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**Article:**

Michallat, W.T. [orcid.org/0000-0003-2042-1702](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2042-1702) (2017) *Mental Distress Under Occupation: The Journal of Madeleine Blaess*. *French Cultural Studies*, 28 (2). pp. 173-185. ISSN 0957-1558

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0957155817693496>

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## Mental Distress under Occupation: The Journal of Madeleine Blaess

### Abstract

Madeleine Blaess a British doctoral student studying at the Sorbonne was trapped in Paris unable to return home to York for the duration of the Occupation. In October 1940 she began a diary which she kept diligently until September 1944. This unique testimony written from the perspective of a British student at liberty to roam wartime Paris, focuses more on the civilian struggle through the everyday than on the political and military situation which Blaess, vulnerable to arrest, thinks wise to mention as little as possible. This exhaustively documented, voluminous record of the minutiae of a daily struggle with material hardship discloses a struggle with mental illness articulated and managed through the writing of the diary. That diaries can have a therapeutic purpose for writers under mental strain is axiomatic and this article examines a variety of palliative strategies both deliberate and involuntary invoked through the writing process. In so doing, the article will survey the incidence and causes of civilian mental distress on the home front over the period; an area of inquiry which, other than recent work into the psychological impact of Allied bombing of civilians, has been largely neglected in recent work foregrounding and valorising the historical importance of life-writing sources in the field of Occupation studies.

### Keywords

Occupation; diaries; France; War; OCD; psychology; mental illness

Mental Distress under Occupation: The Journal of Madeleine Blaess

Car puisque j'ai un cafard fou  
 Je vais partir je ne sais où;  
 Je n'écrirai plus rien du tout.  
 Vivrai-je encore au mois d'août ?

(Madeleine Blaess, 8 June 1943)

In July 1939 Madeleine Blaess graduated with a first class honours degree in French from the University of Leeds and was subsequently awarded a grant by the University and the Education Department of the City of York to study for a doctorate at the Sorbonne in Paris. She arrived in Paris in November 1939 and registered for a doctoral thesis entitled 'Le rôle de Merlin dans le roman courtois du XII et XIII siècle' under the supervision of Gustave Cohen and Joseph Vendryès. In June 1940, she was still in Paris shopping for souvenirs ahead of her planned journey home to York via Le Havre when the rapidity of the German advance cut her off from the ports. She joined other Parisians in the flight from Paris to the south and when she returned to Paris she began a diary to coincide with the resumption of classes at the Sorbonne and kept it for the duration of the Occupation. The diary began brightly and defiantly as a replacement 'letter' to her parents. Buoyed by the return to classes and to routine, not even the fact that her bourse was now unattainable worried her unduly: 'Cette lutte pour l'existence sera bonne pour moi, à qui tout a été trop facile grâce à vos privations, mon Daddy et ma Mummy ; <<let the weakest go to the wall>>, et si j'hérite de votre sang, je survivrai'.<sup>1</sup> However, one year into the Occupation she was beginning to struggle both physically and psychologically. On New Year's Eve 1941, alone in her room, with ice on the

inside of the windows and a frozen sink, she writes in her diary of another year ruined by the war. ‘Sorted vieilles lettres – donc cafard. Que Hogmanay 1942 se passe chez-moi! Avec Papa et Maman!! Quelle veille d’année, avec pas de feu, seule au milieu de vieilles lettres, de vieux souvenirs. Encore une année passée – gâchée. Tout est gâché, loin de Mamie – et ma thèse?? (Blaess, 31 Dec 1941). In May 1942, she describes the lethargy and inertia induced by ‘la stérilité de l’époque’. Nauseous, ‘tout glisse dans ma tête’: all she wants to do is sleep (Blaess, 27 May 1942). In August 1943 she writes of having lost the ambition and sense of purpose she’d had between the ages of 18 and 19. Now she writes ‘si je n’en ai plus une si forte conscience, c’est que je sens les murs de ma prison trop hauts pour l’instant – et j’ai l’impression qu’il faut encore une ou deux années se passent avant que je puisse donner ma mesure’ (Blaess, 9 August 1943).

Other Occupation diarists describe a similarly taxing psychological encounter with the everyday and look to their diaries as a therapeutic outlet. In June 1941 Jean Guéhenno (1890-1978) had described his Occupation diary, *Journal des années noires* as an absurd undertaking given the ‘grandeur des événements’ (Guéhenno, 1947: 155). He is less dismissive of it by March 1943. Now, his journal is as necessary to his health as physical exercise affording him the structure, purpose and routine he needs to cope with the strain of the Occupation which he describes as a state of psychological paralysis characterised by ‘solitude’, ‘douleur’ and physical suffering (Guéhenno, 1947:97). The Occupation itself is ‘le vide’ (Guéhenno, 1947 : 82) where Guéhenno is ‘sans tentation, sans désir. Si rarement, une pensée ose ouvrir ses ailes. Elle s’abat, dès qu’elle s’élève. A quoi bon. La neige a fondu dans Paris; c’est le dégel. On pense seulement qu’on va avoir un peu moins froid’ (Guéhenno, 1947: 97). In her diary, as early as July 1940, Liliane Schroeder (b. 1920) describes inertia, hopelessness and an overwhelming sense of pointlessness. She is ‘moralement vide’ finding neither pleasure nor interest in a new ‘façon de vivre’ that demands silent acquiescence (Schroeder, 2000: 26). Like Blaess, she laments a stagnant existence in the present. Future

plans have no sense. They depend entirely on ‘événements mondiaux exceptionnels’ (Schroeder, 2000:211) and uncertainty and rumour cause a mental fatigue, ushering in ‘les plus noires idées’ where ‘le plus petit espoir semble vain et risible’ (Schroeder, 2000: 49). For Schroeder as for Guéhenno, the keeping of a diary enabled the maintaining of a routine and routine is, as she notes in March 1942, an aid to survival. ‘C’est elle qui aide les hommes vivant dans des périodes “contre nature” à supporter des épreuves qui, vues avec le recul du temps ou le recul de l’espace, paraissent impossible à surmonter’ (Schroeder, 2000: 129).

Until relatively recently, scant attention has been paid to the everyday psychopathology of the civilian population during the Occupation and very little work has been produced on the relationship between diary and letter writing and dealing with mental distress. How did civilians cope mentally with the unrelenting grind through years of material deprivation and uncertainty which was for so many also a period of self-abnegation and compromise? Gregory Thomas's 2009 study *Treating Trauma of the Great War, Soldiers, Civilians and Psychiatry in France 1914-1940* says little about the day-to-day management of mental illness but, despite featuring the Occupation almost in epilogue, Thomas contests hitherto unchallenged assumptions that mental distress was a relatively minor characteristic of civilian life on the Home Front. He cites an account of the December 1939 meeting of the *Société medico-psychologique* where mental distress amongst civilians was reported as already widespread as early as the Phoney War and where Dr François Achille-Delmas observed that if the number of those committed to asylums ‘might not increase during war [...] the number of cases of mania and melancholy certainly did’ (Thomas, 2009:178-9). It is, says Thomas, a finding which is in direct contradiction with Walter A. Lunden’s 1947 journal article *Suicides in France 1910-43* which, for years, was the only scholarly study of mental health during the period. With no apparent evidence (and an over-reliance on Émile Durkheim’s study *Le Suicide* in 1898) Lunden had argued that in wartime civilians engaged with the challenges facing them with renewed purpose and vigour and, because of this, their

mental health actually improved rather than deteriorated (Lunden, 1947: 321-34). Thomas and J.L.T Birley, the latter writing in the *British Journal of Psychiatry* in 2002, both point out that low asylum admissions during the Occupation did not accurately reflect the incidence of poor mental health given that large numbers of the mentally ill were cared for at home by relatives for reasons of affordability and because of well-founded fears about the quality of asylum care. Patients couldn't survive on the rations they were given and did not have the financial means or resourcefulness to supplement them like the rest of the population had to do in order to survive. Institutional neglect caused 40,000 asylum inmates (a conservative estimate) to starve to death between 1940 and 1944 (Birley, 2002: 298-99 and Vinen, 2006: 226). Pierre Laborie touches upon mental health during the Occupation in his 1990 *L'Opinion française sous Vichy: Les Français et la crise d'identité nationale 1936-1944* where he writes of the widespread mental fatigue of a struggling and tired French populace apparent in letters intercepted by the Vichy authorities. The everyday difficulties cause 'un formidable travail d'usure sur les esprits et les énergies' (Laborie, 1990: 297) and by 1943 the atmosphere is 'lourde et angoissée'. People are 'déçue, désabusée, inerte, à bout de nerfs, souhaitant la paix à tout prix' (Laborie, 1990: 292). As one might expect of a general history of public opinion, mental health is a marginal concern for Laborie but it also appears to have been of marginal interest to French life-writing specialists who are nevertheless familiar with diary and epistolary outputs over the period. In fact, it was a woman scholar writing a thesis under Occupation who first linked mental distress to the palliative properties of diary writing in a thesis which, when it was published in 1952, became the first French specialist monograph on the form. However Michèle Leleu's observation that women relocated to their diaries emotions suppressed, silenced and ignored in everyday life appears to have been completely overlooked by Philippe Lejeune who, half a century later, doesn't interrogate why certain women diarists writing under Occupation might choose to write about their day-to-day activities and feelings in their diaries rather than about the War which was, for most women

diarists the 'cause' and 'objet' of their diaries. Jacqueline Gausson-Salomon was, he writes, preoccupied with art, Marie de la Trinité with God and Jeanne Demessieux with playing the organ (Lejeune, 2009: 1). Lejeune does not countenance, at least in respect of these Occupation diaries, that mental distress might be present and managed in diaries outside of a format he describes in earlier work as a 'crisis diary'; a writing project started during period of distress and (usually) ended by the diarist when the crisis comes to an end (Lejeune, 2001: 99-112). As such he quizzically compares these introspective, self-centred diaries with Hélène Berr's anguished, fearful and defiant testimony of anti-Semitic persecution before requesting that the reader (at least) reserves moral judgement: 'Mais chaque journal suit sa ligne, et il n'en fait rien déduire sur l'auteur' (Lejeune, 2009:1).

David Boal's 1993 *Journaux intimes sous l'Occupation* (still surprisingly enough the only monograph written specifically about Occupation diaries) also overlooks the potential of civilian diaries to disclose mental distress and strategies of coping. Boal sets out, he claims, to identify the panoply of private opinions which manifested in public behaviour during the Occupation. But he is interested in thoughts and feelings about cultural and political issues of well-known cultural and political figures, like Ernst Junger, whose diary is 'un travail extrêmement dense et riche orné de maintes réflexions culturelles et d'observations historiques' (Boal, 1993: 10). Boal tells us little about the general civilian population's everyday engagement with the Occupation and nothing about how its psychological disposition might be revealed in its diaries.

Madeleine Blaess writes about the military and political face of Occupation right at the beginning of her diary in October and November 1940 and again from June 6 1944 until the Liberation. However between these dates she does so rarely, fearing that if the diary is found she might risk being interned like her Canadian friend Ruth Camp who had been arrested by Vichy police in front of her in their shared flat in December 1940. Blaess's

French nationality (and papers) had saved her from the same fate. Until she is certain of Allied victory she vows not to mention 'les événements politiques' again in the diary and instead writes, with scarcely a gap, an extraordinarily detailed account of the morale-sapping struggle of everyday life during the Occupation and her fragile mental health. Physical illness, material shortages, loneliness, fear that she or her parents might die before they see one another again are recurring triggers for mental strain. Fear of dying of malnutrition or of TB (an epidemic across Paris and rife among friends and family) is constant as is the physical discomfort of the bitter cold without heating or adequate winter clothing or shoes. Pleasurable social activities are rare. The astronomical cost of food means little disposable income for outings to the theatre or cinema and staying indoors is a misery too with no electric light to read by and no candles. Paper, envelopes and ink for writing are often hard to come by. Even the doctorate she came to Paris to study for is disrupted. She has to prioritise working to support herself because she can no longer cash her bourse. Life is not about living, realising ambitions, taking opportunities. It is about physical and psychological survival.

The field of psychiatry and linguistic theory offers a useful theoretical frame for an examination of the writing strategies Blaess uses in her diary to control the anxiety and depression she struggles with through the Occupation. In his article *Diaries, Self-Talk, and Psychosis: Writing as a Place to Live* Brendan Stone draws on the work of Benveniste, Anthony Kerby, Derrida and Lacan to locate self-identity and subjectivity in a 'lexical reservoir' of language. For Stone it is entirely logical that diary writing should be a strategy used to bolster and preserve self-identity when mental pressure threatens to cause it to fragment but, he ventures, the process is more complicated than simply reinforcing a sense of properly existing by writing one's 'voice on the page'. He looks closely at how specific qualities of the writing 'voice' dynamically and palliatively address well-known triggers and symptoms of mental illness and it is here that we find interesting resonances with the Blaess diary. For Stone, diary writing which looks to strengthen or rebuild self-identity under threat



from mental distress always looks to engage ‘with the social’. (Stone, 2006: 52). The texts of his case studies are ‘preoccupied with other people’ and have ‘an acute awareness of others’ and often are addressed to imaginary readers, occasionally as letters (Stone, 2006: 52). The diary writers thus situate themselves ‘at the centre of a web of care, an interpersonal network of others’ but Stone, borrowing Vygotsky’s theory of egocentric speech first expounded in *Thought and Language* in 1934 goes a little further to claim that diary writing is a ‘public’ writing; a ‘self-talk’ typically associated with children who create monologic narratives both for themselves and for a listening audience and not just a private, closed-off inner-speech vulnerable to ‘the hostile energies’ of the ‘thinker’ (Stone, 2006: 54).

The first of several diary writing strategies used by Blaess to manage her mental health corresponds with Stone’s idea that a diary can be used to create, preserve or reinstate a social subject in the face of identity disintegration. Blaess explicitly gives her diary a social purpose and imposes herself as the social subject described by Stone. She wants it to describe ‘les autres’ and ‘les choses’ rather than her ‘états d’âme’ (Blaess, June 23 1944) and most of her diary entries have social content. Hundreds of people’s names are noted down and with them the nature of the interaction she has with them. Every letter sent and every letter received is recorded. Even when there is no social prompt in the immediate she evokes one by way of nostalgic recollections of familial togetherness or of university life at Leeds, or of the kindly nuns at the Bar convent in York where she went as a child. From the very outset she assigns the diary a social purpose as the replacement for letters she can no longer send to her parents arranging its first page to resemble that of letters sent to them between November 1939 and June 1940. In the top right hand corner of the page of the first entry on October 1 1940 she writes her address and then a first line greeting, ‘cher papa, chère maman.’ Blaess’s letter-diary concept eases the distress of separation from her parents and loneliness both of which are felt keenly throughout the Occupation. In the same entry she writes: ‘C’est pour vous que j’écris ceci’ she writes, ‘car je ne peux plus vous envoyer des lettres, alors voici ce

que je vous écris pour remplacer [...] voici longtemps que je voulais le faire, car c'est un moyen de me sentir plus près de vous'. The diary prose style which consistently references an interlocutor resembles very closely the intimate conversation Blaess 'shares' with her mother in the letters and the choice of French as the diary language supports the notion of an ongoing dialogue. These long 2000 word letters sent twice weekly by Blaess from Les Marronniers, the pension on the Rue d'Assas during the Phoney War are lighter in mood than the diary but their content is broadly similar. Blaess reproduces her 'everyday' in parcels and snippets of information which she knows will interest, delight or merely solicit the maternal concern of the mother reader. Similarly, in the diary, there is delightful unselfconscious 'chatter' about the budding and blooming of flora and foliage, the vagaries of the weather, family gossip, the charming and irritating idiosyncrasies of friends and work colleagues, the food shopping miseries of rutabaga, ersatz coffee, wormy bread and vexed lists itemising rationing restrictions and so on and so forth. The social contact Blaess creates with her mother through her diary prose is an evocation of the domestic experiences shared between them and as such bears a similarity with the Victorian women's diary type described by Cynthia Huff as a private diary space which becomes a public space when it is accompanied by memorabilia; material objects and artefacts which 'resonate with the rituals and practices that bound a community together.' (Huff, 2008: 25-40). Huff links the use of evocative memorabilia in diaries with Silke Wenk's idea that 'imagined communities' can be constructed around 'cultural representations' which connect 'perceptions, emotions and memories of individuals with those of the collective [to] signify belonging (Wenk, 2000: 63-64). Blaess does not introduce material artefacts into her diary but she does include in her text 'representations [...] practices and rituals' (Wenk, 2000) of a gendered behavioural code which, if one were to apply Huff and Wenk's analysis, could be said to bind her to the collective of all women and through them to the mother. Blaess is trying to evoke the comforting presence of the mother through written evocation of a common experience

intensely focussed on the domestic realm with its meticulous descriptions of cleaning, cooking, shopping, darning and lists of rationing and budgetary information. It is a gesture which resonates with Luce Giard's idea that recipe books can conjure up the voices of forgotten women 'sans écriture' through the 'savoir-faire' of culinary practices passed down the generations from woman to woman: 'le poème des mots traduit celle des gestes, qu'à votre écriture de recettes et de saveurs correspond une écriture de paroles et de lettres'. For Luce Giard, the repetition of the gestures of these invisible, forgotten women through cookery books constitutes 'une fidélité matérielle', an act of love to her mother, to all 'les femmes scolarisées à la génération de mes grand-mères' which is 'plus profonde' than words (Giard, 1994:216-17). That Blaess may be evoking the mother through repeated written description of domestic activities is a good fit with what Stone says about how a suffering writing-subject can conjure a palliative social presence in diaries. Many of the entries about housework, cooking, gardening, darning and studying are often accompanied with stern admonishments to do more and to do it better. The 'everyday' subject matter reinstates Blaess the daughter and the parental disciplinarian to whom Blaess can mentally relinquish control. It is a dynamic at its most vivid when the epistolary format fades and when the mother addressee is replaced by an imaginary interlocutor who Blaess, familiar with Freud, describes as the other half of a split self; a kind of ego and super-ego reining in the spontaneous, selfish excesses of the ID. On 19 October 1943 she writes: '[...] car j'ai deux moi. Un qui m'aime et ne pense qu'à mon confort, et l'autre, c'est le contraire. Et le premier m'obéit presque toujours quand le 2 se manifeste - je pourrais même dire qu'il obéit toujours. Souvent même j'ai l'impression de ne pas être libre, qu'il faut obéir - si parfois je contreviens, je me sens fautive et inquiète jusqu'à la punition - une tuile qui ne tarde pas à tomber'. But, in a diary where Blaess constantly looks to restore her mother's presence (through the epistolary connection & evocations of shared experience but also simply through members of the extended family who look and sound like her) the 'Super Ego' may double

up as a projection of maternal authority and an illusion of security and safety. On other occasions, the evocation of the parents enables Blaess to self-empower as their protector; shielding them from worry by minimising difficulties in the same way she had done in her final letters home in May and June 1940 playing down the chaos and danger and cheerfully promising that she'll be heading up the 'Great North Road' within a week when most of her student friends had already fled Paris in panic (Blaess, Letters, 25 May 1940). She produces the same performatively therapeutic writing in the diary. She describes difficulties but minimises their seriousness. How would she afford books, coal, course fees without her grant she worriedly 'asks' her parents before meeting the questions with her own reassuring rejoinders: 'La vie n'est pas si délicieuse lorsqu'on regarde son porte-monnaie. Cette lutte pour l'existence sera bonne pour moi, à qui tout a été trop facile, grâce à vos privations, mon Daddy et ma Mummy; « let the weakest go to the wall », et si j'hérite de votre sang, je survivrai' (Blaess, October 1940).

Blaess thus creates what Stone describes as a social presence to palliate isolation and alienation and one which constitutes at turns an empowering and infantilising remedy for stress and anxiety. The reinstatement of the mother/daughter relationship by way of an evocation of a shared domestic context also links with Stone's idea, inspired by Blanchot's 1969 text *The Infinite Conversation*, that the subject loses a sense of self in an everyday 'being state' where speech cannot bolster a 'sovereign ego' but is 'absent-minded and unaware of itself' because the everyday 'tends unerringly to weigh down into things' undermining the subject who is overwhelmed by 'an unconstrained flow of impressions' s/he cannot rationalise (1993: 245). Particularly vulnerable, he writes, is the subject 'labouring in a monotonous existence who has only the everyday because it is s/he for whom 'the everyday is most heavy' (1993:244). Stone, looking to Richard Jenkins (1996:40) and Louis Sass (1998:491), talks of his diarists resisting the alienation of the everyday by using their diaries to reinstate their 'shattered selfhoods' through adopting a 'position from which to speak' in

their texts; they shore up their self-identity by ‘assuming the subject position of an I within language; speaking or writing as an I (Stone, 2006: 48). Stone’s ideas are extremely useful for analysing the meticulous record of the banal everyday which dominates Blaess’s diary criticised at the time by friends for its un-intellectual ‘détails d’ordre presque ménagers’ (Blaess, 23 June 1944) when diaries of the educated were fashionably meditative and reflective. Blaess’s struggle with ‘everyday’ deprivation was certainly ‘monotonous’ and ‘heavy’. It was also fraught with anxiety. Like virtually all Parisians, each day was a battle to find food to eat. Her ‘food’ entry of 3 April 1941 is not untypical: ‘En revenant, Dilys venait chez-moi. On verge of nervous break-down. Toute suite chez Dilys m’a donné carte viande George et un œuf’. Food anxiety is one aspect of the everyday Blaess tries to control by making it, and all aspects of everyday life connected with it, an entry in the diary and entries, with few exceptions, show a ‘coping’ and resourceful self. Outside of the many accounts of shopping excursions of varying success are the ruses and strategies she employs to get food, how she manages to pay or pay in kind for it and how she prepares the often barely edible foodstuffs she does come by. She describes bartering wine and cigarette ration tickets for food, pooling food supplies with friends, swapping a surplus food item for one lacking or trading against English lessons or typing services. Every new set of ration measures is noted down and compared with the previous one. The absence of food is also logged. The bleak phrase ‘pas de ravitaillement à Paris’<sup>1</sup> repeats daily over an entire week between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> of February 1942. Food is but one example of where Blaess’s meticulous logging of the everyday might be seen as a means to exercise objective control over it by reinforcing herself as ‘articulating subject’. She appears to do the same with distressing social interactions. The overwhelming everyday threatening to swamp Stone’s diarists encompasses people and

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<sup>1</sup> 7-14 February 1942

voices which his diarists find menacing and his case studies fight off the intrusion of hostile voices by writing down a voice that they identify as properly their own thereby resisting ‘suffocation and non-being’ by making a self-aware record of what is happening (Stone, 2006:50). Blaess’s diligent descriptions of distressing or mentally exacting social interactions complete with verbatim dialogue also suggest that she is trying to assert control particularly as the objects of the text are often diminished within acerbic and caricatural descriptions. Very few actors in Blaess’s text are spared whether it is ‘sickly’ former boyfriend Jean relentlessly pressuring her for sex, Michael, the hapless suitor and ‘ass’ with ‘yeux de poisson frit’ (Blaess, March 2 1941), domineering Tante Violette, the ever-selfish next-door neighbour Dilys who only calls when she wants something, or lesbian Ruth who reminds her of a red, green mottled snake in need of a pole to wrap herself round (Blaess, June 1 1942). Relationships, be they with men, with female friends and with her extended family are invariably a source of stress, particularly when she feels under pressure to please or to compromise her own desires. She writes of cherishing solitude and silence for peace of mind and calm: ‘L’extérieur vient, crie, se force sur votre attention, empiète, comme une foule dans un garden-party, foule la pelouse et écrase les fleurs [...] Mais la solitude ? Le bruit meurt, et dans le silence de l’âme, on distingue une foule de choses....’[...]‘Ce n’est que là qu’on puisse trouver sa propre mesure’ (Blaess, August 13 1943).

Troubling encounters with the everyday are also reflected in the structuring of Blaess’s text. She accords great importance to routine, order and accuracy chiding herself for scruffy handwriting, for missed and inaccurate entries to which she returns to scatter with corrective annotations. There is an intensification of this zealotry during states of heightened anxiety and Blaess dissolves boundaries between diary space and living space with the tidiness and neatness of both diary and flat being conflated into a single necessary ‘tidying’ task. Stone’s idea that the writing subject tries to control the sensory overload of

the everyday still applies but the quest for control is so emphatic that it becomes controlling of Blaess herself. Indeed, in the summer of 1941 there are hints in the diary that Blaess may be suffering from an obsessive compulsive disorder which becomes manifest in the writing she employs to try to control it. Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) has been little written about in connection with diary or memoir writing yet it is an anxiety disorder which causes sufferers to ‘adopt various behavior patterns in unsuccessful efforts to institute control in their lives’ (Jacobson, 2001: 6). The American Psychiatric Association attempts to arrive at a definition of this complex condition by listing common symptoms through what it calls ‘repetitive behaviors’. These include ‘hand washing, ordering, checking’ or what it calls ‘mental acts’ like ‘praying, counting, repeating words silently’ which aim to ‘prevent or reduce anxiety or distress’. The compulsions it claims to be the most common are ‘washing and cleaning, counting, checking, requesting or demanding assurances, repeating actions and ordering’ (ASA, 1994: 418). Washing and cleaning, counting and ordering’ are the most prevalent in Blaess’s diary along with a newer, more recently recognized manifestation of the disorder; hoarding. Hoarding could be viewed as a pathological analogy for Blaess’s meticulously comprehensive logging of everyday trivia. Certainly, it would appear to map onto definitions of hoarding as an attempt to (re)gain control by removing objects from temporality, from history and to ‘immortalize the present’ in the face, one would suppose, of fear of the everyday and fear of the future. (Cefalu, 2015: 224). The hoarding analogy articulates as pathology Stone’s idea of the diary writer trying to stop the disorientating, saturating flow of external stimuli by writing everything down and there are other examples of behaviours redolent of OCD appear to coincide with Blaess’s heightened states of anxiety. On 25 August 1941, Blaess, who says of herself, ‘m’en fous de tout. Suis trop fatiguée mentalement’ wearily describes the appearance everywhere of red, white and yellow posters announcing hostage taking, executions and rewards for the denunciation of saboteurs. This entry evolves into the first of a series of lists beginning with names of colleagues she works

with at the Bibliothèque nationale and then a second list of new rationing measures and the next seven days of diary entries are dominated by lists of cleaning and tidying activities. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of September, Blaess has ‘rangé pour nettoyer’, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September, she has ‘nettoyé cabinet de toilette’, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of September she has ‘frotté à la paille de fer’ and on the 5<sup>th</sup> she has ‘rangé chambre’. In the spring of 1943 there is a suggestion that OCD tidying compulsions might also extend to the very purpose of writing the diary. On 1 April 1943, the day Joseph Vendryès the Sorbonne's Dean of the Faculty of Arts was forced to hand over the registration details of all foreign students (including Blaess) to the police she suddenly decides to ‘tidy’ her diary by copying it out: ‘Vais manger tartine pain et beurre (bien qu’extravagance) et me remettrai à recopier diary. C’est beaucoup plus propre ainsi. Je raccommoierai ce soir à la lampe’. Two days later, on Saturday April 3, she writes, in English, that she is ‘On verge of nervous break-down’.

Because the Blaess diary is written over such a long period of time and not in response to a specific and short-lived crisis, the ‘daughter’ reconstruction exists in parallel with the emergence of an incompatible strong, mature and older independent self. Severe anxiety results from the clash between the two which becomes more pronounced when Blaess first begins to countenance her return home in the summer of 1943. Blaess imagines her father making her give up her studies. She transcribes dreams where she is beaten and imprisoned by a brutish husband who burns all her books and makes her pregnant to stop her leaving him (Blaess, October 30 1943). Alongside these anxious imaginings she sets out her feelings very lucidly. She has lived through far too much pain to be the dutiful daughter she once was: ‘Voilà la grande chose lâchée. Je suis sûre que je pourrais me mettre la main au feu, que dans le fond de leur cœur ils espèrent que rien n’est changé, que la vie reprendra comme avant dans le petit cercle serré à trois – quatre avec le chien. [...] j’ai été trop près de la misère et la mort pour pouvoir être comme avant. Et je ne pense pas comme mes Parents. Et ma liberté ???’ (Blaess, August 15 1943). It is, here, late in the diary where Blaess draws on



reading matter to help her order her thoughts and calm her mind. Reading was one of the most intensely pursued leisure pursuits of the war and in diaries of the period, like those written by Geneviève Gennari and H  l  ne Berr both student contemporaries of Blaess at the Sorbonne, it was therapeutically escapist. Gennari imagines safe refuge from distress in a parallel world of literature: 'Il y a des moments o   les bruits s'apaisent autour de moi, et o   je me trouve calme et certaine, souriante int  rieurement [...] je fais partie du plus beau royaume qui soit sous le ciel: celui de la litt  rature' (Gennari, September 18 1940: 40) H  l  ne Berr seeks comfort in Martin du Gard's descriptions of astral magnificence in *Les Thibault   pilogue* (1940) after the deportation of her best friend Fran  oise Bernheim and quotes directly from the text : 'j'ai pu penser    ma mort avec une esp  ce de calme, d'indiff  rence transcendante. D  livr   de l'angoisse, devenu presque   tranger    mon organisme p  rissable' (H  l  ne Berr, 2008 : 208) Jean Gu  henno pictures himself as Rousseau and imagines that he is living Confessions and the Occupation in parallel in order that he might be guided by his hero: 'je suis aid   par le sujet m  me. En vivant comme je le fais la vie de mon h  ros, jour apr  s jour, il m'arrive d'  tre aussi curieux du lendemain qu'il pouvait l'  tre lui-m  me' (Gu  henno, 1947: 242). Ella Ophir's article 'The Diary and the Commonplace Book: Self-Inscription in The Note Books of A Woman Alone' is a rare critical examination of why diarists invest their writing with traces of what they read. Ophir writes very interestingly about how her diarist case-study Evelyn Wilson, living in the mid-1930s, compiles extracts from novels in a throwback to a nineteenth century style of diary writing known as 'commonplace' where writers assembled fragments of their reading interspersed with their own writing. In the case of Evelyn Wilson, the author of *The Note Books* where over half of the 300 pages comprise texts, transcribed or memorised, Ophir finds a 'form of diaristic writing that lays bare how individual self-definition is forged through inter-subjective reflection' (Ophir, 2015: 43). She describes how 'Wilson's collecting was bound up with the intimate purposes of her diary writing' spotting that the texts she (re)uses 'address [...] the

acutely felt experiences and conditions that dominate her own entries: the position of women, systematic poverty and injustice, family power structures, the vulnerability of children, psychological damage, social isolation, the significance of home, and countervailing all this, the satisfactions of independence and the resources of mind and spirit in the face of duress' (Ophir, 2015:45). Interestingly for our purposes of looking for strategies to manage mental illness, Ophir claims that the key to this writing was the spirit of 'self-improvement and self-help' and evokes Rita Felski's notion in *Uses of Literature* that 'we evolve our senses of affiliation and of individual distinction within and through the acknowledgement of others, and for those who are marginalised and alienated, the experience of recognition in books may provide [...] "a solace and relief not to be found elsewhere" and an "assurance that they are not alone"' (Ophir, 2015:47). Ophir describes this process as 'reading for recognition'; a process of shaping the self [...] lending higher definition and solidity to incompletely formulated experiences and feelings' (Ophir, 2015: 48). Evelyn Wilson, Ophir's diarist, explicitly used reading as a remedy for anguish. 'I was obliged in my reading to look for a reason for an assurance that my pain was pain not hysteria, not a mind morbidly inclined'(Ophir, 2015: 49). Blaess 'reads for recognition'. She does not transcribe from the books she reads but she assimilates their prose styles and themes into her own diary text. She looks for recognition in the writing of British 'middlebrow' women writers and does so in a number of respects. Blaess, anxious about her future career prospects, may have been attracted to the genre because the writers were successful, reassuring role-models with an academic background similar to her own; Dorothy Sayers and Rosamond Lehmann were Oxbridge language graduates. Winifred Holtby and Vera Brittain both graduated in History from Somerville College. These women were also writing about the conflict between society's enduringly traditional and limited horizons for women and women's post Great War and post suffrage ambitions for social mobility and career fulfillment outside of the home and this was conflict, as we will see, Blaess also felt keenly. Initially, however, Blaess uses her

reading simply to relieve the distress of homesickness. She says that she reads Winifred Holtby's *South Riding* just to see Yorkshire place names in print: 'cela me rechauffe le coeur que de revoir imprimé Leeds -York' (Blaess March 26 1943). On 2 October 1941, 'restless [. . .] bored, ennuyé et assez de tout' she reads Holtby's *Pavements at Anderby* (1937) and immediately afterwards, in the only passage of English in the diary, fashions a sentimental description of the North Yorkshire landscape in the style of Holtby's prose:

C'est elle qui a écrit « *South Riding* » - Je l'aime car elle parle de Yorkshire, le pays que je connais et que j'aime. C'est là que je vais m'en ( ?) retourner, avec ses couches de soleil magnifiques, green pastures, grey skies – windy ridges and grey stone walls. Cold, sharp coldness but joy. Lambs wagging their tails at their mother's teat. The wind and the spray at Robin. The smell of baking, and the sight of steps edged with white or ochre. Choosing a sheltered spot for the lilac. The lupins and the laburnum. Weeding in an old red mac and pulling up the clover meandering round and wandering after its roots and tendrils. Miss M like a rose in her white satin blouse. A good coal fire and the smell of toast (Blaess October 2 1941)

Rather curiously, Blaess also appears to adapt to this text a passage from Rosamond Lehmann's novel *Dusty Answer*. She chooses a scene and character she can identify with in Lehmann's heroine, the homesick undergraduate student Judith, who, staring out of her hall quarters across the bleak Cambridgeshire flatlands after a first alienating experience of college dinner evokes a scene of home bearing remarkable similarities to that evoked by Blaess. Given that Blaess was an avid reader and re-reader of Lehmann, the similarity is unlikely to have been a coincidence:

Now shut your eyes and see the garden at home, the summer sun wildly rich on the lawn, hear the hot whirr and pause of the mowing machine; smell the mown grass mixed with the smell of roses and pinks and lavender; see the white butterflies dancing above the herbaceous border; see Mamma, going slowly up the steps with a basket of sweet peas, pause and draw up the striped Venetian blind; because now it is evening; the sun is behind the massed toppling dark-green luxuriance of the unmoving chestnut trees, has drained its last ray out of the rooms and left them warm, throbbing and wan (Lehmann, 1937: 111)

Blaess's recycling of the Middlebrow through her diary writing assumes a more complex and subtle psychological purpose two years later in the summer of 1943 when Allied victory is so confidently expected that Parisians are predicting dates for the débarquement. It is no coincidence that this period of anxiety coincides with a period during which Blaess intensively reads Holtby, Lehmann and other women 'Middlebrow' novelists of the inter-war. When Blaess writes anxiously about obstacles to her future ambitions she reflects the anxiety which unifies middlebrow heroines and underpins narratives across the genre. As literary historian Nicola Humble points out, Middlebrow heroines were conscious of the exciting possibilities for professional and personal fulfillment beyond marriage and maternity but were susceptible to the pressures not to pursue them (Humble, 2001: 1-6). Their narratives are about freedoms tantalisingly glimpsed but unable to be realised or, if they are, then they are tempered by reprobation and isolation. From October 1942 through to September 1943 Blaess rereads *Dusty Answer* (1927), *A Note in Music*, (1930) *Invitation to the Waltz* (1932) and *The Crowded Street* (1924), novels by Holtby and Lehmann in which the young female central characters struggle to assert their own ambitions in the face of pressure to pursue 'sex-success'; social mobility through marriage. In the summer of 1943, Blaess's anxiety about going home is at its height and in August she writes 'Moi, j'ai une frousse affreuse de l'après-guerre. Je veux de tout cœur que la guerre finisse. Mais après?? Où vivre? Que faire? Que

deviendrai-je?? Où me serait-il permis de vivre? Pourrais-je trouver du travail chez-moi?? (Blaess, August 15 1943). On September 9<sup>th</sup> she reads *The Crowded Street* (1924), perhaps the most synonymous with the predicament she envisages for herself, in which the heroine Muriel rejects marriage prospects in her Yorkshire village and escapes to London bohemia. *The Crowded Street* is typical of the Middlebrow work of Holtby and Lehmann in particular in as much as it problematises this liberty by implying that it comes at the price of a future which is uncertain, frightening and potentially very lonely. Blaess appears to find neither solace nor guidance in these novels which are evaluated not with the customary 'bien' or 't.bien' she reserves for her other reading but with 'déprimée'. When she does not find the comfort she is looking for, she lifts the tropes of the Middlebrow into her own prose narrative and writes a kinder, reassuring and, interestingly, more modern future for herself around them. She chooses the home as her setting mirroring the middlebrow novel where, as Nicola Humble points out, the home is often the backdrop to the angst and frustrations of the middlebrow heroine because the home is the most realistic end-point for the ambitions of middle-class educated women (Humble, 2001: 1-6). Blaess does not re-structure any particular text but, retaining the central trope of the 'middlebrow domestic' she places herself in a future fictional world from which all anxiety over a woman's rightful place and role has been smoothed away. She defiantly projects a fantasy of a future domestic environment where all her anxieties about career, marriage, children and a place of her own are resolved. There are floor plans, with study space for her and for a husband. The bedrooms and recreational space for children anticipate a life of affective and professional fulfilment, financial security and independence:

Et après essai de job à l'université (je ne sais pas si je l'aurai) puis mariage avec un professeur de préférence un chimiste. Puis une grande maison à la campagne, avec poules, grands jardins, verger, etc. J'hésite entre deux plans : Ils ne sont pas merveilleux, les halls sont trop grands, l'escalier est très difficile à placer – Enfin,

vaguement, je n'ai pas tout à fait la proportion. J'aimerais un aquarium, mais encastré dans une fenêtre, et illuminé la nuit. Pourquoi pas ? Et une salle de bains pour chaque chambre. Un bureau pour mon mari, un bureau pour moi, et beaucoup de chambres car, au moins quatre enfants, please God. Autrement la maison des Brown n'est pas trop mal, mais je préfère la porte d'entrée devant. Et il faut un lavabo en bas avec des placards, etc pour que les enfants pendent leurs habits et se lavent les mains avant d'entrer. Chauffage central partout, mais aussi feux. Cuisson au nord, et réfrig. Longue fenêtre au-dessus sink etc. Que de rêves!! Aussi lingerie avec grands placards, eau, sink, machine à coudre, table, etc etc, etc, divan car elle servirait aussi d'infirmerie – il le faut s'il y a beaucoup d'enfants (Blaess, October 10 1943).

Madeleine's narrative is, like the Middlebrow, sited in the domestic environment and replete with objects connoting identity and pleasure but it is much more modern, more demanding and it expunges the doubt and anxiety of the middlebrow whilst leaving the positives of the domestic intact. The passage, with allusions to comfort, warmth and plenitude in the countryside is of course a fantasy antidote to the grey, cold deprivation of wartime Paris but it also resolves the worries of the middlebrow heroine. There is no place here for the troubling spectre of dysfunctional marriage or no marriage at all. There's no place either for fears that marriage and compulsory motherhood will enforce a renouncement of career plans. Blaess envisions a nuptial academic bliss with separate study rooms for her and her scientist husband. Madeleine thus writes a happy-end for herself, the middlebrow heroine of her own diary. But, when one looks back, to the letters she wrote during the Phoney War in 1939, one can see that even then, as a young recent graduate she was clear about what was a rightful expectation. She would have a career and she would marry. She'd have it all: 'Et si je fais du travail assez remarquable, je ferais comme nos prédécesseuses (Norah et moi nous avons décidé cela) quand on se mariera, on gardera aussi notre nom de jeune fille. Mille

Sjoestedt est devenue Mme Sjoestedt-Jonval ; Mlle Borodine est devenue Mlle Lot-Borodine  
 – alors pour quoi pas moi Mme Blaess-Untel? (Blaess, Letters, February 9 1940)

Madeleine Blaess made a final diary entry, ‘Messe. Acheté dahlias feu. Vu Françoise’, on September 17 1944 and she finally returned to Britain and to her parents in York in January 1945; a return evidenced only by a letter sent to bookseller Sylvia Beach asking for news of Jewish friend Françoise Bernheim, deported and murdered in Auschwitz in September 1943. Blaess’s unique diary narrative forsakes the more familiar military drama to embed a rare and precious testimony of the causes and nature of psychological strain during the war years in Paris within the ‘trivial’ minutiae of everyday life. The descriptive approach she adopts and the material she gathers disclose a wealth of data about the triggers for mental distress. The writing strategies she employs to manage that distress suggest fresh methodological possibilities for revealing hidden ‘interior’ narratives in hitherto neglected life-writing texts. The psychological battle has largely been the hidden battle of civilian life during the Occupation; a battle largely consigned to the private sphere of letter and diary writing and oral testimonies. An interrogation of these silent battles may well unveil more about the roots of from which post-war silences grew. Already, in August 1943 Blaess writes of her shame and guilt that she did not contribute more to the fight against the enemy. Her struggle was too great, too overwhelming for her to have energy for anything other than her own survival. The entry is defiant and unabashed, regretful and apologetic. Above all, she tries to explain:

Moi je n’aurai rien fait pour hâter la guerre vers sa fin, je n’aurai mené qu’une dense lutte pour l’existence, pour ne pas crever de faim et l’abrutissement, je ne me suis pas battue pour d’autres. Je suis seule dans une lutte pour ma vie, les seules personnes qui m’aiment sont trop loin, je n’ai pas le réconfort que je lutte

épaule contre épaule pour une chose meilleure, ou même contre un ennemi. Pour moi, l'ennemi c'est la faim, le froid, le manque d'argent. [...] « qu'avez-vous fait pendant la guerre ? » « J'ai essayé de ne pas mourir de faim ». Quelle belle réponse héroïque – assez, assez – J'ai tout de même appris un peu à vivre, et je n'ai pas édifié ma vie sur la ruine des autres.

After the war, Blaess worked briefly for the Ministry of Information in 1946 although nothing is known about her role there. In 1948, she obtained her first academic post as a lecturer in the French Department at the University of Sheffield, teaching Medieval studies until her retirement in 1983. She did not complete her PhD thesis on Merlin but continued to research and to publish in the field of Arthurian legend maintaining strong links with the Department of French until her death in 2003 at the age of 85. She left her books and papers to the University of Sheffield and when her house was cleared, her diary was found hidden underneath her bed alongside the letters she has written to her parents from Paris during the Phoney War.

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<sup>1</sup> Blaess Journal October 1 1940.