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Richard J. Bernstein
New School for Social Research

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Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen New York: Zone Books, 1999. 175 pp. ISBN 189051161265.

Reviewed by Richard J. Bernstein, New School for Social Research

We read books on Auschwitz. The wish of all in the camps, the last wish: know what has happened, do not forget, and at the same time never will you know.

Maurice Blanchot

Everyone who tenaciously tries to comprehend the meaning of Auschwitz *experiences* what Blanchot describes. The desire to know, to understand, to grasp what happened at Auschwitz has become obsessive. We return to it over and over again. And yet there comes a point when one realizes that “never will you know.” Hannah Arendt voiced a similar existential experience when she was asked about her first reactions upon hearing about Auschwitz: “Something happened there to which we cannot reconcile ourselves. None of us can.” It is this paradox, this space in-between—knowing and not knowing—that fascinates Giorgio Agamben. We now have the most minutely detailed information about the historical, material, bureaucratic, and legal circumstances that led to the death camps; but as Agamben rightly tells us, “the same cannot be said for the ethical and political significance of the extermination.” “Not only do we lack anything close to a complete understanding: even the sense and reasons for the behavior of the executioners and the victims, indeed very often their words, still seem profoundly enigmatic.” Agamben admits that there is little information in his book that cannot be found in the testimony of survivors. *Remnants of Auschwitz* is a sustained commentary on testimony, a reflective probing of the enigmas and aporias of Auschwitz.

The central figure for Agamben is the *Muselmann*. This is the name for those who in the camps were reduced to “living corpses,” “nameless hulks,” beings who were presumably human but seemed to lack any dignity, spontaneity, or humanity. The perverse and diabolically systematic creation of such beings led Arendt to speak of *radical evil*. Agamben might well endorse Arendt’s judgment that “the camps are meant not only to exterminate people and degrade human beings, but also to serve the ghastly experiment of eliminating, under scientifically controlled conditions, spontaneity itself as an expression of human behavior and transforming the human personality into a mere thing, into something that even animals are not.” And yet this is not quite accurate. The *Muselmänner* are not mere *things*, for they are still recognizably human, although one is tempted to describe them as inhuman humans. It is the *threshold*, the limit experience that seizes his imagination: “At times a medical figure or an ethical category, at times a political limit or an anthropological concept, the *Muselmann* is an indefinite being in whom not only humanity and non-humanity, but also vegetative existence and relation, physiology and ethics, medicine and politics, and life and death continuously pass through each other. This is why the *Muselmann*’s ‘third realm’ is the perfect cipher of the camp, the non-place in which all disciplinary barriers are destroyed and all embankments flooded.” Agamben seeks to articulate the precise point where our “normal” ethical, political, medical, and biological concepts and categories break down. They fail to do justice to this cipher, to this non-place. We may say that the *Muselmänner* lack humanity, but we recognize that they are *still* human. We may say that

they are living corpses—but they are neither quite living nor dead. Our language reaches an impasse when we attempt to describe *who* and *what* is the *Muselmann*: “Auschwitz is the site of an experiment that remains unthought today, an experiment beyond life and death in which the Jew is transformed into a *Muselmann* and the human being into a non-human. And we will not understand what Auschwitz is if we do not first understand who or what the *Muselmann* is—if we do not learn to gaze with him upon the Gorgon.” The reference to the Gorgon is taken from Primo Levi, who describes the *Muselmann* as “he who has seen the Gorgon.” And yet this too is not quite accurate. According to Greek mythology, the Gorgon is that horrid female head covered with serpents whose gaze produces death; but the *Muselmann* is not quite dead. “The Gorgon designates the impossibility of seeing that belongs to the camp inhabitant, the one who has ‘touched bottom’ in the camp and has become a non-human.”

Agamben is particularly critical of those who—like Bruno Bettelheim—interpret the limit experience of the *Muselmann* in *moral* terms. Bettelheim tells us that once one passes beyond the point of no return, the *Muselmann* abdicates his inalienable freedom and loses all traces of affective life and humanity. He is no longer a creature about whom we can speak of his human dignity, a being who is capable of responsibility. But dignity and responsibility, which, according to Agamben, are originally *legal* (not moral) concepts, obscure the threshold reality of the *Muselmann*. In a manner similar to Nietzsche, Agamben also argues that our moral concepts have their genealogy in the history of the law. Our standard moral discourse fails to do justice to the fact that the *Muselmann* is “beyond” dignity and responsibility.

It is at this point that we can begin to see the larger ramifications of Agamben’s inquiry. Auschwitz shows us that it is possible to lose one’s dignity and decency beyond imagination, but that there is still life in this most extreme degradation. Indeed, this paradoxical knowledge becomes the touchstone for judging *all* morality and all dignity. The *Muselmann* is the threshold of a new ethics, an ethics of a form of life that begins where dignity ends.

Frankly, I find Agamben more suggestive than persuasive. His intent is to show us that the *Muselmann* raises the most profound questions about the basis of dignity, morality, and politics—indeed about our very understanding of humanity. I think he is absolutely right about this. But what never emerges with any clarity is what really constitutes this “new ethics,” this new understanding of the threshold of the human and the inhuman. The *Muselmann* may be a “creature” who is both human and inhuman. We may recoil with the shocking realization that *anyone* can become a *Muselmann*, that this potentiality lies hidden within all of us. We may even agree with Agamben that any ethics and politics that doesn’t confront this threshold phenomenon is deficient. But still we want to know in what sense and how this realization leads to a *new* ethics and a *new* politics. And Agamben never really tells us.

In the concluding sentence of his preface, Agamben declares: “For my own part, I will consider myself content with my work if, in attempting to locate the place and theme of testimony, I have erected some signposts allowing future cartographers of the new ethical territory to orient themselves. Indeed, I will be satisfied if this book succeeds in correcting some of the terms with which we register the decisive lesson of the century. . . .” One can see how Agamben does this in his treatment of the theme of death. Here too he meditates on the insights of Primo Levi, “the implacable land-surveyor of *Muselmannland*,” who declares that one hesitates to speak of the

Muselmann's death. The particular horror of the so-called death camps is not the death of victims but rather the “fabrication of corpses.” The SS even forbade the use of the expression “corpses.” The dead bodies are not corpses but *Figuren*. Agamben relates this to Heidegger’s own understanding of the *meaning* of death, and the difference between a *human* death and the corpse that is fabricated. For death has no meaning in the camps. It cannot be related to the *Muselmann's* potentialities. There is no anxiety in the face of death. So we cannot name what happens to the *Muselmann* as “death”: “Where death cannot be called death, corpses cannot be called corpses.” They are *Figuren*.

Agamben is drawn to paradoxes, enigmas, aporias, impossible possibles in the way in which a moth is drawn to light. He affirms (following Levi) that the complete witness of Auschwitz is not the survivor who writes, but rather the *Muselmann* who has virtually lost the capacity to speak. He tells us that there is testimony only where there is the impossibility of speaking. He affirms that the true witness is not the survivor who tells his tale, but rather the *Muselmann*—the one for whom the survivor cannot speak. It is the speechless *Muselmann* who is the complete witness. The survivor and the *Muselmann* cannot be split apart. What then is testimony? “We may say that to bear witness is to place oneself in one’s own language in the position of those who have lost it, to establish oneself in a living language as if it were dead, or in a dead language as if it were living—in any case, outside both the archive and the corpus of what has already been said.”

Despite the brevity and compactness of Agamben’s study, he touches on grand themes—the nature of the human and the inhuman, language and speech, the basis of ethics and politics, the meaning of witnessing, archive, and testimony. And even though Agamben’s speculations sometime seem more dazzling than illuminating, he succeeds in unsettling traditional thought patterns. Agamben’s monograph reads more like a compendium of fragments or remnants rather than a sustained argument. (He even numbers the sections of each of his chapters, e.g. 1.1. 1.2, 1.3). Agamben would welcome the comment that he raises more questions than he answers. The truth is that there are very few questions that he does answer. And yet his very rhetoric promises more than it delivers. For he leads us to think that confronting the phenomenon of the *Muselmann*, reflecting on the meaning of testimony, witnessing, and archive will lead to a new understanding of speech, language, the subject, modality, ethics, and politics. Agamben may well be right. But if one stands back and asks what is the character of this new territory, one discovers that only a few signposts may be helpful to “future cartographers.”

It is only near the end of his study that one realizes why he calls his book, “Remnants of Auschwitz.” The remnant is a theological-messianic concept. In the Old Testament what is saved is not the whole people of Israel but only a remnant. For just as the remnants of Israel signify neither the whole nor a part of the people, and just as messianic time is neither historical time nor eternity, but the disjunction that divides them, so the remnants of Auschwitz—the witnesses—are neither the dead nor the survivors, neither the drowned nor the saved: “They are what remains between them.”

Arendt, whom Agamben greatly admires, told us that after Auschwitz, we have to learn to think without banisters (*Denken ohne Geländer*). We not only have to unsettle and shake up our well-entrenched concepts and categories; our task is to resist clichés and our comfortable familiar ethical and political categories. Agamben eminently succeeds in making us think anew. He

disorients us by showing that what we take to be familiar is strange and enigmatic. This is a significant achievement—a necessary moment in any rethinking of Auschwitz.