

ANUARIO DE LETRAS MODERNAS

FACULTAD DE FILOSOFÍA Y LETRAS
UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL AUTÓNOMA DE MÉXICO

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On the limits of knowing the Holocaust

Richard EXNER
University of California-Santa Barbara

Please permit me a few introductory sentences by way of a preface. Why did I choose this topic? Why am I as scholar and as writer obsessed by it? What is my right to treat this topic?

I truly wish my topic did not exist and that it were not necessary to speak about it. I was tempted to speak to you tonight on a virtually unassailable, strictly literary topic such as the autobiographical and literary implications of the recently published diaries of Thomas Mann or —perhaps with even more conviction— on a topic from what is and continues to be my scholarly life's whole love, the oeuvre of Hugo von Hofmannsthal. What I have chosen instead seems more necessary to me. Time, not only mine, is running out, and perhaps we should turn first to those topics which address both the intensity and the intimacy of our physical, intellectual, spiritual, and moral survival.

Besides, the study of the Holocaust indeed befits the scholarly community because that particular community's lack of sensitivity and commitment has had disastrous consequences in the past, at least once within my lifetime. I therefore decided to use this opportunity to get as many of my listeners involved in a topic which they can, regardless of their immediate interest, avoid only at some peril to their own being, and I have chosen to stretch the scope of my remarks, at times quite beyond my normal areas of scholarly interest.

Your own involvement is as simple as it is harsh. Whatever you know of the Holocaust already and whatever you will hear tonight: please imagine yourself a part of it, of the preparation, deportation, hunger, torture, fire, gas, and —as survivors— of its aftermath. This effort, taxing the physical, the political and the moral imagination, has been a part of my life since my teens, and has, as the problems of the nuclear holocaust became more pressing, intensified over the last few years.

What is my right to this topic? I am German by birth, inextricably and irrevocably bound to the language of many of the victims and most of the perpetrators of the Holocaust; orders were written and spoken in the language in which I justify my existence. I have been friend and companion to many whose brothers and sisters or parents were exterminated. I grew up in wartime Germany; I was almost four years old when Hitler came to power, and I survived the virtual death by fire of Darmstadt, the city I grew up in and later, after entering Dresden “The Day After” the now legendary air raid, I travelled the breadth and part of the length of Germany as a refugee in a cattle car. After May 1945, i.e. the end of the war, I learned of the extent of the Holocaust but barely became aware of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and such words and concepts and places as *katonga*, Lublyanka, Kolyma. The Soviet destruction camps were unknown to me or simply subsumed under the cold but vague notion of “Siberia”. Thirty years ago next January, I unconditionally surrendered my first citizenship and equally unconditionally and fervently held on to my first language. You might say, then, that I am a survivor and witness by one, no, by several life-preserving removes and that, as a writer, I am extra-territorial — it seems for life. And finally, I think that I can say, whatever my perhaps arguable credentials as scholar and poet of the post-Holocaust period may be, in my studies and writings on this topic I am not driven by guilt; another universal, even stronger impulse has fired my curiosity, scholarly inquiry and, ultimately, my knowledge: shame.

I

Let me begin by reminding you of a famous painting by Pieter Brueghel entitled “The Fall of Icarus” or “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus”. It shall serve as a kind of water mark of my talk tonight. Brueghel is a master in the depiction of everyday and nightmare-reality. Wystan Hugh Auden wrote one of his most famous poems on this painting.¹ While “a boy is falling out of the sky” and repeats before our very eyes man’s erstwhile Fall, the post-edenic world around him, “the expensive delicate ship that must have seen / something amaz-

¹ “Musée des Beaux Arts”, in *The Collected Poetry of W.H. Auden*. New York, Random House, 1945, p. 3.

ing" ... "sails calmly on". The plowman plows, the shepherd looks up into the sky, and the city which seems full of life while the sun is setting "turns quite leisurely from the disaster". And life goes on because Icarus' plunge, though a "disaster", had not seemed, these are Auden's words, "an important failure".

One of the first things a student of the Holocaust can tell you is that very little knowledge of it seems to have spread except among those whom first hand experience imbued with the essence of this knowledge. Most of the rest of us sat on this expensive delicate ship and sailed calmly on. I shall try to get us off that ship and into full view of the Fall and hope that, by the end of the hour, the spectacle of the boy falling will at least momentarily have shaken and perhaps outraged our unconcerned tolerance and will have moved that Fall to the center and foreground of our vision.

Once we have broken out of our narcissism and realize what happened, the next problem, that of naming and describing, will face us. Let me show this clearly to you also. Please recall the moment when Dante the pilgrim, in the "Inferno", makes ready to descend into deepest hell. As it will again later, at the very center of paradise, the linguistic problem of speechlessness besets him:

S'IO AVESSI le rime aspre e chioce,
 come si converrebbe al tristo buco
 sovra 'l qual pontan tutte l'altre rocce,
 io premerei di mio concetto il suco
 più pienamente; ma perch'io non l'abbo,
 non sanza tema a dicer mi conduco;
 ché non è impresa da pigliare a gabbo
 discriver fondo a tutto l'universo,
 nèda lingua che chiami mamma a babbo.²

(If I had harsh and grating rhymes as would befit the dismal hole on which all the other rocks converge and weigh, I would distill more fully the essence of my conception; but since I do not have them, it is not without fear that I bring myself to speak; for to describe the bottom of the whole universe is not an enterprise to be

² Dante ALIGHIERI, *The Divine Comedy*. Translated, with a commentary, by Charles S. SINGLETON, "Inferno I: Italian Text and Translation". Princeton, Princeton University Press [Bollingen Series LXXX], 1970. The passage cited is the beginning of Canto XXXII, p. 339; the translation was slightly altered.

taken up in sport, nor is it proper for a tongue that is used to call out mama and papa.)

Some perspective, by way of a shock of sudden recognition and identification with the poet's problem, can be gained by holding this passage against a few lines from Elie Wiesel's most famous autobiographic text *Night*. "...But we had reached a station. Those who were next to the windows told us its name: 'Auschwitz'. No one had ever heard that name".³ Upon reading this, I experienced a profound shock which perhaps I cannot even transmit: it was caused by the awareness, all of a sudden, of our former, forgive the term, innocence in the presence of this name. Similarly, few people outside of Japan had heard the name of the city of Hiroshima before August, 1945. Like Auschwitz, that name has now become a magnet around which entire verbal, conceptual, and pictorial worlds have massed. Despite the essential aspect of technocracy which these two holocausts share, we shall do well to observe the difference which, in his essay 'The Question Concerning the Future', Karl Jaspers formulated so pointedly: "The reality of the concentration camps with their circular process involving torturers and tortured, the method of their dehumanization is a warning of things to come in comparison with which everything pales... We confront a greater danger than that of the A-bomb, a danger jeopardizing the soul of man. An awareness of total hopelessness may well grip us".⁴

We must know what to be afraid of and what to guard against. Several epistemological approaches offer themselves since the Holocaust affects practically all areas of human endeavor. We do well to deal with history first. In that context the responsibility of the teaching germanist is a special one. A Jewish germanist, Alfred Hoelzel, has recommended that we begin by taking into account Erik Erikson's notion that nations, in their collective identity, are indeed defined by the distance between their highest and lowest achievement.⁵ We also do well to speak of collective responsibility, instead of that abhorred and much more restricted concept of collective guilt:

³ WIESEL, Elie, *Night, Dawn, The Accident: Three Tales*. New York, Hill and Wang, 1972, p. 35.

⁴ JASPERS, Karl, "Die Frage nach der Zukunft" in *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*. Zürich, Artemis Verlag, 1949, p. 190.

⁵ HOELZEL, Alfred, "The Germanist and the Holocaust". *Unterrichts-Praxis* XI, 2 (1978), pp. 52-59. Erikson is cited from Erik ERIKSON, *Childhood and Society*. New York, W. W. Norton, 1963, p. 327.

As germanists we must note that the Germans cannot claim Goethe, Lessing, Rilke, Mann and Albert Schweitzer as theirs and divest themselves at the same time of Hitler, Goebbels, Rosenberg and Eichmann. And we must face what is even less comfortable, the grey cases, for example Martin Luther who, in his essay "Concerning the Jews and Their Lies" of 1543, had recommended setting fire to synagogues and talmud schools.⁶ Let us not forget that Goethe's residence in Weimar was virtually within view of Buchenwald. The American general who marched the citizens of Weimar through that camp had succeeded in unblocking one road to knowing what the Holocaust was about.

"Holocaust", "shoa" or "churn" —today they all suggest complete destruction. Originally, the Greek word meant a "burnt offering", a term which certainly took on monstrous dimensions. Normal language, a "*lingua che chiami mammo o babbo*" which barely serves to describe adequately a paradise's ever-increasing intensity of light and must, at that, resort to babble— such language surely was not meant to describe "the bottom of the whole universe", the *anus mundi*, as the humanistically trained Nazis chose to refer to the extermination camps.

It is easy to see that historiography is up against the massiveness and potential serialization of disaster, also against the inability to react meaningfully to uninterrupted monstrosities and the perceived imminent danger of even greater holocaust and, finally, the seeming impossibility to convert scientifically gained information into an acknowledgement of actual reality and moral significance. To mourn an emotionally unacknowledged loss is impossible.

The philosopher Karl Jaspers — let me cite him again —has said of the Holocaust that "only in knowledge can it be prevented"⁷— in the intellectual and emotional knowledge, we must add. This, of course, presents particular problems to an historian. In 1948 Isaac Rosenfeld, after listing the most frequent types of Holocaust documents (diaries, eyewitness accounts, certified documents and records by victims and perpetrators), pointed out: "By now we know all there is to know. But it hasn't helped; we still don't understand ... There is no response great enough to equal the facts that provoke it".⁸ Let us try, nevertheless.

⁶ "The Christian in Society". [Vol. 47 of *Luther's Works*]. Ed. Franklin SHERMAN. Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1971, pp. 268-269.

⁷ JASPERS, Karl, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

⁸ Cited in EZRAHI, Sidra DeKoven, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature*. Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 197.

How great the danger of historiographical distortion really is becomes obvious if we but consider two countries and their attempts at dealing with the Holocaust: Divided Germany and the Soviet Union. In the Soviet Union, the event seems to have quite simply disappeared in what William Korey called "History's 'Memory Hole'".⁹ The German treatment in both states is subject to enormous pressures. In the Federal Republic there are conscience and pride and apathy to contend with; in the German Democratic Republic, on the other hand, an ideologically petrified unwillingness to see, officially, any parallels between the Nazi and the Soviet states in terms of the neglect of human rights. Jews, furthermore, are pointedly left unidentified as specially selected victims of either state. This is demonstrable beyond any doubt by the manner in which Soviet press and history books have recorded and interpreted an event such as the Babi Yar massacre and any of its literary commemorations, and by the reaction to the capture and trial of Adolf Eichmann, occurrences which triggered a fairly massive response among American intellectuals. In the Soviet Union these occurrences were used as an occasion to slander the Adenauer government. Yet, as Rainer Baum has pointed out, the facts about Babi Yar were always available and could have been told—if the Soviets had chosen to do so—in a manner to approximate Leopold von Ranke's dictum that written history should tell us what actually happened.¹⁰ No amount of "criticism" in a poem such as Yevtushenko's "Babi yar" has made any difference in the state's attitude. It is quite evidently not Ranke whom Holocaust historians, and not only in the Soviet Union, seem to want to please. They act, on the contrary, in concert with Jacob Burckhardt's observation that history is the record of what one age found worthy of note in another.

For this, the history of the Holocaust is an excellent case in point. Lucy Dawidowicz, a prolific Holocaust historian, has every reason to fear that we might some day find ourselves without any reliable record of the Holocaust.¹¹ She however places some of the responsibility

⁹ KOREY, William, "In History's 'Memory Hole': The Soviet Treatment of the Holocaust", in BRAHAM, Randolph L. *Contemporary Views of the Holocaust*. Boston/The Hague, Kluwer Nijhoff, 1983, vi, pp. 145-156.

¹⁰ BAUM, Rainer C., *The Holocaust and the German Elite: Genocide and National Suicide in Germany, 1871-1945*. London, Croom Helm, 1981, p. 18.

¹¹ DAWIDOWICZ, Lucy S., *The Holocaust and the Historians*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1981, p. 1.

for the level of Holocaust historiography on the Jews themselves, particularly on those who, by comparing the Holocaust to disasters like Ma'lot and Hitler to Arab leaders, destroy all perspective. In doing so, they invite that old and vicious and immoral game of *Aufrechnung*, that banal and exculpatory pastime of matching and measuring disaster against disaster — Auschwitz against Cambodia or the Turkish massacres of the Armenians, My Lai against Lidice, Dresden against Coventry and the V-weapon attacks, and so *ad absurdum* and, truly, *ad infinitum*. This is the way to assure disaster serialization and governance by the politics of never-ending retribution. But one may shun comparisons for other reasons also. Lucy Dawidowicz will not hear of comparing the Holocaust to the A-Bomb attacks,¹² a comparison Robert Lifton, A. Alvarez and Günther Anders have always taken for granted. They saw the extermination camps as a kind of trial run for an expanded nuclear war which would, following an H-Bomb attack on either New York or London, yield between four and five million casualties. Still, for Dawidowicz, there is intent to consider, not extent alone. Hiroshima, she points out correctly, was not bombed to eliminate the Japanese people as a people.

We must simply accept as certain the possibility that records concerning Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Gulag, and other disasters can be extinguished, discarded, and fabricated. Record taking and preserving will always jeopardize the national interest of any state. In the Federal Republic of Germany there were, according to Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, three main reactions to the Holocaust, all of which jeopardized historical research: (1) marked emotional insensitivity to the horrors of the camps, resulting in a de-realization of the period; (2) the resultant attempt to identify with the victors rather than the vanquished and (3) an enormous collective effort toward reconstruction which, in itself, de-realizes by erasing the traces of what was. Repeatedly, say the Mitscherlichs, German politicians stressed that the post-war period was over, neglecting to acknowledge that such periodization was not within their granting. And not until after the screening of the Holocaust series in the Federal Republic did sentiment concerning the statute of limitations turn around, precisely because the TV-series had re-realized that period in German

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18 [on the topic of "Aufrechnung" and Hiroshima].

history which so many had been eager to forget.¹³ The very primitiveness of the approach of the series was its success, the 'particularization' did not make everything harmless but brought it frighteningly close, and those dealt with as human garbage and as sub-human suddenly had become, on the screen, human beings that said "I" and "you" and "we". The numbing which the numbers, which that six million figure had caused, had suddenly ended and released, on a massive scale, empathy with suffering and dying individuals. The showing of the Holocaust series—I agree with Günther Anders—has taught us that what we need is the very opposite of magnifying glasses.¹⁴ We need glasses that reduce and scale down inhuman events so that we may know, intellectually and emotionally, what happened, and that we react as if it were happening now and to us. And that is one more way of knowing the Holocaust.

Historical recording, then, all prejudice and repression aside, is technically difficult. The very mass of materials of such varied provenance and authenticity simplifies and, at the same time, complicates the historian's task. History is unthinkable without documents, but documents alone are hardly history; rather, they are potentially uncritical and unrepresentative collages which will obscure and keep obscure large areas of inquiry. The documents may show, however, where the historian will experience the limits of knowing the Holocaust, and where he must search further.¹⁵ Is the poet, that proto-historian, as chronicler and interpreter, really more favored? Are interpreted 'fictions' more reliable than historical documents?

They may well be. The historians at the dawn of history were poets; great creations and apocalyptic catastrophes seem to call for the singer or the writer as "remembrancer", a term George Steiner used in his "Notes on Poetics 9". His paper deals specifically with the fact that on the one hand we seem to have to rely on poets rather than historians when faced with the unimaginable, while on the other we must hope that the truths about Babi-Yar, for example, would not remain "in the flamboyant, albeit ethically courageous, keeping of a Yevtu-

¹³ MITSCHERLICH, Alexander and Margarete M., *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern: Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens*. München, Piper, 1973, pp. 40-43.

¹⁴ ANDERS, Günther, *Besuch im Hades: Auschwitz und Breslau 1966 / Nach 'Holocaust' 1979*. München, C. H. Beck, 1979, pp. 182-183, 203.

¹⁵ DAWIDOWICZ, Lucy S., "On Studying Holocaust Documents", *A Holocaust Reader*. Ed. Lucy S. DAWIDOWICZ. New York, Behrman House, 1976, pp. 20-21.

shenko or a Kuznetsov".¹⁶ It seems that the combination of historian and poet may have the best chance at bringing us closer to the truth. Historical honesty and scrupulous remembering, both practiced selflessly, may well be the principal answer to our present limits of knowing the Holocaust.

In one of the major post A-bomb fictions, in Masuji Ibuse's *Black Rain*, the past is recalled as an instrument to help cope with the present. We continue our lives in order to record. Psychologists have told us that the recovery of our individual and collective past is the first step in defining the present and in facing the future. This act of recovery may be accomplished in a "novel" in which conversations are constructed, not as they did take place, but as they might have. Fiction, as Simone de Beauvoir attested in her preface to Jean-François Steiner's *Treblinka*, is able to deliver the historical material by way of the shock of recognition, of identification, a shock which in our day seems to be delivered, as I have just mentioned, most indelibly by the screen rather than the printed page. The final act of cognition is often, if not always, preceded by this shock.

We are speaking here of non-belletristic fictions, of fictionalized documentaries. Solshenitzyn called his monumental trilogy *The Gulag Archipelago*, I believe most felicitously, "An Experiment in Literary Investigation". He offers statistics, eye-witness reports, memoirs, historiographical reflections, convinced that even so extensive an investigation as this has definite limits in terms of the transmission of knowledge rather than of information. He states in the briefest of prefaces that those who explored all this fully are in their graves: "No one can ever tell us the *most important thing* about these camps".¹⁷ And so he amasses his facts and does not even attempt, as he does (perhaps unsuccessfully) in *August 1914*, to write *literature*. Solshenitzyn is, in George Steiner's words, "trying to do the job which Soviet historians lack the courage and the means to undertake".¹⁸

Meanwhile, the 'material' is expanding. The proces of historical or literary investigation, rather than interpretation, must remain

¹⁶ STEINER, George, "The Writer as Remembrancer. A Note on Poetics, 9", in *The Center: Dialogue Discussion Paper*. Santa Barbara, The Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, April 9, 1973, p. 9.

¹⁷ SOLZHENITSYN, Alexandr I., *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*. New York, Harper & Row, 1975, vol. II, [7].

¹⁸ STEINER, George, "The Writer as Remembrancer ...", p. 10.

open. The study of the literature of the Holocaust faces very specific problems; foremost among them are those of defining, of categorizing and —most vexing— of subjecting this literature to the application of traditional literary and aesthetic criteria.

II

The literature of the Holocaust: it is art, rescued from death; it is realized remembrance. The philosopher, sociologist and critic Theodor Adorno considered the writing of poetry after Auschwitz barbaric and felt that any artistic representation of people clubbed to death must always be unacceptable because it is possible that we may derive aesthetic pleasure from such representation.¹⁹ But, as Alfred Kazin reminds us in his preface to Sidra Ezrahi's study of Holocaust writing, literature *will* be produced, and a literature of total despair is a contradiction in terms.²⁰ We have Elie Wiesel's "Night" and have Tadeusz Borowski's stories. They are, quite simply, despair; Borowski's texts are despair filtered through suicidal cynicism. And so another contradiction is here to stay: the act of writing as temporary cessation of despair is a kind of displaced or deferred suicide. Quite often it is also an act of penance on the part of the survivors (of extermination camps or atomic bombings), that kind of 'creative guilt' felt in the presence of the dead. This gesture is as perceivable in Peter Weiss' Auschwitz essay as it is in Tamiki Hara's A-bomb stories. In short, *literature*, Holocaust writing, has without question become the infra-text for most of post World War II writing, a litmus test for human behavior under inhuman or extreme circumstances.

Holocaust literature has its antecedents, of course—or does it? Are the well known representations of hell, among them that earlier cited lowest hell of Dante's, an adequate introduction to "l'univers concentrationnaire", to a world, so named by David Rousset, through which untold millions have passed in this century? Is Thomas Mann's famous twenty-fifth chapter of his novel *Doctor Faustus* more adequate, that text which described hell at the very time it was re-created: "in hell all things come to an end [...], all mercy, grace, forbearance,

¹⁹ ADORNO, Theodor "Engagement", in *Noten zur Literatur III*. [Gesammelte Schriften. Ed. Rolf TIEDEMANN]. Frankfurt/Main, Suhrkamp, 1974, vol. II, p. 423.

²⁰ EZRAHI, Sidra DeKoven, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature*. With a Foreword by Alfred KAZIN. Chicago/London, The University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. xii [A. K. cites Camus on this point].

every last vestige of consideration for such pronouncements as YOU SIMPLY CANNOT DO THIS TO A HUMAN SOUL? It is done *without ever being accounted for* (my emphasis), in a soundproof cellar, fathoms below God's hearing, and in eternity".²¹ A myth without the comfort of distance. But is it a literary antecedent of Holocaust writing? Is Poe? Is Kafka's awakening of Gregor Samsa, after his metamorphosis; is his infernal writing machine in the *Penal Colony*? Yes, they are manifestations of hell, but of a kind that allows for exegesis, and exegesis means deferral of ultimate signification, of execution —and translates into breathing space. By comparison, the primal scenes of Holocaust writing preclude exegesis; they represent, to borrow a phrase from a poem of Celan's, "the arrival of the truth amidst squalls of metaphors".²² "There are no metaphors for Auschwitz, just as Auschwitz is not a metaphor for anything else... because the flames were real flames, the ashes only ashes, the smoke always and only smoke... They can only 'be' or 'mean' what in fact they were: the death of the Jews".²³ The study of myths and of classic representations of hell were no preparation for this. The burning pit was a real burning pit, what was burning were real human beings, and Elie Wiesel's often cited garlands of smoke were literally metaphorized children. Not all of Holocaust literature is than unmediated. Some of it was written at several removes, at the periphery of the concentrationary universe. None of it, however, would exist without the primary scene, the event itself.

Books have been written which try to establish new standards of 'immediacy' for Holocaust and post-Holocaust of genre, such as novel, essay, lyric poem. I shall give you the briefest and this necessarily incomplete and haphazard, seemingly arbitrary, survey. Let us begin at the periphery, with Gentile authors such as Ilse Aichinger, Albrecht Goes, Sylvia Plath, and Carl Zuckmayer, all of whom (in George Steiner's words) "arrogated" the topic and dealt with it and its details without the authenticity of having been witnesses.²⁴ Jewish

²¹ MANN, Thomas, *Doctor Faustus*. Tr. H. T. LOWE-PORTER. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1948, p. 245 [Translation substantially altered].

²² "Ein Dröhnen: es ist / die Wahrheit selbst / unter die Menschen / getreten, / mitten ins / Metapherngestöber", in Paul CELAN, *Gedichte in Zwei Bänden*. Frankfurt/Main, Suhrkamp, 1975, II, p. 89.

²³ ROSENFELD, Alvin H., and Irving GREENBERG, (eds.), *Confronting the Holocaust: The Impact of Elie Wiesel*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1978; "A. H. Rosenfeld: The Problematics of Holocaust Literature", p. 19.

²⁴ STEINER, George, "Silence and the Poet", in *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhuman*. New York, Atheneum, 1967, p. 53.

authors, as removed from the center as the just mentioned Gentiles, are Bellow, Asch and Weiss. As authors, Jewish or Gentile, who speak directly from the center, I would name, among others, Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi, Abba Kovner, Charlotte Delbo, and include those who, like Tadeusz Borowski, Nelly Sachs and Paul Celan, escaped only physically and, in many cases, not for very long.

Put in its simplest terms, the next question would have to be: if literary, musical, pictorial or cinematographic art is to provide the cognitive shock of truth, we must be able to judge such art. How can we do that if the experience described is virtually beyond the imagination and seems, purely as experience, entirely beyond criticism? In other words: shall we let the description of raw experience take its effect? Is that more urgent for our survival than any artistic critical concerns? On the other hand, A. Alvarez is convinced that only art will deliver a lasting shock and asks us to see that Bor's *Terezín Requiem* and Wiesel's *Night* are failures as works of art.²⁵ Surely, some of "remembrancing" is rhetoric. Yet, Borowski's stories which were also written after the author had escaped from an extermination camp and before his suicide by gas six years later, are without parallel and transcend the 'rhetoric' of remembering. Moreover, the apocalypse that, for Borowski, began with Auschwitz is in full force today. This, then, is not imaginative literature in the traditional sense. Within the context of the Auschwitz experience, Borowski offers *precise* description of a whirling stream of people:

Through half-open eyes I see with satisfaction that once again a gust of cosmic gale has blown the crowd into the air, all the way up to the tree tops, sucked the human bodies into a huge whirlpool, twisted hair lips open in terror, mingled the children's rosy cheeks with the hairy chests of the men, entwined the clenched fists with strips of women's dresses, thrown snow-white thighs on the top, like foam, with hats and fragments of heads tangled in hair-like seaweed peeping from below. And I see that this weird snarl, this gigantic stew concocted out of the human crowd, flows along the street, down the gutter, and seeps into space with a loud gurgle, like water into a sewer.²⁶

²⁵ ALVAREZ, A., "The Literature of the Holocaust". *Commentary* XXXVIII, (November 1964), p. 65.

²⁶ BOROWSKI, Tadeusz, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*. Tr. Barbara VEDDER. New York, Viking, 1967, p. 159 [From "The World in Stone", this passage also cited in EZRAHI, S.D. *By Words Alone...*, p. 62].

Adorno's dictum does not seem to apply; besides, it would be contradicted by both Sartre and Camus who held that the transformation of despair into art represents the very conquest of despair. This transformation certainly invites critical study. The house of language must be entered even if there is good reason to believe that the thousands of scholars who have, for example, entered Kafka's house of language, have for the most part not shared Kafka's despair and have derived pleasure from the structured order of his terrors.

To avoid purposely all potentially attainable pleasure in literary form would, in my opinion, result in the blank ignorance of what literature describes. Contemporaries and those born later must remember, also in writing, and almost at any cost. The cost can be disturbingly high. The reception of the famous "Fugue of Death" by Paul Celan is a case in point. The recital of "Todesfuge" in word or musical composition and its aesthetic analyses have frequently served, I am certain of this, as an expiatory and exculpatory exercise. Having recited that poem one had done one's part in coping with the past and had done it with some pleasure. I recommend that every reader and interpreter of that poem hear it spoken by the author. Instantly, the text will resurrect to its full horror. The fictions of Lind and Kosinsky and others, as well as such films as "The Night Porter", exploit and stress the evil and violence of the Holocaust. At that point "literature" will not outrage its readers, but fascinate them and arouse their morbid curiosity, and thus cease to be an adequate response "to the enormity of the reality it represents".²⁷ The "pornography of death" is undeniably a part of the Holocaust and suffuses to some extent even as "historical" a play as Rolf Hochhuth's "The Deputy". The line between unflinching recognition and commercial exploitation is very thin. I need only remind you of Bruno Bettelheim's vociferous —and I believe entirely justified— attack on Lina Wertmüller's film "Seven Beauties".²⁸ Such fictions suggest that "l'univers concentrationnaire" is, in essence, an obscene and ubiquitous *mondo cane*: that the extermination camps spilled over and turned the entire world into what they were. This philosophy might be attractive because it promotes a levelling after which we no longer need to distinguish between victim and victimizer and can safely abandon all conventions of human conduct. It is one more way of making a myth out of the Holocaust

²⁷ EZRAHI, S.D. *ibid.*, p. 217.

²⁸ BETTELHEIM, Bruno, "Surviving". *The New Yorker*, August 2, 1976.

and one more of inflating limits on our knowledge of its reality. If the entire world is Auschwitz or Gulag, we have been exempted from every conceivable moral decision. Curiously however, it is precisely this view which helps us see how absurd its complete reversal is: the denial namely that there ever was such a reality as Auschwitz. Both views spell victory for dictatorships which design and direct the systematic elimination of millions of people.

But perhaps the most radical and lasting literary and aesthetic change which the massive holocaust events in our century have effected has to do with a change in our perspectives of death and dying. It will simply not do to present to post-Auschwitz readers an aesthetics of death, such as, to cite but one example. Thomas Mann offers in *Death in Venice*. Discussions on modern tragedy have frequently hinged on the consideration that massive death and dying—cities and armies, Dresden and Stalingrad—have transcended tragedy which, in turn, has ceased to be a viable literary form. Readers of holocaust literature are often struck by the fact that they rarely encounter the pronoun “I”; survival is almost always a collective act. Ultimately, in the concentrationary universe and in nuclear wars and in extermination camps, there is no place for death in its time-honored and “decent” forms.²⁹ What people were concerned with was not death but the process of dying. As Jurek Becker ends a most moving passage in *Jacob the Liar*: “the worst that could have happened to us would have been a meaningful death”.³⁰ Our views of tragedy have certainly changed radically.

The essayist Günther Anders had, as a young man, re-formulated the old Lucretian summary of our pleasure in things tragic, that feeling of satisfaction which comes when we watch a shipwreck from a safe shore. He describes a woman on a tower, who, from a truly dwarfing distance, looks on as her child dies in an accident. He has her say: “Down there I would have gone mad with despair”, and has her refuse to be led down from the tower.³¹ In very similar manner, we who

²⁹ LIFTON, Robert Jay, *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima*. New York, Random House, 1967, p. 133. Also see Charlotte DELBO, *None of Us Will Return*. Tr. John GITHENS. New York, Grove Press, 1968, p. 121.

³⁰ BECKER, Jurek, *Jacob der Lügner*. Neuwied/Berlin, Luchterhand, 1970, p. 93 (“Das Schlimmste, was uns hätte geschehen können, wäre ein sinnvoller Tod gewesen”).

³¹ Cited in Günther ANDERS, *Besuch im Hades*, p. 201 (“unten wäre ich verzweifelt!”).

consider that art should salvage, in Sidra Ezrahi's words, "the voices of the dying"; we who expect literature to come up with the poem "to replace the disrupted ceremonies of mournig" and we who want the novel "to resurrect private destiny from the heaps of bone and ash"³² seem to be unable to face disaster head on. As time has passed over some major holocausts, and as geography seems to have kept others far away from many of us, we have chosen to use literature and art as Perseus once used Athena's shield when he set out to slay the Gorgon Medusa. Having to face her directly would have meant certain death. Yet, in order to know, we must come down from the tower and must reflect upon our existence as social and political beings without the accustomed and comfortable mirrors of art and religion.

I cannot now give you a full critical evaluation of the research efforts of Kren and Rappoport, or of Rainer Baum and Günther Anders. They are exponents of what one might call a humanistic sociology which, quite beyond any ideology, concerns itself with the questions of how to prevent future holocausts. They would have us accept that such events and concepts as Auschwitz and Hiroshima have expanded our universe of consciousness no less than have the conquest of space and the landing on the moon. They would also posit that Hitler and Stalin have dangerously increased the world's tolerance to mass murder and torture, and to turning human beings into material, into matter, into garbage and trash. And, furthermore, that in doing this, these two dictators were able to rely on our very resilient incredulity. Neither victims nor by standers believed what was going to happen, what did happen, and some cannot to this day believe that it did happen and that, if we look at the Gulag, it is still happening now.³³ This constant stretching of our imagination has resulted in colossal indifference and moral paralysis. Within the context of this paralysis, however, we must make ourselves heard. There will be no chance to avoid the next holocaust unless we do.

Quite often, when asked to imagine what might happen next, we very likely react with a 'You can't be serious!' ("Das darf doch nicht wahr sein!") and may take pride in the fact that, as human beings, we

³² EZRAHI, S.D. *By Words Alone...*, p. 218.

³³ ALEXANDER, Edward, "The Incredibility of the Holocaust", in *The Resonance of Dust: Essays on Holocaust Literature and Jewish Fate*. Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 1979, pp. 10-11 et passim; similarly in Primo LEVI's novel *If This Is a Man*. Tr. Stuart WOOLF. New York, The Orion Press, 1959, p. 120.

cannot imagine a holocaust. We must imagine it; and we must know (and experience should have taught us that, at least) that “culture”, “religion”, and “law”, these pillars of our Western morality, are inadequate when it comes to protecting ourselves and others, and that equally revered science and technology or any other symbols of rationality may actually turn out to be the major contributing factors in future disasters. While preparing this talk I was often overwhelmed by what I thought was crushing evidence that we could indeed have almost limitless knowledge of the Holocaust. Yet, there is much deliberate blindness, and an unwillingness to view the evil behind the Holocaust, and to consider it not simply as banal and regrettable, but as vicious evil. If we look at books that decry Auschwitz as a hoax and put the Holocaust in quotation marks, and if we read of Faurisson’s insistence that there were no gas chambers, we who unfortunately know better must resist. This resistance is, I am afraid, our only hope of prevention. Is it surprising that, at Hiroshima, in February of 1981, the Pope insisted that humanity could survive only through conscious choice and deliberate policy?³⁴ Excluding oneself from inhuman act and hoping for the best was never enough; today it is virtually the hallmark of moral indifference, of that newest and most deadly sin of omission. In order to understand what happened and what might happen, we must, through reading and researching of Holocaust literature, strengthen our emotional responsiveness and expand and extend our moral imagination. These resolves should, think, become the method of our sanity. We need imagination because we truly lack a trained organ for perceiving the virtually unimaginable, and that includes what we ourselves might suffer or inflict upon others. We must, though it seems utter contradiction and madness, imagine the end, i.e. that precisely what we always thought we were living for may not survive.³⁵

What is more, we must imagine, *in words*. We know since time immemorial that we cannot remember or regret adequately except within the context of language. Many of the perpetrators of the Holocaust have for decades refused to put their deeds into words.³⁶ And so we have arrived at the root of the problem of silence which

³⁴ SCHELL, Jonathan, “The Abolition: I. Defining the Great Predicament”. *The New Yorker* (January 2, 1984), p. 36.

³⁵ ANDERS, Günther, *Besuch im Hades*. pp. 38-39, 48-49.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

surrounds the Holocaust and has issued from it: repentance, remembrance, and sensuous impression are determined linguistically; impressions must become expressions.³⁷ And if indeed there were no language in which to express Auschwitz and Hiroshima clearly so that their truth pierces our own and everyone else's perception, it would be up to us to find such language. Let us, then, to conclude our reflections, look at language and how it functions in the face of the inexpressible.

III

We remember through language. When we forget, said Hofmannsthal, language will remember in our stead. The Nazis knew that language had power. So did and do the Soviets. Dictatorships, engaging in censorship, know that unwanted names and script must disappear or be falsified. Piotr Rawicz in *Blood from the Sky*, describes a scene where Jewish Häftlinge (camp prisoners) are forced to demolish the tombstones in a Jewish cemetery. The narrator is confronted with the "death of stones". More correctly, with the death of writing. I cite this passage to prepare us for the reduction of language and its successive death in Paul Celan's poetry:

The blind, deafening hammer blows were scattering the sacred characters from inscriptions half a millennium old... And *aleph* would go flying off to the left, while a *he* carved on another piece of stone dropped to the right. A *gimel* would bite the dust and a *nun* follow in its make... Several examples of *shin*, a letter symbolizing the miraculous intervention of God, had just been smashed and trampled on by the hammers and feet of these moribund workmen.³⁸

It is difficult to imagine a more radical metaphor for the destruction of human communication. The sanctity of script, which certifies our very existence as human beings, was laid waste to during the Holocaust. Alvin Rosenfeld reminds us of finger-clawed messages in the "bath-houses" of the extermination camps and asks us to imagine

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 190-191.

³⁸ RAWICZ, Piotr. *Blood from the Sky*. Tr. Peter WILES. New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964, p. 57.

what must have occurred at the moments when these “iconic signatures were placed”.³⁹ Elie Wiesel expected that the silence following the screams would deafen the world. But the world was largely silent, and most screams went unheard. Therefore Wiesel and others decided to break the silence. What the witnesses have written to represent or to mediate the terror of these messages or to metaphorize it, quite literally to carry-it-over into the language of memory, has become the text of a new poetics which Alvin Rosenfeld called “the poetics of expiration”.⁴⁰ This poetics encompasses a sizable body of literature. It has roots in the scriptural tradition of *The Lamentations*, written to forestall the silence of forgetting. Readers of Nadjezhda Mandelstam’s *Pyrwaya Kniga* and *Wtoraya Kniga* (*Hope Against Hope* and *Hope Abandoned*) will recall that she tells us, after her husband had been extinguished and erased like a piece of writing, that the “scream is the last trace of the human being. With his screams he fights for his right to live, he calls for help, he marshals us into resistance. If all else is gone, one must scream. Silence is the true crime against humanity”.⁴¹ Screams are notations of a meta-language of terror, which contemporary poetry seeks to translate into words; they are appropriate in a language that is to “discriver fondo a tutto l’universo”, and not in one “which cries mama and papa.” After Horace’s *carmina non prius audita* and countless heard and unheard melodies throughout history, the Holocaust has presented poets and their readers with a new challenge: *clamores non prius auditi*, screams hitherto unheard.

If these screams are allowed to go unrecorded, we destroy the suffering and dead once more; German has a verb *totschweigen*, which means to kill, to erase by silence. Dictatorships pay close attention to poems and other scripted things. Mandelstam virtually chose his own death when, in November of 1933, he wrote a poem in which Stalin was addressed as “murderer and peasant-slayer”.⁴² In essence, he was killed for having written a poem. And besides he was Jewish. What ultimately makes the Holocaust very much a matter of language is that the exterminations were acts committed in language. Language was

³⁹ ROSENFELD, Alvin, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature*. Bloomington /London, Indiana University Press, 1980, p. 95.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 82-95.

⁴¹ MANDELSTAM, Nadezhda, *Hope Against Hope: A Memoir*. Tr. Jeanne NEMCOVÁ. New York, Atheneum, 1970, pp. 42-43.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

thought, therefore, to have sustained such massive disturbance, interruption and loss of innocence that a new language seemed necessary, one which not only included the vocabulary of inhumanity but cries, screams, and gestures as well. Primo Levi, who realized after his arrival at Auschwitz that we lack words for “the demolition of man”, was sure that if the camps has lasted any longer “a new harsh language would have been born”.⁴³ Readers of the Gulag volumes have observed that the specific and largely unfamiliar camp-vocabulary necessitated a separate glossary.

Is it presumptuous to suggest that, among literary forms, poetry must ordinarily bear the brunt of having to mediate the inexpressible and that it must, in particular, “replace the disrupted ceremonies of mourning?”⁴⁴ The Holocaust poet therefore has the most difficult task. Listen to the words of Abba Kovner:

...But the community in which I pray and say my poems is half alive and half dead. Who are the living and who are the dead? I don't know how to answer this question. But I believe there is one place in the world without cementaries. This is the place of poetry. And because of this belief, I stand here before you.⁴⁵

Holocaust poetry is for the most part burial poetry, consisting mainly of brutally deferred and delayed commemoration. The poet places himself between us and naked unmourned death. We might wish to extend a comment by Stephen Spender and say that Kovner, Sachs and Celan have provided a “veil between us and the dead”.⁴⁶ This mediation, perceived by Celan, for example, as “the excess of my speech”,⁴⁷ led many of the mediators into sickness, premature death and suicide. But their words, though interrupted, do remain. An example: Dan Pagis, a Hebrew poet who spent his adolescence in

⁴³ LEVI, Primo, *If This Is a Man.*, p. 144.

⁴⁴ EZRAHI, S.D. *By Words Alone...*, p. 218.

⁴⁵ KOVNER, Abba, *A Canopy in the Desert*. Selected Poems. Tr. Shirley KAUFMAN. Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973, p. xiii.

⁴⁶ KOVNER, Abba and Nelly SACHS, *Selected Poems*. Tr. Shirley KAUFMAN, Michael HAMBURGER and others. Introduction by Stephen SPENDER. [Penguin Modern European Poets] Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1971, p. 9.

⁴⁷ “Und das Zuviel meiner Rede: / angelagert dem kleinen / Kristall in der Tracht deines Schweigens”. From the poem “Unten” (“Sprachgitter”) in Paul CELAN, *Gedichte in zwei Bänden*, I, p. 157 [Regarding all SACHS and CELAN text references please see notes 49 and 52 respectively].

camps wrote a poem "Written in Pencil in a Sealed Boxcar". I need not cite more than the following lines: "Here in this transport / I am Eve / With my son Abel / if you see my elder son / Cain son of Adam / tell him that I".⁴⁸

None of the Holocaust poets whose work has reclaimed lost or unknown linguistic land died with a 'rounded' *oeuvre*. I should like to call your attention to two poets, Nelly Sachs and Paul Celan, and reflect briefly on how they managed to mediate the face of the Gorgon Medusa. I hope you will later continue and pursue by yourself what I can only hint at.

Language in itself became a problem for Nelly Sachs whose life in exile was in constant jeopardy from physical and mental illness. She too (as had Celan) incessantly tried to find a language for the dead. This process is serially repeated: "When the great horror came / I became mute, / Fish its death side / turned upward".⁴⁹ We come upon a virtual community of metaphors denoting silence and muteness: lips with the mouth removed, fish with its death side turned upward, language trying to be born inside the mouth, letters dying as martyrs, and the ineffable tearing at the umbilical cords of the words. Rawicz's desecrated grave stones come to mind when, in her collection "Flight and Metamorphosis", Sachs says: "Unassailable / my dead, is your fortress built from blessings // I do not know / how to ignite / the light of your vanished alphabet / with my mouth / which / has / earth / sun / spring / silence / grow on its tongue".⁵⁰ This section represents the first two-thirds of the poem, the lines consisting, for the most part, of a single word, iconizing not only the short and labored breath, but the difficult birth of this language as well. The theme is varied

⁴⁸ Translated from the Hebrew and cited by EZRAHI, S.D., in *By Words Alone...*, pp. 111-112.

⁴⁹ "Als der große Schrecken kam / wurde ich stumm — / Fisch mit der Totenseite / nach oben gekehrt [...]" from the collection "Glühende Rätsel" in *Suche nach Lebenden: Die Gedichte der Nelly Sachs*. Eds. M. and B. HOLMQVIST. Frankfurt/Main, Suhrkamp, 1971, p. 50. For the translation of this and other text by Nelly SACHS consult Nelly Sachs, *O the Chimneys: Selected Poems*. Tr. Michael Hamburger and others. New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967.

⁵⁰ "uneinnehmbar / ist eure nur aus Segen errichtete / Festung / ihr Toten. // Nicht mit meinem Munde / der / Erde / Sonne / Frühling / Schweigen / auf der Zunge wachsen läßt / weiß ich das Licht / eures verschwundenen Alphabetes / zu entzünden // [...]", in *Fahrt ins Staublose: Die Gedichte der Nelly Sachs*. Frankfurt/Main, Suhrkamp, 1961, p. 272 [From the Collection "Flucht und Verwandlung"].

endlessly: "Behind the lips / the ineffrable waiting / it tears at the words' / umbilical cords // martyrdom of the letters in the mouth's urn / spiritual ascension / out of the knives of pain".⁵¹

It took time for the critics to admit that Paul Celan is essentially a Holocaust poet, albeit solidly anchored in the modern tradition. Post-structuralist attention has made his *oeuvre* the rather restricted province of hermeneutic critics and theorists. Let me point out that in Celan the suicidal rhetoric mentioned by George Steiner, after its irreversible recession and reduction, led to the successive death of language. We might adapt the observation: 'Had Billy Budd found words and a way to deliver them, Claggert might have lived', to Celan's work and conclude: Had Celan found communication in German truly possible, he would never have reduced that language—his mother tongue and the tongue of the murderers of his mother and his people—and alienated it into other languages and into silence. He was conversant with French and with other languages as well. He chose to let incommunicability in *German* determine his fate: and thus, *die Sprache starb dem Dichter vor*, i.e. language showed the poet how to die and preceded him in death. Language and the poet *in extremis*. Let me give you, in choronological order, some of Celan's most memorable Holocaust encodations: "We were dead and able to breathe"; the choreographic figure of the 'Death Fugue'; in "Tenebrae", a poem constructed on a Hölderlin grid, "We have been seized, Lord / clawed into each other as if / everyone's body was yours, Lord." Again and again the dead are invoked, and the distinction between them and the living, here in "Stretto", is erased: "It is I, I, / I lay between you and I was / open, was / audible, I kept ticking for you / your breath / did obey / it is still I / you are asleep" or "Came, came / a word came / came / through the night / wanted to shine, wanted to shine. // Ashes / ashes, ashes / Night / Night and Night / Go to the eye, the / moist eye". Or "All those names, / all those names incinerated / with you. So much ash must be blessed" or "Silence, fired like gold, in charred, charred / hands. / Finger, thin as smoke. Like crowns, crowns made of air / on—" and, finally; "that language-swal-

⁵¹ Hinter den Lippen / Unsagbares wartet / reißt an den Nabelsträngen / der Worte // Märtyrersterben der Buchstaben / in der Urne des Mundes / geistige Himmelfahrt / aus schneidendem Schmerz — // [...], also from "Flucht und Verwandlung", in *Fahrt ins Staublose*, *ibid.*, p. 319.

lowing/ shower / transluminated semantically // the bare unwritten wall / of a stand up cell // here // I traverse / without clock".⁵²

As Celan's suicidal rhetoric becomes more pervasive, devastations in the poet's house of language become predictable: particles of negation, reductions; demolished corpuscles of speech take over. Literally and figuratively, cohesive language stops where human communication ceases. Celan knew then that nothing that he had ever experienced, historically and in language, could ever be encoded in comprehensible linguistic sign-systems. The Holocaust proved ineradicable, and language itself, by means of which it could, for him, perhaps have been eradicated, proved ineradicable also, despite all hermetization, hebraization, decontextualization and reduction to various modes of "sickle-script".⁵³ At the end, death became another form of life, as Hölderlin had hinted at in his text "In lieblicher Bläue": "Leben ist Tod, und Tod ist auch ein Leben".⁵⁴

Celan had expressed his affinity to the victims of the Holocaust and had, by consciously over-seeing and practicing the syntactic disin-

⁵² "Wir waren tot und konnten atmen" from the poem "Erinnerung an Frankreich" ("Mohn und Gedächtnis") in P. C. *Gedichte*, I, p. 28; "Gegriffen schon, Herr, / ineinander verkrallt, als wär / der Leib eines jeden von uns / dein Leib, Herr". From "Tenebrae" ("Sprachgitter"), *ibid.*, I, p. 163; "Ich bins, ich, / ich lag zwischen euch, ich war / offen, war / hörbar, ich tickte euch zu, euer Atem / gehorchte, ich / bin es noch immer, ihr / schlaft ja" from "Engführung" ("Sprachgitter"), *ibid.*, I, p. 198; "Kam, kam. / Kam ein Wort, kam, / kam durch die Nacht, wollt leuchten, wollt leuchten. // Asche. / Asche, Asche. / Nacht. / Nacht-und-Nacht. — Zum Aug geh, zum feuchten", *ibid.*, p. 199; "Alle die Namen, alle die mit — / verbrannten / Namen. Soviel / zu segnende Asche. [...]" from "Chymisch" ("Niemandrose"), *ibid.*, I, p. 227; "Schweigen, wie Gold gekocht, in / verkohlten verkohlten / Händen. / Finger, rauchdünn. Wie Kronen, Luftkronen / um —", *ibid.*, I, p. 228; "der [...] / spracheschluckende Duschraum, / semantisch durchleuchtet, // die unbeschriebene Wand / einer Stehzelle: // hier // leb dich / querdurch, ohne Uhr". ("Fadensonnen"), *ibid.*, II, p. 151. — — For the translation of this and other text by Paul CELAN consult the two principal bi-lingual anthologies: *Paul Celan: Speech-Grille and Selected Poems*. Tr. Joachim NEUGROSCHER. New York, E.P. Dutton, 1971 and *Paul Celan: Poems. A Bilingual Edition*. Tr. Michael HAMBURGER. New York, Persea Books, 1980.

⁵³ This refers to the passage "Singbarer Rest — der Umriß / dessen, der durch / die Sichelschrift lautlos hindurchbrach, / abseits, am Schneeort." ("Atemwende"), *ibid.*, II, p. 36.

⁵⁴ From a very late text, "In lieblicher Bläue..." of Hölderlin's. Its attribution has been in question. I refer the reader to a convenient one volume edition: Friedrich HÖLDERLIN, *Sämtliche Werke*. Ed. Paul STAPF. ["Tempel-Klassiker"] Berlin/Darmstadt, Der Tempel Verlag, 1960, pp. 415-417 and to Michael HAMBURGER's translation in *Poems and Fragments. A Bilingual Edition*. Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1967, pp. 600-605.

tegration of his language 'executed' German from inside out. An American writer, Jed Rasula, suggested that, in Celan's hands, the German language had become the instrument of its own disembodiment.⁵⁵ Disembodiment metaphors are uncommonly frequent in Celan. Language disembodies first itself, and then the poet. In German, "sich ent-leiben" (to disembody oneself) means to commit suicide. Celan's suicide, whatever the immediate triggering circumstances might have been, had been prescribed by his own writing.

Poetry after Auschwitz: I will end on a personal note, to establish a transition to the reading of a few poems several of which, set to music, you will hear performed for the first time tonight. I cannot and I do not wish to speak about my own poetry. I am quite aware that, along with many others, I have arrogated Holocaust experience and am, in George Steiner's eyes, guilty of poetic overdrafts. I gave you in the beginning what I believe were the elements of my modest authentication. Witnesses, survivors, and spared bystanders do, on one level, constitute a community of destiny and experience. Auschwitz and Hiroshima, as completed and potentially repeatable holocausts, have forged East and West and Jew and Gentile into a democracy of disaster. May I say, and I shudder as I say it, that while conceiving and writing my Auschwitz poem I was seized and marked, though I escaped in the flesh.

Writing may create a momentary island of sanity on which it is possible to live and to love. One section in my poem reads: "That we continue to love / is a miracle / Since Auschwitz / since Auschwitz / I feel shame in an embrace".⁵⁶ These lines and those that follow and speak of physical love have been criticized as morbid, in poor taste, and, worst of all, as mendacious and untrue. Let me try to answer this massive reproach. I consider it proper to ask myself and my readers whether, after Auschwitz, we should feel shame while embracing or writing about embracing. Is it not at the moment of the embrace that we become most aware of the preciousness of human life and of its need for protection? Should we not speak of that knowledge and thereby attempt to slow down the seemingly irreversible plague that has

⁵⁵ RASULA, Jed, "Paul Celan", in *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature* VIII, 1 (1983), p. 115.

⁵⁶ "Daß wir weiterlieben / ist ein Wunder. // Seit Auschwitz, // seit Auschwitz / schäme ich mich / in der Umarmung", from "Nach Auschwitz" in Richard EXNER, *Mit rauchloser Flamme*. München, Schneekloth, 1982, p. 102. The entire text of this poem, in German and in English, is appended.

befallen us in all our relationships private and public, the plague of indifference? Do we need to explain why the act of love and the act of speech and writing are, on a very important level, one and the same? I am convinced that the question of whether we should feel shame when we embrace as survivors of holocausts, addresses a more legitimate and a more pressing concern than would one more discussion of Adorno's famous dictum that it has become impossible to write poetry after Auschwitz. Impossible or not, to me it seems necessary.

Perhaps the plunging human child Icarus has moved a bit into the foreground now and perhaps our daily lives, informed by the limited but palpable knowledge of the Holocaust, will sail on a little less calmly. I think we have understood that this fall was an important failure and why it was one. And perhaps we are now in the position of that desperate person in Goya's caprichos who clutches his head, around which whirl and circle batlike creatures, horrible products of our own fantasies: "The sleep of reason produces monsters".⁵⁷ The lesson of this *capricho* is worth the horror. Especially as members of the academy we share the collective responsibility to stay awake and to dispel these monsters.

It seems to me that much of the knowledge of the Holocaust was born of fire, whether it fell from the sky or rose from the pit. Countless millions have perished in our lifetime, ultimately victims of the indifference of countless other millions and, in some cases, of their own disbelief. All of us, without exception, whether we know it or not, have been burnt. Let us live and act in accordance with this knowledge. I believe we have no choice.

⁵⁷ "El sueño de la razón produce monstruos". For a brief but excellent discussion of the "caprichos" see F. J. SÁNCHEZ CANTÓN, *Los Caprichos de Goya y sus dibujos preparatorios*. Barcelona, Instituto Amatller de Arte Hispánico, 1949, pp. 45, 87 and illustrations.

Nach Auschwitz

1

Keine Gedichte mehr?
Etwa der apologetische
Regierungsbericht
(das Weißbuch — o Sprache,
mißbrauchte Sanftheit
des Schnees!),
der langatmige verlogne
Roman oder die
Zeitung?

Wie ein Massengrab
spart ein Gedicht
Raum un Zeit.

Vor Auschwitz,
seit Auschwitz
regnete es Diktaturen,
und Flüsse un Städte
führten Blut.

Seit Auschwitz
ist die Geschichte
nicht totzukriegen.
Arbeit macht
immer noch frei,
und abends hört
immer noch Bach
oder Mozart,
wer tagsüber tötet.

Seit Auschwitz
—Hut ab vor diesem
Jahrhundert—
ist nichts mehr
unmöglich.
Auch Gedichte nicht.

2

Ermuntert,
ihrer Plantasie
freien Lauf zu lassen,
zeichneten Kinder
aus Kambodscha,
dessen neuester Mörder
letzthin befand,
es gebe dort ganze
Millionen Menschen
zuviel,
wie man Eltern,
Geschwister und Fremde
aufhängte, erschöß
und verbrannte.

Dabei
erkundigte sich ein Mädchen,
was eine Puppe sei.

Die Luft bebt noch
vom Zuschlagen der Pforten
des Gartens,
und eine Stimme,
die Adam und Eva
zur Arbeit befahl
(es war Gnade, glaubt
mir, Routine und
Trost der Erschöpfung),
weht noch immer.

3

Heute,
einen Atemzug
vor dem dritten Jahrtausend
des Kreuzes,
fressen
die erste und zweite Welt
wahllos die dritte.
Strahlend

wird zugrunde gehen,
was nicht verhungert.
Anthropophagen:
o wie das Fremdwort
euch schont.

Die Apokalypse
(Johannes auf Patmos,
Hieronymus Bosch,
die furchtbaren
Märchenerzähler)
hat schon lange
begonnen.

Wir leben,
ehe wir sterben,
ihre Details.

4

Frühmorgens
die Sonne,
die Blumen,
das Erdreich geöffnet.
Natürlich
schlagen die Amseln
auch im Wald
von Katyn.

Hut ab
vor unserem Jahrhundert.
Sein Fortschritt
ist unübersehbar:
Genickschuß und
Hirnchirurgie
pflegt es mit
Akkuratesse.
Es rottet uns aus
wie es uns rettet
und ficht mit dem Krebs
den es gesät.
Kopf ab
vor unserem Jahrhundert.

Komm,
neues Jahrtausend
nach Auschwitz.

Sonst war alles
umsonst.

5

Daß wir weiterlieben
ist ein Wunder.

Seit Auschwitz,

seit Auschwitz
schäme ich mich
in der Umarmung.

Dein Hals pulst
gegen meine Lippen
wie große Vögel
ihre Beute schlagen.

Unsere Leiber
fahren atemlos
ineinander
un liegen nackt
verklammert,
als hätte sie einer
zu Tode geduscht.

Solange ich
deine Haut spüre,
schinden sie dich nicht.

Wir fahren vor Dankbarkeit
aus dem Schlaf.

6

Wach auf!
Sie töten im Schlaf,
und südlich von uns

(los desaparecidos)
wird, was einer geküßt
(die Verschwundenen)
schon wenig später
gefoltert.

Komm,
eh uns mit Keulen
die Stunde schlägt,
ehe wir,
die Verschwindenden,
uns übergeben.

Trotz Auschwitz
ist die Geschichte
nicht totzukriegen.
Aber wir,
aber wir,
und wie leicht.

7

Wach auf,
berühre mich,
warte nicht,
bis die Zeiten
sich ändern
Sie ändern
sich nie.

Bis Auschwitz
und alle Verschwundenen
vergessen, erinnert,
gesühnt —
sind wir verstummt.

8

Dennoch Gedichte.

Mundtot gesprochen,
gefoltert empfangen.

Nur Menschen
verschwinden
spurlos.

Dichter kann man
erschlagen, Namen
werden gelöscht.
Einer, die Hoffnung
vielleicht, brennt sich
die Lettern ins
Hirn.

Weiß,
drucklos,
aus Archipelen
über die Grenzen
mit ihnen.

Und jetzt
schreien, sie laut
und auswendig
schreien:

Die Schrift
als Sturm,
als Rauch von Menschen,
die brannten.

After Auschwitz

I

After Auschwitz
no more poems?

Do we prefer
the apologetic
government newscast,
(the White Paper —oh language,
abused gentleness
of snow!),
the longwinded
and lying novel,
the daily paper
perhaps?

Like a mass grave
a poem saves
space and time.

Before Auschwitz,
since Auschwitz,
dictatorships
have rained from the shy
and cities and rivers were
swollen
with blood.

Since Auschwitz
you cannot kill
history. Work still
sets you free, and
after work those who
have killed during
the day still listen
to Bach and Mozart
at night.

Since Auschwitz,
—hats off to
this century—
nothing is ever
impossible.

Not even poems.

II

Encouraged
to give free vent
to their imagination,
children
from Cambodia
whose latest murderer
recently decided
there were still
millions of people
too many,
drew parents,
brothers, sisters and strangers

being hanged, shot
and burned.

While drawing
a little girl inquired
what a doll was.

The air still trembles
from the slamming of the gates
of the Garden,
and a voice
which commanded
Adam and Eve to work
(it was mercy, believe
me, routine and
the comfort of exhaustion),
is still calling

III

Today, a breath away
from the third millennium
of the Cross, the first
and second world
indiscriminateley devour
the third

Radiant whatever does not starve
will perish.
Anthropophagi:
oh, how that foreign word
shields you.

The Apocalypse
—St. John of Patmos
and Hieronymus Bosch
(ghastly teller of tales)—
has already begun.

Before we die
we shall live
its details.

IV

Early in the morning
the sun,
the flowers, the earth
wide open.
Yes,
the blackbirds sing
also in the forest
of Katyn.

Hats off
to our century.
It has
amazingly refined the shot
in the back of the neck
and brain surgery.
It exterminates as it
saves us, and fights
the cancer it sows.
Heads off
to our century.

Come,
new post-Auschwitz millenium,
to Auschwitz.

Or all was
in vain.

V

That we continue
to love is a
miracle.

Since Auschwitz

since Auschwitz
I feel shame
in an embrace.

Your throat's

beat hammers
 agains my lips
 as large birds
 would finish their prey.

Our bodies
 breathlessly rush
 into each other
 and lie naked,
 interlocked as if
 showered to death.

While I still
 feel your skin
 they cannot flay you.

We awake with a start —
 from gratitude.

VI

Awake! Sleepers
 they kill in their
 sleep.

And to the south
 (los desaparecidos)
 what a man has kissed
 (those vanished)
 is tortured
 soon after.

Come!
 The bell, rung with clubs,
 is tolling for us —
 before we
 vanishing ones
 will surrender.

Despite Auschwitz
 they cannot kill
 history dead —

But us
but us
and how well.

VII

Awake!
Touch me.
Don't wait til the times
change. The times never
change.

Before Auschwitz
and all the vanished
are forgotten, remembered,
atoned for
we will have lost
our voice.

VIII

Poems,
nevertheless.

Uttered through
gags. Conceived on the
rack.

Humans only
vanish without
a trace.

Poets can be clubbed
to death. Names
are expunged. Someone,
perhaps Hope, remembers
and burns its letters
into the brain.

White
printless,
from archipelagoes

get them across
the frontiers.

And now
scream them, scream
them out loud and
by heart.

Writing
as a storm
as the smoke of human
beings who burnt.

(translated by Ewald Oser
and Richard Exner)

Schwarzgeburt

Gräßlicher
Dammriß

Glatt
lagt ihr in Nessus-
hemden unentfacht
als sich am sechsten
des achten fünfund-
vierzig die Hölle
im Himmel
entband

Toten-
umquirlt die Brücken-
Pfeiler des Ota. O Spring-
flut schwarzer Tränen die
Augen Mäuler und Haut
zerregneten

Wo
seid ihr Herzentfallene
wo?

Gesichter von dieser
Sonne gesotten blättern den
Leib hinunter und stießen

Zungen aus

Entsetzliches
wehte

Schon vor der halben Nacht
waren wir nackt und bloß
noch Knochen. Am dritten Tage
riß lauter Tod
zum zweiten Mal
den Schoß:

Läufiger weit-
offner Schwarzgebärer.

Black Birth

Ghastly
rupture

You lay
poised in tight Nessus
shirts when on the sixth
of the eight month in forty-
five hell was born in
heaven above

death-
clogged bridge piers of
the Ota. Oh rip tide of black
tears whose rain dissolves
eyes mouth and skin

where
are you where heart-
disgorged beings?

Faces boiled
by this sun shredded shedding
downward emitting tongues

a ghastly
wind

Before night came we were
naked and nothing

but bones. On the third day
the womb crammed with
death tore open
once more
in heat wide open
black bearer.

(translated by Richard Exner)

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