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Empathy? Substitution? Identification?: How Should We Read Texts About the Holocaust?

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Literature about the experience of the Holocaust – more than any other literature – forces us to reflect on the relation between the work and the reader. More specifically, it provokes reflections on the ethical determinants of this relation. In reference to Holocaust writing, we often use “appropriateness” as a fundamental category – understood here as the compatibility of the means of literary expression with the subject at hand. Yet perhaps we should apply the very same category to theoretical reflections on this form of literature, understanding “appropriateness” here as the ethical suitability or moral validity of these reflections.

When we study Holocaust literature, we must constantly ask ourselves questions about the legitimacy of using the same descriptive tools that we might use for other domains. This should mean questioning our right to classify particular works (notwithstanding any nuances) as better or worse, and their authors as more or less convincing. Yet we still tend to judge Holocaust literature precisely in this way. In simple terms, the basic criterion for this appraisal appears to be the power of specific examples to shock. Leaving aside for the moment any precise definitions of this genre of writing (I assume that it generally includes both literary fiction with biographical elements and direct personal accounts), I would like to devote my attention in this article to the other side of the question – to us, as the readers of today. This means examining the spiritual predisposition required for us to face this kind of writing, and through it to face the events and experience of the Holocaust, which most often reach us as written testimony.

The question of empathy immediately arises in relation to Holocaust literature and to our own thinking about the event itself. We may examine it on various levels with slightly different meanings. After all, the question presents itself differently in the relation between literary testimony and the reader (between the victims or witnesses of the

Holocaust and us) than it does in the relation between survivors, since we know that only some of them have assumed the burden of describing their own and other people's experiences. Moreover, the question appears in another entirely different light in cases where people who were only witnesses have appropriated the memories of others and thus assimilated their experiences. Here empathy or identification may appear as elements within a reconstructed literary vision of the Holocaust. Yet another question – which arises in many texts devoted to contemporary reflections on the Holocaust – concerns the attitude we should (or can) adopt towards these past events, and above all, towards the sufferings experienced by their participants.

In the case of Holocaust literature, we cannot apply theories of empathy as it manifests itself in the relation between the reader and the work, or – in the case of literary fiction – as a possible effect or result of intentional authorial strategies.¹ It is difficult to speak here of any premeditated operations on the part of the author, who takes the audience's expectations into account and encourages the reader to collaborate in the creation of meanings and to supplement the text with his or her own imaginative activity. This type of literature evokes specific psychic states in the reader, though these are exclusively a result of his or her own spiritual predisposition. In this respect, Holocaust literature is entirely disinterested (devoid of all assumptions except one: the need to bear witness). The compulsion to write felt by these authors finds its complement in the audience's compulsion to read. The writer's need to preserve the memory of his or her own suffering corresponds with the reader's need to find his or her own suffering in the suffering of others. In this sense, a person who reads records of Holocaust experiences is never disinterested. In the case of literary fiction, a kind of symmetry is possible in the reader-writer relation. The reader follows the same paths as the author and thus is "capable of collaborating in the text's actualization in a way that the author can imagine, making the same moves that the author made to create the text."² However, when we are dealing with Holocaust literature, this symmetry is undermined, and the reader seems to eclipse the author. On the one hand, the reader experiences the "psychic resonance" of empathy; on the other hand, he or she encounters the sphere of impressions exerted by this kind of material. This sphere extends from quandaries over the rights and wrongs of drawing emotional or intellectual benefits from this material to these very benefits themselves. According to Simon Lesser, "we read novels in order to provide ourselves with a fuller satisfaction of desires that are only partly fulfilled in real life and to soothe the fears and feelings of guilt aroused by our experience."³

Paul Ricoeur – on the other hand – makes the following remarks in his examination of the narrative nature of our existence, in which he includes its very end as a project: "Literature helps us in a sense to fix the outline of these provisional ends.

¹ On this subject, see: Markiewicz, Henryk, "Odbiorca i odbiór," *Teorie powieści za granicą. Od początków do schyłku XX wieku* (Warszawa: PWN, 1995).

² Ibid., 503.

³ Ibid., 513.

As for death, do not the narratives provided by literature serve to soften the sting of anguish in the face of the unknown, of nothingness, by giving it in imagination the shape of this or that death, exemplary in one way or another? Thus fiction has a role to play in the apprenticeship of dying.⁴ Of course, these words might seem inadequate in the face of death in the Holocaust. Yet for the living every end is equally terrifying. And just as a person who suffers immeasurably may turn into stone – like the hero of Wilhelm Dichter's *God's Horse* (*Koń Pana Boga*, 1996)⁵ – a person who constantly confronts descriptions of death, particularly in its most monstrous forms, may begin to perceive it as a figure of thought.

In his analysis of transformations in studies on the novel – partly under the influence of psychoanalytical theories – Henryk Markiewicz makes the following remarks:

If interpretive efforts had previously been directed at revealing the operation of the concealed phantasms driving the work, nowadays (in the 1970s and 1980s) we treat its contents as in-controvertible. Instead, we focus our attention above all on how form and overt meaning affect the reader by weakening, masking and sublimating the phantasmic contents, thus protecting him or her from feelings of fear or repulsion.

Later he adds the following assertions (taken from Norman Holland):

All readers create phantasms that correspond with the diverse structures of their character from the phantasm that apparently exists “in” the work. Consequently, every reader recreates the work in the categories of his or her own identity. Firstly, the reader shapes the work in order to filter it through the net of his or her own adaptive and defensive strategies towards the world. Secondly, the reader recreates the particular form of phantasm or gratification to which he or she responds.⁶

I would define this recreation of the work to correspond with identity construction and psychic needs (together with Hans Robert Jauss' concept of the “desire to look and find illusion,” which forms one of the possible patterns for reader behavior in identifying with a literary protagonist⁷) under the previously discussed emotional benefits – however

⁴ Ricoeur, Paul, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 162.

⁵ “I was like a stone that somebody had thrown – hard, smooth and cold. I flew fast and high. I would stop for nobody.” Dichter, Wilhelm, *Koń Pana Boga* (Kraków: Znak, 1996), 175.

⁶ Markiewicz, *Teorie powieści*, 513.

⁷ Among the interaction patterns enumerated by Jauss, two seem to fit the records under analysis here: the sympathetic pattern, for which Jauss proposes compassion as a basic condition, and the cathartic pattern, where the suffering hero appear as a context through identification with which the reader experiences a tragic shock. As norms of behavior, Jauss enumerates a progressive model, based on reflection and free moral judgment, and a regressive model, involving the desire to watch (a desire for illusion). See: Jauss, Hans Robert, “Interaction Patterns of Identification with the Hero,” *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

inappropriate this might sound in reference to literary records of the Holocaust. On the side of intellectual benefits, I would point to certain literary works that emerged from these events years later as testimonies not so much to empathy as to the literary capacity to exploit the experiences of others (here I have in mind Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz's *Umschlagplatz* and Marek Bieńczyk's *Tworki*). The false tone clearly perceptible in these attempts perhaps confirms the thesis that our task with respect to the Holocaust is rather to listen. But how?

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Descriptions of suffering – the suffering of others – and death have a magnetic power, especially when accompanied by consciousness of the separateness and security of one's own existence. These descriptions simultaneously attract and repulse, thus creating a state of emotional ambivalence.

In his short story "Day and Night" ("Dzień i noc"), Leo Lipski writes: "I remember an incident before the war when the police took a man and beat him up...I could not tear my eyes away. A crowd was following them. And I had to look. Perhaps you, too, will find something at which you have to look." The literature of the Holocaust is something at which we have to look. The painful tension arising from its authors' belief in the impossibility of conveying tragic experiences and their simultaneous compulsion to record them finds its reflection in the situation of the reader torn between "I cannot read this" and "I must read it."

Facing this kind of literature requires an act of distancing oneself. Distance – meaning the permanent consciousness of one's separateness from the suffering character – is a fundamental feature of empathy as Martha Nussbaum defines the feeling.⁸

In her chapter on empathy, Nussbaum devotes a lot of space to the terminological and semantic nuances inherent in the terms "compassion," "sympathy," "pity," and "empathy." Yet the crucial distinction here is between compassion and empathy. Compassion is – in a certain sense – a painful emotion caused by the consciousness of another person's undeserved suffering. According to Nussbaum, empathy – on the other hand – denotes only the imaginative reconstruction of another person's experience without any judgment or appraisal of this experience. In this sense, the emotion is very different from compassion. In the case of empathy, compassion is unnecessary. Nevertheless, in various texts by psychologists and psychoanalysts, we sometimes encounter the term "empathy" to define a certain combination of imaginative reconstructions of another person's experiences with an appraisal of the person's situation as a misfortune and an appraisal of this misfortune as an evil. In this sense, the term begins to approach the meaning of compassion, though it is still not identical with it (for instance, one might feel compassion without making an imaginative reconstruction of the other person's experiences).

⁸ See: Nussbaum, Martha, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). I thank Professor Zdzisław Łapiński for recommending this book to me.

Nussbaum categorically differentiates compassion from empathy, insisting that the latter constitutes an imaginative reconstruction of another person's experience – irrespective of the kind of experience (whether it be sadness or happiness, pleasure, or pain) and regardless of whether the person making the reconstruction perceives the other person's situation as good, bad or indifferent (excluding cases in which a malicious person regards somebody else's misfortune as good or fortune as bad). Here Nussbaum introduces another distinction – between sympathy and compassion. This particular distinction concerns the intensity of feeling, both of the person suffering and the person experiencing compassion. Sympathy – which essentially represents a weaker form of compassion – also differs from empathy. An ill-intentioned person who imaginatively reconstructs the experience of another and draws pleasure from his or her misfortune may be regarded as empathetic, but certainly not sympathetic. Compassion and sympathy include an appraisal of the other person's suffering as bad.

We might compare empathy with the mental preparations of accomplished actors, who feel their way into the situations of suffering people while remaining fully conscious that they themselves are not the sufferers. This consciousness of the separateness of one's own existence from the existence of the sufferer is crucial, especially when empathy manifests itself together with compassion. After all, compassion allows one to forego any concentration on one's own "I," since it remains a feeling directed towards the other. When we feel compassion, we must be conscious both that somebody else's unfortunate fate is bad and that we are not the suffering person at that moment, since we remain ourselves. If we really felt pain in our own bodies, then we could not understand the pain of the other as truly other. We must remain conscious of a qualitative difference between ourselves and the suffering other. In other words, I must be conscious that the other suffers as another, and not as "I." The consciousness of separateness allows us to assess the meaning of suffering for the suffering person. In order to preserve this consciousness, a kind of "twofold attention" is necessary. To repeat: this is based on the sympathizing person imagining how it must feel to be in the place of the sufferer, while preserving consciousness of his or her own safe distance from this place. An empathy based on the idea that one really is the suffering other may lead to a dangerous delusion of identification, while also placing the sympathizer in the center of the experience instead of the sufferer.

In this interpretation, empathy would be reduced to mere understanding of other people's spiritual states, stripped of the element of personal engagement. Here it is more a way of preserving distance than a path to identification with the suffering person. When we confront accounts of the Holocaust, empathy understood in this sense ensures the necessary distance without which we might (or would have to) find ourselves on the other side. In other words – as Hanna Krall once suggested – we would have to enter the mass grave, or rather the pit full of corpses. The feeling of empathy properly understood – according to Nussbaum – brings the desired effect from the ethical perspective. It allows us to concentrate our attention on the experiences of the person suffering. It also guarantees that we can remain mentally balanced. And yet it is only a plan for preferable emotional reactions. In reality, the borders between

compassion, sympathy, “co-suffering” and empathy are fluid and indefinite. As Anna Łebkowska observes, “empathy and sympathy (in the sense of compassion) are often treated almost synonymously and identified with a kind of co-being with those who are excluded, other, different or condemned to silence.”⁹

However, in this case, we might begin to fear what Łebkowska calls “the assimilation of otherness by seizing hold of it, by an almost imperial appropriation of it, an identification with the other through a false usurpation and violation of the other’s autonomy. This threat is especially dangerous when sympathy is identified exclusively with the projection of one’s own ‘I’ and with the application of general rules or stereotypes for sensing or imaginatively understanding the ‘other.’ Ultimately, this means doing so according to one’s own laws.”¹⁰

Nussbaum’s understanding of empathy – supported by a deepened mindfulness – might protect us from this kind of appropriation. In her discussion of the ethical consequences of empathy, Nussbaum draws attention to its social aspect. She sees in empathy a fundamental respect for the world of the other’s feelings and experiences. Even when devoid of compassion, it shows respect for the other person’s reality and humanity. In this sense, it is close to the concept of social solidarity, which is “to be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers. Solidarity is not discovered by reflection but created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people. Such increased sensitivity makes it more difficult to marginalize people different from ourselves by thinking, ‘They do not feel it, as we would.’”¹¹

The question of appropriating other people’s experiences appears extremely often in the case of Holocaust literature – both in the form of specific examples and in general meditations on how we should reflect on the Holocaust.

Łebkowska distinguishes two separate literary manifestations of empathy. The first of these functions through narratives that reconstruct the past with the aim of “reconstructing the other’s identity in oneself through narrative,” reconstructing one’s own identity as another with whom – through empathy – one may identify. This is the case with Benjamin Wilkomirski and his (supposed) memories of the Holocaust.

The second manifestation is based on “evoking ‘the other’ in oneself, an attempt at creating other people’s emotional states and ideas in oneself, producing another world by impersonating or mimicking another person.”¹² Henryk Grynberg almost uses this method in reverse in those of his works characterized by what I would describe as writing in “the voices of others.” Grynberg does not evoke other people’s emotional states

⁹ Łebkowska, Anna, “O pragnieniu empatii w prozie polskiej końca XX wieku,” *Teksty Drugie* 5 (2002), 160.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Rorty, Richard, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), xvi.

¹² Łebkowska, 164.

in himself. Instead, he enters other people like a *dybbuk* and speaks with their voices from inside them. At the same time, he always remains himself, using the other as a medium for his own states and thoughts. Perhaps he meets the other halfway, since he never entirely appropriates the person. Nevertheless, he only loans his voice to others, rather than permanently bestowing it. This is the case with the reconstructed memoirs of Maria Koper, with the protagonists from his collection *Drohobycz, Drohobycz*, and with Adam Bromberg. In the heartbreaking short story "Raccoon," which testifies to the deepest empathy with a mute being, the author-protagonist-narrator experiences a sense of extreme danger. On the basis of this shared experience, he temporarily turns into a mute animal condemned to death. The protagonist's scream at the end of the story represents the sound the terrified animal cannot make.

Therefore, Grynberg's method is to replace in speech those who cannot (or are unable to) speak, while still preserving his own perspective. In literary practice, this inevitably leads to manipulation of the material entrusted to him.

I do not visit lands or seas, but people. Especially when a painful story is trapped inside them and cannot escape... I do this not for them, but for myself. I express myself in these stories – not through commentary, but through identifying with their fates.¹³

Grynberg constantly emphasizes the role of compassion in his writings. Indeed, compassion becomes – so to speak – his creative method. He also looks for it in other writers who address the Holocaust: "Compassion was always more important than knowledge to me. I have not found it in many writers who have tackled this subject."¹⁴

Empathy – and especially identification with the fate of the Jews – determines the value of Holocaust literature written by witnesses. Grynberg does not expect such works merely to express their voices, but also to form a testimony to compassion.

In his view, Jan Kostański's account exemplifies this kind of testimony: "I found in it something I had always sought in vain in non-Jewish memoirs – complete identification with the fate of the persecuted and murdered Jews."¹⁵

The Wilkomirski case is an example of a more pathological form of identification. Here we might say that the writer had fallen victim to empathy. In this sense, his character approaches those fictional characters infected with the "Auschwitz disease." These include the young American lawyer from Philip Roth's short story "Eli the Fanatic,"¹⁶ who (through a complicated chain of events) assumes the identity of a Holocaust survivor together with his clothes, and the unfortunate Nelli Doder – the wife of a concentration camp commandant – from Stanisław Grochowiak's *Trismus*.¹⁷

¹³ Grynberg, Henryk, "Szkoła opowiadania," *Lekcja pisania* (Wołowiec: Czarne, 1998), 56.

¹⁴ Grynberg, Henryk, *Prawda nieartystyczna* (Czeladź: Almapress, 1990), 25.

¹⁵ Grynberg, Henryk and Jan Kostański, *Szmulglerzy* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Twój Styl, 2001), 5.

¹⁶ Roth, Philip, "Eli the Fanatic," *Goodbye, Columbus* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959).

¹⁷ Grochowiak, Stanisław, *Trismus* (Warszawa: Iskry, 1998).

Nelli's love and compassion for a little Jewish girl ultimately lead to her death – and to the death of her child.

In reality, Wilkomirski was the bastard child of a poor working-class woman – a foundling raised in an orphanage and later adopted by a bourgeois family from Zurich in 1945. He was a sensitive man with a painful inferiority complex (his mother and her brother also spent their childhoods in orphanages), which inclined him to identify with those most cruelly afflicted by fate. He presents an example of metamorphosis through identification. As he wrote his book,¹⁸ “Bruno Dösseker gradually turned into Benjamin Wilkomirski, incarnating himself as the protagonist and narrator of his story.”¹⁹

According to Waław Sadkowski:

Wilkomirski's book forms the other pole of that peculiar magnetic field stretching between Goethe's fiction and truth. Jerzy Kosiński's *The Painted Bird* is clearly at the first pole. In Kosiński's case, an autopsy and a true story serve as material for metaphorization and a subsequent transformation into a poetic horror story of his own experiences. In the case of Dösseker-Wilkomirski, an empathy conditioned by his own internal drama transforms other people's experiences – which he has heard and studied in various sources and accounts – into a quasi-true story of uncommon literary distinction.²⁰

In this way, Wilkomirski joins the ranks of the “symbolic orphans,” the children of the twentieth century, the modern Kaspar Hausers with no past and a heavy burden of traumatic experiences. (Małgorzata Baranowska writes about such cases in an article on another doubtful true story from a book by Roma Ligocka²¹).

In an essay on the question of truth and fiction in Holocaust literature, Cynthia Ozick makes the following observations:

Embedded in the idea of fiction is impersonation: every novelist enters the personae of his characters; fiction-writing is make-believe, acting a part, assuming an identity not one's own. Novelists are, after all, professional impostors; they become the people they invent. When the imposture remains within the confines of a book, we call it art. But when impersonation escapes the bounds of fiction and invades life, we call it a hoax – or, sometimes, fraud.... One claim in Wilkomirski's defense (reminiscent of Rodriguez's charge against Isacovici) is that he is no fraud, and that there can be no hoax because he believes in his written story, and takes it to be his own. Perhaps he does. In that event we might wish to dub him insane.²²

¹⁸ Wilkomirski, Benjamin, *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* (New York: Schocken Books, 1996).

¹⁹ Sadkowski, Waław, “Prawda i zmyślenie,” *Literatura na Świecie* 5/6 (1996).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Baranowska, Małgorzata, “Symboliczna dziewczynka,” *Gazeta Wyborcza* (19 July 2001).

²² Ozick, Cynthia, “The Rights of History and the Rights of Imagination,” *Commentary* (March 1999). <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/article/the-rights-of-history-and-the-rights-of-imagination/>. Accessed 7 September 2013.

In other words, Wilkomirski is like the protagonist of Philip Roth's story, who also loses contact with reality when he comes into contact with the miracle of a person surviving the conflagration of the Holocaust.

Our challenge as readers of literature about the experience of the Holocaust today is to find a place for ourselves (and in ourselves) from which to interpret these documents. It is debatable whether it would be more desirable to evoke empathy within ourselves as Nussbaum understands it – meaning the acknowledgement of other people's psychic states while remaining aware of the separateness of one's own "I" – or rather to attempt to combine empathy with compassion or "co-suffering." The latter option would require at least a partial liquidation of the border dividing the "I" from the "not-I." While I am conscious of the dangers associated with immersing ourselves in the world of other people's impressions – and thus in other people's suffering – it seems to me that this might be the most honest way to deal with records of the Holocaust. I write "*might be the most honest*" since we must always remember the temptation to "use" these records for our own emotional or intellectual purposes. At the same time, the question arises as to whether appropriation or assimilation of another person's trauma is really an inevitable consequence of this position. Is it possible to find a way of reading texts about memory that would allow us to experience them in a disinterested manner, and thus to forget about ourselves?

On the one hand, discussions about strategies of remembrance, the problem of filling the void after the Shoah, the appropriation of trauma, catharsis and reiteration seem to suggest that every attempt to find a suitable place for oneself in this discourse is condemned to failure. On the other hand, these discussions include suggestions that we should renew these attempts.

The postulate of "pure" empathy, free of any appropriation, appears in a certain sense in Frank Ankersmit's reflections on the contemporary necessity of using the language of memory instead of the the language of history when we speak about the Holocaust – the discourse of suggestion instead of explanatory discourse.²³ However difficult it might seem to grasp this opposition – and however the ideas themselves evade definition – when we read records of the Holocaust, we intuitively sense the meaning of the distinction. We find an echo of this thinking in the work of Jan Tomasz Gross, when he writes about the need for historians to develop a new attitude towards their sources. This new method would be based on "good faith," compassion and empathy:

To begin with, I suggest that we should modify our approach to sources for this period. When considering the survivors' testimonies, we would be well advised to change the starting premise in appraisal of their evidentiary contribution from a priori critical to in principle affirmative. By accepting what we read in a particular account as fact until we find persuasive arguments to the contrary, we would avoid more mistakes than we are likely to commit by adopting the opposite approach...And that is why we must take literally all fragments of information at our disposal,

²³ Ankersmit, Frank, "Remembering the Holocaust: Mourning and Melancholy," *Reclaiming Memory: American Representations of the Holocaust*, eds. Pirijo Ahokas and Martine Chard-Hutchinson (Turku: University of Turku Press, 1997).

fully aware that what actually happened to the Jewish community during the Holocaust can only be more tragic than the existing representation of events based on surviving evidence.²⁴

Accordingly, the discourse of memory would require us to follow the memory of those who actually remember, since theirs is a memory of events, while ours is mere knowledge that they took place. In this very order of memory and empathy, the Holocaust would always remain an “empty place,” which nobody could attempt to appropriate.

It is impossible in this context not to mention Dominick LaCapra, who has argued for the necessity of liberating collective and individual memory from the weight of other people’s traumatic experiences, whose recurring image forms an unnecessary burden on the consciousness of those born later.

According to LaCapra, “those born later should neither appropriate (nor belatedly act out) the experience of victims nor restrict their activities to the necessary role of secondary witness and guardian of memory.”²⁵ The most desirable approach would seem to be a kind of empathy devoid of compassion – which appears to LaCapra as an unnecessary and undesirable addition potentially leading to emotional complications. And yet how can one be empathetic “without intrusively arrogating to oneself the victim’s experience or undergoing (consciously or unconsciously) surrogate victimage”? At the same time, LaCapra warns against “treating certain questions with empathy [while renouncing] all critical, and possibly self-preservative, distance.”²⁶

In this interpretation, the constantly renewed experience of the Holocaust becomes a dangerous and hypnotic obsession, which is damaging both to survivors and to those born later. The memory of limit events from the past seems to be an unnecessary ballast, while empathy and compassion appear as forms of appropriation. Yet any cure here would surely bring us too close for comfort to forgetting – and ultimately there is no place within this project for those who do not wish to be healed.

²⁴ Gross, Jan Tomasz, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 139-142.

²⁵ LaCapra, Dominick, *History and Memory After Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 198.

Joanna Tokarska-Bakir has devoted an essay (“Historia jako fetysz,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 15-16 [February 2003]) to questions of post-trauma and post-memory in the context of the “Jedwabne affair.” Here she blames the mythologization of social memory of the past for the current state of Polish historical consciousness (which makes all historical debate inconclusive). This process is precisely a consequence of post-memory – meaning transferred memory or memory based on a misunderstanding of empathy (whose emergence might have resulted from feelings of guilt), realized through the appropriation of other people’s trauma. All manifestations of this “post-traumatic madness” and “recurrences of distorted memory” – as Tokarska-Bakir describes these phenomena – are clearly judged negatively in her essay. However, there is no way to determine – and the same is true of LaCapra’s conception forming the basis of Tokarska-Bakir’s thought – which model of reaction to the constant manifestations of trauma arising from past events would be most desirable.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 182.

Therefore, it seems more fitting to agree with Ankersmit, who writes the following: "There are things in our common past which we shall never assimilate and which should constantly provoke chronic disorders and neuroses...We can only refer to and reinterpret traumatic events appropriately insofar as the wounds associated with them have not healed."²⁷

Translation: Stanley Bill

²⁷ Ankersmit, Frank, "Pamiętając Holocaust: Żaloba i melancholia" ("Remembering the Holocaust: Mourning and Melancholy"), *Pamięć, etyka i historia. Anglo-amerykańska teoria historiografii lat dziewięćdziesiątych. Antologia*, ed. Ewa Domańska, (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2002), 180. The neurotic memory about which Ankersmit writes is associated with the question of melancholy as the basis for an art that springs from suffering. This art is non-cathartic, since it brings neither healing nor beauty – apart from the melancholy appeal of the illness itself. See: Kristeva, Julia, "The Malady of Grief: Duras," *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989). Agnes Heller – on the other hand – points to the impossibility of experiencing catharsis for events whose meaning is incomprehensible: "Catharsis is only possible when we understand something or at least recognize its meaning *ex post*. However, there are some shocks that I would describe as conditional catharsis – meaning catharsis by way of an exchange of roles...In this mysterious exchange, adopting the role of a victim means taking on the victim's unbearable pain." Heller, Agnes, "Pamięć i zapomnienie. O sensie i braku sensu," *Przegląd Polityczny* 52/53 (2001).