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Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self

By Susan J. Brison (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002)

Jennifer J. Llewellyn

*L'ouvrage de Susan Brison, intitulé **Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self**, est important, car il ouvre des voies qui vont au-delà des expériences personnelles de traumatisme vécu par l'auteure. Le processus de rétablissement de Brison à la suite d'un viol brutal et d'une tentative de meurtre a provoqué une prise de conscience non seulement par rapport à elle-même, mais aussi par rapport à la nature humaine en général, un phénomène qui ne concorde pas avec la conception classique du moi qu'elle connaissait en qualité de philosophe. Le moi découvert par Brison est «susceptible d'être défait par la violence, mais aussi d'être refait dans ses rapports avec les autres» (p. xi). Le moi que Brison révèle est de nature relationnelle. Cette vérité n'est pas, cependant, comme Brison le laisse entendre, connue des seules victimes de traumatisme personnel. En effet, c'est une vérité dont sont particulièrement conscientes les victimes de traumatismes provoqués par la guerre, par le génocide et par d'autres abus des droits humains. Bien que l'ouvrage de Brison puisse servir de bon compagnon de route pour les personnes en voie de guérison, sa perspicacité a une portée plus large que Brison ne semble le croire ou le reconnaître. Sa pénétration va au-delà de la réflexion du moi individuel et est d'une importance cruciale pour les personnes qui font face au défi d'une réconciliation à caractère collectif. S'il est vrai, comme le suggère Brison, que la violence nuit aux relations et mène à la rupture—c'est-à-dire qu'elle rompt le lien qui soutient et sustente le moi—, il est clair que le rétablissement exige la mise en place de relations avec les autres, tout autant dans les cas de traumatisme collectif qu'individuel.*

*Susan Brison's book **Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self** offers important insights beyond those related to her personal recovery from trauma. Brison's process of recovery from a brutal rape and attempted murder lead her to insights about herself and, in the process, to broader insights about the nature of the human self that are at odds with the traditional conception of the self familiar to her as a philosopher. The self that Brison discovers is "capable of being undone by violence, but also of being remade in connection with others" (p. xi). The self that Brison reveals is relational in nature. This is not, however, as Brison seems to suggest, a truth known only to victims of personal trauma. Indeed, it is a truth of which victims of trauma born of war, genocide, and other human rights abuses are acutely aware. Thus, while Brison's book is sure to be good company for those on a journey of personal recovery, its insights are of broader significance than Brison acknowledges or recognizes. They extend beyond the*

remaking of the individual self and are crucial to those who face the challenge of reconciliation on a collective scale. If, as Brison suggests, violence harms relationships and results in separation—severing the connection that sustains and nurtures the self—it is clear that recovery requires connection with others just as much in the case of collective trauma as in that experienced by the individual.

Susan Brison's book *Aftermath* is subtitled *Violence and the Remaking of a Self*.¹ In part, the choice of subtitle reflects the author's intention to chronicle her personal experience of a brutal rape and attempted murder. However, as much as the book draws the reader into the intimacy of the author's experience and her thoughts and struggles during the ten years following, its insights are much broader than the personal or the individual. The book offers more than a story about the remaking of one self but reveals a compelling truth about the nature of the human self more generally and the implication of this truth for dealing with trauma.

During a trip to France in 1990, Brison was raped and left for dead in a ravine near a village outside Grenoble where she had been staying with her husband. In an effort to comprehend this violent attack and find some consolation, Brison, a professor of philosophy at Dartmouth College looked to philosophy. Unable to find answers or meaning in this world of reason she had inhabited for so long, she queried whether her "reasoning had broken down? Or was it the breakdown of reason?"² Brison found no consolation or explanation in traditional philosophical theories, which had for so long been the lens through which she understood the world. This framework was inadequate to her experience, through which she had "ventured outside the human community, landed beyond the moral universe, beyond the realm of predictable events and comprehensible actions."³ It was a place from which Brison could find no return and reason, and the rational conception of the self, offered little guidance on this journey.

It was in this space outside community, and in her search for a way to return, that Brison discovered a truth about herself and, in the process, accessed a broader truth about human selves—that they are fundamentally relational of nature. This vision of the self was not that of the traditional philosophers, it was not the rational individuated self. The self that Brison discovered was one that was "capable of being undone by violence, but also of being remade in connection with others."⁴ She recognized this vision of the self as that offered by feminist accounts of the relational self. Her experience of trauma and of what was required to recover and make a return to the human community from which she felt isolated demonstrated the truth of these feminist accounts.

For the most part, the book is a record of personal reflections, discoveries, and thoughts. One will not find in this book an academic (in the traditional sense)

1. Susan J. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

2. *Ibid.* at ix.

3. *Ibid.* at ix-x.

4. *Ibid.* at xi.

consideration of theories of the self. It is, for example, short on citations and references on these subjects. What it offers in place of this typical philosophical approach is a compelling and convincing account of the nature of the self, borne of the experience and struggle that led to these realizations. Hers is not an account founded on theoretical argument alone. Through Brison's reflections, she offers more than another reasoned argument for the nature of the human self. She offers insights into, and truths about, the nature of the human self, accessible only at the margins of human community and the limits of human experience. It is through the study of trauma that Brison argues that the "accounts of the embodied self, the self as narrative, and the autonomous self are compatible and complementary, focusing on different aspects of the self."⁵ The insights gained through the experience of trauma "provides additional support for the view that each of these aspects of the self is fundamentally relational."⁶

While an unusual approach for a philosopher, it seems appropriate and perhaps unsurprising that the proof of the relational nature of the self would be revealed by personal experience and not by formal logic or theoretical supposition. Such a truth is often obscured in comfortable, safe, and everyday moments where the illusion of independence from others can be maintained because the fact of connection is something presumed, something woven into the underlying reality of life so well that it goes unnoticed. Thus, it is in times when the comfort of the world is shaken, connections broken, and the self shattered that the truth of the self's relational nature becomes evident—and painfully so.

This is a truth revealed to, and known by, victims of trauma in other contexts. Victims of violence as the result of war or other human rights violations have found themselves on the outside of human community. They too have discovered the relational nature of the self as they strive to recover and make their way back into the realm of human community. It is a truth that transitional contexts attempting to emerge from pasts marred by violence must contend with if they are to remake a nation.

Brison's book is certain to be good company for those travelling the oft-times very lonely journey to recovery from sexual violence and trauma. It also offers important insights for those seeking to accompany others on this journey individually or collectively through the design of processes and institutions that enable the remaking of these selves. The insights that Brison offers, however, have broader application and implications than the author considers. They extend beyond the remaking of the individual self and are crucial to those who take as their task reconciliation on a collective scale. If violence harms relationships and results in separation severing the connections that sustain and nurture the self, then it is clear that recovery requires connection with others. Just as this is true for the individual who experiences personal traumas it is true for the nation fractured by trauma. If reconciliation is to happen on a national or collective scale, it must

5. *Ibid.* at 41.

6. *Ibid.*

first take account of the individuals who make up the collective and their need to remake the self—the relational self.

Brison recognizes that the relational nature of the self has implications for what is needed to remake the self. The remaking of the self requires, according to Brison, the reconstruction of an individual narrative: “Trauma survivors are dependent on empathic others who are willing to listen to their narratives ... Not to be heard means the self the survivor has become does not exist for these others ... This reveals the extent to which the self is created and sustained by others and, thus, is able to be destroyed by them.”⁷ Brison is clear then about the importance of others to the project of constructing a self-narrative and thereby reconstructing the self for “one can become a human subject again through telling one’s narrative to caring others who are able to listen.”⁸ According to Brison, “[t]his working through, or remastering of, the traumatic memory” is key to remaking the self because it “involves going from being the medium of someone else’s (the torturer’s) speech to being the subject of one’s own.”⁹ It is further key not only to the remaking but to the survival of the self because “to the extent that bearing witness reestablishes the survivor’s identity, the empathic other is essential to the continuation of the self.”¹⁰

Through her identification of these needs of the individual for recovery, Brison offers much to those who work to discern what is needed in transitional contexts, to recover from pasts marred by violence and gross violations of human rights. It helps to make sense of the instincts of those who advocate truth commissions in these contexts as necessary to the remaking of selves and to the remaking of nations. Brison does not, however, acknowledge or recognize the full breadth of her insights. The wider implications of her reflections are obscured by her belief that the trauma of rape victims is different from that of victims of collective trauma like war. She argues that “[u]nlike survivors of wars or earthquakes, who inhabit a common shattered world, rape victims face the cataclysmic destruction of their world alone, surrounded by people who find it hard to understand what’s so distressing.”¹¹ Yet this claim is based on the mistaken presumption that simply inhabiting a common social space makes it possible for victims to hear one another and to recognize their common experience. In the context of oppression secured by violence often in the form of gross human rights violations or indeed in the chaos of war, this commonality is often no more a recognized reality than it is for rape victims who share a common experience of a shattered world and yet remain isolated and alone in that world.

Brison’s insights are shared by those who argue in favour of restorative justice-based institutions such as truth commissions, as those institutions best suited to the task of dealing with pasts marred by human rights violations in the course of transition. Brison’s record of, and reflections on, a personal experience

7. *Ibid.* at 62.

8. *Ibid.* at 57.

9. *Ibid.* at 15.

10. *Ibid.* at 59.

11. *Ibid.* at 15.

and journey are thus relevant and important to those seeking to deal with recovery from the trauma of the past in transitional contexts. Such institutions are founded on the understanding that reconciliation on a collective scale cannot be achieved without attending to the harms experienced by individual victims. And such institutions recognize that these harms are relational of nature and thus can only be addressed or repaired through the restoration of relationships with a view to remaking the selves at stake. It is only if the call to remake the self is heeded that reconciliation on a collective scale is made possible.

The South African Truth Commission is an example of a restorative justice-based institution that recognizes this truth in so far as it conceives its contribution to reconciliation as one step along this road. Brison's personal reflections help make clear the significance of this contribution to reconciliation—that is, to hear the stories of victims and, in so doing, to honour the subjectivity of survivors and thus secure the possibility of connection with others. Truth commissions then serve as institutions aimed at remaking the self—a crucial step in the remaking of a nation. Indeed, they are founded on the core insight that Brison reveals, namely that “[i]t is only by remembering and narrating the past—telling our stories and listening to others’—that we can participate in an ongoing, active construction of a narrative of liberation, not one that confines us to a limiting past, but one that forms a background from which a freely imagined—and desired—future can emerge.”¹²

12. *Ibid.* at 99.



SHELF LIFE

BOOKS EDITOR MARTIN LEVIN'S PICKS AND PANS

Rape and narrative

A friend of mine, a professor of philosophy, had a sign on his office door that read: "There never was philosopher yet that could cure the toothache." What happened to Susan Brison was vastly worse than a toothache and, as she admits at the outset in her memoir-meditation, **Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self** (Princeton University Press, 165 pages, \$30.95), all her training as a philosopher was of little avail. At first.

One July day in 1990, Brison, a professor at Dartmouth College, was out for a morning constitutional in southern France, near Grenoble, when she was attacked from behind, raped, severely beaten, strangled and left for dead. Her body survived; her psyche almost did not. Her assumptions about the structure of the world and the nature of the self occupying it were shattered, Humpty-Dumpty-like. She writes: "I turned to philosophy for meaning and consolation and could find neither." She was no longer at home in a world that now made no sense. *Aftermath* is an affecting

and spirited record of how she managed, with great difficulty, to put it back together, but in new and unexpected forms.

Brison discovers all sorts of interesting things, making a kind of triumph out of a desolation. She learns almost immediately that there is an almost universal (lucky it's just *almost*) lack of empathy for sufferers of trauma, stemming from fear "of identifying with those whose terrifying fate forces us to acknowledge that we are not in control of our own." She might have added that the same fear is a major source of the gallows humour that is often a reaction to traumatic events.

She discovers, too, the power of testimony, of acts of memory and speech as forms of healing through constructing a narrative. And narrative is the still the greatest sense-making device we humans have ever invented (or, if you prefer, discovered). Wisely, Brison lets her narrative assume the arc of 10 years' (to the day) experience; the earlier recollections and reflections, filled with anger, give way to a growing sense of

calm, though the progress — I think we may call it that — is far from linear. She argues forcefully for the admittance of personal stories into philosophical discourse.

Throughout, she melds her own story of a shattered self with more theoretical (and to me, often less interesting) discussion of various forms of trauma — rape, of course, but also murder and war and various forms of abuse. There are nice insights: the way in which trauma creates its own divisive sense of time and how it affects character and relationships; philosophy's failure as neat abstraction in the face of life's inevitable messiness; how it is often easier to accept blame oneself than to admit to a world where randomness reigns.

Although there is plenty of philosophy here, as well as feminist analysis that teeters on the brink of predictability, there's much interesting anecdote, too, both personal and culled from the works of others. Finally, *Aftermath* works as the story of a life pulled back from the brink because, at its best, it exemplifies its own argument for the lasting power of narrative.

To: Susan Brison

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AFTERMATH *Violence and
the Remaking of a Self*
Princeton Univ. (192 pp.)
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How do you cope with the catastrophic calamity of sexual assault and near murder if you are a philosopher dedicated to rational discourse?

Those are the questions posed by Dartmouth professor Brison in a poignant account that begins on July 4, 1990, when, walking in broad daylight on a country road in southern France, she was grabbed from behind, raped, beaten, and left for dead. It was, for Brison, a complete undoing of her persona—a shattering of self and a destruction of her past and future. She speaks of it as a condemnation to live in a now of non-sense, non-reason, suffering the pathological fears, flashbacks, and other accoutrements of post-traumatic stress disorder. Worse, she was saddled with the shame that accompanies sexual assault and with well-meaning friends, colleagues, and family who urged her to get over it and to get on with her life. Here, she traces the nonlinear trajectory of her recovery via multiple pathways. Academically, she took risks to introduce the personal in a field noted for its lofty planes of abstraction. Historically, she explored the records of Holocaust and other trauma survivors and analyzed the varied political and social views of feminist and other historians, becoming politically active herself. Emotionally, she had the loving support of her husband. Medically, she was helped by individual and group therapy, as well as for drugs to fight depression, insomnia, and anxiety. Physically, she learned self-defense. Throughout, she emphasizes the necessity, indeed the life-saving value, of narrative. Telling one's story over and over, she notes, the details will vary, but each retelling helps reconnect the self to the world. Metaphysically, the self gains meaning only in relation to others. By the end of the decade (coinciding with the end of her assailant's prison term), Brison has overcome her terror, borne a child, regained a sense of control, and is again "at home in the world."

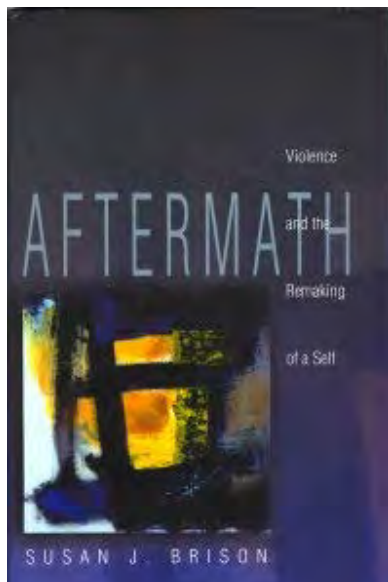
A moving diary of personal trauma and recovery.

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Narratives of the traumatized self



What happens to the self, when traumatized by rape and other abuse? Can trauma narratives reconstruct our belief that we can understand the world and feel at home again? Or does the traumatic loss of carefreeness forever destroy our attempts to find our way home? Philosopher Robin May Schott explores different approaches to this ever-present issue

By Robin May Schott

"We have means both to understand the world and to act in it. Arendt compared the feeling of understanding to the feeling of being at home." (Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 303)

"In telling a story we renew our faith that the world is within our grasp." (Michael Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling*, p.17)

"I am not alive." (Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, p.260)

FORUM/26.6.2003 Any student of philosophy will remember Descartes' famous cogito ergo sum: "I am, I exist is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it." Denying the cogito would be pragmatically self-defeating -- as Bernard Williams writes, like saying "I am absent" in a roll call. What is one then to make of Charlotte Delbo, a non-Jewish French woman who survived Auschwitz and Ravenbrück, and claimed that she had died in Auschwitz? What does this pragmatic contradiction tell us about the conditions for being a self?

Delbo's claim is not a response to Descartes' need to prove the existence of a thinking self. It is a response to another question about the self: Can one feel at home in the world? Being at home in the world is one of the fundamental impulses for both philosophy and storytelling, as Hannah Arendt's work has made clear. The attempt to reassure oneself that human beings and the world are made for each other can be viewed as a form of secular theodicy, an affirmation of the meaningfulness of the world, even though this world is a place of suffering and atrocity.

Stories of traumatized selves raise a number of questions: What happens to a self when the unthinkable happens, when one is stripped of what makes one human? Can narratives of trauma reconstitute our faith that the world is within our grasp and that we are at home in it? Or does the traumatic loss of carefreeness forever mar one's attempts to find one's way back home?

The American feminist philosopher Susan J. Brison, who survived rape

and attempted sexual murder, affirms in *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton University Press, 2002), that narratives of trauma enable one to remake a self that at least some of the time can feel at home in the world. More troublingly, Charlotte Delbo's trilogy, *Auschwitz and After* (Yale University Press, 1995), vividly shows that paradoxes forever haunt the effort of returning home.

Brison's book is situated within three overlapping discourses. First, the book is a wrenching personal account of how, while she was walking on a country road outside Grenoble, France on a lovely morning in July 1990, she was attacked from behind, raped, beaten and left for dead. Her book is a sensitive account of her rape and her ten-year long and difficult journey to remake herself. Her personal account situates the book among other accounts written by survivors of individual or collective atrocities. In this respect, Brison's primary task is to bear witness to her rape. Bearing witness is both a way of working through her personal trauma and engaging in the political necessity of bearing witness to the injustice of sexual violence.

Second, as a professional philosopher Brison reflects on her personal narrative in order to engage with philosophical issues about the nature of the self, the nature of knowledge, and the role of narrative. Third, as a professional feminist philosopher, Brison is firmly oriented by feminist discussions of the relational self and the significance of the perspective of the victim. Although on a quick read one might oppose the personal account to the philosophical dimensions of the book that would sadly do little justice to the philosophical contribution of the book. The book is philosophical in including not only "a number of pages which only an academic could love", as one reviewer put it in *The Spectator* [Remembering to forget](#).

The book's philosophical mission is carried out by the personal narrative, which anchors philosophical issues in the actual life-experiences of empirical individuals -- in this case, in the author's traumatic experiences. This approach reflects one of the central contributions of feminist philosophy. If philosophical problems about personal identity and knowledge are thought in relation to concrete selves - including selves who have been raped - then one arrives at rather different theories of the self than if one seeks to disengage oneself from all concrete experiences.

Hence, the question that motivates Brison is: what are the conditions for remaking the self, when she/he has been unmade by trauma and violence? Her answer is that since the self is fundamentally relational, the self can be remade in connection with others. As the psychologist Judith Lewis Herman notes, a traumatic event is one in which a person feels utterly helpless in the face of what is perceived to be a life-threatening force. Trauma destroys the belief that one can be oneself in relation to others. Working through trauma can only be done in relation to empathic others, who become the keepers of one's story. Brison worked through her trauma in the context of relations with her husband, therapists, fellow rape victims, friends, and professional philosophers. This relational character of the self no more undermines the possibility of autonomy than does recognition that all selves are embodied. In fact, Brison along with other feminists argues that the possibility for becoming self-determining is thoroughly imbued with one's dependence on others through caring and socialization.

Anchoring philosophical issues in the concrete experiences of violence has implications for other areas of philosophy as well, including epistemology. Whereas philosophers typically argue that in order to have knowledge, one must divest oneself of particular perspectives, accounts by victims of violence lead to very different implications. Take the example of the philosopher who adopted a utilitarian approach to assessing whether the harm to the rape victim outweighs the benefit to the rapist, as described by Brison in chapter one of her book.

There are a number of troubling aspects to this example. First, one might well wonder whether a utilitarian cost-benefit analysis is the most illuminating starting point for considering the ethical implications of rape. Second, even if one were a persuaded utilitarian (and I have met feminist philosophers who are), one would wonder about how to apply a utilitarian methodology to this question. One would need to be able to imaginatively understand what the harm done to the

able to imaginatively understand what the harm done to the rape victim is -- no easy matter, since as Brison notes much of what a rape victim goes through is unimaginable. Thus, no matter what methodological approach one adopts, one must try to understand the perspective of the victim of rape. First-person narratives are essential epistemological tools that enable philosophers to understand different kinds of selves, and thereby open up new areas for philosophical inquiry.

Victims of rape experience the unmaking of the self and the loss of the feeling of being at home in the world. As the Serbian feminist and anti-war activist Lepa Mladjenovic writes, rape makes a woman "homeless in her own body" (quoted in Rhonda Copelon: "Surfacing Gender: Reconceptualizing Crimes Against Women in Time of War" in *Mass Rape*, 1994). Are there strategies that help one to return home again? Brison thinks that narratives of trauma do enable one to return to this feeling of being at home.

For the traumatized self, narrative serves both to integrate memories of trauma into the survivor's sense of self and view of the world, and to reintegrate the survivor into a community. Brison uses the language of "mastering" and "remastering" a trauma through narrative. The residue of trauma is a kind of body memory. Whereas traumatic memories feel as though they are passively endured, narratives are a result of certain choices. By engaging in a narrative, the survivor takes control over certain aspects of both her story and her memory, and thereby can regain more fully her voice and subjectivity. And by narrating one's past, one is more able to freely construct a narrative of future liberation from this past.

In contrast to Brison's notion of narrative as enabling one to master trauma, remake oneself and ultimately approach the feeling of being at home in the world, Charlotte Delbo's trilogy *Auschwitz and After* unsettles these ideas. Delbo's account is based on a structurally different situation than the violence that Brison experienced. *Writing by survivors of Auschwitz* addresses the unthinkable that happened not once, but happened over and over and over again to those closest to one and to those thousands of other persons and corpses that passed by on the way to the crematorium. Because the atrocity to which she testifies is a mass atrocity, Delbo shuns the individual narrative voice. In the first volume, *None of Us Will Return*, the women in the group are occasionally named, but mostly appear as part of the "we" that experiences arrivals and departures, thirst, roll call, daytime, night, and the tulip in front of the SS officer's house. Delbo shuns the narrative impulse, which depends on reflection, in favor of a direct confrontation with the physical details of atrocity through "sense memory", which drowns all intellectual defenses. This sense memory is a blending of senses that is conveyed in the present tense, as in the following: "The woman moves forward...The dog leaps on the woman, sinks its fangs in her neck...The woman lets out a cry. A wrenched-out scream. A single scream tearing through the immobility of the plain. We do not know if the scream has been uttered by her or us, whether it issued from her punctuated throat, or from ours. I feel the dog's fangs in my throat." (Delbo, 28)

The presence of sense memory is one of the reasons that Delbo described herself as living next to Auschwitz. "Auschwitz is there, unalterable, precise, but enveloped in the skin of memory, an impermeable skin that isolates it from my present self. Unlike the snake's skin, the skin of memory does not renew itself...." Delbo gives voice to a splitting of self. On the one hand, she remembers every moment of Auschwitz; on the other hand, she does not recognize herself in the self that was in the camp. This splitting of the self attests to the paradoxes of witnessing - its necessity and impossibility. For how can one bear witness to that which is unthinkable, to the arbitrary and inexplicable infliction of brutality that reduces one's choice to that of death or living death? Charlotte feels the dogs' fangs in her own throat and the writer Delbo thereby ruptures narrative form, with its traditional distinction between self and other, life and death, past and present.

In the third volume of the trilogy, *The Measure of Our Days*, about the survivors' physical return home, the multiplication of individual voices is even more explicit. As the survivors are released from their shared trauma, the "I" is sometimes Charlotte, sometimes Gilberte, Mado, Poupette, Marie-Louise, Ida, Jacques, and others. The varied fates of the returnees show that accidents of fate are decisive for survivors'

the returnees show that accidents of fate are decisive for survivors attempts to live. Does one marry prince charming who turns out to be a man who will cheat and desert one? Is one's husband a man who will memorize every detail of his wife's camp experiences, making her memory into his own? Does one marry a man who is himself a survivor and who lives as if he were the only survivor in the family? Does one return to one's father alone, having witnessed the death of one's sister in the camp? Is one falsely suspected of having been a collaborator and shunned for years by one's former comrades?

Given the variety of fates that Delbo portrays, I find the notion of "mastery" of trauma suggested by Brison's interpretation of narrative difficult to apply to Delbo's text. The horrors of the camps continue to disorient both the "I" and the reader, and resist integration into the "normal" life of earning a living, keeping a house, and rearing a child. The paradoxes in surviving atrocity and bearing witness to it are alluded to by the paradoxes within the text itself. The knowledge gained in the camps is "useless" knowledge - useless for living - though also "a deeper, more trustworthy knowledge" by which one could see everything in a person's face the moment one set eyes on them.

Can narratives enable survivors to return to a feeling of being at home in the world? Can they deepen the reader's/listener's understanding of what is possible in the world? Both Susan Brison and Charlotte Delbo answer the second question in the affirmative. But they struggle differently with the first question. The anthropologist Michael Jackson describes in *The Politics of Storytelling* (Museum Tusulanum Press, 2002) the intelligibility of a story as depending on the "unconscious bodily rhythm of going out from some place of certainty or familiarity into a space of contingency and strangeness, then returning to take stock."


Brison's personal narrative follows this structure. She is raped in a foreign country, returns home, and through narrative seeks to master the trauma and remake herself. Nonetheless, she cannot sustain the belief in irreversible repair and her renewed feeling of being at home is constantly at risk. Although Delbo's text follows this literal form of storytelling as well (arrest and deportation, camp experiences, and return to home), she nonetheless resists the attempt to provide narrative mastery of traumatic events. She writes, "A child gave me a flower / one morning / a flower picked / for me / he kissed the flower / before giving it to me / and asked for a kiss /...There is no wound that will not heal / I told myself that day / and still repeat it from time to time / but not enough to believe it." (Delbo, 240-41)

Both philosophy and storytelling may renew our faith in the world and reassure us that we can feel at home in it. But they must also give voice to the profound dislocations that continually rupture this reassurance. As Brison and other feminist philosophers illustrate, personal narratives do effectively anchor reflection in concrete experiences, with profound implications for philosophical theories. But these narratives must themselves resist the impulse to master that, which is unmasterable. Delbo's work provides a remarkable example of how the self that is split retains the sense of contingency and strangeness in the world, which makes impossible a return to the certainties and familiarities of being at home.

Robin Schott, Ph.D., is feminist philosopher based in Copenhagen.



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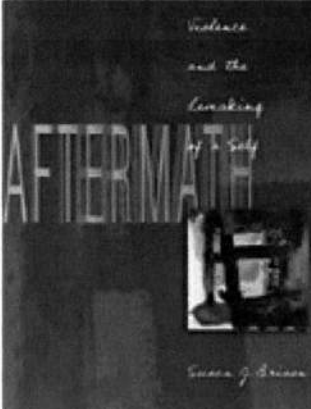
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Stronger in the Broken Places

In *Aftermath*, Susan Brison tells the true story of her harrowing assault and extraordinary struggle back to wholeness.



In a bright summer morning in 1990, Susan Brison went for a walk along a country road in southern France. "About an hour and a half later," she explains, "I was lying face down in a muddy creek bed at the bottom of a dark ravine, struggling to stay alive." She had been

pulled from the road into the bushes, beaten, raped and strangled until she lost consciousness. When she came to, the attacker was dragging her by her feet through the ravine, where he bludgeoned her with a rock, strangled her again and left her for dead.

In *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton), Susan Brison charts the disintegration of identity that occurs after sexual violence, and the long and arduous journey back toward a new self. A philosophy professor at Dartmouth, Brison uses her intellect as a powerful tool for survival and recovery, the way a karate

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champion would use her hands or a long-distance runner would use her legs—methodically she deconstructs the experience over a decade, bearing witness to her own trauma and carefully observing how it transforms her. She weaves her personal narrative together with larger philosophical questions about the nature and effects of violence. The end result is an illuminating study of how shattered lives can be made whole again—how we can move from victimhood to a new and stronger sense of self.

"You'll never be the same," Brison is told at her first meeting of a survivors support group. "But you can be better." Slowly, amazingly, this becomes true: Both student and teacher at once, Brison learns how to construct a new life story that incorporates her assault for what it was—something she endured. "What I wish [for] is not the superhuman ability to avoid life-threatening disasters," she tells us, "rather, resilience, the capacity to carry on, alive in the present, unbound by dread or regret." Restrained, lucid, and elegant, *Aftermath* is a testament to endurance and, ultimately, to survival.

— Jo Ann Beard

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Reviews

Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self by Susan Brison

Review by: Soran Reader

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New Books

victorious French, pass through his native village' (Gooch, 72), and appears to have backed off engaging with the political present. His famous wish merely to show how things actually were was seen by the historian Heinrich Leo as a 'timid avoidance of personal views' (Gooch, 98). What more centrally characterized the foundations of historical science, according to Gooch (13), was not some version of information-preserving inference to the best explanation analysable in Bayesian terms but 'the liberty of thought and expression, the insight into different ages, and the judicial temper'. While there is no doubt that Ranke's critical approach to sources became increasingly influential through his many pupils, Ranke's own passionless detachment was rarely followed and historiography as a discipline in Germany, while notable for its political motivation both before and after Ranke, was increasingly feverish as it developed the self-understanding of German nationalism (McClelland, 63–4). If there was a developing consensus among historians in Germany (consensus in England came later), there was more consensus on this than on focusing on 'the dust of archives' (Gooch, 101). The 'rise of German nationalism' is sometimes given as a one-line answer to the cause of the Great War; it was itself a response to the Napoleonic wars. We may disagree about the connection between Auerstädt in 1806 and Auschwitz in 1940 but we had best not consign the moral and political judgments which are inevitably involved in the historical understanding here to mere 'superstructure', nor think that cognitive values are not *values*.

It seems clear to me that different cognitively sound histories can be written about the development of the Rankean approach to history. There may not be a *best* explanation. Tucker brings philosophical assumptions to his history which lead him to seek features of a Kuhnian paradigm; I—and I claim no merit for the approach—have sought here something more political. Truth—whatever philosophical sense we make of that—is best seen as the answer to a question. Collingwood saw it that way. We each put history to the question in our own ways, and there is no *one right question to ask*. Consistently with this I affirm the importance of Tucker's book. His is a question worth asking.

Jonathan Gorman

Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self

By Susan Brison

Princeton University Press. 2002. \$29.25

In *Aftermath* Susan Brison describes her recovery from a sexual attempted murder. Because she is a philosopher, it is as a philosopher that she seeks to recover, so her account includes her struggles with our discipline along the way. The book was written over a long period, and includes changes of opinion about identity and recovery, and changes in the foci of Brison's concern. In Chapter 1, which is angry and univocal,

Brison describes the assault on her as a hate crime, and describes her recovery as a restoration of a coherent, unified self through the construction of a heard, autonomous narrative of her trauma. As she discovers, far from confirming that all knowledge is good, the knowledge confronted in the true narrative of a trauma may 'fill you with incapacitating terror and then uncontrolled rage' (p. 20). Nevertheless, it must be faced because recovery is impossible without it, and because it makes you stronger.

In Chapter 2, Brison tackles the view that 'the personal' has no place in philosophy. Her reasons, of course, are both personal and philosophical (Brison does not dwell on the personal reasons in *Aftermath*, but is open about them in conversation). During her recovery, she was told that her work on sexual violence was not philosophical enough to count for tenure. This added insult to her injury, and it shames our profession that it could be done in the name of philosophy. We share a duty to ensure that it cannot be done again. Brison's need to make philosophical sense of what had happened to her was absolute, "a matter of life and death", as she put it to me, and it was the clear moral duty of philosophers around her to respect and support this work she had to do. It is a tribute to Brison and those who helped her, that she did not sink into despair and leave philosophy, or dissipate her energies in public anger and blame. Instead, she uses philosophy to expose the philosophical mistakes underlying the view used to harass her, and makes a positive philosophical case for philosophical engagement with the personal.

The first mistake in denying that the personal can be proper topics of philosophy, Brison argues, is inconsistency: if war and abortion are proper topics, how can murder, assault and rape fail to be? The second mistake is imagining that an 'impersonal, acontextual' stance for philosophy is even possible, let alone ideal. Scratch any piece of 'pure' philosophy, and you will find the very specific preoccupations of a particular man at a particular time and place. Brison goes on to make a positive case for philosophical attention to personal experience. First-personal narratives of experience are needed to 'expose previously hidden biases in subject matter and method'; to 'facilitate empathy with those different from ourselves', and to 'lay on the table our own biases' (p. 26). There are specific dangers, but the way to deal with them is not by flight to the impersonal. Rather, it is by their more careful, self-reflective and critical use. The first danger is that the narrator may claim excessive authority to speak for a group, as when Brison might be tempted to speak for all victims of attempted sexual murder. The second, is that first-personal experiences may be treated as foundational, beyond doubt and critique, as Descartes' meditations have been used. The third and fourth dangers are specific to victimhood. Victim narratives may trigger counter-narratives, as when claims of feminists shape counter-narratives about the suffering of men. And narratives of victimhood may perpetuate negative stereotypes about the victim's group, as when the story of a rape perpetuates the idea that women are to-be-violated.

Brison may underestimate the fourth danger. When I first heard of

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Brison, in a full-page article in *The Guardian* headlined as the violent rape of a young woman philosopher, her story seemed to me just to add to the pile of salacious stories of sexual violence that dominate the media, feeding a male appetite for stories of harm to women—the more ‘pure’ the women, the more extreme the degradation, the more fully reported and satisfying the story. (A middle-class philosopher makes an only slightly less exciting victim than a virginal nun.) Brison focuses on resisting stereotyping of the victim as helpless, ‘by rejecting the dichotomy between victimization and agency, avoiding sensationalist accounts, and refraining from appearing on talk shows in which sleaze is valued over truth’ (p. 35). If negative stereotyping as helpless were the only worry, this might be enough. But how are negative stereotyping as deserving, and as exciting, to be prevented? Many victims are deterred from the healing narration of their suffering for those reasons, rather than from fear of being seen as helpless. A narrative which integrates suffering into ongoing life is the only way to heal trauma. Silence is no more use than inarticulate grief and rage, and even less use than flight to the impersonal. One way to meet the danger might be to make victim-narratives much more common. If we fill the public domain with them, how will any illicit thrill remain? In the face of the sheer diversity of victims, harms and perpetrators, how will the cruel notion that some groups of victims deserve their suffering be maintained? The persistence of negative stereotypes of women is a sad tribute to the persistence and ingenuity of patriarchy. But more telling, not less, may be the only way to drive negative stereotypes into the dust where they belong. Brison’s own narratives can be seen as first steps in the right direction.

In Chapter 3 Brison returns to the theme of self and recovery, exploring the connection between narrative, speech and subjectivity, and emphasizing the social aspects of the being, harming and restoration of the self. In Chapter 4 she discusses the problems faced by trauma victims in telling what has happened to them—the need for action, and the pervasive, impossible double bind that victims face: if you are composed enough to be able to tell about your trauma competently, then you can’t be that traumatised, and you probably bear some responsibility and guilt, so you will not be taken as a victim. But on the other hand, if you are so damaged by your trauma that you cannot tell about it competently, then you will not be taken seriously as a victim either. Brison here raises the possibility that passivity—allowing that one is helpless, ill, in pieces and needing to be acted on—may be a precondition for the recovery of the capacity for effective agency (p. 83).

By Chapter 5, Brison’s conceptualization of her trauma has broadened, and she considers the range of narratives available to capture it. She is now safe enough to notice how earlier on she felt bound to pick and hold on to just one narrative for purposes of getting her assailant convicted, and another one for purposes of presenting the trauma as a philosophical problem about gender-hate-crime and self-hood. She notices how the different narratives of the experience fit into culturally available ‘scripts’: rape, attempted murder, sexual murder as entertainment. She worries that her

narratives might feed what she calls the 'pre-memories' of rape of all women in our culture, and add to the burden of 'post-memories' of historic wrongs that we all carry. She worries, but in the end decides that the obligation to tell is overriding. Failure to tell is dangerous; others need to know what happened, and need to be recruited to the fundamental ethical work of ensuring that 'never again'. In Chapter 6, Brison's commitment to a single narrative of trauma, and the idea of healing as recovering a linear, orderly history and a capacity to go on in the same way is further loosened, as she adds more reasons why telling is essential. A failure to tell—however raggedly and provisionally—makes it impossible for the self to recover—instead, it is doomed to be forever 'clenched'—holding on to the trauma, remembering it over and over again, until it finds a space where safe, heard telling is possible (p. 106–7; p. 115).

The question which leads us to, and through, *Aftermath* is, roughly, 'how does one carry on living after a horror like that?', but in the final chapter and afterword the question dissolves into a simpler, more general one, 'how does one carry on?'. For in the end, the book includes not just the terrible assault on Brison, but the suicide of her brother, the barely-reported murder of two black PhD students at Dartmouth, and the murder just as *Aftermath* was completed, of Brison's mentor—someone who had given her hope to continue her career. We are forced, in the face of these sparsely narrated further shocks, to face the fact that there is never just one trauma. Rather, trauma is all around us, all the time. In extremis all our narratives of self give out, 'meaning flows away like blood' (p. 122), and all that is left is human, animal life with its push and pull of despair and hope. The idea of recovery as recovery of control is one that Brison now rejects, arguing that what is needed in the face of uncontrollable terrors of such magnitude is not control, but its opposite—letting go, accepting, feeling your way. The later pages of the book offer a vision of hope as a will 'to believe that there ... might be such a thing as irreversible repair' (p. 116).

Although Brison renounces the idea of a fixed point of clarity in recovery, or a single right stance in relation to evil, when she contemplates telling her son about her trauma, her ethical vision becomes more definite. How provisional is that definiteness, I wonder? Might it rather be foundational? As she gathers herself to introduce her son to the horrors of the world, of which her trauma is only one, Brison articulates what might just be a unique moral imperative: help your children be safe. She seeks a telling for her son which will enhance 'not the superhuman ability to avoid life-threatening disasters, but, rather, resilience, the capacity to carry on alive in the present, unbound by dread or regret ... the will to say, whatever comes, *Let's see what happens next.*' (p. 117). The place where *Aftermath* leads us is a very human place, and Brison's eloquence as she speaks from it is shaming. Why have so few philosophers dared to speak of suffering and recovery, when these are unalterable facts of the human condition, as brute as the facts of agency, penalty and reward to which we so much more eagerly attend?

Soran Reader

proved fickle. But there are some unexpected revelations, too: the ostensibly reserved George Bush, for example, is an effusive epistolary lover. Lowenherz introduces each letter with a quick, helpful biographical note about the author, and the collection as a whole reveals an infinite number of ways to say "I love you." Photos. (Jan.)

Forecast: *If Crown can generate enough publicity for this, it should be a cinch for literate lovers on Valentine's Day.*

AROUSAL: The Secret Logic of Sexual Fantasies

MICHAEL J. BADER. *St. Martin's/Dunne*, \$23.95 (304p) ISBN 0-312-26933-1

This analysis of the pathologies of fantasy and psychology shows the road to hedonism is not paved with bricks but with dreams. With more than 20 years of counseling experience, Bader comes across as a compassionate psychotherapist, dedicated to exploring desire in whatever shape it might take: "Sexual excitement," he writes, "is loaded with taboos in our culture and is inevitably fraught with conflict and complications." Describing clinical practices and employing stories from his couch, Bader constructs a sexual world view wherein the shame and guilt patients experience in their early years (via the usual suspects: unhappy childhoods, bad parents) later well up in their intimate lives, often times in the form of secret—and seemingly deviant—fantasies. Throughout the book, Bader attempts to elucidate how these fantasies are used as the bridge between sexuality and the unreleased psychological tensions that float beneath the surface of consciousness. Readers may find his interpretations of fantasies from the familiar to the strange titillating (from voyeurism to coprophilia and sadomasochism), but may wonder if it's really accurate to say that "sexual fantasies are the keyhole through which we will be able to see our true selves." Bader's methodology insists that these desires are played out on a field viewed solely through the lens of psychoanalysis, a form of treatment some believe is outdated. And even though he may be a proponent of pop-sexology, Bader never gives a nod to Havelock Ellis, who pioneered in the field a century ago. (Jan.)

HOW CAN I GET THROUGH TO YOU? Reconnecting Men and Women

TERRENCE REAL. *Scribner*, \$25 (320p) ISBN 0-684-86877-6

"Conventional therapy has failed most couples," Real writes, and with over 20 years of marriage and family counseling experience, he's qualified to judge. Though traditional marital counseling has been prevalent for 30 years, divorce rates remain the same, and studies show that counseling has no lasting effect on either marital satisfaction or endurance. The author of *I Don't Want to Talk About It*, the national bestseller on male de-

pression, Real is attuned to the characteristics of contemporary marriages and demonstrates insight into both male and female perspectives. The fundamental problem, he argues, is American culture's deeply entrenched "psychological patriarchy," which devalues all things feminine (including healthy relationships) and wounds males at an early age by disconnecting them from themselves and others. Men can't relate, and women can't teach them how ("If a wife truly demands that her emotional needs be met, she may indeed put her marriage on the line"). Counseling, too, fails them both in a "collusion of silence" as to what's really wrong. Real's alternative is "relational recovery." Identifying a healthy marriage as one following the repeated pattern of "harmony, disharmony, and restoration," Real teaches five skills for accomplishing the crucial, ongoing task of repair: holding the relationship in high regard, preserving intimacy and relational (i.e., authentically connected) speaking, listening and negotiating. With numerous scenes from his therapy sessions—including quarrels most married couples will recognize—Real deftly shows readers how to transcend "our culture's anti-relational bias" and move "out of patriarchy into healthy relatedness." This is a well-balanced and exciting new addition to the marriage-manual genre. *Agent, Beth Vesel.* (Jan.)

Forecast: *This breakthrough handbook should cause a stir in the marriage guidance field, with its acknowledgement of counseling's failings and exposing of what Real considers unhealthy fundamental American cultural values.*

MY STROKE OF LUCK

KIRK DOUGLAS. *Morrow*, \$22.95 (208p) ISBN 0-06-000929-2

One of Hollywood's brightest stars since the late 1940s (*Champion, Lust for Life, Spartacus*), Douglas embarked on a literary career in the 1980s, with his bestselling memoir *The Ragman's Son*. He suffered a debilitating stroke several years ago, and now, at 84, he offers the inspirational but not at all Pollyannaish story of his recovery. A peculiarly painful sensation in his right cheek was the first warning, followed by a bewildering inability to talk. Lying in a hospital bed set up in his home, Douglas felt his situation was hopeless. How could he be an actor and not be able to talk? He contemplated ending his life, but when he put a gun in his mouth and painfully bumped his teeth, he withdrew the weapon and began to laugh at his own dramatic gesture. Douglas recounts how he battled his depression not only with medical care but also by recalling happy memories (he shares reminiscences about Sinatra, Reagan and others), and he explains tips and exercises he learned from his speech therapist. Inspired by the courage of others who endured physical or emotional illness, Douglas began to overcome his fears. With the

help of his supportive family (who refused to coddle him), he even returned to the screen in *Diamonds*, playing a boxer who had a stroke. Entertaining and uplifting, Douglas's story is a lesson in survival, one that will entice readers whether or not they have had similar illnesses. B&w photos. (Jan. 14)

Forecast: *This book is a natural for the 65-plus crowd, especially those who enjoyed Tuesdays with Morrie.*

AFTERMATH: Violence and the Remaking of a Self

SUSAN J. BRISON. *Princeton Univ.*, \$19.95 (192p) ISBN 0-691-01619-4

In this movingly written meditation on the effects violence has had on her life, Brison evokes the experience of trauma, both for those who seek to understand its power and for survivors who might find solace in her words. A philosophy professor at Dartmouth, Brison was taking a walk in the French countryside when she was brutally attacked, raped and left for dead. This slim volume is the result of years of recovery—both the physical healing in the immediate aftermath and the emotional repairs necessary over the subsequent decade. Her training as a philosopher makes this an intellectually stimulating read, even as she successfully avoids the academic tone that could be off-putting to a wider audience. Brison's reflections on memory and forgetting and the manner in which traumatic events divide time and affect personality and relationships will resonate with anyone who has experienced great pain and suffering, as well as with the people who love and care for them. As she writes on the importance of telling the story, "control, repeatedly exercised, leads to greater control over the memories themselves, making them less intrusive and giving them the kind of meaning that enables them to be integrated into the rest of life." This is a brave and inspiring book—and with its references to literature, film, psychology and philosophy, a thought-provoking one, too. (Jan.)

Forecast: *Brison's work goes far beyond typical memoirs of surviving dreadful circumstances. Booksellers should recommend it to anyone reeling from the events of September 11.*

MARIA FITZHERBERT: The Secret Wife of George IV

JAMES MUNSON. *Carroll & Graf*, \$26 (432p) ISBN 0-7867-0904-9

The well-connected Maria Fitzherbert, twice widowed and still childless at 24, had all the qualities the future King George IV desired: she was older than he (by six years) and was widely traveled and experienced. There was just one problem: she was Catholic under a Protestant monarchy that considered Catholics Papist puppets. Drawing on historical fact and gossipy, entertaining firsthand accounts, Munson (*Victoria: Portrait of a*



Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self by Susan J. Brison

Between Women and Generations: Legacies of Dignity by Drucilla Cornell

Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self by Susan J. Brison.; *Between Women and Generations: Legacies of Dignity* by Drucilla Cornell.

Review by: Sara Murphy

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Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self. By Susan J. Brison. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003.

Between Women and Generations: Legacies of Dignity. By Drucilla Cornell. New York: Palgrave, 2003.

Sara Murphy, New York University

Early in her book, Drucilla Cornell recalls the emphasis of second-wave feminism on the ways in which women have historically and socially been silenced, noting that silencing is not simply remedied by the increased presence of women's voices in the public sphere, for sometimes "we either do not know there is something to talk about, or we feel our experience recedes before the lack of language" (13). As professors, neither Cornell nor Susan Brison finds herself in a traditionally silenced position. But both have written books that, by combining philosophical and theoretical analyses with the autobiographical, seek to challenge deeper, more complex forms of silencing, especially those that characterize extreme forms of experience.

Part memoir, part philosophical study of the effects of violence, Brison's *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* tells of the brutal sexual assault that transformed her world and her sense of herself as a woman and a thinker. Cornell's *Between Women and Generations: Legacies of Dignity*, an exploration of family history that gives way to theoretical explorations of female subjectivity, political analyses, and ethnography, is a sort of eulogy, written in response to a request from her mother, who committed suicide in 1998, that she write a book "bear[ing] witness to the dignity of [her mother's] death" (xvii). Different as these two books are, they both recall for us in vivid terms the ways in which the silencing of women's experience, while often borne as suffering of individual women, cannot be located within the individual in any simple way but is integral to social, political, economic, and family structures.

Certainly these issues are not new to women's historians and scholars of women's autobiographical writing. Cornell and Brison, however, draw attention to gender's relation to the representation of traumatic experience. Both are committed to bearing witness, writing not simply autobiographically but testimonially. They would no doubt concur with Cathy Caruth's insight that the traumatic cannot be understood simply as an event but rather as "a structure of experience" in which temporality and

language are dislocated, demanding new ways of speaking, writing, being.¹ “The challenge of finding language that is true to traumatic experience . . . is a daunting one,” Brison writes. “How can we speak about the unspeakable without attempting to render it intelligible and sayable?” (xi). Her own book is testimony to her struggle to find such language and to the success of that struggle. Cornell’s book in turn traces in its very shape, organization, and language a similar endeavor to find language for unspeakable losses. The analytically trained philosopher Brison suggests, quoting Ursula K. LeGuin, that her strategy of resisting some scholarly conventions in her discipline might be “rather in the feminist mode” (xii).² In fact, these two volumes suggest that, for women, representing the extreme or the traumatic requires feminist modes that address the disparities and relations between the philosophical and the theoretical and the autobiographical and the testimonial—and most crucially, modes that enable engagement with cultural representations of gender and sexuality.

Before the trial of Brison’s rapist, the French prosecutor cautioned her that “when the trial is all over, you must forget that this ever happened” (86). Recalling this injunction, Brison remarks, “Perhaps *he* could have forgotten, but given the stories of rape I’d grown up with and the ones I’d heard about and read again and again in adulthood, one might say I remembered the rape before it happened, as a kind of postmemory . . . informing the way I lived in my body and moved about in the world” (86). While she has neither desire nor capacity to forget the assault that nearly took her life, she finds that many of those around her do; her own recovery is affected by the expectations of others that she will go on as before, that nothing has really changed. Her narrative tells of the isolation the experience of violence brings. She reaches out to her community, takes self-defense classes, and joins a survivors’ group but finds that the assault has left her, as she says at one point, “as though I’d somehow outlived myself” (9). As is the case for many survivors of traumatic experience, Brison finds that the assault created a break in her sense of identity as continuous and integral: “The trauma has changed me forever, and if I insist too often that my friends and family acknowledge it, that’s because I am afraid they don’t know who I am” (21). Her book simultaneously enacts and explores the relation of narrative to selfhood as she examines how violence disrupts the stories we tell ourselves of who we are in the

¹ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

² Ursula K. Le Guin, *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, and Places*. New York: Grove, 1989. Cited in Brison, xii.

world. Brison wants to understand how violence, in her words, unmakes the self and how the practice of memory, in her case literally re-membering, can remake it.

If this book is testimony to the structure of violent experience, it also stands as an intellectual autobiography, for Brison's project of reassembling a self unmade by trauma involves a reexamination of the philosophical tradition in which she was trained. She writes as both a woman who has undergone sexual assault and as an analytic philosopher; much of her book can be understood as an attempt to bring these two parts of her life together, and her writing limns the difficulty of doing so. "We are trained," she writes, "to write in an abstract, universal voice and to shun first-person narratives as biased and inappropriate for academic discourse" (8). Yet she finds the methods and assumptions of the analytic tradition, particularly those pertaining to selfhood, language, and what constitutes an appropriate object of philosophical attention, inadequate to an exploration of her own experience and to the impact of violence on the self more broadly. Struggling with a philosophical discourse whose methods and assumptions silence her, she embarks on a journey that is intellectual and personal into recent writings on the traumatic, Holocaust testimony, and the work of feminist theorists and activists.

Toward the end of her book the survivor and the philosopher come together in an astute if painful irony: "Recovery," she writes, "no longer seems to consist of picking up the pieces of a shattered self (or fractured narrative). It is facing the fact that there never was a coherent self (or story) there to begin with" (118). Surviving violence lays bare the artificiality of the coherent stories we tell ourselves about who we are and where we are going. But Brison also suggests that surviving makes an ethical demand. This is what motivates her telling of her own story in such a direct and honest way.

The ethical demand of survivorship shapes Cornell's *Between Women and Generations* as well. Cornell's survivorship is of a different sort; the ethical demand is that specifically articulated by her mother. Like Brison, Cornell is engaged in a quest to speak the unspeakable. Her book is shaped not simply by her mother's death, however, but by the fact that her mother chose to die. Cornell asks what it means to bear witness to another's death, a question taken up by philosophers such as Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, who have been central to her prior work. Here she wants to explore how the shape of that question changes when the other is one's mother, who, in the face of inexorable illness, chose to take her own life. But, as Cornell notes, "this is not a book about the right to die. . . . I leave those . . . to be written by people whose mother did not

choose to exercise that right" (xviii). Instead, Cornell acknowledges that the elder woman made a choice that she felt was her own, perhaps for the only time in her life.

Between Women and Generations springs from this deeply disturbing acknowledgment. A strange and at times confusing book, it performs a work of mourning by questioning what this recognition of another woman's life—and death—choices might entail. Mourning becomes a quest for redemption, as the task of bearing witness to her mother's dignity in death leads Cornell to argue for the importance of feminism as a broad concept of dignity, developed through autobiographical reflections, an engagement with feminist readings of psychoanalysis and Kantian philosophy, and ethnographical-style interviews with members of a housecleaner's collective.

The first chapter of the book is autobiographical; the second takes up psychoanalytic theory, specifically guided by the work of the Lacanian analyst Judith Gurewich. The third chapter moves on to a complex reading of the Kantian sublime, and the fourth and fifth chapters discuss and present interviews with the women of the Unity housekeeping collective. The sixth chapter returns to the autobiographical and movingly tells of Cornell's mother's last days. The shifts between autobiography, theory, and ethnography mark a tension in the text; it can seem as if this is actually two interrelated books inhabiting the same cover. In a sense, *Between Women and Generations* is a coauthored work, shaped by the distinctly different claims of Mrs. Cornell, who wanted her daughter to write a book "that members of her bridge class could read" (xvii), and her daughter, who seeks through her work as a feminist theorist to understand the legacy of the older woman's life and death.

One way to read this book might be to think of it as metonymically organized; each chapter leads to the next, not through any traditional narrative or scholarly form of organization but through a network of associations, hinged on the importance to feminist theory and practice of respecting and valuing the differences between and among women. Cornell seeks not so much to say what has been left unsaid but rather to attend to the ways in which "traces can remain for us as what is missing as we begin to measure silence and pay heed to [its] significance" (72). The engagement with psychoanalysis is therefore central. Cornell's concept of dignity involves both a reworking of female development as understood by classical psychoanalysis, in which the girl achieves womanhood via a rejection of the mother and a turn to the father, and more recent feminist theories that emphasize a close and intricate mother-daughter bond. Cornell theorizes an alternative in which mother and daughter could see the other as a separate and in some sense unknowable human being.

Thinking of the mother-daughter relation as the cornerstone of women's relations across class, race, and geographical boundaries, she seeks to think through how connections between women might be elaborated in terms of this alternative.

Testimony to the dignity of a mother's suicide is made through exploring the ways we might live with, respect, and value others even as we might not fully understand their actions, feelings, and experiences. Cornell shares with Brison a hope that somehow, in finding a language for extreme and traumatic experiences, we might reimagine bonds of community. |

Surviving Poverty in Medieval Paris: Gender, Ideology, and the Daily Lives of the Poor. By Sharon Farmer. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002.

Women in a Medieval Heretical Sect: Agnes and Huguette the Waldensians. By Shulamith Shahar, translated by Yael Lotan. Woodbridge, U.K.: Boydell Press, 2001.

Penelope D. Johnson, New York University

Two medieval French institutional documents are the main sources for these studies that attempt to uncover the lives of nonelite people in the Middle Ages. Sharon Farmer uses the miracle stories collected at St.-Denis outside Paris, in 1282–83, for a canonization inquest into the sanctity of the deceased king of France, Louis IX, while Shulamith Shahar studies two heretical women from Bishop Jacques Fournier's inquisitorial register compiled in the south of France in 1319–20. Both authors seek to understand women's experience, but their analytic strategies differ. Shahar writes compensatory women's history to show the position of women within the poor of Lyons (the persecuted Waldensian heretical sect), a task that would not be necessary, she notes tartly, if women "had been included in the leading narratives" (xiv) about the group. Farmer uses her documents to analyze the grid within which gender functioned in the later Middle Ages; her aim is to avoid "constructing simplistic gender categories" (70). Both studies are well researched and written, but Farmer goes further to tease theoretical implications from her sources although, with her small number of cases, those sources sometimes seem too slim to support her statistical arguments.

Shahar's first chapter is a thumbnail sketch of Waldensian history, a

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Editor:

Jane Davis

Co-editors:

Sarah Coley

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Brian Nellist

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Student Assistants:

Hannah Sheppard

Tom Spertlinger

Contributing editor:

Les Murray

Thanks to:

Brenda Henley

Kate Keogan

Address:

The English Department

University of Liverpool

Liverpool L69 7ZR

Email:

readers@thereader.co.uk

Web:

www.thereader.co.uk

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The Reader Reviews

Life-loving Spirits

Susan J. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*

(Princeton University Press, 2002)

Carolyn Slaughter, *Before the Knife: Memories of an African Childhood*

(Doubleday, 2002)

Andrea Ashworth

To be crazy-human with hope...

May Sarton, 'Night Watch', *Collected Poems*

Crazy-human with hope – that's how I felt when I opened the first letter sent to me by a reader of *Once in a House on Fire*, the story of my childhood in Manchester in the 1970s and '80s. After a dark wrestle with memory and shame, mixed up with the tussle to shape images and find words, here it was: the echo I had, without realizing, been aching to hear. That first, tissuey message assured me that I had managed, after all, to pin down the haunting, blue-black butterflies of my past and bring them into the light. My story – and I – had been heard.

My avalanche of index cards, frenetically scribbled-on envelopes and coffee-stained manuscript pages had, months earlier, been calmed into a handsome, hardbacked book. The book was a wondrously solid thing, but it didn't save me from feeling – still, after all those hours and fears and words – anxiously lost in the face of a past so chaotic. I didn't dare to open the cover and face the pages. Chopping a life into chapters, editing, typesetting and binding – all this loving industry surely helped to jail ghosts in amber. But, with the book in my hands, I still felt secretly helpless. I wondered why I had pushed myself through the mad challenge of trying to say, to show, to share with even one other person what had happened to my family and me. All that was ugly and terrifying and incredible, all that was beautiful and gracious and even funny – I had hoped to give it all away to the world, in exchange for a kind of serenity. But the promise of peace came – naturally, and at

the same time, as it felt to me, magically — only after the book was opened by other people and brought to life by their generous curiosity.

Countless warm, enthusiastic and encouraging letters have graced my letterbox and my life since that first surprise. Today three fresh envelopes arrived, one sent by an Englishman, an artist, who happened upon my book in a mobile library, one from a French teenage girl studying *Once in a House on Fire* in a pleasant boarding school in some leafy nook in Scotland, and one from an Australian doctor who, across the globe, recognizes herself and her secret childhood in the snapshots of my story. My gratitude is, as I open these letters, as intense as ever. Each reader fortifies my sense of being free of, without running away from, the horrors of the past. Each reader makes me freshly glad that I wrote my memoir. Each one sparks a strange and lovely sense of aliveness.

Telling your story and being assured that the story has — that you have — been heard is a privilege not only consoling and inspiring, but sometimes life-saving. In *Survival in Auschwitz*, his memoir of life and death in the concentration camp, Primo Levi contemplates the nightmares of survivors who are, after their physical release, at risk of being snuffed out in spirit (and body) because they are terrified there is no one to listen to them. No one to recognize their suffering. No one to reflect some understanding of what has happened and thus help the sufferer to understand and come to terms with it. 'Why', Levi's keen sensitivity to this helplessness and prolonged suffering shines through his words, 'is the pain of every day translated so constantly into our dreams, in the ever-repeated scene of the unlistened-to story?' Living to tell the tale is only one aspect of surviving trauma: the traumatized person must, as Levi knew and as a compelling new book on the subject explores, also 'tell to live'.

In *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*, Susan J. Brison talks about finding a voice to tell a story — or a flux of growing, ever-changing stories — that might save one's soul, one's sanity, even one's life, in the wake of trauma. *Aftermath* is an unusual and remarkable book, at once intimate and analytical, disturbing and consoling. It is written in a rare voice that harmonizes the professional reflections (Brison is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Dartmouth College and a Visiting Professor at Princeton University) and personal experiences of a woman (warm and charming and brave) who has survived a horrific sexual and torturous attack — which almost killed her. Brison moves fluidly from her

own sensitively-told story to explore universal issues about suffering and surviving. And coming to thrive. Her book is, in an understated and breathtaking way, immensely inspiring. Recognizing the 'deeply social nature of one's sense of self', Brison focuses on how one can heal and remake a damaged self by communicating with other people, re-establishing trust and contact with the world — and with oneself. 'Fortunately', she points out, 'just as one can be reduced to an object through torture, one can become a human subject again through telling one's narrative to caring others who are able to listen.'

Brison's eloquence and elegantly-structured thoughts are poignant testament to her own painful but successful struggle to survive. 'For about a year after the assault,' she tells us, 'I rarely, if ever, spoke in smoothly flowing sentences.' Her experience was, in every sense, unspeakable. It left her feeling 'spectral' — 'not quite sure whether I had died and the world went on without me, or whether I was alive but in a totally alien world.' She felt particularly disconcerted and demoralized by the need of others, including friends and family, to pretend that nothing had happened. While the urge to forget and move on may be understandable and, under certain circumstances, healthy, Brison found that she was able to begin to 'master the trauma' only when she faced it head-on and talked about it, then wrote it down. Capturing events in a narrative — albeit a narrative that, Brison has found, shifts and changes shape over time — allowed her to feel more in control of what had happened, less prone to panic, less vulnerable to debilitating flashbacks. Looking back is what allowed her to begin to move on. Even writing in a journal, Brison believes, 'can help to resubjectify a self objectified by trauma'.

It can also enable the survivor to gain greater empathy with herself. It was only when I managed to write a narrative of my assault, several months after the attack, and then read it, that I realized, 'My God, what a horrible thing to happen to someone!'

To look, as if into a mirror, at one's own story and experience the painful but salutary shock of acknowledgment that Brison describes — this is something intimately familiar to me. Writing about darkness involves a plunge that can be terrifying but also terribly consoling. Yes — you can see more clearly when you have framed things on a page — *that did happen to me, and it helps to*

explain why I feel so strange and afraid sometimes. No – the setting down in words helps to reassure you – that is not happening to me anymore, and I have come, or am coming, through.

Story's saving grace is especially apparent when there is a charged beauty in the telling. One of art's most beloved aspects is its promise to redeem experience by transforming something ugly, messy, bad into a thing beautiful, shapely and good. The traces of this alchemy glitter on every page of Carolyn Slaughter's stunning memoir, *Before the Knife: Memories of an African Childhood*. Her book is a starkly lucid portrait of a child's struggle to survive unspeakable suffering and to make sense of it, to come through, body whole, and find a way to save her soul. It also offers an intimate, enthralling painting of the troubled, seductive and 'singularly beautiful place' at the heart of the Kalahari desert where Slaughter grew up. 'I fixed my eyes on the landscape' – she reveals how she helped to save her self through a kind of devotion – 'and loved it with a passion that came close to religious ecstasy.'

In the midst of the wild wonderland of the Kalahari, a heart of darkness throbbled in Slaughter's quietly, intensely desperate British family home. With an aggressively authoritarian father and a mother dedicated to smooth appearances but constantly dissolving into depression behind the mosquito netting, the little girl lived in an atmosphere of secret violence and unspoken confusion. When she was six years old, her father raped her for the first time. There was bloody evidence – everybody saw it; she was even taken to the doctor and stitched up – but the atrocity was shrouded in silence. Shrouded, the child's nightmare went on for years and years. 'What happened to me affected all of us – my mother, my father, my sisters and me: we all fell apart under the horror of it, and we all tried to pretend that there was no horror.'

Looking back, Slaughter faces the horror and lays it out in prose that is subtle and searing: grounded in stark truth and buoyed by wit and lyricism, the narrative voice is beautifully modulated for the light and dark of her story. We witness the twelve-year-old girl's unadorned hatred of her father – 'I kept having flashes of sticking a knife into him, or of shooting him' – and flinch with her as she contemplates her ferocious anger and violent outbursts against herself, her little sister, her schoolfriends. 'I knew that I was in serious trouble, and that if someone or something didn't save me, I might kill someone.' Slaughter's honesty in anatomizing her raw feelings of rage is matched by her exquisite delicacy in sharing moment upon revealing moment, excruciating or tender – as in this snapshot of the young girl's worship of and attempt to be close to

her fatally neglectful mother:

When she was adorning herself in the mirror she was most perfectly herself. I used to stand behind her watching her flirt with her own face. She set me little tasks like dunking the powder puff in the Helena Rubenstein box, and she let me dab silky powder on to her white shoulders.

How did this girl survive the violence and desperation of her childhood? How was she able to escape the sinister malaise of her family to shape a viable and (ultimately) happy, peaceful and successful self? The saving of Carolyn's body and soul are impressionistically evoked through vivid vignettes; tragic, funny, chilling, lovely. We see the girl growing, secrets to her soul captured in scenes of confrontation and communion, with her self, other people and the magnificent landscape, opened up to us through glorious descriptions that pierce the eye and the spirit: 'How could I live among people who didn't know where I'd come from? Who wouldn't have seen the things that I knew and loved?' the teenager worries on the brink of her departure to England:

How could I bring them the magic of the river in Maun, or of the African women walking down to the mealie fields with their babies strapped to their backs? How could I tell them how guinea fowl stepped lightly through splashes of moonlight, or describe how the scorched plains vibrated and hummed when the sun was high? What could they know of the slibery nights when the hyenas bayed at the moon and the lion gave out its solitary cry; how could they understand the underwater silence of the crocs sidling among the water-lily stems? How could I tell them any of it?

The author's talent for sharing experience through words is shimmeringly clear from the first to the last line of this mesmerizing book. *Before the Knife* is, like *Aftermath*, a triumph of beauty and understanding in the face of unspeakable horror. The two books speak in distinctly different voices, but the brave, vibrant and stubbornly life-loving spirit of each promises to touch and transform any reader.

Violence and Remaking

Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self

by Susan J. Brison. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002). 192 pp.

REVIEW BY JUDY MACDONALD

The truth is, I'm not lucky or unlucky. I'm just alive.

One moment, Susan J. Brison was a visiting American philosophy professor going for a walk on a French country road in the middle of the day. The next, she was grabbed from behind, dragged down into thick brush, attacked and almost strangled to death.

In the upside-down world of rape and justice, she *was* lucky in some ways. Her case was clear-cut. There would be no questions about her complicity, about whether she had somehow provoked it, about whether it had happened at all. Her assailant was a stranger, with none of the emotional and social bonds that could have kept her silent had the attacker been her husband, father, boyfriend or acquaintance, as is the case for most survivors. And the beating she endured meant there would be no doubt about whether this rape was violent or not — unlike the attitude many women encounter when they speak about a sexual assault. Even so, crawling out of the underbrush after she had regained con-

sciousness, Brison had considered telling people she had been hit by a car rather than deal with the aftermath of letting them know she had been randomly raped and nearly murdered.

Everyone needs to try and make sense, in however inadequate a way, of such senseless violence... It can be less painful to believe that you did something blameworthy than it is to think that you live in a world where you can be attacked at any time, in any place, simply because you are a woman.

Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self is a collection of six essays that Brison wrote over the ten years after she was attacked. She explores trauma, memory, a survivor's crisis of identity and the role of her discipline, philosophy, in her recovery. This last fails her.

In philosophy, she finds a denial of the physical body, a rejection of personal narrative and an overwhelming ignorance of what an event like the one she endured does to the no-

tion of self. This book is, in part, Brison's attempt to address those failures. As a result, the language is sometimes academic. The dense writing can be hard to get through ("trauma can obliterate one's former emotional repertoire, leaving only a kind of counterfactual propositional knowledge of emotions"). For the most part, though, this is a book that anyone with an active interest in justice, feminism and the malleable nature of identity could appreciate.

For months after my assault, I had to stop myself before saying (what seemed accurate at the time), "I was murdered in France last summer." ... I felt as though I'd somehow outlived myself.

Brison compares rape to the experiences of Holocaust survivors, soldiers and torture victims. These parallels don't always work, but the effort is worth making, tying together events that have robbed people of their autonomy, their history, their place in the world, their (and their abusers') humanity. But she acknowledges significant differences, too.

Rape has, all too often and for all too long, been considered a private, personal matter, and thus not worthy of public, political concern. War, on the other hand, has been viewed as a paradigmatic public, political event... The fact that rape occurs all the time, in places all over the world, may render it less noticeable as a collective trauma, but does not make it an exclusively "individual" trauma... Unlike survivors of wars or earthquakes, who inhabit a common shattered world, rape victims face the cataclysmic destruction of their world alone, surrounded by people who find it hard to understand what's so

distressing.

After the assault, friends and family would not talk about what had happened. Instead, Brison was encouraged *not* to talk, but rather to forget. She mentions relatives who "were quick to give God all the credit for my survival but none of the blame for what I had to endure" — one of the few times God is mentioned in the book. What also distressed the author was how strangely familiar the attack had been.

She writes, "I remembered the rape even before it happened, as a kind of postmemory."

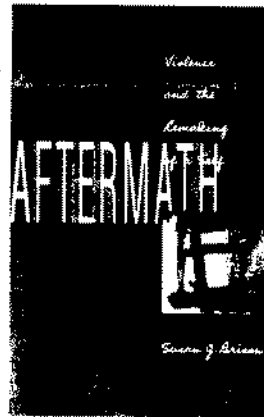
This is interesting territory, broadening the discussion from what are often seen as isolated incidents to the larger culture of rape that is all around. Girls are raised with rape as an ever-present possibility. The threat is infused in entertainment, through books, newspapers, television and movies.

Yet people rarely discuss it beyond whispers, clipped gossip and warnings to women and girls about limiting personal freedom in order to be safe. Survivors are rarely heard from. Brison finds that some feminists are ambivalent about such first-person accounts; they believe these stories only add to the crippling fear that stops women from fully engaging in the world. Brison acknowledges that this is a real concern, but concludes that the telling, again and again, is a crucial part of a survivor's recovery. As well, efforts like hers force society to see rape as a social crisis, rather than simply an individual's tragedy. She sees that such testimonials counter some dangerous myths.

How many of us have swallowed the potentially lethal lie that if you don't do anything wrong, if you're just careful enough, you'll be safe? ... The most well-meaning individuals, caught up in the myth of their own immunity, can inadvertently add to the victim's suffering by suggesting that the attack was avoidable or somehow her fault.

In *Aftermath*, Brison discusses her own recovery at length. She deals

with the depression she fell into, the drugs she took for it, the discovery that she was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. She writes about intrusive, nightmarish flashbacks. Self-defence classes helped her, but she argues that they don't replace better laws and lighting. What this book doesn't touch on is the role of faith through her journey. She is left with the simple miracle of being alive.



with the simple miracle of being alive.

Perhaps because it is impossible for us to imagine our own deaths, our existence can feel necessary, bound to continue. But maybe my lawyer was right: I should remember that I'm not supposed to be alive. What if I take that as my starting point? None of us is supposed to be alive. We're all here by chance and only for a little while. The wonder is that we've managed, once again, to winter through and our hearts, in spite of everything, survive.

Judy MacDonald is the author of *Jane*, a novel, and *Grey*, a collection of stories. She has worked as an editor with *This Magazine*, *Compass: A Jesuit Journal* and the *Canadian Forum*. She lives in Toronto.



Mind over Matter

Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self by Susan J. Brison

Review by: Mimi Wesson

The Women's Review of Books, Vol. 19, No. 7 (Apr., 2002), pp. 7-8

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father's family: "We were always being observed to see if we would do something Jewish like crucify someone in the backyard." Of high school: "a time of pervasive, massive boredom, boredom as thick as peanut butter, as bland as vegetable shortening... My daydreams, the stories I told myself, were like knitting I carried with me and took up at any odd moment." Of the decision to agree with her second husband's desire for an open marriage: "I thought, when you get a second cat, you don't stop loving the first. Why shouldn't it be that way with people?"

Neither of these writers falls into the trap of writing a "recovery narrative." Dworkin is unreconstructed in every way and proud of it; Piercy describes herself as having changed in a general way, become more capable of putting her own writing, and herself, first. "Feminism had given me a spine," she writes of the period when her second marriage was exploding, and "I was no longer the earth mother... everyone's mama." But, to steal Robin Morgan's phrase, she "disowns none of her transformations." She fully conveys the heady excitement of New York in 1968—"like a medieval fair... intense friendships, intense sex, intense politics, intense pleasures, intense terrors." Self-righteousness and score-settling are almost entirely absent: "I hated the factionalism, but I did not hate the people." And when she turns to feminism, she does not tell tales out of school; she seems concerned to keep the peace and preserve the possibility of coalition, rather than to take personal credit. There are many things (specific and general) about the early feminist movement I still want to know, and she could have been more informative or analytical. But I do prefer this approach to the wrangling about exactly who invented which slogan exactly when that has begun to surface elsewhere.

Similarly, Piercy describes the period when she and her second husband chose to "live differently" and yet stay together as a series of politically rational, emotionally sustainable commitments, rather than some crazy youthful phase. "We believed in honesty... We believed we were making a new world in every way, on every level. Nothing could be taken for granted." She ends this section with "To Have Without Holding," the familiar poem about "love with the hands wide open," which conveys better than prose can that difficult dream of building something together, choosing to love differently but (as Rich put it) with all one's intelligence, not with the cunning of the dependent slave who needs the master but with some idea about knowledge, self-knowledge and knowledge of the other. What would a world that truly recognized the idea that most people love and want more than one person, that trying to own other human beings is not the most ethical move imaginable, be like? People trusting each other that much. Well, it was a fine dream in its way, though the world has moved on.

Finally, it is my duty as a reviewer to say that the title of the memoir is not coy or sly; Piercy does in fact give a very great deal of space to the animals that have shared her life and her various beds from girlhood ("I was an alley child, and my cats were alley cats") to her present menagerie—five at the beginning of the book, four by the end. Cats often understood and comforted and were there for her when humans

weren't, and she gives each one full and individual credit. As a woman writing memoir by means of cat life she is far from unique; in fact I was intrigued to learn from the flyleaf that there is even a Library of Congress category called "women cat owners—united states—biography." (This is the number three subject heading given to Piercy's book; number four is "cats—anecdotes." I'm afraid this is not wholly unfair.)

Writing well and seriously about cats is almost as hard as writing well about sex: there's such a tradition of trite and sentimental associations to overcome; so many existing examples are cutesy, or smug, or self-righteously moralizing, or all three at once. Piercy never falls into the worst excesses of Sartre with her "fur person" and her "dear pussies." Still, whether readers who prefer dogs, or tropical fish, will be fully fascinated by the exploits and idiosyncrasies of the various Burmese, Siamese, korats and regular old lovable strays, is a question I am not well-positioned to answer.

I'll admit there are things about Piercy's life and opinions I wanted to know more than I want to know which cat sits where and why. But somehow building the narrative around the cats has helped her avoid any of the more annoying reductive master narratives that are certainly available to frame her life—from "promiscuity" to true love, from politics to domesticity, up from poverty to the American Dream. Cat stories give the book a lumpier and a different shape, less like a story of willful progress and conversion, more like actual messy life. Perhaps it makes ethical sense to treat one's cats like people, provided one does not treat the people in one's life like pets. Or perhaps cat ownership provides a useful model of independent relatedness—you're necessary to them, but they don't let you get too full of yourself about it. "The love of a cat is unconditional, but it is always subject to negotiation."

What then, to return to my starting place, can we learn about political survival from this finally tranquil portrait of a life in balance? That resistance, like sex, is a part of life, not apart, or instead of. That living in a constant state of emergency is not good for one's body or one's writing. That the ability to live alone is essential, but loneliness is not required, not morally superior. That it's not shameful or selfish to be personally happy, to eat well, enjoy sex, enjoy life. "I don't admire despair," Piercy has written elsewhere. Is this our old adversary, the retreat into the individual solution? I don't think so. Unlike Dworkin, Piercy presents her life, not as the solution to a problem ("I did it, so can you") but simply as a life. She isn't asking us to do anything, one way or the other. She's asking us to remember.

Dworkin asks far more, asks more than most people can give. Elements of a possible feminist intellectual creed in a dangerous time: I will speak truth to power, where I can... and when I have figured out what the truth is. I will not pretend things are simpler than I know they are. I will not pretend to any impressionable person that I understand better than I actually do or am any better informed than I am. It must be possible: some non-terrorized form of mindfulness and some way of breaking through fear and inertia that does not require the constant white heat of irrational rage. But to see with both the red light of anger and the white light of truth you might have to look at both simultaneously—and squint.

Mind over matter

by Mimi Wesson

Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self

by Susan J. Brison. Princeton, NJ: Princeton

University Press, 2002, 156 pp.,

\$19.95 hardcover.



Susan Brison, trained as a philosopher and employed as an academic, reminds us that in her profession many of the comforting premises that sustain us through everyday life are not taken for granted. Many philosophers doubt the proposition that each person has or is a continuous self, a core of identity that is unchanged from birth to death. The subjective experience of this self is, they argue, merely a very powerful illusion. Or consider the philosopher's insistence on the non-navigable gap between experience and memory. It's less startling to the rest of us than the denial of personal identity because we have all experienced mistakes and forgetting, but once we understand that some philosophers deny even the possibility of a reliable memory, maintaining that even the memories in which we have the greatest confidence are inaccurate, we are troubled. We wonder how one endures a daily life inflected by such pessimism. Yet many philosophers seem to enjoy what Brison






Susan J. Brison

calls an "ability to feel at home in the world," a talent for proceeding through life without the nourishment of the familiar illusions (if they are illusions)

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If it is true that dogs have no soul, I would not want a place in heaven. - Moira Rayner

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harbored by the rest of us: identity, memory, a world external to human minds that exists independent of our various experiences of it.

But suppose that a philosopher, having achieved this comfortable coexistence with uncertainty, should find her very capacity to live in the world damaged by events from which her accomplished mind cannot protect her? And suppose that this question is posed not as a thought experiment, but by events terrifyingly, inescapably, real?

Brison's is a story in layers: it carries its own intrinsic and suspenseful narrative interest, but it also discloses how Brison's relationship to her life's work was profoundly and irrevocably changed by a crime. The story begins with her account of a violent sexual assault she suffered while walking along a sunny French country road. To Brison the attack was as unexpected as an earthquake, but its features made clear that the perpetrator had deliberated on it, and calculated its time and place with care. The brutality of the sexual crime was followed by an attempt to kill her.

This event, this morning, will always be for Brison the demarcation between before and after. Her account of it draws us in, the chronicle both startling and sickeningly familiar.

I sang to myself as I set out, stopping to pet a goat and pick a few wild strawberries along the way. About an hour and a half later, I was lying face down in a muddy creek bed at the bottom of a dark ravine, struggling to stay alive.... I tried to appeal to [my assailant's] humanity, and, when that failed, to his self-interest. He called me a whore and told me to shut up.

(p. 2)

But this is only the beginning of her work, for Brison intends to take us on a journey through a well-trained and exquisitely nuanced mind, once secure in its ability to make sense of a senseless world, now confronted with an enormous challenge to these skills. The mind is, of course, her own, and her method consists of a sort of counterpoint between lucid philosophical exposition and the insistent descant of the story of her victimhood, recovery and transformation.

Brison's descriptions of the horrors of the first weeks after the assault are absorbing and perceptive. She reflects, for example, on the difficulty others have understanding why so many victims of assault are willing to blame themselves—insist on it, sometimes. These shocked observers, she writes, "don't know that it can be less painful to believe that you did something blameworthy than it is to think that you live in a world where you can be attacked at any time, in any place, simply because you are a woman." But it is what follows that forms the most original part of her book. She notices that the puzzles that had once preoccupied her have come to seem irrelevant, even nonsensical; the concerns of her post-assault life seem at times to turn the conventional enterprise of philosophy onto its head. Descartes sought to provoke an epistemological crisis in his readers by asking them to consider the question "What if I'm dreaming?" Brison's nightmarish experience left her with a wish to escape, rather than produce, a perfect perception, and she finds herself harboring the ironic but anguished query, "What if I'm awake?"

Unlike Descartes, who had to "demolish everything and start right again from the foundations" in order to find knowledge, Brison realizes that "I had my world demolished for me." She doesn't say so, but she must have reflected on the luxury enjoyed by those who might wish for such a demolition, merely to satisfy their curiosity about the relationship between the world and their minds.

Brison is no less engaging when she examines the literature of trauma, victimization and recovery. Her interest in feminist philosophy had drawn her to those subjects even before the attack, despite their distance from the classical concerns of her discipline; they became even more central to her thinking afterward. She is most provocative on the relationship between truth-telling and the other purposes of speaking or giving an account. She acknowledges that a crucial task for a survivor of violence is "living to tell"—achieving some degree of mastery over the recall and recounting of the traumatic story.

Yet as she recalls the pressure to get her story "straight" for purposes of testifying at trial, she concludes that the law-driven imperative to eliminate ambiguities and inconsistencies may hinder the exercise of a more therapeutic form of narration—what she calls "telling to live," and describes as "letting go, playing with the past in order not to be held back as one springs away from it." Narrative, Brison has come to believe, "facilitates the ability to go on by opening up possibilities for the future through retelling the stories of the past. It does this not by reestablishing the illusions of coherence of the past, control over the present, and predictability of the future, but by making it possible to carry on without these illusions."

And so Brison's journey through shock and sorrow and recovery brings her back, eventually, to some semblance of the intellectual and psychological confidence she had earlier enjoyed, despite her understanding that the truth of the universe is inaccessible to discovery, and that the world will make unknowable demands on those who would survive in it. But she has been changed, and she knows it. She has learned, through the lengthy process of healing endured by her body and mind together, that the "ability to feel at home in the world is as much a physical as an epistemological accomplishment." She no longer judges a proposition or a life exclusively by shining the cold hard light of rationality onto it; instead she navigates by the light of "the illusory sense of the permanence of hope." It may be irrational, she concedes, but she wants to believe that "just as there is such a thing as irreparable damage, there might be such a thing as irreversible repair." She does not allude to it, but her account reminded me of the hope that lingered in Pandora's box after all of the catastrophes had dispersed.

One might construct a syllogism, that favored teaching tool of the philosopher, as follows: Hope is wishful thinking. Wishful thinking is wishing for that which is not, and confusing it with that which is. Confusion about what is and what is not makes for bad philosophy. Therefore, hope makes for bad philosophy.

There is something wrong (or at least beside the point) about this syllogism, although the flaw may not be easy to locate. Brison, in this lovely and inspiring volume, shows us what it might be.

Veteran's day

by Suzanne Ruta

For Rouenna: A Novel by Sigrid Nunez.

New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001,

230 pp., \$22.00 hardcover.



The greatest poetry is that which is written for those who can't write poetry," Simone Weil once said. Sigrid Nunez' latest novel, *For Rouenna*, is a case in point. Here we have a gifted author finding her subject, her mission and her full voice, all in the same place.

Nunez' three previous novels were about writers. Her first, *A Feather on the Breath of God*, was about her own beginnings. Its three brief, beautifully honed sections read as if she had much more to say about her messy childhood but, unable to say it with crystalline limpidity, simply left it out. The result is a minimalist, memoirish novel, full of subtle hints and echoes of life in a Brooklyn housing project with a Panamanian-Chinese father who worked as a dishwasher and a German war bride mother in love with finer things—music, literature, fashion. Three daughters of this unlikely couple grow up feeling they don't belong to either parent's world. Mother would prefer the blond, blue-eyed daughters of a German fairy tale. Father only breaks his habitual silence in the presence of other Chinese.

Nunez' tepid second novel, *Naked Sleeper*, introduced an ethnically generic woman writer trapped in a marriage to a good man, her sleepwalking existence broken by odd spasms of self-destructive behavior, until a sudden act of God or fit of authorial despair forces her to grow up overnight. *Naked Sleeper* was followed by *Mitz: The Marmoset of Bloomsbury*, a quirky mammalian interspecies love story set against the sad background of a childless marriage—that of Leonard and Virginia Woolf. *Mitz* feels as if it might be another fanatically discreet memoir, the author's own grief at missed opportunities projected onto the brilliant screen of Bloomsbury. Every sentence rings with crisp authority, but the format is maddeningly small.

With *For Rouenna*, Nunez makes a great leap forward. The writer and her anguish are still part of the formula, but only a small purposive part, once the writer is seized—almost literally—by her subject, a fat, demanding, loud-mouthed, middle-aged woman who wants someone to tell her story while there's still time.

For Rouenna, one of the best American novels I've read in a long time, is about Vietnam and how the war looked to a 22-year-old nurse in 1969-1970, the worst year of a war fought on our side by kids just out of high school. "Think of your high school yearbook, that's closer to the age most troopers really were. Some of them weren't even shaving yet. Then you have to see them the way I saw them, lying in all that pain, all that blood, and they look even younger. I swear, some of the dead ones looked about ten."

An elegy, an editorial, a crypto-memoir, this novel tackles the other great American subject—not race, but class relations. Nunez measures the gap between those who served in Vietnam and those who did not. She counts the cost of upward mobility for winners and losers in the great lottery of American life.

Rouenna Zycinski, with her "ordinary fiftyish face" looks like a loser—a woman so obese people gawk at her and call her names. She's a former nurse, former midtown Manhattan steak house waitress, now manager of a 34th Street women's plus-size clothing store. She lives alone in Brooklyn with two parakeets and spends weekends with her mother in New Jersey. She cooks huge meals and gives a portion to the homeless. Her life, as Nunez describes it, eerily anticipates *The New York Times*' capsule obits of ordinary working folk who died in the September 11th attacks.

Rouenna thinks Virginia Woolf was a role in a Liz Taylor movie. She doesn't read or vote or follow politics. She mistrusts the whole idea of psychotherapy. She hates wimps. She buys a book because she recognizes the author's name: they lived in the same Staten Island housing project, forty years back. It takes her "weeks" to finish it. Then she writes the author a letter.

The author is in fact the narrator of *For Rouenna*, a writer who has reached the age "in a woman's life when to most eyes she is invisible." She lives alone in the East Village with a cat and a rocking-chair. She has just ended a seven-year relationship with a man known only as G. She's writing her will. Self-protective, introspective, solipsistic, unnamed, her past a blank, she seems to have won a draft exemption from life itself. She's also a snob, worried her stylish skinny artistic friends may catch her hanging out with Rouenna. When Rouenna asks her to collaborate on a memoir of her year in Vietnam, she dismisses the idea out of hand: "I would never write a book with or for someone else."

But the two women continue to meet once a month, oddly drawn to one another. Then Rouenna commits suicide, and the narrator is galvanized by grief and memory to write about her after all. Writing liberates her from her demons. But nothing liberates Rouenna; for her it's too late. In tragedy, since ancient times, the hero and the messenger have different roles.

The Vietnam bibliography is vast. Vietnam nurses have web sites and chat groups. And Nunez has done her homework. What sets her book apart is the way she infuses the mass of Vietnam legends and statistics with private memories of 1950s urban poverty on Staten Island, the forgotten borough, home of "the largest trash heap in the world, *visible from outer space!*" She never loses sight of the whole arc of Rouenna's life, from her Cinderella childhood ("I did all the housework and I was unloved") to the brief adventure of war and tragic aftermath.

In Parts One and Three of this artful triptych of a novel, the narrator is a knowing, officious, first-person presence. Part Two, with its carefully calibrated flashbacks (a technique Virginia Woolf called "tunneling"), feels composed, like music,