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Configurations of Cultural Amnesia



**From Cultural Amnesia to 'Anamnesia' in Reading Life-Writing Narratives of the French Occupation: The Lost Manuscript, the 'Handwritingness' of History and the Broken Narrative**

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# **From Cultural Amnesia to ‘Anamnesia’ in Reading Life-Writing Narratives of the French Occupation: The Lost Manuscript, the ‘Handwritingness’ of History and the Broken Narrative**

Debra Kelly

The study of memory turns academics into concerned citizens who  
share the burdens of contemporary memory crises.—  
Kansteiner

## **Cultural Amnesia and Cultural Assumptions**

Focusing on two French texts concerned with experiences of the Second World War and more specifically with the French experience of Occupation, this article works broadly within the approaches developed (and being developed) within memory studies.<sup>1</sup> It will be suggested that life-writing may enable a move from a contemporary position of ‘amnesia,’ understood as related to the inability to trace the past and the urgency to remedy that state, to the Aristotelian concept of ‘anamnesis,’ or as a recent critical work terms it ‘anamnesia’: “recollection as a dynamic and creative process, which includes remembering as much as forgetting” (Collier, Elsner and Smith 13).<sup>2</sup> An underlying premise is that both Agnès Humbert’s *Résistance: Memoirs of Occupied France* (published for the first time in English in 2008) and Héléne Berr’s *Journal* (first published in both French and English in 2008) are ‘witness’ texts. Although they are both partially concerned with recounting traumatic experience, they are not ‘trauma texts’ as the term ‘trauma’ is currently understood in memory studies: the authors were reacting immediately on the whole to those experiences and committed them to writing within a short space of time, rather than ‘uncovering’ them at a later stage as is the case with ‘trauma.’<sup>3</sup> Although marketed by their respective publishers as ‘memoirs’ and a ‘diary,’ the term ‘life-writing narrative’ is preferred here. ‘Life-writing’ covers the production of a more diverse range of writing concerning the self, and importantly its reception, and avoids an over-emphasis on the definition of genre, gaining wide academic acceptance from the 1980s onwards.<sup>4</sup> Both the *reception* of Humbert’s and Berr’s texts and a preliminary analysis of the conditions of *production* of these texts and of their recurring tropes will be considered here. The notion of ‘cultural amnesia’ will mainly be understood more specifically in terms of the types of ‘cultural assumptions’ that are made by contemporary readers when reading certain types of historical life-writing narratives that purport to bear witness to historical events. How we read such texts is influenced by what the writer and we ourselves remember, and what the writer and we forget or indeed forget to remember. In fact, it may further be suggested that the contemporary publishing successes of such life-writing narratives may in reality be a symptom of contemporary cultural amnesia—or rather the attempt to remedy it, to move from amnesia to anamnesia:

If amnesia is defined as the absence of memory, the linguistic formation of *anamnesia* refuses this absence in an act of double negativity that recollects something that has always already been lost. Anamnesia, though commonly understood as ‘remembrance,’ in fact, *resists forgetting*. (Damlé 229)

Undoubtedly one should bear in mind the caveats which will be discussed below concerning the often too facile identification with victims of traumatic events and the consequences of this for the study of history. There is nonetheless, as it will be suggested, a dynamic process at work in the reception of the life-writing narratives of witnesses to history; namely, the opportunity to remember and to re-think what has been (mis)remembered concerning the realities of lived experience.

This article therefore has two main aims. It firstly proposes some ideas concerning the reception of life-writing narratives which share the experience of the Occupation with a range of French and (in translation) English-speaking readerships. It also addresses the issue of what these forms of publication and reading experiences in the present might further tell us about cultural assumptions concerning both the historical lived experience of the Second World War and about life-writing narratives and their authors more generally. This emphasis on assumptions is important since, even without the additional ‘emotional baggage’ of the war period, life-writing is a site of readers’ assumptions, notably of course concerning notions of ‘truth’ and the ‘real’ in the context of lived experience. All approaches to autobiographical texts involve

assumptions concerning the relationship between literature and autobiography. Assumptions too about what constitutes style in literature and life...assumptions about the author's own values, moral code, ethics, and assumptions about culture, society, religion. Assumptions about life itself, about feelings—one's own and others. Assumptions about one's body and soul. (Mandell 67)

Secondly, this article analyses some ways of reading three recurring tropes: the story of the 'lost manuscript,' what may be termed the 'handwritingness' of history (especially the tendency to make a fetish of the original handwritten diary or manuscript, for example), and the fascination of the 'broken narrative,' broken often by tragic or violent events. These three tropes are projected onto the texts of the two women writers under analysis as they attempt to fashion ephemeral lived experience into enduring narrative form, thereby constructing 'figures of memory' in the written word.

Humbert's text, the first to be examined here, is published in English in hardback as *Résistance: A Woman's Journal of Struggle and Defiance in Occupied France* and in paperback as *Résistance: Memoirs of Occupied France*, both translated by Barbara Mellor (2008). Originally published in France in 1946, and then re-published in 2004 by Tallandier in an edition overseen by the author's grandson Antoine Sabbagh,<sup>5</sup> the title of *Notre Guerre. Souvenirs de Résistance* by Agnès Humbert clearly underwent interesting changes in translation which are worth further comment and which already begin to suggest assumptions concerning readership(s) and reception. The title of any literary work has a highly symbolic value and function given that it is the first site of interaction between the text and the reader and is the designation by which it functions in the literary 'system.'<sup>6</sup> It also has, of course, an important economic function within the contemporary publishing/marketing world. In French, first published just after the war, Humbert's title would seem to play wholly into the post-war Gaullist myth of the Occupation of France as part of a war in which the majority of French citizens participated—on the side of the Resistance. In 2004, following the work of historians, filmmakers, writers and the various 'memory wars' which have challenged the immediate post-war history of the Occupation experience over the last three decades or so, the title resonates very differently across the generations. From the 1970s onwards, the French have been dealing, at national and private levels and in a more or less willing manner, with their cultural amnesia of the Second World War and of the Occupation and notably with the part played in the deportation of the Jews during the Holocaust. Keeping the accented 'é' of '*Résistance*' in the English edition makes explicit an editorial decision to mark out the 'Frenchness' of the text, thereby suggesting a clearly designated readership, playing on romanticised British perceptions of the French Resistance still nourished by cinema and literature. As a consequence, the intermittent echoes of, for example, the Klaus Barbie and Maurice Papon trials, and other manifestations of the more troubled memories of France in the war, finally do little to disturb the popular imagination.<sup>8</sup> The British memory of the Second World War seems apparently less problematic given the nation's favoured role as brave resister and then liberator. But this attitude too results in cultural amnesia concerning Britain's real experiences of the war and its well-established conceptions of its various war-time allies and adversaries and of their conduct. The relationship to its closest European neighbour is one that has been informed by myths of various types and by (mis) remembering and forgetting, as well as by centuries of intertwined histories at collective and individual levels. For the American readership, the text changes its title yet again: *Resistance. A Frenchwoman's Journal of the War*. The accent, probably less understood by the reading public, is dropped, the 'Frenchwoman' is reinstated, while the specifics of the Occupation (again less well known as a reference?) is replaced with the more general 'war.' For the UK market, and an indicator of further cultural assumptions, there is a notable change of emphasis in the second part of the title for the paperback edition. There is an explicit change from the specific female experience to the more general 'memoir' suggesting a concern for the gendering of the text and its readership (and therefore for sales). Thus the enduring perception in the publishing establishment is implicitly acknowledged: while male writers convey 'universal' experience, women's experience is just that (although interestingly the American title risks it). The book was launched in the UK at the French Institute in London in June 2008 and was listed by *The Sunday Times* as one of the "History Books of the Year" (Holgate), again suggesting a certain type of reader reception and categorisation: this is a factual work of history and not a work of literary status. The publication of the prominent post-war writer

Marguerite Duras's *Wartime Notebooks* in France in 2006 and in English in 2008, the same year as the Humbert and Berr texts and by the same British publisher as the Berr diary, provides a further important counterpoint, as will be discussed in the concluding section to this article.

The second text is Hélène Berr's *Journal*, translated into English by David Bellos and published by MacLehose Press (an imprint of Quercus, London) in Autumn 2008, and again receiving a launch in the UK at the French Institute in February 2009. It was originally published in France, also by Tallandier, in January 2008 with a Foreword by the well-known writer Patrick Modiano whose own work frequently treats the Second World War and which does not appear in the English version. The English version features instead an introduction and an essay, both by the translator, on the position of the Jews in France prior to and during the Occupation—again suggesting very different assumptions concerning readership and their historical knowledge and relationship to the text. Frequently described as a “publishing sensation,” the publication of Berr's diary in France, even before the English version was available, was seen as meriting reporting in the British Press in, for example, *The Observer* (Burke). Such acknowledgement and press attention needs to be seen against the annual statistics for the publication of translated works in the UK which is around merely three percent of all publications.

### **Cultural Amnesia, Lived Experience and the Published Memoir**

A concern with the cultural assumptions surrounding texts written during the period of the Occupation requires a preliminary examination of two contexts both concerned with lived experience, but in very different ways and from very different perspectives. The first, which will be dealt with in this section, concerns the publishing world, constituted here both by the conditions in which a text comes to be published and disseminated to its reading publics, and press reviews as a specific example of one of those reading publics. The second, to be developed in the next section, concerns the theoretical framework within which war-time life-writing narratives may be read by academics and other cultural commentators (another reading public which may overlap to some extent with that above), namely that of memory studies.

As previously noted, in France the two texts are published/re-published by the same publisher, a scholarly press, with the Humbert text preceding the Berr text by some four years. The issue of timing of publication in English and of the launches in the UK is rather different, with the Humbert text appearing just a few months before Berr's *Journal* and by very different publishing houses. Berr's British publisher registered some dissatisfaction with the way in which Tallandier dealt (or rather did not deal) with this fact.<sup>9</sup> He notes that the *Journal* did not receive press reviews in all the publications whose attention it might have been expected to attract, suggesting that there may have been some press fatigue concerning ‘another’ Frenchwoman's war memoir after fairly extensive coverage for Humbert's work. This may also have been due to the earlier huge international publishing success of Irène Némirovsky's *Suite Française* (published in France in 2004, and in English in 2006). Although a work of fiction, this is also concerned with the experiences of those caught up in the events of the Occupation, and the attendant focus on the fate of the author herself blurred the distinction between fiction and lived experience. The critical and public reception of Némirovsky's work both inside and outside France provides an important context for the readings of other recently published texts situated during the Occupation—and especially those written by women. Some commentators saw Humbert's text as the ‘next Némirovsky’ as will be seen below. As for Berr, it is clear that Tallandier felt that it had an international bestseller on its list, and the rights to Berr's *Journal* had already been sold in fifteen counties before it was even published in France.

One might have expected some joint reviews of Berr and Humbert given the very interesting and striking contrast which the books provide: one by a middle-aged art historian whose early resistance activity leads to imprisonment in France from April 1941 to March 1942; she was then deported as a slave labourer to Germany for the rest of the war enduring gruelling hardships, until being liberated

by the Americans; the other by a much younger, well-assimilated, Jewish woman who spends the Occupation in Paris until her arrest on her twenty-third birthday in March 1944; she survived eight months of Auschwitz and five months of Bergen-Belsen before being beaten to death five days before the liberation of the camp. Of all the British press reviewers who may have been interested in such an approach, it was, rather surprisingly perhaps, *The Daily Mail* which reviewed the two texts together under the title "The extraordinary courage of women who resisted" (Anon). The text noted that "Read together, they give a vivid picture of the confusion and complexity of war" suggesting that they do offer something more 'universal' while also emphasising the female experience of war. A further flavour of the British press reception can be gauged from other brief extracts and both Humbert and Berr are likened to previous authors: "Bloomsbury finds 'real-life' *Suite Française*" (Humbert described in *The Bookseller* [Anon]); "France finds its own Anne Frank as young Jewish woman's war diary hits the shelves" (on the publication in France of Berr's diary heralded in *The Observer*) (Burke). Berr is billed in numerous reviews as the 'French Anne Frank.' In fact, they both died at Bergen-Belsen in 1945 and, as *The Washington Post* reviewer conjectures, "The two young women were imprisoned there at the same time. They might have met" (Dirda), a journalistic anecdote perhaps, but poignant nonetheless. Berr died of typhus within a month of Anne Frank, beaten to death because she was unable to get out of her bunk to attend roll call. Carmen Callil, author herself of *Bad Faith: A Forgotten History of Family and Fatherland*, provided a thoughtful reflection in her "Testament to that other Holocaust" on Humbert's "memoir of love and captivity through the eye of an artist," thereby reminding or informing the reader of the less well-known suffering of those deported for slave labour by the Nazis. Callil welcomes a "timely" translation of a "heroine's war journal" and also emphasises the place of the trained art historian's eye in the construction of experience in the written word. The education, background and influences (and hence implicitly the writing style) of both authors would form an important element of the reception of each of these texts.

The selection of reader reactions that follows focuses on the reception of Humbert and Berr in the publishing world, in the press and amongst a small selection of readers to assess what this may tell us about forms of cultural amnesia and 'anamnesia.' How, then, were these texts received in the British press, within a national culture that conceives of the Second World War as a victory and tends broadly to a one-dimensional view of the 'heroics' of the French Resistance—of course ably abetted by the British Secret Services, and then by the British military (with some help, eventually, by the Americans). This is also a national culture and a collective national memory that did not experience occupation during the Second World War and which in broad terms conceives of itself as a place of asylum for refugees, including Jews during that war.

Most reviewers note the harrowing read delivered by the Humbert text: "You have to force yourself to go on," writes Allan Massie in *The Literary Review*, "so vile are the conditions she describes and the conduct of those in authority." And adding, rather curiously, "Anyone who has ever responded, even in the smallest degree, to the seedy glamour of the Nazis should read these pages and feel ashamed." His is also a typical overall 'evaluative' reading of the sort contained in several reviews, focusing on Humbert's own strength of character: "Her generosity of spirit is as remarkable as her courage and endurance [...]. This is a remarkable book by a remarkable woman." For Caroline Moorhead in *The Spectator* "with its precise and moral tone and its humane perceptiveness, it is an extraordinary story" ("War of words"). Importantly for *The Washington Post* this is again a "real-life *Suite Française* by a key member of the French Resistance [...]. Humbert, who trained to be a painter, writes with remarkable pictorial skill" (Grey).

In addition to the reception by professional journalists, it is interesting to gauge some more general reception through on-line postings—and here the personal reaction and 'universal' message of the text is striking as the reader places himself/herself in that position: "If our houses and families were threatened or destroyed, if our bodies were racked and our minds abused, would we succumb?" (Teele); "The astonishing courage of the author and fellow victims challenges the readers to ask how they would have reacted in those circumstances"; "I found Agnès's story to be profoundly moving [...].

Whenever I read such a book as this, and one that is a true story as well, I am staggered at the bravery displayed under fire. It makes me feel very humble and also makes me wonder just how I would behave and act if placed in such circumstances" ([Customers' reviews](#) of Agnès Humbert's *Résistance: Memoirs of Occupied France* on [Amazon.co.uk](#)). This process of identification is very prevalent, but the effect can also produce adverse reactions. Under a posting entitled "misleading," one reader is profoundly disappointed, angry even, and in a revealing way:

this is not a memoir of the French Resistance or occupied France [...] of the 370 pages only the first 50 or so directly concern the Resistance [...]. The last chapter covers her release and brief time working alongside the allies in Germany. Following this is 100 pages of what amount to padding—a long afterword [...], an appendix and copious translator's notes. There is no doubt that this is a hugely valuable document, but it doesn't surprise me at all that it has taken so long to be translated. As an academic reference it is priceless [...] but it is neither a memoir of the French Resistance, an insight into Agnès Humbert herself or a particularly moving or engaging story that you would expect to be promoted in the manner it has [...]. I'd question the appeal of this book to the casual reader." ([Customers' reviews](#) of Agnès Humbert's *Résistance: Memoirs of Occupied France* on [Amazon.co.uk](#))

What such personal reactions and statements tell us about cultural amnesia and our relationship to lived historical experience will be returned to after a further consideration of the reception of Hélène Berr's text.

Much of the French press review reception emphasises the literary and intellectual qualities of the writing by the young woman who studied Russian and English (several sections of the diary were written in English) at the Sorbonne: "She was incredibly literary" Antoine Sabbagh, the editor, tells *Der Spiegel* on-line in 2008. He was certain from the first pages that this was the "work of an intellectual" and a "literary description of life in Occupied Paris." Sabbagh attributes the diary's popularity to its "exceptional literary quality" and the fact that it describes "how one young woman discovers war" (Dowling). The female experience of war, then, previously alluded to here, sells books in the twenty-first century. Revealingly, the word 'Jewish' is not used by Sabbagh either with reference to the collective experience of 'life in Occupied Paris' or to the individual young (Jewish) woman's experience. Cultural remembering and forgetting remain selective. It is hard not to conclude that there is either a wariness that the French have still not come to terms with France's Vichy past and its role in the deportation of the Jews, or that the feelings of the family need to be considered, not least because several of its members avoided deportation and survived the war. In the French reception then, both the diary's literary and historical value are emphasised. Simone Veil interviewed in *L'Express* notes its "exceptional literary quality," and also its importance as an "historical reference" (Peras and Veil).<sup>10</sup> For *Libération*, the diary is "the publishing sensation of 2008" while it astonishingly suggests that we "seem to understand *for the first time* the horror and absurdity Jews had to face in their everyday lives in occupied Paris" (Levisalles). Modiano's French foreword stresses the physical presence of Hélène for the reader and places the diary firmly within the status of 'witnessing text' as previously discussed. The listener/reader witness is encouraged, therefore, to take up the 'burden of history' as in the overall epigraph to this article. The press reviews in Britain focused on the 'unbearable' feelings of the reader who knows Berr's fate. Caroline Moorhead (who also reviewed Humbert) in *The Spectator* also notes "the exceptional portrait of Paris," and most interestingly, the "testimonial to how well and bravely many perfectly ordinary French citizens behaved" ("Yellow star"), playing again into British notions of how the French might have behaved, rather than how many of them did.<sup>11</sup>

A selection of reader responses again from on-line postings focuses on the emotionally moving nature of the journal as it develops. The first quarter of the journal which deals with the happier elements of the teenage girl's life and interests is seen as "ordinary" and "quite boring." For the French public response, of particular interest are a series of reactions to Raphaël Sorin's (a journalist for *Libération*) blog [Lettres ouvertes. Les divagations de Raphaël Sorin](#). One suggests that the diary gives us some insight into what "today's outsiders" feel; another likens the situation to that of Iran and Algeria; yet

another has the feeling of being a member of the Berr family, even though not Jewish: "it's a part of me, of my culture that the anti-semites wanted to destroy." The public response can also be read within the recent boom in the 'misery memoir' and what is seen by some as a troubling contemporary 'addiction' to other people's agony.<sup>12</sup>

### **Lived Experience: the Witness, the Reader and the Text**

Both Humbert and Berr therefore represent themselves as 'witnesses' to lived experience. The 'witness texts' that they produce are also just that, 'texts,' constructed representations of 'reality' and 'lived experience' and as such they are works of literature and cannot be read in an unproblematic way as 'documents.' This renders the reading experience complex and the relationship of the reader to the text ambiguous since the reader must tolerate the uncertainties of the text as literature, even as s/he accepts the truth of the account sealed by the 'autobiographical pact' offered by the author.<sup>13</sup>

Before turning in the next section to what more detailed readings of Humbert's and Berr's texts might yield, I am, at this stage, situating my readings within memory studies and three of its linked features as defined recently by Susannah Radstone:

- urgent and committed engagement with varied instances of contemporary and historical violence;
- close ties with questions of identity, and, relatedly, with identity politics;
- bridging of the domains of the personal and the public, the individual and the social (31).<sup>14</sup>

Both writers felt compelled by the urgency of their experience in the Second World War and of varied forms of violence perpetrated on them and on those around them to keep a written record. While it would be anachronistic to think of them as being concerned with 'identity politics,' both were certainly aware of their own 'identity' and of the position of their gender within the society in which they were living and, again, within the events to which they bore witness (indeed in the case of Humbert, her gender leads to deportation rather than execution). Berr obviously becomes increasingly aware of her status as Jew. Both become increasingly aware of the identity of the citizen under occupation and his or her relationship to the power of the occupier. Both authors write at the intersection of the personal and the public, examining their own feelings and reactions within the broader spectrum of the immediate and of the larger society in which they live, and within the historical circumstances that they experience.

The notion of the witness, of witnessing and the associated notion of testimony occupy a central place in memory studies and in associated areas of enquiry such as trauma studies as they have developed over recent decades. The concept of the 'witness' in its double meaning of 'eye-witness' and 'bearing witness' to what cannot/has not been seen by the reader has proved an extremely fertile, creative and critical ground as writers and film-makers examine the relationship between the individual and (often traumatic) historical events. The idea of the 'performative act' of bearing witness and notions of the agency of the witness also underlie the readings of the texts undertaken in this article. In a recent collection of essays dedicated to the 'image and the witness,' the editors stress the importance of this performative function: "For a witness to perform an act of bearing witness, she must address an other, a listener who consequently functions as a witness to the original witness" (Guerin and Hallas 10). Hence the focus here on the consideration of the *reception* of these texts. Guerin and Hallas continue: The relationship between the survivor witness [in the case of Berr we might speak of the survivor text] and the listener witness frames the act of bearing witness as a performative speech act. It is not a constative act, which would merely depict or report an event that takes place in the historical world. (10)

Derrida's much quoted intervention on the poetics and politics of witnessing reveals many of its complexities and ambiguities. Derrida questions whether the concept of bearing witness is compatible with a "value of certainty," of assurance and "even knowing as such," reminding us that "whoever



bears witness does not bring a proof" and further raising the problematic notions of truth-value (190). Importantly for the context here, 'textual' witnessing raises questions concerning the ethics and aesthetics (or the ethics of aesthetics) of bearing witness and therefore of the reception of such texts. In their founding text on narrative testimony, Felman and Laub note that:

Thus the act of bearing witness is not the communication of a truth that is already known, but its actual production through this performative act. In this process the listener becomes a witness to the witness, not only facilitating the very possibility of testimony, but also subsequently sharing its burden. That is to say, the listener assumes the responsibility to perpetuate the imperative to bear witness to the historical trauma for the sake of collective memory. (11)

The event witnessed need not be traumatic, although it often is, and whatever it is we must all look more closely, listen and read more attentively. The listener/witness is encouraged to take up the 'burden of contemporary memory crises.' In the case of Berr, the diarist is herself fully conscious of her status as witness: "I have a duty to write because people must know [...]. I am still trying to make the effort to *tell the story*. Because it is a duty, it is maybe the only one I can fulfil" (157). Although there will always be a necessary distance between witness and reader, they "take a step towards each other, because testimony demands trust and promises truth. And this trust, which must not be understood as an appropriation of the other nevertheless allows the [reader] to desire to understand the other, because this abstract other has become closer through the act of testimony" (Elsner 45).

### **Figures of Memory: The Lost Manuscript, the 'Handwritingness' of History and the Broken Narrative<sup>15</sup>**

This final section sketches out what further close textual reading of Humbert and Berr might yield by means of the examination of three tropes identified in their reception as common to both texts: the story of the 'lost manuscript' and how it came to be found, read, disseminated and finally published; the value placed on the handwriting of the author as a physical link to History; the status of the narrative that is in some way 'broken,' being either interrupted or left unfinished due to tragic or violent events. These three tropes could equally be applied to Némirovsky's *Suite Française* and to the recent publication of Duras's *Wartime Notebooks* which provides, as will be seen, an interesting comparison in terms of the perceived 'status' of the authors. Indeed a further 'meta-trope' is that of the 'woman who has experienced war'<sup>16</sup> (notwithstanding earlier remarks concerning gender and 'universal' experience). All four writers, who continue to hold academic and journalistic attention in the present day, may be considered themselves to be 'figures of memory' in that they have come literally to embody the historical moment in which they lived and about which they wrote. This status as 'women writers' is, however, complex: do these texts finally transcend the label of 'women's writing' and provide an articulation of 'universal' experience in the way writing by men has been presumed to do within western culture? Or is it that this female experience of war exerts a different type of fascination on their reading publics?<sup>17</sup>

Agnès Humbert's memoir was first published just after the end of the Second World War, re-published in 2004 in France after a considerable lapse of time, and published for the first time in English in 2008. At first sight then, this may not appear to be a 'lost manuscript,' but it was known only to historians and scholars of the period, not to the larger reading public and so still 'lost' to the wider cultural landscape. Very interestingly As a journal in its original form, it participates in the 'handwritingness of History,' although it does not reach the 'sacralised' status of the manuscripts of Berr and of Némirovsky: their lost manuscripts and other objects pertaining to them were eventually put on public display in an exhibition, enhancing the idea of their quasi-sacred nature.<sup>19</sup> Again, as a text originally published soon after the war, it may not appear as a 'broken narrative,' but the conditions of the text's production were complex due to the author's imprisonment and deportation.<sup>20</sup> "It's like the real-life *Suite Française*," according to Bloomsbury editor-in-chief Alexandra Pringle in *The Bookseller*. "It's incredibly moving. Every time I read [the dedications] I want to cry. We had the only look at it so we just snapped it up" (Anon). Of course the memoir of a middle-aged art historian who participates in early resistance activity, is imprisoned and then deported as a slave labourer is



very different to the fictionalised account of a large cast of characters during the early years of the Occupation as portrayed by the then successful Jewish author of *Suite Française*. Humbert did, however, participate in the 1940 Exodus following the Fall of France on which the Némirovsky novel opens and presents her own vivid portrayal of the 'real-life' of it, including a stark account of a moment shared with Jean Cassou when a young girl dies in their arms after being accidentally killed by the retreating French forces. Born in 1894, Humbert grew up in Paris and studied painting and design at the Sorbonne and the Louvre. Her academic work includes a book on the painter David (published before the war) and several other art historical works. She was employed at the *Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires* and was a politically active supporter of the Popular Front government and then a member of the *Musée de l'Homme* resistance network which carried out some of the very first resistance activities, notably producing a clandestine newspaper. It was during this period (June 7, 1940–April 13, 1941) that she kept her detailed diary which forms the first part of the published text. This first section of the text provides a record of life in occupied Paris and of her early resistance work. She was imprisoned in Paris for ten months before the trial of the *Musée de l'Homme* group before a German judge. While most of the male members of the group were sentenced to death, despite the efforts of French intellectuals including Mauriac, Humbert was sentenced to five years imprisonment with forced labour and deported to Germany. The longest part of the book is therefore concerned with her years as a slave labourer working for most of the time at the Phrix rayon factory in Krefeld, and the account of her experiences and of those of her fellow workers living and dying in terrible conditions appears to have been set down with astonishing clarity in the immediate months after her liberation. This section of the narrative therefore contains some elements of 'memory work,' but is still largely a work of immediacy. The final section of the book was again recorded at the time (as for the first section) after she was moved to a camp in Westphalia and liberated by the Americans, and where she helped to restore order, nurse the sick, hunt down Nazis and contributed to a denazification process (believing, as she did, that the Germans were also themselves Hitler's victims).

Mariette Job, the niece of Hélène Berr, was instrumental in bringing the diary to publication. She first saw the original, handwritten version of her aunt's diary in 1992, fifty years after it was written, on a set of undamaged sheets from a student notepad: "When I took hold of the diary, it was very moving. *When you see the actual handwriting, that really is life.* She has precise, beautiful handwriting and crossed out very little" (emphasis added; Jacobs, [The Jewish Chronicle Online](#)). Job's emotional response to the fifty-year old manuscript returns us immediately and powerfully to the tropes of the story of the lost manuscript, of the power of the 'handwritingness' of history and of the broken narrative—again broken by deportation, but this time also by death. The diary is also a broken narrative within itself, just as is Humbert's during the period of slave labour. Berr stopped writing at one point after the diary's inception for some ten months and started again in autumn 1943. The intended recipient and therefore privileged reader was a young man with whom she had recently fallen in love, Jean Morawiecki. At the time of the publication of the diary, he was a man in his late eighties and still living. Job had read a typed version of the diary when she was fifteen. According to her, for years Jean could only read the typed copy because Hélène's handwriting "emphasised the cruelty of her absence" and was like a "frozen hand" reaching out to him: "it took me [Mariette Job] thirty years to read the original manuscript. To touch it, see what it looked like" (Grice). Job had the manuscript microfilmed and, over a period of six years, made into a disc and then made her own book with a cover and a photograph, giving one to each member of the family and one to the Shoah Memorial Library in Paris. Placed in an exhibition there, the diary attracted a huge amount of interest. She was eventually approached by Tallandier and the publication caused what several journalists in France and Britain referred to as a 'publishing sensation.' The interest in the diary in France, however, was clearly focused on the 'how? why?' of the fate of the members of an educated, wealthy, professional, well-connected—and above all apparently totally integrated—Jewish family in wartime Paris. Such a family represented the epitome (as David Bellos points out in the essay accompanying the English edition) of the "*fous de la République*" (literally those who were "mad about the Republic") who were more attached to French republicanism than to specifically Jewish beliefs (279). Berr begins the diary more concerned with her own emotional turmoil than with the events around

her, but as anti-semitic measures come into force, she records her outrage and defiance at, for example, wearing the Yellow Star and having to board the last carriage in the metro. The tone of the diary rapidly becomes more anxious, questioning, as she tries to make sense of what is happening and as her family live out their time in Paris. A 'need to know' becomes more and more pressing, her 'knowingness' contrasting with what she perceives as the 'unknowingness' of other French citizens, and haunts her. There is also very much the feeling of being in a collective experience, as well as an individual one, believing it would be cowardly to the other internees and the "wretched" poor to leave.

Clearly, such emotive and powerful texts raise issues concerning the individualisation of history and the dangers of an unreflective relationship between academic memory research and the broader field of memory culture to which Susannah Radstone has drawn attention. Radstone points out the dangers of contemporary emphasis on the "processes of identification with suffering" and of "taking the memoir's realism at face value" and thereby "producing a literal reading that assumes that the subjects inscribed by memoirs are coincident with and can be mapped straightforwardly onto suffering 'persons' or 'individuals' with whom readers can then identify." The danger is that "memoirs of suffering invite specifically empathetic identification *with* suffering" (34). She goes on to note the importance of "adequate attention to the literary as literary" and to the "complex play of tropes, narration, point of view and address that together constitute the complexity of texts and the reading experiences that they offer" which we have attempted to address in the readings here. From the tropes of 'the lost manuscript,' 'the handwritingness' of history and the 'broken narrative' then, a necessary further step would be to move on to explore these reading communities, their experiences, their responses, their ways of reading in the more positive perspective also offered by Radstone:

Critiques of the memoir move beyond assertions about the reading positions offered by texts, however, connecting the identifications with suffering that they supposedly proffer with the formation of actual, if fragile communities. While textual analysis might complicate and extend these limited readings of the positions offered by texts, the exploration of those positions by *actual* reading communities would require contextual reader research studies. (34)

One final observation can be made on the way in which the Humbert and to an even greater degree the Berr texts are taken at face-value because they are not 'writers,' in direct contrast to the press reviews of Marguerite Duras's *Wartime Notebooks*. This time the experience of war is striking in its almost total absence in the reviews, for it is the nascent novelist who receives attention. Aamer Hussein in *The Independent* (who also reviewed Humbert) asks: "was the unconscious novelist in Duras already turning the events of her life into fiction?" And goes on commenting that "The formation of Duras the famous writer is documented in these early fragments." For *The Times Literary Supplement*, "In these notebooks one can observe the nascent writer at work, someone compelled to write in order to make sense of her thoughts and experience (Bickerton). *The Observer* echoes this: "What it most strikingly reveals is the process by which life is transformed into art" (Laing). Carmen Callil, who reviewed both Humbert and Berr, writes in *The Observer* that "the publication of her *Wartime Notebooks*, written between 1943 and 1949, before she had published her first novel, is a marvellous introduction to what is best in her writing." Notably, the novelist Michèle Roberts in *The Sunday Times* writes: "Anyone interested in the process of writing, of revision and re-writing, will find these notebooks intriguing. Duras helped pioneer our contemporary fascination with the overlaps between fiction and autobiography: her work simultaneously asserts the difficulty of pinning down anything called truth – and yet the obligation to pursue it." This is a particularly striking reading position to adopt given that Duras is perhaps the writer who has dealt most insistently, if not (deliberately) consistently, with France's post-war memory, or rather post-war amnesia, notably concerning the memory of the Holocaust. Duras's commitment to furnishing varying versions of events and experiences is a writing strategy that consciously interweaves 'fiction' and 'truth' all the more to reveal the gravity of dealing with the truth of history. Hers has been described as a "multifaceted project of *writing of memory* as historical and political duty to record the trauma of past events for future generations" (Collier, Elsner and Smith 10). The 'memoirist' and 'diarist' then, as Humbert and Berr are marketed, occupy a

different place to the professional novelist with regard to their historical moment and their lived experience.

### From Cultural Amnesia to Cultural Anamnesia

The assumption is, therefore, that we read the novelist's diaries and notebooks to understand how s/he became a writer and implicitly accept the more nebulous notions of 'truth' and 'reality.' We read the memoir or the diary for an apparently unfettered access to the experiences and emotions of someone who has lived what we have not. In their urgency to trace the past and remedy memory's lacunae, readers may mix cultural amnesia with cultural assumptions and consequently mix truth with what they imagine that experience to have been. Women's memories of war are also currently perhaps more palatable to contemporary tastes concerning the experience of war and nourish the aspects with which twenty-first century readers prefer to identify: the war of the victim, either as eventual survivor or as tragic corpse, while the role of perpetrator, for example, is a historical food that is harder to swallow and those memories are allowed to recede thereby provoking further amnesia.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, as some memories are recovered and others retreat or are pushed away, perhaps temporarily, from view, it may be more appropriate to designate our current state as one of 'anamnesia' rather than amnesia. To add to a quotation used at the very beginning of this article:

Anamnesia, though commonly understood as 'remembrance,' in fact, *resists forgetting* [...]. 'Double negatives are against the rules of our language system and they produce illicit meanings. To speak in the double negative of anamnesia is a gesture of creation as well as resistance.' (Damlé 229)<sup>22</sup>

Anamnesia is not a 'simple act of remembrance' (in which the reading of witness memoirs participates), but a:

Gesture that exposes, in the layering of its definition, the very tensions that arise in the intertwining of remembrance and forgetting: gaps, slippages, repression, fabrication, invention, transferability. Memory is an instrument through which we define our identities; anamnesia provides a kaleidoscopic lens through which to view the fragmented and fragmenting nature of remembering, of identity. (Damlé 229)

Without indulging in the types of facile identification with the victim against which Radstone warns us, and if we are mindful of readings of the sort she advocates, more dynamic, if necessarily more fragile, identities that connect us with the histories that we seek to know may come into being. Agnès Humbert and Hélène Berr offer us the possibility of just such connecting identities if the "empathetic identification *with* suffering" avoids the simplistic reading positions that we may appear to be invited to adopt by life-writing narratives and if the reader above all resists the "voyeuristic or triumphalist observation of suffering" (34).

Life-writing provides another "kaleidoscopic lens" through which to view our relationship to the past, to the identities and experiences of those who lived it, and to our own needs, desires and identities in the present as we read.

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<sup>1</sup> The newly-emerged, and still developing, field of 'memory studies' remains the subject of much scholarly discussion encompassing as it does a number of areas of the humanities and social sciences, with its interdisciplinarity being perceived both as a strength and a weakness. However, the types of readings suggested in this article sit broadly within its main approaches. Scholars within memory studies are currently critiquing the field of enquiry even as it develops. See, for example, the first issue of the journal *Memory Studies* launched in 2008 (London: Sage).

<sup>2</sup> I am most grateful for the suggestive notion of 'anamnesia' which provides the title of this recent book on private and public memory in modern French culture. The notion "offers new ways of writing on and engaging with memory, commemoration and forgetting" (Wilson xiii).

<sup>3</sup> The place of trauma theory within memory studies is becoming increasingly problematised. See, for example, Kelly and Rye.

<sup>4</sup> The use of terminology in the field of autobiographical studies is notoriously fraught. The term 'life-writing' is that used by Margaretta Jolly as the editor of the *Encyclopaedia of Life-Writing*, which covers an internationally diverse range of writing concerning the self. The criteria established by Philippe Lejeune provide a founding moment in autobiographical studies, but since then no two specialists on autobiography fully agree on what constitutes autobiography. It is usually broadly agreed that 'autobiography' concerns the examination of a life from childhood onwards, while 'memoirs' are concerned with the individual's relationship to other (often significant) people around him/her and to (again often significant) historical events he/she has lived through.

<sup>5</sup> For both the Humbert and Berr texts the intervention of the family in the story of their publication goes beyond the anecdotal to become an important element in that process.

<sup>6</sup> For a study of the ways in which titles and subtitles function, see Genette.

<sup>7</sup> Since the 1970s, France has been coming to terms with the role Vichy played during the war and the support that Pétain and Vichy received from considerable sections of the general public. Marcel Ophüls's 1969 film *Le Chagrin et la Pitié* (*The Sorrow and the Pity*) was a key moment, as was Robert Paxton's *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order*. Further important historical analyses have followed, for example: Henry Rousso's *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*. The British publisher suggests that Berr's *Journal* should in fact have sold around four times as many copies in France. He sees this as evidence of continued resistance on the part of the Parisian intelligentsia in accepting the history of what happened to the Jewish population in France during the Occupation (telephone interview with the article's author, July 2009).

<sup>8</sup> The trial of Klaus Barbie, who became known as 'the Butcher of Lyon,' was a member of the special security branch of the SS and was sent to Lyon, France in 1942 where he became head of the local Gestapo. His most famous case was the arrest, torture and murder of Jean Moulin, one of the most important members of the French Resistance. Found by Nazi hunters, the Klarsfelds in Bolivia in the 1970s, he was finally extradited to France in the early 1980s. His trial began in May 1987 in Lyon and in July he was condemned to life imprisonment for crimes against humanity. He died four years later. This trial, together with that of Maurice Papon in 1997, played a significant role in France's 'memory wars' of the late twentieth century. Papon was a senior French civil servant also convicted for crimes against humanity for his participation in the deportation of Jews during the Occupation when he was secretary general for police of the Prefecture of Bordeaux.

<sup>9</sup> In a telephone interview with this article's author, July 2009.

<sup>10</sup> It also needs to be noted that some reviews in the French press suggest (sometimes implicitly) the idea that had Berr lived, she might have become a writer. This is an important element in the general appreciation of the 'literary quality' of the diary which is prized by a number of reviewers.

<sup>11</sup> Caroline Moorhead notes that in France only one Jewish child in ten perished, far fewer than in other occupied countries. For an overall evaluation of the 'French paradox' concerning the statistical survival of the Jewish populations of France (a distinction needs to be made between 'French' Jews and Jewish immigrants), see Jackson.

<sup>12</sup> The term 'misery memoir' was coined by the *Bookseller* to describe memoirs in which the author recounts his or her triumph over personal trauma and, often, abuse. The popularity of such memoirs can be seen in, for example, the UK's bestseller lists, and the large UK bookshop chain Waterstones until quite recently had a 'Painful Lives' section. Some cultural commentators have expressed anxiety about this contemporary 'addiction' to other people's agony. See, for example, Adams.

<sup>13</sup> The reference to the 'autobiographical pact' refers to Philippe Lejeune's founding text in the study of autobiography.

<sup>14</sup> Radstone notes the analogy to be made with the development and concerns of cultural studies, feminist studies, and gender studies.

<sup>15</sup> Special acknowledgement is due here to the artist Jinny Rawlings who suggested these three tropes with reference to her own work dealing with war and memory. Her work was exhibited (for example) at the Group for War and Culture Studies, *Journal of War and Culture Studies* Conference, "Men at War: Masculinities, Identities, Cultures," University of Swansea, UK, September 2009. Given the suggestive readings of her visual productions and of the texts under discussion here which they engender, it would be interesting to pursue the application of these three tropes to a wider body of work concerning memory, identity and war.

<sup>16</sup> For further discussion of the forms of representation of a wide range of female wartime experiences and changing perceptions of the role and place of women in war see, for example, Fell's *French and Francophone Women*.

<sup>17</sup> The issue of the status of 'women writers' in relation to war memory narrative is clearly an important one which deserves further analysis beyond referring to it here as a kind of 'meta-trope.' However, a full treatment is beyond the scope of the present article. As one starting point, see Fell's "Gendering the War Story," an overview article which contains a considerable bibliography on this subject.

<sup>18</sup> Regarding reference to the disappearance of the original manuscript, *The Washington Post* (Grey), for example, notes that we will never know whether or not Humbert revised the original diary entries before publication.

<sup>19</sup> In both Berr's *Journal* and Némirovsky's *Suite Française*, the author's handwriting figures in facsimile in the published versions as a page inside the text, and for the English hardback of Némirovsky as the back/front cover.

<sup>20</sup> The details of these events are available in, for example, Massie.

<sup>21</sup> Duras is again an important (counter) example here, treating as she does (for example in *La Douleur*, 1985) the experiences of victims and perpetrators during the Occupation and victims (resisters) turned perpetrators at the Liberation.

<sup>22</sup> Damlé is quoting Castelli and McBride 115-16.

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