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Holocaust in Literary and Cultural Studies

Przemysław CZAPLIŃSKI

The Holocaust as a Challenge
for Literary Reflection

Joanna TOKARSKA-BAKIR

Prodigal Son Ten Years Later

Tomasz MAJEWSKI

Das Ereignis Auschwitz

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A Holocaust Soap
and the Story of Its Production

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Exiting the Grave

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Index of Content

Holocaust in Literary and Cultural Studies

Anna NASIŁOWSKA	
Introduction	6
Przemysław CZAPLIŃSKI	
The Holocaust as a Challenge for Literary Reflection	13
Aleksandra UBERTOWSKA	
“Invisible Testimonies” The Feminist Perspective in Holocaust Literature Studies	27
Dorota KRAWCZYŃSKA	
Empathy? Substitution? Identification?: How Should We Read Texts About the Holocaust?	39
Dorota GŁOWACKA	
“Like an Echo Without a Source”: Subjectivity as Witnessing and the Holocaust Narrative	50
Joanna TOKARSKA-BAKIR	
Prodigal Son Ten Years Later	68
Tomasz MAJEWSKI	
Das Ereignis Auschwitz	83
Zofia MITOSEK	
An Event That Never Happened: The Holocaust for the Masses	91

Eugenia PROKOP-JANIEC	
Jew, Pole, Artist: Constructing Identity After the Holocaust.	99
Marta (MŁODKOWSKA) JANCZEWSKA	
Ghetto Trajectories. Writing about personal experiences in the Warsaw Ghetto journals (Abraham Lewin, Rachela Auerbach, Janusz Korczak)	113
Jacek LEOCIAK	
Exiting the Grave.	132
Bożena SHALLCROSS	
A Holocaust Soap and the Story of Its Production	149
Tomasz ŻUKOWSKI	
Savoir-vivre: Ironic Strategies in Calek Perechodnik's Confession	166
Andrzej LEŚNIAK	
The problem of formal analysis of the representations of the Holocaust. Georges Didi-Huberman's Images in Spite of All and Harun Farocki's Respite.	182
Katarzyna BOJARSKA	
The Art of Impossible Possibility.	203
Maciej LECIŃSKI	
"Elimination of the advantage." Empathy and the work of mourning in Marek Bieńczyk's Tworki	214

New Challenges of Holocaust Research

We should begin by stating what the presented collection of articles and essays published after the year 2000 in Teksty Drugie is not. It is neither a complete overview of the Polish Holocaust research nor the presentation of the main Holocaust debates in Poland – these are still taking place. In 2000, we did not voice our opinion in the famous dispute which resulted from Jan Tomasz Gross' book Neighbors treating of the slaughter in Jedwabne because it was carried on in the media of much wider range. We did not perform reviews of new historical and literary works on the subject and, although the time passes and the circle of witnesses decreases, there have been surprisingly many of them. The launch of the quarterly Zagłada Żydów gave space to numerous historical, factographic and theoretical publications. Giving our magazine – dedicated to literature, anthropological reflection, and philosophy of word – a professional character, maintaining the academic nature of the reflection and keeping away from the main tensions emerging in the collective discourse allows us to be low-key which is advisable when such a theme is touched upon but difficult to reach when there are emotions involved. Above all, our situation enables methodological reflection, which seems indispensable in view of ethical challenges posed by the Holocaust literature. We stand for the continuity of the reflection on the Holocaust; the continuity, however, also assumes changeability in time and necessity to constantly renew interpretations.

The reader of this volume will not receive either a complete picture or a portion of new historical findings. Reading the selected texts, one could learn from allusions placed on the margin of the core deliberation, what publications, writers, and artistic approaches in Polish literature are linked with the Holocaust and what is the rank of this subject among other themes prevailing in the 20th century. This is caused by the sense of continuity and the common feeling that the new, younger generation of writers who currently speak their mind, has access to a certain, already established, intellectual landscape but they still need to pose several preliminary, yet fundamental questions. The position of a witness or a participant of events secured some privileges which resulted from having a given point of view; at the moment, however, generation-wise, very few researchers and writers belong to the generation of people who went through the experience of war with full awareness. This is why there is an urgent need to establish rigours and conditions connected with the Holocaust discourse.

One might have an impression that there is certain reluctance to use elementary source texts. They first appeared in the Polish literature of the 1940's. They did not enter the international canon (like Anna Frank's Diary), but they are discussed in secondary schools and it is impossible to graduate without being acquainted with Tadeusz Borowski's short stories, early poems by Tadeusz Różewicz or Zofia Nałkowska's Medallions (among the texts included in this collection, Nałkowska's work is analyzed by Bożena Shallcross). The phenomena have already obtained their canonical readings and interpretations.

In the context of Tadeusz Różewicz's output, Polish critics often quote Theodor Adorno's expression: "to create poetry after Auschwitz" referred to by the Polish poet in one of his pieces as it seems to describe well the problems of his own aesthetics. There is not much to add here. Replacing this classic interpretation with anything else seems impossible. The objective of "creating poetry after Oświęcim" is paradoxical – the world has been emptied, beauty could be a lie and words may be a sign of haughtiness and indifference. The experience of mass death is indeed indescribable and literature in which this theme is taken up should stop at the threshold of inexpressibility and unveil its impotence. The poetics of Różewicz's works – operating with the simplest forms and being anti-aesthetic – fulfils this objective.

In his book Fight for Breath (in the chapter devoted to Adorno's paradox), Tadeusz Drewnowski, a critic belonging to the oldest generation of today, who has accompanied Różewicz and Borowski for years, wrote,

While the theory and terminology related with the paradox (not mentioning the underlying historical facts) were of foreign provenance, in practice, "poetry after Auschwitz" and the reflection over it was born in Poland – many years earlier and without any theoretical preparation. During the war (therefore also during Auschwitz) and shortly after the war – among numerous martyrological literary works – poetry was clearly standing out: first of all, it was written by young people such as Tadeusz Borowski, Jan Józef Szczepański, Tadeusz Różewicz czy Marek Edelman or Jan Strzelecki. Some elder writers followed a similar path: Adolf Rudnicki, the author of *The Epoch of the Ovens (Epoka pieców)*, Kornel Filipowicz, the author of *Unmoved Landscape (Krajobraz niewzruszony)* Leopold Buczkowski and his *Black Torrent (Czarny Potok)* and particularly Zofia Nałkowska and her *Medallions (Medaliony)*. Nonetheless, the main cognitive effort and the risk of moral heresy together with all the consequences fell to the

Holocaust in Literary and Cultural Studies

young... These young people – apart from their dates of birth (around 1920) and participation in the resistance movement – had nothing in common. There did not belong to one group. On the contrary, they lived in various parts of the country, believed in varied ideals, belonged to different, often antagonistic organizations, they experienced the war differently (conspiracy, partisan fight, the ghetto, the uprising; among the above mentioned figures, only Borowski survived Auschwitz, he committed suicide six years after the war). Although they did not constitute a community, they independently came to astonishingly identical diagnoses and conclusions with regards to their historical and personal experiences.¹

*I have quoted Drewnowski's overview because in Polish literary criticism, this collection of works and their interpretations have the status of unquestionable, obvious and inarguable, although they could be new to a non-Polish reader. The overview should be complemented by one additional comment: an after-the-war brochure written by Marek Edelman, the only commanding officer of the Warsaw Uprising who had survived the war, was later substituted by the later book *Shielding the Flame* (Zdążyć przed Panem Bogiem) by Hanna Krall – prepared on the basis of her conversations with Edelman and it is now on the list of school readings. Besides that, all of the above mentioned works were written, although not always published, in the 1940's. Further, the list was extended and among the most important literary pieces we need to mention works by two rescued authors: Bohdan Wojdowski and Henryk Grynberg.*

Since the beginning, silence has been inscribed in the literary structure of the story about the Holocaust: silence of victims unable to speak of death. What they have in common is factual realism, radicalism of opinions, the conviction of the tragic condition of the humanity, the need to challenge optimism and artistic innovation characteristic to Nelly Sachs or Paul Celan. The works still emanate cruelty achieved by minimalistic literary means. They are continuously shocking: I cannot forget a student who started to cry when she was asked about Medallions during her exam. Re-reading the book as an adult was much more traumatic than reading it for the first time – more superficially – at school. Emotional shock evoked by the book was so strong that it was difficult for her to tackle it.

Those literary interpretations were so intense that it seemed that the Holocaust literature would stop expanding because it would be difficult to go much further. Shock is of the absolute nature; it cannot be graded and planned in time. The above assumption was proved wrong: the last 20 years brought numerous works as many witnesses needed more time to restrain the trauma to such extent that they would be able to go back to it via storytelling; the generation of children of the Holocaust survivors also started to write. One of the examples of such later output are *Black Seasons* (Czarne sezony) by Michał Głowiński, a researcher for the *Teksty* magazine.

There was a discussion held for some time whether continuation of the Holocaust subject in literature after all participants of those events pass away would be at all possible; for instance, Hanna Krall, a writer who noted down people's accounts, ascertained that the subject should end at a certain moment because the only morally-grounded position is testimony; references to one's memory and experiences. According to the above claim

¹ T. Drewnowski, *Fight for Breath: Bio-poetics: On Tadeusz Różewicz's writings*, Cracow 2002, 63-64.

maintained by Dorota Kawczyńska, among younger scholars, fiction is impossible – lack of its validation equals the act of “making up,” the art of creating illusion and as such should be rejected in the context of the Holocaust theme.

This orthodox view was linked with realistic, almost report-like interpretations formulated in the 1940's. Tadeusz Borowski was arrested in Warsaw when he was searching for his fiancée Maria and taken to the concentration camp in 1943. Maria had Jewish origins but this fact remained unrevealed back then. After a while, Borowski managed to contact her via letters illegally smuggled to the women's camp – the same letters which were later included in his short stories. After arriving in Birkenau he observed “the death industry,” the conveyor belt: train platform – baths – crematory. Due to his Polish nationality, he was treated as physically exploited slavish manpower; at the same time, Jews were transported to camps from all over Europe.

Borowski's short stories present the reality of the camp as an organized system of the distorted community where ethics was degraded, whereas survival was only possible by “getting used” to the Holocaust, adjusting to inhuman rules. Borowski was a young, radical communist. Initially, his stories were received with disbelief and annotated with commentaries as they seemed too radical. According to the writer, the camp made all the values unsteady and nobody, who survived, should consider himself innocent; keeping to one's values in hell is an illusion. Undoubtedly, Borowski described what he saw and experienced; he gave his own name to the character in his stories. There are many other accounts from concentration camps, being of much less literary rank, which emphasized different attitudes: solidarity of prisoners, appeals to Catholic faith and heroism, therefore Borowski was at first accused of cynicism or even threatened with the court.

The debate concerning Borowski as well as – in different proportions – Różewicz is somewhat an “obligatory programme” for every student or beginning professor of Polish studies. There is no parallel here to the situation in Hungary where the fact of awarding Imre Kertész, who survived Auschwitz and Buchenwald, the Nobel Prize in Literature evoked astonishment. It seems that the situation of Polish literature resembles the one of Hebrew literature as described by Avner Holzman, “the more time passes from the Holocaust, the more persistently we are followed by its effects which destroy our tranquility and influence our lives.”² Although the time passes, the rank of this part of Polish literature remains stable. Its interpretations don't change much, it's hard to add something after the works of Tadeusz Drzewnowski or Andrzej Werner³ – perhaps only an observation that cultivation of the memory in its radical form is like a renewing wound which cannot be healed; according to psychoanalytical terminology, it is endless mourning. It is also impossible to forget or to limit anthropological problems to the period of the World War II.

² A. Holzman, *Holocaust in Hebrew literature*, transl. Tomasz Łysak, „Teksty Drugie” 2004 no 5.

³ A. Werner, *The Usual Apocalypse. Tadeusz Borowski and his visions of the worlds of concentration camps* (*Zwyczajna apokalipsa. Tadeusz Borowski i jego wizja świata obozów*), 1971 (first edition), T. Drzewnowski, *Escape from the world of stone* (*Ucieczka z kamiennego świata*), 1972 (first edition, then subsequent editions)

However, if the interpretations are to be maintained and the reflection continued, and this is how it should be, this requires not only openness to new challenges and dialogue. In his introduction to one of the editions of *Teksty Drugie* treating of representations of the Holocaust trauma, Ryszard Nycz wrote, "In this type of a never-ending undertaking, cognitive objectives cannot be separated from their complementary ethical imperative: it is worth describing only the non-existent experience; what we should try to give presence to what does not come from the order of presence."⁴

In the last few years, the thesis that it's immoral to create fiction round the Holocaust theme has not been considered that obvious. What contributed to its being questioned was – to some extent – the interest of the international film industry in the subject of the Holocaust. Roberto Benigni's comedy *Life Is Beautiful*⁵ certainly could not have been made in Poland in fear of provoking a scandal already on the preparation stage. This also concerns *The Schindler's List* by Steven Spielberg, a Hollywood fairy-tale about good people and the possibility of salvation. In this context Roman Polański's *The Pianist* is in a better situation as the plot is based on the authentic memories of Władysław Szpilman and does not promise collective rescue.

When Andrzej Wajda produced *Korczak*, which – according to Polish views on the conflict between the Holocaust theme and the aesthetics of beauty and the dramatic, conventionalized plot – had a scenario strictly connected with the facts and was black-and-white in order to underline its ascetic and documentary-like character. Even though it was made with reverence, the film didn't have good reception. After the publication of Spiegelmann's *Maus*, a Polish comic book devoted to the Holocaust maybe wouldn't have incurred a scandal related with violation of the taboo and the hierarchy, according to which this subject is reserved for the area of high and serious arts, but it would have been treated as a "caprice" of the youth. Prolonged discussions were conducted due to the 1996 work by Zbigniew Libera, a visual artist who produced a Lego set by means of which one could build a model of a concentration camp.⁶ On the one hand, it is provocative because many bricks composing those special sets are typical elements to be found in standard Lego sets for children, therefore it seems to stand for a specific warning and reminder. On the other hand, it introduces destabilization because it puts the only potential, but possible to imagine, user/player in the position of a builder of Auschwitz (including the gate inscription: *Arbeit macht frei*). I perceive this famous work as a prolonged shock strategy – in the language of modern art – of arranging situations that evoke viewers' ethical and cognitive dissonance.

It is not completely clear how to write a novel about the Holocaust – Dorota Kawczyńska distances herself from such works as *Umschlagplatz* by Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz and Marek Bieńczyk's *Tworki*; I think that the 2012 novel *Night of the Living Jews* by Igor

⁴ R. Nycz, "How to describe a non-existing experience" ("Jak opisać doświadczenie, którego nie ma"), „*Teksty Drugie*” 2004 no 5.

⁵ We published Slavoj Žižek's essay about this film, *Camp Comedy (Komedia obozowa)* (in Polish: „*Teksty Drugie*” 2004 no 5).

⁶ Katarzyna Bojarska wrote about it in our magazine, *Concentration Camp as a Toy, Zbigniew Libera, Corrective Devices*, „*Teksty Drugie*” 2004 no 5.

Ostachowicz seems even more disputable. This does not mean that there are no other books by younger authors in which they were able to avoid taboo subjects. Here, I would like to refer to works by Piotr Szewc, Piotr Paziński, or Magdalena Tulli. Literature is entangled with other paradoxes similar to the Holocaust research: on the one hand, the subject should be maintained – on the other hand, nobody is in the position that would allow him to make statements and judgements. Some of them manage to safely get out of this maze full of contradictions.

The years after the transformation in 1989, after the opening of the borders and the explosion of global techniques, opened Poland to the world. The Holocaust is an international theme, therefore the Holocaust research primarily refers to discussions held in America. It is quite typical nowadays, but in the case of the present essays, this gains an additional meaning. When one writes in Polish, he or she inherits experience and the position of the Holocaust witness – we are sure it is not ethically indifferent. The outside point of view is what Polish researchers dream about – especially the ones belonging to the younger generation who from the beginning struggle with questions and doubts about what new information could be added, whether objectivism is at all possible, and what to do if the aim is in fact empathy towards victims and not a reserved researchers' distance. It could be stated that the Holocaust research in the Polish humanities is a place where the reflection over the representation of the historical reality meets with the ethics, even if it is questioned more often than other subjects. Challenges related with the subject of the Holocaust are not new but they are taken up in the context of the new generation of people who do not remember the war.

Anna NASIŁOWSKA

Translation: Marta Skotnicka

Przemysław CZAPLIŃSKI

The Holocaust as a Challenge for Literary Reflection

There is no single definition for Holocaust literature. More or less, though, we know that it numbers several thousand books and more than a dozen thousand articles written in well over a dozen languages over the course of more than sixty years. This is too much for anybody to have managed to read all of them and enough for somebody to have managed to overlook everything; too little to express the Holocaust and too much to for the axioms of the humanities to remain unchanged.

This is also an outline of the challenge represented by the Holocaust for literary reflection. It compels us to part with our dreams of synthesis and synthetic thinking itself, and at the same time, urges us to consider fundamental matters.

A different story

Is the 20th century history of Polish¹ and European literature² not worth rethinking? If anyone doubts whether there are grounds for such a revision, one could reply that a few stage plays by Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Adamov were enough for the theater of the absurd to be formed – and this revolutionized European drama and created a sharp divide in history. At play here, meanwhile, is a set of several thousand pieces with

¹ At least two texts provide a very instructive trial run for the history of Polish literature seen from the perspective of the Holocaust and writing about it: Grynberg, Henryk, “Holocaust w literaturze polskiej,” in: *Prawda nieartystyczna*, Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1994; Löw, Ryszard, “Uwagi do przyszłej historii literatury (polskiej) o Zagładzie,” in: Brodzka-Wald, Alina, Krawczyńska, Dorota and Leociak, Jacek (eds), *Literatura polska wobec Zagłady*, Warszawa: ŻIH, 2000.

² One of the first attempts to make such a synthesis revisiting the European literature of the 20th century is Alvin Rosenfeld’s book *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988.

a beginning and apparently no end, expanding with the backward wave of the debates in France³ and Germany,⁴ as well as in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. It is in our part of the continent – in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary – that the Holocaust current is among the liveliest, abounding in momentous books (just look at Imre Kertész and Jáchym Topol) and works that are still able to cause conflict in society and transcend literature, as happened with the dispute with Henryk Grynberg⁵ or the debate on Jan Tomasz Gross' *Neighbors*.⁶ One might say that for the society of the former Soviet bloc the Holocaust, like the traumatic recollection of totalitarian rule, constitutes a lexicon of fundamental political concepts around which the new identity of state and society is negotiated. Yet construction of this identity requires that certain accepted truths must be questioned.

“Rethinking” the history of European literatures would mean first of all asking about the relationship of modernism and postmodernism – the two strongest aesthetic formations of the 20th century – with the Holocaust. For avant-garde authors, society was a unity of functions, a structure lacking internal contradictions or endowed with the strength to remove them, and finally a whole that was part of a certain process of accumulation of experiences aiming to achieve one of the planned – but also predictable, belonging to some sort of order – ultimate objectives. Was the avant-garde, belonging to modernism and with its categories of whole, coherence and evolution, capable of perceiving the looming danger?⁷ Did the revolutionary and functionalist views visible in the programmes of Italian, Russian and Polish futurism and the Russian journal *LEF*, constructivism and Bauhaus not make artists indifferent – and sometimes enthusiastic – observers of the introduction of totalitarianism?

The lack of reaction to anti-Semitism and the Nuremberg Laws that was characteristic of the majority of groups was a sign that the desired unity was more important for the avant-garde than killing of otherness. It was this indifference of avant-garde trends, however, that showed that the anti-bourgeois sentiments that weighed so heavily on their worldview was one of the largest mind traps of 20th-century art. As it turned out, it was possible to hate the bourgeoisie in the desire for social justice and world peace, and at the same time support totalitarianism. To be more precise, avant-garde thought

³ See Rousso, Henry, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944* (trans. Arthur Goldhammer), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991.

⁴ See e.g. Goldhagen, Daniel J., *Hitler's Willing Executioners. Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, New York: Vintage Press, 1997; Browning, Christopher R., *Ordinary Men. Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, New York: HarperPerennial, 1993.

⁵ See also Zaleski, Marek, “Różnica,” in: *Formy pamięci. O przedstawianiu przeszłości w polskiej literaturze współczesnej*, Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich 1996; Tokarska-Bakir, Joanna, “Skandalista Henryk Grynberg,” *Res Publica Nowa* 2003 no. 6.

⁶ See also Steinlauf, Michael, *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996.

⁷ See Bauman, Zygmunt, *Ciało i przemoc w obliczu ponowoczesności*, Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika 1995, 15-18.

had a dichotomous character (either-or) and was based on projects for holistic social order, but not on individuals' rights. This was why left-wing avant-garde groups were anti-fascist, but at the same time pro-totalitarian. In turn, the institutionalization of the avant-garde that took place in Italy and Soviet Russia before the war and after it in the socialist bloc demonstrates that the goals of the totalitarian state – achieving social unity, administering the whole – were dangerously close to the aspirations of authors.

One can therefore venture the hypothesis that the disintegration of the avant-garde, which had proceeded from the 1940s through desperate attempts at revival or continuation, did not take place in the 1960s, but in fact during the Holocaust. For anyone who did not understand that indifference to the Holocaust was a sign of totalitarian thinking awoke a little later with the post of state avant-gardist. Anyone who saw the crime with their own eyes began to dismantle the avant-garde illusions of the functionality of language, indispensability of authors, or rationality of history.

Perhaps it is this dismantling that gives rise to postmodernism. This stands on the side of difference, and not similarity, otherness and not unity, aimlessness or multitude of aims, and against functionalism as a principle ordering social life. As one scholar writes, postmodernist thinking should “emphasize dissonance, separation, disparity, plurality, distinction, change, over against those who would continue the search for unity, identity, presence, permanence, foundations, structures, and essences.”⁸ Such a strong opposition regarding modernist thought derives from the conviction that absolute categories were behind the Holocaust. When thinking about culture, we should always remember that it has its social implications. “If there is today an ethical or political question and if there is somewhere a *One must*, it must link up with a *one must make links with Auschwitz*,” claimed Jacques Derrida.⁹ In this sense, the Holocaust is a headstone for modernity and a fluid foundation of postmodernity; since the Holocaust it has no longer been possible to forget that “Auschwitz has enlarged our conception of the state’s capacity to do violence. A barrier has been overcome in what for millennia had been regarded as the permissible limits of political action. The Nazi period serves as a warning of what we can all too easily become were we faced with a political or economic crisis of overwhelming proportions.”¹⁰

To some extent, postmodernism emerges from the experience of the defeat tasted by culture in its encounter with the Holocaust.¹¹ Theodor Adorno claimed that

⁸ Wood, David, “Introduction,” in: Wood, David and Bernasconi, Robert, *Derrida and Différance*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988, ix.

⁹ Benjamin, Andrew, *The Lyotard Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1989, 387.

¹⁰ Rubinstein, Richard L., *The Cunning of History: The Holocaust and the American Future*, New York: Harper Perennial, 1987, 2.

¹¹ In part because of contemplation of the Holocaust, postmodernism abandoned the search for the fundamental Truth, deciding that it is always of a discursive-institutional character that is dependent on the context; departure from the philosophy of first principles offers an incentive for creating “counter-narratives” that question the dominant versions of history. This is discussed by Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg in *Experiments in Thinking the Holocaust: Auschwitz, Modernity, and Philosophy*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, 14.

“All post-Auschwitz culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage.”¹² From then on, “thinking – if it is to be true today... must also be a thinking against itself. It thought is not measured by the extremity that eludes the concept, it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of its victims” (Adorno 1973: 512). It would appear that literature after the Holocaust becomes just such thinking and writing against itself – practising plurality and contradiction, constant testing of various narrative models, continual changes in perspectives, searching for a language which cannot be reduced to a concept. This negative connection of postmodernity with modernity means that there is no need to decree an absolute beginning, or a radical break in history. Postmodernity has nothing to offer – at least it is a policy that makes mass killing possible – apart from falsifying the existing order.

One might say that for postmodern philosophy and literature the Holocaust has become – or, more cautiously, is becoming – a kind of Book of Exodus: a test to which we inexorably return and which always leads to expulsion.

Shouting, gibberish, non-speech

One of the first concentration camp scenes in Roberto Benigni’s film *Life Is Beautiful* depicts an SS officer presenting prisoners with their new living regulations. The main protagonist, Guido, acts as his interpreter, despite *not knowing German*. An absurd translation ensues: the officer spouts guttural and harsh sounds, his sentences apodictic and his intonation threatening. Guido repeats his gestures, uses similar-length sentences and imitates his intonation, but says something completely different (and this solely to his young son Giosuè, presenting the stay in the death camp to him as a “game about a real tank.” This is a game in which “you’re not allowed to ask for a second helping of dessert” and “You lose two points for complaining to mum.”

Although almost burlesque, this scene reveals a certain hidden side to the role of language in the Holocaust. First, we see how the victims are multilingual and their executioners monolingual. The problem of translation therefore takes centre stage, in both apparent and very real terms. This issue is entirely real (more about the “appearance” in a moment), because the Holocaust was a phenomenon rooted in nationalism, and yet at the same time, as it took on supranational dimensions, requires multilingual studies.

How many languages would any synthesis of the literature of the Shoah have to encapsulate? Without nullifying the response to this question, we can assume that any number here will be too small. This is because the ghettos and camps gave rise to stylistic and linguistic mixtures which extended the list of languages immeasurably. The camp slang attested in hundreds of documentary records, the prose of Tadeusz Borowski or Marian Pankowski and, for example, Mieczysław Lurczyński’s drama

¹² Adorno, Theodor W., *Negative Dialectics* (trans. E.B. Ashton), London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973, 367.

The Old Guard,¹³ give us an extra problem; for to the list of languages we must add not just this vernacular, but also the question of translation, the issue of things “lost in translation,” as Eva Hoffman put it. Of course, this is the case with every text, yet the dramatic power of the untranslatable is revealed all the more strongly when what is said is crucial for living and does not possess ready symbols.

In his book *If This Is a Man*, Primo Levi writes of a three-year-old child at Auschwitz whose only identifying mark was a number tattooed on his forearm. The boy’s name – Hurbinek – was given to him by other prisoners. He could say only one, incomprehensible word: “massklo” or “matsklo.” To paraphrase the title of Levi’s book, we might ask: is this a language? Perhaps it is the case – as every reader of Holocaust texts must have wondered at some point – that this incomprehensible word that was Hurbinek’s whole language is what should be treated as a model of that language. In other words, even when we are dealing with Holocaust texts written in an understandable language, we should see in it words from our world and an entirely alien one, expression that is inconceivable and yet crucial. The word spoken by Hurbinek belongs exclusively to him, but simultaneously forms a *common foreign language* – the only code that could not serve as the basis for segregation of the world, composed of separate symbols not belonging to any syntax, with no illusion of any belonging to the world. As Imre Kertész stated, “the Holocaust does not and cannot have its own language.”¹⁴ This means that a story about the Holocaust is always told in supranational language, speaking of the supranational character of the Holocaust, and at the same time in a foreign language, extracting the ominous detachment that lies in common values.

And this is where we come to the apparent nature of the question of translation and multilingualism. The scene from Benigni’s film as well as Hurbinek’s single-element lexicon make it clear that neither a complete roll call of the languages of the Holocaust (its slang, dialects, jargons) neither the most carefully discussed matter of translation explain anything. Or perhaps even: the more they explain, the closer they will be to some common semantic core for various languages and the more fully they will mystify this reality. This Achilles paradox results from the fact that in the context of the Holocaust the belief in language as the most important communication tool in the human universe,

¹³ 1st edition entitled *Stara Gwardia*, Hannover 1946; 2nd ed. – *Alte Garde*, London 1970; 3rd ed. – *Die Alte Garde*, in: Ratajczakowa, Dobrochna (ed.), *Polski dramat emigracyjny 1939–1969. Antologia*, Poznań 1993. On this drama see Guderian-Czaplińska, Ewa, “Alte Garde” Mieczysława Lurczyńskiego,” in: Kiec, Izolda, Ratajczakowa, Dobrochna and Wachowski, Jacek (eds), *Teatr i dramat polskiej emigracji 1939–1989*, Poznań 1994. Note that Lurczyński believed that owing to its language the play should not be widely disseminated; in his introduction, he writes: “The language of this book, the language of the human dungheap, forces me to closely supervise the whole publishing event... I am very much aware that the book is not intended for the general reader. I am having 200 copies printed, and shall personally send each volume to people who can withstand the harsh wind blowing from its pages.”

¹⁴ Translated from Polish version: Kertész, Imre, *Język na wygnaniu* [“A Language in Exile”] (trans. Elżbieta Sobolewska), Warszawa: WAB, 2004, 194.

as well as the conviction of the existence of an essence of language, proved pitiful and lethal. There is no language that can express the truth of the Holocaust, because language expresses nothing, and the Holocaust does not have its truth.

As Benigni shows, language is neither the only, nor the most important communication tool: without gestures, intonation and context we would not understand anything. And when gestures, intonation and context appear, it is almost insignificant. We do not have to understand the words of violence if violence itself does not ensure that anything other than utter obedience results from this understanding. If there was any essence of language that was manifested in the Holocaust, it was linked with its magical function – creating things through words. And it was this power of creation that proved to be completely indifferent to understanding. Somebody who can use language like a god, or who can decide on someone's life through language, is not concerned with whether he is understood. He expects nothing but obedience, and not listening, from the objects over whom he rules. The opposite is also true: we conceive the language of extreme violence without understanding; we know what it is saying to us without understanding the words, and we know that it compels us to obey and warns of dire consequences for the slightest infraction. For such language to be a means of communication, its “essence” would have to be not so much translatable as symmetric, transitive, reflexive – that is to say that it would have to serve both the “creator” and the created object equally. Without this transitivity, language is above all a *means of discipline*. And only as a component of discipline can it be seen as a tool.

In very much simplified terms, then, these are the challenges of the linguistic side of the Holocaust faced by literary reflection. It is obliged to take into account and carefully – in the 19th-century spirit – piece together the infinite multitude of languages of victims, as well as to fix and systematise the rules of translation. At the same time, all actions seeking order encounter the hidden side of language revealed by the Holocaust: it is not a tool of understanding, naming the world and expressing feelings, as the more it fulfils these objectives, the closer it is to being a tool of domination and a method of creating the world. The essence of language is not decided on by symbols and meanings, but relations between those who say something to each other. From the point of view of language and translation, the Holocaust was a unification of linguistic differences and removal of that small element of every statement that cannot be translated.

Unable to fit

It may be that the Holocaust – and its unique non-language¹⁵ – compels us to perceive the unnameability and the inexpressibility of experiences as a communicational rule, and not an exception. Yet the Holocaust also compels us to distinguish the modernistic and postmodernistic understanding of this question.

In modernistic practice, “expressing the inexpressible” meant aesthetic formation of what was not self-contained in its being – i.e., whatever was in a fluid, unready, incomplete state before the act of expression. And since chaos, fluidity, disturbance to the order

¹⁵ This term was used by Maria Janion in her article “Nie wiem,” in: *Żyjąc tracimy życie. Niepokojące tematy egzystencji*, Warszawa: WAB, 2001, 397.

and inability to fit the model is that which is Other, we can say that modern expression came out of fear and fascination with Otherness. The reverse of this approach to being was a desire to prevail over Otherness¹⁶ – by adopting, marginalizing, or excluding. The Other, experienced negatively, could come to the fore in the form of eccentricity, oddity, exception, or adored or condemned subject.

It seems that it is not the change in approach to the “inexpressible” that was decisive in the transformations in 20th century art, but rather the changing attitude to the Other. In the place of the Other as a – fascinating or threatening – alternative to the order, as that which questions the order by its very existence, Otherness appears as an indelible component of every Norm. Postmodernism therefore goes from interest in “styles of seeing” – which allowed Otherness to be seen in various ways – to reflection on “looking” itself. If it is only through introducing differences that we can understand reality, then postmodern art desires to make it possible to see the mechanisms by which differences are produced. “See what seeing allows,”¹⁷ “express what expression makes possible,” “cognize what is determined by cognition”¹⁸ – all of these sentences call forth

¹⁶ I owe my fundamental inspiration in this passage to Ryszard Nycz’s article “Wyrażanie niewyraźnego w literaturze nowoczesnej,” in: *Literatura jako trop rzeczywistości. Poetyka epifanii w nowoczesnej literaturze polskiej*, Kraków: Universitas, 2001.

¹⁷ Martin Jay writes about this in his book *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993; Jay discusses the privileged position of the eye and the blindness characteristic of every hegemon that it produces, manifested by adapting reality to the pictorial outlines cultivated by cultural schools of seeing. In other words, ocularcentrism is the cultural domination of looking that does not see, as it has been cultivated by the tradition of the incorporeal looking subject and transcendental perspective. As a consequence, our seeing ignores the surface of things in two ways: first, it places on the seen world schemes of appearance which cause “know” to precede “see”; second, as an action rooted in the tradition of transcendentalism, this looking omits the outer layer, supposedly in order to permeate the centre – and this with the “eye of the mind” or “eyes of the soul” to see the truth (although this compels us to treat the skin of the world as an insignificant or even deceptive veil). For Jay, though, as Grażyna Borkowska writes when discussing the art of seeing in Halina Poświatowska’s work, “the most important thing is what one does not see or escapes one’s attention – not because it is buried deep, but because, like grass, it lies on the surface (*Nierozważna i nieromantyczna. O Halinie Poświatowskiej*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2001, 150).

¹⁸ Paul K. Feyerabend, considering the ways in which presupposition is revealed, points to literary means: “how can we possibly examine something we are using all the time? How can we analyse the terms in which we habitually express our most simple and straightforward observations, and reveal their presuppositions? How can we discover the kind of world we presuppose when proceeding as we do? The answer is clear: we cannot discover it from the inside. We need an external standard of criticism, we need a set of alternative assumptions or, as these assumptions will be quite general, constituting, as it were, an entire alternative world, we need a dream-world in order to discover the features of the real world we think we inhabit (and which may actually be just another dream-world).” (*Against Method*, London: Verso, 1993, 22).

an inexpressibility different from the modernistic type. For Otherness proves to be not only the fundamental component, buried deepest, of every social order, but also a condition of seeing Otherness. In other words, postmodernity makes us realise that every story about social diversity and social plurality is in itself a small piece of this plurality. Otherness remains inexpressible, but loses its negative undertones.¹⁹

In this respect, the Holocaust was a summary of the history of (in)expressibility. Its source came from a precisely planned world which was in its entirety rational, and therefore stood on the side of language, and was also in its entirety a-logical: mad, insane, counter-linguistic. Contemplation of the Holocaust therefore constantly circulates between acknowledgement of the trueness of every Holocaust document and the awareness that each of them depicts only a small fraction of the Holocaust, and furthermore, that these fractions will never piece together a whole.²⁰ As one scholar wrote, “the reality of the Holocaust is always lost when attempts are made to portray it.”²¹

This loss comes from the fact that the “final solution of the Jewish question” was from the very beginning burdened by a curse that could not be named – forbidden, but also unfulfilled. First there was prohibition:

I also want to make reference before you here...to a really grave matter...I am referring to the evacuation of the Jews, the annihilation of the Jewish people...Most of you must know what it means to see a hundred corpses lie side by side, or five hundred, or a thousand. To have stuck this out and – excepting cases of human weakness – to have kept our integrity, that is what has made us hard. In our history, this is an unwritten and never-to-be-written page of glory.

The above words were spoken by Heinrich Himmler.²² Rarely in universal history do we encounter sentences with such far-reaching consequences – sentences from which the history of several million people can be extracted. Yet this short passage, rather lacking in rhetorical terms and crude in its pathos, contains the reverse of the act of creation. It predicts mass murder (“annihilation of the people”), points to the technicalization

¹⁹ See Lyotard, Jean-François, “An Answer to the Question, What is the Postmodern?” in: *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence, 1982–1985* (trans. Don Barry), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992: “Finally, it should be made clear that it is not up to us to *provide reality*, but to invent allusions to what is conceivable but not presentable.”

²⁰ There is copious literature on the problems of portraying the Holocaust – the main studies include: Bartov, Omer, *Murder in our Midst: The Holocaust, Industrial Killing and Representation*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996; LaCapra, Dominick, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994.

²¹ Easthope, Antony, “Holocaust i niemożność przedstawienia,” trans. M. Pietrzak-Merta, *Res Publica Nowa* 1997 no. 11, 65.

²² Cited in: Dawidowicz, Lucy, *A Holocaust Reader*, New York: Behrman House, 1976, 130-134.

of killing (“a thousand corpses lie side by side”), and ennobles extreme evil (“stuck this out...that has made us hard”). But there is something more in these words too – a certain link between the extermination and the record. This is not only an express forbiddance of recording,²³ almost a divine prohibition on creating images, but also something that can be called the curse of inexpressibility.

Today, six decades after the Holocaust, we know – fortunately – that innumerable texts exist to record it. Himmler’s prophecy of this page being “unwritten and never-to-be-written” was not borne out. At the same time, though, Himmler’s words were spoken from within a history that was utterly European, and yet terrifyingly alien, embodying the idea of rational order, and incomprehensible, executed with technological perfection, and barbaric, spoken in a simple language of orders and screams, and illogical. At the time of the Holocaust, or even in the Holocaust itself, the most important ideas of European culture – those of order, community, law established by humans, controlling history and the functionality of social organization – reached their apogee. And it was these ideas that proved to be criminal. This is why the history of the Holocaust cannot be fully named, expressed, or described. In this sense, Himmler was right to say that the page would in some part remain unwritten. This is attested by words spoken from the other side:

“There is no person who could tell the whole truth about Auschwitz,” claimed Józef Cyrankiewicz, testifying as a witness before the Supreme National Tribunal in Warsaw in the trial of Rudolf Höss, commandant of the Auschwitz camp.²⁴

“I know that I have not said everything. I do not think that anyone could say everything about this modern method of psychological and physical crushing of millions of people,” writes Mirosław Lurczyński (1993: 30).

“Behind your lips / the unspeakable waits / tears at the umbilical cords / of words,” wrote Nelly Sachs in her poem “Behind Your Lips.”²⁵

This deliberately random mix of quotations – which could be expanded into the hundreds and thousands – is supposed to demonstrate that the history of the Holocaust, portrayed in diaries, testimonies, memoirs and eminent literary works, is text afflicted with the curse of Penelope – text both woven and at the same time damaged. The words are arranged in it by the authors, and the work of destruction is done by the inexpressible – words leached out of their meaning, a language of exterminated symbols, symbols held behind the gate of recollection. The paradox of the Holocaust, then, is that those who walked the path of death to the very end are dead, while those who survived do not

²³ See also Arendt, Hannah, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York: Penguin Classics, 229: “The totalitarian state lets its opponents disappear in silent anonymity” (The words of Peter Bamm, a German army doctor who served on the Eastern front).

²⁴ Cited in: Korotyński, Henryk, “Kiedy będziemy znali Oświęcim?,” *Odrodzenie* 1947 no. 34.

²⁵ Translation by Catherine Sommer: <http://nellysachsenglish.wordpress.com/2013/04/30/behind-your-lips/> (access: 26.09.2013).

know everything. What they do know in any case means that they live without a tongue with which to speak.²⁶

Another literariness

Almost from the beginning, Holocaust writing has been pervaded by a heated conflict between the imperative to bear witness and what we might call mistrust towards style. The confrontation of menace and traditional views on the subject of literature meant that the first commentators were decidedly against the use of any artistic devices.²⁷ Here are a few views among thousands:

Michael Wyschogrod:

I firmly believe that art is not appropriate to the holocaust. Art takes the sting out of suffering...It is therefore forbidden to make fiction of the holocaust....Any attempt to transform the holocaust into art demeans the holocaust and must result in poor art.²⁸

Elie Wiesel:

Auschwitz negates any form of literature, as it defies all systems, all doctrines...A novel about Auschwitz is not a novel, or else it is not about Auschwitz. The very attempt to write such a novel is blasphemy.²⁹

Wiesel again:

By its uniqueness, the holocaust defies literature.³⁰

Two views overlap here: an ontological one, according to which Holocaust literature is impossible, and a moral one, which says that it is inappropriate. The representatives of the first thesis saw in the Holocaust something that in its essence was not subject to literature, something alien to it and impossible to process into art. The proponents

²⁶ I am referring here to a well-known passage from Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man*, quoted in Hobsbawm, Eric J., *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (1994): "We who survived the Camps are not true witnesses. We are those who, through prevarication, skill or luck, never touched bottom. Those who have, and who have seen the face of the Gorgon, did not return, or returned wordless."

²⁷ The same view was dominant in the views of researchers – see e.g. Sawicka, Jadwiga, "Uciec od literackości," in: Święch, Jerzy (ed.), *Świadectwa i powroty nieludzkiego czasu*, Lublin: Wyd. Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 1990, 35: "The document here possesses that superiority over fiction that it makes it possible to understand a phenomenon that might have been taken differently from the production of a story or underlining the literary nature than as an actual, crucial experience of a 20th-century person."

²⁸ "Some Theological Reflections on the Holocaust," *Response* 1975 no. 25, 68; cited in: Rosenfeld 1988, 28.

²⁹ "For Some Measure of Humility," *Sb'ima* 1975 no. 5/100, 314; cited in: Rosenfeld 1988, 28.

³⁰ "One Generation After," in: *One Generation After*, trans. into English by Lily Edelman and the Author, New York: Random House, 1970, p. 10; cited in: Rosenfeld 1988, 36.

of the other view, meanwhile, were against the idea of literature beautifying the horror of a dehumanized world, and wanted language to stay as faithful as it could to experiences so that nothing could obscure the concentration camp reality. A common justification for the two views seems to be the conviction that Holocaust texts as sources have functions different from mere aesthetic ones, that they are not subject to artistic evaluation, or even that they question the existing criteria of how literary something is. The task of writing about the Holocaust is not to add beauty to tragedy, but to speak the truth, establishing a complete source that is fulfilled in itself and is identical to reality.

However, complications ensue with the passing years and increasing numbers of books. Increasingly often it was perceived that there was no transparent style, or language fulfilling the requirement of adhering to the world, writing free from links to conventions. The evolution of views on this subject can be seen for example in the opinions of Grynberg, one of the most important authors of Holocaust literature. In the mid-1980s, he wrote:

Universality and generalization are indispensable for great literature and art, but this new experience is no longer about great literature or great art, but the truth – which is most *unartistic*. It is covered by generalization.³¹

By the end of the 1990s, the writer's views were slightly modified: "I would say that economy and modesty of means in holocaust literature are practically obligatory. The holocaust has dimensions that require distance. The closer you are, the less you see."³² The difference in views comes from the fact that in the first quotation Grynberg, like many others, sharply contrasts literature and truth, while in the second he acknowledges the possibility of using literary means, albeit in moderation. In this opinion, literature appears as an essential tool for building distance, without which "the less you see." This means that literature is necessary to "see more," and as such is crucial in writing about the Holocaust. This is expressed even more clearly in the Polish writing of Hanna Krall, who stated: "Tragedies devoid of form are something shameless. Form withdraws to a distance necessary for speaking."³³ This view leaves us on the antipodes of the initial conflict between truth and beauty. Literary means are now not just possible, but essential. No text can be produced without literature – style and composition. Moreover, since it is form that allows communication, it also comprehension. It would seem that we are now just one step away from the next conclusion – that a literary nature is inevitable. For years, literary studies has been discovering that this is something that exists outside of choice, that even the most

³¹ Grynberg, Henryk, "Holocaust w literaturze polskiej." in: *Prawda nieartystyczna*, Warszawa: Czarne, 1994, 160.

³² Grynberg, Henryk, *Szkola opowiadania*, in: Sznajderman, Monika (ed.), *Lekcja pisania*, Warszawa: Czarne, 1998, 73.

³³ "Dramalurgia uczuć"; first printed in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 13.4.1997; reprinted in Sznajderman (1998).

unconventional text remains a text, and therefore a combination of diverse compositional and stylistic orders. The also applies to documents, meaning that they too are part of the literary universe. In no respect does this take away their credibility, but it does mean that reading Holocaust texts must take into account the necessary mediation that comes between language and reality. Interpretation can therefore lead towards a kind of archaeology of text, i.e. uncovering all the layers – conventions, genres, styles – within a document, and testifying to the communicational culture to which the author belonged and which the reader introduces. Furthermore, it is this textual archaeology that makes it possible to reconstruct the kind of reading reaction that the author planned, as well as the diverse conflicts that emerge, for example, between the modern reality of killing and the pre-modern convention of recording. Finally, such a perspective permits the reader him/herself to remain aware that he/she is a participant in the communicational reality in which diverse conventions are used. The reader therefore has no direct access to the world, and should not treat his/her understanding of the text/reality as objective, true, and final.

Literary reflection on the Holocaust has, then, come a long way: initially impossible and undesired, and with time valuable and important, it is nearing a point at which it will be viewed as inescapable. This is significant as it makes it clear that the Holocaust emerged from a crude narrative which too many people viewed as an ultimate truth, and thus an extratextual entity. Yet it is likely that anybody who understands that in life we quarrel about stories and metaphors shows less inclination to violence.

The Holocaust – end and beginning

The Holocaust distorted the history of Europe. As a product of the primal powers of modernity – rationalism, science free from ethical checks, administration and technology³⁴ – it revealed their criminal side. After the Holocaust, uncritical trust in reason and state, as well as everything that adjusted all too smoothly to the pre-eminence of killing, became impossible. This is why contemplation on the Holocaust is not limited to collecting documents telling of the ghettos and camps, but is rather oriented to the present. This orientation – more permanent than one-off – involves stubbornly examining the foundations of our civilization – as well as its susceptibility and resistance to the temptation of administering death.

In this process of the *distortion of the present*, and opening up its concealed sides, the only reason that literary studies is not located in the centre is because it made this centre movable itself. The reading of the Holocaust that it cultivates creates opportunities for asking questions on the roots of the present. At first glance, the issues proposed by literary studies scholars, discussed in brief above, are specialized: another history of Polish and European literature, problems of language, translation and untranslatability, the question of inexpressibility and the debate on the literary approach. Yet one merely

³⁴ I am referring here to the interpretation of the Holocaust made by Zygmunt Bauman in his book *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989.

needs to be aware of the distorting character of today's reflection on literary studies to realise that these issues are lined by the lively delusions of European culture. Let us try to name those illusions that for centuries operated as fundamental ideas in the humanities (although sometimes they were closer to obsessions):

1. Fixation on objective truth
2. Conceiving history as a uniform current
3. The belief in the possibility of a complete translation of someone else's text
4. Distinction of literary texts from "documentary" ones.

However, literary studies – influenced not only by the Holocaust, but to a great extent on the basis of the radical nature of its consequences – shows that: 1. The objective truth is a certain narrative; 2. History consists of metaphors, among which a "trend" is one of numerous aspects – though even this suggests consistent acknowledgement that there can be many trends, the "main trend" is indicated by the prevailing ones; 3. Untranslatability and unrepresentability are norms of human communication; 4. The difference between a document and literature lies in the selection of rhetorical devices and ways of telling the story, rather than a radical difference between "the truth" and "invention."

Literary reflection therefore questions the dominant versions of social consciousness every bit as stubbornly as sociology, political science or historiography. In doing so, it enforces on all the participants in debates an ever greater awareness of the relationship between the social behaviours and narratives in our heads.

As this shows, the Holocaust forces us to rethink the foundations and broaden our fields of critical observation. We can also add further problems to those we have briefly discussed: inversion of aesthetic categories;³⁵ the history of insanity in a time of totalitarianism (through which we can understand the way in which irrationality is designated by totalitarian reason as well as the insanity of a state doctrine), the genology of the Holocaust, meaning an attempt to describe the genres and categories of writing in Holocaust literature (i.e. searching for an alternative to the Greek division into lyric,

³⁵ The Holocaust would appear like no other experience to belong to tragedy, and like no other to be subject to comedy. Yet one might also perceive the task of art after the Holocaust as being reclaiming everything that its perpetrators tried to take away from the victims – so the multitude and the mixture of experiences. In the first respect, regarding tragedy, the necessary inversion requires that these categories be conceived not as an inevitable and irreversible destruction of a certain value bringing cleansing (in accordance with the tradition of Aristotle and Scheler), but as a "victory of evil that was not necessary and is irreversible"; this experience is accompanied by "not coolness, but just disgusting exposure of the victim and the people caught up in the afterglow of tragedy" (Brach-Czaina, Jolanta, *Szczeliny istnienia*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo eFKa 1998. A similar "reclaiming" of the right to comedy – i.e. to comic narrative on the Holocaust – came with *Life is Beautiful*, and Art Spiegelman's *Maus* means that it is impossible to claim that low arts are by definition or by nature incapable of transmitting the complexity of the Holocaust. In short, if art after the Holocaust has its essence, this is questioning essence (substantiality) – since this category lies at the foundation of all segregation.

Holocaust in Literary and Cultural Studies

epic and drama); styles of reception,³⁶ that is the history of variable ways of reading Holocaust literature, and also the always necessary review of today's dominant and alternative interpretation models.

Perhaps it is the case that the larger the Library of the Shoah becomes, the more problems we discover – both in the works and in our present. Perhaps it is in this that we can find one of the most important tasks of speaking and writing about the Holocaust – not allowing anybody to bring this history to an end by usurping the final word for themselves. After all, it was from just such a decree that it all started.

Translation: Benjamin Koschalka

³⁶ This term was coined by Michał Głowiński – see *Style odbioru. Szkice o komunikacji literackiej*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1977.

Aleksandra UBERTOWSKA

“Invisible Testimonies”: The Feminist Perspective in Holocaust Literature Studies

Holocaust studies, usually perceived as a sub-category of other, more academically established disciplines, such as Jewish studies or history, has always been an interdisciplinary enterprise. By necessity, studies in this field must focus on border areas of different disciplines or varied methodologies.¹ This opening to varied inspirations and influences often assumes an interesting, if sometimes controversial, form. The combination of feminist/gender studies and Holocaust studies is a good example of this duality. These two intertwining research formations have produced results which, in my mind, are of great academic merit and have refreshed the image of literature of the Holocaust. One could even assume (a step that always carries risk) that with the dawn of research on the “feminine experience of the Holocaust,” scholars have embarked on a “revisionist moment” that forced, at least partially, a rethinking of the theoretical foundations underpinning much previous research. In my essay, I intend to present the results of these studies. In other words, I would like to show a self-critical impulse that has come to the foreground, becoming a vital force against certain clichés or conclusions that have been well-established within the history of the Holocaust.

In the field of the Holocaust studies, the question of women’s war experience and its specific character, as well as forms of its expression, has appeared relatively late. Chronologically, it intersects with the so-called “second wave” of interest in the Holocaust (circa the 1980s), even though the most important publications in the field took place in the second half of the 1990s. The conference which established feminist Holocaust studies

¹ This article is a modified version of a lecture given as a part of series of meetings entitled “Learning about the Holocaust: Themes, Methods, and Limits” at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, 28.04.2009.

as a branch of humanities took place in New York City in 1983. Its participants agreed on methodology, along with the scholarly foundations and institutional framework necessary to describe the “female experience of the Holocaust.” According to Joan Ringelheim, initiator and organizer of the conference, these foundations stem from resistance to the universalistic tendencies within Holocaust studies. She claimed this tendency blurs distinctions, which are present in descriptions of war experiences.² Women constituted half of the population of Holocaust victims, and yet – according to New York conference participants – their distinctive fate (although present in some literary accounts) tended to be omitted in historical, or literary analysis. It would often remain unrecognized, hidden in the form of muted, unspoken accounts. Ringelheim claims that we only recently acquired the “conceptual framework” necessary to grasp the feminine perspective of war. That is why most of the approaches and methodologies used, attempted to be “gender neutral,” or tried to ignore it as an analytic category.³ Other factors played a part in this turn as well. Some have been provoked by “third wave” feminism, which highlighted the importance of “difference” and introduced (in relation to the image of a woman) divisions based on ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, etc. The process of “decolonizing the subject” (female subject) – a term coined by Sidonie Smith – revealed that the “era of universal, neutral female has ended, even for women who remained traditional essentialists.”⁴

The most influential works which help to orient oneself in the realm of feminist studies of the Holocaust literature, principally written by American authors, focus around questions such as: Can we talk about a specific, gender-defined experience of the Holocaust? What are the criteria we should use for such descriptions? Are there “female narrations” – forms of articulating suffering, with clear gender marking? There is great variety among the publications that I have included here: anthologies which combine testimonies of the survivors; theoretical essays (including the volume *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust* edited by Carol Ritter and Johna K. Rotha, or *Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust: The Voices of Eyewitness* edited by Vera Laska); post-conference volumes that have gathered representatives of various disciplines, such as Lawrence Langer, Marion Kaplan, Myrna Goldenberg (for example *Women in the Holocaust* edited by Dalia Ofer and Lenor Weitzman, or *Experience and Expression: Women, Nazis, and the Holocaust* edited by Elisabeth Baer and Myrny Goldenberg); monographs of historians of literature, such as those by Merlene Heinemann, Rachel Feldhay Brenner, S. Lilian Kremer or Judith Tydor Baumel, which are based on the vast resources of comparative materials and the analysis of female autobiographies from

² See Distel, B. “Frauen im Holocaust,” in: *Wir konnten die Kinder doch nicht im Stich lassen. Frauen im Holocaust.*, herausg. von B. Distel, Köln: 2001, 15.

³ Ringelheim, J. “The Split between Gender and the Holocaust,” in: *Women in the Holocaust*, edited by D. Ofer, L. Weitzmann, Yale University Press, New Haven: 1998. 244.

⁴ Hyży, E. *Kobieta, ciato, tożsamość. Teorie podmiotu w filozofii feministycznej końca XX wieku*, Universitas, Cracow: 2003. 21.

the time of the Holocaust.⁵ The interdisciplinary character of the subject encourages looking at works from different fields, for example a book by the American sociologist Nechama Tec, entitled *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men and the Holocaust*.⁶

Already at the outset, I have to make clear that works by the literary scholars I have mentioned use categories developed and defined within the feminist thought. However, because they are applied in a particular context, these scholars usually do not care about methodological correctness or cohesiveness. Very often, the terms "feminist" and "gender" are used interchangeably. The latter category maintains patronage over publications which are close to rather traditionally understood "women studies," where the constructivist dimension of "gender"⁷ is not pronounced strongly enough. Most of the authors propose approaches belonging to historiography, which is usually non-symmetrical and focused less on the present, recording women's experience of the Holocaust (and not, as one might assume based on the employment of the word "gender," on differences between male and female patterns of behavior). They rarely take male experience of the Holocaust into consideration (with the exception of the sociological works of Nechama Tec), which would involve a comparative method operating like a pendulum, but also distorting the research, blurring the status of male testimonies that have established the canon and a blueprint for "normative Holocaust narration."

The aforementioned works tend to display a lack of radical, theoretical ideas, signs of deepened feminist awareness, or references to the feminist theory (these references happen rarely, usually in the articles by Joan Ringelheim and books by Judith Tydor Baumel). Oftentimes, one feels like the lack of meta-theoretical reflection weakens the impact of feminine perspective and female testimonies of the Holocaust. For example, it would be fascinating to learn about the extent to which the self-created image of female Holocaust writers in their memoirs are an effect of internalizing stereotypical ideas about femininity and masculinity. An important issue with which we are confronted in reading the Holocaust memoirs is the question of female writers having access to a "feminine" discourse, when describing this borderline experience of being "thrown into history." Another interesting issue would be to see when they were forced to choose between male style, which was full of heroic pathos, and a heavily-stylized genre of gossip literature (with a retained possibility of marking one's distance toward such a speech register). This lack of awareness in the works I am discussing is often the result of overly "essentialist" assumptions regarding the understanding of female identity, often finding a legitimate explanation, as I will develop farther in the article.

⁵ In my essay, I focus primarily on Jewish wartime experiences. That is why, only in one of the footnotes, I mention that there are interesting, albeit rare, studies of the war female experience in the literature from the Polish perspective, such as the study of women in concentration camps (by Bożena Karwowska), or gulags (Inga Iwasiów).

⁶ Tec, N. *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men and the Holocaust*, Yale University Press, New Haven: 2003.

⁷ See Łebkowska, A. "Gender", in: *Kulturowa teoria literatury. Główne pojęcia i problemy*, edited by M.P. Markowski, R. Nycz, Universitas, Cracow: 2006.

“Methodological pragmatism,” taken with the necessity of protecting Holocaust testimonies from being overshadowed by theory, is the dominant mode of debate. That is why I would like to use the term “feminist perspective” to describe the works in question. It seems to be the fairest, since it pays tribute to philosophical sources, without which female description of the Holocaust experience would not be possible, and highlights the lax approach to methodological and terminological frameworks in the discussed works.

“Cracks” or Controversies

In my opinion, the first object of our immediate consideration should be all the areas of controversy, or questions which ignite debate. These will be areas where Holocaust studies collides with the implications of feminist theory. Although there are dimensions of these fields which overlap – both can be interpreted as minority discourses (with their emancipatory goals and poorly codified, often questionable, methodologies) – already at the very outset of gender studies concerning the Holocaust, there have been mentions of a split between female accounts of the Holocaust and the official version produced by historians researching the destruction of the European Jews. Authors who pointed to that split, principally meant to identify the subjective recollections by female survivors and their astonishment over the fact that their wartime experience was not compatible with the dominant narrations of the Holocaust. The revealed “anomalies” have undermined the ethical and cognitive foundations of the Holocaust witness. Often subject to strong self-censorship, one taboo that must be mentioned was phrased in a question posed by Ringelheim: “To what extent was the sexism of Nazi ideology and the sexism in Jewish communities tragically intertwined or strengthened by one another?”⁸

Many sociologists, literary critics and writers have singled out certain reservations, which have not necessarily undermined the validity of gender-oriented studies, but rather thematized epistemological and ethical conflicts emerging at the meeting points of disciplines and discourses. Editors of the volume *Women in the Holocaust*, Dalia Ofer and Lenor Weitzmann, have pointed to the most commonly expressed reservations. I believe we can distinguish three categories between them.⁹

Firstly, both in autobiographical commentaries of survivors, as well as in scholarly publications, one can spot an accusation (probably the most serious) that by focusing on the gendered aspects of the Holocaust, the ethnic character (Jewish) of the victims has been overshadowed. In other words, it weakens the cultural context of the Holocaust, which refers us back to historical forms of anti-Semitism. One identity starts to overshadow another, which creates an ambiguous rivalry between two identities and two forms of oppression.

Focusing on the female war experience yields another serious consequence – it questions all national divisions (and signs of ethnic value attached to those divisions). Within the research interested in this issue, particularly from the German academia,

⁸ Ringelheim, J. *The Split...*, 345.

⁹ Ofer, D., L. Weitzmann “Introduction” in: *Women in the Holocaust*.

we can find studies on stories from Holocaust survivors, as well as regular citizens of the Third Reich, or even female guards in concentration camps (that was the focus of the last year's Berlin session *Scham und Schuld. Geschlechter(sub)texte der Shoah*).¹⁰ It is also a focus of many anthologies, including *Wir konnten die Kinder doch nicht im Stich lassen!. Frauen im Holocaust*.¹¹ However, the profile of such studies directly impacts the foundations of classical Holocaust studies, so-called "Hilberg's triangle" (perpetrator – victim – bystander).¹² From a certain orthodox (but understandable and legitimate) point of view, one could claim that the feminist approach breaks up the community of victims, introduces divisions and hierarchy, creating a dangerous precedent for historical relativism.

However – when looked at from a different perspective – this method unquestionably brings certain benefits: it opposes the one-sided "victimization" of women, by revealing their varied social and historical roles.

Secondly, we often hear an accusation of presentism and ahistoricity. Feminist projects in relation to Holocaust are met with criticism, because they are seen as an attempt to impose a contemporary philosophical perspective onto events from the past, as well as (which seems to be far more serious accusation) imposing this particular mentality on the female authors of diaries and journals written during the Holocaust. From the perspective of literary scholars and readers, who specialize in these writings, such accusations seem senseless, to a point where they feel tempted to reverse the order of thinking that constitutes its foundations. That is because – according to Judith Baumele,¹³ who is perhaps most explicit on the subject – most of the female accounts display an extremely high level of "gender awareness," which seems to be worthy of our attention, since the authors were not professionally trained writers. They reveal an entire spectrum of self-knowledge, in a way anticipating all the achievements of future feminist thought: from the diaries of Zivia Lubetkin (one of the commanders of the Jewish Combat Organization), to Anne Frank and Mary Berg's *The Diary of a Young Girl*. Lubetkin is fully aware of being in the matrix of social roles connected to gender, its limitations, as well as of the privilege to cross over these historical gender limitations that became part of her experience. Frank and Berg thematize women's conditions and turn it into a subject of reflection, often including elements of emancipatory criticism, which one might be tempted to describe as "pre-feminist."

Thirdly, it has been claimed – and these accusations have been expressed by well-respected authors, such as Lawrence Langer and Cynthia Ozick – that gender studies of

¹⁰ The meeting was organized by The Department of History and Sociology at the Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, 11/14-15/2008.

¹¹ See also Krauss, M. *Sie waren dabei. Mitläuferinnen, Nutzniesserinnen, Taeterinnen im Nationalsozialismus*, Verlag, Göttingen: 2008.

¹² See Hilberg, R. *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe, 1933-1945*, New York: Aaron Asher Books, 1992.

¹³ Baumele, J.T. *Double Jeopardy: Gender and the Holocaust*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1995.

the Holocaust open the possibility of trivialization. The feminist perspective, the authors mentioned above claim, almost becomes an argument on the behalf of the “universalists”¹⁴ (or even “negationists”). It neutralizes the uniqueness of the Holocaust by integrating it in the history of patriarchal oppression over women.

Lawrence L. Langer, a historian of the Holocaust whose voice cannot be ignored, appreciates the role of new impulses in the Holocaust studies, while warning against the dogmatic use of a gender criterion,¹⁵ particularly against ascribing them with value judgments. According to Langer, gender divisions overlap and influence relations of other kinds (parents – children, different positions in camps or in ghettos), which substantially complicate (or even partially undermine) the foundations of feminist theory within Holocaust studies.

Controversies created around the project of gender studies of the literature of the Holocaust do not weaken its legitimacy. They should be understood as a part of late modern epistemology, where different disciplines or academic projects are subject to permanent pressure from processes attempting to destabilize their assumptions, forcing the redefinition of their subject of study and the rethinking of their ethical and political implications. They can also perform the function of “negative methodology,” which points to dangers, shows “dead ends” of feminist discourse, which become visible precisely when confronted with the categories of testimony, guarded by numerous ethical limitations.

“Exemplary and Normative Narration about the Holocaust”?

We talked about a characteristic profile of historico-literary profile of monographs, which focus on descriptions of particularly female experience of the Holocaust. Comparative perspectives, which place female experience within the network of gender relations, emerge for very specific reasons. These perspectives are treated as a method for revealing the position of female autobiographies against the dominant model of Holocaust relations. Joan Ringelheim, responsible for delineating the borders of the field and rightly problematizing the starting point of feminist studies on the Holocaust as an issue of integrating personal narrations of women-survivors with “exemplary, normative narration about the Holocaust,” speaks of effacement of the female perspective from the history of the Holocaust. She points to talking about the Holocaust from the “universal perspective of Evil”¹⁶ Even if among those statements one can observe an “ideological over-abundance,” or particular emphasis, it is hard to ignore certain suggestions that are being made. Especially when they help to reveal the superficiality of the category of

¹⁴ See Muchowski, J. *Historyka Shoah. Problematyka przedstawiania katastrof historycznych*, Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2006. 32.

¹⁵ Langer, L. “Gendered Suffering? Women in Holocaust Testimonies,” in: *Women and the Holocaust...*, 362.

¹⁶ Ringelheim, J. “The Unethical and the Unspeakable. Women and the Holocaust,” *Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual*, vol. 1, 1984. 74-76.

"canon" from Holocaust testimonies. The frequency of references made to "exemplary, normative narration about the Holocaust," which became a *leitmotif* of most of the works dedicated to the female experience of the Holocaust, reveals hierarchies embedded in the canon. Attention is being brought to the fact that within the canon of Holocaust literature, seemingly "neutral" testimonies of the Holocaust, which secretly used the category of "gender," dominated and remained carriers of male experience. The core of the canon was constituted by the memoirs of Tadeusz Borowski and Primo Levi, and not by Charlotte Delbo or Seweryna Szmaglewska; by Marek Edelman and Adam Czerniakow, and not by Zivia Lubetkin or Vladki Meed.

S. Lilian Kremer characterizes the starting point of her deliberations similarly and writes that both Holocaust historiography and literary criticism have a male-centered character and privilege male experience of the Holocaust, assuming it is a universal and gender neutral blueprint of such experience. As a result, scholars representing different fields "pushed female Holocaust relations to the peripheries of the discourse, or made them altogether invisible."¹⁷ Kremer confronts dominating male narrations, in which women played secondary, "supporting" roles, of victims passively allowing to be obliterated, with stories focused around female experience. Women in these narrations are well-defined and multi-dimensional subjects, strong protagonists. They experience war in all of its forms and individually create and shape their auto-biographical accounts (e.g., auto-biographical novels by Ilona Karmel, Elzbieta Ettinger and others).

Hence, summarizing statements by the authors presented above, one can conclude that the canon of Holocaust literature functions oppressively toward women's war narrations. In the first place, it does so by talking about women indirectly, through a male narrator, who decides about the choice and assessment of the described events. The prose of Borowski and Levi are perfect examples of such work, where certain kinds of violence against women are marginalized (rape, sexual abuse, etc.). A similar effect, blurring the differences, is achieved by presenting women as a unified social group, homogenous in terms of education, politics, psychology or personality. Finally, Kremer and Ringelheim recognize the usage of a strongly autonomous division between roles and features as an oppressive marker of the Holocaust literary canon. This division forces representations of men as strong and brave, while women remain fearful, subdued, incapable of their own, distinctive (referring to the female model of social behavior) survival strategies.

It is precisely the way we understand the subject and subjectivity in relation to the borderline experience that constitutes an axis, around which all the efforts to separate the specificity of the female experience of the Holocaust are focused. It is also a focal point, at least in part, for the reformulation (or expansion) of the Holocaust literary canon. Scholars like Myrna Goldenberg and S. Lilian Kremer point our attention to the dominant, among male accounts, themes of individualism, the power of the individual and resilience – features which are the key to survival. The subject of these accounts is a subject based on strong ontological foundations. It is a foundation which is allowed

¹⁷ Kremer, S.L. *Women's Holocaust Writing. Memory and Imagination*, Lincoln-London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999. 5.

to confront the apocalypse of the known world, languages, systems of signs; to face life in a concentration camp, Gulag, or ghetto. The most painfully felt oppression is the moment of losing autonomy and the right to self-determination. In case of female authors, a different rule of structuring the concentration camp and Holocaust experience dominates the discourse. The aspect of autonomy, individual strength, loses its significance for the sake of saving the family or loosing those closest. The female subject involved with testimony (the autobiographical “I”) is also constructed differently. It manifests itself in attempts to depersonalize the narrative, as well as through efforts to accentuate the saving role of community ties, created within the circle of “foster families,” “sister” relations, and friendships.

However, one cannot talk about a specific subjectivity in relation to the “gender” history of Holocaust literature as an area of permanently defined and established issues. Sarah Horovitz writes: “genocide (borderline experience) destabilizes the boundaries of ‘I’ and undermines the gender identity.”¹⁸ One should understand this statement as an indication that, within Holocaust testimonies, traditional dichotomies and classifications (active/passive, individualism/submission, and strong/weak subject) undergo reevaluation and are reconfigured into new, more complex pairings.

Searching for the Formula for a Female Testimony

The late emergence of a scholarly perspective attuned to the description of the female experience of the Holocaust brought with itself important, methodological consequences. Grounding the studies of the Holocaust in a certain “historical reality” suggests, almost intuitively in this context, “thematic interpretations,” which focus on characteristics of so-called “specifically female themes.”¹⁹ These will be themes of maternity, pregnancy, sexual violence, mother-daughter relations, woman-parental relations, or specific, gender-conditioned socializing patterns and transgression in a state of extreme danger. According to the ethical demand of marking the referentiality of relations, women in Holocaust autobiographies are always grounded in a specific historical reality. She provides testimony of how profoundly her social role and physicality determines her life and survival strategies (even if she herself radically transgresses these determinations). One could assume, that this strategy will account for complete “transparency” of the autobiographical texts, drawing attention away from their formal and linguistic set-up. However, this is not always the case. Sometimes, authors of the essays in question (S. Lilian Kremer, Sara R. Horovitz, Rachel Brenner) manage to outline the continuity between “female themes” (which, in feminist theory, would inevitably lead to naively essentialist assumptions) and a particular kind of narration, in which “female themes” are articulated and create an organic connection, a unique formula for autobiographical writing, which one could call generically charged.

¹⁸ Horovitz, S. *Women in Holocaust Literature: Engendering Trauma Memory*, w: *Women in the Holocaust...*, 375.

¹⁹ Kremer, S.L. “Introduction,” in *Women’s Holocaust...*, 11.

According to Pascal Rachel Bos, "there is something disarming in the experience of the Holocaust, which makes the more refined (poststructuralist) methods of research seem inappropriate towards such well-defined research subject."²⁰ This "condition of appropriateness" does not seem to have been questioned, or weakened, in the past. However, it was certainly modified (and cognitively enriched) by the "linguistic" and "narrational" turns. They have revealed the rhetorical dimension of Holocaust testimony and its status of as ontologically "folded" and a representation dependent on many factors. The end of the 1980s was a period in which the poststructuralist theory of history became far more pervasive. It made it much easier for the representatives of emerging, feminist current of studies in Holocaust literature, already at the outset, to include complexities involved in the ontology of testimony and the nature of autobiographical writing.

Bos distinguishes between three levels of Holocaust testimony: experience, memory, and narrational structure. She claims that each of those levels can be equally shaped by the category of gender.²¹ This particular gesture of denaturalizing autobiographical texts seems to be common to many female scholars focused on literature of the Holocaust. Among the monographs containing female wartime accounts, one can spot interpretational tropes, which are the heritage of currents of thought in the humanities (White and Ankersmit's tradition, alongside rhetorical analysis of autobiographical discourse inspired by writings of Paul de Man and Phillippe Lejeune). Oftentimes, they take a form of concretizing metaphors, describing the situation of women found in the literature of the Holocaust. That is what happens with the metaphor of a "muted female voice," which Carol Ritter and John K. Roth illustrate in the introduction to the anthology *Different Voices* with a phrase from Gertrud Kolmar, the German-Jewish poet. In the poem we hear a call to the reader: "hear my voice."²² Lawrence Langer looks for examples of internalizing this figure, treating it as a descriptive category, which points to a characteristic feature of "female writings about the Holocaust." Referring to rich comparative material, a large number of written and audio-visual testimonies, used during the writing of *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, he states that female accounts are far more "elliptical," and female authors much more often use omissions – indirect, implied information – which compose a "knot of paradoxes, which is difficult to untangle."²³ This conclusion allows us to explain why these were the memories of a female author, Charlotte Delbo, that illustrated Langer's deliberations over the dual self of Holocaust accounts – a category which assumes the existence of experiences impossible to convey, calcified in the subconscious. Female writers, according to Langer, reveal greater aware-

²⁰ Bos, P.R. "Women and the Holocaust. Analyzing Gender Difference," in *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust*, edited by E. Baer, M. Goldenberg, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003. 29.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

²² Rittner, C. J. K. Roth "Prologue: Women and the Holocaust," in *Different Voices. Women and the Holocaust*, 3.

²³ Langer, L. "Gendered Suffering? Women in Holocaust Testimonies," in *Women and the Holocaust...*, 351-364.

ness of the traumatic consequences of the war and point to the incredible inventiveness in describing them. It can be observed through the creation of particular terms, which force speculative, or medical language out (e.g., “speaking body,” effect of “stonefication” in narrations by Mado and Arina B. – protagonists of Ch. Delbo’s book), becoming almost a rule for constructing these individual stories.

A similar approach is employed by Myrna Goldenberg, who points to a different model of narration appearing in a concentration camp prose and referring to the “typically female” activity of preparing food – the so-called “cooking memoirs.” These are stories which, due to their repetitiveness, become almost topical and are built around meals, recipes (often very elaborate) and perform a function of compensating, or easing the consequences of camp’s hunger and starvation. However, in those female “narrations about narrations” they acquire much deeper meaning. According to Goldenberg, they play the function of “life-giving” stories and become the camp’s “anti-discourse,” or an emancipatory discourse and a part of surviving strategy in a much wider sense than merely physical salvation. Stakes in this “discursive game” are questions of identity, memory and moral order. According to the scholar, “culinary stories...not only established a continuity between the past and the future, but also reminded women about their role as care givers and mothers. They constituted a form of affirmation of female community and a therapy, sublimation of hunger.”²⁴

A separate current of studies within feminist studies on Holocaust writing is a tendency to define wartime autobiography as a genre heavily corresponding with female social roles of assuming responsibility for others, as well as female protectiveness. Thinking about autobiography (or other autobiographical forms) as female genres, or forms of expression characteristic to women, is heavily rooted in feminist theory.²⁵ They situate the history of female identity in a literary history order, but the scholars of the Holocaust literature give it a distinct character. Marlene Heinemann in her *Gender and Destiny: Women Writers and the Holocaust*²⁶ takes up and develops the topic of feminist confessional genres. The author assumes that, according to the bourgeois, Western European cultural models, autobiography as published work, was not among the means of expression for women. It was banned, because it involved exposing oneself or “I”

²⁴ Goldenberg, M. “Memoirs of Auschwitz Survivors: The Burden of Gender,” in *Women in the Holocaust*, 335. See also different article by the same author: “Food Talk: Gendered Responses to Hunger in the Concentration Camp,” in *Experience and Expression...*, 161-180.

²⁵ See also Smith, S. *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women’s Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993; Iwasiów, I. “Gatunki i konfesje w badaniach „gender”, in *Genologia dzisiaj*, edited by W. Bolecki, I. Opacki, Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2000; Ritz, G. “Gatunek literacki a „gender”. Zarys problematyki”, in *Genologia dzisiaj*; Lejeune, Ph. *Dziewczęce „ja”*. *O dziennikach panien z XIX wieku*, translated by M. i P. Rodakowie, “Teksty Drugie” 2003, issue: 2/3.

²⁶ Heinemann, S. *Gender and Destiny: Women Writers and the Holocaust*, New York: Greenwood Press, 1986.

a peculiar form of exhibitionism. It was war and the imperative of giving testimony that created conditions necessary to overcome the cultural ban. The wartime formula for autobiography moved the egocentrism of autobiographical writing to the background and pronounced the tendency, embedded within a female social role, to "treat needs of others with greater attention than the needs of oneself."²⁷ According to Heinemann, this is how we should explain the relatively large number of female personal writings, which have been published during the war, as well as after.²⁸

The privileged position occupied by the autobiography within female literature of the Holocaust could be related to the fact that the confessional genres are perfect carriers for a different (because of gender) character of the traumatic wounding. As Sara R. Horovitz has put it, "a wound based on gender, distortion, tremor, related to something deeply intimate and important for the very essence of femininity."²⁹ That is precisely how Rachel Feldhay Brenner understands the sense of female intimism in her study of the three autobiographical projects from the times of war: works by Anne Frank, Etta Hillesum, Edith Stein, and Simone Weil.³⁰ For the author of the book, autobiography which includes descriptions of wartime is not only a form of self-presentation, a recording of changes in self-perception, but also a form of resistance in a situation of being exiled and sentenced to death, which is directly connected to the "obligation [of writers] toward the world." That is why the journals and letters of Weil, Hillesum, and Stein are marked by strong (strengthened by a female sensitivity) sense of moral decline, worldly "sickness," that they are trying to face with the "ethics of responsibility" and a tradition of dialogue, listening closely to the voices of others. Brenner attempts to reconstruct forms of "resistance" against the cruelties of history, using gender categories against dogmatic and accepted standards. She seeks signs of spiritual and intellectual freedom common to the four authors, which are realized through a particular perception of suffering and pain (according to Weil "suffering is the essence of human existence"), through the affirmation of sacrifice of oneself for the sake of the others (voluntary work for others by Etty Hillesum in Westbrok camp), through the attempt to create a "philosophy of suffering." The journal as a form of autobiographical writing turns out to be an important criterion for the ethno-gender identity. On this point, credit is due to the influence and popularity of Jewish author's journals from the times of *Haskalah* (Glueckel of Hamel and Pauline Wengeroff, whom Stein calls upon). Not always, however, the journal plays the role of a carrier of content affirming femininity. In *The Spiritual Autobiography*, Simone Weil seems to be rejecting her femininity, her female emotional and sexual needs, which in her mind constituted a condition for sanctity or genius. It was an attitude against that of Stein, who was convinced that it is a woman who can save the world, particularly when

²⁷ Ibid., 6.

²⁸ Ibid., 7.

²⁹ Horovitz, S.R. *Women...* 366.

³⁰ Brenner, R.F. *Writing as Resistance: Four Women Confronting the Holocaust: Edith Stein, Simone Weil, Anne Frank, Etty Hillesum*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997.

Holocaust in Literary and Cultural Studies

confronted by the kind of unimaginable cruelty witnessed by the writer herself. It was moral responsibility toward the world that Stein made into an attribute and female skill; one that brings hope for re-establishing the order of values.

From the discussed currents of feminist studies in Holocaust literature, we can draw the conclusion that they are internally diverse and rooted in many different traditions of thought. They are also open to new ideas and impulses from the humanities (such as: category of experience, philosophy of Agamben, extremely popular opposition between private and public). This diversity, as well as attempts to escape ideological and research fundamentalism, constitutes a good recommendation for the further development of feminist studies in Holocaust literature. Hopefully, they will retain their revisionist and critical approach toward established, research frameworks.

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Dorota KRAWCZYŃSKA

Empathy? Substitution? Identification?: How Should We Read Texts About the Holocaust?

Literature about the experience of the Holocaust – more than any other literature – forces us to reflect on the relation between the work and the reader. More specifically, it provokes reflections on the ethical determinants of this relation. In reference to Holocaust writing, we often use “appropriateness” as a fundamental category – understood here as the compatibility of the means of literary expression with the subject at hand. Yet perhaps we should apply the very same category to theoretical reflections on this form of literature, understanding “appropriateness” here as the ethical suitability or moral validity of these reflections.

When we study Holocaust literature, we must constantly ask ourselves questions about the legitimacy of using the same descriptive tools that we might use for other domains. This should mean questioning our right to classify particular works (notwithstanding any nuances) as better or worse, and their authors as more or less convincing. Yet we still tend to judge Holocaust literature precisely in this way. In simple terms, the basic criterion for this appraisal appears to be the power of specific examples to shock. Leaving aside for the moment any precise definitions of this genre of writing (I assume that it generally includes both literary fiction with biographical elements and direct personal accounts), I would like to devote my attention in this article to the other side of the question – to us, as the readers of today. This means examining the spiritual predisposition required for us to face this kind of writing, and through it to face the events and experience of the Holocaust, which most often reach us as written testimony.

The question of empathy immediately arises in relation to Holocaust literature and to our own thinking about the event itself. We may examine it on various levels with slightly different meanings. After all, the question presents itself differently in the relation between literary testimony and the reader (between the victims or witnesses of the

Holocaust and us) than it does in the relation between survivors, since we know that only some of them have assumed the burden of describing their own and other people's experiences. Moreover, the question appears in another entirely different light in cases where people who were only witnesses have appropriated the memories of others and thus assimilated their experiences. Here empathy or identification may appear as elements within a reconstructed literary vision of the Holocaust. Yet another question – which arises in many texts devoted to contemporary reflections on the Holocaust – concerns the attitude we should (or can) adopt towards these past events, and above all, towards the sufferings experienced by their participants.

In the case of Holocaust literature, we cannot apply theories of empathy as it manifests itself in the relation between the reader and the work, or – in the case of literary fiction – as a possible effect or result of intentional authorial strategies.¹ It is difficult to speak here of any premeditated operations on the part of the author, who takes the audience's expectations into account and encourages the reader to collaborate in the creation of meanings and to supplement the text with his or her own imaginative activity. This type of literature evokes specific psychic states in the reader, though these are exclusively a result of his or her own spiritual predisposition. In this respect, Holocaust literature is entirely disinterested (devoid of all assumptions except one: the need to bear witness). The compulsion to write felt by these authors finds its complement in the audience's compulsion to read. The writer's need to preserve the memory of his or her own suffering corresponds with the reader's need to find his or her own suffering in the suffering of others. In this sense, a person who reads records of Holocaust experiences is never disinterested. In the case of literary fiction, a kind of symmetry is possible in the reader-writer relation. The reader follows the same paths as the author and thus is "capable of collaborating in the text's actualization in a way that the author can imagine, making the same moves that the author made to create the text."² However, when we are dealing with Holocaust literature, this symmetry is undermined, and the reader seems to eclipse the author. On the one hand, the reader experiences the "psychic resonance" of empathy; on the other hand, he or she encounters the sphere of impressions exerted by this kind of material. This sphere extends from quandaries over the rights and wrongs of drawing emotional or intellectual benefits from this material to these very benefits themselves. According to Simon Lesser, "we read novels in order to provide ourselves with a fuller satisfaction of desires that are only partly fulfilled in real life and to soothe the fears and feelings of guilt aroused by our experience."³

Paul Ricoeur – on the other hand – makes the following remarks in his examination of the narrative nature of our existence, in which he includes its very end as a project: "Literature helps us in a sense to fix the outline of these provisional ends.

¹ On this subject, see: Markiewicz, Henryk, "Odbiorca i odbiór," *Teorie powieści za granicą. Od początków do schyłku XX wieku* (Warszawa: PWN, 1995).

² Ibid., 503.

³ Ibid., 513.

As for death, do not the narratives provided by literature serve to soften the sting of anguish in the face of the unknown, of nothingness, by giving it in imagination the shape of this or that death, exemplary in one way or another? Thus fiction has a role to play in the apprenticeship of dying.⁴ Of course, these words might seem inadequate in the face of death in the Holocaust. Yet for the living every end is equally terrifying. And just as a person who suffers immeasurably may turn into stone – like the hero of Wilhelm Dichter’s *God’s Horse* (*Koń Pana Boga*, 1996)⁵ – a person who constantly confronts descriptions of death, particularly in its most monstrous forms, may begin to perceive it as a figure of thought.

In his analysis of transformations in studies on the novel – partly under the influence of psychoanalytical theories – Henryk Markiewicz makes the following remarks:

If interpretive efforts had previously been directed at revealing the operation of the concealed phantasms driving the work, nowadays (in the 1970s and 1980s) we treat its contents as inconvertible. Instead, we focus our attention above all on how form and overt meaning affect the reader by weakening, masking and sublimating the phantasmic contents, thus protecting him or her from feelings of fear or repulsion.

Later he adds the following assertions (taken from Norman Holland):

All readers create phantasms that correspond with the diverse structures of their character from the phantasm that apparently exists “in” the work. Consequently, every reader recreates the work in the categories of his or her own identity. Firstly, the reader shapes the work in order to filter it through the net of his or her own adaptive and defensive strategies towards the world. Secondly, the reader recreates the particular form of phantasm or gratification to which he or she responds.⁶

I would define this recreation of the work to correspond with identity construction and psychic needs (together with Hans Robert Jauss’ concept of the “desire to look and find illusion,” which forms one of the possible patterns for reader behavior in identifying with a literary protagonist⁷) under the previously discussed emotional benefits – however

⁴ Ricoeur, Paul, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 162.

⁵ “I was like a stone that somebody had thrown – hard, smooth and cold. I flew fast and high. I would stop for nobody.” Dichter, Wilhelm, *Koń Pana Boga* (Kraków: Znak, 1996), 175.

⁶ Markiewicz, *Teorie powieści*, 513.

⁷ Among the interaction patterns enumerated by Jauss, two seem to fit the records under analysis here: the sympathetic pattern, for which Jauss proposes compassion as a basic condition, and the cathartic pattern, where the suffering hero appear as a context through identification with which the reader experiences a tragic shock. As norms of behavior, Jauss enumerates a progressive model, based on reflection and free moral judgment, and a regressive model, involving the desire to watch (a desire for illusion). See: Jauss, Hans Robert, “Interaction Patterns of Identification with the Hero,” *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

inappropriate this might sound in reference to literary records of the Holocaust. On the side of intellectual benefits, I would point to certain literary works that emerged from these events years later as testimonies not so much to empathy as to the literary capacity to exploit the experiences of others (here I have in mind Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz's *Umschlagplatz* and Marek Bieńczyk's *Tworki*). The false tone clearly perceptible in these attempts perhaps confirms the thesis that our task with respect to the Holocaust is rather to listen. But how?

*

Descriptions of suffering – the suffering of others – and death have a magnetic power, especially when accompanied by consciousness of the separateness and security of one's own existence. These descriptions simultaneously attract and repulse, thus creating a state of emotional ambivalence.

In his short story "Day and Night" ("Dzień i noc"), Leo Lipski writes: "I remember an incident before the war when the police took a man and beat him up...I could not tear my eyes away. A crowd was following them. And I had to look. Perhaps you, too, will find something at which you have to look." The literature of the Holocaust is something at which we have to look. The painful tension arising from its authors' belief in the impossibility of conveying tragic experiences and their simultaneous compulsion to record them finds its reflection in the situation of the reader torn between "I cannot read this" and "I must read it."

Facing this kind of literature requires an act of distancing oneself. Distance – meaning the permanent consciousness of one's separateness from the suffering character – is a fundamental feature of empathy as Martha Nussbaum defines the feeling.⁸

In her chapter on empathy, Nussbaum devotes a lot of space to the terminological and semantic nuances inherent in the terms "compassion," "sympathy," "pity," and "empathy." Yet the crucial distinction here is between compassion and empathy. Compassion is – in a certain sense – a painful emotion caused by the consciousness of another person's undeserved suffering. According to Nussbaum, empathy – on the other hand – denotes only the imaginative reconstruction of another person's experience without any judgment or appraisal of this experience. In this sense, the emotion is very different from compassion. In the case of empathy, compassion is unnecessary. Nevertheless, in various texts by psychologists and psychoanalysts, we sometimes encounter the term "empathy" to define a certain combination of imaginative reconstructions of another person's experiences with an appraisal of the person's situation as a misfortune and an appraisal of this misfortune as an evil. In this sense, the term begins to approach the meaning of compassion, though it is still not identical with it (for instance, one might feel compassion without making an imaginative reconstruction of the other person's experiences).

⁸ See: Nussbaum, Martha, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). I thank Professor Zdzisław Łapiński for recommending this book to me.

Nussbaum categorically differentiates compassion from empathy, insisting that the latter constitutes an imaginative reconstruction of another person's experience – irrespective of the kind of experience (whether it be sadness or happiness, pleasure, or pain) and regardless of whether the person making the reconstruction perceives the other person's situation as good, bad or indifferent (excluding cases in which a malicious person regards somebody else's misfortune as good or fortune as bad). Here Nussbaum introduces another distinction – between sympathy and compassion. This particular distinction concerns the intensity of feeling, both of the person suffering and the person experiencing compassion. Sympathy – which essentially represents a weaker form of compassion – also differs from empathy. An ill-intentioned person who imaginatively reconstructs the experience of another and draws pleasure from his or her misfortune may be regarded as empathetic, but certainly not sympathetic. Compassion and sympathy include an appraisal of the other person's suffering as bad.

We might compare empathy with the mental preparations of accomplished actors, who feel their way into the situations of suffering people while remaining fully conscious that they themselves are not the sufferers. This consciousness of the separateness of one's own existence from the existence of the sufferer is crucial, especially when empathy manifests itself together with compassion. After all, compassion allows one to forego any concentration on one's own "I," since it remains a feeling directed towards the other. When we feel compassion, we must be conscious both that somebody else's unfortunate fate is bad and that we are not the suffering person at that moment, since we remain ourselves. If we really felt pain in our own bodies, then we could not understand the pain of the other as truly other. We must remain conscious of a qualitative difference between ourselves and the suffering other. In other words, I must be conscious that the other suffers as another, and not as "I." The consciousness of separateness allows us to assess the meaning of suffering for the suffering person. In order to preserve this consciousness, a kind of "twofold attention" is necessary. To repeat: this is based on the sympathizing person imagining how it must feel to be in the place of the sufferer, while preserving consciousness of his or her own safe distance from this place. An empathy based on the idea that one really is the suffering other may lead to a dangerous delusion of identification, while also placing the sympathizer in the center of the experience instead of the sufferer.

In this interpretation, empathy would be reduced to mere understanding of other people's spiritual states, stripped of the element of personal engagement. Here it is more a way of preserving distance than a path to identification with the suffering person. When we confront accounts of the Holocaust, empathy understood in this sense ensures the necessary distance without which we might (or would have to) find ourselves on the other side. In other words – as Hanna Krall once suggested – we would have to enter the mass grave, or rather the pit full of corpses. The feeling of empathy properly understood – according to Nussbaum – brings the desired effect from the ethical perspective. It allows us to concentrate our attention on the experiences of the person suffering. It also guarantees that we can remain mentally balanced. And yet it is only a plan for preferable emotional reactions. In reality, the borders between

compassion, sympathy, “co-suffering” and empathy are fluid and indefinite. As Anna Łebkowska observes, “empathy and sympathy (in the sense of compassion) are often treated almost synonymously and identified with a kind of co-being with those who are excluded, other, different or condemned to silence.”⁹

However, in this case, we might begin to fear what Łebkowska calls “the assimilation of otherness by seizing hold of it, by an almost imperial appropriation of it, an identification with the other through a false usurpation and violation of the other’s autonomy. This threat is especially dangerous when sympathy is identified exclusively with the projection of one’s own ‘I’ and with the application of general rules or stereotypes for sensing or imaginatively understanding the ‘other.’ Ultimately, this means doing so according to one’s own laws.”¹⁰

Nussbaum’s understanding of empathy – supported by a deepened mindfulness – might protect us from this kind of appropriation. In her discussion of the ethical consequences of empathy, Nussbaum draws attention to its social aspect. She sees in empathy a fundamental respect for the world of the other’s feelings and experiences. Even when devoid of compassion, it shows respect for the other person’s reality and humanity. In this sense, it is close to the concept of social solidarity, which is “to be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers. Solidarity is not discovered by reflection but created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people. Such increased sensitivity makes it more difficult to marginalize people different from ourselves by thinking, ‘They do not feel it, as we would.’”¹¹

The question of appropriating other people’s experiences appears extremely often in the case of Holocaust literature – both in the form of specific examples and in general meditations on how we should reflect on the Holocaust.

Łebkowska distinguishes two separate literary manifestations of empathy. The first of these functions through narratives that reconstruct the past with the aim of “reconstructing the other’s identity in oneself through narrative,” reconstructing one’s own identity as another with whom – through empathy – one may identify. This is the case with Benjamin Wilkomirski and his (supposed) memories of the Holocaust.

The second manifestation is based on “evoking ‘the other’ in oneself, an attempt at creating other people’s emotional states and ideas in oneself, producing another world by impersonating or mimicking another person.”¹² Henryk Grynberg almost uses this method in reverse in those of his works characterized by what I would describe as writing in “the voices of others.” Grynberg does not evoke other people’s emotional states

⁹ Łebkowska, Anna, “O pragnieniu empatii w prozie polskiej końca XX wieku,” *Teksty Drugie* 5 (2002), 160.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Rorty, Richard, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), xvi.

¹² Łebkowska, 164.

in himself. Instead, he enters other people like a *dybbuk* and speaks with their voices from inside them. At the same time, he always remains himself, using the other as a medium for his own states and thoughts. Perhaps he meets the other halfway, since he never entirely appropriates the person. Nevertheless, he only loans his voice to others, rather than permanently bestowing it. This is the case with the reconstructed memoirs of Maria Koper, with the protagonists from his collection *Drohobycz, Drohobycz*, and with Adam Bromberg. In the heartbreaking short story “Raccoon,” which testifies to the deepest empathy with a mute being, the author-protagonist-narrator experiences a sense of extreme danger. On the basis of this shared experience, he temporarily turns into a mute animal condemned to death. The protagonist’s scream at the end of the story represents the sound the terrified animal cannot make.

Therefore, Grynberg’s method is to replace in speech those who cannot (or are unable to) speak, while still preserving his own perspective. In literary practice, this inevitably leads to manipulation of the material entrusted to him.

I do not visit lands or seas, but people. Especially when a painful story is trapped inside them and cannot escape...I do this not for them, but for myself. I express myself in these stories – not through commentary, but through identifying with their fates.¹³

Grynberg constantly emphasizes the role of compassion in his writings. Indeed, compassion becomes – so to speak – his creative method. He also looks for it in other writers who address the Holocaust: “Compassion was always more important than knowledge to me. I have not found it in many writers who have tackled this subject.”¹⁴

Empathy – and especially identification with the fate of the Jews – determines the value of Holocaust literature written by witnesses. Grynberg does not expect such works merely to express their voices, but also to form a testimony to compassion.

In his view, Jan Kostański’s account exemplifies this kind of testimony: “I found in it something I had always sought in vain in non-Jewish memoirs – complete identification with the fate of the persecuted and murdered Jews.”¹⁵

The Wilkomirski case is an example of a more pathological form of identification. Here we might say that the writer had fallen victim to empathy. In this sense, his character approaches those fictional characters infected with the “Auschwitz disease.” These include the young American lawyer from Philip Roth’s short story “Eli the Fanatic,”¹⁶ who (through a complicated chain of events) assumes the identity of a Holocaust survivor together with his clothes, and the unfortunate Nelli Doder – the wife of a concentration camp commandant – from Stanisław Grochowiak’s *Trismus*.¹⁷

¹³ Grynberg, Henryk, “Szkoła opowiadania,” *Lekcja pisania* (Wołowiec: Czarne, 1998), 56.

¹⁴ Grynberg, Henryk, *Prawda nieartystyczna* (Czeladź: Almapress, 1990), 25.

¹⁵ Grynberg, Henryk and Jan Kostański, *Szmyglery* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Twój Styl, 2001), 5.

¹⁶ Roth, Philip, “Eli the Fanatic,” *Goodbye, Columbus* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959).

¹⁷ Grochowiak, Stanisław, *Trismus* (Warszawa: Iskry, 1998).

Nelli's love and compassion for a little Jewish girl ultimately lead to her death – and to the death of her child.

In reality, Wilkomirski was the bastard child of a poor working-class woman – a foundling raised in an orphanage and later adopted by a bourgeois family from Zurich in 1945. He was a sensitive man with a painful inferiority complex (his mother and her brother also spent their childhoods in orphanages), which inclined him to identify with those most cruelly afflicted by fate. He presents an example of metamorphosis through identification. As he wrote his book,¹⁸ “Bruno Dösseker gradually turned into Benjamin Wilkomirski, incarnating himself as the protagonist and narrator of his story.”¹⁹

According to Waław Sadkowski:

Wilkomirski's book forms the other pole of that peculiar magnetic field stretching between Goethe's fiction and truth. Jerzy Kosiński's *The Painted Bird* is clearly at the first pole. In Kosiński's case, an autopsy and a true story serve as material for metaphorization and a subsequent transformation into a poetic horror story of his own experiences. In the case of Dösseker-Wilkomirski, an empathy conditioned by his own internal drama transforms other people's experiences – which he has heard and studied in various sources and accounts – into a quasi-true story of uncommon literary distinction.²⁰

In this way, Wilkomirski joins the ranks of the “symbolic orphans,” the children of the twentieth century, the modern Kaspar Hausers with no past and a heavy burden of traumatic experiences. (Małgorzata Baranowska writes about such cases in an article on another doubtful true story from a book by Roma Ligocka²¹).

In an essay on the question of truth and fiction in Holocaust literature, Cynthia Ozick makes the following observations:

Embedded in the idea of fiction is impersonation: every novelist enters the personae of his characters; fiction-writing is make-believe, acting a part, assuming an identity not one's own. Novelists are, after all, professional impostors; they become the people they invent. When the imposture remains within the confines of a book, we call it art. But when impersonation escapes the bounds of fiction and invades life, we call it a hoax – or, sometimes, fraud....One claim in Wilkomirski's defense (reminiscent of Rodriguez's charge against Isacovici) is that he is no fraud, and that there can be no hoax because he believes in his written story, and takes it to be his own. Perhaps he does. In that event we might wish to dub him insane.²²

¹⁸ Wilkomirski, Benjamin, *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* (New York: Schocken Books, 1996).

¹⁹ Sadkowski, Waław, “Prawda i zmyślenie,” *Literatura na Świecie* 5/6 (1996).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Baranowska, Małgorzata, “Symboliczna dziewczynka,” *Gazeta Wyborcza* (19 July 2001).

²² Ozick, Cynthia, “The Rights of History and the Rights of Imagination,” *Commentary* (March 1999). <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/article/the-rights-of-history-and-the-rights-of-imagination/>. Accessed 7 September 2013.

In other words, Wilkomirski is like the protagonist of Philip Roth's story, who also loses contact with reality when he comes into contact with the miracle of a person surviving the conflagration of the Holocaust.

Our challenge as readers of literature about the experience of the Holocaust today is to find a place for ourselves (and in ourselves) from which to interpret these documents. It is debatable whether it would be more desirable to evoke empathy within ourselves as Nussbaum understands it – meaning the acknowledgement of other people's psychic states while remaining aware of the separateness of one's own "I" – or rather to attempt to combine empathy with compassion or "co-suffering." The latter option would require at least a partial liquidation of the border dividing the "I" from the "not-I." While I am conscious of the dangers associated with immersing ourselves in the world of other people's impressions – and thus in other people's suffering – it seems to me that this might be the most honest way to deal with records of the Holocaust. I write "*might be the most honest*" since we must always remember the temptation to "use" these records for our own emotional or intellectual purposes. At the same time, the question arises as to whether appropriation or assimilation of another person's trauma is really an inevitable consequence of this position. Is it possible to find a way of reading texts about memory that would allow us to experience them in a disinterested manner, and thus to forget about ourselves?

On the one hand, discussions about strategies of remembrance, the problem of filling the void after the Shoah, the appropriation of trauma, catharsis and reiteration seem to suggest that every attempt to find a suitable place for oneself in this discourse is condemned to failure. On the other hand, these discussions include suggestions that we should renew these attempts.

The postulate of "pure" empathy, free of any appropriation, appears in a certain sense in Frank Ankersmit's reflections on the contemporary necessity of using the language of memory instead of the the language of history when we speak about the Holocaust – the discourse of suggestion instead of explanatory discourse.²³ However difficult it might seem to grasp this opposition – and however the ideas themselves evade definition – when we read records of the Holocaust, we intuitively sense the meaning of the distinction. We find an echo of this thinking in the work of Jan Tomasz Gross, when he writes about the need for historians to develop a new attitude towards their sources. This new method would be based on "good faith," compassion and empathy:

To begin with, I suggest that we should modify our approach to sources for this period. When considering the survivors' testimonies, we would be well advised to change the starting premise in appraisal of their evidentiary contribution from a priori critical to in principle affirmative. By accepting what we read in a particular account as fact until we find persuasive arguments to the contrary, we would avoid more mistakes than we are likely to commit by adopting the opposite approach...And that is why we must take literally all fragments of information at our disposal,

²³ Ankersmit, Frank, "Remembering the Holocaust: Mourning and Melancholy," *Reclaiming Memory: American Representations of the Holocaust*, eds. Pirijo Ahokas and Martine Chard-Hutchinson (Turku: University of Turku Press, 1997).

fully aware that what actually happened to the Jewish community during the Holocaust can only be more tragic than the existing representation of events based on surviving evidence.²⁴

Accordingly, the discourse of memory would require us to follow the memory of those who actually remember, since theirs is a memory of events, while ours is mere knowledge that they took place. In this very order of memory and empathy, the Holocaust would always remain an “empty place,” which nobody could attempt to appropriate.

It is impossible in this context not to mention Dominick LaCapra, who has argued for the necessity of liberating collective and individual memory from the weight of other people’s traumatic experiences, whose recurring image forms an unnecessary burden on the consciousness of those born later.

According to LaCapra, “those born later should neither appropriate (nor belatedly act out) the experience of victims nor restrict their activities to the necessary role of secondary witness and guardian of memory.”²⁵ The most desirable approach would seem to be a kind of empathy devoid of compassion – which appears to LaCapra as an unnecessary and undesirable addition potentially leading to emotional complications. And yet how can one be empathetic “without intrusively arrogating to oneself the victim’s experience or undergoing (consciously or unconsciously) surrogate victimage”? At the same time, LaCapra warns against “treating certain questions with empathy [while renouncing] all critical, and possibly self-preservative, distance.”²⁶

In this interpretation, the constantly renewed experience of the Holocaust becomes a dangerous and hypnotic obsession, which is damaging both to survivors and to those born later. The memory of limit events from the past seems to be an unnecessary ballast, while empathy and compassion appear as forms of appropriation. Yet any cure here would surely bring us too close for comfort to forgetting – and ultimately there is no place within this project for those who do not wish to be healed.

²⁴ Gross, Jan Tomasz, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 139-142.

²⁵ LaCapra, Dominick, *History and Memory After Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 198.

Joanna Tokarska-Bakir has devoted an essay (“Historia jako fetysz,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 15-16 [February 2003]) to questions of post-trauma and post-memory in the context of the “Jedwabne affair.” Here she blames the mythologization of social memory of the past for the current state of Polish historical consciousness (which makes all historical debate inconclusive). This process is precisely a consequence of post-memory – meaning transferred memory or memory based on a misunderstanding of empathy (whose emergence might have resulted from feelings of guilt), realized through the appropriation of other people’s trauma. All manifestations of this “post-traumatic madness” and “recurrences of distorted memory” – as Tokarska-Bakir describes these phenomena – are clearly judged negatively in her essay. However, there is no way to determine – and the same is true of LaCapra’s conception forming the basis of Tokarska-Bakir’s thought – which model of reaction to the constant manifestations of trauma arising from past events would be most desirable.

²⁶ Ibid., 182.

Therefore, it seems more fitting to agree with Ankersmit, who writes the following: "There are things in our common past which we shall never assimilate and which should constantly provoke chronic disorders and neuroses...We can only refer to and reinterpret traumatic events appropriately insofar as the wounds associated with them have not healed."²⁷

Translation: Stanley Bill

²⁷ Ankersmit, Frank, "Pamiętając Holocaust: Żałoba i melancholia" ("Remembering the Holocaust: Mourning and Melancholy"), *Pamięć, etyka i historia. Anglo-amerykańska teoria historiografii lat dziewięćdziesiątych. Antologia*, ed. Ewa Domańska, (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2002), 180. The neurotic memory about which Ankersmit writes is associated with the question of melancholy as the basis for an art that springs from suffering. This art is non-cathartic, since it brings neither healing nor beauty – apart from the melancholy appeal of the illness itself. See: Kristeva, Julia, "The Malady of Grief: Duras," *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989). Agnes Heller – on the other hand – points to the impossibility of experiencing catharsis for events whose meaning is incomprehensible: "Catharsis is only possible when we understand something or at least recognize its meaning *ex post*. However, there are some shocks that I would describe as conditional catharsis – meaning catharsis by way of an exchange of roles...In this mysterious exchange, adopting the role of a victim means taking on the victim's unbearable pain." Heller, Agnes, "Pamięć i zapomnienie. O sensie i braku sensu," *Przegląd Polityczny* 52/53 (2001).

Dorota GŁOWACKA

“Like an Echo Without a Source”: Emmanuel Levinas’ Witnessing Subject and the Holocaust Narrative

[W]e are all witnesses and we are all messengers. He who listens to a witness, he in turn becomes witness and messenger.

Elie Wiesel¹

We have to remember that Echo produces the possibility of a cure against the grain of her intention, and, even, finally, uncoupled from intention.

Gayatri Spivak²

In a short, poetic reflection “Nocturnal Variation on a Theme,” from the volume *Traces*, Ida Fink, an Israeli writer and Holocaust survivor, describes a former camp inmate’s recurrent dream: “He was freed from the camp and passed through the gate with the sign ARBEIT MACHT FREI. He was overcome by a wave of happiness unlike any he had ever known”³. Like a refrain, this description of the longed-for moment of

¹ “From the Ashes: Elie Wiesel in conversation with Roy Bonisteel.” *Man Alive*. Canadian Broadcast Corporation. 1973. 28min.

² Gayatri Spivak, “Echo.” *Selected Works of Gayatri Spivak*. Ed. Landry, Donna and Gerald MacLean. New York: Routledge, 1996. 186.

³ Fink, Ida. “Nocturnal Variations on a Theme.” *Traces*. Trans. Philip Boehm and Francine Prose. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998. 109.

liberation is repeated three times. In each vignette, however, the prisoner’s march toward a new life turns out to be only a detour, before a series of uncanny events leads him back to Auschwitz.⁴ While evoking a traumatic event, signaled by the nightmare, the author also gives testimony to another truth about the Holocaust: the story of the events it can never be told only once.

In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Giorgio Agamben reminds us that numerous survivors of the Holocaust have testified that the imperative to bear witness was their sole reason for survival. Perhaps one of the most compelling examples of survival by witnessing is the testimony of Filip Müller, a member of *Sondercommando* in Auschwitz, as it was captured by Claude Lanzmann in *Shoah*. In one episode, Müller describes his encounter with the women from his hometown, who were among the victims he was delivering to the gas chamber. When he decided to die with them, the women implored him to save himself for the sake of telling their story. Müller recalls their words: “You must get out of here alive, you must bear witness to our suffering, and to the injustice done to us.”⁵ He literally owes his existence to the necessity of being a witness.

The main theoretical framework of the following engagement with the Holocaust narrative is Levinas’ ethical re-formulation of subjectivity in terms of witnessing and of what the philosopher refers to, in *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, as “substitution.” In order to elucidate the ethical meaning of substitution, I will first attend to the notion of recurrence, defined by Levinas as the movement of return to oneself in infinite repetition. I will subsequently refer to ethical subjectivity as “iterable subjectivity” and describe it as the structure of witnessing.⁶

Interestingly, a number of contemporary thinkers, not necessarily directly influenced by Levinas, have recently attempted to redraw the parameters of subjectivity in relation to witnessing. In very different ways, authors such as Giorgio Agamben, Kelly Oliver, and Dominick LaCapra have offered this new model of subjectivity as a necessary corrective to modern, universalizing formulations of subjectivity on the one hand and the poststructuralist proclamations of the subject’s demise on the other. Feminist philosopher Kelly Oliver, for example, agrees with Levinas that we need to rethink subjectivity in light of ethics, as “response-ability, or response to ad-

⁴ In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Giorgio Agamben describes a similar nightmare as recounted by Primo Levi: also a former camp inmate, Levi dreams of having dinner with his family or friends. After a while, the picture becomes blurry and he hears, once again, the guard’s screaming voice: “Wstawac!” [Get up!] Agamben, Giorgio. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. New York: Zone Books, 1999. 101.

⁵ Claude Lanzmann. *Shoah*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1985. 165.

⁶ I am guided by Derrida’s discussion of iterability in works such as “Signature Event Context” (*Limited, Inc.* Evanston: The Northwestern University Press, 1988) or in “Freud and the Scene of Writing” (*Writing and Difference*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978). See Rodolphe Gasché’s discussion of iterability in *The Tain of the Mirror*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986. 212-17.

dress" (5).⁷ Agamben describes his entire philosophical project as "a kind of perpetual commentary on testimony" (13). In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, he arrives at the general definition of subjectivity that, at least at the first glance, approximates Levinas' own: becoming a subject is synonymous to bearing witness. LaCapra argues for a participatory model of researching history, whereby the historian integrates empathy and the work of memory into the task of establishing the truth of historical facts; that is, the historian's relation to history is that of bearing witness.⁸ We may recall as well that, although he refrained from the idiom of subjectivity, Jean-François Lyotard elaborated his theory of the *differend* in terms of bearing witness to the occurrence of the pre-ontological question "is it happening?" and posited that this was the main task and obligation of thought today.⁹

The confines of this paper do not allow for a detailed analysis of the excellent works mentioned above; let me comment, however, that I find it fascinating – and by no means "obvious" – that Agamben, Oliver, and LaCapra all acknowledge their debt to Dori Laub's seminal thesis about the "collapse of witnessing" and Shoshana Felman's corollary reference to the Shoah as "an event without witnesses," developed in their ground-breaking study on testimony.¹⁰ Subsequently, the three authors take written Holocaust narratives or videotaped oral testimonies as their point of departure. Agamben, for example, derives his notion of subjectivity as witnessing from the necessity to speak for the Muselmann, that unique product of the camps about whom Primo Levi famously wrote that they are "non-men...the divine spark dead within them: one hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death"¹¹. Let us recall that, also drawing on Holocaust testimonies, Lyotard developed his theory of the *differend* as a refutation of Robert Fourrisson's revisionist theses about the gas chambers, the argument to which Agamben returns in his own book.

What gives impetus to the new way of approaching the question of the subject and why is it happening at this particular moment? In psychoanalytic terms, bearing witness

⁷ According to Oliver, rethinking subjectivity in terms of witnessing requires that we move beyond Hegelian recognition, the paradigm that relies on the distinction between the subject and its object and is thus already a symptom of the pathology of oppression. According to Oliver, reconceiving subjectivity beyond recognition, that is, in terms of witnessing, is necessary if we are to envisage interhuman relations as peaceful, compassionate, and respectful of difference.

⁸ LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

⁹ "What is at stake in a literature, in a philosophy, in a politics perhaps, is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them." Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*. Transl. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 3.

¹⁰ Laub, Dori and Shoshana Felman. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

¹¹ Levi, Primo. *Survival in Auschwitz*. Trans. Stuart Woolf. New York: Collier Books, 1993. 90.

to trauma can only take place belatedly, outside their immediate frame of reference. In the case of the Holocaust, meaningful contexts, in which the horrific testimonials could be received, often emerged many years, even decades, after the events. Shortly after the Holocaust, it was possible for writers such as Theodor Adorno, Jean Améry, or Tadeusz Borowski to note that the catastrophe had resulted in the collapse of mainstay ethical values and epistemological concepts. Yet it is by deferral, in the context of contemporary catastrophes and emergent new cultural dominants that philosophy can articulate the implications of this historical trauma, of which the necessity to overhaul the parameters of subjectivity is perhaps a “symptom.” Agamben suggests that the questions of contemporary relevance of survivors’ testimonies can only arise after the factual “truth” of the Holocaust has been established (11).¹² I would like to redirect Agamben’s inquiry and ask the following question: is the Holocaust narrative simply an example *par excellence* of the new notion of subjectivity, with a Holocaust survivor as the figure of paradigmatic witness, or is the emergence of the amorphous genre of Holocaust *témoignage*, whether in its literary guise or in the form of videotaped accounts, what has made it both possible and necessary to rethink the subject in terms of witnessing?

What initially prompted my research was the dual epigraph to Emmanuel Levinas’ *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*. It reads, in the English translation: “To the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by National Socialists, and of millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism.” The dedication in Hebrew, however, evokes Levinas’ loved ones who had been murdered by the Nazis: “To the memory of the soul of my father and teacher, Rabbi Yehiel, son of Rabbi Abraham Ha’Levi; my mother and teacher, Deborah, daughter of Rabbi Moshe; my brother Dov, son of Rabbi Yehiel Ha’Levi and Aminadab, son of Rabbi Yehiel Ha’Levi; my father-in-law Rabbi Shmuel, son of Rabbi Gershom Ha’Levi; and my mother-in-law, Malka, daughter of Rabbi Haiim. May their souls be preserved in the bond of life.”¹³ The doubling of the dedication and the disjunction between a more general statement in French and its intimate, untranslated Hebrew equivalent is even more significant if we consider that the Shoah is seldom an explicit subject of Levinas’ philosophical reflection. The motivation for this reticence is, as Levinas writes in “Loving the Torah More Than God,” that “I refuse to offer up the ultimate passion as a spectacle and to use these inhuman screams to create a halo for myself as either author or director. The cries are inextinguishable; *they echo and echo across eternity*. What we must do is listen to the thought they contain” (81).¹⁴ In the light of the epigraph to *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas’s own reflection on the constitution of

¹² Undoubtedly, Agamben’s assertion that the process of acquiring factual knowledge about the events of the Holocaust is now complete should be put to scrutiny, especially in the face of new historical data still emerging, especially in the Eastern European countries such as Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, or Estonia.

¹³ I would like to thank Mrs. Liliana Falk for translating the Hebrew epigraph.

¹⁴ The essay is a commentary on the novella “Yosl Rakover Talks to God,” by an Israeli writer Zvi Kolitz. Originally published in 1963, the essay was reprinted in Levinas’s *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990.

the ethical subject as a witness to the existence of another can be reread as – although by no means reduced to – an act of witnessing and perhaps a prayer, reminiscent of Elie Wiesel’s repeated recitation, in both his written works and his public appearances, of “Yitgadal v’yitkadash sh’mei rabba,” the first lines of the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead in which the divine name is glorified.¹⁵

Asked whether he had not said enough about the horror that is now many years in the past, Wiesel retorted: “Even if I wrote on nothing else, it would never be enough”¹⁶. Responding to Wiesel’s proclamation of the never-ending task of witnessing and moved by a sense of urgency it exudes, I would like to attend to the movement of repetition in the construction of the Holocaust narrative and listen to the reverberation of the witnessing voice.

If we peruse the canon of Holocaust literature, we notice that a number of writers, such as Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, and Imre Kertesz – to cite the most familiar names – initially produced autobiographical accounts of their “survival in Auschwitz” and then carried on with works that, although not directly on the subject of the Holocaust, have been “variations on a theme.”¹⁷ While Primo Levi’s feat of surviving Auschwitz was put to doubt by his suicide in 1987, the other two writers went on to achieve the status of emblematic survivors. Both were awarded the prestigious Nobel Prize, the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize in the case of Wiesel, and the 2002 Nobel Prize for Literature for Kertesz. There are many lesser known, striking examples of literary “repetition compulsion” in Holocaust narratives. A remarkable example is the work of Isabella Leitner, a survivor from Hungary now living in the United States. In 1978, she published *Fragments of Isabella*, an account of her ordeals in the camps, based on the notes she had jotted down shortly after the liberation. Later, with the help of her husband Irving Leitner, she revised her initial text several times, in each subsequent version adding, rearranging and editing her “fragments.”¹⁸ A repetitive

¹⁵ “May the great and ineffable name of the Lord be exalted and sanctified in the world.” When Wiesel and Levinas once met in person, Levinas praised Wiesel’s work by using the term “kiddush hashem” (the sanctification of the Lord’s name). Incidentally, the two had the same teacher of the Talmud, Mordechai Shushani. I would like to thank Joseph Rosenberg for sharing his inspiring ideas about the recitation of the Kaddish in relation to Levinas’s ethics.

¹⁶ Wiesel, Elie. *All Rivers Run to the Sea. Memoirs*, Vol. I. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995. 333.

¹⁷ The autobiographical accounts I refer to are Primo Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz*, Elie Wiesel’s *Night*, and Imre Kertesz’ *Fateless*. It is fascinating to compare, for instance, Levi’s account of his ordeal as it was first written in 1946 with his reflection on the same events in a much later book *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Summit Books, 1988). The same can be said of Wiesel’s refashioning of his initial account in his autobiography *All Rivers Run to the Sea*. Unlike Wiesel and Levi, who insist on the factual truth of their first accounts, Kertesz describes *Fateless* as a novel that draws on autobiographical detail.

¹⁸ The subsequent revisions include: Isabella Leitner and Irving Leitner, *Saving the Fragments: From Auschwitz to New York* (New York: NAL Books, 1985), Isabella Leitner and Irving Leitner, *Isabella: From Auschwitz to Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), and Isabella Leitner, *The Big Lie: A True Story* (New York: Scholastic

yet always different gesture of these literary excursions into the traumatic past draws attention to the continuous, open-ended nature of testimony, beyond its function as archival safe-keeping of memory. I will also posit that this insistent movement of return, performed as a response to the imperative “Remember!” establishes a recollecting subject as witness.

Levinas defines ethics as the calling into question of the Same by the Other, whereby my identity arises from the impossibility of escaping ethical assignation. The ethical subject, primordialily indebted to another, thus appears prior to the autonomous subject that always remains safely anchored in its sense of self-sameness. Levinas frequently evokes the myth of Odysseus in order to describe the subject whose departures from itself are already animated by the goal of a safe return. It is mediated through the ideal principle that, while engulfing its singularity, offers indemnity against the risk of remaining adrift. To the Odyssean adventure, Levinas juxtaposes the myth of Abraham, who, after his ordeal at Mount Moriah, departs for an unknown land. Like Abraham, the ethical self forsakes its ancestral home.¹⁹ As he writes in “Substitution,” recurrence – the repeated movement of withdrawing into oneself, constitutive of subjectivity, disallows coincidence with oneself, evicting the subject from the core of its own unity and breaching the plenitude of its self-presence. This iterative mis-encounter with oneself is precipitated by the ethical truth that, rather than originating in the self, recurrence is “an exigency coming from the other over and above the active dimension of my powers”²⁰. Predicated on the prior moment of ethical obligation, recurrence is not a matter of volition or ability (of the “I can”). In the ethical relation, the self is never at rest in its identity but remains in exile, “outside the nucleus of my substantiality”²¹, in the affective state of vigilant disquietude. The self is, first and foremost, oneself-for-the-other since prior to having ventured outside of itself, it has already returned from the outside, from the absolute exteriority that it cannot inhabit. The Self returns to itself in identity proper to cognition and memory only because recurrence, as initiated by the other whom I cannot appropriate, is prior to departure.

Because iterability – the movement of return from the non-place of the ethical encounter – is the function of the ethical relation, the hypostasis of the I as a subject is already testimony to the existence of another: “The subject, in which the other is the same, inasmuch as the same is for the other, bears witness to it”²². The ethical subject is a witness before it assumes the task of witnessing, that is, before intentionality. It bears

Inc., 1992). The author also recorded her story on an audio-tape and authorized its production as a motion picture (made with the support of the Amnesty International).

¹⁹ For the analogy between biblical Abraham and the ethical subject see, for instance, Levinas, Emmanuel. “The Trace of the Other,” *Deconstruction in Context*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

²⁰ Levinas, Emmanuel. *God, Death, and Time*. Trans. Bettina Bergo. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000. 179.

²¹ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*. Trans. Alfonso Lingis. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1998. 142.

²² *Ibid.* 146.

witness to the source of its own obligation, the source that is absolutely external and that cannot be derived from consciousness. While the phenomenological subject is anchored in the temporal continuum through memory and intentionality, which are “the content” of its selfhood, the subject as witness is the addressee of a command arriving from the other, who cannot be seized in reminiscence. Temporality as such must therefore be reconceived starting from the time of the Other, as the recurrent movement of departure and return from the (non)place of alterity. As a witness to the other, the subject is always non-synchronous with what it bears witness to. It is primordially transcended by the diachrony of the other that signals, through the gratuitous lapse of time, “a past more ancient than every representable origin, a pre-original and anarchical passed” (9). The subject as witness returns from the past which cannot be represented as *arche* and synthesized in the present; it lags “already in the past behind which the present delays, over and beyond the now which this exteriority disturbs and obsesses” (100).

To convey the sense of the subject’s being touched by the unrepresentable exteriority from which the demand to bear witness issues, Levinas resorts to the metaphorical figure of the echo. The self, writes Levinas, is like a sound “that would resound in its own echo” (103), endlessly repeating after him who had called upon it in the immemorial past. The echo is Levinas’s paramount figure of speech through which he attempts to convey the sense of iterable subjectivity. The echo reverberates in the witness’s speech, rippling across the surface of his or her words. It is a trope for what Levinas calls Saying, that is, the ethical essence of language as “response-ability,” antecedent to communication. Levinas underscores the repetitive nature of Saying: “There is then an iteration of Saying, which is... a ‘here I am’ as the origin of language... bearing witness regardless of the later destiny of the said”²³. Already transmuted into echo, the Self cannot refuse to respond, repeating after the voice whose source remains unknown. The “echoing” speech foregrounds its status as an address to the Other, who is not only an interlocutor but also the source of the witness’s language. To call upon Gayatri Spivak’s brilliant reflection on Ovid’s representation of Echo, this mythical figure, who is condemned to express herself through the repetition of another’s words and who thus acts as a foil to Narcissus’ desire for self-knowledge, is an excellent trope for “the (un)intending subject of ethics [through which] we are allowed to understand the mysterious responsibility of ethics that its subject cannot comprehend” (190). At the same time, to articulate the Self figuratively as echo is to designate it as the movement of infinite repetition, of insistent and unstoppable return of the Other’s voice, even against my will. In this movement, the Self is simultaneously proclaimed and repeatedly desubstantiated. Its speech is evacuated of positive content and becomes echolalia – the reverberation of the infinitely distant sound, “uncoupled from intention.” As the echo, the Self lends its voice to another, putting itself in his or her place. It is in the idea that the ethical subject is responsible to the point of substitution that Levinas’s own articulation of subjectivity is most dramatic. The Self’s relationship with itself is declared to be “the extraordinary and everyday event of my responsibility that answers for the faults and misfortunes of others”²⁴.

²³ Levinas, *God, Death, and Time...* 198.

²⁴ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being...* 10.

This entails that not only is the Self called upon to answer before the Other and for the Other's deeds, but it also holds itself accountable for the Other's responsibility.

As in the case of Filip Müller's testimony,²⁵ the Holocaust narrative is a site where the movement of substitution traces itself in a unique way. Insofar as one is a witness, he or she assumes the impossible position of the victim, entering the unimaginable place where speech ceases, in order to bring that silence to speech. In Volume II of his memoirs, Elie Wiesel writes: "Long ago, *over there*, far from the living, we told ourselves that... the one among us who would survive would testify for all of us. He would do nothing else." The witness is also motivated by an obligation to lend his voice and his talent as a storyteller to the other survivors who find it difficult to speak. In that sense, as Primo Levi has noted, the survivors are never true witnesses since they cannot testify to the limit experience at which only those who were permanently silenced had arrived. The survivor is already a surrogate witness, speaking "in their stead, by proxy," borrowing the authority to speak from the dead.²⁶

Toward the end of *Night*, Wiesel recalls the events leading to his father's death: the father, who was by his side and sustained him throughout the ordeal of the camps, falls ill during the death march and, one night, simply disappears from his bunk. Wiesel writes, in sorrow, "His last word was my name. A summons to which I did not respond."²⁷ Wiesel's recounting of that unwitnessed event also carries the trace of an even deeper, unspeakable wound: that of the death of his mother and his little sister Tzipora, whom he saw for the last time on the ramp in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Yet, this is the summons to which the writer is still responding, and the impossibility to be indifferent to that call is the meaning of the witness's "speaking by proxy." Isabella Leitner has dramatized the substitutive displacement of the witness's voice by writing her "fragments" in the second person, as an address to her dead loved ones. When she asks, "I saw the flames. I heard the shrieks. Is that the way you died, Potyo? Is that the way?" (32), this question is not a mere figure of speech but an intimate address to her little sister. The writer's promises given to her dead mother are just as immediate: "I will tell them [Leitner's two sons] to make what is good in all of us their religion, as it was yours, Mother, and then you will always be alive...Mother, I will keep you alive" (103).

The sense of indeclinable duty, however, issues not only from the survivor's being a *porte-parole* for another, but also from an even more fundamental sense of having taken another's place. Levi asks: "Are you ashamed because you are alive in place of another? And in particular, of a man more generous, more sensitive, more useful, wiser, worthier of living than you?"²⁸ The concentration camp is then the most extreme

²⁵ It is important to keep in mind that the viewer receives that account within the frame of Lanzmann's *magnum opus*. For comparison, see also: Filip Müller, *EyeWitness Auschwitz: Three Years in the Gas Chambers* (Dec, Ivan R. Publisher, 1999).

²⁶ Levi, Primo. *The Drowned and the Saved*. Trans. Raymond Rosenthal. New York: Summit Books, 1988. 84.

²⁷ Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. Trans. Stella Rodway. New York: Bantam Books, 1982. 106.

²⁸ Levi, *The Drowned*... 81.

example of Levinas's critique of Heidegger's *Dasein*: its "Being-in-the-world" always amounts to taking up someone else's place under the sun, of, literally, having lived in his or her stead.²⁹

In order to examine the way in which the Holocaust narrative mobilizes the notion of substitution, I will briefly look at two novels, Elie Wiesel's *The Gates of the Forest*, written in 1964, and Imre Kertesz's *Kaddish For a Child Not Born* (1990). In Wiesel's novel, the main character, Gregor (an assumed name), is hiding in a cave in the forest, eluding a massive manhunt. One night, a stranger arrives at the hideout, claiming that he has forgotten his name. He responds with laughter to all of Gregor's queries. Under these circumstances, Gregor, who himself has been stripped of everything, offers the stranger the gift of his Jewish name – "Gavriel." The novel opens with the following sentence: "He had no name, so he gave him his own. As a loan, as a gift, what did it matter? In the time of war every word is as good as the next. A man possesses only what he gives away" (3). It seems that Gregor's gesture of dispossessing himself of his real name makes it possible for the narrative to commence. As if it were a counter-gift, the stranger begins to tell his story: unable to leave, Gregor has to listen to the horrifying account told by him who now bears his name. Gavriel commands Gregor, "You must learn to listen. Listening gives you the key" (44). Such listening, in which the listener is a prisoner of the tale, is what precedes and what will bring about the witness's own speech. When the story is finally told, the stranger – now Gavriel – surrenders himself to the Germans, who believe they have captured Gregor. Gregor survives the war first by slipping into the role of a deaf-and-dumb village idiot, and then by living out what would have been Gavriel's life with a group of Jewish partisans.

Levinas contends, in the section "Witness and Language" in *Otherwise Than Being*, that the subjectivity of the subject is "the possibility of being the author of what has been breathed in unbeknownst to me, of having received, one knows not from where, that of which I am an author" (148). To an unparalleled degree, the author of the Holocaust narrative rescinds his autonomous right to the authorship of his story. Insofar as the witness substitutes for another, he always lends his true name to the stranger. The stranger is then the locus of the witness's identity, now evacuated outside itself, while the name that the witness carries and that designates him or her is always only an alias. The transposition of the name in witnessing evokes Levinas's notion that, in its identity as a being, the Self is only a mask: "It bears its name as a borrowed name, a pseudonym, a pronoun" (106). On the other hand, this gesture of putting oneself in place of the stranger constitutes the subject as witness and enables the passage from the absolute impossibility of speech to the actuality of testimony. As conveyed poetically in Levinas's metaphor of the echo, the indisputable fact of the existence of the other can only be manifested in the witness's voice. This also means that the imperative to speak must be obeyed, and it is in this sense that ethical responsibility amounts to "the impossibility of being silent, the scandal of sincerity" (143). Witnessing is an event of

²⁹ For a critique of Heidegger, see for instance Chapter Two of Levinas' *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985).

spectral re-visitation unhinged from time, the incision in chronologies recorded by history, and the dispersion of language beyond the said. Yet, as always already repetition, it also precipitates the witness' entrance into the continuum of time and space, into the actuality of speech and writing.

The folding back upon itself in recurrence is already a persecution by the other who holds me hostage and puts into question the meaning of my existence as “for-itself.” Levinas writes: “It is therefore necessary that there be in the egoity of the I the risk of a nonsense, a madness”³⁰. In *God, Time, and Death*, Levinas locates the core of that “nonsense” in the scandalous fact of the other's death; it makes “no sense” because it radically cancels the possibility of response. The madness of absolute no-response, located in the very core of meaning, refers me and consigns me to the other. In “Useless Suffering,” one of the few texts where he makes an explicit reference to Nazi atrocities, Levinas also focuses on the “no-sense” of the other's pain and postulates that the self's own suffering and death can only acquire meaning starting from the suffering of someone else. For Levinas, that madness at the center of signification has to be affirmed as the nexus of subjectivity, affecting the self in its very identity, since it marks the limit of speech as the vehicle of meaningfulness (94). Thus recurrence, the movement of return from “beyond essence,” is set in motion by the nonsense of the Other's death, and the exteriority from which the witnessing subject returns is the unrepresentable place of that death. The subject's temporality is then the function of the awakening of the Same by the Other in the light of the Other's death and suffering. Marking the other's absolute “no-response,” they command response and designate the witness “in my culpability of a survivor,” turned toward “another source of meaning than the identity of the same with itself” (12). The Other is the incision in temporality; constituted as a witness to the existence of the other, the I is the reverberation of this pre-original interval.

Again, the Holocaust narrative reveals this limit condition of witnessing – the “no-sense” of the Other's suffering and death that initiates the movement through which the I posits itself as the subject. In its primordial manifestation as witness, always in the accusative and accountable for the other's choices, the subject is deposed from its sovereign position as the originator of logos. Prior to being an address, the witness's speech is already “a response to a non-thematizable provocation.”³¹ I am a witness because the evanescent passage of the Other through the world can only trace itself in my voice: “Language permits us to utter, be it by betrayal, this *outside of being*, this *ex-ception* to being” (6). The meaning of the witness's speech is therefore what Levinas calls obsession, that is, the self's being affected by the encounter with the other. Since the movement of repetition, constitutive of substitution, puts the subject out of phase with itself, its speech is also dissonant, animated by significations that it cannot derive from itself. Insofar as witnessing is primarily Saying, in which only the Self's appointment by the Other speaks, the words are devoid of sense and the witness's speech is obsessive.

³⁰ Levinas, *God, Death...* 20.

³¹ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being...* 12.

In Holocaust literature, a frequent symbolic inscription of this speech, emptied of meaning by the fact of the other's death, is the figure of a "madman," usually someone who has miraculously escaped execution and has returned to warn the others.³² A particularly haunting example, which was later immortalized by a Polish director Andrzej Wajda in his film *Korczak* (1990), is an episode in *Bread for the Deported*, a novel by Polish-Jewish writer Bogdan Wojdowski, which describes the life and then tragic disappearance of the Warsaw Ghetto. In the hours preceding deportations, "a bellowing specter" is running through the streets, exclaiming incomprehensible words: "Brothers! They drive people naked into ditches and shoot them in the back. They fill in the pits and the blood flows over onto the fields. Like a watery swamp. The blood surfaces above the graves. The earth moves over those graves... They have some kind of smoke. They have some kind of fire. They suffocate and they burn" (374). An indelible *revenant*, the figure of a "madman" appears in almost all of Wiesel's writings. The most memorable character in the writer's first narrative, *Night*, is Moshe the Beadle, a survivor of a mass execution, who returns to his village to warn the Jews of Sighet. His stories are disbelieved, and he is said to have lost his mind. In *The Gates of the Forest*, the "madman" reappears as the laughing stranger who claims that his name "has left him."

The tension in Wiesel's narratives arises from the fact that, ever since *Night*, his testimonials have been a struggle against Moshe the Beadle and at the same time a continuation of his irrefutable legacy. To write about the Holocaust is to say "here I am" to the unrelenting specter of Moshe, to be his hostage. It is significant that, in *Night*, before plunging into "madness," Moshe was young Elie's teacher in the cabbala and introduced him to arcane knowledge. To testify to the Event, to be a witness, is to repeat Moshe's fate: it means to tell the stories that are insane, to utter empty words that do not deliver meaning. Yet it also means to toil against language; to compose meaningful phrases, even if they continue to abscond into "madness." The "mad" speech, which seems to be the only way our language can describe the words of the Holocaust witness, marks the chiasmus between the possibility and impossibility of speech. In *And the Sea Is Never Full*, Wiesel writes, "The mystical madmen of Sighet, the beggars, bearers of secrets, drawn to doom, they all appear in my fictional tales. But I am afraid to follow them too far, *outside myself or deep within me*" (5, emphasis added). The madman is the stranger-within-the-same, yet whose strangeness can never be absorbed and who perseveres as the sign of absolute exteriority whose trace is imprinted in the witness's speech. The madman is a paradigmatic survivor and, at the same time, a trope for "a modality not of knowing, but of obsession, a shuddering of the human quite different from cognition."³³

Obsessive words are the insignia of the narrator's halting monologue in Imre Kertész' *Kaddish For the Child Not Born*, the novel that carries the paradox of substitution toward a new limit. The author was fifteen when he was deported to Auschwitz, and from there

³² Dori Laub notes that the power of the Nazi delusion was such that those who tried to tell "the truth" about it were taken to be mad: paradoxically, the truth could only be conveyed in the form of a madman's speech.

³³ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being...* 87.

to Buchenwald. Already in his first novel, *Fateless* (1975), he speaks of having lived a borrowed existence: “I, too, had lived out a given fate. It wasn’t my fate, but I am the one who lived it to the end”³⁴. In *Kaddish*, the narrator’s voice exudes a sense of homelessness, of drifting through life that does not seem to be his own, a survivor’s endemic rental life that “I didn’t quite live, and undeniably, this was not quite life; it was, rather, functioning, yes, *surviving* to be more precise.”³⁵ The main character reflects on his failed marriage and on his career as a writer and translator. He confesses that he writes all the time because of the “stubborn duty” to write, although, unlike Wiesel, he cannot clearly articulate the meaning of this “duty”: “I can’t help it; if I write I remember, I have to remember even if I don’t know why I have to. . . I can’t be silent about [my stories] because it is my duty, albeit I don’t know why it’s my duty, or more precisely why I feel it’s my duty” (21-34). The unavowed *raison d’être* of this rapid, confused monologue, however, is to address a child “not born,” whom the narrator has refused to beget “after Auschwitz.” The text performs the rites of mourning for the child that could have been born and whose potential existence was annihilated by Auschwitz. The narrator chooses not to “multiply the survival of himself in descendants,” which painfully contrasts with, for instance, Isabella Leitner’s exhilaration at the birth of her two sons, whom she repeatedly calls her greatest victory over Hitler. The opening sentence of the narrator’s confession is the announcement of this refusal: “No, I said immediately and forthwith, without hesitation and spontaneously.”³⁶ This “screaming, howling ‘No’” resounds throughout the book, at times becoming a painful, even nostalgic question of “Were you to be a dark-eyed little girl? With pale spots of scattered freckles around your little nose? Or a stubborn boy? With cheerful, hard eyes like blue-gray pebbles?” (17) What does it mean for the witness to speak in response to him or her who will not have been, whose non-existence was begotten by Auschwitz?

The narrator views his existence through the lens of the unfulfilled potentiality of another’s life, and the refrain “my life in the context of your potentiality” is repeated on almost every page of the short novel. The intrinsic cause that has undercut that potentiality is revealed through the other *leit motif* reiterating throughout the monologue: the narrator’s life has been nothing but “digging the grave in the air.” Thus, the astonishing fact of the narrator’s survival, that is, the unfulfilled possibility of his death at Auschwitz, the death that he continues to die, is inseparable from the unfulfilled potentiality of his child’s birth. He qualifies his thesis as follows: “to view your non-existence in the context of the necessary and fundamental liquidation of my existence” (24). His existential reflection on Being-towards-death (now indelibly marked by the impossibility of his very possible death at Auschwitz) is tantamount with the Being-toward-“not being-born” of

³⁴ Kertesz, Imre. *Fateless*. Trans. Christopher C. Wilson and Katharina M. Wilson. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1992. 188.

³⁵ Kertesz, Imre. *Kaddish for a Child Not Born*. Trans. Christopher C. Wilson and Katharina M. Wilson. Evanston, III: Hydra Books, 1997. 45.

³⁶ Leitner, Isabella. *Fragments of Isabella: A Memoir of Auschwitz*. New York: Dell Publishing, 1978. 1.

his child, in the wake of Auschwitz.³⁷ The compulsion to write, to literally bury himself in his writing, is inseparable from the repetitious “digging the grave others had started for me in the clouds”; as the narrator says, “for the pen is my spade” (24).

Kaddish for a Child Not Born is also an erudite philosophical reflection, abounding with allusions to German writers and thinkers, most notably to Rilke, Nietzsche, Hegel, and Heidegger. The only famous name the narrator conspicuously passes over in silence is that of Paul Célan, a Holocaust survivor who committed suicide in 1970, and yet whose well-known verses from the poem “Death Fugue” he quotes repeatedly: “How could I have explained to my wife that my pen was my spade? That my reason for writing was that I had to, and I had to because even then they whistled to me to dig deeper, to play death’s tune darker, more sweetly? How could I perform work predicated on the future using the very same spade with which I must dig my grave into the clouds, the wind, into nothing?” (66).³⁸ Toward the end of the novel, the narrator’s droning voice, his “mad” speech on Being-towards-death after Auschwitz, becomes that of a “madman” from Wojdowski’s or Wiesel’s tales: “Occasionally, like a drab weasel left over after a process of thorough extermination, I run through the city” (94). As if lamenting over his own grave and the grave of his unborn child - which is always “the grave in the air” drifting over the chimneys in Auschwitz, the narrator ends with a prayer that evokes all the “drowned” of Primo Levi’s narratives: “I may drown/Lord God/let me drown/forever, Amen” (95).

Yet, because it is an address delivered in the second person, his voice is ultimately, by Levi’s definition, that of a “saved” one. Undoubtedly, the narrative of *Kaddish* re-inscribes the (non)experience of trauma, and its most powerful vehicle is the displaced repetition of Célan’s refrain. With his pen turned spade, the narrator can only “dig up” words that instantaneously turn into ash. His inability to anchor himself in life, his “pristine homelessness,” is caused by the fact that the only home he makes for himself

³⁷ I am drawing here on Martin Heidegger’s existential analysis of death as “Being-toward-death,” in *Being and Time* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962). I am guided by Kertesz’ use Heidegger’s terminology.

³⁸ The following lines from Célan’s poem are tacitly woven into narrative of *Kaddish for the Child Not Born*:

we dig a grave in the breezes there one lies unconfined
A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents he writes
he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden hair
Margarete
he writes it and steps out of doors and the stars are flashing he
whistles his pack out
he whistles his Jews out in earth has them dig for a grave
he commands us strike up for the dance

He calls out more sweetly play death death is a master from
Germany
he calls out more darkly now stroke your strings then as smoke
you will rise into air.

Paul Célan, *Poems*, trans. Michael Hamburger (New York: Persea Books, 1988), 61-62.

is the unlocatable “grave in the air.” And yet, this failure to assert the givenness of his existence after Auschwitz leads the narrator to the realization that his right to be must be considered in the light of another’s potentiality for being, and his address is primarily a response to this exigency. The text unfolds as *epochē* of the facts of his existence, stripping the narrator to the nudity of the address to another: he witnesses, therefore he is. Bearing witness – to those buried in the grave in the air, to his own imminent death and to the child not born – thus constitutes the mystery of his survival, delivering him into subjectivity. The announcement of another’s annulled potentiality for being in face of his imminent and yet unfulfilled death is the enunciation of his subjective existence, of his “here I am.” The narrator’s supernumerary life, the miracle of *sur-vivre*, consists of his being-witness. In lending his voice to the child not born, the narrator transforms his “obsessive speech” into Kaddish, the prayer for the dead that extols the divinity of the other. The witness’s speech can only arrive from the impossibility of speaking, but it is also, as Agamben insists, why the subject is always a witness, why it can speak for those who cannot speak: “*The authority of the witness consists in his capacity to speak solely in the name of an incapacity to speak – that is, in his or her being a subject*” (158). In a stark and unsparing manner, *Kaddish* brings out the complexity and difficulty of being a witness “after Auschwitz.” It also throws into sharp relief the narratives that attempt to present the survivor’s life in terms of redemptive closure; at the very least, it points to the hidden ruptures in those narratives.

The imperative “Remember!” issues from the time of the other, from the past that neither historiography nor individual memory can assemble, and that haunts every testimony as obsessive and traumatizing exteriority. The compulsion to repeat, intrinsic to the Holocaust narrative, indicates that the subsequent retellings of the story do not assuage the need to testify, and the witness can never disburden herself of her task. On the contrary, she suffers the increasing demand to bear witness; one could speak, in Levinas’s terms, of the obsessive “insatiability” of these re-tellings. Paradoxically, the witness’s responsibility is augmented the more she or he testifies; the debt is not dischargeable, and it grows with each repetition of the story. Wiesel summarizes this exigency by means of a succinct metaphor encrypted in the titles of the two volumes of his *Memoirs*: Volume One is called *All Rivers Flow to the Sea*, while the title of Volume Two states that *The Sea Is Never Full*. Levinas writes: “The more I return to myself, the more I divest myself, under the traumatic effect of persecution, of my freedom as a constituted, imperialist subject, the more I discover myself to be responsible; the more just I am, the more guilty I am.”³⁹ In that case, the infinite debt incurred by a Holocaust witness cannot be discharged not only because those who cannot speak for themselves are innumerable, but also because the irreducibility of the ethical obligation, which produces subjectivity in the movement of recurrence, is the condition of the very possibility of witnessing.

What does it mean to testify to the events of the Holocaust? Perhaps – that one can only become a witness, in the sense of giving testimony to traumatic events, because as a subject, one is always already a witness. To arrive into speech and to announce oneself as

³⁹ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*... 112.

an “I” is already a pronouncement of the “Here I am,” that is, the subject’s election in the movement of return and departure from the non-place of the ethical encounter. That is, only because to be a subject means to be a witness, is it possible to assume the concrete task of bearing witness and to remain accountable for the ways in which this task is fulfilled.⁴⁰

The Holocaust narrative insists on the duty to bear witness, and it is written as an interpellation in which the subject of enunciation appears as the inscription of the trace of the other. It is addressed both diachronically to the other who has affected the witness and proleptically, to him or her who would have been. This modality of future anterior inscribed in witnessing, of “Il y aura obligé,” is signaled in Kertesz’s novel by the negative figure of the unfulfilled possibility of the child.⁴¹ Antecedent to the time measured ontologically against the horizon of one’s own demise, is the ethical time, defined by the possibility of the Other’s death. It confers meaning on both life and death, insofar as the I lives for the Other, for the “beyond-my-death.” The subject of ethics returns not only from the immemorial past but also from the unknown future in which his or her voice will continue to reverberate. It is in this sense that the retelling of the Holocaust story is an homage to the victims but also a gift to the future generations of rememberers. In the context of the Holocaust narrative, it is of special importance that Levinas’s shattering of the temporal horizon circumscribed by the ego tensed on itself thus allows for the witnessing subject who is responsible for the past before its immediate time and for the future that extends forward, beyond the horizon of its death. In Levinas’s own words, “the work of memory consists not at all of plunging into the past but of renewing the past through new experiences, new circumstances, new wounds or horrors of everyday life. And from this point of view, it is the future that is important and not purely the past.”

I would like to postulate that the compelling need to bear witness after the Shoah, as it has gradually materialized in the form of innumerable Holocaust testimonies, has mobilized the attempts to rethink subjectivity in terms of witnessing; this necessity has found its most profound expression in Levinas’ thought. I have elaborated Levinas’ model of the iterable subject as a witness substituting for another and related it to the repetition compulsion that underwrites the Holocaust narrative, as well as to the witness’s “obsessive” speech. It is remarkable that Levinas frequently borrows the psychoanalytic language of trauma to describe the ethical encounter with alterity.⁴² Drawing on the

⁴⁰ For an excellent discussion of Primo Levi, Tadeusz Borowski and Paul Célan in relation to Levinas’s notion of witnessing, see: James Hatley, *Suffering Witness: The Quandary of Responsibility after the Irreparable* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000). Hatley writes, in Chapter Four (“The Transcendence of the Face”): “The question is not whether one should witness the victim but whether one is to embrace one’s responsibility for that witness. The witness, according to Levinas, occurs whether one wills it or no” (94).

⁴¹ Jacques Derrida’s expression, in “At This Moment, in This Text, Here I Am,” *Re-Reading Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 1-48.

⁴² Incidentally, in a less pronounced way, so does Agamben, when he says that “subjectification, the production of consciousness in the event of discourse, is often a trauma from which human beings are not easily cured” (123).

work of Sigmund Freud as well as Dori Laub’s study of trauma in the aftermath of the Shoah, Cathy Caruth reminds us that trauma can never be experienced directly and thus marks an interval in the temporality of the subject. This is why it returns not only in nightmares but also through the survivor’s unknowing acts, “haunting” the survivor against his or her will.⁴³ Especially important for my discussion is Caruth’s conclusion that, since the experience of trauma consists in the repeated reenactment of the event that was not fully experienced at the time of its occurrence, trauma is locatable in the very movement of repetition rather than in the event itself.

For Levinas, the ethical exposure to the other is always “a trauma at the heart of my-self”⁴⁴, “a deafening trauma, cutting the thread of consciousness which should have welcomed it in the present.”⁴⁵ The shock of being affected by the Other, which constitutes the ethical subject as a witness, cannot be comprehended or captured in memory; it is “the bursting of experience” rather than its disclosure. The encounter with alterity marks a break in the subject’s experience of time; it is indeed, to borrow Caruth’s term, a “missed encounter” since the self is never contemporaneous with the other. Since my response to the other is an “obsession,” that is, a “persecuting accusation that strips ego of its pride” (110), on the level of affectivity, I experience the being of the other as a shock, a suddenness which cannot be converted into cognition. For Levinas, the witnessing subject repeatedly turns toward the other, although this movement of infinite approach already presupposes the re-turn from outside the periphery of the same. Recurrence is then described as the dialectic of return and departure from the site of trauma.

As Dori Laub already noted, the overcoming of trauma, the breaking away from the immobilizing cycle of repetition compulsion, becomes possible in the process of giving testimony. Since the accounts of traumatic events mostly convey the impact of their incomprehensibility rather than a positive content, Caruth insists that “it is in the event of this incomprehension and in our departure from sense and understanding that our own witnessing may indeed begin to take place” (56). Caruth’s rethinking of trauma in terms of survival and her emphasis on the passage from compulsive “acting out” to witnessing, draw attention to Levinas’s positive valorization of repetition in the positing of subjectivity as recurrence and thus to his transvaluation of the very notion of trauma in ethical terms.

Levinas’s re-inscription of trauma also underscores the fact that the witnessing subject is not a passive victim afflicted by the demands of the other and incapable of meaningful action. To read Levinas in these terms is to overlook the fact that Levinas’ entire project is a protest against victimization and degradation, of which the Holocaust victim was the epitome. I do not dispute that Levinas’s idiom of “obsession, persecution, and submission” implies victimization, but these connotations themselves can only arise within the traditional understanding of subjectivity, whereby the alternative to conquer-

⁴³ Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. 2.

⁴⁴ Levinas, *God, Death...* 187.

⁴⁵ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being...* 111.

ing otherness is being its victim, that is, within the very paradigm of victimization. The reformulation of subjectivity in terms of witnessing is necessary in order to arrive at the notion of the Self's activity which is more than only for itself. The Self's awakening to the needs of others and its restlessness (since it cannot assuage the need to help) make it impossible to be indifferent; that is, it is necessary to act. Such is the meaning of Levinas' insistence on the need to "pass from the outrage undergone to the responsibility for the persecutor, from suffering to the expiation for the Other"⁴⁶. The ethical relation designates me as responsible even for my persecutor's deeds, that is, it decrees respect for the humanity of those whose face is hidden behind the mask of murderous hatred. "Turning the cheek," symbolic of the subject's patient passivity in the ethical relation, is a radical act that breaks the cycle of violence. It also marks the suffering subject's ethical transformation from a victim to a witness *and* initiates a passage toward the possibility of subjectivity "after Auschwitz."

As Levinas insists, the existence of the other, "the glory of the infinite," traces itself in the witness' speech. Thus, the emergence of subjectivity in substitution enables the transition from the impossibility of speech to the actual speech in the form of testimony. In a paramount fashion, the Holocaust narrative exposes the need to pay attention to that passage and call for vigilance as to how this journey is accomplished.

Drawing on the idiom of witnessing, Agamben describes his own project as "listening to something absent," as finding a way to "listen to the unsaid" (14). The following passage, in which Agamben's language suddenly lapses into the first person singular, is particularly striking. Commenting on a witness's account of a soccer game played in Auschwitz, he avows, "I, like the witnesses, instead view this match, this moment of normalcy, as the true horror of the camp... But also hence our shame, the shame of those who did not know the camps and yet, without knowing how, are spectators of that match, which repeats itself in every match at our stadiums, in every television broadcast, in the normalcy of everyday life" (32). At the end of my theoretical reflections on the notion of subjectivity alongside Holocaust narratives, this statement leads me to conclude that not only does philosophy take up the task of rethinking the subject as the structure of witnessing but also the very task of philosophy is being redefined in terms of witnessing, as was announced already in Lyotard's injunction that the task for thought today was bearing witness to the *differend*. Pre-eminently in Levinas's writing and strongly resonant in the works of authors as different as Agamben and Oliver, a philosopher situates himself or herself in the position of a witness, and so does a historian, in LaCapra's case, or a literary critic such as Caruth.

Agamben identifies the Muselmann as a lacuna in experience, knowledge, and speech, the point at which the very notion of subjectivity implodes. The living dead from the camps are "the *larva* that our memory cannot succeed in burying, the unforgettable with whom we must reckon" (81). As the untestifiable par excellence which gives rise to the necessity of speech, the Muselmann is the limit from which we must rethink what it means to be a subject. While Agamben's diagnosis that the Muselmann is the catastrophe of the

subject, the dissolution of the very notion of humanity that marks the limit of speech is important, it obscures innumerable other “black holes” that puncture the continuity of Holocaust narratives. I have spoken of these breaking points in terms of “madness,” of “no-sense,” that impels the witness’s speech. More specifically, in Wiesel’s *Night*, the threshold from which Wiesel’s life of witnessing has unfolded is the missed experience of his father’s death, as well as the unspeakable wound of the loss of his mother and sister. The vortex of the narrator’s monologue in Kertesz’s text is the unpronounceable name of Paul Célan, as it coincides with another missing name – that of his unborn child.⁴⁷

It is also in the caesura between the possibility and impossibility of speech that a peculiar feeling, experienced by the secondary witness – the reader of the Holocaust narrative – is located. It is an affective mixture of grief, awe, and respect but certainly also shame; the shame for the other’s shame, the shame for my own comfort. This singular sensation is only possible as an affective trace of being beholden to the other, a sign of the “breathlessness that pronounces the extraordinary word beyond”⁴⁸, the “breathlessness” that is almost audible in Paul Célan’s poetry. This extraordinary expression conveys the mortal danger of the deprivation of air and thus the sheer physical impossibility of speech. It is the limit condition from which speech bursts forth, “pronouncing” the beyond; the rhythm of respiration that is inspiration for the witness’s speech. In another striking metaphor, Levinas describes this speech as “The breathless spirit [that] retains a fading echo”⁴⁹. The fading echo of his murdered relatives’ voices in Levinas’s own texts is perhaps why I always lean over the epigraph/epitaph preceding *Otherwise Than Being* and think of that book as a *matzevah* in the form of a philosophical treatise. After all, if, as Levinas insists, our ethical obligation to the Other is always directed at a concrete human existent rather than at an abstract entity, so are our words.

⁴⁷ Perhaps we should also consider another constitutive limit of all Holocaust speech, that of the survivor’s – the paradigmatic witness’s – suicide. Tadeusz Borowski, Paul Célan, Jean Améry, Primo Levi, Jerzy Kosinski, Piotr Rawicz, Sarah Kofman... If being a witness is a condition of possibility of speech in the first place, does the annihilation of their own ability to speak by those who have spoken mean an absolute, irreparable destruction of all speech?

⁴⁸ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*... 16.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 42.

Joanna TOKARSKA-BAKIR

Prodigal Son Ten Years Later¹

It is hard to get rid of objects because they exist.

J. Appleby, L. Hunt, M. Jacob *Telling the Truth about History*

Not everyone has a right to every question.

M. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*

This essay is concerned with the question of the conditions under which the characteristic late modern mode of interpretation has ceased to function as the moving feature, “factor of movement,” of research in the human sciences, a role that it has held since approximately the middle of the 1980s.² My intention is to analyze various symptoms of this hermeneutic crisis under the pressure of Holocaust studies, as

¹ This article is a follow up to: Tokarska-Bakir, J. “Dalsze losy syna marnotrawnego. Projekt etnografii nieprzezroczystej.” *Polska Sztuka Ludowa. Konteksty*, 13-22, vol. 1, 1995. [“Future Fate of the Prodigal Son: A Non-Transparent Ethnography Project.” *Polish Folk Art. Contexts.*]

² The term “factor of movement” is taken from Stanisław Ossowski, who in 1947 used it in his critique of dogmatic Marxism: “For Marxism to play a more significant role in modern academic life, it needs to become a factor of movement. Retrospection and continuous repetition of old formulas is not enough. One needs to reach for new issues and new methods. This dynamic must be followed by scientific reliability, without which Marxism will not identify itself with a movement of bright minds.” Ossowski, S. “Doktryna marksistowska na tle dzisiejszej epoki” [“Marxist Doctrine in the Contemporary Context”], 202, in his *Dzieła t. VI* [Collected Works, vol. 6], Warsaw: 1967.

well as phenomena connected to the attempt to go beyond language in the so-called ethical turn.³

The introduction of philosophical hermeneutics to cultural studies released tensions that were long blocked by (post)positivistic reflection. Although difficult to imagine today, books such as Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1960) constituted responses to the "police-like, similar to totalitarian disciplining of cultures and human experience"⁴ and the "epistemological reduction of reality's representation to the types of problems tied to sentences true in a logical sense."⁵ Gadamer himself believed that his work was, to a certain extent, delayed. The structure of the sciences which he attacked was in the midst of falling to pieces as his book was being published.⁶ In the quarter of a century that followed Gadamer's work, the "general collapse of all forms of political and intellectual absolutism," and "recognition of different points of view and of their input into the pool of knowledge"⁷ largely became a reality. In truth, it was one of those peculiar transformations in reaction through which a doubt, "is that so?," suddenly becomes a provocation, "so what?"⁸ Looking backward, this shift is easy to identify.

À rebours positivism

Precisely because of the anti-positivistic character of the observed change, it is hard not to observe a certain paradox of its far removed consequences taking the form of *à rebours* positivism. This has appeared within last few years in several late modern currents of thought. With the term *à rebours*, I mean to designate a phenomenon which Józef Czapski described as follows: "From a timid recognition of the fact that not the entire

³ With respect to the "ethical turn," see: LaCapra, D. *Psychoanaliza, pamięć, zwrot etyczny*, trans. M. Zapędowska (farther LC), in: *Pamięć, etyka i historia. Anglo-amerykańska teoria historiografii lat dziewięćdziesiątych*. Antologia przekładów, 127-162, edited by E. Domańska, Poznań: 2002 (farther: D2); Keller, H. *Etyczny moment w teorii historii: przedstawiając doświadczenie poznania* (farther: HK), in: *Historia: o jeden świat za daleko*, 71-100, edited by E. Domańska, Poznań: 1997 (farther: D1); see also *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory*, edited by J. Adamson, R. Freadman, D. Parker, Cambridge: 1988.

⁴ Zybertowicz, A. "Researcher in a Labyrinth: Notes on Franklin R. Ankersmit's Concept," 49, in D1.

⁵ Ankersmit, F. "Modernist Truth, Postmodernist Representation and Post-postmodernist Experience," 21, in D1.

⁶ Details have been provided in J.C Weinsheimer's *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method*, 4-36, New Haven and London: 1985. Appleby, J. L. Hunt, M. Jacobs *Telling the Truth about History* [Powiedzieć prawdę o historii, cz. 2, trans. by S. Amsterdamski], New York and London: Norton & Company, 1994. Farther referred to as PPH.

⁷ PPH, 286

⁸ Already in 1957, R. Barthes observed that any attempt to demystify dominant ideology, before it becomes socially accepted, is met with two reactions: negation and trivialization. Barthes, R. *Mythologies*, 117-174, edited by A. Lavers, London: 1972.

world is within our reach to comprehend, it [positivism] turned into a brutal negation of everything that we are unable to comprehend.”⁹

Let me provide three examples. The first will be a radical critique and actual rejection of the possibility¹⁰ of historical objectivity, observed among the “new historians.” Carlo Gizburg suggested that the group in question has turned full, comprehensive knowledge of history into a term so clear and unequivocal that in order to force its opinions it had to accept this reversed positivism. The new historians, at least according to Ginzburg in *Just One Witness*, “turned historical testimonies into a wall, which *ex definitione* excludes any kind of access to reality.”¹¹ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht added: “True problems arise when, while stubbornly defending the subjectivism of historians, one excludes the assumption that outside of subjectivism there exists some other reality, as well as desire...to reach this reality.”¹² If one recalls the earlier post-positivistic declarations of Adam Kuper, in which he stated that ethnology is one thing, but “reality is a matter of mysticism,”¹³ it would be hard to observe the difference between the results of those two approaches of *straight* and *reversed* positivism.

The paradox of reversed positivism can be also observed in the social constructivism¹⁴ which dominates today’s social sciences, claiming that society is a self-referential entity and that “nature” (if such a thing exists at all) is beyond men’s reach. This leads to my second example. The results of uttering the sentence “We are concerned exclusively with society, because we are not exactly certain about the meaning of nature” must immediately contend with the cultural repercussions of the view that “we are concerned exclusively with society, because we are not certain if nature exists.”¹⁵

⁹ Czapski, J. (following W. Rozanow) *Czytając* [Reading], 308, Krakow: 1990.

¹⁰ Domańska, E. *Wokół metahistorii* [Around Meta-history], in White, H. *Poetyka pisarstwa historycznego* [Poetics of History], 27, Krakow: 2000: “For many years now, White has been trying to make historians aware of the fact that every presentation of reality is tainted with ideology. And those who point out ideology in other’s works do it not because they seek more ‘objective’ representations of the past, but because they represent different political options, or a different worldview altogether.”

¹¹ Quoted after Strout, C. “Border Crossing: History, Fiction, and Dead Certainties,” *History and Theory*, 153, vol. 31, 1992, after PPH, 268.

¹² Gumbrecht, H.U. *Gdy przestaliśmy uczyć historii* [When We Stopped Teaching History], 195 (farther referred to as HUG), in D2.

¹³ Kuper, A. *From Charisma to Routine: British Anthropology 1922 – 1982*, [Między charyzmą a rutyną. Antropologia brytyjska 1922 – 1982, translated by K. Kaniowska, Łódź: 1987.]

¹⁴ Luhman, N. “The Cognitive Program Of Constructivism and a Reality That Remains Unknown,” in *Self-organization: Portrait of a Scientific Revolution*, 64-85, edited by W. Krohn, G. Küppers, H. Novotny, Dordrecht: 1990.

¹⁵ About the issue of skepticism and world’s independent existence from cognition, see A. Zybertowicz’s answer to F. Ankermit: “reality independent from cognition does exist” (in *D1*, 51). However, according to E. Gellner: “it is completely unspecified, in that it does not display any particular features,” and “External reality, which is outside

The logic of this approximation can be observed – and it will be my third example – in Kate Millet's *Sexual Thesis* (1970) and its claim about the cultural construction of gender formulated in the experiment known as the "John-Joan Case."¹⁶ We can likewise find it in a quote from Judith Butler some twenty years later: "If the unchangeability of sexes will be challenged, we may come to a conclusion that the construct known as sex is equally dependent on culture as is gender. Maybe sex has always been gender and the differentiation will become outdated."¹⁷ Although Butler formulates her statement in the form of a conditional, as an abstract postulate, it perfectly illustrates Czapski's thesis about a positivistic reversal: from regret that the entire world is not within our cognitive reach (in this case our biological sex is beyond our comprehension), one is led to the negation of everything that cannot be comprehended (the negation of meaning of biological sex leading to the negation of differentiation between *gender* and *sex*). A "higher order of humility" resulting from the "humble acceptance of the fact that we cannot feel entitled to knowing the truth," in some cases, may lead to a kind of arrogance. By questioning the existence of the world of nature that is independent from our beliefs, one implicitly rejects limitations which could apply to human appetites.¹⁸

Critique from Within

I will now take a look at critics of this late modern approach, who, in line with the current of recent debates within the humanities, tend to be its decision makers.

of culture interacts only in a negative way." (Ibid. 51) This ought to be compared with Gadamer's observation about the negativity of experience, which can be found in the last part of this article.

¹⁶ The tragic end of the experiment only became public in the 1990s. See F. Fukuyama's *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (excerpt), *Time* 5/24/2004: "Died. David Reimer, 38, a boy reared as a girl in an infamous experiment known as the "Joan-John Case"; of suicide, in Wininpeg, Canada. After his circumcision was botched in infancy, Reimer's parents, on a researcher's advice, renamed him Brenda, had him castrated and put on hormones, hoping they would turn him into girl. Some observers hailed the case as proof that behavioral differences between the sexes are learned and socially reinforced. Reimer learned of his true gender at 14, stopped taking hormones and adopted the name David. He later wed and tried to live a conventional life, but had been depressed since his twin brother's 2002 suicide." See also J. Colpatino's *As Nature Made Him: The Boy Who Was Raised as a Girl*, New York: 2000.

¹⁷ Butler, J. *Gender Trouble*, after Moore, H.L. "Co się stało kobietom i mężczyznom? Płeć kulturowa i inne kryzysy w antropologii", in *Badanie kultury. Kontynuacje*, 406, edited by M. Kempny, E. Nowicka, Warsaw: 2004.

¹⁸ It is a paraphrase of J. Gray's statement from *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals*. Also see a statement by M. Perrot, a French scholar of the history of women: "Never before has the very idea of nature has been questioned so strongly. Thanks to that very questioning we gain freedom of choice." After C. David from L'Uterus artificiel H. Atlana, *Nouvelle Observateur* 2005 vol. 7/4, after: "Forum," 9/5-15/5/, 2005.

On the subject of the intellectual and ethical effects of late modern, “fluid” identities, Zygmunt Bauman writes: “Changeability and flexibility of identity can be an announcement of a new, up to that point unknown, freedom of self-definition. However, it can also be an early sign of the approaching of a new and capricious sire. Nobody knows how he looks or where he lives, but he is known for his disregard for the fate and feelings of his subjects.”¹⁹ Bauman observes that the plasticity and mobility of one’s identification are not so much means of emancipation, but rather that of a redistribution of freedom. According to Bauman, that is the source of their negative effects.²⁰ An increase in the number of possible choices means enabling the restructuring of a subject and its fragmentation, which means both the possibility of emancipation and *desarticulation* (Yves Michaud). However, restructuring can sometimes be forced on the subject. Martin O’Brien follows Bauman in his fears and warns against the threat of confusing orders of theory and real life: “although the metaphor of the ‘fluidity’ of life excites the imagination, allowing us to see certain issues and discuss them, it also has aspirations to become a theoretical concept, which leads to the widespread interpretation of ‘fluidity’ as an empirical description of reality.”²¹ Later he adds: “The generalization of the diagnosis, according to which the nature of identity is unstable and fluid, leads to a false interpretation of basic symptoms of its imagining – symptoms which do not yield, despite seemingly crucial socio-economic changes taking place.”²²

The late modern fluidity of identity slows down one’s sense of orientation, but the true hardship emerges from a debate over the conditions of searching for truth. When addressing this issue, Bauman refers back to Aristotle, who claimed that the search for truth takes place in agora – the public sphere – where relations between what is individual (gr. *oikos*) and common (gr. *ecclesia*) are established. Bauman blames several structural conditions of late modernity for the loss of a sphere that would regulate these aspects of life. The first would be individualism:

On today’s agora people confess only from their individual experiences...The discourse is confined by the horizons of an individual. The communal experiences lost “material base,” or a social mechanism, which would allow them to crystalize and clear the path to the truth that goes beyond an individual; truth which is collective and objective.²³

¹⁹ See Bauman, Z. *Tożsamość jaka była, jest i po co?*, in *Wokół problemów tożsamości*, 12, edited by A. Jawłowska, Warsaw: 2001.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 20. See also Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge: 2000.

²¹ O’Brien, M. “Esej o płynności tożsamości,” in *Wokół problemów tożsamości*, [“Essay on the Fluidity of Identity,” in *Around the Issues of Identity*], 27. Non-normative concepts of identity are discussed by J. Kochanowski in his *Paradygmat zróżnicowany. Socjologiczne studium przemian tożsamości gejów* [Diverse Paradigm: Sociological Study of Changes in Gay Identity], Krakow: 2004, would be a classic example of such strategy. I write more closely about it in the second part of this text entitled *Kulturkamp(f)*.

²² *Ibid.* 23

²³ Żakowski, J. *Anty-TINA*, 31-32, Warsaw: 2004.

Blocking of the very possibility of (establishing) truth in the era of late modern individualism can be seen, according to Bauman, also in the contemporary reduction of “common truth,” “truth in general” to the “truthfulness” of individuals. Bauman writes: “When questions of truth are reduced to telling the truth by even the most important individuals, the truth about the society, about the state and condition of the community disappears.”

The second structural enemy of truth in late modern society is the consumer, as opposed to the citizen. “In the world of consumers we break with communication between *oikos* and *ecclesia*. Public figures assure us that...justice is an empty term, invented by ideologues and that only the interests of an individual exist in reality...But if only the interests exist, how are we supposed to search for the truth?”²⁴

Another factor, which makes it impossible for common truth to exist are epistemologies that rule the media: “The technique of transferring the information and the technique of arriving at the truth can be guided by different kinds of logic. The most common source of information, television, by its very nature is not able to keep the viewer interested long enough to explain the logic of any given argument” In this section, Bauman refers to the well-known concept of technopol by Neil Postman, who, when describing media’s interest in informational novelties and a complete lack of interest in correcting false reporting, quoted Walter Lippman’s²⁵ statement from the 1920s: “There is no chance for freedom of communication, if it is not equipped with tools to detect lies.”²⁶

Misuse: Interpretation, Discourse, Narration, and Emancipation

Stepping back from the late modern social reflection, I would like to move back to a discussion of late modern academic practice. Let me quote four more statements, each one of them denouncing the overuse, or misuse, of basic categories of interpretation.

The author of the famous book about 101st Police Reserve Battalion, Christopher Browning, an expert in denier trials,²⁷ knows very well that facts are something completely different from their interpretation. However, he knows facts that do not allow any interpretation. He writes: “101 Reserve Police Battalion arrived in Józefów in the morning of 7/13/1942 and shot and killed hundreds of Jews in the nearby forest. Such “facts” do not allow for any kind of interpretation, they have no sense, at least not within

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Who also happens to be an author of the term “stereotype.”

²⁶ Lippman, W. *Public Opinion*. New York: 1922. Following N. Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 1985. (from Polish translation by L.Niedzielski, 157, Warsaw: 2002.) The phenomenon of truth paralysis, caused by individualistic anomia, the disappearance of agora-oikos, and the transformation of a citizen into a consumer and reduction of epistemological space by new technologies that is analyzed here, can be often reduced to the faint results of Marxism and Nietzscheanism. See Salij, O.J. *Wezwany do miłości*, “Rzeczpospolita”, 14.04.2005

²⁷ *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution,”* 339, edited by S. Friedlaender, footnote 11, (farther referred to as F) Harvard: 1992.

the categories of questions about sense that I am interested in answering.²⁸ Browning points to the limits of hermeneutics, which are delineated by the interpretation of evil, which – in his mind – is redundant. Although Gadamer claimed that under the influence of interpretation, its object experiences the surge of being (*Seinszuwachs*), when asking a question posed after reading Browning, we are aiming at something completely different. Which experiences have a characteristic that requires silence, or at least control over the commentator's voice?²⁹

The second statement not requiring commentary comes from a text by historian Pierre Vidal-Naquete. When confronting deniers, he decided that, although everything should be filtered through discourse, still “there is something that exists outside of it, that have existed before it – something that cannot be reduced to discourse and what he would be willing to call a reality.”³⁰

A similar ethico-realistic undertone can be assigned to the third statement. Its author, Thomas S. Weisner, analyzes a strictly anthropological theme: child upbringing in the African family. In his *Kultura, dzieciństwo i postęp na obszarze Afryki subsaharyjskiej (Culture, Childhood, and Progress in Sub-Saharan Africa)*³¹ he criticizes another work by a different scholar researching Africa, entitled *Except-Africa: Remaking Development, Rethinking Power*.³² According to this thinker, Weisner attempts to prove, “the literary track ‘with the exception of Africa’ [appearing in disproportionate, statistical factors listings describing socio-economic changes on different continents] constitutes a part of ‘narration,’ which in and of itself leads towards negation of any progress. He [the author] proposes numerous, positive counter-narratives, which are based on differentiation, surprise factors, unpredictability and the complexity of certain situations. However – Weisner concludes – issues involving ‘narration’ do not include pressing socio-economic issues of Africa.” On the contrary, belief in the self-fulfilling prophecy of negative narration could press for attempts of negating reality and a subsequent lack of initiative to improve it.

The fourth example is concerned with the limits of multiculturalism and is taken from a debate taking place in the United States. The debate was focused on the status of deaf persons and took place in American newspapers in the 1990s.³³ The main problem

²⁸ F, 22-36.

²⁹ Book by J. Brach-Czajny, *Szczeliny istnienia, (Cracks of Existence)*, 38, 41, Cracow: 1998, supplies a catalogue of similar phenomena: “Observing the act of giving birth soothes anxiety, because the way it looks – in all honesty – does not allow any doubt... Its brutal force cannot be confronted by fiction.”

³⁰ Ginsburg, C. *Just One Witness*, 86, in F.

³¹ Compared in: Harrison, L.E., S.P. Huntington *Kultura ma znaczenie. Jak wartości wpływają na rozwój społeczeństw (Culture Matters. How Values Influence Development of Societies)*, 230, farther referred to as: HH, translated by S. Dymczyk, Poznań: 2000.

³² After HH, 249.

³³ *Pride in a Soundless World: Deaf Oppose a Hearing Aid*, “The New York Times”, 5/16/ 1993, after: P. Schwartz *Wielokulturowy nihilizm (Multicultural Nihilism)*, in: Rand, A. *Powrót człowieka pierwotnego (The Return of the Primitive)*, 338-339, translated by Z. Czarnecki, Poznań: 2003. 1, 22.

is already signaled in the title of the article which is one of the main voices in the debate: *Deafness as Culture*. In the article we find the following: “Deafness is not an impairment. It is, according to many deaf people, a subculture like any other. Deaf people are simply a language minority (speaking American Sign Language) and need as much medical attention as, for example, Haitians or Spanish speakers.”³⁴ This statement is analyzed by Christopher Lash in his *The Revolt of the Elites*:

Diversity – a slogan universally attractive – became [within American society] to mean its opposite. In reality, diversity turned out to legitimize a new kind of dogmatism, one in which the competing minorities hide behind their respective systems of belief closed to a rational debate. The physical segregation of the society enclosed within racially homogenous enclaves is accompanied by balkanization of opinions. Every group tries to hide behind its dogmas. We became a nation composed of minorities.³⁵

The four aforementioned statements criticize the abuse of theoretical categories of interpretation. There are several conclusions to be drawn:

- 1) Although the discovery of the omnipresence of interpretation used to be considered a major breakthrough, another statement currently carries the stigma of revolution: why do some facts do so well without interpretation? Interpretation is never innocent and it is not always necessary. It lacks innocence particularly in cases where it appears in the absence of need.
- 2) Although discourse is a valuable theoretical category, not everything begins and ends with discourse.
- 3) Although narration can give a voice to reality, there are narrations which will deprive reality of that voice. These are simply wrong interpretations.
- 4) Although multiculturalism, for a long time, was a comfortable and official tool for suspending problems connected with differences, there exists a limit beyond which it is impossible to uphold the existing state of aporia. It signals a need for understanding – just like in the case of debate over cochlear implants for deaf children.

Reactivation of Realities

Having discussed symptoms of interpretative overabundance, I would like to turn my attention to the reverse phenomenon. In particular, I want to look at renewed interest in the sphere beyond discourse, present in various areas of humanities. It emerges through reaching beyond language and human intentionality. Two of the primary directions of this turn, a repeated turn toward reality that we are currently observing, were pointed

³⁴ Dolnick, E., “Deafness as Culture,” *The Atlantic Magazine*, 37, September 1993; after: Schwartz, P., Wielokulturowy nihilizm (*Multicultural Nihilism*), in: A. Rand *Return of the Primitive* (The debate is already taking place in Poland. Artur zmijewski shot a touching movie entitled Lekcja Śpiewu (Singing Lesson), starring deaf children. In the interview for “Duży Format” (5/16/2005 issue) he said: “They don’t won’t others’ sympathy. Often, they are not interested in integrating with their healthy counterparts. Often they don’t even need us. They create their own communities and use their own language. They are a little bit like denizens of some exotic country.”

³⁵ Lasch, Ch. Bunt Elit (*The Revolt of the Elites*), translated by D. Rodziewicz, Cracow: 1997.

out by those who initially questioned possibility of accessing it: sociological constructivists and new historians.

Already in the 1960s, social phenomenology observed the asymmetrical character of attention paid to men and reality in social studies. "Natural sciences are concerned solely with how world is perceived by the onlooker. They never deal with how world, or objects perceive us. But it does not mean that they do not influence us, or each other."³⁶ R.D. Laing's vague observation was unexpectedly taken up by a group of French and British post-constructivists, sociologists affiliated with Lancaster University (creators of *actor-network theory* (ANT): Bruno Latour, Michael Callon, John Law).³⁷ By radicalizing the postulate of the symmetry of the strong sociology of knowledge program,³⁸ they have attempted to redefine the object of sociological studies. By posing questions about who is the author of differentiation between Nature and Society, where society is only a product of this differentiation,³⁹ they have posed a question about the investigation of reality as a whole, and not only its "social element." They were aiming at creating a series of experiments, which would produce a kind of non-symbolic language detecting poorly mapped aspects of the world, nature and technology. The group became famous after introducing a member⁴⁰ of

³⁶ Laing, R.D. *The Politics of Experience and the Bird of Paradise*, (Polityka doświadczenia. Rajski ptak, 20, translated by A. Grzybek, Warsaw: 2005)

³⁷ Callon, M. "Some elements in a sociology of translation: domestication of the scallops and the fishermen of St Brieuc Bay," in: *Power, Action, and Belief*, edited by J. Law, from *The Sociological Review Monograph*, vol. 32, London, Boston Henley: 1987. Thanks to Michał Libera for a copy of the article and commentary.

³⁸ See Barnes, B. and Bloor, D. "Relatywizm, racjonalizm a socjologia wiedzy" in: *Racjonalność i styl myślenia*, ("Relativism, Rationalism and Sociology of Knowledge" in: *Rationality and the Style of Thinking*) edited by E. Mokrzycki, Warsaw: 1992. From last year see "manifest of the second empiricism," Latour, B. Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Facts to Matters of Concern, in *Critical Inquiry*, 454-497, Winter 2004, vol 30, issue 2.

³⁹ The question was waived by Ernst Geller, who explained that society is a transcendental condition of our cognitive abilities and its 18th century variation, which has developed a distinction between "nature" and "society." See also Latour's *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (farther referred to as Pandora), Cambridge, MA and London: 1999.

⁴⁰ The question of the scallop as an "actor" in this experiment has been captured by Dr. Krzysztof Arbiszewski (UMK Toruń), who wrote in his Ph.D dissertation: "An actor does not have to be 'somebody,' it is only something or someone that acts. In order to avoid confusion, researchers from ANT very often used the term 'actant.' However, for their friends in humanities, this particular word sounds alien, weird and repulsive. In addition, an actor was not supposed to move around the network. The network is a set of relations between actors – a set which is dynamic. Some relations become calcified, others do not. If the relations are calcified strongly enough – closed in a black box, according to ANT members – they will create a new actor. Hence, the actor is also a network. Both words, in two different ways, describe the same thing (Latour, B. "On recalling ANT" in *Actor Network Theory and After*, 19, edited by J. Law, J. Hassard, Oxford: 1999." After: <<http://bazy.opi.org.pl/raporty/opisy/dokhab/71000/d71432.htm>>, Ph.D dissertation supervised

the research team with full and equal rights (equal with both fishermen and scientists) into their research on fishery. The new team member was a larva form of a certain species of scallops. One might assume that the actions of the Lancaster group were mere eccentricity. But one could also follow the group's own interpretation: the attempt to broaden the range of interactions with the world, establishing some form of non-symbolic communication with it,⁴¹ and creating a "new subjectivity" as a result of the interaction.

Far more dramatic was the turn toward reality taken by the new historians, as it was forced by ethical questions. This happened largely as a result of conflicts over the possibility of manipulation of their discourse by deniers.⁴² Hayden White wrote under the influence of those "games with the truth" already in the 1990s. At that point he stated: "Truth, obviously, is important, but only because it often hides reality. And currently I am more interested in reality."⁴³ Franklin Ankersmit made a turn in a similar direction. He started looking for reality in the most sensual and direct possible contact with history. New historians have become fascinated with artifacts: "direct experience of the past... possibility to touch, smell and taste worlds in the objects that created them."⁴⁴ Some, like Steven Greenblatt, went as far as to admit that they have always desired to "talk with the dead."⁴⁵

by A. Szahaj. Thanks to Dr. Andrzej W. Nowak for help in discovering this text and pointing to the bibliography of B. Latour.

- ⁴¹ Using the term "translation," scholars from ANT attempt to prove that cognition, even in the sciences, is based on a number of transformations, through which the "compressing of things into words" takes place. For example (taken from Pandora), if I want to answer the question of whether the soil in the Amazon forest expands or contracts, I need to research samples of the soil in that region. Between a trip to the Amazon jungle and organizing research space (through sampling, applying coordinates, etc.) and a final diagram allowing for an answer about the condition of the soil in the Amazon jungle, there is a series of leaps between things and words. Every single stage works in response to the previous one as a sign. It becomes its representation. Toward the next one, it works as a piece of matter, something that needs to be represented. (Pandora, 69-70) There is no simple imposition of signs on the shapeless matter at any moment in this string of transformations (Pandora, 56-58).
- ⁴² C. Ginzburg's "Just One Witness" (in: F, 25) is a good case study on that issue. I do not agree with Slavoj Žižek's thesis, which states that "those who undermine the very fact of Holocaust occurring never base their claims on postmodern constructivist discourse, but stick to the empirical framework of facts." See Žižek, S. *Perspektywy polityki radykalnej* (Radical Politics Perspectives), translated by A. Mazur in *Krytyka Polityczna*, 70, vol. 1-8, 2005. In the academia one can find not only "empiricist deniers," but also "postmodern deniers" coming from, for example, readings of Paul de Man.
- ⁴³ Domańska, E. "Wokół metahistorii" ("Around Metahistory") in White, H. *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory*, 27.
- ⁴⁴ Gumbrecht, HUG, in D2, 198.
- ⁴⁵ Greenblatt, S. *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, 1, Berkeley: 1988. After Gumbrecht, HUG, in: D2, 195. It is hard not to observe that on the level of popular phenomena, longing for the Real is worldwide. Phenomena itself is described as a "post-traumatic culture" and has been developing fast since the end of the 1980s.

Regardless of how we will interpret declarations of that sort, both in these statements and in the experiments of Callan-Latour with scallops, one can recognize the same desire to renew a connection with the world.⁴⁶ It is a world, which is not entirely human, one that is characteristic for today's post-hermeneutical humanities. The leash of language became a nuisance to the field precisely because of its biggest asset: flexibility.

Franklin Ankersmit wrote in his *Narrative Logic* about narration as means of domesticating reality, as a mechanism, which does not reflect it, but rather specifies, does not discover, but uncovers it.⁴⁷ At the same time, Hayden White differentiated between the cognitively unreachable *event* and *fact* – its linguistic image.⁴⁸ These actions were certainly not intended to question reality itself. They were certainly not interested in negating the Holocaust, and yet it was what became an ultimate border and a stop sign for them. It was this particular fact, with its overabundance, which pointed to the poor taste of late modern approaches as auto-thematic narratives, within which every interpretation is acceptable and every definition of truth inadequate.⁴⁹ Under the guise of the “event,” the long forgotten “object” appeared in front of the historians again. American historians Appleby, Hunt and Jacob used to say that the object is “hard to get rid of, because it exists” and that the event’s objectivity is expressed by its insusceptibility to just any given interpretation.⁵⁰ It was due to the object that the scholars noticed the threat of aestheticizing historical knowledge by constructivist approaches, as well as relativizing the past. In other words, they observed an unintentional paving of the way to negationism.

This object reappeared before the eyes of the subject, singular or collective. The subject underwent serious degradation after the Holocaust. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe wrote about a “cancer of the subject” in the era of furnaces.⁵¹ Because the discussed subject established itself based on elimination procedures (“elimination is the most reliable method of identification”)⁵² he/she was reduced by losing the right to interpretation, and if not fully, than at least banning some of the possible questions (this was foreseen already by Heidegger, when he claimed that not everyone has a right to ask

⁴⁶ Hydle, I *Anthropological Theory*, 111-124, Vol. 4(1), London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi 2004, (www.sagepublications.com DOI: 10.1177/1463499604040850 Book Reviews): “Latour’s work introduces vocabulary to describe the new hybrids emerging from the wreckage of old dichotomies and taxonomies. Nonetheless, reality is a key term to which he returns throughout the book as he builds a new logic based upon another thought – a ‘grammar’ distinct from those of the natural and social/human sciences.” (emphasis JTB)

⁴⁷ Domańska, E. “Wokół metahistorii” (“Around Metahistory”) in White, H. *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory*, 12.

⁴⁸ Event and fact, see *Krytyka Polityczna*, issue 7-8, 2005.

⁴⁹ Van den Braembussche, A. “Historia i pamięć” (“History and Memory”), in D1, 112.

⁵⁰ PPH, 270.

⁵¹ Lacoue-Labarthe, P. *Poezja jako doświadczenie (Poetry as Experience)*, 17, translated by J. Margański, Gdańsk: 2004.

⁵² Ibid.

every question). But while the Shoah involved the reduction of the subject, one needs to remember that among the witnesses there is another, different subject – non-subject,⁵³ a “subject buried alive, almost-shot, not entirely dead.”⁵⁴ It is a subject, which is a “bearer” of Agamben’s *Muselmann*. This particular subject survived, while becoming radically weakened by guilt or trauma.

In a classic description of an epistemological situation, deconstructed by Heidegger and his successors, a vision of this weakened, not fully belonging to the “order of presence,” subject accompanied by the dominant “object” (in the form of the “event”) is something completely new. In such circumstances, a question about access to the aforementioned subject arises. It is followed by a question about “experience, that is not there.”

Experience reactivated

In his *Jak opisać doświadczenie, którego nie ma* [*How to Describe Experience That Is Not There*] Ryszard Nycz writes that the growing interest in the Holocaust studies probably triggered the last of general turns in the realm of theory and a direction of research done within humanities. This turn led to recognizing language as a condition of possibility and (as a warrant of existence) of cultural experience. It was recognized as a condition of radical attempts to step outside language – toward, ahead or outside of the discursive experience of humans connecting with themselves and the world outside the human realm.⁵⁵ We are the witnesses of this particular turn gaining its momentum, attempting (yet again!) to open up the prison of language and turn towards reality. According to Nycz, the reactivation of the category of experience is a sign of the mentioned change. After many years, the category comes back in a form, which its own contradiction: “shapeless, unformed sensations,” “incoherent, heterogeneous, discontinuous,” – unspecified – according to Ernst Gellner. It means that these will be the sensations, which one can describe only by attempts at substitution,⁵⁶ or through negation,⁵⁷ but at the same time painfully real, and impossible to forget.

It seems, Nycz states, that “sensations and experiences unimaginable, impossible to be grasped by consciousness, do not belong to the realm of true experience.” However, the question is what should be done with massive numbers of individual and collective stories. Its tide is as powerful as resistance against it (against representation):

⁵³ Contrary to Agamben, I am looking at this purely from ontological perspective similar to Žižek in his *Patrzac z ukosa. Do Lacana przez kulturę popularną*, 39, Warsaw: 2003.

⁵⁴ Nycz, R. How to describe experience that is not there, in *Teksty Drugie*, 7, vol.5, 2004. (farther referred to as T) Agamben, G. *Remnants of Auschwitz. The Witness and the Archive*, New York: 2002.

⁵⁵ T, 5, highlight by JTB.

⁵⁶ “It is rather its lining, which is impossible to be represented: experience which is incoherent, not homogenous, discontinuous, graspable only through its secondary symptoms, its incompetent attempts to elaborate, per procura and in effigie” (T, 6-7).

⁵⁷ See Zybortowicz, A. *Badacz w...*, 51, D1.

Holocaust in Literary and Cultural Studies

This traumatic burden of unutterable and impossible to actualize parts of experience become deposited in the non-reflective memory of individuals, as well as the collective community and moves along with them, never allowing itself to be dropped or defused. It creates pressure and demands to be revealed and articulated – always merely halfway. But the revelation and articulation become significant factors and symptoms of realness attached to what cannot be understood.⁵⁸

The category of experience is demanded by what is unreflective, disconnected from the killed and numbed, rendered as a phantom pain of collective memory. It does not remind us of anything like “practical knowledge, acquired through contact with the world. Knowledge which is integrated, conscious, utterable,” which we used to call experience. It cannot be reduced to the question of interpretation, narration or discourse. Although all three: discourse, narrations, and interpretations, force themselves into the negativity of this experience it is not its natural area. It is not agora, nor literature, or any other place where one can speak. The wordless reality will be its natural area, which does not wish to reveal what it is exactly, and stops after admitting that it exists,⁵⁹ allowing only ostensive, indexed representations.

From a hermeneutical reflection on experience, I would like to extract three guidelines which could potentially play a role in problematizing “experience that is not there.”

The first will require a brief mention of “silent figures of experience” in *Kleine Schriften* by Hans-Georg Gadamer. He mentions “hunger,” “love,” “labor,” and “power” – which are only on the path toward language, low on the scale between the world and mind. Gadamer, however, calls these experience.⁶⁰

Second, there is Gadamer’s definition of the negativity of experience:

we speak of the negativity of experience meaning two things – firstly, about experiences which match our expectations and confirm them, secondly – about experiences we sense. The latter, proper experience, is always negative. When we experience an object, it means that up to that moment we have not seen things properly and now we know it better. Negativity of experience has a particularly creative sense⁶¹...The experience, changes the entire knowledge of the one involved in it...Only through the negative cases do we reach a new experience (something that Bacon already knew). Every experience, which deserves to be called negative, destroys certain expectations.⁶²

⁵⁸ T, 6

⁵⁹ T, 8

⁶⁰ In a different text, however, he says: “Experience is not wordless, only to become an object of reflection on its way to be taken under the definition of word’s generality. The very nature of experience is based on its search for words and finds ones that express it.”(Gadamer, H.-G. *Truth and Method*)

⁶¹ Ibid., 481

⁶² Ibid., 481-5. See also Gadamer’s opinion on the exceptionalism of experience (Ibid., 482) contrasted with scientific concept of experiment as a strictly repetitive activity. It may be that from the difference of those two traditions (“truth”/ “method”?) there emerges contradiction between Gadamer’s concept of “experienced man” as somebody “extremely non-dogmatic,” who does not have any pretense to be omniscient and is open

The third guideline is a message hidden in the very etymology of the word “experience.” After Philip Lacoue-Labarthe:

The experience, *expérience*, is derived from latin *experiri*, which meant “to test.” Its core is *feriri*, appearing also in *periculum* – “danger.” Indo-European root is *per*, which connects with meanings such as “to cross,” “a passage,” “an attempt,” or “experience.” In Greek, we encounter many words which are related and also connote “passage,” or “crossing” : *peiro* – “to cross”; *pera* – “outside”; *perao* – “to go across”; *peraino* – “arrive at the destination”; *peras* – “limit, boundary.” As far as the Germanic languages are concerned, in the Old German we encounter *faran*, from which we derive *fahren* – “to transport” and *fuehren* “to lead.” Should we connect *Erfahrung* – “experience” – with the same root, or should we connect it to another meaning of *per* – “an attempt,” or the Old German, *fara* – “danger” and *gefaehrden* – “to expose to danger”? Boundaries between those meanings are fluid. It is similar with Latin *periri* – “to try” and *periculum*, which initially meant “attempt,” “test” and only later “risk” and “danger.”⁶³

Gadamer and Labarthe’s statements point to the fact that from both a semantic and etymological perspective it is hard to separate “experience” from the “risk” it entails. Experience has cognitive profit as its objective, but it becomes possible only due to negativity and loss. If that is the case with every instance of experience, think how often one might observe this rule coming to life in “the experience that is not there.”⁶⁴

From philosophy class we know that there are two ways of arriving at the truth: proofs and futility. The first approach assumes that what exists cannot not exist. The second approach, by contrast, assumes that what exists does exist and what does not exist, exists as well.⁶⁵ The question of the “experience that is not there” follows the path we have been warned against: “One can never prove that there are things, which are not, but you steer away from that path! And do not allow the habit of investigation through experimentation to push you towards the path of believing your shortsighted eyes, cacophonous ears and tongue. Judge the proof I have presented to you with your reason and mind.” (Parmenides, B1, 7)

However, from the same philosophy classes we remember what the Stoics used to say: “All things have two grips: one with which you can lift them, and the other with which

to new experiences (Ibid. 484) and Latour’s concept of of experience’s repetitiveness and limits of the mind that knows about something: “When we experience something for the first time we have no knowledge of the phenomena. Our knowledge starts with the second instance of the same experience. We tend to say that somebody knows a lot about something, when he or she can interpret experience as an example of an event already classified.” (Latour, B. *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society*, 219, Cambridge Mass.:1987, after K. Abriszewski *Poznanie... 40*.

⁶³ Lacoue-Labarthe, Ph. *Poezja jako... (Poetry as...)*, 150, footnote 16.

⁶⁴ Differently about “experience without a subject” see Ankersmit, F. *Narracja, reprezentacja, doświadczenie. Studia z teorii historiografii, (Narration, Representation, Experience: Studies in the Theory of Historiography)*, 299, edited by E. Domańska, Cracow: 2004.

⁶⁵ Someone impertinent enough to assume that there exists something that is not” (gr. to me on einai, Plato’s Sophist) enters the path of impossibility.

Holocaust in Literary and Cultural Studies

the task will be impossible to complete.” If the grip on the side of reality seems to be failing, try to use the grip on the side of non-reality – with the things that cannot be explained in human categories, we can try to explain in non-human ones. “Experience that is not there” cannot be lifted with the grip on the side of reality. That is why when we ask about it, we argue with Parmenides and with unexplainable hope observing, one after another, the failures of language.⁶⁶

Translation: Jan Pytalski

⁶⁶ A good example of the fiasco would be an attempt to place this experience in the framework of old, religious language. Such an inscribing of the “Muselmann” experience in the language of traditional narrations in a correct, but necessarily failing fashion, is the text by Jacek Leoniciak “Wyjście z grobu” in *Teksty Drugie*, 48-63, vol.5, 2004. Another, much more vivid example would be a collection of stories by survivors, stylized as traditional Hassidic stories by Y. Eliach *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust*, New York: 1988.

Tomasz MAJEWSKI

Das Ereignis Auschwitz: the Ontology of Modernity

Thus far the Polish reader has had no opportunity to become acquainted with the important voices in the debate of the 1980s and 1990s concerning the philosophical and political implications of the Holocaust.¹ Alan Milchman's and Alan Rosenberg's *Eksperymenty w myśleniu o Holokauście. Auschwitz, nowoczesność i filozofia*,² brings

¹ I am referring primarily to the significant books by French philosophers: Ph. Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique. Heidegger, l'art et la politique*; J. Derrida, *De l'esprit. Heidegger et la question*; J.-F. Lyotard, *Heidegger et "la juifs"* and *Le Différend*; L. Ferry and A. Renault *Heidegger et les Modernnes*; S. Kofman, *paroles suffoqués*; and the most important English language voices in the debate, such as: S. Friedlander's, *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay On Kitch and Death and Memory, History and the Extermination of Jews of Europe*; Y. Bauer, *The Holocaust in Historical Perspective*; D. LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* and *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*; B. Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* and *Holocaust Representation. Art within the Limits of History and Ethics*. The Polish reader had the opportunity to become acquainted with the German debate, with contributions from D.J.K. Peukert, D.Diner, and J. Habermas, in the anthologies: *Historikerstreit. Spór o miejsce III Rzeszy w historii Niemiec*, ed. M. Łukasiewicz, Londyn, 1990, and *Nazizm, Trzecia Rzesza a procesy modernizacyjne*, sel. and ed. H. Orłowski, Poznań, 2000. Among the more important texts the only one fully translated into Polish is Z. Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Cornell University Press, 2001, translated in 1992, which inspired a heated debate.

² A. Milchman, A. Rosenberg, *Eksperymenty w myśleniu o Holokauście. Auschwitz, nowoczesność i filozofia*, trans. L. Krowicki, J. Szacki, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warsaw, 2003. [The book has not been published in English, references are to the Polish edition.]

a flashback of that discussion, relating to the key issues of the debate: the problem of the exceptional and universal character of the Holocaust; the fiasco of “the project of the Enlightenment” and the end of the idea of progress; “the case of Heidegger”³ (which had a continuation a few years later in “the case of Paul de Man”); the problem of memory and forgetting in the public sphere: anamnestic solidarity with the murdered, the official historical discourse, the problem of the “excess of memory,” and the phenomenon of “traumatized memory,” which locks individuals in the trap of posthistory.⁴

For the authors the key issue remains the relationship between the “technology” of the Holocaust, that is, the totality of the social and technical infrastructure which made it possible, and the internal logic of modernization. Milchman and Rosenberg perceive the Holocaust as a modern, science informed “transformative event”:

In our appropriation of Dan Diner’s term *das Ereignis Auschwitz* we want to preserve the Heideggerian sense of disclosure or lack of concealment and also the emphasis on some features which...we ascribe to *Ereignis*, features which would have been concealed were we simply to talk of an event or an incident: firstly, the *progressive* character of the event...secondly, its *coming*, its approaching us, something *pointing toward the future*; thirdly the fact that the stake here is disclosure – in the sense of revelation – of something *important*, something *transformative* in its influence on humankind.⁵

Das Ereignis Auschwitz is what is about to come, an event whose consequences have not been fully revealed, but model the unpredictable future shape of the political sphere. Introducing this topic into the larger discussion is undoubtedly the most important contribution made by the authors. The relationship between “Modernity and the Holocaust” has been addressed

³ In fact, “the case of Heidegger” had a large response in Poland. The discussion on the topic begun in *Znak*, 1974, no 6(24), to broaden in scope after the famous interview with the philosopher, “Tylko Bóg może nas uratować” [Only God may save us] appeared in *Teksty* 1977, no 3(33) (first published in *Der Spiegel*, May 31, 1976). An important role was played by *Aletheia*, 1990 1(4) titled *Heidegger dzisiaj* [Heidegger today] devoted to the topic and containing a broad range of materials, including texts from *Le Nouvell Observateur* (1988) and from the Frankfurt anthology edited by J. Altwegg *Die Heidegger kontroverse* (1988) that is, commentary belonging to the new phase of the discussion initiated by the publication of Victor Farias’ book. Among the Polish publications it is worth mentioning C. Widziński’s *Heidegger i problem zła* [Heidegger and the problem of evil], 1994. V. Farias’s *Heidegger and Nazism* was published in Polish as *Heidegger and National Socialism* in 1997 with an introductory essay by J. Habermas, reprinted from the German edition. Among other publications, there were: J. Young, *Heidegger, Philosophy, Nazism* (published in Polish in 2000 as *Heidegger, filozofia, nazizm*); H. Ott, *Martin Heidegger: A Political Life* (published in Polish in 1997 as *Martin Heidegger. W drodze ku biografii*); and O. Pöggeler, *Martin Heidegger’s Path of Thinking* (published in Polish in 2002 as *Droga myślowa Martina Heideggera*).

⁴ For a broader discussion of this phenomenon see: A. Leder, “Przemoc, krzywda i racjonalność. W horyzoncie myśli Waltera Benjaminia,” *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, 2003, no 3.

⁵ A. Milchman and A. Rosenberg, *Eksperymenty...*

in detail before.⁶ This time emphasis is placed on “the transformative potential” of the event of the Holocaust, that is, a redefinition it has triggered of the fundamental perceptions of the future. For it is a significant fact, as Arendt emphasizes in relation to genocide, that what happened once may happen again. The possibility of a repetition of what, until the moment it happened, had seemed impossible (unthinkable), and thus was not a part of a possible future, begins to define the horizon of the future and indirectly determines all our projects from the moment it became reality. This possibility of a repetition is the more probable the easier it will be in successive generations “to forget the holes of oblivion, the mass manufacture of corpses.”⁷ As Zygmunt Bauman points out, “We know now that we live in a type of society that made the Holocaust possible, and that *contained nothing which could stop the Holocaust from happening*”⁸ (emphasis mine, TM). When it comes to the study of the Holocaust, even if that had not been clear from the beginning, “Much more [has been] involved in such a study than the tribute to the memory of the murdered millions, settling the account with the murderers, and healing the still-festering moral wounds of the passive and silent witnesses.” Reflection on the Holocaust itself is not enough to prevent its return. “Yet without such a study, we would not even know how likely and improbable such a return might be.”⁹ The future dimension of the Holocaust is an ever open threat of repetition on a scope impossible to determine and in a shape difficult to predict, as implied by the modern biotechnologies and means of digital control. The reality of such possibility remains “suspended,” but the fact that, as Ernst Bloch argues, this possibility is objectively potentially real places permanent pressure on the political present.¹⁰ When we become aware of it, the threat of the future means the necessity to act for the transformation of the current state of the public sphere. This necessity is ethically grounded and the shape of the approaching future depends on the degree to which the modern reflection on the motifs of the genocidal *universum* will be able to transform the ethical and political ideas that determine the framework of human coexistence.

Thought experiments we have engaged in and the new truths they could generate are related to the very perspective of *transforming our existence, our being*. This adventure also contains the possibility of changing the social and cultural matrix.¹¹ (emphasis mine, TM)

Philosophy that undertakes the task of rethinking Auschwitz is for these authors an engagement “in which critique and the impossibility of separating it from practice, would

⁶ R. Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1961) New York, 1985; Z. Bauman’s *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Cornell University Press, 2001; D.J.K. Peukert, “The Genesis of the ‘Final Solution’ from the Spirit of Science,” 1994; R. Zitelman, “Die Totalitäre Seite der Moderne, 1991.

⁷ H. Arendt, „Concluding Remarks” to *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1951, 430.

⁸ Z. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Cornell University Press, 2001, 87.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ A. Milchman and A. Rosenberg, *Ekaperymenty...*, 14-15.

¹¹ Ibid., 21-2.

shape the activity of thinking.”¹² *Das Ereignis Auschwitz* remains a transformative event insofar as “thinking about Auschwitz” itself means an interior transformation of thought (*metanoia*) and the resulting transformation of the basic categories of culture. It is no accident that the contemporary relevance of the Holocaust mentioned earlier remains the premise of the ethical duty to “transform thought.”

Holocaust has opened the doors to the genocidal *universum*, a “world” in which mass death inflicted by people becomes the constitutive feature of the social and political life. At the beginning of the new century...this door remains open.¹³

Thinking about Auschwitz is transformative here because it takes up what is of contemporary relevance to us, and therefore what is a constitutive, if unnamed, moral, practical, and political dimension of life.

The point is not therefore the analysis of truth, but what one could call the ontology of contemporaneity, the ontology of ourselves and, it seems to me, that the philosophical choice confronting us today is the following: one could opt for critical philosophy that would represent itself as an analytical philosophy of truth, or for critical thought that takes the form of an ontology of ourselves, an ontology of the present. This is the form of philosophy that from Hegel, through Nietzsche and Max Weber, to the Frankfurt School has founded the form of reflection within which I attempt to work as well.¹⁴

Most likely this is the form of thinking within which the authors of *Eksperymenty w myśleniu o Holokaucie* would situate themselves as well.

One of the basic spheres that have changed under the influence of the reflection on Auschwitz is the modern form of understanding time and the awareness of history based on this understanding. For it is a challenge to historical discourse to confront what for ethical, political, or religious reasons does not simply recede into the past, but situates itself “vertically” in relation to the historical-narrative continuum. Holocaust has “fallen out of history” in precisely that way, remaining “transhistorically suspended” due to the triple ethical, political, and religious motivation. Permanently modern, incapable of being thought as something that passes and recedes in time, the Shoah is a stone of stumbling and a challenge for historiography.¹⁵ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe in *La fiction du politique*

¹² Ibid., 23.

¹³ Ibid., 12.

¹⁴ M. Foucault, „Kant i problem aktualności,” trans. B. Banasiak, *Pismo Literacko-Artystyczne*, 1987, no 6, 75. (After Polish translation KM)

¹⁵ On the subject of religious discourse after the Shoah, see: Rabbi Byron L. Sherwin, *Sparks Amidst the Ashes: the Spiritual Legacy of Polish Jewry*, Oxford University Press, 1997; A. Ravitzky, “Wpływ Holocaustu na współczesną ortodoksyjną myśl żydowską,” *Res Publica Nowa*, 2001, no 8. The implications of adopting the “transhistorical” perception of the Holocaust for the public sphere and political practice in Israel is discussed by Y. Zerubavel in “The Death of Memory and Memory of Death: Masada and the Holocaust as Historical Metaphors,” in: *Representations* 1994, no 45, and S. Friedländer, “Memory of the Shoah in Israel: Symbols, Rituals, and Ideological Polarization,” in: *The Art Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History*, ed. J. E. Young, The Jewish Museum, New York – Munich, Prestel, 1994.

and Jean Francois Lyotard in *Heidegger et 'les juifs,'*” offer the classic ethical argument demonstrating the supra-historical character of the Holocaust as “the fault-line cutting across the continuity of western history.” For the former, quoted by Milchman and Rosenberg, the Shoah is a caesura that, “being inside history, disrupts history and opens another historical possibility or closes down all historical possibilities.”¹⁶ This position, however, still allows both possibilities of change in historical orientation implied by the fact of the Holocaust. In the second part of *Heidegger et 'les juifs,'* which is a response to Lacoue-Labarthe, Lyotard presents the opinion that the Holocaust annuls the future in a specific manner, for nothing new can happen anymore, nothing that could be more current than the Holocaust, nothing that could make the Holocaust a bygone fact inscribed in the existing categories of history. Recently Berel Lang has undertaken a polemic with Lyotard’s position.¹⁷ His argument is that the Holocaust has “hurled us back into history,” abolishing “the utopia of progress with the immoral vision of historical redemption inscribed into it.” The consequence of the Holocaust is the growing awareness that evil of the past never finds its “justification” in any of the possible “happy futures,” which signifies the demise of the philosophy of history and not of history itself. It is no accident that the “post-Holocaust” times are linked to the violent revelations of the “pre-Holocaust” past, as if that past could be revealed only now, after the dismantling of metaphysics, which made possible the metahistorical, safe perception of the horror of history. Emphasizing that this is a bitter fruit of the Holocaust, Lang defends the tendency of contemporary consciousness to “be inside history” from the discourse that transforms the event of the Holocaust into a “metaphysical residue,” a supra-historical Absolute. He believes that the Shoah will not cease to be the mystery of evil and the source of moral obligation if we acknowledge its fundamental historicity. We can confront the “problem of evil” itself only when we cannot escape it any more, from “inside history.” And undoubtedly, one of the forms of such an escape is seeing the Holocaust in “transcendental” terms and the fixation which does not allow to see it as “a part of the history of evil,” without hope for redemption in the future “state of purpose.”

Reflection on the Holocaust in its “transformative” dimension leads to the renewal of the question about the relationship between freedom and necessity in the context of constituting history. If we think more deeply about Milchman’s and Rosenberg’s thesis, it implies a renewed mobilization of the time of history by activating the horizon of the future. The anxiety related to the future dimension of the Holocaust would then signify not an elimination of the historical dimension in postmodernity, a peculiar synchronicity of all wrongs experienced in history (or post-history, as was often claimed in the course of such arguments), but conversely, an open horizon of the future, defined by contemporary anxieties and by the image of a desirable future, an image mediated by the rational project of activity toward such a future. This image of the future will never be stabilized as a logically necessary shape of what is to come, but it will remain an ethi-

¹⁶ A. Milchman and A. Rosenberg, *Eksperymenty...*, 12.

¹⁷ B. Lang, “The Post-Holocaust vs. Postmodern. Evil Inside and Outside History,” in: *Holocaust Representation. Art within the Limits of History and Ethics*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore & London, 2000.

cally necessary shape of the future we are obliged to act toward. The future proceeds here from a new, Adornian categorical imperative, an imperative that establishes an intention of acting directed toward the future, after all illusion of progress has ceased, both in its Marxist and liberal versions.

Such renewal of the historical dimension in postmodernity (provided that, together with Lacan and Lacoue-Labarthe, we consider the Holocaust the end of modernity) is defined by a paradox related to the surprising repetition (rather than negation) of the basic tenets of the Enlightenment. The ultimate discrediting of the Enlightenment philosophy of history by the appearance of the genocidal *universum*, and the undermining of the idea of immanent teleology of history expressed in the law of historical progress, unexpectedly revealed the inherent characteristic of the Enlightenment as the intentional political project. The Kantian notion of moral progress, to be realized in universal ethics and international law based on this ethic, has proven to be relevant insofar as it is based on willing participation of free, ethically obliged subjects, not determined by historical necessity, mind's cunning, and teleology of Nature.¹⁸ Hanna Arendt was aware of this when she claimed in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that “[i]f there is any sense in the eighteenth century formula that man has come of age, it is that from now on *man is the only possible creator of his own laws and the only possible maker of his own history*”¹⁹ [emphasis mine, TM]. This is a task, however, that no one has undertaken yet, and that “terrifies with its magnitude.” For the Enlightenment did not fulfill its promises, assuming wrongly that the necessity for moral and political progress can be derived from the idea of human nature. Yet no one could expect at the time that the “post-Auschwitz” knowledge about human beings and their nature will arouse “*serious doubts about the existence of natural laws*”; in effect, human beings are “no longer the measure [of human laws] despite what the new humanists would have us believe,”²⁰ and political order requires an entirely new basis that can be provided only by free, sovereign legislation based on new ethics, a type of a new foundational act. As Arendt observes, only the greatest tragedy could have forced us to undertake such a challenge.

How great our calamity actually is can be gauged from the fact that to achieve even so simple a task as the prevention of murder, we are forced to doubt the unchallenged existence of the basic tenets of morality upon which the whole structure of our life rests and which none of the great revolutionaries, from Robespierre to Lenin, ever seriously questioned. We can no longer believe with Lenin that “people will gradually become accustomed to the observance of the elementary rules of social life that have been...repeated for thousands of years” (*State and Revolution*) and we must therefore try for what Burke’s great common sense deemed impossible: “new discoveries...in morality...or in the ideas of liberty” (*Reflections on the Revolution in France*).²¹

¹⁸ Cf. Hanna Arendt, *Kant's Political Philosophy* (notes), Courses University of Chicago, seminar 1970, *The Hanna Arendt Papers*, Library of Congress, call number 032255.

¹⁹ H. Arendt, “Concluding Remarks...,” 437.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 435 and 436.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 438.

It is worth pointing out that the above idea has been entirely ignored by the authors of the *Eksperymenty w myśleniu o Holokaucie* in their account of Hanna Arendt's thought.²² And yet a consideration of this line of thinking could have reinforced their argument at points which are crucial for them. For what has already been said implies that Arendt considers the Holocaust to be a special event, isolated in history, that makes people aware of the course of history and its potentially dangerous direction. Arendt thus understands the Holocaust as a Kantian *signum rememorativum, demonstrativum et prognosticum*,²³ although she does not define it as the absolute historical exception.²⁴ The "post-Auschwitz" situation means above all the necessity for the new beginning of human history in the sense of the new beginning of political order.

Only a consciously planned beginning of history, only a consciously devised new polity, will eventually be able to reintegrate those who in ever-increasing numbers are being expelled from humanity and severed from human condition...The concept of human rights can again be meaningful only if they are redefined as a right to the human condition itself, which depends upon belonging to some human community... [These rights] can be implemented only if they become the prepolitical foundation of a new polity, the prelegal basis of a new legal structure, the, so to speak, prehistorical fundament from which the history of mankind will derive its essential meaning in much the same way Western civilization did from its own fundamental origin myths."²⁵

There are twofold consequences of making human rights, the rights which humans proclaim themselves and which do not have any transcendent guarantees, into the pre-political basis of the new political order.

Firstly, the foundation of human rights implies the restriction of the sovereign right of the nation states and, in consequence, the right of the international community to intervene if genocide is suspected.²⁶ The current situation after Auschwitz signifies,

[t]he emergence of mankind as *one* political entity, [and] makes the new concept of "crimes against humanity," expressed by Justice Jackson at the Nuremberg Trials, the first and most important notion of international law. It should be recognized, however, that with this notion international law...enters the sphere of a law that is above the [sovereign] nations...Russian concentration camp, on the other hand, in which many millions are deprived of even the doubtful benefits of the law of their own country, could and should become the subject of action that would have to respect the rights and rules of sovereignty.²⁷

²² A. Milchman and A. Rosenberg, *Eksperymenty...*, pp. 174-195.

²³ Cf. I. Kant, *The Contest of Faculties*, Cambridge UP, 1970.

²⁴ From the start Arendt considers Gulag and Auschwitz to be comparable phenomena.

²⁵ H. Arendt, "Concluding Remarks," 439.

²⁶ Sh. Weiss, *Holokaust i nowy ład międzynarodowy*, paper delivered at the conference *Pamięć Shoah, współczesne reprezentacje*, Łódź, May 2003 (typescript).

²⁷ H. Arendt, "Concluding Remarks," 436-7; cf. J. Habermas, "Dispute on the Past and Future of International Law," 2003.

Holocaust in Literary and Cultural Studies

Secondly, thinking through the Gulag and the Holocaust – that, in Arendt’s thought, leads to the suspension of the problem of absolute exceptionality of the Holocaust, implying a universalization – is not in itself a sufficiently effective means to establish the new law. It is, however, undoubtedly, “a way toward the new form of universal solidarity.”

Because those who were expelled from humanity and from human history, and thereby deprived of their human condition, need the solidarity of all men to assure them of their rightful place in “man’s enduring chronicle.”²⁸

Thus the conclusion of these considerations brings us back again to the problem of the new ethic as an expression of the new political beginning of human history. It is an ethic of universal solidarity of the living, based on the anamnestic solidarity with all those who were murdered. By opening the horizon of the future, this ethic actuates history again.

Translation: Krystyna Mazur

Zofia MITOSEK

An Event That Never Happened: The Holocaust for the Masses

This article constitutes my response to a discovery that has led me to rethink the question of the boundary between factual accounts and fictional texts. Recently I experienced a kind of shock – an ethical shock. Instead of truth, audiences received a story about the Holocaust that intentionally imitated truth, though it was not fiction but a forgery. Let me begin with the facts.

In a gesture of atonement for the reprehensible attitude of the French during the Second World War, President Nicolas Sarkozy proposed to the Ministry of Education that every primary school student should learn the story of a murdered or deported Jewish child as of September 2008. The program's slogan would be “Devoir de mémoire” – the “Duty of Memory.” In the end, the proposal was rejected at the development stage as too radical. Even Simone Veil – a former Auschwitz prisoner – questioned the wisdom of the idea.

Almost simultaneously with Sarkozy's proposal, the Franco-Belgian film *Surviving with Wolves* (*Survivre avec les loups*) hit French screens. Various political and cultural personalities attended the official premiere on 16 January 2008. Directed by Vera Belmont (the producer of several well-known films, including *Farinelli*), the film adapted Misha Defonseca's book of the same title, which had come out earlier in the USA (1997) and France (1998). Both the book and the film depict the experiences of a little Jewish girl named Misha, who crosses Europe – from Brussels to Ukraine – in search of her lost parents, who have been transported to a concentration camp. During her wartime wanderings through the snows of Germany, Poland, and Ukraine, she finds salvation in her compass and in a pack of wolves that adopt her into their family. Along the way, Misha meets various people who turn out to be more dangerous than the animals. She witnesses a rape, kills a German soldier with a knife, and secretly watches the execution of Jewish children. She sees a train transporting people to Auschwitz, while Polish children

hurl stones and yell at them: “Serves you right, Jews!” Yet everything ends happily, as the twelve-year-old Misha returns on foot from Ukraine to Brussels via Yugoslavia, Italy, and France. In total, she walks around six thousand kilometers. The film is beautiful. The girl’s adventures stretch the limits of plausibility, but the producers assure us that the story is “based on true events.”

I came out of the cinema moved. There were many children present. And now suddenly I discover that the action of the book – *Misha: A Mémoire of the Holocaust Years* (the title of the American edition) – is a complete hoax. Misha Defonseca is not Jewish. Though her parents were deported for their part in the resistance movement, she herself remained in Belgium. The wanderings of little Misha were the invention of an adult woman. The Belgian daily *Le Soir* uncovered the deception. *Le Figaro* later repeated the news on 29 February 2008. The newspaper established that Defonseca had been born in 1937 and baptized by her parents as a Catholic. Her real name was Monique de Wael. She had not spent the war in the forests of Poland, but close to Brussels. Numerous historical errors came to light in both the film and the book – many of which had been circulating among readers for over a decade. Misha is eight years old in 1941 when her parents are seized in a street round-up. Yet the round-ups in Belgium only began in September 1942 – as Belgian Holocaust historian Maxime Steinberg points out. Monique de Wael was only five years old at the time, not eight. Her school and baptism certificates also emerged. Serge Aroles – who had lived in Brussels during the war and later wrote a book entitled *L’Enigme des enfants-loups* – began to examine the plausibility of her story, the possibility of a wolf pack adopting a human being, and the cases of so-called wolf children. He questioned the authenticity of the story from both historiographical and anthropological points of view. These first revelations appeared in the journal *Regards: Revue du Centre communautaire laïc juif en Belgique* on 20 January 2008.

So what was Ms. Defonseca’s response? In an interview with *Le Figaro*, she confessed to the hoax. Two separate lines of defense appear in her remarks. Firstly, she presents herself as the victim of a multi-faceted manipulation. She first told “her” story at an American synagogue, having been invited there for Yom HaShoah – the holiday dedicated to memory of the Holocaust. Later, she presented it at multiple American and European universities. Jane Daniel – an American editor – set about persuading her to publish it. De Wael (“Defonseca”) refused for two years, before finally surrendering – as she writes in the book – to the promptings of the Jewish community she had joined after settling in the United States. They told her to “do it for future generations.” The book’s success convinced her that she was helping young people understand the nightmare of war.

The second line of defense was more psychological. Since she was unhappy in post-war Belgium (her deported father had been accused of treason), she gradually became convinced that people were worse than wolves, because they were capable of killing their own children. This conviction became a kind of inner truth for De Wael. She expressed this “truth” in an allegorical fable about a little girl who takes refuge from cruel human beings in a pack of wolves. The psychoanalyst Serge Tisseron – author of *Virtual mon amour* – characterized her case as one of “split personality.” Defonseca defended herself against the charge of deception for a long time. She appeared with Vera Belmont for

Mitosek An Event That Never Happened...

a sneak preview of the film at Le Bretagne cinema in Paris, where she answered an audience member's question with a speech about the childish courage that springs from ignorance and naive innocence. These qualities had helped her cross the lands engulfed by the Nazi inferno with a pack of wolves. She even showed the compass that had supposedly guided her eastward through Europe. Only after the article appeared in *Le Soir* was she forced to reveal the truth.

Here a third problem arises – not so much with the “inner truth” itself as with the translation of this “inner truth” into the obvious financial profits stemming from publication in eighteen countries, film rights, and collaboration on the film's production. In *Le Figaro*, we see pictures of Ms. Defonseca with the child actress Mathilde Goffard. Bernard Fixot – the French editor of the book at Editions Laffront (1998) – is outraged. He says that Ms. Defonseca misled him by presenting her tale as a true story, for which he then paid a lot of money (before selling the rights to the film). At the same time, he adds that the whole affair is essentially harmless and that the author has not hurt anybody with her evocative fable. The question of historical truth does not even enter his mind. Vera Belmont – the director of the film – talks about the situation with the same ambivalence. In an article published in the *Nouvel Observateur* on March 6, she claims to have believed Ms. Defonseca, though she still attempted to persuade her to omit certain implausible episodes – such as the scene where the little girl kills a German with a knife and her wanderings through the Warsaw Ghetto. Defonseca agreed to cut the Warsaw episode, but the scene in which Misha kills the German soldier receives a realistic depiction in the final film. The “excursion” to the Ghetto is replaced with shots of the train full of deportees, where the director chooses not to dispense with the scene in which Polish boys throw stones at the Jews. In the end, after the revelations in *Le Soir* and *Le Figaro* more than a month after the premiere, Vera Belmont decided to withdraw any information suggesting the authenticity of the story, as well as the epilogue, which states that Misha – now back in Brussels – is still searching through lists of names for her missing parents.

Personal motivation is crucial here. Belmont refers to the case of Roman Polański, who made the main character of *The Pianist* a symbol of his own murdered father. Yet Belmont makes no mention of Władysław Szpilman's memoirs, which form the authentic basis for the film's plot. Nobody has questioned their credibility. The director (who was a child during the war and also lost her parents in a concentration camp) lays the emphasis on the need to acquaint the younger generation with the reality of the Holocaust. Could there possibly be a better subject than the survival of a little Jewish girl wandering across Nazi-occupied Europe?

Here we reach a phenomenon described by the American political scientist Norman Finkelstein as “the Holocaust industry” (*The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering*, 2000). Finkelstein opposes the exploitation of the Holocaust by the American media in their treatment of Israel's contemporary history, since this attitude would subordinate an unprecedented historical tragedy to immediate political ends. I am not overly concerned here with his controversial theses. Neither do I know whether Defonseca's “forgery” has anything in common with the phenomenon described by Finkelstein. Nevertheless, it is worth emphasizing that Defonseca's hoax is

by no means an exceptional case within the rich field of Holocaust literature – from the alleged Hitler diaries (published in 1983 by Konrad Kujau) to Helena Demidenko's book about two Ukrainians who join the SS (published in 1993 in Australia) to the scandal provoked by Binjamin Wilkomirski. The latter case deserves further elaboration.

Wilkomirski was really a Swiss musician named Bruno Dösseker, born in Zurich in 1941. In 1995, he published a book entitled *Bruchstücke: Aus einer Kindheit*, in which he described his “own” experiences in the Majdanek concentration camp. After three years of commercial success, the fraud was discovered and the author punished. The publisher withdrew the book from circulation (though only two years ago I saw its English edition in a Warsaw bookshop). Yet I have managed to purchase *Survivre avec les loups* today – 1 March 2008. The publication is still “warm.” Misha (the young actress Mathilde Goffart) is on the cover. The author thanks XO Editions (an imprint of Laffront) and her editor Marie-Thérèse Cuny for their help with the new edition of her memoirs. I describe it here as a “publication,” because – though I have known since yesterday that the book is not an autobiography – I am not inclined to call it a novel. The film is still running at the Paris cinema, in afternoon hours when children on their winter holidays can see it.

So Misha Defonseca has confessed? But to what? To lying or to the nightmares that have tormented her since the war, which she has dressed up in the form of a beautiful fable? As I read this book with film pictures on the cover, I cannot fight off the sense that we are dealing with a manipulation as ideological as it is financial. I feel embarrassed. Both Wilkomirski and Defonseca created falsifications that perhaps served the “inner truth” of their authors, but certainly have not served the historical truth about the extermination of the Jewish nation by a modern European state in a “scientific manner” (as Adorno and Horkheimer suggested). Neither have they served the truth about the tacit consent to genocide betrayed by other modern states, including France.

President Chirac's gesture of apology and the later declarations of President Sarkozy could be compromised in this situation. It would be enough for a primary school student to discover that the film *Survivre avec les loups* was based on a lie and that Misha's autobiography was a hoax. This young person might easily decide that various other stories “pushed on him by his elders” might also be untrue – that the Nazis did not kill children and that the death camps were mere conjecture. Here the “professional” anti-Semites and so-called “deniers” could get involved. Indeed, they regard any literary and cinematic discourse around Misha Defonseca as part of a global Jewish conspiracy. For them, this conspiracy also includes the solid archival work of French, American, and Israeli historians (incidentally, they classify the findings of Polish historian Jan Tomasz Gross in the same way), as well as *Les Bienveillantes*, the brilliant French-language novel by American author Jonathan Littell about an SS officer who witnesses and participates in the Holocaust. The borderline between lies and fiction is sometimes very fine, though it inevitably leads to ethical conclusions. Philippe Di Folco expresses the following opinion on the Dösseker-“Wilkomirski” affair in his book, *Les grandes impostures littéraires* (Paris: Vrin, 2004):

But now, when he has publically confessed to his lie, it is appropriate to discuss the accusations raised against him. None of this can explain why two films have been made about him with

Mitosek An Event That Never Happened...

public money – and with the blessing of certain world authorities on psychoanalysis as well as various Jewish luminaries. In the end, he was able to make money on the memory of the victims of fascism, pretend to be a survivor... lie to his wife and children about his adoption, talk about the sufferings of a little boy lost in the Polish snows, and then – like a traveling salesman – go from conference to conference, accept money, and consider all this to be normal (275)

It is worth adding here that Wilkomirski's false identity was only discovered thanks to a DNA test.

Four years after the publication of Di Folco's brilliant book and ten years after the Wilkomirski scandal, history is repeating itself. In fact, Defonseca published her book two years after *Bruchstücke* (1995). Like Wilkomirski, she created a fable and wrote about something that never happened.

Yet here I fall into certain traps of writing that have become genuine dilemmas within literary theory. By writing about "an event that never happened," I evoke one definition of fiction. The title of this article refers not to the extermination of the Jews, but to a narrative about the Holocaust in a book pretending to be authentic. But is such a fake or forgery a work of non-fiction or fiction? Was the fact that both books functioned as personal memoirs – and that their authors presented them as such – the reason for the referential reading that yesterday turned out to be a referential illusion? The text of the book is the same, but its semantic dimension has changed. The truth has become lies. Or perhaps it has not become lies, but simply a plausible tale about something that might have happened (people wanted to kill a little girl, but wolves rescued her). Perhaps this is the beautiful fairy tale of Peter and the Wolf, a myth imposed upon a terrible reality? The cover of the American edition – *Misha: A Mémoire of the Holocaust Years* – features a Barbie-like blonde girl with little wolves in her arms.

A question immediately arises that literary scholars have avoided. Who determines the "ontological" status of the world depicted in the text? Is it authorial intention or the reader? And what if the author hides his or her (deceitful) intention? As we weep at the film about little Misha, do we immerse ourselves in a story about human destiny in which miraculous events take place? Or do we grasp particular details like the Polish boys throwing stones at the train transporting Jews to Auschwitz? When we think that Misha Defonseca really saw this, we fall into various complexes associated with Polish anti-Semitism. But when we discover three weeks later that the author hiding behind the name Misha Defonseca invented the whole thing, do we cease to believe this fact or do we ask who told her that Polish boys threw stones at a train full of a Jews? In short, we ask not about the truth, but about the story serving as the basis for another story pretending to be the truth. We offload our complexes onto the person of the author. Since she spent the war in Belgium and never went to German-occupied Poland, we ask what right she had to depict such scenes. We ask what documents might have formed the basis for the constructions of the book and the film. In short, we move with a certain measure of relief to questions about plausibility.

With the same sense of relief, I set about reading the book. I feel that I have been duped, so I carefully search this text that pretends to be the truth. I search through it mercilessly, since by now I am deeply committed. I am fighting for the truth. The book

appears to be just as beautiful as the film. So it would appear, but in fact it is a mere compilation of popular literary tropes and clichés – from the motif of a child raised by animals (like Mowgli from Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*) to the tale of a little girl separated from her parents to the stereotype of an anti-Semitic Poland. As I read the book, I am not surprised that “ordinary” readers believed Misha's story. The fairy tale themes mingle here with realistic depictions, while the hero is a child. The book beguiles the reader like Kipling's tales. Yet publishers and even a famous director believed Ms. Defonseca (De Wael?). Nobody looked for consistency in the dates. Nobody asked questions about the child's physical capabilities. The author convinced everybody of her Jewish background, constantly rejecting the name De Wael in the book and claiming that she only received it at the beginning of the war as a child hidden by Catholics. Indeed, it is almost as if Monique De Wael – “Misha Defonseca” – had foreseen or anticipated her later exposure.

This suggestive narrative leads to another legitimate question. Perhaps the documents discovered and exposed in *Le Soir* were also fakes? After all, other documents speak of the production of such papers during the war, while the main character in the book also talks about the fabrication of documents for Jewish children. A vicious circle. Who are we to believe? According to the theories of “new history” (Hayden White, Frank Ankersmit), it is possible to destroy the credibility of records. Jacques Derrida repeats that lies can never be proven, since the liar may always respond that he believed what he said and was mistaken. Then the opposite of the truth is not lies, but error.

Literary scholars are presently mired in irresolvable questions about the textual signs of fictionality, the haze of interpretation, interpretive communities, intention and intentionality, the immanent ethics of the literary text, and a theory that one might alternately describe as narrative or dialogue. All these intellectual endeavors reveal their powerlessness in the face of the situation I have described. Theory becomes anti-theory not because scientific thinking has deconstructed itself, but because life constantly imposes questions that theory cannot handle. The average reader does not ask about the difference between truth and fiction. Yet he or she feels deeply injured when somebody attempts to deceive him, when a text pretends to be authentic when in fact it is not.

Be that as it may, a substantial portion of contemporary prose clearly feigns authenticity. So what is the difference between Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes* and *Survivre avec les loups*? Both narratives are written in the first person. Both depict subjective experiences – those of an executioner in Littell's book and of a victim in Defonseca's. Both texts have undergone processes of verification – though Littell's fictional novel has not revealed any historical errors, while Defonseca's fake “true story” contains many.

And yet this is not the point. Ms. Defonseca has violated the communicative contract. The interpretive community for whom she wrote her text expected truth in the classic sense – not some hazy “inner truth” or the expression of nightmares. All these justifications may apply to literature, and indeed readers have become accustomed to this idea. They have given literature a license to spin fairy tales. But with texts about the Holocaust, they expect a clear and unambiguous vision. Even if they are prepared to forgive the author for errors and for gaps in his or her historical education, they still find the meaning of the text in its endeavors to reconstruct the past – and not in mere pretending. Lying violates

Mitosek An Event That Never Happened...

the rules of the game. In fact, this is not quite the right expression. Lying excludes the very possibility of the game. Testimonies to the Holocaust are inevitably monotonous, dark, and sad. Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman have written recently about the silence of witnesses in their book *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. In the case of Defonseca's work, the author dresses up this dark subject in new robes, depicting not the camps or deportations, but a child, animals, nature, the road. Here and there we find blood, but not often. The hero struggles with nature rather than with evil people. At a certain moment – as in a fairy tale – she faces a test, and – as in a fairy tale – she emerges victorious. She kills the enemy. Then she happens upon some good people. Defonseca has constructed the plot of a fairy tale. The fake true story of *Misha: A Mémoire of the Holocaust Years* tells of an event that never happened. The author has created her own Holocaust.

We might mention two cases where the truth of a text – despite the author's intentions – became the domain of the reader. Firstly, we may recall the outrage in Poland at the reception of Jerzy Kosiński's *The Painted Bird*. Western readers interpreted this work – which the author himself characterized as a novel – as a true account of the German occupation of Poland. The second example is Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*, a work of authentic prose that Frank's father edited for publication purposes after his daughter's death. In this case, the discoveries of researchers working on the manuscript in no way disturbed the referential reading of Anne's record. In the cases of Wilkomirski and Defonseca, all readers – in my opinion – should share my sense of shock. But will they? The answer is uncertain.

In contemporary times, the collection of reading testimonies is no longer the painstaking and impossible work of sociologists. The press broke the news of Defonseca's hoax. I found the reactions of various readers and viewers on the Internet. Literary scholars should not ignore this source of information. I looked at the FERUS website where Serge Aroles published his articles. The responses of internet users mainly referred to questions of the relations between human beings and wolves. Both the film and the book had convinced their audiences. People referred to Aroles' "scientific" research with irony. Many insisted that wild animals and people could live together. The plot roused no objections, while the question of the Holocaust disappeared from view. People noticed the physical limitations of the child more than any historical errors. Right up until the official exposure of the hoax, neither readers nor viewers questioned the authenticity of the story. Later they wrote about the right to subjective experience. The documents presented also raised doubts, since Jane Daniel – the American editor of *Misha: A Mémoire of the Holocaust Years* – had posted them on the Internet after losing a lawsuit against the author.

The favorable reception of the film and the book – sometimes even ridiculing the findings of the "truth searchers" – is puzzling. Prominent Holocaust scholars have not generally concerned themselves with such matters. Instead, we find them deeply immersed in scholarly work on the reconstruction and redaction of documents, in disputes over research methodology, and in discussions about the differences between testimony and historical narrative. Yet perhaps they have forgotten that this subject – like all subjects – can fall prey to mass culture. If there has been any discussion of Wilkomirski's hoax, it

is only because the text has exceptional artistic merit. Philosophers and psychoanalysts have also written about this case.

Misha Defonseca's book circulated happily for thirteen years in print runs reaching millions of copies. Only the production of the film raised any doubts among Jewish groups in Belgium. I am not concerned here with precisely what happened to the film later in this country. For me, the problem is that eminent scholars have ignored the influence of hoaxes on the epistemological dimension, when supposed truth turns into lies and the audience for these lies includes young people and children. In the case under discussion here, the problem of the Holocaust gives way to the problem of a friendship between a little girl and a wolf.

French people with whom I have spoken tend to downplay the matter. I have already mentioned that the left-wing *Nouvel Observateur*, which wrote a favorable review of the film after the premiere, did not withdraw its positive appraisal a month later. Instead, the newspaper has interpreted the whole affair in "expressive" categories. The author had to give expression to what had lingered inside her after the war – the trauma of losing her parents. One critic described this process as a form of catharsis.

In her own explanations, the author emphasizes that she did not receive any money for the book, since she fell victim to the machinations of the editor. Of course, this would support the thesis of the book's expressive and cathartic genesis. But what does this catharsis have to do with the twenty-five million dollars that the American editor – Jane Daniel – now owes the author? In 2005, Misha Defonseca went to court demanding half the book's total royalties. The myth of expression had come to an end. As long as she transmitted her fantastic tale orally, even at synagogues and universities, nobody would speak about money. Only the written record of these Holocaust fantasies – a work fabricated by two (at least two) people for the consumer market and exposed as inauthentic years later by chance – could become a legal and financial scandal. I keep thinking about what Defonseca said as she showed her compass at the sneak preview of the film – after she had won the lawsuit against her editor. How can we speak here of catharsis?

The tangled tale I have presented has multiple dimensions. In discussing the literary facts of the case, I have examined only the most controversial moments. I leave the rest to other scholars – those who work on the Holocaust, those who write about the anthropology of literature and its reception, and those for whom the ethics of the text remains an important problem.

Translation: Stanley Bill

Eugenia PROKOP-JANIEC

Jew, Pole, Artist: Constructing Identity after the Holocaust¹

“He is equally a Jew, a Pole and an artist” – so the essayist Kazimierz Brandys repeats his own earlier words about the novelist Adolf Rudnicki in *Remembered* (*Zapamiętane*), a volume of autobiographical prose published in the mid-1990s.² He did not take this view about Rudnicki alone. Indeed, he applied the same triple definition to various other figures, including the well-known poet Aleksander Wat. Even more significantly, Brandys clearly viewed himself in the same manner, not only in *Remembered*, but also in the earlier *Months* (*Miesiące*): as a writer of dual national identity.

Reflections on national belonging and the role of the writer form important motifs in the personal writings of several contemporary authors associated with Poland's Jewish world. We find the same knot of problems not only in the autobiographical prose of Kazimierz Brandys (*Miesiące 1978-1979*, *Miesiące 1980-1981*, *Miesiące 1982-1984*, *Miesiące 1984-1987*, *Zapamiętane*, *Przygody Robinsona*, *Notatki z lektur i życia*); but also in the diaries of his elder brother, Marian (*Dzienniki 1972*, *Dzienniki 1975-1977*, *Dzienniki 1978*); in certain well-known passages from the diaries of Adolf Rudnicki (*Dziennik 1984*); in the notebooks of Aleksander Wat (*Dziennik bez samogłosek*); the memoirs of Henryk Vogler (*Wyznanie mojżeszowe*) and Aleksander Rozenfeld (*Podanie o prawo powrotu*); and finally, in the autobiography of Artur Sandauer (*Byłem*).

The complex identity of authors on the Polish-Jewish borderline arises in these works on multiple and diverse occasions: in anecdotes, essayistic excursions, self-analyses and portraits of literary *confrères*. The writers variously reduce and increase the objective

¹ This text constitutes an altered and expanded version of a paper given at a conference on “Jews in Literature” at the University of Silesia (Katowice, 21-23 April 1999).

² Brandys, Kazimierz, *Zapamiętane* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1995), 18.

distance of their observations, evaluating their own positions and analyzing the positions of others, studying the situation from within and without, probing their own and other people's consciousness, recording their own and other people's behavior, as if they were testing diverse perspectives on the phenomenon and diverse ways of speaking about it. It is striking how often an external impulse – the prying of an inquisitive journalist³ or the need to fill out a passport form⁴ – provokes the writers to ask themselves questions about community and solidarity, distinction and difference. It is striking how all of them seem to need a field of reference delineated by the destinies and choices of others, and how they find a background of collective models so essential. Reflections on their own identity often arise simply as glosses to stories about acquaintances, friends, and enemies – as if each individual case could become more tangible and comprehensible thanks to other comparable cases, as if it were only the certainty that identity trouble forms a universal experience that could provide sufficient justification for devoting any attention to it at all.

On reading these diaries, memoirs, and autobiographies, we sometimes get the irresistible impression that Artur Sandauer's concept of autobiographical modulation as a literary device has found collective expression within them. According to Sandauer, the same event "could be served, respectively, in frivolous, tragic, realistic or grotesque flavors."⁵ The distinctions in aesthetic and stylistic registers observed by Sandauer are clearly audible in this hastily assembled choir of voices:

I never felt like a Polish Jew or a Jewish Pole. I couldn't stand mestizos. I always felt like a Jewish Jew and a Polish Pole. This is both difficult to explain and true at the same time. I was always proud – as far as one may be proud simply for belonging to one human group or another – that I was a Pole, that I was a Jew. And yet I was also devastated that I was a Pole, that I was a Jew.⁶

³ This situation frequently occurs. In *Miesiące*, Kazimierz Brandys writes: "A woman from Radio France-Culture asked me whether I felt more like a Pole or a Jew – to which I answered that my feelings about myself are variable. We would have to begin with the fact that I feel like a vertebrate from a supposedly higher species of mammals. Sometimes I feel like a European. I think in Polish, I'm a Polish writer, I belong to the milieu of the Polish intelligentsia, and I was raised within Polish culture. When they persecute the Jews, I feel like a Jew" (*Miesiące 1985-1987* [Warszawa: Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza, 1989], 158).

⁴ Marian Brandys makes a note in his *Dzienniki 1972* of the following story from Julian Strykowski: "When he wrote 'Polish' under nationality on a passport application for a trip to Italy (he was going there as a delegate of the Polish Writers' Union), his hand began to tremble. It had never trembled before. At once, he realized that he should have written 'Jewish nationality,' for at that moment he felt like a Jew" (*Dzienniki 1972* [Warszawa: Iskry, 1996], 98). The passport scene also appears in Kazimierz Brandys's *Miesiące 1985-1987* (53).

⁵ Sandauer, Artur, "Zapiski z martwego miasta (Autobiografie i parabiografie)," *Proza* (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1983), 114.

⁶ Wat, Aleksander, *Dziennik bez samogłosek* (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1990), 19.

To be a Jew is a curse; to be a Pole is a curse; to be both at the same time in one body is truly difficult to bear.⁷

I am both a Pole and a Jew. Unfortunately, in an era of newly and ever more powerfully rising nationalisms, this seems impossible to some people.⁸

Nobody will be fully satisfied with this little work of mine. The Jews will be upset at me and take me for an apostate for not throwing my lot in with Jewry and the very idea of Jewry with all my heart and soul. But I have surrendered at least half of these two organs (as far as it is appropriate to speak of the soul so objectively) to Poland. The Poles will condemn me for polluting their pure and irreproachable Polishness with ingredients of an entirely different, unfamiliar order...I have only one chance and one lonely hope...If there exists somewhere on high – above our reality – some kind of almighty power...then my confession might be received with indulgent understanding. And I trust that all my errors and sins – those I have confessed, those I have concealed and those I have forgotten – will be magnanimously forgiven together with both my Polishness and my Jewishness. Amen.⁹

A close acquaintance of mine – who shall remain nameless, as he is a well-known figure – says the following: “To be Polish is already a misfortune. To be a Pole and a Jew is a misfortune within a misfortune. To be a Pole, a Jew, and a writer means three misfortunes.”¹⁰

As these quotations suggest, one may speak about complex problems of identity in tones of elevated seriousness, colloquial directness, melancholy spiced with humor, or with the intention of producing a rhetorical effect. Stories of identity employ several permanent figures. Among them, we find above all the genealogy and the family history. Almost all the above-cited authors of various diaries, journals and memoirs spin brief or more expansive family tales. We even encounter two versions of the same family story told by the Brandys brothers. Kazimierz Brandys repeatedly relates the history of the family line from its Czech beginnings lost in the gloom of a legendary past through to its most recent phase in Warsaw and Paris, while Marian Brandys examines two different versions of the family’s origins – Semitic and Scandinavian. Sandauer describes the city of Sambor, whose mythical topography forms the background for understanding the choices, wanderings, and ideological conflicts that divide the members of his family. Józef Hen returns to his former self as a little boy from Nowolipie Street and “the Jewish universe in Warsaw” between the wars.¹¹ Vogler presents a Krakow Jewish version of the fading glory of a merchant’s home. The key role in these stories falls not only to the places to which the writers belong – Warsaw, Krakow, Sambor – but more broadly to the places and spaces that represent a sense of rootedness. These are clearly geographical, though ultimately they are also historical and social.

⁷ Rozenfeld, Aleksander, *Podanie o prawo powrotu* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 1990), 48.

⁸ Vogler, Henryk, *Wyznanie mojżeszowe* (Warszawa: PIW, 1994), 98.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 123-124.

¹⁰ Brandys, Kazimierz, *Miesiące 1982-1984* (Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1984), 120-121.

¹¹ Anna Sobolewska gave this title to Hen’s work *Nowolipie Street*. See: Sobolewska, Anna, “Żydowski kosmos w Warszawie. Nowolipie” Józefa Hena jako dokument pamięci,” *Literackie portrety Żydów*, ed. E. Łoch (Lublin: UMCS, 1996).

It is worth remembering that Polish-Jewish literature of the interwar period also referred widely to genealogy and family history. Indeed, the search for identity was one of its most important themes. This choice has a deep motivation. In the end, family stories are tales about bonds, and – in certain aspects – about stability and continuity. They are also tales about community, within which and thanks to which a person can construct his or her own identity. Yet in order to have any power beyond the particular or to merit retelling outside the most intimate circles, the family biography must reveal a more general pattern and thus transform itself into a kind of exemplary tale.¹²

The rules for constructing this type of model are easy to grasp – for instance, in one of Marian Brandys's genealogies. He refers to "all...my ancestors and kinsfolk over three hundred years in Poland who actively participated in Polish life: the wise doctor from the Czech Brandeis family (now Brandys) who performed the duties of physician at the court of King Władysław IV Vasa and gave the beginning for more than one native Polish family of the nobility; the captain and doctor in Tadeusz Kościuszko's insurrectionary army; the member of the National Government during the January Uprising; and...three uncles in the Polish legions."¹³ Finally, he adds his own participation in the campaign to repel the Nazi invasion in September 1939. In the history of his family, he is exclusively interested in the process of transition from Jewishness to Polishness. Therefore, he presents the narrative according to the classic assimilation model. Moreover, through his eyes, the Polish side takes on an exemplary insurrectionary and patriotic form. Yet this same historical material – as Kazimierz Brandys suggests – may also reveal a very different pattern. Specifically, this entails a more significant role for the Jewish aspects, as the Holocaust casts a shadow on the assimilation process, pushing the family back towards the Jewish side.

Interestingly, a situation of double or parallel reading may also serve as a figure of identity. This is the case in Rudnicki's diaries, where he reads both Andrzej Strug and Jeszajahu Trunk,¹⁴ as well as in Kazimierz Brandys's *Robinson's Adventures (Przygody Robinsona)*, where the author reads Philip Roth and various works about Andrzej Towiański. This combination of Polish and Jewish texts may be supplemented with commentaries showing the similarities and differences between works and authors – or even raising the question of relations between Poles and Jews. And yet they may also do without this kind of commentary, since the crucial point here is precisely the situation of the reader, who defines his or her place in cultural space through reading, thus naming the regions of his or her spiritual home.

Accounts of identity troubles and dilemmas have appeared in personal documentary literature for quite obvious reasons. The distinguishing characteristic of this genre – as Roman Zimand has established – is the creation of "a world of writing directly

¹² See: Złatanowa, Nadia, "Naród rodzin w świetle przekazów rodowodowych," *Kategoria narodu w kulturach słowiańskich*, eds. T. Dąbek-Wirgowa and A. Makowiecki (Warszawa: Uniwersytet Warszawski, 1993), 40.

¹³ Brandys, Marian, *Dziennik 1978* (Warszawa: Iskry, 1997), 34.

¹⁴ Rudnicki, Adolf, "Dziennik 1984," *Twórczość* 9 (1995).

about oneself.”¹⁵ We might add that this is also a world in which one may express the “I” in all its multifaceted and mutable nature – a world in which one may construct the “I.” A personal record is equally a space for diagnosing individual identity, a field of battle over this identity, and the place of its creation. This is the case in diaries, which record the flickering stream of external events in all their fluidity and momentary existence, and in autobiographies or memoirs, which aim to unify, organize and structure experiences. After all, it is not only diarists who come to believe that they are using a form that is “always inclined...towards self-creation.”¹⁶ Memoirists also understand that when they set about “describing their lives,” they simultaneously set about “creating them.”¹⁷ Organizing memories is an operation of constructing and establishing meaning.

Some of the works under discussion here refer directly to a Gombrowiczian conception of literature as the terrain of a game played over the self. Sandauer and Kazimierz Brandys perhaps most strongly emphasize the self-creative (and self-analytical) role of writing. Both of them are equally intrigued by the mystery of *Dichtung und Wahrheit* in their own work – the problem of the relation between invention and experience. In *Notes from a Dead City* (*Zapiski z martwego miasta*), Sandauer combines autobiographical passages with the grotesque parabiography of Mieczysław Rosenzweig, thus staging the transmutation of his own fate into a plot with a fictional character before the reader’s very eyes. In *Months, Remembered* and *Robinson’s Adventures*, Kazimierz Brandys introduces fictional elements into his documentary notes, only to unmask these “spasmodic movements of the literary writer” (143) and to examine through metacommentary the function of literary constructions in autobiographical narrative.

As a literary genre in which an inclination towards truth plays a fundamental role, personal testimony demands a special sphere of authenticity and honesty. However problematic or conventional this principle might appear, it often passes as a basic condition of the genre. Brandys insists that “if the writer censors his own identity, he thus condemns himself to untruth, which will either shut his mouth or metamorphose into hatred.”¹⁸ In this observation, he equates multiple phenomena – creative work and truth, creative work and honesty, creative work and identity.

At the same time, understanding writing as both an artistic and existential task is not only a lesson learnt from the school of Gombrowicz for these authors. They also refer to other models. All the family stories they tell are marked by the Holocaust. All give accounts of death and salvation. Kazimierz Brandys describes his “adventures” in Warsaw on the so-called “Aryan side.” Sandauer describes the ghetto in Sambor and his time in hiding. Vogler relates his experience of the camps. The narrator of *Months* abandons the biographies of his kinsfolk in mid-sentence, concluding them with the

¹⁵ Zimand, Roman, *Diarysta Stefan Ż* (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1990), 17.

¹⁶ Brandys, Kazimierz, *Zapamiętane*, 201.

¹⁷ Vogler, Henryk, *Autoportret z pamięci*, Volume 1: *Część pierwsza: dzieciństwo i młodość* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1978), 5.

¹⁸ Brandys, Kazimierz, *Zapamiętane*, 100.

following information: “I do not know when or in what particular circumstances they suffered and died.”¹⁹ Even more clearly, he writes: “I had no wish to get to the bottom of how and when they died.”²⁰ According to Marta Młodkowska – an expert in documentary evidence from the Warsaw Ghetto – we find in these Holocaust testimonies a “sylleptic understanding” (Ryszard Nycz’s phrase²¹) of subjectivity, in the sense that writing represents for these authors a form of existence, while “textual subjectivity saves both the individual and the whole world he describes by exempting them from the law of a universal Holocaust.”²²

Here we should recall that the triple definition “Jew-Pole-artist” arose in Polish literature as a response to the Holocaust. Indeed, the Jewish-Polish poet Julian Tuwim proclaimed this formulation in one of his most famous and dramatic texts – a confession-manifesto written in 1944 under the title “We Polish Jews” and dedicated to “My mother in Poland or her most beloved shade.” Here the proud and tragic refrain “I am a Pole because it pleases me” appears alongside a request that the “Polish poet” might earn the rank of “Jew Doloris Causa” from “the nation that produced him”:

Not for any merits of mine, for I have none to show you. I shall consider it a promotion and the highest honor for the few Polish verses that might outlive me and whose memory will be bound to my name – the name of a Polish Jew.²³

Tuwim’s manifesto reveals identity as founded on an individual decision or internal choice, though these might not always be entirely independent. For the younger generation of writers reaching maturity in independent Poland between the wars, it became clear that Jewish identity was quite a different question, as we observe in Józef Hen’s *Nowolipie Street*:

Jewishness does not demand orthodoxy, a ritual diet, specific clothes and customs, or even language. Instead, it is exclusively an internal matter of feeling one’s own identity – or an external matter for others who think they see Jewish people.²⁴

Therefore, both Tuwim and Hen (who – *nota bene* – devoted a beautiful section of his autobiographical *I’m Not Afraid of Sleepless Nights* [*Nie boję się bezsennych nocy*] to Tuwim’s “We Polish Jews”) experienced a phenomenon described in Lucy Dawidowicz’s well-known article “Jewish Identity: A Matter of Fate, A Matter of Choice.” According to Dawidowicz, post-Enlightenment Jewish culture – which was open to external influences – gave rise to a modern model of identity in which “being a Jew was not only

¹⁹ Brandys, Kazimierz, *Miesiące 1985-1987* (Paris, Instytut Literacki, 1987), 78.

²⁰ Ibid., 79.

²¹ Nycz, Ryszard, *Język modernizmu. Prolegomena historycznoliterackie* (Wrocław: Leopoldinum, 1997), 107-114.

²² Młodkowska, Marta, “Pisanie jako forma istnienia – na podstawie dokumentów z getta warszawskiego,” *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* 1 (1999), 73.

²³ Tuwim, Julian, *My, Żydzi Polscy... We, Polish Jews...* (Warszawa: Shalom, 1993), 16.

²⁴ Hen, Józef, *Nowolipie* (Warszawa: Iskry, 1991), 104.

a question of origin and a sentence of fate. It was a question of the choice or desire to be a Jew.²⁵ In short, being Jewish was a question of a conscious will to affirm everything Jewish.

Nevertheless, such identity choices always had to confront – as Hen emphasizes – the reactions of the broader community. In *Nowolipie Street*, we find the archetypal scene – so to speak – in which a child is spurned by his classmates as an outside, a “lousy Jew.” Hen writes: “At once I had to reconcile myself with this reality. That it would be a distinguishing mark throughout my life, a curse from childhood.”²⁶ An identical scene recurs several times in Brandys’s *Robinson’s Adventures*. Here the narrator is first rejected by the Poles and then finally “hears who he is” from the Germans. Jewishness is associated with the traumatic experiences of stigmatization, a stamp that cannot be erased from the memory since it constantly returns in various new forms of the exclusion ritual. Even the older Brandys, who considers his choice of Polishness as one of his most important existential decisions, mentions in his notes of 1978 that he has started work on a book entitled *The Stain of Otherness*.

In the interwar period, the two communities existed alongside each other, differing in culture and religion, often mutually antagonistic. National identity appeared to many as a choice, as Henryk Vogler observes:

At that time, things presented themselves quite separately. One was either a Pole or a Jew. There did not seem to be any other possibilities. Polish culture seemed separate and independent to people immersed in it, thus giving rise to hostilities towards other equally separate cultures, which threatened the one and only proper culture.²⁷

Even Tuwim – we should add – appeared in Polish nationalist circles of the time as a Jewish writer creating Jewish poetry, while his public image consisted of various anti-Jewish stereotypes (of which he was perfectly well aware, as his numerous satires on anti-Semitism suggest). Moreover, thinking in categories of radical difference and division also prevailed on the Jewish side. A young Roman Brandstaetter described writers associated with the liberal *Literary News* magazine (*Wiadomości Literackie*) as “half-Jews, half-Poles” and “national hermaphrodites,” basing his pun on a concept of anomaly and illness.²⁸

Tuwim’s manifesto – and we should not forget that before the war he was the author of several poems interpreted as hostile towards Jews – represents an early example of transformations in the views of writers with Jewish background in the face of the Holocaust. In *Robinson’s Adventures* – written almost half a century later – Kazimierz

²⁵ Dawidowicz, Lucy, “Jewish Identity: A Matter of Fate, A Matter of Choice,” *The Jewish Presence: Essays on Identity and History* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977), 4.

²⁶ Hen, *Nowolipie*, 55.

²⁷ Vogler, *Wyznanie*, 98. At the same time, in her interpretation of Hen’s *Nowolipie Street*, Anna Sobolewska writes about the formation of a “Polish-Jewish identity” (See: Sobolewska, “Żydowski kosmos w Warszawie,” 52).

²⁸ Brandstaetter, Roman, *Zmowa eunuchów* (Warszawa, 1936), 105.

Brandys makes the following description of their situation: “Keeping quiet about one’s Jewish origins after the extermination of the European Jews is quite a different matter from concealing it before this event. By hiding one’s origins as an odious secret after the Holocaust, one indirectly admits that the cannibals were right.”²⁹ Being a Jew is understood here as an act of conscious will to affirm the universal values of humanity. One is not a Jew in spite of the Holocaust, but rather against the Holocaust.

Even today the idea of identity as an act of choice is not self-evident to everybody. Therefore, it was not for no reason that Brandys included the following sentence in his words of prayer offered up to God: “Lord, my homeland is the people who acknowledge my nationality, which I myself have determined.”³⁰

Yet the problem of identity is not only complicated when others shape us from the outside – creating an image, imposing it upon us and dictating our allegiances. After all, it is possible for a person to define himself independently of his social image, or even to define himself against it, constructing his “I” in an act of sovereign freedom, protest or revolt. This attitude distinguishes the *Diaries* of Marian Brandys, who repeatedly rejects any external determinations of his nationality – both when those expressing them are hostile to him and when they are among his closest peers:

I feel like a Pole, and I shall not allow anybody to impose any other classification on me, just as forty years ago in cadet school I did not allow anybody to categorize me under Jewish nationality. I feel a sense of community with the Jews only when they are persecuted.³¹

In his indomitable Polishness – which he affirms in spite of and perhaps on account of anti-Semitism – Brandys seems to resemble Victor Klemperer, who confirmed his German identity in his diaries during the years of the most extreme anti-Jewish persecutions.

The most telling aspect of the trouble with identity undoubtedly lies in the fact that the double identification may manifest itself in the individual’s personal experience as a process of change, vacillation and constant shifts between national poles. The poet Aleksander Wat described himself in the 1950s as a “Jewish Jew” and a “Polish Pole.” Yet he would go on to make the following observation in later decades: “I am and always will be a Jewish cosmopolitan who speaks Polish – and that’s that.”³² Later he would shift his position yet again:

In my old age, I feel increasingly in my deepest being like a Jew, a distant descendant of Rashi, the twelfth-century philosopher and Bible commentator from Troyes, a descendant of generations of rabbis from the priestly caste, with my fingers forming the gesture of priestly blessing.³³

Kazimierz Brandys sometimes performs certain quintessentially Polish rituals (which include presenting satirical interpretations of Poland, posing in front of Juliusz Słowacki’s

²⁹ Brandys, Kazimierz, *Przygody Robinsona*, 73.

³⁰ Brandys, Kazimierz, *Miesiące 1985–1987*, 53.

³¹ Brandys, Marian, *Dzienniki 1972* (Warszawa: Iskry, 1996), 99.

³² Wat, *Dziennik bez samogłosek*, 139.

³³ *Ibid.*, 231.

portrait, and describing a daguerreotype of Adam Mickiewicz decorating his Paris studio). Sometimes he characterizes his nationality as an allegiance to the intelligentsia – “liberated from hatred and superstitions.”³⁴ Sometimes – especially in his recollections of the occupation – he gives moving expression to his sense of connection with the Jews. The author himself notices and comments on all these fluctuations in his national feeling, from volume to volume devoting more and more space to Jewish questions and confirming his double allegiance.³⁵

Artur Sandauer – on the other hand – explains how often he has confronted the problem of self-definition (“Jew or Pole? Or maybe both?”³⁶), and how often he has attempted to avoid any final decision. At the same time, he wishes to understand his entire *oeuvre* as a record of a great transition, as documentary evidence of “the gradual transformation of a Jew into a Pole.”³⁷ At various stages of his life, he produces autobiographical writings that record the different phases of this metamorphosis.

The most passionate accounts of these identity dilemmas come from Aleksander Rozenfeld. His *Petition for the Right of Return* (*Podanie o prawo powrotu*) records a life spent on the road in constant wanderings between Israel and Poland, between two cultures and two societies. Rozenfeld exclaims: “Among Jews, I am not a Jew; among non-Jews, I am a Jew. It seems that I have hallucinated my own self.”³⁸ Rozenfeld calls himself a Jew, a Pole, a Polish Jew, a Pole of Jewish origin, and finally a Jew and a Pole at once. Each of these separate identifications – and all of them together – are equally honest. All of them – though fragmentary, momentary and dependent on the situation – ultimately contribute to the construction of the author’s identity.

More problematically, all of these vacillations and changes (sociology and psychology describe them as situational and alterable actualizations of diverse dimensions of identity) may provoke acute and painful conflicts with society. Being a Pole and a Jew may well appear as a coherent duality for the individual concerned, but it often turns out to be confusing for others who find it foreign to their own experience. They see only a split or an internal contradiction, while they demand clear and unambiguous declarations. The theme of double identification – which is so important in the late autobiographical prose of Kazimierz Brandys – leads one critic to make the following remark: “Coming from an entirely assimilated family, with no knowledge of the Jewish language, religion or culture... he presents a curious and not entirely authentic split.”³⁹ This complex identity remains a subjective truth of internal experience.

³⁴ Brandys, Kazimierz, *Miesiące 1985–1987*, 53.

³⁵ Zbigniew Jarosiński notices this theme in his article “Świadcstwa Kazimierza Brandysa,” published in *Sporne postaci polskiej literatury współczesnej: Kontynuacje*, eds. A. Brodzka and L. Burska (Warszawa: IBL, 1996).

³⁶ Sandauer, Artur, *Byłem...* (Warszawa: PIW, 1991), 114.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁸ Rozenfeld, Aleksander, *Podanie o prawo powrotu* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 1990), 103.

³⁹ Czyżak, Agnieszka, *Kazimierz Brandys* (Poznań: Rebis, 1998), 117–118.

Characteristically, Rozenfeld's life in Israel reveals a chain of never-ending clashes with everybody – family, officials, employers and politicians – over his identity as a Pole. The only non-confrontational and constructive role he is capable of inventing for himself is that of translator – “building a bridge between the Polish and Hebrew languages.”⁴⁰ Kazimierz Brandys – who lived in Poland, Germany, France, and the United States – must constantly stand up to Polish anti-Semitism, while simultaneously resisting any Jewish blanket condemnations of all Poles. He keeps changing fronts, representing first one and then the other of the conflicting sides. Regardless of who is taking aim at whom, each and every attack is equally dangerous, since each attack strikes at the connection between Polishness and Jewishness that forms the writer's personal and artistic *raison d'être*. By placing himself on the national borderline, Brandys must accept – whether he likes it or not – the role of a mediator mitigating the mutual reproaches of the two parties: “People on both sides are uttering ridiculous outrages.”⁴¹

In a work titled *The Social Identity of the Individual* (*Spoleczna tożsamość jednostki*), the sociologist Małgorzata Melchior describes double identification as “a way of solving the problem of the (cultural, ethnic, social) ‘borderline’ and the ‘conflict’ of identity.”⁴² At the same time, she emphasize the following point:

This solution is possible only when the individual believes that the two identifications are not mutually contradictory or exclusive, since they refer to different aspects of the individual's existence or concern meanings and values that are in a certain sense “incommensurable.”⁴³

The personal documentary literature under discussion here demonstrates that this can be the case in situations of a split between personal destiny and cultural roots. We recognize this division in the fact that complete assimilation into the Polish tradition by no means excludes a share in a Jewish destiny. Sandauer expresses this conviction in the central dichotomy through which he strives to comprehend himself: “Jewish life, Polish culture.”⁴⁴ In *Months*, Kazimierz Brandys records an author's meeting in Jerusalem, where he publicly emphasizes his “allegiance to Polish culture and the nature...of its links with Jewry.”⁴⁵ In *Remembered* – on the other hand – he records his reaction to a request that he attend a Paris synagogue, where a *minyan* was required to pray for the recently deceased Adolf Rudnicki: “I don't like religious rituals, I don't know Hebrew, and I do not belong to any faith.”⁴⁶ Nevertheless, he decides to visit the synagogue on rue Copernic and experiences a powerfully emotional response. He tells himself that this is not a religious experience,

⁴⁰ Rozenfeld, *Podanie o prawo powrotu*, 35.

⁴¹ Brandys, Kazimierz, *Miesiące 1982–1984* (Paris: Instytut Literacki), 144.

⁴² Melchior, Małgorzata, *Spoleczna tożsamość jednostki (w świetle wywiadów z Polakami pochodzenia żydowskiego urodzonymi w latach 1944–1955)* (Warszawa: Uniwersytet Warszawski, 1990), 169.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Sandauer, *Bylem*, 6.

⁴⁵ Brandys, Kazimierz, *Miesiące 1985–1987*, 166.

⁴⁶ Brandys, Kazimierz, *Zapamiętane*, 8.

but rather a feeling evoked by “the sight of one or two hundred praying people, the vast majority of whom were born after the time of the Nazi ovens. These were the children and grandchildren of those who had survived the gas chambers.”⁴⁷

This sight forces him to think about the murdered and the living, his own dead loved ones and himself as a survivor. Jewishness comes to him mainly as a sense of community in danger and suffering. His attachment to Polishness is not a betrayal. Yet rejecting solidarity and separating himself from the Jewish destiny clearly is a betrayal: “All my sins seem childish next to the fact that I was alive, playing at cards, having women, while they were dying.”⁴⁸

Ultimately, activating one’s Jewishness does not inevitably mean rejecting or compromising assimilation. On the contrary, despite the passage of time, the majority of these writers still believe in the values of the “humanitarian vulgate”⁴⁹ – the liberal ideas of the assimilators dating back to the Enlightenment. This attitude is often presented as a continuation of family traditions or as the legacy of one’s ancestors. Kazimierz Brandys describes his family tradition as “intelligentsia Judeo-Polishness,”⁵⁰ emphasizing its immediate influence on himself: “My father was a fervent assimilator, though he was not one of those who denied his Jewish origins.”⁵¹ Marian Brandys also repeatedly declares his loyalty to the assimilationist code, criticizing any deviation from this code as a loss of existential foundations.

We might well ask where art fits into all this. Despite all the vacillations, changes and shifting circumstances, creativity typically remains an undisputed and inviolable value. The notes of Kazimierz Brandys – which have been criticized (often harshly and uncompromisingly) for their worship of literature – reveal that he absolutized art, celebrated the role of the artist and identified writing with existence partly because these processes seemed to offer the surest path to self-definition:

It was and still is irrelevant to me whether somebody calls me a Pole of Jewish origin or a Jew of Polish origin. Language determines my identity. I think and write in Polish. I have not written a single literary sentence in any other language. I could not define my sense of myself in any other way. Being a Polish (or French or English) writer has a certain advantage over any other claims. It is objective and verifiable, while the authenticity of one’s origins is always uncertain.⁵²

Therefore, for authors who acknowledge the triple role of Jew-Pole-artist, the last of these identifications is the surest, and thus the most important. Through all the vacillations and changes, writing preserves its immutable and enduring meaning.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 22.

⁴⁸ Brandys, Kazimierz, *Miesiące 1985–1987*, 86.

⁴⁹ This is Jan Błoński’s term for the assimilationist worldview. See: Błoński, Jan, “Autoportret żydowski, czyli o żydowskiej szkole w literaturze polskiej,” *Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1994), 85.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 173.

⁵¹ Brandys, Kazimierz, *Miesiące 1985–1987*, 166.

⁵² Brandys, Kazimierz, *Przygody Robinsona*, 72–73.

Such certainty is possible thanks to an exceptional and powerful bond with language. This bond seems almost to take an organic or corporeal form. Indeed, Brandys claims in *Months* that any foreign language would disconnect him from “a cerebral cortex formed from layers of Polish associations and impulses.”⁵³ In an article entitled “The Literary Afterlife of Polish Jewry,” Zygmunt Bauman describes this sense of finding succor or shelter in the space of language as the distinguishing feature of contemporary Polish-Jewish writers abroad.⁵⁴ Their repeated homage to the Polish language is no mere performance for the benefit of others, but rather a way of repeating to themselves a confession of faith in the grounding power of the word. These contemporary prose writers add their voices to the voices of earlier poets such as Julian Tuwim, Marian Hemar and Aleksander Wat. Perhaps Rozenfeld formulates this conviction most clearly. As he wanders between Poland and Israel, he regards himself as somebody who essentially belongs to a single place – as “a person living in language, in a specific place, in the word.”⁵⁵ The Hebrew language – which he has learnt with difficulty and above all with reluctance – will always be a secondary tongue for him. His various euphoric projects – “I shall translate the psalms and Bialik!” – are accompanied by an equally euphoric remark: “I shall write in Polish!”⁵⁶ After all, this is precisely what translating from the Hebrew means for him. Existing in the Polish language presents itself as his ultimate and only artistic destiny. It is worth carefully reading the following scene from his memoirs: “I make my way to Krakow. At five a.m. I stand by the Cloth Hall on the main square with tears in my eyes. ‘I’m finally here,’ I tell the statue of Mickiewicz. ‘You see, I’ve returned.’”⁵⁷ This return to the city of Krakow – which turns out to be the center of Polishness, partly because the statue of the national bard stands at its core – essentially represents the author’s return to his own role as a poet.

“He is equally a Jew, a Pole and an artist,” says Brandys of Adolf Rudnicki, before adding the following observations:

The central conflict is concentrated in these three forms, in this triple engagement in the drama of history. He is defined three times and he knows this in three ways. This triple consciousness pulses in every passage of his prose, setting the direction or path towards his main theme.⁵⁸

It was not only for Brandys (though Sandauer clearly disagreed) that Rudnicki personified the fulfillment of this triple fate, thus appearing to hold the secret to a remarkable art that would be simultaneously Polish and Jewish. Recalling his own literary youth as an avant-garde internationalist, Aleksander Wat jealously admits that among all the interwar writers only Rudnicki did not cut his ties with the Jewish people or with Jewish culture:

⁵³ Brandys, Kazimierz, *Miesiące 1982-1984*, 24.

⁵⁴ Bauman, Zygmunt, “The Literary Afterlife of Polish Jewry,” *Polin* 7 (1992).

⁵⁵ Rozenfeld, *Podanie o prawo powrotu*, 5.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁵⁸ Brandys, Kazimierz, *Zapamiętane*, 18-19.

He alone was not a renegade – neither personally nor as the second or third generation to rebel. He escaped the ghetto and his father's house, amused himself with noblemen, but always in the role of a prodigal son. He knew that his father and the fattened calf and a degraded elder brother – like Esau next to Jacob – were waiting at home.⁵⁹

So what was the basis of Rudnicki's secret? He is admired for his faithfulness as a writer to Jewish experience, for his search for the artistic truth about the Jewish world, for the authenticity of his own place within it, and – above all – for his witness to the Holocaust. Jan Kott would later write in his reminiscences on the *Kuźnica* weekly magazine that Rudnicki “had a different kind of sensitivity and a different conscience from the rest of us, perhaps because he was still deeply affected by the extermination of his nation.”⁶⁰

Other authors were only beginning to learn about their Jewishness (the Brandys brothers mention various readings in Jewish studies in their diaries), since they had invested their earlier interests in other areas of literature. For these writers, personal documentary literature seemed to be the only way to approach Rudnicki's model of writing, since this genre preserved the form of private Jewish experience. Therefore, it is no surprise that an attachment to Jewish themes appears as an important element in the image of the author created in Kazimierz Brandy's *Months*. He records these themes as the opinions of an outsider: “Why do you keep coming back to these problems? Jews, anti-Semitism – do you really have to write about this?”⁶¹ The diaries of Marian Brandys – on the other hand – record his friends' attempts to persuade him to make “the fate of a Pole of Jewish origin, whom they would deny any right to Polishness” the main theme of his notes. According to his friends: “Nobody is as well qualified for this task as you. Nobody could do it better than you.”⁶²

In 1981, when Jan Błoński published the first, censored version of his now classic article on the “Jewish school” in contemporary Polish prose (entitled “Jewish Self-Portrait: On the Jewish School in Polish Literature” [“Autoportret żydowski, czyli o żydowskiej szkole w literaturze polskiej”]), the wave of personal documentary literature was just beginning to rise. One of the factors in the formation of this movement was a growing interest in Jewish matters characteristic of the political climate in the 1980s. This shift recovered certain subjects that had been purged from social memory for various political and non-political reasons. The new interest also sprang partly from the situation on the artistic market – specifically, the increasing status of this kind of writing among readers, thanks to which it moved from its earlier marginal position towards the center of the literary scene.⁶³ Indeed, it is striking that so many of these memoirs came out precisely in the 1990s – including Hen's *Nowolipie Street* and Julian Strykowski's *The Same, But Different (To samo, ale inaczej)*, which both revealed how deeply immersed the earlier

⁵⁹ Wat, *Dziennik bez samogłosek*, 244.

⁶⁰ Kott, Jan, *Przyczynek do biografii. Zawal* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1994), 217.

⁶¹ Brandys, Kazimierz, *Miesiące 1982–1984*, 145.

⁶² Brandys, Marian, *Dziennik 1978* (Warszawa: Iskry, 1997), 34.

⁶³ Jarosiński, Zbigniew, “Proza dokumentu osobistego,” *Sporne sprawy polskiej literatury*, eds. A. Brodska and K. Burska (Warszawa: IBL, 1998).

novels by these authors had been in the autobiographical element (Hen's *Herod's Theater* [*Teatr Heroda*] and Strykowski's *The Great Fear* [*Wielki strach*]).⁶⁴ Certain other writers – such as Vogler and Sandauer – published several versions of their autobiographies, supplementing and commenting on their earlier autobiographies.

Two decades later, we can see quite clearly that personal records have complemented and enriched the prose of the Jewish school in a vital way. Above all, they have complemented and enriched the theme of identity, which absorbed Jewish prose artists from the very earliest novels by Wilhelm Feldman, Michał Mutermilch, and Aniela Kallas. These writers at the beginning of the twentieth century were already setting their creative works in literary or journalistic milieus. In fact, one might compile an exemplary biography of a “borderline writer” from diverse episodes scattered throughout various works over the course of the century. In his novel *A Stolen Biography* (*Czas zatrzymany do wyjaśnienia*, 1987), Szymon Szechter symbolically depicts his double identity as the bond linking a small boy with an adult man, a Jew with a Pole: “little Józef Hirszfeld, who grew up into Józef Potoczek,” and “Józef Potoczek, who grew out of little Józef Hirszfeld.”⁶⁵

In its focus on expressing the “I,” personal documentary literature today seems to occupy a place that once belonged to psychological prose.⁶⁶ By examining the dilemmas of identity from the inside, this genre depicts the subjective aspect of identity, recording its dynamic nature and mutable forms, which depend on varying states of consciousness and on time. Here we find authors speaking about themselves (and about others) as Poles, Jews or Polish writers, explaining when and why they feel like Jews, Poles or Polish Jews, while also revealing why they always feel like Polish writers. Thanks to these authors, personal documentary literature has become a space for grounding and constructing a complex Polish-Jewish identity – which ultimately becomes possible through art.

Translation: Stanley Bill

⁶⁴ Ibid., 341.

⁶⁵ Szechter, Szymon, *Czas zatrzymany do wyjaśnienia* (London: Kontra, 1981), 169.

⁶⁶ Zbigniew Jarosiński writes about this possibility in “Proza dokumentu osobistego” (134).

Marta (MŁODKOWSKA) JANCZEWSKA

Ghetto Trajectories: Writing about Personal Experiences in the Warsaw Ghetto Journals (Abraham Lewin, Rachela Auerbach, Janusz Korczak)

Capturing experiences recorded in journals written in the Warsaw ghetto presents many difficulties. Sudden incomprehensible extirpation, total unpredictability of the future, constant threat of death, consequently the loss of control over one's life situation, and the collapse of the biographic scheme of actions become part of the experience of all inhabitants of the closed district. They all share with each other this common experience but at the same time each of them goes on with his or her own unique life story. Both specificity of an individual fate and regularities of the ghetto experience could be interpreted by the notion of "trajectory." The concept of the "dying trajectory" elaborated by A. L. Strauss served to describe medical work, its organization and its influence on dying people and their families (*Time for Dying*, 1968). The study of patients' suffering and chaos emerging in the course of performing medical work made it possible to capture the phenomenon of trajectory as, in general terms, established by G. Riemann and F. Schütze. The general concept of trajectory is a tool of reconstructing and understanding phenomena which "are structured by the chain of interconnected events which are unavoidable without bearing high costs, repetitive breakdowns, expectations and the increasing feeling of control loss over one's life situation. It feels as if being 'pushed' and only able to react to 'external forces' which are hard to understand."¹

The trajectory understood this way is an instrument used to analyze suffering and disorderly social processes. For obvious reasons, the experience of being thrown into the ghetto reality gains the trajectory potential. This "collective trajectory" consists of

¹ G. Riemann, F. Schütze, Trajectory as a Basic Theoretical Concept for Analysing Suffering and Disorderly Social Processes.

individual “biographic trajectories.” Suffering always takes place within an individual biography – this is why the latter can be the only measure of the trajectory. G. Riemann and F. Schutze point to the biographic influence of the trajectory of suffering which lies in transformations of the individual’s identity. All of the changes within the individual “I” are “internal events” (as the authors call them), which are not a subject of external observation. This is why the only, although indirect, possibility to look into those changes is reading autobiographic forms – in this particular case, journals and diaries written in the Warsaw ghetto. These literary forms as space for direct manifestation of subjectivity become a place where the trajectories’ dynamics can be captured.

Three examples of journals conducted in the Warsaw ghetto illustrate the trajectory experience, show the construction of a new definition of a life situation and the attempt to gain control over the trajectories’ dynamics.

Accelerating Trajectory: Abraham Lewin

Abraham Lewin, a well-known pedagogue and historian, author of the book *The Cantonists*, cooperated with the ghetto underground Ringelblum Archive. Lewin is an author of a journal found – similarly to Rachela Auerbach’s notes – among the materials hidden in the archive.² The discovered part spans a period between June 1942 and January 1943. The last note was made on 16 January 1943, most probably a few days before the author’s death during the January deportation (between 18 and 20 January 1943). Although the period covered by the journal is relatively short, the notes overlap with a few main stages of the gene life: “normality” before July 1942, the July action, life in factories, the January action. The author notes his observations down with great frequency, but not every day.

The most characteristic feature of Lewin’s journal is its unusual factographic abundance. The author fills every note (all of them annotated with dates) with a lot of information related with events happening in the ghetto and outside of it. Some of them are eye-witnessed by the author himself, but the majority of them are rumours and gossips heard and noted down by Lewin. Each event is located in space and time with scrutiny. The author particularly emphasizes facts seen or heard “from the reliable source”:

Last Wednesday, i.e. on May 6, almost all Jews from Dęblin and Ryki were taken away. Only around 50 strong, healthy and robust Jews (together with their families) – as I was informed – were left in Dęblin because they were suitable for hard labour. The rest were taken away in an unknown direction. (1956 no 19-20, 174)

Engineer Sz., a serious man, told me about the last week murder Germans committed on a young girl in the house in Pawia IIa Street. (1956 no 19-20, 188)

² The entire ghetto journal of Abraham Lewin (written in Jewish and Hebrew) was published in English: A. Lewin, *A Cup of Tears. A Diary of the Warsaw Ghetto*, ed. A. Polonsky, transl. C. Hutton, Fontana/Collins 1990. The Polish version (with some omissions) was published in “Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego” (transl. A. Rutkowski), no 19-20/1956, no 21-24/1957, no 25/1958.

Last week, I was told that Jews are being evicted from Cracow. I did not believe the sad news and I did not note it down. (1956 no 19-20, 188)

The facts written down by Lewin are very homogeneous. It is a litany of acts of violence and outrage, massacres, and murders done to Jewish communities everywhere in Poland and in the Warsaw Ghetto. With this regard, Abraham Lewin's journal becomes a chronicle of the Holocaust. The great majority of his observations from before the extermination action resemble a catalogue of murders and assaults. If we wanted to create an index of all places mentioned by the author, it would include dozens of Polish towns of different sizes:

1. In Zduńska Wola, during last Purym, ten Jews were caught...
2. The same happened in Łęczycza...(Supposedly, the same thing had place in Bieżeń).
3. In Izbica (Lubelskie region) all local Jews (around 500) were sent away.

(1956 no 19-20, 170)

The flow of news from Poland is often interrupted by a murder committed right around the corner, in the neighbourhood: on Dzielna, Więzienna, Orla, Krochmalna, Waliców, Chłodna. Murders help the author measure time but danger slowly approaches not only in time (repeated phrases: lately, in those days, currently, tonight, today) but also in space.

If Abraham Lewin's journal only consisted of notes which would panoramically picture the Holocaust, it could be perceived as a journal-chronicle. At the same time, we feel that the identity of the author unceasingly permeates even through the most objectivized note. Here is a chronicler who faithfully and precisely describes events and realities simultaneously exposing his own anxiety. It is fear that becomes the basic component building up the diarist's identity, transforming the chronicle into the dramatic personal journal.³ Fear taints every page of the text – at times the author straightforwardly admits it, other times the reader is under the impression that the whole Lewin's account is lined with fear:

The abyss is getting closer to each of us, the muzzle of the apocalyptic beast whose forehead is marked with the words: death, destruction, extermination, painful agony and eternal uncertainty; endless fear is the most terrible feeling among all our experiences and suffering – so rough and tragic. If we survive till the end of this dreadful war, when – as free people and citizens – we will retrospectively ponder upon the past war years, we will ascertain with no doubt that what was most terrible, saddest and most destructive to our nervous system and health was to constantly live in the atmosphere of anxiety and fear of the naked life, incessant shifting between life and death, the state in which any second our heart was threatened to break out of anxiety and fear. (1956 no 19-20, 176)

In his analysis of fear, Antoni Kępiński demonstrates the unconditional relation between the feeling of fear and the future.⁴ We are always afraid of what will happen, what waits for us

³ The unusual character of Lewin's personal testimony in which the narrative is filled "from the inside" with "fear and trembling" was indicated by Jacek Leociak, cf. id., *Text vs Holocaust (on accounts from the Warsaw Ghetto)*, Wrocław 1997, 141-143.

⁴ A. Kępiński, *Fear*, Cracow 1995, 120.

in the future. Fear remains a signal we are unable to verify, and it is only based on a certain sense of probability. The feeling of our life being threatened is a signal of death lurking in a temporal and spatial distance. The feeling of being threatened permeates through the entire Lewin's journal. The more information the author gathers, and the denser the register of German crimes, precisely located in time and space, the more penetrating sense of the proximity an individual death. The author's feeling of constant danger determines a specific type of narrative, it affects the storytelling. Enumerating names of towns or streets in Warsaw, underlining the up-to-date nature of events (typical of this literary genre) and repetitive "I'm afraid" makes the story dynamic. This leaning towards the future and the trepidly intense expectation of what must come makes us see the structure of Abraham Lewin's text as a metaphor of a noose tightening around one's neck. Indeed, the author's sense of being imprisoned in space and time results in many stifling metaphors:

When I hear this kind of news, I choke and I feel a terrible burden pressuring my heart. Black fear strangles and crushes me...The pressure on our soul and mind became so strong and overwhelming that it's impossible to stand it. (1956 no 19-20, 176)

The noose around Warsaw increasingly tightens. (1956 no 19-20, 202)

Nothing new has happened but there is something extraordinary in this tranquillity, something suffocating. We fear our fate that the nearest future, i.e. after October 20 will bring us. (1957 no 23, 71)

When I listen to stories from Treblinka, something starts to choke and stifle my heart. Fear of "what" will happen is perhaps stronger than one's suffering in the moment of their death.

(1958 no 25, 127)

Incessant feeling of suffocation, tightening of the noose, is strengthened by the sense of more and more claustrophobic space:

Increasingly tight. Terribly, dreadfully. (1957 no 21, 136)

Well known streets – Nowolipie (from both sides of Karmelicka), Mylna and others – are completely enclosed by fences and walls, it's impossible to get in there. It feels as if these were cages. (1957 no 22, 85)

[Streets] have been enclosed by fences...Insatiable enemies' clutches are reaching for us again.

(1957 no 22, 88)

But for us, in our tight and dark little world, days are black, sad and seem very long.

(1957 no 23, 74)

People locked in prison, like animals in a cage, cannot defend themselves. A sense of being restrained is amplified by fear which results from the increased feeling of helplessness.⁵ When the noose tightens around one's neck, when crimes take place in close proximity, space shrinks and time thickens, the ontological anxiety is getting greater and more intense.⁶ The continuous threat is hard to handle, if one is not able to take a deep breath

⁵ Ibid., 63.

⁶ Cf. B. Engelking, *Czas przestał dla mnie istnieć... "Analiza doświadczenia czasu w sytuacji ostatecznej"*, Warsaw 1996, 118.

(following the noose metaphor). Every time the author finds an asylum, it is fragile and momentary. Short-time haven can be found in time, a short moment of “now”:

It's quiet at the moment (emphasis mine), they don't murder and send to death in Treblinka.
(1957 no 23, 75)

One could look for shelter in the thought of revenge to be performed by next generations, so in the undefined future:

Let this blood scream and demand revenge for the crimes which have never taken place before in our history and in the history of mankind. (1957 no 24, 45)

But death, although distant in time, becomes more and more certain. Searching for hope resembles leaning on quicksand:

There are moments when I am slightly more confident of my fate, I sometimes become indifferent, but suddenly I'm overwhelmed by such fear of death that I'm close to going insane. It all depends on the news from the streets. (1957 no 21, 130)

If time before the July action is a premonition of danger and the time after the action is anticipation of death, the extermination action becomes the turning point. It constitutes a breakthrough not only in the author's biography but also in the narrative of the journal. Detailed and precise descriptions are replaced with a fragmented and interrupted text which seems to imitate the chaos of events:

Misfortune: Gucia was evicted from her flat. Five people were killed at night on Dzielna. Terrifying scenes take place in the streets. Policemen take away nicer furniture from flats people had been expelled from. Umschlagplatz: a Jew is crying. They are beating him. Why are you crying? My mother, my wife! Wife – yes, mother – no. A smuggler who jumped out of the window on the fourth floor. I saw him, he was seriously injured. Ten thousand! The Wajcblum family. Property plunder. (1957 no 21, 127)

Against the chaos of events emerges the biggest tragedy in Lewin's life – on 12 August, during the blockage of the factory on Gęsia 30, his wife Luba is taken away. Next pages of the journal are stigmatized with his personal tragedy:

There are no words to express my tragedy. I should have gone after her – to die. But I'm not strong enough to do it...I will never find consolation, as long as I live. If she had died naturally, I would have not been so unhappy and crushed. But to fall into clutches of those barbarians?! Have they murdered her already? (1957 no 21, 137)

The limit of the expressible reached by the author is impossible to be crossed, there is no more to say. What is more important, not only despair cannot be spoken about but it is also the reason why one cannot speak about oneself. The sense of our own “I” is lost – it becomes an unknown territory. “There are no words to express my tragedy” means so much as “there are no words to express myself.” The author's actions lose their intentionality, he can't do what he wants: he's not strong enough to go with his wife to death.

Holocaust in Literary and Cultural Studies

“Will there be new Bialik who will create a new threnody and will write a new work *In the City of Slaughter?* (no 25/1958, 127), asks Lewin but he does not really wait for “the new Bialik” but attempts to testify with his own life. The chronicler of the Holocaust places his own fear, despair and his most dramatic experiences in the centre of the text.⁷ The author himself, experiencing fear and despair, becomes a peculiar *exemplum*, an illustration of the history of his nation. Lewin often writes about fear in the first person plural because the border between the collective fate and the story of an individual is very liquid in his journal.

A lawyer from Lviv in two hours told us today...about the gehenna in Lviv and the entire Eastern Galicia... These two hours were one of the most tragic hours of my life.

(1956 no 19-20, 197)

– says Lewin, linking his own fate with the fate of the community.

The account on the external world is particularly developed in Lewin’s journal, while the collective trajectory and the individual fate of the author interlock into an inextricable knot. Chaos and helplessness of the community give rise to the individual identity constructed out of the remains of the collective fate. Lewin’s case, which illustrates in a special manner the social process of building the trajectory, also shows the individual biography shaped by the personal tragedy. The tragedy, i.e. the loss of his wife during the July action, becomes the turning point of the story. At the same time, due to the coherence between the collective trajectory and the individual biography – so strongly felt by Lewin – in consent with historical events subsequent, the author’s trajectory undergoes “acceleration.”

The tension between the story of the nation and one’s own fear and despair, completely individual and unable to communicate, permeates through Abraham Lewin’s journal, building its unique structure and giving testimony to the individual trajectory process.

Domesticated Trajectory: Rachela Auerbach

Among numerous personal accounts written in the Warsaw Ghetto, Rachela Auerbach’s journal stands out as the one to be particularly homogeneous in terms of its subjects.⁸ Death appears to be the most dominant theme: death of close people who pass away in front of the author’s eyes, and death of strangers – nameless corpses lying in the streets of the Ghetto. For ten months (between August 1941 and June 1942) she watches and keeps account of the city’s slow death. Auerbach surveys the ghetto from a peculiar point: a kitchen for writers on Leszno Street where the author was a manager.

⁷ The tension between a desire for the new language and attempts to rise to one’s own experience in Lewin’s journal was pointed out by L. Langer in his article *Social Suffering and Holocaust Atrocity*, (in:) *Social Suffering*, cont. A. Kleinman, V. Das, M. Lock, Berkeley 1997, 50-52.

⁸ The journal (not published yet) is kept in the archive of the Jewish History Institute in Warsaw, sign. Ring 1,641 and 654.

Dishes served in this kitchen (similarly to dozens of other places of this kind) were most often the only source of food for its clients. Beside the ones who were entitled to dinner coupons and who could pay for meals regularly, the kitchen attracted large groups of beggars counting on a spoonful of soul portraits of those “domestic” clients, as Rachela Auerback calls the unwanted consumers, are a significant part of the journal.

Rachela Auerback, born around 1903, was a writer before the war. Her origins were in Lviv and she had connections with the Polish-Jewish literary circles (promoting Jewish art and culture in Polish). She divided her time between the local kitchen and conspiracy practices in the Warsaw Ghetto Archive founded by a historian Emanuel Ringelblum. She remained in the Ghetto for almost the whole period of the existence of the closed district. Most probably, she went out to the Aryan side right after the January action in order to continue her conspiracy activities outside of the Ghetto (in the “headquarters” of the help centre for Jews hiding in Miodowa Street). She lived through the war and emigrated to Israel in 1950 where she died in 1976.⁹

The journal written by Rachela Auerbach is an exceptional document in terms of its literary qualities (as it was carried on by a writer). But not only. It is also a crucial study of the intensity of death experienced in the closed district – a document of immersion in the process of dying.

The author of the journal was alone in the Ghetto – her closest family (brother and his children) lived outside of Warsaw. As more rumors of mass deportations of Jewish communities reached the capital, she felt increasingly concerned about her kin. Loneliness and fear are very distinct in her account. Experiencing death alone also becomes a condition of experiencing her own “I” in a situation of danger. But due to that loneliness it is possible to observe the Ghetto with scrutiny. What characterizes Auerbach’s style of writing is the concentration on every detail of the Ghetto world and the ability to see and extract “metaphorical précis” out of this reality. Looking at the ghetto becomes a starting point to experiencing oneself. “The world of writing about oneself openly” and “the world of eye-witnessing” are visibly present in the journal and determine each other.

The function of the kitchen’s manager was to feed people. Triviality of such a statement conceals the drama behind the seemingly ordinary activity of sharing food. Distribution of food in the Warsaw Ghetto was neither banal nor innocent. Direct access to food articles – a privilege of very few – became the source of moral dilemmas. One

⁹ Basic information about biography of R. Auerbach was taken from the following publications: E. Prokop-Janiec, *Międzywojenna literatura polsko-żydowska jako zjawisko kulturowe i artystyczne*, Cracow, 1992; E. Ringelblum *Kronika getta warszawskiego*, transl. A. Rutkowski, Warsaw, 1983; Archiwum Ringelbluma. *Getto warszawskie lipiec 1942 – styczeń 1943*, elaborated by R. Sakowska, Warsaw, 1980; R. Sakowska, *Ludzie z dzielnicy zamkniętej. Z dziejów Żydów w Warszawie w latach okupacji hitlerowskiej październik 1939 – marzec 1943*, Warsaw, 1993; *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej. Polacy z pomocą Żydom 1939-1945*, elaborated by W. Bartoszewski i Z. Lewinówna, Warsaw, 1966; R. Low, *Ostatki polskie. Rzecz o izraelskiej prasie w języku polskim*, „Zeszyty Literackie” 1994 nr 4 (part II: 1995 no 1); letter by Mr Natan Gross (in my possession).

Holocaust in Literary and Cultural Studies

of the usual practices was to give leftovers to beggars who “hanged about like hungry dogs around the carnage...as if being close to the ‘satiety’ area already brought them relief” (P 44). Rachela Auerbach supported chosen beggars more than others. Making “a choice,” a certain “selection” was followed by other dilemmas:

In order to do something for people in these circumstances, it was necessary to be occupied with this activity exclusively, and I often got offended when somebody judged me for having singled out this or that person and took care of them more than others. I justified it saying that fair distribution of insufficient benefits and incomplete help does not have any effect and is a waste – even though this is how I understood these things, obviously I was able to provide productive assistance to one person, neglecting my general duties, futile but unavoidable.

(P 53-54)

At the beginning, there is an illusion that we have a weapon to fight against everyday death. Why, death can be the result of certain deficiencies that could have been avoided:

The information (death of a friend) was like a heavy blow. For the first time since the bombing I cried so much. Sorrow of losing a person and my personal depression caused by ill-done work. I should probably have gone with him to Tozu and made sure he would get the injections, etc. (P 24)

Month after month, day by day, it turns out that selection of those who can receive soup is a superficial, symbolic choice, only confirming one's own helplessness. A queue to get a plate of soup becomes a queue to a mass grave, a death queue. A plate of soup cannot defend us from the inescapable end:

What else could I do but give him soul gave him through S. 50 zlotys which had not been used for Braxmeier's funeral but to rescue somebody who is already swollen from death, you need thousands. (P 40-41)

I was slowly growing a conviction that all the activities performed by our charity institutions should be called death in instalments. We should finally realize that we cannot rescue anyone from death, we don't have such means. We can only postpone death, prolong it but not prevent it. In my practice, I did not succeed with anyone, not one person! (P 50)

The lack of means is juxtaposed to the extending procession of beggars. The queue of people in need never ends – a person who dies is immediately replaced by a few starving people:

[W]hen H. died the next day after a demonstration which he, as a member of the union, had organized himself by lying on the pavement in front of the gates, his daughter came to us with his dying wish to give her “his” portions of soup now. Then the Geboren family after the father's death, Łabicki's wife, etc. A plate of soup to wipe tears. (P 47)

The folk kitchen, so also Rachela Auerbach's activities not only do not help but – according to the author – inscribe into a certain logic of events in the Ghetto and is only one of the elements leading to the expected death of all inhabitants of the Ghetto:

We are powerless, we work in the vacuum. The only effect of our work is that the whole ghetto will not be annihilated right away, that death is regulated and that we will gain just enough time to bury all the dead. It is impossible to change anyone's destiny. (P 51-52)

The first person plural consequently used by the author in her narrative seems to be not only a conventional form and a method to maintain the distance towards the feeling of co-responsibility. On the contrary, "we" become here a mask for the "I" which is clearly revealed in the next confession:

Terribly malicious and tactless, highly indiscreet was one acquaintance's gruesome joke that there is certain fatality in my care and all people I give special attention to have to die...I was really, really hurt. (P 50-51)

Numerous initiatives taken up by Rachela Auerbach paradoxically become the source of intensifying the chaos. The trajectory rises from intentional actions, while the irony of the situation is that each activity aiming at controlling the trajectory, i.e. taking initiative ends with a failure which magnifies the frustration. Subsequent failures, gradually destroying the feeling of having the reality under control, become a reason why the trajectory potential is piled up and multiplied. Institutional expectation patterns which put life in order and the biographic action scheme which contains, on the one hand, an element of intentionality, on the other hand, real possibilities to act, openly contradict with each other, adding to the impression of total disorientation.

Death of a close friend, Braxmeier,¹⁰ becomes a breakthrough, tangible "crossing the border" and entering the phase of passive reactions. It completely destroys orientation in the world because it is totally – even considering the conditions in the Ghetto – irrational. The man who dies was exceptionally "destined to live" (with regards to his physical features and special care offered by Rachela Auerbach). What is more, the person who dies was not only her friend, but a symbol of "being able to survive":

I obtained money and packages trying to give Braxmeier belated, as it turned out, he said that it would be a real shame and failure to our kitchen, to all our social help work; I said that it would be my personal shame and failure if we didn't rescue from starvation the only man we cared about. The man who was a true evidence, the man who survived "that" and another "that" as one of a dozen out of one hundred went through it alive and survived something all the rest died from – this particular man could not bear our social help system...I said it at a wrong time that the old Mrs Feld would outlive him. About 25 years younger than her, athletic, iron man, once a sports champion. (P 16)

The increasing feeling of helplessness towards the overwhelming death, terror and sorrow permeates through the entire text of the journal. "And who else, who else (died)?" becomes a narrative link illustrating the process of absorption and the inability to handle the excess of death. In the case of each of the kitchen clients there is no accidental death, on the contrary, there are no possibilities to play the game of life and avoid death. Eve-

¹⁰ In this case, the "passive reaction phase" is not literal resignation from acting. Rachela Auerbach still fulfils her duties as a kitchen's manager. It is rather about automated reactions deprived of hope for actions to actually be effective.

ryone is doomed to the common grave, while treacherous time brings us closer to that moment, which is expressed by the metaphor of flowing:

Down all roads and paths leading to Gęsia (where the cemetery was – M.M.) briskly swim black carts and prams. One by one. As if streams, tributaries of a great river which absorbs everything. (P 39)

Living in the waiting-room to death sharpens the senses. Time of the journal is the condensed present, intensified “now.” Rachela Auerbach’s diary focuses on the everyday life, the everyday reality of the Ghetto. The category of everyday plays a special role. But everyday life in the Ghetto does not blot out existential anxiety, it rather sharpens it, constantly reminding us of the tangible presence of death. Corpses lying on the streets become the everyday view and an average, ordinary man will have to face this reality:

Where does an ordinary man, an average Jew of our times find strength for such death, what can be comforting to him when he’s been awaiting his execution for weeks? (D 3)

Analyzing the experience of concentration camps’ prisoners, A. Kępiński indicated that after crossing a certain border of tolerance of the unusual, prisoners defended themselves from the surrounding reality treating what was happening as a nightmare.¹¹ “Just like a sleeping person escapes from a nightmare thinking this is just a dream, the prisoners’ defence from the camp nightmare was the feeling of de-realization, the unreality of what surrounds them,”¹² claims A. Kępiński and this exactly the case of Rachela Auerbach. How to avoid the reality which is impossible to be handled? One cannot run away from the Ghetto, therefore the author finds her own way to tackle the reality. Her strategy is to dream the nightmare till the end. The journal is a place where this might be done.

Given notes often resemble frozen film frames, each experience and image undergoes enormous intensification, augmentation. The reality of the closed district prepares “strangely clear symbolic short-cuts” (D 1), which are animated by Rachela Auerbach – like an experienced film director – on the pages of her journal.

The world of the Ghetto reveals to her its grotesque nature: it gets distorted in a gigantic false mirror and is reduced to absurd. The grotesque becomes the only possible method to domesticate the chaos of the Ghetto and also to register it.¹³ It is not only the cultural category but also the existential one. It expresses uniqueness of personal experience but remains the language of culture. The most characteristic example is a description of “the dead’s fair” in the morgue:

And so they were lying there in front of us (illegible) inert dead people. There are very few “decent” places in the “factory”...merely 15 or 20...They are lying and pretending they don’t see, they are trying not to look at those who are lying by the walls, thrown on each other, one along, another crosswise, someone face up, another face down, one more in an impossible,

¹¹ A. Kępiński, *Nightmare*, (in:) *The Rhythm of Life*, Cracow 1994.

¹² *Ibid.*, 15.

¹³ On the grotesque as a means of describing the reality of the Ghetto in R. Auerbach’s journal, cf: J. Leociak, *Text...*

arch-acrobatic position – on a pile. In piles. There is also segregation. Men and women separately. Children also separated. Here or there a dead child's body rolls down. One of them was delightfully spread out, 2- or 3-year-old kid with his arms bent in elbows, and with fists as if they were to wipe the eyes in a sleepy stretch...Here and there the rustle of paper can be heard. One of the corpses is looking for a more comfortable position, maybe trying to straighten the bones in private. (P 33-34)

Outside, in front of the factory, in a flume, I saw a few half rotten dead bodies...The stink was horrifying but curiosity made me look at it." (P 36-37)

The multiplied terror of the Ghetto, its absurd unreality is so protective that it allows us to break a taboo: the author is looking at the decomposing bodies. Looking in the face of a corpse, breaking the taboo and watching death deprived of its dignity not only evokes fascination. The embodied and literalized death – given the status of personified existence – makes the horrified author recognize her own end. She smells the putrid odour of her own skin:

It seems like a sweet, putrid smell. Characteristic, different than the smell of animal carcass, the smell of human carcass. Don't we know this smell well enough, don't we sometimes smell it on our sweaty skin, wouldn't we recognize it immediately without any guidelines, even if we felt it for the first time? (P 32)

Rachela Auerbach, immersed in the world of the closed district, totally absorbed within it, presents to us the tragic "world upside down," the world where everyday life loses its primary attribute: routine, where the boundaries between life and death are blurred ("buried alive," writes Rachela Auerbach). Life becomes a seeming activity because the only possible strategy of life is to wait passively for death. All other activities are performed in the vacuum, the author completely loses control over her life. The feeling of total danger, automation, uncommonness, and helplessness – therefore all attributes of a nightmare (or a trajectory) – prevails over an individual. The only possible reaction turns out to be an attempt to domesticate the trajectory by means of getting closer to it, immersing in it consciously.

Embodiment of death: a corpse can be considered as an emblem of the whole Ghetto experience of Rachela Auerbach. It becomes not a metaphor of the subject's personal death but a strong and real analogy. What shall one do looking straight in the eyes of one's own death? The only answer the author finds is: not to lose consciousness in the middle of the inferno but remember and write down. Language is everything that we can set against death (especially when it is a language of the grotesque, then it is possible to ridicule the reality). Trust for the language becomes a straw a drowning man clutches at.

Disregarded Trajectory: Janusz Korczak

The most dramatic last three years of Janusz Korczak's life overlap with the war. In November 1940, Korczak moves with his pupils to the Ghetto area. Leaving the orphanage by Korczak and the children in order to move to the closed district starts the most tragic period in their life. They not only left a safe home but were also thrown into the

strange inferno of the Ghetto, into hunger, sickness, and death. During the moving process, Korczak was arrested and spent one month in prison, which exhausted him physically and emotionally. After getting released, he had to take the responsibility of providing food supply to all of his orphans. He was responsible for two hundred children who – till the very end – he tried to save from the nightmare of the Ghetto (originally, one hundred children lived in the orphanage but during the war this number radically increased). It was for them that he went around gene institutions and private people begging for food. In February 1942, he took up another undertaking: he tried to rescue children from the Main House of Shelter which had truly become a place for the dying.¹⁴ The only time that was free from intense and exhaustive work were moments in the evening or at night when the entire house was asleep, Korczak devoted those moments to write a diary which – together with documents tracked down in 1988 – constitutes the primary source of knowledge about the Ghetto life of Korczak (and his pupils).¹⁵

The figure of Korczak, his life and particularly his death, became the source of a legend. The subject of the debate is not Janusz Korczak – the famous social worker, writer, pedagogue whose ideas changed the perception of the process of bringing up a child. All over the world, there are hundreds of publications devoted to this legendary personage. Instead, the interest focuses on the old, tired man with a duty to provide for two hundred children thrown with him into the ghetto reality. In other words, I would like to concentrate on subjective judgements and experiences of one of the participants of the Ghetto drama in a situation of continuous threat. Therefore, I am interested in Korczak as an author of *Diary*, letters, and articles in the weekly paper published in the House of Orphans during their stay in the Ghetto. These texts are also treated as personal documents both being the source of knowledge about Korczak's life in the Ghetto and offering insight directly into his experiences and emotions related with the Ghetto.

When Korczak began to write his diary, he was 63 or 64 years old. He started making notes in January 1940; after a break, he went back to writing his observations down as late as in May 1942. He regularly conducted the journal by August of the same year. The last note dates back to 4 August 1942 – it was made a few days before his death in one of Treblinka's gas chamber (the exact date of Korczak and his orphans' transport to the concentration camp is not known, it most probably happened on 6 August 1942, the date of Korczak's death remains unknown either – 7 or 8 August). In the course of time, the regularly noted down memories began to be focused more on current events and gradually turned into a journal.

Korczak's *Diary* was an effect of combining and confronting elements of autobiography, diary, and journal. Autobiographical bits scattered in the text (this is how Korczak himself talks about his notes) in fact compose the entire life of the author. Memories

¹⁴ Detailed biographic information concerning the life of Janusz Korczak in the Ghetto, cf. A. Lewin, *When the end was coming... The last years of Janusz Korczak's life*, Warsaw 1996 and id. *Korczak known and unknown*, Warsaw 1999.

¹⁵ I used the following editions: Janusz Korczak *The Diary*, (in:) id. *Selection of works*, vol. 4, Warsaw 1958; *Janusz Korczak in the Ghetto. New Sources*, Warsaw 1992.

stand close to loose reflections and opinions resulting from years spent on watching people and the world. Further, we can also find fragments being *ad hoc* observations with no time perspective. These parts are characterized by the intimate and mysterious aura and appear to be utterly direct and spontaneous – typical of a journal. In Korczak's *Diary* time perspectives cross: from the ghetto towards the past and the memories but also into the future, towards new plans. The clash of various perspectives, the mixture of autobiography, diary, and journal elements is emphasized by intra-textual tension, but it might also become a starting point for the analysis of Janusz Korczak's experience in the Ghetto.

“Who describes someone else's pain, as if they were stealing, taking advantage of the misery, as if they wanted more” (537), writes the author, somewhat declaring to ignore in his notes crimes that surrounded him and to avoid archiving current events. A few pages earlier, he “forgot to mention that there is war” (514) and it was a note made in May 1942. The overall assumption is that memories are a dominant element:

There is a risk that I will repeat myself more often. What is even worse, facts and experiences may be, must be and will be reported differently. That's nothing. It only proves that these were important moments I deeply felt and to which I keep going back. It also shows that memories depend on our present experiences. (536)

Of course, the majority of *Diary* takes form of nostalgic memories related with his childhood and later professional life, memories that are bright and innocent. However, we might risk a statement that despite the domination of “diary elements” in terms of the volume, Korczak's text still keeps his journal character. Not only because, obviously, “memories depend on our present experiences” and our current situation influences the assessment of the past. In his *Diary* Korczak goes further: he makes past events sound like they are happening now, he looks at current events through the prism of the past. He does it in a manner allowing us to find the reflection of his contemporary psychological states in his account of events that are historical to him. It is illustrated by the memory of his first death experience (death of a canary):

I wanted to put a cross on its (the canary's) grave. The servant told me that it was a bird, something much lower than a human being. It is even a sin to cry. That's for the servant. What is worse, the caretaker's son said the canary was Jewish. And me too. I was Jewish and he was Polish, Catholic. He is going to paradise and, after I die, – if I don't curse and bring him sugar stolen from home – I would go to a place which is not hell but it's dark out there. And I was scared of a dark room. Death – Jew – hell. Black Jewish paradise. There was a lot to think about. (513)

Inseparably connected with the nationality problem and punishment for being different, this was the earliest experience of death noted down by Korczak in May 1942, being already inside of the “black Jewish paradise”:

An old man (a beggar who collected money after the Nativity play – M.M.). Nothing but him. Him in the first row. He was insatiable. His bag got filled with first, indifferent parental silver coins, then, my own strenuously gathered copper. Bitterly experienced and educated, I collected it for a long time, from wherever I could. An old man in the street was often the victim; I thought, “I will not give it to him, I will hide it for my Nativity play old man. My old man

Holocaust in Literary and Cultural Studies

was never satisfied and his bag was never full...The old man from Miodowa, after the desperate siege of Warsaw, taught me a lot. Helplessness of defence from importunate begging and endless demands that cannot be fulfilled. (529-530)

– writes Korczak in the period when he was responsible for feeding the entire orphanage (the note made on 15 May 1942).

My frequently returning dream and project was to leave for China....I did not go to China but China came to me. Chinese hunger, Chinese misery of orphans, Chinese death of children. (536-537)

The above quotes indicate that Korczak was completely immersed in the Ghetto reality, even though he “forgot to mention that there is war.” “Recalling” that, Korczak not only makes the past sound present and affirms the reality of the past, but he also goes deeper into the reality of the Ghetto. Not so much does he reinterpret the past as he interprets the present. The past, even bright and innocent, cannot become an analgesic for a man who is thrown into the horror of the Ghetto.

Notes in Korczak’s *Diary* not only refer to the particularly sensitive fact of “touching the Ghetto,” to the focused reflection over the reality of the Ghetto which becomes a test to all past experiences of the author. They are also an evidence that, day by day, he loses the sense of predictability of life; the permanent, the well-known and the ordered no longer provides an illusion of stability, the future is unknown, a man faces unknown, unpredictable forces alone, as if there was already a storm above their head:

Where will the clouds come from? What kind of invisible ohms, volts, neon signs will gather to create a coming thunder or wind from the dessert and when will it happen? The tormenting question, “Did I act right or wrong?” becomes morose accompaniment for the carefree children’s breakfast. (541)

Now, when I know that I don’t know and why I don’t know, whenever I can, according to the basic claim: “Do not harm the sick,” I swim into the unknown waters. (556)

Spit and go away. I’ve thought about it for so long. More – noose – led my feet. (588)

The Ghetto reality is unpredictable, whereas little everyday activities become the source of misery:

Are honest people from higher levels permanently doomed to Calvary? (518)

Help, Almighty! Let them stop asking, begging, talking...I would like to have nothing, so that they can see I have nothing, to let it all end. I came back from the “round” crushed. Seven visits, conversations, stairs, questions. The result: 50 zlotys and declared 5 zlotys monthly. You can support two hundred people! I go to sleep in my clothes. The first hot day. I can’t sleep, and at 9 pm we hold an educational meeting. (543)

Speaking of the general concept of trajectory, Gerhard Riemann and Fritz Schutze defined it as a category describing a biographic chain of events which disturb the control over one’s life, making an individual feel pushed from that moment on. Korczak talks about this state metaphorically: “noose and lead at my feet,” “unknown waters,” the storm, Calvary.

Suffering caused by helplessness towards the inevitable fate intrudes the sphere of one's identity. The identity's image undergoes transformation. Alienation towards oneself entails changes in defining one's identity. Suffering, which becomes the basic indicator of the "I," is at the same time impossible to communicate.¹⁶ "Who am I now?" asks Korczak from within the trajectory:

An old blind Jew was left in Myszyniec. He walked with his stick among carts, horses, cossacks, cannons. What a cruelty to leave a blind old man alone.

They wanted to take him with them, says Naścia, but he insisted on staying, because somebody needs to watch the synagogue.

I met Nastka when I helped her find a bucket taken away from her by a soldier who was supposed to bring it back but he never did. I am the blind Jew and Nastka. (594)

Does the story from the author's life gain the meaning of a great metaphor, a parable about the necessity to defend one's values and about the fate of a guard of those values (this is how this fragment was commented on by Irena Maciejewska).¹⁷ This is surely also the case. I believe that the fundamental matter, however, is a possibility to experience oneself and to communicate the identity of the "I." If understanding a metaphor may serve as a key to comprehend longer texts,¹⁸ or the whole discourse, we might risk a statement that the "blind Jew and Nastka" metaphor opens the reader to the experience of Janusz Korczak's Ghetto trajectory. The figures of this trajectory are a cheated child and a helpless, groping old man. A metaphor needs linguistic tension in order to maintain tension in the image of reality. This tension, following the words of Paul Ricoeur, takes place "not between the words but within the auxiliary itself."¹⁹ The irremovable opposition between the language (verbalization) and the experience of oneself and one's own suffering leads Korczak to radical expressions. The metaphor of the torn identity evokes a one-time, momentary clasp of the sense inside of "I am" which reveals the "deep suffering I," the deepest individual identity beyond its social identity.

One of the most controversial fragments of *Diary* is *History's Programme Speech*. The author presents the Nazis' point of view using their most rational arguments.²⁰ From the external perspective, with the eyes of a German, he tries to not only look at the Ghetto reality but he also tries to see himself:

¹⁶ On inability to communicate and alienation in suffering, cf. Ricoeur *Philosophy of a Person*, transl. M. Frankiewicz, Cracow 1992, eschapter *Suffering is not pain*.

¹⁷ I. Maciejewska *Janusz Korczak's Diary*, (in:) *Janusz Korczak – life and work*, materials from the International Scientific Session, Warsaw, October 12-13, 1978, ed. H. Kirchner, A. Lewin, S. Wołoszyn, Warsaw, 1982, 256.

¹⁸ Cf. Ricoeur, *Language, text, interpretation. Selection of works*, transl. Graffi, K. Rosner, Warsaw 1989, 256.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 154.

²⁰ Cf. I. Maciejewska, *Janusz...*, 256.

Holocaust in Literary and Cultural Studies

You are a social worker? Here is a plan. You can pretend for some time and we will pretend to believe. We generally believe until it is comfortable and in what is comfortable to us. I'm sorry: uncomfortable. What has been planned. (589)

German thinking becomes a mirror in which the author can see himself clearly. See himself somewhat "from outside," from another point of view, looking as if through binoculars, but the other way around. Giving place to the German on the pages of his intimate notes turns into the closest possible encounter with another person, although they both take radically different positions. Understanding the other is a condition to understand and express oneself. The last observation in *Diary* displays a desire for such an encounter and for understanding, although on the formal level, "he" and "I" are vividly distinguished (both in terms of grammar and physically; they are separated by the space between the window and the sentinel where the German is standing):

I'm watering flowers. My bold head in the window – such a good aim. He has a rifle. Why is he standing and looking calmly? He has not been given an order. Or maybe, being a civilian, he was a country teacher, a notary, a street sweeper in Leipzig, or a waiter in Cologne? What would he do if I nodded in his direction, waved to him friendly? Maybe he doesn't even know how it is here? He might have just come yesterday from far away. (599)

In his memory of Myszyniec, from the period of the First World War, the author finds himself in the experience of the other by means of the encounter and by going deep into "he"; through integrating the others' experiences, he discovers himself. In *Speech...* "he" (the German) takes over the competences of "I" (the author) so that the author could look at himself from outside as well. This emphatic narrative is deprived of its boundaries because there are continuous attempts to give voice to "the other."

Incessant tension between "I" and "he" permeates through the above quoted fragments. The opposition of "I-subject" and "he-object belonging to the outside world" is abolished. Such attitude is radically implemented in a part of the diary, where "the other" completely takes over the author's competences. At the same time, the experience of "the other" gets included into the experience of the speaking subject and integrated into the "I." The text becomes a space due to which, by creating "the other," it is possible to experience oneself (an attempt to reach someone else's way of thinking is located within clearly drawn frames of the autobiography).

Everyday distress, being lost in the Ghetto reality, is such a painful experience that it is necessary to look for breathing space. Even a momentary chance to hide from the insane stream of stirring events brings comfort.

For a short moment, one's own bed at night becomes the only asylum. Days are hard (518), arduous (534, 538), exhausting (595), full of hostile and morbid emotions and experiences (595). The bed and the night are definitely assessed in a positive manner, they become extraterritorial, entirely excluded. Living in the rhythm of day and night becomes a method to save one's own privacy:

Five glasses of spirit with hot water give me inspiration. It is followed by the delightful feeling of painless exhaustion because the scar doesn't count and "twinging" legs don't count, even hurting eyes or a burning scrotum do not count. Inspiration makes me aware of the fact

that I am lying in my bed and it will last till the morning comes. So twelve hours of normal functioning of lungs, heart and thoughts. After a busy day. In my mouth, the taste of cabbage and garlic, and a caramel candy I have put in the glass. Epicurean...I'm feeling good, quiet and safe...so quiet and safe. (538)

Be greeted, beautiful silence of the night.(542)

It's so soft and warm in my bed. It will be very hard for me to get up. (594)

What is characteristic in Korczak's account is similarity of his personal experience of day and night and the Jewish philosophy of time. Korczak lives in the rhythm of "tiring day" and "comforting night." It seems that his time is absolutely private: neglecting the "time of the Ghetto" which consists of subsequent extermination actions. It turns out that in the Jewish tradition, the night is explicitly superior to the day. It is darkness that is a special and solemn time with traits of happiness.

All Jewish holidays are marked with intense preparation the day before, after which, by the sunset and together with first stars in the sky, there is a radical change, going from acting to resting, from the secular to the sacred.²¹

We might risk a metaphorical statement that Korczak lives in the Ghetto having his private, everyday Shabbat. Neglecting the "gene time" becomes one of the elements of neglecting the Ghetto trajectory, an element of being faithful to the private ritual.

Responsibility for the orphanage (then for two orphanages) held by Janusz Korczak in the Ghetto forced him to constant activities. Perhaps it would be difficult to find another person who would be so full of initiatives. Providing for the orphanage, working on reorganization of the Main House of Shelter, working on different projects aiming at improving the fate of children in the Ghetto (such as organization of a unit for mortally ill and dying children of the streets, cf. NZ, 63) – these are some of his everyday activities. Letters, articles, reports he wrote in the Ghetto show him as an energetic man, full of ideas and unstoppable in his efforts to improve children's life. But also rough and ruthless, if it was required to help orphanages:

He begged, threatened, argued. He didn't care who would donate and whether it would be enough for others. He was a father of two hundred children and he had to provide for them. This was another Korczak...Tired, irritated, suspicious, prepared to make a big fuss about a barrel of cabbage, a sack of flour.²²

Does this image not stand in contradiction to the picture of the "blind Jew and Nastka" coming out of Korczak's *Diary*? Can a man who is "pushed," impelled by the Ghetto trajectory, simultaneously make plans and, what is more, (even if partially) carry out his plans? In order to answer this question, it would be worth looking into the way Korczak assessed his actions himself:

²¹ A. Neher, *Visions of time and history in the Jewish culture*, transl. B. Chwedeczek, (in: *time in Culture*, Warsaw, 1988, 279.

²² I. Newerly, Introductory note to J. Korczak, *Diary*, (in:) J. Korczak, *Selection of works*, vol. 4, 506.

Holocaust in Literary and Cultural Studies

A thought. A barber does hair, a manicurist (sic) takes care of nails of a convict who is on his way to the gallows. The second thought: an owner of the circus strenuously tames animals in order to have them killed once they are tamed. (NZ, 131)

What do they want from me? A merchant woman reacted to the claims of a buyer:
– Dear Mrs, these are not goods, this is not a shop, you are not a client and I am not a seller, I don't sell and you don't pay me...Only, one needs to do something, right? (552)

Despite its tragic nature or due to it, the reality of the Ghetto reveals its grotesque character. Every action remains superficial, self-deceiving. This is how Korczak perceives his work. His work is doomed to failure because it is impossible to fulfil the needs of the Ghetto inhabitants and there is scarcity of food and medicaments. In *History's Programme Speech* Korczak sees his work as a part of Nazis' plan. This is why it is doomed to failure from the very beginning. Is there a more dramatic description of his attempts to save the children than his comparison to the barber who does the convict's hair before the execution? Further he writes that life in the Ghetto is "A mental house. A game house. Monaco. Stake-head." (595)

A fool and pretender, a helpless pawn, a player who passively submits to the fate – this is how he judges himself. But can he stop working? Can the blind Jew leave the synagogue?

Korczak's activities in the Ghetto are not the embodiment of the trajectory domestication, the attempt to control it – on the contrary, they strengthen the trajectory. The feeling of being lost and the need to act make each other stronger, becoming two sides of the same reality between which there is two-way feedback.

Is it possible to get out of the vicious circle of self-propelling misery? Death could be the only escape.

The reflection over death accompanied Korczak throughout his whole life. It was not only linked with his profession but it also concerned his personal experiences: death of his mother for whom Korczak felt responsible (she died of typhus, after being infected by her son whom she took care of during his illness). His plan to commit suicide matured in him through the years:

If I kept postponing my thoroughly designed plan (of suicide), it was because always in the last moment, a new dream emerged which I could not leave without trying to work on it. (535)

In the Ghetto, Korczak always carried morphine in his pocket. A large part of *Diary* is devoted to thoughts on euthanasia, which he considered as a sign of mercy.²³

I feel smudged, stained with blood and stinking. Cunning since I'm alive – I sleep, I eat, I sometimes even joke. (566)

After the war, for a long time people will not be able to look in each other's eyes not to see the following question: how is it that you are alive, that you survived? What did you do? (567)

²³ The last spectacle in the Orphanage was also devoted to death. It was *The Post Office* by Rabindranath Tagore. To the main character of the play, a sick Indian boy Amal, death stands for salvation and it is embodied by dreamed of life on the king's court.

Life, therefore, became a subject and a reason to be ashamed, while death – a duty of an ethical man. “A bastard might live to see his grey hair” (596). Korczak did not commit suicide. He didn’t decide to escape, to stop the trajectory. In his ceaseless confrontation with death, without illusions regarding this further life and the fate of the entire closed district, he remained alive.

The dynamics of chaos, the unpredictable stream of events, which engages a person thrown into the Ghetto, finds its embodiment in the biographic process that affects Janusz Korczak. Being completely dependent on external forces and conscious effort to ignore them make the biography of an individual and the external reality intertwine. The world of the Ghetto intruded the individual fate and penetrated it. In the trajectory of chaotic events, Korczak escapes into the story about himself. But searching for his identity in new circumstances determined by the closed area of the Ghetto becomes a story about experiencing the reality of extermination (without notice, the diary turns into the journal). And on the contrary – keeping to the well-known system of actions, the everyday ritual of obtaining food helps Korczak realize that it is impossible to control the trajectory. Actions which are supposed to oppose and neglect chaos, become a part of the chaos which make it even more intense. The trajectory’s disorder is stopped only once: during the encounter with the other who “might have come here only yesterday from far away.”

The three exemplary biographies constitute a story about a personal experience of the final situation. They show effort to find support in the world where everything changed and resembles a chaotic whirl which destroys predictability and sucks everybody in. The feeling of being together, language, personal ritual, or an encounter with the other may stop the trajectory for a moment. However, the only permanent factor remains the sense of identity which is newly defined in the border situation.

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Jacek LEOCIAK

Exiting the Grave

I.

In the eleventh chapter of Saint John's Gospel, Jesus speaks to Martha of "resurrection" upon the news of Lazarus's death: "Your brother will rise again" (John 11:23).¹ Yet, in fact, he brings about a kind of "revival." Lazarus is revived or returned to earthly life, but in the long run his life is still heading towards death. By contrast, the perspective of resurrection is an eschatological one. Therefore, I wish clearly to distinguish resurrection from revival and to emphasize that my interest here will lie in the realm of phenomena that we might metaphorically define under the term "revival" – in the anthropological rather than theological sense.

The Gospel story about the revival of Lazarus emphasizes the authenticity of his death. Martha – a matter-of-fact and practical person – tries to warn Jesus, as he orders the tombstone to be removed: "But Lord...by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there for four days" (John 11:39). We must distinguish the authentic death of Lazarus from a mere death-like state, from a situation in which a person brushes with his destined death, but manages to avoid it through some stroke of fate. My interest will lie in precisely those situations in which a person comes face to face with death and in some metaphorical sense "survives" his or her own demise.

Jesus wept by the tomb of Lazarus. Exegetes have pointed out that the Greek expressions used here in the Gospel text imply a strong reaction of disapproval and even anger, a state of anxiety and internal distress. The Jesuit Menochiusz – in his extensive nineteenth-century commentaries to the Latin-Polish edition of the Bible – interprets Jesus' state as "outrage...against death and the devil, whose hatred brought death into the world."² Contemporary exegesis places more emphasis on the

¹ All biblical passages are from the New International Version.

² *Biblia Święta Łacińsko-Polska*, Volume III (Wilno: 1896), 312.

lack of faith in those lamenting Lazarus' death. In their despair, the mourners are trapped within purely human impulses, as if they were ignoring the truth – already known to Judaism – of resurrection.³ These interpretations also point to Jesus' own hidden distress at the grim toll of death. Hence the mystery of Jesus' tears by the tomb of Lazarus directs us towards the inscrutable threat of death, in the face of which even God himself is shaken. The situations that I shall examine in this article reveal precisely this irreconcilable threat.

In Saint John's canonical account, Lazarus exits the tomb wrapped in linen strips and with a cloth around his face. He says nothing. Jesus orders the assembled people to unwrap him and then let him leave. We find Lazarus's story in none of the apocryphal gospels, either. The revived man remains silent.

Narratives about revival as an anthropological metaphor are a fundamental object of reflection for me. The tales of people who have reached the land of the dead and returned alive fill mythology and literature. Orpheus makes the journey to Hades in search of Eurydice, who has died of a snake bite. Odysseus descends to Hades to ask Tiresias for an oracle concerning his return to Ithaca. Aeneas visits Hades with the Sibyl before going on to Elysium. Gilgamesh – shaken by the death of his friend Enkidu – journeys to the underworld and swims across the “waters of death” to discover the secret of immortality. The most famous wanderer through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven was Dante, led by Virgil and Beatrice, though the *Divine Comedy* grew out of numerous artistic images and stories about the other world which had shaped the collective imagination long before Dante.⁴ Medieval legends take up the motif of revival – which is present in the New Testament apocrypha – as a way of proving a person's innocence. Such tales treat the return to life instrumentally. The person who rises from the dead sings the praises of the reviver and testifies to his or her righteousness.⁵ The more contemporary argonauts of the other world are especially eloquent – that is, people who have survived their own clinical deaths, experiencing what Raymond Moody calls in his international bestseller *Life After Life* a “near-death experience.” Their accounts fill the pages of many books and internet sites.

Apocryphal literature may bring us some knowledge of Lazarus's words and deeds after his revival. We find here two diametrically opposed images of the revived Lazarus.

³ See the exegetical commentary in *Ewangelia według św. Jana. Wstęp – przekład z oryginału – komentarz*, ed. L. Stachowiak (Poznań: Pallottinum, 1975, pp. 276–278. The doctrine of resurrection – as the object of fierce disputes between the Pharisees, who accepted it, and the Saducees, who rejected it – appears as a dogma of faith. The Talmud declares in the tenth chapter of the Sanhedrin tractate that those who reject resurrection will have no part in the future life. See: “Resurrection: Judaism,” *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Volume 12, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 345–347.

⁴ See: Guriewicz, Aron, “Boska Komedia przed Dantem,” *Problemy średniowiecznej kultury ludowej*, trans. Z. Dobrzyński (Warszawa: 1987), 170–232.

⁵ For instance, in the legend of Saint Stanisław reviving a man named Piotr, who had lain in the grave for four years. See: Siemiński, Lucjan, *Podania i legendy polskie, ruskie i litewskie* (Poznań: 1845).

Holocaust in Literary and Cultural Studies

One of them – from the pen of the Czech writer Karel Čapek – portrays what I would call the trauma of revival.⁶ The second account – authored by Eugene O’Neill – presents what we might term the euphoria of revival.

The Lazarus of Čapek’s *Apocryphal Tales* (1932) fears for his health and is terrified of death. He is no longer the same person. He is breaking down under the strain of the life returned to him. He feels the strangeness and horror of his own existence after death. He complains of the torments of illness:

“Well, you are healthy, Lazarus,” Martha retorted. “You *must* be healthy, since He healed you!” “Healthy!” Lazarus said bitterly. “I’m the one to know if I’m healthy or not. I’m only telling you that, ever since *that time* things haven’t been easy for me, even for a minute – Not that I’m not *extremely* grateful to Him for – getting me back on my feet; don’t think that, Martha. But once someone goes through what I did, that – that,” Lazarus shuddered and covered his face.⁷

At the news of Jesus’ arrest in Jerusalem, Martha decides to go there at once. Lazarus wants to accompany her, but he soon succumbs to his fears and stays behind in Bethany.

Tears trickled slowly from Lazarus’s eyes. “I’d like so much to go with you, Martha – if only I weren’t so afraid...of dying again!”⁸

The Lazarus of Eugene O’Neill’s play *Lazarus Laughed* (1928) does not remain silent after his revival like the Gospel Lazarus, but instead gives triumphant speeches, punctuating his words with euphoric laughter. In Bethany, he establishes a new religion, which reaches as far as Rome and wins masses of supporters there. He proclaims the ecstatic joy of life, in which there is no place for fear. He not only rejects the threat of death, but questions its very reality:

There is no death, really. There is only life. There is only God. There is only incredible joy... Death is not the way it appears from his side. Death is not an abyss into which we go into chaos. It is, rather, a portal through which we move into everlasting growth and everlasting life...The grave is as empty as a doorway is empty. It is a portal through which we move into a greater and finer life. Therefore there is nothing to fear.... There is only life. There is no death.⁹

2.

First of all, we should present a typology of the situations in which a condemned person may survive. We can divide the survivors of executions into two basic categories.

⁶ I use the word “trauma” here more in its general sense (meaning a psychological disorder) than in the strictly technical sense delineated by the works of Sigmund Freud or Dominick LaCapra – though in my view the two definitions do not contradict each other.

⁷ Čapek, Karel, *Apocryphal Tales*, trans. Norma Comrada (North Haven: Catbird Press, 1997), 73.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁹ O’Neill, Eugene, *Plays*, Volume 1 (New York: Random House, 1951).

The first includes those who initially survived but were not destined to live, since their executioners later finished them off. The second includes those who survived and had the chance to live on.

Those survivors who were later finished off have left behind no testimony. We know about their fates from the accounts of others. The shooters approached the death pits filled with corpses, or walked among the victims lying on the ground, finishing them off with pistol shots. There are many such testimonies. They largely concern the Holocaust or the extermination of the civilian population during the Warsaw Uprising. For a different perspective, we might refer to an account from the years of the communist terror in Poland. The author is Father Jan Skiba, a Wrocław prison chaplain in 1946-1947:

One of the most horrific sights was the triple shooting of an officer...After the first salvo, it turned out that only one rifle had fired. The bullet had missed the condemned man. The officer ordered the men to reload their guns. This time only two rifles fired. The bullets did not inflict any fatal wounds. By then the officer had had enough. He went up to the man, who was lying on the ground and soaked with blood. He drew his pistol and shot the man straight in the head.¹⁰

But the tales of those who emerged alive from the gas chambers are absolutely exceptional. They had no chance of survival. At Chełmno, the victims were killed by exhaust fumes in the backs of trucks. Szymon Srebrnik tells the story of a certain day when two people fell out of a truck still breathing. They were thrown into the oven alive.¹¹ Jankiel Wiernik escaped from Treblinka during the rebellion of 2 August 1943. He saw people being pulled out of the gas chambers half alive, only to be “finished off by a rifle butt, a bullet, or a powerful blow...The children were the most resistant. They were often alive as they were dragged out of the chambers.”¹² Szlama Dragon from the Auschwitz *Sonderkommando* had to remove the gassed bodies: “Sometimes we found babies alive, wrapped in a pillow... We took them to Oberscharführer Moll, reporting that a child was alive. Moll would take them to the edge of the pit, lay them on the ground, stamp on their necks and throw them into the fire.”¹³ Doctor Miklosz Nyiszli from the Auschwitz *Sonderkommando* recalls that they once found a sixteen-year-old girl alive as they removed the bodies from the gas chamber. Moll – who was in charge of the crematoria – ordered his subordinate to shoot her.¹⁴ Eliezer Eisenschmidt –

¹⁰ Bambus, T, and S Bogaczewicz, “Człowiek z piętnem wyroku śmierci,” *Nowe Życie: Dolnośląskie Pismo Katolickie* (February 2002).

¹¹ Lanzmann, Claude, *Shoah*, trans. Marek Bieńczyk (Koszalin: Novex, 1993), 113. Three prisoners survived the extermination camp at Chełmno – Podchlebnik, Żurawski and Srebrnik. The latter was seriously wounded during the execution, but managed to escape the mass grave and hide.

¹² Wiernik, Jankiel, *Rok w Treblince* (Warszawa: Rada Ochrony Pamięci Walk i Męczeństwa, 2003), 9-10.

¹³ Greif, Gideon, *...plakaliśmy bez łez...Relacje byłych więźniów żydowskiego Sonderkommando w Auschwitz* (Warszawa: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2001), 121.

¹⁴ Levi, Primo, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Vintage, 1986), 55-57.

another member of the *Sonderkommando* – probably describes the same event in another account.¹⁵

The group of execution survivors is relatively large. Among them are those who received pardons at the last moment. Although the executions did not take place, they still stood face to face with death. These include literary characters (Kordian from Juliusz Słowacki's drama and Pablo Ibbieta from Jean-Paul Sartre's short story "The Wall") and real people – like Fyodor Dostoevsky, who was condemned to death at the trial of the Petrashevsky circle, then pardoned on 22 December 1849 at the last moment and sent into penal servitude in Siberia for four years. Here I shall examine those whose executions were carried out and who still survived.

In criminal records, we find an astounding number of cases in which people have survived execution at the gallows. Historians of the British judiciary inform us that more than a dozen such incidents were recorded in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Here I shall mention the three most famous cases. On Christmas Eve 1705, the execution of John Smith – a soldier, sailor and burglar condemned to death for robbery – took place at Tyburn (where the Marble Arch stands today in London). Smith hung from the rope for a good fifteen minutes, giving continual signs of life. The gathered crowd began to demand a reprieve. The hanged man was cut loose, carried into a neighboring home and revived. Immediately, people began to ask him questions about his experience. Smith gave extensive explanations, which today might appear strangely familiar to readers of Raymond Moody's *Life After Life*. The moral of this particular story is unedifying. The lucky survivor did not give up his criminal activities, though he would "escape the hangman's noose" on two more occasions. Margaret Dickson – an infanticide – was hung in Edinburgh in 1728. Her body was laid in a coffin and loaded onto a wagon, which set off over the bumpy road towards the town. When the cart driver returned to the wagon after a break at an inn, he found Mary alive, sitting up in the coffin. The court decided that the condemned woman could not be hung a second time and waived her sentence. Mary Dickson used her miraculously restored life to bring an enormous brood of children into the world. Sixteen-year-old William Duell was hung on 24 November 1740 at Tyburn for the rape and murder of Sarah Griffin. In accordance with the practice of the time, his body was assigned to anatomy students for practice. But the youthful murderer awoke on the dissecting table in the mortuary and was sent back to Newgate Prison. He too received a pardon.¹⁶

Michał Maksymilian Borwicz (Boruchowicz) was the author of various camp memoirs and studies on the Nazi language of hatred, the editor of an anthology of poems about Jews under the German occupation, and a pioneer of sociological and literary scholarship on Holocaust testimony. He survived his own execution at the Janowska camp in Lviv. He literally broke free from the noose.¹⁷ Borwicz was part of a camp conspiracy in

¹⁵ Greif, 181.

¹⁶ All of these examples come from *The History of Judicial Hanging in Britain*. <http://www.richard.clark32.btinternet.co.uk/hangingl.html>

¹⁷ I thank Ryszard Lów for drawing my attention to Borwicz's case.

which he was teaching selected prisoners how to use guns. An SS officer surprised them during one of these lessons. Later Borwicz found himself standing under the gallows. His memory recorded the last seconds before the execution of the sentence:

I see the SS officer coming towards me. Around me a kind of vague commotion ensues...a chaotic jerking, my vision is filled not by the gallows but by the end of the rope trailing along the ground. I become aware of a loss of support. With it comes a strangling sensation – terrible, yet somehow grotesque, since it is so ridiculously expected. And the hazy consciousness that this is the end. Was I really conscious of all this in the moment of my resurrection? Or did I reconstruct it all later?...Even in such a reconstruction the whole scene is reduced to a few details. My sudden awakening on the ground...A sensation of profound haziness...My friends told me later that at the very moment in which I had hung suspended in the air, the rope broke. I fell to the ground.¹⁸

Once he had picked himself up off the ground and rejoined the rows of prisoners, the German supervising the execution declared: “An old German custom demands...that a condemned man who breaks free of the gallows must get a reprieve.”¹⁹ As a man who had “broken free of the rope,” he was treated in a special manner. Even the SS officers showed him respect.

There is one more group of execution survivors – the people who survived mass shootings, then dug themselves out from under the corpses, crawled out of the death pits or mass graves, and escaped their executioners.

3 .

Mass executions were never one-hundred-percent effective. Somebody always survived. Thanks to those who managed to escape the grave and tell their stories, the world found out about these crimes. There are a great many such tales, and we could easily compile a sizeable anthology full of them. My main source here will be the Second World War records of Jews who survived the extermination operations, or of Poles who survived mass shootings during the pacification of the civilian population in the Warsaw Uprising.

On the basis of multiple testimonies, it is possible to construct a general model of the situation under discussion – its specific phases, the varieties of behavior and types of experiences associated with those who “exited the grave” (the “revived”) and those who encountered them.

Everything begins with the firing squad. The mass executions of Jews usually took the form of a schematized procedure that was almost monotonous in its banal cruelty. The victims dug their own graves or were forced into a pit prepared earlier. They were ordered to undress. Then they had to stand on the edge of the pit or on a plank laid across the trench. Sometimes they were forced to lie directly on the bodies of those already murdered. The culminating point of this phase came with the German gunshots and

¹⁸ Borwicz, Michał, *Spod szubienicy w teren* (Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1980), 23-24.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

the fall of the Jews into the pit immediately after the shots or a split second earlier. It sometimes happened that a particular victim was not injured or even grazed by a bullet. Jonasz Stern tells the story of how he was taken with other prisoners from the Janowska camp to a forest outside Lviv: “And here they were supposed to shoot me. But I played a little trick on them and fell earlier.”²⁰ Sixteen-year-old Zvi Michałowski – the son of a *melamed* from Ejszyski – “fell into the grave a split second before the bullet could hit him.”²¹ A certain youth from Tłuste “fell into the grave untouched by the bullet.”²² The Poles murdered in the suburb of Wola during the Warsaw Uprising were lined up and shot against walls, in the courtyards of tenement houses and in cellars. Mrs. Wacława Gałka was on Wolska Street. The Germans shot at her twice and twice the bullets missed her.²³ Sometimes the person shot was only wounded. Maria Cyrańska – a survivor of an execution carried out in August 1944 near Sowiński Park in Wola – gave the following evidence to the Warsaw Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes: “I fell to the ground wounded. I had been shot in the left arm. Apart from that, some shrapnel had wounded me in the temple and cheek.”²⁴

A constant feature of the mass murder of Jews was the nakedness of the victims. Men, women, and children entered the gas chambers naked. In forest ravines, gorges, fields, and cemeteries – wherever the death pits were dug – the victims had to undress before the execution. Little Mendel Rozenkranz described the liquidation of the Horodenka Ghetto in December 1941: “They stripped naked and were shot like that.”²⁵ Some women who survived the execution at Ponary in July 1941 said that “Jews in their dozens had to undress beside the pits where they were shot.”²⁶ In her evidence at Eichmann’s trial, Ryfka Joselewska reconstructed the final moments before the shooting, when everybody was already undressed. Only her father had remained in his clothing: “They began to beat him. We prayed, we begged him to get undressed, but he would not undress. He wanted to stay in his underwear. He did not want to stand there naked. So they tore the clothing of this old man and shot him.”²⁷

What was the reason for this mercilessly enforced requirement of nakedness? What was the point of this ritual of killing naked victims? We might leave aside any practical considerations and the doubtful material value of the clothes themselves. A certain move-

²⁰ Stern, Jonasz, “Interview with M.A. Potocka,” *Odra* 11 (1988), 37.

²¹ Eliach, Yaffa, *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage, 1988), 54.

²² Milch, Baruch, *Testament* (Warszawa: Karta, 2001), 173.

²³ Drozdowski, Marek, Maria Maniakówna, and Tomasz Strzębosz, eds. *Ludność cywilna w powstaniu warszawskim: Tom I. Pamiętniki. Relacje. Zeznania* (Warszawa: PIW, 1974), 316-318.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 312-313.

²⁵ Hochberg-Mariańska, Maria, and Noe Gruss, *Dzieci żydowskie oskarżają* (Warszawa: Shalom, 1993), 104.

²⁶ Grynberg, Michał, and Maria Kotowska, *Życie i zagłada Żydów polskich 1939-1945. Relacje świadków* (Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 2003), 533.

²⁷ Gilbert, Martin, *The Jewish Tragedy* (New York: Collins, 1990), 421.

ment within historiosophical reflections on the Holocaust has interpreted the motif of nakedness within the genocidal technology of *die Endlösung* as a parody – expressed in the aesthetics of Nazi kitsch – of the Last Judgment, whose iconographical representations had shaped the European imagination for centuries.²⁸

Those who manage to escape the graves after the shootings – and thus, in some sense, after death – are naked. The revived Lazarus has the linen strips and cloth removed from his body. The survivors of the executions return to life with the stigma of nakedness, which makes their escape more difficult and sows terror in those they meet. Estera Winderbaum survived the shootings during the liquidation of the camp at Poniatowa on 4 November 1943. She crawled out from under the corpses and wandered naked among the neighboring huts, begging the petrified peasants for clothing.²⁹ A butcher's daughter survived the executions at Horodenka in 1942: "When the Germans had finished their work and left the graves, she crawled naked out of the grave [and] found her way to the village of Siemakowce."³⁰ In a short story entitled "The Landscape That Survived Death" ("Krajobraz, który przeżył śmierć"), Kornel Filipowicz depicts nakedness as the survivor's burden after an execution. In a purely practical sense, nakedness can give a person away, since the body glows in the dark:

How could he cover his nakedness so that when he broke free from the background of human bodies and found himself on the rough, light-absorbing surface of the earth he would not suddenly become an isolated shape, visible from afar?...The night still veiled his nakedness well enough. With the coming day, he would face a cruel dilemma: how to cover himself once again in the skin that forms the most human of shells – clothing. A dressed person has no idea what a problem nakedness can be!³¹

²⁸ Stanisław Lem writes: "Naked, as they came into the world, they passed into clay. Murder here represented at once a substitute for the dimensions of both justice and love. The executioner stood before the mass of naked people preparing for death. Half-father and half-lover, he was to give them a just death – like a father justly aiming his rod, like a lover gazing at their nudity and offering his caresses...How should people stand before the Last Judgment? Naked. It was exactly this kind of judgment, and the Valley of Josaphat extended everywhere. The stripped and murdered people were to play the role of the judged in this drama." In the genocidal liturgy of the Nazis, "Judeo-Christian symbolism shows through, transformed into murder. Since the Germans could not kill God, it is as if they had killed his 'chosen people' in his place" (Lem, Stanisław, *Prowokacja* [Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1984], 28, 30, 35). Paweł Śpiewak points to the project of self-salvation at the origins of the Third Reich. The medium and author of this salvation is to be the Führer, "who regards himself as the irrevocable earthly judge of the Last Judgment, adjudicating the immortality or annihilation of every human being." (Śpiewak, Paweł, "Szoah, drugi upadek," *Więź* 7/8 [1986], 9-10). See also, George Steiner's essay "A Season in Hell," *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).

²⁹ *Likwidacja Poniatowej*, Account 2209/118-1, Yad Vashem Archive.

³⁰ Grynberg and Kotowska, 332.

³¹ Filipowicz, Kornel, "Krajobraz, który przeżył śmierć," *Krajobraz niewzruszony* (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1956), 95-96.

On a metaphorical level, nakedness represents the stigmatized “otherness” of the person who has escaped from the grave. It divides those who are trying to return to life and to people from life and from people.

When the shots had rung out and the victim lay among the corpses, the time came for an attempt to comprehend this state of suspension between life and death, which evaded consciousness while still being recorded by it. In many accounts, this moment of uncertainty is crucial. Am I still here or am I already gone? A little boy from Wyszaków voiced this question with childish simplicity and naivety:

I didn't know whether I was dead or alive...It was completely dark when I felt a kick in the side. I was terrified that the corpses were rising from the dead.³²

Henryk Bryskier – who was shot on 24 April 1943 in the Warsaw Ghetto on the grounds of Brauer's workshop on Nalewki Street – entered into expansive reflections on this subject, which he describes as a form of “philosophizing”:

I could not imagine that I was alive, so I believed in life that I was dead. It seemed to me that life and death did not follow each other, but rather that they existed alongside each other at every moment. I fell into a dark abyss. Then my astral body soared through the expanse of space with the clouds sometimes below it and sometimes above it. I don't know whether I subconsciously opened my eyes a little or whether the rays of the sun burst through my eyelashes to the narrow slit of my lowered eyelids, but I know that a kind of vague consciousness began to work. Thanks to this consciousness, I understood that I was not floating on the clouds, but lying on the earth and peering up as if through a fog at the sky, where I could see white clouds blown by the light breath of the wind. I was afraid to open my eyes any wider, covered as they were with a layer of dust carried by the wind. If my state was nirvana, then it seemed a pity to return to reality. This philosophizing took place in a moment of physical paralysis, but also as my cerebral lobes were gradually returning to functionality.³³

The experiences described here seem to belong to a common scenario repeated in hundreds of accounts from people who have returned to life after clinical death. Characteristically, however, Bryskier rationalizes the mystical aura of his near-death experience and even adds a certain dose of irony. Ryfka Joselewska from a village near Pińsk – who was shot in August 1942 – came back to life when the weight of the bodies in the pit began to suffocate her:

I thought that perhaps I was no longer alive, and that I was only feeling something after death. I thought that I was dead and that this was the feeling that comes after death. Then I felt that I was suffocating with the people pressing down on me. I tried to move, and then I felt that I was alive and that I could get up.³⁴

Sooner or later the survivors become conscious of their paradoxical situation. What they have taken for symptoms of death turn out to be the proof of life. The main character

³² Grynberg, Henryk, *Dzieci Syjonu* (Warszawa: Karta, 1994), 22.

³³ Bryskier, Henryk, *Nowiny Kurier* (Tel Aviv), 4 May 1990.

³⁴ Gilbert, 422.

of Kornel Filipowicz's story, lying in a deep pit among the dead, believes that "death is some dazzling liberation of consciousness from the burden of the body. But then he immediately understood that thinking precisely meant life."³⁵

The return to full consciousness of life is connected with the imperative to save it. An obvious strategy in this kind of situation is to pretend to be a corpse. The perpetrators always finish off the wounded after an execution, so the only chance is to resemble a corpse. Even children are perfectly well aware of this fact. During the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto, the Germans shot at ten-year-old Irka Rubinsztein and other Jewish fugitives hiding in a bunker at 38 Świętojerska Street. Irka and her friend Halinka survived. They crawled out from the pile of bodies: "Then I heard footsteps. Halinka and I lay back down again with the corpses, pretending to be corpses."³⁶ Among the bodies, a living person must look like a dead one in order to survive. Above all, one cannot move. As Maria Cyrańska lay in a group of executed people during the Warsaw Uprising, "a German soldier stood on [her] back," shooting at anybody who moved. She managed to restrain herself.³⁷

Yet simply pretending to be a corpse might not suffice. Another form of camouflage was often necessary. Here the dead might come to one's aid. Their bodies could cover a person and hide him or her from the executioners' sight. The blood of the dead could also splatter the living, giving them a corpse-like appearance. During the liquidation of the Poniatowa camp, an SS officer led a woman and child to the ditch filled with bodies in which Estera Winderbaum already lay: "A shot rang out and her blood spurted onto my head, covering my neck and hair. From the back I probably looked like a corpse."³⁸ Situations in which this solidarity between the dead and the living involved the survivor's immediate family carried a particular resonance. Sometimes the corpses of mothers concealed their living children. Irka Rubinsztein gives the following account:

I lay there a little longer and pushed the corpse off me. Then I saw that the corpse which had covered me was...my mum. Her blood had trickled onto me. Mummy was already dead... Halinka was only wounded, but she lay there in a faint. I shoved aside the corpse that was covering her, and then I saw that it was Halinka's mother.³⁹

The corpse of a son could also save a mother. Waclawa Gałka – who was shot during the Warsaw Uprising on Wolska Street – made the following testimony at the Warsaw Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes:

My son Leszek began to cry that his knees were numb and a policeman shot him. My little son was lying beside me on top of my cousin Damian Pasterski, who had been shot after the

³⁵ Filipowicz, 95.

³⁶ Najberg, Leon, *Ostatni powstańcy getta* (Warszawa: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 1993), 92.

³⁷ Drozdowski, Maniakówna and Strzębosz, 312-313.

³⁸ *Likwidacja Poniatowej*.

³⁹ Najberg, 92.

Holocaust in Literary and Cultural Studies

first salvo. When the policeman shot my little son, his blood trickled onto me, and probably that's why they thought I was dead.⁴⁰

The next link in the chain of events was to dig one's way out from under the mound of corpses to the surface. Some accounts depict this as a long process – as hard and laborious work. Those who managed to make their way out had to watch every movement. The slightest mistake could destroy the camouflage and squander their chance of saving themselves. So they moved very slowly, waiting for any possible dangers to pass, always on the lookout for a favorable moment. Vilnius school teacher Tima Kac lay in the pits at Ponary after the execution of 10 September 1941:

Despite the late hour, somebody was still tramping around on the corpses, pouring out slaked lime, digging about in the grave. I lay there, holding my breath, listening for every murmur and rustle...Suddenly I heard a soft cry nearby. I realized that a child was crying. I began to crawl in the direction of the sound....A three-year-old little girl was crying – alive, not even wounded. I decided to save her and myself. Whenever I stopped crawling under the corpses to rest for a moment, I hugged the little girl.⁴¹

The survivors only exit the grave with difficulty and at the cost of great exertion. They must overcome not only the watchfulness of the executioners and their own weakness – after all, they are injured and in shock – but also the resistance of the grave itself and the bodies filling it. It seems that in order to emerge they must first fight a macabre battle with the corpses. The roles are unexpectedly reversed. The corpses may have saved them earlier by providing cover; now they get in the way, blocking their path, as if they did not want to let any living person escape from among them. Ryfka Joselewska gives a shattering account of this battle:

I felt that I was suffocating, choking, but I was trying to save myself, trying to find a little air to breathe. And then I realized that I was climbing over bodies towards the edge of the grave. I lifted myself up and the hands of the corpses began to cling onto me, clutching at my legs, pulling me back down. But with a final effort I managed to drag myself out of the grave, and when I had done so I could not recognize the place. A great many bodies were lying everywhere, a great many dead people. I tried to see where the field of bodies ended, but I could not.⁴²

Anna Szaret – a character from Kazimierz Traciewicz's novel, *Yom Kippur (Jom Kipur)* – was shot with a group of prisoners at a work camp. She survived and managed to get out of the mass grave. But first she had to fight a real battle for her life:

How she hated the corpse lying on top of her, which seemed almost deliberately or intentionally to become heavier and heavier. Anna was sure that he was baring his teeth in a malicious grin, baring his teeth through lips parted in pain and smiling with half-open eyes. With the great effort of despair, she finally succeeded in freeing herself from under this hateful burden. She turned him over on his side and knelt on his chest. Then there was a leg – no, it wasn't his

⁴⁰ Drozdowski, Maniakówna and Strzębosz, 317.

⁴¹ Grynberg and Kotowska, 543.

⁴² Gilbert, 422.

leg – then a hand, which seemed to be trying to keep her in the pit. They wanted her to stay with them. Never, never ever...with violent movements she began to drag herself out of the grave. Something cracked under her feet, something moved. Air, air at last – she sucked it in with open mouth...She pushed off with one leg – probably off the head of a corpse – and found herself on the surface at last.⁴³

Those who had managed to escape from the death pits and now took their restored lives into a dark and hostile world could either speak or remain silent. It is characteristic that this dilemma does not appear in the Polish accounts I have examined. The problem of whether to speak or remain silent and the related question of the listeners' reactions do not form major themes within them. But the accounts of Jews who survived executions reveal two extreme models of behavior. Some people talk openly about what they have survived. In fact, they feel a compulsion to speak. This imperative springs both from a desire to throw off a burden of experience that surpasses all human measure and from a sense of mission commanding them to bear witness to the Holocaust and to convey a warning. This group represents the clear majority. The others retreat into themselves and remain silent. They become separate, isolated, divided from other people by an insurmountable barrier. They have no wish to cross this line. We find this response in two little girls who survived the extermination at Tluste: "They dug themselves out from under the corpses and returned to the town. But they seemed to have gone mad, and they did not want to speak."⁴⁴ We might describe this attitude of silence as the canonical model of behavior – if we recall Lazarus from Saint John's Gospel, who says nothing and walks away after exiting the grave. Perhaps we could define the opposite attitude – characterized by the survivors' narrative initiative – as the apocryphal model.

Every story needs listeners. Without them, it becomes futile. Baruch Milch learns of the massacre at Horodenka from "those who managed to escape from the grave after the executioners had departed...I spoke to one of them myself. He fled almost naked to our town. He told me terrible things."⁴⁵ Milch wants to listen, but for some survivors it is difficult to find listeners. People do not want to believe those who have left the grave. They turn away from them or regard them as lunatics. Six women who escaped from the Ponary death pits "told of what happened, but nobody wanted to believe their terrifying stories."⁴⁶ The survivors' despair comes partly from the impossibility of conveying their testimony. This is the despair of people who have been crushed by the burden of a terrible knowledge – paid for in suffering and wrested away from death – which now is of no use to anybody. It is the despair of envoys from beyond the grave, whose salutary mission is derided and rejected. Mosze Stróż from Elie Wiesel's *Night* is precisely this kind of tragic narrator. After being deported from Sighet and surviving execution, he returns to his little town:

⁴³ Traciewicz, Kazimierz, *Jom Kipur* (Warszawa: Alfa, 1992). 140.

⁴⁴ Hochberg-Mariańska and Gruss, 16.

⁴⁵ Milch, 121.

⁴⁶ Grynberg and Kotowska, 533.

Holocaust in Literary and Cultural Studies

Day after day, night after night, he went from one Jewish house to the next telling his story and that of Malka, the young girl who lay dying for three days, and that of Tobie, the tailor who begged to die before his sons were killed...But people not only refused to believe his tales, they refused to listen. Some even insinuated that he only wanted their pity, that he was imagining things. Others flatly said that he had gone mad. As for Moishe, he wept and pleaded: "Jews, listen to me! That's all I ask of you. No money. No pity. Just listen to me!...I was saved miraculously. I succeeded in coming back. Where did I get my strength? I wanted to return to Sighet to describe to you my death so that you might ready yourselves while there is still time."⁴⁷

People who have been shot, but survived, their wounds still oozing blood, then thrown into a pit full of corpses, yet somehow escaped, are wounded once again on their road beyond the grave. The people they meet do not want to listen or believe them. They do not want to understand or even to help them. They react with fear, aggression, or evasion. They refuse to have anything to do with them. Salomon Günsberg tells of the survivors from an extermination action in Stanisławów on 12 November 1941:

The wounded victims escaped from the mass graves at night, trying to save their own lives. Without any help, only a handful managed to save themselves. The population of the neighboring farmsteads refused to take in those who had already been "slain."⁴⁸

Tima Kac hid for two days in the forest along with five other women who – like her – had escaped from the grave after the Ponary executions: "We came across a peasant, who took fright at the sight of us and ran away with a scream. Later, when we met him again, he told us that he had taken us for spirits, sinful ghosts come to haunt the land."⁴⁹ The superstitious fear of the "slain" formed a common reason for their rejection. The peasants to whom the survivors appealed for help often treated them like phantoms, apparitions, or evil spirits. They warded them off with the sign of the cross or a curse, like Zvi Michałowski from Ejszyszek: "Jew, go back to the grave where you belong!"⁵⁰ They threw stones at them, as they did at Ryfka Joselewska, frozen in her tracks for three days after emerging from the grave. They threw stones at her for so long that eventually they forced her to leave.⁵¹

However, there were also those who extended a helping hand in spite of their fear – some reluctantly, as if under compulsion. Estera Winderbaum tells of an elderly couple she came across as she sought help after the liquidation of the camp at Poniatowa:

The old people were terrified of us, crossing themselves at the sight of these three naked women. An old woman threw us some old, torn trousers and a torn dress. She began to drive us out, frightened that we would bring the Ukrainians down on her. I ran into the kitchen, hoping to warm up a bit, but the old woman wouldn't have it. We had to leave the house...We rushed into another hut, asking for warm water to wash ourselves a bit. We were completely soaked

⁴⁷ Wiesel, Elie, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 7.

⁴⁸ Grynberg and Kotowska, 349.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 543.

⁵⁰ Eliach, 54.

⁵¹ Gilbert, 423-424.

Leociak Exiting the Grave

with blood. They gave us water, a blouse for me, since I was still naked, and a piece of bread each. Then we had to move off again.⁵²

Others treated helping survivors as a simple, evangelical reflex to feed and clothe, as I. Gogan – who survived the Ponary executions – relates:

Covered in blood, I made it to the nearest village and entered the poorest cottage. A poor farmhand who worked for a rich Lithuanian lived there. I told him who I was and what had happened to me. He gave me hot water to wash off the blood and something to drink...The farmhand let me sleep on his bed and the next day he took me back to the ghetto.⁵³

Bullet wounds could be washed and allowed to heal. Yet those who emerged from the grave carried with them an indelible stain – the “trauma of revival.” For the people around them, they were now different, irreversibly altered. After all, one could not cross the border between life and death with impunity. One had to pay for it with useless and bitter knowledge, with alienation and with the stigma of madness. The folk imagination classified them as phantoms or lunatics – as dangerous beings, since they had visited the border between worlds. In one of his short stories, Bogdan Wojdowski sketches the following scene:

Franek swears that he saw a phantom again at dawn today. A phantom, and nothing else.

“A phantom, my eye. A Jewish girl escaped from the pit. People saw her at Babice.”

“I’m telling you it was a phantom.”

“A Jewish girl!”

“A phantom!”

“She escaped from under their spades and fled naked over the fields.”⁵⁴

The bloody and naked fugitives from the graves were treated like lunatics as they stole across the fields. Yet there was no way to determine where their madness began or ended. Artur Schneider tells of a survivor from the liquidation of the Dubno Ghetto in October 1942:

The woman had gone out of her senses. She walked across the field half-naked, shaking her fist at the brightly shining moon, as if blaming it for the crime that had been committed. She wandered around like this for two days. Eventually somebody from the village, probably the head man, notified the police.⁵⁵

We find a brilliant study of the trauma of revival in Saul Bellow’s novel, *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, in which a certain eccentric New York intellectual, Artur Sammler, remembers being “marked for death” in German-occupied Poland. He passes through all the stages

⁵² *Likwidacja Poniatowej*.

⁵³ Grynberg and Kotowska, 544.

⁵⁴ Wojdowski, Bogusław, *Mały człowiek, nieme ptaszę, klatka i świat: Opowiadania* (Warszawa: PIW, 1975), 68.

⁵⁵ Schneider, Artur, *Jak ścigane zwierzę* (Lublin: Norbertinum, 2003), 152-153.

described above in the experience of revival. Together with his wife and a few dozen other people, he stands naked on the edge of a grave they have dug themselves. After the shots, he tumbles down into the pit. The falling bodies crush him and his dead wife lying beside him. Somehow he escapes: "Struggling out much later from the weight of corpses, crawling out of the loose soil."⁵⁶ After digging himself out from under the bodies, he becomes a partisan in the woods near the town of Zamość. He carries a gun and begins to shoot people himself. Once he captures a German, disarms him, orders him to undress and shoots him at close range:

That man to Sammler was already underground. He was no longer dressed for life. He was marked, lost. Had to go. Was gone...Sammler pulled the trigger...A second shot went through the head and shattered it. Bone burst. Matter flew out...When he fired his gun, Sammler, himself nearly a corpse, burst into life.⁵⁷

Later he must flee the bullets of Polish partisans, who have turned against the Jewish fighters. He finds shelter in a tomb. The pre-war caretaker of the cemetery hides him inside a family mausoleum and brings him food. Years later, Sammler reflects: "By opening the tomb to me, he let me live."⁵⁸

For Artur Sammler, his existence in the tomb is both a wartime memory and a symbol of his fate. There are those whom humanity "marks for death," against whom it "shuts a door." Sammler belongs to this "written-off category." Admittedly, he is still alive in spite of everything, but a "certain hypersensitivity" – as he puts it – remains with him.⁵⁹ It is difficult for him to define his attitude towards himself. What is a person who "has come back from the grave and who "for quite a long time...had felt that he was not necessarily human"?⁶⁰ What is a person who has been "inside death"?⁶¹ Is he filled with indifference towards the world or delight at the most trivial manifestations of existence? Does he become a pure spirit, completely separate and liberated from the chains of Nature, or rather somebody who is unusually sensitive to the material substance of reality and the biological conditions of human life? Sammler is unable to answer these questions. He is a riddle to himself. As a correspondent for the American press during the Suez Crisis in 1956, he wades through hundreds of corpses in the hot sands of the desert: "The clothes of the dead...were strained by the swelling, the gases, the fluids...In the sun the faces softened, blackened, melted, and flowed away. The flesh sank to the skull, the cartilage of the nose warping, the lips shrinking, eyes dissolving."⁶² He looks at the disintegrating bodies of the Egyptian soldiers as if at his own macabre self-portrait.

⁵⁶ Bellow, Saul, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 75.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 113-115.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 95-96.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 207.

He is conscious of his otherness, conscious of his deformity: "I am of course deformed. And demented."⁶³ He constructs two metaphors through which he attempts to capture the phenomenon of his life after death. The first is – so to speak – a telecommunications metaphor. It places the emphasis on the contact that never took place – on the bullet missing his temple and death missing life. Once he had stood naked before an open grave:

But somehow he had failed, unlike the others, to be connected. Comparing the event, as mentally he sometimes did, to a telephone circuit: death had not picked up the receiver to answer his ring. Sometimes, when he walked on Broadway today, and heard a phone ringing in a shop when doors were open, he tried to find, to intuit, the syllable one would hear from death. "Hello? Ah, you at last." "Hello."⁶⁴

The second metaphor is based on the trivial experience of a normal day:

And had the war lasted a few more months, he would have died like the rest. Not a Jew would have avoided death. As it was, he still had his consciousness, earthliness, human actuality – got up, breathed his earth gases in and out, drank his coffee, consumed his share of goods... In short, a living man. Or one who had been sent back again to the end of the line. Waiting for something.⁶⁵

This man who has failed to be connected and who has been sent back to the end of the line meets a dead friend at the end of the novel. The meeting takes place in a hospital morgue, just before the autopsy. The scene takes the form of an epiphany. Until then, Sammler could never precisely describe his own status. In response to the obsessive questions – "They say that you were in the grave once...How was it?" – he always replied: "Let us change the subject."⁶⁶ Now he stands before the body of his friend. He pulls back the sheet covering the man's face, on which "bitterness and an expression of obedience were combined." He understands that his friend has kept "the terms of his contract. The terms which, in his inmost heart, each man knows." For the first time, Sammler discovers the truth he has carried throughout his whole life, wrested from the death pit: "For that is the truth of it – that we all know, God, that we know, that we know, we know, we know."⁶⁷ Yet this knowledge does not belong to the realm of the *episteme*. It is inexpressible. It comes with the removal of the death cloth from the face of a revived man, who cannot...or will not say anything.

4.

Escaping the mass graves of the Second World War was not a victory, but a deferral of the sentence. It allowed the intended victim to feel the joyful pulsing of blood

⁶³ Ibid., 190.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 112.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 226-227.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 155-156.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 260.

through the temples for years to come, but it left him or her with an indelible stain of dread and humiliation. It was not a liberation, but rather it imprisoned the person in a trap between the black pit of death and the blue expanse of life, between apathy and activity, between the courage aroused by this passing of the impassable border and the fear nourished by the same event. Between solemnity, madness and buffoonery. It was an escape to nowhere, which led the person along the back roads of existence into a realm of otherness, into a dimension where the order of things was reversed, into a crack of being, into a state of inner conflict.

The experience we read about in the accounts I have cited in this article is a traumatic one. Elias Canetti seems to think otherwise. Referring to the “stories of people who come back to life in the midst of a heap of the dead,” he claims that “such people tend to think of themselves as invulnerable.”⁶⁸ It is difficult to agree with this claim. For the survivors who have told us their stories, exiting the grave did not deliver any sense of triumph over death or ecstatic affirmation of life. On the contrary, some of them – like Tima Kac – envied the dead their liberation from horror. Others – like Ryfka Joselewska – prayed for death, begging God to open the grave once again so that it might swallow her up. Perhaps we can understand Canetti’s thinking in the context of the two different visions of Lazarus from apocryphal literature presented above. Eugene O’Neill depicts the euphoria of revival; Karel Čapek presents the trauma of revival. Canetti seems to follow in the footsteps of O’Neill. Yet I find myself more convinced by the Lazarus of Čapek’s apocryphal account – torn, uncertain, and very fearful of dying a second time.

Translation: Stanley Bill

⁶⁸ Canetti, Elias, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (New York: Continuum, 1984), 247.

Bożena SHALLCROSS

A Holocaust Soap and the Story of Its Production

“I did not make up anything.”

Zofia Nałkowska on *Medallions*

“In Nałkowska everything is a construction.”

Michał Głowiński (not on *Medallions*)

“*Soap, Ladies and Gentlemen, die Seife, die Seifenkugel, you know, certainly, what it is.*”

Francis Ponge

Soap’s *telos* is to purify, to clean and then to disappear completely. Its semantics should be in conflict with its impure origins, in the same manner in which its cleansing effect clashes with dirty hands. Contrary to Francis Ponge’s assessment in the inscription, which is concerned with the cosmetic’s phenomenological ‘whatness,’ consumers have only a vague idea of the contents of soap (including its main ingredient, animal fat) or the chemical process required to transform that coarse material into a pleasantly scented, neatly molded and packaged cosmetic.¹ Our consumption of soap is one of

¹ Although I am interested in the phenomenology of the soap as an object, its chemical processing deserves to be revealed briefly: “A cleansing and emulsifying agent that is made usually either from fats or oils by saponification with alkali in a boiling process or the cold process or from fatty acids by neutralization with alkali, that consists essentially of a mixture of water-soluble sodium or potassium salts of fatty acids, and that may contain other ingredients such as perfume, coloring agents, fluorescent dyes, disinfectants or abrasive material.” Webster’s Third International Dictionary (1981), s.v., “soap.”

the least complex, and thus most overlooked, occurrences. The narrative of soap's consumption is brief and takes place entirely on the body's surface, between the skin and the pleasantly disappearing product.² The gist of this narrative can be contained in one sentence: the soap, made from an animal's body, washes another body – in other words, the body washes the body.

Considered by Sigmund Freud to be a “yardstick” of civilization,³ later soap was defined in nearly military terms of “a civilization's triumph over the forces of defilement and excrement.”⁴ But what, ladies and gentlemen, if a human body is washed by soap manufactured from the human body? Such an uncanny, and seemingly impossible, concept of the everyday artifact perverts the main trope of civilization to which the cosmetic traditionally belongs, since such soap dehumanizes one body in order to re-humanize another. As I will attempt to demonstrate, this kind of soap—its use, production, symbolization and network of cultural association in which it is entangled – represents a complex cultural text in that it embraces both the civilizational and anticivilizational impulses. Therefore, the story of its actual manufacture overlaps with my reconstructing the story of its cultural production.

The utilization of cadavers for educational and medical purposes has a long history, one that is often intermingled with unethical practices related to the provenance of the bodies. The Nazis who viewed the ideologically categorized body as fit for recycling obviously acted without obtaining consent as they used cadavers of those people whom they criminalized or considered racially inferior. Today's ethical standards allow the harvesting of organs and body parts *pro publico bono* only with the consent from the donor or his or her family. This understanding would render both present or historical practices of utilizing unclaimed bodies, as well as those of paupers and criminals, illegal, regardless of the purpose for which the body was used. This, however, was not the case, especially, when boiling, dissection, and display of bodily remnants coincided with the medieval Catholic cult of relics considered to be holy.

The implications of a human subject producing and using a cosmetic made from bodily matter retrieved and recycled from other human subjects without their consent draw us, then, into the sphere of ethics. In this case, however, the ethical proves to be entangled with less sublime questions – those of economics and the welfare of a society at war. Both aspects of the question prove to be conveniently intertwined with the promotion of economico-ethical happiness under the banner of distorted utilitarianism. Since 1789, when Jeremy Bentham published his *An Introduction to the Principles of*

² Soap was known in ancient civilizations (Pliny the Elder thought it was invented by Gauls), yet the story of its modern production, defined above, harks back only to the 19th vegetable oils (coconut, palm-kernel, etc.), but this type of raw material for saponification has been used for commercial production only since the 1950s.

³ S. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. J. Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1961), 46.

⁴ L. Douglas, “The Shrunken Head of Buchenwald: Icons of Atrocity at Nuremberg,” in *Visual Culture and the Holocaust*, ed. B. Zelizer (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 291.

Shallcross A Holocaust Soap and the Story of Its Production

Morals and Legislation, utilitarian philosophy has evolved into several distinct strands, including the codification of utilitarianism into a normative theory of ethics. The British philosopher's promotion of ethics, calling for the overall happiness of both the agent of an action and everyone affected by this action, privileges results over methods. Utilitarianism's teleological character, neatly opposed to deontological ethical theories concerned with moral duties and obligations instead of with goals and ends, eventually evolved into present-day consequentialism. We can trace the utilitarian underpinnings of a variety of 20th century developments, in the realms of economics, social sciences, and yes, politics. The misapplied utilitarian doctrine of motivation, privileging ends above means, would vindicate many dictators and their followers, including such Nazi scientists as Professor Rudolf Maria Spanner.

In that he used human corpses for the production of soap, Dr. Spanner's research represents one of most notorious cases of the recycling of the human body for utilitarian purposes. In reconstructing the story of this experimental, scientific production, I mainly rely on Zofia Nałkowska's "Professor Spanner," the opening reportage in her collection entitled *Medaliony* [Medallions]. As far as I know, Nałkowska's reportage, although translated into more than twenty languages, has never existed as a significant point of reference in the discourse outside of Poland. Nałkowska, best known for several of her pre-war psychological novels, was also actively engaged in socio-political questions. It was her work on behalf of political prisoners in Towarzystwo Opieki nad Więźniami [The Association of the Care of Prisoners], which resulted in the collection of reportages entitled *Ściany świata* [The Walls of the World, 1931] that is directly related to *Medallions*. After the caesura of WWII, Nałkowska remained active in a variety of official functions and published, most notably, she worked as a member of on the Committee for Researching Hitlerite Crimes, collecting former Nazi victims' testimonies, taking field trips to death camps and other sites of the genocide such as Spanner's lab. *Medallions* recorded her continued engagement on behalf of the silenced victims.

The understated content of "Professor Spanner" is framed by historical facts: together with a crew of lab assistants, prep workers, and medical students in the forensic laboratory of the Danzig medical school, Dr. Spanner recycled human fat into soap. As the Soviet Army advanced, Dr. Spanner, avoiding his scientific, moral, and technical responsibility, fled to the western part of Germany.⁵ Since he did not kill people in order to make soap and could have been prosecuted only for removing evidence, his *numéro savon*⁶

⁵ After the war, only two members of his laboratory staff, compromised as collaborators, were arrested and interrogated by the Soviet and Polish secret police, as well as by the Main Committee for Researching Hitlerite Crimes, which included among its members Nałkowska. A German prosecutor, who interrogated Spanner in 1948, dropped the case against the doctor. During the investigation, Spanner denied making such soap; his denial was consistent with the fact that he treated his wartime experiments in soap production as a secret operation disguised as a manufacture of anatomical specimens for medical students.

⁶ As Nałkowska put it in her *Dzienniki* [Diaries] VI 1945-1954, Part I (1945-1948), ed. H. Kirchner, (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 2000), VI: 150.

turned out to be a classic case of the divide between juridical and ethical law, a divide that effectively enabled him to avoid punishment.⁷

During the Nuremberg trials, Soviet prosecutor L.N. Smirnov submitted a bar of soap allegedly made of human fat understanding that this item demonstrated important legal evidence that the industrial production of human soap, contrary to the fact that Spanner's manufacture was not able to mass produce the cosmetic. Subsequently, survivors,⁸ activists of such stature as Simon Wiesenthal, as well as certain historians maintained that the soap was made of human fat.⁹ Later on, the fact was dismissed as not based on reality. However, the investigation was reactivated under the aegis of the National Remembrance Institute in Poland.¹⁰ When, thanks to the German prosecutors, an extant soap sample (considered lost) was discovered in the Hague archives, a series of tests was conducted.¹¹ They confirmed that Spanner's soap was made from human fat and, ultimately, corroborated the facts reported by Nałkowska.

From a historical distance of more than half a century, we see that one of the Holocaust's projects was to transform or negate the presence of cultural traces, archival materials, material remainders of massacres, vestiges of crematoria and, in sum, to blot out all traces of life, death, and even traces of traces. Texts of the Holocaust, as testimonial traces, contain descriptions of transformational processes that question the durability and resistance of both bodily matter and material objects. The question that comes to mind is that of how long a man remains a man, how long after death his body continues to be a vessel of human content. Nałkowska represented the stages of transformation of the body as a pseudo-scientific and violent spectacle, juxtaposing the anonymity of fat to the bodily forms, often fragmented, but still bearing vestiges of human shapes.

The Holocaust subjugated both material objects and human corpses to the recycling process, whose first stage rendered them ontologically equal. Manufacturing soap from human fat represented an extreme example of the transformational model, according to which both the surface and the core of the individual body are metamorphosed and processed beyond recognition. Both human-made and organic matter were made

⁷ Aside from Spanner himself, numerous Holocaust revisionists deny that the production of soap from human fat ever took place; one can find an abundance of information about the subject on the Web; for example, Mark Weber, an American historian who denies the Holocaust writes that reports about human fat soap were mere Holocaust propaganda.

⁸ The production of such soap was mentioned by two Czech prisoners, O. Kraus and E. Kulka, in their book *Noc a mlha*. Additional evidence was provided by the British prisoners of war J. H. Witton and W. Neely, who installed the machinery in Spanner's lab.

⁹ Among others, W. L. Shirer, the author of *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* and E. Raab, the author of *Anatomy of Nazism* (1983) repeated the claim concerning the soap.

¹⁰ The Polish prosecutor who, in 2005, opened the case against the late Spanner, also found him not guilty of any crime. The only direct result of the revised case was a plaque mounted on the lab's façade to commemorate the unwilling subjects of this research.

¹¹ The soap also contained caolin, likely added for better exfoliation.

Shallcross A Holocaust Soap and the Story of Its Production

vulnerable as never before and were destined to be completely recycled, without any residual remainder. In the trajectory relating the permanence and impermanence of matter, a defining path for the Holocaust transformational paradigm, the intent to erase vestiges of raw material became paramount. In order to achieve this goal, recycling occurred to various degrees.

Although at the beginning of Spanner's operation, the corpses he processed were Jewish, towards the end of the war, he used racially and ethnically diverse corpses for his experiments. In general, the processing of corpses speaks both of a perverted utilitarianism and of a certain shift in the Nazi approach to the Jewish body. The Nazi vision of the perfect society excluded the supposedly dangerous, effeminate, and diseased Jewish body. In order to create and substantiate this racist formulation, the Nazis drew on a mixture of medieval conceptions and aspects of modern philosophy that they buttressed with deviant scientific claims. Its central principle was the necessity of a complete removal of the Jewish body from society. But once the project of eliminating the revolting body was moved from the level of ideology into that of its practical realization, in particular after the Wansee conference, another shift took place. During this stage, the Jewish corpse was endowed with a set of new, yet opposite, qualities. When death removed the threat and disgust that the body represented, new traits were inscribed on the corpse through its treatment. On the one hand, being a mere husk inside which was hidden sought-after Jewish gold, the body was useless. On the other hand, it became a locus of diverse resources, even a commodity in itself. With this radical change – characteristic of the transformational paradigm to which the dead body was subjugated – its previously pronounced and targeted racial, cultural, ethnic essence, was completely erased. In this way, the assumed uselessness of the corpses, perceived only as objects, was replaced by a redefined use-value. Such a permissive resourcefulness, part of the larger Nazi utilitarianism, could only be facilitated by their overarching totalitarian power.

Upon closer scrutiny, the story of Spanner's production (and first attempts at circulation) of his variety of soap demonstrates denial and repression, both which were supported by any number of ideological rationalizations. The rationale given by one of the interrogated medical doctors (and his colleagues) revealed that it was "common knowledge that he was an obedient party member."¹² Moreover, as the other doctor indicated, "[a]t that time, Germans were experiencing a severe shortage of fat. Given Germany's economic state, he could have been tempted to do it for the good of the nation" (Nałkowska 2000, 10). Thus, Spanner's readiness was justified both by the Reich's economic demands and by his loyalty to the NSDAP.¹³ These testimonies – dull expressions of their false consciousness, delivered in front of the Committee – have a certain Conradian effect: the witnesses spoke of the antagonist Spanner in his absence, and in

¹² Z. Nałkowska, *Medallions*, trans. D. Kuprel (Evanston, IL., Northwestern University Press, 2000), 10.

¹³ R. J. Lifton's magisterial monograph *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of the Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 1986) and M. H. Kater's *The Doctors under Hitler* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989) are still the most comprehensive studies on the subject of Nazi medicine.

doing so, relativized the actual impact of his research. One articulated his utilitarian principle of improving the quality of life in the Third Reich, while the other defined him as a totalitarian subject. What is so extraordinary about the comment concerning his obedience to the party is the fact that it escaped the eye of another totalitarian subject – the Polish censor who accepted Nałkowska's *Medallions* for publication at the time when the Polish press was already under communist control.¹⁴ Thus censorship, understood as a part of a larger discourse on traces and obfuscation, appears on the fringes of her collection.

An erasure of what one may call historical documents was painfully familiar to Nałkowska, who, during the war, kept two diaries. In one, she wrote about everyday events, albeit deeply colored by the Nazi occupation: she describes her and her family's struggle for survival in Warsaw, her job in a small tobacco shop, and her writing and social life intertwined with sporadic visits to the countryside. The other diary was defined more strictly and kept completely secret, for she intended it to be an account of everything related to the persecution and extermination of the Jewish population. Since she likely knew and participated in conspiratorial rescue operations and underground cultural life, Nałkowska's knowledge about the unfolding extermination exceeded the vagueness of rumors that circulated in Warsaw and made her second diary particularly incriminating. She later burned these records in a stove, when Gestapo searched her apartment building, executing thusly the ultimate act of *prekarium* on her own work. The "auto-da-fe" of her diary was yet another act of self-protection and self-censorship performed under the pressure of life threatening circumstances, rather than an enactment of her inner desire. The destruction of her writings did not extend to her other wartime diaries which contained scarcer, more coded notes about the plight of Jews, usually referred to periphrastically as "the people behind the wall." The same attentive empathy with the plight of Jews, so characteristic of Nałkowska's wartime writings, is also visible throughout *Medallions*.¹⁵

Vagaries of the Scientific Self

Utilitarian morals were fused with the ideological semantics of the Nazis by means of a much older tradition of dehumanization, which treated the body as nothing more than reified meat. Julia Kristeva would consider such an approach to cadavers as an

¹⁴ I owe this observation to Samuel Sandler.

¹⁵ The collection was written almost entirely after the war, with the exception of "The Cemetery Lady." Among its seven reportages, this piece employs employs a *Jetztzeit* which differs from the post-war perspective Nałkowska applies elsewhere in the collection. Here the author deliberately retains the concreteness and contemporaneity of the lived experience in her conversation with an old, anti-semitic woman who takes care of some graves in the Catholic Powązki Cemetery located on edge of the Warsaw Ghetto walls. The reportage takes place in 1943, during the Ghetto Uprising, as Nałkowska visits her mother's grave and is in the close proximity to the ongoing killing on the other side of the wall.

argument in support of her concept of the abject corpse as neither subject nor object.¹⁶ In the places of extermination and recycling, however, a corpse was only an object remotely reflecting its previous ontology. Spanner's lab serves as a case in point, in its role as a part of a smoothly-functioning war machine, whose executioners were eager to improve the mechanization of death. Following the installment of a guillotine in the Danzig prison, Spanner dealt with an abundance of "raw material" for his covert research. The recycling in Spanner's lab demonstrated this mechanized treatment in each of its steps. First, the cadavers were "halved, quartered, and skinned" (9); then, the bones were removed; and the so-called saponification concluded the process. The writer described its end result as "a whitish, rough soap" (9) formed in metal molds. Strikingly similar, providing both a parallel and a precedent for this commodification of the body, is the fragmentation of the animal body that occurs in the slaughterhouse. There, animals are killed, skinned, disemboweled, cut into pieces, boiled, smoked, and packed, all in the name of producing food for humans. For Daniel Pick, a slaughterhouse becomes the metaphor for a war that emphasized the division of labor and the speed with which the carcasses were processed.¹⁷ Each worker was responsible for a specific morsel of each carcass, such that the animal would never appear to the worker as a physical whole – but only in a multiplicity of identical parts from countless individual animals. The division of labor determined the slaughterhouse's similarity to an assembly line, where each worker played a small role in a precisely outlined process of assembly; however, instead of piecing together, the system employed in a slaughterhouse disconnected and undid an original bodily unity.

Division of labor governed the manufacture of soap in the Danzig institution and played an important role in the preservation of secrecy. According to Nałkowska, except for Spanner and two of his lab assistants, no one involved in manufacturing the soap observed or participated in the entire cycle, which began when the prisoners were led to the guillotine, followed by their execution and the collection and transportation of their bodies to the lab, where the eerie final artifact was produced. And yet this conceptualization does not account for the final stages of soap production, during which the fragmented body underwent a complete recycling and disappeared, so nothing even remotely reminiscent of the initial human form and substance remained. These stages prompted one of the reportage's main questions as to how long after death and the process of recycling the body continued to house human content and, moreover, was recognizable as human.

The uncanny connection between the war and meat production did not escape Nałkowska, who ruminated in her *Diary 1939-1944* about the link between the war machinery and those people who were caught in it, as though in a "meat grinding

¹⁶ J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. L. S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

¹⁷ "The individual must accomplish his or her specific action at a frenzied pace, often amidst a pool of blood." D. Pick, *War Machine: The Rationalization of Slaughter in the Modern Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 184.

machine” (V: 305). While there is nothing particularly novel about this association,¹⁸ it resonated differently for this writer, in that, through it, she directly connected the concept of the self, anchored in the soma, with the meat that constituted her own diet only to undermine it with disbelief.¹⁹

It is strange that this – which makes me happen, through which I participate in the world, through which I feel myself – is *meat* (the meat brought from “town” for dinner).²⁰ Thinking about man in chemical categories can be borne easily. The fact that life “borrows” free elements of dead world, does not cause resistance; there is a quiet acceptance and understanding of it. But when viewed with the eye of “naïve realism,” meat as an organ of life and consciousness, as the site where the sweetness and horror of life occur—what an arbitrariness, what a perfunctory concept (*Diaries* V: 490).

Dialectical materialism, which Nałkowska embraced in her youth (although not in any orthodox manner), eventually took a form of monism in her writings. She was convinced that, in a strictly biological sense, there was no ontological difference between nature and humanity. As she claimed in an interview in the 1930’s: “Man is made more or less of the same material as the world; he is con-generic with it.”²¹ In a later response, the writer modified her biological monism somewhat by including an ideological element from her formative period: the belief in science. The fusion of dialectical materialism with a scientific approach to reality motivated her proclaim, with what would seem now an inflated sense of optimism, a radical faith in the “Soviet experiment” and its limitless, scientific progress:

Considered at this angle the future and durability of the Soviet experiment seems to me to depend on whether “matter,” as a gnoseological category, will prove – so to speak – its developmental capacity, its capacity to adapt to the ever more stunning discoveries within hard science, blowing up the essence and quality of matter as the subject of physics.²²

Inspired by scientific research in its Soviet instantiation, and as though intoxicated by the prospect of future technological advancement, Nałkowska displayed no foreboding about the effects of its deployment against mankind. This prewar ideology – of a materialist cognition without ethical safeguards – would return like a boomerang in her *Medallions*.

¹⁸ After all, the cynical expression “mięso armatnie” [meat fodder] functions in many languages.

¹⁹ Even prior to the war, Nałkowska observed that a fish farm was a sort of a concentration camp.

²⁰ Emphasis in the original.

²¹ S. Essmanowski, “Dialogi akademickie. Rozmowa z Zofią Nałkowską” [Academic dialogues: A conversation with Zofia Nałkowska], *Pion* 10 (1934), quoted after E. Frąckowiak-Wiegandtowa, *Sztuka powieściopisarska Nałkowskiej (Lata 1935-1954)* [Nałkowska’s Art of the Novel (Years 1935- 1954)], (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 1975).

²² This is a passage from Nałkowska’s contribution to the 1933 survey entitled “Polish Writers and Soviet Russia” conducted by *Wiadomości Literackie* [Literary News]; quoted by Frąckowiak-Wiegandtowa.

Shallcross A Holocaust Soap and the Story of Its Production

Curiously enough, in defining material unity, Nałkowska never engaged dialectical materialism in her own fiction. As observed by Frąckowiak-Wiegandtowa, the writer overlooked the idea of her characters' material/somatic foundation, focusing instead on their psychological dimension and interactions with the world. *Medallions* is an obvious exception. Here, stories of cannibalism, torture, starvation, horrible wounds, and beatings bring the suffering body, in all its mortal materiality, into the narrative foreground. In this collection, Nałkowska revises not only the bio-ontological position of the human subject; she also modifies the world, which framed these subject in terms of a radical corpo-reality.

Nałkowska's voicing a futuristic trust in physics and its transformation of matter, occurred several years before her carefully measured reportage from Spanner's lab. It almost overlapped in time with the monistic theses she articulated in her wartime diary. As such, these claims also marked an important direction in her thinking about the limitations of human cognition. However, the writer did not connect them, perhaps leaving this aspect up to the readers to decide. It was as if the ethical consequences of Spanner's activities made them incompatible with human cognition, in general, and scientific knowledge, in particular.

Had she consistently revised the concept of homogeneity of matter, would Nałkowska then adopt utilitarianism and, in its name, vindicate Professor Spanner, who obviously chose not to distinguish between human and animal *soma*? Or would her position remain irresolvable on account of the apparent split in ethical, juridical and scientific reasoning? Had she connected her prewar vision of the 'blown-up matter' with the postwar construction and usage of the atomic bomb, would she condemn one or the other? As far as we know, she did not find it necessary to revise her own scientific fetishes, including her concept of somatic homogeneity, which troubled her so much during wartime.²³ Nazi experimentation in human recycling, in which the separation of the somatic and the individual (human) became obsolete, was a direct challenge to Nałkowska's scientific ideology. She posed the question and cannot be blamed for not finding an answer to this problems.

'Meat in the Pot'

Nałkowska's reportage was conceived of as a passage through the uncanny underground facility that constituted Spanner's lab. First, the narrator, already familiar with the premises, conveyed to the reader a confused sensation that something was fundamentally wrong with the place. Spanner's facility looked like an abandoned forensic lab with corpses lying in various configurations and shapes. Only later was the site's true function disclosed to the reader, as the passage through the basement revealed the gradual

²³ With the exception of a brief passage in the article „Nowe żądania“ [New Demands], published in *Kuźnica*, in which the writer seems to accept the dangers inherent in modern science: „Science does not stop its experiments at the moment when their paths seem to go off the straight lines and utilitarian directions.“ Z. Nałkowska, *Widzenia dalekie i bliskie* [Visions Close and Distant], (Warszawa: PIW, 1957), 72.

dismantling of the corpses into parts: shaved heads in one place, flayed skin in another, a boiled torso further down. And, as the body was becoming more and more fragmented, the incriminating evidence of Spanner's research became insurmountable. This feeling coincided with the construction of the passage, from the ground level to the basement, as an archetypal descent to the underworld (*katabasis*); as a passage from the solemn to the abject, from the highest to the vulgarized, from the whole to the fragmented, from an aporia of the place to a recognition of its function. The site ultimately disclosed its dead corporeal reality – its corpo-reality.

Although Nałkowska's description of this site integrates several textual and visual traditions, the parallel with a slaughterhouse/meat-processing factory, as a workplace ruled by mechanized neutralization of ethics, becomes particularly apt. The uniformity of the images of a mechanized, serialized death stunned the writer because each cadaver had a clean cut on the neck, signifying the violation of the body. For Nałkowska, this line was too perfect, too precise – to the extent that she perceived the preserved corpses as made of stone. Only later would the technological cause of that neatness become clear to her: it was the guillotine blade that made such a disquietingly neat cut.

Elias Canetti made the gruesome remark that seeing a heap of corpses is an ancient spectacle; he outlined the way in which such an event empowers the victorious and satisfies the powerful. However, that ancient sight was not what Nałkowska reported from Danzig. Not quite. Her experience there modified Canetti's observation, emphasizing the difference that existed between *any* dead body and a dead body that has been quartered and boiled. This distinction between the spectacles of dehumanization became obvious to the visitors only when they came across a cauldron containing a dismembered and boiled human torso: "There, on the cooled hearth, stood a huge cauldron brimming with a dark liquid. Someone familiar with premises poked under the lid and retrieved a boiled human torso, skinned and dripping with the liquid" (4). This dark liquid – fat – was what interested Spanner most.²⁴ Usually, fat connotes the interiority of the body; however, its exteriorized and liquified state implied violence and the stage beyond which recycling would completely obliterate the shape of the body.

Everything in this episode – the lifting of the lid, the color of the liquid, the pulling out of a boiled and flayed body – was concerned with demonstrating the crucial stage in the recycling of the commodified and fragmented human body: the retrieval of fat from soma. Almost indiscernibly, Nałkowska changed the status of what was collected and unseen to that which was displayed, to the spectacle of reification. Through the realization of the lab's true function, the space transmogrified from the forensic lab into a soap-manufacturing place. Therefore, her reportage was conceived as a carefully dosed distribution of knowledge, or rather of both the initial lack and the gradual acquisition of knowledge by the reader. Only the visitors investigating the basement understood the unfolding logic of the whole cycle – which is to say, while they knew – the dead participated unknowingly and passively in the spectacle of showing and recycling their own cadavers.

²⁴ The question of the quantity of fat was addressed during the interrogation as a matter of fact: „One man maybe five kilos of fat.” (8).

Shallcross A Holocaust Soap and the Story of Its Production

For the dead, the gesture of exhibiting and, thus, “museuming” their cadavers took place without their knowledge. As they lay extended, they resembled the dead Psyche from Freud’s last written note.²⁵ Like her, they were unaware of the ongoing panoptic spectacle. Having been shown, they were subsequently subjected to an aestheticizing strategy, in which Nałkowska elevated the status of the immobile body to that of a work of art, to a stone sculpture,²⁶ only to overshadow this visual impression by the images of a drastically chopped up and deformed human soma. One such heap of shaved heads lying chaotically, one on top of another – “like potatoes poured onto the ground” (4)—made the spectacle grotesque and almost unreal, despite the comparison taken from the vocabulary of a naturalist.

Nałkowska’s polarized representation of the human *soma* (portrayed either as sculpted stones or potatoes) might appear unwarranted to a critic seeking consistency in her narrative. This conflicting construction subjected the fragmented *soma* to two contradictory systems: that of modernist aestheticism and naturalist authenticity. In fact, this apparent confusion stemmed from the author’s previously unresolved and intrinsically incoherent philosophy.²⁷ However, from my critical perspective, which does not privilege consistency in art, the rupture caused by her reliance on two different sets of imageries represented to represent her scene most effectively, affected the representational dimension, and thus contributed to a greater dramatic tension within the narrative.

The uneven, oscillating pull of contradictory values and perspectives is best documented in the imagery of collective and individual deaths. For the writer, this must have been a formidable challenge, as she strove to find an adequate strategy to represent the morbid spectacle of recycling human *soma*. Demands of communicating the mass death called for the representation of a total distortion of unique bodily forms. Therefore, Nałkowska suspended the spectacle of erasing individual bodily forms, of turning them into anonymous piles of meat and cauldrons of fat, to expose to the readers’ voyeuristic gaze two, complementing each other, bodily fragments that were still legible and were represented by the writer as inscription subjected to her own way of decoding. One of them is the able-bodied and tattooed torso of a sailor, reduced to being *res extensa*:

In one sarcophagus, the so-called headless “sailor” lay prostrate on a heap of cadavers. He was an impressive youth, as big as a gladiator. The silhouette of a ship was tattooed on his broad chest. Across the contour of the masts hung the sign of vain faith: God is with us (4).

Despite its defacement, the headless torso still bore traces of its previous personhood, since one was able to follow the chain of signification that retained its individuality: the

²⁵ “Psyche is extended, knows nothing about it.” Freud wrote this last note of his on August 22, 1938, a year before his death. S. Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, eds. J. Strachey and A. Freud, trans. J. Strachey et al., 24 vols. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), 23:300.

²⁶ *Nota bene*, the sculpture of a human head on the jacket cover for the first Polish edition of *Medallions* refers to this aestheticized fragmentation of the body in her narrative.

²⁷ As Frąckowiak-Wiegandtowa diagnosed the writer’s thinking in her monograph (145).

ship indicated the sailor's line of work, the body build spoke of his strength and height, and the tattooed skinscript was a confession of his faith.²⁸ In fact, this skinscript was longer and contained more information than the writer conveyed to the reader, since it indicated that the wretched sailor had served since 1930 as a crewmember on the Polish destroyer, "The Gale" ["Wicher"]. Nałkowska excluded this information from representation and reduced the already sparse data to a shred, only to question the effectiveness of the sailor's religious beliefs. Her verdict denied any agency to the sailor, rendering his faith entirely powerless: he was decapitated, exposed, and denigrated, intended for consumption in the form of soap. In her representation, Christ's *hic est enim corpus meum*, as an article of faith, had no power to redeem the sailor's defaced cadaver. Through this and similar narrative interventions present in her collection, Nałkowska negated any soteriological possibility, a maneuver in sync with her pronounced atheism that also constitutes one of her volume's most complete and coherent aspects.

In yet another glimpse, the writer used her descriptive skills to create a death mask. This time, the image of a singular death reversed the meaning and the form of the sailor's corpse: all that remained of the body was the head severed from the torso. In this seemingly coincidental manner, both corpses created an uncanny wholeness.

In the corner of one vat lay the small, cream-colored head of a boy who couldn't have been more than eighteen years old when he died. His dark, somewhat slanted eyes were not closed, the eyelids were only slightly lowered. The full mouth, of the same color as the face, bore a patient, sad smile. The strong, straight brow was raised as though in disbelief. In this most odd and inconceivable position, he awaited the world's final verdict (4).

Again, Nałkowska excised the bodily shred from any theology of embodiment. Instead, the youth's decapitated head recalled the Cartesian dualism as a philosophical trope. It signified the location of the thought-producing brain, the thinking substance, the *res cogitans*. In approaching this death mask, Nałkowska focused on seeking a lasting meaning in the subtly detailed facial expression frozen by the *rigor mortis*. In this instance, her mimetic precision demanded an unusual degree of insight, a means of getting, literally, under the skin – even at the risk of destabilizing her usual policy of non-intrusion.

Although throughout *Medallions* the authorial position is defined through this non-intrusive approach to the lives and narratives of Holocaust victims, in these two brief glimpses at individualized death, Nałkowska deemed authorial intervention necessary perhaps because, first of all, these shreds of the human form could not speak for

²⁸ The skinscript was in Polish, which added more weight to the argument against connecting this phrase with the "Got mit uns" calling of the two world wars; furthermore, its iconography, as recorded by Nałkowska, differs from its much better-known German counterpart. The phrase inserted on belt buckles of German imperial army soldiers was intended as part of an iconographic and ideological design, which included a laurel wreath and, as its most prominent sign, the imperial crown. The Wehrmacht soldiers' belt buckle consisted of yet a more complicated design: the very same religious expression, the *Hakenkreuz*, a laurel leaf wreath and an eagle. Nonetheless, in each case, one encounters an old tradition of invoking God's help.

themselves, but also because of their particularly disturbing nature. The writer's usual gesture of self-decentering²⁹ would have proven ineffective in conveying her horrifying encounter with the dismembered youth. Therefore, she created space for a rather discrete evaluation in an otherwise factual description of the victim's age, smile, and raised eyebrows – as though to prevent herself from mimicking the mere mechanical listing of the “parts among parts.”

Frąckowiak-Wiegandtowa remarked that after Nałkowska's authorial debut, the adjective “dziwny” (odd, strange) belonged to Nałkowska's entrenched lexical repertoire (36). She criticized what she viewed as the writer's predilection for the adjective, maintaining that, in using it, Nałkowska tended to blur everything.³⁰ The word, particularly popular in the Young Poland, can easily obfuscate the meaning of its context and, indeed, even sound naïve. In the case of Nałkowska's Holocaust narration, though, we deal with a different, quite subtle and relevant meaning of “most odd, perplexing” as a qualifier for her encounter with the dead youth. Balancing a difficult act between the tender and dispassionate, Nałkowska conveyed the individual death in terms of an extreme experience with which she empathized *against all odds* and, especially, against an overwhelming sense of loss and dehumanization.

This impossible gesture came with a price: the crisis of *Einfühlung* was enhanced by a universal awareness that another's experience of dying cannot be reconstructed. The boy's death mask suggested the lengths to which one could, or rather could not, go in an attempt to read someone else's passage to death. There is no easy way out of this cognitive conundrum, although the necessity of differentiating the movement towards death from death's finality is critical to the entire Holocaust experience, as it transcended the limits of universal accessibility.

Nałkowska ended her attempt at invoking individual death with a nod toward the inaccessible. Was it the brutality of his execution at such young age or that the victim himself could not conceive? Since it would be preposterous to use a prosopopeic voice and speak in his name, the unreachable and, thus, unspeakable was negotiated through the spectator's contradictory rhetoric of oddity and *Einfühlung*. The writer's reading the skinscripts on the sailor's headless body along with the mortuary traces left on the youth's facial features pointed to an insurmountable distinction between the living spectators and the dead subjugated to ongoing scopis inquiry. It also pointed to the living spectator who participated in this process and inscribed on it the verdict of disbelief as an ethical response. This had to do with the dynamics of (un)knowing throughout the narrative, in which the living had access to different aspects of both knowledge and its lack, while the dead represented the unknowing. The final stage of recycling the corpses into soap constituted their knowing (and the victims' unknowing) and reflected the entire trajectory from the single body to cosmetic.

²⁹ In “Professor Spanner,” the writer uses the plural we to refer to the committee members and their usher, which stood in polar opposition to the truncated cadavers referred to as these.

³⁰ However, the critic did not speak of Nałkowska's *Medallions*.

In her wartime diary, Nałkowska pondered the eerie and repetitious nature of the war experience, its uncanny resemblance to other wars and how it all always-already was. Her contemplation of the war pointed to the repetitious nature of its universal cruelty, as well as its mimetic representation. If we follow the author's premise that "wszystko to już było," paradoxically, several new cognitive possibilities are open for interpretation, shifting the narrative from the historical referent to the author's artistic construal. Besides and beyond the accuracy of the parallel with the slaughterhouse, Nałkowska's narrative also engaged other contextual, religious, literary and pictorial traditions. By retreating to her old vocabulary (and interpretative habit), which connoted a feeling of strangeness, oddity, and disbelief, Nałkowska enabled an evaluative mechanism, which referred as far back as Ezekiel's vision of the bodies of deportees from Jerusalem in a foreign city, described rather bluntly by the prophet as "the meat in the pot" (Ezekiel 11:1-13). While the prophet's better-known intimations of his people's rebirth and redemption were hardly relevant to Nałkowska's non-soteriological conception, his rhetoric combined with the pictorial concreteness characteristic of his first vision, preempts not just the accumulation of fragmented corpses in Spanner's lab, but, to a certain extent, the twentieth-century artistic practices of fragmenting and, most notably, dissolving the body.

Furthermore, under the writer's pen, the modernist order of the slaughterhouse is intertwined with another form of imagery – the Shakespearean horror understood as violation of ethics, a sphere of the evil subjected to a taboo; hence associating such activity with witchcraft. The eerie witches, Macbeth's helpers, brew a potion out of morsels of animal bodies mixed with pieces of human corpses: "a liver of a blaspheming Jew,"/ "Nose of Turk; and Tartar's lips/ Finger of birth-strangl'd babe."³¹ This concoction of anatomical fragments was based on a simple recipe: it consisted of everything that, in Shakespeare's time, represented the Other and, as such, became a candidate for sacrifice.

Unlike the witches, who were not task-oriented, Spanner had a clearly defined utilitarian goal that prevailed over his anti-Semitism: to provide soap for Germany. Indeed, during the earlier stages of his operation, the corpses Spanner processed were Jewish, mainly from the Stutthof concentration camp. However, toward the end of the war, he used, in the mode of the Shakespearean witches, racially and ethnically diverse corpses in his experiments. Nałkowska's reportage uncovered the use of ethnically diverse bodies in Spanner's lab, since the vats contained a diversified human *soma*, diverse in terms of the victims' national and racial origin: the bodies of Soviet prisoners of war, of Jews from East Prussia and Pomerania, of patients from the psychiatric institute in Conradstein, as well as corpses of executed German officers, possibly victims of the escalating purge of the anti-Hitlerite opposition, sent from both the Danzig and Königsberg state prisons. Since the bodies were sent from the entire Pomerania region, one can safely surmise that there were more Polish cadavers some of the bodies than the corpse of the able-bodied sailor.

³¹ W. Shakespeare, "Macbeth," *The Complete Works* (New York: Avenel Books, 1975), 1060.

Shallcross A Holocaust Soap and the Story of Its Production

This defies the popular perception that the soap was made of “pure Jewish fat.” Since, during the war, the abbreviation “R.I.F.” (with no final period) was inscribed on bars of soap, although Spanner’s bars of soap had no such sign, these letters were mistranslated and misspelled as *Rein Idische Seif* (pure Jewish soap), when, in reality, the abbreviation stood for *Reichsstelle für Industrielle Fettversorgung* (State Center for Supply of Fats). Therefore, we may consider this misperception a curious symptom of a “purist” and essentialist reading, or, at least, note that the tension between essentialism and utilitarianism reaches its peak in this misreading.

The Smell of Truth and Two Digressions

“Don’t economize on soap!”

(Sign on the wall of the washroom in Auschwitz)

Primo Levi

Both the medical and the chemical processes taking place secretly in the Danzig forensic lab were based on the initial premise that the body could be completely transformed into a new and useful product. If the body, in the Nazi project, was to be transformed totally (into soap), it was presumed that its new utilitarian ontology would retain no vestiges or traces of its previous status – which is to say, nothing human. For Spanner, fulfilling the objective of such recycling meant eliminating the last remaining human trace: the soap’s stubbornly persistent, peculiar odor. The interrogated lab worker confessed that this product “didn’t smell very good. Professor Spanner tried hard to get rid of the smell. He wrote away to chemical factories for oils. But *you could always tell the soap was different*” (emphasis added, 9). Since the doctor could not erase the trace of the constituent bodies from the disgusting soap, his research thus emphasized the tension inherent in soap between its sanitary use and abjection. The appearance of the odor as a byproduct of the fat recycling revealed the limits of scientific progress and, subsequently, of the transformational method that he used: even in its radically altered form, the soap continued in its abjection, exuding, in one of the unwilling consumers’ own words, an “unpleasant” human odor.

In the lab’s utilitarian microcosm, where “everything was permitted,” reaching a solution to the unappealing smell was only a matter of time. Yet the divide between the utilitarian approach to the body and the principle of absolute permissiveness did not necessarily inform a clash between them. In fact, as Hannah Arendt pointed out in her *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the claim of absolute permissiveness was already a part of nineteenth-century utilitarian understanding of common sense (440). If we follow her analysis of permissive utilitarianism as present within totalitarianism, one thing becomes quite clear. The enclosed realm of a concentration camp and a zone such as the one under Spanner’s control share one characteristic: the totalitarian power that allowed the cruelest, craziest, and “most odd” (many of them non-utilitarian) concepts to have materialized. And it was permissiveness in its totalitarian version

that facilitated Spanner's inventiveness,³² which for one of his lab workers spoke of the arcane knowledge of "how to make something—from nothing" (9).

The usage of soap was cleverly manipulated in Auschwitz in order to dispel a fear of death in the newly arrived prisoners. Primo Levi mentions that the signs encouraging a liberal use of soap were undermined by the poor quality of the product distributed to prisoners.³³ In the larger context of the genocide, an excursion into cosmetic supplies in wartime France seems a bit out of place, but, after all, that war was prompted, among others, by a grandiose project of social hygiene. The greatly simplified bodily hygiene and a corresponding shortage of cosmetic supplies was, so to speak, a collateral damage incited by the war economy. Soap, usually taken for granted, became scarce even in France during the war. The provincial town of Roanne in central France and, later, the village of Coligny, north of Lyon, served as the wartime refuge of the French poet Francis Ponge and his family, who experienced war through "restrictions of all kinds, and soap, real soap, was particularly missed."³⁴ His complaint pertained to the same inferior quality of soap as that mentioned by Levi: "We had only the worst ersätze – which did not froth at all" (Ponge 11). The inferior quality of soap, predicated on widespread shortages, motivated the poet to focus his post-phenomenological gaze on other aspects of the cosmetic. He observed its hard substance: "a sort of stone" (14), "Magic stone!" (21), "Slobbering stone..." (28). In short, Ponge invented soap anew and construed its naturalness as stone.

Even during the post-war years, by which time conditions had improved, Ponge perceived soap as an elusive product. Whenever he tried to touch its pebble-like form, the soap would foam and slide easily from his hands. Gazing thus at its absence, he reflected on its slippery and almost deceitful, yet tangible, concreteness. For him too, soap's teleology was to disappear – either in water or in the war.³⁵ Like a stone, Ponge's soap has weight, but its flowery aroma was beyond his olfactory expectations, for "it was

³² For example, there were 350 corpses in the morgue, in contrast to the anatomy institute's standard requirement of approximately 14, the number necessary to teach local medical students the craft of dissection. The abundance of corpses forced Spanner, anticipating their usefulness, to store some of them should there be future shortages or an expansion of his manufacture. This excess illustrates well the permissive aspect of totalitarianism.

³³ Levi writes: "The prisoners were required to take a shower two or three times a week. However, these ablutions were not sufficient to keep them clean as soap was handed out in very parsimonious quantities: only a single 50-gram bar per month. Its quality was extremely poor; it consisted of a rectangular block, very hard, devoid of any fatty material but instead full of sand. It did not produce lather and disintegrated very easily, so after a couple of showers it was completely used up." P. Levi with L. de Benedetti, *Auschwitz Report*, trans. J. Woolf, ed. R. S.C. Gordon (London and New York: Verso, 2006), 45.

³⁴ F. Ponge, *Soap*, trans. L. Dunlop (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1969), 11.

³⁵ Ponge's *Savon* serves as a case in point for Peter Schwenger who persuasively relates the concept of the thing and its poetic erasure to the death drive. P. Schwenger, "Words and the Murder of the Thing," in *Things*, ed. B. Brown, ed., *Critical Inquiry*, no. 1 (2001): 99-113.

Shallcross A Holocaust Soap and the Story of Its Production

a little more strongly scented” (63).³⁶ I do not suggest that he became a bit indifferent to the odor of history; rather, in all probability, the stench of decomposing corpses – *that* horrible stench mentioned by Borowski, Janet Flanner, and W.G. Sebald among others – never reached Roanne and Coligny. Pleasant or not, for Ponge, the smell transcended the questions of matter and its markers to enter the domain of olfactometry and subjective responses to odors.

Arguably, no modernist inquiry into the sense of smell can match Patrick Süskind’s novel *Perfume*, which made a compelling equation between the soul and the individual’s essence as constituted in a bodily smell.³⁷ Thus this odor, if captured and retained (as his protagonist-perfumist desired to do), would preserve the core of an individual soul. But the perfumer had to kill a virgin in order to extract a unique essence. Was the German writer speculating about the (im)permanence of the soul and matter in the manner that I struggled to dispel on these pages? Hardly. Rather, he focused on the social repercussions of the perfect perfume in the manner that allowed an allegorization of the political. In “Professor Spanner,” on the other hand, the persisting odor of the soap suggested that between the intimate and somatic traverses something that can be qualified as an irreducible phenomenon, indivisible and invisible, the most intimate and little known bond between the physiological and the spiritual.

While Süskind’s “alchemist” set for himself the goal of both discovery and preservation, perhaps even respect, for the individual bodily essence, Spanner intended to obliterate the bodily core entirely from his final product. The symbolic concept of (un)recyclability did not exist in his mortuary science prior to recycling. Spanner’s *savon* did not yield itself to pleasant consumption, for it remained abject from beginning to end and, thus, he furtively searched for an effective recipe to dispel human vestige – in the ethereal form of smell – in order to manufacture the better quality soap worthy of every German bathroom.

This odor – the invisible remainder/reminder of the soap’s true origin – signaled a particular glitch in Nazi recycling. The trace of the human agent, if you will, worked against the total reduction of the reified body into nothing. Thus the human agent destabilized, albeit temporarily, the unvoiced ideological assumption concerning the utilitarian and biopolitical status of the human subject as easily recyclable. The undesirable smell of the extract spoke of the spectral Derridian trace, of the illusive core that continued to remind its consumers of their own bio-ontology. Only a complete obfuscation of the human agent could make the process successful. Instead, the somatic object of scientific desire, which was sought only that it might be destroyed and never again desired, resisted the transformation. It became a spectral remainder/reminder of a seemingly neutralized truth, its working parallel to that of memory. Of all the types of Holocaust recycling, this one failed.

³⁶ The reader should not be mystified by this arguably frivolous statement since, during WWII, Ponge was also a soldier, an insurance worker and a Resistance organizer.

³⁷ P. Süskind, *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*, trans. J. E. Woods (New York: Pocket Books, 1991).

Tomasz ŻUKOWSKI

Savoir-vivre: Ironic Strategies in Calek Perechodnik's *Confession*¹

Until recently, the Shoah was mostly discussed in categories of inexpressibility and trauma. It is true that the enormity of the crime took away the voices of victims, witnesses, and interpreters. Writers have long been interested in the subject of the experience of suffering and grief,² but Polish culture also has another problem to solve: enunciating and comprehending what happened on the boundary that divided Polish society into the Aryan and Jewish sides. Yet the poetics of inexpressibility is insufficient for describing social mechanisms. Polish Jews know about these all too well, as they were excluded and consigned to the position of a minority, were and continuing to be subject to enormous pressure.

¹ Translator's note: *Confession* is the literal translation of *Sporowiedź* – the short title of the unabridged 2004 edition of Calek Perechodnik's memoirs referred to in the original version of this article (*Sporowiedź. Dzieje rodziny Żydowskiej podczas okupacji hitlerowskiej w Polsce*, ed. David Engel, Warszawa: Karta, 2004). I have used quotations from *Am I a Murderer?*, Frank Fox's English translation of the earlier edition. However, this version is sometimes lacking in elements and even whole sentences and passages from the unabridged version. Therefore, where necessary I have added my own translations, marked by italics and square brackets. Page numbers refer to *Am I a Murderer?* except where the whole quotation is my translation, in which case they refer to *Sporowiedź*.

² Just to mention Władysław Broniewski's "Ballads and Romances," Wisława Szymborska's "Still," Tadeusz Różewicz's poems such as "Pigtail," Chaskiel and "The Old Jewish Cemetery in Lesko," and from more recent literature Paweł Huelle's *Who Was David Weiser?* or Marek Bińczyk's *Tworki*.

Among them, Calek Perechodnik was a remarkable author. His insight, observational mind, and competences as a participant in Polish culture are immeasurable. He chose an exceptional tool: irony. His ironic temperament gives his position an added acuteness, revealing the discursive mechanisms that organize the space in which Polish Jews move. It is these that are responsible for the construction of facts, ordering of reality and its interpretation. And it is in this way that the image in which Polish society sees itself is formed. Jews exist in this in a way accepted by the majority, and the reactions to what their Polish fellow citizens have in store for them must fit within a specified framework. They themselves are forced to participate in the rituals of agreement for the discursive – and not only – norms established by the dominant group. Violation of taboos proves to be tantamount to rejection and collective damnation of somebody who risks such a step.

Perechodnik's irony is levelled at the cultural mechanisms measured in this way. It unveils and brings to a halt the machine that produces series of appropriate responses and images. To achieve this task, it cannot be limited to the meaning of individual sentences. As a larger-scale strategy, it involves contrasting juxtapositions of facts in extensive passages of text. It often uses a punchline, which turns on its head a statement that appears wholly innocent, conforming to the accepted norms. This is irony aimed not only at the content of sentences, but at the social practices of using them.

Irony against ritual

At the beginning of his *Confession*, Perechodnik writes the following about his experiences in inter-war Poland: “Because, I want it clearly understood that I personally did not come in contact with [practical] anti-Semitism. It's true that I could not study at Warsaw University, but because of that, I had an opportunity to go to France [Toulouse] for graduate studies.”³

Even at first glance, this sentence seems odd. What is “practical anti-Semitism” in pre-war Poland, and how does it differ from plain anti-Semitism? Why does Perechodnik assure the reader that he has not encountered anti-Semitism, but then immediately note that he “could not study at Warsaw University,” known for anti-Semitic wrangles, ghetto benches and the *numerus clausus* for young Jews?

If he had made it to a Polish university, he would have become acquainted with a whole range of anti-Semitic behavior, from invective to physical attack. He no doubt knew this, because everyone did know about the anti-Semitic brawls organized by the student population. He must also have realized that his going to France to study was nothing other than the result of discrimination against Jews at Polish universities, especially Warsaw. Since the beginning of the 1930s, anti-Semitic incidents had been a regular occurrence, often leading to the university being closed during the academic year. When young Polish Jews went abroad to study, this was a direct consequence of

³ Perechodnik, Calek, *Am I a Murderer? Testament of a Jewish Ghetto Policeman* (trans. Frank Fox), Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996, xxii.

Holocaust in Literary and Cultural Studies

anti-Semitism at domestic universities and the related policy of reducing the number of Jewish students in Poland.⁴

Perechodnik therefore contradicts himself. He assures the reader that he has not encountered anti-Semitism, but his account shows that he did on many occasions. This contrast becomes a vehicle of irony: losing the opportunity to become acquainted with the batons of the National Radical Camp party is “rewarded” by the necessity to study abroad. This subject returns several times over the next two pages. The discord between the first declaration and facts and experience becomes ever clearer.

First we read:

I was placed in category A, but because Poland was such a mighty power, possessed of such a strong military and of so many educated and commissioned engineers-officers, I was obviously superfluous! Anyway – why beat about the bush? – they gave me a supernumerary status. They did it with me, my brother (also an engineer), and all of our Jewish friends who had a high school education or higher. They just did not want to have Jewish officers in the Polish army. (xxiii)

And further, on his wife’s family, all on the next page of text: “They wanted to build another movie house in Otwock, but the mayor would not permit it. He’d rather there was no movie house...than for a Jew to be an owner of one. But never mind that” (xxix). One paragraph later: “As for me, I was certain that I could get another ten degrees, and I still wouldn’t be given a government position in Poland” (12).

There are enough examples to show that Perechodnik came across anti-Semitism in interwar Poland many times and in person. So why does he claim otherwise?

Such declarations are recurrent and characteristic. Even today, one continues to hear them. They form a series of appropriate responses generated by the discursive norm, constituting part of the ritual cultivated by those who live under pressure of being accused of otherness. Here is a sample. In the book *Między Panem a Plebanem* (“Between the Lord and the Vicar”), Adam Michnik speaks of Jacek Kuroń’s “red scouting: “And why did I recall this with sentiment?” he explains, “Because it was the only period in my life when I had no fear of someone saying ‘Jew’ to me and having to defend myself from it.” Two pages later, asked by Jacek Żakowski about anti-Semitism, he answers, “I didn’t come across it either in school or at university. That all came out in 1968, when the government started to incite.”⁵

The members of a discriminated group ritually avoid making direct accusations to the majority. As a rule, discrimination happens to other people, not those who happen to be speaking. Violence is something distant, and has nothing to do with the personal experience of the speaker. It is usually someone from outside who is guilty,

⁴ See: Natkowska, Monika, *Numerus clausus, getto lawkowe, numerus nullus, “paragraf aryjski.” Antysemityzm na Uniwersytecie Warszawskim 1931–1939*. Warszawa: IH, 1999. The book’s final chapter is devoted to the phenomenon of Polish Jews going abroad to study and difficulties with gaining official recognition of their degrees.

⁵ Michnik, Adam, Tischner, Józef and Żakowski, Jacek, *Między Panem a Plebanem*, Kraków: Znak, 1995, 56 and 59.

who cannot be identified with the dominant group (with Michnik it is the communist rule that is to blame; a psychoanalyst would no doubt have something to say about the word “incite” – *judzić* in Polish, possibly etymologically linked to “Judas,” and even if not, then sounding alike – which appears in this context as an additional, unconscious sign of subordination). Although a direct question about anti-Semitism usually brings a ritual reaction in keeping with the expected norm in such cases, when the pressure is less, uncensored experience comes out, almost incidentally.

Perechodnik’s irony, then – the anti-Semitism at Warsaw University that forced him to go to France saved him from ordeals with anti-Semites – is not limited to adding caveats to the sentence “I personally did not come in contact with anti-Semitism.” The quotation marks encompass the ritual of creating before the eyes of the majority a supposed enclave in which there is allegedly no anti-Semitism and establishing a phantasmic “healthy core of the nation” with no connection with evil. Perechodnik seems to tamely respect the way of speaking imposed on the majority: he fulfils the requirement, distances the problem and absolves his interlocutor, because since a Polish Jew telling his story has never encountered anti-Semitism, then the problem does not concern those to whom he is speaking. And yet the ironic temperament prevails in *Confession*.

The contradiction that goes unnoticed in other authors becomes a method of revealing the ritual itself here. Owing to this contrast – whether built consciously or not – we are unable to naively treat ritualized assurances as a description of reality. When the automatism created by social norms disappears, we face the question of the function of sentences which are clearly not a description of reality. The comical and internally contradictory reasoning points to the mechanism that creates it. By saying “I could not study at Warsaw University, but because of that, I had an opportunity to go to France for graduate studies,” Perechodnik mocks the labels imposed by the dominant ones on the discriminated minority, and the irony reveals the presence and rules of the ritual.⁶

A similar ironic strategy appears many times in *Confession*. Let us look at some more distinct examples.

Mass theft and a clear conscience

After completing his account of events in Otwock, Perechodnik devotes several pages of his *Confession* to “the attitudes of Poles towards Jews and, in general, towards the acts of extermination of Jews” (97-101). This passage, dripping in biting irony, is extremely

⁶ Gabriel Lawit acknowledges this ritual in “Ballada o czterech muszkieterach” (“The Ballad of the Four Musketeers”): “When you need to, you find a way/ When they spit, I say it looks like rain/ And I have never seen/ The words Jews – off to the gas.” The song is a conversation between four friends from Krakow’s Kazimierz district, meeting again years later. The last of them decided to settle in Poland. Polish lyrics taken down from a recording made available by Anna Zawadzka. The two-disc *Album rodzinny – ballady Gabrysia* (“Family album – Gabe’s ballads”) was released by the author in 2000. Gabriel Lawit lives in Ballerup near Copenhagen, having emigrated from Poland in 1972.

important for understanding his strategy. It contains a summary of the observations made so far and experiences which suggest that for Polish society the Shoah is above all an opportunity to pillage Jewish property on a mass scale. Yet proves to be really interesting is something else: the Polish sense of innocence and the mechanisms used to create it and then maintain it. From this point of view, Perechodnik is a remarkable expert on the Polish consciousness and discursive practice. Let us try to compile a catalogue of the major mechanisms he finds.

1. "It's not us, it's the Germans," Perechodnik writes:

The lower classes of the townspeople as well as the peasants oriented themselves to whichever way the wind was blowing. They understood that they had an opportunity to enrich themselves, one that came only in a great while. One could pillage without penalty, steal, kill people, so that many using the slogan "now or never" got to work. [*In the naivety of their spirit they think that they will never be punished.*] After all, [*there is a "responsible editor."*] the Germans...[*if necessary everything will be put down to the Germans anyway.*]

On the first level, the irony of this passage entails speaking in someone else's voice – that of the Polish majority – which is at the same time unmasked as the voice of hypocrites. But this is not just about an inelegant or morally dubious "taking what was left behind for yourself." The meaning of Perechodnik's irony becomes clear only after revelation of the context in which he sets the Polish "if necessary everything will be put down to the Germans anyway." This context is the hunting for Jews described in the next paragraph:

In every town where there was an *Aktion*, the ghetto was surrounded by a mob that participated in a formal hunt on Jews, a hunt according to all the rules of hunting – with beaters. Did many Jews perish at their hands? Countless ones! In the best case, the beaters took money from Jews, resigned to lead them only to the gendarmes. It was in any case a sentence of death. What could the Jew do without money? He could go to the gendarme himself and ask for a bullet... Just to make things clear, Perechodnik adds "The mob acted in unison, the nameless mob" (97).

The image is completed by a remark on Polish intellectuals, or in fact the whole society, with no division into the mob and the upper echelons:

It's a peculiar thing: Jews did not even dream that the order to kill Jews would apply to all Jews, while the Poles realized right away that no Jew would survive the war. [*Are we to take this as proof of their remarkable wisdom and political farsightedness, or might this wisdom have resulted from a proverb: all people draws the conclusions about the future that suit them – this is not hard to answer.*] (98)

It therefore turns out it is not only sole responsibility for appropriation of things that falls the way of the Germans, as "responsible editor." In Perechodnik's take, between the occupier and the Polish population, irrespective of social class, a tacit understanding exists: the robbing, if not "leading them to the gendarmes," makes it impossible for Jews to escape to Polish districts, and largely contributes to the success of the German plan of extermination. In return, the Nazis allow people to engorge themselves at the cost of the Jews, assuring them that none of those robbed will be back to demand his property, regardless of the result of the war. Only with this silent conspiracy comes the

irony. Perechodnik brings it to the fore and mocks the connected hypocrisy. At the same time, he breaks the pact of silence. He shows that in the phrase “it’s not us, it’s the Germans” the reference is to the Polish part in the Holocaust and to its avoiding becoming a subject of discussion.

2. Obedient Pole – Obedient Jew. In order to maintain the sense of innocence, the fact of silent complicity in the extermination of the Jews must be concealed as deeply as possible. This was particularly important for well-cultivated people with more delicate consciences. Perechodnik has a fair amount to say about representatives of the Polish intelligentsia, with whom his own education and position brought him into contact:

Indeed, it happened that a Pole had a Jewish friend who gave him things for safekeeping. If he then obligingly went to Treblinka, the matter was finished. Possessions increased: the conscience was clear – *tout va très bien*. It was worse when a Jew appeared to be “bothersome,” wanted to live and remind them of his possessions. Then there was something to talk about to others. Indeed, the Jew will not survive the war anyway, and so he will not be able to repay the favor after the war. He will not be able to lodge charges before a court, will not cast a shadow on an unblemished name. To give anything back to him is simply a sin. If we give things back to him, others will come and take things away. (98)

The above passage can be understood when we look at it in the context of complicity in the extermination. The Jew “without things” loses the chance to survive (exceptions occur, but statistics are implacable). Refusal to give up money or objects that have been put away means a sentence. But this is not the point here. Perechodnik’s irony is guided more by a demand made of the Jews themselves: they should “obediently” play the role assigned to them, and in such a way as not to bother the Polish conscience. They should disappear, discretely leaving their things for their Polish “friends” and the guilt to the Germans.

A caricature of this “obedient” appropriation is Miss Lusia. Perechodnik is particularly scathing when writing about her:

Janek appealed to Miss Lusi [*sic*] to return four hundred zloty and the things she had taken from my aunt Czerna. I found out that the money was in the hands of Lusi’s friend. Salted bacon that had been bought for that sum had to be resold. This product had now fallen in value, so it was necessary to wait. In addition, Lusi would take everything to my aunt, and in a little while she would bring her from Kolbiel to her place. Janek was barely able to get a negligible portion of the things she had and one hundred zloty. The rest Lusi was to return personally to my aunt. She even began to write a letter to Kolbiel: “I will shortly come to you, my lady, but in the meantime don’t send me Janek or Calek.” Surely she would have arrived; it’s just that earlier they had deported Jews from Kolbiel to Treblinka. It seems to have been foreordained for Lusi to receive a trousseau gratis from my aunt. After six weeks, when I told her of the death of my aunt, the poor girl broke into tears. Crocodile tears flowed. Well, the ordinary sort of morality... but with the crazed pretense of being a decent person. (95-96)

We will return to the question of Perechodnik’s silence in such situations. More important now is the feeling of guilt *per se*. Miss Lusia takes the things as a friend and – whether consciously or not – arranges the situation in a way that allows her to maintain this status.

The ironic “It seems to have been foreordained for Lusi to receive a trousseau gratis from my aunt” shows the mechanism of transferring responsibility for perpetrating an unspecified fate with which one has nothing to do, and at the same time determining the right to inheritance based on friendship, good relations and a lack of any other heirs. Miss Lusia feels that the kindness she has shown to Czerna entitles her to acquire her things.

A model example of this mechanism can be found in another passage:

I know a Pole, our former tenant [*Bujalski*], who considers himself 100 percent patriot and a decent man. And, indeed, he is a decent man. I can trust him absolutely. He is probably the only tenant in 1943 in all of Poland's territory paying rent to his Jewish landlord. This man, in a conversation with my father, could express himself in the following manner: “I traded with that Jew for so many years, and think about it, he gave me nothing for safekeeping. They took him to Treblinka – and what did he get from that?! If only had had left me his goods. (99)

Even someone like this Bujalski seems convinced that his conduct towards Jews is a kind of excessive goodness going beyond the limits or moral obligation. The conclusion that arises from this is that the Jew's duty is gratitude, that he has a debt to pay. The tacitly assumed norm proves to be discrimination from which somebody has magnanimously made an exception. In the manner of thinking represented by Bujalski, there is no room for reflection on the connection of this norm with the German Holocaust machine. The death of Jews also does not bring any change to the norm or in the way in which it is seen and carried out. Making an exception is something so significant and momentous that neglecting the most material expressions of gratitude is in fact the fault of the Jew, even if it was *in articulo mortis* that he permitted this neglect. As we see, attempts to escape from transportation are not a sufficient excuse.

3. Justifications. We come therefore to the matter of the justifications of the Holocaust with which Polish society reacted to it. “But let us put aside the material questions,” writes Perechodnik, “these are dirty matters. It was reasoned plainly. From where did the Jews get such wealth? Wasn't it from the Polish soil? The time had come for them to repay their debt to Poles...*pecunia non olet*” (99). Again, the irony is a double one. On the one hand, it is clearly someone else's speech being quoted: for those who do not have to fight for their lives, money is not the most important thing. They can look upon it as a mundane thing, not worth the attention of a decent fellow. Yet when the question “From where did the Jews get such wealth?” is asked, it turns out that Jews should not talk about money, because of the supposed harm they have done to Poles and the associated guilt. Grievances over being robbed would be extremely inappropriate here. The discrete silence that surrounds the material aspect of the Holocaust is therefore kept out of respect to the Jews themselves, and as a noble gesture reinforces the Polish sense of guilt.

Elsewhere, Perechodnik speaks with bitterness, but this time without irony, of this attitude:

Three months after the start of the *Aktion*, in October 1942, an article discussing the deportation of Jews appeared in *Biuletyn Informacyjny* [Information Bulletin]. It emphasized the barbarism of the Germans, expressed compassion for the Jews, but in the end came to the following

conclusion: the best class of Jews were those who before the war did not want to be a parasite on a foreign organism and immigrated to Palestine. They were destined to live; the remainder of the nation perished. (100)

There are various types of this kind of awareness. It is evident that there is a kind of template at work that produces sets of similar statements. Take this example. Perechodnik gives an account of a visit to Miss Lidia, a dentist:

“You see, Mr. Calek, the reason that your sister [*Rachela*] perished was because she testified against me falsely in court. It’s a deserved punishment from God that she finally met up with.” I open my eyes wide. I feel as if I have broken out in a cold sweat. Finally I have an answer as to why my sister perished: It was for having been a witness for the opposite side in a case concerning ten or twenty *złoty* of a monthly rental. [*For this, she had to die, a deserved punishment from God...And I heard her out in silence.*] (127)

As we see, the belief in the guilt of the Jews as a group and of specific Jews as individuals is so strong that it remains unshaken even in the face of a massacre. Yet even more important is the relationship that the belief in Jewish guilt forms between Poles and Jews helping each other. Kindness, it turns out, is an act of magnanimity confirming the moral superiority of those who suffered harm at the hands of Jews.

4. Live corpses. Exclusion is shown in the specific attitude towards Jews – both living and deceased ones. What got stuck in Perechodnik’s memory from the liquidation of the Otwock ghetto was the image of Poles looting the ravaged homes:

At times the looters come across murdered Jews, but what does it matter? They argue and fight among the not-yet-cold bodies; one tears out of the hands of the other a pillow or a suit of clothes. And the Jewish corpse? Like a corpse, it lies quietly, does not speak, does not bother anyone; it will not even appear to anyone in their sleep. After all, the Poles have a clear conscience...“We didn’t kill them, and in any case, if we don’t take it, the Germans will!” (57)

The body of a dead person, usually the object of respect, in the case of a Jewish corpse becomes an insignificant object. No attention is paid to it, its presence does not cause any changes to collective actions and does not cause any guilty consciences.

It soon becomes evident that those who have managed to survive the liquidation of the ghetto acquire a similar status to the dead. Not only are they seen as only temporarily alive, but they are also treated like corpses in the ghetto. This approach has many hues. Let us start from the mildest. During his visit to Miss Lidia, Perechodnik hears the following remarks: “Indeed, I do have to get along with you. Your father is already old, he will probably not last too long, after the war you will be the landlord. So I have to get along with you” (127). Miss Lidia comes to terms with the death of his sister similarly easily – after all, like his father, she was at fault in respect to her. Jewish guilt means that a just sentence is just a matter of time.⁷

⁷ This is an old model of Polish culture. Co-existence with the Jews as an exceptional state and annihilation and punishment as a natural order of things is discussed by Joanna Tokarska-Bakir in her article “Żydzi u Kolberga,” *Res Publica Nowa* 1999 no. 7-8.

Others too passed this sentence off all too lightly. Perechodnik notes that “almost all my colleagues had things and money stored at Polish friends’ houses, and later it turned out that 90 percent of it was gone” (158). The explanation for this state of affairs is brutal. Referring to the matter of Alchimowicz, captain of the Polish armies and bailiff of the Magistrates’ Court, who took some of the stored items for himself, he comments: “Apparently the human soul reacts differently in the presence of a live person and differently when it has to do with live corpses.” Alchimowicz retains a distinct sense of superiority to his former Jewish acquaintances, whom he treats like bothersome suplicants. Perechodnik advises his father, not to tell Alchimowicz about this [a missing fur lining] because this great “gentleman” would feel insulted and in general would not want to talk to him... But nothing helped. When my father returned to recover his things, Alchimowicz did not deny that he had the fur, but said that he would return it in the spring because his wife would wear it in the winter, and in general “he does not have a cloakroom.” I am certain that he knew very well that my father would not dare come to Otwock in the spring.⁸ (136)

This motif – of such delaying tactics in the hope that it is a matter of time till what must happen will happen – recurs many times in *Confession*.

What is especially important, however, is that both Alchimowicz and the Perechodnik are very much aware of the relationship of power that has evolved between them. The former knows that he can actually get away with anything, and that if he does not throw the Jews out on the street, he will moreover be seen as a most honest and gracious man; Perechodnik knows that he has no rights, and must put up with everything in silence and feign gratitude.

Once the premise has been established that sooner or later what lies in wait for Jews is death, loyalty to the “live corpse” turns out to be nonsense. Let us return to the ironic words quoted earlier: “To give anything back to him is simply a sin. If we give things back to him, others will come and take things away” (98). The norm whose application is felt by all the participants in the events absolves them from responsibility – after all, the Germans are always guilty. At the same time, the Polish conviction that nobody shall be spared makes the Nazis’ task easier, and is one of the factors that tightens the walls. The Jews, treated as “live corpses,” in fact become this. Systematically robbed, they lose their chance of survival, but something more happens. They become invisible and insignificant, like corpses from the Otwock ghetto.

5. “One must not generalize.” In the Polish collective consciousness, Jews are treated as a group that is actually monolithic. The belief in the existence of a uniform national character and collective responsibility unchanged for generations is a foundation of the justifications cited above. Polish society is also a nation, but one spoken of in different terms. The actions that cloud the image of the society are

⁸ Perechodnik adds: “How could this man tell my father that there was ‘no cloakroom’ in his place when all the furniture in his apartment was either mine or my father’s? I will add that some time ago he asked my father if he would give them to him for safekeeping” (136-137).

only marginal. Those who commit evil cannot be identified with Polishness. This is the root of the interminable debates rumbling on even today of whether or not the crimes or indecencies of Poles towards their Jewish fellow citizens are a burden on the nation. The crowning argument in these disputes is the idea that “one must not generalize.” This suggests that individual cases do not entitle us to pass judgment on an entire nation (whatever that might be).

Perechodnik is familiar with this mechanism. In the passage intended to – as he puts it – “characterize the attitudes of Poles towards Jews,” he acknowledges it with an ironic comment. After describing looting and catching ghetto escapees, he says:

Thinking of the base ones should not lead one to draw conclusions touching on all. Does the statistic of good and bad deeds have any meaning? No, this is not important. God on Highest took a position on this matter. In the Old Testament it is written that if one finds in a town ten righteous people, that place will not be destroyed. Probably in Warsaw and in every other city one can also find ten righteous people. [*The Polish people can therefore sleep soundly at night, as they face no threat, and those who robbed them have and will continue to have.*] (101)

The ironic leap from abstract moral contemplations to mercantile issues demonstrates the role of the prohibition on generalizations: looting is to remain in the shadows, where it cannot be problematized and spoken of. The existence of “righteous” people brings the consideration to an end before anybody can even ask the first question. If facts were to see the light of day, the “righteous” would prove to be a miraculous weapon of the community. Invoking them automatically solves the problem. The nation has a phantasm with which to identify itself,⁹ and behind which it can hide itself. It reacts to accusations – as has often happened – with moral indignation.

A variation of the same idea is casting the responsibility on the so-called “mob.” The description of the incidents during the liquidation is furnished with a comment: “it is only the mob, but the fact that in Poland half the people belong to these lower classes, that’s another matter” (98). Perechodnik realizes that the disparaging term “mob” is intended above all to remove the perpetrators from the nation. He also knows that it is not the victims (i.e., Jews) that count in all this, but the image of the Polish nation, which is to remain immaculate so that what has happened cannot be examined and named. This is why he ironically notes that the “mob” is not worthy of discussion. The real numbers and proportions do not play a role, and neither do the real attitudes of social groups. During the occupation, Perechodnik encountered representatives of all classes, and he often states that someone’s attitude towards Jews does not depend on his position in the social hierarchy.

Since generalization is not allowed, and the Holocaust is thus viewed in terms of the “moral approach of the nation,” we cannot ask the question about the rules of social behaviors, and therefore the characteristic features of Polish culture. Perechodnik does not use the phrases “culture” or “cultural model,” as of course he did not know them in the

⁹ A phantasm, because in social reality “the righteous” are often the object of persecution. One only has to look at the stories described in Anna Bikont’s *My z Jedwabnego* (“We from Jedwabne”) (Warszawa: Prószyński i S-ka, 2004).

sense given to them by 20th-century social sciences. He only mentions twice “climatological conditions” (106). This probably refers to a *calque* from the French expression “*l'air du pays*” (since he studied in France), meaning the type of air breathed in the country, its climate, but also its atmosphere. According to Perechodnik, it was these conditions – the rules of social life rooted in a culture – that allowed the Nazis to do something in Poland that seemed unthinkable.

A commentary on the text of *Confession* has been added by life, or actually the dynamic of the Polish discourse on the Holocaust. The prohibition of generalization applies, and moreover, has acquired legal sanction. Art. 55a of the Law of 18 October 2006 on exposure of information on the documents of state security bodies from 1944-1990 and the contents of these documents reads “Anybody who accuses the Polish Nation of participation in, organization of or responsibility for the communist or Nazi crimes is subject to imprisonment for 3 years (Dz.U.

[Journal of Laws] 2006, no. 218, item 1592).

“I have learnt to be silent”

The expression “I have learnt to be silent” is used repeatedly in *Confession*. This is the way in which Perechodnik acknowledges statements which use Polish outlines of perceiving the Holocaust. Silence is part of the ritual. This means a dual consent: for what is happening, and how it is spoken of. It confirms participation in a game whose rules have been imposed by the majority.

Let us take this image, in which the dentist’s assistant is wearing a sweater belonging to Perechodnik’s sister:

[Miss Lidia] would ask if she had made it herself... The girl blushed deeply, but inside she was probably laughing at us. “You’re making fun of me,” she might say to herself, “but I know that I am dressed well. Why should one get upset if these were things stolen from Jews? The owners will not rise from their graves, and those who live must be silent.” (127)

Perechodnik says nothing, and Miss Lidia goes no further than gibes and allusions. The discursive rituals exercise real pressure on the participants. They create a community of consented silence. Since events cannot be named, and one’s position towards them must remain concealed, the facts are cultivated by the obligatory way of talking about Jews and the Holocaust (it is Miss Lidia who explains Perechodnik’s sister’s death by the testimony which she gave against her in the wrangle over the rent). The community of consent to the rules of linguistic games is in fact invisible for the Aryan participants. For Jews, it is another matter. The need to be silent, and therefore the de facto declaration “I am one of you, we belong to one world which I accept” is torture for Perechodnik. If he refuses obedience he will place himself outside of the Polish community (most of which in any case views him as foreign), which is tantamount to either a death sentence or a much-reduced chance of survival. A Jew cannot say what he thinks of Miss Lidia, or even more so of young Miss Stańczak. Silence only puts him on their side. For Perechodnik, the mimicry imposed on him feels like disloyalty

to the victims, especially those closest to him, who have died so recently. Yet to survive he must be unfaithful to himself.

The unbearable falseness of the situation is seen clearly in the passage on the Arbeitsamt official who takes the Perechodniks' books away. As he is a man of culture, he enters a discussion on literature:

I am afraid to insult him, but I would happily thrown him out of the door...For four long hours I endure his presence as the worst of tortures...I would like to see him another time and settle scores. In his mind he hasn't done any harm. On the contrary, he recognizes me as an intelligent person and wants to discuss with me a theme as important as literature. What of it if shots are heard in the street? Indeed, they only kill a few Jews. (95)

Owing to discursive rituals, in Polish company Perechodnik must don a mask. He pretends not to remember the brand with which he is marked. Yet at the same time he takes part in games which are a constant reminder that he is branded, and that exclusion associated with the brand of Jewishness remains a norm that is suspended only for a moment, as an exception – one that is a kind of trial. The Jew feels the eyes of his Polish interlocutors on him, checking whether he is conforming to the rules of the ritual. The conditional consent to the bond is a constant examination in subordination. He is not permitted to speak in his own voice, or to express what he is experiencing. He is to remain a perfect confirmation of the image that the dominant group has established on the subject of him and itself. Perechodnik senses the need for mimicry as one more kind of violence. This time this violence is specifically Polish.

Maria Janion argues that what was at stake for Perechodnik when he wrote his *Confession* was visibility. He managed to pierce the Nazi extermination plan, transforming the victims into passive puppets controlled by, as he put it, the “German Satan,” unconscious of the meaning of their acts or the end in store for them. Recognizing the Holocaust as a tragedy in which ironic fate mocks the participants in events means that one can recover oneself in the act of tragic self-awareness. Only on this condition can one proceed to mourning rites. The text becomes almost a headstone for his deceased wife:

Describing how this plan [the German plan of extermination] was realized, and using his journal to erect a visible grave to his wife, Perechodnik refuted the invisibility, transparency, insubstantiality of the *Figuren* [this was how the Nazis told prisoners working on cremations to describe the bodies of murder victims]. He restored the name. This was what he understood by immortality.¹⁰

This is made possible by invoking and making use of Polish Romantic tradition, especially that of the tragic irony of Juliusz Słowacki's song *Lilla Weneda*. Perechodnik was an insightful reader of Polish Romanticism, somebody who contemplated and internalized the narrative models and understandings of existence, history and grief.

The idea of “I have learnt to be silent” is also about visibility. The de-personifying perfidy of the Nazi plan of extermination is accompanied by Polish cultural models,

¹⁰ Janion, Maria, “Ironia Calka Perechodnika, in: *Bobater, spisek, śmierć. Wykłady żydowskie*, Warszawa: W.A.B., 2009, 278.

which also – albeit in a different way and by different rules – make victims faceless and their experience invisible. Yet Perechodnik recognizes these mechanisms and is able to face up to them. He turns out to be not only a competent participant in Polish culture, reaching for Romantic tradition, but also an astute critic of it, especially concerning the ideas of the innocence of the nation and the associated social rituals that are established in Romantic poetry. Irony brings out symbolic violence.¹¹ It is no longer Poles looking at a Jew, seeing him through his subordination in the way that they want to see him, and seeing themselves in a picture that suits them – now it is they who are being watched. They must face up to the truth about them spoken from the perspective of the Polish collective that is not in power. From being an involuntary tool serving to allow the dominant group to reassurance in its feeling of innocence over the “live corpse” that “says nothing, bothers no one and no one dreams of,” Perechodnik becomes a partner. He enters into the debate with Polish culture as an equal participant in it.

The text of *Confession* and Perechodnik’s ironic strategies allow us to understand the experiences of the survivors who lived under the pressure of the Polish majority. An example and emblem of their fate might be Marianna Ramotowska, one of few to have survived the pogrom in Radziłów. The portrait of her from Anna Bikont’s book *My z Jedwabnego* (“We from Jedwabne”) is striking. Ramotowska is without doubt one of the most important interviewees, and yet also gives the impression of a figure who retreats and hides away, or in fact disappears. She renounces her own voice. Her story is told by her husband, who rescued her when she was still Rachela Finkelsztejn. She herself barely speaks. She asks people not to talk too much. She does not hear questions, because they make her fearful, does not recognize people whom she certainly once knew, does not stay in touch with family members, does not want to remember Jewish customs or speak of them, although her husband recalls that for several years after the war they secretly observed kosher, but she made him swear never to mention it. Bikont tells, “When I asked Ramatowska various questions, she replied with the same few issues which she repeated right to the end of the meeting, like a mantra, at the same time weeping. One of these sentences was ‘Mother Stasinka must have been sure I was worth something’” (Bikont 2004: 62). After the war, Marianna Ramotowska testified on behalf of the murderers in court. Her husband explains how they managed to survive the 1950s, the time of civil war in the Łomża region. “That was why no one was sentenced, because we had to protect them” (64). When, during an argument, he spoke aloud of what had happened in Radziłów, the answer that came back was “Perhaps better not speak up with that truth” (63).

¹¹ I use the term “symbolic violence” as understood by Pierre Bourdieu. For him, the discriminators and those discriminated against are connected by the same ideas and practices, in which they remain immersed to the extent that comprehending their own situation from an external perspective is inaccessible. As a result, the victims of discrimination also participate in the reproduction of discrimination and its conditions. By gathering distance and irony, Perechodnik breaks this monopoly. See Bourdieu, Pierre, *Masculine Domination* (trans. Richard Nice), Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

The obligation of gratitude and its paradox

The passage quoted earlier about Miss Lidia, the dentist who treated Perechodnik for free, contains the characteristic sentence “I feel a deep gratitude to Miss Lidia that she received me so kindly, but I cannot forget a few facts testifying to her character.” In *Confession*, gratitude often comes with this type of reservation, qualified in a certain way.

The attitude of Jews hiding out to those who helped them is an extremely difficult one from a psychological point of view. The sense of gratitude, pressure of discriminatory cultural models, its rituals and anti-Semitic stereotypes, and finally the complications that are an inseparable part of interpersonal relations – all of this overlaps, forming a knot that is hard to unravel. This is something that Perechodnik tries to analyse and discuss.

In a late entry addressed to his wife Anka, he declares:

You see, life is made up of small everyday episodes. You can't remember the whole time that someone is saving your life, but you also have to remember the little things they do to bother you. After a while, after you leave that person, you forget about the bothering, and are just left with a sense of profound gratitude for saving your life. The best proof is Sewek. I erased the portrait of Franek's wife based on his description. When I read it to him today he's outraged, saying that it's not true. He says that Franek's wife is a truly decent woman, explaining that the bothering came from the fact that she was scared herself, but basically she's the best woman in the world. And anyway, she didn't poison his life at all, she's a lovely woman. And Sewek is right to say that. It is thanks to her that he's alive, only thanks to her help. He's forgotten about the little episodes and remembers the main event: she saved his life, his and other Jews. (260)

And who was Franek's wife, and what image emerged from Sewek's account after leaving her home?

Daily, she told the people who were in hiding about the coming blockades of houses, pitied them, and whined that they would have to go out into the street, where they would surely be killed right away. Determined, she knelt before the holy picture, loudly recited her prayer, and struck the floor with her forehead. After finishing her prayers she said, “Let it happen what may happen. It can't be helped! Please stay here one more day”...She repeated this story every day. [At night she woke them up and told them to get dressed quickly and be on the alert, as she thought the gendarmes were in the yard. She kept them there dressed until she her eyelids started shutting and she fell asleep, and then the Jews could go back to bed too.] (161)

The description is longer, and rich in such scenes. “Of course, these were stage-managed scenes,” Perechodnik acknowledges (211). He also tells of when Sewek left Franek's wife and how he overpaid for her services. He could not protest, for fear of burning bridges: every Polish home which might offer him protection could save his life.

It is obvious that hiding Jews had a cost. That the hosts took risks. That life under one roof must have caused conflicts. But something more comes out of Perechodnik's account. Hostile behavior and what we class as help form a continuum for him. Although compared with rescue, everything else is immaterial, and this is spoken of many times in *Confession*, in certain situations this fundamental difference seems to be blurred. The pressure of the norm that is exclusion of Jews can be so strong that it is hard to tell the “righteous” and the “unrighteous” apart. Franek's wife saves Sewek, but simultaneously

robs him. Admittedly only partially, and not of everything, which the context might suggest to be a favor, but still.¹² Her behavior is dangerously close to that of the people whom Perechodnik sums up with the ironic statement: “They took all the Jews’ money and valuables, but they left the Jews themselves on the square...they could have led them to the gendarmerie, but they set them free. What decent people” (142). Many times, he mentions the hosts who conceal escapees for as long as they can make money out of them.¹³

The situation is further complicated by the fact that help is given by people who often see the excluding stereotypes as the norm. Examples might be Miss Lidia or Bujalski. Help therefore comes together with a set of discriminatory behaviors. The gulf dividing the righteous from the hostile environment is reduced this time, which increases the sense that anti-Semitism is the norm from which for unclear reasons an exception has been made. The mixture of fury and gratitude of rescued Jews, who encounter the instincts of human goodness set against hostility and often bestiality, is depicted by the event from the liquidation in Otwock described by Perechodnik.

Around the ghetto there gathered a crowd:

[By the fence stands Zygmunt Wolfowicz. He has an aching heart.] The Germans took his family away; then the Poles took all of his property. Is he saying this? Is this from his own lips? “You wait! I will live to see the end of you, bandits. Yes, I will see it as I will see the end of the Germans!” He is yelling at those hyenas, jackals, waiting patiently all day in order to rob even the corpses. Finally Wolfowicz walks away, but the mob is dissatisfied. A Jew has abused them, told them “a falsehood” to their faces; it is necessary to find an earthly justice that would punish them. Just then two German soldiers approach; one of them even understands Polish. The mob, indignant over the impudence, turns to them for justice. A Jew dares to say that he will live to see the end of their Germans, or their end, the end of such decent people. “Hand over this Jews!” I approach just then. Everyone is pointing their hands at me. “That’s the one who said it!” The soldier takes out the pistol. “Did you say it, or didn’t you?” My solemn oath that someone else said that doesn’t help. The German does not believe me at all, his eyes glint with malice, he will shoot me momentarily...Just then some poor woman speaks out. This is not the one; the other one did not have glasses and was taller. Others contradict her...He lets me live...I don’t know whether to thank God or that old woman who saved me or whether to curse those who knowingly wanted to have me killed. (57-58)

In spite of everything, Sewek defends Franek’s wife and sees her portrait as damaging. Perechodnik himself excuses her, saying that years later bad memories will give way to “profound gratitude for saving a life.” And yet he meticulously describes what he has experienced, observed and felt. His lack of acceptance of the pact of silence imposed by the majority means that he does not want to stay quiet even when he himself feels that he is coming close to disloyalty. He is determined to state everything until the end.

¹² Perechodnik found himself in a similar situation at the home of Miss Hela, who in addition to collecting rent, also made money buying food (*Am I a Murderer?*, 201-202).

¹³ And it is not only he who does. Such cases are referred to by many testimonies, from Henryk Grynberg to Jan T. Gross.

The subordination rituals that come out of *Confession* cast a shadow on the loyalty instincts of those who are saved. They appropriate them and change their meaning, using them as one more element of blackmail that is meant to enforce obedience. In Poland the tendency is to look at the fates of the Jews from the point of view of how they bear testimony to Polish society and whether this might not be harmful. If the words of a Jew betray ingratitude, the social norm dictates that they be put down to his Jewishness and used to discredit what he says. The ungrateful Jew who left nothing for safekeeping can easily become the ungrateful Jew who defames the innocent or even good-doers. And all this so that Polish culture can retain a conviction of the nation's innocence and authority over the discriminated minority.

In this too, Perechodnik swears obedience. The "local climate" was something to which he could not agree. Polish culture dictated terms to Jews. Participation in the community proved to be a privilege that stuck in the throat.

Translation: Benjamin Koschalka

Andrzej LEŚNIAK

The Problem of Formal Analysis of the Representations of the Holocaust: Georges Didi-Huberman's Images in Spite of All and Harun Farocki's Respite

To seriously speak of the experience of the Holocaust, one has to consider the forms used to talk and write about it and the forms which shape the structure of films, images, and photographs related to it. This thesis seems rather obvious as it calls up a whole assortment of research practices concentrating around the issue of the representation of the Holocaust. The significance attributed to form becomes more problematic, however, when we examine ways in which the visual works and testimonies related to the Holocaust are spoken about. Morphological issues are very often marginalized and defined as secondary to the ethical issues. In line with consistent anti-formalism, morphological issues, labeled as “aesthetics,” are excluded from discussion. The most vivid and symptomatic example of this phenomenon is the latest phase of the debate about representations of the Holocaust related to the text by Georges Didi-Huberman published in the catalog to the exhibition *Memoire des camps. Photographies des camps de concentration et d'extermination Nazis (1933-1999)*,¹ subsequently reprinted in the book *Images malgré tout (Images in Spite of All)*,² with an extensive appendix which was a response to the polemic in the press. I wish to demonstrate how in the above mentioned

¹ See: G. Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout*, in: *Memoire des camps. Photographies des camps de concentration et d'extermination Nazis (1933-1999)*, dir. C. Cheroux, Marval, Paris, 2001.

² G. Didi-Huberman, *Image malgré tout*, Minuit, Paris, 2003. English edition: *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, trans. Shane B. Lillis, University of Chicago Press, 2012 All references in the text are to this edition.

texts and the images they discuss, and in Harun Farocki's film *Respite*, the formal aspect of representation is the condition for the possibility of asking ethical questions and to explain why in the analysis of visual materials it is necessary to simultaneously take into consideration the ethical and epistemic efficacy of the images. Didi-Huberman's essay concerns four photographs taken by the member of the Sonderkommando of the Auschwitz concentration camp in August 1944. The photographs, reproduced in the first part of the book, are meticulously analyzed in Didi-Huberman's text which consists of three interconnected layers or argument.

The first layer consists of detailed descriptions of each of the photographs. Each visual level is discussed separately, and the author attends not only to the visible figures, but also to those elements which have been omitted in earlier interpretations as unimportant. Particularly crucial are the large black frames significant especially in the first two photographs. The scenes representing the burning of the bodies, the laying of the corpses, and the smoke rising above, even if clearly decentered, can be located more or less in the middle visual level. Their presence reveals the place from which the photograph has been taken and simultaneously the need to hide at the moment of pressing the shutter release. Although the black elements do not represent anything, their analysis may say more about the photograph than what is visible on it at the first glance. Earlier no particular importance was placed on those elements as evidenced by the characteristic photo editing of the photographs: they were cropped in such a way as to eliminate the "redundant" element, to remove it from the field of vision.

As strange as that might seem in a context – history – that normally respects its research material, the four photographs of the Sonderkommando have often been transformed to make them more informative than they were in their official state. This is another way of making them "presentable" and of making them "present a face"... There is, no doubt, in this operation a desire – both good and unconscious – to approach by isolating "what there is to see," by purifying the imaging substance of its nondocumentary weight. (34)

The photographs were also subjected to other manipulations; for example the disturbed line of the horizon was returned to its "natural" position, as if the photographs had been taken in comfortable conditions, without the need to hide from the guards, with the use of a tripod or some other stable support, with the camera resting on the hip. Thus Didi-Huberman attends to the formal aspects of the four specific photographs and those formal qualities become the grounds to determine what happened. In other words, morphological analysis allows to describe the epistemic efficacy of those images, efficacy not directly dependent on their readability, on the obviousness of what is represented, but on the expressiveness of the material visual layer. The black margins, removed when the photographs have been reframed, reveal the circumstances in which the photographs had been taken.

The second layer of Didi-Huberman's text, directly resulting from the first, is the history of the four photographs: narration based on the photographs. Didi-Huberman begins at the beginning of the whole project. Next, after describing the circumstances in which the members of the Sonderkommando prepared the event and the taking of the

photographs, he reaches the moment when the photographs can be sent, taken outside the camp. Scrupulously he reconstructs those events using the visual materials but also a number of other documents and memoirs describing the functioning of the camp (especially the strict prohibition of photography), the activities of the Sonderkommando and the efforts of the Polish opposition to get a hold of photographs of the camp and transport them to Great Britain. The reconstruction of those probable events would not be possible had not Didi-Huberman relied on images which decide how the documents related to the background of the events are to be interpreted. For example, the scene of the burning of the corpses in the incineration pits recorded on two of the photographs makes possible an interpretation of the memoirs of Filip Müller in which he talks about the material process of the destruction of the bodies:

The gestures of the living tell the weight of the bodies and the task of making immediate decisions. Pulling, dragging, throwing. The smoke, behind, comes from the incineration pits, bodies arranged quincuncially, 1.5 meters deep, the crackling of fat, odors, the shriveling of human matter – everything of which Filip Müller speaks is there, under the screen of smoke ... (14)

Here images are an equally valid point of departure for history; they make it possible to acquire knowledge of the events; they guarantee the legitimacy of historical narration. At this point, one needs to emphasize the significance of the solution presented by Didi-Huberman. His point is not only to illustrate the memories of eye witnesses or to give weight to their accounts. The narration of *Images in Spite of All*, focused on four specific photographs, posits those very photographs as a legitimate source of knowledge.

In *Image malgré tout*, photograph analysis provides the grounds for asking questions about ways of practicing the historical sciences. The third, most general layer of Didi-Huberman's text concerns the conditions of the possibility of constructing historical discourse in the context of the category of the unimaginable, which dominates the discourse of the Holocaust. The discussion provoked by *Image malgré tout* concentrated on that issue: while Didi-Huberman's opponents vehemently contested all attempts to move beyond the codified ways of speaking in which imagining is strictly forbidden, *Image malgré tout* concentrate on the question about the possibility of using visual sources in the field of historical discipline. The four photographs taken in the Auschwitz camp are treated as visual phenomena which allow a thinking through of the dialectical relation between what is unimaginable and the process of imagining. Were we to define the two most extreme epistemic options in relation to history – in the context of the problem of imagining – we would define them in these very categories: on the one hand there is the unimaginable, surfacing in the various forms of the prohibition against imaging, on the other, there is imagining, the potentially unlimited ability to produce, assimilate, watch, and absorb images. The discourse on the Holocaust is based on the category of the unimaginable. Didi-Huberman's critical proposition is not, however, a voice defending the latter, oppositional option, embracing unlimited imagining irrespective of the form it would take. The author of *Images malgré tout* suggests a third solution, one that is least obvious and most difficult to theorize, but which constitutes the most momentous proposition of his essay. He disagrees with the imposed prohibition of imaging; he resists

the arbitrary decision according to which images become suspect, inappropriate, and finally invisible and overlooked as in Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, in which testimonies of the survivors entirely replace the visual archival materials:

In particular, we will note that certain important works of art have caused their commentators to give misleading generalizations on the "invisibility" of the genocide. Thus, the formal choices of *Shoah*, the film by Claude Lanzmann, have served as alibis for a whole discourse (as moral as it was aesthetic) on the unrepresentable, the unfigurable, the invisible, the unimaginable, and so on. (26)

But neither does Didi-Huberman choose the opposite solution, such as would advocate an uncritical use of images. *Images in Spite of All* are committed to researching the possibility of creating knowledge based on fragmentary visual materials and analyzing the conditions of the possibility of knowing history based on specific pictures and their formal qualities. Beginning with the first pages of his book, Didi-Huberman justifies the necessity of speaking about those materials:

Let us not invoke the unimaginable. Let us not shelter ourselves by saying that we cannot, that we could not by any means, imagine it to the very end. We *are obliged* to that oppressive imaginable... How much harder was it for the prisoners to rip from the camps those few shreds of which now we are trustees, charged with sustaining them simply by looking at them. Those shreds are at the same time more precious and less comforting than all possible works of art, snatched as they were from a world bent on their impossibility. Thus *images in spite of all*: in spite of the hell of Auschwitz, in spite of the risks taken. In return, we must contemplate them, take them on, and try to comprehend them. *Images in spite of all*: in spite of our own inability to look at them as they deserve; in spite of our own world, full, almost choked, with imaginary commodities. (3)

From the above fragment we may gather that the researcher does not have a choice between alternative ways of proceeding. The rhetoric of this introduction, based on repetitions, written in the form of an appeal, speaks about the absolute necessity of analyzing the photographs. Only they can allow an interpretation of history which had been deemed unrepresentable already within the directives regulating the operation of the camp. Indeed, numerous fragments of *Images in Spite of All* refer to the camp policy based, among others, on the consistent prohibition of registering camp events. In fact, Didi-Huberman claims that only these photographs may allow us to experience what is left of the truth about Auschwitz:

The four photographs from August 1994, of course, don't tell "all of the truth" (it would be very naïve to expect this from anything at all – things, words, or images): they are tiny extractions from such a complex reality, brief instants in a continuum that lasted five years, no less. But they are for us – for our eyes today – truth itself, meaning its vestige, its meager shreds. (38)

Didi-Huberman's position and argument may serve as a justification for an entire theoretical model of rethinking the experience of the Holocaust. In line with this alternative way of thinking, the formal dimension of the image (which, in itself, demands further definition) has to be taken seriously as grounds for analysis in which the ethical aspect

and the epistemic value of the photographs are considered to be inseparably related. In other words, to convey the experience of the Holocaust, one has to take into account how the images of the Holocaust are structured. The discourse Didi-Huberman is critical of, in which the unimaginable is an endlessly recurring motif and a substitute for argumentation, is dominated by ethical rhetoric. There is talk of the suitability of representations, of responsibility in relation to the imaging of historical events, of inappropriateness of images in the face of genocide. The domination of ethical categories is so strong that the mark of impropriety touches not only images but also the very questions about their meaning and form.

In this context, a theoretical model which emphasizes formal analysis is not obvious at all, not only because of the interrelation of the ethical and epistemic discourse mentioned above, but also because of the need to work out such research practice as would allow a redefinition of the general categories which define visibility on the basis of specific visual experiences. Here it may be useful to refer to one of the texts by Jacques Rancière.³ In *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, Rancière addresses the relationship between psychoanalysis on the one hand, and art and literature on the other. He does not repeat, however, the most obvious move of applying Freudian concepts to the works of art (a practice present, as we know, already in Freud's own writing). In this well-known method, psychoanalytical concepts are used as a ready system of tools to be applied to the material analyzed in order to arrive at an interpretation. The meaning of the work is based on references to psychoanalytic theory and its assertions concerning psychic structures. Rancière, however, begins with specific works, with particular interpretations considered central for the operation of psychoanalytic concepts. In other words, the aim of his strategy is to determine how specific art works may influence psychoanalytic concepts:

I will...ask why the interpretation of these texts and works occupies such an important strategic position in Freud's demonstration of the pertinence of analytic concepts and forms of interpretation. I have in mind here not only the books or articles that Freud specifically devoted to writers or artists – to Leonardo da Vinci's biography, Michelangelo's *Moses*, or Jensen's *Gradiva* – but also the references to literary texts and characters that frequently support his demonstrations, such as the multiple references made in *The Interpretation of Dreams* to both the glories of the national literary tradition, such as Goethe's *Faust*, and contemporary works like Alphonse Daudet's *Sapho*.⁴

Rancière analyzes the efficacy of the figures of discourse and their ability to generate effects of signification and to influence the meaning of concepts. He thus assumes that artistic and literary forms remain in a direct relationship to the configurations of thought and to what is unthinkable:

These figures are not the *materials* upon which analytic interpretation proves its ability to interpret cultural formations. They are *testimony* to the existence of a particu-

³ I have referred to the essay discussed below in my analysis of the works by the Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar. See: A. Leśniak, "Ukryte Obrazy Alfredo Jaara. Konfiguracja widzialnego," *Konteksty*, 2010, no 1(288).

⁴ J. Rancière, *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, Polity, 2010, 1-2.

lar relation between thought and non-thought, a particular way that thought is present within sensible materiality, meaning within the insignificant, and an involuntary element within conscious thought.⁵

Rancière recognizes the value of work which constitutes artistic and literary figures, and thus opposing the tendency to treat them as objects of analysis that are simultaneously independent of any process of interpretation and reveal their value only through interpretation. In *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, a figure is defined as a visual or textual element that permanently transforms some way of thinking, reformulates a concept, changes or decides the meaning of a descriptive category.

The above way of defining a figure and the work of figuration has been present in the French humanities before Rancière. The motif holds a special place in the work of Jean-Francois Lyotard,⁶ who speaks of figures as units which disturb discourse. According to the thesis of *Discours, figure*, the experience of visual figures presupposes the co-presence of the receiver and the matter of the image. Reference to physicality and desire makes this experience indeterminate, unstable, and transforms the units of discourse meant to describe it. Rancière continues Lyotard's way of thinking in the psychoanalytic vein, which allows him to offer a vision of theory with a source (or one of the sources) in art and literature. At this point we return to the reversal proposed in *L'inconscient esthétique*, and to the emphasis on the necessity of close analysis:

[I]f it was possible for Freud to formulate the psychoanalytical theory of the unconscious, it was because an unconscious mode of thought had already been identified outside of the clinical domain as such, and the domain of works of art and literature can be defined as the privileged ground where this "unconscious" is at work.⁷

According to Rancière, visual and literary figures precede psychoanalysis, at least from the point of view of one who considers the mutual relation between the arts and analytical practice from a contemporary perspective. That is why all interpretations based on psychoanalytical categories considered to be unambiguous cease to be obvious; in the case of such interpretations it is impossible to take into consideration the work of figures which disrupt the operation of concepts. We cannot at this point engage in the analysis of specific examples of interpretations inspired by psychoanalysis, but it seems that Rancière's proposition encourages us to rethink the practice which until today has been defining our thinking about art and literature, from Freud's essays on Leonardo da Vinci's paintings and *Gradiva*, to the works of Hal Foster and, in the Polish context, Paweł Markowski or Luiza Nader. The question, however, does not concern the legitimacy of those analyses but, above all, the status of the applied concepts and the very possibility of their application.

How can one make use of the critical potential of the argument proposed in *L'inconscient esthétique* in the field of research on the representations of the Holocaust?

⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁶ See: J-F Lyotard, *Discours, figure*, Klincksieck, Paris, 1971.

⁷ Rancière, *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, 4.

Perhaps it would be appropriate to develop an analogy between the field of psychoanalysis and the whole arena of problems related to the representation of the Shoah. What I have in mind is the hypothesis that specific works of art, material practices, and formal qualities of representation influence the operation of the basic concepts defining the thinking on the Holocaust. In other words, what is at stake is such experience of visual forms as would allow psychoanalytic work and also precede the possibility of posing ethical questions.

Representations of the Holocaust should be considered from the formal and aesthetic perspective. This statement, if rather uncomplicated, requires some explanation. To attend to the formal and the aesthetic does not mean to aestheticize the visual. Didi-Huberman himself posits a clear-cut difference between aesthetization and analysis when he mentions the retouching of photographs from the Auschwitz camp and the corrections of anatomical detail. The analysis of the formal aspects of the image, on the other hand, allows one to refer to its function, to determine how the image shapes the meaning of the represented event and how it may be possible to memorialize the past. If ethical questions concerning the adequacy of representations can be sensibly posed at all, it is only thanks to the prior analysis of the aesthetics of those representations, of how they have been formed.

A similar hypothesis may be posited in relation to *Respite*, a 2007 forty-minute film by Harun Farocki. The work is a montage of documentary materials on the everyday life of the Westerbork camp established in the Netherlands in 1939. Initially the camp had served the refugees from Nazi Germany. After the occupation it was transformed into a transitory camp for Jews who were later transported to Auschwitz. Materials used by Farocki are from 1944. They had been commissioned by the Nazi camp commandant. Farocki adds commentary to the silent sequences of archival materials which show the life of the camp. White strings of letters on black panels coming together as sentences or single words are used to divide the film into fragments, function as captions, and structure the whole film. The meaning of the work can be discerned only when one takes into consideration aspects of its formal structure. The strategies employed by the director, particularly the decision not to add sound to the silent documentary materials further emphasize the significance of the image's form. If we were to use Fred Camper's classification of films based on their relation to sound, *Respite* belongs to the category of "true" silent films, that is films which technically could have been produced or shown with a soundtrack, but remain silent by the decision of the director: "the 'true' silent film was made fully possible only by the invention of sound."⁸ Watching such a film creates a special state of concentration on the visual and isolation from the external world beyond the movie theater that produces a change in the viewer's behavior. Talk in the theater becomes rare because there is no music or dialogue to mask it. The absolute silence during the screening sharpens the attention of the viewers:

⁸ F. Camper, "Sound and Silence in Narrative and Nonnarrative Cinema," in: *Film Sound. Theory and Practice*, ed. F. Weis and J. Belton, Columbia University Press, New York, 1985, 377. I would like to thank Prof. Iwona Sowińska for drawing my attention to this text.

Silent film has the potential...to place the viewer in a new state of isolation. Presented with images drained of the "life" that sound can impart, the viewer is thrust more deeply into a contemplation of their inner mysteries, and of his own state of being as well. The silence of such films is not merely the silence that comes from the absence of sound; it is a deeper silence, in which the noise of the external world has been stilled, in order to allow the contemplation of other sounds – as from the body, the nervous system, the mind, in a revelatory purity.⁹

Yet the quieting down of the viewer does not lead merely to self-absorption; Camper mentions "the inner secrets of images" or their formal qualities, the details which would not be noticed under different circumstances. They become more apparent (or more expressive, more painful) due to the silence during the screening.

Hal Foster describes Farocki's projects as "a genealogy of visual instrumentality."¹⁰ His works are political precisely because they use strictly visual film strategies to reveal the significance of the image as a political tool. Farocki allows us to confirm the thesis that images functioning in the public sphere are inevitably political. The point is not, however, following the popular understanding of engaged art, to search the visual sphere for the possibility of propagandist uses of art. The sources of the effectiveness of art lie in the interrelationship of the formal, the ethical and the political and that means, above all, that each analysis of the image has to account for its morphological characteristics.

The title "respite" (which means not only delay, but also an interval of rest, relief) which refers to the period before the Holocaust, can be represented only thanks to the respite inscribed in the film's structure. In this sense *Respite* is not merely a collection of archival fragments, not merely the result of the simple bringing to light of the tapes recorded in a transitory camp, but it is a complex whole that allows the creation of alternative historical narrations. Along the same lines, the interpretation of Farocki's work by Thomas Elsaesser points to a paradoxical epistemology of forgetting that provides an alternative not so much to the insufficiency of knowledge as to its excess:

Respite thus returns to the Westerbork past, not exactly its future (cruelly taken from so many thousands of human beings), but its lacunary present, creating out of Breslauer's images and Gemmecker's narrative a history with holes, so to speak – once more open, without being open-ended. In the claustrophobic world of Holocaust memory, he cuts the breathing room that re-invests the history of Westerbork with the degrees of contingency and necessity, of improbability and unintended consequences, that serve as a "counter-music" to the relentlessness of the destruction machine that the extracted footage of the transports has so vividly bequeathed to us.¹⁰

Respite is not "a film to watch" that would make possible some specific narration, but "a film which allows watching," that makes possible a variety of narrations and a variety of answers to the question about the meaning of the images of the Holocaust and about

⁹ Ibid., 380. Hal Foster, "Vision quest. The Cinema of Harun Farocki," *Artforum*, November 2004, 156.

¹⁰ T. Elsaesser, "Holocaust Memory as the Epistemology of Forgetting? Re-wind and Postponement in *Respite*" in: *Harun Farocki: Against What? Against Whom?*, ed. A. Ehmann, K.Eshun, Koenig Books, London, 2009, 68.

their adequacy. The last problem deserves special attention for it brings us back to the question of the relation between the formal (or, in this particular case, the aesthetic, although thanks to Rancière's proposition those two terms define related phenomena) and the ethical.

The formal complexity of *Respite* is revealed on two basic levels: the function of the captions and the effects of montage. As the layer added by the director, the captions are the most obvious aspect of authorial intervention. In the opening fragments of the film, however, the text panels have a neutral, purely descriptive character. They offer information allowing us to situate in time and space both the represented places and people and the descriptions which allow us to identify individual figures. After the first three panels bearing the projected information: "silent film," the title of the film, and the name of the director, we watch the first image: the still panorama of the camp, the barracks seen from above, and a small group of people. Movement is not visible; the stilled frame performs the function of an introduction. After several seconds text appears: dry information about the camp. "In 1939, in the north of the country, the Dutch government created Westerbork, a camp for the Jewish refugees from Germany." The following panel contains another historical information: "In 1940 Germany attacked the Netherlands and begun its occupation. As in Germany, Jews were deprived of their rights and possessions. In 1942 the German SS became the camp's warden." Several images that follow show the inside of the barracks; text panels refer to the operation of the camp, to the way the prisoners are treated, to living conditions, and finally, to the circumstances under which the film material was produced. Here Farocki's film introduces the figure of Rudolf Breslauer who was commissioned by the commandant to make the film about Westbork; this figure will reappear in the film several times. A moment later we see the first moving image: a train entering the camp; there are third class carriages with Jewish families inside. The camp police forces maintain order on an improvised platform. In these early fragments the relation between the image and text, documentary material and Farocki's interventions seems unproblematic. Text performs the function of a caption under the photograph or film fragment or supplements the changing images. Directorial intervention is minimal and consists only of the selecting of documents and outlining the context. With time, however, the relation of the text to images changes. Captions become critical of what is represented on the visual level. At some point a panel appears on the screen asking "Do these recordings make reality more beautiful?" For the first time we experience a crack between the two layers of the film; a distance is introduced by the director toward the documentary material used. Obviously, the question relates not only to Farocki's work but also to the documentary materials he uses, his responsibility as an author, and the meaning of archival work. Only at this moment the question about adequacy and responsibility of representation can be posed, because we begin to be aware how the images we are watching operate. They cease to be obvious; they become problematic thanks to the complexity of the film, its formal qualities, the deepening mismatch between word and image the film introduces. The film's form provokes questions about the adequacy of representation. The viewer, accustomed to representations of the camps which fore-

ground the suffering of the prisoners doomed to a certain death, may be surprised or even disturbed by the materials shown by Farocki. At the beginning of the film we see neutral or even happy scenes, episodes from the life of the temporary community, work, numerous images meant to testify to the productivity of the camp, even play and sports games. All of those may be considered inappropriate, even if we are aware of the circumstances in which the film was made and of the fate of the author of these images and his protagonists.

Farocki goes beyond exposing the ambiguity of images. He employs the effects of montage; repetitions reproduce the act of establishing the identity of the characters and deepen the viewer's sense of the reality of history. The name of the camp commandant, Albert Konrad Gemmeker is repeated: he is identified twice in the film. We also repeatedly see the face of a Roma girl; it is the only close-up in the film, perhaps also the only image which captures the dread caused by, at the time unknown but sensed, fate of the prisoners. At another moment, Farocki decides to perform a subtle intervention into the documentary material, by enlarging a fragment of the frame to decipher the inscription on the suitcase of an elderly woman put on the departing transport. Based on the transport lists Farocki can unequivocally establish her identity. This short sequence of images stands out clearly against the rest of the film; the intense experience of reality created by the material transformation of a fragment of the archival document, thanks to the identification of the specific person, a future victim of the Auschwitz concentration camp, changes the way in which we perceive the film as a whole. Images acquire a different meaning; sequences which earlier may have seemed neutral or even joyful now seem to pre-figure the future fate of the characters.

What is more, several scenes in Farocki's film are legible allusions to the representations of the Holocaust. Bundles of used wire from Westerbork are simply recycled product, but we look at them through the prism of photographic and film images showing hair piled on heaps next to the Auschwitz gas chambers. All of these scenes influence our reading of the film: our initial perception of the film as pure documentary almost entirely free of the archival work mediation, disappears. *Respite* is a complex work, which in this case means not only that the formal construction of the film is not uniform, but also that the layers it is constructed of engage in critical relationships to one another. Farocki tests the operation of the image, juxtaposing it with the textual order and emphasizing the difference between the two. The textual layer, progressively more distanced toward the images as narration develops, to the point of almost denying their message, undermines our ability to read those images correctly. Archival materials presented at the beginning as the source of knowledge, as artifacts belonging to the historical context, raise more and more doubt. This fact, however, does not deny their epistemic efficacy. On the contrary, Farocki's film, combined with knowledge we have on the subject of concentration camps and the Holocaust, appears to be an analytical historical study describing the moment in life right before the Holocaust, the moment when the Holocaust is present as a presentiment and a forewarning. "Only knowledge of the event and the context of its recording allows us to restore to these images their hidden violence, to take the measure of what is not immediately represented, to see how these elderly people, these women and children

Holocaust in Literary and Cultural Studies

are caught on the threshold of death.”¹¹ And yet, Sylvie Lindeperg’s commentary, even if it points to a certain possibility of interpretation, seems to miss something. *Respite* is not illegible; its interpretation does not depend entirely on the knowledge we possess prior to watching it. Images put together by Farocki, supplied with a commentary, create a knowledge of their own thanks to the juxtaposition of images and texts. What is more, confronted with commentary and critique, those images allow to pose questions of an ethical order concerning the adequacy and responsibility of representation, but also concerning the ways images are and may be used for political ends.

Translation: Krystyna Mazur

¹¹ S. Lindeperg, “Suspended Lives, Revenant Images. On Harun Farocki’s Film *Respite*,” in: *Harun Farocki. Against What?*, 29.

Katarzyna BOJARSKA

The Art of Impossible Possibility

on my face in the mud and the dark I see me it's a halt
nothing more I'm journeying it's a rest nothing more

Samuel Beckett

Thinking involves not only the movement of thoughts
but also their zero-hour [*Stillstellung*]. Where thinking
suddenly halts in a constellation overflowing with
tensions, there it yields a shock to the same, through
which it crystallizes as a monad.

Walter Benjamin

How it is

A metal ramp leads to the giant steel 30x10x13 meter container whose ribbing resembles the architecture of the former power station, today Tate Modern gallery of art, where it is housed. It is placed on two-meter stilts. Thus one can walk underneath it (almost physically sensing the several dozen kilos of its weight suspended right over one's head) or around it. The entry is strategically placed so that from ground level one cannot look in and prepare oneself for what to expect inside. The ramp pounding under one's feet leads the viewer to the 10-meter-high, completely darkened interior. The inside of the container is lined with black satin which contrasts with the steel coating outside. Inside nothing can be seen. Nothing can be seen. And it is silent, as if the viewers abided by the unwritten rule to keep quiet. The space draws one in. It is difficult to determine its boundaries. The viewers' steps are uncertain. A number of commentators and critics

have pointed out the historical and social dimension of Mirosław Bałka's work. According to them, in the context of his earlier work, the container, the ramp, steel, carry unambiguous associations. But what are they? To suggest that the work says a lot about the universal human condition is to say nothing.

My thesis is the following: Bałka's *How It Is* is an example of art which undertakes the challenge of the aesthetics of trauma, as perhaps the most interesting and ambiguous example of such art in recent years. In the subsequent successive close-ups I will attempt to describe elements of that aesthetic and point out the possible contexts of situating them in art and theory.

As Hal Foster observes, "In contemporary art and theory, let alone in contemporary fiction and film, there is a general shift in conceptions of the real: from the real understood as an effect of representation to the real understood as an event of trauma."¹ From a certain perspective, particularly in literature, art, and theory, "this trauma discourse continues the poststructuralist critique of the subject by other means."² Foster points out that in the purely psychoanalytic register (he himself refers mostly to Lacan's version of psychoanalytic theory) the subject of trauma does not exist, for this position has been evacuated, and therefore the critique of the subject seems most radical here.³

As Cathy Caruth emphasizes, however, what is at stake here is not a pathology but a reformulation of the structure of experience: what happens is not fully experienced and assimilated in its own (proper) time, but with a delay, in recurrent nightmares, retrospections, acts of possession by the experience, possession of the one who experiences.⁴ The point is not to associate all experience with trauma, but to allow within the experience for something unforeseen, for a break, a lack of continuity. The traumatic possibility does not come from beyond experience but is inscribed into it as its paradoxical impossibility.

In the conceptualization proposed by Marie Torok and Nicholas Abraham, the traumatic can be found in any experience which evades psychological metabolism: it is the element which cannot be known, thought, or verbalized and included in the symbolic field. Such unassimilated and unassimilable experience creates wounds in the psychic web thus destroying the individual sense of cohesion and continuity. The unassimilated fragments of experience break off and are deposited intact in the isolated regions of the psyche, those parts of the I, which, consequently, also become detached and isolated. Separated from the experiencing and experienced I, beyond the reach of its knowledge and self-awareness, secret and hidden, they become a veritable psychic no-man's land, toward which, however, a substantial part of the individual's symbolic field begins to weigh.⁵

¹ H. Foster, *Obscene, Abject, Traumatic*, „October,” Vol. 78 (Autumn, 1996), 110.

² *Ibidem*, 123.

³ *Ibidem*, 110.

⁴ See: C. Caruth, „Introduction” in: *Trauma. Explorations in Memory*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1995, 10.

⁵ See: N. Abraham, M. Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word. A Cryptonymy*, trans. N. Rand, introd. J. Derrida, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2005.

The whale

What does Bałka's *How It Is* consist of? It consists of a ramp, a giant steel container, and 3900m³ of darkness. Bałka's work does not represent anything, does not tell anything, does not make anything present. It is itself a presence, a possible situation, a potential event. The list of inspirations, possible analogies, and sources presented by the artist in a book – which can be called without hesitation an artistic book and an integral part of the project – that list is long and almost dizzyingly diverse. This is the reality or even the truth of how it is. And the way it is, darkness is, paradoxically, everywhere the same and everywhere different. The work calls up numerous associations with the horrific, the strange, the fear of the night, dread, industry, the railroad, depth, the abysmal, the beast, danger, the uncanny, the black box, the cellar, the air-raid shelter, hell, *The Heart of Darkness*, the trench, but it can also serve as the figure of the unconscious.

In László Krasznahorkai's novel, *The Melancholy of Resistance*, one day a small Hungarian town is visited by a circus with the world's largest (stuffed) whale. The whole menagerie fascinates at first, then becomes progressively more disturbing, to ultimately lead to a complete deconstruction of the order of this apparently normal place. The plot, which takes place as if beyond time and in a non-place, involves the disoriented community attempting to reconstruct order. What if the stuffed whale is the return of everything that has been deposited and hidden, repressed and covered up with the apparent order of structure, conforming to the principle of collective pleasure? "Seeing the whale did not mean [one] could grasp the full meaning of the sight, since to comprehend the enormous tail fin, the dried, cracked, steel-grey carapace and, halfway down the strangely bloated hulk, the top fin, which alone measured several meters, appeared a singularly hopeless task."⁶ What if *How It Is* were such a whale?⁷

As Cathy Caruth points out:

The full impact of this notion of trauma can be understood when we look at it in terms of the inside/outside model of the psyche implied in the theory of the pleasure principle, which implicitly suggests that what is inside the psyche is a mediation of the outside through desire, repression, and so on. In trauma, there is an incomprehensible outside of the self that has already gone inside without the self's mediation, hence without any relation to the self, and this consequently becomes a threat to any understanding of what a self might be in this context.⁸

Bałka's "whale," a veritable anti-Moby Dick, allows for a peculiar (aesthetic) experience. But one cannot speak here of the sublime, such as would depend on the calculated aesthetic effects, on expressing vastness and power or on the suggestion of unrepre-

⁶ László Krasznahorkai, *The Melancholy of Resistance*, New Directions Publishing, 2002, 142.

⁷ This association is not accidental: the whale appears on Bałka's list of inspirations, and Krasznahorkai is the author of the story "On Velocity," placed in the book which accompanies the exposition.

⁸ C. Caruth *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1996, 131-132

sentability.⁹ Although *How It Is* pulls the viewers out of narrative continuity, it does not offer any special epiphany. Neither is the point to create a feeling of impotence in the viewers, to oppress or humiliate their imagination. On the contrary, the point is to deeply move their imagination by surprising their consciousness and putting it off course. The point is not, finally, to create a momentary feeling that something unrepresentable does exist or happens in ecstatic moments arrived at through the transcendental calling of the subject. *How It Is* is rather calls the viewer-subject inside (literally and figuratively), not to go beyond but to move within the self. In the absence of light and as if deprived of “mirrors,” the viewer ceases to occupy the position of the static center of the visual experience and unavoidably moves down: into the cellar, the dugout, the hole, the trench, the crypt; and all those figures point toward the unconscious, or perhaps they do not.

The crypt

And what if *How It Is* is a crypt?

“Between the idyllic moment and its subsequent forgetting (we have called the later ‘preservative repression’), there was the metapsychological traumatism of a loss ... This segment of an ever so painfully lived Reality – untellable and therefore inaccessible to the gradual, assimilative work of mourning – causes a genuinely covert shift in the entire psyche. The shift itself is covert, since both the fact that the idyll was real and that it was later lost must be disguised and denied. This leads to the establishment of a sealed-off psychic place, a crypt in the ego.”¹⁰ A live correlate of loss rests in the crypt, reconstructed from words, images, and feelings.

The most important quality of this object placed in the inner crypt is its being unsayable, and thus its absolute exteriority. The creation of the crypt is thus the result of a failed or never undertaken work of mourning or, to put it in Abraham’s and Torok’s terms, of incorporation, which takes place where knowledge and language fail to work out and through loss and understand absence.¹¹

The crypt is the place inside the subject, in which the lost object is devoured and preserved. Cryptofor is the one who becomes the carrier of the crypt, who has incorporated the absolute exterior into his/her interior. The dialectic of the inside and the outside, as has been pointed out above, is crucial to Bálka’s work. I believe one could suggest the following experiment: to think about *How It Is* as a crypt that has been unearthed and

⁹ See J.-F. Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde.” Trans. Lisa Liebmann, Geoffrey Bennington and Marian Hobson, *The Inhuman*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, 89-107; and A. Rejniak-Majewska, “Obraz jako sytuacja,” *Teksty Drugie*, 2009, no. 5, 180.

¹⁰ Nicholas Abraham, Marie Torok, “The Lost Object--Me,” in: *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 1, University of Chicago Press, 141; quoted in: Michał Paweł Markowski, “Perekreacja,” in: Georges Perec, *Gabinet kolekcjonera*, trans. MP Markowski, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo KR, 2003.

¹¹ Michał Paweł Markowski, “Perekreacja,” 98.

opened, a crypt which becomes the possibility of any crypt, when we are fumbling in the dark and unable to be (with) ourselves anymore. After all, it is an interior entirely devoid of sense and emotion, which does not encourage any effort to name or categorize.

Inspired by Abraham's and Torok's metapsychology and Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, Bracha Ettinger offers *transcryptum* as "an artobject, artevent, artoperation, or artprocedure which incarnates transcription of trauma and...its traces."¹² In this way the work of art works through the world's amnesia and transforms it into a memory. Ettinger calls this process transcriptomnesia: "the lifting of the world's hidden memory from its outside with-in-side."¹³ *Transcryptum* is an occasion to share and affectively recognize the unknown Thing and Event. "The art as *transcryptum*," says Ettinger, "gives body to a memory of the Real...Our posttraumatic era becomes, by virtue of this art, transtraumatic."¹⁴

Trauma as the absolute other of representation evades its grammar, the structure of time and space, and demands calling to life a new grammar (and even a new vocabulary). According to Griselda Pollock, the aim of art is different from that of representation, because art leads to an encounter, during which and through which trauma will be transmitted, however, not in the form of paralyzing and confounding weight, but as irreducible otherness. Obviously this is not a reference to art understood as therapy, but a type of aesthetic of confrontation, as opposed to presencing; not a bringing over to oneself but a bringing of oneself over to the shaky ground of an encounter, during which, after all, ultimately nothing may happen. The ground seems very fragile: on the one hand, we are dealing with a destructive abyss, emptiness, and nothingness, and on the other, with the danger of covering them up, talking them down/to death.

Passages

Under this title the Israeli artist, Dani Karavan, created in Portbou the installation-monument dedicated to the memory of Walter Benjamin. It is a fold in the landscape, on top of the hill, in the vicinity of a cemetery, by the sea, in the Pyrenees. A triangular, steel, brown shape is sticking out of the rock. On the ground, in front of the entry to this peculiar dark corridor, there is a steel sheet that looks like an open door. 87 steps lead down, almost as far as one can see, all the way to the sea. Reality upside down: the mountain opens up to admit us into an impossible passage, impossible, because one is separated from the last jump into nothingness by a glass wall, behind which the waves crash on the rock. An inscription on the wall (in German, Spanish, Catalanian, French, and English) reads: "It is more arduous to honor the memory

¹² Bracha Ettinger "Transcryptum: Memory Tracing in/for/with the Other" in *Matrixial Borderspace*, (ed.) Brian Massumi, foreword Judith Butler. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2007. 166-7.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

of the nameless than that of the renowned. Historical construction is devoted to the memory of the nameless.”¹⁵

Inexact and incomplete historical records say that escaping from France, Walter Benjamin reached the French-Catalonian town of Port Bou in the Pyrenees. It so happened that on the day he arrived there, the border patrol was not allowing anyone to pass. Benjamin probably committed suicide by swallowing a lethal dose of morphine. The circumstances of his death, however, remain unclear. He was buried at the Roman-Catholic cemetery in the niche number 563. His companions were allowed to cross the border on the next day, safely arrived in Lisbon on the last day of September, and boarded the ship for the US. In the summer of 1945, Benjamin's remains were moved to a mass grave, *fosa comun*, nameless, and thus joined what Canetti called “the nameless crowd of the dead.”

Michael Taussig writes that a cemetery and, above all, the grave, is meant to create an illusion of direct contact between the name and the body, to (re)tie the word to the object. How to mark the death of tens, hundreds, thousands? How to mark the presence of absence, how to memorialize? At the Port Bou cemetery and in Caravan's monument-installation, the beauty of the landscape mixes with the terror of death (and history): the human world is arrested and naturalized into what we call a *still life* or a *landscape*. The danger releases flashing images which hold both the past and the future suspended. It is an experiential state of exception in the tunnel between the sea and the sky, in the face of the real inability to pass.

Balka does not claim this as an inspiration. But *How It Is* is also such an impossible passage.

(After)shock

If aesthetics is a theory of sensual impressions, the aesthetics of trauma would have to be concerned with a veritable shock to the senses. *How It Is* is not art which terrifies, but art as a space from which one experiences the world, in ways defined above. Unseeing, which is the elementary condition of the viewer inside Balka's work, allows to critically approach seeing as such. Ernst van Alphen aptly describes it, emphasizing that in the context of the limit-experience, seeing does not mean knowing.¹⁶ This, it seems, is the fundamental lesson of trauma. Balka produces a reversal: unseeing is to lead to a new knowledge and even self-knowledge. It is an opening of an epistemological possibility.

In the experience of the victims of the Holocaust, the relationship between seeing and understanding was radically disrupted. The analysis of the accounts of eyewitnesses proves that the visual functions here as an unmodified return to what has happened, rather than a way of reaching or penetrating what happened. The visual becomes raw

¹⁵ Underneath, there is an abbreviation “G.S.I, 1241,” which most likely is a reference to the collected works of Benjamin in German, *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser. See: Michael Taussig, *Walter Benjamin's Grave*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

¹⁶ Ernst van Alphen, “Caught by Images: on the Role of Visual Imprints in Holocaust Testimonies,” *Journal of Visual Culture*, August 2002 vol. 1 no. 2, 205-221.

material. Seeing does not mean “being a witness.” Apart from seeing, one needs to formulate a narrative about what one saw. The problem, it seems, lies in the very mediation, in transmission. Seeing does not lead to the possibility of representation. Trauma, as I frequently emphasize, is a highly paradoxical phenomenon. The attempt to understand it may leave us facing an irresolvable conflict: the most intense confrontation with reality turns out to lead to utter numbness toward it and immediacy takes the form of delay, of belatedness.

The structure of an encounter

To more fully understand the concept of trauma in the context of art and aesthetics, it seems necessary to introduce the distinction between structural and historical trauma. The former is an element in the shaping of subjectivity: those events in the history of a subjectivity that undergo a primal repression, the losses that the subjectivity is marked and shaped by. Historical trauma, on the other hand, refers to the catastrophic and overwhelming events and experiences that may (or may not) influence our lives as already shaped subjects. Structural trauma happens at a time when the psychic apparatus is not developed fully enough to deal with it, and thus it is subject to primary repression, leaving no knowledge or memory of the events, but handing down unbridled affects related to those events, which reside in the cracks created by those formative erosions. Those affects explode again when historical events take place that are somehow related to the affects. “The historical traumatic event becomes traumatizing in part because it inherits the hitherto virtual character of the structural trauma (sealed in primal repression) within the formation of a subjectivity who cannot know what was always awaiting this belated activation.”¹⁷ This binary structure seems absolutely crucial. In order to understand the sense of contemporary traumatic experiences we need to take into account both structural trauma and the concept of trauma as an event in life and history whose magnitude and scale overwhelm and immobilize the psychic ability to deal with them, as well as trigger the effects of structural trauma, something that defeated, overwhelmed, and created an interior split in us already earlier, in an indefinite some/time, some/where.

One should pose the question now what can art do. What should it be called upon to do, to help us think not only about the traumatic dimension of subjectivity but also about history and politics, in the present which seems particularly marked by catastrophe. Pollock claims that the split subjectivity desires an encounter. Because of its special condition, the subjectivity is capable of sharing, and thus processing, the traumatic residues lingering in historical reality. The aesthetic of trauma is the aesthetic of the threshold, of liminality. The encounter Pollock demands from art, is not about intersubjective communication, not about conveying meanings or narration, but about the remnants of the event-encounter form another time and space, transported here and now thanks to the meeting of the artist and the viewer: this is to activate the traumatic potential. Traumatic

¹⁷ G. Pollock, “Art Trauma Representation,” *parallax*, 2009 no 15:1, issue 50, 44-45.

experience is not so much a missed sublime encounter with death as an experience of rupture, a disruption in the matter of human communication.

The possibility of history

Apart from the critique of the subject and experience, trauma theory seems to play an important role in deconstructing history. As Cathy Caruth observes, by only attempting to understand the meaning of traumatic experiences, we can find the possibility of history, “the possibility of a history that is no longer straightforwardly referential (that is, no longer based on simple models of experience and reference). The very critical rethinking of reference “is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not.”¹⁸ The historical power of trauma lies not only in the experience being repeated after it has been forgotten, but in trauma being experienced in and only through forgetting itself. This necessary concealment of the event explains the peculiar time structure, the structure of retroactive attribution of meaning, the Freudian *Nachträglichkeit*. As Caruth sums it up: “For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the inaccessibility of its occurrence.”¹⁹

A similar intuition seems to reside in Benjamin’s historical theses. As he observes, “To articulate what is past does not mean to recognize ‘how it really was.’ It means to take control of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger. For historical materialism it is a question of holding fast to a picture of the past, just as if it had unexpectedly thrust itself, in a moment of danger, on the historical subject.”²⁰

Balka like Sebald

This correspondence is difficult to ignore when one holds in one’s hands Mirosław Balka’s book, *How It Is*. W. G. Sebald’s writing is founded on catastrophe which happened when he wasn’t there yet. That catastrophe was the Holocaust of the European Jews. The writer became heir to unredeemed suffering. He now wants to understand the being of humans in time, whose fundamental element is historical time. In this approach, all history after catastrophe is traumatic. We were not there when the historical event happened of such lethal power that it determines our lives in the world “after.” One cannot comprehend or include this catastrophic event in one’s life, and it returns belatedly overshadowing everything else. This is why Sebald’s writing is a specific kind of meditation on time. Catastrophe is not epiphanic here, and the prose does not try to represent the specific, historical catastrophe, the particular event, but is concerned, above all, with its

¹⁸ C. Caruth *Unclaimed Experience*, 11.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁰ Walter Benjamin *On the Concept of History*, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2009, 6.

distance, its presence in the form of inherited, reproduced images and their senselessness. Writing seems to be the measuring of that distance and the photographs strewn among words paradoxically make visible only the absence of the Real event as such (without confirming or proving its truth), they do not constitute artistic ornament. The nomadic nature of photography parallels here the nomadic nature of people: photographs also travel, get lost, and are found in the strangest places and situations.

As his video works testify particularly pointedly, Bałka, similarly to Sebald, is the subject of this intergenerational transmission of the “phantom” created by trauma, the heir of a tradition not-his-own. In the complex structure of inheritance Abraham and Torok write about there is no place for a simple transmission from one generation to the next. Instead, it is a complex process based on the movement of trauma: the given meaning is first unsayable, due to the pain and shame it carries; then it becomes unmemorable: the subject can sense it but does not know its meaning; and in the following movement it becomes unthinkable, as something that exists but cannot be rationally accessed. Aesthetic experience is meant not so much to allow to reduce the distance or to break out of the vicious circle of traumatic heritage, as to search for an answer, for a reaction to pain (of being and history). The point is not to heal or soothe, but to reformulate, to transpose, to cross the boundary of pain, of the chasm dividing the past from the future.

Comment c'est – commencer

Christopher Bollas says:

“aesthetic moments” are those points in life when we feel held and embraced by the spirit of things that are being considered or contemplated. And although such moments can subsequently be explained and articulated, they are fundamentally wordless occasions, notable less for thoughts than for the density of the subject’s feeling. These experiences, are existential memories, non-representational recollections conveyed through a sense of the uncanny... The ‘aesthetic moment’ is an evocative resurrection of an early ego condition, an instant when the subject is ‘captured’ by an object and enjoys the sensation of being engaged in a meaningful, and perhaps even reverential, experience. But the pursuit of such moments is an endless search for something in the future that actually resides in the past. In reality, we are looking for “transformational objects” that promise to change us, to bring us into harmony with the non-self²¹

How It Is does not introduce any harmony. Quite on the contrary, one would be tempted to say, it points to other than harmonious structuring of the world.

Unheimlich, or the uncanny, is what was meant to be hidden but saw the light of day. The container in the art gallery is a peculiar kind of the uncanny. It is a scandal of visibility, but not because modern art can still tremble in the face of a “shocking” work, but because it leads what I have been describing as “trauma” or traumatic experience into the sphere of aesthetic experience. “The uncanny reminds us that everything is far too

²¹ Ch. Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object. Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known*, Free Association Books, London 1987. After: „Miroslaw Bałka,” in *Miroslaw Bałka. Dig Dug Dug*, ex. cat., The Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin 2003.

Holocaust in Literary and Cultural Studies

close to home...Our deepest wish is that there is no place like home, precisely because our deepest fear is that there is no place unlike home. Home is where the trouble starts.²² Bringing the unhomely back home, in other words, normalising of an experience as if we were more or less transparent to ourselves in this more or less transparent world, renders our lives more, not less troublesome and obscure.

Balka's container is an empty archive. Here one should begin (again).

Translation: Krystyna Mazur

²² J. Hutchinson, "Miroslaw Balka," in *Miroslaw Balka. Dig Dug Dug...*

Maciej LECIŃSKI

“Elimination of the Advantage”:¹ Empathy and the Work of Mourning in Marek Bieńczyk’s *Tworki*

Marek Bieńczyk’s latest novel, unlike the earlier *Terminal* and the essayistic *Melancholia*, enjoys a moderate but, more importantly, favorable interest of critics.² The charges that he has written a “doctoral book” waged against his debut novel *Terminal* (after all, Bieńczyk works at the Institute of Literary Research at the Polish Academy of Sciences), seem to have provoked the author to accompany *Tworki* with unnecessary and essentially conservative commentary on the occasion of interviews.³ The novel, even if it makes for a “resistant” reading, can be considered a successful attempt to find a new language for speaking about the Holocaust.

¹ The title of the essay comes from the conversation with Marek Bieńczyk conducted on the occasion of his receiving the “Passport” award from *Polityka*. See: “Słowo w akcji. Rozmowa z Markiem Bieńczykiem, literackim laureatem Paszportu *Polityki*,” *Polityka*, 2000 no. 5, 51.

² I am referring to the following reviews: M. Zaleski, “Praca żałoby,” *Gazeta wyborcza*, 1999 no. 108, 3; K. Szczuka, “Miłość w czasach Zagłady,” *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 1999, no. 27, 14; K. Nadana, “U Pana Boga za piecem,” *Res Publica Nowa*, 1999, no. 7–8, 103. The favorable responses of the critics are not, however, reflected in the interest of the general readership, for until now, a year since the publication of *Tworki*, less than a thousand copies were sold. In “Proza życia,” a type of report from the sales of the work of young Polish authors, Maja Wolny expresses a hope that this situation will change for *Tworki* because Bieńczyk was awarded the “Passport” award by *Polityka* (see: Maja Wolny, “Proza życia,” *Polityka*, 2000 no. 7, 57). In comparison, Olga Tokarczuk’s *Prawiek i inne czasy* was published in 40 000 copies, and Manuela Gretkowska’s *Namiętnik* in 13,000 copies.

³ See: “Imię Soni,” *Rzeczypospolita*, 1999 no. 159, D3.

Bieńczyk has undertaken a very ambitious and difficult task of writing – half a century after the end of the war – a book about the Holocaust of the Jews, a book which would speak not only to those who remember that period but also to young people who have access only to the documentary and literary representations of those times. *Tworki* represents the trauma of the Holocaust not in events but in language. It is a novel about the “elimination of the advantage” the living have over the dead,⁴ an attempt to understand the people of the times and the choices they made and, in effect, also an attempt to recover faith in the cognitive power of literature, in its significance. Finally, the novel performs the author’s own work of mourning, an attempt to overcome fear and trauma.

Bieńczyk performs these tasks on two levels: on the level of language and, additionally, on the level of composition (here the use of the myth of Arcadia is particularly worth noting).

In the beginning there was writing⁵

The roots of *Tworki* are tangled, reaching many places at once and connecting loosely related experiences, because the novel grows out of childhood trauma, teenage fears, and the feeling of being – as Bieńczyk puts it – “an accidental debtor” of the letter of a young woman saying good bye to her family before dying.

Bieńczyk, born eleven years after the war, confesses in a conversation with Maja Wolny that he belongs to the generation who dreamed about the Germans:

The walls of my building had been punctured by shells, kids continued to play war, war was the subject endlessly discussed at school, often in television, sometime at home. When I first went to Germany, as a 13-year-old...I was unable to swallow anything.⁶

The films he has seen about the Nazi, the books he has read, and his own unpleasant experiences caused the future author of *Terminal* to be haunted by, as yet unrealized, fear.

The fear intensified later with the accidental discovery of an authentic letter written by a woman who was hiding during the war in the *Tworki* psychiatric hospital. She was one of the Jewish women whose work in the hospital gave them a chance to survive the

⁴ See: “Słowo...,” 51.

⁵ M. Bieńczyk, *Tworki*, Warsaw, 1999, 7. English edition: M. Bieńczyk, *Tworki*, trans. Benjamin Paloff, Northwestern University Press, 2008. Subsequent references in the text are to this edition.

⁶ „Słowo w...,” 50. In the conversation with Wojciech Chmielewski (“Imię Soni”), Bieńczyk adds: “When after a month we left for Zebrzydowice, I literally devoured food... The funny thing is that when as a 19-year-old I went to Germany again, hitchhiking, the first German words I heard – I was sleeping in a ditch, and was woken up by a plainclothes policeman with a gun in his hand – were “Hände hoch.”

war; many of them did, she did not.⁷ One cannot, however, speak of misfortune, because Sonia consciously chooses to die, or rather consents to her fate.

The letter the novel begins with ("Yes, in the beginning there was writing, not very pretty, tall, tightly squeezed letters denying each other space and denying sails to the sentences") made Bieńczyk a willing "debtor" – though I think the word "hostage" would be more appropriate – of its sender. He was forced to write an answer which, for the lack of reliable information, had to be a fabrication. Writing *Tworki*, Bieńczyk performs a forgotten homework without which, as it turns out, one cannot say anything certain about oneself or the world in which one happens to live.

The language of the novel-answer differs substantially from the language usually used to speak about the Holocaust, the language which registers, catalogues events, violence, long agonies and quick deaths... The author of *Tworki* disagrees with what Grynberg says about "the novel of the Holocaust" in his essay "Szkoła opowiadania":

economy and modesty of means seems a must to me in the literature of the Holocaust... the situations and events I choose speak for themselves, in their own language; without the rhetoric which is absent from real life and true literature.⁸

This is not the language of Bieńczyk's generation, raised to a large extent in a textual world.⁹ What is more, Bieńczyk has another end in mind: his task is not to describe the Holocaust, to save the Jewish nation from being forgotten, but to search for another human being, to understand him or her, to join him/her in suffering, to feel what Jurek must have felt reading Sonia's farewell. Bieńczyk seems to believe in the individual dimension of loss. After all we do not lose a whole nation, but specific people who are dear to us. It is their passing that moves us, inspires sadness or fear.

To understand one has to find a platform for an encounter. Bieńczyk believes that only language can be that platform, that an encounter with the Other is possible only in language. In order for the encounter to take place a confrontation of the idiolects is necessary. The language of the novel's protagonists (as Katarzyna Nadana points out, "the pre-war, Warsaw style" is imitated by the author with true "virtuosity"¹⁰) is confronted with the language of the author (never the author's own, for it consists of cultural quotations) on almost every page of the novel, thus the multiplicity of pseudo-poetic rhymes, puns, parodies, ellipses, and anacoluthons. In one of the interviews Bieńczyk mentions that when preparing for writing the novel he hardly used the

⁷ See: K. Szczuka, "Miłość..." 14. "It is worth mentioning that much, including the name and the kindness of the director, as well as Sonia's story, belongs to the authentic war history of the hospital in *Tworki*, where many Jews were lucky to survive, also among the patients (many, but not all)."

⁸ Quoted after „Imię...”

⁹ See: *ibid.*: „My experience is different: not only the historical experience of a person born after the war, but also the literary experience of one who was educated and learned to write...in the textual world.”

¹⁰ K. Nadana, „U Pana Boga...” 104.

archive and the old press but spent much time “listening intently to old songs, and films – to the Polish of the time.”¹¹

“Listening intently” is an interesting way to put it, especially when juxtaposed with another comment made by Bieńczyk:

I give those dead people this experience, this language, just as they give me theirs. I want to meet them not in the realm of concrete facts, which I know little about, but in something which is more alive, more physical to the writer, in language, with which I consume them as they consume me with theirs.¹²

What the author of *Tworki* proposes here is knowledge through empathy, where understanding depends on identifying with another person, on “consuming” that person, on perceiving the world with his or her eyes. Importantly, such empathizing always entails taking on the language and style of the person we are trying to understand, which makes it empathy through language, a textual empathy.

The shortest definition of empathy offered by Józef Rembowski in a work devoted to the subject says it is “a process of feeling, perceiving, and understanding the psychic state of another person.”¹³ In further qualifications borrowed from other researchers on the topic, Rembowski points out that empathy resembles “psychological cannibalism,” because for a moment it includes the other person in one’s own “I” (E., 35); “empathy is based on the ability to put oneself in the position of another person” (E., 44) and requires that the person wanting to empathize “accept the point of view of other people” and “accept their social role” (E., 57). It is also important that empathy, “trying to feel the pain” of another person (E., 66), puts in motion the linguistic condition, for the one who empathizes has to express his impressions in the language of the one whom he is trying to understand (E., 67-8).¹⁴

Bieńczyk works with the tradition of treating language as the platform for the encounter with the Other. Such critical stance was creatively explored in the 1960s and 1970s by some of the French literary critics within thematic criticism. They tried to reach the hidden meanings of the work by adopting the point of view of its maker. The task of the critic was to “allow” the Other into oneself, to make space in oneself for the Other’s word, a process that was to allow the discovery of the essence of the work.¹⁵ Bieńczyk appears

¹¹ “Słowo...,” 50-51.

¹² Ibid, 51.

¹³ J. Rembowski, *Empatia*, Warsaw, 1989, 89. Subsequent references in the text preceded by E are to this edition.

¹⁴ The very word “empathy” is not much more than a hundred years old (its creator in German in 1885 was Th. Lipps; the German *etnfühlung* was translated into English in 1912), which does not mean that the concept was not known earlier. It appeared in the history of culture under the name of “compassion,” “shared pain,” “resonance,” “adherence” (J. Rembowski, *Empatia*, 33).

¹⁵ See: M. Głowiński, T. Kostkiewiczowa, A. Okopień-Sławińska, J. Stawiński, *Słownik terminów literackich*, Wrocław, 1998, 577-8.

here once again as a student of Poulet, Richard, and Starobinski (after all he frequently used their findings in his work on *Czarny człowiek*), only he combines thematic criticism with his own conviction that the world is a collection of texts and therefore the Other can be reached only through the word.

Much earlier, the critics of *Młoda Polska* have addressed literary works in a similar manner. In his book devoted to expression and empathy in the literary criticism of *Młoda Polska*, Michał Głowiński shows that this group of critics, especially Brzozowski, used the category of empathy in their consideration of the literary work.¹⁶ This meant "adopting to a greater or lesser extent the style characteristic [for the work/writer – M.L.]," and "more or less suspending all distance" toward them,¹⁷ and thus largely paralleled what Bieńczyk does in his last novel.

As it turns out, Bieńczyk consciously brings the language of the pre-war and war-time schoolboys into the language of his narrator because only in this way can he come closer to, feel, and know the thoughts and feelings of his characters. This process of empathizing begins with Sonia's letter or, more specifically, with its expressive style. Exclamation marks say much more than all (equally brief and emphatic) sentences of the farewell letter:

which is why I think I can ride along those exclamation points, as though on rails, along narrow paths, by a magical line, into those neighborhoods; that through a gymnastic effort I can take them right up to Sonia's square room...slip over onto that side there, near the tick-tocking ticks of Sonia's watch. (5)

Exclamation marks, poetic emphasis, exaltation, the protagonists' taste for humorous song, war-time jokes, rhyme and rhythm are absorbed by the narrator, so that the language of *Tworci* begins to resemble – as Kazimiera Szczuka puts it – "a Holocaust sing-song."¹⁸ This "sing-song," half playful, half serious (after all a sing-song is an incomplete utterance, open to the accident of the "other's word," as well as open to the unofficial language) eliminates the type of advantage the living have over the dead.¹⁹ This is because by letting the languages of the dead enter our own, we bring the lost ones back to life in their word, and at the same time, we renounce the knowledge unavailable to them which we acquired after their death.

Erasing the distance is one of the conditions of empathic knowledge. The first contacts have been made, the "mixer" is over, time to explore.

¹⁶ See: M. Głowiński, *Ekspresja i empatia. Studia o młodopolskiej krytyce literackiej*, Cracow, 1997, 76-9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 79.

¹⁸ K. Szczuka, „Miłość w...,” 14.

¹⁹ See: Bieńczyk's comment in the conversation with Maja Wolny: „empathy in Canetti is very physical, deeply felt, with all the senses, with the whole body; there is also in Canetti an almost obsessive feeling of debt toward the dead. . . . Canetti makes it one of his writerly tasks to eliminate the advantage the dead have over the living” (“Słowo...,” 51)

The work of mourning

Marek Bieńczyk's latest novel seems different from *Terminal* because it concerns not so much melancholia as mourning or, more specifically, the work of mourning. For if melancholia and mourning grow out of the same experience of loss, only the later overcomes trauma. "The melancholic," writes Zeidler-Janiszewska, "cannot move beyond re-living the experience of loss; his complaints...become accusations...The time of mourning, on the other hand, is the time of intense work leading to the reintegration of the 'I' of the mourner and a reconciliation with the changing shape of the world."²⁰ "[A]fter the work of mourning is completed, Freud argues, the 'I' becomes free again and unfettered."²¹

Sonia's death is such loss, first for Jurek, then for the narrator. Bieńczyk, by feeling compassion for his protagonists, by empathizing with them, also in a sense becomes a "mourner." As Jurek, he did not lose the entire Jewish nation, but this one specific girl, to whom he has been tied through the letter and through his fear. It seems that Bieńczyk, together with his protagonists, holds a mass for Sonia, participates together with Jurek in a "funeral procession" and then reintegrates his "I" of the mourner, discovers that the Holocaust of the Jews cannot be voiced other than through the attempt to reach the motivation behind individual choice of the individual who said "yes" to death.

Sonia is a mystery Jurek listens to intently as a doctor listens to the sick patient. Bieńczyk uses a common motif of the literature of the Shoah, namely the uncovering of one's hiding place and giving oneself over to the Gestapo. It seems to me, however, that in Sonia's case one cannot speak of exceeding "the critical mass" or about a dramatic reaction to the final defeat of the Warsaw ghetto uprising – after all Sonia's decision is made already six months after its fall. The girl takes with her to her grave the mystery of her death, the reasons for her choice. She leaves Tworki, despite the fact that she loves and is loved, she may feel safe in the hospital, she is not in any danger, the director of the hospital – the Good German Honette (there are many characters like this one in literature) could protect her in case of an emergency. So why does she leave? There is no simple answer to this question, perhaps her death is a "homework" one needs to complete.

Jurek, who "read out the sentences yet again, stared into them as though into a mirror, repeated them like aphorisms, last words...understood that now he will always have to turn these sentences over in his dreams like a millstone, to chew them like an acrid vitamin, like his own tears upon waking" (146). Further on it turns out that this is a task not only for Jurek; the narrator says that "that piece of paper is the best thing that's been done for us, that's been thought about our life here and the road laid out before us" (146). Because Sonia's letter may give meaning and weight to our lives, so that we are able to feel again a "tingling in our hands and a tickle in our throats" (146). The death of Olek's lover returns to our lives their tragic dimension; it is a bitter *memento*. Each of

²⁰ A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, *Między melancholią a żałobą*, Warsaw, 1996, 7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

us, Bieńczyk seems to be saying, should have one's own Sonia to whom one could write till the end of one's life, as he has been writing all his life "to Berdichev" (163) in order to realize whom we have lost in that war.

By coming to terms with the loss, the mourner performs the work of mourning, makes his or her "I" ready for new experiences, opens to the world.²² Bieńczyk performs the work of mourning and discovers that "there is no literature without the Other and without the desire, the longing for the impossible presence"; according to him, true literature "opens itself to the Other, to his presence."²³

How are we to understand Sonia's decision? We could, in line with the narrator's suggestion, see in it a recognition of one's own fate. By choosing suffering, by freely turning herself over to the Gestapo, Sonia is a victim who knows her fate, who pursues step by step her own destiny: "Strange how things work out! Seems like it's the way it had to be!" (146). She discovers that she can make her "I" free in one way only, by choosing the way of suffering which was meant for her. Her fate is the exile from Paradise, a voluntary departure from Arcadia and her lover.

It seems that Sonia's choice may be considered also from the perspective of the Romantic notion of the Sublime. As Magdalena Popiel observes, "For the Romantics the greatest attraction of the Sublime was that it *revealed the human sense of freedom*. Especially when juxtaposed with tragic fate, the piece of mind resulting from the absolute moral agency acquired the value of sublimity"²⁴ (emphasis M.L.). Deciding to turn herself over to the Gestapo, Sonia reaches the sublime moment of her existence. From this perspective, death in the epiphanic flash of recognition appears to be not so much a loss of life as the recovery of the sublime freedom.

"Clean glades and crystal water" (16)

Speaking of the empathic reading of Bieńczyk's novel, one needs to comment on the place where the meeting with the Other takes place. That place is the hospital for the mentally ill²⁵ which, however, as a place where love is born and where there is time for strolls and poetry, strangely resembles Arcadia, or perhaps its Biblical equivalent, Paradise.

Tworki is today one of the largest mental hospitals in Poland, as well as one of the oldest, established at the turn of the 20th century. Historic red brick buildings and the beautifully kept park over the river Utrata are preserved in their original shape.

In conversation with Maja Wolny, Bieńczyk confesses that it took him a long time to "tame" Tworki, by wandering in the park, sitting on the benches, by "listening intently"

²² Unlike the mourner, the melancholic does not fully understand whom he has lost, because he contemplates not the subject of loss but loss itself.

²³ See: „Imię...”

²⁴ M. Popiel, *Oblicza wzniosłości. Estetyka powieści młodopolskiej*, Cracow, 1999, 40.

²⁵ One should point out the significance of the metaphor of the hospital for the lunatics—after all it is a world upside down, and also a refuge for Anti-Plato and his poetry.

into the spirit of the place.²⁶ We can find traces of those meanderings on the pages of the novel:

this place is strangely warm, a safe center like a valley among mountains (9)

...

Even here, not so far from the hospital walls, it's not bad, a meadow quiet as though after a flood, a little bridge as unyielding as faith and green as hope, and a little river running under it, not too big, transparent, with little fish as signs of God's love, but made smaller by whatever its name, Utata – "Loss" – subtracted from its lovely sum. (16-7)

Except for the name of the river, which constitutes a form of a warning or quotation marks, nothing disrupts the idyllic pastoral image. When this world is invaded by blackmailers from Warsaw, who demand ransom from Marcel Brohowicz in return for peace, the protagonist is justifiably surprised and taken aback:

They knocked right on Paradise's door. That's the first thing that's popped into my head, that thought. That time doesn't flow here and that nothing can happen. That we're sitting here behind the oak of good and evil snug as bugs in a rug. (95)

But soon the situation goes back to normal (even if the stability is only illusory) and it is time for an outing, a holiday of song, dance, poetry, and an allegorical procession:

Coming ever closer, they are at their great apogee. The first one on the right, Love, waves her free hand in the measure of some melody...Next to her strides Serenity, distinguished by his great height and boot size... That hand under his elbow belongs to Hope. (102)

From the first pages of *Tworki* the reader receives signals that the hospital is more than simply a realistic location. The image of the hospital reality overlaps with the icon of the pastoral idyll; the passages quoted above inspire such an Arcadian reading.

The hospital in *Tworki*, similarly to Arcadia (originally a rocky and infertile region in Greece, that only with time became a secular Paradise, a garden of lush vegetation) is isolated from the rest of the world.²⁷ The place is doubly separated: first by the fence in the park, which prevents the patients from running away, and second by the river Utrata which flows by the park.

As Jadwiga Sokołowska points out, Arcadia cannot exist without its antithesis, the city.²⁸ *Tworki* also has their counterpart: the dangerous, occupied, informer-filled Warsaw. Even if the hospital remains under German jurisdiction, there are no roundups here, no armed underground, no forced labor, no prisons. Here, even if supplies are scarce, life pulsates with the pre-war idyllic rhythm. Only the local train which connects *Tworki* to Warsaw as with an umbilical cord is a reminder of danger; Love often arrives by it (Jurek, Olek, Anna), but sometimes also Death (the blackmailers).

²⁶ See: „Słowo...,” 51.

²⁷ See: D. Śnieżko, *Mit wieku złotego w literaturze polskiego renesansu*, Warsaw, 1996, 127.

²⁸ J. Sokołowska, *Dwie nieskończoności. Szkice o literaturze barokowej Europy*, Warsaw, 1978, 49.

As Dariusz Śnieżko observes, "Apart from an attractive environment... Arcadia possesses also a peculiar atmosphere of *otium*, where poetic competition and unrequited love become serious concerns."²⁹ In Bieńczyk's novel, which turns out to be also a "love story" the pastoral idyll takes place in "the garden of Eros" whose arrows wounded – though not particularly accurately – Jurek, Sonia, Olek, and Janka. The love exploits of the two couples take up quite a lot of space; there is even a betrayal – Jurek betrays Janka with Danka, there are crude rhymes, parodies of Mickiewicz's 13 syllable meter, much "poetry-making."

Despite such extraordinary surroundings and the propitious climate of happiness, the fate of the characters who come to Arcadia to rest does not radically change – as is the case in Theocritus:³⁰ from among the three hiding Jews only Janka will survive (perhaps because she is not as mysterious as Sonia, but rather plain); destiny will catch up with Sonia, Olek, and Marcel's wife, Anna. Apparently in Arcadia love and death have always been intricately connected. Although the elegiac tone had been recognizable in the literary representations of the Arcadian myth already in Theocritus' *Idylls* and Virgil's *Eclogues*, only the Renaissance, and even more the Baroque imagination pronounced this "melancholy" note really clearly. The conviction that death comes also for the heroes of the idyll found representation in 17th century painting. Two artists – Giovanni Francesco Guercino and Nicolas Poussin – separated by a quarter of a century, paint two paintings of death in the Arcadia. The first is titled *Et in Arcadia Ego* (1621-1623), which can be translated as "I am even in Arcadia"; in the context of the shepherds who find a skull on a wall with the title utterance underneath there is no doubt that the painting is a reference to death which extends its power also to the idyllic space.

It seems that Bieńczyk, by mobilizing the myth of Arcadia, attempts to create a literary equivalent to the world of emotions of his novel's protagonists. This procedure is similar to having an ear for the language of the characters, because the aim is the same: to understand what Jurek and Sonia felt in that situation, what they thought about falling asleep, waking up, working, and making love. The discovery that Tworki are a description of another "exile from Paradise" in which death swings on the garden swing, back and forth (and sleeps in a watch – a significant prop in Arcadia which apparently knows no time), allows the reader interested in empathetic, emotional reading to perform his own work of mourning. Only by trying to empathize with those people, to understand what they felt walking in the hospital park at a time when the Ghetto uprising was expiring in Warsaw, can we say something important also about ourselves. Bieńczyk makes us aware that, similarly to himself, we are all marked by loss. To understand oneself, one has to know what one has lost and later perform the individual work of mourning. That is possible only when we speak about specific people and not about general phenomena. Thus the author of

²⁹ D. Śnieżko, *Mit wieku...*, 29.

³⁰ J. Sokołowska, *Dwie nieskończoności...*, 37.

Tworki is saying “Sonia” instead of “the Holocaust”; “Marcel” and “Anna” instead of “the Shoah” and “the hecatomb.”

At the *Polityka* “Passport” award ceremony, Bieńczyk said that word “makes up for the loss.”³¹ He may have had his latest novel in mind. *Tworki* undertakes the task of recovering the Other in literature. Toward this end Bieńczyk employs “the Holocaust sing-song,” a controversial form especially for those who believe that speaking humorously about the Holocaust is inappropriate. The author of *Melancholia* believes otherwise, and although he appreciates the books by the author of *Kaddish* and by Hanna Krall for their precision, he believes that to say something important and moving about the Holocaust in the contemporary “textual” world it is not enough to describe the lives of those people, but one has to reach for their language. For it is in language, Bieńczyk believes, that one can find the truth, language is the vehicle by which we travel into the past.³²

This is not easily accessible language; one needs some time and effort to reach it. A good way to do it is, according to the author, through empathy. It is empathy that can give us direct contact with the Other. And in *Tworki* empathy is based on listening to language which conceals true emotions under the layer of school-boy humor; this is a specific type of “identification” with the lost person which leads to the “elimination of advantage” the living have over the dead.

It seems that the proposition of empathetic reading is inscribed into the novel. Bieńczyk wants a reader who will follow his characters, who will try to empathize with their lives and their decisions:

And so I come as called, I receive the transmission, on so many pages I sign for this unwelcome, unaddressed gift and call on you, because perhaps one of you will come, one of you will arrive permanently at my bench, yes, I’m calling you, all of you, come...by whatever train you can... and read, please read...and sign for receipt...sign again, confirm it, certify it, check off that you’ve received it, throw in your own post-postscript. (171)

³¹ See: „Słowo...,” 50.

³² In her conversation with Bieńczyk, Maja Wolny quotes from his afterword to the Polish edition of Elias Canetti’s *The Conscience of Words* (Cracow 1999). Bieńczyk refers to Canetti’s concept of “absorbing people into oneself in order to understand them anew again.” It seems that the author of *Tworki* borrows from Canetti the thesis about the “elimination of advantage” of the living over the dead. Writing about the Austrian’s essays that they are focused on “the physical detail Canetti seems to unearth in order to make it belong to his own physicality” (326), Bieńczyk discovers his own creative method. He then adds: “On many pages of this volume sentences flash about the experience of touch and closeness...the physicality of this experience is crucial to me: an encounter, a meeting of two bodies, their identification with each other; closeness which comes from contact...No abstract value, no beautifully posited memory of others.” (330). One can hardly resist the feeling that Canetti’s words are a point of departure for Bieńczyk’s own thoughts about loss and the work of mourning, in *Tworki* necessarily based on language (after all we live in a textual world, says Bieńczyk).

The request for a postscript is an encouragement for the work of mourning, for empathy toward the Other, for the recognition of one's own loss.

Marek Bieńczyk's *Tworki* is a novel which allows us to believe again in the significance of literature because the capacity for compassion, the capacity to "listen intently" to another can be used in prose to recognize one's own trauma, one's own loss. For Bieńczyk writing, long believed to be therapeutic, and for the receiver reading, may turn out to be (and here is more good news) medicine for the "illness of mourning." In order for that to happen, Bieńczyk suggests, one has to first become "ill" with mourning, that is, realize that each of us has in one way or another lost the Other. We should all live through that, give in to the "illness," in order to let go of the useful language of statistics, the practical language of psychoanalysis, and to eliminate the advantage, to recover the original language of the Other, to understand him, and to recover.

Translation: Krystyna Mazur

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Holocaust in Literary and Cultural Studies

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