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# The Holocaust as a Challenge for Literary Reflection.

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## The Holocaust as a Challenge for Literary Reflection

There is no single definition for Holocaust literature. More or less, though, we know that it numbers several thousand books and more than a dozen thousand articles written in well over a dozen languages over the course of more than sixty years. This is too much for anybody to have managed to read all of them and enough for somebody to have managed to overlook everything; too little to express the Holocaust and too much to for the axioms of the humanities to remain unchanged.

This is also an outline of the challenge represented by the Holocaust for literary reflection. It compels us to part with our dreams of synthesis and synthetic thinking itself, and at the same time, urges us to consider fundamental matters.

### A different story

Is the 20<sup>th</sup> century history of Polish<sup>1</sup> and European literature<sup>2</sup> not worth rethinking? If anyone doubts whether there are grounds for such a revision, one could reply that a few stage plays by Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Adamov were enough for the theater of the absurd to be formed – and this revolutionized European drama and created a sharp divide in history. At play here, meanwhile, is a set of several thousand pieces with

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<sup>1</sup> At least two texts provide a very instructive trial run for the history of Polish literature seen from the perspective of the Holocaust and writing about it: Grynberg, Henryk, “Holocaust w literaturze polskiej,” in: *Prawda nieartystyczna*, Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1994; Lów, Ryszard, “Uwagi do przyszłej historii literatury (polskiej) o Zagładzie,” in: Brodzka-Wald, Alina, Krawczyńska, Dorota and Leociak, Jacek (eds), *Literatura polska wobec Zagłady*, Warszawa: ŻIH, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> One of the first attempts to make such a synthesis revisiting the European literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is Alvin Rosenfeld’s book *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988.

a beginning and apparently no end, expanding with the backward wave of the debates in France<sup>3</sup> and Germany,<sup>4</sup> as well as in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. It is in our part of the continent – in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary – that the Holocaust current is among the liveliest, abounding in momentous books (just look at Imre Kertész and Jáchym Topol) and works that are still able to cause conflict in society and transcend literature, as happened with the dispute with Henryk Grynberg<sup>5</sup> or the debate on Jan Tomasz Gross' *Neighbors*.<sup>6</sup> One might say that for the society of the former Soviet bloc the Holocaust, like the traumatic recollection of totalitarian rule, constitutes a lexicon of fundamental political concepts around which the new identity of state and society is negotiated. Yet construction of this identity requires that certain accepted truths must be questioned.

“Rethinking” the history of European literatures would mean first of all asking about the relationship of modernism and postmodernism – the two strongest aesthetic formations of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – with the Holocaust. For avant-garde authors, society was a unity of functions, a structure lacking internal contradictions or endowed with the strength to remove them, and finally a whole that was part of a certain process of accumulation of experiences aiming to achieve one of the planned – but also predictable, belonging to some sort of order – ultimate objectives. Was the avant-garde, belonging to modernism and with its categories of whole, coherence and evolution, capable of perceiving the looming danger?<sup>7</sup> Did the revolutionary and functionalist views visible in the programmes of Italian, Russian and Polish futurism and the Russian journal *LEF*, constructivism and Bauhaus not make artists indifferent – and sometimes enthusiastic – observers of the introduction of totalitarianism?

The lack of reaction to anti-Semitism and the Nuremberg Laws that was characteristic of the majority of groups was a sign that the desired unity was more important for the avant-garde than killing of otherness. It was this indifference of avant-garde trends, however, that showed that the anti-bourgeois sentiments that weighed so heavily on their worldview was one of the largest mind traps of 20<sup>th</sup>-century art. As it turned out, it was possible to hate the bourgeoisie in the desire for social justice and world peace, and at the same time support totalitarianism. To be more precise, avant-garde thought

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<sup>3</sup> See Rousso, Henry, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944* (trans. Arthur Goldhammer), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Goldhagen, Daniel J., *Hitler's Willing Executioners. Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, New York: Vintage Press, 1997; Browning, Christopher R., *Ordinary Men. Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, New York: HarperPerennial, 1993.

<sup>5</sup> See also Zaleski, Marek, “Różnica,” in: *Formy pamięci. O przedstawianiu przeszłości w polskiej literaturze współczesnej*, Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich 1996; Tokarska-Bakir, Joanna, “Skandalista Henryk Grynberg,” *Res Publica Nowa* 2003 no. 6.

<sup>6</sup> See also Steinlauf, Michael, *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> See Bauman, Zygmunt, *Ciało i przemoc w obliczu późnowczesności*, Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika 1995, 15-18.

had a dichotomous character (either-or) and was based on projects for holistic social order, but not on individuals' rights. This was why left-wing avant-garde groups were anti-fascist, but at the same time pro-totalitarian. In turn, the institutionalization of the avant-garde that took place in Italy and Soviet Russia before the war and after it in the socialist bloc demonstrates that the goals of the totalitarian state – achieving social unity, administering the whole – were dangerously close to the aspirations of authors.

One can therefore venture the hypothesis that the disintegration of the avant-garde, which had proceeded from the 1940s through desperate attempts at revival or continuation, did not take place in the 1960s, but in fact during the Holocaust. For anyone who did not understand that indifference to the Holocaust was a sign of totalitarian thinking awoke a little later with the post of state avant-gardist. Anyone who saw the crime with their own eyes began to dismantle the avant-garde illusions of the functionality of language, indispensability of authors, or rationality of history.

Perhaps it is this dismantling that gives rise to postmodernism. This stands on the side of difference, and not similarity, otherness and not unity, aimlessness or multitude of aims, and against functionalism as a principle ordering social life. As one scholar writes, postmodernist thinking should “emphasize dissonance, separation, disparity, plurality, distinction, change, over against those who would continue the search for unity, identity, presence, permanence, foundations, structures, and essences.”<sup>8</sup> Such a strong opposition regarding modernist thought derives from the conviction that absolute categories were behind the Holocaust. When thinking about culture, we should always remember that it has its social implications. “If there is today an ethical or political question and if there is somewhere a *One must*, it must link up with a *one must make links with Auschwitz*,” claimed Jacques Derrida.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, the Holocaust is a headstone for modernity and a fluid foundation of postmodernity; since the Holocaust it has no longer been possible to forget that “Auschwitz has enlarged our conception of the state’s capacity to do violence. A barrier has been overcome in what for millennia had been regarded as the permissible limits of political action. The Nazi period serves as a warning of what we can all too easily become were we faced with a political or economic crisis of overwhelming proportions.”<sup>10</sup>

To some extent, postmodernism emerges from the experience of the defeat tasted by culture in its encounter with the Holocaust.<sup>11</sup> Theodor Adorno claimed that

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<sup>8</sup> Wood, David, “Introduction,” in: Wood, David and Bernasconi, Robert, *Derrida and Différance*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988, ix.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin, Andrew, *The Lyotard Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1989, 387.

<sup>10</sup> Rubinstein, Richard L., *The Cunning of History: The Holocaust and the American Future*, New York: Harper Perennial, 1987, 2.

<sup>11</sup> In part because of contemplation of the Holocaust, postmodernism abandoned the search for the fundamental Truth, deciding that it is always of a discursive-institutional character that is dependent on the context; departure from the philosophy of first principles offers an incentive for creating “counter-narratives” that question the dominant versions of history. This is discussed by Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg in *Experiments in Thinking the Holocaust: Auschwitz, Modernity, and Philosophy*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, 14.

“All post-Auschwitz culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage.”<sup>12</sup> From then on, “thinking – if it is to be true today... must also be a thinking against itself. It thought is not measured by the extremity that eludes the concept, it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of its victims” (Adorno 1973: 512). It would appear that literature after the Holocaust becomes just such thinking and writing against itself – practising plurality and contradiction, constant testing of various narrative models, continual changes in perspectives, searching for a language which cannot be reduced to a concept. This negative connection of postmodernity with modernity means that there is no need to decree an absolute beginning, or a radical break in history. Postmodernity has nothing to offer – at least it is a policy that makes mass killing possible – apart from falsifying the existing order.

One might say that for postmodern philosophy and literature the Holocaust has become – or, more cautiously, is becoming – a kind of Book of Exodus: a test to which we inexorably return and which always leads to expulsion.

### Shouting, gibberish, non-speech

One of the first concentration camp scenes in Roberto Benigni’s film *Life Is Beautiful* depicts an SS officer presenting prisoners with their new living regulations. The main protagonist, Guido, acts as his interpreter, despite *not knowing German*. An absurd translation ensues: the officer spouts guttural and harsh sounds, his sentences apodictic and his intonation threatening. Guido repeats his gestures, uses similar-length sentences and imitates his intonation, but says something completely different (and this solely to his young son Giosuè, presenting the stay in the death camp to him as a “game about a real tank.” This is a game in which “you’re not allowed to ask for a second helping of dessert” and “You lose two points for complaining to mum.”

Although almost burlesque, this scene reveals a certain hidden side to the role of language in the Holocaust. First, we see how the victims are multilingual and their executioners monolingual. The problem of translation therefore takes centre stage, in both apparent and very real terms. This issue is entirely real (more about the “appearance” in a moment), because the Holocaust was a phenomenon rooted in nationalism, and yet at the same time, as it took on supranational dimensions, requires multilingual studies.

How many languages would any synthesis of the literature of the Shoah have to encapsulate? Without nullifying the response to this question, we can assume that any number here will be too small. This is because the ghettos and camps gave rise to stylistic and linguistic mixtures which extended the list of languages immeasurably. The camp slang attested in hundreds of documentary records, the prose of Tadeusz Borowski or Marian Pankowski and, for example, Mieczysław Lurczyński’s drama

<sup>12</sup> Adorno, Theodor W., *Negative Dialectics* (trans. E.B. Ashton), London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973, 367.

*The Old Guard*,<sup>13</sup> give us an extra problem; for to the list of languages we must add not just this vernacular, but also the question of translation, the issue of things “lost in translation,” as Eva Hoffman put it. Of course, this is the case with every text, yet the dramatic power of the untranslatable is revealed all the more strongly when what is said is crucial for living and does not possess ready symbols.

In his book *If This Is a Man*, Primo Levi writes of a three-year-old child at Auschwitz whose only identifying mark was a number tattooed on his forearm. The boy's name – Hurbinek – was given to him by other prisoners. He could say only one, incomprehensible word: “massklo” or “matsklo.” To paraphrase the title of Levi's book, we might ask: is this a language? Perhaps it is the case – as every reader of Holocaust texts must have wondered at some point – that this incomprehensible word that was Hurbinek's whole language is what should be treated as a model of that language. In other words, even when we are dealing with Holocaust texts written in an understandable language, we should see in it words from our world and an entirely alien one, expression that is inconceivable and yet crucial. The word spoken by Hurbinek belongs exclusively to him, but simultaneously forms a *common foreign language* – the only code that could not serve as the basis for segregation of the world, composed of separate symbols not belonging to any syntax, with no illusion of any belonging to the world. As Imre Kertész stated, “the Holocaust does not and cannot have its own language.”<sup>14</sup> This means that a story about the Holocaust is always told in supranational language, speaking of the supranational character of the Holocaust, and at the same time in a foreign language, extracting the ominous detachment that lies in common values.

And this is where we come to the apparent nature of the question of translation and multilingualism. The scene from Benigni's film as well as Hurbinek's single-element lexicon make it clear that neither a complete roll call of the languages of the Holocaust (its slang, dialects, jargons) neither the most carefully discussed matter of translation explain anything. Or perhaps even: the more they explain, the closer they will be to some common semantic core for various languages and the more fully they will mystify this reality. This Achilles paradox results from the fact that in the context of the Holocaust the belief in language as the most important communication tool in the human universe,

<sup>13</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> edition entitled *Stara Gwardia*, Hannover 1946; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. – *Alte Garde*, London 1970; 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. – *Die Alte Garde*, in: Ratajczakowa, Dobrochna (ed.), *Polski dramat emigracyjny 1939–1969. Antologia*, Poznań 1993. On this drama see Guderian-Czaplińska, Ewa, “Alte Garde” Mieczysława Lurczyńskiego,” in: Kiec, Izolda, Ratajczakowa, Dobrochna and Wachowski, Jacek (eds), *Teatr i dramat polskiej emigracji 1939–1989*, Poznań 1994. Note that Lurczyński believed that owing to its language the play should not be widely disseminated; in his introduction, he writes: “The language of this book, the language of the human dunghheap, forces me to closely supervise the whole publishing event... I am very much aware that the book is not intended for the general reader. I am having 200 copies printed, and shall personally send each volume to people who can withstand the harsh wind blowing from its pages.”

<sup>14</sup> Translated from Polish version: Kertész, Imre, *Język na wygnaniu* [“A Language in Exile”] (trans. Elżbieta Sobolewska), Warszawa: WAB, 2004, 194.

as well as the conviction of the existence of an essence of language, proved pitiful and lethal. There is no language that can express the truth of the Holocaust, because language expresses nothing, and the Holocaust does not have its truth.

As Benigni shows, language is neither the only, nor the most important communication tool: without gestures, intonation and context we would not understand anything. And when gestures, intonation and context appear, it is almost insignificant. We do not have to understand the words of violence if violence itself does not ensure that anything other than utter obedience results from this understanding. If there was any essence of language that was manifested in the Holocaust, it was linked with its magical function – creating things through words. And it was this power of creation that proved to be completely indifferent to understanding. Somebody who can use language like a god, or who can decide on someone's life through language, is not concerned with whether he is understood. He expects nothing but obedience, and not listening, from the objects over whom he rules. The opposite is also true: we conceive the language of extreme violence without understanding; we know what it is saying to us without understanding the words, and we know that it compels us to obey and warns of dire consequences for the slightest infraction. For such language to be a means of communication, its “essence” would have to be not so much translatable as symmetric, transitive, reflexive – that is to say that it would have to serve both the “creator” and the created object equally. Without this transitivity, language is above all a *means of discipline*. And only as a component of discipline can it be seen as a tool.

In very much simplified terms, then, these are the challenges of the linguistic side of the Holocaust faced by literary reflection. It is obliged to take into account and carefully – in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century spirit – piece together the infinite multitude of languages of victims, as well as to fix and systematise the rules of translation. At the same time, all actions seeking order encounter the hidden side of language revealed by the Holocaust: it is not a tool of understanding, naming the world and expressing feelings, as the more it fulfils these objectives, the closer it is to being a tool of domination and a method of creating the world. The essence of language is not decided on by symbols and meanings, but relations between those who say something to each other. From the point of view of language and translation, the Holocaust was a unification of linguistic differences and removal of that small element of every statement that cannot be translated.

### Unable to fit

It may be that the Holocaust – and its unique non-language<sup>15</sup> – compels us to perceive the unnameability and the inexpressibility of experiences as a communicational rule, and not an exception. Yet the Holocaust also compels us to distinguish the modernistic and postmodernistic understanding of this question.

In modernistic practice, “expressing the inexpressible” meant aesthetic formation of what was not self-contained in its being – i.e., whatever was in a fluid, unready, incomplete state before the act of expression. And since chaos, fluidity, disturbance to the order

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<sup>15</sup> This term was used by Maria Janion in her article “Nie wiem,” in: *Żyjąc tracimy życie. Niepokojące tematy egzystencji*, Warszawa: WAB, 2001, 397.

and inability to fit the model is that which is Other, we can say that modern expression came out of fear and fascination with Otherness. The reverse of this approach to being was a desire to prevail over Otherness<sup>16</sup> – by adopting, marginalizing, or excluding. The Other, experienced negatively, could come to the fore in the form of eccentricity, oddity, exception, or adored or condemned subject.

It seems that it is not the change in approach to the “inexpressible” that was decisive in the transformations in 20<sup>th</sup> century art, but rather the changing attitude to the Other. In the place of the Other as a – fascinating or threatening – alternative to the order, as that which questions the order by its very existence, Otherness appears as an indelible component of every Norm. Postmodernism therefore goes from interest in “styles of seeing” – which allowed Otherness to be seen in various ways – to reflection on “looking” itself. If it is only through introducing differences that we can understand reality, then postmodern art desires to make it possible to see the mechanisms by which differences are produced. “See what seeing allows,”<sup>17</sup> “express what expression makes possible,” “cognize what is determined by cognition”<sup>18</sup> – all of these sentences call forth

<sup>16</sup> I owe my fundamental inspiration in this passage to Ryszard Nycz’s article “Wyrażanie niewyraźnego w literaturze nowoczesnej,” in: *Literatura jako trop rzeczywistości. Poetyka epifanii w nowoczesnej literaturze polskiej*, Kraków: Universitas, 2001.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Jay writes about this in his book *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993; Jay discusses the privileged position of the eye and the blindness characteristic of every hegemon that it produces, manifested by adapting reality to the pictorial outlines cultivated by cultural schools of seeing. In other words, ocularcentrism is the cultural domination of looking that does not see, as it has been cultivated by the tradition of the incorporeal looking subject and transcendental perspective. As a consequence, our seeing ignores the surface of things in two ways: first, it places on the seen world schemes of appearance which cause “know” to precede “see”; second, as an action rooted in the tradition of transcendentalism, this looking omits the outer layer, supposedly in order to permeate the centre – and this with the “eye of the mind” or “eyes of the soul” to see the truth (although this compels us to treat the skin of the world as an insignificant or even deceptive veil). For Jay, though, as Grażyna Borkowska writes when discussing the art of seeing in Halina Poświatowska’s work, “the most important thing is what one does not see or escapes one’s attention – not because it is buried deep, but because, like grass, it lies on the surface (*Nierozważna i nieromantyczna. O Halinie Poświatowskiej*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2001, 150).

<sup>18</sup> Paul K. Feyerabend, considering the ways in which presupposition is revealed, points to literary means: “how can we possibly examine something we are using all the time? How can we analyse the terms in which we habitually express our most simple and straightforward observations, and reveal their presuppositions? How can we discover the kind of world we presuppose when proceeding as we do? The answer is clear: we cannot discover it from the inside. We need an external standard of criticism, we need a set of alternative assumptions or, as these assumptions will be quite general, constituting, as it were, an entire alternative world, we need a dream-world in order to discover the features of the real world we think we inhabit (and which may actually be just another dream-world).” (*Against Method*, London: Verso, 1993, 22).



an inexpressibility different from the modernistic type. For Otherness proves to be not only the fundamental component, buried deepest, of every social order, but also a condition of seeing Otherness. In other words, postmodernity makes us realise that every story about social diversity and social plurality is in itself a small piece of this plurality. Otherness remains inexpressible, but loses its negative undertones.<sup>19</sup>

In this respect, the Holocaust was a summary of the history of (in)expressibility. Its source came from a precisely planned world which was in its entirety rational, and therefore stood on the side of language, and was also in its entirety a-logical: mad, insane, counter-linguistic. Contemplation of the Holocaust therefore constantly circulates between acknowledgement of the trueness of every Holocaust document and the awareness that each of them depicts only a small fraction of the Holocaust, and furthermore, that these fractions will never piece together a whole.<sup>20</sup> As one scholar wrote, “the reality of the Holocaust is always lost when attempts are made to portray it.”<sup>21</sup>

This loss comes from the fact that the “final solution of the Jewish question” was from the very beginning burdened by a curse that could not be named – forbidden, but also unfulfilled. First there was prohibition:

I also want to make reference before you here...to a really grave matter...I am referring to the evacuation of the Jews, the annihilation of the Jewish people...Most of you must know what it means to see a hundred corpses lie side by side, or five hundred, or a thousand. To have stuck this out and – excepting cases of human weakness – to have kept our integrity, that is what has made us hard. In our history, this is an unwritten and never-to-be-written page of glory.

The above words were spoken by Heinrich Himmler.<sup>22</sup> Rarely in universal history do we encounter sentences with such far-reaching consequences – sentences from which the history of several million people can be extracted. Yet this short passage, rather lacking in rhetorical terms and crude in its pathos, contains the reverse of the act of creation. It predicts mass murder (“annihilation of the people”), points to the technicalization

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<sup>19</sup> See Lyotard, Jean-François, “An Answer to the Question, What is the Postmodern?” in: *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence, 1982–1985* (trans. Don Barry), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992: “Finally, it should be made clear that it is not up to us to *provide reality*, but to invent allusions to what is conceivable but not presentable.”

<sup>20</sup> There is copious literature on the problems of portraying the Holocaust – the main studies include: Bartov, Omer, *Murder in our Midst: The Holocaust, Industrial Killing and Representation*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996; LaCapra, Dominick, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994.

<sup>21</sup> Easthope, Antony, “Holocaust i niemożność przedstawienia,” trans. M. Pietrzak-Merta, *Res Publica Nova* 1997 no. 11, 65.

<sup>22</sup> Cited in: Dawidowicz, Lucy, *A Holocaust Reader*, New York: Behrman House, 1976, 130-134.

of killing (“a thousand corpses lie side by side”), and ennobles extreme evil (“stuck this out...that has made us hard”). But there is something more in these words too – a certain link between the extermination and the record. This is not only an express forbiddance of recording,<sup>23</sup> almost a divine prohibition on creating images, but also something that can be called the curse of inexpressibility.

Today, six decades after the Holocaust, we know – fortunately – that innumerable texts exist to record it. Himmler’s prophecy of this page being “unwritten and never-to-be-written” was not borne out. At the same time, though, Himmler’s words were spoken from within a history that was utterly European, and yet terrifyingly alien, embodying the idea of rational order, and incomprehensible, executed with technological perfection, and barbaric, spoken in a simple language of orders and screams, and illogical. At the time of the Holocaust, or even in the Holocaust itself, the most important ideas of European culture – those of order, community, law established by humans, controlling history and the functionality of social organization – reached their apogee. And it was these ideas that proved to be criminal. This is why the history of the Holocaust cannot be fully named, expressed, or described. In this sense, Himmler was right to say that the page would in some part remain unwritten. This is attested by words spoken from the other side:

“There is no person who could tell the whole truth about Auschwitz,” claimed Józef Cyrankiewicz, testifying as a witness before the Supreme National Tribunal in Warsaw in the trial of Rudolf Höss, commandant of the Auschwitz camp.<sup>24</sup>

“I know that I have not said everything. I do not think that anyone could say everything about this modern method of psychological and physical crushing of millions of people,” writes Mirosław Lurczyński (1993: 30).

“Behind your lips / the unspeakable waits / tears at the umbilical cords / of words,” wrote Nelly Sachs in her poem “Behind Your Lips.”<sup>25</sup>

This deliberately random mix of quotations – which could be expanded into the hundreds and thousands – is supposed to demonstrate that the history of the Holocaust, portrayed in diaries, testimonies, memoirs and eminent literary works, is text afflicted with the curse of Penelope – text both woven and at the same time damaged. The words are arranged in it by the authors, and the work of destruction is done by the inexpressible – words leached out of their meaning, a language of exterminated symbols, symbols held behind the gate of recollection. The paradox of the Holocaust, then, is that those who walked the path of death to the very end are dead, while those who survived do not

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<sup>23</sup> See also Arendt, Hannah, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York: Penguin Classics, 229: “The totalitarian state lets its opponents disappear in silent anonymity” (The words of Peter Bamm, a German army doctor who served on the Eastern front).

<sup>24</sup> Cited in: Korotyński, Henryk, “Kiedy będziemy znali Oświęcim?,” *Odrodzenie* 1947 no. 34.

<sup>25</sup> Translation by Catherine Sommer; <http://nellysachsenglish.wordpress.com/2013/04/30/behind-your-lips/> (access: 26.09.2013).

know everything. What they do know in any case means that they live without a tongue with which to speak.<sup>26</sup>

### Another literariness

Almost from the beginning, Holocaust writing has been pervaded by a heated conflict between the imperative to bear witness and what we might call mistrust towards style. The confrontation of menace and traditional views on the subject of literature meant that the first commentators were decidedly against the use of any artistic devices.<sup>27</sup> Here are a few views among thousands:

Michael Wyschogrod:

I firmly believe that art is not appropriate to the holocaust. Art takes the sting out of suffering...It is therefore forbidden to make fiction of the holocaust....Any attempt to transform the holocaust into art demeans the holocaust and must result in poor art.<sup>28</sup>

Elie Wiesel:

Auschwitz negates any form of literature, as it defies all systems, all doctrines...A novel about Auschwitz is not a novel, or else it is not about Auschwitz. The very attempt to write such a novel is blasphemy.<sup>29</sup>

Wiesel again:

By its uniqueness, the holocaust defies literature.<sup>30</sup>

Two views overlap here: an ontological one, according to which Holocaust literature is impossible, and a moral one, which says that it is inappropriate. The representatives of the first thesis saw in the Holocaust something that in its essence was not subject to literature, something alien to it and impossible to process into art. The proponents

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<sup>26</sup> I am referring here to a well-known passage from Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man*, quoted in Hobsbawm, Eric J., *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (1994): "We who survived the Camps are not true witnesses. We are those who, through prevarication, skill or luck, never touched bottom. Those who have, and who have seen the face of the Gorgon, did not return, or returned wordless."

<sup>27</sup> The same view was dominant in the views of researchers – see e.g. Sawicka, Jadwiga, "Uciec od literackości," in: Święch, Jerzy (ed.), *Świadectwa i powroty nieludzkiego czasu*, Lublin: Wyd. Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 1990, 35: "The document here possesses that superiority over fiction that it makes it possible to understand a phenomenon that might have been taken differently from the production of a story or underlining the literary nature than as an actual, crucial experience of a 20<sup>th</sup>-century person."

<sup>28</sup> "Some Theological Reflections on the Holocaust," *Response* 1975 no. 25, 68; cited in: Rosenfeld 1988, 28.

<sup>29</sup> "For Some Measure of Humility," *Sb'ima* 1975 no. 5/100, 314; cited in: Rosenfeld 1988, 28.

<sup>30</sup> "One Generation After," in: *One Generation After*, trans. into English by Lily Edelman and the Author, New York: Random House, 1970, p. 10; cited in: Rosenfeld 1988, 36.

of the other view, meanwhile, were against the idea of literature beautifying the horror of a dehumanized world, and wanted language to stay as faithful as it could to experiences so that nothing could obscure the concentration camp reality. A common justification for the two views seems to be the conviction that Holocaust texts as sources have functions different from mere aesthetic ones, that they are not subject to artistic evaluation, or even that they question the existing criteria of how literary something is. The task of writing about the Holocaust is not to add beauty to tragedy, but to speak the truth, establishing a complete source that is fulfilled in itself and is identical to reality.

However, complications ensue with the passing years and increasing numbers of books. Increasingly often it was perceived that there was no transparent style, or language fulfilling the requirement of adhering to the world, writing free from links to conventions. The evolution of views on this subject can be seen for example in the opinions of Grynberg, one of the most important authors of Holocaust literature. In the mid-1980s, he wrote:

Universality and generalization are indispensable for great literature and art, but this new experience is no longer about great literature or great art, but the truth – which is most *unartistic*. It is covered by generalization.<sup>31</sup>

By the end of the 1990s, the writer's views were slightly modified: "I would say that economy and modesty of means in holocaust literature are practically obligatory. The holocaust has dimensions that require distance. The closer you are, the less you see."<sup>32</sup>

The difference in views comes from the fact that in the first quotation Grynberg, like many others, sharply contrasts literature and truth, while in the second he acknowledges the possibility of using literary means, albeit in moderation. In this opinion, literature appears as an essential tool for building distance, without which "the less you see." This means that literature is necessary to "see more," and as such is crucial in writing about the Holocaust. This is expressed even more clearly in the Polish writing of Hanna Krall, who stated: "Tragedies devoid of form are something shameless. Form withdraws to a distance necessary for speaking."<sup>33</sup>

This view leaves us on the antipodes of the initial conflict between truth and beauty. Literary means are now not just possible, but essential. No text can be produced without literature – style and composition. Moreover, since it is form that allows communication, it also comprehension. It would seem that we are now just one step away from the next conclusion – that a literary nature is inevitable. For years, literary studies has been discovering that this is something that exists outside of choice, that even the most

<sup>31</sup> Grynberg, Henryk, "Holocaust w literaturze polskiej." in: *Prawda nieartystyczna*, Warszawa: Czarne, 1994, 160.

<sup>32</sup> Grynberg, Henryk, *Szkola opowiadania*, in: Sznajderman, Monika (ed.), *Lekcja pisania*, Warszawa: Czarne, 1998, 73.

<sup>33</sup> "Dramalurgia uczuć"; first printed in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 13.4.1997; reprinted in Sznajderman (1998).

unconventional text remains a text, and therefore a combination of diverse compositional and stylistic orders. The also applies to documents, meaning that they too are part of the literary universe. In no respect does this take away their credibility, but it does mean that reading Holocaust texts must take into account the necessary mediation that comes between language and reality. Interpretation can therefore lead towards a kind of archaeology of text, i.e. uncovering all the layers – conventions, genres, styles – within a document, and testifying to the communicational culture to which the author belonged and which the reader introduces. Furthermore, it is this textual archaeology that makes it possible to reconstruct the kind of reading reaction that the author planned, as well as the diverse conflicts that emerge, for example, between the modern reality of killing and the pre-modern convention of recording. Finally, such a perspective permits the reader him/herself to remain aware that he/she is a participant in the communicational reality in which diverse conventions are used. The reader therefore has no direct access to the world, and should not treat his/her understanding of the text/reality as objective, true, and final.

Literary reflection on the Holocaust has, then, come a long way: initially impossible and undesired, and with time valuable and important, it is nearing a point at which it will be viewed as inescapable. This is significant as it makes it clear that the Holocaust emerged from a crude narrative which too many people viewed as an ultimate truth, and thus an extratextual entity. Yet it is likely that anybody who understands that in life we quarrel about stories and metaphors shows less inclination to violence.

### The Holocaust – end and beginning

The Holocaust distorted the history of Europe. As a product of the primal powers of modernity – rationalism, science free from ethical checks, administration and technology<sup>34</sup> – it revealed their criminal side. After the Holocaust, uncritical trust in reason and state, as well as everything that adjusted all too smoothly to the pre-eminence of killing, became impossible. This is why contemplation on the Holocaust is not limited to collecting documents telling of the ghettos and camps, but is rather oriented to the present. This orientation – more permanent than one-off – involves stubbornly examining the foundations of our civilization – as well as its susceptibility and resistance to the temptation of administering death.

In this process of the *distortion of the present*, and opening up its concealed sides, the only reason that literary studies is not located in the centre is because it made this centre movable itself. The reading of the Holocaust that it cultivates creates opportunities for asking questions on the roots of the present. At first glance, the issues proposed by literary studies scholars, discussed in brief above, are specialized: another history of Polish and European literature, problems of language, translation and untranslatability, the question of inexpressibility and the debate on the literary approach. Yet one merely

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<sup>34</sup> I am referring here to the interpretation of the Holocaust made by Zygmunt Bauman in his book *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989.

needs to be aware of the distorting character of today's reflection on literary studies to realise that these issues are lined by the lively delusions of European culture. Let us try to name those illusions that for centuries operated as fundamental ideas in the humanities (although sometimes they were closer to obsessions):

1. Fixation on objective truth
2. Conceiving history as a uniform current
3. The belief in the possibility of a complete translation of someone else's text
4. Distinction of literary texts from "documentary" ones.

However, literary studies – influenced not only by the Holocaust, but to a great extent on the basis of the radical nature of its consequences – shows that: 1. The objective truth is a certain narrative; 2. History consists of metaphors, among which a "trend" is one of numerous aspects – though even this suggests consistent acknowledgement that there can be many trends, the "main trend" is indicated by the prevailing ones; 3. Untranslatability and unrepresentability are norms of human communication; 4. The difference between a document and literature lies in the selection of rhetorical devices and ways of telling the story, rather than a radical difference between "the truth" and "invention."

Literary reflection therefore questions the dominant versions of social consciousness every bit as stubbornly as sociology, political science or historiography. In doing so, it enforces on all the participants in debates an ever greater awareness of the relationship between the social behaviours and narratives in our heads.

As this shows, the Holocaust forces us to rethink the foundations and broaden our fields of critical observation. We can also add further problems to those we have briefly discussed: inversion of aesthetic categories;<sup>35</sup> the history of insanity in a time of totalitarianism (through which we can understand the way in which irrationality is designated by totalitarian reason as well as the insanity of a state doctrine), the genology of the Holocaust, meaning an attempt to describe the genres and categories of writing in Holocaust literature (i.e. searching for an alternative to the Greek division into lyric,

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<sup>35</sup> The Holocaust would appear like no other experience to belong to tragedy, and like no other to be subject to comedy. Yet one might also perceive the task of art after the Holocaust as being reclaiming everything that its perpetrators tried to take away from the victims – so the multitude and the mixture of experiences. In the first respect, regarding tragedy, the necessary inversion requires that these categories be conceived not as an inevitable and irreversible destruction of a certain value bringing cleansing (in accordance with the tradition of Aristotle and Scheler), but as a "victory of evil that was not necessary and is irreversible"; this experience is accompanied by "not coolness, but just disgusting exposure of the victim and the people caught up in the afterglow of tragedy" (Brach-Czaina, Jolanta, *Szczeliny istnienia*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo eFKa 1998. A similar "reclaiming" of the right to comedy – i.e. to comic narrative on the Holocaust – came with *Life is Beautiful*, and Art Spiegelman's *Maus* means that it is impossible to claim that low arts are by definition or by nature incapable of transmitting the complexity of the Holocaust. In short, if art after the Holocaust has its essence, this is questioning essence (substantiality) – since this category lies at the foundation of all segregation.

## Holocaust in Literary and Cultural Studies

epic and drama); styles of reception,<sup>36</sup> that is the history of variable ways of reading Holocaust literature, and also the always necessary review of today's dominant and alternative interpretation models.

Perhaps it is the case that the larger the Library of the Shoah becomes, the more problems we discover – both in the works and in our present. Perhaps it is in this that we can find one of the most important tasks of speaking and writing about the Holocaust – not allowing anybody to bring this history to an end by usurping the final word for themselves. After all, it was from just such a decree that it all started.

*Translation: Benjamin Koschalka*

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<sup>36</sup> This term was coined by Michał Głowiński – see *Stylę odbioru. Szkice o komunikacji literackiej*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1977.