember often lies somewhere between truth and fiction, employing aspects of both. Some might call this a betrayal of the truth. Yet, this inevitable constraint applies equally to the writing of novels as to the writing of diaries, giving witness to events, or to the telling of one's experiences in the form of memoir or testimony. The most 'truthful' of accounts are nevertheless caught between the act of remembering and the act of inventing, between memory and imagination.

In Germany at the start of the Second World War, the character Concetta in *Earthly Powers* asks Toomey to preserve an account of recent horrors in the diary form she had written her evidence. Specifically she asks, 'Don't make a novel of all this.' His retort that 'Novels can be more real than -' is simply met by her with a desperate cry for truth preserved through martyrs and witnesses. 'These are bad bad times', she insists:

'This is the worst century that history has ever known. And we're only a third of the way through it. There have to be martyrs and witnesses.'

'They're the same thing, you know.'

'You see what I mean,' she said kindly. 'A certain tendency to frivolity. I know that *martyr* means witness. You're too used to dealing with words.' (EP: 377)

In other words, she is appealing for 'real' testimonies of the atrocities committed during the war. She sees his commitment to words as 'frivolous' and dealing with 'unreality', and yet, it is within a novel that we read this exchange, it is in words that it is brought to us, and this is true whether it be the words chosen by the writer of 'real' testimony or the writer of novels. Finally, their subject is the same.

Perhaps a 'frivolous' point that might be mentioned is that since the reading of novels tends to be more enjoyable than the reading of straightforward testimonial accounts, then the novelist probably

plays a greater part in providing 'witness' to countless readers of those events of the past whether or not he happened to be there, whether or not the writer was an actual eye-witness to events.

The problem of truth in the novel is an interesting one. If the novel does have access to truth, then what kind of truth is it? It must partake more of the imagination than of memory, that pair of mental images which philosophers have tried to define, often unconvincingly. David Hume, for instance, tried to differentiate between the two by claiming that memory involves 'belief' in an idea, whereas imagination does not, and that memory must preserve the original 'order and form', whereas in the imagination ideas may occur in any order.

The similarity and difference between memory and imagination has presented itself as an interesting philosophical question, from Plato and Aristotle to the more recent philosophers of language. How is the individual to recognize a memory from an image or idea that is imaginary? We seem to be able, most of the time, to tell the two apart, and yet it has proved difficult to define them. Imagination is more directly related to artistic creation, disordered as Hume claimed it be, but as Burgess reminds us, memory is also disordered and furthermore, it is full of gaps, gaps which in all probability can only be filled imaginatively.

The historian is also heavily implicated in the problematic involved in this division since he is in search of verifiable evidence of past events. He is, therefore, closer in spirit to memory than to the imagination, but a skepticism about the very possibility of 'objective knowledge', as discussed by Michel Foucault, wreaks havoc with some of the assumptions of supposedly straightforward historical archival research. In 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History' (1971), Foucault challenges history's claim to provide neutral objectivity. All subject matter, as well as all objects, are 'ordered things' and it is their ordering, in terms of literary genres as well as categories and catalogues, that reveal the frame of mind of the writer or of the episteme within which he is writing, rather than the objective status of the things or facts themselves.

A common feature in all written accounts, fictional, historical or testimonial, is the reliance on narrative. Each tells its story or provides

its account ordered in terms of the dominant genre, whether it is the populated fiction of direct speech and narrative voice of the novel, the apparently objective and uninvolved stance of the historian, or the first person narrative account of the oral testimony with its suggestion of language being transparent and the facts coming through unmediated. The 'raw material' made up of ideas, facts or experience, which are not entirely separable, have to have order imposed upon them to make them make sense. That order is provided by the narrative, the means the novelist manipulates most consciously.

The suspicion of the novelist's art is not altogether unfounded. When the novelist draws attention to his own fiction in terms of the problem of transcribing the real, then he moves beyond self-reflexivity using those very objections to sway the reader. The narrator, who in *Earthly Powers* is the protagonist speaking in the first person, says:

You will see my problem here. If this were fiction, I should have no trouble imposing on you a suspension of disbelief, but it is not fiction and I require your belief. And if there is a sense in which all reminiscence is fiction, though the creativity of memory is not in the service of the art which is itself in the service of a deeper and factual truth. Memory lies, yet how far we can never be sure. I can do no more than transcribe memory. (EP: 276)

A very convincing plea and yet used to introduce a passage in the book, itself therefore a part of the fiction, about exorcism and therefore a difficult, dangerous and for some incredulous, subject. Again reflecting on the freedom of the novelist in the face of fact, Toomey muses that, 'Being uncommitted to verifiable fact, [. . .] I can indulge in the free fancy that often turns out to be the truth.' (EP: 454)¹² The truth of

12. Another passage from Burgess about the novelist's control, or lack of it, over his characters makes interesting reading on this point:

I went to my study and, sighing, numbered a new sheet of foolscap (140), recalled some of my characters from their brief sleep and set them talking. They started talking, to my surprise, about the novel which contained them, rather like one of those cartoon films in which anthropomorphic animals get out of the frame and start abusing their creator.

'A novelist friend of mine,' Diana Cartwright said, 'affirmed that a satisfactory novel should be a self-evident sham to which the reader could regulate at will the degree of incredulity.'

fiction, as opposed to the factual truth of statistical data, and on the other hand, the truth of personal testimony - all attest to being truth, or having access to truth, while all being different. Different in what way? Different versions of the truth? Or different truths?

Sometimes, the urge to provide the 'facts' can be stronger than the desire to create with those facts. This can cause problems for the novelist who tries to be 'true' in terms of verifiable historical detail rather than trusting in 'free fancy that often turns out to be the truth'. This seems to be the case in Nicholas Monsarrat's writing of *The Kappillan of Malta*. There are frequent shifts in style from narrative to a more journalistic type of writing in which the character's point of view seems forgotten in the author's immense desire to provide the details and the statistics of, for instance, those crucial convoys, their casualties, their losses, and their ultimate victory:

But on the other side of the account, on the day of the Mother of God, the four ships, and now this last fugitive from the Santa Maria convoy, had brought their cargoes safely in. The tremendous cheering which now broke out again as the ship was nudged towards her berth, the waving of flags and handkerchiefs, hailed the miracle. No convoy in the history of the island siege has ever been more desperately needed, nor more loved when at last it arrived. [...]

It might have thought that a convoy of fourteen ships escorted by 2 battleships, 4 carriers, 7 cruisers, 24 destroyers, 8 submarines, 4 corvettes, 4 minesweepers, and a tug - that such a convoy with four escorts for each merchant ship, would have a very fair chance of scoring 100 per cent. But perhaps its enormous size was a fatal flaw; it was far too big for

'A sham, eh?', Walter Dunnett said. 'Even when there are verifiable historical personages in it? Like Havelock Ellis and Percy Wyndham Lewis and Jimmy Joyce?'

'They're not the same as what they would be like in real life. The whole thing's a fake. We're fakes too. We're saying what he wants us to say. You see that Degas over there - he could turn it into a Monet at a stroke of the pen. He could reduce the number of oranges in that bowl from eight to three. He could make me die now of a heart attack.'

I nearly wrote: *She died at once of cardiac arrest*. This would not do at all. I got up and walked around my study. For the first time I was being made to realize how tenuous my art, such as it was, was. This was the impact of the age, in which the suspension of disbelief was slowly being abandoned. (EP: 520-521)

secrecy, and having been spied on by commercial aircraft and venal fishermen it was waylaid, well in advance, by E-boats, bombers, and torpedo-bombers from Sicily, and a whole line of U-boats patrolling between Algiers and Majorca. (KOM: 396-7)

This description goes on with no reference to the characters through whose senses this description is supposed to be coming to us. This sustained documentary style bulletin goes on for pages before the characters are remembered and drawn back into the picture.

The uncontrolled desire to bring in the details which better suit the style of history writing or journalism seem to create an obstacle to the emotional and intellectual response of the reader. In traditional terms, the 'suspension of disbelief' does not hold. A similar dilemma seems to haunt the First World War poems of Wilfred Owen. The desire to communicate the details and the reality of the suffering is often given priority over the poetry. However, whereas in Owen's case there was a need to tell of a truth that was not being communicated, in Monsarrat's case these details were already communicated elsewhere in documents and in popular discussion, the novel having been published in 1963. The excessive presence of statistical detail often inserts itself like a newspaper within the narrative structure of the novel. On the other hand, reading *The Kappillan of Malta* does provide the reader with the satisfaction of an abundance of statistical and factual detail, if that is what the reader happens to be looking for.

This same argument can be put to all kinds of art, cinema being no exception. The notion that one can simply record the 'real' in its unmediated form is proved faulty in the long run. In the case of news-film or journalistic cinematography, the product is still necessarily a reflection of a limited point of view it reflects what the person working the camera believed important or relevant and excluded that he felt was less so. Time may prove certain decisions faulty and incomplete, manipulated to reflect a bias, in other words, put together with much the same sort of faults as the artist is accused of operating, but often without offering the artistic merit which provides enjoyment on the part of the viewer, or reader, as the case may be. As Toomey says when adjudicating at a post-war Film Festival in Cannes, 'Propaganda,' I said, 'not art. I vote that it be

eliminated as ineligible for serious consideration.' [. . .] 'Art tells the truth . . . and this does not.' (EP: 577 - 78) And earlier, in discussion with some American soldiers in London during the Blitz, Toomey is told that:

'He wanted trick camera shots, but Meyer said what we're doing is just recording history for posterity. Kind of pompous.' (EP: 466)

The implication that simply avoiding 'trick camera shots' guarantees that the end product is in some way a more authentic version of the facts of 'history' does not hold. And it is a small step to substitute the idea of 'trick camera shots' for the novelist's 'tricks'. Each one is ultimately only that, a version of events, of history.

The 'truth' is under construction. There are different kinds of construction of the same events, and each is not mutually exclusive. That testimonies should prove to be less 'true' than might be expected, or that literature can be more 'true', that history selects and is organized from a precise point of view thereby excluding other possible explanations, shows each version to be incomplete, shows each to be constructed along the axis of a particular genre, denies each the total vision which could, ideally, make up the truth. What we do have are different versions that produce a mosaic of the past but still the total picture eludes us. The very notion of truth, a complete and total truth, is ultimately only a fiction of our desire. The bringing together of a range of versions of the same events produces a composite view of the past that is both complementary and suggestive. Evoking the emotions of lived experience, coupled with 'hard' statistical facts and data, and supported by inert objects in collections and museums, all attest to the complex phenomenology of past lived experience.

Despite all of these means to grasp and understand the past, it is within the novel that the problematics of truth, language and memory are most honestly and fruitfully discussed. The most interesting aspect of these three novels under discussion here is that this very debate takes place within the pages of the novels. This is not a theoretical discussion about truth and memory applied to these works but a discussion which takes place within them. The novel is capable of providing the site for self-reflexive discussion about its own kind of authenticity and about the haunting veracity of fiction.

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