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ESTELLE TARICA

## Jewish Mysticism and the Ethics of Decolonization in André Schwarz-Bart

The three novels published by French author André Schwarz-Bart are primordially concerned with human suffering on a grand scale. His first novel was an immensely popular prize-winning Holocaust novel, *Le dernier des justes* (1959), published to great acclaim and some controversy. His second novel, *Un plat de porc aux bananes vertes* (1967), was co-authored with his wife, Guadeloupe novelist Simone Schwarz-Bart; set in 1952, it is about an elderly Martinican woman living out her final days in a Paris hospice. His third novel, *La Mulâtresse Solitude* (1972), is a historical novel set in eighteenth century Guadeloupe and based on the life of a legendary rebel slave named Solitude.<sup>1</sup> These works focus on traumatic Jewish and African diaspora experiences—the Holocaust, West Indian slavery, postcolonial immigration to France—and appear to have been directly influenced by developments in the author's life: the fate of his family in the Holocaust,<sup>2</sup> his alliances with West Indians in postwar Paris, his marriage to Simone and move to Guadeloupe with her, and his engagement with decolonization and national liberation movements in North Africa and the Caribbean.

Beyond the biographical connections, however, these works are linked by Schwarz-Bart's conviction that Jewish and black collective identities have been similarly shaped by a history of slavery and stigma; what they have in common is the burden of a traumatic past.

1. André Schwarz-Bart, *Le dernier des justes*. (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1959); André Schwarz-Bart and Simone Schwarz-Bart, *Un plat de porc aux bananes vertes* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967); André Schwarz-Bart, *La Mulâtresse Solitude* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972).

2. Schwarz-Bart survived the Holocaust in hiding. He managed to save three of his siblings from deportation; the rest of his family perished.

YFS 118/119, *Noeuds de mémoire*, ed. Rothberg, Sanyal, and Silverman, © 2010 by Yale University.

Schwarz-Bart's view of this shared relationship to the past produces a particular ethical and affective vision, a significant aspect of his work that has yet to be fully explored. That vision draws on a combination of political and theological sources and often takes a mystical form in his novels, in which we find the problem of the existence of suffering in the world to be an important source of conflict. As Michael Rothberg and Bella Brodzki have each pointed out, Schwarz-Bart's view of the past is mythical and spectral, a turn away from historicism.<sup>3</sup> These elements of Schwarz-Bart's work have sometimes been treated by critics with a degree of skepticism because they suggest a redemptive or even escapist relationship to the violence of limit events from the past, especially the Holocaust. Yet these aspects of Schwarz-Bart's work need to be re-evaluated in light of his own quite sophisticated, learned, and politically-committed approach to the traumas of Jewish and black history. In fact Schwarz-Bart's turn to mysticism is not an escapist turn away from history, but rather the result of his confrontation with the ruptural effects that the Holocaust and African slavery occasioned for Jewish and West Indian historical consciousness. The political force of Schwarz-Bart's ethos, meanwhile, lies precisely in its reparative and metaphysical character, for it is this aspect of his thought that guided his relationship to decolonization in the 1960s and drew him into a complex dialogue with anticolonial thought, which involved an implicit rejection of ethno-nationalism but respect for other forms of ethno-particularism.

The mystical current that circulates through the works is perhaps the most salient feature linking together his three novels and their Jewish, African, and Caribbean themes. It produces a particular ethos of sympathetic awareness, what I will call Schwarz-Bart's *reparative intent*, which underlies the human relations the novels depict and lends them an other-worldly dimension. In each of his works we find a recurring situation: the characters display a capacity for an inter-subjective encounter that allows them a metaphysical transport away from indignity. Schwarz-Bart's vision of this encounter was influenced by Emmanuel Levinas and Martin Buber, and his work as a whole can thus be said to participate in the "retrieval of humanism" associated

3. Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 138–53; Bella Brodzki, "Nomadism and the Textualization of Memory in André Schwarz-Bart's *La Mulâtresse Solitude*," *Yale French Studies* 83/2 (1993): 224.

with the postwar efforts of these Jewish philosophers.<sup>4</sup> To understand the significance of Schwarz-Bart's linkage of the Holocaust to African and Caribbean history, we must therefore look to the phenomenologies of racism and anti-Semitism that he explores, and to the reparative, consoling nature of his response.

In essays and interviews, Schwarz-Bart established that the affinity between Jews and the people colonized and enslaved by France was central to the conception of his novels. He once said of his overall project that he aimed to write a "reversible book," one that would operate like a reversible garment, as Francine Kaufman describes it, which "can be read on both sides at the same time: a black side and a Jewish side."<sup>5</sup> Yet when the three novels are assessed individually their shared origin and "reversible" vision can be difficult to perceive, a limitation that Schwarz-Bart himself was apparently conscious of (Kaufman, 34). Indeed, one of the difficulties of interpreting the significance of Schwarz-Bart's project of bringing Jewish and Antillean histories together is that the link between them is so fleeting and allusive, in each novel quite marginal to the story at hand. The awareness of a common legacy hardly appears in the individual novels, if at all. Here it is important to remember that Schwarz-Bart envisaged these three works as part of a series of nine volumes that he never completed. Presumably the full significance of the relationship between the two collective histories would have been revealed across the projected cycle of novels. As the work stands now, however, the link between the Shoah and the black diaspora can only be tentatively sought in the fragments of this vast unfinished history, as some critics have already done.

For instance, Michael Rothberg has shown that what links black and Jewish histories together in Schwarz-Bart's work is the deliberate use of anachronism, establishing a relationship to the past as spectral that can be found in Schwarz-Bart's Holocaust novel *Le dernier des justes* as well in his Caribbean novel *La Mulâtresse Solitude*; in both works, "a strong drive toward historical continuity coexists with

4. Matthew Calarco, "The Retrieval of Humanism in Buber and Levinas," in *Levinas and Buber: Dialogue and Difference*, ed. Peter Atterton, Matthew Calarco and Maurice Friedman (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2004), 250–61.

5. Francine Kaufman, "André Schwarz-Bart, entre mémoire juive et mémoire noire: une oeuvre réversible," in *Dossier: Hommage à André Schwarz-Bart*, ed. Diana Rammassamy and Kathleen Gyssel, *La tribune des Antilles* 53 (October 2008): 34. Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

ghostly discontinuity" (*Multidirectional Memory*, 142). This awareness of history as ghostly appeared first in the Holocaust novel but in fact, Rothberg argues, it was inspired by Schwarz-Bart's conversations with his West Indian friends about black slavery, making the Holocaust text the product of cultural and intellectual cross-pollination and producing a kind of mutual haunting of Jewish and West Indian histories across all of the author's works. Meanwhile, Ronnie Scharfman, drawing primarily from *Un plat de porc*, has argued for an allegorical relationship between the black diaspora experience in France and the Holocaust. She argues that because Schwarz-Bart could not confront the concentrationary universe head on—he recounts that various reasons prevented him from doing so, including sheer terror<sup>6</sup>—he turned instead to the old-age home and to the legacy of the black experience of slavery and exile embodied in the novel's main character; these can be seen as stand-ins for the Holocaust and other inexpressible aspects of the Jewish experience, making the novel "a metaphor for Jewish suffering during the Shoah."<sup>7</sup>

What is clear is that Schwarz-Bart was interested in what a relationship to black history could illuminate about Jewish history, and vice-versa, perhaps more so than in using one as a vehicle to represent the other. Indeed, to read *Un plat de porc* as an extended allegory of the Holocaust runs the risk of diminishing the overall importance Schwarz-Bart lent to the themes of black slavery and racism, because it suggests that an absent and unsayable referent—the Holocaust—determines the greater significance of the novel. It is instead the "contiguity" between the two, as he put it,<sup>8</sup> their mutual encounter, that is most important. Such encounters, many of which took place in 1950s Paris, appear as key moments in the author's various autobiographical accounts of how he came to work on the Caribbean and become involved in Caribbean lives.

The symbolism of the biblical Exodus structures Schwarz-Bart's account of one such formative encounter, an epiphany inspired by the word "slavery." In his lengthy 1967 essay in *Le Figaro littéraire*, he

6. André Schwarz-Bart, "André Schwarz-Bart s'explique sur huit ans de silence: Pour quoi j'ai écrit *La Mulâtresse Solitude*," *Le Figaro littéraire*, 26 January 1967, 8.

7. Ronnie Scharfman, "Exiled from the Shoah: André and Simone Schwarz-Bart's *Un plat de porc aux bananes vertes*," in *Auschwitz and After: Race, Culture and "the Jewish Question" in France*, ed. Lawrence Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1995), 262.

8. Diana Rammassamy and Kathleen Gyssels, "André Schwarz-Bart: Oeuvres," in *Dossier: Hommage à André Schwarz-Bart*, 32.

explains that in postwar France he heard that word in reference to black history, but that it then awakened in him an intimate memory of a Passover Seder, when his father had explained to him, as is the custom, that like all Jews he is a child of slaves under Pharaoh—a condition that Schwarz-Bart would then extend to the Jews under Hitler (“André Schwarz-Bart s’explique,” 1). In this relationship to slavery, and from the perspective of that Jewish child who listened to his father, he found himself “taken by definitive and fraternal love” for West Indians, by a “great, keen sympathy” (Ibid.). It is a theme he echoes in an interview with the American Jewish journal *Midstream* later in 1967. He says that before his contact with West Indians, “I had always thought that what happened to the Jews was without comparison with anything that had happened to other human beings. . . . I remained sealed within the solitude of Jewish destiny. But when I found myself face-to-face with people who carried upon their shoulders an experience about which it can be said—without meaning to establish an exact correlation—that it is similar to our own [as Jews], that this suffering still serves to shape them today, I came to know a feeling of fraternity that I had never before felt toward non-Jews.”<sup>9</sup>

In Schwarz-Bart’s appeal to the existence of a common experience of past trauma, his thinking slides between the mystical and the historical. The Exodus event recalled in the Passover Seder is not only a past event; it also refers to an experience that continues to be actualized across history—even into the very recent past. Thus, Hitler becomes another Pharaoh, and the Holocaust, a re-enslavement. This approach loosens the Jewish past from its moorings in temporal history, making it available as a parable for the continued instruction of Jewish children and a means of interpreting the significance of present-day events and experiences. Brought into the timeless realm of biblical parable, the Jewish past thus framed also becomes available as a template for more universal instruction. Here the Exodus story has been invested with meaning that responds to the contemporary moment of decolonization, much as happened in Latin American liberation theology in the 1960s. Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutiérrez, one of the movement’s most important theologians, wrote in his seminal *Liberation Theology* (1971), “The Exodus experience is paradigmatic. It remains vital and contemporary due to similar historical experiences which the people of God undergo.”<sup>10</sup>

9. André Schwarz-Bart, “Interview with Michael Salomon,” *Midstream* (1967): 4.

10. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, Revised Edition, trans. and ed. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 90.

He saw the biblical Exodus as an event with an explicitly political meaning pertinent to contemporary national liberation movements: "The liberation of Israel is a political action. It is the breaking away from a situation of despoliation and misery, and the beginning of the construction of a just and comradely society" (88). The Exodus represents for Gutiérrez the "'desacralization' of social praxis," putting the transformation of society into human hands (90).

Schwarz-Bart's renewed appreciation of the meaning of slavery brought him into kinship with West Indians, but he still had to work out the terms of this affinity. Schwarz-Bart's re-encounter with the Exodus story loosed it into a stream of universal history, but his encounter with the anticolonial thought of intellectuals from Africa and the Caribbean brought home the power of particularism, or what he referred to as the "unfathomable hard core" at the heart of each collective cultural entity ("André Schwartz-Bart s'explique," 9). He feared that bringing the black and Jewish experience to bear on each other might violate this particularity, especially because it ran the risk of obscuring, in his words, the "singular," "sentimental" and "folkloric" character of the racism experienced by blacks, by which he seems to have meant its historical, emotional, and cultural specificity (8). Schwarz-Bart was interested in capturing what he called the "great universal stream of violence and degradation," but not at the expense of an appreciation of the singularity of its instances (8). He thus placed tremendous authority in figures who could provide his work with political and cultural authenticity. Conscious that a white man could no longer serve, morally or politically, as the mouthpiece for the aspirations of people of color, he sought approval from leading black intellectuals, especially Aimé Césaire—the publication of his West Indian novels was conditional on Césaire's approval (9). Even more significant, he asked his wife Simone to become a co-author because she provided the knowledge of the Creole language that he lacked. This, he admitted, was the greatest obstacle that he faced when composing his Caribbean novels: "I believed in the limitless power of human sympathy, which was my only weapon in this adventure. . . . Nothing in my text, it seemed to me, represented a betrayal of my West Indian brothers. Nothing, except precisely the absence of that inexpressible element which I was discovering, and which is the flower of any work that springs from a *terroir*, from a spiritual soil" (9).

But by far the most important aspect of Schwarz-Bart's ongoing dialogue and collaboration with West Indians was his loyalty to the sym-



pathetic awareness engendered by his re-encounter with the biblical Exodus and to the reparative urge that it inspired. He wrote, "I believe, according to the terms that Levinas uses with respect to Martin Buber, that the essence of dialogue is not in the universal ideas that interlocutors hold in common nor in the ideas that one has of the other, but in the encounter itself, in the invocation, in the power of the I to say You."<sup>11</sup> Everywhere in his work we see the hard kernel of identity give way to enigma and infinity, to a vast, borderless space opened up when "I" invokes "You."

In the mid-1950s, still while writing *Le dernier des justes*, Schwarz-Bart had a conversation with a West Indian friend on the Paris metro. She was depressed because acquaintances had wounded her, unintentionally, with their racist comments. Schwarz-Bart recounts that he attempted to comfort her by showing her how much progress had been made world-wide in the struggle for black liberation. He pointed to the imminent independence of Africa and predicted the end of racism. Yet his friend refused to be cheered by his optimism. Faced with her refusal, he had a kind of depressing epiphany. He writes, "I had the impression that I was butting up against a mysterious, oppressive reality whose existence I had never before suspected." She says to him, some things will change, but "in a hundred years, in a thousand years . . . a *négresse* will always remain a *négresse*" ("André Schwarz-Bart s'explique," 1; ellipsis in original). He recognizes her "naïve fatalism," as he calls it, as the one he himself had experienced as a Jewish child, and vows to try to convince her that she is wrong—by writing a book.

The novel series, then, originates in his desire to intervene in his friend's negative relationship to herself, a relationship of suffering and despair—his aim is to repair this particular effect of racism, what he calls, in *Un plat de porc*, "metaphysical indignity" (53). This effect, this "mysterious, oppressive reality" in which identity and punishment are indissociable, in which identity is stigma and indignity, and of whose existence he becomes aware in talking with his friend and which he recognizes as having once been his own, permeates *Le dernier des justes* as well as the two subsequent novels. How can writing a book prove to his friend that she need not despair? It seems that

11. Ibid. Schwarz-Bart may have been referring to Levinas's article "La pensée de Martin Buber et le judaïsme contemporain," in *Martin Buber: L'homme et le philosophe*, Introduction by Robert Weltsch (Brussels: Éditions de l'Institut de Sociologie de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1968), 42–58.

this book will not only contain a lesson. The fact of its existence will also be a lesson, a kind of proof or rebuttal. The resulting works—for eventually the author came to think in terms of a cycle of several books—are not simply descriptions of this oppressive reality, but also refutations of it, attempts to deny its claim on reality. This is not to say that the works deny the strength of the experience of stigma; rather, Schwarz-Bart was intent on showing that a certain kind of inter-subjective encounter can generate another, more powerful reality than stigma, and so heal the breach.

Of all the formative experiences that Schwarz-Bart recounts in his story of the genesis of his novel series, it is this reparative intention that has left its most enduring trace in the novels themselves, both formally and thematically. What links the three existing novels together is the presence of an exemplary character—Ernie Lévy in *Le dernier des justes*, the narrator Marie of *Un plat de porc*, Solitude herself—who responds to surrounding brutality or indignity with the attitude of sympathetic awareness that Schwarz-Bart had described in his essay in *Le Figaro littéraire*. This attitude infuses the entire narration—even those moments of violence so unbearable that they would seem immune to consolation. One of the principal aims of this sympathetic awareness appears to be to offer evidence of the existence of an alternative reality more powerful than the oppressive reality in which the characters live. The appearance of this awareness at critical junctures has a mystical effect, for it seems to transport those whom it reaches out of the world and into a better place; such characters, or more precisely, the awareness embodied in these characters, is a kind of bridge between two worlds. These moments thus have the trappings of the mystical “escape from history,” the escape from the temporal and finite world to a world of timeless infinity.<sup>12</sup>

Hence the recurrence of a certain gesture on the part of Schwarz-Bart’s characters and narrators toward the existence of a more profound reality underlying that negative reality of “metaphysical indignity” in which their daily lives unfold—whether as European Jews, West Indians in contemporary France, or Africans and West Indians living in slavery. Repeatedly, we are brought to their consciousness of standing before a vast and enigmatic reality, quite often embodied in the form of another person. In the novel *La Mulâtresse Solitude*, the

12. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Third Edition Revised (New York: Schocken Books, 1971 [1946]), 20.

awareness of enigma comes to the title character through her mother, whose mystery the child attempts to decipher: "she would concentrate very hard in the earnest hope of penetrating Man Bobette's secrets . . . she resumed her delicate, exacting task, winding and unwinding the thread of her reverie."<sup>13</sup> Solitude in turn grows up to be a mystery to those around her, a strange presence in their midst of whom they ask, "Is she of this world?" (129). At the end of the novel, in the chaos of the last battle between the rebel slaves and the French army, her thoughts turn outward to consider the sky "as vast as the sea, where all things . . . are confounded in insignificance" (145).

The appearance of this mystical "escape from history" derives not only from a theological inspiration. It was also guided by a formal problem Schwarz-Bart confronted as he was composing the novels of the Solitude series. He realized that West Indian identity cannot be grasped in the traditional way, by tracing back a line in time and using genealogy as the narrative backbone of the novel. This is because (and here he seemingly anticipates Glissant), "the true depths of the Antilles is the rupture (le déchirement)" ("André Schwarz-Bart s'explique," 1; ellipsis in original). For a novelist who wants to write a historical novel, this realization poses a serious dilemma. His answer, he writes, was to create a character who is internally vast, as vast as the world, a "Carrier of Times" (porteuse du Temps), to encompass that history of rupture not from some point outside it but from within the subject herself. Schwarz-Bart's turn to the mystical is thus caused by the limits of conventional history imposed by the fact of African slavery.

The enigmatic beings who people the novel thus become symbols in the mystical sense of the word. As Scholem explains, "[I]n itself, through its own existence, [the mystical symbol] makes another reality transparent which cannot appear in any other form. . . . A hidden and inexpressible reality finds its expression in the symbol" (Scholem, 27). Solitude's capacity to perceive a hidden and formless reality "expressed" through or by the people-symbols whom she meets across her life sets her at odds with the all-too-concrete and visible reality of the slave plantation. It lends that brutal reality, filled with torture and ruled by the punitive visual economy of the phenotype, a baroque air of unreality, of *mere* appearance. Solitude's "delicate, exacting task" of

13. André Schwarz-Bart, *A Woman Named Solitude*, trans. Ralph Manheim, Introduction by Arnold Rampersad (San Francisco: Donald S. Ellis Publisher, 1985), 53–54.

deciphering the people-symbols around her, a task everywhere associated in the novel with love and tenderness, works a kind of magic on the "real" environment, effectively diminishing it. Eventually, Solitude herself becomes a symbol, especially in her after-life as a figure of legend.

Working backwards chronologically to Schwarz-Bart's second novel, *Un plat de porc aux bananes vertes*, co-authored with Simone, we find similar gestures performed by Marie, the narrator. We learn that Marie is the great-granddaughter of the rebel slave Solitude. Like Solitude, Marie has a special capacity to recover from the indignity and despair caused by her miserable circumstances. She is often insulted by other patients in the old-age home with the lacerating lip-smacker "miam miam" (yum, yum), absurd references to cannibalism whose effects, the narrator reports, "send me back to my nothingness [*néant*] as a *négresse*" (*Un plat de porc*, 52–53). The phrase recalls Schwarz-Bart's conversation with his friend on the Paris Métro, her pessimistic "believe me, my dear André, in a hundred years, in a thousand years . . . a *négresse* will always remain a *négresse*"—"néant" and "négresse" are fatally and fatalistically conjoined. In one instance the insult to Marie is followed by an act of physical assault, the swiping of Marie's glasses from her face, leaving her blind. From this sightless nothingness, Marie responds desolately to her assailant with the cry, "Mademoiselle! . . . Infinitely! . . . *Infinitely*, . . . I tell you!" (*Un plat de porc*, 53; emphasis and ellipsis in original). The words are short-hand for the polite "Merci infiniment," whose meaning in this context could be both sardonic and obsequious (thank you for insulting me). The reference to "infinity" can hardly be literal, and yet absent the requisite "merci," and so closely following on the idea of the "néant," the word takes on a life of its own, a spontaneous, outraged rebuttal that draws the speaker back into her dignity. Nothingness transmutes into infiniteness. Later, when the narrator is seized by dark thoughts about the past and wonders "how many lives . . . [have been] reduced to ashes?" (206), she turns inward to that infinity, addressing herself as "my sweet little World," and enjoins herself, "oh remember . . . recognize . . . admit . . . never to be able fully to unfold the map of the Universe: because behind these islands, these seas, continents. . . ." (206; ellipses in original). The words end in a suggestive ellipsis, but the thought goes on, as a kind of mantra, to encompass "all those little people perched up there, with all their little eyes but immense, perhaps, in their own

suffering," and ending, finally, on a note of her own insignificance, with the question, "what is this but the sigh of a *négresse* into the infinite?" (206).

These gestures lend the novels a recognizably mystical air, but although the presence of mysticism in Schwarz-Bart's work is unmistakable, it is of a nontraditional sort, adapted for secular ends. The people-symbols of *La Mulâtresse Solitude* make a timeless or infinite reality manifest, but that reality consists essentially of their inward selves in relationship to others. Schwarz-Bart was not apparently troubled by the co-existence of a religious and secular worldview in his novels.<sup>14</sup> This may have been due in part to his exposure to the ideas of Martin Buber, whose infusion of Jewish mysticism into a universalist existential and psychological language had already established this possibility. The slippage between mystical and historical registers in Schwarz-Bart's work correlates loosely to Buber's I-You/I-It distinction. Like most novels, those of Schwarz-Bart depict what Buber called "the It world," the object world that one knows and experiences, in which a person, "He" or "She," appears as a "dot in the world grid of space," as "a loose bundle of named qualities."<sup>15</sup> But the novels also seek to transmit something of the I-You relationship, its infinite space of encounter, its timelessness: "It cannot be surveyed: If you try to make it surveyable, you lose it. . . . The You world does not hang together in space and time" (Buber, 186). Schwarz-Bart's novels are filled with depictions of what Buber called "You moments," an opening onto a dialogue or relation with no borders: "Whoever says You does not have something; he has nothing. But he stands in relation" (182). This kind of I-You relation is not knowing or experiencing an other, but rather "a world in itself" (175).

With Buber serving as a loose intertextual key, it is perhaps less surprising to note the similarity between the Tzaddikim, the Just or Righteous men found in *Le dernier des justes*, and figures such as Marie and Solitude. The Tzaddik is, among other things, a "bridge be-

14. For a nuanced account of the co-existence of secular and religious approaches to the past in Schwarz-Bart's work, especially in *Le dernier des justes*, see Neil Davison, "Inside the Shoah: Narrative, Documentation, and Schwarz-Bart's *The Last of the Just*," *Clio* 24/3 (Spring 1995). (Accessed June 30, 2008). [http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx\\_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res\\_ver=0.2&res\\_id=xri:lion-us&rft\\_id=xri:lion.ft:mila:R03021037:0](http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:lion-us&rft_id=xri:lion.ft:mila:R03021037:0)

15. Martin Buber, *The Martin Buber Reader: Essential Writings*, ed. Asher D. Biemann, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 183.

tween the divine and the material world."<sup>16</sup> Here too Schwarz-Bart may have been influenced by Buber's early writings on Hasidism, which included material on the Lamed-vov. According to Buber, for the Tzaddik "what matters is not what can be learned; what matters is giving oneself to the unknown" (Buber, 69). The task of the Tzaddik is to fulfill the relation or bond with the infinite (84).

In *The Last of the Just*, that power is accorded, ambiguously, to the protagonist Ernie Lévy as he confronts what Geoffrey Hartman calls "the limit of sensibility," the inability of the senses to assimilate certain events as real, a limit that recurs throughout Holocaust survivor testimonies because of the overwhelming horror of their circumstances.<sup>17</sup> Schwarz-Bart brings this limit, this sense of unreality, to the fore in the penultimate episodes of the novel which recount the cattle-car transport to the death camp and the annihilation in the gas chamber. In the cattle-car Ernie has taken a group of children under his charge. Many of them have already died in the transport, and to soothe the ones still living, he tells them a story of messianic redemption. He says, the dead are just sleeping, and will awaken later on when we arrive in the Kingdom of Israel, a place of joy and comfort. Ernie's voice has a hypnotic effect on his listeners; the children's eyes take on a dreamy expression, though they, like everyone else in that place, are covered in filth and dying of pestilence and thirst. For this reason, Ernie's act enrages another adult in the cattle-car, who hisses at him: "How can you tell them it's only a dream?" Ernie responds politely: "Madame, there is no room for truth here."<sup>18</sup>

The formula recalls a famous line from Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*, "Hier ist kein warum" (Here there is no why), uttered by an SS guard at the camp when Levi first arrived.<sup>19</sup> The phrase marks the inmate's entry to an arbitrary world utterly divorced from reason. For Levi, it is this aspect of the camp, perhaps more than any other, that crushes him and renders the experience senseless; reason and reality have parted ways. Schwarz-Bart's phrase, meanwhile, under-

16. J.H. Laenen, *Jewish Mysticism: An Introduction*, trans. David E. Orton (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 236.

17. Geoffrey Hartman, "The Book of the Destruction," in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 326.

18. André Schwarz-Bart, *The Last of the Just*, trans. Stephen Becker (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1961), 366.

19. Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Collier, MacMillan, 1961), 25.

scores the extent to which the Nazis have destroyed the human faculty for a sensory apprehension of the truth. The reality they have created is too awful to be recognized as true, the mind cannot accept it; what the eyes see simply cannot be believed.<sup>20</sup> Truth and reality have parted ways. To live in this reality, we require a lie; hence the messianic tale. Ernie's awareness of this does not comfort him, because he does not believe the lie himself. There is no room for the truth here, he says; left unsaid is the fact that there is nowhere else to be *but* here. The statement is thus an expression of despair. But the phrase opens up to its opposite if we put ourselves in the position of the children's caretaker and allow that consolation in such circumstances might also be a real imperative. If the truth is not here, then where is it? The phrase suggests the displacement of truth onto some other plane of reality. From such a perspective, the cattle-car takes on an aspect of mere appearance. How could Ernie deny this to the children? Laden with metaphysical import, this meaning of "there is no room here for the truth" diverges radically from Levi.<sup>21</sup>

Though unfinished, Schwarz-Bart's work demonstrates the power of the Holocaust to evoke other historical traumas but also, equally important, the power of other traumas to shape the memory of the Holocaust, as Rothberg has argued, suggesting a tangled pathway of interconnected memories. If memories need social authorization to flourish, then Schwarz-Bart offers an interesting form of authorizing Holocaust memories: through a critical perspective on French colonialism. Such a gesture was not uncommon in its time, though from the vantage point of the present day it has a controversial ring, in part because of the prevailing tendency in the United States and elsewhere to view the Holocaust as unique and incomparable, in part because of the questionable purposes for which comparisons between the Holocaust and French colonialism were invoked in the 1980s during the trial of Klaus Barbie.<sup>22</sup>

20. See Hartman for the recurrence of such expressions of disbelief in Holocaust survivor testimonies. "The Book of the Destruction," 326.

21. See also Davison, "Inside the Shoah," for an analysis of this passage.

22. See Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *The Assassins of Memory: Essays on the Denial of the Holocaust*, trans. and foreword by Jeffrey Mehlman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), which offers a thorough account of the dilemmas that resulted when two otherwise valid historical insights concerning the Holocaust—one, that it could be inserted into world history and thus "compared, confronted, and even, if possible, explained" (126), and two, that the logical contradictions and expediency that characterized the French legal proceedings against Barbie were problematic (131–35)—were put to use in the attempt to acquit Barbie of his crimes.

Yet it is Schwarz-Bart's metaphysical approach to past trauma, his reparative intent, consoling tone, and mystical turn away from history, *not* his comparative framing of the Holocaust, that have been the target of criticism, whether because the mystical "escape from history" that his works depict suggests that Jewish and black victimhood is eternal and inevitable or because the works' reparative intent suggests redemption for suffering that many believe to exceed all possibility of redemption. Sidra Dekoven Ezrahi, referring to both *La Mulâtresse Solitude* and *Le dernier des justes*, says of Schwarz-Bart that he "transmutes the bloodbath into a gentle lyrical parable" in which the suffering of Solitude and Ernie Lévy "is ultimately redeemed by the harmony and ascendancy of [their] being."<sup>23</sup> Ezrahi faults the author for "a message of comfort" and compassion that is—she claims—more Christian than Jewish, and in fact it is not clear if her criticism is based on her objection to consolation as an appropriate response in the face of genocide or her objection to Schwarz-Bart's (highly debatable) departure from the Jewish tradition. Lawrence Langer also objects to the martyrological thread running through *Le dernier des justes*, arguing that because Schwarz-Bart places the suffering of Auschwitz within the long history of Jewish oppression and endurance, he gives such suffering a millennial meaning. Yet, Langer says, the horror of the camps is unsurpassed, unprecedented and unparalleled, thus it cannot be enveloped by Jewish history. "Ernie Lévy's pathetic desire to link his fate with a universal pattern," writes Langer, is nullified by the nature of the Holocaust experience, which "imprisons the survivor in an uncycled moment of time."<sup>24</sup> Langer claims that Schwarz-Bart's turn to the Jewish martyrological tradition offers a false redemption; it reaffirms our capacity to "translate . . . suffering into the exemplary" and pretends "a spiritual meaning to redeem the horror"—yet nothing can redeem the horror of Auschwitz, Langer argues (265).

Implicitly, both Langer and Ezrahi reject Schwarz-Bart's belief in the existence of "inexact correlations"—to recall an expression by Schwarz-Bart in his *Midstream* interview—between the millennial past and the recent past, and between the Jewish response to oppression and the response of other peoples. In contrast, Michael Rothberg

23. Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 137.

24. Lawrence L. Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 263–264.



seeks to rescue the comparative element of Schwarz-Bart's approach to the Holocaust, arguing that the author's linkage of Jewish and black histories "disrupts the sacralized uniqueness of the Holocaust."<sup>25</sup> Yet, he continues, the desacralizing potential of these "intersecting stories" is nullified by Schwarz-Bart's use of myth, which "seems to transfer historical losses into a de-historicized realm." Echoing a claim made by Ezrahi,<sup>26</sup> Rothberg argues that in Schwarz-Bart's work black and Jewish victimhood come to seem eternal, a "transcendent, extra-historical inevitability."<sup>27</sup> By this reading, Schwarz-Bart's desacralization of biblical history and Hasidic theology in order to bring them to bear on contemporary situations of alienation and dispossession has the precise opposite of its intended effect: it sacralizes contemporary politics, because it appeals to the existence of a realm that transcends the material world.

However, it bears noting that Schwarz-Bart's characters are victims of historical circumstances that the author describes in precise, grim detail. If their victimization seems timeless, it is due to its long-lasting effects, which outlive the original circumstances that gave rise to it and which are compounded by continued pervasive racism. In other words, he is responding to a traumatized and stigmatized condition, though Schwarz-Bart uses other language to describe this state: solitude, indignity, hopelessness, sorrow. Schwarz-Bart does not portray it as eternal and inevitable, but he does confront the despair of those who fear it might be, including himself. He seeks to intervene in a situation of sorrow and despair in a way that both acknowledges its hold *and* tries to break it. The point is not to diminish the extent of the original suffering, but rather to diminish its hold on the psyche. Thus his novels transcend their realist and historicist devices in order to reframe the past as a parable for the present day. His depictions of an ethos of sympathetic awareness circulating in situations of deep and systemic violence constitute an element of that parable. So too does his mystical loosening of the bonds of material reality, which generates *noeuds de mémoires* linking together disparate histories, much like Gutiérrez's re-interpretation of the Exodus and God's plan in terms of national liberation, and, to a lesser extent, Buber's "I/You" encounter.

25. *Multidirectional Memory*, 152.

26. *By Words Alone*, 133.

27. *Multidirectional Memory*, 152.

Is Schwarz-Bart in fact *redeeming* the Holocaust and slavery by finding in these stories of suffering “an affirmation of faith and solidarity,” as various critics imply?<sup>28</sup> It seems rather to be a salvage operation, an incomplete rescue rather than a full-blown redemption, for it is all too conscious of its own limits. Langer is aware of this when he concludes his analysis by saying, dismissively, that “Ernie’s consolations are surely only that—not revelations of a higher reality, a deeper truth, a spiritual meaning to redeem the horror.”<sup>29</sup> But here Langer misattributes to Schwarz-Bart his own value system, whereby consolation falls miserably short of true revelation, whereas Schwarz-Bart’s work seems to subsume these two together: the revelation of another reality is itself a consolation, but only modestly so, a temper of despair. Furthermore, what is transcendent about such moments in the novels is not precisely the opening onto a deeper truth, but the fact that such opening happens inter-subjectively in a context of dehumanizing hatred. It thus offers an alternative social web, beyond the web of violence and injustice, and serves as a reminder that another world is possible.

Even if we agree with Hartman that the Holocaust “challenges the credibility of redemptive thinking,”<sup>30</sup> it does not necessarily follow that the challenge is absolute. The question can still be posed: can the credibility of redemptive thinking be restored? This question circulates throughout Schwarz-Bart’s work, although reformulated toward more modest and limited ends—not, is it possible to recover the belief that human suffering is justified by a greater good? But, is consolation, the alleviation of sorrow and despair, still possible? Schwarz-Bart’s representations of past horrors, though graphic and at times quite brutal, remain fundamentally lyrical and consoling—not in order to evade history, but in order to respond to the challenges to historical thinking that such events engendered and to the ethical imperatives they call forth. His stance toward catastrophe is guided by the need for psychic repair, and he finds an answer precisely in the *noeuds de mémoires* he perceives between the death camp and the slave plantation. Sympathy joins these disparate memories of suffering together and, once conjoined, transmutes them mystically into evidence of fellowship.

28. The quoted phrase is Neil Davison’s, from his analysis of the tension between secular and transcendent elements in *Le dernier des justes*. “Inside the Shoah.”

29. *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, 265.

30. “The Book of the Destruction,” 326.