

# Who should speak of the Shoah? In praise of imperfect testimony\*

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**Abstract.** A detailed analysis of the context and the text of a letter of Freud, refusing to write about anti-Semitism in his last year of life with the Shoah approaching against the horizon of nazism, but finally published as such, leads to reflections on testimony in general, on who should give it in the cases of crimes like the Shoah, and on indirect and impure testimony and its ethics.

**Keywords:** Testimony, Ethics, Freud, Anti-Semitism, Reflections

On June 4th, 1938, Freud flees from Vienna. After briefly passing through Paris he arrives in London, where he will live until his death, a little more than a year later. A few months after Freud's arrival Margaret Haig Mackworth, 2nd Viscountess Rhondda, known as Lady Rhondda, the editor of the weekly journal *Time and Tide*, asks him to write an article for a special volume on anti-Semitism, arguing that there is a growth of that sentiment in England (Freud, 1985) (Figure 1).

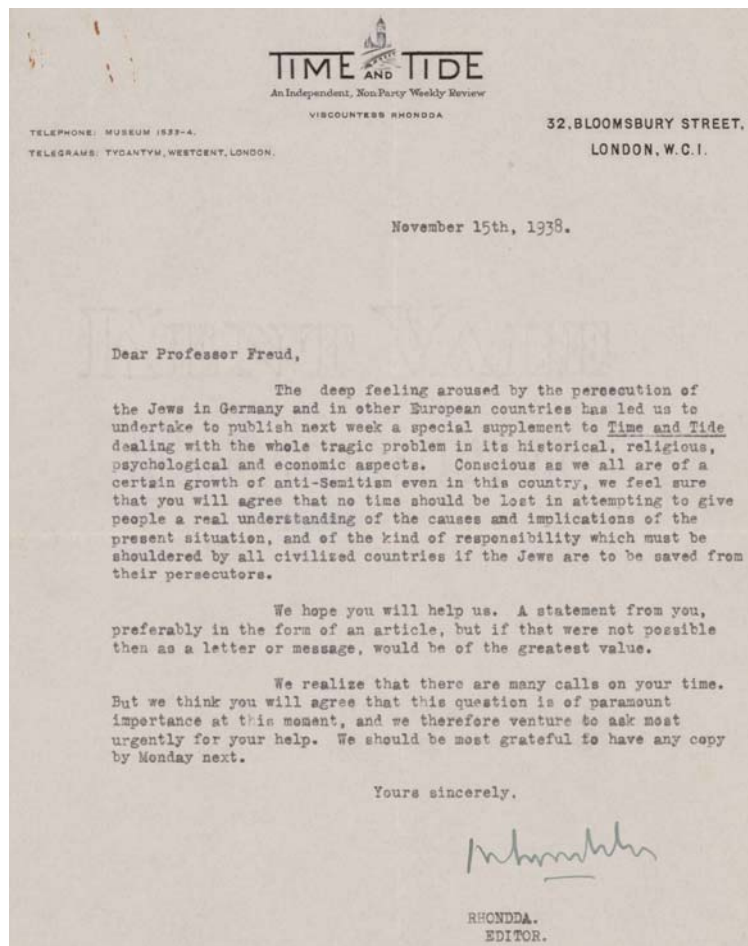


Figure 1

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The subject is not alien to Freud; he has referred to it before (1962a, 1962b). He is finishing his book *Moses and the Monotheism* and he has escaped nazism almost miraculously. However, he refuses to write about it, explaining his refusal in a brief letter that, with his permission, Lady Rhondda publishes in the special volume she edits on November 26th, 1938. This is Freud's letter written in English:

«20 Maresfield Gardens. London NW3, 16/11/1938  
To the Editor of *TIME and TIDE*,

I came to Vienna as a child of four years from a small town in Moravia. After 78 years, including more than half a century of strenuous work I had to leave my home, saw the Scientific Society I have founded dissolved, our institutions destroyed, our Printing Press (*Verlag*) taken over by the invaders, the books I have published confiscated and reduced to pulp, my children expelled from their professions. Don't you think the columns of your special number might rather be reserved for the utterances of non-Jewish people less personally involved than myself? In this connection my mind gets hold of an old French saying:

*Le bruit est pour le fat La plainte est pour le sot; l'honnête homme trompé S'en va et ne dit mot*.  
[The English translation would be: "A fuss becomes the Fop / A Fool's complaints are heard; / A Gentleman betrayed / Departs without a word"]

But Freud leaves the verses untranslated. And he ends up saying:

«I feel deeply affected by the passage in your letter acknowledging 'a certain growth of anti-Semitism even in this country'. Ought this present persecution not rather give rise to a wave of sympathy in this country? Respectfully yours, Sigm. Freud» (Figure 2)

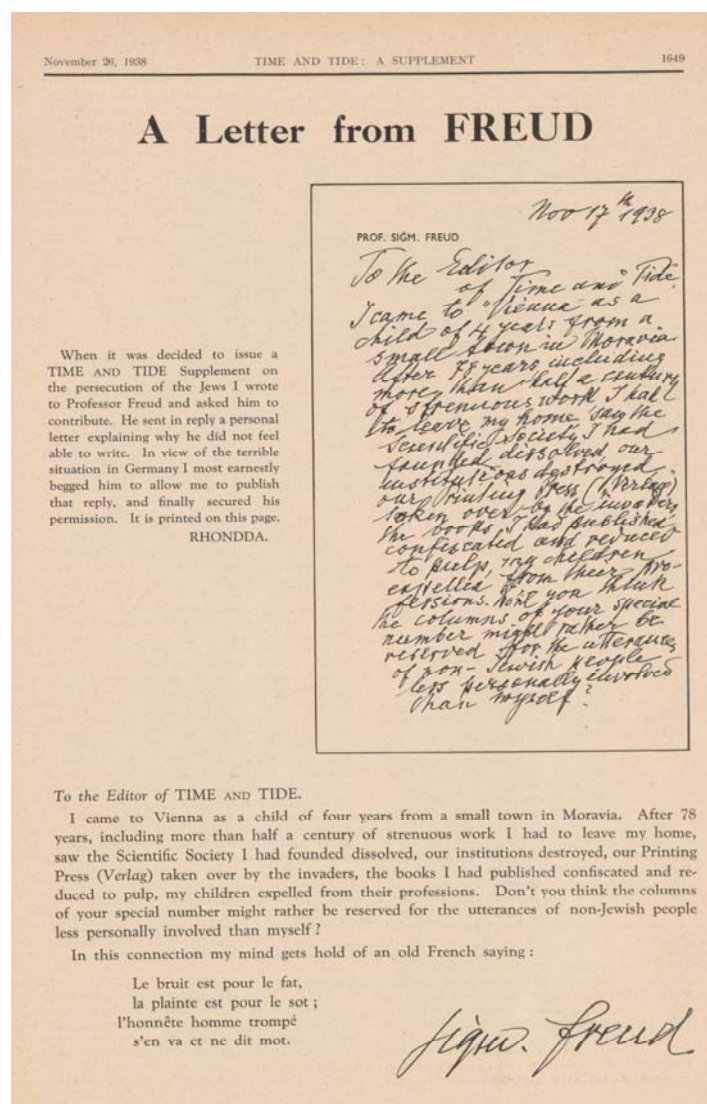


Figure 2

The circumstances of Freud's testimony become even more complicated by the shadow of a doubt. Fleeing from the Nazis often involved a secret *quid pro quo* under the form of a monetary arrangement with someone within the Nazi hierarchy. This was a typical transaction that so many Jews had to make: from those who treasured the meager savings of a lifetime or a small piece of jewelry, hidden in an improvised time capsule, to those who made a pact with the devil in the attempt to save fortunes, like the one Freud had accumulated during his professional life. In his case the devil was represented by Anton Sauerwald, who had been a dark character since his youth. A chemist in the service of the Vienna police prior to the *Anschluss*, the annexation of Austria by the Nazis, Sauerwald had the best record in the detection and identification of explosives used in the, by then, frequent terrorist attempts, the majority of which were bombs set by members of the Nazi Party themselves (Edmunson, 2017). What was the reason for this formidable performance? Sauerwald himself fabricated the explosives he would then discover. With the annexation, he soon joined the Nazis and was designated as commissar for the confiscation of Jewish properties. His assigned target was the *Verlag* - the publishing house of Freud's books - and the valuables and money of the Freud family. A long process followed, including the interrogations to Anna Freud by the Gestapo (suspiciously a few days after Sauerwald's first visit to Freud), searches in the publishing house, and the repatriation of Freud's texts - which had been sent to Switzerland in an attempt to save them - with the sole purpose of destroying them. Freud was finally forced to sign a declaration stating that he was not abused by the Gestapo. We will never know how this declaration became famous as an audacious act, interpreted by some as a last rebellious and almost suicidal cry, in which Freud supposedly stated he would recommend the Gestapo to everybody. Were this version to be true (Roudinesco, 2016) it would imply that the Nazis either did not understand the irony or else they preferred to overlook it for reasons we do not know. But what we do know is that Sauerwald had information about the bank accounts Freud kept abroad and that had the Nazis known about it they would have prevented him from getting out of Vienna. However, Sauerwald, in a new double-cross, did not communicate this information to his superiors, thus putting at risk the possibility of obtaining a promotion. Freud, and a large part of his family, were granted an *unbedenklichkeitserklärung*, a certificate of "innocence" or "innocuity" issued by the Nazis, necessary for them to be able to leave the country. But in October 1938, a few months after Freud's arrival in London and shortly before the already mentioned letter to *Time and Tide*, who do we find registered by Freud in his visitor's book? Anton Sauerwald himself.

Right after the end of the war, Harry, Freud's nephew, the son of his brother Alexander, a member by then of the United States' Army, searched and detained Sauerwald. Harry probably had information confirming that Sauerwald was an extortionist, and wanted to do something about it. During Sauerwald's trial, Anna Freud and Marie Bonaparte - who had done so much to facilitate Freud's flight from Vienna - both testified with mixed feelings on his behalf (in fact, at first, Anna did not want to sign her declaration). Even today some chroniclers try to show Sauerwald as "the Nazi who saved Freud", either because his many readings in the *Verlag* awakened an interest in psychoanalysis and generated sympathy for the old master, or because he had been a student of Joseph Herzig, a friend of Freud.

Now, how can we evaluate these contextual facts in relation to Freud's response to *Time and Tide*? Maybe they influenced him to become ambiguous about manifesting himself. We do not know if by then the money was recuperated, and if it was, whether wholly or partly and whether this happened before or after the letter was written. We know about one of Freud's grandsons, most likely Anton (Alford, 2012), whose claim to the Claims Resolution Tribunal (CRT) in charge of adjudicating material retributions for properties stolen by the Nazis was successful (CRT, c.2005). But that was almost 70 years later. Back to 1938 circumstances, we may acknowledge the many pressures that could have been influencing a testimony, making for conditions far from ideal in terms of what it meant to speak then and there. But Freud's answer is there, and beyond the conditions of its origin, it constitutes a differential text regarding his *oeuvre*, including his vast correspondence.

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In this text Freud questions, apparently, the validity of a testimony about violence by someone directly affected by it. We don't know if what he questions of such a testimony is its legitimacy, its efficacy, or both. Thus the goal of Freud's claim remains in principle open: the eventual manifestations of those who are not Jewish, defined in terms of its condition of "not affected", would supposedly be more objective, more valid? or would that demand aim instead to achieve a more intense effect on others? A few decades earlier, Freud had rushed to name Jung as president of the International Psychoanalytic Association as a strategy to avoid the nascent psychoanalytic movement being identified as a "Jewish affair". But this attempt at privileging efficacy over solidity ended up disappointing him. In 1938, even though Freud responds to Lady Rhondda by reformulating her request with the proposal to bring the words of non Jews, we find the paradox that his letter is in fact published. Freud does not consider he is apt to write but he accounts for the reasons for that refusal, and that testimony of his supposed ineptitude ends up being published, with his authorization, solicited by the editor. Could we take the text as a contribution to the subject at hand? Could we consider it as an implicit essay about antisemitism? And furthermore on the consequences of it, as instrumented by the Nazi regime, in the years to follow that our hindsight allows us to know? Let us remember that Freud had already explicitly written about the deeper elements of antisemitism. Or we have to assume instead that we have here an essay on the condition of the possibility of a testimony. Freud seems to change his past strategy and instead of insisting in writing an explicit psychoanalytic argument he chooses to remain silent without remaining silent: he speaks about his silence.

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Perhaps the most overwhelming testimony about the Nazi genocide is the silence of the submerged in the extermination camps: the *müßelman*. Agamben, after Primo Levi, considers this testimony of those who cannot give testimony a central element of the Shoah (Agamben 2002). But while the *müßelman* could not give testimony, Freud, in his letter to Lady Rhondda, by self-disqualifying himself as a witness capable of denouncing due to his condition, seems to indicate another way in which the potency of the unsaid is present when there is a choice of remaining silent, albeit only partly or, as we saw, paradoxically. Freud thus decides not to speak, apparently, to avoid not being impartial. He considers he cannot be the *terstis* required by a fair testimony. But, at the same time, Freud makes a sort of interpellation, if not accusation, to those who could fairly occupy the position of witness he rejects. But those referred to by Freud as "personally less involved [than myself]" could be transformed into the targets of an accusation only *après coup*, when with a final question he asks the editor about the supposedly unexpected unsympathetic reactions from people in those days to the victims of increasing antisemitism.

In terms of the question of the division itself between Jews and non Jews (the *goyim*, the gentiles, the members of the "rest" of the nations), although it can be seen as absurd it is part of the practice of many communities and it becomes evident when they are in exile. What is Freud's position in this regard? He identifies himself clearly as a Jew while he chooses to remain silent. Jews frequently laugh about themselves assuming a type of queer logic, at least toward the outside. And they assume this right even though it can probably give also weapons to anti-judaism. Freud seems to be saying, first, *this is a problem for those who are not affected and who show lack of sympathy* but he is careful to avoid providing further tools of disqualification; and second, let *these others speak*, these others who are not Jewish. But if it is as they tell him, they would not speak with sympathy even when confronted with the ongoing persecution. Freud's answer to the editor has then the value of an interpellation and, by the way, nobody took the challenge. Unless we consider that the very publication of Freud's letter was a way, somewhat tenuous, of "taking charge": Freud interpellates the editor of a journal dedicating a volume to antisemitism, and indirectly the readers, to take charge of *what she is taking charge of*. She in fact deviates then from a fact: associations defending the rights of the Jews are basically formed by Jews, as it happens also with other minorities. So, what represents this stepping aside of Freud while calling to those supposedly "less personally involved"? What is the type of witness Freud prefers to be and enunciates? Probably an empathic witness, capable of giving testimony but not merely to condoling. Freud chooses to keep his distance: there is a sort of *imperfection* of the empathic witness who speaks in an indirect way.

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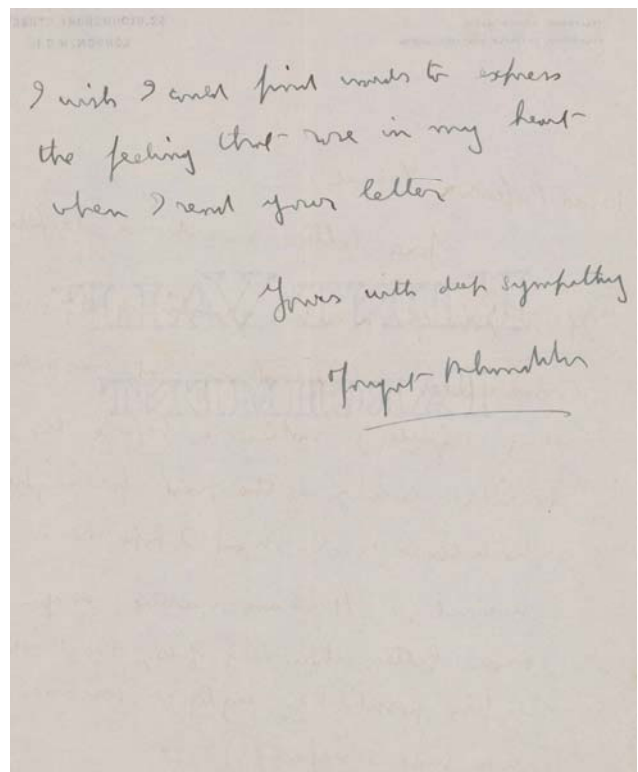
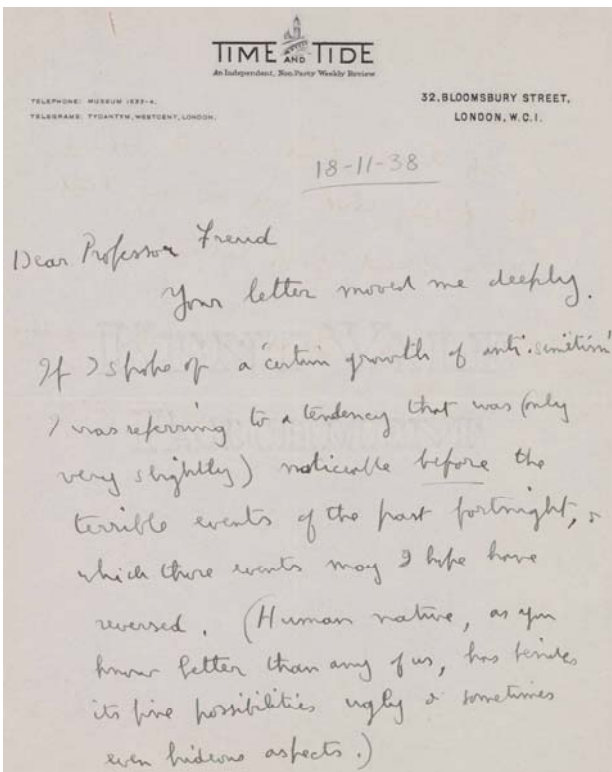
In the context of the relation between Freud (Jew, victim, intellectual, carrier of a *non plus ultra* word at the end of his life) and Lady Rhondda (*suffragette*, a woman of the nobility but also of the *avant-garde*), a relation that precipitates at the moment she requests his collaboration, his answer seems to be “you want to out me to work on this, but I believe it is really your turn and many of your readers turn to do it”. Is it perhaps that their lack of questioning of antisemitism matters more than the reality of what is approaching across the English Channel because they are not asking what is happening to themselves? (and in hindsight of what will happen in a couple of years in their own land with the Nazi bombs?) At the time Lady Astor, more famous for her sharp dialogues with Churchill than for her explicit antisemitism had already collaborated with *Time and Tide*. Freud’s answer is not only an interpellation but maybe also an anticipation of the costs the British might pay if they do not take charge of their growing antisemitism in the context of Nazism.

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Now, what is the role played within this context by Freud’s quote of Jean Sauvé de la Noue’s in French at the end of his letter? Why praise for silence, and disdain for complaining and making noise? We can ask now in hindsight: were the writings and other testimonies and reflections of Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, Jorge Semprún futile and dum? Why the disdain for the testimony of a victim? If Freud’s letter is an interpellation, it is an indirect strategic text more than a direct and explicit reflexive analysis: let the English write on antisemitism given that there are more and more anti-Semites among you! The more direct style of Lady Rhondda is what puts the text back in the context of that relationship thus becoming more substantial only with this interchange. The letter is in fact published. Lady Rhondda knows it is powerful, efficacious. According to her written response to Freud she found herself shocked by his letter. This is the text of her letter from November 18th, 1938:

«Dear Professor Freud,  
Your letter moved me deeply. If I spoke of a certain growth of anti-Semitism, I was referring to a tendency that was (only very slightly) noticeable before the terrible events of the past fortnight, which those events may I hope have reversed. (Human nature, as you know better than any of us, has besides its fine possibilities ugly or even hideous aspects.) I wish I could find words to express the feeling that rose in my heart when I read your letter.

Yours with deep sympathy, Margaret Rhondda» (Freud, 1938) (Figures 3 and 4)



Figures 3 and 4

Again, can we take then Freud's text as an intervention on antisemitism in overt opposition to his explicit wishes of not doing it? Considering that Freud is who he is, and that he has at that moment a powerful intellectual height, he is telling the reader that his texts were reduced to a pulp, his association was destroyed, his publishing house taken over. If the reader admires Freud he is getting his own word about what antisemitism amounts to. So, Freud: testimony, reflection and defense or else who should speak before an evil that will shortly after evolve toward the catastrophe of the Shoah.

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Then, we can say that when Freud is asked to reflect or write apropos antisemitism he responds with a triple movement: first, he gives a moving testimony of his experience as a victim of antisemitism; second, he excuses himself from giving an opinion about antisemitism because he had been its victim; and third, he is astonished by the fact that the victims of antisemitism, like him, do not receive more sympathy, against what could be in principle expected.

So when Freud excuses himself to give an opinion beyond his brief and blunt testimony, he seems to sustain a Kantian ethics aimed at being free of any personal and "pathological" interest in order to be able to formulate, starting from a concrete situation, a pure and universal principle or action with the quality of a categorical imperative typical of the moral law: you can because you ought to (Kant 2012, 2015). His predicament as a victim disqualifies him to support a Kantian ethics. To act ethically as a victim is forbidden, given the condition of possibility he assumes. But is this all that is entailed here? Freud was in fact asked *about* antisemitism and not about *what to do* about antisemitism. But he finds impossible to be objective and it is this impossibility that prompts him to excuse himself from doing an analysis. Kant was not promoting and inhibition from reflection. He was only drawing attention to the obstacles for the formulation of an ethics. But Freud also inhibits himself of offering his thoughts. Is Freud extending the inhibition from taking an ethical position to even reflecting as if reflecting involved inevitably taking an ethical position? That would, however, make of the reflection a purely rational endeavor but it would be odd for Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, to base his position only on rational considerations that he considers impossible to articulate when he disqualifies himself, because it could not escape him that both thinking and assuming an ethical position are inevitably related with unconscious elements. Furthermore, if there is for Freud an ethics totally independent of truth acting as an imperative it comes from the super-ego (Freud, 1990).

Regarding the last aspect of Freud's letter, he expects, perhaps rhetorically, that the mere confrontation with the fact that we are talking about innocent victims would be followed by sympathy. And he leaves a question hanging up in the air: why is that not the case? An interpellation anticipated by his silence and aimed at those who are not marked as victims by the chances of history. It is as if he were saying: this is what I have lived, I cannot speak about it due to my respect for the principle of objectivity so as to avoid being told that I am bleeding from my wounds, but what is the reason for your silence, you who are not affected directly? His silence, between his initial testimony and the last question, challenges the silence of the others. This is his answer to the question about antisemitism in this letter. Arguing that: I cannot speak because to be a victim has been my problem, he is saying to those who do not have this personal problem why don't you speak? This is Freud's way of saying indirectly: antisemitism is not the problem of the victims but a problem of silence and inaction, of silence as everybody's inaction. So, it is not a problem of the Jews. It is here that antisemitism resides as a prejudice stronger than the sympathy that the victims could elicit. It is also everybody's problem: what does it say about those who remain silent and about their silence?

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What type of intervention is Freud then making in his interaction with Lady Rhondda and with the audience of readers through the publication of his non-contribution that she asked him to authorize? His intervention is not an interpretation of unconscious forces, of the dynamics at play in antisemitism that preoccupy Lady Rhondda, of what a psychoanalyst should do and has done in other cases: here Freud goes beyond that refusing to do it again or to continue doing it and offers instead a symptom that imposes on others the interpretive task of being worked through. Because a symptom always entails a demand for interpretation or else brings a malaise not only for the one who expresses it but also for those surrounding him. Freud responds indirectly with a transaction formation but not frontally and directly as he was asked to do. He thus avoids taking the position of the psychoanalyst but he does not resign to exercise it through his reticence to respond in the way he was expected to doing. Before the question of a directly and honestly preoccupied Lady Rhondda, Freud seems to take into account the society the publisher is part of as well as the antisemitism of this society. He avoids taking the position of the Jew who explains or defends himself. He knows that a direct, interpretative answer is condemned beforehand because it would increase the accusations of those antisemites who would see in that type of answer new tricks of the Jew that is never to be trusted, new ways of justifying his actions in order to continue manipulating others to his advantage. Freud opts then for an ironic position, indirect, symptomatic, imperfect in terms of Kantian aspirations of a pure ethics and in taking this position he reverses the situation and frees him from falling even deeper into the ignominy of the position that the antisemitic society offers him.

As we said before, when Rhondda reads Freud's letter she is moved and probably perplex and she also admits *not finding the words* to describe an intense feeling but she says goodbye with sympathy (*sic*) which is exactly what Freud had expected. This sequence appears as an almost identical description of the insight experienced by a psychoanalytic patient after an adequate interpretation, namely precise and timely. Freud's letter operates here as a symptom and as an interpretation generating an effect still questioning us. This effect elicited by the letter operating as a demand or an interpellation is included in its symptomatic quality, thus subtracted from following a pure intrapsychic dynamics.

Freud reminds us of Shakespeare's Shylock (1992) who, a few centuries earlier, in that same land that Freud comes to inhabit at the end of his life, seemed to say: if we Jews are as bad as you say, I would be like that and even worse; if you say I take advantage, you will see now how I can take advantage. But Freud, unlike Shylock, does not present himself as being worse than what is attributed to the Jews. He responds instead as a *gentleman*, not only refusing to speak because he is a victim and he would not be reliable in the antisemitic atmosphere surrounding him but also, and somewhat ironically, quoting verses that speak of the wisdom of reticence. A double cover up because he quotes the verses of De la Noue in French without translating them, at the end of a letter otherwise written in English, as a good immigrant would make the effort to do when he is trying to adjust to his new environment. But in his refusal to be the Jew who explains, who defends or who justifies himself knowing that bad intentions will be anyhow attributed to him because he has suffered and they will suppose he is bleeding through his wound, the symptom formulated with irony allows him not to respond like the Jew they expect but as the Jew who responds to a question with another question. In doing his job as a psychoanalyst, without being the psychoanalyst who interprets but one that presents instead a symptom, as much as being the Jew who answers a question with another question, Freud makes an *avant-la-lettre queer* turn that appropriates that which is usually used against the Jews, namely: to put them in an impossible position, and through this queer turn he reverts the position and imposes it as a job for the society at large to take care of.

The letter as a whole supplements the Kantian position in itself and embodies an ethics of testimony that, in spite of Freud's self-disqualification, shows that they have shut up this man of

science they have abused, and furthermore he shows also to be even more righteous in his adversity, more ethical than the perpetrators of his abuse. And there is also at play an ethics of responsibility before historical truth, an ethics of this world, embodied, and not an abstract moral or principles. We are closer here to the already mentioned ethics of Primo Levi (1989), taken by Agamben: testimony has to be given even though it is always given against the horizon of the impossibility of the absolute victim who does not survive to give testimony. Paraphrasing Derrida there could only be testimony given by the one who, by definition, cannot give it. But not in a Kantian sense due to interested and pathological personal motives. The issue is a different one: the survivor cannot transcend the position of victim because this one is not ultimately interchangeable and is related to what has already happened to him or her. Thus the corollary for Derrida that the only act that can be forgiven is the one which is in principle unforgivable (2001). To forgive is neither immanent nor mandatory but an act of freedom, a gift not based upon a logic of retribution or of compensation.

The victim can and should speak of evil giving testimony. This will expose the victim to the lack of sympathy Freud was apparently surprised about, but it would also commit him or her to the historical truth. The testimony would circulate socially and would always be vulnerable to the possibility of being contested. In this way the person giving testimony would become responsible of being a witness and the emotional dimension would be transcended becoming social and certainly political. Those who listen would then be interpellated to become responsible. Against Kant, the reflection about the object of abstract knowledge cannot avoid including the testimony about the experience of the victim, even if it is not based completely on it. The ethics of historical truth is rooted in that direct testimony of the experience and is thus an ethics of memory and of the singular experiences that escape the patterns of understanding, going beyond an ethics of abstract principles related to an epistemological truth or a categorical imperative. Historical truth might not be often evident and immediate and it is exposed to social judgment, political interests and already constituted prejudices. But this exposition is not a reason to abandon the historical truth on behalf of a politically correct relativism that in fact stimulates the multiplication of positions, turning its back to the responsibility before the evil we cannot help but be a part of. Lacking a God that exposes the perpetrator while protecting him from vengeance, as it happened with Cain, who is forced to wander in the world giving testimony of his acts (Pakman, 2018), we are left with creating the social conditions for testimony and responsible action before evil to happen, as a principle of an embodied ethics opened to the battle for historical truth. The affirmation of truth, albeit indirect, refuses to submit to infinite interpretations that, dismissing truth by considering inevitably stable, rigid, partial and suspicious, contribute to a supposedly progressive view with an affinity with post-factual times. Flexibility is not necessarily virtuous when it slides toward the validation of lying. But this doesn't mean that historical truth has to be approached only as a reiteration of abstract facts.

In sum, Freud gives a testimony that is striking in its very concision saying that those who can speak, like him, cannot do it, and reflecting on the fact that those who should do it usually do not do it. The victims are pained and they would be challenged, saying they speak out of lack of objectivity. The witnesses are often insensitive and they abandon the victims. Who should then speak? Before the tribunal of history all the defense lawyers of the victims must speak but not in the style of the abstract intellectual. They have to do it as an act of resistance among others. The victim should assume this ethics for himself when possible and for all victims without becoming responsible for the problems that put him or her in that position, nor responsible for the perpetrators behaviors and in doing so should interpellate all the members of the society, the bystanders who were already part of the situation or who become part of it through listening to testimonies.

The testimony at play is imperfect and in the case of Freud, the opacity of his relation with Sauerwald adds another layer to this imperfection that, however, thus gains a peculiar strength



showing not only what Freud does with antisemitism but also what antisemitism does to him. What else can we ask from his imperfect testimony operating beyond the intent of cutting it down as interested and partial? As everything that is not *perfectum*, it lacks the roundness of the circle, and is not about the past perfect tense, a past already sealed and closed. In its imperfection this testimony opens to the future of what is to come and opens up to the necessary forms of reflection and the insistence of memory going through all the attempts at repression, disqualification and denial.

Art belongs to his type of imperfect testimony, showing indirectly what happened even when we do not know how it happened or exposing the facts in a way that touch people singularly, thus having the potential to being put to the service of an enlivening memory. Art is not limited to repeating facts, important as this is, but like Freud in his letter, it mobilizes people through touching them by an indirect path made of speaking and shutting up, of meanderings, of questioning, of seeding an uneasiness from which it is not that easy to take a distance even in spite of compassion fatigue. Not without the risk of putting the artist before the facts, it moves people to see the facts as if it were the first time. The sense art makes is always positive even when it is about the most enormous crimes. Truth then insists, like a specter, to show up in testimony with the bluntness of the sensual and singular materiality of existence. It is not a path of aesthetic salvation but it constitutes an ethics of a testimony drenched in the singular texture of suffering, and in the social degradation that allows it, putting forward the experience of being touched by traces of historical events as a constitutive aspect of a reflection – a reflection that is potentially efficacious in the service of the insistence of memory.

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