

THE QUESTION OF THE HUMAN IN HOLOCAUST WRITING

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ABSTRACT

This thesis confronts the challenges of a paradox that both suggests the Holocaust is unintelligible and yet demands our unending efforts to understand the persecution and annihilation of millions of human beings. The Nazi project was undertaken because certain groups were considered non-human, and my purpose is to show why I believe that whatever the offence or suffering undergone, the human being is indivisible and retains his/her status as human. Whilst I consider the Holocaust to be intelligible in its unintelligibility, problems remain in understanding what happens to the human when the boundaries of humanity and humanness are reached, and crossed. This demands a consideration of what is meant by the human, the inhuman and the non-human, and is discussed in Chapter I. Chapters II and III examine discourses about the limits and burdens of trauma, memory and mourning, the connections between them, and the effects on concepts of the human. I specifically consider the impossible demand to recall not only the survivor's own dehumanization and annihilation, but also that of others, and how memory and trauma are connected to mourning and Levinasian ideas about responsibility. I also argue that there is another type of Holocaust writing that attempts to articulate the human experience via a displaced mode of representation that is no less potent than more forthright accounts, and particularly analyses adult recollections of traumatised childhoods. In Chapter IV, Enlightenment humanist ethics are interrogated when I ask if there is an irreversible crisis for humanism or whether a possibility for a regenerated humanist ethics exists. I conclude that in order to *be* human and go forward with any remnant of hope, we must be ever watchful and resistant to any ideology that can result in absolute domination and tyranny of others as practised by the Nazis.

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I have wrestled with the ideas of many scholars, and borne witness to the witnesses of the Holocaust. The attempt to be faithful to their ideas, memory and memories has often been harrowing and humbling, but has extended my own understanding of what it means to be human.

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AI</i>	Berel Lang, <i>Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide</i> .
<i>AA</i>	Charlotte Delbo, <i>Auschwitz and After</i> .
<i>ABD</i>	Laura Marcus, <i>Auto/biographical discourses, Theory, Criticism, Practice</i> '.
'AFT'	Primo Levi, 'Afterword', in <i>If This is a Man and The Truce</i> .
<i>ATML</i>	Jean Amery, <i>At the Mind's Limit's, Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities</i> .
<i>BAD</i>	Aharon Appelfeld, <i>Badenheim 1939</i> .
<i>CC</i>	Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, eds., <i>The Cambridge Companion to Levinas</i> .
'CTP'	Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg, 'Confronting the Paradox of Postmodernism and the Holocaust'.
<i>DS</i>	Primo Levi, <i>The Drowned and the Saved</i> .
<i>DF</i>	Emmanuel Levinas, <i>Difficult Freedom, Essays on Judaism</i> .
'EA'	David K. Danow, 'Epiphany and Apocalypse in Holocaust Writing: Aharon Appelfeld'.
<i>FATE</i>	Imre Kertész, <i>Fatelessness</i> .
<i>FES</i>	AharonAppelfeld, <i>For Every Sin</i> .
<i>GPAL</i>	David Bellos, <i>Georges Perec, A Life in Words</i> .
'GP'	Warren Motte, 'George Perec and the Broken Book'.
<i>HR</i>	Robert Antelme, <i>The Human Race</i> .
<i>HS</i>	Giorgio Agamben, <i>Homer Sacer, Sovereign Power and Bare Life</i> .
<i>HT</i>	Lawrence Langer, <i>Holocaust Testimonies, The Ruins of Memory</i> .
<i>HUM</i>	Tony Davies, <i>Humanism</i> .
<i>IA</i>	Josh Cohen, <i>Interrupting Auschwitz</i> .
<i>IC</i>	Maurice Blanchot, <i>The Infinite Conversation</i> .
<i>ITIAM</i>	Primo Levi, <i>If This is a Man/The Truce</i> .
<i>KRI</i>	Victor J. Seidler, <i>Kant, Respect and Injustice, The Limits of Liberal Moral Theory</i> .
<i>LA</i>	Leigh Gilmore, <i>The Limits of Autobiography, Trauma, Testimony, Theory</i> .
<i>LP</i>	Howard Caygill, <i>Levinas and the Political</i> .
<i>ME</i>	Giorgio Agamben, <i>Means Without End, Notes on Politics</i> .
'MM'	Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia'.
<i>ND</i>	Theodor W. Adorno, <i>Negative Dialectics</i> .
<i>OTB</i>	Emmanuel Levinas, <i>Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence</i> .
<i>PL</i>	Robert Bernasconi and David Wood, eds., <i>The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other</i> .
<i>PTL</i>	Saul Friedlander, (ed.), <i>Probing the Limits of Representation, Nazism and the 'Final Solution'</i> .
<i>PME</i>	Zygmunt Bauman, <i>Postmodern Ethics</i> .
<i>RA</i>	Giorgio Agamben, <i>Remnants of Auschwitz, The Witness and the Archive</i> .
'RPH'	Emmanuel Levinas, 'Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism'
<i>SL</i>	Aharon Appelfeld, <i>The Story of a Life</i> .
<i>SW</i>	Sarah Kofman, <i>Smothered Words</i> .

SWQR	James Hatley, <i>Suffering Witness, The Quandary of Responsibility after the Irreparable.</i>
TCW	Shoshana Felman & Dori Laub, <i>Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History.</i>
'TE'	Emmanuel Levinas, 'Transcendence and Evil'.
TI	Emmanuel Levinas, <i>Totality and Infinity, An Essay on Exteriority.</i>
TJP	Tamra Wright, <i>The Twilight of Jewish Philosophy, Emmanuel Levinas' Ethical Hermeneutics.</i>
TLR	Sean Hand, <i>The Levinas Reader.</i>
'TWD'	Sigmund Freud, 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death'.
TWG	Tadeusz Borowski, <i>This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen.</i>
UE	Cathy Caruth, <i>Unclaimed Experience, Trauma, Narrative and History.</i>
'US'	Emmanuel Levinas, 'Useless Suffering'.
VOM	Marco Belpoliti and Robert Gordon, eds., <i>The Voice of Memory, Primo Levi, Interviews 1961-87.</i>
VS	Lawrence L. Langer, <i>Versions of Survival, The Holocaust and the Human Spirit.</i>
W	Georges Perec, <i>W or The Memory of Childhood.</i>
WD	Maurice Blanchot, <i>The Writing of Disaster.</i>
WH	Dominic LaCapra, <i>Writing History, Writing Trauma.</i>
WL	Alain Finkielkraut, <i>The Wisdom of Love.</i>
WRH	James E. Young, <i>Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust, Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation.</i>

THE QUESTION OF THE HUMAN IN HOLOCAUST WRITING

INTRODUCTION

This thesis continues and deepens the inquiry begun in my MA dissertation, 'Themes of Silence in Representations of the Holocaust' which aimed to demonstrate the ways in which silence tells a story. If the suggestion that Holocaust scholarship still leaves us with a sense that there are unanswerable questions, gaps and silences, I have wanted to ask if and how Holocaust literature serves to fill the voids. What are the implications for human beings of assertions that this Event is inexplicable, inexpressible and unintelligible, and in what ways do these ideas have relevance in the contemporary world? Does our thinking about what it is to be human change after the Holocaust and, if so, why and how? As Alain Finkielkraut writes: 'To accept the idea that all people in the world form a single humanity is not, it is true, the same thing as recognizing that they all belong to the same human species'.¹ Persecution and massacre are not new phenomena in the history of man, but the Nazi oppressors regarded their victims not only as unacceptably different human beings, but as *non* human objects to be used and then discarded, liquidated.

I want to show that whilst much of the literature may be equivocal and ambiguous, it is far from incoherent, and thus serves to make the Holocaust more intelligible. Time and again, a sense of disbelief and incomprehension permeates, where witnesses are unable to assimilate the evidence before their eyes, and post-Holocaust survivors and thinkers alike continue to ask 'How could the Nazis have done what they did'? This leads us to consider a paradox regarding the inextricable link between what is, and what is not intelligible about the Holocaust. Not to do so results in a tendency to define the Holocaust in terms of the mystical and unknowable, and that would not only be an expression of intellectual laziness – it would be unethical because it imposes an almost mythological status on the suffering of the victims, dehumanizing them afresh.

¹ Alain Finkielkraut, *In the Name of Humanity, Reflections on the Twentieth Century*, (London: Pimlico, 2001), p.5.

This thesis therefore confronts the challenges of a paradox that both suggests the Holocaust is unintelligible according to existing models of explanation, and yet demands our unending efforts to understand the persecution and annihilation of millions of human beings. The Nazi project was undertaken because certain groups were considered non-human, and my purpose is similar to that of Finkelkraut and, particularly, Robert Antelme, to show why I believe that whatever the offence or suffering undergone, the human being is indivisible and retains his status as human.² I consider the Holocaust to be intelligible in its unintelligibility because whereas, seventy years ago, in the words of Zygmunt Bauman, it was ‘unimaginable ... unbelievable[,] [t]oday, one cannot imagine a world in which a ‘holocaust’ is impossible’.³ Furthermore, ‘[w]ithout modern civilization and its most central essential achievements, there would be no Holocaust we know now that *we live in a type of society that made the Holocaust possible, and that contained nothing which could stop [it] from happening*’ (87-8). This requires an attempt to confront the ethical implications of the Holocaust for the world, and demands a (re)consideration of what is meant by the human, the inhuman and the non-human, which is discussed in Chapter I.

Problems remain in understanding what happens to the individual human when the boundaries of humanity and humanness are reached, and crossed, and I am mindful of Yehuda Bauer pointing out that something which *may* be explicable ‘does not mean that it *has* been explained’ (my emphasis).⁴ Chapter II explores the idea that there is something in the Holocaust that overflows the bounds of comprehension and that this represents a paradox; that is, the notion that something is not reducible to comprehension results in an intelligibility *because* it is not intelligible; the two terms are inseparable in this context.

Chapters II and III examine discourses about the limits and burdens of trauma, memory and mourning, the connections between them, and the effects on concepts of the human. I specifically consider the impossible demand to recall not only the survivor’s own dehumanization and annihilation, but also that of others, and how memory and trauma are

² Wherever appropriate, the use of ‘his’ or ‘man’ includes ‘her’ and ‘woman’ throughout this work.

³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, (Oxford: Polity Press, Blackwell, 1993), pp.231-2.

⁴ Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), p.22. Chapter 2, ‘Is the Holocaust Explicable’, is useful, although his statement that: ‘To say that the Holocaust is inexplicable, in the last resort, is to justify it’ is contentious (p.38). It may *mystify* it, but to mystify is not to justify. Whilst not within the remit of this paper, his critique of Bauman in Chapter 4 bears further scrutiny, although both scholars seem to agree that the Holocaust was ‘unprecedented’, rather than ‘unique’. Steven R. Welch situates Bauer in the ‘intentionalist’, and Bauman in the ‘functionalist’ or ‘structuralist’ camp. His Report summarizes their positions and other competing perspectives in ‘A Survey of Interpretive Paradigms in Holocaust Studies and a Comment on the Dimensions of the Holocaust’ (The University of Melbourne, 2001).

connected to mourning and Levinasian ideas about responsibility. I also argue that there is another type of Holocaust writing that attempts to articulate the human experience via a displaced mode of representation that is no less potent than more forthright accounts, and particularly analyses adult recollections of traumatized childhoods. In Chapter IV, Enlightenment humanist ethics are interrogated when I ask if there is an irreversible crisis for humanism or whether a possibility for a regenerated humanist ethics exists. I conclude that in order to *be* human and go forward with any remnant of hope, we must be ever watchful and resistant to any ideology that can result in absolute domination and tyranny of others as practised by the Nazis.

In the sixty years since the Second World War, there has been a radical revision in ideas about the human. Advances in the fields of science and technology have transformed our understanding of the human mind and body. These developments challenge our understanding of what it is to *be* human, which becomes ever more elusive and necessitates an ethical response. The emphasis in this thesis is, however, on human responses and intellectual investigations after the specific experience of the Holocaust. Enlightenment, liberal and existential humanisms, with their certainties about the human are displaced by an uncertainty, whereby the human is, to an extent, now defined by our understanding of the *inhuman*.⁵ These issues are explored in Chapters I and IV.

For Hanna Arendt, the concentration camps represented ‘the very realistic totalitarian attempt to rob man of his nature under the pretext of changing it.’⁶ The Nazi project was to rule the world, and people it with certain categories of human beings. It was seen as necessary to destroy and annihilate those considered biologically unacceptable and thus non-human, and to reshape others who were human, but considered inferior to the master Aryan race. Their intended destiny was to be reshaped as slaves. Arendt claims that ‘Extermination happens to human beings who for all practical purposes are already “dead”’, but one may claim that one has to have been *alive* in order to be exterminated and dead.⁷

⁵ See also Paul Sheenan, *Modernism, Narrative and Humanism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Sheenan’s excellent introduction summarizes many of the challenges the human now confronts and distinguishes between them and humanism – see pp.1-23. I agree with his claim that ‘the critical engagement with the concept of the human is not an exclusively post-war skirmish, but a century long project, whose roots are concealed by the shifting cultural formations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries’ (p.xi).

⁶ Hannah Arendt, ‘Social Science Techniques & the Study of Concentration Camps’ in *Essays on Understanding’ 1930-54, Formation, Exile and Totalitarianism*, [1950], ed. Jerome Kohn, (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1994), p.236.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.236

When she asserts that '[t]otalitarianism strives not *toward despotic rule ... but toward a system in which men are superfluous*', the sense of systematic destruction is captured in a compelling summary of the aims in concentration camps:⁸

... the concentration camps are perhaps not economically useful, but ... ontologically necessary. To make sure that a single purpose reigns, it is necessary to liquidate the enemy of man, while liquidating *in* man all his spontaneity, singularity, and unpredictability – all that makes a human being's character unique. In this system, death factories become humanity factories without humans. (my emphasis)⁹

Whatever the perception, as Elie Wiesel wrote, what was destroyed in the camps was not just man, but the idea of man.¹⁰ As Finkelkraut shows, the Nazis' aim was not simply to subjugate and murder, but to deprive each prisoner of the individuality and difference that identified him or her as human.

When we consider the litany of pain, suffering, death and unmarked graves, we confront not only the severity of the slaughter, but also the implications for modernity and what it means or *should* mean to be human in the post-Holocaust world. The Holocaust was not only an historical event, with all the ideological, sociological, political, psychological or religious contexts. It was a moral event, albeit the nadir of morality. To describe it is to embrace a narrative of horror and death. There are survivors and scholars who have tried to describe, account for, and understand it, and to warn the world about what can happen given certain conditions, circumstances and attitudes, as well as an imperative to remember it. Such attempts are important, but meaningless, unless they include a sombre reflection about the kind of *responsibility* human beings share and bear for the past, present and future. In order to aid our thinking in these terms, Levinasian ethics are explored throughout this work.¹¹

The choice of literary texts analysed are those I have deemed best exemplify the threads of my questions regarding trauma, memory and what it is to be human. The literature is primarily restricted to the personal memories of survivors and these often palpitate with distress, anger and opacity. Chapter III specifically addresses the burden of memory for survivors, and the limits of autobiographical texts. There are numerous texts which merit

⁸ Finkelkraut, *In the Name of Humanity*, p.77.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.77

¹⁰ Elie Wiesel, *Legends of Our Time*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1968), p.190.

¹¹ Useful works that aid understanding Levinas include *CC, IC, TJP*, Michael Morgan, *Discovering Levinas*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) and Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other, An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1993).

exploration, but which I am unable to include. Amongst these, valuable contributions to any discussion of the human and intelligibility have been made by Lisa Appignanesi, Roman Frister, David Grossman, Kazuo Ishiguro, Anatoly Kuznetzov, Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, Bernhard Schlink, André Schwarz Bart, Art Spiegelman, George Steiner, Leon Wieseltier and Elie Wiesel.¹² However, my considerations concentrate on the work of Primo Levi, Robert Antelme, Georges Perec, Aharon Appelfeld, Tadeusz Borowski and Jean Amery, with brief references to Imre Kertész, Ruth Kluger and Anne Michaels. It should also be said that I share some of Berel Lang's concerns about the quality of some Holocaust representation when he writes

few readers of Holocaust writings would deny that there is much "bad" writing among them: novels, poems, plays, memoirs that display some or all of the many features readily agreed on as objectionable – sentimentality and cliché, exploitation and tendentiousness, in short literary and moral dishonesty'.¹³

As I argue in Chapter III, memory is more than a factual chronicle of past events, interpreted and infused with meaning by historians, sociologists, psychoanalysts, creative artists or other scholars. It is both collective and personal. What is at stake is the individual identity and how this subjectivity fits in within the wider communal arena of national and international recollection.¹⁴ Memory is not static, and changes as individual lives progress or as history is re-interrogated and even revised. Personal memories serve to form the individual, and are both conscious and unconscious. That which one appears to have forgotten may be revealed in dreams and trauma, and we reinvent memories and ourselves. Moreover, memories are ineluctably connected to language, and we contain our own kind of textuality in the stories

¹² I found the following of these authors' work particularly relevant: Lisa Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead, A Family Memoir*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1999). Roman Frister, *The Cap or the Price of a Life*, [1993], (London: Phoenix, 2000). David Grossman, *See: Under Love*, trans. Betsy Rosenberg, (London: Pan Books, 1991). Kazuo Ishiguro *The Remains of the Day*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1999). Anatoly Kuznetzov, *Babi Yar, A Documentary Novel*, trans. Jacob Guralsky, (New York: Dell Publishing Co. Inc., 1967). Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, *Auschwitz, True Tales from a Grotesque Land*, trans. Roslyn Hirsch, (Chapel Hill, CA, The University of North Carolina Press, 1985). Bernhard Schlink, *The Reader*, trans. Carol Brown Janeway, (London: Phoenix, 1998). André Schwarz-Bart, *The Last of the Just*, (New York: Atheneum, 1961). Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, [1986], (London: Deutsch, 1987). George Steiner, *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.*, (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1999). Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea, Memoirs, Volume One, 1928-1969*, (London: Harper Collins, 1996). Leon Wieseltier, *Kaddish*, (London: Picador, 1999).

¹³ Berel Lang, *Holocaust Representation, Art within the Limits of History and Ethics*, (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), p.48.

¹⁴ Although concerned with American memories of the Holocaust, Peter Novick's *The Holocaust and Collective Memory, The American Experience* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Co., 2000) is a good starting point for understanding the issues involved in a concept of collective memory. James Young writes perceptively about how physical memorials suppress as much as they commemorate in his *The Texture of Memory, Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

we tell *to* or *about* ourselves, and these contribute to what we are, and who we become. Whatever form narrative takes, it is also performative, and entails not only that which can be articulated, but that which cannot.

Questions asked by Ellen S. Fine draw attention to the difference between memory and history, and the 'dilemma of post-Holocaust generations: how to live with Auschwitz after Auschwitz':¹⁵

How does one 'remember' an event not experienced?... How does the Holocaust shape the identity of those living in its aftermath - 'the self's sense of itself' - and how is the burden of memory then assumed? How does the post-genocide generation respond psychologically and imaginatively to the legacy bequeathed?¹⁶

That having been said, there is a further difference in the way in which the Holocaust is memorialised. This arises in the stories that are (or are not) handed down by survivors to their friends, family members and particularly to their children. Although I recognize that the issue of 'postmemory' is an important part of Holocaust scholarship, my approach in this thesis is more philosophical and literary, and I use thinkers such as Dominic LaCapra, Cathy Caruth and Freud to explore the consequences of trauma and its effects on memory and mourning of survivor-witnesses. Nevertheless, a brief explanation of the term and its application is warranted.

Marianne Hirsch coined the term 'in relation to children of Holocaust survivors'.¹⁷ Ellen Fine suggests that the children of survivors 'continue to 'remember' an event not lived through. Haunted by history, they feel obliged to accept the burden of collective memory that has been passed onto them and to assume the task of sustaining it'.¹⁸ Hirsch notes how children long to know how the world was before they were born and writes

How much more ambivalent is this curiosity for children of Holocaust survivors, exiled from a world that has ceased to exist, that has been violently erased. Theirs is a different desire ... more powerful and more conflicted: the need not just to feel

¹⁵ Ellen Fine, 'The Absent Memory: The Act of Writing in Post-Holocaust French Literature', in *Writing and the Holocaust*, ed. Berel Lang, (New York, NY: Holmes and Meier, 1988), p.41.

¹⁶ Ellen S. Fine, 'Transmission of Memory: the post-Holocaust Generation in the Diaspora', in *Breaking Crystal: Writing and Memory of Auschwitz*, ed. Efraim Sicher (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998), p.185.

¹⁷ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photographs, Narrative and Postmemory*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p.242-43. See too Marianne Hirsch, 'Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Memory', in *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, Vol.14:1, (Yale University Press, 2001), pp.5-37.

¹⁸ Fine, *Breaking Crystal*, p.187.

and to know, but also to re-member, to re-build, to re-incarnate,
to replace and repair.¹⁹

Finkelkraut movingly considers the ethical problems of how postmemory can be transformed into a sense of *appropriating* memories, whereas Rick Crownshaw concludes, via a reading of Sebald²⁰, the possibility of an 'ethical dynamic of postmemory that resists a colonizing impulse'.²¹ This partly inherited sense of exile and absence provides the way that 'many Jews have built an identity as Jews precisely through the shared traumatic memory and postmemory of the Shoah'.²²

Postmemory is powerful because it imaginatively engages with the experiences of others than those who actually went through the Holocaust experience. It affirms a sense of loss and mourning in order to 're-member, to rebuild and repair' our human status and identity.²³ The consideration of memory, mourning and trauma is where postmemory converges with the work of this thesis, as well as in the attempt to establish an ethical approach in our ruminations. Nevertheless, I share Crownshaw's anxiety that postmemory could dominate memorialisation, and appropriate witnesses' memory, resulting in the universalization of trauma, and depriving it of its specificity. Where this thesis diverges from the work on postmemory is that I confine myself to the testimony of those who did go through the experience.

¹⁹ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, p.242-43.

²⁰ See Alain Finkelkraut, *The Imaginary Jew*, trans. Kevin O'Neill & David Suckoff, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), particularly pp.9-34 and p.113. Richard Crownshaw raises the problem of memory appropriation in 'Reconsidering Postmemory: Photography, the Archive, and Post-Holocaust Memory in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*': see *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*: Vol.37:4, University Of Manitoba, Winnipeg: December, 2004, pp.215-236. He writes: 'What concerns me here is the potential for adoption to turn into appropriation [...] "remembering through another's memories" (Hirsch 10) to collapse into seeing through one's own eyes and remembering one's own memories instead. In short, what is to stop the colonization of victims' memories and identities?' He acknowledges Hirsch's similar concern when she asserts: "These lines of relation and identification need to be theorized more closely" to see how "identification can resist appropriation and incorporation, resist annihilating the difference between self and other, the otherness of the other" (Hirsch, 11).

²¹ For an assessment of fictionalised Israeli postmemory, see Rivka Kashtan 'Perpetual Redemption: David Grossman's *See Under Love*', in *The Jewish Quarterly*, Spring, 1990, 16-23, and Gilead Morahg, 'Israel's New Literature of the Holocaust: The Case of David Grossman's *See Under: Love*', in *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol.45:2, 1999, pp. 457-479.

²² Hirsch, p.244. Karein Goertz offers a psychoanalytic interpretation in 'Transgenerational representations of the Holocaust: From memory to "post-memory"', in *World Literature Today*, Vol.72:1, Norman: 1998, pp.33-39.

²³ Hirsch, pp.242-3.

CHAPTER I

THE HUMAN, THE INHUMAN AND THE NON-HUMAN – THE LIMITS

Introduction

This chapter considers some of the philosophical questions and dilemmas to do with the ways in which much Holocaust writing entails a radical re-evaluation of what it is to be human, what it is to be inhuman and the possibilities of how to remain human or reclaim one's humanity after surviving a concentration camp.

Despite all the painful paradoxes and dilemmas to be discussed, it will be argued that whatever the offence or evil suffered or inflicted, human beings ultimately remain human. They cannot live or die as other than human, even when deprived of all comfort and control over their lives. Despite the way in which they were *named* by the Nazis, who found their task of killing more palatable if they deluded themselves into thinking of their victims as non-human, there is a need to restate that those victims were neither 'sub-human' nor 'vermin', but human beings. Although the Nazis systematically sought to deprive prisoners of everything that confirmed their status as human, they could not strip them of their humanity, and the greater the attempt, the more the victims' human status was upheld. I therefore argue that despite the depth and scope of the suffering of Holocaust victims and victim-survivors, the Nazi attempt to redefine them in order to facilitate their project of annihilation, failed. They could not change them into a new species, where to call them human would be a misnomer.

If there is a claim that the victims retained their human status, there is of course a linkage between such an assertion and the way in which one thinks (or should think) about the perpetrators. One has to ask how and whether *they* maintained their status as human, even in the darkness of their ghastly crimes. I claim that despite the evil committed by the Nazis, it is ethically inappropriate to think of them as either inhuman or non-human, however tempting that may be. They too must be affirmed as human. Their attempt to strip their victims of their humanity failed, and the greater the attempt, the more incontrovertible their victims' human status was. Similarly, the perpetrators' diabolical persecution and murder of

six million Jews cannot be accounted for on the grounds that the Nazis were 'in' or 'non' human. What one *can* claim is that they extended the understanding of the boundaries of what it is to be human, and this remains difficult to comprehend or assimilate. This is the basis of Antelme's autobiographical reflections in his deeply moving testimony, *The Human Race*.

The most extreme paradigm of suffering will be seen in the condition of the *Muselmänner*, the broken humans of the camps, and Antelme was himself close to this state. His clarity of thought enables us to see the ways in which the evil of the Nazis and the suffering of the camp inmates are mirror images of each other in their intensity, terror and horror. Indeed, it is worth noting that the French word for both 'evil' and 'suffering' is 'mal' and, as Antelme shows, and Levinas discusses more explicitly, both are absorbed into the human, and yet somehow transcend it, because neither is assimilable or integratable.

To accommodate the idea that the Nazis were always human beings is difficult, particularly when one knows how they forced other human beings to eat their own excrement, threw babies against walls and shepherded men, women and children into the gas chambers. It would be simpler to dismiss them as evil brutes, inhuman, animals, devils or monsters. Even more uncomfortable is a recognition that, as a human being, I am implicated by my silence or indifference because of my inherent responsibility to and for the Other. Levinas' compelling ideas about evil, suffering and justice all serve to clarify the ethical implications of what it is, and what it means to be human and are explored more fully in Chapter II. Meanwhile, suffice it to say that his ideas are founded on the idea of an infinite responsibility that I have to and for the Other, and underpins many of my questions about the human throughout this work.

I now focus on Giorgio Agamben's perplexing distinctions between the human, inhuman, non-human, which emphasize the crisis of re-evaluation for bearing witness. What are revealed are dilemmas for authors, survivors and scholars alike. Some such dilemmas are implicitly expressed. In the case of Levi and Antelme's autobiographical accounts of their experiences and thoughts, the predicament of what it is to be human, and whether or not it is possible to remain human after the Holocaust, is confronted explicitly. Agamben shows how, for Levi, the dilemma remains because being human is for him not just a question of belonging to the human race, but about how to maintain that status. As a survivor, he is

concerned with what remains of the human, having been so profoundly ‘diminished’ and degraded (*DS*, 56). He does not argue that victims became non-human, but is honest enough to give voice to his doubts about what a claim to be human actually means in the light of the trauma.

In Sarah Kaufman’s *Smothered Words*, it is Robert Antelme’s affirmation she supports. He claims that the Nazis could neither ‘alter our species’, nor can he ‘perceive [a] ... substantial difference between the SS and ourselves ... we have to say there is only one *human* race’ (*HR*, 74, 220, my italics). The perfidy of the Nazi ideology resides in the aspiration to be more than men – that is to be supermen, and to designate their victims as less than human or ‘*Unter-menschen*’ (sub-human). Just as the Nazis were not supermen, their victims were not, and could not become non-human, and my view chimes with Antelme’s claim that both were inescapably ‘enclosed within the same humankind and the same history’ (*HR*, 74). It was for him part of the ‘SS fantasy’ that the victims could ‘change species’ (*HR*, 218).

Sarah Kofman was an admirer of Blanchot and Blanchot was a friend and admirer of Levinas. As will be discussed in Chapter II, Levinas has much to say about the possibility of the ethical relation to make something into speech without betraying or violating it. The dilemma of saying what cannot be said, but cannot not be said, remains the ethical challenge in all post-Holocaust work, and I shall probe how Kofman analyses this issue, and the links between her, Antelme and Blanchot, as well as the differences between Antelme and Levi.

Levi and Antelme both attempt to confront the question of how to call the destroyed person human. Is there more to the destroyed person than his humanity, or can his humanity be destroyed along with his destruction? Antelme asserts an ‘almost biological claim of belonging to the human race’, whereas Levi’s anxiety that the radical deprivation and trauma that camp inmates underwent calls into question the possibility to retain their status as human (*HR*, 6). This will lead to the suggestion that the use of the word ‘human’ is actually homonymic, where the term signifies different understandings or, indeed, boundaries, at various points in their narratives. The subtleties of both their points of view raise problems that require acknowledgement and further scrutiny.

Broadly speaking, Levinas, Blanchot, Kofman and Antelme would subscribe to Blanchot’s maxim that ‘man is the indestructible that can be destroyed’ (*IC*, 130). Levi and Agamben

want to believe in the truth of this, but seem to reach a limit after the loss and atrocity of the Holocaust. They then appear to be beset by doubts as to whether or not one can still call a victim-survivor 'human'.

The 'Complete' Witness - the 'Muselmann' and the Human

In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Giorgio Agamben examines the idea of speech and testimony when witness-survivors bear witness to that to which it is impossible to bear witness, and what happens to speech when one reaches the limit of what defines the human being as human. The one who most approaches this limit is seen in the figures of the so-called 'Muselmänner'.²⁴

The *Muselmann* becomes a 'paradigm' of the extermination of European Jewry that is distinct from the mechanized extermination of the gas chambers, which has preoccupied most historians (*RA*, 52). Agamben claims that his book is a 'perpetual commentary on testimony', but it becomes clear to him that at the core there is a lacuna – 'the survivors bore witness to something impossible to bear witness to' (*RA*, 13). In order to understand rather than mystify the silence of this gap, he seeks to 'erect some signposts showing future cartographers ... the new ethical territory' (*RA*, 13). What is of interest is Agamben's discussion of how to differentiate between the 'human', the 'inhuman' and the 'nonhuman'. The 'Muselmänner' were the prisoners regarded as the 'walking dead' and who were mostly doomed to die. They embodied the borders between the human, inhuman and non-human, and Agamben's discussion of how to give them a voice is a very significant contribution to any debate about intelligibility in and of the Holocaust.

Agamben discusses how Bruno Bettelheim concludes that the *Muselmänner* are non-human.²⁵ For Bettelheim, the transformation from human to non-human comes about when he who became a *Muselmann* had reached a 'point of no return' even 'as a debased and

²⁴ For a detailed explanation of the origins the term, see Agamben, *RA*, pp.44-6.

²⁵ His writing about the *Muselmänner* warrants scrutiny in *The Informed Heart, A Study of the Psychological Consequences of Living under Extreme Fear and Terror*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960), pp.151-159. It should be noted that Bettelheim was in Dachau and Buchenwald from 1938-39, and although the conditions there were incomparable to Auschwitz, the *Muselmänner* later became paradigms for his study of childhood schizophrenia (see *RA*, p.46).

degraded but still human being' (Bettleheim, 157). The *Muselmann* gave up 'all feelings, all inner reservations about one's actions' – that is, he 'abdicated his inalienable freedom and ... lost all traces of affective life and humanity' (Bettleheim, 158 and *RA*, 56). Agamben credits Bettleheim with realising that choice and freedom were hardly within the currency of the camp, but the point is that Bettleheim claims that one could still remain aware of the 'point of no return' (*RA*, 56). He thus suggests that there was a measure of self-control prior to a man's transformation to *Muselmann* and the non-human. However, most of the evidence disputes this. The extent of deprivation of choice or freedom in the camps implies a loss so great that the assertion that there was even an awareness of boundaries or a point of no return is a fantasy. All such deprivations were brutally enforced by the authorities and part of their strategy. Any suggestion of voluntary submission or acquiescence is therefore fallacious. Some people had the requisite fortitude to resist, whilst others, for whatever reason, did not.

Furthermore, Bettleheim claims that this 'point of no return' in the *Muselmann* is equivalent to the same in some of the perpetrators, and cites Höss, the infamous commander of Auschwitz, as having also become a *Muselmann*. This was not because he was starving and had no choices about what he could or could not do, but because he had divested 'himself ... of self-respect and self-love', and therefore 'was little more than a machine' and thus like a *Muselmann* (quoted in *RA*, 57).

To agree with Agamben that this is a 'mistake' suggests that Bettleheim was at best confused or that he lacked compassion.²⁶ In his effort to distinguish between the human and the inhuman, he transforms the human into an 'unreal paradigm', which makes the *Muselmann* a 'vegetative machine' (*RA*, 58). Bettleheim is then able to equate this with the mindlessness of those who mindlessly responded to the commands to oppress and kill. When dignity is gone or seems senseless in the camps, it behoves the witnesses such as Levi and Antelme to think about the very real dilemma of what it is to endow the human with the dignity, love and respect *denied* the *Muselmänner* (and indeed themselves) in the camps. The problem with Höss was that nothing was denied him – everything was possible. He had the power to maim and destroy and he *chose* to use it.

²⁶ Indeed, see Inga Clendinnen's scathing criticism of Bettleheim's attitude to the absence of Jewish resistance as 'fatuous' in *Reading the Holocaust*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp.56-7.

This is where Levinas' idea that suffering only has meaning if it is my suffering for the Other is of paramount significance (see Ch.II). It affirms the primacy of the ethical over the political, psychological and juridical. As previously stated, the French word for both evil and suffering is 'mal', and they are mirror images of each other in their inexorable severity and torment. What Levinas shows is how they are commensurable in their unassumability, but they are never the *same*. Whilst Bettleheim sees this connection between the human and non-human, he confuses the status of victim and perpetrator as resulting in the same non-human status when self-love and self-respect are gone. Evil and suffering are not the same, but the non-human and the inhuman *are* part of being human, however difficult that is to accept. My contention is that Bettleheim errs both at a human and ethical level. What does not change is my infinite responsibility to and for the Other.

Although Agamben disagrees with Bettleheim's conclusions, he compares them with what Levi has to say. On the face of it, Levi seems to agree with Bettleheim because he writes that the *Muselmänner* were 'non-men who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead within them' (*RA*, 55, *ITIAM*, 96). However, he grants them a dignity and respect that Bettleheim abjures because he goes on to call them the 'complete witnesses' (*DS*, 64). For him, '[t]he 'saved' ... were not the best, for 'the best all died ... not despite their valour', faith or strength, but 'because of it' (*DS*, 62, 63). The survivors are also not 'the true witnesses' for Levi (*DS*, 63). These are the *Muselmänner*, 'the submerged ... the ones whose deposition would have a general significance' because they reached the limit in terms of loss of dignity, decency, self-respect and identity (*DS*, 63, 64). It is, furthermore, for those who no longer had 'the ability to observe, remember, to compare and express themselves' that Levi chooses to speak 'in their stead, by proxy' (*DS*, 64). As Agamben succinctly puts it:

This is the specific ethical aporia of Auschwitz: it is the site in which it is not decent to remain decent, in which those who believed themselves to preserve their dignity and self-respect experience shame with respect to those who did not. (RA, 60, my italics.)

There are two things here. The first is that any concept of dignity is undermined by the existence of the *Muselmänn* where dignity loses all sense and actually becomes indecent. The second is the introduction of the idea of shame whereby those who believed they had preserved their own dignity felt ashamed for those who did not. Of course, this points to the

degradation of all who entered the camps, where morality and humanity are called into question and contested. But I believe it extends the boundaries of the human rather than condemns anyone to the status of non-human. I agree with Agamben that:

Simply to deny the *Muselmann's* humanity would be to accept the verdict of the SS and repeat their gesture.... no ethics can claim to exclude a part of humanity, no matter how unpleasant or difficult that humanity is to see. (RA, 63- 64.)

I also subscribe to his view that

If one establishes a limit beyond which one ceases to be human, and all or most of humankind passes beyond it, this proves not the inhumanity of human beings but, instead, the insufficiency and abstraction of the limit. (RA, 63.)

There seems to be no equivocation in Agamben's idea that no one can be excluded from the human race, whatever their state or moral condition. So where do the doubts I have suggested exist? The stance of both Agamben and Levi has much more to do with how far the boundaries can be extended towards an indefinable limit beyond which life can no longer be called life, death no longer death, and the human no longer human. This has nothing to do with the will of the individual, but is involuntary, and raises the ethical problem of what it actually means to be human, and how to express it. Although Agamben attempts to resist making both the condition and the Holocaust unintelligible, his discussion is at times difficult to grasp and ambiguous. He writes that 'The *Muselmann* is a limit figure of a special kind, in which not only categories such as dignity and respect but even the very idea of an ethical limit lose their meaning' (RA, 63).

When he turns his attention to how, when 'dignity ends' a 'new ethics of a form of life' begins, he raises issues that, for me, suggest ambivalence in his own thoughts (RA, 69). This new form of life is the one 'between life and death', as personified by the *Muselmänner* or 'walking corpses' and, for him, Levi is the 'cartographer' of '*Muselmannland*' because he attempts to speak for the dead' (RA, 69, 70). One of Agamben's responses is to write:

In Auschwitz, *people* did not die; rather, *corpses* were produced. Corpses with death, *non-humans* whose decease is debased Precisely this degradation of death constitutes the specific offence of Auschwitz, the proper name of its horror. (RA, 72, my italics.)

It was Levi who wrote 'One hesitates to call their death death', not because they did not die but because their death became insignificant in the camps (RA, 70). This calls into question not only death, but also life. If the dead cannot die, how can the lives of those still alive be called life, and what are the implications of this for what it is to be human and how to

communicate? If to be non-human implies a condition of no longer existing as a human being, it also suggests some kind of renunciation, dispossession or relinquishment by one who was once human. This implies a state of passivity that symbolized the *Muselmänner*, who appeared to have lost their sense of selfhood and life.

According to Agamben, Bruno Bettelheim tried to relate the radical state of the *Muselmänner* to symptoms presented by schizophrenic children (See *RA*, 46).²⁷ He aimed to 'teach *Muselmänner* to become men again', even though he recognized that they could 'never be reduced to a clinical category' (*RA*, 46, 47). For him, their state had a 'moral and political connotation', where they 'marked the moving threshold in which man passed into non-man, and in which clinical diagnosis passed into anthropological analysis' (*RA*, 47). Agamben rightly points out that, in contrast with Bettelheim, Levi was more concerned to investigate the ethical implications of any distinction between man and non-man when 'dignity' is radically undermined (*RA*, 47). However, the major question for Levi was *if* there could be a non-man, *not* the impossibility to distinguish between them that Agamben suggests (see *RA*, 47). These ethical implications also have to do with the excess of power the perpetrators had over the 'Other', and Levi's concern with the dignity of a man has much to do with his idea of what makes him human. For Bettelheim, the camp paradigm allows him to draw conclusions and make judgements that *separate* the *Muselmänner* from the human. They now become 'nameless hulks' and only 'nominally alive' (*RA*, 48). However, the argument here is that it is in that self-same inhumanity of their condition that the remnants of their humanity remain. They may be treated as a 'category', whether political, medical, anthropological or vegetative, but in our considerations, we must not then deny them their humanity. The Nazis tried to do that.

Agamben points out that 'Auschwitz is precisely the place in which the state of exception coincides perfectly with the rule and the extreme situation becomes the paradigm of daily

²⁷ In *The Survivor*, Terence Des Pres claims that a 'psychoanalytical approach [to Holocaust survivors] is misleading because it is essentially a theory of culture and of man in the civilized state'. See Terence Des Pres, *The Survivor, An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1976), p.155. He is opposed to Bettelheim's thesis that 'equates the prisoners' objective predicament with behavior inherently regressive' (p.56). Whilst not wholly supporting Des Pres' analysis, Timothy Pytell has also written a highly critical historical assessment of Bettelheim, in which he claims that Bettelheim's use of a 'Freudian worldview of development and regression became mobilized in a self-serving fashion, suggesting that *he* had survived without regression and without succumbing to debasement' (p.649, my italics, and see p.653-4): See Timothy Pytell, 'Extreme Experience, Psychological Insight, and Holocaust Perception: Reflections on Bettelheim and Frankl', in *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, Vol. 24:4, 2007, pp.641-657.

life' (RA, 49). If the abnormal becomes normal, the normal resides in the abnormal. If extremity is absorbed into a concept of normality, it loses its opacity, but one is unable to claim that the *Muselmann* can be separated from the human. He is indeed at a 'fatal threshold' but it is the one *between* the life and death of a human (RA, 51). To cross it is to die *as* a human, *not* to become non-human. After liberation, the *Muselmann* is outside the camp in time and space and removed from a situation where abnormality became the norm. He comes to be identified as the 'core' of the camp because he symbolises the radical extremity of a situation that affected all inmates whilst there. Inmates feared him because he was in the 'vortex' that terrified them (RA, 52). His image represented neither man nor god, and yet both. Whoever 'gazed' at him gazed upon death – that of the Other and his own. To bear witness to this becomes an imperative but is almost superseded by its impossibility. It is impossible to see the 'anti-face' of the Gorgon, as Levi describes him (RA, 53).

What Levi describes is the vision of something that is available only to the *Muselmänner*. That something is the impossibility of seeing or knowing to which Levi tries to give voice and which, for both Levi and Agamben, represents the problem of bearing witness and finding a language which overcomes the desecration of language. The combination of the biological and linguistic desecration is what causes Agamben to state 'The *Muselmann* is not only or not so much a limit between life and death; rather he marks the threshold between the human and the inhuman' (RA, 55). He then interrogates this idea and asks what it can mean for 'a human being to become a non-human', Bettelheim's 'objects' rather than 'persons' (RA, 55). But when he asks: 'Is there a humanity of human beings that can be distinguished and separated from human beings' biological humanity?', the problem for him is compounded (RA, 55). It is as if he seeks to separate the biological from the human, which is of course what Antelme refuses to do in *The Human Race*. As will be shown, Antelme claims that the biological form of the human is inextricably bound up with what it is to be human, and there is a connection between his views and those expressed in Levinas' essay 'Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism' to be examined in Chapter IV.

Agamben states that the suffering of each inmate 'whether he was drowned or survived' in its 'extreme power ... has nothing human about it. Human power borders on the inhuman; the human also endures the *non-human*.' (RA, 77, my emphasis). He endorses what Levi writes about an 'empty universe crushed under the spirit of God but from which the spirit of man is absent: not yet born or already extinguished' (RA, 77). For Agamben, this means

that the human bears 'the mark of the inhuman ... non-human chaos atrociously consigned to its own being capable of everything' (RA, 77). It is as if the *capacity* itself of experiencing the inhuman persecution is equated with a suffering so radical, that those whose capacity to bear more and still more deprives them of their humanity (RA, 77). However, and contrasting with Bettelheim, Agamben sees it as demonstrating the way in which the perpetrators could not lose *their* humanity, but neither could they bear witness. This is because they did not bear what 'they could have borne' (RA, 78). They *inflicted* the unbearable. Whatever misgivings they had, they were *capable* only of 'Befehlnotstand', having to obey an order' *as if* they were 'Kadavergehörsam, like a corpse' (RA,78).²⁸ One can understand the link between the 'Kadavergehörsam' and the *Muselmann*, but the Nazis were not corpses, or like corpses, precisely because no unbearable suffering was inflicted upon them; their *capacity* was thus, in fact, untested. They remained human not because 'they did not experience the inhuman', but because they extended and challenged the boundaries of what is to be human in their *inhumaneness* (RA, 78). I would also contend that Levi's own stance may have been misunderstood by Agamben.

It now becomes possible to identify more clearly what I see as Agamben's ambiguity and ambivalence. To call into question the 'very humanity of man' is predicated on the appearance of the *Muselmann*, he who 'wavers without finding a definite position' because his 'life is not truly life', and whose 'death cannot be called death' (RA, 81). Even if it is true that man 'observes the fragmentation of his privileged tie to what constitutes him as human; that is, the sacredness of death and life', the following also holds true (RA, 81). The appearance of the *Muselmann* cannot obviate the fact of his *humanity*, but the *form* of his life, and as Agamben himself infers, this extends the boundaries of what it is to be human (RA, 81). It does *not* make him the 'non-human who obstinately appears as human ... the human that cannot be told apart from the inhuman' (RA, 82). When Levi expresses his doubts and fears of what it is to *be* a man, it does indeed imply that 'the *human being* is the one who can survive the human being' but this is not wholly based on what he says about the *Muselmann* being the 'complete witness' (RA, 82). It has as much to do with any human who *survived* the horror inflicted by other humans as the human *Muselmann* who saw the death-producing Gorgon, touched bottom, and died or survived (See RA,53). But *seeing* the Gorgon does not make *him* a Gorgon. The Gorgon and *Muselmann* 'are one gaze ... a single

²⁸ Although not within the remit of this chapter, Bernhard Schlink's depiction of Hanna in *The Reader* comes to mind. See especially the description of her trial, pp.92-116.

impossibility of seeing' (RA, 54). The *Muselmann* reached the limits but saw the impossibility of *seeing* the limits of what it was to be human, and what would, could or should make him the complete witness.

If the complete witness is annihilated, that annihilation is what makes him a complete witness, as it were, but not a complete human being. However, he is still human and whilst dignity and self-respect might well have been useless in Auschwitz, if we are to include the *Muselmann* in the zone of the human as Agamben asserts we should, how can we deny him a dignity or respect even though they may have lost their relevance for him. In other words, they may be useless for him, but not in our considerations. If it is his annihilation that makes him the complete witness, something remains intact and inviolate, and that is his humanity. One thus returns to Blanchot's epigrammatic 'The disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact' (*WD*, 1). It is nevertheless troubling because whilst Levi is hesitant to say that anyone's humanity is completely destroyed, his ambivalence is suggested just by the title of his book, *If this is a Man*, and the poem of the same title, and I shall return to this vexing question. The evidence of the text suggests that Agamben also struggles with such a view. He claims that, on the one hand, '*the one whose humanity is completely destroyed is the one who is truly human*' and on the other hand, posits the idea that it is actually not possible to completely destroy the human (*RA*, 133). He thus pinpoints a subtle, but crucial and paradoxical difference between one's humanity and one's status as human.

When Levi proclaims that "they, the *Muselmänner*, the drowned are the complete witnesses" (*RA*, 133), Agamben seems to understand this as meaning that:

... *the human being is the inhuman; the one whose humanity is completely destroyed is the one who is truly human.* The paradox here is that if the only one bearing witness to the human is the one whose humanity has been wholly destroyed, this means that the identity between human and inhuman is never perfect and that it is not truly possible to destroy the human, that something always *remains*. *The witness is this remnant.* (*RA*, 133-4.)

To say true humanity emerges when humanity is completely destroyed is to mine a deliberate paradox that then gives birth to the impossibility of completely destroying the human. The 'production' of the *Muselmann* destroys his humanity in the sense that it is severed from the factual life - or, indeed, the *bios* - in which being human consists.²⁹ Yet

²⁹ See Agamben's chapter 'Form of Life' in *ME* pp.3-14. Agamben precisely discusses the difference between *bio* and *zoe*, where *zoe* is simply means 'living', and *bio* has to do with the 'form' of life of a person or group. This is discussed further in Chapter IV.

this severance discloses the underlying truth of humanity. The disclosure is morally and metaphysically obscene precisely because it exposes what should remain concealed in the everyday. Agamben's use of the word 'human' can be described as homonymic, since it signifies in different ways at various points in the narrative. There is a difference in meaning between the human as a purely biological entity and as one which also contains all the other attributes of a human being, such as the ethical, psychological, social or spiritual. It is indeed difficult to divorce *zoe* from the *bio* because they are *both* human, but Agamben's attempt makes his analysis all the more difficult to grasp.

Agamben writes that 'what man despises is also what he fears resembles him' and that 'the *Muselmann* is universally avoided because everyone in the camp recognizes himself in his disfigured face' (RA, 52). What Agamben seems to be suggesting is that what we fear or hate in others is a reflection of that which we fear or hate within ourselves: that is, our own ruin and annihilation. Accordingly, the *Muselmann* 'casts new light on the extermination itself, making it in some way even more atrocious' (RA, 52). His disfigurement represents 'not only or not so much a limit between life and death; rather he marks the threshold between the human and the inhuman', (RA, 55). Of course, the disfigured face of the *Muselmann* suggests more than the physical deterioration caused by the camps' harsh conditions, compounded by the shaved heads, acute hunger and malnutrition. Most prisoners looked emaciated, and their humanity was certainly contested, but they did not all become magnets for fear and hatred. It therefore seems that what aroused inmates' fear and contempt was also a disfigurement of the *spirit* reflected in the posture and expression of human beings beyond despair, on the edge of life, having reached the limit of their own endurance or will to live. *This* is what made them unrecognizable as human. For those who were barely clinging on to the residue of their own lives, the *Muselmänner* reminded them of their own vulnerability.

To suggest that fear or hatred of the other is somehow refractive suggests that the *Muselmann* is, after all, 'human'. But what is of concern here is the way the *Muselmann* has been equated with a 'non-human'. Agamben writes that what is suggested by the title of Levi's '*If This is a Man*' is that 'In Auschwitz ethics begins precisely at the point where the *Muselmann*, the "complete witness", makes it forever impossible to distinguish between man and non-man' (RA, 47). He also writes that 'Auschwitz is ... an experiment beyond life and

death in which the Jew is transformed into a *Muselmann* and the human being into a *non-human* (RA, 52, my italics). To express a sense of what happens to the human in a person when that person reaches a limit in terms of suffering and witnessing others suffering is undoubtedly difficult, but the idea of a transition from human to non-human is still inherently troubling. It suggests something deprived of both the physical and spiritual aspects of what was once called human, now condemned to a nether world, even to the extent of belonging to a new species, that of the *Muselmann*, which is neither dead nor alive, human, inhuman or non-human.

Levi's 'grey zone' introduces a universe where the distinctions between good and evil, suffering and the infliction of suffering become blurred because of the way they co-exist in the camp, where there was such extreme 'capacity' because the 'spirit of man' was 'absent' (RA, 77). This suggests that under more normal circumstances, binary oppositions are easier to define in the world outside the camps, and ethical boundaries easier to identify. It was only the *Muselmänner* who *could* bear witness to that absence of spirit, and who *could* impart a sense of what was extinguished. However, the *Muselmann* was no longer capable of anything. The perpetrators could not bear witness because as stated above, they were incapable.

Once they embarked on their murderous project, any suffering was a self-absorbed one; they were incapable of suffering *for the Other*, of being responsible to or for him. That they were further incapable of recognizing that their own 'weakness' or inability to bear the sight of one hundred or one thousand corpses as other *human beings* was not *weakness* but a profound ethical flaw (RA, 78).³⁰ They always knew that *all* their victims were human, however much they tried to convince themselves to the contrary. That is why the greater the attempt, the greater the failure – they could not do it and this was terrifying. They could murder millions and did, but the face of the Other still stared back at them – and it was other and their own - they were murdering themselves too. If they had been able to recognize these things, it would not have been the '*weakness*' that Himmler suggested, but actually the

³⁰ See Martin Gilbert, *Second World War*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989), p.465. He quotes Himmler's infamous Poznan speech of October 4th, 1943 to SS functionaries: 'Most of you know what it means to see a hundred corpses lying together, five hundred, or a thousand. To have stuck it out and at the same time – apart from exceptions caused by human *weakness* – to have remained decent fellows, that is what has made us hard. This is a page of glory in our history which has never been written and shall never be written' (my italics).

source of their potential strength (RA, 78). Instead, their 'capability' was their perverted claim to decency and greatness because they were capable of persecution and murder on so terrifying a level, whilst falsely claiming that their victims were not human. There is an extent to which the perpetrators' disfigurement was far, far greater than that of the pathetic broken figures of the *Muselmänner*.

If we are to argue that 'the one whose humanity is completely destroyed is the one who is truly human', then what more are we able to say about the perpetrators? (RA, 133). If it were possible to show that one could somehow become 'non-human', this would have to apply also to them, and the implication would be that no responsibility could be attributed or judgement made. Any objection to the notion of the non-human can thus be grounded in a determination not to absolve the perpetrators in any way for their responsibility *as human beings* for the heinous crimes and abominations of which they were a part. It is true that one might be able to present a cogent argument that it was the perpetrators who relinquished their humanity and became 'non-human', albeit via a different route from that of the *Muselmänner*. However, if one wants to insist that the *Muselmänner* were never non-human, it would be inconsistent not to also claim that whilst the perpetrators may have been inhuman, they too were never non-human. Just as no metamorphosis took place that transformed them from human to non-human, neither were they anthropomorphised from non-human to remnants of a human shape. They were human throughout.

When Agamben talks about the historical tradition of treating death and the corpse with respect, he says this does not belong to the realm of ethics but of law (RA, 79). What he states about '[t]he ambiguity of our culture's relation to death' reaching 'its paroxysm after Auschwitz' may be true (RA, 80). That Auschwitz 'realised the unconditional triumph of death against life' and 'of having degraded and debased death' also resonates with truth (RA, 81). However, I do not see the same contradiction in this as does Agamben. It is more of a paradox than contradiction because where death triumphs as it did in the camps, it debases not only death because of the manner of dying, but life itself. Death can no longer be a kind of culmination of a man's life because both are rendered futile and meaningless. This is part of the tragedy and horror of the Holocaust, but whilst the way death is *treated* belongs to the realm of law, it is also related to the realm of ethics, and it is *that* relationship that has primacy.

Agamben cites Blanchot's idea that '[m]an is the indestructible that can be destroyed', and his view that destruction is 'the place of "the human relation in its primacy" as the relation to the Other'.³¹ Blanchot describes the 'human relation in its primacy' as

... a bondless entanglement of Others ... a magma of the other face to face with the force of a Self that kills, and that represents nothing but the untiring power to kill no language is possible To speak in refusing, but in reserving speech we understand this reserved speech of autrui; a speech unheard, inexpressible, nevertheless unceasing, silently affirming that where all relation is lacking there yet subsists, there already begins, the human relation in its primacy. (*IC*, 135.)

Agamben claims that Blanchot misunderstands his own words and that

the human being is what remains after the destruction of the human being ... because the place of the human is divided ... the human being exists *in* the fracture between the living being and the speaking being, the inhuman and the human. (*RA*, 134, my italics.)

If, as Agamben claims, 'the identity between the human and inhuman is never perfect', it is unclear in what way he thinks that Blanchot misunderstands his own words (*RA*, 133). They are talking about two different things here. Where Agamben is talking about identity, Blanchot precisely talks about a relation as Agamben himself acknowledges. Agamben may disagree, but for Blanchot, the indestructible has to do with a relation, and it is not intended to be a 'definition which ... identifies a human essence', a concept which Blanchot might well regard as dubious (*RA*, 134). Man has a relation with himself, the other, and with life and death, and such relationships do not have an essence or core that defines them, but are unstable and fragmentary. Furthermore, it is unclear what the difference is between what Blanchot says about man being indestructible and what Agamben himself says later: 'What can be infinitely destroyed is what can infinitely survive' (*RA*, 151). Both concern the relation between the human, inhuman and non-human.

Blanchot's statement about man as the indestructible is made with specific reference to Antelme's book, *The Human Race*, and his assertion that whilst the SS have the power to kill, that is the only power they have. This power will ultimately result in their powerlessness because their aim is not only to kill, but to deny their victims' very status as human – 'below every class and every real collective relation', a no-thing without 'face or speech' (*IC*, 130). According to Agamben, '[t]he word "indestructible" ... does not mean ... an essence or human relation – that infinitely resists its own infinite destruction' (*RA*, 184). He argues that what Blanchot writes should be understood differently as 'Man is the

³¹ *IC*, pp.130, 133, 135 and *RA*, p.134.

indestructible *who* can be *infinitely* destroyed’, and that this means that there is no such thing as a human essence. This is why – for him, Blanchot has misunderstood his own words.³²

However, Blanchot is actually claiming that there is something that transcends the ability to possess or destroy a person, and that cannot be appropriated. That something has to do with a decentering of the self to take account of not only his need, but the needs of the other, and accords with the potential for a post-Holocaust humanism.³³ Blanchot and Levinas would agree with this, and Agamben is mistaken to believe that Blanchot is even arguing about the idea of a human *essence*. I also take issue with his differentiation between the human, the inhuman and the non-human.³⁴ Blanchot and Levinas precisely argue for the primacy of my responsibility in my relationship with the Other, which prohibits killing, but state that even if I do so, I cannot own that part of my victim which is ‘otherwise than being’. This is validated when Blanchot writes:

When man is reduced to the extreme destitution of need ... we see that he is reduced to himself, and reveals himself as one who has need of nothing other than need in order to maintain the human relation in its primacy, negating what negates him Even at the level of this need ... there is in me a quasi impersonal affirmation that alone sustains the fact of being dispossessed; when, therefore, my relation with myself makes me the absolutely Other [l’Autre] whose presence puts the power of the Powerful radically into question, (signifying) the failure of power – not ‘my’ victory ... (or) salvation. (*IC*, 133, my brackets.)

A central point of Agamben’s argument is that

... there is no human essence; the human being is a potential being and, in the moment in which human beings think they have grasped the *essence* of the human in its infinite destructibility, what then appears is something that “no longer has anything human about it”. *RA*, 134-5 (my emphasis).³⁵

This also validates the idea that there is a kind of equivalence in his use of the words ‘human’, ‘inhuman’ and ‘non-human’ because each word seems to mean different things at different stages of the book. However, whilst I can agree that the ‘human is divided’, I suggest that one exists *as* rather than *in* the ‘fracture between ... the inhuman and the human’ (*RA*, 134). This supports Blanchot’s contention because if one exists only *in* as opposed to *as* the fracture, it seems to diminish the possibility of that all important relation between the

³² *RA*, p.134, and my italics to indicate the difference between this and what Blanchot actually wrote (‘[m]an is the indestructible that can be destroyed’) that Agamben also misquotes (line 4, *RA*, p.134).

³³ The possibility for a post-Holocaust humanism will be fully discussed in Chapter IV.

³⁴ And it is apposite to remember Levinas’ sense that any *essence* of man is as a corporeal being that houses thoughts, feelings and the spirit, discussed in Chapter IV. It is this that places each person in ‘a kind of bondage’ (*RPH*, 69).

³⁵ Kofman enunciates this sense of ‘infinite destructibility’ well when she writes ‘Man “after Auschwitz”? The indestructible. But this means “that there is no limit to the destruction of man”’ (*SW*, p73 and *IC*, p.135).

self and the other, whether human *or* inhuman. 'In' suggests a space or distance between two definable points wherein both the human and inhuman reside. 'As' strikes me as more encompassing because it better accommodates the idea that the human *is* a divided self, but where there is a relationship between the divided elements. Thus, when Agamben discusses Levi's paradox, the idea that the *Muselmann* 'is the complete witness', and says that the title *If this is a Man* implies 'the human being ... is the one who can survive the human being', it seems even more than that, because it also seems to imply one who can survive the inhuman, both in himself and the perpetrators (RA, 82).

The complexity of the issue is captured when Agamben writes:

... the *Muselmann*, the "core of the camp" ... who is inscribed in every testimony as a lacuna - wavers without finding a definite position. In one case, he appears as the non-living ... in the other, as he whose death cannot be called death In both cases, what is called into question is the very humanity of man the *Muselmann* is the non-human who obstinately appears as human; he is the human that cannot be told apart from the inhuman. (RA, 81-2.)

What I object to here is not that the *Muselmann* is the human that cannot be told apart from the inhuman, but that he is the *non-human* who obstinately appears as human. To be 'non-living' does not deprive one of human status. This may be a necessary contradiction, but my appreciation of Agamben has been that his thesis attempts to show how and why the *Muselmann* is not inhuman, but human, albeit at the very limits of understanding what this means, or an ability to define it. It is perhaps inconsistent because the form of life that the *Muselmann* represents violates his position as human in every way other than via the remnants of his human appearance. That he is divested of the most basic things that enable him to 'be' human creates a kind of caesura in his status as human. He is, as it were, between 'zoe' and 'bio', but, for me, there is still no equivocation; he is not metamorphosised into something other than human, whatever his appearance, and what Agamben says suggests his own ambivalence because of his concern with what happens to the ethical status of such a deprived being. It also reinforces the idea of an ambiguity internal to Agamben's thought that sometimes makes it difficult to understand what he means. It can be regarded as a further example of the homonymic use of 'human', revealing a necessary inconsistency in order for Agamben to make his point about the difficulty in defining the lines between the human, the inhuman and the non-human. It is also why I say

that one exists *as* rather than *in* the ‘fracture between ... the inhuman and the human’, and this seems to apply as much to the *Muselmänner* as to other prisoners³⁶.

It goes beyond death, even transcends death. In a sense, it is not about death, but about whether one can die as anything other than a man, whatever the manner of one’s dying, which is, of course, what Antelme rejects. Blanchot wrote that ‘He who has been the contemporary of the camps is forever a survivor: death will not make him die’ (*WD*, 143). His use of the word ‘contemporary’ encompasses everyone there at the time. Neither victims nor perpetrators or the relentless ideology that was the driving force are excluded from this undying death. This is because ‘the Finite is only the ebb of the Infinite’, and whether good or evil, suffering or not, finite man cannot become part of the flow of the infinite as anything other than as man (*WD*, 31). Like Levinas, Blanchot also speaks of ‘passivity’, and asserts it is an undergoing rather than the binary opposite of activity. It thus suggests more of an abject patience where one is powerless either to do or not to do, but where one undergoes (See *WD*, 14-15). Such passivity represents ‘that “inhuman” part of man which destitute of power, separated from unity, could never accommodate anything able to appear or show itself’ (*WD*, 16). Passivity thus ‘interrupt(s) our reason, our speech, our experience’, and that conscious part of us that is able to make a decision (*WD*, 16). What we are left with is silence, self-abnegation and abdication rather than a voluntary refusal, and this can be seen as a summary of the plight of the *Muselmann*, and why his death transcends death – the ‘indestructible that can be destroyed’ (See too *WD*, 17; *IC*, 130).

That the ‘human cannot be told apart from the inhuman’ is really the issue here because the possibility or impossibility to distinguish between them at a specific moment in time cannot of itself deprive the *Muselmann* or any other person of his humanity (*RA*, 82). As Antelme wrote, ‘The reign of man, man who acts or invests things with meaning, does not cease. The SS cannot alter our species. They are themselves enclosed within the same humankind and the same history’ (*HR*, 74). The *Muselmänner* were sometimes known as the ‘living dead’ which also calls into question what *living* means. It could be said that some *Muselmänner* represented a kind of rebirth, having shed one life for another, and one can only wonder what they thought, whether they thought at all, or like newborn babies, had not yet acquired the

³⁶ Indeed, one could argue that we all live as a fracture between the inhuman and the human at various points in our lives, but such a discussion is not within the remit of this thesis. That said, I think the idea applied to the perpetrators and, indeed, bystanders could provide the basis of a fruitful investigation.

uses and abuses of any language. Or perhaps they were the new old decrepit men, abandoned by and abandoning all language and thought, wanting only to leave a world they could not grasp, love or respect, and to shed 'this carrying of our one-time face, the mask of a human being' (*HR*, 52). The 'inhuman' is *in* the human, is an integral part of the human, and it is a mistake not to recognize that from the outset.

Any contradiction in Agamben seems more to do with the appearance of a human form that no longer contains the attributes of that which we call human in either a material or self-affirming conscious sense. Both Levi and Agamben need to find a defining distinction between the human and inhuman, and at times display a difficulty in accepting that they are part of the same currency. They thus tend to affirm the more radical distinction of human and non-human. It is also a painful reminder that the perpetrators were also human even in their inhumanity. However much they attempted to deprive prisoners of what should have been inalienable and unassailable – their humanity and human-ness – the persecutors remained human. One is again reminded of Antelme, who wrote that 'Trees haven't dried up and died just because the SS decided we were not men' and 'we are unable to become either animals or trees and the SS cannot make us succeed in it the executioner's power cannot be other than ... the power of murder. He can kill a man, but he can't change him into something else' (*HR*, 45, 219-220).

To grasp 'the essence of the human in its infinite destructibility' is connected to what can be expressed, and another important aspect of Agamben's thesis is to demonstrate the impossibility to bring to life the language of the dead. Nevertheless, he also wants to show how, in Levi, this is somehow what happens (*RA*, 135). When he writes about Foucault and 'enunciation' as referring to a 'pure event of language', this intimates that it is hard to know that whatever is said is said by an 'I' as a subjective being, or to ascribe meaning (*RA*, 139). This relates to the way that survivors grapple with how to bear witness, to speak not only for themselves, but for the dead.

The relevance of Agamben's discussion of Foucault's notion of desubjectification and the decomposition of the author is to explore the idea of how someone who has lost his identity

can talk about or express his own ruin and annihilation.³⁷ After asking 'How can a subject give an account of its own ruin?', he seems to suggest that we never really speak for our 'selves', that what we say is somehow not from us, that in speaking, we speak on behalf of other discourses and other times (*RA*, 142). If that is so, then the whole discussion about the *Muselmänner* becomes the most potent proof of this. One begins to understand and appreciate the *Muselmann* as a living being, able to be, but who - because of some contingency within or without - also recognizes within himself an impossibility of being (see *RA*, 147). The relationship between 'to be' or 'not to be' is subjectification, where the world is 'my world'. In the two contradictory potentials for possibility and impossibility, there is still the 'living being' - what Levi calls the 'complete witness'. One is reminded of Amery who wrote 'I was no longer an I and did not live within a we', and can better understand the agonising dilemma which Agamben confronts in his attempt to distinguish between the human, inhuman and non-human.³⁸

For the witness, the speaking being, not being able to be, and not being able not to be, lead to desubjectification where the world cannot be 'mine' because I am no longer an 'I' - that possibility or potential is gone. In the case of the survivor and the *Muselmann*, they are thus 'like the tutor and the incapable person and the creator and his material ... inseparable' (*RA*, 150). Thus it is that the *Muselmann* - the one Agamben calls the 'non-human', cannot bear witness to his own destructibility or destruction and yet is the only one able to do so. This is why he is the 'complete witness'. The survivor, the 'witness' becomes the 'ethical subject ... who bears witness to desubjectification' because of the 'impotentiality and potentiality of speaking', which is why Agamben says 'What can be infinitely destroyed is what can infinitely survive' (*RA*, 151). And this is why the proposition that Auschwitz is unsayable, 'a reality absolutely separated from language' is so dubious, and why - if one breaks 'the tie between an impossibility and a possibility of speaking that, in the *Muselmann*, constitutes testimony' - one does indeed 'repeat the Nazis gesture' (*RA*, 157). As Agamben points out, if Levi and others do not speak in place of the *Muselmänner*, the Nazis' confident prediction that none would be left to bear witness, and that even if there were survivors, they would not be believed, would become a reality (*RA*, 157).

³⁷ See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror, An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), where she explains why the 'abjection of the self' is a kind of narcissistic crisis which becomes a 'resurrection that has gone through the death of the ego' (14, 15).

³⁸ *ATML*, p.44.

In the last chapter of *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben writes more explicitly about biopolitics, which has to do with the way in which life is or can be controlled through biological mechanisms. For example, if someone is on a life support machine, the decision to switch it off is not only an ethical decision, but a political one, just as the decisions to turn on the gas in the gas chambers or perform ‘medical’ experiments were. Agamben believes that:

... the most specific trait of twentieth-century biopolitics [is] no longer either *to make die* or *to make live*, but *to make survive*. The decisive activity of biopower in our time consists in the production not of life or death, but rather of mutable and virtually infinite survival ... dividing animal life from organic life, the human from the inhuman, the witness from the *Muselmann* Biopower’s supreme ambition is to produce ... the absolute separation of the living being and the speaking being, *zoe* and *bios*, the inhuman and the human – survival. (*RA*, 155-6.)

The death camps became *the* paradigm of thanatopolitics, and what we are left with is a thanatography or narrative of death, which imposes limits on those who record these events – whether historiographers or witnesses – in terms of how to represent them. For Agamben, the survival of the *Muselmann* provides biopower’s ‘final secret: a survival separated from every possibility of testimony’ as a ‘bare, unassignable and unwitnessable life’ (*RA*, 157, 158). This makes the inclusion of testimonies from those who claim to have been *Muselmänner* a courageous one on Agamben’s part³⁹ – the *zoe* or bare life, the one who cannot speak becomes the ‘complete’ witness, and we are left with a new ‘paradox’ – does the *Muselmann* now ventriloquise the survivor who bears witness for him – the *bio* - or does the survivor ventriloquise the *zoe*?

The Human and The Survivor ‘Storyteller’

If Agamben provides a powerful commentary on the limits of the notions of what it is to be human and of survival, Sarah Kofman provides an equally powerful discussion of the limits of ‘telling’, of how to tell that which is refractory to telling. *Smothered Words* is about how one can use a narrative mechanism to narrate that which destroys narrative, and how something happens to language and narrative, particularly in the testimony of the witness-survivor. In a very affecting passage, she writes:

If no story is possible after Auschwitz, there remains, nonetheless, a duty to speak,

³⁹ See *RA*, pp.166-71.

to speak endlessly for those who could not speak because to the very end they wanted to safeguard true speech against betrayal. To speak in order to bear witness. But how? How can testimony escape the idyllic law of the story? How can one speak of the “unimaginable” – that very quickly became unimaginable even for those who had lived through it – without having recourse to the imaginary? And if, as Robert Antelme says, literary artfulness alone can overcome the inevitable incredulity, is testimony not impaired by the introduction, with fiction, of attraction and seduction, where “truth” alone ought to speak? (*SW*, 36.)

Testimony ‘cannot be read and consumed like other books’, which is what Blanchot says about *The Human Race*, where what distinguishes it from other books is its ‘exceptional significance’ (*SW*, 36; *IC*, p447, n.8).⁴⁰ Like Levinas, she gives voice to the problem of meeting the ethical challenges of representing the ‘said’ of the Holocaust without betraying it. This cannot be done, but the inability becomes the paradoxical basis of a narrative of witnessing. In other words, it is founded on its own impossibility. Whilst many witnesses convey a sense of how they believe they are confabulating reality, this is because the reality – the ‘untransmissible knowledge’ – cannot be grasped or conveyed in all its atrociousness (*HR*, 289). This does not mean it does not take place, but it takes place in its own impossibility, which is what Agamben sees in Levi, who appears to be clear, but whose writing is also conditioned by an impossibility of speaking.

After Auschwitz, stories about the camps cannot be other than fragmentary and disrupted. There will always be lacunae that cannot be filled, accompanied by a sense of disbelief. Kofman clearly agrees with Blanchot’s view when she writes: ‘About Auschwitz and after Auschwitz, no story is possible, if by a story one means: to tell a story of events which makes sense’ and, in fact, Blanchot eliminated the word “story” from all his texts after 1947.⁴¹ She cites his analysis of a character in one of Duras’ novels, ‘forever set apart because of the suspect closeness with which she offers herself’ and his often repeated idea that:

... it is that which separates, leaves at an unbridgeable distance (in a relation which maintains a caesura such that the other forms neither a duality nor a unity with the self), which forms an authentic relation. Closeness and the power to communicate depend upon the force of separation.⁴²

⁴⁰ For a collection of enlightening essays about Antelme as well as some of his own writing, see Daniel Dobbels, (ed.), *On Robert Antelme’s The Human Race*, trans. Jeffrey Haight, (Evanston, IL, The Marlboro Press, 2003). Of particular interest are essays by Blanchot, Perec and Kofman.

⁴¹ Blanchot wrote ‘Every story from now on will be from before Auschwitz All narration ... has lost the foundation on which another language could be raised, through the extinction of the happiness of speaking’, quoted in *SW*, p15, from Maurice Blanchot, ‘After the Fact’, afterword to *Vicious Circles*, comprising ‘The Idyll’ [1935] and ‘The Last Word’ [1935-6], trans. Paul Auster, (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1985), p.68-69.

⁴² See *SW*, p.30 and Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris, (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1988), p.38.

Together with Blanchot, Kofman asserts that ‘An idyllic community which erases all trace of discord, of difference, of death, which pretends to rest on a perfect harmony ... can only be a fictional community, a beautiful (psychotic?) story’ (*SW*, 30).

Kofman is undoubtedly issuing an ethical warning here of the need to recognize the otherness of others, not simply as the other person but as utterly separate and irreducible to consciousness, but one for whom and to whom we are responsible. Only this recognition enables the ‘authentic relation’ and the respect for otherness that makes love possible: ‘Closeness and the power to communicate depend upon the force of separation’ (*SW*, 30). If we assume a ‘perfect harmony’ or total empathy with the other, we create a ‘psychotic story’ because such an ‘idyllic community’ has no place in reality. Of course, by introducing the idea of ‘community’, she extends the idea of ‘my singular relation to the Other’ to ‘responsibility to the many others beyond the Other’, which is what makes the idea of justice possible (*IA*, 144). As Cohen comments, ‘Kofman counterposes a community founded in the “foreignness of that which can never be held in common”’ (*IA*, 144, *SW*, 30). The community that refuses Auschwitz and its recurrence is one that ceaselessly resists the “‘psychotic’ temptation of fusion, the subordination of alterity to the law of identity’ (*IA*, 144). This makes what Blanchot writes about there being no stories after Auschwitz so compelling; they become as ‘psychotic’ as Auschwitz which, because of the deluded conditions of impossibility under which it operated, provided no insights into either itself or the wider community.

A ‘récit’, which means ‘story’ and ‘narrative’ as well as ‘recital’ or ‘recitation’ of past events, thus becomes impossible because it renders the intolerable tolerable in terms of continuity – there is no break in time or chronology.⁴³ Blanchot abhors this interruption or caesura between the words that tell pre-Auschwitz, and those that tell about Auschwitz, as if there could be some ‘harmony’ between the two. The ‘récit’ has a kind of omnipotence because its form dominates – ‘the law of the story and its economy is to bury all strangeness ... can alone provide a true foundation for the idyll’ (*SW*, 30).⁴⁴ “The Idyll” (as in

⁴³ See footnote 14, *SW*, p.77

⁴⁴ An ‘idyll’ is normally a narrative poem or story with a pastoral subject, tending to depict innocence and rusticity. Kofman explores its etymology from the Greek, meaning ‘form’ and talks about ‘the inseparability of form and content, the very emblem of the story, of the “unqualifiable Saying” which precedes all accepted distinctions, including that of signifier and signified; *idyll*: the “glory” of the narrative voice “that speaks

Blanchot's story), 'a title that permits every form of continuity' is thus inappropriate after the 'inexpressible affliction' of Auschwitz which was, on the one hand, 'unimaginable' and yet, on the other hand, 'must be said' (*SW*, 31).⁴⁵

Although no 'story' may be possible after Auschwitz, Kofman is unequivocal in her assertion that there is a 'duty to speak, to speak endlessly for those who could not speak because to the very end they wanted to safeguard speech against betrayal' (*SW*, 36). Antelme exemplifies the witness who does not betray speech, and she describes his book, *The Human Race*, as 'sublime' because 'it bears witness for the incommensurable, for a number of dead that surpasses all imaginable measure ... not permitted to speak, to have a story' (*SW*, 40). There are those who might point out that because Antelme's voice is not the voice of a Jew, but that of a political prisoner, he has less authority to bear witness for the dead. Furthermore, Gandersheim – where he was imprisoned – was not an extermination camp in the same way as Auschwitz was. There therefore might seem to be a limit beyond which his testimony cannot go, and this additional dimension could make Kofman's assertion that Antelme's writing can 'make us understand the silence of those who could not speak, the "true speech"' somewhat limited itself (*SW*, 41). This is also because she does not compare Antelme's perspective with that of a Jewish witness-survivor from Auschwitz or another extermination camp.

However, such a claim would be spurious, not only because it privileges Jewish suffering, but because it would demean Antelme's invaluable contribution to the corpus of Holocaust work. It must also be noted that whilst millions of Jews suffered and died, countless non-Jewish partisans, political prisoners and others were also subjected to Nazi brutality. Furthermore, close to the state of a *Muselmänner* as Antelme was, he was sadly all too well-placed to offer his own version and interpretation of the different attempts to exterminate a human being and the ethical issues they raise. I subscribe to Kofman's view that Antelme 'responds to the highest ethical exigency' in the sense that he not only attempts to bear witness for the dead denied a story, but also in that he

clearly, without ever being obscured by the opacity or the enigma or the terrible horror of what it communicates" – not even by death' (*SW*, p.16).

⁴⁵ See, note 37, p.81: the translator explains 'enchaînement' as signifying 'a linking or sequence of words or events, [and] can also mean to carry on or move beyond an event in the past'. It is also this idea of 'continuity' which prohibits Blanchot's use of the word 'story'. However, 'enchaînement' also means 'chained up', 'fettered' as well as 'linked', which would impede such continuity, so the sense is somewhat ambivalent here.

can make us understand the silence of those who could not speak, the “true speech” that is one with the silent presence of the other (autrui), prevented from expressing itself in the camps, forbidden ... yet also ... protected against all ... corruption ... that might have exposed it to the suspicion of playing along with boundless violence ... and discredited it forever and “definitively compromised the future of communication”. (*SW*, 41.)⁴⁶

This refers not only to Antelme’s descriptions of the numerous ways in which prisoners were deprived of their status as men, and were addressed and treated as ‘animals’, but also in his ability to convey the way that language subsists in the relation to the ‘other’ and ‘Other’.⁴⁷ In the camps, just as no language was possible between the SS oppressors and the victims’, neither was ‘true speech’ possible between the inmates (*SW*, 41). As Antelme describes it, unless one was sure one would die and never see the sea or feel the sunshine again, ‘language acted like a sorcery’ and could make one ‘suffocate’ with longing – ‘so long as the future was possible we had to keep quiet’ (*HR*, 162).⁴⁸ One can barely imagine how the inmates enclosed in the filth and ordered chaos of the camps, noisy with the despair of their own silence and the screamed orders of the SS, must have yearned for time and an empty space where they could savour their broken hearts.

A further tragedy is that even when liberated, speech was impossible between the liberator, ‘whose ignorance was enormous’, and victim, the ‘prey to untransmittable knowledge’ (*HR*, 289). The liberators do not want to listen to horrific stories and can only respond with a trite and redundant ‘Frightful, yes Frightful’, and Antelme writes that ‘it requires considerable artfulness to get even a smidgen of truth accepted ... to vanquish necessary disbelief’ (*HR*, 289). The fact is that the text ends in an exchange with a Russian who offers Antelme a cigarette and a handshake, and with whom the only common language is a halting few words in the oppressors’ tongue. Kofman’s suggestion that it is a way for him to ‘erase the betrayal of this language, to rehabilitate the language of the other by giving it the last word’ is persuasive (*SW*, 55). However, it is also a deeply ironic way to end the text, and I am reminded of George Steiner’s somewhat emotional remark that the German language ‘found precisely what it needed to give voice to its savagery’ and became ‘a language being used to

⁴⁶ The quotation in double quotation marks is from Blanchot, *IC*, p.135, translation modified.

⁴⁷ See the translator’s footnote 40, *SW*, p.81 about the different uses of ‘l’Autre’ and ‘Autrui’ in Kofman and Blanchot. It seems that Blanchot uses ‘Autrui’ for both senses of ‘other’. Kofman seems to use ‘autrui’ in a more abstract way for ‘other things’ and ‘l’autre’ for the sense of someone already identified, but separate, as it were. ‘Autrui’ thus seems to represent for her the Other as in the stranger, even someone perceived as not meriting identification as a person.

⁴⁸ See also *IC*, p.131, where Blanchot comments on Antelme’s ‘unflinching instinct’ to distance himself from thoughts about the beauty of the world because such images made one ‘choke when bodies were decomposing’.

run hell'.⁴⁹ The memory of this is not easy to erase, and also reminds us of the millions of other erasures that cannot be rehabilitated.

The Human Status – A Sense of Belonging

One of the things worth considering is the ways in which Antelme and Levi complement each other. Both felt a 'frantic desire' to speak about their experiences in the camps, but what is of particular interest is the way they both seem to address the question of how, whether perpetrator or victim, guilty or innocent, men cannot be other than men even in conditions of the most acute extremity (*HR*, 3). Kofman wrote that:

Antelme returned from the camps ... with the kind of certainties that only profound affliction can instil He never ceased experiencing what is possible for the human race, what is possible for it beyond all possibility: to remain men to the end'. (*SW*, 57.)

There was for Antelme an 'almost biological claim of belonging to the human race' even though this was challenged by the Nazis whose aim was to annihilate the prisoners' sense of their own humanity by constantly referring to them as animals, and treating them far worse than they would treat beasts of burden (*HR*, 6). As Agamben asks, 'What is the "ultimate" sense of belonging to the human species?', and it is this question that is most explicitly addressed by Antelme (*RA*, 59). Levi's *If this is a Man* asks what it is and what it means to *remain* 'human', but his poem (known as both 'Shema' and 'If this is a man') suggests an ambivalence about the possibility to do so after an experience such as that in the camps.⁵⁰ It therefore seems that there is an uncertainty in him which makes it difficult for him to wholeheartedly subscribe to Antelme's claim. However, whatever his misgivings and doubts, like Antelme, Levi had the courage to expose himself and record his experiences, and has left a legacy that cannot be undervalued. How he must have trembled when, with pen in hand, he faced his first blank page, but it represented an act of supreme faith in the ultimate humanity of his fellow human beings – that there would be those who would not only read, but who would absorb what he had to say.

When Levi discusses the grey zone, he precisely outlines the ways in which the human and inhuman contaminate each other in the camps, and this is one of the harshest truths he

⁴⁹ George Steiner, *Language and Silence, Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman*, (New York, NY: Atheneum, 1976), pp.99-100.

⁵⁰ It appears with either one of these names depending on the edition of *ITIAM*.

imparts. He argues that the harsher the oppression, 'the more widespread among the oppressed is the willingness to collaborate with power' (*DS*, 28). In the camps, it was not possible to choose to be a man because the attempt to remain alive entailed feeling and behaving in a manner which was without precedent in what it meant to be either a man or human. It meant ignoring the plight of others, walking silently past corpses, stealing food, being hungry, dirty and responding only to the insane orders of the SS masters. For Levi, however, the moral imperative is to 'save the skeleton, the scaffolding, the form of civilization' (*ITIAM*, 47) in an environment which is 'counterhuman, without historic precedents, with difficulty comparable to the cruellest events of the biological struggle for existence'.⁵¹ These witnesses are the remnants, the scaffolding of humanity.

It is not, for Levi, simply about 'belonging' to the human species, but about how to remain human and what it is that survives. Dignity and morality are set aside upon entry into the camps and, upon liberation, Levi writes about how 'coming out of the darkness, one suffered because of the reacquired consciousness of having been diminished' (*D & S*, 56). That sense of degradation as a victim of the Nazis' lascivious oppression led him to consider the perversity of being human, which resulted in his concept of the grey zone. One cannot equate the pitiless callousness of the persecutors with what some inmates did in order to survive, but what was done in the name of a will to live implicates many victims too, however much one seeks to excuse their actions as desperate measures for desperate times. The difference between Antelme and Levi thus seems to reside in what for Levi is the slippage between human and inhuman and how they contaminate each other, whereas Antelme is more concerned to show what is possible for the human race as a species, and that no matter what, men remain men.

Any discussion about the human or inhuman is complex because of the different registers of the writers discussed. Antelme affirms a point of solidarity as a human on an 'almost' biological level, looking at the skeleton and skeletal when a person has no food or shelter. One might argue that it is then that the person has no ethical status as a human being, but there is more to it than that. What deprives him of his ethical status as a man is that he cannot take an ethical stance, having been deprived of all possibility to take decisions or make choices. However, for Antelme, the loss of status does not deprive the human of his

⁵¹ 'AFT', p.395

humanity, no matter what. At one point, he ponders on the world outside the room in which he sleeps, where a man is lying in his own excrement being abused by a *Kapo* as ‘*Scheisse*’ and a ‘*Schwein*’.⁵² The world outside behaves normally – the night is quiet, ‘trees breathe calmly ... insects feed in the fields ... leaves perspire’ and so on (*HR*, 218). This leads Antelme to reflect that:

To us who look so like animals ... so similar to any rotting plant ... we exist on the level of some other species, which will never be ours ... we’re still men, and we shall not end otherwise than as men ... It’s an SS fantasy to believe that we have an historical mission to change species. (*HR*, 218-9.)

For Levi, any claim to one’s status as human seems reliant upon certain fundamental attributes and abilities. His poem precisely asks if the man or woman who works in the mud, knows no peace, has to fight for a scrap of bread, is weakened beyond endurance and whose remnants of life depend on the say-so of another man can still be ‘human’.⁵³ Implicit in his very questioning, Levi seems to be saying ‘No’, or at least expressing a fear that the answer *should* be ‘No’. This has links to Agamben, who writes ‘Thought is form-of life, life that cannot be segregated from its form; and anywhere the intimacy of this inseparable life appears, in the materiality of corporeal processes and of habitual ways of life no less than in theory, there and only there is there thought’ (*ME*, 11-12).

What Agamben asserts is that for human beings ‘only if ... there is thought – only then can a form of life become, in its own factness and thingness, *form-of-life* in which it is never possible to isolate something like naked life’ (*ME*, 8). What he also infers is that if there is thought, intention and apprehension, not only is this indicative of a form of life, but also a life of form that is potentially empowering. In answer to the question ‘what is life?’, one could say it is anything that lives and breathes. But to talk about a form-of-life for humans requires a consideration of what is meant by a ‘human’ form-of-life because any life always has a form. A flower is a flower, and the life it has is inextricably linked to its form. Even if one prunes a rose and is left with the stem, it does not change from being a rose. One cannot separate its form from its life, or its life from its form. As a human, I do not say I am living and am then somehow inserted into the life I lead. To live is to be given over to forms, and I cannot separate my life from the form of my life, and still be called a man or woman. What Levi says in his poem is that I cannot be deprived of all the things that give my life form, and

⁵² Meaning ‘Shit’ and ‘Pig’, *HR*, p.218. *Kapo* from Italian *capo* (commander), *DS*, p.29.

⁵³ At the beginning of *If This is a Man*, with the same title, but in some editions known as ‘Shema’.

still be called a woman or man. Agamben stresses this separation of life from the form-of-life as a violation of a guiding ethical principle or ethics itself. This is because it threatens even the biological claim to being human and is why, in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, we have to see Auschwitz as a paradigm, because of the Nazi efforts to separate life from its forms irrevocably.

It also serves to explain why Levi is Agamben's *key* witness in this complex issue rather than Antelme. Levi has a brutal kind of honesty whereby he insists that one has to have the most basic of human needs such as bread, heat, and shelter if one is going to be able to call oneself a man. If one is *zoe* or bare, naked life – literally a skeleton – he asks with what kind of language and at what level can one be considered to be human. This explains Agamben's own confusing kind of language where he endeavours to differentiate between the human, the inhuman and non-human because of the impossibility to penetrate these concepts with clarity and explain what it means to experience a sustained effort to separate life from its form. Almost all the *Muselmänner* who were reduced to the irreducible died, and the fact that he includes the testimony of some of the very few who lived is testimony to his own ethics and integrity as a writer.⁵⁴

One objection to Levi and Agamben might be to suggest that by saying one cannot separate life from form of life, they repeat the gesture they try to refute by being forced to conclude that the *zoe* is indeed non-human. Levi implicitly asks us to consider this question, but Agamben is more explicit about expressing the dilemma within it, which is an ethical one to its core. But then there is Levi's description of the *Muselmänner* as 'the drowned ... backbone of the camp ... non-men who march ... the divine spark dead One hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand' (*ITIAM*, 96). He wants to believe in the moral imperative that Steinlauf impresses on him, that they have to 'save at least the skeleton, the scaffolding, the form of civilization' (*ITIAM*, 47). 'We still possess one power, and we must defend it with all our strength for it is the last – the power to refuse our consent' says Steinlauf (*ITIAM*, 47). The consent he refuses is the separation of life from form of life but Levi says 'the wisdom and virtue of Steinlauf ... is not enough for me' (*ITIAM*, 47). When he writes 'we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man', the

⁵⁴ See *RA*, pp.166-171.

demolition entails not only the deprivation of basic comforts associated with civilization such as clothing, shoes, food and shelter but also their very names (*ITIAM*, 32). He refers not only to the names given at birth, but to that which resonates ‘behind the name ... of us, as we were’ (*ITIAM*, 33). And what they were and ‘have to find ourselves the strength’ to retain is their status as human, and Levi’s fear is that they cannot do so without communicative language (*ITIAM*, 33). Communicative language is an integral part of being human, but he is afraid that any language purporting to communicate their experiences is inadequate. It is as if there are not only no names but also no words, and yet this is all that they have.

Antelme differs philosophically because he says that because I am or can be killed – because you can exert that power over me - I *know* I’m a man. When you exert your power over me as the powerless one, you actually reveal my power and your lack of it because nothing you do or do not do can dispossess me of my status as a man.⁵⁵ The greater the attempt to reduce us to one and the same, ‘*alles Scheisse!*’ and vermin, the greater the distinctions are between us in our differences from each other, and in the distinctions between you and us (see *HR*, 88-89). As he writes, ‘The inhabitant of the camps is not the abolition of these differences; on the contrary, he is their effective realization’ (*HR*, 88). For Antelme to say that when you attempt to separate me from my humanity, my identity, my form, you are unwittingly making me my most human, is to make a crucial ethical and political claim. The grounding of human community cannot be circumscribed by a ‘badge’ of identity. Antelme does not say that we are all the same, but he does say that ‘there are not several human species, but only one’ (*HR*, 219). If we claim there are several species of humans, it can slide into a claim that one has the authority to dictate to the other on the grounds that ‘They aren’t people like us’ (*HR*, 219). This is, of course, what happened during the Holocaust, and continues to happen in various parts of the world where one group seeks the kind of power that enables them to dominate and oppress those others who are not ‘like us’.

Antelme wants to claim that it is the unity of the human race that allows for absolute difference - ‘the variety of the relationships between men, their color, their customs, the classes they are formed into’ (*HR*, 219). It is this recognition that reveals the possibility *not* to discriminate against the ‘Other’, not to destroy and not to kill. He recognizes the absolute

⁵⁵ See too *SW*, p70-73.

alterity of the other, and yet affirms that 'there is no ambiguity: we're still men, and we shall not end otherwise than as men' (HR, 219). This is what being close to being a *Muselmann* reveals to Antelme. That the last word of the book is in German may be ironic, but it is also contiguous with the way in which a sense of unity is possible, and it is this that Antelme seeks to re-establish. In an extraordinary passage, Antelme affirms that despite the 'culminating moment in man's history' when an almost biological 'solidity and stability' is under threat as well as the various relationships between men as men:

... there are not several human races, there is only one human race. It's because we're men like them that the SS will finally prove powerless before us. It's because they shall have sought to call the unity of this human race into question that they'll finally be crushed. (HR, 219.)

Furthermore:

At the moment when the subjugation of some and the power of others have attained such limits as to seem frozen into some supernatural distinction; if, facing nature, or facing death, we can perceive no substantial difference between the SS and ourselves, then we have to say that there is only one human race ... Everything in the world that masks this unity ... and thereby implies the existence of various species of mankind, is false and mad. (HR, 220.)

Thus it is that 'the executioner's power cannot be other than one of the powers than men have, the power of murder. He can kill a man, but he can't change him into something else' (HR, 220).

Antelme's answer to Levi's question about whether or not one can still call oneself a man in conditions of radical extremity is therefore an unequivocal 'Yes'. The humanity that Levi *wants* to affirm cannot be conditional, but it is. He *wants* to save an enlightened humanism with a rational bond between people. That is why he tends to see rage and anger as a fall from rationality. In the end, then, he does impose conditions. One might want to ask him if 'dehumanized' is less than human, and to ask Antelme if *he* is somehow valorising the destroyed with an elevated status. One might also ask Blanchot or Kofman 'Are you saying the destroyed person is the foundation of a political and ethical community, that is founded on ruins?'

It is here that Levinasian ethics might help to clarify these troubling distinctions and questions. In '*The Name of a Dog or Natural Rights*', he recalls his time as a prisoner of the Nazis.⁵⁶ Whilst protected from 'Hitlerian violence' because of his French uniform, he notes

⁵⁶ See *DF*, pp. 151-3.

how so-called 'free' men, women and children 'stripped us of our human skin. We were subhuman, a gang of apes' as they passed by (*DF*, 152). He asks how 'can we deliver a message about our humanity which, from behind the bars of quotation marks, will come across as anything other than monkey talk?' (*DF*, 153). What he seems to suggest is that beyond all thought, feeling and identity – the 'trappings' of language, culture and ideology - if there is no primary, primordial, absolute recognition and concomitant acceptance of responsibility to and for the Other prior to all other responsibilities and all communication, it is possible for one to be stripped and, indeed, to strip the other of his humanity.

It is left to Bobby, the 'wandering' dog (like the wandering Jew?), who neither recognizes nor distinguishes between prisoner and Nazi, but greets all with equal joy. It is he alone who meets the 'rabble' prisoners because it is he alone for whom 'there was no doubt that we were men' (*DF*, 153). He has 'neither ethics nor *logos*' because he is a dog, and nothing can deprive him of the 'dignity' of that status, and what the dog does is not so much 'reject the affront of a repulsive prey', the figurative 'crouching, servile, contemptible dog', as remain a dog (*DF*, 152-3). Without the 'scruples' or 'brain' to 'universalize maxims and drives', he does not distinguish between the guards who chase him away or the prisoners who are 'enslaved', neither does he judge them (*DF*, 152,153,152). There are the prisoners whose being as men is jeopardised by their entrapment by other men, and their persecutors who are the true devourers of their own species 'despite all their vocabulary', because they speak without saying anything to define their humanity.

It is Bobby, the dog, who sees in the faces of both persecutors and persecuted that they are all men (*DF*, 153). It is not that he has a sense of association, affiliation or even solidarity with man because he is a dog. He does not treat them in a special way. He simply responds to their status as men who do not threaten his existence as a dog and who, since biblical times have been instructed to cast him food. Yet it is he who 'disrupts' the true 'butchery' of man's "consecrated" mouths' by 'jumping up and down and barking in delight' at all of them, thereby disrupting the logic of the butchery (*DF*, 151,153). In light of the above, I would locate Levinas' Bobby as a humanist of the Antelme variety, who not only refuses to distinguish between different species of the human, but who confounds the Germans by being a dog who cannot recognize the different species of humans they decreed.

If 'The Name of the Dog' posits a denial of the concept of exclusion from the human, this is partly what Agamben writes. However, whilst his ideas are close to those of Antelme, he is overall closer to Levi, who has more doubts about how much one can suffer and yet retain one's status as a human. After his own Holocaust experiences, Paul Celan's poetry, with its opaque and obscure language, threatens and disrupts one of the essential aspects of one's humanity, where language *should* make the world intelligible and comprehensible to the other and for each other. Obscurity of language is thus another thing that causes Levi to doubt the foundations of our humanity. This is why he finds Celan's poetry so disturbing and threatening.⁵⁷ Agamben seems to find it difficult to accept the idea that the more one is 'destroyed', the more human one actually is in the sense that the more you try to destroy me as a human, the less you can, which is Antelme's position. This might be because Agamben believes that there is a point in the dehumanization or destruction of a man where it becomes impossible to affirm a solidarity with anything or anyone – life, death, the human or the Other.

Levinas responds to these questions by saying that suffering itself is never meaningful as my suffering, but can be meaningful as suffering for the Other. He is not redeeming suffering, but claiming that its meaning resides in a restlessness of conscience. For Levinas, suffering is both psychological and transcendental. If my experience, my suffering, is not conditioned by obligation, experience reduces suffering to a psychological phenomenon. For him, there is something prior to the empirical, which has to do with obligation and responsibility to and for the other. If there is not this prior obligation, the empirical experience would, for Levinas, be empty. He is not a Buddhist saying that I have to suffer for everyone in equal measure, but *is* saying that unless I am ethically responsible, merely offering an 'I feel for you' when faced with someone's suffering would be facile and trite. Furthermore, Levinas is closer to Antelme than to Levi when he writes 'The supreme ordeal of freedom is not death, but suffering', particularly in situations where one hates the Other and has the power to impose his will (*TI*, 239). However, 'The one who hates seeks to be the cause of a suffering to which the despised being must be witness. To inflict suffering is not to reduce the Other to the rank of object, but on the contrary is to maintain him superbly in his subjectivity' (*TI*, 239). This seems to be both Antelme and Blanchot's stance. If to be mortal is to face death, it is also to be not yet dead but to see murder in the will or face of the

⁵⁷ See also *RA*, pp.36-7.

Other. 'Violence does not stop Discourse; all is not inexorable. Thus alone does violence remain endurable in patience. It is produced only in a world where I can die *as a result of someone and for someone*' (TI, 239).

Although ethics and justice are linked, they are not the same. I may have an obligation to the other, but there are always other others, and Levinas recognizes that I am going to feel more obliged to some 'others' than others. However, what he insists is that only if that calculation is conditioned by prior obligation, does it become meaningful. If justice is conditioned by a prior infinite obligation, there is no clear passage from the transcendental to the empirical. When we consider questions to do with empathy or sympathy for the other, they are basically empirical, and Levinas' argument is that they need to be conditioned by the transcendental, rather than the other way round. When he talks of suffering for the Other, he does not mean a form of self-immolation because there are so many others, and he not only recognizes the impossibility, but would also claim it as unethical. We also have an obligation to ourselves in order to fulfil the obligation to others. But, unless that moment of prior obligation to the other - impossible though it is - conditions our psychological feelings of sympathy for the other, such sympathetic suffering becomes facile and even trite.

The Nazis justified their unjust attitudes and actions in all kinds of abhorrent ways, but during the Holocaust, flouted the prohibition not to kill and yielded to the temptation of it because they *could*, and each crime served to feed their delusions of grandeur and omnipotence. Their intention was to kill until they eradicated all the Jews, who threatened their concept of themselves as superior human beings. Levinas warns of the danger of ethical degradation if the primacy of prior obligation is abandoned in favour of a sense of omnipotence. It is this that makes him view psychology with scepticism because psychology has to do with consciousness as the defining dictator of action. Thus any concept of willingness or unwillingness to welcome the stranger suggests the realm of consciousness, whereas Levinas' conception of the relationship with the Other is 'irreducible to consciousness', and prior to it (OTB, 100).

The discussion about the *Muselmänner* by Levi and Agamben demonstrates their sense that when everything that makes one human, such as the ability to make choices and go about one's daily life, is stripped away, one is excluded from one's self as a human self. What Kofman and Antelme say is that it is only when one is forced to reach that sub-stratum that

one can affirm solidarity with the human species, albeit at an ‘almost’ biological level. Whilst Agamben seems to share this view, it is qualified by his suggestion that there is a moment when life is separated from bare, naked, or stripped-down life which is what an ethics has to refuse. For him, when that point of the sub-stratum is reached, one can no longer affirm a solidarity with anything – human or other. Thankfully, most people can rely only on intuition because we have never known what it means to be reduced to the kind of bare, naked state of *zoe* which Agamben describes, and cannot fully apprehend it. This takes us back to the idea that it is simply not possible to become ‘non-human’, and what Antelme says about the Nazi persecutor: ‘He can kill a man but he can’t change him into something else’ because the idea that there exist ‘various species of mankind is false and mad’ (*HR*, 220). It is not simply a ‘biological claim’, but as profoundly ethical as Levi’s stance which questions the possibility for a human being to retain that status (*HR*, 6).

The Human and The Destroyed

Upon first reading Amery’s *At the Mind’s Limits*, one might find its tone distasteful, despite being aware that he was a tortured human being, who eventually committed suicide in 1978. For him, to be ‘human’ is apparently connected to an engagement with one’s intellectual and cultural heritage and living within ‘a spiritual frame of reference’ (*ATML*, 2). He also provides another perspective on aspects of what the maintenance of dignity might entail. The book comprises several essays, the first of which was written in 1964.

In the opening lines, Amery imposes a limit on his writing by claiming that what is of interest to him is the plight of the intellectual in Auschwitz. He claims to speak for himself as an intellectual and demarcates the differences between the intellectual and non-intellectual, whilst acknowledging that *all* were subjected to the same Nazi terror, and the totality of the Nazi project to terrorize all. I was disturbed by what I interpreted as a disquieting tone of intellectual snobbism in a text that resounds with references to writers, poets, philosophers and political idealists, and which asserts that ‘the intellectual prisoner had it harder than the unintellectual’ (*ATML*, 11). That someone of Amery’s obvious intellectual capacity could differentiate in this way seemed both elitist and lacking in compassion for the plight of all prisoners, intellectual or not. In fact, much of what Amery

aims to do is precisely to show just how the 'intellectuals' in Auschwitz 'lost a good deal of arrogance, of metaphysical conceit, but also quite a bit of our naïve joy in the intellect and what we falsely imagined was the sense of life' (*ATML*, 20).

The text is a passionate, angry and bitter one and, in many ways, his references to the great German intellectuals are profoundly ironic plaudits of an Enlightenment without clarity. There is a purpose to the way in which Amery represents the inversions of the status of the intellectual and non-intellectual in terms of their physical and spiritual power and stamina to survive. He aims to demonstrate how concepts of culture and education became meaningless unless one had a bedrock of faith, either in an ideology or God. For such people, whether 'Orthodox Jews' 'militant Marxists', 'practicing Catholics or less versed workers ... their belief or their ideology gave them that firm foothold in the world from which they spiritually unhinged the SS state' (*ATML*, 12-13). For Amery, 'they survived better or died with more dignity than their irreligious or unpolitical intellectual comrades' who 'took recourse, in vain, to our literary, philosophical, and artistic household gods' (*ATML*, 31, 12).

This book does not appear to belong to the categories of Holocaust testimony as outlined, for example, by Terence Des Pres.⁵⁸ It is neither a 'group portrait' nor is it a depiction of the 'writer's personal experience' as part of that group.⁵⁹ Yet the fact that Amery writes as a rebellion 'against my past, against history, and against a present that places the incomprehensible in the cold storage of history and thus falsifies it in a revolting way', is testament enough to his sense of duty towards his fellow survivors and those who died.⁶⁰ If survival and bearing witness are 'collective acts,' and 'rooted in compassion and care', Amery's testimony does not fit this description.⁶¹ His is a compelling voice that screams for the dead, against the betrayal of the dead and about the burdens of survival. It is too angry and bitter to be called a work of 'compassion and care', because Amery spares no one, especially not himself. His narrative is a narrative about the wreckage of a human being, and one where his soul is laid bare, quivering with fury and despair, mourning the illusions of the past. If his 'hope' is to 'recognize reality', that reality still seems to be a negation of any claims to be living a life that can be said to be flourishing (*ATML*, 101).

⁵⁸ In *The Survivor, An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁶⁰ *ATML*, p.xi.

⁶¹ Des Pres, 1976, p.38.

If it can be argued that reality itself is different for everyone, the possibility to distinguish between an inner and outer reality which leads to a more universal concept of reality seems to find its fruition in the status of the prisoners in the camp – that is, in the ‘de-intellectualised’ and the ‘dehumanized’. Amery may ‘recognize reality’, but the reality of the camps is a dubious paradigm for life or living other than that lived in the most extreme conditions of suffering. Whilst he was referring to the paradoxical ‘necessity to be a Jew and the impossibility of being one’,⁶² his comment that ‘because it became hard for me to be a human being does not mean I am a monster’ is notable as one of the most poignant statements from a survivor (*ATML*, 100,101). Amery did not feel that anyone in Auschwitz became a better person, but that they were all ‘stripped, robbed, emptied out, disoriented’ (*ATML*, 20). The book is a rebellion against the impossibility that these recognitions represent, and the limits they impose on him. Although an intensely personal book, it is not autobiographical in the sense that the reader is made aware of the facts of Amery’s life. What occupies him is his personal response to his experiences as a Jew, having lived through torture and the Nazi regime, and what he seeks to impress upon his readers is the non-redemptive nature of the experience.

If a victim such as Amery could even consider the idea of himself as a ‘monster’, the countervailing idea that many Nazis were ordinary, normal people who were simply cogs in the mechanized wheels of destruction, rather than ‘monsters’, is one that many intuitively resist. However, it is Levi who yet again has the ability to warn against the intuition to condemn all the Nazis as ‘evil’: ‘the diligent executioners of inhuman orders were not born torturers, were not (with a few exceptions) monsters; they were ordinary men’.⁶³

Nevertheless, I sympathise with Amery’s fury and sense of injustice when he considers the ‘banality of evil’ and, indeed, the responsibility of totalitarianism as an ideology for the excess of persecution, torture and killing:

... the enormous perception ... that destroys all abstractive imagination, makes clear to us how the plain, ordinary faces finally become Gestapo faces after all, and how evil overlays and exceeds banality. For there is no “banality of evil”, and Hannah Arendt ... knew the enemy of mankind only from hearsay, saw him only through the glass cage.

When an event places the most extreme demands on us, one ought not to speak

⁶² See the chapter ‘On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being A Jew’ in *ATML*, pp.82-101, where he explains how he was not Jewish because of upbringing or religious beliefs (his mother was Catholic), but that once he read the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, he realized he was a Jew ‘by decree of law and society’ whether he liked it or not (*ATML*, p.85).

⁶³ Levi, ‘AFT’, p. 396.

of banality. For at this point there is no longer any abstraction and never an imaginative power that could even approach its reality. (*ATML*, 25-6.)⁶⁴

The difference between Amery, Levi, other survivors and Arendt is that they were there and she was not, and at some level, she seems to ignore the relationship between suffering inflicted and the actual consequences of traumatic experience in a way that Levi most certainly did not. Furthermore, even though Levi cautions against regarding all the Nazis as evil monsters, he never, as far as I am aware, regards evil itself as banal.⁶⁵

The Effects of Trauma on the Human in Being Human

In 1938, Amery fled to France and then to Brussels, where he joined the Resistance. He was captured in 1943, and severely tortured by the Gestapo.⁶⁶ Eventually deported to Auschwitz and then Buchenwald, he was finally liberated from Bergen Belsen in 1945. Having survived the war, he became a brilliant essayist, but the trauma of what he had suffered remained with him, and he finally committed suicide in 1978.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* [1920], Freud explores the ways in which trauma affects the psyche and how this manifests itself in post-traumatic responses, either whilst sleeping or awake.⁶⁷ He shows how dreams and behaviour repeat unpleasant experiences and asks how this fits in with the pleasure principle. Normally, anxiety prepares us to expect danger but

⁶⁴ However, an account of the similarities as well as differences between Amery and Arendt is offered in Roy Ben Shai, 'Reductio ad Moralem: On Victim Morality in the Work of Jean Améry', in *European Legacy*, Vol.12:7, 2007, pp.835-851. See too Hannah Arendt's controversial *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, [1963], (London: Penguin Books, 1979).

⁶⁵ In November, 2002, I attended a Hannah Arendt Conference at SOAS in London. Richard Sennett explained how she was taken aback by the attacks on her work on civil rights and Eichmann. Scholem was outraged by her book on Eichmann, and ended their friendship. Sennett asserted that it was untrue to say that Arendt was a completely assimilated Jew, because she involved herself in Jewish affairs, arguing for a Zionist army against the Germans. She advocated a politics of help, but opposed anything that could be construed as 'pity' as leading to contempt. For this reason, she abhorred charity, which she regarded as given either out of pity or eventually leading to pity. This is rooted in her sense that Jews were objects of pity because they were seen only as victims, and she disdained the marks of victimization as an appeal for special rights and privileges. Concern for others consisted in her maxim 'Love the world', and such concern should be devoid of pity and free of subjectivity. Arendt wanted to eschew sentimentality in politics, but as Sennett pointed out, this carries costs. He suggested that she put forward some heartless arguments, and that there is – or should be – a relationship between politics, subjectivity and compassion.

⁶⁶ In a formidable chapter, 'Torture' (*ATML*, pp.20-40), Amery writes about how the victim of torture loses 'trust in the world' and whose 'physical' and 'metaphysical being' is violated (*ATML*, p.28). Furthermore, he asserts that 'Whoever was tortured, stays tortured' (*ATML*, p.34).

⁶⁷ In Strachey, ed., *Standard Edition*, Volume XVIII (1920-1922), (London: Vintage, 2001), pp.7-64.

sometimes, the psyche suffers a shock for which it is not prepared, and where there has not been prior anxiety. It then creates a retrospective anxiety in the psyche, whereby the painful memory is relived in order to build up a defence against it, as it were.⁶⁸ However, it can be compulsive and lead to a desire for death – what Freud called the death instinct.

According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is understood by Freud as wounding the mind, not the body (in fact, he said it could affect both). She discusses the story of Tancred who kills his lover Clorinda whilst she is disguised as an enemy. When he later strikes a tree with his sword, blood gushes and he hears the voice of Clorinda whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, crying that he has wounded her yet again (see *UE*, 2). It is as if the original wound was too unexpected and ‘not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor’ (*UE*, 4). When Holocaust survivors tell or write their about experiences, this too seems to be ‘the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available’ (*UE*, 4). We have the history of events during the Holocaust but, according to Caruth, the questions that arise from traumatic experience cannot be assimilated at the time of the trauma, and must be ‘spoken in a language that is always somehow literary ... that defies, even as it claims, our understanding’ (*UE*, 5).⁶⁹ She seems to be asserting that trauma cannot be expressed in ordinary language and that it has to be a ‘somehow literary’ one, with ‘recurring words or figures’ which bear witness to some forgotten wound (*UE*, 5). This suggests that the wounds that are written about hide even deeper wounds that go beyond the experiences in the camps – a kind of secondary trauma. Furthermore, Caruth says that ‘at the heart of these stories is ... an enigmatic testimony not only to the ... violent events but to what, in trauma resists simple comprehension’ (*UE*, 6).

There is an extent to which the impact of the Holocaust on survivors’ lives is endless, and thus without limit, ending only with their own death. What they describe is about life – how they survive, clinging on by the thinnest of threads – *and* death – not only of those who died and the manner of their dying, but also the effects on those who remain. Such descriptions are painful to recall, and contain elements of the incomprehensible and unassimilable for the ‘teller’ and the ‘listener’ alike, but the survivors have an additional burden. Like Tancred, they not only have to confront that which has traumatized their own lives, but have a

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, see pp.31-2.

⁶⁹ See too my discussion re Caruth and LaCapra, pp.109-110.

compulsive need and sense of duty to hear, listen to, and represent the wounds and traumas of others.⁷⁰

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the horror and tragedy of the Holocaust does not deprive the human being of his status as human. This, it has been argued, applies to both the victim and perpetrator. Agamben and Kofman's discussions are forceful ones and show how what it might mean to be human, inhuman or non-human after the Holocaust entails a new ethics that is inextricably related to speech and language. There is a difference between that which is fitting for a human being and that which throughout the ages has created wretches and wrecks by the forms of torture imposed by one human upon the other. And yet, whatever the form of mutilation, humiliation or death; no matter what the conditions imposed that are inappropriate for any living creature, the argument throughout this work is that the human remains human.

Despite this assertion, one cannot ignore what the victim-survivors say themselves, and their inherent honesty and integrity means their claims are to some extent qualified or tentative. For Levi, there is a slippage between the human and inhuman that makes him ask *if* this is a man. In Amery's angry testimony, we see a man who can state quite simply how hard it was for him to be human, but he concludes that he was not a monster or non-human either. Even Antelme's claim for the human becomes an *almost* biological one. Agamben wants to share Antelme's view, but seems to waver at times because Levi's honest doubts and anxieties fill him with misgivings.⁷¹ For Kofman, it is Antelme's perspective to which she subscribes. For her, the human is transformed after Auschwitz, but is still irreducible to something other than human. She therefore agrees with Blanchot that 'there is no limit to the destruction of man' (*IC*, 135; *SW*, 73). Survival entails a need to become part of the world again, and to understand that which was incomprehensible in the camps. It also concerns the need for an

⁷⁰ See too Caruth, *UE*, p.8

⁷¹ For a provocative critique of Agamben, see Jean-Phillipe Deranty 'Witnessing the Inhuman: Agamben or Merleau-Ponty', in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol.107:1, 2008, p165-186.

apprehension of the form of one's own ruin, and to rebuild one's life from the scaffolding of that ruin.

With the rise of the Third Reich, one of the most sophisticated and civilized nations of the world became a country where all rules governing civilized behaviour were suspended in favour of power, domination, and self-interest. Of course, some acted with generosity, giving of themselves to strangers who needed their help, but others grew cruel almost by default. However, the overwhelming evidence suggests that, for the most part, persecution and murder were undertaken without passion, but calmly and with deliberation. The people who stood by whilst others were tormented may not have been responsible, but they were certainly irresponsible because of their silence. To be human entails responsibility and a refusal to be deflected from protecting each person. As will be shown, Levinas' insistence on the primacy of the ethical relation, of my responsibility to and for the other is both compelling and persuasive.

A person may be hopelessly and irrevocably damaged because of the Holocaust, but he cannot be wholly stripped of his status as human however he regards himself and however he is regarded or treated. If there is any redemption in the Holocaust, it has not yet been revealed. But just maybe, there is some immutable quality to the human that will ultimately transcend the inhuman within us all if we pursue the wisdom of an ethics of responsibility.

CHAPTER II

MEMORY, TRAUMA AND RESPONSIBILITY

Introduction

This chapter is primarily concerned with the relationship between memory and trauma, and how these are connected to the notion of responsibility. I propose to consider the limits of ideas and discourse when writing about the Holocaust, and my discussion includes an analysis of remarks made by Levi in relation to the writing of thinkers such as Sigmund Freud and Maurice Blanchot. I also show how Emmanuel Levinas aids and facilitates our reflections on the problems of intelligibility, suffering and evil during the Holocaust, and how and why an ethics of responsibility should underpin all reasoning after it.

The thinkers cited have served to augment my own understanding of the terror. However, I am constantly mindful of the limits of language and representation, and how those limits raise profound questions about what we mean when we talk about the human, the inhuman and the non-human in the post-Holocaust world. One does not have to be a post-modernist to subscribe to an insistence on the ‘transformative character of Auschwitz’ or modernity’s ‘potentially lethal implications for our present and future’ (‘CTP’, 58). One may also share Zygmunt Bauman’s sociological insight that

[t]he Holocaust was born and executed in our modern rational society, at a high stage of our civilization and at the peak of human cultural achievement, and for this reason it is a problem of that society, civilization and culture.⁷²

The Paradox of Intelligibility

Any study of the Holocaust soon runs up against a certain kind of impossibility inherent in the task. On the one hand, there are the terrible facts and historical accounts and, on the other hand, a plethora of personal accounts as well as attempts to explain the genocide from various perspectives. Whilst this study engages with issues arising from diverse accounts

⁷² Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, p.x.

and competing perspectives, there is an underlying wish to assert that the Holocaust *is* intelligible, because to claim otherwise risks slipping into a lazy mystification of it. Nevertheless, there is something in the Holocaust that overflows the bounds of comprehension, seeking to render intelligible that which is nonetheless unintelligible. This poses a paradox consisting of the notion that something is not reducible to comprehension, and yet results in a form of intelligibility despite the sense that it is unassimilable, ungraspable and incomprehensible.

During the Holocaust, prisoners entered a world of ghettos and concentration camps committed to their dehumanization and extermination. The perpetrators were giddy with their power and ability to achieve these aims. If the Nazis' thirst for power led them to neglect, ignore and abandon a moral consciousness, it is the work of Levinas which counters that craving, and directly examines both what is meant by moral consciousness and how it relates to the human in humanity. For him, it is 'not an experience of values, but an access to external being: external being is *par excellence*, the Other'.⁷³

It is neither possible nor desirable to divorce scholarly or historical studies of the Holocaust from the emotional trauma and its effects on the human. Ideas about what it is to be human, inhuman or, indeed, a 'non-human' human exceed ordinary comprehension, particularly in the hitherto unknown radical environment of the Holocaust. It is this excess that the Nazis wanted to disavow. The link between the refusal of an excess that defines or reduces the human to the concept of a quantifiable unit, paves the way towards a genocide that is both intelligible *and* unintelligible because of the attempt to reduce the human, who is actually irreducible and unknowable.

To claim that the Holocaust is intelligible infers an acceptance of an excess that is so excessive that there are those who reach a limit, and then assert it is unintelligible. There is therefore a need to probe what it is that frustrates and resists attempts to render the Holocaust intelligible. I claim that intelligibility is *violated*, but also achieved by formulating the questions that must be asked but cannot be answered. If Auschwitz suspends or interrupts

⁷³ 'Signature' in *DF*, p.293.

thought, speech and intelligibility, it also conditions their regeneration via an epistemological understanding of how we confront an excess of unknowable knowledge.⁷⁴

It is often the witness-survivors who best express the dilemma of intelligibility that confronts us. Aharon Appelfeld writes that 'Everything that happened was so gigantic, so inconceivable, that the witness even seemed like a fabricator himself'.⁷⁵ To counter that unintelligibility, he also writes about the

... tendency to speak of the Holocaust in mystical terms, to link the events to the incomprehensible That tendency is both understandable and dangerous (the) [m]urder that was committed ... must not be interpreted in mystical terms. A vile hand was raised against mankind: we do not have mysticism here ...⁷⁶

Some six million human beings suffered and died, and to remember them endows them with a presence.⁷⁷ It also reminds us what can happen when we traverse the borders of our own humanity and humanness. This is the relevance of the Holocaust for the modern world, and why an attempt to penetrate all aspects perceived as unintelligible is still needed.

For some religious believers, whilst there are aspects of the camps that remain incomprehensible, the Holocaust is understood and made intelligible in an ultimately redemptive way; that is, that 'Auschwitz' was God's will. Conversely, the camps' existence confirmed the non-existence of a benign, supreme Being or God. My personal stance rejects as obscene those theological explanations that suggest the Holocaust was God's punishment of the Jews for their sins, or that the 'innocent ... died in Auschwitz, not for the sake of their own sins but because of the sins of others' as some kind of 'sacrifice' whose 'death purged western civilization'.⁷⁸ Furthermore, I find Emil Fackenheim's explanations that the Holocaust paved the way for the creation of the State of Israel objectionable. This objection resides in the way he seems to deny Judaism or Jewishness any independence by inferring

⁷⁴ See also Josh Cohen: 'Auschwitz imposes not simply a new demand on thinking, but a transformation on the very mode of thinking' (*IA*, p.xvi). 'If Auschwitz is what destroys thought, it is equally what conditions its urgent renewal' (*IA*, p.xviii).

⁷⁵ Aharon Appelfeld, 'After the Holocaust', trans. Jeffrey M Green, in Berel Lang, ed., *Writing and the Holocaust*, (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988), p.86.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.92.

⁷⁷ This number refers to estimations of Jewish victims. However, it is also estimated that a further 5 million non-Jews were murdered on racial or political grounds. This thesis does not privilege the suffering of Jewish survivors above the important testimony from non-Jews such as Tadeusz Borowski, Robert Antelme and Charlotte Delbo.

⁷⁸ See Ignaz Maybaum: *A Reader*, ed. Nicholas de Lange, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001), quoted in *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, Vol.21:4, 2003, p.144.

that it is the Holocaust that shapes Jewish life.⁷⁹ In 1967, he formulated the 614th *commandment* that Jews have an obligation not to ‘grant Hitler a posthumous victory’ via secularism.⁸⁰ This imposes for him, a moral duty for Jews to remain Jewish in a post-Holocaust world.⁸¹

Levinas, also an orthodox Jew, offers another way to think about God and our humanity in the post-Holocaust world and sees both the religious and the human as inexplicable (but not unintelligible). As Josh Cohen writes, ‘Religion for Levinas signifies not the struggle for the reconciliation of finite being and the Absolute, but their untiringly preserved non-reconciliation’ (*IA*, 72).⁸² Levinas’ thoughts about ethics offer a way to make the unintelligible aspects of the Holocaust more intelligible, and his ideas will be discussed in greater detail. Meanwhile, suffice it to say that, as Peter Haidu has pointed out, Levinas insists on the ‘unity of ethics and religion: religion is the name we give to the bond that is established between self and other, without constituting a totality’.⁸³

Whilst thinking of Levinas as a postmodern thinker, we may register a further paradox that exists between modern and postmodern thought that raises issues about intelligibility. On the one hand, modernity which, broadly speaking, started with Enlightenment thinking, posits ideas about a foundation of knowledge, universal truths, ethics, reason and rationalism. Many of these ideas are interrogated and challenged by postmodern thinkers such as Levinas, Derrida, Blanchot, Lyotard and many others. As Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg have suggested in a thought-provoking article, each of these thinkers has ‘insisted that the Holocaust marks a break in the trajectory of the West’ which forces us ‘to rethink the implications of the project of modernity’, and this includes the idea of intelligibility (‘CTP’, 55). This is because postmodernists call into question our very ability to understand,

⁷⁹ See particularly Emil Fackenheim, *The Jewish Return into History, Reflections in the Age of Auschwitz and a New Jerusalem*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), pp.278-9, and *To Mend the World: Foundations of Future Jewish Thought*, (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1982).

⁸⁰ Emil Fackenheim, ‘Jewish Values in the Post-Holocaust Future’, in *Judaism*, Vol.16:3, 1967, p.272.

⁸¹ See a reconstituted view of Judaism in Richard Rubenstein, ‘The Death of God, Theology and Judaism’ in *After Auschwitz, History, Theology and Contemporary Judaism*, [1966], (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1922), pp.247-266.

⁸² For more about Levinas’ thoughts about religion and philosophy, see Jacob Meskin, ‘The Jewish Transformation of Modern Thought: Levinas and Philosophy after the Holocaust’, in *Cross Currents*, Vol.47:4, 1997/8, pp.505-518. Also see Zachary Braiterman, ‘Anti/theodic Faith in the Thought of Eliezer Berkovits’, in *Journal of Jewish Thought & Philosophy*, (Routledge), Vol.7:1, 1997, pp.83-101, especially comments about Yosel Rakover, pp.96-7, about whom Levinas also wrote: ‘Loving the Torah more than God’ in Zvi Kolitz, *Yosel Rakover Talks to God*, trans. Carol Brown Janeway, (London: Vintage, 2001).

⁸³ Peter Haidu, ‘The Dialectics of Unspeakability’ in *PTL*, p.281, and see *TI*, pp.80-1.

and 'emphasize dissonance, separation, disparity, plurality, distinction, change' as opposed to those who 'continue to search for unity, identity, presence, permanence, foundations, structures and essences' ('CTP', 54). The Holocaust becomes the event where

all 'historiality' is swallowed up, the absolute destruction of any 'logic', any 'essence' [I]n ... postmodernist discourses the Holocaust assumes a central role in the unfolding of modernity'. ('CTP', 57.)

If postmodern thought opposes ideas about essential truths and knowledge, it can be argued that both modernism and postmodernism contain similar dangers regarding potential links to fascism or totalitarianism. Just as modernism has to confront the accusation of uncompromising foundationalism, postmodernism has to confront the argument that it is actually irrational *and* defers any commitment to right or wrong thinking (see 'CTP', 63). However, as Foucault argues: 'the blackmail to which every critique of reason ... has been subjected ... operates as if it were not possible to make a rational critique of rationality'.⁸⁴

Whilst sympathetic with Saul Friedlander's sense of 'unsettledness' that arises from postmodernism's lack of certitude in 'foundational Truth', it also imposes an urgent need to continue asking questions and modifying our responses ('CTP', 71). This is necessary in order not to sink into explaining the Holocaust as merely an aberration or unintelligible. What is frighteningly clear is that neither foundationalists nor antifoundationalists can provide ammunition with which to prevent further genocides. The most one can hope for is that 'The insights of postmodernism and deconstruction may enable us to illuminate significant aspects of the Holocaust, and its futurity, to which the discourse of modernity has remained blind' ('CTP', 74).

Few Holocaust texts are redemptive texts about how 'good' triumphs over 'evil' or how the 'triumph of the human spirit in adversity' prevails. This does not mean that ideas about 'good', 'evil' or the 'human spirit' are not revealed or under constant scrutiny in such texts. Instead, they suggest a redundancy in the idea that experience or life has 'meaning' where 'good' or 'the 'human spirit' surmounts all ills, particularly after the catastrophe that afflicted so many millions. One enters into what Levi called the 'grey zone' of moral ambiguity, where the boundaries of guilt, culpability and innocence become blurred.⁸⁵ This

⁸⁴ Ibid., p.65. See also p.66 re Nancy and Derrida, and the section headed 'The purported danger of the antifoundationalism of postmodernism', pp.66-8.

⁸⁵ *DS*, pp.22-21.

moral ambiguity has implications for what it means to be human (or inhuman) because in the catastrophic environment of the concentration camps, the dehumanization and brutalization of prisoners led to actions where it becomes almost impossible to offer rational or ethical judgements about what was right or wrong, heroic or cowardly. The inability to render reasonable or reasoned judgements provides further evidence of what frustrates attempts to make the Holocaust intelligible.

Lawrence Langer writes about how many people feed on legends of redemptive heroism.⁸⁶ In the starving conditions of the camps, even such gestures as sharing one's bread are difficult to call heroic, since this idea became irrelevant when people had such limited control over their decisions or actions.⁸⁷ Any concept of moral decisiveness becomes hollow because of the extremity of the camp environment. 'This wasn't good and that wasn't good: so what choice did we have' says one witness, who stole a friend's bread because she was so tyrannised by hunger (*HT*, 26). Moral distinctions were overruled by the need to relieve the relentless gnawing in her stomach. Any currency of moral distinctions thus all but disappears like an evanescent vision of a world where such things were once possible and relevant, but no longer are. It also makes the idea of a redemptive narrative well nigh redundant, if not impossible. The overriding response by witness-survivor-victims is to try to express the horror of the trauma that men, women and children endured. What is of interest is the point at which each writer or speaker reaches a limit reflecting what he is able to say about who he is, what he is, and his relationship to and with both the living and the dead. This too brings us back to the paradox of intelligibility that we confront in our discussion.

In any discussion about the limits and trauma of the Lager world, binary oppositions such as good and evil, joy and misery, hope and despair, right and wrong, cruelty and compassion

⁸⁶ See *HT*, p.26.

⁸⁷ That said, much has been written about those who heroically resisted the Nazis, and includes the following: Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust, The Jewish Tragedy*, (London: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1986), Israel Gutman, *The Holocaust and Resistance: An Outline of Jewish History in Nazi-Occupied Europe (1933-1945)*, (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1972), Israel Gutman, *Resistance: The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*, (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), Hermann Langbein, *Against All Hope: Resistance in the Nazi Concentration Camps, 1938-1945*, trans. Harry Zohn, (New York: Continuum, 1996). Primo Levi, *If Not Now, When?*, trans. William Weaver, [1982], (London: Michael Joseph Ltd., 1986), Milton Teichman, 'How Writers Fought Back: Literature from the Nazi Ghettos and Camps' in *A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought*, Vol.47:3, 1998, p. 338-50.

have a limited application. It may be tempting to read or listen to the testimony of survivors as evidence of the 'resiliency of the human spirit' or the 'intrepid mind' but, as Langer states, whilst there is some truth in such assertions, they are limited in the chiaroscuro of the experience (*HT*, 35, 36). Witnesses bear witness to stories of 'deprivation, not survival', of life within death and death within life and, by and large, they resist the conclusion that what they have to say ultimately offers a clearly defined moral message of salvation (*HT*, 16).

Although witnesses, readers and listeners yearn for a message of redemption, there is an 'atmosphere of eschatology' that lurks in Holocaust testimony through the absence of salvation (*HT*, 37). We who bear witness to the witness have a responsibility to listen and hear what is said, and need to suspend the judgments we might make from our privileged positions outside the camp environment. It is incumbent upon us to understand that there is a dissonance in the values so many are taught to accept. They are opposed to the reality of a world not only mutilated by the testimony of Holocaust witnesses, but also by the suffering of countless, voiceless victims of persecution throughout the ages. As Langer suggests, we may thus learn something about what it means to be human in the post-Holocaust world. He finds it self-deceptive to imagine that one finds an affirmative or celebratory closure in the oral testimonies that he examines. They raise as many questions as those that they answer. I extend his analysis of oral testimony to include written testimony, where there is also little evidence to suggest that 'the invincible human spirit provided an armor invulnerable to Nazi assaults against the self' (*HT*, 77). Statements such as 'they didn't break our spirit' become irrelevant in the context of 'a totally foreign atmosphere inhospitable to the responses that normally define a human being' (*HT*, 104).

Crisis for Memory

The role of memory in the way survivors think about themselves and the world, and the effects on their views and beliefs is important when considering ideas about limits. This is because memory itself imposes boundaries on consciousness. Death and survival have a parallel prominence in the memories of the past for the survivor, where one's own survival co-exists with the loss of loved ones and a sense of loss of self. To think in terms of a victim *or* witness *or* survivor is deeply problematic because these terms are actually conflated. A survivor is also a victim as well as a witness, whether or not he or she actually bears witness or remains silent. Blanchot describes an Auschwitz prisoner forced to lead his family to the

crematorium, who was also forced to hold other victims' heads still whilst the SS shot into their necks. He was 'saved' from being killed (although he subsequently killed himself), and Blanchot rightly asks 'how can one say that: saved?'.⁸⁸ With these things in mind, the written testimony of victim-survivor witnesses such as Levi provides invaluable insights into the hearts and minds of those who underwent the trauma of what is mostly called the Holocaust.⁸⁹ Older certainties about humanity, what it is to be human, and what characteristics are considered inhuman are increasingly dissolved during the Holocaust, and as a result of it. Much post-Holocaust writing implicitly or explicitly explores and interrogates these borders.

Levi prefaces his book, *The Drowned and the Saved* with the following lines from Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner':

Since then, at an uncertain hour
That agony returns,
And till my ghastly tale is told
This heart within me burns.⁹⁰

The resonance of these lines resides in the way they capture the 'compulsion' that many survivors have expressed whereby they have *had* to tell their tales, rather than feeling they have *chosen* to do so. These are stories of suffering, victimhood and death which expose and explore the seemingly absolute limits of traumatic experience, of language and of intelligibility.

⁸⁸ *WD*, p.82. See too Gillian Rose's discussion in *Mourning Becomes the Law, Philosophy and Representation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp.119-121). She challenges Blanchot's interpretation as 'blaming the victim', stating that 'knowledge is said to have been offered in the place of response, in place of responsibility. The dignity of knowledge is thereby shown to be obscene'. However, the point that Blanchot makes has nothing to do with 'blame', or replacing responsibility with knowledge. Knowledge is connected to the young man's unbearable memory and the horror of *that: knowing* what he had done – 'the discrete complicity ... with the most insupportable aspects of power' - revealed both his responsibility and his innocence that we readers should neither 'forget', but can never 'know' (*WD*, p.82).

⁸⁹ Whilst I recognize that many scholars find the term objectionable, and share their misgivings, I use it throughout this work simply because there is a shared recognition of the event to which it refers. Giorgio Agamben draws attention to the problems associated with the term in *RA*, pp.28-31. However, although any one word is euphemistic, most people know that the 'Holocaust' refers specifically to the almost successful enterprise to exterminate the Jews of Europe during the Second World War.

What Ruth Kluger writes is also striking: 'The word *holocaust* for the Jewish catastrophe came into general usage in the seventies. Since then many have objected that it is derived from a non-applicable source, since mass murder isn't a burnt offering to the gods (which is what the word *holocaust* traditionally meant), and that *Shoah* is a better term. I don't care particularly, as long as there is a word, any word, that unambiguously refers to what we are talking about without the need for a lengthy circumlocution to pinpoint a particular catastrophe and distinguish it from others'. See Ruth Kluger, *Landscapes of Memory, A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), p.224.

⁹⁰ Quoted in *DS*, and from James Reeves, ed., *Selected Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, (London, Heinemann, 1959), p.42.

Levi and others have identified the connection between the need to tell in the mariner and that same need in the witness survivor.⁹¹ When the mariner looks inside himself, recognizes and feels his culpability, the compulsion to tell and retell his tale is born. One could argue that this 'sadder and wiser man' fulfils a certain artistic duty as the teller of his tale, and that its telling is also of some benefit to society. The similarity between the mariner and some camp survivors resides in the way they *become* their stories, as it were. Any relief in the telling is momentary. It is not cathartic because the agony of the memory and experience returns until the stories are told once more – and then again - and again.

Sarah Kofman captures the sense of compulsion, duty and, indeed guilt, when she writes that even though no 'story' may be possible after Auschwitz, there 'remains ... a duty ... to speak endlessly ... to safeguard true speech against betrayal' (*SW*, 36). It is the fear of betrayal of the dead, the betrayal of the past, the betrayal of the memory itself, and the speech with which to tell it that the survivor seems to have in common with the Mariner. Again, Kofman seems to illuminate the intensity of the survivor's predicament and quest:

How then can one tell that which cannot without delusion, be "communicated"? That for which there are no words – or too many – and not only because the "limit experience" of infinite privation, like all other experiences, cannot be transmitted? How is it possible to speak, when you feel a "frenzied desire" to perform an impossible task – to convey the experience just as it was? (*SW*, 38.)

It is perhaps the only way in which one can cling to the wreckage of one's psychic life, and I associate this idea with Levi's 'pathological narrative charge' and compulsion to write,⁹² and his ability to draw on both immediate and unconscious memory to communicate not the wreckage, but the 'scaffolding' of his claim to be a man (*ITIAM*, 47).

Kofman's questions about the possibility to transmit the 'limit-experience' indicate a necessity to apprehend what that 'limit' is, as well as the possibility to transmit it accurately. For the survivor, the 'limit' implies a magnitude of loss and trauma that are indeed difficult to grasp, let alone to express. Dominick LaCapra implies that the Holocaust was a 'limit event' or 'experience', but it is unclear whether he means this as a limit of experience, emotion, trauma, expression, or as an 'event' which has elements of difficulty in all these

⁹¹ There are many reference to the poem in Levi's writing, and one can only speculate about the connection between a line in the poem : 'Forthwith this frame of mine was wrenched With a woeful agony' and the choice of *The Wrench* as the title for one of his novels. See *VOM*, pp. 27, 34, 112,129 and 162.

⁹² See Myriam Anissimov's worthy biography *Primo Levi, Tragedy of an Optimist*, trans. Steve Cox, London: Aurum Press, 1998), p.257.

areas, making it perplexing to contextualize in terms of, say, history, psychology, sociology or politics (*WH*, 206, 160).

There is a connection between the idea of the Holocaust being a 'limit-event' and the thorny question as to whether it was unique in history. Referring to Saul Friedlander's concept of the uniqueness of the Holocaust, LaCapra writes that 'something is unique when it passes or transgresses a certain limit, when it becomes a limit experience' (*WH*, 160). He does not say what that 'certain limit' is, or whether that limit has changed or needs revision after the Holocaust. However, he does explain that 'it doesn't mean this happened only once, and ... *can* happen only once, but that something happened that was so outrageous, so unheard of, that it is ... unique' (*WH*, 160). It thus seems that both Kofman and LaCapra regard the Holocaust as unique, *not* in the sense of possessing an absolute singularity, but as an event unprecedented in its excessive transgression of any restraining boundaries. It could also be argued that whilst the Holocaust was not unique in a world replete with historical examples of genocide, the problems that arose out of it for the modern world and the sheer scale and severity of traumatized survivors are somehow unique (thus contributing to a sense of unintelligibility).

One of the problems for any victim of trauma and loss is that of how to remember and how to mourn. When asked if it is possible to destroy the humanity in man, Levi's affirmative answer is that:

... what characterizes the German camps ... is precisely their annihilation of man's personality, on the outside and on the inside. This goes not only for the prisoner but also for the prison guard who loses his humanity in these places ... Only very few had the luck to keep their awareness intact during their imprisonment. Some rediscovered that sense of awareness of what happened afterwards, but whilst there, they had lost it. Many forgot everything, they never recorded their experiences mentally, they didn't engrave them on their memories.⁹³

This remark provides the basis for an exploration of many issues to be confronted when considering survivors' recollections. Firstly, it raises important questions about the nature of memory to do with how and what is remembered, particularly after extreme trauma. If one cannot remember, one cannot take responsibility for one's memories, and Levi seems to make a Levinasian assertion that only by assuming such responsibility does traumatic

⁹³ *VOM*, p.216

memory become meaningful. It also alleviates the fear of being forgotten oneself, and of forgetting the Other.⁹⁴ Secondly, it re-introduces a familiar theme in Levi – the grey zone between humanity and inhumanity, where either one may triumph.⁹⁵ And thirdly, it has to do with mourning the events of the trauma, and all the loss this entails.

For Levi, memory is not only a ‘gift’ but also a ‘duty’, and there seems to be an implicit criticism of those who did not ‘engrave’ their experiences on their memories, suggested by the oblique reference to the *Shema*⁹⁶ (*VOM*, 145). However, what Levi draws attention to are the defence mechanisms that survivors use to live with traumatic memory and to mourn the past. There are moral implications in the relationship between memory and forgetting, although Levi’s comments are in no way sententious. Just as he talks about the grey zone as the suspension of conventional ethical categories in both *If This is a Man* and *The Drowned and the Saved*, what he seems to be saying in this interview is that not only is this suspension involuntary, but so is the effort to try and re-establish ethical categories which the survivor can invest in his continued existence.

In *The Drowned and the Saved*, he wrote:

I am not an expert of the unconscious and the mind’s depths ... I do not know, and it does not much interest me to know, whether in my depths there lurks a murderer, but I do know that I was a guiltless victim and I was not a murderer. I know that the murderers existed ... and that to confuse them with their victims is a moral disease or an aesthetic affectation or a sinister sign of complicity’. (*DS*, 32-33.)

This is one of the rare moments where Levi’s anger surfaces. He asserts that both inside and outside the camp, there were ‘grey, ambiguous persons’ who compromised and negotiated with the evil around them by turning a blind eye or actively participating to some degree (*DS*, 33). To compare the victims with their oppressors and custodians would be ludicrous, and Levi is very careful never to do this, but aims to show how they contaminate each other.

⁹⁴ Jonathan Druker addresses the connections between Levi and Levinas in ‘Ethics and Ontology in Primo Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz: A Levinasian Reading*’, in *Italica*, Vol.83.3-4, 2006, pp.529-542.

⁹⁵ One of the pre-eminent books to trace Levi’s ethical position is Robert Gordon, *Primo Levi’s Ordinary Virtues, from Testimony to Ethics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Gordon contends that Levi’s language ‘is best understood as a language of ethics’ that jibes with Levinas and that ‘the limitations of legal judgment are at the heart of Levi’s mapping of the ‘grey zone’ (pp.13, 19, 9).

⁹⁶ The *Shema* is the prayer recited three times a day by Orthodox Jews (Deuteronomy, Ch.6, verses 4-16), and probably the one prayer known by all Jews. It includes the idea of ‘engraving’ in the following extract: ‘And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be upon thine heart: and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up’. (Taken from *The Authorised Daily Prayer Book*, pp.41-2)

What he repeatedly emphasizes from the perspective of a victim is that when one is stripped of all the things that make one human, one's potential for ethical choice is also stripped bare.

For those who survived with blighted lives, the task of re-establishing the more precise ethical boundaries of the world, and to believe that they once again had choices, must have been gargantuan. Perhaps it also aroused deep suspicion in them because of what they had already undergone. There always seems to be an element of 'guilt' in Levi for all those who survived. This is expressed by his scrupulous determination to show how victims sought a more 'privileged' status in the camps that guaranteed them a slightly easier time because it afforded them more food, shelter and sleep. This did not necessarily involve any wrongdoing on their part, because such privilege was often achievable due to a prisoner's trade or profession. Whilst one understands the will to live, Levi nevertheless comments: 'It is the duty of righteous men to make war on all undeserved privilege, but one must not forget that this is a war without end' (*DS*, 27). This suggests that 'privilege' entails responsibility and strikes me as a Levinasian kind of assertion. For Levinas 'the duty of righteous men' of which Levi speaks entails an ethics of responsibility that should come before all other considerations, even life itself, severe though that may be. I shall return to this idea.

Levi's concept of the grey zone in the camps is anti-Manicheanistic because rather than believing that human behaviour emanates from good or evil principles, he aims to show how it has 'ill-defined outlines which both separate and join the two camps of masters and servants' (*DS*, 27). Furthermore, 'It possesses an incredibly complicated internal structure, and contains within itself enough to confuse our need to judge' (*DS*, 27). Levinas might say that prior to all judgement, it was the absence of an ethics of responsibility that contributed to the breakdown of morality and even made possible the existence of a 'grey zone'.

For him, the history of humanity has led us to reduce the other to less than he is or can be, or to misuse our power in order to rule over him. We have not recognized our responsibility to the other or for him, but rather thematized him and used him for our own egotistical purposes. Thus it is that the Nazis were able to maintain their order and power 'within subjugated Europe' (*DS*, 27). They were able to turn prisoners into collaborators – not as equal partners in their murderous endeavours, but those so worn out and fearful for their own survival that they betrayed their own moral conscience to become complicit in their own and others' destruction. As Levi implies, just to be able to have an illusion of 'privilege' or

power became worthwhile if it prolonged one's existence for a little longer, although there were also those 'sadists' who 'spontaneously aspired to power' because the 'privilege coincided with the possibility of inflicting suffering and humiliation on those below them' (*DS*, 32). To then return to the world, as it were, and to have to remember their own and/or others' complicity must have made the psychological temptation to 'forget' an alluring one.

For Levi, to understand and enable others to grasp what happened does not only necessitate an engraved memory and the fulfilment of a duty by retelling the experience. It also entails an attempt to simplify one's understanding of the experience, and that may lead to self-deception. The tools used to delude oneself into justifying or excusing certain actions were conceptual thought and language (see *DS*, 22). To 'reduce the knowable to a schema' means that during the Holocaust, perpetrators, victims and bystanders were able to turn a blind eye or act against their consciences in the name of some other principle of so-called civilization, such as not contributing to even greater wrongdoing or, of course, risking their own survival or that of those they loved (*DS*, 22). This is why Levi insists that in the camps, one was no longer able to unequivocally differentiate between the victims and perpetrators or good and evil (see *DS*, 23). This inability extended beyond the boundaries of the camps to how memory itself was jeopardised in post-camp existence. The reason for this partly resides in the desire to re-establish the ethical boundaries of a more normal existence. Another major factor is to do with conflicting feelings about one's own survival and the loss and sense of grief for the countless others who did not return.

It is undoubtedly true to say that shock and trauma affect the memory, where certain overwhelming recollections become buried in the unconscious, or in a kind of willed and deliberate 'forgetfulness'. Having to face what happened to them, their loved ones and to their fellow human beings, aroused in some survivors a profound need to 'forget' in order to be able to exist at all, both during their ordeal and upon their release. Levi – who was there, went through the process, and struggled with the understanding of it in the face of what seemed to be the ruin of all understanding – is concerned with both the relationship between memory and forgetting, and their effects on the individual. He thus tries to draw attention to how some survivors forgot, not in a deliberate or willed sense, but involuntarily. For such survivors, this undoubtedly served to help them to rebuild their lives. However, Levi also believes that part of what it is to be human is jeopardised by such forgetfulness, and that the 'duty' incumbent on all survivors is to retrieve the memories of their experiences. It seems

as if in order to live a life that could be called living, it was vital to understand the fragile status of what it means to be human. This validates his stance in the quoted extract about 'luck' and 'awareness'.

Memory and Mourning

Whatever the internal coping mechanisms a survivor employed, it represented an attempt to function in the post-camp world, having endured conditions so shocking and traumatizing that, at the time, must have seemed limitless, endless and boundless. However victim-survivors responded upon their release, their personalities were altered whether because of a persistent 'numbing of sensibilities' after their release, or because they *did* 'engrave' the experience on their memories (*VOM*, 216). Since one of the major difficulties for any victim of trauma and loss is how to remember and how to mourn, it is useful to recall Freud's contribution to this topic. In his difficult paper 'Mourning and Melancholia' [1915], he differentiates between the two terms of the title, claiming that whilst some people have the psychological mechanisms with which to deal with mourning the loss of loved ones, others do not.⁹⁷ For those who do not, mourning becomes depressive, guilt-ridden and obsessive in such an overwhelming way that the ego cannot cope realistically and mourn in a normal way. Unlike mourning, 'a reaction to the real loss of a loved object', melancholia is 'marked by a determinant which ... transforms (it) into pathological mourning' ('MM', 259-60).

According to Freud, when a loved one dies or there is the 'loss of some abstraction ... such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on', it is normal to mourn ('MM', 252). If one is in a state of psychotic depression or melancholia, that person's grief masks hatred, which is unconscious, and can result in feelings of worthlessness, guilt and even thoughts of suicide.⁹⁸ As one cannot admit to such feelings, whatever is mourned for is identified with the mourner's ego, and the hatred is redirected against one's self. This self-accusatory hatred and guilt exemplify an abnormal regression to infantile narcissism, where the mourned love

⁹⁷ 'MM', pp.247-268.

⁹⁸ Freud writes that 'melancholia' results in a 'profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment' ('MM', p.252).

object is 'devoured' by the ego and, as in the infant, feelings for the loved one alternate between love and hate. This is, as it were, mourning gone wrong.⁹⁹ As Freud wrote:

The melancholic displays something ... which is lacking in mourning – an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale. In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia, it is the ego itself. ('MM', 254.)

Furthermore, in the melancholic, there is a 'trait of insistent communicativeness which finds satisfaction in self-exposure' ('MM', 255).

The literature suggests that concentration camp victims and survivors experienced a similar sense of 'diminution' in their sense of self and of the world. Indeed, one could argue that they witnessed the dissolution of all the limits as to how human beings feel, behave or speak, and this applied as much to themselves as to the perpetrators. Whilst incarcerated, the laws and orders of the state offered no protection and were precisely designed to degrade, dehumanize and eventually kill them. What actually contributed to the survival of some prisoners was a determination to live and tell which – certainly in Levi, was transformed into his pathological narrative charge and almost 'frenzied desire' upon his release (*SW*, 38) – that 'trait of insistent communicativeness' to which Freud refers.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* [1920], we learn that for Freud, '[d]reams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing ... back ... a situation'.¹⁰⁰ This is perplexing for him because 'in their waking lives they are more concerned with *not* thinking of it (13). It thus becomes the 'literal return of the event against the will' and 'can only be understood' as 'the attempted avoidance of unpleasurable conflict'.¹⁰¹ In 'Not Being Able to Sleep', Jacqueline Rose re-reads *The Interpretation of Dreams*, claiming that since traumatic images do recur in dreams, there can never be any kind of closure or working through (as Freud tentatively suggests in 'MM').¹⁰² Rose cites Freud's dream when his father dies and how 'one should do one's duty to the dead' which reawakens the past in all its

⁹⁹ In 'Totem and Taboo', Freud wrote about the relationship between 'the sons and the father of the primal horde that "in the act of devouring him", they accomplished their identification with him!' See Sigmund Freud, 'Totem and Taboo', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XI, (1913-1914), trans. and ed. James Strachey, (London, Vintage, 2001), p.249.

¹⁰⁰ Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XVIII (1920-1922), trans. and ed. James Strachey, (London: Vintage, 2001), p.13.

¹⁰¹ See *UE*, p.59-60, *WH*, pp.65-7 and 'Acting-Out and Working-Through' in Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust, History, Theory, Trauma*, [1994], (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp.206-223.

¹⁰² 'On Not Being Able to Sleep', Rereading *The Interpretation of Dreams* in Jacqueline Rose, *On Not Being Able to Sleep, Psychoanalysis and the Modern World*, (London, Vintage, 2004), pp.105-124.

opacity. Would it be right to say that Levi's own 'trait of insistent communicativeness' reflects his own 'uncertainty' that appears in the permanent mourning that permeates much of his writing? Does restful sleep elude him and can we say that when Rose writes that 'as soon as we take sleep as our focus, then fear of the dark, instead of a metaphor for the limits of knowledge ... becomes precisely – fear', and relate this to Levi's own attempt 'to build bridges into the dark' even though he knows it's impossible? To 'work-through' the trauma entails a reliving of being condemned to a living death in the camp, and he cannot *know* something beyond the limits of knowledge, (that is, death).¹⁰³

It is true that some survivors repressed their memories, but there is still an involuntary and troubling paradox in Levi regarding those who did not 'engrave' their experiences on their memories. He was not a man who readily passed judgement, but to say that some had the 'luck to keep their awareness', whereas others 'didn't engrave them on their memories,' provides an unusual discordance that is atypical in his writing (*VOM*, 216). It bears further scrutiny because the ability to remember is an important feature of what Levi regards as comprising the human, and has little to do with 'luck'. One is tempted to respond by saying that the only 'luck' involved was that of survival itself. A further response might be to think that whilst 'luck' or serendipity has little to do with those who managed to keep their 'awareness', those who did not 'engrave' their experiences did not omit to do so *deliberately*. Their forgetfulness can be attributed to an unconscious mechanism that precludes the more normal mourning of which Freud speaks, and of which the memories of who and what one has lost is such an important part. From the opening pages of *If This is a Man*, Levi conveys his amazement and bewilderment at what he sees, and when he eventually asks 'Warum?' (Why), he is told 'Hier ist kein warum' (there is no why here) (*ITIAM*, 35). What is important is his need to understand, and whilst he recognizes that any such understanding will only be partial, memory is crucial to that understanding.

The word 'luck' is also used ironically. Levi draws less attention to the ramifications of having had the 'luck' to physically survive, and more to the 'luck' if one's 'awareness remained intact' whilst incarcerated. This sense of 'luck' is extended to include the restoration of a numbed memory after liberation, even at the expense of subjectivity or a sense of oneself. There is a relationship between the idea of 'luck' and that of 'engraving',

¹⁰³ See too 'The Dread of Return' in *TCW*, pp.67-8.

which has to do with memory, forgetting and personality. It is a complex and paradoxical relationship because it is as if Levi suggests that the outer personality is retained only in forgetfulness and a loss of awareness. In other words, those whose personalities were 'annihilated' on the inside lost their memories, but those who were aware and remembered lost their personality on the outside, and yet are considered to be the 'lucky' ones. Their understanding of the human and inhuman within humanity is somehow sharper. Whilst their awareness and memories might cause them to feel or be more damaged, one may suggest they are more complete human beings precisely *because* of their continuing vulnerability and awareness. However mournful and painful the response, these are the survivors who are more *able* to respond - with grief, fear and anger because of what they have seen and endured – and relief and gratitude that they have survived. The memory of the inhumanity combined with the threat of its recurrence must play their part in the effects on the personality. But if the memories are retained, what the personality does not lose is its ability to respond to the disaster and the sense of ruination it invokes.

The use of the word 'luck' is thus an ironic device, meant to draw our attention to the contrary of what is said, and make us think about its implications. It is not that Levi is being sarcastic, but that the ironic register is turned inward, and contains a kind of rueful bitterness. He tends to maintain a detached and objective tone in all his ruminations, but there is here a sense of personal irony because he is all too aware of the unbearable images which are 'engraved' if one has the 'luck' – like him – to remember. This also means that his 'awareness' somehow endows him with a responsibility and burden that he cannot share with those who have either 'forgotten' or not experienced the camps. He knows that remembering entails painful predicaments to do with the impossibility of presenting accurately the precise impossibility of the Lager experience. One's own personal perspective cannot fully apprehend, let alone convey, the full enormity of either the Lager or the genocide.

The most tragic aspect of the irony in Levi's use of the word 'luck' is that the awareness to which he refers has little to do with good or ill fortune. What he seeks to emphasize is the recovery of an awareness of being annihilated, and yet this of course begs the question as to

how one can be aware that one's very awareness is destroyed.¹⁰⁴ It therefore seems that any such recovery of awareness would be aporetic and that, in some sense, those who 'forget' are actually more faithful to the experience because it is, quite simply, not recoverable.

Charlotte Delbo's remarkable book, *Auschwitz and After*, both reinforces and expands the issues to do with memory that Levi raises. In Lawrence L. Langer's introduction, he cites her as having said that the memories were 'so deeply etched on my memory, that I cannot forget one moment of it I live next to it Auschwitz is ...an impermeable skin that isolates it from my private self' (AA, xi). Distinguishing between what she calls 'common memory' and 'deep memory', she claims that whereas common memory was part of a chronological past that helped her have the good fortune "in not recognizing myself in the self that was in Auschwitz", deep memory 'reminds us that the Auschwitz past is not really past and never will be' (AA, xi). Like Levi, she is aware of the paradox of remembering and yet there is an *unrecoverability* of the self as it was or the experience. This sense of the irretrievable resonates in the anguish of her writing. She knows that she has 'returned from beyond knowledge' where 'all knowledge becomes useless' having 'spoken with death', but voices the paradox she shares with Levi (AA, 230, 226, 225):

As far as I'm concerned I'm still there
dying there
a little more each day
dying over again
the death of those who died (AA, 224.)

Levi and many other survivors who have borne witness share this sense and feeling that one can neither fully recover either the experience itself or from it. In some peculiar sense, one might suggest that those who 'forget' are *more* aware because they are not caught by the following paradox. They *know* they cannot remember losing their 'selves', and once there is some kind of recovery, they can no longer speak for who they were, because that person is no longer the same person. It is painfully ironic to realise that one cannot remember and maintain the same personality, be the same person. The personality can only be retained via a mechanism of 'forgetfulness', but when memories of the camp are fixed and 'engraved' at a conscious level, the extremity of those very memories annihilate the person in a different way. Of course, one could argue that in such cases, there is something in that person which

¹⁰⁴ Levi writes about a 'double' sense of the term 'extermination camp', indicating both the destruction of inmates' bodies and the annihilation or erasure of everything that constitutes being called a man. (*ITIAM* 33).

recognizes that any effort to remember, any effort to 'engrave' those memories in one's heart and mind will be to relive a trauma that might also yet again threaten the annihilation of one's selfhood, personality and indeed, one's life. This seems to be the essence of what Levi is saying in the quoted passage. It also accords with the duty to remember, and yet not to know, not to recognize what it is one remembers. One is reminded of Blanchot who wrote 'And how, in fact, can one accept not to know? ... 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'.¹⁰⁵ What one is called on to remember does not end, for one is ever more imperatively called upon to remember again and again, and more and more.

The Quest for Clarity

As we have seen, there is a contrast between the survivor who is able to 'remember', and the one whose memories are not 'engraved'. As a witness, it is notable that, particularly in *The Truce*, Levi seems to withdraw from the scene as an actor. Of course, he communicates his erudition, dignity, gentleness – even his wit and a certain shrewdness – but one has little sense of what he is actually feeling. The writing differs from a Borowski or Amery, where the compulsion to talk has more to do with a compulsion to express rage and fury and their sense of outrage than the need to tell the 'stories'. In *The Truce*, there is a sense of being part of and yet at a remove from the action. For example, Levi describes the recovery of the libido in others, but expresses no such impulse in himself. It is as if memory dispossesses him of his 'self' and 'will' and without these things, what remains is the compulsion to tell. Like the Mariner, Levi *becomes* his stories. There are thus questions that arise about what witnessing does to consciousness.

What is clear in nearly all Levi's writing as well as his interviews is his ability to communicate the incommunicability of what he is communicating – the grey zone and opacity of moral life in the camps and of moral understanding. The tension between opacity and communicability is a tension between two different demands and yet they are related. There is the demand to tell, but to tell using a language which does not confuse.¹⁰⁶ The

¹⁰⁵ *WD*, p.82.

¹⁰⁶ See Primo Levi, 'On Obscure Writing' in *Other People's Trades*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal, (London, Penguin, 1989), particularly pp. 158-161. Levi's pre-occupation with clarity is specifically addressed in his

problem is that clarity is no longer possible, which is why Levi chooses 'grey' as the colour of his zone. He wants to restore clarity, but is unable to do so, and these contradictory strands are related. He might be less opposed to opacity if it were not so essential to try and restore clarity. In that sense, it is perhaps fruitful to think about 'luck' as something that Levi associates with the ability to recover clarity. Those who can forget can return to clarity that belongs to reason and normative consciousness. But the intensity of the desire is proportionate to the impossibility of the cause.

Freud and War

Whilst Freud differentiates between 'war neurosis' and 'pure traumatic neuroses', he writes that 'what is feared is *nevertheless* an internal enemy' (210, my emphasis).¹⁰⁷ He challenges the idea of 'eradicating evil human tendencies' by stating that 'the deepest essence of human nature consists of instinctual impulses according to their relation to the needs and demands of the human community ('TWD', 281). It thus becomes imaginary to believe in a 'process by which an individual rises to a comparatively high plane of morality' ('TWD', 281).

In war, the moral restraints of peacetime behaviour are 'abrogated', and probably involve '*no breach in their relative morality within their own nation*' ('TWD', 285, my emphasis). To draw an analogy, the Nazis discarded the veneer of so-called civilized behaviour, encouraged to do so by the distorted 'morality' of their nation. Some resisted, but because morality became so 'topsy turvy', they risked punishment rather than reward. It remains a 'mystery' to Freud why 'collective individuals ... despise, hate and detest one another', but he bleakly suggests that only further development of the human species may lead to some kind of positive changes ('TWD', 288). Nearly a century later, one wonders how he would regard the development of the human psyche today.

attitude to what he sees as an inherent 'responsibility' any author has to his readers, who 'should not write in an obscure manner' (161, 158).

¹⁰⁷ Sigmund Freud, 'Psycho-Analysis and War Neuroses', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XVII, (1917-1919), trans. and ed. James Strachey, (London: Vintage, 2001), pp.205-210.

One is tempted to compare the Nazi murderers with Freud's conclusions about 'primal man' who 'had no objection to someone else's death' ('TWD', 292), but opines that when a man kills another, he kills something of himself. Although primitive man did not intellectually 'rack his brains about the enigma of life and death', what inspired reflection was emotional: 'What released the spirit of enquiry in man was ... the conflict of feeling at the death of loved yet alien and hated persons' ('TWD', 293). These conflicted feelings led man to concede 'the fact of his own death' and invent spirits [gods] 'to appease his sense of guilt at the satisfaction mingled with sorrow' ('TWD', 294).

Accordingly:

the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' makes it certain that we spring from an endless series of generations of murderers, who had the lust for killing in their blood, as, perhaps, we ourselves have today. ('TWD', 296.)

There is a further emotional rather than ethical conflict in our attitude to loved ones, who arouse both love and hate, which leads to neurotic worries about loved ones' well-being and/or guilt after their death. This has profound relevance for Holocaust survivors, where such feelings are multiplied because of the circumstances surrounding their loved ones' deaths, and the ethical questions it raises about the murderers. It makes coping with memory and trauma even more difficult because of unconscious ambivalent drives that reveal the primitive and aggressive.

Whilst we may understand this emotional dichotomy, our ethical obligations not to harm others, but to be responsible to and for them in the Levinasian sense, are also pressing. If one considers that impulses are unconscious, this is not incompatible with the idea that we also have a primary responsibility that, according to Levinas, comes prior to consciousness and the development of a super-ego or conscience. It is this too that could serve to suppress our more primitive drives, and help us towards a more ethical as well as psychologically healthy human life, rather than it being totally imaginary to believe in a 'process by which an individual rises to a comparatively high plane of morality' ('TWD', 281).

Memory, Speech and Betrayal

The imperative call to the duty of remembering and how to 'say' it, to bear witness, is a lonely space because, as Paul Celan wrote, 'No one bears witness for the witness'.¹⁰⁸ The witness speaks not only for himself, but for others, and to others. He becomes the interlocutor between silence and speech, and this is an onerous burden of responsibility to the other that he can never wholly fulfil. Shoshana Felman writes that 'To bear witness is to bear the solitude of a responsibility, and to bear the responsibility, precisely, of that solitude'.¹⁰⁹ She quotes Levinas, who writes: 'The witness testifies to what has been said through him. Because the witness has said 'here I am' before the other'.¹¹⁰ Levinas' suggestion is that because the witness is addressing others about events that have happened to him and others, he creates a kind of transcendent reality – a 'stance or a dimension beyond himself'.¹¹¹ That dimension beyond himself has to do with the infinite responsibility one has to and for the Other, that is such an integral part of Levinasian ethics. When I speak, it is in relation to the Other. By offering a word, I lay myself open almost as if I were praying.¹¹²

Levinas distinguishes between the 'saying' and the 'said', and this takes on a specific significance in any discussion about the role of memory in Holocaust testimony. For Levinas, the 'saying' betrays itself in the 'said'. The trace of 'saying' is in all language in the simple fact of language, and that fact of language means that 'saying' betrays itself in the 'said'. In Holocaust testimony, there is for many the feeling that any attempt to speak of it entails betrayal. This is because part of one's response to the inhumanity described is to consider how language itself contains its own limits. Its pertinence is specifically located in the idea of betrayal that is brought out in Levinas' discussion. Betrayal can be thought about in two ways. Firstly, it can mean that something one has desired to remain concealed is revealed, such as betraying a confidence or a secret. It can also mean that I may pretend to be indifferent about something, but my face or speech betrays me, either by an evasive expression in my eyes, or by my speech when there is a Freudian parapraxis or slip. Indeed, one could say that both revelation and the concealed are two models of the same logic.

¹⁰⁸ Paul Celan, 'Ashes-Glory, quoted in *TCW*, p.3.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.3.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.3, quoted from Levinas, *Ethique et infini: Dialogues avec Nemo*, (Paris: Fayard, 1982), p.115.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.3.

¹¹² See *TLR*, p.149.

It is the second version of betrayal, where something comes to light by being concealed that is particularly pertinent here. It speaks by not speaking but via a displacement or trace. For Levinas, language is 'contact' and 'immediacy' and, as Blanchot explains, this has grave consequences (*WD*, 24). Immediacy is 'absolute presence ... the infinite neither close nor distant ... but violent abduction one must manage somehow to understand the immediate in the past tense. This renders the paradox practically unbearable' (*WD*, 24). This is why in the 'said', there is only a trace of the 'saying', and why the 'said' always entails betrayal, where words run up against the limits of their own power.

For Levinas, 'Saying is not a game it is the proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach, the one for the other, the very signifyingness of signification' (*OTB*, 5). What Levinas means by proximity has little to do with physical nearness or a moment in time. Josh Cohen provides a clear definition of Levinas' usage of the term, which he describes as the 'the simultaneity of 'contact' and 'separation' by which the human other discloses himself to me' (*IA*, 3). It is 'the relationship with the other, who cannot be resolved into "images" or be exposed in a theme' and a 'suppression of the distance that consciousness ... involves a disturbance of the rememberable time' (*OTB*, 100, 89). 'Saying' thus becomes part of that 'obsession with the other ... which is the very birth of signification, beyond being' (*OTB*, 90). Levinas' distinction between the 'saying' and the 'said' is not a claim that there are two separate realms of speech. What concerns him is how – as Simon Critchley puts it – 'The saying is ethical and the said is ontological'.¹¹³ If Levinas uses the term 'ontology' to describe 'any relation to otherness that is reducible to comprehension', his contention is that the relation with *autrui*, that is the human other, is *irreducible* to comprehension.¹¹⁴ What he rejects is the idea that the other can be reduced to the idea I have of him, where he can be thematized or fit in to a category of being that becomes part of my knowledge, and where I may use or abuse him as a means, rather than as an end in himself.

For Levinas, the Other is unknowable, and beyond my understanding of *being* in his absolute mystery and alterity. The ethical relation with the other is precisely the recognition of this otherness and resides not in my consciousness, but in my responsibility to and for him. It is

¹¹³ *CC*, p.17.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.11.

an irrecusable responsibility and the 'impossibility of declining' it 'is reflected only in the scruple of remorse which precedes or follows this refusal', even though 'the gravity of the responsible saying retains a reference to being' (*OTB*, 6-7). This responsibility is expressed in the 'saying'. However, what comes out of my mouth is never a 'saying', but a 'said' that belongs in the realm of phenomena. 'Saying' is never accessible to the ears because as soon as I hear it, it's 'said'. As soon as I claim to have heard, it has been captured in the senses phenomenally; that is, in consciousness. Thus, 'saying' is never a content in consciousness. Levinas is concerned here with what is in excess to consciousness and the point is that I cannot say 'here's the saying'. Once it is said, there remains but a trace of the saying, and in that 'pre-original language' (before ontological being, as it were) resides 'the responsibility of one for the other, the substitution of one for the other', that is beyond consciousness and being (*OTB*, 6). Indeed, Levinas' whole project is to seek 'the *otherwise than* being', but he too runs up against the limits of language, which is why he writes that 'as soon as it is conveyed before us it is betrayed in the said that dominates the saying which states it' (*OTB*, 7). If the 'saying' is not a content and cannot be captured in consciousness, what is it? 'Saying' does the signifying, but only in the betrayal of the 'said'.

The 'saying-said' relation belongs to the structure of language itself but, as intimated above, is relevant to the discussion of what Holocaust survivors are able to say about their experiences and how they say it. One can think of the trauma undergone as disclosing this structure of language, where the gap between the 'saying' and the 'said' is revealed in a way that might ordinarily be concealed. It also helps to explain why so many survivors of trauma and genocide remain silent. When Wittgenstein wrote 'what we cannot speak, we must pass over in silence' and 'the limits of my language mean the limits of my world', he posits an idea about the 'opposition' between the inside and outside of language.¹¹⁵ In Levinas, however, there is a sense in which the inside and outside of language spill into each other. The language that the witness has at his disposal is thus refractory to a loss of language because of the loss of and to humanity, and yet it is the only means left to restate and reclaim that humanity. This is why, for the Holocaust survivor, the 'saying' of the experience cannot be said, but cannot *not* be said either. It can be seen as an attempt to justify one's continued existence, however fragile the hold on one's life may be.

¹¹⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness, [1922], (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1997), Propositions 5.6 and 7, pp.56 & 74.

Ethics as First Philosophy

Coming even before experience and the knowledge that emanates from experience, or speaking about the experience, it is the ethical relation that is of central and primary importance to Levinas. In his essay, 'Ethics as First Philosophy', Levinas claims that ethics is grounded in something other than metaphysics or ontology. What he argues for is a conscience and consciousness that is beyond consciousness, and transcends it. For him, if we are persuaded to behave according to imposed rules and concepts whereby we rationalize that we are behaving rightly, we are also susceptible to behaving wrongly simply because we are *told* it is right. Levinas talks about the 'correlation between *knowledge ... and being*' having been understood as 'the very site of intelligibility, the occurrence of meaning' (TLR, 76). If relationships have been equated with 'experiences', and primacy of 'being' given to knowledge, he asks 'whether beyond knowledge and its hold on being, a more urgent form does not emerge, that of wisdom' (TLR, 77, 78). He suggests that there is a gap between 'being and knowledge' and is opposed to the idea that 'wisdom of first philosophy is reduced to self-consciousness' alone (TLR, 78).

What he asserts is that what I know about identity and identification entails a self-absorption that results in a refusal or inability to be self-forgetful, and having a more interior or subjective recognition of the Other as other (See TLR, 79). In order to be able to say 'I', to affirm myself as me, there has to be an 'other'. To maintain myself as 'I', I assert my 'right to be', and this leads me inevitably to oppress the Other (TLR, 82). What irrupts or interrupts my hatefulness is 'the proximity of the other' which entails both the contact and separation 'by which the human other discloses himself to me' (IA, 3). The vulnerability and mortality of the other 'summons me ... as if the invisible death that must be faced by the Other ... were my business The other man's death calls me into question, as if, by my possible future indifference, I had become an accomplice of the death' (TLR, 83). The calling me into question comes 'before being devoted to myself', and is 'as if I had to answer for the other's death before *being*' (TLR, 83). This is the ethical responsibility and what Levinas thinks of as first philosophy, where there is a 'fraternity' in 'extreme separation' that 'dates from before my freedom in an immemorial past, an unrepresentable past' (TLR, 84). As he puts it, 'It is in the laying down by the ego of its sovereignty ... that we find ethics and also probably the very spirituality of the soul' (TLR, 85).

To understand this ethical relation is to begin to understand its absolute relevance to thinking about the Holocaust, and how both the catastrophe and its consequences form the foundation of so much Levinasian thought. For him, living as a human being is not about knowing, but about alterity – recognizing the otherness of the Other, who I cannot reduce to my own categories or terms, but remains other. Ethics is not about rules for Levinas. He does not believe that by knowing the rules, I act in a good way. Ethics occurs in the encounter with the other, whom I *cannot* know, and to claim such knowledge is to attempt to dominate. Ethics is not about things that are fixed, stable or universal, and I am never enough as a self or identity to be the moral centre of my world. My encounter with the Other undermines my confidence, judgement and knowledge because that other person is always more than I can think or know. The Other's demands of me therefore always exceed my possibility to fulfil them. I am inadequate. If the Other always demands a response from me, I have to be response-able and responsible. I cannot possess the other person by claiming knowledge of him, and to do so represents a wish to dominate.

Levinasian ethics suggests a kind of generosity of spirit that is always unachievable. Hence it is 'infinite' in the sense that the Other to and for whom I am responsible is something unknown that cannot be overcome. Any attempt to reduce him to a kind of finite certainty is regarded by Levinas as totalization, and he is opposed to totality because it universalizes, reducing others to the same, whereas Levinas believes in the multiplicity, difference and separation of alterity. Universalizing the other will always result in a hierarchy of power and, like Blanchot, Levinas believes that 'power' is 'always related to domination' (*WD*, 8).

The face-to face encounter that, for Levinas, always entails language and dialogue as well as the visual, reveals how arbitrary, random and potentially domineering a totalizing view of the other is. He is against moral certainties about human beings, and has an idea of the Other as quintessentially enigmatic, unknowable, and therefore unconquerable. This is relevant to the Nazi project during the Holocaust, where the attempt was made (and nearly succeeded) to repress and subjugate all difference, precisely in order to dominate and destroy. What the Nazis did was to claim that the Jews, gypsies and homosexuals could not be part of the Aryan world, because they all represented a threat, and thus became objects of hatred. They were denied individuality or, as Levinas would say, 'totalized'. Once defined by what one is

not (i.e. as part of the group with the power), rather than by what one *is*, the road towards extermination is shortened.

Whilst Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia' provides invaluable insights into the psycho-analytical perspective of how traumatic memory affects one's sense of self, Levinas implicitly provides a philosophical perspective on the responsibility to the Other entailed in bearing witness, and helps a move towards understanding why it is that whatever is said entails a kind of betrayal. One cannot ignore either perspective because my relation to myself affects my relation with the other and vice versa.¹¹⁶ Whereas Freud might argue that first and foremost is one's own subjectivity, Levinas would claim that ethics in the form of the relation with the Other comes prior to any sense of self.

What both thinkers address is the issue of memory and suffering, but whereas Freud was preoccupied with 'why' a human being acts in certain ways, and what makes an individual the way he is after trauma, Levinas is primarily concerned with the ethical implications rather than the psychological response to that trauma. By advocating an 'access to external being' via the relationship with the other, Levinas is also urging a kind of consciousness that is not forgetful that there are others whose demands of me are more important than my own self-interest, self-absorption, and pursuit of pleasure. If Levinasian ethics is concerned with responsibility coming before all other considerations, it is also precisely the proposition that not only must I remember the Other, but also that I must never forget the widow, the orphan or the stranger in all their vicissitudes and otherness, particularly their suffering.¹¹⁷ There can be no freedom, equality or justice without this basic kind of fraternity, and my responsibility and obligation are infinite. This is also why Levinas claims that all suffering is 'useless' unless it is for the other.

¹¹⁶ Whilst not within the remit of this paper, it is worth noting that there is an increasing dialogue between philosophers and psychoanalysts who recognize that whilst the relationship between the two disciplines might be asymmetrical, there are areas of both mutual interest and, indeed, dependence. The empirical evidence from psychoanalysts exerts a pressure on philosophers to take this into account when pursuing theories of the mind, just as there is a pressure on psychoanalysts to absorb and consider philosophical theories. There is a growing feeling that the relationship should be reciprocal. Thought without emotion can be distorted and emotion can be overwhelming, but to try to ignore the emotional content of a problem or dilemma does not necessarily mean that it cannot distort thinking. However, if all emotion is suppressed, one wonders how one can think at all. It therefore seems that emotional self-awareness is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for moral deliberation.

¹¹⁷ Whilst Levinas was an observant Jew, he insisted that he was writing philosophically and not theologically. However, one is constantly reminded how much Jewish thought resonates in his work. See Jeremiah, Chapter 7, v. 1-15 for a discussion of the responsibility for the widow, orphan and stranger, and Exodus, v.20-23 which talks about the treatment of the stranger.

Many (although by no means all) people would agree that one can achieve neither liberty nor equality without fraternity, and contend that fraternity is an essential feature of what it means to be human. To be human entails *being*. How one *is* is what concerns Levinas. 'How being justifies itself' is for him *the* question that should be asked rather than the choice between 'to be and not to be' or Heidegger's 'Why being rather than nothing?' (*TLR*, 86). In other words, it is not that Levinas is prescriptive, exhorting people to behave in a certain way, but he suggests that people take responsibility for themselves by asking 'what should I do?'

Although the question of descriptive versus exhortative readings of Levinas is a difficult one, there is no fixed practical application to the *idea* of infinite obligation which, by very definition, can never be fulfilled. That said, infinite obligation can condition our finite action by the restless demand of the ethical, and the more practical demands of questions to do with politics, justice and the state. When practical action as individuals or collectives is informed by the infinite obligation of the ethical, it will be very different from practical action conditioned simply by utilitarian reasoning or pragmatic motives. Nevertheless, because there is and can be no easy translation or transition from the infinite demand of the ethical to the finite demands of the political, it is impossible to say exactly where this difference resides. We have to ask ourselves 'what should I do' in order that our actions do not forget the infinite obligation that conditions them.

Levinas consistently maintains that ethics exists as the pre-eminence of the relationship between people that is '*an irreducible structure upon which all other structures rest*' (*TI*, 79, my emphasis). My language and freedom are meaningless if my being-in-the-world, the enjoyment of my sentient existence, is not called into question by the Other and provides the basis for fraternity. My relation with the Other is in its turn also 'irreducible' – to comprehension. This is because it is a relation beyond knowledge and beyond consciousness. Ethics is not founded in the encounters I choose, but in the relation itself, and the commandment towards my infinite (unending, and thus never fulfillable) responsibility.¹¹⁸ If I fail to recognize the humanity of any other as absolutely Other rather than simply one of the crowd, I fail to assume my responsibility to and for him. The danger

¹¹⁸ See too Critchley's introduction *CC*, pp.12-13

is that his very existence, let alone his needs or suffering, become matters of indifference to me, rather than of concern and compassion, or even of fear or guilt.

This is one of the most palpable aspects of the role of the perpetrators and bystanders during the Holocaust and, as Simon Critchley states, of ‘countless other disasters ... where the other person becomes ... faceless ... someone whom the passer-by simply passes by’ (CC, 13).

This is not an appeal to *understand* the Other, which Levinas would say was egotistical. On the contrary, what is required is my recognition of the distance between me and the other that *transcends* our shared humanity. The ethical obligation to the Other is asymmetrical rather than reciprocal, and that places the demand on me rather than others.¹¹⁹ What matters is that I approach the Other.

There are those who might argue that any desire to help others is grounded in a sense of shared humanity. Despite some basic disagreements between Kant and Levinas, they would concur that we *should* treat all others with respect, as an end in themselves rather than a means, attempting to alleviate others’ suffering whenever possible.¹²⁰ However, for Levinas, we are *not* ‘*fundamentally* the same’.¹²¹ Hilary Putnam explains the danger intrinsic to ‘grounding ethics’ in any appeal to a shared humanity because ‘one only has to believe that *some* people are not ‘*really*’ the same’ to pave the way for denying any ‘common humanity’ (CC, 35, my emphases). The Nazis designated the Jews as ‘really’ not the same – they were ‘vermin in *superficially* human form’ (CC, 35, my emphasis). Excluding them from a ‘common humanity’ meant they could justify the discrimination, persecution and eventual extermination of Jews because they felt no ethical obligation to them as ‘other’. This is why Levinasian ethics insists on a distance between me and the other that *transcends* any shared humanity.

Meaning and Suffering

Many Holocaust survivors have sought some meaning for their suffering in order to invest it with some measure of intelligibility. If they could only understand it, perhaps they could

¹¹⁹ This aspect of Levinasian thought will be discussed further in Chapter IV.

¹²⁰ See CC, p.12.

¹²¹ Hilary Putnam, ‘Levinas and Judaism’, in CC, p. 35.

come to terms with it. We may say that suffering itself is the beginning of a kind of understanding, and that the quest for meaning that remains elusive does not mean that one should not search or 'keep watch over absent meaning' (*WD*, 42). This suggests to me that a survivor's effort to express the trauma and suffering reveals no meaning. Language itself is inadequate and the aporia reveals an excess to intelligibility that precludes any 'closure' or 'working through'.¹²²

Another aspect to the whole question of suffering is guilt – guilt for what one did or did not do that caused suffering, or where suffering itself is regarded as punishment for the sins of commission or omission.¹²³ Blanchot wrote that 'forgiveness accuses before it forgives' and that 'responsibility is innocent guilt' (*WD*, 53, 22). In *The Truce*, Levi describes the arrival of the Russians, who were confronted by corpses and the dying:

They did not greet us ... they seemed oppressed, not only by pity but ... restraint which sealed their mouths It was the same shame which we knew ... which submerged us after the selections, and every time we had to witness or undergo an outrage ... that the Germans never knew, the shame which the just man experiences when confronted by a crime committed by another, and he feels remorse because of its existence. (*DS*, 54)

This sense of shame and guilt is confirmed by numerous testimonies and provides a link with the *sine qua non* of the compulsion to talk, to tell the stories of one's traumatic experiences, and one is again reminded of the bond between 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and the ruin of understanding, by which I mean the ruin of a world that is graspable, assimilable and intelligible. Levi's remarks also accord with a Levinasian sense of responsibility when confronted by the other, whether that other is suffering his own anguish or is implicated by the 'evil' to which he bears witness.

¹²² See also p.11, Steven E. Ascheim, 'On Saul Friedlander', in *History and Memory*, Vol.9:1, 1997, pp.33-4, and James E. Young's comments on Friedlander's use of the term and views on the intrinsic incoherence at the heart of the victim's experience of events: 'The Holocaust as Vicarious Past: Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and the Afterimages of History', in *Critical Enquiry*, Vol.24: 3, 1998, pp.666-699.

¹²³ See Michael Nutkiewicz, 'Shame, Guilt and Anguish in Holocaust Survivor Testimony', in *Oral History Review*, Vol.30:1, 2003, pp.1-22. He writes that the 'textbook definition of guilt refers to both feelings of responsibility and fear of punishment: "feelings of culpability arising from behavior or desires contrary to one's ethical principles" which involve "both self devaluation and apprehension" (p.11). However, as Levi observes in 'Shame', *DS*, having 'lived ... at an animal level ... space for reflection, reasoning, experiencing emotions was wiped out Our moral yardstick was changed' (*DS*, 56). Nonetheless, after liberation, '[s]elf-accusation is more realistic, or the accusation of having failed in terms of human solidarity. Few survivors feel guilty about having deliberately damaged ... a companion ... but ... almost everybody feels guilty of having omitted to offer help Simply being there, which is itself an entreaty [t]he demand for solidarity, for a human word ... was ... universal but rarely satisfied' (*DS*, 58-9).

For all his scepticism about psychology, Levinas' philosophical thoughts about how the Other is unknowable in his alterity is not incompatible with Freudian ideas about how, since we can never fully know ourselves, we cannot completely empathise with the other. The difference is that Levinas would insist that the attempt to do so would somehow reduce the other to a theme that could be integrated into our knowledge, and that we could exploit for our own egoistic ends. Memory, and how to remember, is part of the ruin of understanding for the Holocaust witness-survivor because it entails an attempt to understand suffering so devastating, that it actually reveals nothing useful or meaningful to the individual. Josh Cohen's epigrammatic 'The memory of suffering is a memory that suffers' captures this predicament whereby hope for a redemptive resolution verges on the absurd.¹²⁴ Most individuals suffer either physically or emotionally at various points in their lives. Many – either with or without professional help – are able to use such suffering as a means of discovery about aspects of themselves. This is more problematic for Holocaust victims because of the extremity of both personal disintegration and that of a world to which they had previously believed they belonged, and to which they had – as human beings – an inalienable right to belong. Meanwhile, one is left with Blanchot's statement that the Holocaust was 'the absolute event of history ... where the movement of Meaning was swallowed up' (*WD*, 47).

I now turn to Levinas' powerful essay 'Useless Suffering' which asserts that in itself, suffering is 'useless'.¹²⁵ It does not belittle the suffering or trauma of Holocaust victims, but goes beyond the emotional to offer an ethical way to think about these things that renders them more intelligible. After 'two world wars, the totalitarianisms of right and left, Hitlerism and Stalinism, Hiroshima, the Gulag, and the genocides of Auschwitz and Cambodia',¹²⁶ he asks 'Can we speak of morality after the failure of morality?'¹²⁷ A major part of this failure can be seen as the result of the anthropocentric humanism of the eighteenth century, and Levinas' stance helps to re-establish the possibility to redress that failure by de-centralizing the individual as the centre of his or her world. I am not the centre, but am replaced by the primacy of the other. Humanism will be discussed at length in Chapter IV.

¹²⁴ *IA*, p.87.

¹²⁵ 'US', in *PL*, pp.156-167.

¹²⁶ 'US', p.162.

¹²⁷ 'The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas' in *PL*, p.162.

For Levinas, suffering is an 'evil', 'more passive than receptivity' and it is 'through evil that suffering is understood' ('US', 157). The only suffering that has meaning is the suffering of the other, because it is this which creates subjective bonds in the inter-relationships between people (See 'US', 159). Levinas writes that the demand or 'ethical principle' to attempt to alleviate the suffering of the Other makes waiting for the intervention of an omnipotent God a 'degradation' ('US', 159). For him, a 'consciousness of this inescapable obligation makes the idea of God more difficult, but it also makes it spiritually closer than confidence in any kind of theodicy' ('US', 159). Levinas sees suffering as 'unassumability', which 'results from an excess ... which is inscribed in a sensorial content' ('US', 156). That is, it is not aimed at, taken on, or assumed in consciousness, but occurs 'in spite of' it, and is not 'borne' by it ('US', 157, 156). In 'Useless Suffering', suffering is consciousness, but also in spite of consciousness. There is a content of experience that one can remember and perhaps even 'say'. At the same time, where a survivor possesses a memory that is objectifiable via consciousness, it is not possible to objectify the camp because it is the camp which 'possesses' the person, and is therefore unassumable. It cannot be imagined, believed or grasped if it is present and permeates every part of one's being as a sensorial content.

Suffering is also 'passivity' by which, as Paul Davies notes, Levinas means that 'in my inability to give a meaning to suffering, I suffer: I fall back upon a passivity always this side of an active sense-engendering life ... from which ... I can gain or claim no support' (CC, 171; 'US', 157). Passivity is also a 'saying' in the in-spite-of consciousness, which emanates from the 'said' that is psychological consciousness, and such saying cannot be thematized into a universal truth, retaining only a trace.¹²⁸ Because of its excess, suffering is neither meaningful nor meaningless, but a 'vulnerability, more passive than receptivity ... an ordeal more passive than experience' ('US', 157). Just as I am passive as a hostage to the Other because meeting the stranger is quite contingent – I do not plan who I meet but am confronted by the Other – so it is with the suffering I neither seek nor plan. 'It is precisely an evil', and 'through evil that suffering is understood' ('US', 157).

So why does Levinas describe it as 'useless' and as an 'evil'? As a 'pure undergoing', suffering limits man's freedom to the point of an 'identity of a thing only in the passivity of the submission', subsuming his humanity ('US', 157). That for Levinas is an evil, because it

¹²⁸ See too Cohen, *IA*, p.87 and *CC*, p.179

curtails my freedom of responsibility for the Other in its 'extreme passivity, impotence, abandonment and solitude ('US', 158). Whilst suffering in its purity is 'intrinsically meaningless and condemned to itself without exit, a beyond takes shape in the inter-human' which, for Levinas of course resides in responsibility. This is why he writes

... at the end of a century of nameless sufferings, the just suffering in me for the unjustifiable suffering of the Other, opens upon suffering the ethical perspective of the inter-human ... It is this attention to the Other which, across the cruelties ... can be affirmed as the very bond of human subjectivity, even to the point of being raised to a supreme ethical principle. ('US', 159.)

This does not mean that suffering is any less an 'evil' but, on the contrary, shows the absurdity and meaninglessness of trying to ascribe some justice to the suffering of the Other. This is why Levinas links the question of suffering to that of theodicy where, with uncustomary bitterness, he notes how Western humanity seeks meaning via

a kingdom of transcendent ends, willed by a benevolent wisdom, by the absolute goodness of a God who is in some way defined by this super-natural goodness ... where it would command the paths which are ... painful, but which lead to the Good. Pain is henceforth meaningful, subordinated in one way or another to the metaphysical finality envisaged by faith or by a belief in progress. These beliefs are presupposed by theodicy! ('US', 160.)

It is bitter because it is a demonstration of how man relies on God's goodness without taking on the responsibility for his own deeds or misdeeds. God is all good and omnipotent but can be blamed for the existence of evil. Man mistakenly tries to justify or make suffering 'comprehensible' by attributing it 'to an original fault of the congenital finitude of human being', and where suffering is a form of atonement for the sins of mankind, which will be recompensed 'at the end of time' ('US', 160-1). Looked at in this way, it truly does seem absurd to attempt to impose a sense of order on something which is 'essentially gratuitous and absurd' ('US', 161).

In a related essay, Levinas addresses the question of evil in more detail.¹²⁹ He writes that whilst we cannot comprehend evil, theodicy tries to accommodate it. Because we cannot comprehend it, the ethical response is to recognize the commensurability of *that* incomprehension with the incomprehension of the Other. The Other's suffering is therefore ethically more important to me than my own. Whilst it is normal to search for a reason for

¹²⁹ 'TE', in *Collected Philosophical Papers, Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998), pp.175-186. See too Richard Bernstein's excellent analysis in 'Evil and the Temptation of Theodicy' in *CC*, pp.252-267.

evil, the ethical has to be more important. If I think that evil is balanced by good, then I am seduced by theodicy, but the ethical response which refuses all accommodation with evil seeks 'a transcendence that shines forth in the face of the other man: an alterity of the non-integratable, of what cannot be assembled into a totality' ('TE', 185). This means that there is no divine synchrony between good and evil.

Levinas quotes Emil Fackenheim's exhortation to the Jews that to renounce God after Auschwitz 'would amount to finishing the criminal enterprise of National Socialism' ('US', 163). We are therefore commanded to remain faithful to ensure the continuity of 'Israel' and assured by Fackenheim that God was present even in Auschwitz, albeit silent. The timbre of Levinas' comments makes clear that whilst he might agree with Fackenheim's exhortation, any hint that the Holocaust entailed divine planning or acquiescence is abhorrent to him. The Holocaust is the 'paradigm of gratuitous human suffering, where evil appears in its diabolical horror', and 'renders impossible and odious every proposal and every thought which would explain it by the sins of those who have suffered or are dead' ('US', 162, 163). Any attempt to justify 'my neighbour's suffering' or to explain the deaths of those 'least corrupted by the ambiguities of our world' is anathema for Levinas ('US', 163). '[T]he very phenomenon of suffering in its uselessness is, in principle, the pain of the Other' and 'the source of all immorality' is any attempt to justify it ('US', 163). Suffering such as that undergone during the Holocaust cannot rely on explanations of God's 'will', 'absence', 'presence' or indeed 'punishment', and its 'fundamental malignancy' raises questions about the very meanings that 'religiosity and the human morality of goodness can retain' ('US', 163, 164).

Despite his religiosity, Levinas believes that theodical explanations for the existence of evil are useless, and that the explanation resides in an indifferent humanity which, in the light of the evils of the twentieth century, must

... in a faith without theodicy, continue Sacred History; a history which now demands even more the resources of the *self* in each one, and appeals to its suffering inspired by the suffering of the other person, to its compassion which is a non-useless suffering (or love), which is no longer suffering 'for nothing'. ('US', 164.)

Levinas imposes the responsibility for relief from the existence of evil in man's hands. Rather than placing that responsibility upon God, it is the 'inter-human' relationship wherein 'lies in a non-indifference of one to another, a responsibility of one for another' ('US', 164,

165). This responsibility to and for the other 'is prior to every contact which would signify precisely the moment of reciprocity where it can ... attenuate or extinguish altruism and disinterestedness' ('US', 165). It occurs to me that this is truly more 'godly'. His argument serves a new post-Holocaust morality where my obligation to God is fulfilled not by remaining a Jew, but by taking responsibility for my own actions and the consequences of those actions, rather than by placing them upon God.

In 'Transcendence and Evil', Levinas makes further important points about the nature of evil. He claims that we cannot know evil or integrate it into the boundaries of our knowledge about the world by trying to understand or find reasons for it. This does not mean we should cease in our quest, but that it transcends our knowledge in the sense that, whilst omnipresent and concrete, there can, as Blanchot suggests, never be an adequate response because we cannot 'know' evil. We are at the absolute limits of knowledge, and to claim such knowledge is to be seduced 'by the temptation of theodicy' (CC, 266). However, the ethical response is one that refuses all accommodation with evil (See 'TE', 185). As with suffering, Levinas reiterates the idea that the only response to evil is the ethical one where I recognize my responsibility for the useless and unjustifiable suffering of others, my responsibility to respond to the evil inflicted upon my fellow human beings – my responsibility for the other person, without demand for reciprocity (See 'TE', 185).

For Levinas, to think that evil is somehow balanced by good means that I am seduced by theodicy. He believes that there is more to me than my being in or of the world. My horror at an evil aimed at me is surpassed by my horror at the evil of the Other, which in turn 'commands and prescribes' responsibility ('TE', 185). In that command resides the possibility for a good which is transcendental, not an 'inversion' of evil, for evil is incomprehensible and non-integratable ('TE', 185).

The essay suggests that if we are only concerned with our own survival at the expense of the well-being of the Other, the prohibition not to kill becomes meaningless, and we can succumb with impunity to the law of evil as substitution for the 'law of being'. Because I am human, I can be good or evil, and if I act only to preserve my own being, I commit evil. It is a kind of murder because if I ignore the life of the Other as more important than my own in terms of value, then I can kill in the name of my own being, unimpeded by any ethical

imperative that limits the evil, and makes possible the good – a good which goes beyond being to an ‘otherwise than being’.

Ethics, Politics and the Honour of Responsibility

If part of the problem of expressing the Holocaust experience has to do with the opacity of guilt and innocence, and how the two contaminate and feed into each other, Finkelkraut helps to clarify this from a philosophical and ethical perspective. He speaks of the ‘temptation of innocence’ thus (*TLR*, 290):

We are split between a feeling of innocence and a feeling of responsibility, both of which are anchored in our traditions and our ordeals. I do not yet know which of the two, innocence or responsibility, we will choose as Jews. But I believe that one decision will determine the meaning that we give to the ordeal of genocide.¹³⁰

Levinas talks about the ‘honour of responsibility’, an arresting phrase because it draws attention to the fact that Levinas does not regard responsibility simply as a burden, but as an opportunity (*TLR*, 290). Even when one is not directly involved, (whether guilty or innocent of some wrongdoing), one is implicated in responsibility for events just by knowing, and by one’s connectedness to the experiences of others. This is what underpins his whole philosophy. If one ignores the ‘original responsibility of man for the other person’, one is guilty in a way ‘which has nothing to do with any acts one may really have committed’ (*TLR*, 290).

In other words, to claim ‘ignorance’ of an event is not only disingenuous for Levinas – it is unethical. As he says ‘Prior to any act, I am concerned with the Other, and I can never be absolved from this responsibility ... “Even when he does not regard me, he regards me”’ (*TLR*, 290). Bearing witness to one’s own experience and to that of the Other is part of that unchosen responsibility. For some, this entails what Levi has called the compulsion to tell the stories, in the form of testimony. For others, bearing witness entails a more silent reflectiveness and watchfulness that affects the individual’s attitudes and the approach to and from the Other. Neither approach is undertaken in innocence or ignorance, but is inextricably connected to the responsibility of which Levinas speaks.

¹³⁰ See ‘Ethics and Politics’ in *TLR*, pp.289-297 – ‘A discussion between Emmanuel Levinas, Alain Finkelkraut and Shlomo Malka in the aftermath of the Sabra and Chatila massacre (Sept’, 82)’, p.290.

When Levinas asks ‘Can we speak of morality after the failure of morality?’, Tamra Wright suggests this is the preoccupation of his thought in *Totality and Infinity*.¹³¹ She writes that if philosophy judges the claims of morality, Levinas accuses it when he claims that ethics must be the ‘first philosophy’, not a ‘branch’ of philosophy (*TJP*, 1). According to Wright, Levinas uses ‘the word ‘ethics’ to refer to the ‘face to face’ or ethical relation to the human Other. He defines ethics as ‘the calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other’ (*TI*, 43). Levinas’ discussion of what he means by the ‘face-to-face’ encounter is problematic but as Wright explains, has something to do with the way the other presents himself to me (see *TI*, 50-1). She summarizes it thus:

Although the word ‘face’ evokes a visual image, the term in Levinas’ usage does not refer to what we see [i]nstead it evokes that which we can never see, perceive or comprehend. Levinas defines the face as ‘the way in which the other presents himself, *exceeding the idea of the other in me*. (*TI*, 50, quoted in *TJP*, 8.)

My inability to have a complete or even adequate idea of the Other belongs to the ‘experience of the encounter’ (*TJP*, 9). Although I never fully understand him because the other is absolutely Other, there is still a relation and a responsibility to and for him in all his alterity or difference. For Levinas, ‘the face is the fact that a being affects us not in the indicative, but in the imperative and is thus outside all categories’.¹³² *This* is what is so important about Levinas’ emphasis on expression, language, communication, vulnerability and appeal as represented by the face-to-face human encounter.

It also supports what Levinas says during the interview cited above:

I have always thought of Jewish consciousness as an attentiveness which is kept alert by centuries of inhumanity and pays particular attention to what occasionally is human in man: the feeling that you personally are implicated each time that somewhere ... humanity is guilty.
(*TLR*, 290.)

He is not saying that Jews have some kind of moral high ground or have an exclusive, empirical claim to unique knowledge of man’s inhumanity to man. Neither does he write that this ‘consciousness’ is a response to the mistreatment Jews have endured whereby they

¹³¹ ‘The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas’ in *PL*, p.176 and see *TJP*, p.1.

¹³² Levinas, ‘Freedom & Command’, in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, p.21.

are 'alert' to the threat of further mistreatment. He is suggesting that the 'Jewish experience', which includes its teachings as well as events in history, has (or should have) made Jews more alert to the idea that when we do not respond with welcome to the face of the other, to his needs, to his fear of death, to his difference, we are implicated whenever and wherever mistreatment arises. It is this awareness that Levinas regards as 'human', and why his ideas are so pertinent when thinking about man's inhumanity to man.

If I say something 'has nothing to do with me, it is not my fault, I did not do anything', this is antithetical to Levinasian thought. For him, this makes me *more* implicated and susceptible to 'the temptation of innocence' because by abrogating my responsibility, I also repudiate an ethics of responsibility that permits me to say that. This clearly applies to the bystanders during the German Reich, but is also a post-Holocaust temptation for Jews after the attempt to eradicate them. Having been inscribed as strangers, different and undesirables was a justification for, at best, non-involvement, and at worst, indifference to the plight of the non-Jewish Other. It could further make us as Jews ask:

What ... in concrete terms, can be our responsibility towards the Other, towards those who are not us? If we are the absolute victims, the insulted and injured of history ... that has led us to catastrophe ... then perhaps we have no responsibility towards the non-Jew. (*TLR*, 291.)

Levinas responds to Finkelkraut by insisting that the idea of responsibility is 'not morbid, but ... moral' and that it has to do with 'real innocence' – an intersection of action and inaction, thought and feeling where paradoxically, 'the more innocent we are, the more we are responsible' (*TLR*, 291). Whilst no one could possibly forget the Holocaust, nothing could justify

...closing our ears to the voice of men, in which sometimes the voice of God can also resound I don't at all believe that there are limits to responsibility, that there are limits to responsibility in 'myself'. My *self*, I repeat, is never absolved from responsibility towards the Other. (*TLR*, 291.)

Having said that, Levinas also affirms that 'there is certainly a place for a defence, for it is not always a question of 'me', but of those close to me, who are also my neighbours. I'd call such a defence a politics, but a politics that's ethically necessary. Alongside *ethics*, there is a place for *politics*' (*TLR*, 292). He recognizes a 'direct contradiction between ethics and politics, *if* both these demands are taken to the extreme Unfortunately for ethics, politics has its own justification' (*TLR*, 292, my emphasis). Although he was talking about the

massacre at Sabra and Chatila, the implications apply to all circumstances where actions are morally wrong if the first consideration is political expedience at the expense of responsibility for the Other.

We are responsible and obliged to respond to the other's *singularity* as a subject in his or her difference or alterity - not similarity, and *not* by trying to *identify* with him or her.¹³³ This represents what I claim to be the difference between sympathy and empathy, where empathy represents the attempt to put oneself *in the place* of another. To be confronted by the face makes the other's presence felt, but this can be via his absence too. As Finkelkraut notes:

I am not the one who determines whether I will be egotistical or selfless:
it is the face that, in its nakedness, takes me beyond self-interest.
The Good comes to me from without, the ethical falls from above,
and it is in spite of myself that my "own being turns into being for
another". (*WL*, 15.)

The primacy of the Other is established during the confrontation with the face: 'The absolute nakedness of a face ... is what opposes my power over it, my violence and opposes it in an absolute way'.¹³⁴ This means that whatever power I have or use against the Other, his 'vulnerability to suffer at the hands of my power utterly escapes my power' (*SWQR*, 84). The face is both a call to responsibility and a solicitation to murder. It is the fear of the other which exposes the fact that, actually, I have no power, apart from the power of murder. The other can be killed, but is indestructible in that there is a part of him that cannot be possessed or negated, and that part is his very vulnerability or 'face'.

One thing that troubles some readers of Levinas' work is that there may be a conflict between one's responsibility for one Other which takes precedence over one's responsibility for a third Other. One wants to ask if this responsibility is prior to all knowledge and all consciousness, how is it compatible with my feeling more responsible to and for some others over other others, such as family or friends? Asked if politics is the 'site of the encounter with the 'other'', Levinas explains that:

The other is the neighbour, who is not necessarily kin, but who can be.
And in that sense, if you're for the other, you're the neighbour. But if your

¹³³ That which Hatley describes as a 'node of responsibility for others whom no other can replace', *SWQR*, p.86.

¹³⁴ Levinas, 'Freedom and Command', in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, p.21.

neighbour attacks another neighbour or treats him unjustly, what can you do? Then alterity takes on another character, in alterity we can find an enemy, or ... are faced with the problem of knowing who is right and who is wrong, who is just and who is unjust. There are people who are wrong. (TLR, 294.)

Whilst this seems perfectly sensible, it raises questions about Levinas' thought because it introduces notions about justice and objective (or subjective) judgements and about good or bad, right or wrong behaviour. If I submit to the interests of the State, am I not submitting to a totalizing stance that prevents me from fulfilling my obligation to the Other? If I judge the other to be 'wrong', is this because he really is wrong or because I can never fully understand him in all his difference, and how does this affect my responsibility to him?¹³⁵

In *Probing the Limits of Representation*, Peter Haidu reinforces Levinas' appeal to the face-to-face encounter as the primary relation, which has the potential to be ethical prior to all the 'effects of culture and history'.¹³⁶ This is because it is the first encounter with the other which is 'intelligible', making me aware of the other's 'naked neediness which assigns responsibility to me'.¹³⁷ It is why its primacy is obligatory, and the responsibility entailed in it is without limit. Haidu somewhat rhetorically asks whether, if the response to this ethical imperative were met, 'Can a sharper contrast be envisaged to the behaviour of persecutors of the Jews in the camps? Can a more ironclad guarantee of nonrecurrence be imagined, were this ethic universally adopted?'¹³⁸ As he points out, this transforms the issue from the personal to the political, from the individual to the collective, and of course begs the question of how any encounter with the other *can* accommodate 'social, cultural, and historical alterity'.¹³⁹ It is certainly difficult to see how such an ethics can achieve a universal unity or heteronomy because, whilst as an individual, I may recognize the other's need and my responsibility, I might, quite simply, get it wrong because of social, cultural or historical differences.

This problem is something which Levinas himself acknowledges in 'Signature'¹⁴⁰, where he writes 'Time, language and subjectivity delineate a pluralism and consequently, in the strongest sense of this term, an experience: one being's reception of an absolutely other

¹³⁵ I think Levinas would say it does not. I am still responsible. The relationship with the other is asymmetrical and, as Putnam writes in 'Levinas & Judaism', Levinas is not a 'contractarian' (CC, 55).

¹³⁶ Peter Haidu, 'The Dialectics of Unspeakability', *PL*, p.282.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.282.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.282.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.282.

¹⁴⁰ In *DF*, pp291-5

being which is ... not equivalent to a rapport between subject and object, but rather to a proximity, to a relation with the Other [*Autrui*]' (DF, 293). However, he seems to overcome this problem:

The disproportion between the Other and the self is precisely moral consciousness. Moral consciousness is not an experience of values, but an access to external being: external being is, *par excellence*, the Other. Moral consciousness is thus not a modality of psychological consciousness, but its condition. (DF, 293.)

What Levinas insists here is that what *should* overwhelm me in my encounter with the Other is his or her being – it is the fact or act of being which I see in his face that *should* not only affirm his absolute humanity, but also my obligation to respond to that humanity and not to do him violence in word, thought or gesture. That does not necessarily mean it is achievable, but it demonstrates the requirement for a new kind of universal recognition and philosophy.

In a world that seems increasingly menacing in its tendency towards ideological totalitarianism, which 'reduces the Other [*l'Autre*] to the Same' in order to stultify freedom and autonomy in the *name* of so-called freedom and liberty for all, the possibility seems remote (DF, 294). Levinas realises that he has to move beyond the one-to-one relationship to those in the wider world but, as outlined above, sees the face-to face relationship as the first essential one:

...my responsibility for all can and has to manifest itself also in limiting itself. The ego can, in the name of this unlimited responsibility, be called upon to concern itself also with itself. The fact that the other, my neighbor, is also a third party ... is the birth of thought, consciousness, justice and philosophy. The unlimited initial responsibility, which justifies this concern for justice, for oneself, and for philosophy can be forgotten. In this forgetting consciousness is a pure egoism. (OTB, 128.)

For Levinas, then, 'ethics' and 'justice' are not totally distinct from one another, but are inexorably linked together through the excessive responsibility of the self. However, given that the basis of Levinas' thought is the idea of a surplus of responsibility, and that he recognizes that there are always more than two of us in the world, one understands why Tamra Wright asks what need Levinas has of the notion of a face-to-face relation (See *TJP*, 16). One can argue that this is because the ethical starts with me as interiority and infinite

responsibility - not as part of my experience of the world or relationship to the world - but because in the face-to-face relationship resides the potential for all relations, and thus justice.

If we think about the Holocaust, and consider that Levinas' claim that ontology results in tyranny, Wright's emphasis that Levinas does not reject ontology without which 'the institutions which belong to the realm of "justice"' would not be possible', but tries to show that 'the obligation to the other is prior to freedom and truth' is well made (*TJP*, 25). The point is that any social, political or historical development is preceded by Levinas' 'first philosophy' (i.e. infinite responsibility). That I can never fulfil that responsibility, that my awareness of it that comes 'like a thief in the night' serves to enable me to judge any system of justice. If ontology is first philosophy, it 'denies either the self's responsibility for the world or its capacity for influencing events' because it is concerned with being and beings at the expense of ethics (*TJP*, 26). For Levinas,

The foundation of consciousness is justice ... But justice can be established only if I ... can become an other like the others. Is not the Infinite which enigmatically commands me ... also the turning of the I into "like the others", for which it is important to concern oneself and take care? My lot is important. But it is still out of my responsibility that my salvation has meaning, despite the danger in which it puts this responsibility ... just as the State issued from the proximity of the neighbor is always on the verge of integrating him into a we, which congeals both me and the neighbor'. (*OTB*, 160-1.)

This suggests that whilst I am not like others, I have a responsibility for the Other, and justice entails treating the others 'as if' they were the same, and yet asserts that I too am to be treated like an Other by the State. This shows that whatever Levinas has to say about justice does not lessen responsibility for the Other, and does not contradict his 'first philosophy'.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown how the trauma of the Holocaust affects both the individual and collective ability to remember, record, express or endow the experience with anything that approximates meaning. In order to demonstrate the possibility for clarification of the issues involved, two main paradoxes have been discussed. Firstly, there is the paradox of intelligibility, where the idea that the Holocaust is comprehensible and expressible is countered by the notion that it was so overwhelming in the magnitude of horror that it is

unassimilable into the lexicon of human understanding. This demanded probing those very issues that defy understanding. It also led to a second paradox, namely the discordance between modern and postmodern thought, whether theological or secular. All such thought is nevertheless part of a general project of modernity emanating from the Enlightenment, and raises quandaries about the limits of ontology, epistemology, morality and truth for humanity after the Holocaust.

Whilst many survivors and scholars recognize an *imperative* to record their memories, feeling compelled to do so in order to mourn the dead and regain a sense of their own (tainted) humanity, others block out that which is too painful for either memory or language. An examination of remarks made by Primo Levi reveals how memory of the trauma somehow exceeds what *can* be remembered, but there is nonetheless a duty to remember and to assume responsibility for what is unknowable. For Levi as witness, and me as witness of the witness, it is as if we must say 'I cannot speak for the dead, but have to'.

Freud's writing on mourning, war neuroses and death serve well to increase understanding of how the Holocaust disturbs the psychic life of survivors, and the role of the unconscious on memories of suffering and death. However, whilst Freud provides many insights, it is Levinasian philosophy about the primacy of ethics that offers the most convincing explanation for the transgression of the Holocaust, and the intelligibility embedded in its unintelligibility.

Levinas' insistence on the primacy of the ethical relation, of my responsibility (or lack thereof) to and for the Other, either explicitly or implicitly, underpins the work of many of the writers and thinkers discussed throughout this work. With the rise of the Third Reich, one of the most sophisticated and civilized nations of the world, all rules governing civilized behaviour were suspended in favour of power, domination, and self-interest. Honest people became liars and self-deceivers, and criminals became heroes in a world where morality was distorted.

In a post-Holocaust era, the world is far from past it, as evidenced by stories of individual abuse and persecution in various communities that continue to demand our attention on a

daily basis.¹⁴¹ Its noise and silence continue to affect us, and the spectre of further genocides is omnipresent despite all the cries that ‘this must never happen again’. In this chapter, I have shown why the memory of the offence is a moral imperative for Primo Levi and, via the work of Emmanuel Levinas, considered how an ethics of responsibility offers a possible way forward. Having also discussed possible distinctions between the human, the inhuman and the non-human, the remaining chapters will explore the *burden* that memories of the offence impose on survivors and what potential there might be for any kind of *humane* human in a regenerated form of humanism.

¹⁴¹ See too Geoffrey Hartman’s impressive introduction ‘On Closure’ in *The Longest Shadow, In the Aftermath of the Holocaust*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp.1-14.

CHAPTER III

THE BURDEN OF MEMORY

Introduction

In Chapter II, it was argued that the effects of the Holocaust trauma on survivors' memory are connected to the quest for approaching a new ethics of responsibility. The ethical dilemmas confronted by inmates of the camps have been expressed in survivor testimony and literature in an attempt to confront both the experience and the tenuous re-entry into post-camp life.

This chapter will argue that there is another kind of Holocaust writing that no less attempts to articulate the experience, but sustains an intensely displaced mode of representation that conveys it at a number of removes. Facing the experience directly is supplanted by a less explicit mode of expression, but one that recalls the trauma by seeking to communicate its intrinsic incommunicability just as effectively as do the more candid accounts. Instead of narratives that unambiguously bear witness to the atrocities committed, there are other texts that render the Holocaust opaque by not dwelling on the slaughter of the camp experience, but demand that the reader makes the connections and interprets the implications. This is achieved by a number of textual effects in the writing that obscure the experience, and this opacity leads to a sense of indirection and abstruseness which paradoxically reveal the trauma and burden of memory. It is another device to express the inexpressible and to comprehend the incomprehensible.

Whilst the structure of most Holocaust literature reflects the effects of the trauma in terms of emotional and practical consequences, in some texts events actually experienced are disguised and displaced to conceal their original source. The effect of this kind of displacement is to disclose how traumatic memory is evoked via a circuitous route of allusion and suggestion rather than by the more direct and precise recollections found in autobiographical narratives of witnessing or testimony. This chapter will examine autobiographical, fictional and scholarly texts in order to determine what motivates this lack of transparency, but will also claim that such representations are as powerful as more direct

approaches of other witness/survivor accounts. Whilst the writing and stories of some of the texts discussed may appear to be simple and straightforward, this will be shown to be deceptive. If, as will be claimed, the Holocaust is present even in its absence, such simplicity will be shown to conceal a deeper indirectness and obliquity that has to do with the memory of loss and absence.

There is a related tension between opacity and communicability. The desire to communicate with clarity often becomes as challenging for the survivor as the possibility to restore clarity to one's life. If, for the survivor, memory can be seen as a 'walking shadow' because it accompanies the life that is lead, the past is also an unwelcome companion because it may both possess and dispossesses the possibility for recovery from the trauma.¹⁴² What is of concern here is not so much the moral aspects of Holocaust literature or testimony, but how literature itself provides a way to confront the burden of the witness's memories of the trauma. However, as we shall see, moral and ethical issues are also of concern. I therefore aim to show how the Holocaust is remembered in literature not only by the depiction of its horror, but by the ways in which it is suggested by its absence.

In particular, I intend to demonstrate how Appelfeld's fiction is as potent a mode of remembrance and remembering as Levi or Delbo's accounts, as well as considering the use of fiction in Perec's *W or The Memory of Childhood*. Appelfeld's novels are of particular interest because they serve as paradigms which show how the Holocaust is omnipresent without explicit reference to any atrocity. Many of his novels either anticipate or look back to it, but although the Holocaust dominates both the structure and soul of his work, his novels are not personal memoirs. They do, however, capture the personality of the events and his response to them. Indeed, Keats' idea of 'negative capability' comes to mind when considering Appelfeld's work.¹⁴³ For Keats, what is important is the ability to convey one's feelings, doubts and uncertainties about the world and oneself rather than an 'irritable' quest for meaning. Appelfeld is not a didactic author, but whilst his writing induces an emotional reaction, it never deteriorates into mawkish sentimentality.

¹⁴² William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act V, Scene V.

¹⁴³ John Keats, Letter to his brothers, George and Thomas Keats, dated 21st December, 1817, quoted in Robert Gittings, *Selected Poems & Letters of Keats*, (London: Heinemann, 1987): '...several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature which Shakespeare possessed so enormously - I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason' (p.40-1).

Georges Perec's *W* combines the author's own scant and often flawed recollections of his childhood during the Holocaust with an imaginary tale that does not mention it, but reflects it with each word. Perec struggles to recover lost memories because forgetfulness seems like yet another form of death – like death, memory once truly gone, never returns. Similarly, Appelfeld, who was isolated from friends and family, had to train himself to forget. Both children had to 'kill' the little boys they once were. Their narratives are a poignant reminder that death is not only physical, but lives within one's memory and psyche. Furthermore, whilst each of these authors represent the victims' perspective, they also reveal explicitly or implicitly how the ideology that prompted the Holocaust infected and inscribed the perpetrators with a sense of their own omnipotence, and the effect of this power on these children.

When we read Holocaust *fiction*, we subject ourselves via imaginative texts to a narrator's interpretations of historical events and the people affected by them. Much has been written about the actual and potential problems in the way that *all* writing reflects the writer's or narrator's interpretation, and how this reflects his ideological and/or emotional perspective. The ethical problems that arise are especially obvious in historical texts when interpretation is often presented or re-presented as truth. In common with other historical novels, Holocaust fiction is a branch of literature. It should not be confused with autobiographical testimony or narratives of witnessing, or indeed, historical, psychological, sociological or religious accounts or explanations. Any such narrative might well contain its fictions, but is not written *as* fiction. However, the fiction examined in this chapter is linked to the personal memories or *history* of authors who survived the Holocaust, but who have chosen a form of literature to recall the suffering undergone. My aim is to show how and why this literature mediates the experience of the Holocaust for Appelfeld and Perec, and what their texts suggest about memory: how to remember, what is remembered and what is forgotten or displaced. Their writing can be seen as paradigms of the ways in which literature enables the confrontation of ideas and events that might otherwise be too overwhelming, and it is actually this aspect that makes it so valuable.

Although survivor-victim literature depicts the suffering undergone, it does not always explore the state when there is simply no possibility for human emotional response of the one to the other, or the magnitude of this absence. It is mostly left to writers such as Levi and Antelme to make us aware, although Appelfeld addresses the issue of emotional

isolation as a survivor in *For Every Sin*. The Nazis aimed to reduce their victims to some status that was sub or below human – that is, other than human – long before they dispatched them to their slaughter. That they aimed to raise themselves to some status beyond human was part of their philosophy, but this suggests a non-human status that I have claimed does not exist. Nevertheless, the perpetrators' view of themselves mirrors the non-human status that they ascribed to the increasingly dehumanized victims. Furthermore, the extent of deprivation to which inmates were subjected in the camps led to a degree of dehumanization that challenged the limits of their status as human. This is because their very consciousness was diminished in the effort to survive, even for just another hour. How to remember and express a sense of that stripping away of one's consciousness is a challenge for all survivors. If the relentless trauma to which they were subjected challenged their status as human, there is a need to ask what it is that the human needs in order to function as human?

Some victims survived, and have tried to share their memories with the world. The act of remembrance is undoubtedly a burden for every survivor, and how to tell, how to communicate, creates a further burden in terms of the responsibility entailed in such telling. For the witness of the witness – that is, the reader - there is also a responsibility to do with the ability to respond, and we are reminded of the Levinasian ethics of responsibility. What seems to be sought by all survivors who expose their memories and vulnerabilities is a desire to inculcate in their readers a determination to be alert and wakeful to the human obsession to dominate others. Both Appelfeld and Perec were child survivors and, as adults, their way of remembering is different from those who were older during the Holocaust, but their memories are no less concerned with the perpetrators' will to power. However, their narratives tend to be allusive and indirect, and this is what I now want to probe.

PART I

George Perec and his memory of childhood

Of all the Holocaust narratives of witnessing and memoirs, *W* is one of the most difficult to assimilate. The way it is structured with alternating episodes of autobiography and fiction requires very attentive reading, because the shifts between memoir and fantasy challenge one's ability to grasp the threads that connect what seem to be two discrete narratives. In the fantasy sections, we see victims colluding with their masters in the name of a perverted Olympian ideal, and the analogy between the obscene rules of the games in an imaginary land and the Holocaust becomes clear, reaching a horrifying crescendo that yields no winners. This narrative is intertwined with Perec's own childhood memories, which are sometimes vague, and contain factual errors as the meticulous research of David Bellos shows, but the text is a good example of how the concept of the more *humane* human is, to some extent, extinguished in a child's mind. If we can suspend our disbelief for a while, we may speculate that Perec's imaginary Olympic village is a manifestation of his nightmares about the Nazi world in which he lived.¹⁴⁴ It then becomes possible to understand how the Holocaust represents the kind of burden of memory which simply cannot be confronted directly, and why for many, a direct confrontation without any detours would be impossible. Literature, of course, allows for such detours, and the elements of indirectness that feature in so much Holocaust literature and testimony are a particular aspect of Perec's book.

Whilst the autobiographical sections are ostensibly about his personal history, and the fictional sections are imaginary, we shall see that both narratives are also 'literary', and it is worth recalling what he writes about both memory and writing. In the most explicit attempt to explain his writing, Perec presents us with his problem from the outset: 'I do not know whether I have anything to say, I know that I am saying nothing' (*W*, 42). It is as if the words on the pages amount to little, but represent the link between the irreconcilable loss

¹⁴⁴ That said, Perec's imagination proved to be proleptic. After the war in Iraq, there was a report about sport in that country where, under Saddam Hussein, Olympic contenders were tortured, whipped and lashed on the feet if they did not win. This applied to trainers and athletes alike, and Saddam's son Uday played an active part.

and presence of his family – ‘I write because we lived together Because they left in me their indelible mark, whose trace is writing’ (*W*, 42). His parents are dead and so the memory of them is lifeless as it were, but for Perec, writing becomes not only ‘the memory of their death’, but ‘the assertion of my life’ (*W*, 42).¹⁴⁵

If his memory is lifeless and deprived of vitality, then what he says indeed becomes ‘unsayable’, not because he has ‘nothing to say’, but because their life together has been annihilated, and what remains is but a trace that resides both in him, and *as* him (*W*, 42). Thus he sees no alternative but to respond to their murder with a kind of scandalized silence that is a reflection of theirs. It is not a deliberate or wilful withholding, but indicates a sense of despair in that whatever he writes, whatever he tells about his life, the attempt is bound to fail because of the annihilation. This can be seen as a moving testament to the non-redemptive nature of all witness narratives, and the ethical dilemma that confronts their authors; that is, whether to speak at all or remain silent. That said, Warren Motte claims that ‘The writing not only guarantees the efficient reconciliation of apparently irreducible antinomy ... it also promises to save the writer’ (‘GP’, 245). These two ideas are not mutually exclusive because what Motte suggests is that the act of writing ‘saves’ Perec by reaffirming his life, but what needs to be added is that nothing can redeem the circumstances of his parents’ deaths or console him. As Motte writes ‘The crucial point of *W* is suspended in a locus of distance and absence upon which words finally have no hold; it is a flawed gesture toward the unsayable, a mute token of catastrophe’ (‘GP’, 247). It is the ‘unsayable’ that inspires the compulsion to write even though Perec is aware that ‘what I say is blank, is neutral, is a sign, once and for all, of a definitive annihilation’ (*W*, 42).

It is the fictitious Gaspard Winckler who gives voice to what Perec cannot say in his autobiographical sections when he writes

For years, I put off telling the tale of my voyage to W’ and ‘For years I sought out traces of my history I found nothing, and it sometimes seemed as though I had dreamt, that there had been only an unforgettable nightmare.
(*W*, 3.)

¹⁴⁵ It also recalls Levinas’ understanding of a ‘forgetful’ Holocaust memory, but one ‘that works through writing oriented toward a future’ by producing ‘not so much an account of events ... as an account of the rupture of language and the void of memory’. See the Introduction, p.vi and Michel Bernard-Donals, ‘In Memoriam: Levinas, The Holocaust and the Immemorial’, in *Mosaic*, Vol.40:3, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, 2007, pp.1-16.

On the one hand, what Perec decides to 'tell' in the fantasy section is a masked version of that which he chooses not to 'tell' in the autobiography. On the other hand, there is a contrapuntal type of effect in the reciprocity of the two narratives, which are of dissonance and dispossession.

The autobiographical sections do not, at the outset, seem promising. The reader is told with the utmost brevity that 'I have no childhood memories I lost my father at four, my mother at six' (*W*, 6). As Motte comments, this

...establishes a pattern ... of writing under erasure. The erasure here is itself double: first, Perec suggests that his summary tells the whole story This serves to undermine all of what follows, *before* its articulation; the story, then, will be told within brackets of doubt and uncertainty. Secondly, the truncation that characterizes Perec's summary is directly and materially figural of the themes of absence and loss that will dominate the rest of *W*. ('GP', 237-8.)

The story of Winckler's 'voyage' that he is 'impelled by a commanding necessity' to tell immediately arouses one's curiosity (*W*, 3). What is its 'secret' and why is it an 'unforgettable nightmare'? (*W*, 3). The first intimation that the 'crisscross web' which the two narratives weave are closely and traumatically intertwined is when Perec writes:

When I was thirteen I made up a story I had practically no memory of *W*. All I knew of it came to a couple of lines: it was about the life of a community concerned exclusively with sport I was like a child playing hide-and-seek, who doesn't know what he fears or wants more: to stay hidden, or to be found. (*W*, 6-7.)

There is both pleasure and pain in hiding and being discovered, and Perec discloses aspects of both in the telling of the two stories: 'there is to be found the inscription and the description of the path I have taken, the passage of my history, and the story of my passage' (*W*, 7). There is a sense that Perec feels he does not possess his own memories which have somehow been appropriated by the war, and he takes 'comfort in such an absence of history' because what he does remember is not just absence, but loss (*W*, 6). Thus he writes that 'History with a capital H, had answered the question in my stead: the war, the camps', and tells us that this will be 'if not *the* story of my childhood, then at least *a* story of my childhood' (*W*, 6, my emphasis).

Dominic LaCapra explores the complex and complicated relationship between writing about history and literature, especially when the history is as traumatic as the Holocaust. Seeing it as a 'limit event' raises acute problems when studying historiography, literature or, indeed,

philosophy or psychology (WH, 206). The specific problem is how to represent the trauma in language. Certainly, this problem is raised by almost everyone engaged in any form of Holocaust writing, but LaCapra approaches the issues of post-Holocaust historical and literary writing via a range of theoretical perspectives that help to pinpoint the complexities. He aims to differentiate between trauma and history, loss and absence, theory and practice, objectivity and subjectivity without reducing these things to binary oppositions. Instead, he questions the 'questions we put to the past, with the possibility that what we learn may change our very questions and our understanding' (WH, 204). Should, for example, one 'go beyond generic or disciplinary boundaries in order to attempt to do justice to the object of study'? (WH, 206). Whilst recognizing that there are barriers, but that these are not fixed and may sometimes be transgressed in the pursuit of deeper understanding, this means that a close reading of a work of art 'outside recognizable forms of historiography' may assist a historian with a particular line of enquiry (WH, 206).¹⁴⁶ La Capra himself engages with various literary texts in order to better understand the implications of historical trauma. Although he does not refer to Perec, his comments are relevant when considering the ways in which Perec combines memory and fantasy, history and fiction, and whose text is precisely concerned with the effects of trauma, loss and absence.

Perec's memories of his childhood do not consist of the normal memories an adult might retain of life as a little boy – of time spent with family and friends, of walks in the park, pranks, celebrations, fantasies and so on. There is an absence of such memories because what engulfs him is his parents' deaths and having to conceal his background in order to preserve his own life. He is deprived of his childhood because of the losses he suffers due to 'History with a capital H', and he tries to recover it precisely by recalling the absences (W, 6).

I am reminded of Anne Michaels' novel *Fugitive Pieces* where she writes 'There's no absence, if there remains even the memory of absence. Memory dies unless it's given a use'.¹⁴⁷ This is what Perec endeavours to do. Utilizing the sparse memories he does recall, he conveys the sense of a life transformed from relative stability to chaos before being old

¹⁴⁶ Dan Stone argues for a 'more rounded' theoretical approach to the history of the Holocaust in 'The Historiography of Genocide: Beyond "Uniqueness" and Ethnic Competition', in *Rethinking History*, Vol.8:1, 2004: 127-142, 'Holocaust Historiography and Cultural History', in *Dapim: Studies on the Shoah*, 23, 2009, pp.52-58. See too the impressive *The Historiography of the Holocaust*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), which Stone edited.

¹⁴⁷ Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 1998), p.193.

enough to have any developed sense of self. As he writes: 'there are memories – fleeting, persistent, trivial, burdensome – but there is nothing that binds them together' (*W*, 68). Josh Cohen sees the 'greatness' of *W* as residing in the 'paradoxical attempt to recover the memory of childhood by demonstrating its irrecoverable loss. Perec may not possess his childhood, but he possesses its loss: "My childhood belongs to those things which I know I don't know much about. It is behind me; yet it is the ground on which I grew ..." (*W*, 12).¹⁴⁸

The reader knows from the outset that this extraordinary book is no straightforward narrative, but disassembles and changes direction. Perec's writing appears to be uncomplicated. The fantasy section is written like a mystery adventure story that belies the connections to the Holocaust. However, these are starkly revealed as the text progresses. The autobiography is a more or less chronological narrative, with deviations that seem aimed to provide more detail. Indeed, one might think the purpose is to disarm the reader into believing that this represents a rather charming openness, where Perec is writing spontaneously, and correcting himself as he writes. This is, in fact, highly deceptive and deliberately misleading, masking an opacity that highlights the burden of memories with which Perec lives, and which the reader is invited to observe and share. Furthermore, there is a direct relationship between history and literature where it seems that the one influences the other in equal measure. And that relationship suggests that both genres entail a responsibility in how and what is told.

LaCapra aims to demonstrate how the literature of the Holocaust is written, and why it becomes such a burden for both writer and reader. His discussion of Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience, Trauma, Narrative and History* develops some of the concepts raised in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* [1920] which are relevant in our considerations.¹⁴⁹ This is because Perec's creation of the nightmare world of the Olympian village uses *fantasy* to provide a striking example of how the trauma of loss repeats itself in dreams. As cited in Chapter I, Caruth retells the story of Tancred who mistakenly kills his love, Clorinda, and then grief stricken, slashes a tree and hears her voice crying out that he has wounded her yet again. This, for Caruth, is an example of how trauma 'repeats itself, exactly and

¹⁴⁸ Josh Cohen, taken from a lecture given in Wisconsin, November 2005: "I have no childhood memories": Auschwitz and the Art of Forgetting?

¹⁴⁹ In Strachey, ed., *Standard Edition*, Volume XVIII (1920-1922), (London: Vintage, 2001), pp.7-64.

unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will', pointing out that the word 'trauma' can be a wound of both body and mind (*UE*, 2, 3).

What interests Caruth is not only the unconscious repetition of inflicting the injury, with all the ramifications of that repetition, but that Clorinda's voice cries out to Tancred via the wound to see what he has done. She is further concerned with the relationship between 'knowing and not knowing the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect' which, for her, signify that the 'language of literature and the psychoanalytical theory of traumatic experience *precisely* meet' (*UE*, 3, my emphasis). LaCapra claims that Caruth's analysis exceeds its scope in that "'not knowing" for her is intimately related to the role of affect and the unconscious', but what Caruth is concerned with is an exploration of 'the crucial link between literature and theory' (*WH*, 183; *UE*, 3). The idea that literature might outdo theory in its ability to 'get at trauma' perturbs LaCapra, who asks 'Why may discourse on the literary accomplish this extravagant feat while psychoanalytic (and historiographical?) theory does not?', and links the literary to that which goes 'beyond limits', even towards the 'sublime' (*WH*, 183). He regards the intersection of literary language and psychoanalytical theory as inherently unstable and objects to Caruth's use of the word 'precisely' as actually imprecise – 'the disconcertingly opaque movement of post-traumatic repetition in a seeming attempt to elucidate that movement' (*UE*, 2; *WH*, 14).

As La Capra notes, 'literature' itself is an ambiguous term, and if, as for Caruth, literature is the primary site of the literary, but is present in other forms of discourse, 'both "inside" and "outside"', then it does indeed call for 'further elucidation', but it does not invalidate Caruth's perceptions (See *WH*, f/n3, 184-5). The central significance about the 'meeting point' is *precisely* to be found in the opacity and restlessness which Caruth suggests – the telling without quite saying that occurs in various discourses, and vice versa. It is *precisely* the imprecision that Caruth tries to elucidate. Thus the 'nodal point' of Tancred's experience hearing Lucinda's plaintive voice cry out to him, can be seen as a saying that somehow transcends the betrayal of what is said (*WH*, 184). As LaCapra explains so well, for the survivor of trauma, there is the desire to work through or overcome the incomprehensible aspects, but there is also fear, guilt and a sense of impossibility in the task. But it is Caruth's precise imprecision that increases one's understanding as to why, for example, Perec's narrative restlessly shifts between the autobiographical sections and the fantasy. It is the horrific world of his fantasy which actually unmasks the horror of the

Holocaust. He cannot confront it directly in the telling of his personal history, but the fantasy is a displacement that permits him to venture into that nightmare world. It is the means by which he finds some kind of explanation for his own life and a way to express the anger and grief he feels for all the senseless loss and disruption he has suffered.

Another method that Perec employs is the inclusion of extensive critical and corrective end notes at the end of the relevant autobiographical chapters. These are confined to Part I and are intrusive in the way that they interrupt not only the text, but one's reading of it. However, what is imposed upon the narrative is a deliberate structural fragmentation that disrupts the reader's sense of what is happening, and is symptomatic of the disruption of Perec's own life. The memories are in a normal type face, the fantasy is in italics, and the footnotes are in the same size type as the memories. The effect of this is to impose a visual disruption that serves to impede the progress of the text and acts as a caesura to the reader's attention. Whilst the differences in type face mark the changes in the narrative, the reader is encouraged to work out the connections between them. Chapter 8, which consists of just one page, has six and a half pages of addenda in bold type divided into two parts that Perec explains he has felt 'obliged to add' (*W*, 26). The details of these are marked with small numbers which refer to the further eight pages of end notes. At the end of this, he seems to revert to and complete the one page chapter. Although it is not completely obvious, this section appears to me to commence with the words 'My mother has no grave', and arguably contains the most significant explanation about what and why he writes (*W*, 41-2).¹⁵⁰ The implicit pain of the simple statement that his mother has no grave represents an association of thoughts, that takes us back to the opening of the chapter: 'I possess one photograph of my father and five of my mother' and that the 'The only surviving memory of my mother is of the day she took me to the Gare de Lyon, which is where I left for Villard-de-Lans' (*W*, 26).

Having rejected the use of footnotes in favour of end notes and inserted them in the way that he does, suggests that they provide crucial information and, if so, the interruptions to the flow and continuity of the text are justified. At the same time, the actual content of these notes appears to provide a good deal of pedantic and fastidious detail, where Perec corrects

¹⁵⁰ In fact, after this paragraph, an asterisk appears to mark the section's end, but the first sentence of the next paragraph – 'I possess other pieces of information about my parents' – re-establishes his mother as having been a palpable being.

or amplifies the details of the addenda with comments such as ‘No, in fact my father’s greatcoat does not come very low’, ‘there’s no basis for any of this’, ‘it would be fairer to say’, ‘I can’t quite pin down the sources of this fantasy’ (*W*, 33, 34, 39). But the fact that Perec appears to be providing some fairly inconsequential amendments to his supposedly sparse memories is deceptive, because what he is exactly doing is warning the reader about the fragility of memory, and demonstrating that he is engaged in a quest for his identity in which we, the readers, are his companions. He prevaricates because the five photos of his mother and his one concrete memory of their parting cannot satisfy his need or desire for more conscious memories of the woman who gave him life and love. The fact that she has no grave imbues him with a sense that she is not even a shadow, because there remains not a trace of her to symbolize her having lived, even though he *knows* that she did.

Born in March, 1936, Perec was 9 when he finally returned to Paris. He writes that ‘As we came out of the station I asked what that monument was called: I was told that it wasn’t a monument, just the Gare de Lyon’ (*W*, 157). David Bellos comments on the term ‘monument’ as a possible Freudian slip to symbolize the beginning of a kind of shrine to the mother he had last seen at the Gare de Lyon – ‘site of his last memory, his lost memory, of his mother’ (*GPAL*, 89). This is borne out by the fact that Perec describes his 1942 departure from Gare de Lyon three times in a deliberate narrative strategy to impress upon the reader the importance of this, *the* memory (See *W*, 26, 32, 54). The fact that the memory is so important raises the question as to why Perec errs when he describes how his mother bought him a comic whose cover bore an image of Charlie Chaplin (*W*, 26, 54). Bellos points out that this simply would not have been allowed by the Nazis at the time (see *GPAL*, 58) and ‘undermines and transforms one of the central pillars of Perec’s construction’ (*GPAL*, 547). Bellos goes on to say that:

Charlie Chaplin is mentioned in two other contexts ... once by transcription from the newspapers published on 7 and 8 March 1936, as the maker of ‘Modern Times’ (*W*, 21); and once in connection with ‘The Great Dictator’ (*W*, 77), a film which was banned throughout Nazi-occupied Europe and that renders the memory of the comic bought at the Gare de Lyon an almost certain fabrication. (*GPAL*, 547.)

Perec’s memories are, in fact, peppered with mistakes that are both deliberate and accidental. We know that autobiography is not the most reliable of genres in presenting facts, and childhood recollections are particularly subject to inaccuracy and lapses of memory; I shall return to this theme. However, as Bellos points out, Perec had an excellent memory and

highly developed research skills, so he was well equipped to check information (see *GPAL*, 546). Thus when he talks about the defeat of Japan in May 1945, Bellos describes this as a *deliberate* (accidentally on purpose) error because Perec knew perfectly well that the correct date was 30th August, 1945. What actually happened in May was that Berlin fell, and Perec displaces this information (see *GPAL*, 547).

His corrections and interruptions are a way of sabotaging his own story. There are the memories he does not have such as that of his mother brushing his hair and how he wishes he could have helped her 'clear the dinner from the kitchen table' (*W*, 49, 70). The absence of memories about such common or garden everyday domestic chores cause him great regret, and are described in denotative language. He does not interpret his own losses but, for example, describes what a photo of him with his mother evokes, poignantly commenting '(of all my missing memories, that is perhaps the one I most dearly wish I had: my mother doing my hair...)' (*W*, 49). That this touching regret and symbol of what has been lost is in parenthesis when it is, in fact, the most important point of the paragraph, can be seen as just one of the ways in which Perec finds it difficult to confront the degree of pain caused by his mother's absence. He does not describe the bond between them, but it is 'bracketed' in the memory 'I most dearly wish I had' (*W*, 49).

Apart from the errors that Perec himself points out in *W*, there are many more that might well be made 'accidentally on purpose' for psychological reasons. One illustration is the description of his father's death, which he claims took place on Armistice Day. However, the evidence shows the date of death as 16th June 1940, *not* the 22nd. Bellos writes that Perec's error is to make his father's death 'seem an absurd irony', and points out that the records are unclear as to who was actually responsible (*GPAL*, 45-6). If his little boy had ever wished his father dead as is (arguably) psychologically 'normal', Perec might have felt responsible (see *GPAL*, 49). A Freudian interpretation would be that the 4 year old Jojo, as he was known, might have buried the guilt he felt for secretly rejoicing at being the 'sole possessor' of his mother (*GPAL*, 49). That said, there are memories that the child probably *wanted* to retain, but he was instructed to forget various details of his life when the family moved from Belleville. To talk about them would have been life-threatening and so he was instructed to 'forget'. This resulted in an inner conflict that Bellos expresses:

It was a vitally necessary act of forgetting, and it was also an act of inner betrayal Guilt attached itself to the self-inflicted eradication of Jojo's warmest memories. He grew into a man always puzzled by memory and

sometimes obsessed with the fear of forgetting. (GPAL, 69.)

This goes some way to explain the detours that permeate the text and imposes a sense of opacity and impenetrability. There are memories that cannot be eradicated whatever instructions were given, and the child was forced to develop strategies to hold on to that which defined him. He may bury or mask events and feelings or make ‘accidental’ mistakes in the account of his past but, for him, it is his writing that records the sense of his own annihilation. In one of the most telling passages of the book, Perec explains that

... what I say is blank, is neutral, is a sign, once and for all, of a once-and-for-all annihilation.

That is what I am saying, that is what I am writing, and that’s all there is in the words I trace and in the lines the words make and in the blanks that the gaps between the lines create: it would be pointless to hunt down my slips. (W, 42.)

He does not excuse the errors he makes because they are part of the life he has necessarily invented in order to both grieve and cope with the annihilation, particularly of those he most loved. One begins to apprehend that by frequently drawing attention to possible or actual errors, Perec demonstrates a determination to convey his own search for some kind of truth and meaning, and an acute consciousness of absence. He has *a* story that can be separated from the war and the camps, and needs this in order to return from the brink of his own annihilation. The art of writing the ‘words’, ‘lines’ and ‘blanks’ that fill the pages is crucial for him because, whilst a ‘sign’ of a once-and-for-all annihilation, that annihilation is not only to do with the deaths of his father and beloved mother, but also a means to ‘annihilate’ the pain of the memories that haunt him, and that cannot be eradicated (W, 42).

In an article written for ‘Partisan’, Perec explicitly discloses how much he values the art of writing:

There is no epoch, no condition, no crisis that the mind cannot grasp; there is no anarchy that cannot be ordered, no situation that cannot be mastered, no phenomenon that reason and language, feeling and rationality cannot conquer It was on his return from a concentration camp that Robert Antelme wrote L’Espèce humaine, one of the finest books to the glory of mankind. (GPAL, 277.)

According to Bellos, Antelme’s book ‘corresponded to Perec’s conception of the book *he* wanted to write – *a book that denies itself but works nonetheless*’ (GPAL, 277). In fact, in the original draft plan for *W* which was to have been much more elaborate, the first part was

to be dedicated to Antelme (see *GPAL*, 449-451).¹⁵¹ What Perec apparently admired in Antelme was that whatever the deprivation he suffered in the camp, the more he affirmed man's humanity: 'the more he must *proclaim* that he belongs to humankind, and the more he needs to *write*, for writing is the highest, ultimate, and essential means of saying that one is a *human being*' (*GPAL*, 277, my emphases). Thus we see that Perec's concern with what it is to be human and how to say it is just as powerful as that of Levi or Antelme. Indeed, the same point is made in *W* when Perec explains his own work and death of his parents - 'writing is the memory of their death and the assertion of my life' (*W*, 42). The unpretentious simplicity of the statement is both a tribute to his parents' humanity even in death, as well as an affirmation of his ethical obligation to recall them.

If Perec's writing is partial, representing an incomplete attempt to disentangle some of his most disturbing memories, he also describes how his reading as a child was often deprived. He lists the books he most remembers, but points out that 'they were all in effect incomplete, they presupposed other absent and unfindable books' (*W*, 143). For example, he reads *Twenty Years After* before reading *The Three Musketeers*; *Paris Lad* was missing a volume and so on (see *W*, 143-4). This suggests that he did not know the complete story, and the missing texts are analogous to the missing details of his childhood and absent memories. The caesuras and ellipses in the text also reflect the caesura in actual history and Perec's history that was the Holocaust. The reference to Rousset's history at the end of book shows how sporting competition was used in the camps as a vehicle of destruction and, as stated earlier, it is this that provides the connection that links the fictional and autobiographical texts.

Bellos argues that '*W or The Memory of Childhood* is organised in a material sense around a single page, page 61, which separates Part One from Part Two It is left blank but for a mysterious typographical signifier: (...)'. What is inside brackets is normally a sign that it does not belong to what is outside, but as we have seen, it can also signify something inside that cannot be confronted directly. In this instance, Bellos posits the idea that the bracketed separation between the two parts of the narrative do not indicate that 'there is nothing there; in Perec's words, *I am not writing to say that I have nothing to say*

¹⁵¹ See too 'Perec's Antelme' in Dan Stone, *History, Memory and Mass Atrocity, Essays on the Holocaust and Genocide*, (Middx.: Valentine Mitchell, 2006), pp.93-106, which explores Antelme's influence on Perec's writing.

(*W*, 42). To put it less obscurely than Perec wished to, page 61 indicates typographically: *I'm not telling*. Or at least not that simply' (*GPAL*, 549). One remembers Blanchot's epigrammatic idea that 'The disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact' (*WD*, 1). This oxymoronic idea is also formed within the brackets separating the two parts of *W*, which both conceal and interrogate Perec's most painful memories, reminding us of their existence by means of a radical interruption. Susan Suleiman has called this saying yet not saying in a text 'preterition', to explain how one actually mentions something by professing to omit it. For example, we may consider the way in which the brackets also suggest 'I won't mention '...' or I must forget '...' that in turn both distance and yet bring Perec closer to his fragmented memories.¹⁵²

So, with what does Part One end and Part Two begin? Part One ends with Gaspard Winckler's silence and decision not to ask Otto Apfelstahl if he '*would have better luck*' in finding his namesake (*W*, 60). Part Two commences with Winckler having reached the island, although this is uncertain since there has been a shift from the first person narrative of the first half to a third person omniscient narrator. We may well speculate that this grants Perec a distance, even absence from the text, that allows him the freedom to give his vivid imagination carte blanche, and the possibility to confront the unfrontable. He can talk about 'W' – the fictional concentration camp that is a fantasy, and he can talk about the real concentration camps without talking about them. Although the reader can and probably does draw analogies, it is not until right at the end that the differences between that which Perec imagines and the 'reality' – taken from the excerpt from Rousset's *Univers Concentrationnaire* - is made explicit:

the structure of punishment camps is determined by two fundamental policies: no work but "sport", and derisory feeding Beneath the Homeric guffaws of the SS: having them repeat endlessly the exercise ... (always fast, fast, *schnell los Mensch*), in the mud, up and down again a hundred times in a row, and then making them run to drench themselves in water to get clean, and keep them in wet clothes. (*W*, 163/4.)

Furthermore, it seems as if Perec explicitly confronts his Jewishness, 'that most awkward of themes for him' (*GPAL*, 551). As a child, he was forced to deny it but as an adult, despite his conversion to Catholicism, he would not and could not. It is as if there is a recognition that he somehow remains Jewish because it is his heritage. His fate has been determined by

¹⁵² Susan Suleiman discussed the idea of preterition in 'Literary Innovation and Childhood Trauma' - a keynote address at 'The Future of Memory' Conference in November, 2005.

it, and because he was/is Jewish, he has suffered losses and absences just like all too many other survivors. What is striking is the fact that Rousset's actual opening sentence to the passage quoted above reads: 'the structure of punishment camps for Aryans, such as *Neue-Bremm, near Saabrücken*, is determined by two fundamental policies: no work but "sport", and derisory feeding' (see *GPAL*, 551, my emphasis). As Bellos writes, this serves to draw the reader's attention yet again to the death of Perec's Jewish mother. It is also his way to include *all* Jews in the tragedy, of which he was one, despite his conversion. The fact that he does not indicate that which he has omitted from the quotation is significant because it makes Rousset's statement more all encompassing. Try as he may, Perec could not 'forget' that he was Jewish and it is indeed 'implied on almost every page' (*GPAL*, 552).

Duplicity was forced upon Perec, and that he imposes it on the text serves to explain why he invented the story of 'W'. It is his way to express the fears and sense of acute loss endured. The reader is confronted by two apparently separate texts – the memory of childhood and the fictional story of 'W'. Gaspard Winckler, who is an army deserter, survives the war by taking on the identity of the 'real' deaf and dumb Winckler who, several years previously was a shipwreck victim, but whose body has never been found. The new Winckler is told the story by the mysterious Otto Apfelstahl who wants him to travel to Tierra del Fuego to discover what happened to the young boy.

The matter is never resolved because we are not told what attempts Winckler makes to discover the original boy, only that he undertakes the journey. Thus the child disappears twice, as it were, and this represents an important linkage between the two parts because all Perec's textual deviations emphasize his quest for an identity. It also serves to emphasize the preoccupation with his own history, and the need to establish or reject the veracity of the few conscious memories he does have. This is because both narratives are overlaid with not only absence, but loss – loss of the young deaf and dumb boy and the loss of Perec's mother, who remained unaccounted for. The missing child of the fantasy becomes emblematic of the other absences in Perec's life. Perec writes of his mother's death that 'she was interned at Drancy on 23rd January 1943, then deported on 11 February following, destination Auschwitz. She saw the country of her birth again before she died. She died without understanding' (*W*, 33). In an endnote, the reader is told that

We never managed to find any trace of my mother or of her sister. It may be that they were deported towards Auschwitz and then diverted to another camp; it is also possible that their entire trainload was gassed on arrival. (*W*, 40.)

The family searched, and the effect of finding no trace is suggested by the stark simplicity of the speculative idea that everyone was gassed. The tone of the passage is deliberately unemotional and flat, but a chilling sadness, anger and sense of futility are implied in the following paragraph where Perec reports 'My mother has no grave. It was only on 13 October 1958 that she was officially declared to have died on 11 February 1943 at Drancy (France)' (*W*, 41).¹⁵³ It is as if Perec wants to demonstrate the ways in which his memories not only contain inaccuracies, but are also comprised of layers that have different significance at various stages in his life. Having lived with one memory of how his mother died, having *imagined* her murder in Auschwitz, he discovers that she died in Drancy after all, but this provides no resolution because he does not know how or why she died, and she still has no grave. He is also *deprived* of his imagination because his own history cannot be verified. It is as if something as important as his mother's death never was – she is simply gone. This sense of absence with its concomitant sense of loss is so overwhelming and so dominates the text that it needs to be reiterated again and again.

The separate narratives begin to find a unifying thread towards the end of *W* when Esther takes him to see a photographic exhibition and he remembers 'the walls of the gas chambers showing scratchmarks made by the victims' fingernails' (*W*, 158). I agree with Bellos that this has a trace of the fate of Caecilia Winckler (the mother of the fictitious Gaspard) in the fictional part of the book who, we are told, tried to claw her way out of the shipwreck, and who died '*the most horrible death*' (*W*, 58). She died slowly and painfully:

... her back broken she had tried, probably for hours on end ... to open her cabin door; when the Chilean rescue team found her, her heart had only just stopped beating, and her bleeding fingernails had made deep scratches in the oak door. (W, 58.)

Caecilia's horrible death can be seen as a screen memory that shields Perec's harrowing feelings evoked by the images in the exhibition. Those feelings are to do with how he imagines his own mother's death might have been, and his emotional response to that. He then displaces the feelings evoked by his mother's death to the imaginary death of the

¹⁵³ Warren Motte makes a similar observation. He writes that 'the details of his mother's life that remain to Perec leave little room for embellishment or literary flourish, but as I have intimated, this as much reflects a depth of emotional inability to share or tell his grief as it does the lack of detail' ('GP', p.245).

fictitious mother, where he feels safer to use very strong images of pain and suffering. The effort to relocate these potentially overwhelming feelings are an indirect way to confront them, but his dissemblance also enables him to hide other emotions such as his sorrow, bewilderment and anger.

For a long time, Perec believed that his mother had died in Auschwitz, and of course, there is no reliable evidence of victims' last moments in the gas chamber, but Perec's febrile imagination might well have pictured the brutality of her last moments and that she tried to claw her way out. The fact that he imagines the fictional Caecilia having tried to *escape* can also be seen as an attempt to compensate for the barely veiled criticism in the autobiographical section where he writes that:

There were actually a number of French edicts which were supposed to protect particular categories of people I find it really hard to understand how my mother and so many others managed to believe in them. (*W*, 40.)

The implication is that they were too readily duped, which precluded any possibility for an attempt to escape. Although the idea behind this brief sentence is not directly revealed, Perec is actually pondering on what might, could or should have happened *if only* people had been less naïve or complacent. This is borne out by telling us that his mother was 'advised to move house, to hide', but 'didn't bother', mistakenly believing that her war widow's status would protect her (*W*, 33). It also serves to clarify why the language of the fictional passage is far more dramatic than any in the autobiographical sections – Caecilia's back was 'broken', she tried to 'claw' her way out; the detail she had struggled for 'hours on end', and the somewhat melodramatic information that her heart had 'only just stopped beating' when she was found (*W*, 58). This explicit description contrasts with the presumed cruelty of his real mother's fate that he cannot permit himself to express directly, and that remains implicit in the sparse details he offers.

It is emotionally hazardous territory for Perec, because he is obliquely suggesting that she could have survived had she been less disingenuous and more prepared to resist. He is not alone in this, since many survivors, authors and academics have asked either implicitly or explicitly whether the oppressed went 'like sheep to the slaughter' and, if so, why. The resultant emotional response of those who lost those closest to them therefore includes both anger as well as sorrow, and to be angry with a loved one who has died causes additional

feelings of guilt. For Perec, who wants to hold on to the *love* he felt for his mother as a small child, this is especially troubling, and explains why there is a need for him to displace his own anger in a fictional *storm*, where people *drown*, and in the frantic attempts the fictional Caecilia makes to escape. Such dissemblance offers a fictional displacement of his own trauma.

There is a further complexity in the narrative insofar as there is a link between Gaspard, Caecilia's *mute* son, the young army deserter who takes on his identity and undertakes the journey to look for the child, and Perec himself. It is as if Perec adopts both their identities. He is both the mute child who cannot verbalise his own feelings, and the young man who seeks '*traces of my history*' in order to alleviate the '*incomprehension, horror and fascination co-mingled in the bottomless pit of those memories*' (*W*, 3). Only at the end of the book when the link between the two narratives is unmasked, does the fate of the Jews become utterly tangible. There is a correlation between the Russian liberators' discovery of '*piles of gold teeth, rings, and spectacles, thousands and thousands of clothes in heaps, dusty card indexes, and stocks of poor-quality soap*' and the imagined discoveries of a visitor to the Fortress of W (*W*, 162). This is the point where the fantasy and reality merge to become part of Perec's personal 'history', but more importantly, his representation of the disaster.

In *W*, the reader has to take responsibility for working out the connections between both texts. Furthermore, just to imagine the cruel world of 'W' and to verbalise it entails a responsibility for Perec. This responsibility is both ethical and political, because far from being a simple adventure story, the story of 'W' examines the cultural and political roots of the persecution that relate to the Holocaust. The description of all the grotesquely cruel workings of 'W' suggests an attempt by Perec to express his personal outrage and fury. It is also a means to lay bare the extent to which justice was so abused that the very notion of it becomes ludicrous. If literature lives in the shadows of the Holocaust, it will also always be inadequate as will historical accounts. Just as the effects of it reverberate sixty years later, and with continuing examples of man's inhumanity to man, there is no conclusion to *W*. The slaves continue to '*howl*' or fall '*silent*', and the '*masters*' are '*unreachable*' (*W*, 140, 160).

'W' (the fantasy) has been seen as a satirical critique of totalitarianism but I reject this notion because the story is just too relentless in the depth of its detail, and the violence is too harsh to be 'satirical'. In its sheer length, indeed, there is almost an abandonment of responsibility, because of a kind of sado-masochistic immersion in the harshness of the *imaginary* world. Perec becomes disinhibited and can permit himself this lack of restraint *because* this is the imaginary part of his 'story', however much he and his readers understand that it is also part of History with the capital H. The cruelty depicted bears an uncanny resemblance to that undergone by those subjected to Nazi rule and the world of the camps. The law governing W '*is implacable, but the Law is unpredictable. The Law must be known by all, but the Law cannot be known*' (W, 117). The laws are thus absolutely arbitrary, even whimsical, and bear no relation to a justice that respects all human beings. Even the winners pay for their victory with the knowledge that the losers may well lose their life:

The more the winners are rewarded, the more the losers are punished [and] may result in the death of the man who comes last if no one in the Stadium shows a clenched fist with the thumb pointed down, he will probably save his skin ... he will have to strip naked and run the gauntlet of Judges armed with sticks and crops; like them, he will be put in the stocks, then paraded around the villages with a heavy, nail-studded, wooden yoke on his neck. But if one single spectator rises and points to him, calling down upon him the punishment meted out to the cowardly, then he will be put to death; the whole crowd will stone him, and his dismembered corpse will be displayed for three days. (W, 110-111.)

There is an especially striking similarity between the '*Athletes ... in their striped gear*' and the *Muselmänner* of Auschwitz:

... if you just look at the clapped-out shivering survivors ... hobbling between two serried ranks of Line Judges armed with sticks and cudgels, if you just look and see these Athletes of skin and bone, ashen-faced, their backs permanently bent, their skulls bald and shiny, their eyes full of panic, and their sores suppurating, if you see all these indelible marks of humiliation without end, of boundless terror, all of it evidence, administered every hour, every day, every instant, of conscious, organized, structured oppression; if you just look and see the workings of this huge machine, each cog of which contributes with implacable efficiency to the systematic annihilation of men, then it should come as no great surprise that the performances put up are utterly mediocre. (W, 161.)

This part of the narrative depicts the deformed system that prisoners actually endured in the camps about which Perec cannot speak about in his autobiographical section. Although he was not there, he knows what happened, but is rendered silent. Instead, his imaginary interlocutor speaks for him, and one is reminded of Blanchot who wrote 'It is not you who will speak; let the disaster speak in you, even if it be by your forgetfulness or silence' (WD,

4). Perec, the writer of the fantasy, becomes dissociated from the autobiographer and one is again reminded of Blanchot on the notion of responsibility:

But ... my responsibility for the other ... without reciprocity – is displaced. No longer does it belong to consciousness ... nor is it even a duty that would impose itself from without and from within. *My* responsibility for the Other presupposes an overturning such that it can only be marked by a change in the status of “me”, a change in time and perhaps in language responsibility, which separates me from myself (from the “me” that is mastery and power) ... reveals the other *in place* of me, requires that I answer for absence. (*WD*, 25.)

Perec feels both an ethical and political obligation to speak about the Holocaust, but cannot do so as himself, and thus uses the narrator of the fantasy instead. He cannot do so because he was on the periphery of the experience but its effects are the source of his personal trauma. It is a disaster that involves a responsibility which *speaks* to him – a predicament that renders him both speechless and yet compelled to speak. It is ‘not grief that works’ in the fantasy, but ‘grief keeps watch’ and helps him express his mourning for all the dead (*WD*, 42). The narrative of ‘W’ also exemplifies Levinas’ objection to the lack of respect for, or even recognition of, the alterity of the other. ‘W’ for him would be the embodiment of what occurs if I say you are unworthy, inferior, guilty and contemptible because I dislike you. I accuse you and mistreat you because I can.

Although the ‘memory of childhood’ is presented as autobiographical and ‘W’ a fiction, both stories are, in different ways, the story of Perec’s life and emotional development. Much has been written about the significance of the letter “W” in the title – that the French pronunciation *double-vie* also means ‘double life’, that upside down, it becomes an “M” for *Mama*, insinuating Perec’s guilt for not having taken better care of his lost mother. Motte writes that ‘the radical loss that (Perec) describes in *W* is in fact double: loss of life, first; and, second, absence of memory’ (‘GP’, 241). What becomes clear is that this loss and absence results in sorrow, confusion and internal discord. The burden of the memories that Perec does have are profoundly affecting precisely because of the way he disassembles and changes direction within this complex text. Furthermore, it bestows a sense of his interior life that stimulates the reader’s desire and effort to understand the complexity imposed by both implicit and explicit loss. *W or the Memory of Childhood* has also been called a psycho-analytical novel, and it is no co-incidence that it was completed after the end of his own analysis, although as Bellos comments: ‘If Perec’s psychoanalysis was helping him to take possession of his past, what he found there was not reflected in the explicit text of *W*’

(*GPAL*, 546). What is revealed through a veil of obfuscation is a man in search of himself, his past and his identity in the wake of trauma. That obfuscation might be described in any psychoanalysis as a classic avoidance technique of inner conflict and pain.

PART 11

Autobiography, Truth and Trauma

Bearing in mind the evidence of Perec's *W*, particularly his lapses of memory and factual inaccuracies, I now reflect on some of the problems raised about autobiography as a genre, and consider the effects of trauma on the art of autobiography itself. Laura Marcus traces the history of autobiography and biography as literary genres in order to show how they traverse the boundaries of the subjective and objective, the public and private and fact and fiction. She also demonstrates the ways in which the genre is often unstable, and difficult to define as literature or history. As she writes '... autobiography is itself a major source of concern because of its very instability in terms of the postulated opposites between self and world, literature and history, fact and fiction, subject and object' (*ABD*, 7).

The added distinction between 'autobiography' and 'memoir' where an 'autobiography is 'the evocation of a life as a totality' and a memoir is 'an anecdotal depiction of people and events' is only of partial assistance because in the case of Holocaust memoirs and/or autobiographies, the aim is primarily to bear witness to an ideology and its consequences rather than to either evoke the totality of a life or simply to provide anecdotal accounts (*ABD*, 3).¹⁵⁴ Whilst Marcus does raise the issue of truth and the seriousness of the autobiographer's intention to tell it, in the case of Holocaust writing, a distinction has to be made between the factual truth which was often unknown and *emotional* truth. Perec and Appelfeld are especially vulnerable in this regard because they were children during the Holocaust, and their knowledge was limited *because* they were children. For more adult writers who have written accounts, information itself was limited. What they knew was

¹⁵⁴ In fact, I would suggest that there is an omission in Marcus's description of autobiography as 'the evocation of a life as a totality'. This idea of totality is never fully realizable because an autobiographer cannot describe the end of his life. Furthermore, much post-traumatic autobiography is about the impossibility of evoking the self as a totality.

either their own experiences or impressions of those experiences. Little was known in the camps or, indeed the forests, either about what was happening to Jews and other persecuted groups during the time frame they try to capture, or the dates and times of events that affected their own fate.

Marcus raises the issue of how autobiography is separated from history writing where 'history was and is defined as an "objective", "documentary" approach to lives and events' that grows ever more problematic (*ABD*, 5).¹⁵⁵ She perceptively observes that '[p]sychological and philosophical issues filled the space left by the rejection of history' (*ABD*, 5). Attempts by Holocaust autobiographers have less to do with an 'inner compulsion to write of the self' and more to do with a compulsion to re-present the trauma and to speak for or in honour of the dead as well of as their own survival (*ABD*, 3, my emphasis). It is as much a struggle to grasp the self and communicate it as it is a struggle to grasp what happened to them and others, thereby making something inherently unintelligible - intelligible. Indeed, both Percec and Appelfeld's writing represents a form of dispossessing the past that paradoxically aims at some kind of truth, albeit via a circuitous route. Their work can be seen as an abrogation of ownership of the past by the very act and effort entailed in expression – the selection of what to say, what to leave out, and how to say it. It is also an attempt to re-possess the past in the quest for one's identity. This entails not only *subjective* reflection but also an attempt to look *objectively* at the events and feelings evoked by their experiences.

To some extent, 'fact and fiction ... turn out to be "simply rival versions of the same evidence"' (Meisel, quoted in *ABD*, 114). Percec resolves these problems by self-consciously interweaving the personal with the fictional in *W*. Appelfeld resisted writing an autobiography until recently, instead choosing to displace his own experiences by writing fiction that apparently neither told his own experiences, nor dealt directly with the Holocaust. However, a dichotomy arises because what both writers actually aim to do is to take possession of their past by re-visiting the time, the impressions, the physical components of hunger and cold, the tenuous relationships between people, and, indeed, the

¹⁵⁵ The esteemed historian, Saul Friedlander claims that the opposition between history and memory is far from straightforward and that they are, in fact, intertwined. See Saul Friedlander, *Memory, History and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe*, (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993). For further clarification of the debate between scholars, see too Friedlander's introduction to *PTL* and Haydn White's 'Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth' (*PTL*, pp.37-53.)

very process of dispossession. They each do this in a way that articulates ‘the ambiguity ... of the relationship between the objectivity of “facts” and “truth”, and the subjectivity of fancy, interpretation and understanding’ via a route of allusion and indirection (*ABD*, 113).

One of the most moving parts of Appelfeld’s autobiography, *The Story of a Life*, is when he describes how he remembers his past and attempts to voice the sense of barrenness which has endured:

Sometimes I felt it wasn’t I who was in the war, but someone else I say ‘I don’t remember’, and that’s the whole truth. The strongest imprints those years have left on me are intense physical ones. The hunger for bread I eat as only people who have known hunger eat, with a strangely ravenous appetite. (*SL*, 88.)¹⁵⁶

For him, what happened ‘is imprinted within my body and not within my memory’ (*SL*, 90). He does not remember and yet ‘recall[s] thousands of details’ such as the ‘long line of people weighed down with bundles and knapsacks’, and the ‘aroma of a certain dish ... [that] is enough to take me back into the middle of the war’ (*SL*, 90). Simply walking barefoot on the grass reminds him of his fear of the open spaces he inhabited whilst hiding in the forests. He raises a persistent theme in his writing when he asserts a profound difference between how a child and adult remembers:

... someone who was an adult ... took in and remembered places and individuals, and at the end of the war he could sit and recall them, or talk about them With us children, however, it was not names that were sunk into memory, but something completely different. For a child, memory is a reservoir that doesn’t empty It’s not a chronological recollection, but overflowing and changing. (*SL*, 91-2.)

During the war, children were ignored Like the straw on which everyone trod. (*SL*, 47)

Marcus recalls Nietzsche’s idea of truth as ‘aletheia – literally the not-concealed, the unveiled’ which ‘is tied to moral questions of decency and indecency’ (*ABD*, 122). The concept of “the naked truth” in autobiographical discourse becomes inextricably linked to these questions’ (*ABD*, 122). Clearly, a small child has no concept of the ‘naked truth’; nor can he settle moral questions to do with decency. However, if Appelfeld is correct, the sheer physicality of a child’s memories has an element of that naked truth. What he writes about his memories obliquely suggests a feeling that if he were to superimpose feelings he imagines he might have had, that would be indecent. Life was clearly ‘unveiled’ for him

¹⁵⁶ The Hebrew version of the book is *Sippur Hayim*. This actually translates as ‘a’ story – if it were ‘the’ story, it would read ‘Ha’Sippur. Percec and Appelfeld thus share the same hesitancy to call their autobiographical memoirs ‘The’ story. It is, for both of them, ‘a’ story.

even at a primitive or intuitive level, and revealed its most basic components. These refer to the factual life of which Giorgio Agamben and Levi speak – the basic requirements for warmth, food and shelter in order to be able to retain one's sense of being human.

If the idea of some kind of 'naked truth' is problematic in autobiography because of a basic instability in the genre, the representation of traumatic experience further problematizes both autobiographical and fictional narratives. In this context, Leigh Gilmore complements Cathy Caruth's exploration of the nature of trauma, which extends our understanding. She addresses the effect on children, which is not covered by Caruth's definition of trauma as 'an overwhelming experience of sudden, catastrophic events' (*UE*, 11). This is helpful when thinking about Perec and Appelfeld as children of the Holocaust. In a general consideration of Holocaust victims, we are not talking about a single event of limited duration, but a series of overwhelming experiences. For many victims, the injuries seemed endless and were both physical and mental, where the victim envisaged no end but death. As Gilmore shows, the traumas that Holocaust victims suffered have more in common with the endless trauma of violence undergone in cases of child abuse, which haunts the adult and 'in which the present feels stalked by a past that will not stay properly buried; or as dissociation, where the boundary between past and present, dead and living, is overwhelmed by their interpenetration' (*LA*, 92).

As discussed, Charlotte Delbo summarizes how this affects the memory in the way she differentiates between 'deep memory' and 'external memory'.¹⁵⁷ It should also be reiterated that almost all survivors who bear witness either wittingly or unwittingly distinguish between what Lawrence Langer has called the 'chronological memory' of a sequential process of time that resembles 'external memory', and 'durational memory' that relates more to 'deep memory'; that is, the 'saying' as opposed to the 'story'.¹⁵⁸ This is because what survivors recall are 'events so harrowing and unassimilable that they persist as memories that exceed all others' (*LA*, 92). It is from the 'deep memory' and 'durational memory' that flashbacks emanate, and for the trauma victim, they often occur as both a memory of the past and as something that is happening once more, but in the present, the here and now. Again, Gilmore expresses this well: 'Flashbacks then, represent not only a disorientation in time, but also indicate a dissonance within the self that can represent memory' (*LA*, 93).

¹⁵⁷ See Introduction to *AA*, p.xi.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.xi-xiv.

This is part of the burden of memory that survivors have to confront. To then try to express the traumas is to relive them even more. It can also be utterly disorientating for the 'teller' because '[t]rauma cleaves time into past and future in such a way that both co-exist in the present At any time for the survivor of trauma, the alarm of memory can sound in the present tense' (*LA*, 93). One recalls Charlotte Delbo's poem

I'm still there
dying there
a little more each day
dying over again
the death of those who died
and I no longer know which is the real one
this world, right here
or the world over there (*AA*, 224.)

When Gilmore asks how 'memory and imagination combine to form a historical record', Perec's *W* embodies a response because of the way that he combines his own recollections with the fantasy of his imagination, and places them in a historical context (*LA*, 47). The complicity between autobiography and fiction is less overt in Appelfeld's approach to the Holocaust, which is a more wary one. Importantly, most of his fiction is written in the third person, and we are only aware of some autobiographical allusions because he describes them elsewhere in interviews or his own memoirs. However, *The Age of Wonders* is divided into two parts where the first part has a third person narrator and the second part is in the first person. It is still fiction as opposed to autobiography but, as Yigal Schwartz points out, for those who have a superficial knowledge of Appelfeld's biography, it can be taken as a 'literary autobiography'.¹⁵⁹ Appelfeld himself has said that:

All my years I have tried to make a reconstruction of my childhood To fill voids *The Age of Wonders* is an effort to re-create my childhood. Since there is little certitude and much obscurity, it is a replica. It is an archaeological excavation within myself. It is in fact a creative process.¹⁶⁰

In this sense, both Appelfeld and Perec's recollections are embedded in their work. However, Appelfeld confronts them even less directly than Perec, and his characters circle around the walking shadows of the immediate pre or post Holocaust period, and it is for the reader to recognize the historical context. What the literary imagination produces in both

¹⁵⁹ See Yigal Schwartz, *Aharon Appelfeld, From Individual Lament to Tribal Eternity*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green, (New England, CT: Brandeis University Press, 2001), pp.20-22.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, quoted on p.22.

these writers is opacity and silence. This reinforces a sense of the ruination of both their childhoods, and I am reminded of Irving Howe's comment that 'In classical tragedy man is defeated: in the Holocaust man is destroyed'.¹⁶¹

Holocaust testimony precisely entails a project that not only concerns the speaker, but also the listener. Whilst this is true of any kind of narrative, Holocaust narratives relate such radical horror that they are themselves 'an experiential category' (*LA*, 31). Dori Laub writes that:

... the speakers about trauma on some level prefer silence so as to protect themselves from the fear of being listened to – and of listening to themselves. That while silence is defeat, it serves them both as a sanctuary and as a place of bondage The listener must know all this must *listen to and hear the silence* must recognize, acknowledge and address that silence, even if this simply means respect – and knowing how to wait. (*TCW*, 58.)¹⁶²

Many have spoken or written about the impossibility of conveying what it was like to be in a place where death was the way of life, and where everything one had previously thought of as laws governing the behaviour of one human to another were suspended. Indeed, the memory of civil relations degenerated into a gruesome and delusional nightmare. This is relevant for reading the literature or listening to testimony because one is both a witness to the actual trauma witness and a witness to oneself and one's own responses (See *TCW*, 58). Furthermore, the sensitive reader or listener needs to recognize that whatever the compulsion to tell, there is a fear one will not be believed juxtaposed with an omnipresent 'fear that fate will strike again' as well as '*a re-experiencing of the event itself*' (*TCW*, 67).

That having been said, and as both Gilmore and Laub explain, 'Trauma is never exclusively personal; it always exists within complicated histories that combine harm and pleasure, along with less inflected dimensions of everyday life. Remembering trauma entails contextualizing it within history' (*LA*, 31). Hegel wrote 'The term history unites the objective and the subjective side, and denotes ... not less what happened than the

¹⁶¹ Irving Howe, 'Writing & the Holocaust: how literature has and has not, met its greatest challenge', *The New Republic*, 27.10.1986.

¹⁶² In 'Between History and Psychoanalysis' in *History & Memory*, Vol.20:1, 2008, pp.7-47, Thomas Tresize identifies a conflict between psychoanalysis and history and believes that Dori Laub 'practices a listening just as selective as the kind he ascribes to historians' (8). This is strenuously rejected by Laub in 'On Holocaust Testimony and Its "Reception" within Its Own Frame, as a Process in Its Own Right' in *History & Memory*, Vol.21:1, 2009, pp.127-150.

narration'.¹⁶³ This is why adults recalling their childhood experiences during the Holocaust tell a very different kind of 'story', as seen in Perec and Appelfeld. In the specific case of group trauma, the burden of the memory of trauma becomes how to say "'our" as much as "thou", for it entails situating a personal agony within a spreading network of connections' (LA, 31). Gilmore captures the difficulty of truth in all narratives of witnessing, writing:

The study of traumatic memory is marked by a history of definitional instability that probably makes it permanently vulnerable ... as the highly charged debate around 'false memory syndrome' indicates When trauma acquired its additional meaning as a psychological wound, memory was made to signify a place where this would be lodged. Memory therefore became especially significant to the meaning and location of identity itself. (LA, 32-3.)

One effect of the Nazi project was to deprive men, women and children of their identity to the point of denying them their status as human. This demonstrates the ways in which 'what is real and what is imagined in a self-representational text can shift in the context of representing trauma towards questions about the ethics and morality of representation' (LA, 47).

As suggested above, one of the most contentious issues raised when considering any Holocaust literature is the problem of truth. However much we may regard a narrative as authentic, how can we be certain that it is a true record of events? As we have seen, it is fair to say that we cannot, which is why many scholars such as Berel Lang imply an imperative for exclusively objective narratives, and are critical of Holocaust narratives other than historically factual accounts. In *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide*, Lang aims to find a philosophical argument for the intentionalist perspective on the Holocaust as opposed to the functionalist perspective.¹⁶⁴ Since its publication in 1990, many other writers have shown the extent to which an intention to act is linked to an idea, and that ideas are bound up with historical forces and events. One recalls how Lang reminds his readers that when Stangl was asked by Gita Sereny why it was necessary to humiliate and dehumanize Jews who were destined to die anyway, he said that it was 'to condition those who actually had to carry out the policies' (AI, 21).

Lang links this to a debate as to whether the Nazis believed the Jews were a disease that needed to be eradicated or whether the policy of dehumanization establishes that choosing to

¹⁶³ Taken from Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, quoted in *TCW*, p. 93

¹⁶⁴ See too 'CTP', pp.67-69.

'do wrong' was a 'matter of principle' (*AI*, 22). In either case, though, the Jews were not thought of as being human. Even if the Nazis saw the Jews as a metaphorical or actual disease or as sub/non-human, and acted with *intention*, believing in the moral rectitude of their actions, the very fact that they aimed to 'dehumanize' them shows that they *knew* perfectly well that Jews were 'human', *and* that what they were doing was therefore wrong. It is not necessary to dehumanize a *non*-human, so the obvious conclusion has to be that what the Nazis were actually doing was somehow reaffirming the Jews' humanity. To foment the idea that they were non-human was just one of their ploys. However, Lang's stance is more concerned to explain 'the ideological structure of genocide as represented in Nazi policy' than to consider the impact on the human within the dehumanized (*AI*, 20). But it is the impact on the humanity of the victims and survivors that is of interest in this exploration, and how they use the more *indirect* form of literature - that is fiction - to express their responses to the Nazi era and their own experiences.

I want to assert that it is the human that is reasserted in a Holocaust literature *because* it deviates from the bald *facts* of the Holocaust, and is allusive in character. Scholars such as Berel Lang are very critical of Holocaust literature. In both *Act and Idea* and his later book *Holocaust Representation*, he writes about the need for silence due to the unrepresentability of the topic.¹⁶⁵ Instead, he advocates only the pursuit of historical and documentary detail:

One objection to the very possibility of writing about the Nazi genocide is that where *the facts speak for themselves*, anything a writer might then add through artifice or literary figuration will appear as a conceit, an obtrusion. (*AI*, 116, my italics).

If Lang were a social scientist, this kind of statement would identify him as a positivist like Ernest Nagel, who claimed that there was a relatively clear distinction between factual and value judgements.¹⁶⁶ Lang would presumably regard any such value judgements as a conceit. The positivist claims that facts can and do speak for themselves, and can lead to indisputable conclusions. However, this ignores the reality that facts only have meaning within some conceptual context, which relates to pursuing one's interests, whether philosophical, political, social science, historical or, indeed, literary. That 'facts speak for themselves' thus becomes a very dubious proposition. If Lang is prepared to acknowledge that 'the history of the Jew and the life of language *are* closely linked', it is unclear as to

¹⁶⁵ Berel Lang, *Holocaust Representation, Art within the Limits of History and Ethics*, (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000)

¹⁶⁶ See in M. Martin, M. and L.C. McIntyre, eds., *Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science*. (The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1994).

why he thinks that 'to see one or the other as symbolised in the Nazi Genocide is ... an exchange in which both lose' (*AI*, 116).

Lang certainly attempts to highlight the problems for all literature when he claims that for some literary subjects:

figurative discourse may not be the most adequate medium, indeed ... it may not be adequate at all the question of what *can* be represented imaginatively or literarily ... precludes the ... view that offers a blanket endorsement to all subjects not only as literarily possible but as *equally* possible. (*AI*, 149.)

Whilst most may agree that there are problems for literary representations of the Holocaust, it must be asserted that there are also problems for historical accounts too – in fact, for any account. But how else are we to attempt to make this catastrophe intelligible and to avoid its mystification? Lang seems to assert the superiority of his own more philosophical project when he writes:

The discussion of the differences – conceptual, literary, moral – between imaginative and historical writing about the Nazi genocide has not addressed the more sweeping objection against all writing This objection is conceptual rather than moral, asserting that the ... genocide is beyond the grasp of human understanding defying comprehension.' (*AI*, 50.)

Leaving aside the contradictory elements of this statement, he clearly does not believe that the objection to literary writing is in any way a 'sweeping objection' (let alone a value judgement), or that all concepts have moral implications and are themselves either moral, amoral or immoral. To be sure, there are certainly novels about the Holocaust that indulge in superfluous 'sentimentality or bathos', but such a judgement has elements of subjectivity which make it open to closer scrutiny and a reasoned critique rather than a 'sweeping objection' (*AI*, 155).

Whilst Lang's contention that representation of the Holocaust ought to be constrained by ethical and historical considerations is a valid one, he seems to dismiss a genre of narrative because of its form. I contend that *content* might also structure that form as it does in Perec's *W*, with its juxtaposition of autobiography and fiction.¹⁶⁷ This in no way detracts from Perec's own concern with both ethical and historical considerations. However, it is

¹⁶⁷ See too Lang's comments on Paul Celan's poetry, *AI*, p.140. I would argue that the content of Celan's poetry is a vital component of its structure – i.e. his use of the poetic form to express the rigour of his concerns which, although beyond the remit of this thesis, are neither to 'incorporate' nor to 'forego history', but have more to do with the trauma of the Holocaust and its moral and physical effects on a damaged psyche. Telling the history of the Holocaust is not his function as a poet any more than it is that of Charlotte Delbo, Nelly Sachs or Abner Kovner, but readers who are aware of the Holocaust will understand the historical *context*.

also fair to say, as Gabriel Josipovici does, that some writers have exploited the Holocaust for their own purposes, but *he* does not insinuate that all such literature is suspect or somehow unworthy.¹⁶⁸ Indeed, he points to Appelfeld's own clarity (as a writer of imaginative Holocaust literature) 'that the real difference, human and artistic, is how both not to write and not to pass over in silence'.¹⁶⁹ Furthermore, he emphasizes the way in which writers such as Appelfeld 'can never speak the truth, only show it', that is reminiscent of Levinas' distinction between the 'saying' and the 'said', and warns us of the way that language can betray itself.¹⁷⁰ By way of contrast, Lang discusses how the Nazis invented reasons for their actions in an attempt to conceal their actual murderous purposes. He associates this 'invention' with the 'imagination in art' which seems to make some of his earlier points about 'the ideological structure of genocide' somewhat superfluous (*AI*, 45, 20). If his interest is in the 'inventive' aspects of the Holocaust, does this not suggest that he *should* concentrate on the different kinds of fiction both during and after the event?

Whilst one remembers Adorno's injunction about the barbarism of writing lyrical poetry after Auschwitz, one also remembers that he somewhat revised his view. He still thought it was barbaric, but nonetheless also believed that one had to write poetry.¹⁷¹ The point is that most serious thinkers would share Lang's views that literature about the Holocaust is problematic, but this applies to *any* writing about it – any kind of re-presentation – which partly accounts for the plethora of scholarly and literary accounts that are still being debated and published 60 years later. When Lang states 'that documentary and historical writing about the genocide have been more adequate and more compelling – in sum, more *valuable* – than the imaginative writings', or that 'the personal perspective', is 'irrelevant', a strenuous objection is that there is an extent to which *all* writing in whatever discipline contains elements of a personal perspective (*AI*, 140, 144, 145). Of course, what he is arguing for are unequivocally 'realist' representations of the Holocaust, but as Michael Rothberg argues, this is no more straightforward than that which Rothberg calls the

¹⁶⁸ Aharon Appelfeld, *The Age of Wonders*, trans. Dalya Bilu, (London: Quartet Books, 1993), p.5.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.5.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.5.

¹⁷¹ See *ND*, p.362: 'Perennial suffering has as much right to expression ... hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz, you could no longer write poems'. As Josh Cohen argues in *IA*, what is central for Adorno in the kind of art he champions is the imposition of a restless kind of questioning rather than any resolution.

'antirealist' school of thought which emphasizes the Holocaust's fundamental incomprehensibility and thus inexpressibility.¹⁷²

Lang presents a thesis that argues for the value of documentary and historical data on the Holocaust above all other forms of *representation*, but contradicts himself by writing 'No single representation, in effect, without the possibility of another'.¹⁷³ Whilst one can sympathize with some of Lang's concerns about Holocaust literature, we are human beings and, as Edward Sapir has written, as such, we do not exist within ourselves or the world objectively.¹⁷⁴ Whatever we say, think or write is via the use of language, and language reflects our experience, the interpretation of which is dependent upon the community to which we belong.¹⁷⁵

James Young conscientiously appraises Holocaust writing with 'sensitivity to hermeneutical activity' (*WRH*, 3). For him, the events and texts of the Holocaust are closely linked, and what is remembered is dependent on how and what is represented in language and form, their interpretation (and who is interpreting), and the 'consequences of interpretation' (*WRH*, 4). What he aims to show is that because of both history and etymology, all texts are multidimensional, and none more so than those relating to the Holocaust. Berel Lang might well ask some of Young's questions:

Whilst it is true that the "image of the Holocaust" is indeed being shaped in fictional narrative, we might ask what the difference is between the "historian's anvil" and the "novelist's crucible"? Is it really that between iron hard history and the concoctions of the novelist's imagination? In what way do historians fictionalize and novelists historicize? (*WRH*, 6.)

I subscribe to Young's idea that we should not 'privilege one kind of knowledge about the Holocaust over another ... "knowing" something about the Holocaust may have everything to do with the inescapably literary character of historical knowledge' (*WRH*, 7). Again, the

¹⁷² Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism, The Demands of Holocaust Representation*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), see pp.3-4.

¹⁷³ Berel Lang, 'The Representation of Limits' in *PTL*, p.300.

¹⁷⁴ 'Human beings do not live in the objective world alone ... It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language ... We see ... very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation'. (Edward Sapir, quoted in *WRH*, 1988, p.1.)

¹⁷⁵ There are conflicting views on this branch of hermeneutics. For an explanation of the view that 'meaning' is dependent on the interpretative community to which we belong, see Stanley Fish, 'Interpreting the Variorum', in *Critical Enquiry*, 2, (The University of Chicago, 1976), pp.465-86. Fish's stance is challenged by Robert Scholes who worries about the complete disappearance of the text in 'Towards a Semiotics of Literature', in *Critical Enquiry*, 4, (The University of Chicago, 1977), pp.105-20 and 'Who Cares about the Text', in *Textual Power: Theory and the Teaching of English*, (Yale University Press, 1985), pp.150-6.

point is that such texts are not simply factual or simply imaginative, but seek to illuminate the meaning of the 'desecration' and to deflect its mythologization or mystification (*WRH*, 19).

Roland Barthes wrote that 'historical discourse does not follow reality, it only signifies it; it asserts at every moment: *this happened*, but the meaning conveyed is only that someone is making that assertion' (quoted in *WRH*, 10). As Young points out, this highlights one of the problems that confront writers of narratives of witnessing. A witness-writer wants to assert the veracity of such testimony and his place in it but, in order to do so, might need to obliterate himself and the eidetic aspects of what is remembered. This, broadly speaking, is what Appelfeld does in his literature, despite the fact that his own personal story could fill many more pages than it actually does in his autobiography. Similarly, as argued, the 'truth' of Perec's account *is* revealed in the fictional account within his autobiography. Both these writers have preferred to express their trauma via fiction because each believes that the consequences of their experiences are more meaningfully transmitted in this way. However, it is also worth reiterating that both were children during the Holocaust, and that to relate their memories and experiences would entail the imposition of an adult's interpretation, which would itself have been conditioned as they grew up. Both writers use their recollections and adult insights into those recollections to inform the texts that we read. It should further be noted that Levi, Antelme, Delbo, Kluger, Wiesel and many others are convincing in no small measure precisely because they insist on establishing their own voices in their autobiographical accounts. It is their memories they offer – they do not aim to tell the 'story' of the Holocaust, but only their experiences and impressions.

What needs to be emphasized is that no one form of writing supersedes another in expressing the Holocaust, and that all writers of fiction or non-fiction need to be scrutinised in such a way that 'produce[s] further knowledge of the Holocaust even as they regulate the practical consequences of this knowledge' (*WRH*, 191). Young insists that all writing should be critical and self-aware because 'the hidden structures and biases of our minds may be as inimical to our critical understanding of the Holocaust as the victims' and writers' assumptions have been to theirs' (*WRH*, 190). This brings us back to points made by Stanley Fish about interpretation being dependent upon the community to which we belong. The ultimate aim in terms of the 'practical consequences' to which Young refers is, in Nietzsche's words, 'life providing, life preserving and perhaps even species cultivating'

(*WRH*, 191).¹⁷⁶ A critical approach to literature that seeks new meanings and interpretations has the difficult aim to distinguish between the 'mythical and real perceptions', but is an aid to recognizing and understanding the very myths within our world that are either life threatening or life sustaining (see *WRH*, 192). This then becomes the responsibility of the critical reader.

Young highlights an important debate within Holocaust studies and the ways they are recorded by survivors. He claims that Terence Des Pres asserts that the experiences described by survivors 'resist the fictionalizing that ... informs most remembering' (*WRH*, 16). Furthermore, he views Des Pres as implying that, because of the radical nature of survivors' experiences, they 'somehow force themselves directly into language as unmediated facts, without being mediated or shaped by structures of mind, culture and narrative' (*WRH*, 16). Whilst it might well be true that the aim of survivor testimony is to tell the 'literal facts', it seems harsh of Young to suppose that Des Pres would be unaware or unmindful that both the selection of what is told or the form of the telling would not also contain traces of the survivor's cultural, psychological or educational past (*WRH*, 16). Another aspect of the debate is put forward by scholars such as Saul Friedlander and Lawrence Langer, who have felt that language is inadequate to represent the Holocaust at all because of its radical extremity, so that what we are left with are 'shadows or myths' (*WRH*, 17).

I find myself in accord with Blanchot's idea that, whilst mindful that it cannot be said, it must be said, inadequate or not - and it has been. Perec displays his own aptitude to come to terms with this ethical stance insofar as he is acutely aware that his autobiographical account is a construct. He therefore picks it apart, critiquing his own memories, and what we are left with is something so raw that it comes close to representing 'reality'. However aware a Holocaust writer may be that whatever he writes is a construct and approximation of reality, he still *aims* to represent a kind of reality, however impossible the task may be. The reader can only imagine the effort and pain that goes into the structure and mode of expression in these texts. It is not simply the words on the page that are affecting but the tone, mood, and, of course, the polyvalent silences which are certainly found in both Appelfeld and Perec. These works are constructed, but that does not mean that they are artificial or should be dismissed as artifice. Furthermore, all too many Holocaust writers express the ways in

¹⁷⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, (New York: Random House, 1966), p.4.

which they themselves cannot believe what happened, or what they are saying, but they know it to be true, if not *the* truth.

James Young is right to point out the kind of agony autobiographical testimony entails for its writers, when he writes:

The possibility that, once committed to paper, a witness's testimony could be perceived as a fabrication of reality ... would seem to mock a witness's very *raison d'être* The more insistently a survivor-scribe attempts to establish the "lost link" between his text and his experiences in the text, the more he inadvertently emphasises his role as maker of the text, which ironically ... further undermines the sense of unmediated fact the writer had attempted to establish. Both the writer's perceived absence from the text and his efforts to relink himself ... seem to thwart – and thereby inflame ... the testimonial impulse. *WRH*, 25.

In *A Beggar in Jerusalem*, one of Elie Wiesel's fictitious characters says that words 'destroy what they aim to describe By enveloping the truth, they end up taking its place'.¹⁷⁷ The fact that Wiesel chooses to write this at all shows that, whilst mindful of the limits of language, he does not abandon its usage. The *need* to tell and a sense of responsibility inform his efforts to describe his characters' (and his) version of truth and reality. One remembers how, in *Night*, Wiesel's autobiographical account, that when confronted with burning babies loaded into a ditch, he writes 'Was I still alive? Was I awake? I could not believe it No, none of this could be true. It was a nightmare ...', or how Delbo introduces Volume I of her trilogy with the words 'Today, I am not sure that what I wrote is true. I am certain it is truthful'.¹⁷⁸ In their different ways, Appelfeld and Perec also aim to be truthful.

As Nicole Thatcher points out, all survivor testimony can be assessed for its historical truth but, at the same time, she questions how or if a survivor can achieve an objective kind of truth.¹⁷⁹ Even when actual events are remembered, 'many factors mediate between the facts and a survivor's testimony because memory is subject to forgetfulness, memory lapses – conscious or unconscious - confusion, embellishment, distortion'.¹⁸⁰ One can assert that the truth of an experience resides in the survivor's personal understanding of it, and so not only does it become a truth *about* oneself, but is also evidence of the rupture *in* oneself. Hence

¹⁷⁷ Elie Wiesel, *A Beggar in Jerusalem*, trans. Lily Edelman, (New York: Hill & Wang, 1961), p.35.

¹⁷⁸ Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Stella Rodway, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), p.43, and *AA*.

¹⁷⁹ Nicole Thatcher, *A Literary Analysis of Charlotte Delbo's Concentration Camp Re-presentation*, (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2000), pp.3-4.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.4.

Delbo's response to the debate about 'objective' facts and their 'subjective' interpretation: 'Today, I am not sure that what I wrote is true. I am certain it is truthful'.

This is why truth becomes such an uncertain, tenuous idea for survivors. We see it in the testimony of Levi, Antelme, Wiesel and Delbo, but the dilemma is more implicit in the work of Appelfeld, and explicit in Percec's *W*. However, this does not affect the ways in which Appelfeld and Percec aim to be truthful, and whilst their fiction is not factually true, it contains a *true* interpretation of their response to the truth of what happened to them, and their view of history. Lawrence Langer makes an interesting distinction between 'actuality' and 'reality', where the latter is the attempt of the individual to absorb a traumatic event.¹⁸¹ He claims that

a tension exists between events as they actually happened and the implications of these events for individual fate and the destiny of humanity One of the main problems ... is the failure to distinguish between the two terms of this "tension" – *actuality* (events that literally occurred, the slow strangulation of the boy or the hurling of infants into a pit of flames in *Night*, for example), and *reality*, the attempts of the mind to absorb such events into a literary harmony or to compose a new dissonance that will make them endurable and meaningful to the imaginative 'ear' (92).

As Antelme writes just days after liberation

...we saw that it was impossible to bridge the gap we discovered opening up between the words at our disposal and that experience which, in the case of most of us, was still going forward within our bodiesNo sooner would we begin to tell our story than we would be choking over it. And then, even to us, what we had to tell would start to seem unimaginable. (*HR*, 3.)

This is not only part of the burden of memory, but also has to do with how one understands what it is to be human after the Holocaust.

Percec clearly defines what is apparently 'true' in his *W*, although Bellos shows the veracity of his story is flawed. However, such flaws reside in the details or chronology of family events, and, whilst he speculates about all sorts of possible reasons, what remains true is that his father died, his mother died, and his childhood was disrupted and marred – because they were Jews and persecuted as such. Gilmore proposes that 'once fiction's truth is *preferred* to facts, the authority of both trauma and autobiography that derives from the eyewitness's credibility is thrown into a crisis of legitimacy' (*LA*, 47). Having shown the ways in which

¹⁸¹ Lawrence Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1975) p.92.

trauma and memory are related, it follows that any mistakes, whether deliberate or not, have psychological implications to do with what and why one cannot remember. It is not a question of 'preference' alone, but *why* one version is preferred over another. Although one understands why any embellishments or inaccuracies might undermine the credibility of an account and, indeed, diminish its legitimacy, such fictional elements sometimes offer a version of truth that facts alone do not. It also has to be recognized that parts of an account subsequently proved to be inaccurate may well be how an individual remembers them, and the *veracity* of that has to be acknowledged.

There is no crisis of ethics or truth if, like Appelfeld, one prefers to offer truths which facts alone cannot. His fictionalised accounts contain certain implicit or unspoken historical and factual truths that many readers recognize. If Levi, Amery, Antelme, Delbo or Perec aim to write the truth as *they* remember it, that is another ethical expression of their singular and particular experience. Where undoubted damage is caused to any notion of legitimacy or veracity is when a Wilkormirski presents a purely fictional so-called autobiographical account *as* a truthful one, and this is subsequently proved not to be so.¹⁸² It is particularly damaging because it provides legitimacy to those who would deny the veracity of the Holocaust itself. Of course, in recounting trauma, some survivors may well resort to using a third person narrative in order to mediate between themselves and the pain their memories cause them, but actually be talking or writing about themselves.

There is a further point related to the problems inherent in the art of autobiography. Gilmore explains how in Paul de Man's 1979 essay 'Autobiography as De-facement', he posits the idea that autobiography is not possible because it 'makes a demand on the dead to do what they cannot do: speak in their own voices' (*LA*, 88). He tries to show how 'the autobiographical "I" is not the self in any simple way No more your possession than are the other persons you compel to speak in your autobiography or their biographies Persons in the past, including you as you were, can only be bidden like discarnate spirits' (*LA*, 88). For de Man, language only *seems*

... to offer the possibility of having the dead speak directly ... to the living and to the future. There is, for him, no core truth. But this illusion as a property of language is a

¹⁸² See Stefan Maechler, *The Wilkomirski Affair, A Study in Biographical Truth, Including the Text of Fragments*, trans. John E. Woods, (New York: Schocken Books, 2001). In 1995 *Fragments* was published to critical acclaim, and won several prizes. Its authenticity was subsequently investigated by Maechler, and this report provides fascinating insights into how people feel about Holocaust literature and the danger 'of turning the Shoah itself into fiction' when such literature is falsely presented as truth (p.viii).

delusion, a ruse, a trope ... passing itself off as truth. In its effort to represent life, autobiography comes inevitably upon its own impossibility. Its burden is to repeat this impossibility, but never to penetrate it, because it is constituted in and as this totality. (LA, 88.)

The idea that autobiography eventually confronts its own impossibility is an interesting one insofar as it highlights the difficulty of reconciling in a wholly truthful way the 'I' that writes or speaks in the here and now, and the 'I' that I was. This 'I' suggests a presence even in absence and, whether dead or alive, includes all the other characters who inhabit a text.

Whilst it may be true that the representation of the dead is an illusion 'passing itself off as the truth', it is nevertheless a *truthful* attempt to restore a sense of those who once lived and to pay homage to their lives. If one can no longer wholly align truth with accuracy, one can argue that what is being attempted has to do with the revelation of some kind of inner truth, whatever the degree to which that might veer from external reality. However incomplete, imperfect and impossible to wholly fulfil, to this extent at least, the past remains present, and those absent are not wholly lost. As Freud wrote in 'Dynamics of the Transference', the figures of the past serve to make 'buried and forgotten love-emotions actual and manifest', and however difficult – even impossible – the attempt is important for we would be the poorer without it.¹⁸³ In all its impossibility, it also represents a possibility to explore the past and one's sense of self as best one can. The most one can hope is that the writer will remain true to the people, events and feelings he is describing, even though to tell *the* truth is not possible (or even knowable). That the writers under discussion do so allusively or indirectly is a measure of the difficulties they face ethically, psychologically and aesthetically, particularly when attempting to convey the Holocaust experience.

¹⁸³ Sigmund Freud, 'Dynamics of the Transference' [1912] in *Therapy and Technique* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), pp.114-5

PART III

Aharon Appelfeld

Aharon Appelfeld's novels eschew the autobiographical, but do not ignore the historical reality of the Holocaust that is so often present in its precise absence in his books. We only have to remember the noose tightening around the inhabitants of Badenheim in *Badenheim 1939*, Bruno's endless and increasingly futile train journeys with his parents in *The Age of Wonders* or Leo's journey without end to find a home and himself in *For Every Sin*. We can draw analogies with what we know about the victims of the Holocaust and with its aftermath for survivors. Appelfeld's own quest for recovery from the traumas of his childhood is masked between the lines of his fiction.

Appelfeld has written prolifically about the differences in the way children and adults recall their experiences,¹⁸⁴ as well as nearly thirty novels. Born in 1932 near Czernovitz, Bukovina to secular, middle-class Jewish parents, he enjoyed a sheltered and secure early childhood, indulged by his adoring parents and protected from the growing menace and hostility of the gentile population. He spent his summer holidays with his pious maternal grandparents, who lived in the country, returning to the cultured, well-to-do environment of Czernovitz which, although under Rumanian control, was culturally influenced by the Hapsburgs, and where German was spoken in his home. In July 1941, his mother was murdered by Rumanian and German troops, and he and his father were put in the ghetto. Later in 1941, they were both deported to Transnistria in the Ukraine where he was separated from his father and, at the age of nine, escaped from the camp. Set to wander, he found shelter with those who lived on the periphery of society – a Ukrainian prostitute, criminals and others, including a stint

¹⁸⁴ See particularly Aharon Appelfeld, 'A Different Testimony', in Michael Brown and Sara R. Horowitz, *Encounter with Aharon Appelfeld*, (Ontario: Mosaic Press, 2003). In this essay, Appelfeld claims that 'The adult survivor recounts and reveals. At the very same time, he conceals. For it is impossible not to tell and it is also impossible to admit that what had happened did not change him' (p.23). However, '[t]he children did not absorb the full horror Children lack a sense of chronology or of comparison with the past While the adult survivor spoke about what had been ... for the children the Holocaust was the present, their childhood and youth They grew up in dread While the adults fled from themselves and from their memories, repressing them and building up new lives ... the children had no previous life The Holocaust was the black milk, as the poet said, that they sucked morning, noon, and night' (p.24).

attached to the advancing Soviet army. He ended up in Italy late in 1944, from where he was taken to Israel together with other orphans of his age in 1946. During his time in Italy, he began to learn Hebrew, and eventually attended the Hebrew University from 1952-1956 where, despite his admiration for professors who represented the culture of Central and Eastern Europe, he chose to specialise in Yiddish literature. His writing, however, was in Hebrew and he began publishing poetry in 1952 whilst doing his military service. His first book, *Ashan (Smoke)*, was a collection of stories and published in 1962. Amongst the extensive writing about him, Yigal Schwartz's interesting biography explores the recovery of childhood memories, the quest for a safe haven and the discovery and problems of Jewish identity.¹⁸⁵

Appelfeld's work constantly interrogates the borders between 'forgetting and remembering' where both conditions are a burden for the individual identity, and 'in which the grotesque, the tragic and the horrific exist side by side'.¹⁸⁶ As David K. Danow has observed, 'the Jew appears a peculiar figure, strange and estranged, an anomaly in both speech and manner', and one might argue that such peculiarities are a feature of Appelfeld's own psychological make-up that he endeavours to interrogate via his writing.¹⁸⁷ These are the things which have a pre-eminent place in Appelfeld's work. He hardly ever mentions the Holocaust directly, nor does he detail any of the atrocity. Not directly, that is, but it is there hovering between the words and lines, particularly the books to be discussed. As claimed by numerous others, he mostly writes about the period leading up to the Holocaust, or the period after liberation, and assumes some knowledge of the historical facts on the part of his readers, but he maintains a resolute distance from a narrative of atrocity that describes the violence and murder.

That said, his novels are infused with menace because of the very refusal to verbalise the crimes committed. Instead, he tends to concentrate on his characters' banal preoccupations with their daily lives, which renders those lives meaningless. However, the concern with

¹⁸⁵ Yigal Schwartz, *From Individual Lament to Tribal Eternity*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green, ((New England, CT: Brandeis University Press, 2001), pp.1-28. It should be noted that gaps and silences persist in the biographies about Appelfeld, as well as in his own autobiography, *Sippur Chayim (The Story of a Life)*, 1999, but the details we do know are indeed even stranger than any possible fiction. Furthermore, to listen to him speak as I have (at Jewish Book Week, 2004) is to listen to a man with a calm, measured, soft voice that belies the absolute rigour of what he says because he does not waste a single word or gesture.

¹⁸⁶ Danow, 'EA', (pp. 61-74), p 61.

¹⁸⁷ *ibid.*, p.67.

trivialities affects the reader who *knows* what is about to happen or has happened. In those novels which deal with the period immediately after the war, the reader begins to comprehend the damage the trauma has wrought on the characters. Appelfeld is not a descriptive writer in the sense that his use of adjectives or lengthy analysis is sparse. This serves to heighten the reader's engagement with the text, as he has to imagine how the gaps may be filled. It is not that Appelfeld is obviously evasive or even opaque as Perec is, but his writing is utterly allusive in that it constantly reminds the reader about the Holocaust.

Badenheim 1939 has been regarded by some as Appelfeld's indictment of complacent assimilated Jews, wrongly confident about their positions as members of the European communities in which they lived. It might also be regarded as a warning to those Jews who not only forget their own history, but who also do not remember the Jewish God and the Jewish traditions. Appelfeld has spoken of the Holocaust as a 'blow directed against the central pillar of the Ten Commandments'.¹⁸⁸ This resonates with his insistence that even those Holocaust survivors who profess to eschew all religious observance, maintain if not some remnant of faith, some consciousness of their Jewish heritage. He writes rather amusingly of his own efforts to learn to pray (which he tells us he has yet to master) after the war from a smuggler who would slap his face if he read the letters of the prayer book incorrectly.¹⁸⁹

Almost all his books allude to Jews who try to forget or ignore their Judaism, and he uses literature to reveal this particular and personal 'angst' via the medium of a more 'objective' fictional perspective. Yigal Schwartz points out how 'Appelfeld has stated on several occasions that he has great respect for the institutional, traditional form of Judaism, but that it is beyond his own existential and emotional limits'.¹⁹⁰ Indeed, Appelfeld sees established Judaism as 'anachronistic and petrified'.¹⁹¹ When Rabbis appear as the official representatives of Judaism in his texts, they are often ineffectual or handicapped. To illustrate, in *Badenheim*, the Rabbi has suffered a 'paralytic stroke', is wheelchair bound and

¹⁸⁸ Brown and Horowitz, (2003), p.41.

¹⁸⁹ *SL*, p.81.

¹⁹⁰ Schwartz, (2001), p101.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p.105. Schwartz also writes about what he calls Appelfeld's 'religious distress', and claims that Appelfeld displays a yearning 'for a "strange" mingling of the basic components of Jewish faith and of the "primitive" gentile Christian faith (101,105). This assertion is borne out in the story of the gentile Katerina in the novel of the same title, who becomes the guardian of a certain kind of Judaism as well as Christianity, and of Theo who wants to convert to Christianity in *For Every Sin*.

speaks in 'a jumble of Hebrew and Yiddish' that no-one can understand (*BAD*, 100, 143). Recalling the assimilated home of his childhood, he writes how 'we carefully avoided words that might be construed as expressing belief', but how his mother 'harboured a hidden affection for the faith of her forefathers' as practised by her own parents.¹⁹² As an adult, he recalls the criticism of the Israeli poet Uri Zvi Greenberg of Appelfeld's first book *Smoke (Ashan)* in 1962 who claimed

A people such as ours cannot permit itself amusing descriptions or nuanced sensibility. We are all links in a generational chain that extends back to the God of Israel and to His Torah, and it is from this we draw our sustenance. Only Jews who have forgotten who they are ... go astray in foreign pastures. After the Holocaust, this would be the worst thing for us to do. Going astray is a sin [w]e Jews ... have the treasures of the Torah, the two Talmuds, the Midrashim, Maimonides, the *Zohar* But we have always fled from ourselves Art that doesn't convey the beliefs of our forefathers will not save us. (*SL*, 160.)

For Appelfeld, Greenberg's words 'have always seemed to me like some ancient mantle of glory in which we can no longer wrap ourselves' but 'struck some hidden chords within me There did exist profound Jewish belief, but I didn't know the path to it' (*SL*, 161).

Despite these confessions about his attitudes towards religion, the text of *Badenheim* defies any attempt to read it as an indictment or judgement. The very elegance and frugality of his writing rather suggests a man who observes human behaviour, remembers what he has learned, but in fact displays no inclination to pass judgement. Indeed, he has written:

During the war, I saw life naked – plain and unadorned. The good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly – all these were revealed to me as strands of the same rope. Thank God it didn't turn me into a moralist. On the contrary, I learned how to respect human weakness and how to love it, for weakness is our essence and our humanity. A man who is aware of his weaknesses is far more likely to be able to overcome them. A moralist cannot face his own weaknesses; instead of criticizing himself, he criticizes his neighbour. (*SL*, 106.)

What concerns Appelfeld much more than passing judgement is to observe and note the gradual 'erosion of innocence' in people approaching the brink of the Holocaust.¹⁹³ He hardly considers the motives of the perpetrators, regarding the Nazis as atavistic, and reverting to a kind of primitivism beyond human understanding.¹⁹⁴ He thus uses his energy to try to understand the victim and writes in a deceptively laconic style to deflect the anxiety of the reader whom he wants to make the same effort to understand. His mode of expression

¹⁹² *SL*, p.121.

¹⁹³ See Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust*, p.79.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.80. Clendinnen explores Appelfeld's lack of interest in the perpetrators with Levi's more ambivalent attitude.

is one aspect of the opacity that characterizes his writing for, apart from protecting his readers (and himself) from the more gruesome details of the growing persecution, it paradoxically has the effect of heightening the very sense of anxiety that one might think he seeks to avoid. Rather than explicitly detailing the self-deception of the future victims or the increasing oppression of their persecutors, we witness the 'the slow erosion of innocence'. This captures the attention and succinctly encapsulates a growing anxiety. It also establishes Appelfeld's emphasis on the predicament of the victims rather than that of the perpetrators, although one is aware of the growing loss of innocence and increasing guilt of the Nazis.

We see that, once again, the Jews will be subjected to radical persecution. Their sanguine confidence and faith in the world to which they believe they belong will firstly be undermined, and then shattered. Their mode of life will become so unrecognizable that their very humanity will be called into question. Appelfeld is aware that the reader knows what is imminent for his characters, but wants us to consider how and why people *became* victims and the kind of violence to which they were subjected. Such violence was, of course, as much psychological as it was physical. This, he has in common with Levi, who talked about the irreparability of the acts of violence that makes the issue of forgiveness difficult because even if the guilty are punished, the original crime cannot be erased. The 'erosion of innocence' applies equally to perpetrator and victim, albeit for different reasons, and it is also appropriate to consider how the onlooker – in this case, the reader – is implicated for the future when considering the past.

In *Suffering Witness*, James Hatley asks what our responsibility is towards those who suffer and how we might be complicit with the perpetrators. Does some suffering claim our attention above other suffering because of its extremity? What Hatley argues is that 'our first duty is not to classify and compare but simply to respond' (*SWQR*, 2)¹⁹⁵. Because of the extremity of suffering undergone during that which many contentiously and inadequately call the Holocaust or the Shoah, our account of it may 'yet again betray the extremity of that suffering' because no account can fully convey the horror (*SWQR*, 2).¹⁹⁶ Bearing witness

¹⁹⁵ Whilst this is undoubtedly compelling, part of the suffering of the inmates of the camps was precisely the difficulty to respond humanely to anyone else's suffering. For example, Levi is unflinchingly honest when he writes about his relief at being able to remember trying to 'give courage ... to an eighteen year old Italian', but how that 'momentary attention' was superseded by his commitment to his own survival whereby he came 'first, second and third' (*DS*, p.59).

¹⁹⁶ See pp.5-6. Like many others, Hatley is troubled by the impossibility of adequately naming what happened to the Jews. Levinas referred to victims as 'The nameless', but this is also troubling. Whilst recognizing the

entails an ethical involvement because one has to tell the ‘truth *about* the victim’ and ‘remain true *to* her or him’ (*SWQR*, 3). But, for the witness of the witness – that is the reader or listener, the difficulty is that he is unable to fully grasp, much less understand, the magnitude of the trauma. One has – to use a popular phrase – to have been there. However developed our ability to sympathise or empathise, we are never, as Levi remarked, ‘in another’s place’ and cannot suffer another’s suffering (*DS*, 43). Any injunction to remain true to the suffering is thus an injunction to remain restlessly wakeful to the way victims and events are remembered. The duty to respond is an onerous responsibility, and the nature of that response invokes the ethics of the teller and the listener. If we turn away or forget to remember, or try to rationalize, we ignore the ‘irreparability’ of the offence to which Levi refers. As Hatley writes:

what the victim’s suffering continually tells us is that our own time is already irreparably ruptured ... that whatever else our witness might hope to accomplish, it cannot undo that which it seeks to witness. (*SWQR*, 3-4.)

For Every Sin

In Appelfeld’s *For Every Sin*, the protagonist Theo struggles against the rupture of time, his identity and suffering by not only endeavouring to turn away from others, but also himself. He undertakes a journey ‘home’ which is a metaphor for the rediscovery of himself, but he cannot undo the torment he has undergone or witnessed. As he meets new people or enters new terrain, the narrative mood and tone also change to reflect his restless impatience, fear and uncertainty. Memories of his family are aroused by different sights, sounds, smells and people, and intrude into the direction of the text. Theo thinks he wants to go ‘straight’ home but, just as the geographical route entails detours, his mind deviates from its course because of his memories.

Appelfeld does not specify many details of Theo’s suffering, but evokes a sense of it by describing the vacuous aims of his journey and his determination to avoid other Jewish survivors. ‘Togetherness drives me out of my mind’, it has ‘brought many calamities down upon us’ he complains (*FES* 25, 61). He yearns to be alone, but cannot because he then has

impossibility and even betrayal of the extent and nature of the suffering undergone, and although victims *died* nameless, they had lived and been identified with names. Furthermore, I continue to refer (however uneasily) to the catastrophe as ‘The Holocaust’ because it is one name which is universally recognized, however impossibly inappropriate or inadequate it may be.

to face the responsibility of having 'abandoned his companions in suffering' (*FES*, 12). Indeed, one of the 'sins' he commits in the eyes of others is his wish to convert, and when a man asks what harm the Jews ever did him, he replies 'It's hard for me to bear that togetherness' (*FES*, 81). The narrative subtly suggests that Theo is a person who has lost his soul because he has lost direction, and having lost it, has no idea what it is he really seeks. The hint is that his aim to reject his Judaism is perilous, but Appelfeld is allusive rather than didactic in this regard. It is simply presented as one consequence of the loss of innocence that is of such concern in so many of his texts, and suggests that the corrosion of one's heritage and identity strips away any faith or optimism in oneself and one's fellow human beings. *For Every Sin* is a text that probes the psyche of Theo in a flat, unemotional third person narrative that, for all that it reveals, offers no resolution. Nonetheless, it highlights one's sense of a character retreating into an utterly insular kind of existence as a result of the Holocaust experience.

Appelfeld uses an unintrusive narrator, and no resolution to the predicaments of the characters, or even any insight into their state of mind is offered. The objective is to demonstrate their rootlessness and disorientation after the Holocaust. What he does do is allude to it with vague comments about the camps, the deportation of Theo's mother, and a brief reference to his father having been shot. Mostly, it is a story about Theo trying to find his way 'home'. Appelfeld uses fiction to show the aftermath of the Holocaust for this young man who is alone, suffering, cynical, yet seeking a self he can believe in. He ultimately fails because he has lost his sense of self. Appelfeld *shows* rather than *describes* it, via a story that has Theo losing his way by losing his determination to return home. The manner in which Theo moves forward, stops or changes direction is analogous to an indirection within the text which shifts from landscape to landscape. This is further intimated by a curious lack of overt emotional content that is replaced by a demand for food, coffee and cigarettes.

There are moments in the interaction between Theo and Mina, when one hopes that with each other's help, they may find some comfort and companionship, but she is too needy and full of despair. Sleeping for hours and hours is a means of escape from her own demons and traumatic memories.¹⁹⁷ After a brief interlude, during which Theo plies her with coffee and cigarettes and enjoys the beginnings of a dialogic exchange, he leaves her because he can

¹⁹⁷ I write this also mindful of Appelfeld's own desire to 'to sleep for years ... and be reborn', in Geoffrey Hartman, (ed.), *Holocaust Remembrance - The Shapes of Memory*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p.149.

barely take responsibility for himself, let alone respond to another. It is as if he cannot forgive the victims for their suffering or even consider the victimizer, and this becomes clearer with the progress of the text.

The Holocaust's 'walking shadows' are ubiquitous in Appelfeld's work.¹⁹⁸ He implies a burden of memory and suffering so great for his protagonist, Theo, that liberation does not set him free. He is bewildered, confused and furious, and in common with countless other survivors who all have different ways of coping, is alienated and lost. What Appelfeld seeks to elucidate is that whilst survivors were no longer confined behind a wall of barbed wire and imminent death, they were imprisoned within their experiences, and could not grasp the idea that they were free.

I am reminded of Imre Kertész' *Fatelessness* when, after liberation, the bewildered young Gyuri wants only his meagre ration of soup and writes "all I heard ... was about freedom, but not a single word about ... the missing soup. I was absolutely delighted, quite naturally, about our being free, but I couldn't help it if, from another angle, I fell to thinking that yesterday ... such a thing could never have happened"; that is, that his soup would be late in the camp (*FATE*, 235-6). It is only when he discovers that a 'strong goulash soup' is being prepared that he can 'think – probably for the first time in all seriousness – of freedom' (*FATE*, 236). Kertész and Appelfeld's texts are both self-conscious ones, but there is a textual abstemiousness in *For Every Sin*, as opposed to the more direct, articulated form of *Fatelessness*. Nevertheless, one discerns a link between the emotional landscape of both texts in the sense that both the principal characters feel hatred towards themselves and others. For Gyuri, this is explicitly voiced towards the end of the novel, whereas Theo's increasing alienation from others and himself *suggests* an irredeemable self-loathing (see *FATE*, 247).

Language is assaulted in both stories, and a prime example is the discussion between Gyuri and the journalist who asserts that 'a concentration camp in itself is *unnatural*' (*FATE*, 247). For Gyuri, however, whatever happened there was completely 'natural' (*FATE*, 247). That he has no common language with the man becomes evident by their polarised terms of reference. The journalist wants to know about 'the hell of the camps' and Gyuri can only

¹⁹⁸ Geoffrey Hartman's *The Longest Shadow* comes to mind again, and his insight that for Appelfeld, 'memory is an absent presence', its "'fire" ... subject to a perpetual curfew' (p.89).

remark that 'I had nothing at all to say about that as I was not acquainted with hell and couldn't even imagine what that was like' (*FATE*, 248). The well-meaning reporter, who wants to bring what happened to the attention of the world, urges Gyuri to acknowledge the impossibility to conceive of a 'concentration camp as anything but hell', but Gyuri writes 'I could only imagine a concentration camp, since I was somewhat acquainted with what that was, but not hell' (*FATE*, 248-9).

Appelfeld's elliptical allusions to the camp experience are powerful because of the associations and dissociations they evoke. To illustrate, Theo remembers the language of love that his mother 'inculcated in him' is gone forever and replaced by 'the language of the camps' and how this makes him 'dreadfully sad' (*FES*, 167). Back from the 'world of truth' where one did not 'talk about death' even though 'it was with us all the time', one senses that for Theo, the very concept of truth has little to do with the reality of the threat to life and liberty (*FES*, 25). It has more to do with one's helplessness when imperilled by forces so dominant that truth becomes the need to recognize one's absolute solitude and isolation. This is why he abrogates all responsibility to or for the other and says 'togetherness drives me out of my mind' (*FES*, 25). The meaning of 'togetherness' is no longer something to be desired because it implies both the unity of the oppressors and their terrifying herding together of the victims. Indeed, part of the reason he wants to convert is because centuries of the Jews identifying with each other and being together has meant 'they never taught their children how to live, to struggle, to demand their due; in times of need, to unsheathe the sword and stand face to face against evil. The wicked had to know that people weren't afraid either of cold or of death' (*FES*, 33).

Theo's identity crisis is a form of self-denial that precludes the possibility to recognize the demands of the other in an ethical sense, even to the extent of being unable to offer another person a cigarette with any generosity of spirit (see *FES*, 42). Appelfeld does not bring this ethical crisis to the attention of his readers by overtly moralizing, but indirectly, showing how the smallest of gestures such as the offering of a cigarette become meaningless without generosity of spirit. He contrasts this with the attitude of Theo's mother who, despite all the mental problems that made her like a 'wounded bird', did not lose her spontaneity, 'lust for ... pleasure' or ability to enthrall Theo 'with her charms' (*FES*, 93).

We see that something has been annihilated within Theo that stultifies his ability to appreciate or enjoy life. He sets off on a journey that he knows both metaphorically and literally he is unable to complete. In *Fatelessness*, being told that “One cannot start a new life under such a burden” Gyuri observes ‘he did have a point. Except I didn’t quite understand [the] wish for something that was impossible ... what had happened had happened ... I could not give orders to my memory we can never start a new life, only ever carry on the old one’ (*FATE*, 256). *Fatelessness* ends in an ambiguous way – on the one hand, Gyuri can say ‘I was already feeling a growing and accumulating readiness to continue my *uncontinuable* life’ and, on the other hand, says:

Everyone asks only about the hardships and the “atrocities”, whereas for me perhaps it is that *experience* which will remain the most memorable. Yes, the next time I am asked, I ought to speak about that, the *happiness* of the concentration camps Provided I myself don’t forget. (*FATE*, 262, my italics.)

What is this ‘happiness’ that makes his life ‘uncontinuable’, and how does it relate to Theo? The ironic use of the word ‘happiness’ is completely arresting, and has something to do with predictability. There were no choices or decisions to be made in the camps. One lived or died, was fed or not, and what one had to do was try to avoid death and beatings, receive one’s meagre ration, and do as one was ordered. Although death was random and indiscriminate, the goal was to remain alive a minute, hour or day longer, and if this was achieved, there was – at least for Gyuri - a grim happiness. The irony strikes me as consistent with someone who is not yet able to embrace the opportunity of a more normal life with all its vicissitudes – hence its uncontinability. Theo’s state of mind is not depicted, but alluded to by the way he moves forward, stops, or changes direction. *He* has a life that is ‘uncontinuable’ because of his loss of self, and the novel ends with his collapse (*FES*, 168).

Theo is resolved to ‘make his way back home alone, in a straight line, without twists or turns’ (*FES*, 3). But he discovers that even if able to follow the geographical route without deviation, the way home emotionally is beset with the detours his memories impose upon him. This is suggested by a narrative that shifts from the present to the past, and the different moods evoked by the people encountered or remembered. Apart from the people he meets along the way that prevent him from being alone, his mind is cluttered with ghosts of the past that preclude any kind of ‘straight line’ and prove to overwhelm and ultimately defeat him.

For Every Sin opens with a paradox because it is clear that it is not a kind of *Bildungsroman* where an eponymous hero embarks on some kind of spiritual and physical journey of self-discovery. As the story unfolds, Theo struggles with that which intrudes into his consciousness in an unbidden, unwanted way – the rediscovery of social intercourse and obligation, and memories of his past before the war. Theo wants both to be released from all obligation to his fellow human beings, and yet not to be treated with contempt by them. He needs them but resents them because of the bond that their similar experiences and victimization impose. If the skies now before him ‘were open ... with a pure, tranquil blueness’, he also remembers the light of the camp at sunset, all too soon ‘swallowed in darkness’ (*FES*, 4). This light becomes a metaphor that ‘poured into him as into an empty vessel’ (*FES*, 4). There is an understated juxtaposition of images that reminds him of the despair in the camps, and what remains are the ‘vacant’ gazes of the survivors (*FES*, 8).

Fellowship is difficult because of a lack of responsiveness between the survivors. It is as if after the trauma, they are all ‘empty vessels’, awaiting their fate ... their death. However, most survivors anger Theo because they *want* to believe in a sense of togetherness. Rather than confront the envy this evokes in him, it is displaced into anger and resentment. This is a ‘sin’ for which Theo cannot forgive them or himself. The oblique references to the camp experience are rendered without resorting to graphic details. They suggest a catastrophe so great that it cannot be spoken about other than in the most allusive way. This strategy of evasion is mirrored by the missing details of Appelfeld’s own life, and one may conclude that fiction provides a means for him to exorcise some of his personal demons, and regain some sense of stability.

Theo also *wants* to reclaim some equilibrium in his life away from the camps and their survivors. He therefore seeks to distance himself both physically and spiritually from whatever horror he has experienced by denying his Judaism and converting. He wants to bask in the love of Bach and Mozart’s music, which his mother instilled in him during their visits to various churches, to exchange the very language of atrocity for one of love, but in the end is defeated by ‘fatigue and helplessness’ (*FES*, 168). What lingers within the text are the memories. They are juxtaposed with a sense of the annihilation of all the memories that could and should have been inherited from generations that have died, that Theo cannot

escape. It is as if he denies any stirring notions of ethical time and the attendant responsibility this implies.

In *Suffering Witness*, Hatley devotes a chapter to the question of *aenocide*, 'a murdering of the generations', which he differentiates from *genocide* (*SWQR*, 30). In this kind of 'aggressive genocide', he explains that 'one not only murders a type of human being, but also one deprives a people ... of their generations' so that their past, future, and memory is utterly annihilated (*SWQR*, 30). If genocide is the wholesale mass slaughter of human beings, *aenocide* not only murders the generations to come, but annihilates time itself. Coming from the Greek word *aeon*, Hatley specifies its original meaning as a 'period of existence' rather than an eternity or world age as used in Platonic texts, or Homer's 'lifetime' or 'life', or Aeschylus's 'age' or 'generation' (*SWQR*, 219:23).

When translated as a 'period of existence', Hatley means 'the murdering of ethical time through the annihilation of all the following generations' (*SWQR*, 219:23). This theme of murdering ethical time is represented in literature where, in Greek mythology, we witness the struggle between Zeus and his father Cronos. Cronos eats his own children but Zeus manages to avoid this fate and, when fully grown, overthrows his father and castrates him. He then awaits his own fate. As Hatley points out, these struggles symbolise the

... extreme insecurity that comes from living in a time that is *not* eternal in terms of duration but rather in terms of one's differentiation from the other. Eternity is time articulated as an infinite difference between oneself and the other, as well as between one's generation and the succeeding one. (*SWQR*, 220:23.)

All the characters of *For Every Sin* are haunted by a period of time when their past and future has been destroyed. They have been forced to face the cruellest of annihilations that has left them alone, but seek to cling together in order to defy the death of the infinite. In their isolation, there are few of them able to acknowledge the other's individuality and separateness.

What Theo refuses is precisely this recognition of difference between him and the other refugees without a place of refuge. He sees them as all the same, and wants to hold himself apart rather than reaching out and responding to their suffering or opening himself. His sin is that he allows the hatred that has ruled the camps to spill over into his life afterwards, and ignores the love which has also been part of his life, and for which he has an ethical

responsibility. As already claimed, Appelfeld refuses to moralise or dwell on events in the camp, but demonstrates via an allusive narrative how Theo loses the struggle to 'escape the horror of the camp' (*FES*, xi). This is achieved by way of an uncompromising account that perpetuates a sense of the togetherness of the victims, but one that is devoid of solidarity between them. They are *bound* together by the language of the camp that is founded on fear and hatred, rather than by any hope for the healing bonds of love, mutual respect or self-forgiveness. Theo's displacement and state of mind is an expression of a textual ambiguity that reflects the hidden presence of the Holocaust in its very preoccupation with its aftermath.

Badenheim 1939

If Theo cannot contemplate forgiving the victims for their suffering or forgive himself, the action of *Badenheim 1939* takes place in a fictional European resort where characters gather together each year, and before issues such as hatred or forgiveness of the perpetrators or survivors arise.¹⁹⁹ In 1939, however, as they assemble, they are on the brink of deportation and probable annihilation. In varying degrees, they conspire and collude to remain ignorant about their fate. As Danow writes, there is 'an implicit mode of expression and narration that barely states the problem and is far less inclined ... to provide an answer' ('EA', 62). Appelfeld's work is indeed 'apocalyptic', where 'life is dictated ... by cruel happenstance ... and reduced to the ultimate existential decision: to live or to give up and die' ('EA', 62). The device to which Appelfeld resorts in order to convey his particular sense of the past and his concern with the experience itself rather than a kind of spiritual transcendence is by a pervasive use of irony. The omnipresent conflict between the reality of the inhabitants' situation is obliquely stated, but disguised by deceptive and misleading language that is both ironic and paradoxical. Instead of a narrative that describes the events leading up to deportation factually, one is distanced from the threat that is concealed in a text that dissembles. Appelfeld uses irony to convey a sense of the atmosphere, adroitly revealing the

¹⁹⁹ I name a few books and articles where the views expressed have informed my own reading: Vivian Rakoff in Brown and Horowitz, particularly pp.69-71, Danow in 'EA', Hatley in *SWQR* and 'Impossible Mourning: Two Attempts to Remember Annihilation', in *The Centennial Review*, Vol. 35:3, 1991, pp.445-59, Geoffrey Hartman, *The Longest Shadow*, and Gila Ramras-Rauch, 'Aharon Appelfeld: A Hundred Years of Jewish Solitude', in *World Literature Today*, Vol. 72:3, 1998, pp.493-500.

contradictions between people's delusions and their failure to believe in or imagine their vulnerable future, whilst being vaguely conscious of it. The *reader* recognizes the irony – those gaps between how things actually are and what they mean, and how they might or should be.

The story opens in Springtime, the season symbolically associated with growth and renewal. Holidaymakers gather, Dr. Pappenheim arrives to organise the annual festival, and the local prostitutes don summer dresses and stroll down the avenues in a carefree way. But, interspersed with this optimistic opening, one also learns that it has been a 'strange, hard winter' when 'rumors were rife' but almost ignored (*BAD*, 1). Trude lies ill and hallucinating because she sees the world as 'poisoned and diseased', ostensibly because she misses her newlywed daughter who is 'no longer a Jewess' (*BAD*, 3, 61)). Of course, in another sense, she is not hallucinating at all because, as we discover, the world is indeed poisoned and diseased, and those who believe otherwise are the ones who are hallucinating (*BAD*, 61). Trude is already disintegrating into insubstantiality as she lies 'listlessly with the gaze of a woman chronically ill' or looks longingly out of the window 'as if she had been resurrected from the dead' (*BAD*, 1,2).

The use of dramatic irony is persistent, where the reader quickly apprehends the true nature of the situation. Whilst the text dissembles, the reader knows that, metaphorically, winter and death, not Spring, have arrived in Badenheim. The irony becomes more overt with the appearance of the Sanitation Department inspector who wants all sorts of 'peculiar details' that are incongruous (*BAD*, 8). His purpose is to extract details of people's personal lives that have nothing to do with sanitation, but disguise far more ignominious aims that become apparent as the text progresses. The vague sense of menace increases as the reader learns that Trude is 'haunted by a hidden fear' that has some connection to life 'among the Jews' (*BAD*, 10). This is juxtaposed with the 'modest announcement' that the 'jurisdiction of the Sanitation Department had been extended' (*BAD*, 11). Again, the narrator does not state the threat that the Sanitation Department represents, but the paradox and irony of the phrase 'modest announcement' is suggested by the term 'jurisdiction', which implies a use of power that goes beyond attending to matters of hygiene.

The characters' mounting sense of menace and death is omnipresent but subtly conveyed by their preoccupation with trivia, rather than attempting to analyse their displaced anxieties.

With every new edict, there is a growing sense of the sinister realization that 'from now on there would be no difference, either in place or time ... here or in some other place, it made no difference' (*BAD*, 85) Facing transportation, the irony is highlighted by the reader's knowledge of their almost certain impending suffering and death, whilst they refuse to acknowledge the threat: 'This is only a transition. Soon we'll arrive in Poland It's only a transition, only a transition', but of course the transition is one from life to death (*BAD*, 143). As the narrative progresses, the coming ordeal is increasingly apparent, even though they try to ignore the threat by rationalizing every new curtailment of their freedom. The irony is situational in that most of the inhabitants either wittingly or unwittingly refuse to recognize the reality of what is happening. Appelfeld, as the putative narrator, does not confine himself to one single perspective, but relies on the use of irony to imply that there is no straightforward way to come to terms with their situation, and to demonstrate how individuals delude themselves. He offers no judgements, but contrasts the seriousness of the threat with the inconsequential preoccupations that distract them; that is, the simulacra or superficiality of their concerns. This renders the inhabitants' lives as somewhat absurd, but also evokes the reader's understanding that so many future victims of the Holocaust simply could not conceive of the horror that lay ahead.

The irony is relentless as they try to prepare themselves by 'learning' about Poland because they think 'We'll have to get used to the new way of life' and 'It will be completely different' (*BAD*, 138). Of course, the new life will be death, and the differences to which they will be subjected are beyond the realm of their imaginations. As Danow points out:

Arguably the most poignant irony of a literature documenting the disappearance of whole populations is that the victims were able perhaps only in nightmare, or in death ... to conceive the dread fate that awaited them. ('EA', 67.)

Badenheim's Jews are 'sucked in' to the 'filthy freight cars', 'as easily as grains of wheat poured into a funnel' (*BAD*, 147, 148). The experience of these few characters corresponds to that of millions of other Holocaust victims, and Appelfeld captures its enormity with a simple metaphor. Furthermore, as readers, we are required to 'suck' the victims into the landscape of our own memory, and remember those who cannot be reclaimed or even named, but who should not be forgotten.

There is a sense in which all the characters are impalpable and intangible, however many cakes they devour or cigarettes they smoke. Whilst we bear witness to the 'dissolution of bodies, their transformation into silence, into nothingness, long before their arrival at those death camps', it is as if they are already decaying as they assemble in the town of 'modest beauty' (*SWQR*, 445; *BAD*, 1). The rumours circulating are not the idle gossip that is often part of small communities, but concern the actions of the euphemistic 'Sanitation Department', which has the jurisdiction to investigate all the details of Jewish residents' backgrounds and wealth (*BAD*, 1 & 12). At first, 'Some said it was nothing but a health hazard, which the inspectors were trying to locate; others thought they were the Income Tax collectors in disguise' (*BAD*, 12). This is as intensely self-deceptive on the part of the inhabitants as it is deceptive on the part of the authorities, who are manipulating the residents for their own nefarious aims. Genuine Income Tax collectors would be as relatively innocuous as authentic inspectors of a 'Sanitation Department'. The reader is aware that the health hazard is the continued health of the Jews, and that any so-called income tax would not simply be a levy on their wealth and property, but a means to steal from them. The layers of irony here lead to an interpretation on the part of the population that bears no relation to the reality of their situation. The hapless victims will ultimately forfeit far more than their health or wealth, because they are to be deprived of their freedom and their lives.

The Sanitation Dept. surrounds the town, measuring, fencing and unloading 'rolls of barbed wire, cement pillars, and all kinds of appliances suggestive of preparations for a public celebration' (*BAD*, 15). This appears to be benevolent but is, of course, sheer fantasy. Once again, this ironic use of fallacious interpretative logic allows the inhabitants to indulge in a collective form of self-delusion whereby they refuse to recognize the more sinister truth that they are being locked *out* of the wider community, and locked *in* to a ghetto. Against this backdrop, Dr Pappenheim's preparations for the annual festival continue, and the 'pale vacationers' whose 'hunger knew no bounds' invade the pastry shop, and 'devoured cakes' (*BAD*, 13, 16). When a notice appears with the edict that 'all citizens who were Jews had to register with the Sanitation Department', no one questions it but a 'distant dread' is in the eyes of the musicians (*BAD*, 20, 23). Trude speaks 'about death all the time, no longer in fear but with a kind of intimacy', consumed by memories of her dead parents (*BAD*, 21). It is as if they all know that something catastrophic is about to happen but silently conspire to deny it, and it is left to Pappenheim to boost resident and visitor morale by saying 'the Sanitation Dept. wants to boast of its important guests' (*BAD*, 23). What is palpable is the

threat to the people of Badenheim, who somehow dissolve into the 'distant dread' of their future deaths. This reminds us of the history of the Jews as replete with past massacres and catastrophes. It seems as if the sense of foreboding that we share is analogous to the production of an all too familiar tragedy play.

As the Festival draws closer, the Sanitation Department also rehearses its performance, producing alluring posters 'LABOR IS LIFE ... THE AIR IN POLAND IS FRESHER' to lull its future victims into the trap of a false sense of security whereby 'the remote, alien Poland began to seem an idyllic pastoral place' (*BAD*, 29, 31). At the same time, the residents are filled with an unconscious, suffocating foreboding exemplified by the silent response to the twins' performance of Rilke (see *BAD*, 17-18). The audience response is 'downcast', and they 'sat and spoke of death ... [l]ike people who had visited hell and were no longer afraid' (*BAD*, 35). There is a 'barrier placed at the entrance to the town' (*BAD*, 38), preventing exit and entry, and people begin to register to go to Poland, volunteering so that they can 'GET TO KNOW THE SLAVIC CULTURE' (*BAD*, 38, 30). They are drawn in to the web of deceit and trickery, knowing the menace implicit in these extraordinary measures, but hoping that their co-operation will prevent further menace. For many readers, this will of course resonate with the reality of the late 30's, when so many Jews could not begin to comprehend the kind of fate that was evolving in Nazi policy.

Appelfeld captures the petty and snobbish rivalries between the different kinds of Jews – the 'Ostjuden' whose origins are East European and the so-called Austrian Jewish aristocracy, who were in Austria for longer and led more secular, assimilated lives. Pappenheim draws attention to the shared past: '[w]e all lived in Poland once' and has a dual function within the text (*BAD*, 52). He endeavours to calm those who are fearful about what might await them, but can also be seen as colluding with the Sanitation Department by helping to do their job. He dupes the residents by assuaging their increasingly fearful intuitions, although he is at the same time fooling himself. The similarity between him and members of some of the Jewish councils in the ghettos who organised the deportation lists is unmistakable, although Pappenheim does not know the final outcome. He tries to cheer people up in order to create a more celebratory and receptive audience for the Festival. However, Appelfeld seems to remind his readers of the ways in which the Nazis exploited trusted leaders in the Jewish community to play what proved to be far more nefarious roles. Such roles may have begun

in innocence with a wish to help, but were gradually transformed into actual collusion.²⁰⁰

This meant that Jewish leaders were either agonisingly aware that they were being forced to send their fellow Jews to almost certain death or chose to exercise their power in order to save themselves.²⁰¹ This too is part of the burden of memory.

Appelfeld portrays the political climate that led to the eventual implication of Jewish leaders. He shows how Pappenheim's seemingly benevolent desire to cheer the residents of Badenheim is actually harmful, because he encourages them to ignore their intuitive dread and concentrate instead on the preparations for a wholly inappropriate festival. As the population becomes entrapped, the subtlety of Appelfeld's writing resides in the way in which he uses a seemingly innocuous place in the form of a sleepy spa town and a forthcoming festival as the backdrop for the unfolding threat. Rather than utilising a more sensationalist example where Jews are physically attacked and persecuted, he shows how the more insidious abuses via gradual isolation and segregation achieve just as profound an effect. The inhabitants of Badenheim are confused, without direction, and without the wherewithal to resist and in this, there is an uncanny resemblance to Theo in *For Every Sin*. When no action seems possible, it is indeed debilitating, and people resort to petty concerns and reassuring preoccupations with trivia such as the stock of cakes in the cake shop and smoking.

Any written text is obviously concerned with language, and how to achieve the desired response by the use of either very suggestive or plain language. Appelfeld does not indulge in hyperbole, but the language he uses is all the more evocative because the reader has to fill in the gaps. The reader is manipulated to become more attentive to who is saying precisely what, and what it means. Language is assaulted in Badenheim, where 'words without bodies floated in the lobby' and 'angry people clung stubbornly to the words, hoarding them like

²⁰⁰ For an interesting discussion of collaboration, see Henry Maitles 'Surviving the Holocaust: the Anger and Guilt of Primo Levi', in *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol.4:2, 2002, pp.237-251.

²⁰¹ As a general rule, we tend to want 'heroes', and heroes tend to be those who give their lives, rather than save them. I think of those who resisted and sacrificed their lives in the Warsaw Ghetto, as opposed to the case of Dr. Israel Kasztner. He was the subject of a documentary shown on BBC 2 on 25th May, 2009, which explored how attitudes in Israel towards survivors were contemptuous because they were perceived as not having fought back or resisted. It also told the story of Kasztner, who negotiated with high ranking Nazi officials in order to save Jews, but who was subsequently accused of collaboration.

antiquated gadgets that had gone out of use' (*BAD*, 94, 92).²⁰² Some words such as 'sport' become 'taboo' (perhaps they realise they are being played with?), but '[o]ld arguments and forgotten conversations and slips of the tongue' remain 'clear as the day they were uttered', not just amongst the inhabitants, but in a palimpsestic way for the reader aware of history (*BAD*, 92-93). It is as if there is a stranglehold on language, whereby its richness is lost and where its ambivalence begins to disappear. The multiple meanings of individual words are gradually murdered or excluded, and as language is reduced, so are the inhabitants reduced and excluded. A poisonous ambiguity infests the language of the text, reducing meaning to a menacing univocality that cannot be misunderstood by the reader, no matter what words are actually used. We recognize the most seemingly innocuous sentence as containing shadows and undertones that will end in the camps and death. Whether in the mouths of the inhabitants or the slogans of the Sanitation Department, language is mocked in the way it is used not to communicate, but to deceive. Language thus becomes something to fear.

Whilst everyone is suspicious, alienated from their neighbour and fellow Jew, nothing is forgotten, but what is remembered are the 'old words and the fear' (*BAD*, 92). They are still the Jews who, however much they have forgotten in their assimilated comfort, remember the persecution of bygone ages, and this centuries-old fear of the other makes them self absorbed, forgetful of kindness and community or obligation. It creates an 'angry people' who 'prowled the streets and cast their angry shadows' (*BAD*, 92). They walk in the shadow of the death of the future and all those deaths of the past that seem to accuse them of not bearing the burden of remembering their past and their Jewish heritage (*BAD*, 92). In this environment, those who think of themselves as Austrian Jews blame the *Ostjuden* (those who originate in the East). They do not know their crime, but attempt to deny that, for the Sanitation Department, to be a Jew is sufficient to confirm their guilt. They try to seek refuge in language as a means to rationalize the dread that increasingly encompasses them, but we have to repeat that language is now to be feared.

Irving Howe reminds us of TS Eliot who wrote:

Great simplicity is only won by an intense moment or by years of intelligent effort, or by both. It represents one of the most arduous conquests of the human spirit: the

²⁰² See Chaya Shacham's 'Language on the Verge of Death: On Language and Language Criticism in *Badenheim 1939* by Aharon Appelfeld', in *Orbis Litterarum*, 2004, Vol.59:3, pp.188-203, and Lawrence Langer, 'Hearing the Holocaust', in *Poetics Today*, 2006, Vol.27:2, pp.297-309.

triumph of feeling and thought over the natural sin of language.²⁰³

Howe's suggestion that this 'sin' might have something to do with trying to 'whip language into doing more than it can possibly do' is compelling. However, during the Holocaust, the rhetoric of hatred precisely did more than anyone could imagine. The 'sin' of language is thus connected to its power to seduce and deceive. What writers about the Holocaust have problematized over and over is precisely the challenge of how to express it in language, but whatever the genre chosen, most have done so responsibly and ethically. One is reminded of Blanchot's remark that 'The disaster is related to forgetfulness – forgetfulness without memory, the motionless retreat of what has not been treated – the immemorial, perhaps' (*WD*, 3). But he also writes that 'It is upon losing what we have to say that we speak We speak suggesting that something not being said is speaking: the loss of what we were to say' (*WD*, 21). The seductiveness of language resides in its ability to be opaque, to dissemble, and to engage with the Holocaust in a way that the writer and reader can absorb and assimilate, but although 'clarity clamors ... (it) does not clarify' (*WD*, 39). In other words, no matter what is said or written, we can never know the 'absent meaning' (*WD*, 52). One is again reminded of Levinas' idea that what is *said* entails betrayal, and this is linked to language's ability to seduce. The point about Eliot's natural sin of language is that the word 'natural' is misleading because language itself is not natural - it is artifice, and therefore the triumph of feeling and thought can never be adequately articulated.

As the narrative of *Badenheim 1939* moves inexorably towards its climax, it becomes imbued with a sense of the approaching end of the world. The old ignored Rabbi reappears whose 'years of isolation had made him forget the language', and now 'spoke a mixture of Yiddish and Hebrew', returning to the roots of the European Jewish heritage (*BAD*, 101). With a menacing fecundity that bears no relation to flourishing, 'the luxuriant creepers had crept inside', symptomatic of the suffocating insulation that envelops the inhabitants (*BAD*, 103). Some commit suicide and others demand drugs from the pharmacist, whilst the Rabbi displays an 'ancient grief' in his eyes (*BAD*, 104). The musicians continue to rehearse, the residents continue to indulge in banal and trivial preoccupations; Pappenheim attempts to pacify the angry pastry shop owner, and the Rabbi prays aloud to welcome the Sabbath (*BAD*, 106). This is the superficial world of Badenheim, but there is another where the

²⁰³ See 'Writing and the Holocaust: How Literature Has and Has not, Met its Greatest Challenge', in *The New Republic*, 27.10.86.

‘people hugged the walls like shadows’ and the repetition of this image emphasizes the way in which the fears and memory of the past are omnipresent, silent and silencing (*BAD*, 55, 106). It is ‘indiscreet’ to ask too many questions or give voice to the gnawing anxiety about what is to happen to them in Poland, which they still try to convince themselves they ‘look forward’ to with such eagerness (*BAD*, 107). And yet, ‘despair now stared from every wall’, inscribed with the shadows of the past, present and future, and no longer possible to ignore (*BAD*, 109).

Although some false gaiety persists, the characters’ chatter and future plans are interspersed with information about the ‘emigration procedures’ (*BAD*, 122). Dr. Langman regards the brash salesman, Salo, whose origins are in Poland, with a ‘loathing’ that is symptomatic of his own denial of reality (*BAD*, 122). But Salo eventually falls silent and ‘A kind of smile split open on his forehead. An evil smile, smeared there with poisonous paint’ (*BAD*, 122). It is as if he no longer has a face that he owns, but having been branded as a sub-human venomous Other by the authorities, is rendered discarnate, without body and unmemorable - erased. There is a sense of foreboding and incorporeality whereby ‘the country parlour was already living a life of its own, a life without people’ (*BAD*, 122). What a ‘life without people’ forebodes is not simply that the parlour will be emptied of its occupants, but that the memory of them will also be eradicated, as if they had never been alive. James Hatley expresses it thus:

The faces of *Badenheim* are ... more the mask of a nothingness which has slowly encroached upon the body, eating away its vitality, its life, its expectation to be remembered To speak of Salo’s face as split open ... is to lead the reader to remember that even as Salo sat ... he will already have been extinguished, that for his Nazi captors he had already become no more than a vermin to be disposed of
the bodies of the Jews of *Badenheim* lived in a world without a future.²⁰⁴

What is also being challenged by the image of Salo as containing both organic and non-organic elements, is his status as human, which will be tested even more severely in the limited future that remains. Human beings will be treated with the same indifference as the dogs the sentries kill, and will be dispossessed of the ability to choose how to live or die. In the midst of people being thought of as dogs instead of as human, the dogs ironically serve as a precursor to the fate of the human. There is a further irony in the way that Death is personified, assuming a responsibility that actually belongs to the murderers.

²⁰⁴ p.p.447-8, James Hatley, ‘Impossible Mourning’, pp. 447-448.

One is reminded of Levinas' recollections of his time as a prisoner of the Nazis and his story about Bobby, the dog.²⁰⁵ Just as the soldiers at *Badenheim* strip their prisoners of their 'human skin' and treat them as subhuman, the dogs become a metaphor for their inviolable humanity.²⁰⁶ The dog, Bobby, makes no distinction between prisoner and Nazi, greeting each with equal pleasure. He irritates the oppressors because he treats each man as a man, not as 'other' or belonging to a different species. This disrupts the logic of the cruelty meted out, whereby some men have the power of life and death over others, and ignore their primordial responsibility to and for them. The murder of the dogs in *Badenheim* is as irresponsible and unjust as the forthcoming murder of the Jews will be.

The characters of *Badenheim* are neither heroes nor villains. What accentuates a sense of pathos is their very ordinariness. The ghosts that haunt us burden our own memories precisely because of the lack of memorable characters. In fact, they actually seem to dissolve into anonymity as much as the indistinguishable ashes of the millions murdered and the remains of their murderers. The lack of palpability in the fictive characters resonates in the impossibility of any attempt for the reader 'to linger mournfully alongside the corpses of these deceased who have left no palpable memory behind'.²⁰⁷ The sheer magnitude of what and who there is to grieve for is overpowering, if not impossible. What the reader encounters is not memory, but the ghosts of memory and the memories of ghosts that render one very uneasy. According to Hatley, Freud would situate such uneasiness as linked to the development of the super-ego. The super ego, simply put, represents the conscience that prevents us from doing certain things, but it is more than that because it also encompasses introjection, or the process where relationships with objects in the world are replaced by internal imagined objects. As infants, our attachment to our mothers is displaced by the intrusion of the voice of authority - usually the father - and results in a sense of alienation as well as anxiety about separation. The super ego thus protects us, but also censures aggressive feelings we may have towards figures of authority who prevent our egoistic aims to satisfy our desires. On the one hand, we gradually have to take into account the demands of those around us, which is part of the socialization process. On the other hand, Freud believed it is not morality that prevents aggressive behaviour, but that we sometimes behave morally because we fear and repress our aggression.

²⁰⁵ Levinas, *DF*, pp. 151-3, and see my discussion in Chapter I.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p.152.

²⁰⁷ Hatley, 'Impossible Mourning', p.450.

Hatley's account for the uneasiness caused by the ghosts of memory suggests that this does not come about via '*identification* with the other but through a *loss* of the other – a loss whose trace consisted in the formation of a conscience, a structure of identification which itself disrupted the projects of the other with the claim of the other'.²⁰⁸ This may reverberate for survivor, mourner and onlooker. It is reminiscent of Levinas, but what Hatley is asserting is that the disruption 'dethrones' the pleasure principle and replaces it with the 'reality principle'.²⁰⁹ However, it seems to me that Levinas might argue somewhat differently; whilst the pleasure principle might well be dethroned, it is not replaced with the reality principle alone, but with the transcendent principle of responsibility to and for the other that comes prior to consciousness and, indeed, conscience. Although we may want to identify with the victims (to allay our sense of alienation), we cannot, and neither can we ever fulfil our responsibility to them or for their suffering, and this in some way explains our uneasiness when confronted by such troubling narratives.

It is noteworthy that the French word 'conscience' translates as both 'conscience' and 'consciousness'. The connections between the two concepts may not be immediately apparent, but they are integral to the memories of survivors. In the camps, it has been suggested that the lack of food, warmth, shelter, choice and so on, led to inmates behaving in a way that they would not do under more normal circumstances. Conscience and consciousness were suspended to an extent whereby they could barely respond to their own inner thoughts and feelings, let alone to those of others. Levinas would not be sanctimonious, but would claim that when reality impinges on both conscience and consciousness, the transcendent principle of responsibility is neglected or ignored. One of the consequences of that is that mourning may be less to do with the memory of the other, and more to do with the guilt that comes about from confronting the memory of one's self, and the reality of what one did or did not do at the time. It is thus not only the loss of the other that is mourned and haunts the survivor, but also the loss of one's self. The pity of it is that there are countless thousands without faces, names or bodies, who have no one left to remember them in their individuality or particularity. To that extent, we can only note their disappearance for they cannot be remembered. It thus becomes an impossibility to ponder all the dead, but only the horror of their dying.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., p.451.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., see p.451

In *Badenheim 1939*, the characters that inhabit the fiction, who so closely resemble ‘real’ Jewish communities, could not have known or foretold precisely the murder of millions that was to follow. There is in *Badenheim* a kind of inertia where despite a sense of foreboding, the inhabitants try to carry on as usual. However, there is also a growing sense of confusion because of an increasingly enveloping sense that they are being deprived of choices in all their actions. Appelfeld’s narrative ensures that we understand the claustrophobic stranglehold in which the characters find themselves. The clamps grip ever more tightly, restricting any freedom of movement and curtailing choice, thus disfiguring the physical space in which they can move about, and affecting their perceptions and their identities. For the reader, Appelfeld foreshadows the inevitability of destruction without reference to it, but assumes the reader’s knowledge of historical facts. One is confronted by the fiction, but it is conflated with whatever historical knowledge one has.

The indirect form of engagement with the Holocaust in both *Badenheim 1939* and *For Every Sin* reinforces the claim made at the beginning of this chapter. Allusion and suggestion in this sample of Holocaust literature provide a way to acknowledge the burden of memory occasioned by the trauma. The personal dilemmas and consequences of the Holocaust are invoked just as powerfully by the absence of direct representation of it, as they are in texts that attempt to detail its terror. Appelfeld restricts his evocation to narratives that avoid recollections of the camps and what happened in them, but in which the absence of such accounts reinforces the significance of the silence. The ironic tone of *Badenheim 1939* detaches the reader from a merely emotional response, and encourages one to think about the implications of the situation for the characters within it. *For Every Sin* shifts from past to present, where the fragments of Theo’s past life intrude into the post-war life he is attempting to enter. Appelfeld uses a physical landscape to map Theo’s emotional indirection and confusion without any explicit reference to what he has endured in the camp. Theo fails because he is unable to assimilate the losses he has sustained, and the disruptions in the text reflect the fragmentation of his life.

Conclusion

There is a need to constantly remind oneself that survivors of the Holocaust underwent not one, but many traumatic experiences over a period of several years. This applies as much to those incarcerated in the camps as it does to those in hiding such as Perec and Appelfeld. They had the additional burden of being very young children whose parents were murdered or disappeared; that is, the people to whom they would, under other circumstances, turn for protection and comfort. Thus, a capacity to endure the unendurable was necessary in order to survive. And when family members die taking their lives and secrets with them in this way, the living are deprived of something that the dead could give - that is their memories and their future. I have aimed to demonstrate the ways in which, however allusive or opaque, literature confronts the walking shadows of memory.

The self-identity of author and subject are called into question time and again in survivor autobiography and fiction because the element of unbelievability in the events distance the author from the subject - that is from one's sense of self. They *own* the memories they describe, but it is as if they resist *possessing* them because they are too traumatic. They can affirm the experiences of the past, and then either say or insinuate 'I know this happened, but I can't believe it'. This is as much about *who* the person becomes as the veracity of what is being told. For some, there is a desire to reject a memory because of its horror and because of its consequences for the person who is remembering. Paradoxically, there is also the compulsion and need to remember as an ethical obligation to the dead, and in order to reaffirm their own sense of life and living. One of the most disturbing consequences for the survivor is his profound uncertainty about his identity - that is, what it is that has survived after having been destroyed.

For Perec, Appelfeld and all other survivors who have borne witness, their stories are not ones of 'unity', where the 'man who sets out to write the story of his own life has it in view as a whole' (*ABD*, 150). These are stories of fragmentation, disruption and destruction. Although the context is different, I agree with Marcus when she claims that the distinction between memoir and autobiography is tied up with issues of power and powerlessness (see *ABD*, 151). The Holocaust survivor reclaims a kind of power just by telling *a* story that evokes a sense of the disempowerment experienced. However, this is a complicated issue

because such power is not born of either strength or weakness, but more often has to do with either a compulsion to speak or pierce the silence.

This chapter has principally been concerned with the literary devices used which enable that which needs or wants to remain allusive or concealed to be achieved via a route of detours, suggestions and gaps, but where the aim is always to convey the experiences, thoughts and feelings as *truthfully* as possible. In Holocaust fiction, this truthfulness is no less important, but the *reality* of the Holocaust intrudes into the narrative more by way of fantasy and imagination that may be both more or less direct than narratives of witnessing or testimony. One can think of Perec's *W*, where the narrative is divided into two parts, the one a sparse account of his childhood memories, and the other a fantasy of a diabolical world that never mentions the Holocaust, but where everything that happens implicitly refers to it.

It could be argued that there are three principle aspects to the burden of memory as expressed in Appelfeld's fiction: the memory as a Jew of Jewish life, the memory of the Holocaust, and the expression of personal memories.²¹⁰ It seems reasonable to suggest that much of Appelfeld's fiction represents his personal attempt to transcend a childhood that was denied him, but that continues to haunt him in its absence. Indeed, we have observed that he has much to say about the ways in which children remember the Holocaust. Where memory is absent, he invents it, and where it is inscribed, he relies on the indelible marks it has left. The specific way in which Appelfeld has situated the time frame of *Badenheim* before the war or *For Every Sin* after the war, captures the atmosphere that beset Jews throughout Europe, and draws the reader in to the actual experience. It serves to frame the void left by the erasure of the past, friends, family and all the symbols of a life free of persecution. I would further assert that the erasure of *Badenheim's* characters in particular, is not unconnected to a sense of erasure in Appelfeld himself – the loss of his childhood and his identity.

To attempt to draw a distinction, one might say that writers of more straightforward autobiographical testimony, such as Delbo, Levi and Antelme, use literary devices in order to make the reality more intelligible, whereas the fiction writers such as Appelfeld and Perec use fiction in order to displace the reality so that they and their readers can confront both it

²¹⁰ This is similar to the preoccupations in Schwartz – see p.xii.

and themselves. 'Storytelling' is a way to express a split consciousness – that which is known, but cannot be confronted directly, and that which is confronted but cannot be known. Thus, whether testimony or a fictional narrative structure, the burden of memory is divulged and both forms are equally potent, containing, as they do, ideas relating to the brutality, the inability or unwillingness to interpret the inexplicable, and perhaps most of all, raising questions about the problems of what it is to be human. The fictional Holocaust narrative structures discussed disclose a need to confabulate the reality, and whilst testimony often conceals that which cannot be said or told, it can be argued that the fictional account makes the reality not more bearable, but more expressible because the agony is displaced.

CHAPTER IV

A CRISIS FOR HUMANISM: A THEORETICAL APPROACH

Introduction

In this chapter, I shall argue that Holocaust literature depicts a crisis for humanism. In order to clarify some of the disparate views, it is useful to consider the etymology of the word itself. The root-word of humanism comes from the Latin *humus*, meaning earth or ground and another derivative is *humilis* or humble; from this comes *homo* or earth-being, and *humanus*, which means earthly, human.²¹¹ The human is thus both of the earth and on the earth, and this earthliness reminds us that human beings are first and foremost material beings. Thoughts, feelings and concepts take place in embodied beings which have finite lives as mortal entities.

What defines the human is thus twofold – the physical composition of matter, and the inner potential to feel, speak or think. The belief that the human being also has some control over his or her life and behaviour is probed by – amongst many – Tony Davies, Sigmund Freud and Emmanuel Levinas. After the Holocaust, it is also questioned by many of those who have written narratives of witnessing, memoirs and Holocaust fiction. Whatever debates surround different understandings of humanism, all agree that it entails a system of values that upholds the idea of individual autonomy. It is this potential for self-determination that distinguishes the human from other forms of life. The central claim of this chapter is that the Holocaust destroyed the potential for self-determination and autonomy. If the quiddity of the human affirms both its material origins as well as a potential for certain freedoms, the extent to which any individual exercised control over his own life was radically called into question during the Holocaust.

Whatever individual autonomy flourished in previous generations of Germans, once the Nazis' power spread throughout Europe, individuals were expected to conform to the

²¹¹ See *HUM*, p.125.

dictates of the *Führer*, in accordance with the “*Führerprinzip*”.²¹² For the reviled Jews and those who tried to resist Nazism, all rights and freedoms – whether of speech or action – were not simply eroded; they were systematically revoked and extinguished in the cities, ghettos and the camps. Basic choices about physical or emotional courses of action were denied them. After the Holocaust and the miasma of the camp environment, there have been implicit suggestions that humanism falsifies what it is to be human because its values became so inapplicable as to be rendered meaningless.

I intend to demonstrate how a crisis for humanism arises via a close reading of the literature of Borowski, who was not Jewish, but was both a victim and a survivor of Auschwitz. I assert that his depiction of the Holocaust and judgement of the world are uncompromisingly harsh in terms of the possibility for a universal, humanistic ethics. However, I claim that he retained a brand of humanism, whereby he regarded the singular, loving relation as the only one that offered some potential for a limited type of self-determination and ethical relationship with others. Humanism thus becomes largely irrelevant and therefore meaningless for him because of his experiences but I shall argue that traces of it remain embedded in his writing.

Any living matter has a *form* of life and what evolves throughout the ages is a concern with the form of life appropriate for the human being to flourish. One is reminded of Giorgio Agamben who explains how the Greeks had more than one way to ‘express what is meant by the word “life”’, and how they made a morphological distinction between two linked, but distinct terms and their semantic differences.²¹³ These terms are ‘*zoe*’ and ‘*bios*’.²¹⁴ The first means the ‘simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men or gods)’ which we may think of as bare, naked life, but without aims or ideas to endow that life with

²¹² Whereas “*Führer*” means “leader”, the “*Führerprinzip*” is the “*Führer* principle”, and is connected to the moral value of the Third Reich which was loyalty and obedience (see www.shoaheducation.com/befehl.html). Hitler was convinced that he alone ‘was destined to lead Germany’ (Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p.184. Ian Kershaw also tells us how Hitler’s ‘absolute supremacy’, a ‘constant Hobbesian ‘war of all against all’ ... enhance[d] his extraordinary position as the fount of all authority ... Hitler was the sole linchpin ... the sole arbiter each sectional interest in the Third Reich could thrive only with the legitimacy of the Fuhrer’s backing’ and ‘the purchase he placed on his own image and standing was narcissistic in the extreme’. In addition, Kershaw states that ‘there was no government beyond Hitler’. He was ‘the only link of the component parts of the regime’. See Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, Nemesis 1936-1945*, (London, Penguin Press, 2000), pp. 94, 93, 229, 227.

²¹³ *HS*, p.1.

²¹⁴ *ibid.*, p.2, and from which we derive zoology and biology.

a sense of flourishing. The second term of '*bios*' goes beyond bare life to include 'the *form* or way of living proper to an individual or a group' (*HS* 1, my italics).

In *Means Without End*, Agamben explains the '*form of life*' as 'a life that can never be separated from its form, a life in which it is never possible to isolate something such as naked life' (*ME*, 2-3). Human life is not simply a matter of *fact* 'but always and above all *possibilities* of life, always and above all power' (*ME*, 3). This refers both to personal power and potential, as well as the authority of institutional structures such as the State. Whilst the Greeks valued the 'mere fact of living' as a 'natural sweetness' (i.e. *zoe*), which most men would cling to even through 'much suffering', they revered the development of man as both reproductive *and* political (*HS*, 2). What distinguishes man from other living beings is the idea of a 'community not simply of the pleasant and the painful but of the good and the evil and of the just and the unjust' (*HS*, 3). Community living is the pursuit of a good life which involves *being* good and just and, for the Greeks, also entailed the political where 'human politics is distinguished from that of other beings [and] ... tied to language' (*HS*, 3-4). Furthermore, human beings 'are the only beings for whom happiness is always at stake in their living this immediately constitutes the form-of-life as political life The state is a community instituted for the sake of the living and well living of men in it' (*ME*, 3).

Michel Foucault uses the idea that human politics is different to that of other species and linked to language. He applies it to the modern era when

natural life begins to be included in the mechanisms and calculations of State power, and politics turns into *biopolitics* The point at which the species and the individual as a simple living body become what is at stake in a society's political strategies'. (*HS*, 3.)

If the 'production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power', this has implications for humanism, because of Foucault's claim that political strategies lead to the 'bestialization of man', achieved via 'political techniques' that enable the protection of life, but may also 'authorize a holocaust' (*HS*, 6, 3).

The totalitarian states and concentration camps of the twentieth century exemplify the most negative aspects of biopolitics although, as Agamben comments, Foucault never examined

the connection.²¹⁵ However, he was concerned with the issue of power and contended that it ‘penetrates subjects’ very bodies and forms of life’ (*HS*, 5). In *Homer Sacer*, Agamben aims to interrogate why ‘Western politics first constitutes itself through an exclusion (which is simultaneously an inclusion) of bare life’ and why ‘bare life has the peculiar privilege of being that whose exclusion founds the city of men’ (*HS*, 7). In other words, even though the ‘mere fact of living’ was something to be valued, the *zoe* could be ignored or used, disregarded or exterminated rather than welcomed into the society of *bios*, especially when politically expedient. Similarly, *bios* could be reduced to the state of *zoe* by a process of exclusion if considered an unworthy part of the political community.

These explanations bear an uncanny resemblance to the dehumanization of the victims of the Holocaust. They also have implications for any discussion about humanism because whatever freedoms or rights an individual may or may not have are dependent upon the political environment that surrounds him/her. Levi’s poem ‘If This is a Man’ suggests the degradation of a form of life that corrupts the inner life of thought and feeling to a point where it can no longer flourish. What becomes clear is that when a man or woman is reduced to bare and naked life, deprived of food, shelter, warmth and so forth, it becomes impossible to sustain a life that is imbued with meaning. The poem angrily asks that we consider the broken spirit of a man:

Consider if this is a man
Who works in the mud
Who does not know peace
Who fights for a scrap of bread
Who dies because of a yes or a no²¹⁶

What is implicitly questioned is what happens to a man reduced to the form of *zoe*; how are we to respond to the idea of such a being, and can we think of him as ‘human’ at all? Levi’s poem insists on emphasising the dehumanization of victims of the Holocaust, and refuses the reader any comforting idea that they retained physical or moral autonomy. This suspends the Kantian notion of the inviolate nature of human autonomy and whilst Levi recognizes this suspension, as a humanist, much of his post-Holocaust writing seeks its restoration. However, despite all his ruminations, he was unable to reconcile what had happened during the Holocaust with his belief that man could be master of his own house. Whatever his

²¹⁵ The political connections between Foucault and Agamben are outlined in Lee Spinks ‘Thinking the Post-human: Literature, Affect and the Politics of Style’, in *Textual Practice*, 2001, Vol.15:1, pp.23-46.

²¹⁶ Preface to *ITIAM*.

fervent hopes, his writing conveys a profound anxiety and uncertainty, particularly in *The Drowned and the Saved*.

According to Kant, although another person may 'seek to deny my autonomy, this does not require my own self-capitulation', and 'the heteronomous forces and desires of the sensual world cannot be used to justify the denial of human autonomy'.²¹⁷ I shall show via an examination of Levi, Borowski and others, that such a humanist rationalization becomes at best, a dilemma for autonomy versus power and, at worst, an irrelevance for those who experienced the camps. The idea that moral autonomy could survive in the camp environment is naïve and, as James Hatley writes, 'autonomy can found the moral only insofar as it is already provided for within a heteronomous order' (*SWQR*, 67).²¹⁸ Crushing whatever autonomy victims had previously enjoyed in their pre-incarceration lives exposed them to a violence that was without limits.

I therefore ask whether a post-Holocaust ethics can be grounded in humanism, or whether cherished ideas about its ethics are called into question. Furthermore is the relationship between humanism and antihumanism solely antagonistic, or does antihumanism 'secrete a humanist rhetoric' that avows what it seeks to reject, as suggested by Kate Soper?²¹⁹ In other words, does Nazism instigate a fundamental break with humanism, or is it in some ways consistent with its logic? In order to attempt answers to these questions, several others occur. For example, is there a hiatus in the general ethics of civilization in order to preserve those ethics which appear to be irrelevant or inapplicable? Are such general ethics suspended rather than rejected in order to re-evaluate our troubled and troubling thoughts about humanistic ethics the human after the Holocaust? If so, can one suggest that the Holocaust led to the subversion of the intrinsic value and values of *all* men, whether those

²¹⁷ *SWQR*, p.49.

²¹⁸ See too *PME*. On questions to do with the law and autonomy, Bauman writes that freedom always needs to be 'monitored' – people need 'to be prevented from using their freedom to do wrong' (*PME*, pp.6). Furthermore 'Autonomy of rational individuals and heteronomy of rational management could not do without each other; but they could not cohabit peacefully either' (*PME*, p.7). During the Holocaust, this is particularly pertinent because it was the power obtained by the Nazis that gave them a disproportionate freedom to do wrong, and they had no desire to cohabit peacefully with the Jews.

²¹⁹ Kate Soper, *Humanism and Antihumanism*, (London: Hutchinson, 1986), p.182. Whilst Soper points out that the term 'humanism' implicitly appeals for approval, she also attempts to redefine the current usage of both humanism and antihumanism: '*Humanism*: appeals (positively) to the notion of a core humanity or common essential features in terms of which human beings can be defined and understood, thus (negatively) to concepts ... designating ... the perversion or 'loss' of this common being *Anti-humanism*: claims that humanism as outlined above is pre-scientific 'philosophical anthropology'. All humanism is 'ideological' to be explained in terms of the systems of thought or 'consciousness' produced in response to particular historical periods' (pp. 11-12).

who dominate or those without power? One also has to ask what happens when human beings confront the kind of dilemmas faced during the Holocaust, which could not be dealt with by a humanistic ethics because those ethics were destroyed by the very dilemmas confronted. Most importantly, can there be a humanism that affirms solidarity amongst human beings, but with a decentring of the self that neither affirms the individual as master of his own house nor, indeed, its centre?

PART I

The Origins and Dilemmas for Humanism

The modern understanding of humanism, with its pre-history in early modernity, refers to the importance of values and ideals emanating from Europe during the eighteenth century, which precisely emphasized the human potential for control over one's life, and the autonomy to make reasoned and moral decisions about one's behaviour. Humanism was anthropocentric, regarding man as the centre of value and meaning in the universe.²²⁰ With the Enlightenment displacement of God by man, man came to be regarded as having a greater potential to reason for himself, and the capacity to develop his own spiritual, physical and intellectual aspirations, as well as values and ideals. This was the new thinking that promulgated the idea that religion no longer grounded philosophy.

Immanuel Kant influenced this thinking, and his ideas put Man, not God at the centre. Unlike many other Enlightenment thinkers, Kant was a religious believer, but held that actions predicated on fear of or love for His omnipotence have no moral worth, although he also believed that 'morality must lead to religion'.²²¹ The laws of National Socialism were

²²⁰ See 'Humanism and Enlightenment' in *HUM*, particularly p.119, where Davies quotes Cassirer as writing 'the process of self-liberation ... toward the spirit's autonomous consciousness of itself and of its task, constitutes the only thing that can be call genuine 'becoming' in the spiritual sense' (Cassirer 1981:227-8). He also recalls both Kant and Diderot's concept of nature as deriving its meaning 'solely from the presence of rational Man' (*HUM*, 123). Indeed, Diderot wrote: 'If mankind ... were banished ... nature would be nothing more than a scene of desolation and silence It is the presence of man which renders other beings interesting Why not make man the central focus? (Diderot 1992:25, quoted in *HUM*, p.123).

²²¹ See H.J. Paton's robust analysis of *The Moral Law: Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, [1948] trans. H.J. Paton, (London: Hutchinson, 1966), p.38.

neither those of God nor humanistic moral beneficence, and an absence of autonomy means 'we are forced to consider the concrete social relations through which it [liberalism] is either undermined and fragmented or nourished and sustained' (*KRI*, 14).

It was, for Kant, no longer what God wants of Man that was as important as Man's *duties* to himself and to others, and he also distinguished between actions undertaken because of inclination as opposed to duty. This raises the idea that a person may do certain things because he *feels* so inclined, thus acting from sentiment rather than reason, and such actions may conflict with one's moral or legal obligations to others and to the society of which he is a part. Paton explains that '[i]f actions are to be morally good, they must be done for the sake of duty'.²²² Kant saw one's duty to others as primarily not using them as a means to an end, but as regarding one's fellow human beings as ends in themselves. If I use another only in order to achieve what I want, I fail to acknowledge his humanity by treating him as a 'thing' rather than as another rational human being. It is thus 'the motive of duty, not the motive of inclination that gives moral worth'.²²³ The pursuit of happiness is not undervalued in Kant, but the notion of duty precedes all other purposes in moral law (see *KRI*, 123). Furthermore, whether or not actions are taken because of duty or inclination, they should be taken by free, autonomous agents (and 'freedom would be identical with autonomy ... a free will would be a will under moral laws' (*KRI*, 4).

Victor J. Seidler convincingly argues that whilst Kant's distinction between inclination and duty is 'crucial' for him, it also divides the individual from himself as if '[o]ur very humanity is to be identified with our reason and morality' (*KRI*, 122). Seidler also challenges the terminology of Kant's imperative about treating others 'never simply as a means, but always ... as an end' as undermining his 'rationalism and individualism' (*KRI*, 12). This is because 'the denial of wants and feelings is in some way a denial of what is particular in people's lives and because there are structures of power and morality that lie beyond the language of individualism' (*KRI*, 12). We shall see how this applies to the treatment of people during the Holocaust, and has implications for humanism.

Contrary to Kant, Seidler argues that reason and rationality are necessary, but insufficient conditions for autonomy, which also entails respect for the feelings, aspirations and needs of

²²² *Ibid.*, p.14.

²²³ *Ibid.*, p.19.

others, both emotionally and materially (see *KRI*, 5). Kant's philosophy is not utilitarian. The possibility for moral goodness is his aim, and in this concept resides the idea of the potential for a human dignity that was denied to the victims of the Holocaust. I agree with Seidler that 'When we degrade or humiliate a person we deny their humanity in a way Kant could never express' (*KRI*, 185).

Kant also upheld the idea of Man as self-determining, self-improving and ethically self-disciplined. According to him, if there is a conflict between people, each person should be considered as having equal value in the eyes of the law. But, as Zygmunt Bauman writes:

Ethics is thought of after the pattern of the law Law ... strives to define the 'proper' and 'improper' actions it acts on the assumption that ... one choice can and should be decreed ... and so acting in all situations *can* be rational But this assumption leaves out what is properly moral It shifts moral phenomena from the realm of personal autonomy into that of power-assisted heteronomy (*PME*, 11).

One begins to appreciate that however straightforward Enlightenment ideas appear, they are far from unproblematic. There are exceptions to acting according to one's duty or inclination when one is *forced* or compelled to do something, and this dichotomy is relevant during the Holocaust when victims became unable to do their duty *or* follow their own inclinations. Such options were mostly obviated by the violence and fear inherent in their situation. Furthermore, if Kant and other Enlightenment philosophers aimed to establish moral foundations that bound *all* human beings whatever their race, creed or class, such foundations were to be based 'solely on 'the nature of man'', without reliance on any gods or superstitions (*PME*, 25-6). However, as Bauman suggests, this replaces the religious 'spiritual rulers and guardians' with philosophers, *and* raises thorny questions about what, precisely, is meant by the term 'human nature' (*PME*, 25-6). The philosophers wanted to be moral guardians and ethical legislators, but recognized that any concept of human nature had to take into account the 'ignorant and stupefied' masses, whose behaviour was often destructive and cruel (d'Alembert, quoted in *PME*, 26). One solution was to claim that human nature was 'its own *potential*' (my emphasis) ... *unfulfillable on its own*, without [the] assistance of reason and the reason bearers' (*PME*, 26). Such assistance comes from the law (and philosophy), but law suggests both authority and coercion, thus impeding the possibility for wholly autonomous decisions or acts, and this represents a problem for humanist ethics.

In Kant's ideal world, any action taken must be dictated by reason, and the basis for any moral action was that it be universally accepted and applicable to everyone, but it is possible to see where problems may arise. If one is confronted by two conflicting duties, moral categorical imperatives become problematic because they challenge the possibility to be universally applicable, and one has to decide which duty should outweigh the other and why. This is apposite in the camp environment when inmates were faced with situations where, whatever action they took was wrong. They stole, lied, remained silent when they should have spoken out, and did appalling things to their fellow inmates, in order to save their own and/or other lives. Because of the terrifying circumstances and their wasted physical condition, they also did things which they knew were morally wrong, but paradoxically, had their own moral justification.

Since the war, and no doubt influenced by it, we have also been confronted by post structuralist theories. A number of thinkers have challenged Enlightenment ideas, including Derrida, Lacan, Foucault, Lyotard and Levinas. The idea of Man is replaced with that of Subject, and as a Subject, man is neither self-determined nor central.²²⁴ For these thinkers (and many others), the idea of any theory about the meaning and interpretation of ethical rules is seen as inherently unstable and subjective, as well as gendered, and therefore has no claims to being universally true. Furthermore, any system of thought that makes claims of universal truth has been accused of being inherently 'totalitarian'; that is, oppressive and authoritarian.

In particular, Levinas is preoccupied with the dangers of any thinking that purports to be universally applicable, and is more concerned with the notion of an infinite responsibility that an individual has than with the idea of *consciously* performing one's duties. James Hatley argues that Levinas would also claim that reason alone is inadequate to decide on the moral rectitude of any action. One has a responsibility for the *suffering* of others according to Levinas, and 'for which no reason, no justification could ever be given' (*SWQR*, 57).

For Levinas, suffering itself has no intrinsic meaning or value unless it is the suffering of the other. The call of the other's vulnerability exceeds any appeal to reason, and Kant's

²²⁴ And, as Agamben writes 'man as a living being presents himself no longer as an *object* but as the *subject* of political power', although one might argue that whether as object or subject, all are subjected to political power. See *HS*, p.9.

rationality thus becomes ‘utterly incapable of being capable’ when confronted by the Nazis’ indifference to the suffering of their victims, and their refusal to recognize or respond to them on the grounds of a shared humanity (*SWQR*, 57).²²⁵ Autonomy and freedom are threatened by those with the power to crush them and, as Lyotard explains in *Le Differend*, to be a victim stultifies the sufferer’s ability to express the harm done to him because the perpetrator denies, ignores or ridicules the ‘address’ of the other ‘as if he or she were without a face’.²²⁶ The persecutor can then claim – as will be shown in Borowski’s *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* – that prisoners deserve to be prisoners and that any attack on them is justified. It should also be said that as human beings, we do not speak or think in one voice. The centre of my world may well conflict with that of the larger world, and my dignity and freedom or autonomy may be jeopardized by that world. This threatens one of the basic tenets of Enlightenment humanism.

Tony Davies also signposts the pitfalls for humanism by summarizing the paradox that confronts modern humanism emanating from the eighteenth century:

On one side, humanism is saluted as the philosophical champion of human freedom and dignity, standing alone and often outnumbered against the battalions of ignorance, tyranny and superstition On the other, it has been denounced as an ideological smokescreen for the oppressive mystifications of modern society and culture, the marginalisation and oppression of the multitudes of human beings in whose name it pretends to speak, even, through an inexorable ‘dialectic of enlightenment’, for the nightmare of fascism and the atrocity of total war. (*HUM*, 5.)²²⁷

This jibes with Bauman’s views when he states that ‘virtually every moral impulse ... leads to immoral consequences (most characteristically, the impulse to care for the Other, when taken to its extreme, leads to the annihilation of the autonomy of the Other, to domination and oppression)’ (*PME*, 11).

Theodor Adorno wrote that the ‘Enlightenment behaves towards things as a dictator towards men. He knows them in so far as he can manipulate them’ (Adorno, quoted in Davies, 120). The Nazis believed in a mélange of often incoherent ideas which cannot really be called either humanist or anti-humanist. On the one hand, their aiming towards Greek ideals such as strength, dignity, beauty, honour, pride, culture and bodily perfection are associated with

²²⁵ See too Hatley’s expanded discussion in *SWQR*, pp.57-60

²²⁶ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges van den Abbeele, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p.9 and cited in *SWQR*, p.59.

²²⁷ See too Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, [1944], trans. John Cumming, (London: Verso, 1979), pp. 51,107, 120.

the humanistic. On the other hand, they were concerned with expunging disease, *but* the disease they most wished to expunge was not represented by bodily illnesses, but by specific bodies, principally those of the Jews. This brings to mind a speech given by Hitler in 1942, when he declaimed 'we shall regain our health only when we exterminate the Jews'.²²⁸ The Nazis compared the Jews to various diseases such as cancer, tuberculosis or a plague, where the 'cure' in the best interests of public health was their extermination. What is taken from humanism is thus little more than a formal husk encompassing Greek ideals concerning physical beauty, health and strength. These were manipulated by the Nazis as having a direct relationship with the metaphysical or soul of a human being. They inverted the historical dominance of the *spiritual* and replaced it with the pre-eminence of the body and, in so doing, distorted virtues associated with the body to accommodate their racial policies and assert their own superiority. I shall discuss how Levinas responds to the idea of an opposition between body and spirit shortly.²²⁹

For the moment, suffice it to say that within the Third Reich, each citizen's origins and ancestry was considered vital according to the Aryan ideal, if an individual was to be granted the privilege of acceptance into the hegemony of racialized perfection.²³⁰ Once in power, the Nazis had the authority to decide *who* was eligible to share their vision of the world, and this depended on race and creed. Those who did not fit the mould or share the Nazi's views and ideology were excluded. It is not just that all others were spurned as political opponents, but that the specific racial policies of the Third Reich encouraged the belief that those whose background did not accord with the Aryan ideal were inferior to the point of being non-human, and were to be treated accordingly. Opponents were ostracized and persecuted in the workplace and on the streets, and as the Nazis' confidence in their own power increased, the racially unacceptable were eventually condemned to torture and death in the secret environment of the camps. One is reminded of Adorno's claim after the discovery of Auschwitz that

²²⁸ Cited by Joachim C. Fest in *Hitler*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston, (New York, NY, Harcourt, 1974), p.212 and quoted in *AI*, p.16.

²²⁹ Levinas, 'RPH', [1934], pp.62-71.

²³⁰ Hitler saw an 'eternal struggle between two hostile forces, the 'Aryan' and the 'Jew', where no less than the 'survival of mankind and the planet' were at stake. See Michael Burleigh's *The Third Reich, A New History* (London: Macmillan, 2000), p.92. Burleigh explains the Aryan concept thus: 'The Aryan was poorly described as a wandering creative force whose destiny was to dominate lesser humans. He was a sort of 'God-man' their strength lay in collective power and preservation of racial purity The Aryan was not a lonely Nietzschean 'superman', overcoming his own nature ... but a collective being'. In Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, he wrote: 'The Aryan[us] instinct of self-preservation has reached the noblest form, since he willingly subordinates his own ego to the life of the community and, if the hour demands, even sacrifices it' (p.92).

A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler on unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen.²³¹

The occurrences of mass murder since the end of the Second World War confirm the impossibility to fulfil his imperative and, as Josh Cohen writes, ‘if Adorno points to a redemptive horizon’ where “nothing similar will happen”, this horizon is always already intricately with the impossibility of its actualization’ (*IA*, 4). The virtual impossibility to fulfill Adorno’s imperative, together with the evidence of further genocidal episodes during the past sixty years, do not alone account for any failure of humanism. However, they do highlight some of its problems as a viable ethics.

For the Germans, the Führer, Adolph Hitler, represented *the* centre of meaning, value and power, and his word was law.²³² The Nazis’ fascism was, of course, anti-humanistic with its ultra nationalistic, militaristic ideals, and its restrictions on the freedom of individuals. Nevertheless, within this mystical anti-humanism, there are *traces* of humanism within the Nazis’ admiration of rational order and symmetry which is exemplified by the kind of cultural life they sought to instil. Literature, art, music and architecture were all subjected to radical revision according to aesthetic standards dictated by the Nazis, and were to be the basis of a social, intellectual and cultural conformity.²³³ The objective was that culture itself should serve the interests of a systemized biological racism, and was a further means of

²³¹ *ND*, p.465.

²³² Ron Rosenbaum’s fascinating compilation of scholarly attempts to explain the reasons for Hitler’s charisma, power and anti-Semitism are instructive. He sees Hitler’s success as ‘the product of multiple factors’ such as the ‘interaction ... between Hitler and other historical figures and forces ... [and] the German people, including the Nazi party’ (Ron Rosenbaum, *Explaining Hitler, The Search for the Origins of his Evil*, (London: Macmillan, 1998), pp. xli-xlii). This is upheld by many, including the controversial Daniel Goldhagen, who states that by the time Hitler came to power in 1933, he had ‘effectively abolished civil liberties’ and the Nazis could start implementing his ‘revolutionary programme’, particularly with respect to the Jews (Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners, Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, (London: Abacus, 1997), see pp. 87-89. Moreover, Ian Kershaw writes that Hitler’s ‘success as a demagogue lay in his ability to say what the disaffected masses wanted to hear’ and this helped him obtain ‘control over the German state’ (Kershaw, *Nemesis*, pp. xli, xlii). Hitler’s ‘unrivalled power’ served a ‘twin ideological purpose ... destroying the Jews ... Germany’s mortal enemy; and, through their destruction acquiring ... a platform for subsequent world dominance. Both interlocking aims ... had been central to his thinking’ (*Nemesis*, p.xli). This jibes with a particularly illuminating chapter in Rosenbaum’s book: ‘Lucy Dawidowicz: Blaming Adolf Hitler’ (pp.369-395). This details Dawidowicz’ claim about the early (1918) origins of Hitler’s Machiavellian plans for the “*Entfernung*”, “*Aufräumung*”, and “*Beseitigung*” (removal, cleaning up and elimination) of the Jews (*Explaining Hitler*, p.380). For her, it was Hitler’s *will* that made the Holocaust possible, and that he ‘knew what he was doing and laughed about it’ (p.388).

²³³ See ‘Hitler’s Cultural Revolution’ in Richard Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, [2003], pp.393-461. Evans’ comments on the influence of Richard Wagner, whose music was ‘to propagate pseudo-Germanic national myths, in which heroic figures from Nordic legend were to serve as model leaders for the German future’ are also instructive (p.32).

controlling the population.²³⁴ In pursuing these aims too, there was a cynical manipulation and denial of freedom, whereby it was *their* meanings and their values that were to rule. Nonetheless, humanistic ideals of culture, learning and beauty were considered an important part of Aryan social life, and although freedom of individual thought did not feature in Nazi philosophy, all too many were duped into believing that Nazism made them free. As early as 1934, Levinas warned that 'Hitlerism is more than a contagion or a madness; it is an awakening of elementary feelings These elementary feelings harbour a philosophy. They express a soul's principal attitude towards the whole of reality and its own destiny It questions the very principles of a civilization' ('RPH', 64).

Levinas and 'Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism'

After the war, Levinas wrote that his life, work and thoughts were 'dominated by the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror'²³⁵ and summarizes his thoughts unequivocally:

Everywhere war and murder lie concealed, assassination lurks in every corner, killings go on the sly. There would be no radical difference between peace and Auschwitz. I do not think pessimism can go much beyond this. Evil suppresses human responsibility and leaves no corner intact where reason could collect itself.

But perhaps this thesis is precisely a call to man's infinite responsibility, to an untiring (*inlassable*) wakefulness, to an absolute insomnia'.²³⁶

In his 1990 'Prefatory note' to the translation of his essay, 'Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism', Levinas wrote that

the bloody barbarism of National Socialism lies not in some contingent anomaly within human reasoning ... [but] from the essential possibility of *elemental Evil* into which we can be led by logic and against which Western philosophy had not sufficiently insured itself. ('RPH', 63.)

What concerned Levinas was thus the failure of Western humanism, with its emphasis on reason and rationality, to prevent National Socialism's perversion into biological racism. In this piece, he helps to clarify how it could be perverted, and against what it did not insure itself.

²³⁴ And this is part of the reason why Adorno famously commented that 'all post-Holocaust culture ... is garbage' (*ND*, p.367).

²³⁵ *DF*, p.291.

²³⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. A. Aronowicz, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), p193, cited in *IA*, 71.

The essay is cited by Agamben as ‘the most valuable contribution to an understanding of National Socialism’ because it pinpoints the ‘indissoluble cohesion of body and spirit’ (*HS*, 151). As we shall see, this is both politically and philosophically significant. If National Socialism was not due to an ‘ideological misunderstanding’, Levinas’ essay merits closer scrutiny because it also calls into question humanism as part of that Western philosophy (‘RPH’, 63). Howard Caygill observes that the 1990 introduction is uncharacteristic because Levinas’ later work is a painstaking analysis and evaluation of everything considered as a primal source of belief, including systems of thought and the use of religious notions in philosophy.²³⁷ He claims that one reason for the departure from Levinas’ more usual approach may reside in the convergence of memory and foreboding inscribed in the preface, and this may be so, but does not detract from the prescience of the piece.

The Prefatory Note of ‘Reflections’ asks ‘if liberalism is all we need to achieve an authentic dignity for the human subject’ and, importantly, whether the subject arrives ‘at the human condition prior to assuming responsibility for the other man’ (‘RPH’, 63). Liberalism is linked to humanism in the sense that to be liberal intimates freedom of thought and humanism places such independence as paramount. If liberalism is jeopardized by ‘Hitlerism’, then so is humanism.

Levinas writes that ‘The philosophy of Hitler is simplistic ... the primitive powers that burn within it burst open its wretched phraseology under the pressure of an elementary force. They awaken the secret nostalgia within the German soul’ (‘RPH’, 64). National Socialism was a political philosophy, and for Levinas, political freedom is connected to history and time. It imposes limits on the individual and his freedom because the passing of time is irreversible. This means that it is beyond our control – irretrievable; we cannot prevent its passing or erase it. Furthermore, because as humans, we are composed of matter, our real destiny is that we die and *decompose*. The prospect of this inevitability is bound to affect the course of our lives. In what may be regarded as an allusion to the difference between pagan and monotheistic attitudes, Levinas shows how, for the pagan, history represents ‘the most profound limitation’ and he lives with the sense of being ‘swept along by a fleeing present [that] forever evades man’s control, but weighs heavily on his destiny’ (‘RPH’, 65). Rather

²³⁷ Howard Caygill, *LP*, [2002].

than looking at the ‘tragedy of the irremovability of a past that cannot be erased’, real freedom would be concerned with the here and now, yet look towards the possibility of a redemptive future that would renew that destiny.

Levinas asserts that in monotheistic cultures such as Judaism and Christianity, freedom is possible via

[r]emorse [which] heralds the repentance that generates the pardon that redeems. Man finds something in the present with which he can modify or efface the past. Time loses its very irreversibility. It collapses at the feet of man like a wounded beast. And he frees it. (‘RPH’, 65).

As Caygill explains, during the Enlightenment, the individual’s power to reason became the new god which ‘refused any *communal* struggle’ for repentance, forgiveness or redemption (*LP*, 35, my emphasis). Individual reason *could* justify all behaviour as long as it ignored one’s duties to the community of man. This pinpoints an inherent and paradoxical struggle between autonomy and communality. The emphasis on autonomy ‘in place of liberation through grace’, provides ‘no possible basis for fraternity, and liberalism, while emphasising freedom and equality, is left without a strong concept of community’ (‘RPH’, 66, *LP*, 35). This makes it susceptible to ‘racial fraternities’ that are able to ‘exploit the deficit of liberal rationalism’ (*LP*, 35).

According to Levinas, a recurring theme described as the ‘Judeo-Christian leitmotif of freedom’ is what made Western philosophy vulnerable to the ‘evil’ of National Socialism because of its unassimilability within Western rationality (‘RPH’, 66). To be sure, the freedom to think and act rationally is an integral tenet of humanism, but as Levinas implies, the traditions of Western and theological thought offer no resources to either prevent or understand Nazism.²³⁸

The ‘leitmotif of freedom’ is contained within the ‘doctrine of the soul’ whose ‘noumenal nature’ places it ‘above the entanglements of finite history in which concrete man nonetheless is placed’ (‘RPH’, 66; *IA*, 5). If this recurring theme of freedom as a thing-in-itself is contained in the unknowable nature of the soul, and protects it from the ‘world’s real history’, it also enables ‘the soul to free itself from *what has been* ... so it can regain its first virginity’ (‘RPH’, 66). However, for Levinas, the human spirit has been endowed with a

²³⁸ See too *IA*, p.5

sense of its own superiority that exceeds reality, and thus paves the way for ‘a gulf between man and the world’ (‘RPH’, 66). This makes it ‘impossible to apply the categories of the physical world to the spirituality of reason’ and the spirit or soul is thus separated from ‘concrete existence’ (‘RPH’, 66).

Instead, we are confronted by a world of ‘idealist philosophy’ where the new ‘god’ of reason replaces the God of the ‘mystical drama’ of the Cross that places the soul above concrete physical existence (‘RPH’ 66, 65). Thus the ‘French Enlightenment’s proclamation of the sovereignty of reason, interposes a permanent distance between spirit and “physical, psychological and social matter”’ (IA, 6; ‘RPH’, 66). The advantage of such thinking is that the individual is no longer restrained by religious traditions, beliefs or ethics – ‘a series of restless powers that seethe within him and already push him down a determined path’ (‘RPH’, 66). Personal needs and desires supplant the religious dictates of behaviour and ethics. The good of one’s soul becomes connected to one’s personal gratification. For some, this will entail ethical, responsible and responsive behaviour. For others, it gives license to a self-absorption that is unfettered by more spiritual considerations.

If it is true that this kind of liberalism releases man from the weight of history, and whose possibilities reside in ‘logical possibilities that present themselves to a dispassionate reason’, it was Marx who first challenged this view of man (‘RPH’, 66). In an ‘inversion’ of the reliance on logic and reason, and a rejection of the soul’s supremacy, Marx asserted that ‘being’s truth is now identified not in the noumenal intelligibility of the soul, but in the material experience of the body’ (IA, 6). In opposition to both liberalism and Christianity, Marxism held that “being does not determine consciousness,” as previously believed, but ‘consciousness or reason determines being’ (‘RPH’, 67). Nevertheless, Levinas’ argument that whilst ‘Individual consciousness determined by being is not sufficiently impotent not to retain ... the power to shake off the social bewitchment that then appears foreign [t]o become conscious of one’s social situation is, even for Marx, to free oneself of the fatalism entailed by that situation’ (‘RPH’, 67). Marxism does not have the power to completely dissociate itself from Western conceptions of the human, which can only take place when ‘the situation to which he was bound was not added to him but formed the very foundation of his being. This paradoxical requirement is one that the experience of our *bodies* seems to fulfill’ (‘RPH’, 67, my italics). Traditionally, having a body ‘breaks the free flight of the spirit’ and is thus something to be overcome (‘RPH’, 67).

What Levinas argues is that liberalism's preoccupation with the soul neglects the body and the fact that it is the body that 'controls our psychological life, our temperament, and our activities' ('RPH', 68). This means that body and soul are ineluctably linked: 'The body is not only a happy or unhappy accident that relates us to the implacable world of matter. *Its adherence to the Self is of value in itself.* It is an adherence that *one does not escape*' ('RPH', 68).

This becomes undeniable if we think about man's experience of physical pain, and how no matter how the spirit may attempt to resist it or 'go beyond it', such an effort is one of desperation because there is a 'union' between the two 'that does not in any way alter the tragic character of finality'; that is, the ultimate death of the body ('RPH', 68). Western philosophy's failure to recognize the soul or spirit of a man as inescapably encased within a body is what creates the possibility of a political philosophy such as National Socialism to flourish. The West became vulnerable to Nazism precisely because it failed to confront the incontrovertibility of the connection between body and soul. This paved the way to allow the Nazis' biological ideology to dictate their perception of spiritual life. Levinas expresses this idea thus:

The mysterious urgings of the blood, the appeals of heredity and the past for which the body serves as an enigmatic vehicle, lose the character of being problems that are subject to a solution put forward by a sovereignly free Self ... Man's essence no longer lies in freedom, but in a kind of bondage To be truly oneself ... means becoming aware of the ineluctable chain that is unique to our bodies, and above all accepting this chaining. ('RPH', 69.)

If freedom now means the *domination* of the body over the spirit, '[a] society based on consanguinity ... ensues from this concretization of the spirit' ('RPH', 69). The notion that 'the forms of a modern society founded on the harmony established between free wills' then become 'not only fragile and inconsistent but false and deceitful' ('RPH', 69).

With the separation of body and spirit, the West becomes more vulnerable to an emphasis on 'consanguinity' and with it, the prospect of biological racism becomes a distinct and demonic possibility.²³⁹ Those who have ignored the truth that a spirit is encased within a body have ignored the basis of human life. This means that he who dominates the body also has the power to kill with impunity, and with the death of the body, the soul may be

²³⁹ See also Caygill's discussion: *LP*, 38-9

‘unchained’, but is no longer of or in the world. Levinas’ insight into what was at stake paves the way for the realization of Nazism’s ‘genocidal ambitions’ to be better understood (IA, 7). I concur with Cohen when he writes about how Levinas reveals the ‘exterminist logic’ of Nazism’s ‘metaphysics’ and the ‘troubling relation of this metaphysics to the governing philosophical categories of Western tradition’ (IA, 7). Concretizing the spirit leads to an ‘*inversion* of this tradition’, and ‘the elevated Absolute of Western soul is reflected in the degraded Absolute of the Nazi body’ (IA, 7). In other words, the notion of an Absolute in terms of body or soul confers a fallacious basis for understanding the meaning or truth of human experience. National Socialism separated the biological and spiritual, and by truncating the determination of the human according to racial and biological origins, was able to ignore the spirit of freedom within man. It was, as Levinas so presciently observed, a philosophy whose expansion would lead to a ‘world of masters and slaves’, and question ‘the very humanity of man’ (‘RPH’, 71).

In such a world, there would be no place for the kind of Enlightenment humanism as envisaged by Kant and others. Its principles could be and were so perverted as to initiate a philosophy which introduced totalitarian principles. This is what happened during the Nazi regime and the crisis for humanism that ensued is reflected in the literature of the Holocaust and remains the arena for debate and analysis until the present time.

The Development of Humanism

It is not within the remit of this chapter to discuss the different meanings and interpretations of humanism throughout the ages but to explore the ethical issues the concept raises in the post-Holocaust world. Nevertheless, some explanations are instructive. Whilst tracing some definitions of the term, we should note how far we have travelled from the humble origins of *homo* and *humanus* as being from and of the earth, and will do well to remember Levinas’ reminder of the indissoluble connection between body and soul.

Having outlined the etymology of the word in the introduction, I turn to the way in which it was used. Tamra Wright explains that ‘the first “humanism” arose from the encounter of Roman civilization with late Greek culture’ when, as Heidegger points out *Humanitas* was

valued in the Roman Republic.²⁴⁰ ‘*Homo humanus* was opposed to *homo barbarus*’ when the *homo humanus* Romans ‘honoured Roman *virtus* throughout the “embodiment” of the *paideia* (education) taken over from the Greeks’ (quoted in *TJP*, 35). Heidegger explains the revival of interest during the Italian Renaissance when *homo romanus* was again opposed to *homo barbarus*, but here, ‘the inhumane is the supposed barbarism of Gothic Scholasticism in the Middle Ages.’²⁴¹ Whatever the creed, humanism as a form of *humanitas* was considered praiseworthy but, as noted, there has been a more critical and suspicious approach in recent years on the grounds that we can no longer assume that man is master of his own discourse.

Tony Davies also problematizes meanings of the term, and asserts that the issue has both political as well as linguistic implications (see *HUM*, 6). He traces the first usage of the word ‘humanists’ to the fifteenth century Florentine *umanisti*. Whatever ideological or emotional implications ensued, Davies begins with humanism’s inseparability from language. He shows how the *umanisti* were above all language teachers, rhetoricians and translators. The tools they forged for their trade were the lexicon and the glossary where a humanist is a ‘grammarian; a philologist’ although an even older meaning is ‘exulting over the defeat of an enemy’ (*HUM*, 4). Any discussion about humanism is thus relevant to the modern or post-modern world and, as Davies claims, is tied to both the culture and power of that world. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, however, the term had no special significance and simply denoted *studia humanitatis* - the study of Greek and Roman authors. Teachers and writers sometimes called themselves *umanisti* or ‘humanists’, but this was ‘a purely functional term that conferred no particular prestige. But if that adds up to an “intellectual program”, it is one characterised by a notable absence of coherence and a remarkable degree of discord’ (*HUM*, 94).

By the 19th century, there are increasingly diverse interpretations of the human and humanism. For Gobineau, humanism ‘dictates the racial superiority of the Teuton and the unaccountable mastery of individual genius’ (*HUM*, 19). Mathew Arnold ‘invokes an irenic humanistic “culture” to arbitrate and unify the divisive anarchy of politics and class’ whilst atheists ‘summon the spirit of humanism to cast out the last tenacious delusions of

²⁴⁰ Martin Heidegger, ‘Letter on Humanism’ in *Basic Writings, From Being and Time to the Task of Thinking*, trans. by David Farrell Krell, (New York, NY, Harper & Row, 1976), pp. 190-242, quoted in *TJP*, p.35.

²⁴¹ Heidegger, ‘Letter on Humanism’, p. 201.

[religious] superstition' (*HUM*, 19). Arnold's study of Chaucer claims that his work 'survey[s] the world from ... a central, a truly human point of view' which has an essence that goes beyond national or historical differences, but as Davies points out, Karl Marx saw the human as far from unchanging but as something subject to 'continuous transformation'(see *HUM*, 19-20). However, the concept remains an anthropocentric one as well as very European.

Davies claims that the perception of a human essence as seen in Chaucer's writing has endured, and has endowed the concept with a historical and ideological status that is actually a myth (see *HUM*, 22). Late nineteenth century ideas about the universality and timelessness of a human essence have continued to influence many people's thinking, although they have been challenged with the advent of modernism and post-modernism, and in the wake of two world wars. It can now be argued that humanism is simply a form of narrative discourse, but one that has persisted, resonating with an anthropocentric subjectivity and notion of autonomy. Davies reminds us of Jean-Francois Lyotard's critique of 'metanarratives', which posit the claim of a master narrative, (or story about/within another story) that explains the world, knowledge and experience according to one overarching principle – in this case, humanism.

This becomes increasingly suspect to thinkers such as Lyotard, who defines the postmodern as 'incredulity towards metanarratives' because any notion of a transcendent or universal truth is regarded with scepticism and distrust as prescriptive and totalizing.²⁴² Any explanation, by definition, entails the use of language and a perception of meaning. For Lyotard, this demands constant reappraisal because the basis of principles and tenets that describe the world are too often founded on myths about what it is to be human. For him, there is no one metanarrative that supplies a universal and timeless truth, because to make that kind of claim would ignore the natural chaos of the universe, the heterogeneity of human life and historical development that defies any one doctrine. Instead, he claims that there are a number of 'petits récits' or little stories that are used to legitimise different versions of truth, and allow for a diverse range of views and theories. That said, one might argue, as does Jurgen Habermas, that Lyotard's own stance of a kind of universal scepticism could

²⁴² J.F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p.xxiv.

itself be seen as a metanarrative.²⁴³ If one disbelieves all narratives about truth, ethics and knowledge, there is no foundation for believing that metanarratives such as humanism are false.

However, if one accepts that humanism is still inseparable from language and meaning, this has implications for descriptions of the Holocaust, when the *context* defied understanding or meaning. Attempts to relate what happened were conveyed as emotionally and psychologically unknowable and indeed, many survivors remained silent. Much of Holocaust literature reinforces the idea that the Holocaust is unassimilable and lacks any form of determinacy. This calls for a relentless self-examination and watchfulness by maintaining a gap between language and meaning. In Borowski's *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, we precisely run up against the gaps and limits of language, representation and meaning. As will be shown, it also reminds us once again, as do all the texts examined in this thesis, that our notions of what it means to be human, inhuman or non-human are complex and require constant scrutiny and evaluation.

Davies summarizes many of the problems for humanism and the human which have confronted survivors and scholars. He claims that the Holocaust was akin to the end of a once familiar world. However much history is replete with examples of man's cruelty to his fellow man, the brutality was beyond anything hitherto conceived, let alone enacted. As he and others assert, one of the most horrific aspects is that there was something so strikingly modern and rational about its total irrationality. It was planned, orderly, using modern technology and systems, but represented a descent into an utterly 'atavistic barbarity' and irrationality. Because of this, the humanism that had seemed to hold such promise for the progress, knowledge and understanding of man was now called into question as was 'the very notion of the *human*' (See *HUM*, 51-2). What remains is an *aporia* which continues to haunt and challenge our thinking. As Theodor Adorno asserts, 'the unconstrained voice of humanist individuality' was adulterated by the will to power implicit in Enlightenment philosophy (See *HUM*, 52). Not only does this obviate the possibilities for poetry and art

²⁴³ Jurgen Habermas, 'Modernity versus Postmodernity', in *New German Critique*, No. 22, Special Issue on Modernism, 1981, pp.3-14.

after the Holocaust²⁴⁴ but, as George Steiner suggests, the only appropriate response was silence.²⁴⁵

Whilst Davies' book offers a comprehensive history and analysis of humanism, like any 'ism', it is a construct. It is a theory of the human concerning the concept of the human subject. There is also an overlap between the idiomatic usages of the term and ideas about responsibility. Levinas, as a philosopher, was pre-occupied with the notion of human responsibility as the ethical grounding of human behaviour. A humanist gives priority to the human because the human is regarded as the centre of value and meaning. This makes the humanist anthropocentric, who regards man as the most important and central factor in the universe. It is not that Levinas is anti-humanist, but he seeks to re-appraise and challenge humanist anthropocentricity.

Broadly speaking, if an anti-humanism stance challenges the anthropocentric model, this is represented by thinkers such as Freud (despite thinking of himself as a humanist) and Levinas, who suggest a shift towards a displacement of the human away from that central determining position. This of course would also mean that the human being is not the master of his own house. Freud explains how the 'self-love' of man concedes to science in two areas. Firstly we learn from Copernicus that the earth itself is 'not the centre of the universe but only a tiny fragment of a cosmic system of scarcely imaginable vastness'.²⁴⁶ Secondly, 'man's supposedly privileged place in creation' is a myth and, as Darwin and others have shown, we are descended from the animal kingdom and maintain aspects of an 'ineradicable animal nature'.²⁴⁷ The final 'blow' to 'human megalomania' emanates from psychological research, 'which seeks to prove to the ego that it is *not even master in its own house*, but

²⁴⁴ Adorno regards as 'negative' any art that aestheticises the Holocaust. He does, however, advocate an art where 'suffering can ... find its ... voice, consolation, without being betrayed' by that art. See Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, [1955], trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber, (Letchworth: The Garden Press, 1967), p.31, and 'Commitment' in R. Livingstone, P. Anderson, F. Mulhern, (eds.), *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. Francis MacDonagh, (London: New Left Books, 1977), pp.177-195. Adorno also intimates the failure of humanism when he writes about the 'irrefutable' failure of culture: 'Whoever pleads for the maintenance of this ... culpable ... culture becomes its accomplice, while the man who says no to culture is ... furthering the barbarism which our culture showed itself to be'. (ND, pp.366, 367.)

²⁴⁵ See George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (Harmondsworth, 1969), where he writes 'It is better for the poet to mutilate his own tongue than to dignify the inhuman ... with his gift' (p.76). He also writes that 'the world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason' (p.123).

²⁴⁶ Sigmund Freud, 'Fixation to Traumas – The Unconscious', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XVI (1916-1917), trans. and ed. James Strachey, (London: Vintage, 2001), p.284-5.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.285.

must content itself with scanty information of what is going on unconsciously in its mind'.²⁴⁸ Freud recognized that psycho-analysis was not the first branch of thought to assert this idea, but claims that the empirical evidence of analysis makes it more compelling, and that it affects everyone. It also challenges humanist ideas that man determines or is master of his own fate as untenable because complete self-knowledge is not possible.

Indeed, as we also consider Levinasian thought, there is an increasing assault on the idea that the human is *the* source of meaning and value. However, there is a major difference between what could be interpreted as 'anti-humanist' stances within Freud and Levinas. In Levinas' notion of the 'Other', we place value and meaning in the idea of the human, but this is not found in the centring of *me* but in the centring of the *other*. We may regard this as ex-centricity which places me outside the centre rather than as the centre of my world. His essay 'Humanism and An-archy' explains this further, but one needs to bear in mind the idea that, for Levinas, there is universality in the singularity of the other.²⁴⁹ It can be argued that, by way of contrast, psychoanalytical thought tends towards a subject-centred logic, where first and foremost, the psychological subject serves itself.

Levinas' idea about the singularity of the other is similar to that of Kant, but again, there is a significant difference. For Levinas, to say that people should not be used as a means to an end risks instrumentalizing them by depersonalizing them, and for him, each human being has to be treated as a singular entity. As seen in *Totality and Infinity*, the face of the other is a call to responsibility as well as a solicitation to murder. And for Levinas, killing is 'not to dominate but to annihilate' (*TI*, 198). In addition, violence against human beings is about making people 'play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves ... betray[ing] not only commitments but their own substance, making them carry out actions that will destroy every possibility for action" (*T&I*, 21). We can thus suggest that the disruption caused by genocide and war also represents a massive pause or interruption to the continuity of a humanist ethics – indeed, a caesura in the continuity of what makes the human race *human* and life itself.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., p.285, my italics.

²⁴⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, trans. Nidra Poller, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), pp. 45-57.

The specific case of the Holocaust, with its destruction of continuity after so many millions needlessly died, not only implies the destruction of individuals, but also what James Hatley describes as aeonicide - the death of all the future generations who would otherwise have been born.²⁵⁰ What Levinas says is that if I think of my substance as that which is beyond consciousness, the *commitment* that is betrayed by any act of violence is the one of infinite, transcendental and unconscious responsibility to and for the other. In this context, the idea of commitment is somewhat ambiguous because it implies a responsibility or obligation which is both conscious and beyond consciousness. This is because of the acts of betrayal that actually preclude action.

PART II

A Crisis for Humanism: An Analysis of Tadeusz Borowski

One omnipresent feature of most Holocaust literature and testimony is the attempt to pinpoint the relationship between the Nazi masters and their slaves in the concentration camps. The effects of the victims' subjugation lead to a sense of being betrayed by other human beings (whether Nazis or fellow prisoners), and a necessity to re-evaluate precisely what it means to be human. Some writers implicitly question the possibility to accommodate a humanistic ethics where any meaning is retained. To illustrate, what paralyzes the narrator in some of Borowski's stories is the shame he feels for the actions that are forced upon him if he is to survive for a short while, and his inability to survive to take any kind of action if he disobeys the orders of the Nazi oppressors. Whatever he does or does not do, he betrays himself and all those around him. He is sickened and hates the persecutors, but also loathes the victims for allowing themselves to be victimized. Most of all, he hates himself for playing a role where he no longer recognizes himself or what he has become. There is a moment in '*This Way to the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*' when he hesitates to hand 'trampled infants, naked little monsters' to women who do not want to take them, all knowing they are bound for the gas chambers (*TWG*, 39). When an SS officer looks as if he

²⁵⁰ See *SWQR*, p.30.

is about to shoot, 'a tall, grey-haired woman takes the little corpses ... and for an instant gazes straight into my eyes. "My poor boy," she whispers and smiles at me' and walks away (*TWG*, 40).

At this moment, when the woman offers *him* her compassion, takes responsibility for *his* suffering, he inappropriately asks Henri 'are we good people' and, in the next moment, explodes with anger: 'Damn them all! I could ... beat them with my fists' (*TWG*, 40). That someone in this camp actually looks him in the eye, smiles at him and offers a few compassionate words is unbearable and he becomes 'terribly tired' (*TWG*, 40). This is not a tiredness which demands sleep, but a fearsome weariness and despair which sap his strength and resolve. The only way to cope, even to survive, is to overcome his fear of those even weaker than he is, and to muster all the murderous rage that he can.

There is a relationship between rage and powerlessness which also has to do with the power of the other. In this instance, the woman's compassion for him demonstrates his own loss of self because of his inability to act. He is unable to take responsibility and respond to her because to do so would threaten his own survival which is in the hands of those even more powerful. This inability threatens any idea of autonomy, and his rage is a reaction to the hatred and persecution that surrounds him. The woman's gentle gaze acknowledges their shared humanity, but she *chooses* to take the 'naked little monsters' from him (*TWG*, 39). In so doing, she reaffirms her own dignity and that which is due to the babies, and his response is tiredness and to seek Henri's reassurance that they are 'good people'. It is, of course, a rhetorical question and, because he cannot bear to answer himself, he becomes 'furious, simply furious with these people – furious because I must be here because of them I just can't understand ...' (*TWG*, 40). The ellipses after the word 'understand' is in the text and elicits the logical, rational, but utterly unfeeling response from Henri: 'the easiest way to relieve your hate is to turn against someone weaker. Why, I'd even call it healthy' (*TWG*, 40). This kind of response is a betrayal of the logic and rationality held in such high esteem by humanism and yet is somehow continuous with it because of its own twisted logic and rationality.

This way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen is a collection of twelve stories all relating with varying emphases to the death world of life in Auschwitz. The book's title includes an invitation to every reader to enter and bear witness to the Auschwitz world, and it is a

terrifying journey whereby our moral compass is rendered speechless. Borowski is unwavering in his attempt to show how the cherished humanism of the past is gone, and that there is a challenge to build a new one.

Borowski was born in 1922 in Zhytomir, Ukraine, then part of the USSR. In 1926, both his parents were deported to *gulags* as dissidents.²⁵¹ Tadeusz and his brother were repatriated from the USSR to Poland in 1932, and settled in Warsaw with an aunt. Their father was freed in a prisoner exchange with communists arrested in Poland, and their mother was released in 1934. In 1940, Tadeusz secretly completed his secondary school education in Nazi-occupied Poland, and then began studying Polish language and literature at the underground Warsaw University.

He was active in several underground newspapers and began publishing his poems and short novels whilst working as a night watchman. In 1943, he and his fiancée, Maria Rundo, were arrested by the Nazis and sent to Auschwitz. He was later sent to the Dautmergen sub-camp of Natzweiler-Struthof, and finally to Dachau. During his incarceration in Auschwitz, he worked on a railway ramp where he witnessed new prisoners' arrival, when they were forced to leave their property behind and immediately transferred to the gas chambers. Whilst there, Borowski caught pneumonia and when he recovered, was set to work in a so called 'medical experiment' hospital. After Poland's 1945 liberation, he went to Munich, returning to Poland in 1946. He then discovered that his fiancée, Maria, had survived the camps and was in Poland. They were married, and moved to the U.S. but days after the birth of his daughter, he turned the gas on himself, and died.

After the war, Borowski shared Adorno's feeling that what he had to say could no longer be expressed in verse, and he turned to prose. His books are recognized as classics of Polish post-war literature, and influenced writers such as the Nobel Prize winner Imré Kertész and the award winning author of *The Reader*, Bernhard Schlink.²⁵² Although fictionalised, many

²⁵¹ It is noteworthy that they were both later to distinguish themselves resisting the Nazis. In particular, his father played a pivotal role in the Warsaw ghetto, saving Jews and fighting during the uprising. 'Idek' Borowski worked within the walls of the Warsaw Ghetto as an engineer. As a non-Jew, he exploited his possibility to pass through the gates without arousing suspicion, smuggling weapons, ammunition and forged documents inside for the Jewish Underground. He also helped them secretly prepare Jewish men and boys for combat. After the war, he was much honoured and received numerous medals for his efforts.

²⁵² In *The Reader*, a former female concentration camp guard is tried and imprisoned after the war. Full of remorse, she reads Borowski's work and later commits suicide. See Bernhard Schlink, *The Reader*, trans. Carol Brown Janeway, (London: Phoenix, 1998), and Ernestine Schlants's discussion of the book in *The Language*

of the events he describes in his stories are based on his own experiences in Auschwitz and Dachau. For a while after the war, he believed that Communism was the only political force truly capable of preventing any future Auschwitz, but later became disillusioned, particularly after a close friend was imprisoned and tortured. Readjusting to post-war life was just too difficult for him. I would argue that he shared the view that '[t]he whole world is really like the concentration camp', where 'the weak work for the strong, and if they have no strength or will to work – then let them steal, or let them die'; he was just 28 in 1951 when he committed suicide (*TWG*, 168).²⁵³

The sense that the whole world was like a concentration camp is articulated in 'A Visit' and 'The World of Stone'.²⁵⁴ These two short pieces are written by a first person narrator after the war, who is compelled to 'write a great, immortal epic' about what he has seen and the people he has met (*TWG*, 180). He is clearly haunted by memories of the camps and the dead that are inescapable, nightmarish and omnipresent. As he walks the streets or undertakes ordinary tasks, he once again sees 'men weep' as they build 'barracks, watchtowers and crematoria ...consumed by eczema, phlegmon, typhoid ... and dying of hunger' (*TWG*, 175). The dead are present in their absence and he lives with the ghosts. He likens the bombed out ruins and people of his post-war city to a new death camp: a 'gust of the cosmic gale' that 'sucked the human bodies into a huge whirlpool' with a 'weird snarl' that 'seeps into space with a loud gurgle, like water into a sewer' (*TWG*, 179). The world swells and bursts 'like an over-ripe pomegranate, leaving behind but a handful of grey, dry ashes' and there is both tragedy and hope in his 'attempt to grasp the true significance of the events, things and people I have seen' (*TWG*, 180). It also suggests that the challenge for traditional humanisms is far from over when the war ends.

of Silence, West German Literature and the Holocaust, (New York, London: Routledge, 1999). Kertész' *Fatelessness* is discussed elsewhere, but his attempt to define 'fatelessness' is noteworthy: 'The external determinacy, the stigma which constrains our life in a situation, an absurdity, in the given totalitarianism, thwarts us; thus, when we live out the determinacy which is doled out to us as a reality, instead of the necessity which stems from our own (relative) freedom – that is what I call fatelessness'. (See Paul Harrison, 'Remaining Still', *M/C Journal*, Vol. 12.1 (March, 2009), culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/135). This mirrors the lack of autonomy and the 'irony of fate' that Borowski depicts, and endorses the view that both writers would argue that the possibilities for a universal humanism are limited (*TWG*, p.46).

²⁵³ 'The January Offensive' in *TWG*, p.168.

²⁵⁴ *TWG*, pp.174-180. Christopher Bigsby, who meditates on the role of memory in the work of various writers, including, Levi, Amery and Borowski, has written an insightful chapter on 'The World of Stone'. See *Remembering and Imagining the Holocaust, The Chain of Memory*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp.341-356.

According to Jan Kott's introduction, we find in Borowski's testimony that 'the identification of the author with the narrator was the moral decision of a prisoner who had lived through Auschwitz – an acceptance of mutual responsibility, mutual participation and mutual guilt' (*TWG*, 21). I would argue, however, that whilst there is certainly a recognition of mutual responsibility, there is little evidence of *acceptance* but, rather, a fury with the dehumanization and brutalization of all those who arrived at Auschwitz.

What is found in all these stories is a livid rejection of cherished humanist principles that are not simply suspended, but irrelevant. In their place is the basic and primitive urge to survive, however one can. The stories contain some of the harshest, most violent descriptions to be found in any Holocaust testimony, written by a fictional first-person narrator to emphasize the degree of implication and complicity with the perpetrators. The voice that emerges throughout the text often sickens the reader, and places him or her in a deeply uncomfortable position. This is because of several 'double binds in which empathy and revulsion or confusion continually interfere with or undercut each other'²⁵⁵ The painful details and descriptions of life and death in the camp are strangely more likely to obfuscate the issues for the reader, precisely because they are so bewildering and perturbing as to defy understanding. Borowski is also a troubled and troubling witness because he was not a Jew. The evidence of his stories shows how aware he is that traumatic though his and his narrators' experiences are, any sense of solidarity with the Jews is necessarily ambiguous.

'The Man with the Package' about the *Schreiber* - the only Jew in his block - illustrates this ambiguity.²⁵⁶ When the man becomes ill, he is selected for the gas chamber, and transferred to 'an almost entirely Jewish block' – this, to spare 'us the unpleasant duty of having to escort him to the Waschraum' (*TWG*, 148). When the narrator sees him from the window, holding on to his package containing his boots, eating utensils and some food received from grateful patients for 'favours rendered', he comments on the pointlessness of this to the doctor (*TWG*, 148). The *Schreiber* knows his fate, and the narrator tries to engage the doctor in a conversation about why he would still hold on to his package and what he might do: 'After all, he could have given it to someone. I know that I'd never ...' (*TWG*, 150). The

²⁵⁵ *WH*, p.208.

²⁵⁶ The *Schreiber* (writer) has a 'close friend' in the *Sonderkommando*, who has obtained the clerical job in the hospital for him. We discover that a *Shreiber* 'escorted patients in and out of the hospital, supervised the block's roll-call, kept the patients' records, and took part indirectly in the selection of Jews destined for the gas chamber' (*TWG*, p.147).

ellipsis signifies what cannot be speculated by the narrator who, as a non-Jew, will not go to the gas chamber. The tired doctor's response is non-committal, but the narrator persists saying 'Forgive me, Doctor, but I feel certain that you too ... (*TWG*, 150). Again, the ellipsis suggests the impossibility to empathize and recognizes the differences in their status, and the doctor shyly says 'Holding a package would be a little like holding somebody's hand, you see' (*TWG*, 150).

The narrator feels a kind of sympathy for the *Schreiber* but is unable to display any solidarity despite the fact that both are implicated by their complicity with the system. Whilst all prisoners in the camp may be killed at any moment, the distinction between the treatment of Jew and non-Jew gives rise to ambivalence in how they respond to each other, even at such (rare) moments of trying to understand.²⁵⁷

In the first story 'This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen', the most conspicuous impression is that of a narrator's incandescent rage with a world where moral values have not only been desecrated, but destroyed. He inverts that fury to a fury with other victims: 'I feel no pity. I am not sorry they're going to the gas chamber. Damn them all!' (*TWG*, 40). On the one hand, the combination of the new arrivals' fear and bewilderment infects and frightens the narrator, who has to suppress and subvert any leaning towards sympathy because of what is demanded of him, and what he has to do in order to prolong his own survival. On the other hand, the reader has to adjust to what appears to be the callous fury he expresses in order to understand what is actually being said and why. It is as if he is furious with the perpetrators because he *knows* their brutal objectives, is afraid for the new arrivals because he *knows* the fate that awaits them, but most of all, he is furious and afraid for himself as both witness and participant. By trying to ignore their faces, he knows that he is not only unfaithful to them, but also to himself.

Anger, however unjustified, is a displacement of shame and allows him to defend himself from the guilt of his complicity. If one is angry, one deflects pity and fear, and this is why the narrator finally feels he 'must vomit' and has a 'humming inside my head' (*TWG*, 41). Furthermore, fury enables him to carry through the victimization of the other in which he is

²⁵⁷ See Harriet L. Parnet, 'Images of the Jew Focused on in the Translated Polish Works of Tadeusz Borowski, Jerzy Andrzejewski, and Czeslaw Milosz, in *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, Vol.18:3, 2000, pp.13-26.

complicit. However, as Hatley suggests, despite his determination to ignore what happens to others 'he finds himself commanded he cannot escape the face of the other' (*SWQR*, 78). This is another reason why he vomits. It is not just an emotional response, but also an ethical one.

In another story, 'Auschwitz, Our Home, (A Letter)', there is a cooler, more philosophical appraisal of what takes place in Auschwitz: There is 'no hocus pocus, no poison, no hypnosis', just the commonplace routine whereby 'twenty thousand people' can be asphyxiated 'without any trouble' by people with 'shiny brutal faces' (*TWG*, 112, 35). Quite apart from any implicit fear and anger, the narrator here is as bewildered and bemused as the new arrivals: 'We doff our caps to the S.S. ... if our name is called we obediently go with them to die We starve ... are drenched by rain ... torn from our families' (*TWG*, 112). He asks the putative recipient of his 'letter':

Why is it that nobody cries out ... spits in their faces ... jumps at their throats
What is this mystery? This strange power of one man over another? This insane
passivity that cannot be overcome? (*TWG*, 112-3.)

The passage ends with one of the most bitterly ironic comments in the whole book when he observes 'Our only strength is our great number – the gas chambers cannot accommodate all of us' (*TWG*, 113). The tragic irony of this sentence pinpoints the ruthless enigma of what is taking place, and indicates why there is not only a crisis for humanism as a system of beliefs, but also why it has no relevance in the camp environment. To claim *strength* from their number paradoxically locates the level of degradation and dehumanization because, instead of presenting an opportunity to overcome an enemy with fewer 'numbers', it passively submits to the idea of a death that will only be prevented by the number of people that can practicably be killed.²⁵⁸ Furthermore, all are implicated and contaminated by a moral paralysis. This is because many prisoners' own (often temporary) survival is dependent on the continuing influx of those who are to die. If the 'strength' of human life is measured numerically in terms of those who cannot all be liquidated, humanist ideals about the sanctity and dignity of human life are subverted, whereby the intrinsic value and values of all become bereft of meaning. Such alienation renders the possibility for ethics in these circumstances as superfluous and farcical.

²⁵⁸ What Borowski could not know at the time was the full extent of the killing, and that it far exceeded the one, two or even three million he cites.

However, as will be shown, what 'Letter from Auschwitz' implicitly affirms is that there is something which transcends the power of one man over the other, and that is *love* for the recipient of the letter, which, for the narrator, is life affirming. It is thus love rather than ethics that becomes paramount. However, the two are not incompatible because the decision on how to behave towards a loved one clearly entails an ethical stance. The possibility of a singular relationship exists through ethics; that is, 'how should I treat the loved one?'

The Wisdom of Love and the Singular Relation

Finkelkraut's *The Wisdom of Love* claims that Levinas makes love the 'critical ground for social thought'.²⁵⁹ Whilst 'committed to universalism', Levinas is also committed to preserving alterity – that is, the particularity of different groups within a multicultural world (*WL*, ix). What does this mean for humanism? To be sure, it militates against exclusion of any Other, and argues instead for a universal justice that affirms *all* men's rights as well as the need to resist any set of laws that favour some groups above others. Instead, what is vital for Levinas is an ethics that affirms the first philosophy of a responsibility to respond to the other irrespective of race or creed, and without reducing the particularity of the Other to a 'fixed essence' according to his origins (*WL*, xi). Love's wisdom 'means keeping the question of the other open' (*WL*, xi).

We have identified one of the dangers that humanism has been unable to combat as actually favouring a universalism that patronizes minorities by seeking to assimilate them, as opposed to accepting them *as* different. This results in a totalizing view of man that can be used as a 'means of social control' (*WL*, viii). Instead of protecting minorities, the danger is that they are denied the very rights claimed to be sought, by applying them only to the majority within a society. Such a withholding of rights from some can lead to the actual persecution of those minorities who are deemed not to *fit in*, and which is undertaken in the name of 'love' for the majority. It is a far cry from a political credo where 'The state is a community instituted for the sake of the living and well living of men in it' (*ME*, 3), and confirms Foucault's view that politics can all too soon turn into biopolitics that authorize a holocaust.

²⁵⁹ *WL*, p.ix.

Love, for both Finkelkraut and Levinas, 'does not mean selfless moralism or universal "knowledge" ... but the acceptance of the Other's likeness and right to exist within the Western tradition *as irreducibly different*' (WL, xii, my italics). Difference is *not* a universal value. Rather, it claims and challenges us as an abstract concept of otherness (see WL, xiv). Finkelkraut concentrates on the ways in which the problems of 'multicultural identity' are in 'direct and critical contact with the Jewish historical experience of the West' (WL, xvii). He claims that Enlightenment humanism separates man from God only to re-situate him with a fascination for the social, and argues for a Levinasian ethical autonomy in which the face of the Other - not God - speaks. Levinas was very careful to separate his work on Judaism from his work on philosophy, whereas Finkelkraut uses both in order to engage more fully with the idea of multiculturalism. He sees the Jewish stance on multiculturalism as one

that belongs to the Enlightenment tradition that seeks "equal rights" but demands a recognition of and respect for difference, admiring a passion that seeks to attain its social, or personal, object while refusing to cancel the Otherness of passion's call. This "Jewish" position ... is thus also a universalist one'. (WL, xx.)

For Levinas, love is *not* the image of the loved one as some kind of essentialized fixed being, but is the face that commands 'our passionate and moral attention' (WL, xx) – in other words, respect rather than absorption. It is the recognition of the loved one's *difference* that is closely allied to the *wisdom* of love. The relation between the two is primary and the condition of all further relations. This also suggests that any search for universal justice is, in fact, conditioned by *love*, and re-establishes the possibilities for a viable humanism.

Returning to the discussion of Borowski, a love that serves as a source of national and individual passion is particularized into a singular relation because the camp environment in which his characters exist is suffused by hatred. The possibility to extend the narrator's 'moral attention' in 'Auschwitz, Our Home' from the singular relation with Maria to a more social or national love comes about as a result of that singular relation. As Finkelkraut suggests, love is not only charity, generosity and giving, but also greed, avarice and taking (see WL, xxv). These polarities are part of the currency of self-interest *and* concern for the Other, that exist side by side in love. Nevertheless, even if it is true that altruism has its roots in ego-centricity, one can still argue that an ethics of love as put forward by Levinas, directs both selflessness and egocentricity to responsibility and sympathy for one other *and*

other others. What concerns him is a de-centring of the self towards an ethics where responsibility for the other comes first, and this reveals itself in Borowski's 'Auschwitz, Our Home'.

The narrator depends on his love, thoughts and memories of Maria, but is dependent on the brutal camp environment for the limits of his freedom and view of the world around him. Love and hatred live side by side. He can write of the 'almost pastoral' view from his window without 'one cremo in sight' and his yearning to live near the forest, 'facing open fields', whilst reminding her of a well loved poem (*TWG*, 100). He can describe the 'roll call', the 'Muslim' who thieved 'strangled' and 'ruined' others, and then suddenly shift to commenting on the strangeness of writing to her, his dreams of her almost forgotten physical appearance which become an 'emotional experience' (*TWG*, 102-3). The matter-of-fact, unembellished description of their physical surroundings and his last view of her with shaven head contrasts with the more 'vivid' memories of the 'young woman with sad eyes and a gentle smile' (*TWG*, 103). His memories are of her and their life together. Writing to her helps sustain him '(d)espite everything' (*TWG*, 103). He compares this to the implicit idea that there are others who are deprived of such comfort and who 'have lived through and survived all the incredible horrors of the concentration camp' (*TWG*, 103).

The Singular Relation and Asymmetry

The singular response to a singular relationship evokes a Levinasian ethics of singularity. When addressing Maria, the narrator considers not only his own situation and dilemmas, but also hers. This extends to a consideration and response to the suffering of other others despite his assertion that 'the gas chambers cannot accommodate all of us' (*TWG*, 113). In other words, despite his cynicism and disgust, there remain traces of a humanistic responsibility for the lack of comfort available to others, but which is still available to him. This is why he writes 'I have kept my spirit and I know that you have not lost yours either But the people here ... you see, they have lived through ... all the incredible horrors' (*TWG*, 103).

He also recalls her maturity and devotion and how he thinks that ‘one human being must always be discovering another – through love’ (*TWG*, 110). In this way, the suffering of the other is considered by him, and the way in which love and suffering are inextricably bound is both an ethical and humanist stance, as a humanism of the Other. This is Finkelkraut’s thesis in *The Wisdom of Love*. It is very different from a Kantian perspective where *everyone* is owed the same in a generalized concept of morality. Such generalized morality is radically problematized by the Holocaust. The response of the narrator in ‘Letter from Auschwitz’ is not realisable in terms of a generalized ethics but it is in terms of Levinasian thought, for whom ethics *is* love.

Tadek considers Maria – one other – and *then* other others. The story is structured in a way that reproduces only the narrator’s letters. The reader is never privy to a response from her. In that sense, it is neither presented as a symmetrical relationship where we bear witness to her responses, nor a reciprocal one. It is possible to expand this lack of symmetry and reciprocity to review a Levinasian perspective. Levinas claims that no relationship with any individual is symmetrical. On the contrary, one’s obligation and responsibility for the other is always asymmetrical. I am always responsible for the other without *demanding* the other’s responsibility for me. Furthermore, I cannot put myself in another’s place, suffer or rejoice in an identical way – every claim to do so would be self serving and solipsistic. Even if I kill or attack another, I cannot ever fully possess him.

Levinas often favours the seemingly paradoxical, and would claim that we are heteronomous before we are autonomous in the sense that the principles that bind us come from outside ourselves, and are dictated by external factors. The paradox is that I must be a free ‘I’ before I receive a command, but what separates me from myself is the Other. Furthermore, the *rules* that bind me to others such as ‘do not kill’ generally come from outside myself. I am always already responsible before I do anything – hence the rather overwhelming asymmetry in my relationship to others. Levinas’ philosophy is concerned with what it is within phenomena that transcends the phenomenological, and my relationship to the Other is always in a setting where there are other others. Finkelkraut quotes Jean Paul Sartre who

writes 'The Other is for me simultaneously the one who has stolen my being from me and the one who causes "there to be" a being which is my being'.²⁶⁰

But for Levinas, the Other is not about 'being', but about responsibility and love. Relationships are not based on me and my perceptions, but on my recognition of the alterity of all human beings. He writes that 'with the appearance of the human – *and this is my entire philosophy* – there is something more important than my life, and that is the life of the other' (my italics).²⁶¹ The relationship with the Other will always be non contractual in the sense that, as Hilary Putnam observes 'entering *human* life, in any sense that is 'worthy of the name' – involves recognizing that one is obliged to make oneself available to the neediness of the other *without* simultaneously regarding the other as so obliged.²⁶² Just as I am commanded to respond, so the other is *also* commanded: the Other 'comes to *join* me. But he joins me to himself for service; he commands me as Master. This command can concern me only inasmuch as I am master myself; consequently this command commands me to command' (*TI*, 213). Thus, whilst the relationship with the other is a mutual one, it is neither reciprocal nor symmetrical. Furthermore, Levinas recognizes that

my responsibility for all can and *has* to manifest itself also in limiting itself. The ego can, *in the name of this unlimited responsibility*, be called upon to concern itself also with itself. The fact that the other ... is also a third party with respect to another ... is the birth of thought, consciousness, justice and philosophy. The unlimited initial responsibility, which justifies this concern for justice, for oneself, and for philosophy can be forgotten this forgetting consciousness is a pure egoism. *But egoism is neither first nor last* (my italics).²⁶³

The Holocaust was about murder, deprivation and torture, and if it is true that I am indestructible, the impossibility to totally destroy me is replaced by an injunction to respect the other who cannot be totally encompassed or subordinated by me.²⁶⁴ This commandment

²⁶⁰ Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes, (New York, NY, Philosophical Library, 1956), p. 364, quoted in *WL*, p.10.

²⁶¹ 'The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas' in *PL*, p.172.

²⁶² Hilary Putnam, 'Levinas and Judaism', in *CC*, p.55.

²⁶³ Levinas, 'Substitution', in *TLR*, p.117-118. Furthermore, as Critchley comments, Levinas never offers a theory of justice (*CC*, 26), but Putnam is 'scandalised' by Levinas' claim that 'I am responsible *even* for the Other's responsibility (my italics) ... subjectivity goes to the point of substitution for the Other' (in *Ethics & Infinity: Conversations with Phillippe Nemo*, trans. Richard Cohen, (Pittsburg, PA, Duquesne University Press, 1985), p.99). Putnam objects to one's being responsible 'to the point of offering myself as a substitute for the other – think of a concentration camp – to the point of martyrdom' (*CC*, 56). For him, '[t]he asymmetry of the ethical relation need not be carried as far (56). I agree that this example defies justice. What concerns me is the idea that sometimes my interests come first *in order* that I may serve the other, but believe that Levinas would agree with this too. His main point remains 'all men worthy of the name, are all responsible for each other' ('The Pact' in *DF*, p.226).

²⁶⁴ See *SWQR*, p.86

was violated over and over again, and renders Levinas' claims paradoxical because the Nazis tried to make their victims *faceless*. If Levinas was correct, then Auschwitz would have been an impossibility, but we know it happened. However, he would claim that the impossible becomes possible but makes its *intention* fruitless. Whatever their intentions, the Nazis could not violate the 'face' to the point of total obliteration. This reiterates his insistence that we are heteronomous before we are autonomous, whereby our dependence on other people and external laws does not render any autonomy as boundless. My vulnerability may command the response of the perpetrator, but this does not obviate my vulnerability to him. The victim can be killed but cannot be made faceless, and in behaving as if he or she was, the perpetrators deluded themselves by trying to ignore or forget the commandment not to kill. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes:

The epiphany of the face brings forth the possibility of gauging the infinity of the temptation to murder, not only as a temptation to total destruction, *but also as the purely ethical impossibility of this temptation and attempt.*
(*TI*, 199, my italics.)

To kill and act as if one is innocent of any crime is to compound the crime – Levinas refers to it as a 'ruse of innocence' when talking about National Socialism. During the Holocaust, the Nazis were complicit in a dishonesty that was on a scale hitherto unimaginable. This also applies to the prisoners forced to participate in the carnage, and who grew indifferent to the plight of their fellow prisoners, even relishing the opportunity to release their own pent up rage and frustration.

The Grey Zone

Time and again, what comes to mind is Levi's grey zone of ambiguity where the distinctions between victim and perpetrator are blurred, but Borowski's distinctions are even more brutal in that the dehumanized victims hover ever more uncertainly between their status as victim or perpetrator. There is an incident in the story 'This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen', when a 'healthy, good looking' young woman denies that a little child 'with a pink cherub's face' is her son during the selection after arrival in Auschwitz. She wants to live, and intuits that if the child remains with her, she will die (*TWG*, 43). Andrei 'knocks her off her feet chokes her ... and heaves her on to the truck', knowing that it is destined for the gas chamber, slinging the child after her, saying 'you bloody Jewess running from

your own child! I'll show you, you whore!' (*TWG*, 43). It is instructive to note the response of an SS man in the story, who comments 'Gut gemacht, good work. That's the way to deal with degenerate mothers' (*TWG*, 43).

This response amply demonstrates an inversion of morality where morality is invoked in a pathologically warped way. Andrei's actions can now evoke moral approbation in a way that is the antithesis of traditional concepts of right and wrong. The lie resides in the 'calm, efficient' and 'kindly' demeanour of the SS officer, which exemplifies the deception in this new moral universe, where the Nazi objective is dehumanization and death (*TWG*, 38). It is also a universe where the victims are forced to become complicit with their captors and to respond to their fellow prisoners, friends and family in a way that is devoid of morality. As readers, we are drawn in to this universe where we can both deplore, but understand the woman who does not want to become one of those who 'vanish', and are forced to confront Andrei's wish to survive too (*TWG*, 42). His work cleaning the train, removing the corpses, depriving people of their pathetic 'loot', and separating families is undertaken in a vodka induced stupor (*TWG*, 42).

Fear, violence and terror are omnipresent and overwhelming. The contrast between the calm demeanour of the perpetrators and panic of the new arrivals makes it almost impossible to respond in any way that can be called humane. Borowski does not flinch from depicting the moral chaos where the SS officers with 'shiny brutal faces' also shake each others' hands 'cordially' and treat each other with warmth, discussing 'mail from home, their children, their families' (*TWG*, 35). The prisoners also chat as they sit around in unbearable heat waiting for the next transport when they might be able to steal 'champagne', 'shoes' or a 'shirt', and speculate about how, if the transports stop, 'we'll starve to death in this blasted camp' (*TWG*, 30-31). Tadek is only too pleased to be invited by Henri to go to the ramp of the 'cheerful little station' because he understands that 'whoever has grub, has power' (*TWG*, 31).

The language is coarse and casual, where being called '*Schwinedreck*' or 'fatso' is matter of fact rather than deliberately insulting (*TWG*, 34). Henri warns Tadek about not stealing money or suits and the necessity for '*Arschaugen*' (eyes in your ass) in order to avoid a beating (*TWG*, 35). So, however tenuous, one may argue that there *is* some sense of responsibility for the other person, whether in the warnings given by one prisoner to another

or the social exchanges between the SS officers. What is absent is the idea of one's responsibility to ease the *suffering* of the other *whoever* he may be, but the very absence of responsibility makes it present in its absence. It is implicit in the 'hate and horror' with which the prisoners, who have to help the Nazis, look at each other when confronted by the fear of the 'multicoloured wave of people' that tumble from the train to have their 'bundles ... snatched' and 'coats ripped off their backs' (*TWG*, 37-8). They know what they should but cannot do, and substitute their self disgust and hatred of themselves and each other by displacing such feelings to hatred and fury of those about to die – 'Damn them all' (*TWG*, 40).

When Andrei chokes the woman he accuses of running out on her own child, he is already enraged – not by her betrayal, but his own. He need never look at her because to do so might mean confronting his own culpability. He knows that she is doomed to die and it is as if he also convinces himself that it makes no difference whether he or someone else kills her. In so doing, he not only kills her but a part of himself. Anger and rage also provide the perpetrators with the motivation to kill. It is easier to do if convinced that it is justified, and even more so if contempt accompanies that anger. Andrei's rage is self-deceptive as are the narrator's sudden furious outbursts, and the 'intention is to act under the delusion that one can violate the very articulation of one's singularity as an involvement in the other with impunity' (*SWQR*, 89).

The 'calm, efficient, watchful' SS officer courteously says '*Meine Herrschaften*, this way, ladies and gentlemen, try not to throw your things Show some goodwill' whilst 'his restless hands' menacingly fondle a 'slender whip' (*TWG*, 38). Rage and contempt lie barely concealed beneath the surface. One also notes the way that language is inverted and used to perpetuate the deception and lies about what is going to happen – show some goodwill, don't throw your things, and so forth. In fact, thousands of human beings become nameless, faceless serial numbers 'from Salonica, 'from Strasbourg', 'from Rotterdam' (*TWG*, 39). They are 'pigs' or '*Schweinerei*' of whom 'no trace' must be left, and the terminology used is part of the dehumanization process (*TWG*, 41, 42). Just as language signifies nothing meaningful, this disorientation extends to other signs such as the Red Cross van that actually 'transports the gas that will kill these people' (*TWG*, 38). That people are reduced to marks in a notebook noting their place of origin and allocated a number elicits a proleptic and ironic comment from the narrator:

When the war is over, they will count up the marks – all four and a half million of them the greatest victory of the strong, united Germany. *Ein Reich, ein Volk, ein Führer* – and four crematoria. (*TWG*, 3.)

The intention to reduce people to marks in a book is to render them as faceless, non-human and unmemorable. Borowski's narrative implicitly restores them to their rightful place as exterminated human beings with human faces, by the telling of the process. At the same time, it ensures that the reader understands how incongruous humanist ideals are in the camp.

Having the power to murder and the will to power on the scale evidenced by the Nazis' behaviour during the Holocaust renders the concept of an Enlightenment kind of humanist ethics as suspended. Any moral law became impotent because no generalized or universal law was able to combat or challenge the absolute power the Nazis wielded. It was not that universal moral law was abandoned, but that the lack of individual autonomy rendered it helpless. The solicitation to murder, and the Nazis' willingness and ability to flout any responsibility when confronted by the face of the Other, meant that they attempted to overcome their fear of him by murdering him.

Images of the Face and Hatred

James Hatley argues that Borowski's writing is obsessed with images of the face, whether the 'pink cherub's face' abandoned by his mother, the mother 'covering her face with her hands' or Andrei who murders her, whose face 'twitches with rage' (*SWQR*, 76; *TWG*, 43). The vodka that is supposed to help the narrator ignore the face of the other makes him 'feel like throwing up', and by the end of this one day that exemplifies the 'commonplace' in Auschwitz, he 'can no longer control the nausea' and begins to 'vomit' (*TWG*, 43, 48).

Hatley writes that:

... the theme of the face is how the face itself announces all themes, how before one can even speak about speaking, one must speak to *someone*, that is, *to her or his face*. This face is precisely what is under attack in the world-betrayed of Auschwitz. (*SWQR*, 77.)

I suggest that it is not only world-betrayed, but *word*-betrayed, because it is in the face that the eyes reside and meet those of the other, 'speaking' their own vulnerability or power. It is from the mouth that language flows and with language comes not only the possibility to

speak, but also the possibility to listen and *hear* what is actually being said and this is also what concerns Levinas. As Hatley writes, Levinas is less concerned to ‘show the rendering faceless of the face that characterized the *Haftling’s* world, as he is to show how the face *as commandment* transcends all plots to overwhelm its authority’ (*SWQR*, 80). Levinas wants to show how, despite all efforts to destroy the ‘face as commandment’, it is not possible. What requires explanation after Auschwitz is how, despite the unethical behaviour of so many, there were moments when ‘someone plays without winning’ and ‘with grace’.²⁶⁵ That moment is ‘when one can hear and understand this commandment’ which comes from the face.²⁶⁶

The significance of the face reminds us of its use as a rhetorical trope, which is present in much Holocaust literature. In Borowski’s volume, there is the woman ‘who gazes straight into my eyes’ before taking babies’ corpses (*TWG*, 40). Then the narrator is confronted by the young woman with ‘enchanted blonde hair’ who ‘with a gliding look examines our faces until our eyes meet’, and he becomes unable to overcome his ‘mounting, uncontrollable terror’ (*TWG*, 44, 45). A pattern of ironical tropes is also used to convey the face and demeanour of the perpetrators that links the stories. The Nazis have ‘shiny, brutal faces’ (*TWG*, 35) and there is the ‘rat-like’ woman commandant who is ‘repulsive, and knows it’ (*TWG*, 41). The ‘Kommandoführer’ in ‘A Day at Harmenz’ is a ‘sickly little SS man’, but ‘an expert in lashing a whip’ (*TWG*, 58). There is the ‘Rottenführer’ who ‘looked at us in the way one looks at a pair of horses drawing a cart, or cattle grazing in the field’, but then slams Janek across the face for not taking off his cap in his presence, or the *Kapo* who rebukes Tadek for some infraction without looking at him, and then fixes on him ‘the lifeless, vacant stare of a man torn out of profound contemplation’ (*TWG*, 66, 67, 72). In ‘The People who walked on’, the women, old men and children ‘would turn their silent faces in our direction’, might throw some bread over the fence and their eyes ‘fill with tears of pity’, but they continued to walk on by (*TWG*, 94). The face of the perpetrator is sometimes described in almost comic terms because the reader recognizes the lie and what actually lies beneath ‘calm, precise’ gentlemen of the SS (*TWG*, 39).

As discussed, the ‘face’ is not restricted to the appearance of the other person, but also represents the encounter. What comes to mind is the ‘endless colourful procession’ to the

²⁶⁵ ‘The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas’, in *PL*, p.176

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.176

gas chamber when SS men daily urge twenty thousand human beings onwards to their destination 'with kindly smiles' on their faces (*TWG*, 97, 95). There is the encounter with the 'man in a green hunting outfit and a gay little Tyrolian hat with the face of a kindly satyr. A 'university professor' who heads the project to artificially inseminate women, injects them with typhoid and malaria or operates on them (*TWG*, 108). Or the man supposed to 'guide' a beautiful girl to a 'flaming trench' where she will be shot, who takes her hand, and covers her eyes telling her 'Be brave' as he pushes her into the pit (*TWG*, 96). There is a torrent of such descriptions, and what stands out is the failure of all those who do not 'even bother to look'; that is, to respond to the face of other (*TWG*, 128).

The indifference to the face is also reminiscent of Levi's interview with Doktor Pannwitz. Levi waits for the man's attention and, eventually, Pannwitz looks at him, but does not *see* him as a man. As Levi writes, 'that look was not one between two men: and if I had known how completely to explain the nature of that look ... I would also have explained the essence of the great insanity of the third Germany' (*ITIAM*, 111-2). Pannwitz' look is one that regards 'something in front of me [who] belongs to a species which it is obviously opportune to suppress. In this particular case, one has to first make sure that *it* does not contain some utilizable element' (*ITIAM*, 112, my emphasis). Standing in the pristine office, Levi feels he might leave a 'dirty stain' and, as he is interrogated, he surveys Pannwitz, thinking 'blue eyes and fair hair are essentially wicked. No communication possible' (*ITIAM*, 112). The irony of this incident is that both Levi and Pannwitz regard each other as specimens and stereotypes. For Pannwitz, Levi is not a man because he is a Jew, but may be 'utilized'. For Levi, Pannwitz is the quintessential wicked German Nazi, but he is dependent upon him for a job so that he can survive longer. He is enraged but his rage is utterly contained in the cold, objective summary. It is an indictment of Pannwitz and, one might say, of Levi himself. However, Levi's statement is more that of an angry, helpless man, not one that is full of hate.²⁶⁷

Levi revisits the incident with Pannwitz in *The Drowned and the Saved*, when he recalls the foul mouthed *Kapo* Alex who accompanies him to the interview and afterwards, 'without hatred and without sneering' wipes his dirty hand on Levi's shoulder (*DS*, 143, *ITIAM*, 113). It is the day that Levi passes personal judgement on him and Pannwitz, but it is a judgement

²⁶⁷ Despite claims that he hated the Germans. See Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust*, p.80

that bears witness and affirms the *justice* of condemnation as opposed to an explicit expression of hatred (*ITIAM*, 114).²⁶⁸ Whilst he may harbour no ‘hatred for the German people’ as a whole, it is a mistake to believe that he has no hatred or rage for the active oppressors.²⁶⁹ Pannwitz’ inability to respond to him as a man is a defining symbol of that oppression. However, he chooses the ‘calm, sober language of the *witness*’ as opposed to an ‘overly emotional’ narrative voice (‘AFT’, 382). He feels that a controlled usage of language and tone is more believable and, as a witness, wants to lay the groundwork for justice, the ultimate ‘judges’ being his readers (‘AFT’, 382). Levi’s renowned rational humanism is severely challenged because of his experiences, and he is honest enough to acknowledge this when he comments that although his thoughts and actions ‘should be the product of reason’, he would be ‘tempted to hate, and with violence too’ if confronted by one of the persecutors (‘AFT’, 382). He never says he is not angry, but his anger resists the temptation to hate in favour of pursuing

a synthesis of different technical narrative modes and an amalgamation of temporalities, to understand more about human life and behaviour, to record the ambivalence of any individual’s physical and intellectual survival, and to implicate the readers in that ambivalence’.²⁷⁰

Borowski and humanism

Although each story in *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* differs in emphasis, what unites them is the assault on any sense that humanism is relevant in Auschwitz. Mostly, there is simply an overweening desire to survive, and that is *almost* all, although underlying much of the narrative there are not only traces of a yearning for values of the past, but also moments of desperate hope for values that might again make any survival meaningful. Despite an implicit rejection of humanism or inability to assimilate its ideals into one’s thinking whilst in the camp, traces of it remain in its absence and are expressed in the anger and sense of betrayal that permeate so many Holocaust texts. What ultimately

²⁶⁸ However, there is an element of irony and satisfaction in the tone when Levi tells us that this ‘coward and bully’ who forbade civilian collaborators to escape with him after the arrival of the Red Army subsequently died of a brain tumour in 1946 (‘AFT’, p.394).

²⁶⁹ H el ene Barr’s ‘disgust’ with the Germans may better capture Levi’s feelings. Barr writes ‘I was overwhelmed by a surge not of hatred, for I do not know hatred, but of protest, revulsion and scorn’ (189). In *Journal*, trans. David Bellos, (London, Maclehose Press, 2008). Barr kept a journal from 1942-1944, after which she was deported, and eventually died on the death march from Auschwitz to Bergen Belsen.

²⁷⁰ Dalya Sachs, ‘The Language of Judgement: Primo Levi’s ‘Se questo e un uomo’, in *MLN*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995 from MUSE, 24.11.08

endows the idea of survival with meaning is the value placed on memory and love in 'Auschwitz, Our Home (A letter)'.²⁷¹ There are some shifts of tone wherein, although the anger is omnipresent, it is more reflective and philosophical. It is also the most moving and horrifying because of the juxtaposition of personal memories of love and anguished thoughts about good and evil. These coexist with the detached descriptions of barbarism and cruelty in which the narrator is daily immersed. What becomes evident in the events he depicts is that there is a crisis for humanism. However, beyond some yearning for past values, Borowski helps to express the intimations of a transformation from a universal humanism to a humanism of the singular relation.

Despite efforts to shield Maria from his livid despair by infusing the more horrific descriptions of camp life with irony, it is clear that he clings to his own sense of being human by the most fragile of threads. Only remnants of his spirit are retained in the camp – these are the memories of their love - but the realities of his daily existence threaten to crush and overwhelm him. This is supported by the fact that the letter ends with the telling of a conversation between him and a Jewish 'old pal', Abie, who works in the *Sonderkommando* (*TWG*, 141). Their conversation starts off with an old world greeting 'what's new Not much' which makes the next sentence 'Just gassed up a Czech transport' so chilling, and reminds us that the very title of the *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* indicates how deceptively detached and unsentimental the narrative is, and the normalized whitewash with which the outrages are perpetrated (*TWG*, 142). It could be either a perpetrator or victim directing others to the gas chamber and the lack of clarity in the words "This Way to the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen" silently screams against the deception used to lead people to their merciless deaths.

It also emphasizes how the distinction between victim and perpetrator was so often blurred by Levi's 'grey zone' – that ambiguous area between victimhood, implication and complicity. This zone was 'held together by the wish to preserve and consolidate their privilege *vis à vis* those without privilege' (*DS*, 28). In a rare flash of overt anger, Levi writes 'I do know that I was a guiltless victim and I was not a murderer' (*DS*, 32) unlike some of the *Kapos* who beat their fellow victims to death, or the *Sonderkommando* who ran

²⁷¹ The letter is based on actual letters Borowski managed to write to his future wife, Maria Runda, known as Tuska, but she is named just once on p.137. There is no evidence of any exchange between them within the text, so that the reader wonders if the silence implies her death or illness. However, we learn that Kurt, who smuggles Borowski's letters to her does bring replies when possible (see p.134).

the crematoria, extracting the corpses from the gas chambers, removing their teeth, hair, classifying their belongings, and finally, overseeing their burning and the disposal of their ashes. It was a further annihilation to remove all traces of the human beings they had once been. They were segregated from other inmates and seen as collaborators, but Levi claims that ‘conceiving and organizing the squad was National Socialism’s most demonic crime’ (*DS*, 37).²⁷²

This iniquitous aspect of the camps is reaffirmed in ‘Auschwitz, Our Home’ when the narrator writes about the destination of an ‘ordinary barn, brightly whitewashed’ with ‘only several men directing traffic’ (human beings) of the ‘thousands’ (of human beings) who ‘flow along like water’ to be asphyxiated by the gas (*TWG*, 112). He and Abie are apparently so immune and desensitized by the world of the death camp that the narrator can indicate ‘polite interest’ in the ‘new way to burn people’, even though he has ‘little enthusiasm’ for Abie’s description: ‘... you take four little kids with plenty of hair on their heads, then stick the heads together and light the hair. The rest burns by itself and in no time at all the whole business is *gemacht*’ (*TWG*, 142). Then he laughs ‘and with a strange expression looked right into my eyes “we must entertain ourselves in every way we can. Otherwise, who could stand it?”’ (*TWG*, 142).

The strangeness of Abie’s expression reflects the strangeness of an appeal that is made to the narrator by looking into his eyes. Paradoxically, Abie appeals to a kind of humanity in order to receive some understanding for the loss of his own. Ironically, it is as if his callous treatment of four little corpses, which he calls ‘entertainment’, helps him to preserve *something* of himself.²⁷³ Abie’s look into the eyes can therefore be interpreted as an ethical appeal, which seeks justification for his sadism as a mechanism for survival. It is also a way to seek expiation for his guilt. Abie’s attempts to become immune to the savagery around him and that of his own actions are therefore not wholly successful. His sadistic treatment of the children makes him feel he has some control, but it also makes him feel guilty. The incident provokes the narrator’s acknowledgement of the ‘monstrous ... grotesque lie’ that underpins the existence of Auschwitz, and is an implicit recognition of what it does to the

²⁷² But see the story of one *Kapo*, Eddy, to whom Levi is indebted for not betraying him in ‘The Juggler’, *Moments of Reprieve*, trans. Ruth Feldman, (London: Penguin Classics, 2001), pp.27-33.

²⁷³ Freud writes: ‘It really seems as though it is necessary for us to destroy some other thing or person in order not to destroy ourselves, in order to guard against the impulsion to self-destruction’. This applies to both prisoners and perpetrators during the Holocaust and, indeed, is part of what Freud sees as the human condition. (See ‘Anxiety and Instinctual Life’, in Volume XVII, (1917-1919), p.105.

human within the human (*TWG*, 142). The telling of this tale ends a series of letters that speak the unspeakable, but also talk of love. That the incident with Abie is the final word disabuses one of any inclination towards a humanistic optimism, which is little more than pious hope and wishful thinking.

Sadism and Privilege – An Antithesis to Humanism

I am again reminded of Amery, who writes about how sadism is a way for the sadist ‘to realize his own total sovereignty’.²⁷⁴ His own experience of being tortured leads him to believe that it is ‘the total inversion of the social world, in which we can live only if we grant our fellow man life, ease his suffering’ (*ATML*, 35). There is something that reflects Levinasian ethics in this statement, which retains a trace of commitment to humanistic ideals by reaffirming the *responsibility* to ease, rather than perpetuate suffering. This is further evidenced when Amery writes about the philosopher he meets who ‘no longer believed in the reality of the mind’ that proposes the ability to think rationally (*ATML*, 8). Amery himself does not deny that reality, but claims an intellectual (rational by implication) ‘is a person who lives within what is a spiritual frame of reference in the widest sense’ (*ATML*, 2). What he does do, however, is to debunk the notion of the triumph of the individual spirit in adversity, writing that the Auschwitz experiences in no way made its survivors ‘better, more human, more humane and more mature ethically We emerged from the camp stripped, robbed, emptied out, disoriented’ (*ATML*, 20). Abie is such a man.

What remains is the raw and petrifying evidence of the world to which Borowski bears witness, and the chilling certainty that whatever remnants of human kindness and tendencies towards a humanistic ideal remain, they co-exist with brutality. Whatever the sins of the SS perpetrators, there is a silent recognition of the ways in which the victims themselves become co-conspirators implicated in the functioning of Auschwitz. Indeed, the fact that Borowski saw himself as somewhere between victim and perpetrator haunts all the stories, particularly because however much he suffered, he was a non-Jewish political ‘privileged’ prisoner, and well aware that the Jews were even more harshly treated. One thinks of Levi who, as a Jew, also considered himself to be amongst the ‘privileged’ when he became a

²⁷⁴ *ATML*, p.35.

laboratory worker. However, the threat of extermination in the gas chamber remained for Levi, whereas Borowski knew that, as an Aryan, this would not happen to him.²⁷⁵ Unlike Levi and all Jewish prisoners, he was also allowed to write letters and receive food parcels.

The difference in their status is highlighted by comparing the description of a football game in which the narrator of 'The People Who Walked On' participates, and which Levi might well have witnessed.²⁷⁶ Two ritualized games are 'played' in this story: football and gassings. It is also replete with opposing images that remain in the memory – of fecundity as inmates plant 'spinach and lettuce, sunflowers and garlic', of green lawns and flowers, and the building of a football pitch (*TWG*, 83). There is the contrasting image of the 'Jew in our Kommando with very bad teeth' who is in love with Mirka, 'a short, stocky 'pink' girl' (*TWG*, 88). Mirka is in the women's section - 'The Persian Market' - so called 'because of its exotic character', inhabited by women with 'bright summer dresses and gay kerchiefs' but deprived of underwear, spoons, bowls, without 'even a rag to clean themselves with' (*TWG*, 86, 85). All the imagery is deceptive, illusory and part of a game, until a 'red-headed Elder' can bear the women's pleas for information about their families no longer, and tells them how they've 'been stuffed into a room and gassed', just like her own family (*TWG*, 91).

The narrator writes ironically about the 'improving' conditions in Auschwitz and Birkenau, how life becomes 'better and better ... after the first three or four years', but in The Persian Market, the selections recommence and the selected women take the lonely walk to the gas as do the endless new arrivals 'from morning till night – every single day' (*TWG*, 92, 96). These are the images imprinted and inscribed on the narrator's memory from his 'last summer in Auschwitz' and the big redheaded Block Elder who asks 'Will evil be punished? I mean in human, normal terms!' (*TWG*, 97). The question is an ethical one that cannot be answered by resorting to a humanistic ethics, because such ethics reside suspended in the wreckage of the annihilation.

A dominant image in the story is that of hospital staff and convalescent patients watching a game of football on the new football pitch. It is a warm, sunny day, and as they watch, the

²⁷⁵ The SS stopped gassing Aryans in Auschwitz in April, 1943, just before Borowski and Maria arrived. See *TWG*, p.113.

²⁷⁶ 'The People Who Walked On' in *TWG*, pp.82-97 and *DS*, p.38.

emerging arrivals from a new transport disappear. For the reader, there is the stark and menacing image of the 'endless colourful procession of people solemnly walking' by, dressed in their bright summer clothes. In a brutal two line paragraph, our fears are confirmed: 'Between two throw-ins in a soccer game ... three thousand people had been put to death' (*TWG*, 84). That these two lines stand alone creates an impression of a silent, wordless scream at the injustice and sense of hopeless guilt. It is so enormous that it cannot be spoken, but the narrator has to acknowledge it even though he knows there is absolutely nothing he can do to stop or change it. He knows that those who walk by are about to be exterminated, and how it is part of a game that they be deceived until the very end. He realizes he is implicated simply by witnessing 'people walking in the direction of the little wood' (towards the gas chambers), and is further implicated because he is still playing and not on the ramp (*TWG*, 83). And so it continues during the following months; months when the narrator shares with us the images of night skies lit up by bursts of flames and 'terrible human screams' (*TWG*, 85). These 'numb' the narrator and reader, who become 'frozen with horror' (*TWG*, 85).

Levi, who might have been writing about the same soccer match, remains under threat of extermination whilst Borowski's narrator is on the soccer field. He famously calls the *Sonderkommando* 'crematorium ravens', and pinpoints the way in which they and the SS are 'bound together by the foul link of imposed complicity' (*DS*, 38). They are *almost* colleagues 'on an equal footing' and by playing football together, it is as if the SS are saying to their captives

... we have succeeded, you are no longer the other race, the anti-race, the prime enemy ... the people who reject idols. We have embraced you, corrupted you, dragged you to the bottom with us. You are like us, you proud people, dirtied with your own blood, as we are we can play together. (*DS*, 38.)

Of course, Borowski was no 'raven' and apparently only worked with the *Sonderkommando* for the day described in 'This Way to the Gas', during which the narrator is whipped into complying, and vomits because of his terror and what he is forced to witness. The fact that he writes about it at all, and does so using a first person narrator, demonstrates that his awareness of the extent to which prisoners were implicated is just as acute as that of Levi. Levi reflects on the 'grey zone', whereas Borowski lives within it and refuses to absolve himself. Neither he nor Levi permit themselves or their readers any refuge from it, or the idea that any notions about humanistic principles are not sabotaged in the camp. Levi writes that 'conceiving and organizing the squads' of *Sonderkommando* was 'National Socialism's

most demonic crime', but acknowledges the confession of one member who says to him 'one either goes crazy ... or gets accustomed to it' (*DS*, 37, 36). Similarly, Borowski writes that they were not 'bad people' but 'simply accustomed', and this is part of the tragedy that befell humanity during the Holocaust.

Rationalism and an Angry Humanism

Brian Cheyette has observed that Levi is often perceived as epitomizing a dispassionate rationalism and clinging to the tenets of Enlightenment humanism.²⁷⁷ However, he takes issue with this view as proposed by Cynthia Ozick, who writes of Levi's 'lucid calm', 'magisterial equanimity' and 'unaroused detachment' as 'scientific investigator', despite what she refers to as his 'rage of resentment'.²⁷⁸ Whilst Levi and Borowski's writing differs in both style and content, what underpins both writers' work is an implacable rage after their camp experiences. To be sure, Borowski's fury is more explicit, but Levi's anger is just as potent. The poem that precedes *If This is a Man* invokes the Shema, but inverts the God-given injunctions of this sacred prayer to his own curse-ridden conclusion. This demonstrates how Levi's apparent 'calm' actually belies the fury and 'resentments' that underlie the book. Levi was not religious and nowhere is his conviction that man is responsible for himself reinforced more than when he is tempted to pray for protection during a selection for the gas chamber. He (bravely) resists, writing that such a prayer would be 'blasphemous, obscene, laden with the greatest impiety of which a non-believer is capable' (*DS*, 118). It was also his horror that any human being is chosen at the expense of another, which is why he angrily berates Kuhn's prayer, who thanks God for not being chosen for the gas chamber knowing that someone else is. Levi writes that if he were God, he 'would spit at Kuhn's prayer' because, for him, a prayer in these circumstances becomes akin to a pact with a devil (*ITIAM*, 136).

Jean Amery, with whom Levi had briefly been incarcerated, called him 'the forgiver' which Levi refutes in his chapter 'The Intellectual in Auschwitz' (*DS*). He considers Amery's label as neither 'an insult or praise but an imprecision' (*DS*, 110). He understands Amery's

²⁷⁷ Brian Cheyette, 'The Ethical Uncertainty of Primo Levi', in *Judaism*, Winter, 1999, pp. 56-67.

²⁷⁸ Cynthia Ozick, 'Primo Levi's Suicide Note', in *Metaphor and Memory* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), pp.37, 36, 34-38. Cheyette describes Ozick's argument as 'misguided' to stereotype Levi's corpus of work as being uni-dimensional.

‘resentments’, but states that whilst ‘I never forgave ... I demand justice’, and prefers to ‘delegate punishments, revenges and retaliations to the laws of my country’ however imperfectly ‘these mechanisms function’ (*ATML*, 62-81 & *DS*, 110-111). Whilst there is never any doubt about either Amery or Borowski’s anger, I want to suggest that, in fact, both these young men subscribed to a kind of radical humanism, borne out by Amery’s Levinasian conviction that the torture he endured is ‘the total inversion of the social world, in which we can live only if we grant our fellow man life, *ease his suffering*’ (*ATML*, 35, my italics). Amery recognizes the responsibility that man has to take for the other’s suffering if he is to live as a man, and this is what grants ‘our fellow man life’. As explored in Chapter II, Levinas asserts that ‘All evil refers to suffering’ and that suffering only has meaning if it is the suffering of the other. He further explains it thus:

a radical difference develops between *suffering in the Other*, which for *me* is unpardonable and solicits me and calls me, and suffering *in me*, my own adventure of suffering, whose ... congenital uselessness can take on a meaning ... in becoming a suffering for the suffering ... of someone else. (‘US’, 159 .)

Care for the other therefore supersedes care for oneself and yet *is* care for oneself.²⁷⁹ Sadly, all three writers discussed in this section recognized others’ suffering in the camps, but could find little or no meaning in it. Indeed, neither Amery nor Borowski was able to ease his own suffering which was a contributory factor in their suicides. As Levinas wrote:

The evil which rends the humanity of the suffering person, overwhelms his humanity otherwise than non-freedom overwhelms it: violently and cruelly, more irremissibly than the negation which dominates or paralyses the act in non-freedom. (‘US’, 157.)

Levi’s suicide is still contested by the idea that he slipped rather than threw himself down the stairs, but his own humanistic ideals were clearly threatened. However, his stated aim was to memorialize the suffering of others – it was not possible to ease their suffering, but it is as if he wanted to mourn the uselessness of it via memory. What restored some potential for freedom and thus his humanism and dignity, was not only the act of writing itself, but also his exploration of the complicity of perpetrators and victims in his outline of the ‘grey zone’ of ambiguity that blurred some of the distinctions between them. That is, he too took responsibility and tried to instil it in others.

²⁷⁹ See Levinas, [2006], *Humanism of the Other*, p.xxvii.

The Holocaust's Effects on Humanism

In 'Auschwitz, Our Home', the 'student' at the hospital describes his 'lofty mission: to nurse ... fellow inmates who may have the 'misfortune' to become ill, suffer from severe apathy or feel depressed about life in general' (*TWG*, 98). The tone is deceptively detached, and the reader soon discovers that the humanistic 'lofty' ambition to cure disease has no relevance in his new 'home'. He remembers the last time he saw the 'tall, willowy young woman with sad eyes and a gentle smile' at the Pawiak prison, and why he tries to ensure that his

letters are not sad. I have kept my spirit and I know that you have not lost yours either But the people here ... you see, they have lived through and survived all the incredible horrors of the concentration camp ... one hears so many fantastic stories. (*TWG*, 103).

Whenever the first-person narrator addresses Maria directly, there is a change of tone to one that contains less rage and is more questioning, seeking meaning for what they are enduring. The language he uses is that of one who seeks to reaffirm their love, which is what he clings to in a world where morality, justice and life itself have lost so much value. Although he sometimes forgets her physical appearance, what is important is surviving their ordeal and keeping their 'spirit' (*TWG*, 103). The recollection and survival of their love for each other is also what reminds him that he is still human.

It is no longer a world where humanism has a role or function. The human ability to reason, to use one's intellect, to have some measure of autonomy as regards one's own existence is imperilled in the camp, where 'morality', 'law', 'tradition' and 'obligation' take on new sinister meanings under the Nazis (*TWG*, 110). Despite the difficulty to distinguish between Borowski and the narrator, what is being said is that even to talk about such things is delusory – hence his condescending smile (See *TWG*, 110). One cannot be deprived of the love for another human being because it is internal, and is not subject to the rules or conventions of the outside world or its power. Humanism then takes on a more profound and enduring mantle which entails the internal and emotional response of one person to another, rather than reason reinforced by power. The external 'age of toughness' cannot be disregarded but like any age, it will pass, whereas the internal yearning for love and the discovery of another is perennial.

Borowski's narrator does not try to ignore what is going on around him and asks Maria to discard her 'sense of horror and loathing and contempt' to try and 'find for it all a

philosophic formula...' (*TWG*, 112); that is, he asks her to resort to Coleridge's 'willing suspension of disbelief'. By referring to a time of innocence before the camps, he heightens one's sense of a horror so great that it is unimaginable, whilst acknowledging that it is the reality of the camp:

If I had said to you as we danced together ... listen, take a million people, or two million, or three, kill them in such a way that no one knows about it, not even they themselves, enslave several hundred thousand more, destroy their mutual loyalty, pit man against man, and ... surely you would have thought me mad. (*TWG*, 112.)

Despite his awareness and despair about the prevailing condition of their lives, he not only still searches for a 'philosophic formula' to understand and cope with it, but also wishes to protect and insulate their love, as when he writes '... I would probably not have said these things to you, even if I had known what I know today. I would not have wanted to spoil our mood' (*TWG*, 112). However, it is as if the brutality that surrounds him is so overwhelming and sullies every aspect of his being that he is compelled to continue describing the killing method that is carried out without 'hocus pocus', and ask why 'nobody cries out, nobody spits in their faces, nobody jumps at their throats' (*TWG*, 112). The contrast between the idea of them 'dancing' and then asking why nobody 'spits' in their persecutors' faces heightens the sense of futility of trying to find a 'philosophic formula' especially one that can be described as humanistic.

Recognizing that Maria is unaccustomed to his writing in this way, and knowing that he has always been thought of as a 'cheerful' sort, it is a measure of the acute depression that engulfs him that induces him to share his thoughts and the sights he sees with her (*TWG*, 113). It also aids him to maintain his sanity because his depression is not only emotional, but painfully philosophical. As he writes 'I think we should speak about all the things that are happening around us. We are not evoking evil irresponsibly or in vain, for we have now become a part of it ...' (*TWG*, 113, his ellipsis). The description of the horrors around him is neither sensationalized nor prurient, but aims to convey the state of mind of both victim and perpetrator and the notion of complicity. It is a vivid picture, and the cynicism and studied indifference in the tone of much of the description belies the narrator's passionate intensity and rage.

The effect of Borowski's use of a first person narrative voice is that it conveys the totality of the narrator's implication in the events described. As Jan Kott comments in the introduction, there is a strong connection between the author and narrator. Borowski also implicates

himself because the reader knows that *he* was in the camp, and that the text is a combination of fact and fiction. Indeed, it is difficult to distinguish between what is based on actual events in the text and what is invented. The evidence is that Borowski's fictionalized letters are based on those he actually wrote, and that he and Maria were reunited and married after the war. Whilst it is important to resist the temptation of conflating fiction and biography, many have argued that there is *always* an element of biography in any writer's work and I would argue that this is especially true of Holocaust literature. Nevertheless, Borowski *chose* to fictionalize his tales of the Holocaust. One cannot suspend their fictionality by eliding the autobiographical aspects, and the relationship with known autobiographical facts arouses our suspicions. This is because it reminds us of both the elliptical and opaque nature of memory, as well as its ambiguity. In a different context, Laura Marcus has commented on the 'radical split between the self that writes and the self that is written' and I would argue that the split between Borowski, the author and Borowski, the narrator in 'Auschwitz our Home' (and elsewhere in the volume) is paradigmatic of a split where it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the two.²⁸⁰

What makes this an issue is the need to recognize the inherent instability in any first person textual voice, whether fictional or autobiographical. 'Auschwitz our Home' is a text that conveys the loss, dehumanization and annihilation not only of human beings, but also of the human spirit, but is one which also seeks to suggest an alternative way to think about ethics and what it means to be human. The loss of every aspect of stability – physical, emotional and intellectual – cries out for the installation of new footholds that enable life and living to be infused with meaning, however unstable it may be. That Borowski chose to call his work fiction rather than autobiography or a memoir also suggests – in Marcus's words - 'a move away from self-reflection towards a sense that we are all witnesses of history's tragedies and may be *summoned* to testify to our knowledge of them (*ABD*, 213). We, the readers bear witness to the way that the narrator in Borowski's work is *summoned* to respond to the suffering of the other in a way that is just as forceful as the more clearly autobiographical testimony that compelled Levi, Antelme, Delbo and many others to record their memories.'²⁸¹

²⁸⁰ *ABD*, p. 183. Borowski also draws the reader's attention to this problem in 'A True Story', where *Kapo* Kwasniak challenges the veracity of the narrator's 'stories' and admonishes him not to tell any more (*TWG*, pp.157-160).

²⁸¹ Anthony Rowland provides further insights into Borowski and Levi via their *poetry* in 'Interview with Tadeusz Pioro re Tadeusz Borowski's Selected Poems', in *Critical Survey*, Vol.20:2, 2008, pp.43-52, and 'Poetry as Testimony: Primo Levi's Collected Poems', in *Textual Practice*, Vol.22:3, 2008, pp.487-505.

In 'Auschwitz, Our Home', we are told that 'People on the outside know that ... life over here is terrible' but readily deceive themselves that a few trappings of the normal world such as a 'symphony orchestra', 'work', 'little green lawns' make it bearable (*TWG*, 115). These things are actually 'a fraud and a mockery' and one day, it will be up 'to the living – to speak up for the dead' (*TWG*, 116). This is, of course, reminiscent of Levi's entreaties to 'meditate that this came about' in the poem at the beginning of '*If This is a Man*'. The description of how truckloads of naked women scream for help as they ride past thousands of 'silent men' and 'not one of us made a move ... lifted a hand', again reminds us of Levi's own depictions of the helplessness, fearfulness and impotency of the camp inmates (*TWG*, 116). It is the silent complicity that is part of the 'grey zone'. This makes the notion of the possibility for a universal humanism seem at best, in crisis, at worst, terminally sick. Nevertheless, Borowski's rage, his ruminations, his guilt, sorrow and wish to 'tell the world the whole truth' about Auschwitz also betrays a yearning for the humanism he would renounce, albeit in a new form (*TWG*, 122).

And yet ... despite everything, Levi *was* a humanist and I suggest that Borowski was too. Broadly speaking, Levi epitomizes an Enlightenment kind of humanism. He regards the loss of humanistic values during the Holocaust as a temporary aberration and although he has doubts, believes their restoration is possible after the war. The philosophical ruminations in his writing about the camp experience and his thoughts about the perpetrators and victims suggest a hope that universal values could be rehabilitated once people were again free. He (rationally) endeavours to accommodate and explain the breakdown of rationality that resulted from National Socialism and its effects on both the individual and society.

Borowski is less confident, but any residual traces of humanism in his thinking revolve around the more Levinasian potential for the singular relationship and love. The evidence of his work suggests a rejection of any universal humanism that Levi seeks. Borowski's non-Enlightenment humanism cannot simply be regarded as an effect of history and, indeed, Levi adapts his thinking to take account of the history of the Holocaust. The Nazis' actions called into question the whole tradition of Enlightenment thinking and any transformation in these writers signifies an autonomy that is particularized. To be sure, historical events induced a shift in their reflections, but humanism still featured in their quests to make sense of what had taken place.

After his experiences, Levi's humanism was of a different ilk to that of the Enlightenment optimists, and Lear's 'unaccommodated man' comes to mind. Like Borowski, he had seen the 'Gorgon' - that is, reached the depths of despair - and witnessed the utter depravity of which man is capable. This tempered his hopes for the restoration of universal humanistic values, and much of his writing - particularly in *The Drowned and the Saved* - gives voice to his doubts about the possibility to do so, but the hope remains. Borowski was less hopeful: 'In the midst of the mounting tide of atavism', he writes with bitterness, 'stand men ... who conspire in order to end conspiracies ... men who steal so there will be no more stealing ... men who kill so that people will cease to murder' (*TWG*, 119). In other words, whatever is done in the name of some so-called universal humanistic ideal in the camp is a corrupt and base perversion, and a regression to primitivism. *Hope* thus becomes a burden for the human soul rather than a source of optimism.

Whereas Levi's quest was his struggle to understand what it is to be human in order to one day return to humanism, Borowski displays no such inclination. As I have argued, his writing suggests that, after Auschwitz, Enlightenment humanism was irrelevant and anachronistic for him, no matter what one's desires for a resurgence of its values may be. Nevertheless, I have suggested that he tentatively offers a new kind of humanism based on the singular relationship, and despite his conviction that to hope had become a burden for the human soul rather than a source of optimism. His stories and wish to 'tell the world the whole truth' about Auschwitz explains his renunciation of older humanisms, but the desire for a new form of it is also voiced, particularly in 'Auschwitz Our Home'.

The narrator recalls complaining about the war and 'the inhumanity of man' before his and Maria's arrest, and how Maria admonished him: 'Think of those who are in concentration camps. We are merely wasting time, while they suffer agonies' (*TWG*, 121). The following passage affirms the ache for the restoration of human rights, hope and peace for all mankind:

Despite the madness of war, we lived for a world that would be different better Do you really think that, without the hope that such a world is possible ... we could stand the concentration camp even for one day? It is that very hope that makes people go without a murmur to the gas chambers ... paralyses them It is hope that breaks down family ties, makes mothers renounce their children ... wives sell their bodies for bread, or husbands kill. It is hope that compels man to hold on ... simply for ... a life of peace and rest. Never before in the history of mankind has hope been stronger than man, but never also has it done so much harm as it has in this war, in this concentration camp. We were never taught how to give up hope, and this is why today we perish in

gas chambers. (*TWG*, 121-2.)

Life in the camps shows him that the priority is survival, but for him, there is one relationship that gives him a more positive hope that will not die. This is what helps him cling to a tenuous form of sanity – caring for and about another human being. This is the crux of what can be regarded as the new kind of humanism that Levinas advocates. Even though hope in the dehumanized camp environment is an additional burden to bear, Borowski cannot live without it, and continues to yearn for ‘love between men, peace, and serene deliverance from our baser instincts’ (*TWG*, 122). At the same time, despair and the bile of fury coexist with this yearning within him, and the PS of this section of the letter confesses his need to ‘throw off the concentration camp mentality’ and his wish to ‘slaughter’ a few people in order to free himself of the ‘effects of continual subservience’ and those of having to stand helplessly by ‘watching others being beaten and murdered’ (*TWG*, 122).

Revisiting the incident of the woman who denies her child, however much one balks at the idea of a mother abandoning her son, the physical assault that greets her on arrival at Auschwitz affects the possibility for the reader to make a moral judgement of her actions. Many testimonies describe how, before arriving at Auschwitz, all prisoners were subjected to unendurable mental and physical deprivation that contributed to their rapid dehumanization – overcrowding on the train, hunger, thirst, lack of facilities to urinate or defecate, and old and young trampled to death in a sealed, black hole from which there was no escape. It is little wonder that all bonds of responsibility towards family and community wavered, and even dissolved. What was left in so many cases was an inability to make any kind of decision beyond an instinctive and primordial will to resist extermination. One’s personality was obliterated.

After Andrei chokes the woman, the narrator takes the vodka he offers and writes: ‘My head swims, my legs are shaky, again I feel like throwing up’ (*TWG*, 43). The experience does not overtly arouse his moral condemnation of either Andrei or the woman, and yet a sense of shame that arises from bearing witness to such violence is implicit in his response. All his senses are assaulted because of the way that everyone is implicated – the woman who apparently abandons her child, the drunk and enraged Andrei who attacks her, and the SS officer who applauds his action.

As Levi observes, and as witnessed in Borowski's writing, the attack on fragile personalities is much more dangerous than the threat of physical death because of what happens to the human within the human being.²⁸² The burden of memory that survivors have had to confront is connected to what they did not do as well as what they did. The loss of self and the deaths of countless others provoked a responsibility that in some cases became obsessive, and that was the obligation to 'tell' what they had seen. Shameful deaths and shameful lives impelled survivors to remember and bear witness. Levinas wrote that 'in crucial times, when the perishability of so many values is revealed, all human dignity consists in believing in their return', and the haunting nakedness of the appeal from one to the other resonates in the responsibility of the response – the unfulfillable and shame-filled obligation to the dead.²⁸³ This suggests the glimmer of a renewed ethical stance to endow some meaning to all the suffering by responding to the suffering of all the named and nameless 'others'.

If some of the most horrific images of atrocity in any Holocaust literature feature in Borowski's volume, one of the things that make his rage so implacable is because he writes from a stance that lies somewhere between that of victim and perpetrator. This has the effect of preventing an all consuming identification with the victim, and forces an uncomfortable concentration on the aspects of victimhood that resemble the attitudes of the perpetrators. This is because some prisoners, particularly the *Kapos*, exercise their own power to oppress and dominate other inmates. However, Borowski predominantly heightens the reader's sense of oppression and helplessness for the *victims*, for whom death was indeed the way of life, and where almost all fellow feeling is completely stultified. For Borowski, any slippage into depictions of fellowship would pollute the memory of the victims' experience, about which nothing is seen as redemptive. The occasional instances of kindness or goodwill are shown by him to be a sham, motivated by self-interest and mostly, we witness a propensity towards aggression and cruelty.

Borowski's stories thus evoke the sense of a suspension of the general ethics of civilization. They become irrelevant or inapplicable in the camp environment. Vasily Grossman suggests

²⁸² '... one begins to consider what they have made us become, how much they have taken away from us, what this life is ... our personality is fragile, that it is in much more danger than our life; and the old, wise ones, instead of warning us 'remember that you must die' would have done much better to remind us of this great danger that threatens us' (*ITIAM*, p.61).

²⁸³ Levinas, 'Celan', in *Proper Names*, [1975], trans. Michael B. Smith, Stanford, CT: Stanford University Press, 1996), p.121.

that the humanist ideal of kindness towards others is not one that asks ‘that its beneficiary deserve it’ and when it is for its own sake is ‘what is most truly human in a human being’.²⁸⁴ But ‘[k]indness is powerful only while it is powerless. If Man tries to give it power, it dims, fades away, loses itself, vanishes, and becomes a spurious pretence’.²⁸⁵ One is also reminded of Adorno for whom the death camps ‘only made explicit the ruthless will to power that had always been implicit in the project of “enlightenment”’ (*HUM*, 52). Amidst the backdrop of absolute power in the camp, truly humanistic gestures shrivelled to vague, irrelevant memories of a way of life that had lost its meaning. Todorov’s thesis in *Facing the Extreme* is one that seeks to affirm the dignity of human life, and challenges the notion that all forms of morality died in the camps. He argues that everyday virtues of solidarity and kindness existed amongst victims and that they were able to survive intact. For him, survival was paramount, but this is not about simply continuing to live. It is also about choosing how/when to die, so that what survives is one’s moral rectitude and humanity. This kind of humanistic attitude neglects the lack of choice and autonomy that inmates had. It suggests a blind faith in the goodness of man and his ability to overcome and survive unspeakable horror, but the evidence of Borowski, Amery and countless others contradicts this idea, however much one would like to share Todorov’s conclusions.

Humanism, Language and Imagery during the Holocaust

As we have seen, duplicity and utter brutality were the currency of the camp where ‘people going to their death must be deceived to the very end. This is the only permissible form of charity’ (*TWG*, 37, my italics). In ‘This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen’, an SS man stands behind:

calm, efficient, watchful.
 “*Meine Herrschaften*, this way, ladies and gentlemen, try not to throw your things around, please. Show some goodwill’, he says courteously, his restless hands playing with the slender whip. (*TWG*, 38.)

The language here is a grim confirmation that what was thought of as ‘courteous’, ‘charitable’ ‘goodwill’ – arguably some of the principle qualities of humanism – have been

²⁸⁴ Quoted in Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing the Extreme, Moral Life in the Concentration Camps*, trans. Arthur Denner and Abigail Pollack, (London: Pheonix, 2000), p.112. The quotation comes from Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate*, trans. Robert Chandler, (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1985), p.409.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.113.

abused to the point of making them meaningless and irrelevant. The language of the text does not signify what is actually happening until the narrative reveals that the 'restless hands' of the SS officer hold a whip. All signs of courtesy lie as does the Red Cross Van that 'transports the gas that will kill these people' or the forced complicity of a narrator who is told to tell the new arrivals that 'first they will have a bath, and later we'll meet at the camp' (*TWG*, 38, 47). The relentless images of brutality are not aimed to spare the reader's sensibilities, and the sparseness of the language renders the horror in the starkest of ways, such as the unembellished comment about the small one legged girl thrown 'on the truck on top of the corpses. She will burn alive ...' (*TWG*, 46). There are recurring images of literal stifling to remind the reader of the asphyxiation of the gas chambers that awaits the victims. There is stifling heat, thirst that clogs up the throat, and a dazed, stultifying panic. All these images contrast with the calmness of the SS whose 'heavy boot' strikes a little girl between her shoulders and whilst 'holding her down with his foot, he draws his revolver, fires once, then again' (*TWG*, 47-8).

Prisoner workers are berated for 'standing about like sheep' ironically drawing attention to the fact that they are, on the one hand, called vermin, lice, pieces of shit or animals and yet, on the other hand, expected to *behave* like efficient human beings (*TWG*, 48). If anything is perceived as dawdling, a 'whip flies and falls across our backs. I seize a corpse ... the fingers close tightly around mine My heart pounds I begin to vomit' (*TWG*, 48). It is as if the narrator's distant memory of how people are supposed to respond to another's suffering surfaces, and there is terror and shame in his feeling of sickness as well as disgust. Much of this terror and disgust are directed inwards for his culpability in this horror, but it is also the overpowering reminder of where he is and what he is forced to do *by other human beings*. In an extraordinary moment considering this backdrop, the narrator says 'Suddenly, I see the camp as a haven of peace. It is true, others may be dying, but one is somehow still alive, one has enough food, enough strength to work' (*TWG*, 48). This reminds one of the irrecusable connection between the material composition of one's being that encases thought and feeling, to which Levinas draws our attention.

Levi writes about 'human beings' in *The Drowned and the Saved*, but reminds his readers that his 'mental habits' as a chemist also make him regard them as "'samples", specimens in a sealed envelope to be identified, analysed and weighed' (*DS*, 114, 113). However, unlike the Nazis, he never remained indifferent to them as human individuals and knew that as

such, they require food, shelter and warmth in order to begin to flourish mentally or emotionally. This meant that, in the environment of the camp, what compelled prisoners was the attempt to ensure one's own survival, and whatever regard one had for one's neighbours, friends or family, it tended to take second place. If not the death of ethics, there was certainly a suspension in the name of ethics in order to preserve them, because survival itself is a value for Levi. This is not a distortion of humanism, but suggests the irrelevance of any kind of ethics in the camp other than the ethic of survival, whatever the cost.

Lawrence L. Langer's analysis of Borowski's book in *Versions of Survival* focuses on confronting the lengths to which people will go in order to survive. He comments on how, at the beginning of 'This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen' the narrator complains about the absence of transports which guarantee the arrival of food and other luxuries for the labour Kommandos of which he is one: 'We are without even our usual diversion: the wide roads leading to the crematoria are empty' (*TWG*, 30). It is a terrifying indictment against men who are no longer appalled by the killing, and regard it as a 'diversion', but it also guarantees their own survival. When Henri moans that 'they can't run out of people, or we'll starve to death in this blasted camp', it provides what Langer refers to as 'a devastating glimpse of the moral cannibalism' that was imposed on inmates (*TWG*, 31; *VS*, 109). When those who are starving gorge themselves on food as they wait for the next transport, the narrator calls them 'pigs' but also knows they will die of dysentery. Thus, the attempt to satiate one's hunger is also a gesture towards death.

The sense of breakdown is powerful in 'A Day at Harmenz', where any idea of a moral compass guiding the protagonists' actions all but dissipates. The story begins by evoking a pastoral scene better suited to a romantic novel, where

The shadows of the chestnut trees are green and soft. They sway gently over the ground, still moist after being newly turned over, and rise up in sea-green cupolas scented with the morning freshness. (*TWG*, 50.)

But the reader soon realizes that the action takes place in a camp where people are starving, and there is an abrupt shift from the peaceful image when Tadek says 'Careful, here comes the S.S.' (*TWG*, 51). The contrast between the pastoral image of fecundity and that of hunger deteriorates further within two pages to talk of gas chambers. Knowing that Tadek has suffered from hunger, but now obtains more food from Mrs. Haneczka, Becker, the 'old, fat Jew', asks for more supplies for the starving (*TWG*, 53). Tadek's response is one of cruel

contempt: 'Get off my back ... and stick to your digging ... when your time comes to go to the gas, I'll help you along personally, and with great pleasure' (*TWG*, 53). This is because he knows that Becker has helped to kill his own people and 'hanged them on the post for every bit of stolen margarine or bread' (*TWG*, 54).²⁸⁶

The tone does not deviate from the conversational - being almost chatty and laconic - but, as the story proceeds, we learn that Becker hanged one of his sons and his other son wishes to have his father killed. The chattiness thus has an increasingly chilling effect on the reader. One hardly knows how to respond when 'the old, melancholy, silver-haired Jew', Becker, says 'Real hunger is when one man regards another man as something to eat My son stole, so I killed him' (*TWG*, 54). When Tadek asks if he ever stole, he says 'I was a camp senior' as if that were sufficient justification for any action. This leads Tadek to remark 'today there's going to be a selection in the camp. I sincerely hope that you, along with your scabs and sores, go straight to the chimney' (*TWG*, 55). He does not say it with anger, bitterness or contempt, but in a matter-of-fact way. It is as if he sees it as a just fate for the pathetic, dehumanized Becker. The predicament for the reader is whether or not Tadek's view should be regarded as just or devoid of sympathy for Becker, who we recognize has been stripped of his own sense of what is right. However, when Becker eventually tells Tadek that he is 'going to the cremo', Tadek responds by giving him food and offering him his bunk (*TWG*, 80). Despite the fact that Tadek believes Becker deserves his fate and hates him because of what he has done, his impulsive generosity can be seen as a Levinasian alleviation of another's suffering.

However, these moments are rare throughout the text, and Borowski depicts the concentration camp universe as one where all the taboos of human behaviour are breached. The hints of cannibalism become explicit when Becker says 'Real hunger is when one man regards another man as something to eat' (*TWG*, 54). When the *Kommandant* orders that 'the entire camp again will go without dinner' the crowd begins to surge forward, and he gives the order 'Achtung! Bereit, Feuer!' (*TWG*, 154, 155). The pavement is filled with 'blood and scattered chunks of brain' as the SS open fire (*TWG*, 155). Once the *Kommandant* leaves, the remaining crowd falls 'in an avalanche on the blood-spattered

²⁸⁶ In a footnote, the text explains that 'Hanging a man on a post was a form of punishment reserved for minor infractions. It consisted of tying a man's hands behind his back and placing him on a post until his arms came out of their sockets'.

pavement', and the following day, a 'Muslimized Jew from Estonia' tries to convince the narrator, who has witnessed this from a distance, that 'human brains are, in fact so tender you can eat them absolutely raw (*TWG*, 155, 156). As Langer angrily writes, 'A morality determined by diet seems a bizarre juxtaposition to readers accustomed to one founded on values less nutritive; Borowski's story records the genesis of this unfamiliar system for gauging human conduct' (*VS*,112).

There are countless examples of cruelty, whether the actions of the perpetrators or those of the victims. The point is that they bear witness to the liminal status of those situated in the 'grey zone' as explained and explored by Levi. The alternation between seemingly casual conversation and abrupt violent gestures such as the German who destroys Tadek's watch because he will not give it to him continue, and the characters seem as if they are within some kind of bizarre montage. There is 'The Kommandoführer, a sickly little S.S. man, worn out He was an expert in lashing a whip I had felt it twice on my own back' (*TWG*, 58). And then there is Janek, 'a young, charming native son of Warsaw, who understands nothing of the ways of camp' and addresses the *Rottenführer* in a friendly manner, for which the German 'raised his hand and slammed him across the face with all his strength' for daring to address him as an equal (*TWG*, 66, 67). These typify the actions of the perpetrators, but the victims' cruelty to each other is also rife, and substantiate Levi's claim of 'moral collapse ... promoted ... abetted ... by the simple prisoners and the privileged ones' (*DS*, 24).

When a 'huge and red-faced' *Kapo* stands over a cauldron of meagre soup, Tadek and others run round 'in complete silence' to serve it (*TWG*, 69). The *Kapo* suddenly 'plunges between the ranks' because someone is licking his bowl: 'He pushes him in the face, throwing him over, kicks him time and again in the genitals, and then goes off, stepping over arms, knees, faces, taking care to avoid those who are still eating' (*TWG*, 69). This kind of radical action from a man who relishes the 'absolute power' he has evokes no response from the other prisoners other than to 'look eagerly into the *Kapo*'s face', hoping they will be granted another helping of soup (*TWG*, 69). This is the 'grey zone' that refuses distinction between 'masters and servants' (*DS*, 27). Levi claims that 'it is imprudent to hasten to issue a moral judgement' because 'the greatest responsibility lies with the system' although this question of judgement becomes 'more delicate and varied for those who occupied commanding positions', such as the *Kapos* (*DS*, 29). National Socialism exerted 'a frightful power of

corruption' that 'degrades its victims and makes them similar to itself, because it needs both great and small complicities' (*DS*, 49).

This is why a contrapuntal relationship between cruelty, indifference and the desire to survive persists in implicating the victims and the perpetrators. The incident outlined above brings us back full circle to the discussion about Levinas' preoccupation with the face to face encounter. Both sides talk *at* rather than *with* each other and rarely look at each other's faces. When the *Kapo* does look at Tadek, it is with 'the lifeless, vacant stare of a man torn out of profound contemplation' (*TWG*, 72). It later occurs to Tadek that the man 'is a wild beast' (*TWG*, 75). The words 'he is a wild beast' are in parentheses, and contain an undertone of discomfort for Tadek because they make him think of the *Kapo*, a fellow prisoner, as non-human which is precisely how the Nazis regard *all* their prisoners.

The people in these scenes seem unreal, almost burlesque, desensitized parodies of human beings. Their actions 'take place within a vividly realized physical space, but in a moral void. Men speak, men act, and there is no moral echo' and 'it is the reader, struggling for a foothold, finding none, who is the protagonist, and feeling – at a remove, but feeling – the moral vertigo investing that cursed place'.²⁸⁷ This void and moral entropy is surely one of the 'double binds' that La Capra would agree also serves to increase the reader's discomfiture with regard to his/her own moral perspective. It also reinforces the idea of a crisis for humanism because it undercuts whatever precepts can be retained that affirms our own humanity.

Conclusion

Lawrence Langer writes that:

Borowski's refusal to spiritualize the experience of suffering in the deathcamp creates distance rather than recognition, and the reader is left with a sense of humanity so violated (and violating) that there is nothing and no one to identify with especially among humanists and men of devout conviction. (*VS*, 113.)

When the purpose of relationships between people is based on avoiding starvation or the gas chamber, ideas about humanism cannot flourish because behaviour is no longer focused on

²⁸⁷ Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust*, p.169.

what is *right* since the control to make choices is depleted – the only aim is to alleviate a physical need for liquid and food. The spiritual side of a person cannot and does not flourish in the death-directed world of Auschwitz. A broken body results in a broken spirit.

Nevertheless, I cannot say that Borowski's writing is anything but ethical at the end of this chapter and thesis. By showing how fragile and tenuous our hold on civility and civilization is, he implicitly appeals for a new approach to preserve those ethics which could restore a more positive sense of value and meaning for the human. He quite literally shocks the smug, self-satisfied reader into asking 'How could this happen?' and 'What would I do in his place?' He does not seek our identification with anyone but wants us to recognize how 'evil irresponsibility' is part of what being human has become (See *TWG*, 113). To recognize our irresponsibility would provide the means to move towards change by taking responsibility for that irresponsibility.

The challenge that Levinas and others pose after the Holocaust is to ask what happens when traditional humanist ethics are no longer possible. Having foreseen the dangers of National Socialism, Levinas believed that humanism could no longer be entirely oriented around the centrality of the human individual. One therefore has to ask whether or not he offers a viable alternative to the traditional subject-oriented humanism by asserting the exigency to understand one's own humanity through that of the Other – one that entails a primary responsibility to respond to the call of the Other. Richard Cohen claims in *Humanism of the Other* that Levinas defends humanism as 'the irreducible dignity of humans, a belief in the efficacy and worth of human freedom and hence also of human responsibility – from different angles' (ix). What Levinas opposes is the idea of *self* determination. For him, it is the 'other' who makes us free via our responsibility to him, even though paradoxically, such responsibility also imposes an unassumable and unfulfillable burden upon each and every one of us. Levinasian philosophy is not about doing *more* than is required, which would be supererogation, but about the idea that we have a responsibility to and for the other person. Levinas does not present this idea as a law or rule for human behaviour, which he would regard as proscriptive and totalitarian. Responsibility simply exists and transcends thoughts, feelings and consciousness.

I have attempted to show how humanism is a political, ideological and philosophical construct, and that it should not be confused with ideas about what it is to be human.

Levinas observed that ‘In a wide sense, humanism signified the recognition of an invariable essence named “Man”’, but this is repudiated by him and others to be replaced by the claim that such anthropocentrism is biologically and philosophically untenable.²⁸⁸ I have also shown how human autonomy is further undermined by Freud’s claim that man does not know himself and cannot therefore be master of himself. Both thinkers argue against a humanism that results in the mastery or domination of others, and which is paradigmatic of the Nazis’ ‘humanism’ during the Third Reich.

Whilst the Holocaust raises many dilemmas for humanism in the post-Holocaust world that lead me to conclude that humanist ethics are indeed in crisis, I do consider that there is scope for a regenerated humanist ethics, such as Levinas posits. Via my reading of Borowski, I have tried to trace the shift of the collapse of a universal humanism to that of the singular relationship. If we think of humanism as having been suspended during the Holocaust, it is as if such a suspension was to prevent its complete submersion and death. Since the Holocaust, there has been an urgent struggle by many to find an ethical code to redress the violation of so many cherished values.

This thesis has been undertaken not only in an attempt to understand what happened and its effects, but also in order to be able to go forward with a remnant of hope, albeit ever watchful and alert to the vicissitudes of man. I have examined various scholars and Holocaust literature to show how this is expressed. In so doing, the aim has been to identify and discuss issues dealing not only with what it is to live and how one lives, but also to address some of the topics that invoke questions about what it is to be human.

²⁸⁸ ‘Anti-Humanism and Education’ in *DF*, p.277.

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