Culture as Text, Text as Culture

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Edited by

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and Mary Cobb Wittrock

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FOREWORD

WRITING THE WORLD: OUR TIMES REFLECTED IN LITERATURE

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By "writing the world" I mean how writing—literature and theater—enables us to understand the world, to understand the apparently *un*understandable, to go beyond the inundation of newsbites and photo-ops and even serious journalism, to hold the proverbial mirror up to life—literature's traditional mission—so that in this mirror we might see reflected our lives, our condition as humans, our political and social reality, our existential situation: in other words, our selves in our world.

Literature is not only that, this is not its only mission. But I suggest it is perhaps its noblest mission, its most useful mission, a mission that only *it* can accomplish, nothing else can, not the daily newspaper nor weekly newsmagazine, not CNN, comic books, or a presidential news conference, not "Law and Order" nor even "West Wing."

More than any other modern writer, Jean-Paul Sartre both theorized and incarnated commitment in literature. Though surprisingly removed and silent during Hitler's rise to power, Sartre was radicalized during World War II and thereafter took an active and always outspoken part in all the major political and social controversies of his time. He was often wrong-headed, at times dogmatic, tended to Manichean oversimplification into good guys and bad guys, but always wrote with courage, accepted the implications of his positions, and was a moral arbiter who could not be avoided. His key 1947 essay, *Qu'est-ce que la literature? (What Is Literature?)* defines the writer as a committed artist with an obligation to speak out, to act, in the name of democracy. In it Sartre pointed clearly to the writer's responsibility:

> …the writer chooses to reveal the world and specifically to reveal man to other men so that, with the object thus completely revealed, they can assume their full responsibility….The art of prose stands behind the only regime in which prose retains any meaning: democracy. When one is threatened, the other is also. And it is not sufficient to defend it with the pen. A day may come when the pen is obliged to stop and then the writer must pick up arms. Thus, however you may have gotten there, whatever opinions you may have defended, literature casts you into the battle. To write is a way of wanting liberty; once you have started, willingly or not, you are committed.[1]

Literature—including great literature—can also be concerned primarily with *other* matters, for instance with esthetic concerns, with the pursuit of beauty for beauty's sake, with abstraction. But the literature that reveals the world to us, that is crucial to our better understanding of it, and therefore of ourselves, is literature that is somehow tied to the here and now. But it is not necessarily tied in realistic terms, because non-realistic metaphors often reveal more about our existence than realistic descriptions, as might be seen for instance in *Œdipus Rex* or in *Waiting for Godot*. If the best of literature deals—and has always dealt—with man in the world, it can do so tragically or comically, politically or non-politically, by depicting a recognizable universe or by plunging us into the metaphors or parables of fantasy.

To illustrate my point, I will refer to writers of the twentieth (and start of the 21st) century. But I mentioned *Œdipus Rex*, and it is clear that 2500 years ago, Sophocles was already writing the world, and writing it with such power and clarity that two and one half millenia later we still learn about the search for self, about the human personality, and about the concept of tragic flaw and fall from high through the story of Œdipus, and we still thrill to the revolt against tyranny, to the refusal to acquiesce to profound injustice of Antigone. Our lives are very different from those of the ancient Greeks, but the world that Sophocles revealed to the spectators of Thebes remains valid in its universality to the extent that it speaks of the relationship of man to the world, to his fate. That has not changed and is not likely to change.

The writer's commitment to his time, to the discussion through art of the great political and social problems of the time became at the time of the eighteenth century enlightenment the major concern of literature, championed so brilliantly by Voltaire most of all, but also by Diderot, and by English, Scottish and eventually American writers. By the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, timeless existential subject

matters joined the more current concerns as the basic raw material of literature in general and the novel in particular.

The modern period provides us with ample examples. The tragic twentieth century was arguably most cataclysmic of centuries whose staggering inhumanity is all the more devastating that, unlike societies in, say, the dark ages, we had the means to do ever so much better—and failed to do so. And our young 21st century gives distressing evidence of trying to catch up with its unhappy predecessor. (Let us hope that this fear will prove to be unfounded!)

Given what the twentieth century managed in the way of cruelty, violence, absurdity, through wars that killed many tens of millions of people, through the Shoah and other forms of genocide beginning early in the century and reaching to the very last years, through the use and threat of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons, on blood soaked battlefields and in devastated cities, but at the same time also given the resistance, heroism, and human resiliency that keep our species going after all—given all that, it is not surprising that the political, social, and beyond that, the metaphysical, existential realities that form the background of the twentieth century are the substance of what writers tried to deal with, often tragically but also ironically, stressing the absurd of human condition.

Some dealt with specific aspects of this doleful history in brilliant works of art that are more than stories "about" something, they "are" something, and these novels or plays are not thesis works written to demonstrate a point but artistic creations that reconstitute the world, and by so doing render it somewhat more comprehensible.

Thus for instance André Malraux's memorable *Man's Fate* set in the early days of the Chinese Revolution, which thrusts us unforgettably into the grim reality of political terrorism that has become all too familiar to us. And this already in 1933! Or the same writer's *Man's Hope*, several years later, that called attention to the Spanish Civil War, that devastating prelude to World War II which Hitler used to test his redoubtable air force before sending it to fight, just a couple of years later, against Poland, Britain, France and the Low countries. Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* also deserves high praise, especially for making that apparently far-off Spanish Civil War a reality to American readers.

The two world wars gave rise to numerous great fictions which did ever so much more than merely *describe* battles: they recreated the horror, the loneliness and fear, and the total disruption caused by these global events in which the individual ceased counting altogether. Of many choices available, I would mention, for World War I, the great German writer, Erich Maria Remarque's epochal *All Quiet on the Western Front*

and for World War II, two grim but brilliant American novels by very young veterans, Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* and James Jones's *From Here to Eternity* and that masterpiece of absurd and black humor, Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*, a novel which gives war a bad name for all time.

Even the unspeakable, the unwritable, the Shoah, has been brilliantly written about, among others by three who survived it: the Italian Primo Levi (who survived more dead than alive, alive just long enough to testify through his writings before eventually committing suicide), Elie Wiesel, who came out of the night of the concentration camp to become the moral conscience of the post-war world—a thankless burden that he assumes willingly, at times controversially, always brilliantly—and the recent Hungarian Nobel Prize winner, Imre Kértesz, author of *Fatelessness: A Novel* a and *Liquidation*, whose approach is more subjective, more emotional. I would also mention a splendid volume of first person testimony entitled *Écrire après Auschwitz* (Writing After Auschwitz) edited by Pierre Mertens with texts by Jorge Semprun, Primo Levi, Jean Cayrol, and Imre Kertesz.

More recently, the Holocaust has been the subject of novels by younger writers who were not themselves victimized by it: for instance, the English author, Martin Amis's, recent *House of* Meetings and the 900 page novel, *Les Bienveillantes*, that won both this year's Goncourt prize and the Grand Prize of the Académie Française—an amazing double recognition by a most interesting writer, Jonathan Lyttle, American born but writing in French. *Les Bienveillantes (The Kindly Ones - The Choephore)* is a first-person narrative told by the bureaucratic, degenerate yet not villainous commander of an extermination camp. It has raised a storm of questions—a healthy result for a committed novel.

One of the most fascinating aspects of twentieth century history was of course the rise and fall of the Soviet empire. For many writers, especially but not only European ones, that history, starting with the Russian Revolution of 1917, with the great figures Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin, with the hopes, the betrayals, the massacres, the terror, proved a great but also fatal attraction. Many were initially drawn to Marxist ideals, but were soon repulsed by the murderous excesses of the nineteen thirties. At the same time, others saw in the USSR the one country opposed to the rise of Hitler and a bellicose, racist, Germany whose program had been clearly spelled out in *Mein Kampf*. That opposition (the Western democracies remained too silent too long!) helped orient many intellectuals toward Moscow in the thirties, until the astounding Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939 allowed both Germany *and* the USSR to attack and divide up Poland, (and enabled

Germany to go to war with France and Britain undisturbed—until of course Hitler stabbed Russia in the back also and attacked *it* in late 1941).

The French writer, André Gide, later a recipient of the Nobel Prize, on the whole more interested in esthetic considerations and in literature of self exploration, was taken with the Soviet experiment but returned from a trip to the Soviet Union in the thirties disabused. Other leading European and American intellectuals came to similar conclusions, and their disillusionment was the subject of an extraordinary book, *The God That Failed*, with essays by Gide as well as other famous writers, including Arthur Koestler, Richard Wright, Ignazio Silone, and Stephen Spender. It turned out to be a crucial turning point.

Years later, Aleksandr Solszenitsins's role as a dissident writer was the very incarnation of the commitment of the author writing the world, and his novels such as *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and *The Gulag Archipelago* may well be said to have contributed to changing things in the Soviet Union, to beginning a process that brought down the regime and the system.

Looking at another part of the globe, think of what the world knows about the long South African tyranny of apartheid and the stunning, successful struggle to get rid of this affront to human dignity! Those of us outside of South Africa (but probably South Africans also) understand that struggle better thanks to the novels, essays, and poems of Nadine Gordimer, J.M. Coetze, and Breyten Breytenbach. They revealed the reality of South Africa better than any statistic or any political tract.

In our country we are not short of examples. Much of modern American literature (fiction as well as theater) has been deeply involved with the problems of American society and policies. Nowhere has this been truer than for the black experience and especially for the early days of the African-American political awareness (before that term African-American was even coined) in such outstanding hard-hitting, conscience-raising novels as Richard Wright's world famous *Native Son*, James Baldwin's ferocious (he had been mild up to then) *The Fire Next Time* and *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, and Ralph Ellison's definitve fictional portrait of the slowly upward moving black American, *Invisible Man*. These books were milestones; many others followed.

I will next examine briefly three other commanding Americans, who left us recently and who wrote courageously and brilliantly about the political reality of the United States but also about the world beyond and about profound social and philosophic issues: Arthur Miller, Susan Sontag, and William Styron.

Arthur Miller's powerful play *The Crucible* is *the* literary statement that put the manipulated hysteria of the McCarthy era in its proper perspective by means of a historical analogy, the seventeenth century Salem witch hunts, which served as a clear parable to the U.S. of the 1950s.Another Miller play, *After the Fall,* much discussed for its dramatization of the author's celebrated marriage to Marilyn Monroe, is more interesting and more provocative for focusing on the leading American moral crisis of the 50s: the subpoenas and blacklisting by Joe McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee.

On a different level, Arthur Miller's earlier, best-known play, the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Death of a Salesman (1949)* shook up the moral certitudes and self-righteousness of post-war America and exposed some raw nerve endings of a society in transition.

Like Miller, Susan Sontag was a courageous writer. That does not mean that she was always right, but she got into the arena, she took positions in public, and often took plenty of flack for them. She spoke up against the war in Vietnam (alongside many others), she defended Salman Rushdie against the fatwa meant to silence and kill him, she spent long periods of time in a devastated Sarajevo under siege as an act of solidarity, she wrote about Aids when few were doing so, in order to de-demonize an illness still being whispered about, and she wrote *Illness as Metaphor*, referring to her own cancer, as an attempt to demistify another supposedly shameful malady. After 9/11 her vitriolic New Yorker piece earned her as many attacks as kudos. She took risks, she made mistakes, but she wrote about what matters in this world, beyond convenient concepts of political correctness. Her voracious intellect helped enlighten the world for us.

In relating the story of Nat Turner, a brilliant, engaged slave who led the only sustained slave revolt in American history (*The Confessions of Nat Turner*, 1967) and of a non-Jewish Polish woman sent to Auschwitz with her two children who was forced by a sadistic doctor to chose between the two—only one would live (*Sophie's Choice* 1979)—William Styron, too, proved to be a courageous writer. He was accused by some black writers for daring, as a white man, to tell the story of a black hero. But whatever the color of the author, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* remains a potent indictment of slavery, founded on fact, enriched by fiction. He was vilified by some conservative whites for mythologizing this rebel who led a group of fellow escapees on a very bloody trail. For *Sophie's Choice*, he was criticized for writing about Auschwitz as a non-Jew and for making his concentration camp heroine a non-Jew when it was principally Jews who suffered extermination there. But Styron's book takes aim at evil as it confronts mankind at Auschwitz, to be sure, but

beyond everywhere, and especially also in the history of American slavery and the hatred and lynching that remained well into the twentieth century. *Sophie's Choice* has been generally recognized as one of the masterpieces of contemporary literature.

Finally, I want to explore three writers who, perhaps more than any others, represent ways (three *different* ways) of writing the world in our times, Kafka, Beckett, and Camus. They have one element in common: they view the world as absurd, but the directions their writings take are very different.

The allegorical tales of the Czech Franz Kafka, who wrote in German, so much encapsulated the absurdity of contemporary man trapped in the undecipherable web of guilt and punishment imposed by bureaucratic institutions that his name has become synonymous with that absurdity. *The Trial* and *The Castle* are, indeed *kafkaesque* and Kafka's hero, or rather *anti*-hero, Joseph K., is not only the protagonist of his works, he is the metaphor of the little man crushed by the system. (In the twentieth century, the antihero replaced the hero—old-fashioned heroes became hard to find).

Take Samuel Beckett's anti-heroes, for instance. Didi and Gogo, the two tramps in *Waiting for Godot* are crushed not by the "system" but by existence, by being forlorn, abandoned, deprived of the salvation they are seeking, since "Godot" has not come and likely will never come. When, at the end of each of the play's two acts, they say "let's go" but don't move, having nowhere to go, they too are overwhelming metaphors of man in his existential anguish, forsaken in his desperate need. But all is not despair, not even in Beckett, as witness the end of his novel, *The Unnamable* when the narrator, despite all odds and in the most desperate of situations concludes the work with: "you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on."[2]

Like Elie Wiesel, but with a gentler, Mediterranean sensibility—and *he* was not in a concentration camp—the Algerian -born French writer Albert Camus also served as a moral guide and the moral consciousness to his era. For him, a human life was, beyond any possible ideology, the basic unit of value of existence. Thus, for instance, Camus wrote the most impassioned indictment of the death penalty, in the name of the secular sanctity of human life, and even while accepting (along with most writers) the world as absurd he struggled intellectually to find an affirmation of life within that absurdity. That is why Sisyphus became Camus' s iconic figure, Sisyphus who was punished by the gods for his excessive (or so the gods felt) attachment to this world and was condemned to roll a rock up a hill for all eternity only to have it roll down once the top was reached. But Camus does not stop there. His Sisyphus thinks of Sophocles's Œdipus

and concludes, with the blinded king, that despite everything, all is well. Camus concluded his essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus* with

> Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks...The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.[3]

The proposition that happiness is attainable by man despite the absurd, despite the fatality of death, despite the weight of history, points to a very human achievement, a potent manifestation of hope that, once more, literature reveals to us, enables us to understand.

Camus also knows the ways of the world and here again his writings offer us precious insights. His 1947 novel, *The Plague*, imagines the outbreak of bubonic plague in the Algerian port city of Oran but it really concerns spiritual and political plagues that can enslave men everywhere, and how they react against the plague. It is a parable that ends in victory through common effort over the plague, in liberation from the repression that accompanied it and in celebration of freedom regained. But Camus leaves us not on a note of triumph but rather with a forceful warning that elevates the novel to universal parable and leaves the world with a significant call to permanent vigilance:

The book ends with the following admonition from the narrator/character Rieux:

> ...as he listened to the cries of joy rising from the town, Rieux remembered that such joy is always imperiled. He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good, that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city.[4]

This, I suggest, is the world revealed by a writer in a way no politician could ever hope to match. Once you have read *The Plague* and have inscribed in your mind the image of rats again setting forth to die in a happy city, you are not likely ever to forget that image nor that lesson. *That* is the role of the writer. We live our lives, we exist from day to day, but perhaps it is through the companionship of novels and plays that we become *conscious* of existing, aware of our place in the scheme of things.

I have mentioned a number of writers, but there are so many others I could have used for my illustrations: for instance, Günter Grass on Hitler's

Germany, Thomas Bernhard and Elfriede Jelinek on Austria's Nazism and Fascist mentality; Emile Zola's valiant struggle to defend the falsely accused Captain Dreyfus, Assia Djebar on the struggle of Algerian women subjugated by a repressive regime, or the most recent Nobel Prize winner, the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk who denounces what today is still an "anti-Turkish" crime in his country, that of calling attention to the Armenian genocide in Turkey at the start of the twentieth century. And there are many more.

But in concluding, a legitimate question needs to be asked. *Must* literature (or theater or film) be committed; is there no room for *non*-committed literature, for art for art's sake? For the esthetic or even deeply philosophic rather than the temporally engaged, and thus perhaps limited, artistic expression? Sartre undoubtedly would have answered that yes, one must be committed. In presenting his new review, *Les Temps modernes*, he wrote: "The writer is *situated* in his time; every word he utters has reverberations, as does his silence."[5] Few of us would, I think, be willing to subscribe to that sharply Manichean view. Undoubtedly, we have a broader, richer, more encompassing view of literary creation, which neither excludes all writing *not* linked to a particular political or social conflict nor views it as an antithesis between committed "content" and artistic expression. For most of us, probably, these two are not in indispensable opposition, and most, if not in fact all the works I have used as illustrations take position with respect to our world and its dilemmas through expression of great brilliance. There is no need for an antinomy.

And who would argue that Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*, written just a couple of years after the end of World War II, after the Holocaust and Hiroshima, is not a major novel because it does not deal with those events that radically changed the world, and explores rather the inner chaos of existence and language? (But are there not connections, after all?) Or that Joyce's *Ulysses*, in concentrating on one day in the life of one man, is satisfied with mere navel-gazing subjectivity while ignoring the world-shaking events that shaped the time: the incredibly disastrous first World War, the rise of Communism, Fascism, and Nazism?

No, the role of the writer cannot be only to take position vis-à-vis the events of the time and we recognize that there are many different ways to express positions. But one of the most compelling missions of literature—and therefore one of the writer's most noble functions—is to bear witness to his/her era, to speak up, to take issue, to be a restless, relentless critic.

Recently, the French writer, Frédéric Beigbeder, ended a novel about another "unspeakable" subject, the destruction of the World Trade Center,

with the following statement intended for French literature but equally applicably to others:

> We must write what is forbidden. French literature is a long history of disobedience...Show the invisible, speak the unspeakable. It may be impossible but that is its raison d'être. Literature is a *Mission: Impossible*.[6]

A mission impossible, perhaps, but a mission that makes our lives *more* possible.

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PART I:

TRUTH, TEXT, HISTORIOGRAPHY

PART I INTRODUCTION

CHRISTINA WALL

A distinction between fictional tales and history as a presentation of historical facts has only existed for roughly 250 years.[1] Although history as a scholarly discipline has since flourished, this does not imply that it should be understood as a purely objective narrative of past events. Rather, many scholars stress that the historian is forced to interpret history through an examination of texts left behind.[2]

Just as the historian constructs a narrative through the analysis of texts, so too does the chronicler of an event interpret his time from his own perspective. The objectivity of any non-fictional account is thereby disputed. Furthermore, the absence of any inherent historical "truth" leads one to question the assumed absolute fictionality of literary texts. As Hayden White indicates in his *Tropics of Discourse*:

> The image of reality which the novelist … constructs is meant to correspond in its general outline to some domain of human experience which is no less 'real' than that referred to by the historians.[3]

The contributors of this section explore exactly this ambiguous space between fact and fiction in order to broaden the understanding of the relationship between "truth," text, and historiography.

In the section's first paper, Benjamin P. Nickles analyzes a frequently overlooked, six-page personal account of the 1945 Sétif uprising in Algeria. Although contemporary scholarship has mainly researched accounts of French repression leading to the rebellion, Nickles breaks with this tradition by examining a report by a French survivor. Analyzing the literary aspects of this historical document, he succeeds in exposing the terror and trauma 'Sétif' unleashed among the settlers, anxieties he proves to be fundamental for Algeria's later decolonization.

Stephanie Wooler also investigates obscured collective trauma, but does so by psychoanalyzing prose fiction. Her paper examines the French Revolution as an attempt to replace the archetypal collective family romance of paternity that was fundamental for French society with one of

fraternity. The following Terror and its fratricidal violence represent a failure of fraternity that results in collective trauma. Studying the novels of Sade, Constant, and Chateaubriand psychoanalytically while simultaneously placing them in their cultural and historical framework, she demonstrates how fiction can become a textual space in which collective traumas are played out.

Whereas this section begins with a literary analysis of a historical document, it ends with a historical analysis of a literary text. Employing Hayden White's argument for the inclusion of literary texts in historiography, Gorsharn Toor examines Irmgard Keun's novel *Nach Mitternacht* [*After Midnight*] (1956) as a historical text. Contrasting the novel's fictional account of daily life in Nazi Germany to non-fictional historical accounts, she succeeds in challenging many long-standing assumptions concerning the Gestapo's role in spreading fascist ideology.

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CHAPTER ONE

TERROR, TRAUMA, AND TEXT: WRITING COUNTERREVOLUTION IN COLONIAL ALGERIA

BENJAMIN P. NICKELS

On June 22, 1957, a 22-year-old Muslim teacher in an Algiers primary school asked the thirty-two Muslim children of his class to write a response to the question, "What would you do if you were invisible?" One 10-year-old wrote, "the first thing I would do would be to go and take revenge on the paratroopers… I will torture them twice before I kill them… I would put bombs in the French areas, I would go all the way to [Prime Minister Guy] Mollet and [Resident Minister] Robert Lacoste, I would kill them." The students said they would "rob a French bank," steal fruit, jewelry, and "my mother's sugar to make a bomb," and "kill all the French and the soldiers." Their teacher passed these responses to sociologist and ethnographer Germaine Tillon, who showed them to Mollet and, years after the war, to historians Alistair Horne and James D. Le Sueur.[1] These short essays continue to serve as a stark statement of the profound anger and alienation produced by colonial and wartime violence in French Algeria. While French paratroopers fought the National Liberation Front (*Front de libération nationale*, FLN) in the Battle of Algiers, thirty-two of the capital's children were writing revolution.

The well-known words of these "invisible" revolutionaries prefigure the most famous case that revolutionary psychiatrist Frantz Fanon recounted, four years later, in the "Colonial War and Mental Disorders" section of *The Wretched of the Earth.*[2] Two Muslim primary school students—aged thirteen and fourteen—describe why they stabbed to death a French playmate on a hill overlooking their village, a place where the three children regularly played with catapults together. "He was a good friend of ours… One day we decided to kill him, because the Europeans want to kill all the Arabs," the younger student explained. The older

student had lost two relatives in 1956 when French militiamen massacred forty Algerians in the village of Rivet: "I wanted to take to the mountains, but I was too young. So, X*** and I said we'd kill a European." The boys chose their best European friend, the 13-year-old explained, because "he used to play with us. Another boy wouldn't have gone up the hill with us… We can't kill big people. But we could kill ones like him, because he was the same age as us."[3] In this case, when the Algerian Muslim students' anger and alienation moved into action, fantasies of bombing able-bodied paratroopers and seasoned politicians sedimented in the modest, mundane, and matter-of-fact—a child, a best friend, a knife from home.

Less well remembered are Fanon's European cases: a policeman and torturer of suspected FLN members who ties up his wife and beats his 20-month-old baby; another policeman/torturer who hears incessant screams and breaks down upon a chance meeting with one of his victims; and a high official/torturer whose deeds, death, and burial disturb and disillusion his daughter. Each of these French wartime cases unites law enforcement and torture with anxiety. But where are the words prefiguring the colonizers' "mental disorders" expressed during "colonial war?" If ordinary Muslim children were writing revolution, were average Europeans in Algeria writing counterrevolution?

This chapter answers the question in the affirmative by recovering and analyzing one text from an earlier event, the "Sétif" uprising of May 8, 1945. A first section considers how current historiographical trends risk overlooking this text. The second and third sections present a detailed reading of the document's expression of terror and trauma, pillars of the counterrevolutionary reaction to the rebellion.

I

On May 8, 1945, Algeria experienced its largest rebellion against French authority in nearly a century of colonial domination. On this day—VE day, marking the end of World War II in Europe—across the colony's Constantine department in the east, from the inland steppe north to the Mediterranean Sea, Arabs and Berbers, members of Algeria's Muslim community numbering some seven million people, started and sustained a state of open revolt against the French government for a period of five days. The uprising claimed one hundred and twelve European lives. In the following weeks, the colonial government unleashed a response of massive repression—including extensive bombardment by air and sea—that took the lives of thousands of Muslims. Many died in revenge killings

by French settlers, members of the colony's European minority (known as the *pieds-noirs*) numbering roughly one million people. Sétif, the town at the epicenter of this historic revolt, has provided a name for the uprising, and "Sétif" the event is generating ever more interest among scholars.

Several factors explain the rising interest in "Sétif." French historians have begun focusing on the rebellion of May 8, 1945, in attempts to understand the origins of the bitter, bloody French-Algerian War that followed approximately a decade later (1954–62). A first generation of French historians has managed with some success to push the French public school system into addressing the "War of Algeria," and a second generation is now moving on from assessing postwar decolonization to reassessing French colonialism, arguably a more fraught and controversial task.

Algerian scholars have engaged the widespread disappointment in their country after decades of rule by the victorious party of the French-Algerian War. They have started searching for distinct nationalist traditions predating the FLN and the "Revolution," looking for a heroic Algerian past beyond the party and period long lauded in official state history. "Sétif" provides an ideal site for this revision: the uprising occurred a decade before the FLN was founded, and the event can be cast as a spontaneous revolt of the Algerian people rather than a rebellion planned by any nationalist organization of the time—be it the Federation of Elected Officials of Ferhat Abbas, the Algerian People's Party (*Parti du people algérien*, PPA) of Messali Hadj, or the umbrella oppositional movement that both Abbas and Hadj joined prior to the revolt, the Friends of the Manifesto and Liberty (*Amis du Manifeste et de la liberté*, AML).

Anglophone academics have introduced a postcolonial perspective to the events of May 8, 1945. Along with general enthusiasm for the wide-ranging intellectual projects of authors actively involved in French-Algerian War (e.g., Frantz Fanon, Pierre Bourdieu), these historians have brought developments in theory to the study of this massive explosion of violence against French colonial rule in Algeria. For example, the apparent disjuncture between Algeria's people and its nationalist political elite during "Sétif" elicits classic Subaltern Studies questions of popular protest and political representation.

However, this confluence of new interest in "Sétif" risks framing the event in old terms. In hopes of elevating its historiographical status, "Sétif" is increasingly being dubbed the "real" beginning of the French-Algerian War. Yet this awkward formulation ironically reinforces the centrality of the FLN and its "Revolution" by appending the 1945 uprising to the 1954–62 period. The current focus on the details of "Sétif" has also

renewed debate over two long-standing questions: how planned was the rebellion of May 8, 1945, and how extensive was French repression in its wake? Yet these debates grow directly out of colonial officials' deliberations during and after "Sétif" itself. On May 18, 1945, just ten days after the revolt began, the colonial administration appointed General Paul Tubert to study the Algerian nationalists' role in planning the uprising, but the Tubert Commission was canceled just one week later on May 26, 1945, at least in part for fear that the general might record facts concerning French repression as well as Algerian revolt. Hence the sole official investigation into "Sétif" failed to determine its planning due to its repression, leaving both unresolved issues—planning and repression—for historians to rediscover upon arrival in the archives years later.

Tubert's unfinished task has largely dictated the research agenda. Historians are hard at work searching for proof that some nationalist organization—the PPA, the AML, etc.—planned an uprising for VE day; they are diligently gathering evidence on French soldiers and settlers killing Muslims in order to document fully the extent of French repression in "Sétif." Without a doubt, these legacy questions remain difficult and important, and efforts to answer them are hardly wasted. Yet planning and repression are not the only productive issues one can study in "Sétif." Instead of addressing archival documents as a haystack hopefully concealing a needle of planning or as a quarry to be mined for data on death tolls, a focus on textuality provides a fruitful way of broadening historical inquiry into "Sétif."

II

Mr. Marcel Pradeilles, an ordinary settler farmer, lived through the "Sétif" uprising in his hometown of Chevreul, in the Constantine department northeast of Sétif, and two weeks later he wrote out by hand a six-page text, dated on May 25, 1945, that he would send to General Tubert.[4] Pradeilles offers next to nothing on the traditional questions of planning and repression, and his letter has received little scholarly attention. Pradeilles' words have essentially lingered, unstudied, among the General Tubert's private papers for the past sixty years.

The storyline in Pradeilles' account is straightforward. On the morning of May 8, 1945, the village of Chevreul is busy preparing for VE day celebrations—an official ceremony to be followed by a public feast. The head administrator of Takitount district, a Mr. Rousseau, telephones to announce his intention to serve as guest speaker in Chevreul that afternoon. Sometime later, amid preparations, the postman arrives in the

village with news of an uprising in Sétif. A telephone call follows informing Chevreul's settlers that the administrator will be delayed. When he has not arrived after the ceremony is set to begin, Pradeilles, the head gendarme, and the local postmaster decide to call for more information on Rousseau's arrival, only to find that the telephone lines have been cut. At this point the settlers decide to postpone the ceremony until the next day, settling for an aperitif that lasts into the evening, after which Chevreul's Europeans return to their homes.

In the middle of the night, Muslim rebels attack a house on the edge of Chevreul, but its owner, a Mr. Lamy, manages to escape. Soon rebels attack an empty house within the village, then eventually move on to a second settler home. The owner, Mr. Basète Grouslet, had heard the rebels' arrival and fled with his wife and daughter to hide with one of his workers. With the rebels sacking his home and the worker troubled by his presence, Grouslet, unarmed, flees with his family once more toward a grove at the foot of the village, but the rebels spot and capture the three settlers. The rebels bind Grouslet's hands and shoot him to death in front of his family; they take his wife and daughter to the grove, rape them, and return them to their ransacked home, where two of Chevreul's gendarmes have arrived in response to the gunshots. A brief nighttime firefight temporarily disperses the rebels.

Early the next morning Pradeilles leaves his residence and meets gendarmes investigating the night's events; he then goes to his brother's house and learns what has happened. The two Pradeilles men, along with a few other settlers, one of whom is carrying a hunting rifle, proceed to the crime scene and are preparing to remove Grouslet's body when they suddenly come under fire. As Pradeilles and his small contingent search for cover, they hear the sound of the general village alarm and manage to join others fleeing toward the gendarmerie. All settlers but three women make it to the building before the site is sealed. Rebels repeatedly rape at least two of the women left outside, one of whom is eighty-five years old.

Inside the gendarmerie, the Europeans plan their defense. Women and children gather in the safest, most central room, while fifteen men take up positions along the gendarmerie's four walls. The rebels, now more numerous and organized, cut off the building's water supply and mount several assaults, all of which the settler men repel. Two French fighter jets in the skies overhead lead the rebels to shift their attention to the abandoned settler homes. While covering fire pins the settlers within the gendarmerie, rebels plunder all of Chevreul's surrounding European residences. They finish by early evening, launch another unsuccessful general assault on the gendarmerie, then gather on the town square for a

rest enlivened by the singing of religious songs. That night the rebels burn all the settler buildings in Chevreul.

The next morning the rebels return to the gendarmerie and, after more unsuccessful assaults, decide to dynamite the building and burn it down. But the distant sound of gunfire from an arriving armored car disrupts their plans, and the rebels disperse. Lamy, in hiding since the first attack, joins the lead vehicle. In the early evening French forces finally reach the gendarmerie, the commanding officer enters the building, and the uprising in Chevreul officially comes to an end.

This, in a nutshell, is Pradeilles' account of the Sétif uprising in Chevreul. One aspect of this basic narrative, namely its approach to time, provides a useful point of departure for analyzing the text. Pradeilles situates his account within twin temporalities that ultimately highlight the inherent tempo of his story's plot. Pradeilles punctuates his storyline with precise references to customary clock time, often set aside as headers. Indeed, a time heading—"Tuesday May 8, 1945"—serves to introduce the narrative as a whole, and Pradeilles' story ends when French forces enter the gendarmerie on May 10 at "7:30pm."[5] Pradeilles also couches his story within evocations of a long-term stability. As the story opens, "[t]he village of Chevreul wakes as usual. The hard-working laborers are at their work, in the street a few inhabitants gather and comment on the latest news on the radio." The deep past is again present when arson destroys the village, which is described as the work of "two generations of French from France."

This temporal doubling has several effects. With its exact orientation within specific uninflected clock time, the account reads like a police report of extraordinary crimes recorded with painstaking attention to factual details, filling Pradeilles' words with an air of restraint and objectivity. Allusions to a slow-moving tradition, meanwhile, cast the uprising as an anomaly impinging on French Algeria's long-term reality. The split also neatly elides deep historical trends, especially the thorough demographic, social, and economic restructuring in the Muslim community, the rise of Algerian nationalism, and two world wars taking place in the half century during which "two generations of French from France" built Chevreul (1898–1945).[6]

The presentation of VE day epitomizes Pradeilles' strategy of doubled time. VE day appears without history. It does not mark victory in Europe in World War II, a war Pradeilles never mentions. Instead, that war—along with the thorny issues of defeat, occupation, and the Vichy/Free French division—disappears behind what Pradeilles vaguely dubs a "day of Victory" to be marked by "an official Ceremony in honor of Victory"