

## *Past Irony: Trauma and the Historical Turn in Fragments and The Swimming-Pool Library*

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After reaching a zenith in the metafiction and poststructuralism of the 1970s, the ironic spirit that so informed modernism has been renounced by many of its former devotees in the name of history. Metafiction has given way to the renaissance of the historical novel, the most significant literary form of the past two decades, and deconstruction has given way to trauma theory, which emerged in the early 1990s and has become an influential branch of theory. Novelists and critics in large numbers have moved, it would seem, past irony and done so by looking to the past, but not to just any past. History today is very often conceived *as* catastrophe and historiography as a form of mourning. Frederic Jameson's famous sentence from *The Political Unconscious* – 'History is what hurts' – has become the touchstone of much contemporary historically-minded criticism.<sup>1</sup> Why this view would suddenly seem so true might be obvious if we consider how much of post-World War II history has hurt. We live in an age in which technological innovation, political rivalries, and media exposure have made catastrophes on a massive scale possible and perceptible by large audiences. The turn to history in the light of the often seemingly endless flood of catastrophes seems inevitable, and it is just this claim of inevitability that trauma theory makes. Strong as this claim might be, however, the turn from irony to history has created as many problems as it has resolved. It has had deleterious effects on the consideration of both fact and fiction, as I will attempt to show through a discussion of a work of non-fiction (or, a work that claimed to be non-fiction), Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments* and a discussion of a novel, Alan Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-Pool Library*. Before taking up these books, however, it will be necessary to

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provide some background on the development of trauma theory and to make some preliminary critique of its methods and goals.

#### **The Fall of Paul de Man, The Rise of Trauma Theory**

In the lecture ‘The Concept of Irony’, Paul de Man describes the rejection of irony for history as a temptation to which most accounts of irony, if not most ironists, succumb. Discussing the arch-ironist Frederic Schlegel, de Man declares, ‘The best critics who have written on Schlegel . . . have wanted to shelter him from the accusation of frivolity, . . . but in the process they always have to recover the categories of the self, of history, and of dialectic, which are precisely the categories which in Schlegel are disrupted in a radical way [by irony]’ (182). De Man rejects this recourse to history out of hand. For him, irony is a ‘destructive power, [a] negative power . . . which by demystification destroys the form’ (182); irony cannot be stabilized in a narrative of development because it is precisely what disrupts narrative. Throughout his career, de Man denied the value of irony for establishing epistemological foundations. In ‘The Rhetoric of Temporality’, de Man writes, in his typically ironic style, ‘It is a historical fact that irony becomes increasingly conscious of itself in the course of demonstrating the impossibility of our being historical’ (211). Later, in ‘The Concept of Irony’, he warned his audience that ‘any expectation that one may have that deconstruction might be able to construct is suspended by [irony]’ (184).

Against this dictum, however, trauma theory attempts to find in deconstruction the basis for and the means of constructing an ethical practice of reading and listening appropriate to an age blighted by enormous historical disasters and, as Cathy Caruth, one of the major figures in the field, points out, forced to confront ‘the possibility . . . [revealed by deconstruction] that we have no reliable access to experience or to history and hence no basis for political action or ethical decision’.<sup>2</sup> Caruth finds a parallel between the deadlock of contemporary theory and the paralysis – physical, emotional, epistemological, and narrative – that lies at the heart of the experience of trauma. In a sense, trauma and theory can solve each other’s problems. Trauma theory can help the survivor move beyond the insistent repetition of the experience of the catastrophe and in so doing help theory overcome its own sense of irrelevance and impotence.

Caruth defines trauma as ‘an overwhelming experience of sudden catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena’.<sup>3</sup> Caruth complicates our understanding of trauma by suggesting that it might be more accurate to speak of trauma as the effect not of encountering but of missing history. Trauma’s interstitial residence in the memory gives rise to one of the greatest difficulties in treating trauma. On the one hand, the traumatized subject needs to testify to his experience

and achieve some mastery over it in the form of narrative, but to turn the catastrophe into just another story is to deny its power, because narrative's structure denies one of trauma's most salient features – its resistance to form. For this reason Caruth and Shoshana Felman sometimes equate the imposition of historiographical conventions and expectations on trauma as tantamount to an act of violence. Felman describes the 'totalized, settled, understood, and closed account' of traditional historical narratives as 'a speech act of disposing of the scandal of the bodies'.<sup>4</sup> (Here we can begin to see why irony needs to be expelled from deconstruction for it to become trauma theory; even more than narrative, irony functions as a distancing technique.) The painful paradox of trauma is that while the victims want to move beyond the past and its pain, the experience of giving up the past can be equally painful.<sup>5</sup>

For this reason, the person responding to traumatic testimony must do so with great sensitivity, and it is deconstruction that Felman and Caruth believe provides guidance here. The traumatized survivor relies on the listener 'as a means of passing out of the isolation of the event', Caruth argues, but the same listener threatens to turn the event into an abstraction stripped of 'the force and truth of the reality that trauma survivors face and quite often try to transmit to us'.<sup>6</sup> Caruth radically recasts the critic's role as she reinterprets the very meaning of reading in ethical terms. The critic's job is not to interpret, to discern and preserve the best that has been thought and said in a culture, or to be oppositional; the critic's responsibility is to *listen* and respond, to be a witness to the testimony. '[T]he problem of reading is not only a struggle with meaning', Caruth argues, 'but the encounter with an *imperative to listen*, the demand for an *act of listening* that is nonetheless *not simply an act of comprehending*' (CE, 6). Deconstruction provides the means to become this 'therapeutic listener' (T, 10), for its 'rethinking of reference is not aimed at eliminating history, but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, of precisely permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not' (UE, 11). To make sense of this point, let us turn back to de Man and his challenging work on the performative aspect of language.

In a 1983 lecture entitled 'Kant and Schiller' de Man describes the textual moment that occupied most of his critical interest.

[W]e have been aware of something which one could call a progression – though it shouldn't be – a movement, from cognition, from acts of knowledge, from states of cognition, to something which is no longer a cognition but which is to some extent an *occurrence*, which has the materiality of something that actually happens, that actually occurs. . . . But then that doesn't mean . . . that the performative function of language will then as such be accepted and admitted. It will always be reinscribed within a cognitive system, it will always be *recuperated*, it will relapse, so to speak, by a kind of reinscription of the performative in the tropological system of cognition again.<sup>7</sup>

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De Man distinguishes between the referential function of language, in which words are understood to be the vehicles of meaning, little delivery trucks of knowledge adding to our understanding of the world and of ourselves, and the performative function, in which words hit us, they have an impact, they *do* something to us and to our world. In a cognitive system, words mean, in a performative they matter. Language becomes performative to the degree that it breaks down the cognitive, tropological systems through which we claim to have a grasp on reality. In this movement from the cognitive to the performative, we feel the force of language and come to understand, through an experience of nonunderstanding, that words are not quite what they seem to be. De Man argues that the *experience* of language occurs precisely through a non-experience of it, which is to say that it is in the moment of language's failure to serve adequately a cognitive function that we see language for what it is, in its materiality.

The appeal of this argument to trauma theory should be quite obvious. Reading for the performative provides access to trauma in a way that accounts for the factual and logical gaps, the repetition, and the resistance to comprehension that characterize testimony. As Shoshana Felman describes them, testimonies are 'primarily *events of speech* . . . [to] be understood . . . not as a mode of *statement of* but rather as a mode of *access to* . . . truth' (15–16). Trauma theorists do not provide solutions to the problems testimony poses to history; on the contrary, they suggest that historiography itself is a problem, because it fails to acknowledge the performative function of testimony.

Trauma theory wants to do nothing less than transform the historical enterprise. As Geoffrey Hartman, the most prominent deconstructionist to take up trauma theory, put it in the first volume of the journal *History and Memory*, 'The aim of judgment in historical or literary-critical discourse . . . is to change history into memory'.<sup>8</sup> What does such a change entail? In the movement from history to memory two key transformations take place:

- 1 The sense of history as a form of knowledge about people and events from the past is replaced by a conception of history as a fundamental factor in the formation of individual and cultural identity. History is no longer something we *know* but something we *are*; we live in history and it lives in us. A lack of knowledge is not ignorance but forgetting, a lack of interest is not indifference but collusion. History is a thing that must be remembered and memorials serve this effort.
- 2 With this demand to remember comes a much greater emphasis on ethical issues than one finds in traditional historiography. History is no longer done in the name of intellectual curiosity but out of a sense of responsibility. Participants in the memory industry argue that we owe something to the past and we pay that debt in testimony, the currency of memory. To remember is to be good, to be good is to remember.

The ethical element of this shift is especially pressing for trauma theory because of its own traumatic origins in the revelation of Paul de Man's involvement with a collaborationist newspaper during World War II. Rather than acknowledge de Man's ethical failures while recognizing them as distinct from his scholarship – a route that readers and critics have taken with tens, if not hundreds, of other writers whose lives have proved far less inspiring than their work – the creators of trauma theory instead tried to redeem the man by turning the ideas of a one-time fascist into the means to deal with the horrors of fascism. Trauma theory is more than a discourse *on* therapy; it *is* therapy, therapy for the wounds inflicted on deconstruction and literary theory in general by the de Man affair.

It should not be surprising that this effort gave rise to a host of problems.

### The Faults of Trauma Theory

Walter Benn Michaels has suggested trauma theorists beg the question when they insist we must remember the past, because they assume the past to be, first, available to memory and, second, a necessary constituent of identity.<sup>9</sup> How, Michaels asks, can we remember something we never experienced? He argues that the transformation of history into memory represents a turn from knowledge to mythology. Those who would accuse postmodernist social constructionists of undermining objectivity are missing the point. 'What makes our history mythological is not our sense that it is constituted but our sense that it is *remembered* and, when it is not remembered, *forgotten*' (7). Michaels attributes this change in understanding to the need to find some basis other than race for establishing a group's identity. As cultural memory supplants race in indentitarian discourse, a subtle reversal of the terms of historical inquiry occurs as 'the effort to imagine an identity that will connect people through history is replaced by the effort to imagine a history that will give people an identity' (5–6).

In this replacement of origins (racial identity) with effects (the transference effected by testimony) at the foundation of historical inquiry, trauma theory places historiography in an ethical and aesthetic realm. History is not to be evaluated on how truthfully it assembles the facts, but on how effectively it makes the reader or, more frequently, the audience (since film, video, and museums exploit a wider range of the senses) *feel* history.<sup>10</sup> Caruth claims that 'listening [to trauma] . . . may no longer be simply a choice, to be able to listen, to the impossible, that is, is also to have been *chosen* by it, *before* the possibility of mastering it with knowledge' (*Trauma*, 10). Knowledge has been surrendered for an overwhelming experience of history, but just how trustworthy is this trauma effect? There is no doubt that many people who have seen Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (or, indeed, *Schindler's List*) have been deeply affected by it, even haunted by it, but, contrary to Caruth's claim, there is nothing compulsory in this response. Appealing as it may be to those

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who have been deeply affected by the Holocaust to think of testimonies as possessing an irresistible power, much as some literary critics like to believe no one can resist the beauty of great literature or some fundamentalists think the Bible itself contains God's word, these claims are not true. To insist they are is to run the risk of sacralizing testimony and demonizing all who don't respond appropriately to testimony as ethical failures.<sup>11</sup>

Trauma theory's mistake is the same one that Stanley Fish has argued all strong theories make: it tries to articulate a practice that necessarily follows from theory.<sup>12</sup> There is no reason to believe that a version of history based on performativity, uniqueness, and specificity will be any more ethical than one based on cognition, universality, and abstraction. Ethnic violence can be committed in the name of memory in the same way that great deeds of humanitarianism can be done in the name of universal principles of human rights. Deconstruction is not ethical or unethical. It belongs to a whole other order than ethics. De Man may or may not have been a fascist, but deconstruction in and of itself cannot implicate or vindicate him. Deconstruction is more like a tool, and it can be used to ethical or unethical ends (although typically it is used to neither). The irony of strong theory is that its claims to strength ultimately reveal its weaknesses. While Caruth might insist on the necessity of recognizing history's 'unerasable singularity' (*CE*, 4), both she and Felman end up making universal claims for their theory; indeed they both make trauma itself universal.

This speaking and listening. . . *from the site of trauma*. . . [relies] on what we don't know of our own traumatic pasts. In a catastrophic age trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures: not as a simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves. (*T*, 11)

But *do* we all have our own traumatic pasts? This, surely, is a point to be argued, not to be assumed.

This claim to the universality of trauma runs into further problems with regard to literature. Caruth argues that literary critics are particularly qualified to deal with trauma because it raises problems that 'have long been at the heart of literary studies' (*CE*, 2), while Felman suggests that we cannot avoid the subject of trauma because 'it is implicated – sometimes unexpectedly – in almost every kind of writing' (17–18). There may be links between testimony and some literary works, but trauma theory runs into one of the recurrent difficulties of an interdisciplinary methodology; it blurs the boundaries of genre. The writer of poetry or fiction might desire to distort reality and conventions of narrative and logic, but the survivor is seemingly unable to do anything but; in literature the distorted relationship between language and reality is assumed and valued; in historical and legal contexts this distortion is assumed and resisted. To place Camus' *The Plague* beside videotaped testimonies

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of Holocaust survivors, as Felman does, in order to emphasize their commonality is to ignore these considerations of form and reception. At a basic level, a literary work is a source of pleasure and video testimonies are typically not. Fiction offers itself up to aesthetic consideration, is designed for it, in a way that testimonies obviously do not.<sup>13</sup>

The appeal of trauma theory is that it ties the free-floating signifiers and pervasive irony of deconstruction back down to the material specificity of history.<sup>14</sup> Take the following passage from Shoshana Felman.

De Man's entire writing effort is a silent trace of the reality of an event whose very historicity, borne out by the author's own catastrophic experience, has occurred precisely as the event of the preclusion . . . of its own witnessing; an event that could thus name the very nameless, the very magnitude, the very materiality of what de Man will constantly refer to as the ever-threatening *impossibility of reading*. (140)

Felman attaches a signified to the void de Man spent his career calling to our attention. She names the nameless, but in doing so she denies the existence of a more general experience of namelessness and noncomprehension that de Man and many psychoanalytic critics would locate in the structure of language if not being itself.<sup>15</sup> Historicized deconstruction must deny itself such an ontological-structural foundation, precisely to stay historicized. Instead it needs to track down the traumatic event, which ironically becomes a foundation for interpretation.

As a result, trauma has become an object of desire in contemporary culture; the survivor is now a legitimate and legitimating identity, because he can, at least, put a name on his lack. This desire for loss manifests itself in the academy (trauma theory), in medicine (the repressed memory movement), and in culture, both popular (*Schindler's List* and *Titanic*) and high (*Shoah* and historical fiction). This is a largely nostalgic impulse, a desire for a past that never was, as the catastrophe serves as the origin for all of our troubled existence. In a postmetaphysical age, the catastrophe becomes a new metaphysic. Trauma becomes another narrative for managing the contingencies of history.

Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments* and Alan Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-Pool Library* both tell the story of a man trying to find a history that will provide him with an identity, and they provide us with a warning against the dangers of memory discourse and the abandonment of irony.<sup>16</sup> The books are almost perfect inversions of each other. *Fragments* claimed to be a work of history, a testimony to growing up in the death camps of World War II, but turned out to be a work of fiction. *The Swimming-Pool Library* is a work of fiction, a novel about a young man who refuses to be touched by history, but turns out to be a sophisticated and profound work of literary history. It is truer as a work of irony than is Wilkomirski's memoir.

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**The Duplicity of History as Trauma: *Fragments***

The true story of *Fragments* and its author, which began emerging three years after the book's publication, could itself provide the material for a novel. In 1995, Binjamin Wilkomirski, a Swiss clarinet teacher and maker, published a memoir of his childhood, in which he was separated from his parents after the massacre of Jews in Latvia, escaped to Poland at the age of two, was taken to Majdanek concentration camp and then to Auschwitz, and after the war ended up, first, in an orphanage in Krakow and then in another orphanage in Switzerland before being adopted by a Swiss family, the Dössekkers, who named him Bruno Dössekker. The book received immediate recognition, as praise and awards were heaped on it. Critics called it an instant classic, history and literature professors added it their syllabi, and its author began appearing at seminars and conferences on the Holocaust. Less than one year after Cathy Caruth published *Unclaimed Experience*, this book that exemplifies so many of Caruth's arguments about testimony came out in an English translation.

It is a short book, but *Fragments* has a powerful impact due to its harrowing account of growing up in a world of radical violence, told in the unadorned prose of a child. Indeed, much was made of the book's style. The jacket description of the memoir described it thus: 'In piercingly simple scenes Wilkomirski gives us the 'fragments' of his recollections, so that we too become small again and see this bewildering, horrifying world at child's-eye height. No adult interventions intervene. . . . Beautifully written with an indelible impact that makes this a book that is not read but experienced'. As these comments reveal, *Fragments* was cannily marketed to the memory industry's rhetoric of performativity over cognition. This appeal to trauma discourse began with Wilkomirski, however, not in the marketing department. *Fragments* begins, 'I have no mother tongue, nor a father tongue either' (3) and goes on in this vein.

The languages I learned later on [after the War] were never mine, at bottom. They were only imitations of other people's speech. . . . If I'm going to write about it I have to give up on the ordering logic of grown-ups; it would only distort what happened. . . . I'm not a poet or a writer. I can only use words to draw as exactly as possible what happened, what I saw; exactly the way my child's memory has held on to it; with no benefit of perspective or vanishing point. (4-5)

For Wilkomirski and his publishers keeping the line between fiction and reality clearly demarcated was important in the process of sanctification. It was important that the book should not be taken as a work of literature, and in a vulgar equation, childhood plus childish prose equal truth, unquestionable truth.<sup>17</sup>

In 1998, however, Daniel Ganzfried, a Swiss author of a novel about the Holocaust and the son of an Auschwitz survivor, did question the book.

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He denounced *Fragments* as a fake, and the charge was confirmed in Stefan Maechler's *The Wilkomirski Affair*, which was commissioned by the literary agency that handled the worldwide rights to *Fragments*.<sup>18</sup> In 1999, the book was pulled from stores, and has now been repackaged with Maechler's study.

The inauthenticity of *Fragments* indicts the memory industry on two counts. First, the fact that Wilkomirski's book was published and praised so highly indicates a negligence on the part of the publishing industry, the critics, and professors in assessing the book's veracity. Second, Wilkomirski made a mockery of the very principle it held up, the ethic of remembrance.<sup>19</sup> Wilkomirski found himself in the stories of other people; he is, like Philip Roth's brilliant creation from *Operation Shylock*, Moishe Pipik, a memory thief, and his crime was abetted by an environment that trauma theory has helped to cultivate. In her account of the case, Elena Lappin speculates that from Wilkomirski's perspective, the story is not made up at all; she believes that Wilkomirski genuinely believed the story he told in *Fragments*. He needed this story, she argues, as a way to make sense of the very sad past of a Swiss orphan boy named Bruno Grosjean, the illegitimate child of a woman who herself grew up in the public welfare system, a boy who spent the first five years of his life in an orphanage, whose 'childhood was swamped with loss and change', a boy 'of obscure origins in a social class that polite Swiss society would rather not discuss' (65). He took this raw material, painful and unrecognized as it was, and recast it in the mould of the twentieth century's most painful and most recognizable narrative.

### The Truth of Irony as History: *The Swimming-Pool Library*

Part of the appeal of *Fragments* lies in its narrative of recovery. The novel is structured like a mystery, jumping back and forth between the present and the past as its hero tracks down his identity. Reading it, one is amazed at how easily and how well Wilkomirski makes the transition from archives to memory. Alan Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-Pool Library* provides an interesting contrast to *Fragments*, because Hollinghurst denies his hero and narrator, Will Beckwith – a young, gay, wealthy, thoroughgoing ironist whose main interest is the pursuit of young men – and his reader the direct access to the past Wilkomirski assumes to be his. Will also attempts to discover a history that will place him within a group identity, but his search is almost always mediated by texts. The past in this novel is not just sitting there, waiting to be remembered; it is gone and texts and traditions provide only mediated access to it. Rather than raise the question of how to remember the past, *The Swimming-Pool Library* asks the far more pressing question of how we should regard a past that we cannot remember. Hollinghurst's novel is about a history fraught with calamities, but it is ultimately about survival and survivors who have moved beyond the catastrophe through the work of not

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memory but irony. The novel goes further yet, because it suggests that, ironically, irony itself can function as a kind of commemoration.

Told in the first person, *The Swimming-Pool Library* begins in June 1983, when Will resuscitates octogenarian Charles Lord Nantwich in a public bathroom. Will and Nantwich become friends, and Nantwich asks him to write his biography. After reading several of Nantwich's journals and discovering his own family's role in Nantwich's life, Will says no and writes *The Swimming-Pool Library* instead. A simple enough story, it is complicated by several factors, first and foremost by the sexual identity of Will and Nantwich. Both men are gay, and Hollinghurst embeds their biographies in what has become a conventional tripartite narrative of gay history in the twentieth century. He does so both to stake a claim to history and to show what is at stake in making it. Born in 1900, Nantwich operates in the novel as an embodiment of the century. He and his journals stand in for the first third of the gay past. He emerges out of the milieu in which modern gay identity was first articulated in medical and sociological discourses and for which the Wilde trials of the 1880s provided much of the language and iconography of the homosexual. The journals end in the 1950s, after Nantwich is arrested for solicitation during a government crackdown on homosexuality. This persecution really did take place, and it provided the impetus for the creation of the Wolfenden Commission, whose Wolfenden Report, released in 1958, played a role in Britain analogous to the Stonewall riots in America: they mark the beginning point of a public gay liberation movement. Will was born in the year of the report, and he is identified with this second stage of gay history. The novel itself provides the link to the third stage of this history, the age of AIDS, for it looks back to the summer of 1983, which Will describes 'as the last summer of its kind there was ever to be. I was riding high on sex and self-esteem – it was my time, my *belle époque*' (5–6). It was also the summer in which AIDS came to widespread attention after the airing of a documentary on AIDS on the BBC and in which the first deaths from AIDS-related diseases began to occur in Britain. Like many novels written by gay writers in past two decades, Hollinghurst's book is an elegy for the pre-AIDS era, but *The Swimming-Pool Library* stands out because AIDS is mentioned nowhere in the novel.

For this reason, Gregory Woods describes the novel as 'already an historical novel', not because it is about Charles's historical experiences but because it is about the time before the catastrophe of the AIDS epidemic.<sup>20</sup> Woods points out an important element of this and many other contemporary historical novels. In them the recent past has become an historical past because the catastrophe has alienated us from our own moment. Hollinghurst's elision of AIDS from his novel and Will's refusal to write Nantwich's biography should not be taken only as symptoms of this alienation; they might also be read, through the lens of trauma theory, as ethical responses to the catastrophe. Will and Hollinghurst refuse to turn Nantwich's past and AIDS into objects of knowledge transparently available to narrative framing.

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This reading of *The Swimming-Pool Library* as a model of postmodern, ethical historiography is complicated, however, by the fact that Will is particularly implicated in Nantwich's history. His failure to write the biography is motivated more by a desire to preserve what meagre identity his irony has secured for him than by some ethical demand. Near the end of the novel, Will discovers that his grandfather, Sir Denis Beckwith, was the head prosecutor of the witchhunt that led to Nantwich's conviction and imprisonment in the 1950s, and this discovery stymies Will's transition from irony to a historical community. Before the revelation of his familial complicity in the persecution of homosexuals, Will had been feeling the first stirrings of a communal impulse. The arrest of his best friend, James, for solicitation and his own experience of gaybashing at the hands of some skinheads awaken him from his ironic slumber.

James's experience, like mine with the skinheads, made me abruptly self-conscious, gave me an urge to solidarity with my kind that I wasn't used to in our liberal times. In the busy one o'clock changing-room, cross as I was, I looked at the others . . . queuing for the hair dryer and clouding the air with Trouble for Men [a cologne], with a kind of foreboding, as an exotic species menaced by brutal predators. (261)

The foreboding Trouble of this passage obviously alludes to the need for solidarity in response to AIDS and to the eruption of a reinvigorated, more conspicuous homophobia that accompanied it. AIDS has played a crucial role in the establishment of gay identity politics in the past two decades, a project encompassing not only overt political action but a dramatic increase of interest in gay history and historiography, a good illustration of Caruth's point that trauma can provide the basis for a community and a link between the past and the future.

The placement of Will's discovery of the past in the chapter following this passage, however, raises troubling issues for those who would see the creation of this community as achievable through desire alone. The revelation is a cracking point in the narrative Will is only beginning to build for himself. Just as Will is entering into a community with a history, he is tossed out of that history. Financially dependent on his grandfather, Will recognizes that his indolence and vice are made possible by Sir Denis's 'crusade to eradicate male vice' (304). Will is not simply a product of the 'power and the compromise in which [he] had unthinkingly been raised' (314) however; he admits he 'loved his grandfather, too. . . . [H]e made one feel part of something superior and precious' (319). He actively identifies with his grandfather's world. The automatic identification with the victims, which Caruth and Felman assume to be the effect of testimony, is complicated here by Will's complicity in their victimization. As a result, Will cannot write Nantwich's biography. In indicting his own grandfather through the exposure of Nantwich's suffering at his hands, he would be denying his own

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implication in Sir Denis's cruelty. More important, he would be denying his own identification with, his love for, him. Compromised as he is, Will can only write a compromised book. 'All I could write now', he tells Charles, 'would be a book about why I couldn't write the book' (329). He writes *The Swimming-Pool Library* as a kind of confession and an exposition of the complications of history and identity that make the construction of either a contradictory and anxious process.

Hollinghurst might appreciate the difficulties of historiography because he was a literary critic and historian before he was a novelist. His M.Phil. thesis at Oxford is entitled 'The Creative Uses of Homosexuality in the Fiction of E. M. Forster, L. P. Hartley, and Ronald Firbank', and *The Swimming-Pool Library* mentions the three subjects of Hollinghurst's thesis (and many other gay writers) by name. Hartley gets a brief mention, but Forster and Firbank play crucial roles in the novel. More than simply appearing as historical figures, the two novelists come to represent two modes, two poles, of gay identity and representation, between which *The Swimming-Pool Library* is written. Like Will, Hollinghurst is caught between competing histories and his obligations to both. Ronald Firbank is explicitly linked with Sir Charles Nantwich – the two men knew each other in Nantwich's youth, Firbank appears in Nantwich's journals – and more implicitly by their (and Will's) attraction to young African men, by their witty sense of humor, and by the irony, the Firbankian '*bjopti* [discretion]' (64), and 'the decadent secrecy . . . [and] furtive peccadilloes of the past' (221) Will associates with Nantwich. More intriguingly, the novel links Forster with Sir Denis Beckwith. When Will, James, and Sir Denis go to see Benjamin Britten's opera *Billy Budd*, Will comments on the ironic indirection of the opera. 'He's sort of coming out with it and not coming out with it at the same time'. Sir Denis responds, 'That was very much Forster's line actually. . . . He wanted it to be much more . . . open and sexy, as Willy puts it' (140–141).

There is an obvious irony in pairing E. M. Forster with a man who led a political and criminal campaign against homosexuals, but Hollinghurst suggests that the two men share a common interest in the exposure of a shameful sexuality, albeit for very different reasons. Sir Denis wanted to expose that shame as a way of gaining political power, while Foster wanted to do so in order to be rid of it, to move beyond shame so homosexuals could take up their place in society. This desire, Hollinghurst argues in a review of a collection of Forster's letters, motivated much of Forster's fiction. 'The moral drift of [Forster's books,] Hollinghurst writes, 'is always against respectability and in favour of responsibility and self-fulfillment'.<sup>21</sup> Forster advocated a more open, sexier style of homosexuality, one that need not rely on strategies of concealment or camp effeminacy that, Alan Sinfield has argued, became the dominant image of homosexuality in the aftermath of the Wilde trials. Forster's *Maurice*, Sinfield writes, 'is designed to show that Maurice doesn't have to be like Oscar Wilde'.<sup>22</sup> Against this ironic, effeminate style, Forster constructs a 'comradely,

masculine homosexuality' (142). Hollinghurst also calls attention to the importance of masculine solidarity for Forster in his review and notes that *Maurice*, *Howard's End*, and *The Longest Journey* all close with the creation of a community that has left respectable, bourgeois society behind so that its members can be who they truly feel themselves to be. '[W]ith total accuracy', Hollinghurst argues, 'Forster looks to an unborn community of homosexuality' (1268). Forster looked, that is, to the community that came into being after the Wolfenden Report and Stonewall and that is still being created today, the community of Will Beckwith. Will lives the Forsterian life of self-fulfillment and openness, minus the responsibility and the politics. He spends the novel going from one gay space to another, indeed transforming all spaces into sexualized zones of potential encounter; it is a London entirely devoid of women and almost so of heterosexual men. Hollinghurst depicts all of this in the most explicit, even pornographic, language.

Even as the book resists the language of metaphor and indirection Forster wanted thrown aside, it also undermines the value of Forsterian explicitness by linking it with Sir Denis. Sir Denis and Forster are linked by their insistence on visibility, and in this insistence they both threaten to make certain aspects and certain homosexuals disappear. Firbank and Nantwich belong to that ironic, campy, Wildean tradition that Forster tries to erase in his fiction and that Hollinghurst tries to preserve in *The Swimming-Pool Library*. Like Nantwich in the novel, Ronald Firbank has been largely written out of literary history, both gay and modernist. As Forster's vision of a gay community proved to be the vision of the future, so too have his novels become key texts in both the gay and the modernist canon. While a certain degree of Forster's prestige in contemporary criticism is attributable to his interest in and affiliation with colonial and class politics and culture, it is worth noting that these same issues come up in Firbank's novels, which suffer obscurity. Rarely written upon, little taught or read, when considered at all, Firbank and his work are usually taken as minor curiosities, reading for fun.<sup>23</sup>

It is with this attitude that Will begins reading Firbank's *Valmouth*. 'I had imagined him . . . to be a supremely frivolous and silly author. I was surprised to find how difficult, witty, and relentless he was. The characters were flighty and extravagant in the extreme, but the novel itself was evidently as tough as nails. . . . [I]t gave the unnerving impression that on deeper acquaintance it would turn out to be packed with fleeting and covert meaning' (64). This could be a description of *The Swimming-Pool Library*. On a first reading, the book is enjoyable enough for its gorgeous prose, its rich depiction of London life, its wit and sexiness, but it is hard to hold off the impression that the narrative is too much the product of its narrator and his wandering obsession with himself and with sex. It is only after the revelation of Will's family history that the book takes on a larger significance, as the reader is forced to recover all that has gone before it. The movement of discovery, rupture, and recovery Will and the reader go through mirror the act of historical recovery

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Hollinghurst undertakes in *The Swimming-Pool Library*. Using the ironic style of Ronald Firbank, he writes his favourite author back into literary history, and in so doing challenges the paradigms of gay literary history. He restores and reinvigorates a tradition that, seen from the Forsterian perspective emphasizing responsibility, visibility, and community (the perspective, Hollinghurst suggests, that is predominant in contemporary culture), represents retrograde tendencies.

Hollinghurst's very attempt to preserve that tradition by writing a novel that participates in it could be seen from within the narrative of development I have described in this essay – a movement past ironical into historical consciousness and maturity – as regression. While the current was moving away from irony toward history, Hollinghurst went from writing a thesis on literary history to writing a novel soaked in irony. He returned to irony rather than grew out of it, a move that looks like a resistance to history itself if one accepts the standard view of gay history as a march toward liberation and visibility, a view well represented in the following comment by Andrew Sullivan in his book *Love Undetectable*.

The leather daddies and lipstick lesbians, the drag queens and diesel dykes, the purveyors and marketers of camp and irony . . . these extraordinary products of a long history of isolation and marginalization are marvels of revolt, of invention, and, often, of beauty. Insofar as they are inventive products of a culture of energetic difference, symbols of a determination to survive against considerable odds, they merit an intense admiration and defense. But insofar as these cultural expressions are also products of deep and searing anxiety, of the inability to be a publicly gay man or woman except as a caricature of one gender or another, then they are no more to be clung to than excruciating racial stereotypes. There is a difference between a culture of difference and a rationalization of pain. And clinging to the manifestation of isolation is no substitute for abolishing the isolation itself.<sup>24</sup>

The Firbankian strain of *The Swimming-Pool Library* is intended to counter this kind of Forsterian historical thinking. Sullivan acknowledges the value of camp and irony in the past, praising them as once-valid forms of resistance and inventiveness, but the thrust of his argument is they are relics that should be abandoned in the name of historical progress. In the name of progress (and it should be clear that Hollinghurst does not doubt that the greater openness, freedom, and political solidarity achieved since the Wolfenden Report do represent progress) the past is stigmatized as nothing but the product of pain and isolation. The imagination of a history that can provide a cultural identity often depends on the erasure of certain facets of that history and identity. Elements of history disappear in order for history to appear. In the name of history, Sullivan turns oppression into the fact of history, and in the name of getting rid of oppression he obscures a historical phenomenon that Hollinghurst tries to preserve.

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*The Swimming-Pool Library* calls this kind of history – what Shoshana Felman considers history as Holocaust – into question. If Felman and Caruth require pain to be the object of memory while Sullivan demands it be forgotten, they have in common a reductive sense of the past. History might be ‘what hurts’, but it is also what enlarges and inspires the present. Hollinghurst’s novel shows that to see the past as nothing more than a source of pain is to ignore a history that could be valuable. The elision of AIDS from the novel can be read in traumatic terms as yet another example of absence testifying to the trauma wound more forcefully than direct representation can, but a fuller reading would also acknowledge Hollinghurst’s own claim that he did not want the disease to determine the truth of gay identity and history. Hollinghurst obviously does not deny the significance of the AIDS crisis in leaving it out of his story but he does suggest, and a reasonable suggestion it is, that AIDS is not the whole story. He treats the fact of oppression against homosexuals in a similar manner, allowing it to appear in the novel but not letting it determine the course of the novel. Like Caruth and Felman, like many contemporary novelists, Hollinghurst sees the problems inherent in irony: due to its anti-communitarian and anti-historical spirit it holds little promise for any form of politics or ethics. The humiliation of Will Beckwith makes clear his critical attitude toward irony, but where Hollinghurst differs from conventional critics of irony is in his response to it. For all Will undergoes, there is no indication at the end of the novel that he has changed at all. The only action that Will takes is the writing of *The Swimming-Pool Library*, and it is this ironic novel that is his and Hollinghurst’s response to the problem of irony. The solution to irony may be irony. The novel recognizes the necessity of some sense of social and historical consciousness, but it suggests that, within the context of gay literary history at least, this sense lies not *past* irony but within it. The return to history here is a return to irony. Hollinghurst celebrates the ironic tradition of gay literature, exemplified in Firbank’s fiction, not by simply recording and describing it, as he did in his thesis, but by recovering it and participating in it. *The Swimming-Pool Library* is a historical novel precisely because it is an ironic novel.

In many ways, then, *The Swimming-Pool Library* demonstrates the value of trauma theory for reading certain literary works. Caruth’s and Felman’s insights into performative referentiality and the effect catastrophe has on narrative are very helpful in explaining the experience of reading Hollinghurst’s novel. These arguments make it clear why those who would accuse Hollinghurst of avoiding the pain of history are wrongheaded; the absence of AIDS from the novel refers to the historical experience of AIDS as loss, a meaningless gap. Furthermore, the novel’s Firbankian irony gives the reader access to history rather than a statement about history. Irony functions as a form of memory resistant to the historical impulse to record and relegate the past to the dustbin of history. These are points that trauma theory, building on Paul de Man’s criticism, helps us see. What trauma

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theory does not help us see, however, is the element of celebration Hollinghurst retains in the novel and the need to reject history through irony in order both to gain a more complete picture of the past and to move beyond the past. Because everything must be related to the catastrophe, trauma theory sometimes obscures those aspects of the past that escaped or grew beyond the catastrophe's shadow and in so doing it risks turning trauma into another metanarrative. As Elena Lappin points out, '[T]o Bruno Dösseker, being a Jew was synonymous with the Holocaust' (65). *Fragments* should be considered a warning against the sacralization of the catastrophe, for if trauma becomes a narrative of legitimization – as it is becoming – then we can expect to see many more books like it. The bravery of *The Swimming-Pool Library* lies in Will's refusal to write and remember the life of a man who will soon be dead. Irony seems especially necessary now not only as a way to counter the excessive reverence in literary criticism for historical calamities – a reverence that sometimes seems to put the calamity above its victims and survivors – but also as a way, in fact, to honour the dead. It is precisely because Will Beckwith and Alan Hollinghurst refuse to respect history that they do it a service.

**Notes**

1 Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, 1981), p. 102.

2 Cathy Caruth and Deborah Esch (eds), *Critical Encounters: Reference and Responsibility in Deconstructive Writing* (New Brunswick, 1995), p. 1. Further references to this book, abbreviated *CE*, will be parenthetical.

3 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore, 1996), p. 11. Further references to this book, abbreviated *UE*, will be parenthetical.

4 Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, M. D., *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (London, 1993), p. 158. Further references to this book will be parenthetical.

5 For a poignant illustration of this paradox see Pat Barker's trilogy of novels (*Regeneration*, *The Eye in the Door*, and *The Ghost Road*) about the effects of shell-shock and other traumas on several participants in World War I.

6 Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore, 1995), p. vii. Further references to this book, abbreviated *T*, will be parenthetical.

7 Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, (Minneapolis, 1996), 132–33.

8 Geoffrey Hartman, 'History and Judgment: The Case of Paul de Man' in *History and Memory*, 1:1 (Spring/Summer 1989), 80. For an insightful overview of the rhetoric of memory in recent scholarship see Kerwin Lee Klein's 'On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse', *Representations*, 69 (Winter 2000) 127–150.

9 Walter Benn Michaels, 'You Who Never Was There': Slavery and the New Historicism, Deconstruction and the Holocaust', *Narrative*, 4:1 (January 1996), 1–16. Trauma theory had not yet come to be known by that name, so he refers to Felman's work as deconstruction. I want to be perfectly clear here that I am not denying that the past is part of our identity; just that there is not a determinate past that is necessarily part of who we are.

10 This aesthetic component perhaps explains why Felman and Laub litter their

essays in *Testimony* with a large number of photographs, some illustrative, others not so clearly related to the text.

11 Shoshana Felman favourably quotes Claude Lanzmann's comment that 'the refusal of understanding . . . is the only ethical attitude [toward the Shoah,] thus turning ignorance into an ethical litmus test. See Claude Lanzmann, 'The Obscenity of Understanding: An Evening with Claude Lanzmann', in *Trauma*, p. 204. Michaels draws out a further implication of trauma theory's ethics. As the past gets turned into 'the defining characteristic of persons [culture becomes] . . . a kind of person, whose death has a pathos entirely independent of the persons whose culture it was. . . . [T]he person is transformed into an identity and the identity is treated as a person' (13). This kind of thinking can be found in Felman's description of traditional historical narrative as 'a speech act of disposing of the bodies'. It is worth asking to what extent the rhetoric of remembrance and the recasting of the Holocaust as an assault on culture rather than on human beings, as the destruction of Judaism rather than the murdering of six million Jews, becomes itself a kind of denial, a denial of the material fact of millions of deaths. We might ask ourselves if this mode of thinking – about people, about culture, about 'the dead' – is not in some ways easier and more comforting than trying to contemplate the death of millions of Jewish persons.

12 Stanley Fish, 'Consequences', in W. J. T. Mitchell (ed.), *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism*, (Chicago, 1985), pp. 106–131.

13 It is worth saying, however, that aesthetic considerations do come up in the evaluation of testimonies. For example, in her essay 'Education and Crisis', Shoshana Felman discusses picking out two videotapes from an archive of Holocaust testimony based on the way 'their singular historical narration seemed to contain the added power of a figure, and the unfolding of self-discovery'. These are formal criteria, which I suggested earlier become inevitable in the switch from a discourse of history to one of memory.

14 These links between words and lives go down into physiology itself. Discerning the effects of trauma on such things as the release of memory-affecting hormones and the very structure of the brain, especially the hippocampus, has been the focus of much medical research into trauma. For a brief summary of some of this work see Marilyn Larkin's 'Can Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Be Put on Hold?', *The Lancet*, 354 (September 18, 1999), 1008.

15 Jacques Lacan, for example, argues that subjectivity itself is constitutionally traumatic. In 'Subversion of the Subject and Dialectic of Desire' he writes, 'I am in the place from which a voice is heard clamoring 'the universe is a defect in the purity of Non-Being'.' Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection* (New York, 1977), p. 317.

16 Binjamin Wilkomirski, *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*, trans. Carol Brown Janeway (New York, 1997, first published in German in 1995). Alan Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library* (New York, 1989, first published in England in 1988).

17 The valorization of the child's voice rises, no doubt, out of the fact that the most famous and best-selling memoir in the world is Anne Frank's diary, but one of the many miracles of that book is watching Frank's prose develop into a sophisticated, adult voice. It should also be noted that Wilkomirski's writing is not quite as naive as some of his advocates claimed it to be. He makes use of a fairly sophisticated narrative structure involving parallel reminiscences and language that no four-year old could possibly use.

18 Stefan Maechler, *The Wilkomirski Affair: A Study in Biographical Truth*, trans. John E. Woods (New York, 2001). For an excellent account of the Wilkomirski affair see Elena Lappin, 'The Man with Two Heads', *Granta*, 66 (Summer 99), 7–65.

19 *Fragments* shows up most commonly these days on the web sites of Holocaust deniers.

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20 Gregory Woods, *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition*, (New Haven, 1998), p. 368.

21 Alan Hollinghurst, 'Parting with Respectability', *Times Literary Supplement*, 18 November 1983, 1267.

22 Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment* (New York, 1994), p. 140.

23 It is worth noting that Firbank's novels have begun to receive more attention recently, perhaps due to Hollinghurst's proselytizing. See, for example, Christopher Lane's *The Ruling Passion: British Colonial Allegory and the Paradox of Homosexual Desire* (Durham, 1995) and Joseph Bristow's *Effeminate England: Homoerotic Writing after 1885* (New York, 1995), both of which make reference to *The Swimming-Pool Library*.

24 Andrew Sullivan, *Love Undetectable: Notes on Friendship, Sex, and Survival* (New York, 1998), p. 54.

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