

SPEAKING ABSENCE: CONSIDERING THE VOICE IN AUSCHWITZ

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

Speaking Absence: Considering the Voice in Auschwitz. (May 2014)

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Despite the proliferation of Holocaust literature and survivor testimonials, philosophy has largely ignored the problems that Auschwitz raises for the possibility of philosophic understanding in a post-Holocaust world. As such it has been suggested that Auschwitz marks not only the limits of reason but also of human understanding. However, even as post-Holocaust thinkers recognize this limit, they gloss over it, employing philosophical tools in their attempts at reconciling the concentrationary universe with the world of reason. In this paper I examine their attempts and then, using their writings, I suggest that any attempt at a philosophical understanding of Auschwitz will have to proceed negatively. That is, post-Holocaust philosophy must attend to the absences of meaning that are themselves the only meaning disclosed by survivor accounts, and the trope of the mute voice in Holocaust literature provides one such means of doing so.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In *To Mend the World*, Emil Fackenheim writes, “All writing about the Holocaust is in the grip of a paradox: the event must be communicated, yet it is incommunicable.”¹ This idea has passed largely into the public understanding of the Nazi genocide, aided as it were by the cliché employment of the phrase “unspeakable acts” as a euphemism for particular cruelties that can, very much, be spoken of, be described. There is an immense amount of historical and statistical information about what actually happened in the camps. Despite this, the Shoah is unspeakable, unthinkable; presumably, one can never really know it unless one was there. And yet, the inability to reconcile explanation or understanding with the experience of the camps is a theme that pervades and motivates almost every account of the camps given by its survivors, by those who were actually there, such that this inability is one (if not the) dominant theme in what has come to be called Holocaust literature. From where, then, does this breakdown in the communicability of the camps derive? And if they cannot be communicated, what does this mean for the possibility of understanding them?

There is a complex relationship between communication, understanding, and relation to the Other that is incredibly important not only in considering Holocaust literature but also in thinking about what philosophy is capable of doing in this realm. The Latin *communicare* means variously, “join with, receive, take a share of, discuss, impart, make common cause.”²

Communicability then suggests the possibility of a thing being shared between two particular subjects such that communication is only accomplished in a mutual relationship of, on the one

¹ Fackenheim (1982).

² Perseus Online Library.

side, expression, and, on the other, reception. That this receiving is marked by understanding, where understanding is “to make common cause,” is clear in the reciprocal movement of fable-telling, where the story is told and followed by the question, “Do you understand?” If the answer is affirmative then the story is not repeated because its original project—the imparting of a moral lesson—was accomplished. If the answer is negative, it is told again so that the communication may be accomplished, so that the recipient may come to understand, and most importantly, so that a relationship can be established between the one who speaks and the other who listens.

Reading Holocaust literature as an attempt at communication marks a shift away from conceptualizing it either as undirected artistic expression or as a simple giving-account-of. Reading it not only as a representation but also a bridge between in the inwardness of the author-survivor’s experience and the need for the other to understand suggests that Holocaust literature takes as its end a *relationship* rather than a rendering. If these expressions attempt to represent a reality, then they always ultimately fail at doing so. As will be discussed later, the reality of the camps always exceeds the signs and signifiers available to express it, always overflows the structures that order its representation, and always resists being rendered static by the generalization process of semantics itself.

Much of this has already been said more eloquently by scholars better qualified to do so. For example, all of the author-survivors address the problem of language and linguistic representation of camp experience in some form or fashion. My intent here is not to re-explicate what has already been said but rather to show how the problem of representability, how the

obstructionary role that language plays in communicating the camp reality, leads one to consider as a way inside of these texts not what was being said but rather the conditions of the saying.

This paper, then, is an attempt to think through the ways in which one ought to philosophically approach Holocaust literature and testimony. It is a very preliminary consideration of the possibility of coming into relation with the victim and survivor, even as it is simultaneously a consideration of the necessity of doing so through the utterly concrete and particular absences created by the survivors' attempts at expression. My aim is to think through these themes from two different perspectives—the limits of philosophy and the speaking absence—which, as I will demonstrate, can be seen to overlap in fruitful ways.

CHAPTER II

THE LIMITS OF PHILOSOPHY

According to the philosopher and camp survivor Jean Améry, there was no “moral” to the story of Auschwitz; there was nothing to be learned, there was no meaning to be found.³ This desire for a resolution that offered some sort of possibility of understanding was something that Améry decried when he argued, in a section in his book *At the Mind's Limits* titled “Resentments,” that the global demand for Jewish forgiveness of those both active and complicit in the Nazi genocide was itself a re-victimization of its survivors. Such forgiveness would have been an objectification of the meaning that the world so desperately wanted to find inside of survivor testimony, a meaning that would facilitate a renewed commitment to the Enlightenment ideals of humanism and progress that had produced Auschwitz in the first place, a meaning that Améry insisted was not and could not be there. Thus it was in Auschwitz that, according to Améry, one came to the limits of reason, the limits of philosophy.⁴

Whether Auschwitz is or is not available to philosophic explanation seems to me to be more than just boundary-marking. If philosophy is understood as the desire and project of understanding and therefore knowing how to act then it serves a therapeutic purpose both for the individual and for society. Ambiguity produces anxiety, and it is both the promise and project of modernism that such ambiguity can be clarified with just enough enquiry, with just the right understanding of whatever dialectic is at play. There is a feeling that our existential anxiety can be allayed through a comprehension that can produce action, and the world's commitment to this was evidenced in the philosophic response or lack thereof to the realities of the Nazi genocide.

³ Améry (1980).

⁴ *Ibid.*

Interestingly enough, the three different translated titles of Améry's work illustrate this struggle quite well: in English the full title was *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor of Auschwitz and its Realities*, in French it was *Beyond Crime and Punishment: An Attempt to Overcome the Insurmountable*, and finally in the original German, *Beyond Guilt and Atonement: Coping Attempts by One Overpowered*. In spite of these differences, all of these titles suggest that a) Auschwitz was outside of the world; it was its own reality—what David Rousset has termed the “concentrationary universe,” and b) as such it is beyond the metaphysical and ethical categories that belong to the world outside of Auschwitz, the world of reason.

The fact that Améry makes these assertions in the way that he does is extremely important, however, because even as he situates Auschwitz beyond the capabilities of philosophy, he uses philosophical ideas to do so. It is both from the perspective of and by way of the philosophical tools of the then-novel Sartrean existentialism that Améry levels his critiques. Perhaps this is why Améry referred to his book in its title as an “attempt”—because it ultimately failed in its philosophic project of understanding, of reincorporating Auschwitz's particular realities back into modern reason and therefore back into the world.

If we consider *At the Mind's Limits* a failed attempt at a philosophical understanding by a camp survivor, then the conclusions (or rather, the anti-conclusions) that it reaches take on a new urgency given its author's suicide in 1978. It is not just that Auschwitz marks the limits of philosophy, it is also that Auschwitz created, to use Emil Fackenheim's term, a “rupture in the

world.”⁵ This rupture was not just one that divided the world into a before-and-after; it was also a rupture that divided the world into a those-present and those-removed, which resulted in the deconstruction of the social relation that was and seems still to be predicated upon the possibility of communicating and thereby sharing realities. Seemingly, this rupture is such that philosophy cannot map much less mend it, and this poses particular problems for the possibility of a future philosophy that can account for or incorporate Auschwitz in some meaningful way.

Firstly, philosophical enquiry itself is largely structured and constrained by particular rules of thought that are flatly incompatible with the camps, and this has been largely expressed by survivors. The doctrine of causation was so deeply and widely contradicted that the camp prisoners no longer expected for their experiences to be determined in any comprehensible way, and expectation itself became superfluous. The law of non-contradiction became a manifest absurdity in the production of the *musselman*, bodies in which life and death were conjoined. Not only were the *musselman* the living dead, but as the Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben has noted, they were the site at which the human was also the non-human; their death was a non-death.⁶ This profound reversal of logical axioms is what Claire Katz has called, in her 2012 book, the “inversion of the world.”

Secondly, the incompatibility of logic with the camps raises specific problems for the philosophical medium of language, as grammatical structure is largely determined by these same rules of thought. Thus, when it is said that the reality of the camps always exceeds the language available to describe it, what is meant is not just that there are no words able to match the

⁵ Fackenheim (1982).

⁶ Agamben (2008).

debasement and suffering of the SS's victims but also that their actual grammatical structuring is already a falsification of what that world was like for those living in it everyday. Auschwitz sits beyond thought, and as such it sits beyond language as well. As Fackenheim observes, "Must we not conclude that where the Holocaust is, no thought can be, and that where there is thought it is in flight from the event?"⁷

Thirdly, philosophy is, if not wholly concerned with the general, at least largely concerned with the universal, which seems to disadvantage it in dealing with what was an unprecedented and highly singular event. Therefore, if the Holocaust is the singular event, and if it is so removed from both history and the world as we, who were not in the camps, know it, and if it is beyond the grasp even of representation in language—how can one even go about confronting it? And how can this confrontation resist transfiguration into flight, as Fackenheim warns? Put another way and keeping in mind Améry's indictment of the world's revictimization of the camp survivors, how can one confront the Shoah in a way that attends to its individual victims and the dignity that they, even (or especially) in death, are owed?

And doesn't all of this leave us right back where we started, within Améry's paradox—that is, in a position of denying philosophy's adequacy to explain only to employ it precisely in our attempts to understand? In a sense it does, but rather than this incongruity marking the obstacle that we cannot approach and the past that we cannot think, I suggest instead that it is the means through which we not only can but must approach and think the Holocaust. The ambiguity of having to give with one hand what one takes back with the other marks not only the means by which the camp reality is expressed but also the content of that expression, which manifests most

⁷ Fackenheim (1982), p. 200.

often (and for what I take to be philosophically important reasons) in a trope that I have come to understand as a “speaking absence.”

CHAPTER III

SPEAKING ABSENCE

In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry seeks to provide a trans-disciplinary understanding of pain and its effects upon consciousness. Because her analysis ranges from aesthetic theory to a theory of war, her analysis in the section on torture, which overlaps considerably with Holocaust literature, provides a theoretical background against which the artistic renderings of camp experiences can be understood. As a result, her analysis is more powerful and more effective than others that have preceded her. In her ontology of torture, Scarry divides the human world into two interpenetrative spheres: the bodily and the vocal. It is through the body, through physical embodiment and lived corporeality, that the abstract and the conceptual—that is, the products of human consciousness—are grounded. Scarry sees the voice as being the bridge between these two spheres, as the site at which they interpenetrate one another.

Considered in itself, the voice is a lived, physical phenomenon, and yet it is also the means by which the inwardness of subjectivity is projected outward into the world. It is through the linguistic representation of ideas, concepts, and emotions—what Scarry calls the contents of consciousness—that the physical world comes into being. What's more, the voice projects the contents of consciousness out into a shared space, where the products of vocalization create a common world. Thus the voice bridges not only the internal and the external but also the division between different bodies, between different minds. This process of bridging divisions, of externalizing the contents of consciousness is what Scarry terms the “making of the world.” In contrast, the absolute reduction of the human person to their physical embodiment through

severe and prolonged pain results in the “unmaking of the world.” Conceptual categories become inaccessible, the social relation dissolves, and eventually even the linguistic representation of consciousness becomes impossible; the prisoner’s only recourse to expression is the inarticulate scream.

That the prisoner still screams even when they have no recourse to linguistic representation, even when they can expect no help suggests that there is something primary about the voice’s function as a bridge between the internal and the external, the inwardness of subjectivity and the shared world outside of the body. The voice is, like the face, a singularly particular expression of a specific individual. No two voices are exactly alike, such that voice recognition is interwoven with the most intimate and detailed memories of our lives. Moreover, the voice is itself always already an expression, albeit one that—like Auschwitz—sits beyond, outside of, or before language. What then would it mean for one to be alienated from her voice, for the voice to be displaced or dis-located, wandering between persons unable to cry or shout? What does it mean for the voice to be absent even as interiority persists? And could such an absence be considered not as impairment but rather as itself a type of expression? Could the absence of the voice, as it were, *say* something that could not otherwise be said?

Often this experience appears within Holocaust literature and testimonials explicitly as a losing of one’s voice, as speaking but “nothing coming out”, as a voice wandering between persons (“Is she screaming or am I?”), and as one’s absolute vocal embodiment (“each body was a shout”).⁸

⁸ Delbo (1995), p. 33.

Charlotte Delbo uses this trope most often, as when she writes of a woman in the camps who, like a madwoman, broke ranks to scramble from some clean snow to abate her thirst. “Her hand flutters once more, like a shout—yet she is not shouting. What language would she shout if she were to shout?”⁹ A little later in the same story, she returns to the voice again, but this time it has been dis-located. It is no longer the dead woman who shouts, it is Delbo, and yet this cry is never realized. “We do not know if the scream has been uttered by her or us, whether it issues from her punctured throat or from ours... I scream. I howl. Not a sound comes out of me.”¹⁰ In another story, she relies on this device again, “these shaven heads, squeezed against one another, bursting with shouts, mouths twisted by cries we do not hear, hands wave in a mute cry.”¹¹

The urge to collapse what Linda Fisher calls the “lived physical voice” into either thought or speech has to be resisted in order to truly attend to the role that the voice plays not only in lived experience but also in the constitution of the person.¹² It is not that Delbo has lost her words; it is that her voice is absent. No doubt at times this failure of the voice *is* a failure of language, but the failure of language communicates something very different than the dis-location or total embodiment of the voice as suggested in Delbo’s lines. The voice is a bodily phenomenon, but it carries the contents of consciousness. As such it is, in many ways, the means by which the self is rooted within the body and therefore within the world. To find one’s voice dis-placed from one’s body or to find oneself embodied *as* voice suggests a radical degradation of the self/body/world continuum that constitutes the individual’s being-in-the-world, and this degradation is so

⁹ Delbo (1995), p. 27.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 28.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Fisher (2010).

profound that not even the inarticulate scream can convey it. Thus the absent voice often becomes more metaphorical; it offers itself as a negative presence, as an absence that speaks of what *ought* to be there but is not. It is objectified in various ways: as a prosthetic leg in the snow behind Block 25, as a line from a verse of Dante that cannot be recalled and put back into its place; as a group of women in the back of a truck on the way to the crematoria, mutely shouting their pleas for life. It's helpful to look at these three textual examples in turn.

The first is an episode from Charlotte Delbo's *Auschwitz and After*. Less realist than the other author-survivors discussed here, Delbo employed the speaking absence in significant numbers and in impactful ways. This particular episode is, like much of *Auschwitz and After*, written in the first person plural, and it recounts the discovery of a prosthetic leg belonging to a woman named Alice behind Block 25, the medical block. Delbo writes, "Lying in the snow, Alice's leg is alive and sentient. It must have detached itself from the Alice. We kept on going there to see if it was still there, and each time it was intolerable," and a little later, "Alice had been dead for weeks yet her artificial leg was still resting in the snow. The leg was covered over. It reappeared in the mud... We saw it a long time. One day it was not there anymore." The leg's presence speaks of what is absent, namely the person to whom it so intimately belonged. As the winter goes on, the leg is covered and then it reappears, speaking again of the absence of Alice. Eventually even the leg—and by extension Alice's absence, her death—is gone; the women will no longer have cause to think of her or notice that is she gone.

The second episode comes from Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*, from the chapter titled "The Canto of Ulysses." Levi recounts a day when he was taken off of a labor detail to go with a fellow inmate to fetch the afternoon soup ration. Being chosen for this was an exciting event, as it meant a reprieve from the day's unceasing labor. It meant a long walk back to the camp, which provided time for conversation and rest. During the walk, Levi and his fellow prisoner—a French political prisoner—attempt to speak across a language barrier; Levi knows only Italian and a little German while his companion speaks French and German but no Italian. For seemingly no reason a verse of Dante comes to Levi's mind, and he seeks to recite it to his companion first in Italian and then in faltering translation. Through this recitation of Dante, he seeks to convey to Pikolo, his companion, the meaning of their condition in the camps. However, as he recites he finds that he cannot remember those lines that are so important in connecting the verses he does remember. He writes, "There is another lacuna here, this time irreparable... Forgive me, Pikolo, I have forgotten at least four triplets," and a little later, "I would give today's soup to know how to connect [this phrase] to the last lines. I try to reconstruct it through the rhymes, I close my eyes, I bite my fingers—but it is no use, the rest is silence."¹³ This bit of Dante is important to Levi and to his companion; it is what will allow them to connect with one another, and it is what will allow Levi to connect to the life and culture that he had before Auschwitz. Reciting Dante in the camps is an act that reconstitutes his world, even if only for a moment—but as Levi says, even here there are irretrievable lacunas. Unable to connect the verses, finding only silence in his memory of them, Levi is unable to make Pikolo precisely understand what was at stake in this communication between two men succeeding. They arrive at the soup queue too soon, and the lost lines are never retrieved. Yet Levi remembers the final phrase: "and over our heads the hollow sea closed up."

¹³ Levi (1994), p. 114.

The third episode comes again from Charlotte Delbo, and while it is possibly the most illustrative of the three, it is also the most disturbing.

The women pass by near us. They are shouting. They shout and we do not hear anything. This cold, dry air should be conductive in a normal human environment. They shout in our direction without a sound reaching us. Their mouths shout, their arms stretched out toward us shout, everything about them is shouting. Each body is a shout. All of them torches flaming with cries of terror, *cries that have assumed female bodies*. Each one is a materialized cry, a howl—unheard. The truck moves in silence over the snow, passes under a portico, disappears. It carries off the cries.¹⁴

There are several things at stake in this particular passage. One is that it can be seen again that Delbo uses the first person plural “we” to describe experiences that are her own, and while she uses “we” more consistently and purposefully than the other author-survivors, it is not unique to her writing alone. Several times through camp accounts, the reader finds the narrative perspective to be unstable and faltering, often moving between specific individual experiences and experiences diffused throughout a group. In Delbo, this takes a more radical form. Not only does she not seem to be able (or possibly desirous) of distinguishing between an individual and collective perspective, she seems no longer to be able to distinguish between her body, her sensations and those of the other women. The boundary between the internal and the external seems to have been so eroded that she can no longer tell if the voice comes from her or from another—if it comes at all. The bridge between her interiority and the external world was not just burned; it was rendered unnecessary as the inward self was displaced, rendered public through its increasing degradation, suffering, and need.

¹⁴ Delbo (1995), p. 33. Italics mine.

While it is hard to imagine a more compelling example of the speaking absence, it nevertheless comes to us in the form of the musselman, the living dead, the regular camp prisoners who, having succumbed to the perpetual degradation and torture of starvation, thirst, and exposure, found him or herself “on the bottom” of an inverted world. Sluggish, unseeing, unthinking, and unable to speak, the musselman was the final goal and product of the camp—the extinguishment of what was human in the one headed toward death. As has been written about at length by Giorgio Agamben in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, it is the musselman who are the ones that can testify to the total reality of the camps, and it is they who for that very reason cannot do so. Thus the musselman is the complete witness, the complete voice—they who must speak but are absent, they who speak most clearly precisely through their absence. It is their silence that one hears in the literature of catastrophe.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

I would like to acknowledge that these ideas are very much in their incipient stages. Obviously, I have offered here no conclusions. Rather, I hope to have offered a set of questions that can provide a starting point for thinking about the limits of our current paradigms and concepts in dealing with a post-Auschwitz world. Relatively very little philosophic thought has been dedicated to the voice and its role in lived experience, and while I believe that is a fruitful area of enquiry in and of itself, I also believe that it can provide a way of thinking about catastrophe and human suffering more traditional, rationalistic methodologies cannot. Moreover, there is an ethical imperative to listen for the absences that speak to us from within the literature and testimony of the oppressed and persecuted, and those of us engaged in philosophical work have a responsibility to account for the silence that has long been philosophy's response to those voices that have been suppressed not just by the Nazi genocide but by all world-destroying regimes. Perhaps it is through this listening—through a search for the voice that cannot make itself present—that the rupture in the world can begin at least to be mapped if not mended.

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