

# Language of Dark Times. Canetti, Klemperer and Benjamin

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What relationship is there between violence and language?\* What happens when language is the main target of attack? We should perhaps begin by defining the inner logic of violence, and then tackle the question of the monstrous hybrid it has created with language. In one of the texts that make up the collection entitled *Difficile Liberté*, Lévinas remarks that violent action is an 'action where one acts as if one were the only actor: as if the rest of the universe existed only to *receive* the action; thus every action is violent that we suffer without wholeheartedly collaborating in it'.<sup>1</sup> So violence has two characteristics. On the one hand, it is fed by a fundamental illusion, that is, a fiction of the will that imagines it is so super-powerful and autonomous that it thinks that by itself it can decide the fate of 'the rest of the universe'. On the other hand, it is never an authentic action, because it prevents others from owning it and becoming co-actors themselves. Thinking perhaps of Spinoza, Lévinas suggests that violence comes into being from the moment when individuals decide to stop being part of the ordinary world of actions and think, 'like an empire within an empire', they are the unique cause of their acts and gestures.<sup>2</sup> This subjective decision is clearly a control decision that contradicts the requirement of common sense, which is to be understood here as a sense of the community. It leads inexorably to consigning others to the world of effects in order more easily to turn them into eternal victims. In Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, Prince Mishkin perfectly embodies the figure of the other who continually 'receives' the action. But when interplay between the will and its own mirrors becomes excessive, individuals always end up confusing the reality of the world with the exaggerated trust they put in their own prejudices. Since the analyses of the psychiatrist Minkowski at least, we know quite well that the more the certainty naturally accompanying the prejudice increases and expands until it borders on madness, the more violence is likely to grow.

## **Power and survival**

When he goes deep into understanding the basic structures of violence and power by analysing paranoia, Canetti studies madness in the same kind of way as the author of the *Traité de psychopathologie*. Focusing on the conscious psychic being of individuals, not the nervous aspect of mental illnesses, Minkowski had stressed the role of 'raving conviction' in the general economy of madness and developed the idea that the logic of psychopathological phenomena always springs from a number of absolute certainties.<sup>3</sup> Madness is based on a series of inflexible convictions, which explain, for instance, why the world of

madness often seems to the clinician more coherent than that of so-called 'normal' people. Taking as a model the case of Schreber, ex-President of the Dresden Senate and a serious paranoiac *vis-à-vis* the Eternal, Canetti brings out 'the inner aspect' of power as well as its target. Because it is impossible to know exactly how it is 'obtained', he attempts to find out what it is 'aiming at'. Starting from the example of an individual who is utterly convinced he is the sole survivor of a terrible catastrophe that has destroyed humanity, he shows that what power is aiming at is survival. In a lapidary phrase, Canetti summarizes his main thesis: 'the situation of survival is the central situation of power'.<sup>4</sup> What should we understand by 'survival'?

What we are dealing with is a certain relationship between life and death, from which a position of power is derived. We should remember that Freud himself announced in his *Considérations actuelles sur la guerre et sur la mort*, published in 1915 amid sound and fury, how trench warfare was in the process of destroying humanity's illusions and forcing upon people a new vision of death. Not only did the myth 'of a community born of civilization' and the illusion of 'citizenship of the world' both collapse, but in addition everyone discovered deep inside that it was no longer possible to 'deny' death. Henceforth 'you were forced to believe in it'.<sup>5</sup> It is true that Canetti was not fond of Freud and even less of the Freudians, who were distanced by their jargon from psychic realities.<sup>6</sup> But what he means by the term 'survival' indicates a relationship between life and death that is just as 'ambivalent' and marked by an identical denial. Indeed the survivor continues to deny death because he does not believe in his own death. Similarly, the 'hero' is like the 'survivor' because he needs to confront death in order to feel truly alive. The higher the pile of corpses, the more his perception of his individual existence is justified.<sup>7</sup> The key to paranoid madness lies in the fact that this impression of survival becomes systematized. When pushed to its extreme, paranoid madness matches exactly a representation of life that cannot be lived other than as immortality snatched out of the mud of circumstances and obtained through the number of dead among whom one is not counted.

Schreber's case fascinated Canetti because it also gave him an experiential analogy with sovereign power. Just like the paranoiac, sovereign power is characterized by the 'need for invulnerability' and the 'fervent desire for survival'.<sup>8</sup> It avoids contractualist fictions by dismissing the pact that traditionally marks the final exit from the state of natural violence. The new context of 'dark times', in Arendt's phrase, the advent of the atomic bomb and the various outbreaks of nationalism, revealed to Canetti that violence and death are consubstantial with sovereignty. Led by the facts themselves to the cliff edge, he does not hesitate to suggest that Schreber's case is an 'exact mirror' of all sovereigns, Hitler included.

Like Schreber, Hitler also had the impression that he was a survivor. For him, 'the sense of the mass of the dead was decisive'.<sup>9</sup> The dead of the Great War were his dead: 'it was his mass *to all intents and purposes*'. But that 'mass of slaughtered victims pleaded to be increased'.<sup>10</sup> As a survivor, Hitler had to keep faith with them. Trapped by the 'illusion of continuous growth' ruling the mass he had escaped from, he therefore chose to pursue glory and greatness by making the disaster of the First World War still more terrible. As war spread, the dead of the present were continually added to the dead of the past. Very quickly they again formed a single, uniquely vast mass and in a vicious circle Hitler's sense of survival was strengthened.

## Wounded language

Moving from the hypothesis of an individual all-powerful will to the analysis of the autistic nature of sovereignty, how does violence happen to cross with the notion of language? Referring again to Lévinas's phrase, can one 'receive the action' through language? To tackle these two points, a minimal functional definition of language is needed here. If we follow the teachings of linguists, among them Saussure in his *Cours de linguistique générale* or Benvéniste, we should make the distinction between *langue* and *parole*. In Chomsky's terms, the feature of *langue* is to provide a 'competence' that it is *parole*'s business to realize and act upon, rather like the muscles that give life to the basic skeleton. *Parole* is defined as the sum total of the acts that translate 'competence' into 'performance'. Thus it is through *parole*, in its concrete dimension, that the abstract level of *langue* can be reached, the latter acting in fact as a kind of transcendental form of all language experiences. We all possess *langue*, which represents the communal level, but it is up to the particular individual to take charge of translating it into action. From this viewpoint, not only does the distinction between *langue* and *parole* make language possible, but *langue* also means that everyone can understand what other people say. *Langue* is the capacity for speech (*parole*) and also the human community's treasure.

Is this functional balance between *langue* and *parole* maintained when violence breaks into language? This question must be answered in the negative since, when it is applied to language, violence tries to target *langue* in its essence, both as a condition of *parole* and as the matter of common sense. By doing so, it exercises control over the innermost part of the person. It attempts to disturb the relationship that all of us have with our basic common language (*langue*). This is what Arendt hints at when she says that, even during the blackest times, her mother tongue (*langue*) did not go mad.<sup>11</sup>

There is a remarkable analysis of this perverse game that violence plays with language in the book by Victor Klemperer on the 'LTI', a Latin abbreviation meaning the 'Language of the Third Reich' (*Lingua Tertii Imperii*). Conflating the two levels of lived experience and scientific observation, Klemperer describes the development of the spirit of a nation – in this case Germany of the 1930s and subsequent years – with reference to the changes taking place in its vocabulary. He analyses minutely the linguistic behaviour of a period that was indeed facing what Canetti calls the 'situation of power'. His experience as a philology teacher qualifies him to give particular attention to the many phenomena of involuntary memory that, better than any other indicator, reveal the destructive operation of a manipulated language. With involuntary memory it is in fact a kind of unknown *langue* that is speaking instead of *parole*. You suspect that this unknown language is still the German language. But the atmosphere of 'disturbing strangeness' surrounding each phrase spoken leads the philologist to think that day-to-day speech (*parole*) is too often not quite itself and shot through with uncontrollable semantic outbursts:

Talleyrand's phrase is always quoted, that language exists to hide the thoughts of the diplomat (or more generally any cunning, suspect individual). But it is just the reverse that is true. What someone deliberately wants to hide, from others or himself, and also what he unconsciously carries within himself, language brings out into the open.<sup>12</sup>

It is as if another *langue* were being expressed through this *parole*. This other *langue* is not the *langue* that conditions the exercise of *parole* and enriches common sense, but the

'*langue of the conqueror*' that everyone, including the 'conquered', adopts unthinkingly. Thus the neighbourhood grocer punctuates his sentences with a 'radiant *Weltanschauung*' without being naturally aware that that expression was especially fashionably in turn of the century neo-Romantic circles and that the political decision by the government to bring it back into use explicitly refers to that long tradition of opposition to logical rational thought.<sup>13</sup> This example demonstrates clearly that *LTI* works on the 'energy potential in every syntagm'. This type of potential continues to act even when it is disconnected from its 'original historical network'<sup>14</sup> and it waits, like a little time-bomb, for the moment when it will explode. *LTI* words are comparable to 'minute doses of arsenic; you swallow them without noticing, they seem to have no effect, and after a while, lo and behold, the toxic effect is felt'.<sup>15</sup> When an expression pops into memory, it is almost always by surprise and without the person knowing where it comes from exactly.

Like Orwell's 'newspeak', *LTI* uses many terms that are already known to everyone. By inventing new combinations, taking away a prefix here and adding a suffix there, it gradually gives another meaning to these everyday terms. Practised at misusing words, it often reappropriates them in a non-neutral context and repeats them in a distorted way. Thus the Nazis used the word 'fanatic' so obsessively and in such an unusual sense that they managed to contradict the German language itself (which has always marked this term as negative), making it for the first time a term of praise. Repetition kills meaning, like a slow-acting poison, or, in the phrase Klemperer borrows from Schiller in order to make better use of it with reference to *LTI*, like a 'language that composes poetry and thinks for you'. And so henceforth *parole* is no longer the conscience of *langue*.

### **Belief and abrogation of responsibility**

The best way to block any real development in linguistic usage, therefore, seems to be to freeze syntax and stabilize signifiers. Language is attacked at its heart and at the same time the most available portion of collective memory is invalidated. Everyday grammar now acts as a channel only for predetermined expressions, which feelings (that are themselves manipulated) end up mirroring.

In this context, it is certainly worth spending some time reflecting on the passage in which Klemperer recounts his meeting, after the war, with one of his old students, who had decided not to volunteer for rehabilitation. Apparently this young man had never been a militant. Why did he not ask to be recognized as a 'victim of Nazism', given that he was someone who had been compelled to join the Party? Why did he not wish to wipe away his shame publicly? Klemperer is stupefied by the realization that it is language itself that holds his student back. Despite the enormity of the crimes revealed, it is language that impels him to say of Hitler: 'I acknowledge all that. It was others who misunderstood him, betrayed him. But HIM, I still believe in him.'<sup>16</sup> This is the power of what Klemperer calls the 'language of belief'. This language not only changes the semantic organization of memory and the history of linguistic usage, it creates a sort of unpayable debt that does not arise from any prior promise. This is an extreme paradox of identity: how, without having entered into any contract, can one bind oneself to belief through language?

In *Masse et puissance*, Canetti puts forward a hypothesis on the nature of orders that perhaps helps to understand how – and not why – a person can continue, once the war is

over and its crimes known, to believe in a proven dictator. Indeed, what happens in a mass experience? When individuals 'enter' the mass (whether it is a case of large-scale religious rites or a popular demonstration), they lose all consciousness of their identity. They 'throw off' all the 'responsibility for distancing' that weighs on their shoulders in day-to-day life. The mass is experienced first as standing outside oneself, which gives the specific 'relief' of finally becoming like one's neighbour.<sup>17</sup> According to Canetti, the schizophrenic also experiences the mass (here we see the paradigmatic significance of the Schreber case). But he carries the mass inside him. In a precise sense, he interiorizes it. To the extent that a mass is alive within him, the schizophrenic feels continually tormented by a number of 'goads'. These 'goads' are orders sent to him by a countless multitude of souls fantasmatically inhabiting his body. The schizophrenic's subjective world is a tortured world that he also sometimes tries to escape from in order to 'throw off' the pain caused by these innumerable goads.

This description of a mass experience, in its dual aspect, both communal and individual, leads Canetti to reflect more deeply on the nature of orders. According to him, every order can be broken down into a 'goad' and a 'impulsion':

The impulsion forces the person receiving it to carry it out, in accordance with the content of the order. The goad stays inside the person who carries out the order. When orders work normally, as one expects them to, the goad remains invisible. It is secret, unsuspected; or else it will show itself almost imperceptibly in a slight resistance prior to the order being carried out. But the goad burrows deep into the person who has carried out an order, and stays there without changing. There is no psychic reality that is more stable. The content of the order persists in the goad; its force, its significance, its limits, everything was determined forever at the very moment when the order was given. Years or even decades may pass before this submerged, stored part of the order, its image in miniature, resurfaces. But we must be aware that an order is never wiped out; the fact that it has been carried out does not kill it off, it is in storage forever.<sup>18</sup>

The goad stands for a certain memory of the order. This means that its effects are not restricted to the moment of execution alone and that it acts over the long term. The simple fact of executing an order determines the future life of the person executing it. You never forget an order. Its content becomes a destiny that may remain unknown for years, but it reappears some time or other, most often involuntarily. The later this content appears, the more it seems like a natural cause that had to happen, that no one can resist. Significantly, this assimilation of the order does not stop one distancing oneself from it. The goad not only keeps the order alive. Its other function is to legitimize, in the last resort, a psychology of denial of responsibility. Thus the goad becomes 'an intruder' the individual uses in order not to accuse himself. Rather it is the goad that he accuses, that

foreign body, the real culprit so to speak, that he carries everywhere inside him. The stranger the order, the less you feel at fault over it, the more clearly detached he continues to live, in the shape of the goad. It is the perpetual witness to the fact that you were not yourself the perpetrator of such and such an act. You feel you are its victim, and so there is not the smallest feeling left over for the true victim.<sup>19</sup>

Following this analysis of Canetti's, we could conclude that the 'goad' may be the deepest, and the most shared, source of 'languages of belief'. It is true that Klemperer's

old student did not experience the mass, if it is correct that he was never a militant. But we know that the linguistic conditioning operated by totalitarian societies is always so effective that it is never necessary to go to meetings in order to fall victim. Peppered with slogans and 'Barnum effects', language changes its nature. It becomes literally 'hysterical' (Klemperer). Each word represents an order that unwittingly 'goads' the collective memory. Remember that Lévinas defined violence as 'receiving the action' without 'wholeheartedly' collaborating in it. With Klemperer and Canetti we now understand that receiving an action through language means not only unwittingly mouthing the phrases of a stereotypical language. It means being ruled by words themselves. To such an extent that one tragically ignores, when the moment arrives, the need for personal vigilance or the demands of the world of community.<sup>20</sup>

The price of this attitude is all the harder to pay because we all think ourselves capable of avoiding the pernicious effects of the 'language of belief', as if all we had to do was think hard about it. But in such a context no one can really escape, not even the professional philologist. What is true for sea-sickness is true for language too:

Far away as we were, we were still unreachable: we watched with interest, we laughed, we made fun. And then the sea-sickness came closer, the laughter stopped and around us people were running to the ship's rail. I studied closely what was happening around and inside me. I told myself that something resembling objective observation must exist and that I had been trained in it, that a strong will existed, and I was looking forward to breakfast – however, my turn came and I was forced to rush to the rail exactly like the others.<sup>21</sup>

The philologist is in the same situation as ordinary people who think they can avoid sea-sickness and realize, at the last moment, that it is utterly impossible. In his turn he repeats phrases he hears around him without exercising the scholar's critical faculty. Even while reproaching himself for not being careful enough about his choice of language, he notices regretfully that he too is giving in, without being aware, to the false finery of the 'language of belief' and that he, like many of his colleagues, is forgetting correct usage.

## Responsible language

How then do we retrieve reasonable language usage? How do we think about responsibility *within* language? In other words, can words keep 'open the pathways *between* human beings'.<sup>22</sup> The case of totalitarian language is of course an extreme one. But this extreme case should not allow us to forget that any language can be as much pure madness as complete wisdom. Here too Canetti understood the power schema that inhabits language and makes it strangely ambiguous. Words do not always work to communicate, nor to bring people closer. Often words tend towards isolation in that private language that we have all carefully developed for our own use.<sup>23</sup> In any case, we all possess an 'acoustic mask', that is, a secret language that helps us defend ourselves against other people and preserve our personal universe. Nevertheless, it may happen that language assumes the duty of 'metamorphosis'. By 'metamorphosis' Canetti means in particular the ability to 'feel what a person is behind their words', a very special



attention to the protean nature of real life.<sup>24</sup> Thus *langue* is torn between two possibilities: one dragging it towards a decidedly private usage and plunging individuals into the compulsive contemplation of their sick, self-accusing inner self, as can be seen in almost all the characters in Canetti's novels and plays; the other stripping language of its guilt mechanisms, tearing off the masks of fragile identity and liberating the chance of recalling a common world. The problem is that violent acts feed on the former tendency and often prevent *langue* from being realized appropriately in a shared *parole*.

As we know, it is History's shocks that arouse a sense of responsibility. Through them events become intimate; they suddenly transform what was in the political domain into a 'personal destiny'.<sup>25</sup> Canetti also concurs when he says he no longer wants to 'separate what is public from what is private'. Faced with the lightning advance of the 'enemies of humanity', which forces those two worlds to merge 'in a hitherto unknown way', he adds that poets, but also people in general, cannot remain 'above their time'.<sup>26</sup> If 'humanity is defenceless only where it has no experience, no memory',<sup>27</sup> it is the business of language to mark out a position of freedom and responsibility for people who wish to live the present as present in a period that nevertheless finds no signs of its conscious history.

This is not a simple task. In fact it is all the more difficult because astonishment, the naïve source of the genuinely philosophical view, has undergone a considerable change of character. At the period when he wrote his 'Speech for Hermann Broch's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday' in November 1936, Canetti observed that he was living in a time

when it is possible to be astonished by the most contradictory things: for instance the centuries-old effect of a book and, at the same time, the fact that all books do not have a longer lasting effect. By belief in gods and, at the same time, by the fact that we do not kneel constantly before new gods. By the sexuality that assaults us and, at the same time, by the fact that this division does not go deeper. By the death we never welcome and, at the same time, by the fact that we do not die in our mother's arms from sorrow because of what awaits us. Perhaps there was a time when astonishment *was* that mirror we often mention, which produced phenomena on a smoother, calmer surface. Today that mirror is broken; and the flashes of astonishment have become smaller. But even in the smallest flash, no phenomenon is reflected on its own any more; inexorably it brings its opposite with it; whatever you see, however little you see, is once more cancelled out, by the simple fact of your seeing it.<sup>28</sup>

The impossibility of a single representation, the break in the simple reflection and the consequent proliferation of viewpoints, all this bears a strong resemblance to the language experience of Babel, which, far from being a negative one *per se* in Canetti's work, can nevertheless lead to the individual's excessive retreat into a private language. The mirror metaphor is not without depth. It signifies the loss of a relationship of natural, unequivocal naming between words and things (one word for a single thing), which is the first step in the process of the privatization of existence. The fragmentation of astonishment and the break in the mirror are proof that a language is exhausted and no longer able to offer a shared experience, except in the blind repetition of identical terms.<sup>29</sup>

In these conditions it is the duty of poets to breathe life back into language. The speech sets out their three duties: first, poets must be 'dedicated to their time', like a 'dog' who sniffs each of the smells specific to the period; then, they must 'summarize their time' and show a 'passion for universality that no small task can deter, that neglects nothing, forgets nothing, omits nothing and does not try to make things easy for itself in any way';

finally, they must force themselves to 'stand up to their time' so as not to become frozen in the 'comprehensive unitary image' they have of it and to be in a position to retain the power to contradict.<sup>30</sup> Canetti stresses the absolute requirement to perform these three duties, for it is the only way to react to the sudden complication of the times. The blurring of the present places an obligation on everyone to 'belong to their own time against their own time' and in particular on poets to assume their role of 'guardians of metamorphoses'.<sup>31</sup>

In these words we again come across the spirit of the second *Considération inactuelle*, on the 'uses and disadvantages of history for life'. Here Nietzsche criticized the overdevelopment of the sense of history, affirming *a contrario* the need to forget in order to live. But he also defined, more subtly, the 'inactuel' character – 'intempestif' 'untimely', depending on the translation – in terms of a dual experience that consists, on the one hand, in not being a 'child of one's time' and, on the other, in 'remembering at the right time'.<sup>32</sup> Conceiving responsibility as an experience of time and language, Canetti keeps faith with Nietzsche's dual requirement to let go of the present and hold on to it. In his view, being responsible requires us to sharpen our sense of time in order to better prepare for the business of preservation and also criticism. While the former supplies all the lines of descent and all the heritage, the latter redistributes them and assumes the task of reinventing them. It is in this sense that neither the poet, nor any other citizen, is 'above the sum total of memories' they carry within them.<sup>33</sup>

### The ethics of the narrator

To conjure up the figure of Benjamin at this point in the analysis will maybe seem paradoxical. On the one hand, unlike Klemperer, his subject is not totalitarian language; on the other, he is seldom presented as a student of narrative. And in any case, what remedies can narrative supply for the 'barbarism' of the twentieth century? Does Benjamin not write that the Great War of 1914–1918 made men poorer 'in communicable experience' and that the survivors 'came back from the front dumb'?<sup>34</sup> His essay on *Le narrateur* suggests, nevertheless, that the experience of narrating is potentially one of 'metamorphosis' and that it keeps 'open the pathways *between* human beings', as Canetti has it.

It is true that Benjamin never forgets the profoundly therapeutic value of narration. On the autobiographical level, he knows how much the story his mother told him about his family background helped him shake off illness when, as a child in the grip of fever, he hovered between life and death. The evocation of his ancestors' past, the very transcendence of memory, further transformed by the warmth of his mother's words, made him recognize that it was pointless to succumb to the temptation of death.<sup>35</sup> Pain cannot hold out against narration. The reason is simple: whoever the teller of the story is, he always seems, to the person listening or reading, to be 'someone returning from afar'. Having travelled the distance of memories, he acquires a certain 'authority' for his narrative and 'usefulness' for others. These two criteria explain why narration is at the crossroads between tale and ethics.

Where stories are concerned, the narrator does not try to prove what he says, or to explain how the events he is describing hang together. He resembles the chronicler, and not the historian, because he wishes to preserve the chunk of memory that someone will



one day repeat. True memory, the one that is passed on, requires the 'simplicity' of the chronicle. No story, according to Benjamin, can hold the listener's attention if the narrator adds to the multitude of facts an extra layer of explanatory or psychological detail. Narrative has no need of abundance. Its sole task is to weave stories together, as in the *Thousand and One Nights* where Scheherazade 'remembers another story connected to every part of her stories'.<sup>36</sup> This is a model that replaces the notion of author with continual exchange of a shared language. All narratives begin by mentioning the circumstances of the first telling and then the narrator enters the story in his own right. What matters in narrative is the fact that the person telling a story begins afresh something that has already begun, finding a place in a need that pre-exists him. The narrator somehow takes advantage of a crossroads in the meaning to pick up the narrative and follow its twists and turns.

If this way of telling stories is not the novelist's way, that is because the narrator is continually encouraging the listener to participate in the story he is being told. Whereas the novelist thrusts readers back into the solitude of a narrative they cannot share in, the narrator places listeners in the space of inherited memory. Unlike what happens between novelist and reader, the narrator-listener relationship is of necessity a living 'companionable' one, which precludes 'private consumption' in the digestive meaning of the term.<sup>37</sup> It invites listeners to take advantage of the many turns in the narrative in order to become the narrator themselves.

As the story is passed from person to another, the narrator may give advice and prove helpful. This is where the ethical dimension is added to the story's momentum. The fact that the advice is good shows in and of itself that it never comes from outside, like an applied patch, but carries on weaving in the threads of a story that already has a memory: 'Indeed, advice is perhaps less an answer to a question than a suggestion as to the continuation of the story (which is in the process of unfolding). In order to be given this advice we must therefore start by telling our own story'.<sup>38</sup> The essence of responsibility could very well stem from advice, as so defined. For advice is not given unless the person seeking it is the same as the one who opens the dialogue. Only a narrator can come and ask for advice from another narrator by offering his own story. Advice legitimates the initiative of individual words. But it also reveals the permanence of common sense since the sharing of the narrative that it leads to turns narrators into co-narrators. If violence divides people by destroying the foundations of ethical action, as we have suggested following Lévinas, advice tends rather to bring them together in the unity of an experience passed on and reappropriated. In this respect it acts as a guide for the individual. It even raises the narrator to the level of an 'image in whom the just see themselves'.<sup>39</sup> By starting to tell our own story, each of us then understands that we use a language that is not foreign to the world of human beings and 'is determined not to give in'.<sup>40</sup>

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What general conclusions can we draw from this analysis of the relationship between language and violence that bring together three such different authors as Canetti, Klemperer and Benjamin? There are at least two. First, the violence that affects language upsets considerably the temporal coordinates of the field of human experience to the extent that it robs individuals of the ability to tell their own story. When *parole* is no longer the conscience of *langue*, the temporal use of reason – by which we all recognize the signs of

our history – is rendered impossible. Common sense is gradually absorbed into a discourse that becomes uniform by continually giving in more to usages, the memory of which is imposed. Secondly, the fact of being dispossessed of language most definitely prevents a period from naming itself by clarifying its relationship to present-day events. The present is experienced as a time of transition that has neither beginning nor end, a kind of elastic, disturbing time that waits for circumstances alone – and not historical consciousness – to draw a line between the before and after. At that precise moment the human spirit takes fright at being no longer able to experience history with eyes wide open. At the opposite end of the spectrum to dull apathy lies lively questioning of each historical experience of the present: without an ethics of language, is an awareness of the period possible?

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## Notes

- \* This article results from a lecture given at the Institut des Hautes Études sur la Justice (Paris, April 1999). I am grateful to Antoine Garapon and Thierry Pech for their invitation.
1. 'Éthique et esprit', in *Difficile Liberté* (Paris, Albin Michel, 1998), p. 18 (author's italics).
  2. The expression is Spinoza's, see *Ethics*, III, preface.
  3. See the *Traité de psychopathologie* (Paris, PUF, 1966), pp. 14–16.
  4. 'Puissance et survie', in *La conscience des mots* (Paris, Albin Michel, 1989), translated by R. Lewinter, pp. 32–33.
  5. At the same time, not only was the 'secret of heroism' discovered, but life 'became interesting and found its full content again', in *Essais de psychanalyse* (Paris, Payot, 1981), translated by P. Cotet, A. Bourguignon and A. Cherki, p. 29.

6. On the differences between Freud and Canetti, see M. Revault d'Allonnes (1995), 'Le faux éclat de la mort', in *Elias Canetti* (Paris, Editions du Centre Pompidou), pp. 99–106.
7. 'Anyone who has been to war knows that feeling of being exalted above the dead. He may be grieving deeply for his comrades; but they are few in number, whereas the death toll keeps on rising. The feeling of might that comes from being alive, unlike them, is stronger than every affliction, it is a feeling of being *chosen*, while the fate of all the others is clearly identical. Just because you are still there, you feel that in some way you are the *best*. You have proved yourself because you are alive. You have distinguished yourself among many others, since all those corpses are not living. He who manages to survive is a *hero*. He is stronger. He has more life', in *Masse et puissance* (Paris, Tel-Gallimard, 1986), translated by R. Rovini, p. 242 (the italics are the author's).
8. *Ibid.*, p. 490.
9. 'Hitler, according to Speer', in *La conscience des mots, op. cit.*, p. 219.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 222 (author's italics).
11. 'All the same it was not the German language that went mad!', see G. Gaus's interview with H. Arendt, 'Seule demeure la langue maternelle', in *La tradition cachée* (Paris, UGE 10/18, 1997), translated by S. Courtine-Denamy, p. 240.
12. *LTI. La langue du IIIème Reich*, presented by S. Combe and A. Brossat, translated by E. Guillot (Paris, Albin Michel, 1998), p. 35.
13. See chapter 22, *op. cit.*, pp. 191–8.
14. As P. Roger (1998) writes in his article, 'Victor Klemperer. Le philologue et les fanatiques', in *Critique* (Paris, Minuit), no. 612, May, pp. 195–210 (here pp. 204–205).
15. *LTI. La langue du IIIème Reich*, ed. cit., p. 40.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 163 (the capitals are in the text).
17. *Masse et puissance*, ed. cit., pp. 14–15.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 324.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 352.
20. In her article on Lessing, Arendt mentions the phenomenon of 'inner emigration', which 'on the one hand implies that there were people inside Germany who behaved as if they were no longer part of the country, like exiles, and on the other hand indicates that they were not truly exiled, but had retreated into an inner world, into invisibility of thinking and feeling'. And she goes on: 'it would be a mistake to imagine that this kind of emigration, exile from the world into an inner world, existed only in Germany, just as it would be wrong to imagine that this emigration ended with the downfall of the Third Reich'. It is clear that the 'language of belief', as Klemperer understands it, makes the person who uses it all the more a stranger to the common world and its future heritage, since it proscribes all responsible use of words. For the quotations from Arendt, see 'De l'humanité dans de "sombres temps". Réflexions sur Lessing', in *Vies politiques*, translated by B. Cassin and P. Lévy (1986) (Paris, Tel-Gallimard), p. 28.
21. *LTI. La langue du IIIème Reich*, ed. cit., pp. 69–70
22. 'Le métier du poète', in *La conscience des mots*, ed. cit., p. 339.
23. It was when he was listening to Karl Kraus's wild talk that Canetti understood how 'individuals have a form of language by means of which they distance themselves from everyone else [. . .], that words are blows that bounce off others' words; that there is no greater illusion than believing that language is a means of communicating between human beings', see Karl Kraus, 'Ecole de la résistance', in *La conscience des mots*, ed. cit., pp. 57–58. On this point, see also the article by M. Schneider (1981), 'Elias Canetti: la défusion des langues', in *Le Temps de la réflexion* (Paris, Gallimard), II, pp. 384–402.
24. 'Le métier du poète', in *La conscience des mots*, ed. cit., p. 340.
25. This 'personal destiny' is exile, as Arendt remarked soon after the Reichstag fire (27 February 1933), see 'Seule demeure la langue maternelle', in *La tradition cachée*, ed. cit., p. 237.
26. See the 'preliminary remarks' to *La conscience des mots*, ed. cit., p. 7.
27. 'Hermann Broch', in *La conscience des mots*, ed. cit., p. 29.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 15 (the italics are Canetti's).
29. 'But these words that cannot be heard, that isolate, that create a kind of acoustic form, are not rare or new, invented by creatures concerned for their uniqueness: they are the most commonly used words, set phrases; the most ordinary of words; things that have been said hundreds of thousands of times; and that precisely

- is what people use to indicate their own wishes', see Karl Kraus, 'Ecole de la résistance', in *La conscience des mots*, ed. cit., p. 58.
30. 'Hermann Broch', in *La conscience des mots*, ed. cit., pp. 15–20.
  31. It has already been emphasized that multifarious life is poetry's subject. Canetti introduces this new phrase 'guardian of the metamorphoses' in these words: 'In a world focused on achievement and specialization; that sees only the peaks we strive towards in a kind of narrowly restricted line; that expends all its strength on the cold solitude of the peaks; that nevertheless despises and ignores everything that exists to one side, the multiple – the real even – that is not rushing up to the peak; in a world that more and more forbids metamorphosis because it is contrary to the single goal of production; a world that thoughtlessly accumulates the means of its own destruction and, at the same time, tries to stifle the human qualities acquired in earlier times, which could still exist and obstruct it; in such a world, that could be called the most deluded ever, it seems necessary for some [poets] to continue, in spite of everything, to exercise that gift of metamorphosis', see 'Le métier du poète', in *La conscience des mots*, ed. cit., p. 339. On the different meanings of this notion of 'metamorphosis', see the comments by Youssef Ishaghpour (1990), in *Elias Canetti. Métamorphose et identité* (Paris, La Différence), especially pp. 31–50 and pp. 93–94. The first formulation is taken from R. Esposito (1993) in his analyses of Canetti's notion of responsibility, in *Nove pensieri sulla politica* (Bologna, Il Mulino), pp. 73–78.
  32. *De l'utilité et des inconvénients de l'histoire pour la vie*, in *Oeuvres philosophiques complètes*, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (1990), (Paris, Gallimard), Vol. II (1), p. 98.
  33. 'Hermann Broch', in *La conscience des mots*, ed. cit., p. 16.
  34. 'Le narrateur', in *Ecrits français*, presented and introduced by J. M. Monnoyer (1991), (Paris, Gallimard), p. 206.
  35. 'Pain was a dam that resisted only at the start of the narrative; later, when it had got into its stride, pain was undermined and carried away into the abyss of oblivion. Caresses made a bed for this torrent. I loved them, for my mother's hand already rippled with stories that would soon pour from her mouth in abundance. It was these that revealed the little I learnt about my ancestors. In my presence an ancestor's career was recounted, a grandfather's ordered life, as if I was meant to understand how premature it would be to abandon, through an early death, the considerable assets I held in my hand because of my origins. Twice a day my mother would measure the distance that still separated me from that death. With great care she immediately carried the thermometer to the window or lamp, and handled the narrow little tube as if my life was there inside it', in *Enfance berlinoise*, translated by J. Lacoste (1998), Les Lettres nouvelles-Maurice Nadeau, pp. 82–83.
  36. 'Le narrateur', in *Ecrits français*, ed. cit., p. 219.
  37. This is J.M. Monnoyer's phrase in his commentary prefacing 'Le narrateur', p. 203.
  38. 'Le narrateur', in *Ecrits français*, ed. cit., p. 208.
  39. It is perhaps this image, with which the essay on 'Le narrateur' closes, that leads Arendt, in her portrait of Benjamin, to remind us that 'every period for which its own past has become problematical, to the extent that ours has, must in the end face the phenomenon of language; for what is past has its ineradicable roots in language, and it is in language that all the attempts to wipe out the past for ever come to nought', see 'Walter Benjamin, 1892–1940', translated by A. Oppenheimer and P. Lévy (1986), in *Vies politiques* (Paris, Tel-Gallimard), p. 304. For the etymology of the notion of advice (*Rat*) and its value as a guide, see J.M. Gagnebin's remarks (1994) on the loss of advice that, on the contrary, leaves the individual disoriented and bereft (*Ratlosigkeit*), in *Histoire et narration chez Walter Benjamin* (Paris, l'Harmattan), pp. 87–112.
  40. With reference to one of his texts ('Crise des mots'), Canetti writes: 'In it I wanted to write what happens to a language that is determined not to give in: the true subject of that piece is language, not the speaker', in 'Preliminary remarks' to *La conscience des mots*, ed. cit., p. 8.