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Colin Davis, *Traces of War: Interpreting Ethics and Trauma in Twentieth-Century French Writing*. Liverpool University Press, 2018. 265 pp. Bibliography and index. £80 U.K. (hb). ISBN 97817869440421.

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The main argument of *Traces of War* is that World War II is present in twentieth century French writing even when—and perhaps, *especially* when—it is not explicitly addressed. Davis's primary goal is to uncover the traces of war present in the works of Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Charlotte Delbo, Albert Camus, Emmanuel Levinas, Paul Ricoeur, Louis Althusser, Elie Wiesel, Jorge Semprún, and Sarah Kofman. By traces, Davis does not mean a sign pointing back to an occluded, forgotten, or repressed event, but rather, one pointing to a disruption of all presence and identity through an encounter with otherness. As such, a trace is a sign which produces signification without leading to or recalling a final signified. Davis's work is squarely situated at the intersection of twentieth century French studies and trauma studies. It would make a useful introductory text because of the wide range of key figures and canonical texts addressed, as well as its overview of major debates and key issues present in both areas of study. At the same time, Davis's discussions on ethics are particularly relevant to scholars in trauma studies, and his integration of archival material and unpublished documents offer thought-provoking ways of reframing texts for scholars in twentieth century French studies.

Davis begins by discussing ethical and hermeneutic problems that arise when academics speak for and interpret the suffering of others. He focuses on Jorge Agamben to illustrate problems with secondary witnessing, and on Shoshanna Felman to discuss the dangers of vicarious trauma. Davis argues that Agamben misreads Primo Levi in his portrayal of the *Muselmann* as the central figure that holds the key to unlocking the meaning of the concentration camps, and critiques Agamben for positioning himself as having the authority to translate this meaning to others (p. 13-17). Davis also criticizes Felman's pedagogy of trauma, which caused her students to experience crisis and made it necessary for her to step in and bring them back into significance. Although Felman concluded that crisis was essential to genuine teaching, Davis questions her authority to provoke vicarious trauma, as well as her ability to satisfactorily resolve it by the end of the class (p. 17-20). In contrast, Davis presents Charlotte Delbo as a model to follow. He contends that her work avoids an appropriative assumption of authority because she includes a diverse range of survivors' experiences and does not attempt to unify them through any kind of hegemonic view. Although there is a merging and loss of voice through her use of "we," each story belongs equally to all of the survivors (p. 20-27).

Davis's valorization of a multiplicity of perspectives is a fundamentally important point, and his refusal to impose a unified narrative by glossing over tensions and contradictory viewpoints reflects best practices. It is clear that *Traces of War* embodies this approach, as it spans a very wide range of diverse experiences and does not attempt to tell a coherent story about World War II. That being said, at times the book comes across as a disjointed compilation of texts because productive resonances or connections are not always articulated, and discussions of several texts are fragmented and dispersed across different chapters.

In the first section, Davis brings up legitimate concerns about Felman's teaching methodology. His points—which resonate with Dominick LaCapra's own reservations—merit thought and attention, particularly for those who teach courses in trauma studies. However, Davis's emotionally-charged and strongly worded criticism sometimes portrays Felman's position in an unfair light. For example, his claim that "failing to be traumatized might lead to failing the class" (p. 19) or "Felman speaks of her students as an undifferentiated block" (p. 21) are unsubstantiated. In addition, I disagree with Davis's stance that "the responsibility of the witness is not to *become* the victim, to partake of the victim's pain; rather, . . . , it is to regard the other's pain as something alien, unfathomable, and as an outrage which should be stopped" (p. 20). Both of these positions represent a failure in reception through the extremes of fusion or alienation. Witnessing another's pain requires both strong boundaries (separateness) and mirroring (sameness) at the same time in order for genuine empathy to occur.

After examining these ethical concerns, Davis focuses on the hermeneutics involved when academics speak about another's pain. He argues that people and texts do not say only or exactly what they mean, and that they are open to interpretation. Because interpretation always invites further interpretation, it leads to multiple layers of meaning, and even to "over-interpretation." For Davis, over-interpretation is not framed as imposing improbable meaning on a text, but as pushing the boundaries of what a text can say (p. 30-34). Davis uses three case studies to discuss the hermeneutics of trauma. The first relates to Phineas Gage, a construction foreman who survived an accident during which an iron rod went through his head. Although he survived, his personality was entirely different due to the cerebral trauma he endured (p. 34-38). The second is Jorge Semprún, who wrote *Le Grand Voyage* in 1963. At the time of its publication, although his experiences in the concentration camps had been terrible, they did not radically undermine his beliefs or identity. However, after Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn published *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*—wherein he compared Nazi camps to Soviet Gulags, thereby undermining the moral authority of communist opponents to Nazism—Semprún's experiences became traumatic because the political framework that made them intelligible to him was no longer tenable (p. 38-40). Third, Davis examines Charlotte Delbo's *Aucun de nous ne reviendra*. The stories of survivors that she presents indicates that although a physical return from the concentration camps is possible, the subject who left is not the same as the one who came back; there is a complete rupture in the continuity of identity (p. 40-44).

Davis's discussion of the hermeneutic issues that arise when academics speak for others or about others' pain is thought-provoking and valuable. It offers important insights on critical issues and has practical application to the field. However, Davis oversimplifies the relationship between trauma and its literary representation when he concludes: "It may be least traumatic when it is most openly expressed and most traumatic when it goes unsaid, covertly inflecting utterances without becoming explicit" (p. 44). This viewpoint valorizes Davis's search for the traces of war, but it is too reductive in nature to be accurate.

After discussing issues that arise when speaking for or about others, Davis turns his attention to literary analysis. He searches for the traces of war in the works of three French intellectuals: Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus. Davis contends that the war was good for Sartre and Beauvoir's careers because it gave them both a lot to write about, and examines the positive terms they use to describe the wartime period. A common theme in their writing is that the war is nowhere and everywhere at the same time; it affects every aspect of life yet is also absent and intangible (p. 50-57). Davis also delves into accusations that Beauvoir had a sexual relationship with a former pupil, and uses the disparity between Beauvoir's version of events in *La Force d'âge* and information gathered from archival materials to measure the gap between what is said and unsaid in her text (p. 58-61). He then goes on to argue that Camus's *L'Étranger* contains traces of World War II because it was written and published in occupied Paris (p. 65-66). He contends that "killing an anonymous Arab in Algeria is a small-scale enactment of the widespread race crimes being perpetrated and prepared in Europe at the time when *L'Étranger* was published" (p. 69). Davis enumerates characteristics in the text—an unsettled chronology, Meursault's detachment from his own emotional life, the disconnection and lack of meaning

of events, a compulsion to repeat, a damaged social bond—as evidence that Meursault is a post-traumatic being (p. 76-78). Afterwards, Davis examines problems of interpretation and ethics in *La Peste* and *La Chute*, where the relevance of World War II is largely taken for granted. He contends that the desire to remove rats in *La Peste* can be linked to Camus's repudiation of otherness in his ethics and aesthetics (p. 80-99). Davis concurs with Felman's analysis of *La Chute*, which posits that a radical failure of witnessing undercuts the possibility of being present to the experience of trauma (pp. 100-104, 108-115). However, he faults her for pinning down the novel's interpretation more confidently than the text allows (by calling the fall a suicide), and especially for distorting Sartre's work in regards to his failure to mention the Holocaust (pp. 104-108).

Davis's treatment of the accusations against Beauvoir offers a careful analysis of the issues at stake. The archival evidence he presents is particularly illuminating. Davis does tend, however, to over-rely on binary oppositions to make his arguments. For example: "Was Beauvoir the victim of persecution by an angry mother and collaborationist authorities, or an abuser of the young who escaped lightly? Is Mathieu free, or still futile? Does the Occupation bring us together or pull us apart? Does the war change everything, or leave everything pretty much as it was?" (p. 62). Even when answering both yes and no, framing major issues in such a way elides alternate possibilities, reduces their complexity, and encourages polarization. In Davis's discussion of Camus, he skillfully analyzes the traumatic elements present in *L'Étranger*; this part of his argument is sound. But his attempt to link the novel to World War II is less than convincing. Davis's argument hinges upon identifying the causality of Meursault's trauma, but the evidence presented is weak, and the various connections suggested between literary content and historical context are tenuous.

Davis then searches out the traces of war in the works of Emmanuel Levinas, Paul Ricoeur, and Louis Althusser—three post-war philosophers who spent most of the war in German prisoner of war camps. In *Réflexion faite*, Ricoeur's account of his five years in the camps is brief and placid: he characterizes this time as a forced sabbatical, and writes about both of his parents' deaths in a short parenthesis. Davis argues that Ricoeur's striking brevity suggests that there is much underlying the text that is not said (pp. 119-123). He contends that the narrative can be interpreted in an alternate manner due to three articles that were published in Ricoeur's name without his consent, as well as Ricoeur's involvement in the Cercle Pétain (pp. 124-128). In Davis's analysis of Levinas's work, he examines the single-sentence paragraph from *Difficile liberté* that indicates World War II is central to the biography. Similarly, Levinas's dedication to victims of Nazism and other victims of hatred, as well as the inscription in Hebrew at the beginning of *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* invite the reader to consider his ethics as a response to World War II, even though this is not explicitly addressed in the rest of his work (pp. 134-139). Davis also examines two unpublished drafts of novels by Levinas that portray experiences of World War II. Particularly because Levinas publically repudiated fiction, yet privately pursued it, Davis considers these texts to be the ultimate trace of war (pp. 148-162). Davis searches out the traces in Althusser's work by examining the disparity between what the philosopher published during his lifetime and what was published posthumously. He interprets Althusser's murder of his wife Héléne as acting out trauma because Althusser describes the strangulation as a massage, and he first learned how to massage from Louis Cler in the prisoner of war camp (pp. 139-145).

Davis's presentation of the issues surrounding the three articles attributed to Ricoeur is balanced and thorough, and his reflection on authorial responsibility is helpful. His reading of Levinas's unpublished, partial drafts of novels as traces of war, as well as his analysis of how these works influenced Levinas's philosophical writings is, in my opinion, the strongest portion of this book. Davis's reading of Althusser and the connection between massage and the concentration camps is also well-argued, even if he occasionally over-reads into things. For instance, it is a stretch to read a description of Louis Cler as "un expert en tout" as an indication that he may have also mastered the art of killing and taught it to Althusser (p. 143).

In the fourth section, Davis uncovers the traces of war in the testimonies of three survivor-witnesses: Jorge Semprún, Elie Wiesel, and Sarah Kofman. Davis examines how Semprún's practice of fiction became a space of witnessing and invention, as well as telling and not telling (p. 166). Semprún's dilemma appears to be that he can either live or write, but not both, because writing takes him back to the sites of death, and exposes him to unfathomable chaos and unspeakable cruelty. Davis concludes that if so many of Semprún's alter egos are condemned to die, it may be so that their author can carry on living (pp. 165-192). Davis then examines how Wiesel's fictional output is also integral to his literary production, even though it sometimes creates tension with his commitment to bearing witness (p. 165). Davis discusses failures in the articulation and reception of Moshe the Beadle's testimony in *La Nuit*, analyzes Wiesel's meditation on madness, and presents varying viewpoints on the nature of Wiesel's death (pp. 193-214). Finally, Davis examines Sarah Kofman's autobiographical *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, which recounts her experience as a young girl who was caught up in a custody battle between two mothers—her biological mother and a surrogate mother who took care of her during World War II. Davis presents Kofman's suicide shortly after the publication of her book as a delayed response to the horrors of the war (pp. 218-233).

Overall, *Traces of War: Interpreting Ethics and Trauma in Twentieth-Century French Writing* provides a thoughtful and substantive analysis of a wide range of authors, texts, and major debates as it explores the traces of war found in literary works that do not explicitly mention World War II. Although not without issues, this book's breadth and depth make it a valuable scholarly contribution, as well as an interesting and informative read.

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