

Editor's Column: The First Blow: Torture and Close Reading

Author(s): Marianne Hirsch

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Editor's Column: The First Blow—Torture and Close Reading

What You Do

*when nobody's looking
in the black sites what you do
when nobody knows you
are in there what you do*

*when you're in the black sites
when you shackle them higher
in there what you do . . .*

—Maxine Kumin

IN THE SUMMER OF 2003, JUST MONTHS AFTER THE UNITED STATES' invasion of Iraq, about forty officers and civilian experts attended a showing of Gillo Pontecorvo's 1966 historical reenactment, *The Battle of Algiers*, at the Pentagon. The invitation flyer described the film thus: "How to win a battle against terrorism and lose the war of ideas. Children shoot soldiers at point-blank range. Women plant bombs in cafes. Soon the entire Arab population builds to a mad fervor. Sound familiar? The French have a plan. It succeeds tactically, but fails strategically. To understand why, come to a rare showing of this film" (Kaufman, "World"). The discussion following the showing was lively, it seems, and future showings were planned. Press reports about the use of the film as a military object lesson occasioned its new release on a DVD that includes several documentaries about the film: interviews with the director, historians, and film scholars; *États d'armes*, a discussion with French military officials involved in the Algerian War excerpted from Patrick Rotman's 2002 documentary *L'ennemi intime*; and the 2004 *The Battle of Algiers: A Case Study*, featuring the former national counterterrorism coordinator Richard A. Clarke and former

State Department coordinator for counterterrorism Michael A. Sheehan. *The Battle of Algiers* has now also elicited renewed interest among academics: it was presented at a plenary showing at the Midwest Modern Language Association conference in November 2005, and it was discussed or referred to in numerous papers at the latest MLA convention.

“What does the Pentagon see in ‘Battle of Algiers’?” asks Michael Kaufman in his 7 September 2003 *New York Times* article, amused that a “teaching tool for radicalized Americans and revolutionary wannabes opposing the Vietnam War” should be of interest to the Pentagon. Interviewed in *The Battle of Algiers: A Case Study* by Christopher F. Isham, of ABC News, Clarke and Sheehan suggest that the film needs to be seen because it has served as a blueprint for a range of revolutionary groups—the Black Panthers, Palestinian radicals, al-Qaeda—teaching them to provoke the police or occupying forces into “heavy-handed” responses that would then mobilize a passive population to revolutionary action. Its political power was of course recognized when the film was first released, in 1966: it was not shown in France until the early 1970s. In the opinions of Clarke and Sheehan, the film demonstrates that “terrorism works,” but it also challenges the efficacy of aggressive counterterrorism techniques. Kaufman speculates that discussion at the Pentagon would certainly have focused on the film’s historically accurate depiction of the tactics of urban guerilla warfare and the challenges faced by occupying armies, particularly the difficulties of identifying combatants who, in a “people’s war,” can easily disappear into their neighborhoods. But, Kaufman adds, in situations in which “interrogations remain indispensable, . . . how far should modern states go in the pursuit of . . . information” about insurgency? The discussions at the Pentagon, Kaufman presciently suggests, must also have addressed one of the most controversial tactics of the French authorities depicted in the film:

the use of torture, its “efficacy,” and the reach of the Geneva Conventions in outlawing it.

In spite of President Bush’s and his officials’ repeated insistence that “we do not torture” (e.g., “President”), we now suspect that our own modern state may be going as far as the French did in the 1950s and 1960s, and we are now once again caught up in the logic and discourse of torture. (Clandestine torture, as Naomi Klein so powerfully points out in her article “Never Before: Our Amnesiac Torture Debate,” detailing the tactics of the School of the Americas, has always been with us—in police interrogations, prisons, CIA training programs. It is just that at certain moments—France in the early 1960s, the United States right now—it becomes public, and at such times, in Klein’s words, the administration demands “the right to torture without shame, legitimized by new definitions and new laws” [12].) Pontecorvo’s film and the story of the 1954–57 battle of Algiers might well have confirmed the “efficacy” of torture: the informant tortured in the first scene of the film enables the capture of the leaders of the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) and organizers of its impressive network of terrorist cells. In his 1971 book attacking Pontecorvo’s film, General Jacques Massu, commander of the French paratroopers delegated to crush the uprising and the man on whom the film’s Colonel Mathieu is partially modeled, defended torture as a “cruel necessity.” Similarly, General Paul Aussarresses, Massu’s former second in command, defended its use in his 2000 memoir, acknowledging thousands of “disappearances,” faked suicides, and his own part in the execution of twenty-five men (Kaufman, “Jacques Massu”). In the 2002 documentary *États d’armes*, Colonel Roger Trinquier explains the need for torture in terms that recall the “ticking bomb” scenarios that are currently circulating in films, on television, and in the press. If information was obtained quickly, it could save hundreds of lives: every bomb set by the terrorists killed about forty people and

wounded two hundred. And yet, Trinquier also admits, the French paratroopers were engaged in a “fishing expedition,” trying to find a few hundred insurgents among thousands of people arrested and tortured. The Algerian insurgents, he relates, organized their cells in such a way that twenty-four hours after one member was captured, everyone in his or her cell disappeared from the scene.

In 2001 General Massu changed his mind about torture in response to the public call for an official inquiry into its use during the Algerian War: “Torture is not indispensable in time of war,” Massu wrote then; “we could have gotten along without it very well” (Kaufman, “Jacques Massu”). A year later, in *États d’armes*, not long before his death at ninety-four, Massu speaks of how, as a practicing Catholic, he found the measures revolting: “I did not lose my honor, but I lost part of my soul.”

To understand why the “tactical” success of the French plan could not prevent its “strategic” failure, Pentagon officials would only have had to watch closely the last scene of Pontecorvo’s film. The camera zooms into the small spaces in the casbah where the last four insurgents hide out and then follows, at close range, the French military closing in on their final hiding place. After an explosion that kills them all to end the battle of Algiers, there is a momentary pause, indicating a lapse of time (three years in the film’s chronology), as the camera pulls back for an establishing shot of the city’s main square. A dense fog gradually clears to reveal one, two, and then hundreds of women, children, and men who stream into the square from all angles of the casbah waving the FLN flag, implicitly replacing the brutally eliminated insurgents in a mass that defies defeat. Their faces shine with enthusiasm and determination, and their ululating voices fill the theater. Even before the voice-over reveals that it would take two more years for Algeria to gain independence, the camera convinces its viewers that,

far from having been crushed, the revolution could not be stopped.

In *The Battle of Algiers: A Case Study*, Isham, Sheehan, and Clarke discuss torture as one of the French tactics that was shown to be of questionable “efficacy” in Algeria. Isham maintains that he would certainly support its use in a scenario, for example, in which it might stop an attack like 9/11. Sheehan speaks of its results as “mixed in terms of getting information” and ultimately self-defeating; Clarke calls it the first step on the “path to the dark side” and a tactic that would seriously hinder the “battle for ideas and values” that is at the heart of counterinsurgency. “Torture sows hatred,” says the last interviewee in *États d’armes*. The exposure of the brutal acts of torture during the Algerian conflict and the public resignations of several top-level military officials (some of whom, like Paul Teitgen, were noted heroes of the French Resistance and survivors of Dachau and Buchenwald) over the tactics of interrogation they were asked to employ certainly provoked major protests in France and lent support to the movement for Algerian national liberation.

I have taught *The Battle of Algiers* and other texts dealing with torture in several courses. In the light of the current debates over what the 26 December 2005 issue of the *Nation* termed “the torture complex,” I have gone back to these texts to see what insights might be gained from rereading them now. I am certainly not alone in this endeavor. *The Battle of Algiers* appears in many recent discussions, as do Elaine Scarry’s groundbreaking and still-unsurpassed *The Body in Pain* (1986), Ariel Dorfman’s *Death and the Maiden* (1990), and Alicia Partnoy’s *The Little School* (1986). Recently, Rosemarie Scullion has done remarkable work on Pierre Vidal-Naquet’s important *Torture: Cancer on Democracy*, which was published in translation in Britain and Italy in 1963 but did not appear in France until 1972. In his recent work, Michael Rothberg has called eloquent attention to Charlotte Delbo’s

virtually unknown first published book, *Les belles lettres* (1961), in which Delbo, a survivor of Auschwitz, collected from the French press letters relating to the Algerian War and particularly to practices of torture that had just been exposed. Among recent books, Mark Danner's *Torture and Truth: America, Abu Ghraib, and the War on Terror* (2004), Karen J. Greenberg's *The Torture Papers: The Road to Abu Ghraib*, edited with Joshua Dratel (2005), and Greenberg's *The Torture Debate in America* (2005) are new texts in a canon on torture that includes the important work of Marjorie Agosin, Temma Kaplan, Antjie Krog, Rita Maran, and Darius Rejali. Scholars of visual culture are analyzing the photographs from the Abu Ghraib prison, and scholars of popular culture are increasingly concerned about the normalization and even authorization of torture in popular television shows and video games like *Alias*, *Lost*, and *24*.

Thinking and teaching about torture, I go back to two texts in particular, and I would like to look at them in detail here: Jean Améry's essay "Torture," in his 1966 book *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities* (originally published in German as *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne: Überwältigungsversuche eines Überwältigten* ["beyond guilt and atonement: attempts to overcome by one who is overcome, or overwhelmed"]), and Marguerite Duras's personal essay (or short story—she doesn't say) "Albert des Capitales," in her 1985 *La douleur* (mis-translated as *The War: A Memoir*). Although both of these short texts assert the inexpressibility of bodily pain discussed by Scarry, both also nevertheless connect torture and language in such complicated, even contradictory, ways as to provoke the unlikely conjunction I would like to make here between torture and close reading: "I give you the torturer along with the rest of the texts," writes Duras. "Learn to read them properly . . ." (115).

The generic ambiguities and the difficulties of translation posed by these two texts

are symptoms of their linguistic, textual, and moral complexities. In their personal narratives of torture, Améry and Duras reflect on the afterlife of torture, on the possibilities of survival, on the need for and the possibility of justice. They think about a future in which the torturer and the victim will have to coexist, a social contract that includes them both, and they think about this from the subject position of the tortured person and that of the torturer, respectively. Working through their textual and conceptual densities in a close reading might give us a vocabulary with which to resist the simplified and clichéd "ticking bomb" scenario that structures current public conversations about torture. To read closely is precisely to resist using a text as an object lesson. It is to be open to its surprises, its open-endedness, its contradictory desires.

I borrow my title "The First Blow" from Améry's essay.

And suddenly I felt—the *first blow*. . . . The first blow brings home to the prisoner that he is *helpless*, and thus it already contains in the bud everything that is to come. . . . They are permitted to punch me in the face, the victim feels in numb surprise and concludes in just as numb certainty: they will do with me what they want. (26–27)

It is wrong to cite this text with ellipses as I have just done. What is remarkable about it is the rhythm of Améry's account, the digressions and hesitations, the dismissal of alternative accounts, the reluctance to describe the actual act of torture.

Jean Améry was born Hans Maier in Vienna in 1912. He was raised by his mother, who was Catholic, in Vorarlberg; his father, a Jew, died in World War I, and Améry did not recognize or acknowledge the significance of his Jewish identity until the outbreak of anti-Semitism in the 1930s, when he was a university student in Vienna. Améry fled to Belgium, was arrested as a German alien and interned in the Gurs concentration camp,

in the Pyrenées, and escaped and returned to Belgium, where he became active in the Belgian Resistance. Arrested by the Nazis in 1943, he was tortured at Fort Breendonk and eventually deported to Auschwitz. After his liberation in 1945, he returned to Brussels and changed his name from Maier to the French anagram Améry. Nevertheless, until his suicide in 1977, he wrote in German, alluding in his work to a vast German and more broadly European literary canon.

His essay on torture, written in the 1960s as events in Algeria and Vietnam were unfolding, is placed in the collection between the title essay, "At the Mind's Limits" ("An den Grenzen des Geistes")—on the role of the intellectual in Auschwitz, where, Améry argues, contrary to most accounts, intellectual knowledge and passion, thinking itself, were of no help in survival—and an essay on exile and its resultant identity loss, especially for the author writing *in* German but not *for* Germans, "How Much Home Does a Person Need?" ("Wieviel Heimat braucht der Mensch?"). All three essays are about the loss of a world, of *the* world, by the victim of torture and internment. And that loss occurs with, is contained in, the first blow. ". . . I am certain that with the very first blow that descends on him he loses something we will perhaps temporarily call 'trust in the world' [*Weltvertrauen*]," and the most important element of this trust, Améry explains, is the confidence that "the other person will spare me." Améry goes on to describe the break in the social contract that is the first blow, the negation and destruction of a world based on an "expectation of help [*Hilfserwartung*]" (28; 51–52). He describes the violation of the prisoner's skin surface, the imposition of the torturer's corporeality on his own body, and the physical intimacy between two individuals, the victim and the torturer, who, in the absolute power and sovereignty one exercises over the other, are nevertheless radically separate: "No bridge leads from the former to the latter" (34).

Améry delays the description of the torture that is inflicted on him in the bunker into which he is led from the "business room" of Breendonk. He "cannot spare the reader . . . can only try to make it brief" (32). Those writing about torture in academic essays such as this one are faced with a similar dilemma: How can we cite the brutal details? How can we not expose them? Is it sensationalist to repeat the narrative of torture, to make of it an example, an anecdote? But isn't it wrong not to reveal the cruelties committed by modern states, their violations of the social contract? One is tempted to cite every line: How can one add to the force of the description, to the materiality of every detail? As I write about Améry, I realize I would prefer just to reproduce his essay. Does it not speak for itself?

Améry is indeed brief in describing the manner in which he was hung from a hook on the ceiling by a shackle that held his hands together behind his back. He goes on to discuss and analyze the effects of the pain he experienced even as he maintains that "[i]t would be totally senseless to try and describe here the pain that was inflicted on me." Comparisons only lead to a "hopeless merry-go-round of figurative speech. The pain was what it was. . . . Qualities of feeling . . . mark the limit of the capacity of language to communicate" ("Sie markieren die Grenze sprachlichen Mitteilungsvermögens"; 33; 59).

The analyses of the long- and short-term effects of torture on its victim are the most searing and memorable aspects of Améry's essay. He describes how "the tortured person is only a body, and nothing else beside that," how "only in torture does the transformation of the person into flesh become complete" (33). In an awful calculus, Améry deduces simply and mathematically, "Body = Pain = Death"; pain "blots out the contradiction of death and allows us to experience it personally." That experience cannot ever be overcome. "Whoever was tortured, stays tortured. Torture is ineradicably burned into him . . ."

(34). Throughout the essay, Améry comes back to this realization. Twenty-two years after the event, his body has “not forgotten until this hour.” “It still is not over” (32, 36).

Torture is intimately connected to language, as Elaine Scarry has shown. It is all about interrogation and confession. But Scarry also shows how the torturer dictates the language of the victim, imposing silence even in eliciting confession, for what can the victim do when not screaming in pain but speak in the terms and in the language of the torturer? Joseph Slaughter argues that torture “destroys the victim’s linguistic systems, undermining any direct correlation between signifier and signified” (426). “I talked,” writes Améry. “I accused myself of invented absurd political crimes, and even now I don’t know at all how they could have occurred to me, dangling bundle that I was” (36). And torture is also at the limit of language, un-sharable (Améry divides *mit-teilen*, exposing its linguistic roots [59]).

But is it? There is an almost imperceptible shift in Améry’s narrative that belies his insistence on incommunicability. Just at the moment when he describes dangling from the hook on the ceiling, Améry shifts from the first person to the impersonal inclusive German pronoun *man*, often translated into English as the second-person pronoun *you* (or the more impersonal and less commonly used *one*):

In such a position, or rather, when hanging this way, with your hands behind your back, for a short time you can hold at a half-oblique through muscular force. During these few minutes, when you are already expending your utmost strength, when sweat has already appeared on your forehead and lips, and you are breathing in gasps, you will not answer any questions. . . . You hardly hear it. (32)

man wird, während dieser wenigen Minuten, wenn man bereits die äußerste Kraft verausgabte, wenn schon der Schweiß auf Stirn und Lippen steht und der Atem keucht, keine Fragen beantworten. Die vernimmt man kaum. (58)

The reader is interpellated in this *man* and the present tense, included in it and thus appealed to directly to imagine, to feel what the tortured person feels, to experience the sweat on the forehead, the gasps of breath. (This interpellation seems stronger and more direct in the English translation, but the German *man* is also inclusive.) What Améry says cannot be done he tries nevertheless to do through the power of tense and address. “[Y]ou will not answer any questions. . . . You hardly hear it”: these sentences about the utter breakdown in communication and communicability that results from the concentration of all human life in the body also become the place of address to a reader and listener. But in his original German text Améry goes further. This writer, who resolutely rejects any notion of collective guilt and insists on the unbridgeable chasm between the torturer and the tortured, encases both in the same pronoun. Here translation fails in precision and nuance: the passive voice cannot render the general and basic humanity of the German *man*, even if, here, cold and impersonal. “Man führte mich an das Gerät. . . . Dann zog man die Kette mit mir auf. . . .” (“I was led to the instrument. . . . Then I was raised with the chain . . .”; 58; 32). In invoking the universal *man* in several significant instances in an essay that so insists on the limited perspective and the loneliness of the I who has been tortured and victimized, Améry, we might say, in some small measure restitches a social contract inverted and torn by an all-powerful, sovereign other, the representative of the authoritarian state.

Can this double application of *man*—to the tortured person, as well as to the torturer—be read as Améry’s deeply ironic slippage implying that each of us might stand in either position? I believe that Améry would reject such a suggestion. In all his writings, Améry voiced the homelessness and loneliness of the exile and survivor. Even before his arrest, his loss of home was coextensive with a loss of self: “I was a person who could no longer say ‘we’

and who therefore said 'I' merely out of habit, but not with the feeling of full possession of myself" (qtd. in Sebald 160). This loneliness increased with the ever-greater unwillingness of the world to hear his indictments throughout the 1960s and 1970s, as Germany was helped to rebuild and, he felt, the past was forgotten. His reflections are filled with fantasies of a dialogue he knew to be doomed. In his essay "Resentments," Améry returns to the subject of torture, not at Breendonk but, this time, in Auschwitz. "The experience of persecution was, at the very bottom, one of extreme *loneliness*." He marvels that his resentments persisted even after the Flemish SS man Wajs, who had beaten him with a shovel handle when he did not work fast enough in the camp, was indicted and sentenced to death for his crimes. "What more can my foul thirst for revenge demand?" Perhaps the only way to be released from this "abandonment" and "foreignness in the world" might be to face his torturer, and he spins out this fantasy in some detail:

When SS-man Wajs stood before the firing squad, he experienced the moral truth of his crimes. At that moment, he was with *me*—and I was no longer alone with the shovel handle. I would like to believe that at the instant of his execution he wanted exactly as much as I to turn back time, to undo what had been done. When they led him to the place of execution, the antiman had once again become a fellow man. (70)

Reversing the radical separation between himself and his torturers, rebuilding the bridge he found irrevocably broken, Améry actually fantasizes a moment in which he and his torturer could share a world and even a desire. Such a meeting would have enabled him, he claims, to die "calmly and appeased" ("ruhig und befriedet"; 71; 114). If Améry ultimately succumbed to his loneliness and his resentment, it was not for lack of attempting to re-create in the shape of his writing a social contract that had been torn. Again and

again he complains of the world's unwillingness and inability to listen to his voice. Rather than concede the incommunicability of torture and pain, we might allow ourselves, as close readers, to be addressed by victims of torture, like Jean Améry, and to acknowledge both the persistence of their wounds and their call for an impossible justice.

Marguerite Duras's text on torture, included in her 1985 compilation of short texts *La douleur (The War: A Memoir)*, also interpellates its reader, but it does so from the unlikely and very different perspective of the torturer. Duras here casts herself as a torturer in the persona of a character named Thérèse. "Thérèse c'est moi," she insists in the preamble to this section of the book (139): "Thérèse is me. The person who tortures the informer is me. . . . I give you the torturer along with the rest of the texts. Learn to read them properly: they are sacred" (115).

La douleur begins with a long and ambiguous disclaimer in which the author explains that she recently (in the 1980s) found two exercise books that contain a journal of April and May 1945, along with some added passages extending into 1946: "I have no recollection of having written it. . . . When would I have done so, in what year, at what times of day, in what house? I can't remember" (3). The journal details the weeks of waiting for her husband, Robert Antelme, who had been interned in Bergen Belsen as a member of the French Resistance, his return from the camp as a mere skeleton, and the months in which he slowly and painfully recovers. In the journal, Duras refers to herself in both the first and the third persons, as "je" ("I") and "elle" ("she"), but also at times by the impersonal "on" ("one"). Some moments are so overwhelming that they seem to require the distance of the third person to be written: "I try to snatch the phone, it's too much, unbearable. . . . She shrieks, 'No! I can't believe it!' . . . She's on the floor, fallen on the floor. Something gave way at the words saying he

was alive two days ago" (38). In these moments of extremity, writing may demand such a splitting of the I, but writing also allows the assumption of radically different personas, those of the Nazi victimizer and of his victim. "But now I can't tell the difference between the love I have for him and the hatred I bear them. It's a single image with two faces: on one is him, his breast exposed to the German, the hope of twelve months drowning in his eyes. On the other side are the eyes of the German who's aiming at him. Those are the two faces of the image. I have to choose between the two" (27).

Throughout the cluster of texts making up *La douleur*, Duras continues to exploit the troubling ethical ambiguities that characterize the complicated power shifts of the moment of liberation. She tells specific moments and scenes detailing her role in the French Resistance, her act of befriending, perhaps inappropriately, a Gestapo officer in the hopes of receiving information about her husband and her ambivalent testimony at the officer's postwar trial, her attraction to a captured militiaman. The incident recounted in "Albert des Capitales" takes place a week after the liberation of Paris. Thérèse's resistance group, "Richelieu," has captured an informer who worked with the police, and they must decide what to do about him. D. is in charge, and, because Thérèse fell out with the group the previous day and is feeling isolated, he hands the interrogation of the informant over to her. The man's pocket calendar had revealed a contact name, Albert des Capitales, and he explained that Albert was a waiter at a café, Les Capitales. Albert's existence is corroborated, but he has long fled the scene. The informer, if indeed he is an informer, D. says, could reveal more names, an entire network of those who worked with the Gestapo to identify and deport Jews and resisters, perhaps those who, unlike this poor guy, were in positions of responsibility and who signed the execution orders of Jews and resisters.

After repeatedly insisting on his innocence, the informer is taken into a room in which Thérèse conducts his interrogation with the help of two young men who themselves were tortured, by the Gestapo in the Montluc prison, and who did not talk. Unlike Améry, Duras does not spare her reader any details. She describes the small room in which the interrogation takes place, the table, the two chairs and the hurricane lamp, the gruff way in which Albert and Lucien order the prisoner to undress and his excruciatingly slow compliance. She describes every item of his clothing, down to the dirt around his collar, his gray underwear, the holes in his socks and the black toe that sticks out. "It's the first time in her life that she's been with a naked man for any other purpose than making love. . . . He has old shriveled testicles, level with the table. He's fat and pink in the gleam of the hurricane lamp. He smells of unwashed flesh" (128).

In a memorable scene in *The Battle of Algiers*, Colonel Matthieu describes the important role many of the French officers in charge of the battle against the FLN played in the Resistance and the internment and torture some suffered in Dachau and Buchenwald, a statement corroborated in the interviews of *États d'armes*. Just days after the liberation, Duras comments on a similar ironic reversal. "He's trembling. Shivering. He's afraid. Afraid of us. Of us who were afraid. Of those who had been afraid he was in great fear" (128). Albert and Lucien, from the Montluc prison, hit the informer in the same ways in which they were hit by the Nazis. As the torture progresses, however, its initial purpose is soon lost. Instead of eliciting names and places, the interrogation revolves around confession, the color of the identity card that enabled the informant to enter the Gestapo headquarters freely. As Thérèse authorizes blow after blow with her "Allez-y" ("Go to it"), she is reassured by visions of Jews and resisters falling, dying. "Three hundred francs for a prisoner of war. . . . And how much for

a Jew?" (129). The torture ceases to be about information and comes to be about revenge, or, Thérèse wants to tell herself, about justice: "you have to strike. There will never be any justice in the world unless you—yourself are justice now" (134). In the original, Duras uses the general and all-encompassing *on*: "Il faut frapper. Il n'y aura plus jamais de justice dans le monde si on n'est pas soi-même la justice en ce moment-ci" (161). For her, justice seems to require a social contract, as Améry found, with "another text and other clauses: an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" (28). And a textual strategy, the *on*, that includes the reader in that logic. Duras also draws an unbridgeable distance between the torturer and the tortured, though from a vantage point very different from Améry's: "He wasn't like other men even before. He was an informer, a betrayer of men. . . . Even when he's dead he won't be like a dead man" (135, 6). *Even before*, she has to insist, resisting the realization that it is actually the torture that removes him from humanity: "He's become someone without anything in common with other men. And with every minute the difference grows bigger and more established" (132). While underscoring this separation, Duras nevertheless reveals again and again the intimacy of torture and the physical, bodily connection between torturer and victim: "The informer looks at her. She's quite close to him. . . . 'What do you want me to say?'" (136). Written from the perspective of Thérèse, but in the third person, Duras's text does not create any easy place for its reader: the victim is unattractive, vile, beyond the pale of the human; we cannot identify with him. Are we, then, with the torturer in her self-righteous call for justice? If Duras forces us to think about this when she insists that "Thérèse c'est moi," it is not because she suggests that anyone or everyone could torture. Her text is closely contextualized. In part, Duras's Thérèse tortures out of loneliness and frustration, out of the inability to agree with her comrades on a

course of action in the moment power shifts over. And yet she finds that the act of torture increases her isolation. Has she become "like them"? This anxiety ("we are not like them") indeed rules discourses about torture and the Bush administration's nervous denials in our own current climate. One by one, Thérèse's comrades leave the room, the group splinters over her response, and at the end she cannot talk to the group any longer but asks D. to speak for her. Has justice been done? After sharing a small room in which she had the power to say "Go to it" and the prisoner was "collapsed on the floor," Thérèse wants him released: "Qu'on ne le voie plus" ("We don't want to set eyes on him again"; 169; 141).

Reading Duras with Améry, Améry with Duras, reveals numerous parallels and convergences on the subject of torture: its pointlessness as a means of gaining information, its deep implication in revenge, its isolation of torturer and victim both, the intimacy of their relationship, and, most important, its challenge to the limit of language and, with it, of the human. But what are we to make of the ambiguities of pronoun and person that structure Duras's texts? Is "Albert des Capitales" autobiographical or fictional? An account of revenge or a fantasy of it? A meditation on justice or a cry for it? Does it reflect feelings of the time or retrospective feelings forty years later? The use of the persona of Thérèse and the ambiguous and resonant "Thérèse c'est moi," the text's temporal ambiguity along with the injunction "Learn to read . . . properly," open this piece to a series of questions very different from Améry's. Is it even justified to speak of the writing of a victim of torture alongside that of a perpetrator of it, no matter the circumstances? "Whoever was tortured, stays tortured," writes Améry, and in an essay on Améry, W. G. Sebald explores what this might mean for writing after torture: "Seen in this light, the act of writing becomes both liberation and the annulment of *délivrance*, the moment in which a man who has escaped death must recognize that he is no

longer alive" (163). Surely that is not the case for one who tortured.

Duras describes the torture of an informer who might have sent others to their death. Although she allows Thérèse to envision his possible victims, and to reflect on the need for justice and on what might constitute it at that particular historical moment, and although she shows the seductions of such retributive justice, she does not go so far as suggesting that the torture of the informer might have been justified. While a great deal more troubling and perverse than Améry's, Duras's text, like his, takes the discussion of torture out of the terms of "efficacy" or "strategy" and out of the "ticking bomb" scenarios, where it resides at our present moment. These terms and scenarios test our limits. Where should the line be drawn; what would justify the first blow? Are there exceptional cases in which torture is necessary, defensible? And when is torture "counterproductive" or "self-defeating"? When do "we" become like "them"? Subtle historical reflections like *The Battle of Algiers* and textured testimonies such as those by Améry and Duras shift our thinking about torture to a different register.

Then again, personal accounts also clarify that the question of torture is neither ambiguous nor complicated. In an article in the *Nation*, "The Torture Administration," Anthony Lewis reports interviewing Jacobo Timerman, an Argentine publisher who was imprisoned and tortured along with more than thirty thousand others, including over two hundred public intellectuals, during Argentina's dirty war (1976–83): "Timerman turned the interview around and asked me questions about torture, positing the ticking-bomb situation. I tried to avoid the question but he pressed me to answer. Finally, I said that I might authorize torture in such a situation. 'No!' he shouted.

'You must never start down that road'" (15). Or, as Anthony Lagouranis wrote about his own acts of torture in the United States military, "No slope is more slippery, I learned in Iraq, than the one that leads to torture."

Marianne Hirsch

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