

Memory and Morality after Auschwitz

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To those united in memory.

Preface

The Archives of Memory

*“...when there is no story left to tell,
what do you then?”*
*“The eye recognizes the new in the
old, the ear the old in the new.”*

Arche der Unschuld ¹

The events that have gone down in history under the name of Holocaust or Shoa lie far behind us, not only in terms of the years which separate us from that period, but of the ever quickly changing nature of our times, the technological and social upheavals, and more than anything else by the increasing speed in which the global village becomes more and more violent. And yet, we tend to develop a keen sense of vigilance: a feeling of foreboding the future affects our lives, colouring our relationships both privately and in public, bearing witness to the knowledge of impending disaster, which cannot be avoided. Vigilance and anxiety are the hallmarks of the world, which has not grasped the soul-shattering experience of Auschwitz, as the collective memo-

ry not only of the experience of the destruction of European Jewry, but of the collective amnesia concerning the very presence of denial in terms of its impact on the pattern of our daily lives.

In modern life many people suffer from the necessity, to make a sharp distinction between their private lives, opinions and convictions – ideology seems a thing of the past—and their public statements. “Political correctness” is often an excuse for taking a safe stand, which gives up on representing one’s own often controversial opinion. The urge for compromise, under the guise of the need for communication, for a cheaply won consensus needed to move to the next item on the daily agenda, does however not only lead to a loss of personal identity, but blocks the way for many to make, a lasting contribution to society: remembering the past and making, as citizens of a democratic world, free choices for the future.

The retreat into the private sphere on the part of men and women in the Western world is a sign of a deep seated alienation, a turning inwards, which basically views outer reality as hostile, alien. “Walls of protection” are built between people, not only on the psychological level, but virtually in front of our eyes by institutional regulations, which by their rigidity delegate human interaction to prescribed rules of conduct, encoded in signs and symbols available to the initiated only. The utopian promise of “Connecting People” has turned out to be the

very instrument of separation. Protection from the forces of violence is threatening to tear apart the fabric of our lives, turning the once friendly next-door neighbour into a possible foe, be it on the personal or on the professional level. In the past, the power of bureaucracy replaced the power of aristocracy, in the present, terror as “*Totalkrieg*” – “Total War” is the name of the global game, played by friend and foe alike, a game in which we are but pawns on the chess-board.

The following reflections are born out of a visit to Auschwitz of more than twenty years ago, with my non-Jewish students at the Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg, where I established and between 1992- 1998 built up the first Department for Jewish Studies in the East after the Reunification of Germany.

The time of our journey was most significant: it was fifty years after the liberation and the fifth anniversary of the Seminar for Jewish Studies. After 5 years of hard work, the Seminar would finally become firmly established with a permanent chair, but as it turned out, the students and I did not succeed to convey the originally conceived aim of tackling the issue of a renewal of the humanities in Germany after the Holocaust: a scholarly endeavour which touches upon the question of concern versus indifference when dealing with detachment and so called “objectivity” as a scholarly virtue.

Memory and Morality after Auschwitz means breaking time by one's presence in history, describing the past not in the light of a projected future, but of a transformed past. A past, which according to historic logic cannot be changed, but can be transformed by memory, expressed in a language of concern, which does not bring the dead back into life, but which opens the Way to Life for us. By displacing oneself, it is indeed possible to unmask the disguises of detachment and the trappings in society, in order to gain the solid ground of morality, steeped in the knowledge of having touched, however slightly, the veil of human freedom and truth.

The period we call modern is defined by the fact man becomes the centre and measures of all things and beings. For the Western world, modernity starts with the Renaissance. It is to the people of the Renaissance, that we owe the beginnings of modern science and technology, unprecedented expansions of trade and commerce, visions of humanism. It is an ultimate challenge to the forces of tradition and rationality and marks the beginning of the emerging Self as the ultimate Judge over Heaven and Earth.

The encounter between Science, Art, Philosophy and Religion, the interplay of various visions of the world, endows the individual with an aura of unprecedented insight and inspiration.

The spirit of the Renaissance continued for over two hundred years and ended in the harsh, rational reality of a *mechanical* vision. What is lost here is

however the opening vision which the Self possess. The triumph of rationality is celebrated in its invisible visibility as background scenery of the world. No longer is the world the tragic stage of humanity: humanity itself becomes the stage for the forces of chaos. The division between the realms of heaven and of earth results in “the fall of Man” - a free fall without a hold.

The Enlightenment tried to regain control through the idea of a universal social revolution, progress was grounded in the belief of objective reason. Freedom was to be gained through the concerted effort of mankind towards progress and prosperity. Nature becomes the place of human telos. Here, reason turns into the will for power, leaving the Self unable to control its destiny.

At the end of the second millennium we found ourselves confronted with the idea of a “global village”, a feeling of connectedness, which leaves the individual with the illusion of “*Geborgensein*” – a false feeling “*Belonging*”, of being at home in a shelterless world. The Self, as an independent subject, is in danger of losing control and becomes the instrument of power without meaning.

In the post-modern situation the human subject no longer experiences its own existence, its ability to find oneself in the universal “Archives of Memory”.

The third millennium, as it now emerges now as a “post-factum” era, might thus be faced with the task of bringing history and memory together to provi-

de for a poetic hermeneutics in which different discourses can find a common ground of communication, beyond theory.

Looking back on my work, I can say that writing out the “*Arche der Unschuld*” gave me a sense of subjective objectivity, which was hitherto hidden from my eye. Unconsciously I had been drawing from this spring the bitter waters of experience, which gave a critical, and at times irritating, quality to my texts, at times almost an unbearable edge, necessary to keep oneself afloat on the stormy waters of academia in order to see through the trappings of its appearances, a seemingly easy and difficult, but therefore apparently impossible task.

As Franz Kafka reminds us: “For we are all like tree-trunks in the snow. In appearances they lie sleekly and a light push should be enough to set them rolling. No, it can’t be done, for they are firmly wedded to the ground. But see, even that is only appearance.”

Eveline Goodman-Thau
Jerusalem, January 27, 2017

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1 “If there is no story left to tell, what do you do then?”... “The eye recognizes the new in the old, the era the old in the new”, *Ark of Innocence*, Eveline Goodman-Thau, *Arche der Unschuld. Vernunftkritik nach Auschwitz*, LIT Verlag Berlin 2008, s.85, engl. *Ark of Innocence. A Critique of Reason after Auschwitz*, publication forthcoming

Eveline Goodman-Thau

Memory and Morality after Auschwitz

Introduction

*“This is that story
The heaving high seas were laden with scum
The dull sky glowed red
Dust and ashes drifted in the wind circling the
earth
The burdened seas slanted this way, and that,
flooding the scorched land under a daylight moon
A black oily rain rained
No one was there.*

*At the end, after the thermonuclear war between the
Djanks and Druzhkies, in consequence of which they
had destroyed themselves, and, madly, all other in-
habitants of the earth, God spoke through a glowing
crack in a bulbous black cloud to Calvin Cohn, the
paleologist, who of all men had miraculously survi-
ved in a battered oceanography vessel with sails, as
the swollen seas tilted this way and that;
Saying this:*

*‘Don’t presume on Me a visible face, Mr. Cohn, I
am not that kind, but if you can, imagine Me. I reg-
ret to say it was through a minuscule error that you
escaped destruction. Though mine, it was not a se-
rious one; a serious mistake might have jammed the*

universe. The cosmos is so conceived, that I myself don't know what goes on everywhere. It is not perfection although I, of course, am perfect. That how I arranged my mind.

'And that you, Mr. Cohn, happen to exist when no one else does, though embarrassing to Me, has nothing to do with your once having studied for the rabbinate, or for that matter, having given it up.

'That was your concern, but I don't want you to conceive any false expectations. Inevitably, my purpose is to rectify the error I conceived.

'I have no wish to torment you, only once more affirm cause and effect. It is no more than a system within a system, yet I depend on it to maintain a certain order. Man, after failing to use to a sufficient purpose his possibilities, and my good will, has destroyed himself; therefore, in truth, so have you.' Cohn, shivering in his dripping rubber diving suit, complained bitterly:

'After Your first Holocaust you promised no further Floods. "Never again shall there be a Flood to destroy the earth." That was Your Covenant with Noah and all living creatures. Instead, You turned the water on again. Everyone who wasn't consumed in fire is drowned in bitter water, and a Second Flood covers the earth.'

God said this: 'All that was pre-Torah. There was no such thing as Holocaust, only cause and effect. But after I had created man I did not know how he would fail Me next in what manner of violence, corruption, blasphemy, beastliness, sin beyond belief.

Thus he defiled himself. I had not foreseen the extent of it.

'The present Devastation, ending in smoke and dust, comes as a consequence of man's self-betrayal. From the beginning, when I gave them the gift of life, they were perversely greedy for death. At last I thought, I will give them death because they are engrossed in evil.

'They have destroyed my handiwork, the conditions of their survival: the sweet air I gave them to breathe; the fresh water I blessed them with, to drink and bathe in; the fertile green earth. They tore apart my ozone, carbonized my oxygen, acidified my refreshing rain. Now they affront my cosmos. How much shall the lord endure?

'I made man to be free, but his freedom, badly used, destroyed him. In sum, the evil overwhelmed the good. The Second Flood, this that now subsides on the broken earth, they brought on themselves. They had not lived according to the Covenant.

'Therefore I let them do away with themselves. They invented the manner; I turned my head. That you went on living, Mr Cohn, I regret to say, was no more than a marginal error. Such things may happen. ''

(from *God's Grace*, Bernard Malamud, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1982) quoted from Penguin Books, USA 1995, 11-13)

When reflecting on the impact of the Shoah, more than seventy years after the liberation of Europe from the grip of Hitler and his willing helpers, we can not escape from the question of God's Grace, the question of the biblical covenant made by God with Noah and his decendancy after the Flood, with the promise that He would no longer use His option of destroying the world and its inhabitants. God, the almighty creator and ruler of the universe, has thus willingly relinquished some of His power for the sake of the freedom of mankind.

From that moment on, it is man who is master of his will and indeed the history of mankind can be described as the history of the Will to Power as Friedrich Nietzsche has taught us. Malamud goes on to describe how Calvin Cohn, cast on a desert island, falls in with a community of chimpanzees, who are attempting to build a new society. The book is a masterful parody on biblical myth and ends with Cohn being sacrificed as a burnt-offering, tied up by his son, the ape Buz, carrying a bundle of split wood with no angel to save him, and no ram in the thicket. A last witness is George, the gorilla, watching the scene from a tall tree in the valley below "wearing a mud-stained white yarmulke he had one day found in the woods", chanting "Sh'ma, Yisroel, the Lord our God is one". In his throaty, gruff voice he began a long Kaddish for Calvin Cohn." (Ibid., 200-201)

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As we look back on the end of the Jewish world in Europe, especially in what was the Jewish space called *Ashkenaz* – united by the common use of the German language in all its cultural ramifications – we are no longer using the same discourse as before, neither from a religious, nor from a secular perspective: we are living in a time of man-made disasters, and apocalyptic myth come-true in the tumbling towers of Manhattan for all to see in real-time over and over again, by the power of technology and global media. The Golem – as a *deus ex machina* – has taken a terrible revenge on its master and we are groping for words and images to describe the unimaginable to bring our world-view and self-image into focus.¹

Thus, the problem of Holocaust-representation touches not only on the question of the biblical prohibition of making a graven image of the divine, as that, which should not be seen but only heard, but enlarges the horizon of our consciousness in a new way, enabling us to comprehend this prohibition from a human, that is a *moral point of view*, cross-

1 “World-view and self-image are indissolubly intertwined with each other. The way man sees the world is the way he sees himself; the way he conceives himself is the way he conceives the world. Alterations in his view of the world lead to alteration in his view of himself and vice versa.” (Christoph Wulf, “*The Temporality of World-views and Self-images*”, in: *Looking Back on the End of the World*, ed. Dietmar Kemper and Christoph Wulf, Translated from the German by David Amtal, Semiotext(e) New York 1989).

sing the boundaries between aesthetics and ethics.²

Although one would not deny the extraordinary character of the Holocaust as an *historical* event, there exists a considerable debate concerning the uses and misuses of memory regarding its moral implications, its “moral space of figurative discourse”³ with its more radical one: silence.

The problem is however not only inherent in the context of Holocaust writing, but even more so in reading Holocaust narrative. Thus, when dealing with the relationship between “how narratives are told (their aesthetics) and how they mean (their ‘hermeneutics’)”, Daniel Schwartz notes, “I see telling as a crucial act, all the more crucial because of the trauma of the originating cause. Because we can never trust memory fully, in narrative effects (how a teller presents himself or herself) sometimes *precede cause* (the explanation for why a narrator is the person he or she is).⁴

The very act of telling the story thus creates a discontinuity with the historical past: the narrator chooses to place himself or herself in the situation of those, who did not live to tell their story to us, as survivors, burdened with the task of creating conti-

2 See Robert Eaglestone, “From the Bars of Quotation Marks: Emmanuel Levinas’s (Non)-Representation of the Holocaust”, in: *The Holocaust and the Text: Speaking the Unspeakable*, ed. by Andrew Leak and George Paizis, London 2000, pp. 97-109.

3 Berel Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1990, pp. 160-161.

4 Daniel R. Schwartz, *Imagining the Holocaust*, New York 1999, p. 35.

nuity in time.⁵

The question posed by Memory and Morality after Auschwitz is therefore: what are the ethical implications of breaking the silence of Auschwitz, of speaking, not only the unspeakable, but speaking the language of those whose voices were not heard then and which cannot be recaptured to-day. “The disaster always takes place after having taken place”, Maurice Blanchot remarked and thus the remarkable fact of the holocaust representation confronts us in the first place with our own lives, with the way we look, directly and indirectly, through the very blurred vision of consciousness, trying at all costs to recapture something of the recognition of origin and thus originality to try and fill the gap caused by a general feeling of “world-loss”, to avoid falling in the abyss of meaninglessness.

Being part of human history and yet outside of human experience as we are used to imagine un-lived events, the Holocaust directs us to face the ‘Unavoidable’, a point of no return, where the Real breaks the boundaries of the Imaginary, shattering our hopes and illusions, the very foundations of human culture and civilization. “Perhaps we should say that Holocaust narratives have become a genre with its own archetypes and its own cultural continuity.”⁶ It means starting at the very beginning: questioning language.

5 Compare the biblical injunction to remember the Exodus from Egypt: “And you shall tell your son on that day, ‘it is because of what God did to me when I went free from Egypt’”. (Exodus 13,14)

6 Daniel R. Schwartz, o.c., p. 35.

Auschwitz: Creation without Language⁷

The question of language has come back again. You thought it seemed as if you had solved it; and you discover that, where language is concerned, you are in exile again.

Not that you lack a language, rather the question of your mother tongue, the German language, is back again.

Are you able to speak in this language or was it extinguished in Auschwitz? Silent like the empty huts, the long row of houses without people. No smoke coming out of the chimneys, no smell of food cooking, even hunger has for the moment abated, the image of a child's scream frozen. – What you hear at the sight are the trains. They pound away in your head because they speak a language that is clearer than any other: this is the way to Auschwitz.

Isn't it always like this? In your head you have places and stories, and the reality looks totally different. How difficult it sometimes is to put the two images together in your thoughts, to get them to overlap. One recollects the old picture, compares, and somewhere, sometimes they come together.

This time it is totally different: the image has disappeared. There is no recollection of a recollection. No recollection of what "like Auschwitz" looks like

⁷ All passages taken from my book *Arche der Unschuld Vernunftkritik nach Auschwitz* (Ark of Innocence, Critique of reason after Auschwitz) LIT Verlag, Berlin 2008, Engl translation of the text passages by Martin L. Davies

when I look back on it. All the images has disappeared. Flight is impossible: one is confronted with reality. Not with any reality, but with reality itself that from now on affects every other reality. There is no way of return. Pre-Auschwitz does not exist. “Unfortunately it is all true” – the refrain keeps running through your head the whole time. From now on nothing is possible: neither with Auschwitz nor without Auschwitz. The paradox is revealed, visible for all to see – because there is no longer any connection between perception, imagination and reality. Seeing reality at last as it is, without likeness, in its identical likeness. It is more than mourning, loss, anger, outrage, lamentation, accusation. Better to remain silent? Is it “appropriate” to remain silent here? Remain silent at the sight of an image, without an original?

For the first time a reality with no original. The beginning and the end in one. No one that speaks, creation without language. Here human presence is not in the elaborate minutiae of the documents. Not in the blood-splattered cells, not in the faces of the prisoners, as they are photographed, registered, tattooed, numbered. Not when everything about them is documented down to the last detail. All this spells the end of detail, the end of all knowledge based on details, incidents, facts, documents. All this has no meaning, since here beginning and end are one. Not life and death, beginning and end. Life and death would again bring you back to an original – something to hold on to.

The image, the document that has a name on it. What story do they have to tell, or the pair of spectacles, the brush, the pot? Where do they belong? To which name, which document, which number? How does one manage in a systematic, scientific way to sort these things out, to catalogue them? Is everything in the files? The empty chairs around the table in the courtroom, the files are lying there, the verdict is “reached”. They can be killed, just as they are, but a verdict on them is “reached”. And then they undress and they are shot, in the washroom when they put up a struggle, or in the courtyard, when they go along quietly, still can walk.

*Here one can still tell a story. But when there is nothing more to be said, when there is no story left to tell, what do you do then?*⁸

Re-visiting the *Arche der Unschuld* means entering into the literary representation of the human construct of the world as the concrete world of immediate experience.

“The world of literature is human in shape, a world where the sun rises in the east and sets in the west over the edge of a flat earth in three dimensions, where the primary realities are not atoms or electrons but bodies and the primary forces not energy or gravitation, but love and death and passion and joy. [...] poetry, according to Milton, who ought to have known, is ,more

8 Eveline Goodman-Thau, *Arche der Unschuld* o.c., pp. 5-6