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The Ethical Limitations of Holocaust Literary Representation¹

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To Speak or Not To Speak

One of the most famous and frequently cited dictums on Holocaust representation is Theodor Adorno's statement that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' (1982, p.34). Clearly Adorno is not merely speaking about the act of writing poetry, but rather the tension between ethics and aesthetics inherent in an act of artistic production that reproduces the cultural values of the society that generated the Holocaust. Adorno later qualified this statement, acknowledging that 'suffering [...] also demands the continued existence of the very art it forbids' (1997, p.252). How then does one presume to represent something as extreme as the Holocaust, when in theory one cannot do so without in some way validating the culture that produced it? As Adorno notes: 'When even genocide becomes cultural property in committed literature, it becomes easier to continue complying with the culture that gave rise to the murder' (1997, pp.252-253). Coupled with this is the commonly held concept of the Holocaust as something that is 'unspeakable'. As a number of scholars have noted, this is not true in the strictest sense of 'unspeakability', as much has been written, and indeed said, on the subject of the Holocaust. Even on the level of historical record, which methodologically adheres to hard fact and traditionally rejects survivor testimony as too 'imaginative':²

the verbal representability of facts suffices, in and of itself, to disprove the claim that the Holocaust is *absolutely* unspeakable. But since verbal representation does not pertain to facts alone, their representability does *not* suffice to

¹ Thanks go to Dr. Louise Sylvester, Dr. Monica Pearl and Dr. Gail Ashton of Manchester University for raising this issue, which prompted me to investigate further the ethics of Holocaust representation, and my own role in relation to this.

² See Hayden White, 'The Modernist Event' in Levi and Rothberg (eds.) *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings*, pp.339-345.

disprove *absolutely* the claim that the Holocaust is unspeakable (Tresize, 2001, p.40).

Berel Lang further defines this in terms of a 'negative rhetoric' surrounding Holocaust representation:

We hear it referred to as unspeakable, and we usually hear afterward a fairly detailed description of what is unspeakable, that description intended, of course, to prove that the designation was warranted (2000, p.18).

Clearly we are not dealing with a physical impossibility here, but rather a moral prohibition, which Thomas Trezise further characterises as a 'taboo' (2001, p.43). Part of the inspiration behind this taboo is a moral problem of representation. As Lang notes: 'by definition there must be a difference between a representation and its object *un*-represented, with the former adding its own version to the "original" it represents' (2000, p.51). In other words, any representation of the Holocaust in literature or art can never adequately convey the reality of a lived experience; it will always be bound to convey a representation of that experience particular to the situation in which it (the representation) was produced. Lang goes on to qualify any form of representation as essentially a 'representation-*as*', in which case we can see that any representation is entirely subjective: whereas a survivor of Auschwitz might represent the Holocaust *as* a living hell, a surviving SS officer might represent the same experience *as* an excellent career opportunity. All representations-*as*, for Lang, imply the possibility of other representations-*as*. The question thus arises: if no form of representation is adequate to convey the extreme pain and suffering experienced by the Holocaust survivor (that experience itself being a mediation of the original object (van Alphen, 1999, p.27)), is it morally and/or ethically correct to attempt representation at all? As a corollary to this question, who precisely should make that decision? Arguably that choice might fall to the survivors themselves, but in making this supposition we forget that although linked by

collective memory, each survivor of the Holocaust is an individual and has his or her own idea of what is/is not appropriate. Is it then a possibility that the very question of the representation of the Holocaust could in some cases cause offence? Adorno certainly believes so: whilst he argues that representation in art and literature is a necessity, in that it is preferable to forgetting or revising what happened, it is also by its very nature abhorrent:

The so-called artistic rendering of the naked physical pain of those who were beaten down with rifle butts contains, however distantly, the possibility that pleasure can be squeezed from it. The morality that forbids art to forget this for a second slides off into the abyss of its opposite[...] By this alone an injustice is done the victims, yet no art that avoided the victims could stand up to the demands of justice. (Adorno, 1997, p.252)

To render the Holocaust experience a work of literature, to express it through written language, necessarily imports some meaning to it, which it arguably does not warrant. In this manner the representation of the Holocaust becomes intolerably offensive to both the survivors and post-Holocaust cultural sensibility alike. And yet the survivors continue to testify, novels continue to be written, and films to be made. Clearly some effort is being made to get around this prohibition. What then are the implications of this dialectic for survivors of the Holocaust?

The most apparent boundary to be confronted by survivors is that which divides the realms of silence and speech. Primo Levi uses this dichotomy as a most basic means of classification: ‘Those who experienced imprisonment [...] are divided into two distinct categories, with rare intermediate shadings: those who remain silent and those who speak’ (1986, p.121). The decision for the survivor whether to speak out or maintain the pre-existing silence is by no means a simple one. As Lang notes, silence itself can be a significant discursive tool:

silence arguably remains a criterion for all discourse (Holocaust or not), a constant if phantom presence that stipulates that whatever is written ought to be justifiable as

more probative, more incisive, more *revealing*, than its absence or, more cruelly, its erasure (2000, p.19).

Any survivor testimony must therefore be weighed and valued against the opposing limit of silence. It is also the case that in relation to Holocaust testimony, silence carries a heavier significance than it might otherwise do, for silence also acts as a memorial. We are all familiar with the practice of holding two minutes' silence to commemorate the dead, but this practice goes far beyond western cultural ritual. Silence is the realm of the dead, who are literally rendered voiceless by the fact of being no longer alive. They are silent because they are unable to interact with society on any symbolic level. For the survivor, therefore, speaking out in the form of testifying to their experiences can constitute a betrayal of their fallen comrades, who cannot speak. As Elie Wiesel comments: 'In the beginning there was silence – no words. The word itself is a breaking out. The word itself is an act of violence; it breaks the silence' (1985, p.119). In this manner the act of speaking on the part of the survivor runs the risk of being construed, above all by the survivor him/herself, as an act of violent desecration against the silence of the dead. Furthermore, to take the nominal meaning of the word memorial, we might view silence in terms of a grave marker, especially following an event such as the Holocaust which left so many dead with no physical remains to mourn or bury. This view of silence is corroborated by the trope of the 'grave in the air' which occurs in renderings such as Paul Celan's *Todesfuge*, or *Death Fugue*: 'we dig a grave in the breezes there one lies unconfined' (1944, (4)]).

Certainly, therefore, there is a great deal to be said for the survivor maintaining a dignified silence in the face of such a moral quandary. There is, however, the following complication: as Primo Levi notes, there is no dignity in survival 'Coming out of the darkness, one suffered because of the reacquired consciousness of having been diminished' (1986, p.56). Following this, one must assume that under these circumstances a "dignified

silence” is unobtainable. Furthermore, for the traumatised survivor, maintaining the silence that surrounded the Holocaust during the years of the war can constitute a reproduction of the depersonalisation tactics used in the Nazi concentration camps, something that Peter Haidu terms the ‘narrative of desubjectification’ (1992). Conversely, the act of testifying, and specifically of regaining the lost subject position serves as a key element in the recognition and processing of traumatic memory (Felman and Laub, 1992, pp. 75-92). In addition to this, there is a further difficulty in silence that is particular to the Holocaust. Although as both Lang (2000) and Adorno (1997) have noted, the representation or rendering into narrative form of the Holocaust experience necessarily implies the possibility of an alternative representation or counter-narrative, the opposing limit of silence does not offer the same symmetry. In maintaining a silence there is always a chance that some other party will take the opportunity to fill that silence, and here we come across the spectre of Holocaust denial.³ Those who argue against the fact of the Holocaust are not nearly as concerned with appropriate methods of commemoration, and are quite willing to speak out at any opportunity. Although many scholars of the Holocaust refuse to engage in discourse with Holocaust deniers, claiming that to do so would lend a validity to their position that it does not deserve, it is equally important (and in fact increasingly so, given the aging of the remaining survivors) that testimonial evidence is produced to support the fact of the Holocaust.⁴ In these circumstances it becomes apparent that the representation of the Holocaust is not only morally acceptable, it is also a matter of necessity: as Lang remarks, ‘the question confronting us is not whether the Holocaust is speakable but how to justify what *is* spoken’

³ For a summary of the history and development of Holocaust denial, see Deborah Lipstadt, 1994. *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory*. London: Penguin Books.

⁴ See for example the incident in 1989 in which Saul Friedländer, giving a lecture at Northwestern University entitled ‘Lessons and Legacies [of the Holocaust]’ refused to answer a question posed to him by Arthur Butz, author of *The Hoax of the Twentieth Century* (cited in Lang, 2000, p.65).

(2000, p.19), or in the words of Thomas Trezise, ‘not *whether* but *how* it should be represented’ (2001, p.43).

Fact or Fiction

There is a clear case to argue that the testimony of Holocaust survivors has both a historiographical and psychological value. What is less clear is how we can position other forms of Holocaust representation within such a precarious moral framework. Imre Kertész, himself a survivor of Auschwitz and Buchenwald, speaks of the danger of the encroaching stylisation of the Holocaust, in which ‘the word “Holocaust” is already a stylisation’ (2001, p.268), and ‘a Holocaust conformism has arisen, along with a Holocaust sentimentalism, a Holocaust canon, and a system of Holocaust taboos together with the ceremonial discourse that goes with it’ (2001, p.269).

Robert Hanks, in a 1996 review for *The Independent* has also noted that:

a peculiar set of conventions has come to cluster around depictions of the Holocaust [...] the effect has been to turn the literature of genocide into a genre, with rules almost as constricting as those binding the Agatha Christie-style detective story (Hanks, 1996).

Whilst this judgement might be construed as slightly harsh, it is undeniable that Holocaust writing has become a genre in its own right, distinguished, as Berel Lang remarks, by ‘its moral connection to the writing of history’ (2000, p.20). I myself have become acutely conscious of this, given that my own research heavily relies upon the fact that Holocaust survivor testimonies follow similar narrative patterns, almost to the point of becoming formulaic. Indeed, I admit that my own use of the word ‘Holocaust’ in my research is indeed a stylisation: I use it because it is more secular than the Hebrew term ‘Sho’ah’, and it is a more compact term than ‘the Nazi genocide’. Thus acknowledging the existence, however controversial, of a specific genre of Holocaust literature, we can begin to explore the implications of some of its manifestations, specifically the sub-genre of Holocaust fiction.

The obvious question regarding Holocaust fiction is: is it 'right' to fictionalise something as catastrophic as the Holocaust? On the one hand, it is possible to argue that the writing of fictional narratives that use the Holocaust as a foundation is disrespectful to survivors and denigrates their experiences, as Imre Kertész says: 'the survivors watch helplessly as their only real possessions are done away with: authentic experiences' (2001, p.269). On the other hand, we must also consider that in imposing the sort of limit upon representation that proscribes against Holocaust fiction, we may unintentionally be guilty of reproducing a similar oppression of free speech as that perpetuated by Nazism. Additionally, Holocaust fiction can be shown to have a number of benefits that are not as readily available to other sub-genres of Holocaust literature. For one thing, a work of fiction is in many ways more accessible than a survivor memoir, and as such can be seen to have a certain pedagogical value. In this way, Holocaust fiction may provoke an interest in the wider genre that might otherwise have remained unrealised. Furthermore, a work of fiction has the power to take the narrative to places that survivor testimony cannot, for, as Primo Levi explains:

We, the survivors, are not the true witnesses [...] we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it (Levi, 1986, pp.63-64).

In other words, survivor testimony can never express the full Holocaust experience, as by definition those who survived did not go to the gas chamber. In this instance fiction has the advantage, as it is technically possible to convey what happens at the moment of death in a fictional narrative. The decision faced by the author is whether or not to enter into this level of representation. The next section examines two examples of narratives that for different reasons fall into the sub-genre of Holocaust

fiction, to see how each deals with the level of representational power afforded to them.

Fragments by Benjamin Wilkomirski is a controversial text, and in no sense is it more controversial than in the row surrounding its classification. *Fragments* purports to be the true testimonial account of the author's recovered memories of his childhood in Latvia, and subsequent deportation to Madjanek and later Auschwitz. Hailed as a masterpiece of exceptionally powerful testimony at the time of its initial publication in 1995, it was subsequently revealed that Wilkomirski is in fact Bruno Dösseker, a non-Jewish Swiss national. Although Wilkomirski/Dösseker maintains his position, enough doubt was raised about his, and his narrative's, provenance, that in 1999 it was removed from publication and has subsequently never been re-printed. I have included it here not because of its controversial status, but rather because of my own reaction to the text when I read it. Let us consider the following excerpt:

The bundles moved, two heads, two white faces became visible, and huge dark eyes. They were tiny babies, they had their first teeth, but they couldn't talk yet ... They lifted their thin little arms up out of the rags and I got a shock. They were white, like their faces; only the hands and in particular the fingers were black, and I couldn't see any fingernails.

"Frozen," whispered Jankl next to me.

Cautiously we nudged them. They didn't react. They sucked on their black fingers, perhaps to warm them, I thought, and they looked off into the far distance out of big eyes, as if searching for something.

I woke up when it got light. I worked my way over to the edge of the bunk and looked down: they were still there, just like the night before, as if they hadn't moved. I leaned forward, not believing what I was seeing. Both of them were holding their hands up stiff in front of their faces, in front of their glassy, half-closed eyes. But they weren't proper hands. What I saw made no connection with anything I knew.

Their hands were black, as they were the night before, but now their fingers were white – snow-white. Except they weren't proper fingers. What I could see were tiny little white sticks that looked broken, each pointing in a different direction.

I pulled anxiously on Jankl's arm.

“What’s that, Jankl – look – their hands!” I said, and Jankl took a long look over the edge of the bunk.

“Bones, he said ... Frozen fingers don’t hurt. Sometime in the night they chewed their fingers down to the bone – but they’re dead now.” (Wilkomirski, 1996, pp.70-71)

When *Fragments* was first published, under the mantle of “true” survivor testimony, one of the reasons it was so well-received was due to its uncompromising approach to scenes such as this. However, when I first approached this text, I was already aware of its dubious origins, and as such, my reaction to it, and to this scene in particular, was significantly affected. The genre of Holocaust testimony demands an implicit bond of trust between the reader and the author. The reader of a text such as *Fragments* believes that the author has actually witnessed the events that are described in the narrative, and thus although the reader may be disturbed by what he is reading, he acknowledges that it is necessary to confront such images in order to appreciate (as far as is possible) the reality of the author’s experience. With prior knowledge of the controversy surrounding *Fragments*, the narrative as a whole, and this scene in particular, becomes disturbing in a gratuitous manner, which leaves an overall negative impression upon the reader. As Berel Lang notes:

even if someone had set out to create extraordinary variations on the already extraordinary themes of suffering known from the Holocaust, it would be difficult to imagine, let alone live through and survive, the “fragments” of Benjamin [sic] Wilkomirski’s recollected wartime years (he would have been only six at the war’s end). But this is what [...] turns out to have been the case. (Lang, 2000, p.77)

The danger here, and one that Wilkomirski seems to have underestimated, is that any excess in Holocaust fiction that repels the reader to this extent runs the risk of negating similar excesses of violence represented in actual testimony, and, in the worst case scenario, opening the door for Holocaust deniers to claim that other accounts are equally fictitious. The emphasis in

Fragments thus no longer falls on the extreme horrors of the Holocaust itself, but rather on the imaginative capacity of the horrors invented for this narrative. One does not focus on the purported subject, the Holocaust, but rather on the grotesque images that punctuate the text, relegating the Holocaust to a mere backdrop against which Wilkomirski's fantastic delusion is played out.⁵

The next text to be examined is a fictional Holocaust narrative that has attracted much praise, but equally has been subject to much criticism for its attempted 'realistic' portrayal of the concentration camp: Steven Spielberg's 1993 film *Schindler's List*. *Schindler's List* is an interesting case of Holocaust fiction, being a film made from a screenplay adapted from a novel (Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark* (1982)) that is itself based upon survivor testimony. Much of the criticism that has been levelled at Spielberg's film is grounded in the way it appears to stylise the Holocaust, and, in some way, sanitise it for a mainstream cinema audience. Imre Kertész, who as we have already seen is angered and saddened by such stylisations as that which *Schindler's List* is perceived to perpetrate, refers to 'Spielberg's saurian kitsch' (2001, p.269), whilst Elinor Brecher, writing on the responses of the real survivors of Schindler's factory to Spielberg's filmic representation of their experiences, quotes: 'If I heard it once, I heard it a hundred times: The movie was so real, but it showed just a fraction of the brutality' (Brecher, 1994, p.xix). The scene that I shall discuss here is one of the most controversial in the film, and is exemplary in that it embodies the problems of representation cited by the film's critics.

The scene, which occurs approximately two and a half hours into the film, is the first in the entire three hours of narrative that takes place in a death camp. Having been saved from extermination by Schindler, the women and girls of the list leave Plaszow for Brinnlitz (and Schindler's new

⁵ I use the word 'delusion' here because, having researched the case of *Fragments*, it appears that on some level Wilkomirski does genuinely believe himself to have had these experiences, although his various accounts are rife with vagaries and inconsistencies. For a detailed analysis see Amy Hungerford, 2001 (Spring), 'Memorising Memory', *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 14, pp.66-88.

factory) aboard a cattle car in the same manner as the men and boys. For some reason left unexplained by the film, the train carrying the women is diverted to Auschwitz. After having their heads shaved, the women are herded naked into a large shower room:



For anyone who has any knowledge of the processes of extermination at Auschwitz, it is clear that in all likelihood this is not a shower room but one of the gas chambers. The fear on the faces of the women confirms this likelihood, as they await the gas:



Suddenly, and surprisingly, not gas, but water, streams forward from the shower heads:





The women are not after all scheduled for extermination: their lives have once again been spared. As they leave the shower block, their fate is juxtaposed with that of another line of people entering the real gas chamber:



Spielberg ends this scene with a graphic representation of what will become of those we see disappearing into the apparently innocuous bunker:



Straight away it is easy to see where the controversy surrounding Spielberg's so-called 'shower scene' lies. The film appears to take the audience somewhere that has rarely been visited before in mainstream cinema, inside a working Auschwitz gas chamber. But let us think for a moment about what Spielberg actually shows us: the implication of the gas chamber hangs over this scene, but what we are actually confronted with is a shower room masquerading as... a shower room. The film has been heavily criticised for this, as, amongst other things, it offers the opportunity for some to claim that all of the gas chamber ruins found at Auschwitz were in fact harmless shower rooms. In this manner it can be argued that Spielberg's rendering of the shower room/gas chamber does in fact appear to denigrate the testimony of Holocaust survivors who vigorously argue the fact of the existence of the gas chamber. I find Spielberg's decision not to show the gas chamber fascinating because, as a film director, he is endowed with the scope and the potential to show us, the viewers, whatever he chooses. It is

conceivable that he is in some way hampered by a limit of taste that, for whatever reason, he is unwilling to challenge. In the UK *Schindler's List* received only a '15' certificate in the cinema, so there was potential for Spielberg to show more graphic violence or disturbing scenes than he does without the film being censored or withdrawn from public showing. He does not shy away from images of shootings, beatings, the excavation and burning of decomposed corpses, and yet he is unwilling to reconstruct one of the key defining elements of the Holocaust: the gas chamber.

Berel Lang identifies four possibilities in relation to the transgression of representational limits: that transgression is either 1. unimaginable and impossible; 2. imaginable but impossible; 3. unimaginable yet possible or 4. imaginable and possible (2000). The filmic representation of the gas chamber falls under the fourth of these, to which Lang attaches a special qualification: 'it is here, in the transgression of limits as both possible and imaginable, that the conception of limits as moral comes fully into view' (2000, p.57). For Spielberg to show prisoners being gassed would be both imaginable and possible, yet he appears to set a moral representational limit for his film, in that it never moves beyond what can be shown or described in survivor testimony. In choosing to limit his representational power in this manner it can be argued that his fictional narrative carries a far greater veritas than the purportedly 'true' narrative of *Fragments*. Let us consider for a moment the 'shower scene' as it appears in the novel which inspired the screenplay for *Schindler's List*. In Keneally's *Schindler's Ark* the scene is presented with far greater brevity:

Mila Pfefferberg was troubled by rumours of the type most prisoners of the Reich had by now heard – that some shower nozzles gave out a killing gas. These, she was delighted to find, merely produced icy water. (Keneally, 1982, pp. 331-332)

Examining the differences between the two representations of the same event, we can see that Spielberg places a far greater emphasis on the shower

than is to be found in his source material. This suggests that although he does not show the process of extermination at work, he does have a serious point to make in this scene. The *implication* of the gas chamber in *Schindler's List* is far more powerful and thought-provoking than the graphically displayed images of Wilkomirski's text. This demonstrates the significance of boundaries within the seemingly boundless realm of Holocaust fiction, and the responsibility to act within those boundaries faced by those wielding the narrative voice.

In conclusion, I would like to return to a question that was posed earlier in this essay, namely: given the artistic dilemmas that surround the representation of the Holocaust in literature and film, why do such representations continue to be produced? Berel Lang has argued that all forms of Holocaust representation, even those that are arguably 'bad' (for example poorly written memoirs or trite fictional narratives) carry some value in that they draw attention to the wider issue of the Holocaust itself (2000, p.50). Does this then justify the existence of texts such as *Fragments*? Many fictional narratives have been generated using the Holocaust as subject matter, what makes *Fragments* stand apart is the attempt (intentional or not) on the part of the author to deceive the reader as to the provenance of the text that he is reading. Why does this matter? As I have argued above, the bond of trust that exists between the author and the reader is especially strong in the case of Holocaust narratives, and yet paradoxically it is also particularly fragile. Those of us who were not there, who did not witness the atrocities of the Nazi era rely upon the authors and film-makers to provide as accurate a representation as they are able, which is why *Fragments* is so problematic. In writing *Fragments*, Wilkomirski purports to recount a history that is not his own, violating the trust of the reader. And yet his text does tell the story of *someone*, it tells the story of a particular time and place, and it is a story that needs to be told repeatedly. There are no easy answers when it comes to the analysis of Holocaust literature, and the question of *Fragments'* value remains problematic. Above

all, it is essential not to lose sight of the greater issue: that the Holocaust happened and it must not be forgotten. This year, Thursday 27 January marked the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, and to commemorate this fact the BBC screened a series of programmes on the Holocaust. Prior to filming, a poll was commissioned to assess the level of knowledge of the Holocaust in Britain. The results showed that 60% of adults under the age of 35 did not know what Auschwitz was. While I recognise the necessity of boundaries within Holocaust representation, it is also the case that the level of ignorance demonstrated by this poll indicates that we cannot afford to limit ourselves when it comes to the acquisition and transmission of knowledge. Whilst there is a duty of care towards the victims and survivors of the Holocaust to ensure that their experiences are adequately and appropriately represented and commemorated, this does not mean that those not directly affected by it should excuse themselves from that responsibility. *Fragments* and *Schindler's List* are very different texts with different agendas, but ultimately they serve a similar purpose which outweighs any considerations of taste that are challenged by the production of Holocaust fiction. The legacy of the Holocaust stretches long before us into the future, and whilst narratives such as those discussed here may not provide any valuable insight into the 'why' or the 'how' of the Holocaust, they do endow the reader with a valuable sense of 'what' happened, and as Primo Levi acknowledges:

Perhaps one cannot, what is more one must not, understand what happened, because to understand is to justify...If understanding is impossible, knowing is imperative, because what happened could happen again (1963, pp.395-396)

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