

# “Les Années noires avaient été grises:” A Meta-Ethical Examination of Pierre Assouline’s Appropriation of Primo Levi’s Concept of the “Grey Zone”<sup>1</sup>

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## **The Grey Zone: Readings, Re-readings and Overreadings**

Primo Levi’s landmark essay “The Grey Zone” opens with criticism of those who, when trying to understand the dynamics of *l’univers concentrationnaire*, reduce the complex network of human relationships to the mutually opposing categories of evil tormentors and saintly victims. Reflected in Christ’s gesture on Judgment day—“here the righteous, over there the reprobates”—, such dualistic thinking fails, according to Levi, in relation to Auschwitz whose horror consisted also in its *indéchiffrabilité*. Namely, some of the victims were dragged into defiling complicity with their oppressors, thus entering what Levi describes as an area so “incredibly complicated [in] its internal structure” that it “confuse[s] our need to judge” (*The Drowned and the Saved* 27). Within this “grey zone” the Italian writer-survivor situates all kinds of “privileged prisoners,” beginning with kettles washers, bed smoothers, checkers for lice or interpreters (29), and ending with *Sonderkommandos*. Recruited predominantly amongst Jewish inmates, these “special squads” were responsible for maintaining order among those to be gassed, disposing of the victims’ bodies, and sorting out their

belongings. Seeking examples of the “grey zone” beyond the *Lager*, Levi invokes controversial leader of the Łódź ghetto, Chaim Rumkowski, or even SS Erich Muhsfeldt, who briefly showed pity to a young survivor of gassing and whom Levi gives the benefit of the doubt by believing that, under different circumstances, he could have been a decent man (40). However, whereas Levi recommends that our moral judgment be suspended in relation to the “privileged” prisoners, in line with his more general and emphatic declaration of his unwillingness to ever forgive his oppressors, he fully endorses the 1948 verdict of the Supreme National Tribunal to sentence Muhsfeldt to death (37).

Since the publication of Levi’s essay, critics have been arguing about who indeed should be included in the “grey zone.”<sup>2</sup> While some mobilize the morally murky area as a universal figure of enforced complicity with one’s oppressor, others believe it to be restricted to the physical space of Nazi concentration camps. Giorgio Agamben, for instance, has famously and controversially deployed the “grey zone” as a paradigm for post-Auschwitz ethics, positioning all human beings within this space of moral ambiguity (101).<sup>3</sup> Others have reapplied Levi’s term to bystanders, collaborators or resisters, or have even assimilated it with Holocaust-unrelated situations.<sup>4</sup> As for Levi himself, he expands the meaning of the “grey zone” by reaching with his intertextual references beyond *l’univers concentrationnaire*, as exemplified by the analogy he draws between the *Sonderkommandos* and the collectors of corpses in Alessandro Manzoni’s novel *The Betrothed* (1827) (39). In the same vein, Levi likens Muhsfeldt’s brief hesitation to an old woman’s single good deed in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) (40). More directly, the Italian writer-survivor inscribes into this area of moral ambiguity, where dichotomies of evil and goodness are no longer operational, various collaborating governments, including Vichy (27). He also identifies it within the Soviet gulag or compares the Nazis’ strategy of burdening their victims with guilt to the practices of the Italian Mafia (27–28). Yet, despite Levi’s broader references, Adam Brown, who has written extensively on the “grey zone,” firmly believes in the term’s historical and topographical specificity (52). His view is shared by Debarati Sanyal who points to Levi’s repeated insistence on the singularity of the prisoner’s physical and emotional experience of the camp (34): “The mental mechanisms of *Häftlinge* were different from ours; curiously and in parallel, different were also their physiology and pathology” (*The Drowned and the Saved* 60).

Another contentious point raised by Levi's essay and relevant to the present inquiry is the confusion of victims with victimizers that some have inferred from the Italian writer's definition of the "grey zone" as a space "with ill-defined outlines which both separate and join the two camps of masters and servants" (27) or, from what can be regarded as Levi's own moment of hesitation whether to insert Muhsfeldt's temporary indecision into the paradigm under analysis. Perhaps the most controversial has been Agamben's over-reading of Levi's meditation on the category of the prisoner-functionary, which repositis the "grey zone" as a space where "victims become executioners and executioners become victims" (17).<sup>5</sup> This sweeping identification has outraged many, including Berel Lang, who reminds us that, for Levi, to conflate victims with perpetrators is a "moral disease" that can only spur Holocaust deniers (127); indeed, in "The Grey Zone" Levi himself states that "the prisoners' errors and weaknesses are not enough to rank them with their custodians (33)." Likewise, although the Italian writer acknowledges that both the oppressed and the oppressors had been dehumanized, in an interview he stresses that, whereas for the former it was imposed, for the latter it was "more or less chosen" (Vigevani 253). Additionally, in the essay entitled "Memory of the Offence," he emphasizes that even if victims and their torturers were all "made from the same cloth" and found themselves in "the same trap [. . .] it is the oppressor and he alone, who has prepared and activated it" (*The Drowned and the Saved* 12). Consequently, victim and victimizer are not interchangeable: "the former is to be punished and execrated, the latter to be pitied and helped" (13).

### *La Cliente*

One of the more recent appropriations of Levi's concept can be found in Pierre Assouline's little commented upon and as-yet-untranslated debut novel that extends the "grey zone" to the French people's responses to the Occupation.<sup>6</sup> More specifically, Assouline fleshes it out with a woman simultaneously responsible for the deportation of a Jewish family and victimized by misguided *épuration*. Set in the 1990s in Paris, *La Cliente* stages a Franco-Jewish biographer and journalist, who could be easily identified with Assouline himself and who, while preparing a biography of fictional novelist Désiré Simon, comes across a letter denouncing his own wife's family. It does not take the protagonist-narrator long to identify the informer as Cécile Armand who runs a flower shop in the Rue de la

Convention in the 15th *arrondissement*, just across the street from the fur shop owned by Henri Fechner, the son and brother of those deported following the florist's tip-off to the *Commissariat général aux affaires juives*. Simultaneously enraged by Armand's heinous deed and curious about her motives, the protagonist-narrator starts stalking the florist: he sends her anonymous threats, bombards her with late-night phone calls, orders flowers from her shop to be delivered to the tomb of the people she denounced, or has a Holocaust survivor bare his tattoo before her. Gradually, the narrator discovers that Armand had been coerced into turning in her neighbours by an inspector who, in exchange for the Fechners' address, had promised to have her brother released from German captivity. Ultimately, the narrator establishes that at the Liberation the florist was briefly arrested and interrogated on the account of her wartime act, which sparked popular suspicion against her. Having been (probably) unfairly accused of *collaboration horizontale* and, consequently, subjected to a public shaving of her head, Armand suffered a nervous breakdown. The crisis culminated in the florist's dramatic suicide attempt that in turn led to the breakup of her marriage and left her with lasting physical and mental scars, including a severe phobia of mirrors.

Concentrating on Assouline's extension of the "grey zone" to a French informer responsible for Jewish deaths and, more generally, to German-occupied France as a whole,<sup>7</sup> the present article offers a meta-ethical analysis of the deeply problematic synonymy resulting from this extension. Namely, considering that Levi's term designates mainly—albeit not uniquely—"privileged Jews" and finds its most dramatic incarnation in the *Sonderkommandos*, *La Cliente* implicitly puts a French anti-Semite on a par with those who, under the threat of instant death and in exchange for some meager privileges, became agents of the annihilation of their own people. I will argue that, in the light of Levi's call for a stance of *impotentia iudicandi* in relation to those who, when *in extremis*, entered a compromising collusion with their own oppressors, Assouline's insertion of Armand into what in "The Grey Zone" Levi calls "ill-defined area of ambiguity and compromise [. . .] born out of political coercion" (49), incites readers to withhold their judgment of—or even to show pity for—the novel's eponymous protagonist. I will then consider the ethical import of the narrative strategies that Assouline deploys to blur further the categories of victim and perpetrator. More specifically, I will examine the author's choice to abandon his historically rigorous approach, which he had adopted in his biographies of Pierre Laval's *directeur du cabinet*, Jean Jardin, or publisher

Gaston Gallimard,<sup>8</sup> and to enter the generic grey zone of historical (meta)fiction, so that he may, as he claims, nuance the Manichean conception of wartime France as a land of vile collaborators and heroic resisters. I will also contend that by using Christian imagery and symbolism to describe Armand's condition, Assouline repositions the florist as a martyr, hence manipulating readers into sympathizing with her and her likes. Finally, I will analyse the function of the mirror in the economy of *La Cliente*, which, like the novel's fuzzy generic status, is meant to complicate our understanding of the Occupation and Liberation. By exploiting Saint Paul's reference to the confusing and imperfect reflections offered by a mirror, or the power of the looking glass to reverse front and back, Assouline, I will contend, signals the interchangeability of roles, deliberately leading us further into the swampy territory of moral relativism.

### **“L’infinie gamme des gris”**

*La Cliente*'s main theme and discursive ethos are anticipated by the cameo story of Désiré Simon that opens the novel. A thinly disguised Georges Simenon, on whose biography Assouline had been working prior to the publication of *La Cliente*,<sup>9</sup> Simon is described as neither a resister nor an outright collaborator, but rather as an opportunist whose books were being adapted for the screen during the Occupation and who, despite the wartime shortage of paper, managed to have his voluminous works published. Furthermore, like Simenon who had to prove his “Aryan” lineage to the Gestapo, his fictional avatar confesses to have been denounced, without, however—as it ultimately transpires—being Jewish. To the narrator, the complexity of Simon's wartime position undermines the overwhelmingly negative evaluation of *les années noires* that has dominated since the 1970s when, in Henry Rousso's terms, French society developed an unhealthy obsession with its lacklustre wartime past: the humiliating defeat of 1940, the collaboration with the Occupier, and the participation of the *État français* in the deportation of some 76,000 Jews. Unmistakably referring to the sense of guilt and shame that Rousso defined as the “Vichy syndrome,” *La Cliente*'s narrator describes France as a country “qui éprouve une certaine volupté à se piétiner. Qui ne cesse de se déplorer. Un vieux pays [. . .] soumis à la dictature du souvenir, résigné à la tyrannie de la commémoration.” (30). Attempting to nuance the damning view of the French as vicious collaborators or at best cowardly bystanders, the narrator rebrands the Occupation as “les années grises,” whereby he implicitly

analyses the variety of stances assumed by the French during the war to the conduct of the “privileged” Jews in concentration camps and ghettos.

And yet, when trying to settle the question of Simon’s denunciation by searching through the then still classified archives, the narrator is only reassured in the understanding of the Occupation as “cette période maudite” (23). Reading through scores of letters of denunciation, he becomes so outraged and repulsed by both their content and euphemistic language that he vomits in the archives’ morbidly decorated lavatories. That now he himself has become possessed by the Occupation is evidenced by his impression that the bus he is taking is one of those requisitioned by the French police for the round-ups of Jews, or that his fellow passengers are former wartime profiteers. By the same token, the sign “\*\*NN” indicating a hotel’s classification,<sup>10</sup> invokes in the biographer the operation *Nacht und Nebel* that targeted Hitler’s opponents in German-occupied Europe, including France. Finally, when passing the former siege of the French Gestapo in the Rue Lauriston the protagonist imagines hearing the screams of victims being tortured. His rage reaches its apogee at a family gathering, during which he urges his relatives to boycott not only German but also French goods and services, since it was France that betrayed the Jews. Among the proscribed products he lists Renault cars, Drieu la Rochelle’s novels, Sacha Guitry’s plays, or Photomaton machines that in 1941 were put at the disposal of the authorities so that interned Jews could be photographed.

### **A Collaborator as Incarnation of the “Grey Zone”**

As wartime informer, Cécile Armand at first appears to be the embodiment of France’s collaborationist past. Indeed, her letter of denunciation testifies to her venomous anti-Semitism and to her wholehearted devotion to the Vichy regime,<sup>11</sup> which she but confirms when confronted by the narrator fifty years later. Not only is she unrepentant about her betrayal, but also proves to be self-serving, conceited, aggressive and hateful, as she shamelessly blames the Fechners’ tragedy on their own imprudence. The narrator’s attitude towards the florist softens, however, when he discovers that she had been pressured into denouncing her neighbours, before he changes his mind entirely as a result of learning about Armand’s public shaming and its ramifications for her family life and mental health.

As a consequence of this change of perspective, the florist becomes for the narrator synecdochic of the ambiguity marking the Occupation and, by

extension, of Levi's concept of the "grey zone" that Assouline enlists to express this ambiguity. However, the parallel that he thus creates between a Frenchwoman trying to obtain her brother's release from captivity and the Jews who strove to prolong their own or their relatives' lives by colluding with their victimizers in the context of having been marked for total destruction, is for several reasons morally flawed. Firstly, one can hardly compare occupied Paris to Auschwitz, whose inmates, having been demoralized for months in the ghettos, were subject to deliberate and systematic dehumanization through starvation, backbreaking labour, lack of sanitary facilities, beatings, random executions, and selections for gas chambers. Consequently, prisoners experienced a collapse of all moral standards, which, as Levi notes in "The Grey Zone," was achieved also by the division of detainees into ordinary and "privileged" ones (24). Convinced about the special element and topographical rootedness of the "grey zone," Brown stresses the physical isolation of the universe analysed by Levi and, as he aptly notes, its domination in the Italian writer's work by the colour grey.<sup>12</sup> These two facts incite Brown to believe that the phenomenon of the "grey zone" is inextricably linked to "the unprecedented circumstances *and* environments [of Auschwitz]" (52–53).

Secondly, just as one cannot compare the hardship suffered by Jews imprisoned in Auschwitz with those of Madame Armand, Assouline's extension of the "grey zone" to the whole of Vichy France appears grossly misplaced. Even if, as mentioned earlier, Levi himself may briefly include Europe's collaborating regimes, comprising Pétain's government, within the "grey zone," Brown lays bare the inaccuracy and consequent moral inappropriateness of such an inclusion. He does so by pointing out the immeasurable difference in the level of coercion, or indeed the lack of coercion in the case of some collaborators. As for the specific case of Vichy, Brown believes that the deeply entrenched anti-Semitism of the French, which Assouline's novel gives much evidence of, "disqualifies any comparison with the forced collaboration of the Jewish leaders and crematorium workers" (54). To support his argument, Brown quotes Rudolf Kasztner who in the aftermath of the war judged an analogy between a *Judenrat* (Jewish Council) and "the ordinary Quislings and collaborationists" as "entirely out of place" (73, n. 85).<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, the fallacy of such parallels is exposed even by Assouline's novel itself, when Armand equates the sufferings of Jews living in wartime France with those of non-Jewish French women and men (138–39).

Thirdly, Assouline's election of Armand as an incarnation of the "grey zone" potentially results in de-Judaization of Levi's term, which, as we will see, is reinforced by the author's ample use of Christian imagery. Although Levi, whose work is structured by the constant tension between the individual and the universal (Brown 58), at times includes Gentiles in the "grey zone," Jews are unquestionably the main focus of his meditation.<sup>14</sup> Through its gentilisation of Levi's concept, *La Cliente* becomes akin to William Styron's controversial novel, *Sophie's Choice*, that provoked much criticism because,<sup>15</sup> without entirely decontextualizing the Holocaust,<sup>16</sup> it focuses on a Catholic Polish woman's enforced collusion with the camp commander.<sup>17</sup> Assouline, however, not only thematizes the "grey zone" through a non-Jew, but also is guilty of the topographical displacement of what Lawrence Langer has called the Jews' "choiceless choices" (226).

Moreover, as if placing a Gentile at the centre of an agonising moral dilemma was not enough in itself, Assouline spells out Armand's Christianity by showing her dwell in a Catholic church or, even more poignantly, by likening her to St George. The comparison between the florist and the Christian martyr is inspired by a stained-glass window that misses the panel featuring the saint's face. This detail is meant to symbolize, on the one hand, the narrator's unmasking of Armand as wartime informer and, on the other, the florist's innermost desire to separate from her own image. Yet, the likening of a collaborator to a Roman soldier killed for his Christian faith and, consequently, venerated for centuries across cultures, is deeply disconcerting, as it invites our forbearance, if not sympathy, for Armand. That this is indeed Assouline's intention is soon confirmed by the image of the florist contemplating a commemorative plaque that lists her brother's name. At this moment the narrator notes that "[i]l y avait en elle autant de péché que de souffrance" (149), before implicitly absolving Armand with the description of the church as a space where "[o]n [. . .] baignait dans une lueur d'une infinie pureté" (149).

Even if at this stage the narrator still perceives Armand as an ambiguous figure, his discovery of the injustice she experienced at the Liberation tips the balance in favour of her victimhood. The mental pain the florist suffered as a result of her *tonte* makes the narrator figure her once again as a martyr or even as Jesus Christ himself, as intimated by the likening of her psychological wounds to stigmata. Yet, even more disturbing is the affinity Assouline notes between Armand, who would cover her shorn head with a scarf, and the Jewish women who had used scarves to dissimulate their

yellow stars (180). While this comparison is supposedly based on the fact that, like Jews during the war, shorn women were ostracized at the Liberation, a discriminatory measure paving the way for mass extermination can hardly be put on the same level as the punishment meted out to the novel's protagonist, however unmerited and heavy in consequences this punishment might have been. We must not forget either that, although Armand was most likely not guilty of *collaboration horizontale*, the shaving of her head happened as a response to her earlier arrest and was therefore an indirect consequence of her denunciation of the Fechners.

### **Per speculum in aenigmate**

To foreground the ambiguities of the Occupation or even, as we will see later, to invert the positions of victim and perpetrator, Assouline structures *La Cliente* with the motif of the mirror that has been traditionally associated with the figure of the double, with self-awareness, or with inversion of reality. That the mirror is meant to unsettle the dichotomy of the informer and the one informed upon is evident, firstly, from the role of Monsieur Adret, a mirror maker also working in the Rue de la Convention. Without the presence of Adret's business, the Fechners' and Armand's shops that not only face each other but also represent the mutually contrasting animal and vegetal worlds, would indeed reflect the dualistic thinking about wartime realities that Assouline sets out to oppose. For, although the fact that the Fechners profit from the suffering and death of animals opens up a path for complicating their victimhood, Assouline chooses not to do so, hence ignoring the fact that the fur industry is the most controversial form of animal exploitation since the abuse is being perpetrated purely in the name of vanity. In other words, while increasing his story's cultural plausibility by casting Fechners as furriers, fur trade being one of typically Jewish occupations, Assouline misses the opportunity to draw on the well established—albeit still contentious—tradition of analogizing “the eternal Treblinka,” as Isaac Bashevis Singer called man's ill treatment of animals (270), to the Nazis' brutalization of the Jews (Patterson, Davis, Sax).<sup>18</sup> Instead, he undermines the Manichean conception of the Occupation by replacing the topographical opposition between the florist's and the furrier's shops with a triangular constellation whose vertex is constituted by Adret's store. Having been metonymically endowed with the quality of the objects he fashions, the mirror maker, who—fittingly— speaks almost entirely in

quotations, is cast in the role of a passive bystander. This is suggested by his position in the photograph depicting Armand's *tonte* where he keeps his distance from the nucleus of the scene. Here, however, Assouline once again chooses to gloss over the ethical investment of bystanders, whose role in the Holocaust has since the end of the war become an object of historical interest (Hilberg, Cesarani and Levine) and whose neutrality has been problematized with, among others, the concept of the "grey zone" (Viola 72). Conversely, the author of *La Cliente* emphatically limits Adret's role to that of a passive observer: "le seul reflet de l'intime tragédie qui liait secrètement les Fechner et les Armand-Cavelli" (121).

The mirror further complicates the victim-perpetrator dichotomy when its customary function of operating a front-back reversal is exploited through the narrator's (mis)use of Saint Paul's dictum "*Per speculum in aenigmate*" (1 Corinthians 13:12). In one of the French translations of the Bible, known as *La Colombe*, the reputedly semantically ambiguous words are rendered the following way: "Aujourd'hui nous voyons au moyen d'un miroir, d'une manière confuse, mais alors, nous verrons face à face; aujourd'hui je connais partiellement, mais alors je connaîtrai comme j'ai été connu."<sup>19</sup> Despite Saint Paul's assertion of the mirror's failure to provide us with straightforward answers, Assouline uses it to symbolize self-knowledge when he posits Armand's phobic aversion to reflective surfaces as motivated by her refusal to accept her self-image. Having been branded as guilty of fraternizing with the enemy, the florist cleared her flat of all mirrors but a cheval glass, which—aptly—, the French call "le psyché." It is the full-length mirror that Armand used to try to commit suicide; after repeatedly hurling herself at its surface and breaking it in the process, she slashed her wrists with shards. In this context, it is unsurprising that the narrator tantalizes Armand by using a pocket mirror; from the Fechners' shop, he sends reflections of light into her face, as a result of which she injures herself with scissors. This scene anticipates the death of the florist who, blinded by light refracted in a passer-by's mirror glasses, falls under a bus. The two episodes clearly symbolize the destructive power of Armand's freshly resurfaced wartime memories, yet there is nothing to suggest that it is specifically her act of denunciation that torments her; rather, it seems that she cannot stand the memory of having been (unfairly) accused of *collaboration horizontale*.

Reasserting the mirror's illuminating powers, the narrator gets to the bottom of Armand's story by questioning Adret, which, significantly enough, he does by the pond in the Parc Monceau. After imparting some of

the dramatic consequences of the florist's *tonte*, the mirror maker troubles the water's reflective surface by casting a pebble. With its disruptive effect on the image of two male figures, Adret's gesture communicates the mirror's limited revelatory potential in regard to the past, which the narrator then verbalizes by first commenting upon the incompleteness of the mirror maker's testimony and then travestying St. Paul's mirror dictum: "nous voyons toute chose à l'envers. [. . .] [L]e miroir reflète la vie dans un tout autre sens" (185). This over-interpretation of the Pauline words repositions Armand as victim and, anticipating the florist's imminent death for which the narrator feels responsible, the narrator himself as perpetrator. Although mitigated by the warning the grandson of the deportees, François Fechner, issues against such moral relativism, this ultimate reversal of roles remains deeply troubling. It becomes even more so when framed by an earlier scene that decries the popular reaction to the narrator's attempts to challenge Armand. Riding on a bus that was earlier identified by the novel as one of the loci of the deportation and thus as a space capable of mentally transporting the narrator to the Paris of *les années noires*, the protagonist questions the florist about her motives. However, rather than with him it is with Armand that his fellow passengers side, while threatening the narrator with legal action or at least with an expulsion from the bus (132). This episode is meant to show how little has changed since the 1940s, with former collaborators being protected and Jews vilified and victimized. Hence, by ending his novel with the mirror's power to reverse what it reflects, Assouline appears to vindicate those whom his narrator was earlier accusing of anti-Semitism and cowardice.

Following this logic, the narrator does not heed François Fechner's advice that "[i]l ne faudrait pas que la culpabilité change de camp [. . .] Sinon, on n'en finira vraiment jamais avec cette histoire" (188). Instead of writing, as he planned, an article about Armand's betrayal, he joins Désiré Simon in a literary space that he describes as "une zone grise où les frontières s'estompaient" (19). The narrator justifies his choice by deeming historical exactitude and truth as mutually exclusive concepts: "[j]amais," he proclaims, "un historien ne pourra donner la vraie mesure du phénomène [de la délation]. Seul un romancier y parviendrait" (29). To expand on this, the narrator opposes history's totalizing and synthezizing priorities, and its ambition to produce unequivocal truths, to the novel's ability to individualize the past, and to explore its intricacies and ambiguities. That said, rather than writing a classical historical novel that, like traditional

historiography, subscribes to the ideals of objectivity, linearity, causality and closure, the narrator produces a strongly self-conscious text where his inquiry into *les années noires* is undergirded by a metafictional meditation on the challenges of establishing and conveying historical truth. His narrative choices are metaphorized with his accidental knocking over of the florist's file made up of meticulously ordered documents. Having freed Armand's story from the shackles of chronological and causal order, he replots it as what might be called a "(self-)detective novel" that opens with the crime and develops towards the revelation that the investigator himself is the wrongdoer.

## Conclusions

Pierre Assouline must be given credit for having addressed two rarely discussed aspects of the Occupation, that are punishment of wartime denunciation and *collaboration feminine*.<sup>20</sup> Also, he needs to be congratulated on his attempts to nuance the sharply polarized view of the Occupation that has prevailed since the 1970s, and, as states Benn Williams, on "throwing into question the ethics involved in doing history" (119).

At the same time, however, attention should be drawn to the morally charged questions raised by Assouline's extension of Levi's term to wartime France, and in particular to a woman responsible for Jewish deaths. One of the flaws of the novelist's narrative strategy is the overdramatization of Armand's situation; although, by having the florist act under duress, the author tries to reproduce the conditions of the "privileged" Jews' collusion with their tormentors, it is plain that the Frenchwoman's circumstances cannot be likened to those targeted by the *Endlösung*. To compare Armand's betrayal to those committed by women and men in an environment of, as Langer puts it, "non-morality" (Brown 16), is therefore potentially offensive to the memory of Hitler's Jewish victims who, having been sentenced to indiscriminate and brutal annihilation, were dehumanized and deprived of all agency. Additionally, we must bear in mind the topographical specificity of *l'univers concentrationnaire*, as well as its unprecedentedness—not to say uniqueness—, which means that it is hardly possible or indeed appropriate to extend Levi's theorization of the "grey zone" beyond the boundaries of Nazi camps or ghettos. The resulting danger of Assouline's assimilation of a French informer with the *Sonderkommandos* and other "privileged" Jews is the extension to the likes of Armand of the *impotentia iudicandi* or even of the indulgence that Levi

encourages in the light of the unfathomable violence and perversity of Auschwitz. Equally problematic is Assouline's expansion of Levi's concept to his own narrative strategy, which has granted him access to the metaphoric and symbolic language available to novelists but not—or at least to a lesser degree—to historians. Hence, despite his manifest awareness of the unethical nature of the biographer's endeavour, the author makes light of the moral implications of his fictional take on the Occupation. Particularly controversial is Assouline's use of Christian imagery that not only de-Judaizes the "grey zone," but also re-positions Armand as victim and martyr, thus eliciting our sympathy for her. This effect is further heightened if we replace the words "*Per speculum in aenigmate*" in the wider context of Saint Paul's first letter to the Corinthians that calls for love and charity in the face of the (temporary) absence of full knowledge. This suggests that, given the partiality of our understanding of the Occupation, we too must suspend our judgment of or even grant our (Christian) forgiveness to the likes of Armand. All this only reinforces the message inherent in Assouline's redeployment of the notion of the "grey zone," which is the need to show tolerance towards unwilling collaborators. The point ultimately made by *La Cliente* is therefore at odds with its ambition as stated in the opening chapters, which is to complicate the black-and-white conception of wartime France. Instead, Assouline ends up lampooning the persistence of guilt and shame encapsulated by the term "Vichy syndrome," which he does by, for example, ridiculing his narrator's unhealthy obsession with the Occupation and his vociferous outbursts against unpunished collaborators or the anti-Semitism of today's Frenchmen. This inconsistency aside, it is highly unfortunate that to further his agenda, Assouline has mobilized an historically and geographically specific concept that is inextricably bound up with what Levi termed the Nazis' "most demonic crime:" by implicating the Jews in the destruction of their own people, the Germans denied their victims even "the solace of innocence" (37).

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## Notes

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pointed me to Laurent Joly's more recent work on denunciation, and to Dominick LaCapra's reading of Agamben's work.

2. Of note is the collection of essays edited by Jonathan Petropoulos and John K. Roth.

3. See Debarati Sanyal's (23–55) and Dominick LaCapra's (144–94) insightful critique of Agamben's expansion of the grey zone. While Sanyal states that "Agamben's appropriation of Levi's voice when discussing a different order of violence altogether is a ventriloquism that disregards the survivor's explicit warning against conflating the camp and civilian life" (34), LaCapra notes that Agamben "generalizes the gray zone in a manner that threatens to undo significant distinctions and to eventuate in a view of all existence in terms of the limit event or situation as a state of exception, if not emergency or crisis, in which the exception becomes the rule" (180).

4. Adam Brown offers an extensive list of studies that have redeployed Levi's term in alien contexts, such as patriarchal repression or psychiatric care (71, n. 61).

5. *Cf.* 21.

6. The only scholarly article on *La Cliente* I am aware of is one by Benn Williams.

7. Since the publication of *La Cliente*, Assouline has returned to the notion of the "grey zone" in *Lutetia*. In his 2002 novel, it is the Parisian hotel that during the Occupation was the headquarters of German military intelligence and after the French capital was liberated acted as a welcome centre for returning deportees, that epitomizes Levi's concept of moral ambiguity.

8. Both Jean Jardin and Gaston Gallimard are considered ambiguous figures. While during the Occupation Gallimard adhered to the anti-Semitic laws and described his publishing house as "aryenne à capitaux aryens," Jardin used his position in the Vichy government to help some resisters and Jews. See Assouline, *Une éminence grise* and Assouline, *Gaston Gallimard*.

9. Assouline, *Simenon*. After the war, Simenon was accused of having been close to the Vichy government and other collaborators, and of having written for collaborationist press. In the end, no charges were pressed against him, but, with purges being still on the agenda, in 1945 Simenon left France for the United States.

10. The letters NN stand for "nouvelle norme."

11. In the interview published on the website of Gallimard Assouline explains that, unable to transcribe an actual letter of denunciation *ad verbatim* but wishing for the letter to sound authentic, he composed it by collating sentences drawn from several such letters ("Rencontre avec Pierre Assouline").

12. Brown points out that in his novels *If This is a Man* (1947) and *Truce* (1963) Levi links greyness to various aspects of the Auschwitz environment, including the bread, the clouds, the sky, the fog, the dawn and the inmates themselves. In *If This is a Man* he writes: "Everything is grey around us and we are grey" (52).

13. Kasztner's words must be, however, seen in the context of his own dubious stance during the war. Although he helped to smuggle persecuted Jews into Hungary and

then, after German invasion, out of Hungary, he was himself accused of collaboration and, consequently, was assassinated in 1957 (Ring, 80).

14. Cf. Brown, 51.

15. Rosenfeld; Dickstein. For a discussion of *Sophie's Choice* as an example of the "grey zone," see Mathé.

16. As Sylvie Mathé observes, Sophie Zawistowski is never shown in the midst of the camp, but rather on its outskirts, first on her arrival and then in the commandant's house. Mathé, 455.

17. As she arrives at Auschwitz, Sophie is made to choose which of her two children should live. She is then engaged as translator by the commandant of Auschwitz.

18. The awareness of the parallel between man's exploitation of animals and the Jewish tragedy is manifest in the work of another contemporary Holocaust writer, Philippe Claudel. See my article "Philippe Claudel's *Brodeck* as a Parody of the Fable or the Holocaust Universalized." *Holocaust Studies. A Journal of Culture and History* 24.4 (2018): 503–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17504902.2018.1468669>.

19. In King James's translation we read "Now we see through a glass, darkly," while the New English Bible offers "Now we see puzzling reflections in the mirror" (Nolan 1). As Régis Burnet explains, Saint Paul's reference to seeing in a mirror darkly can be elucidated with the poor quality of ancient mirrors [paragraph 16].

20. For an examination of the punishment of women suspected of fraternizing with the Germans, see Virgili. For a study of wartime informers, see Joly.

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