Re-examining the Holocaust through Literature

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Edited by

Aukje Kluge and Benn E. Williams

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FOREWORD

SARA HOROWITZ

"What is on your list?" I was recently asked. "Your definitive list of Holocaust literature, the books that must be read, taught, studied, analyzed."

I was asked the question by a colleague, in anticipation of our offering jointly an advanced seminar in literature of the Holocaust. My colleague came with a list of his own, with sound reasoning for each inclusion and for an overarching set of principles that guided the composition of the list. His question was intended as a prelude to comparing our lists, seeing where we overlapped and where we diverged. It was posed, understandably and generously, as a necessary step in determining what set of readings should shape the seminar.

But it was a question I was unprepared to answer. It is not simply that I had no list to put forth, but that I was—and remain—anti-list, at least with regard to Holocaust literature. Of course, I have developed lists. Each course, book, article, finally reduces to something defined and finite. But we were talking not list, but List. To put it differently, we were talking canon. And I have a fundamental resistance to fixing the canon of Holocaust literature.

More than a matter of temperament, or a consequence of coming of academic age during the canon wars, this resistance comes out of my sense of the ethical work of the literary forms that respond to, represent, and mediate the events, implications, and aftermath of the Nazi genocide. Particularly as I envision the future of Holocaust studies, in a world in which those events are no longer within living memory, leaving open the question of "best" or "necessary" or "definitive" novels, memoirs, poems, films, plays, analytic approaches, or theoretical frameworks reminds us of what we do not know, amid all that we have come to understand. Shuffling our readings, shifting our lenses, encompassing lesser known works and new ways of reading, does more than keep our perspectives fresh and original—although it does that, as the works in this volume exemplify.

Three years ago, I had the pleasure and privilege of working with many of the contributors to this volume. Under the aegis of the Holocaust Education Foundation's Summer Institute on the Holocaust and Jewish

Civilization at Northwestern University, we spent several hours of each day plunged into a set of works whose exemplary status as Holocaust canon I had provisionally established and then unraveled. Our discussions in seminar, at breakfasts, lunches and dinners, on the winding campus paths, pointed to more questions, further readings, other reflections. The essays in this volume point to the ways that thinking can creatively and insightfully engage an expanding group of genres, works, and approaches, with important implications for a range of areas and fields.

At the place where literary studies and Holocaust studies encounter one another, the ongoing reframing of what and how we read helps to negotiate a reflective space in which the increasing academization of the study of the Holocaust does not deflect the human (and inhuman) dimensions of what we have chosen to study.

In lieu of canon, then, the capacity to think broadly, sensitively, creatively. In lieu of canon, too, traces of loss, horror, despair, that retain the capacity to shock, even as we sit at our desks or in our classrooms.

York University, Toronto
November 2008

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Besides turning the metaphorical page, one of the pleasures of completing a book manuscript is the opportunity to thank the individuals without whom the endeavor would not have been possible. We are grateful to our editors at Cambridge Scholars Publishing for their initial interest in this collection and to the gracious contributors for having confidence in two junior scholars. We felt honored to witness the development of such intellectually stimulating essays. A special note of appreciation is due the Holocaust Education Foundation and the faculty of its annual Summer Institute on the Holocaust and Jewish Civilization at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois (then led by the admirable Peter Hayes), as we would not have otherwise met one another.

Aukje Kluge thanks her doctoral committee for providing her with intellectual guidance and moral support throughout the past years and encouraging her to complete this project. This anthology shows that a change in research direction does not have to affect one's other interests and passions. I am greatly indebted to my co-editor Benn for his editorial skills, his knowledge in the field of Holocaust studies, his motivation to turn this idea into reality, and his unwavering optimism that two doctoral students could in fact be editors of this collection. My greatest thanks goes to R.C.L. whose love, tactful criticism, and moral support I would never want to miss.

Benn Williams heartily thanks Richard S. Levy at the University of Illinois at Chicago for his intellectual rigor, sense of humor, and for teaching the fine art of editing; remaining deficiencies are my own. Despite changing career interests, my co-editor persevered and often demonstrated a better grasp of the English language *als ich*. For reading portions of the manuscript, I would like to acknowledge William Hoisington (UIC, emeritus), Stephanie Hare (Alistair Horne Visiting Fellow at St. Antony's College, Oxford), and S.R.K. My deepest appreciation goes to the latter who exhibited extreme patience and crucial moral support as we lived with this project.

A.K. & B.W.
November 11, 2008,
Atlanta, Georgia & Chicago, Illinois

INTRODUCTION:

NEW VOICES AND DIRECTIONS IN HOLOCAUST LITERATURE

AUKJE KLUGE AND BENN E. WILLIAMS

The Holocaust ended over sixty years ago. Yet, if the increasing number of Holocaust museums, memorials, monographs, and memoirs created each year is any indication, it continues to haunt, fascinate, and intrigue. Just as we hear the first-, second-, and third-generation survivor voices in these cultural objects, so, too, must we recognize the emergence of another generation of scholars of Holocaust studies. That polymorphous label encompasses specialists who are grounded in strict disciplines—from history to philosophy, theology to literature—as well as those in the variegated interdisciplinary "studies" programs: French, German, borderlands, trauma, etc. The generation born before or during the war has left teaching, and some members are, unfortunately, deceased. Their students continue to teach, publish, and mentor, but they, too, are on the inevitable slope towards emeritus status.

A new generation of scholars, born during the Vietnam War or shortly thereafter, is coming of age, putting its small feet in the large shoes left behind. We did not personally know the horrors of the world wars although some of us were fortunate enough to have surviving grandparents speak of these times. We experienced instead the huge ideological shifts at the end of the Cold War, to say nothing of the new wars in the Middle East and too many genocides around the world. We face our objects of study with the same degree of analytical composure as our elders and as our colleagues who research the Great War, the French Revolution, or the "fall" of the Roman Empire. To paraphrase James Young, we are part of the post-war generation(s) that cannot remember, cannot know the Holocaust as it actually occurred. All we remember, all we know of the Holocaust, is what the victims and perpetrators have passed down to us in their diaries, what the survivors recall in their written and videotaped memoirs. We remember not actual events, but the countless Holocaust histories, novels, stories, and poems that we have read, the photographs,

movies, and video testimonies we have seen over the years.[1] While, incredibly, some survivors still remain, albeit in sadly dwindling numbers, the Holocaust has already become an object of scholarly inquiry replete with its own historiographical and intellectual challenges.

A small but growing number of books have begun to treat the interconnectedness of the Holocaust (as event, as experience), memory, and representation (written and visual) since 1988, the year that saw the publication of James Young's influential *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust* and Berel Lang's edited volume *Writing and the Holocaust*. Furthermore, works by Dominick LaCapra, Lawrence L. Langer, and Sara Horowitz have set the conceptual framework of analytical study of Holocaust literature and highlighted the "problematic" thereof.[2] Recent works by individual authors tend to concentrate on a single genre: diaries,[3] "representations,"[4] or children.[5] Many of these studies focus on the Holocaust literature canon, i.e., Anne Frank, Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi, Cynthia Ozick, et al. A recent collection, edited by Prof. Harold Bloom, provides a perfect example.[6] Another group of encyclopedic works seeks to exhaustively document *all* "Holocaust authors," who are so defined either by their subject matter and/or by the fact that they directly experienced the Holocaust or its effects on their family.[7] A last

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[1] James E. Young, "The Holocaust as Vicarious Past: Restoring the Voices of Memory to the Holocaust," *Judaism* (Winter 2002): 71-87, here p. 71.

[2] See for example, Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1998); Lawrence L. Langer, *Preempting the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1998), and Sara Horowitz, *Voicing the Void: Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Fiction* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997). Cf. Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying. Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), ch. 1: "The Problematics of Holocaust Literature."

[3] Most recently, see Alexandra Garbarini, *Numbered Days. Diaries and the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

[4] Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer (eds.), *Witnessing the Disaster. Essays on Representation and the Holocaust* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

[5] Sue Vice, *Children Writing the Holocaust* (Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) and Marita Grimwood (ed.), *Holocaust Literature of the Second Generation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

[6] A compilation of essays published previously between 1978 and 2003 appears as part of a self-named series: Harold Bloom (ed. and intro.), *Literature of the Holocaust*, Bloom Studies (Broomall, PA: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004).

[7] Recent titles include: S. Lillian Kremer (ed.), *Holocaust Literature: an Encyclopedia of Writers and their Work*, 2 vols. (New York: Routledge, 2003) and Thomas Riggs (ed.), *Reference Guide to Holocaust Literature*, with an introduction by James E. Young, 2 vols. (Detroit: St. James Press, 2002).

subcategory is more pedagogical in nature.[8]

This modest collection of essays does not pretend to provide a "continuous narrative or a unified theory," to quote LaCapra; instead, it seeks to broaden the scope of analysis of Holocaust literature and to re-examine the Holocaust through this prism. A panel on Holocaust literature chaired by Aukje Kluge (Emory University) at the 61st Annual Convention of the Rocky Mountain branch of the Modern Language Association, held in October, 2006, provided the genesis of this project. Contributors included an interdisciplinary group: Jehanne Dubrow (English/creative writing, then at the University of Nebraska), Elizabeth Scheiber (French and Italian, Westminster College at Rider University), and Benn Williams (History, University of Illinois at Chicago), all alumni of the 2005 edition of the Holocaust Education Foundation's Summer Institute on the Holocaust and Jewish Civilization at Northwestern University. Our editor Carol Koulikourdi expressed interest in this project at that early stage.

As we began to conceptualize this book, however, we had to re-examine our definitions of "Holocaust literature." For example, does it include graphic novels? Art Spiegelman's contributions are too large to ignore. Does it include drama? Peter Weiss makes it clear that the stage has a strong presence. Thus we have opted for a broader definition of "Holocaust literature." This broad definition and the patience of our editor allowed us to invite complementary essays from esteemed colleagues living in France, Israel, and the United States in order to round out our "variety of related perspectives," to finish Dominick LaCapra's phrase.[9] Arranged thematically, the essays are nonetheless meant to stand alone.

The essays in Part I concentrate on mixed genres, histories, and representation. After offering readers a brief introduction to the various genres and styles found in Holocaust representation, Elizabeth Scheiber delves into Charlotte Delbo's Holocaust writings. Delbo, herself a survivor, used a range of genres such as poetry, prose, and "collective biography" to express her Auschwitz experiences and life thereafter. While the individual messages Delbo had for readers of her texts are unique and important in their own right, Scheiber also encourages readers

[8] Samuel Totten (ed.), *Teaching Holocaust Literature* (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 2001). Essays cover dos and don'ts in teaching the subject, as well as lessons of study by genre. Most recently, see John K. Roth (ed.), *Holocaust Literature*, 2 vols. (Pasadena: Salem Press, 2008). It includes 82 previously published essays and reviews of Holocaust literature and 27 commissioned essays.

[9] *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 180.

to engage with Delbo's universal historical messages by combining literary as well as historical approaches to analyze Delbo's work. In the second chapter, Scott Windham examines the issue of artistic and legal representation in Peter Weiss's play *Die Ermittlung* in order to gain a deeper understanding of the portrayal of Holocaust perpetrators. The play is based on the Auschwitz trials in Germany. The underlying issue in literature on Holocaust perpetrators is how similar or dissimilar they were to ordinary German citizens. Using critics' reactions to the play as well as societal responses, Windham investigates how representational strategies influence the understanding of perpetrators. In the third chapter, Esther Webman traces the development of a Holocaust discourse in Arab literature and television. Always tied to the establishment of Israel, this discourse provides a powerful example of how politics are intertwined with Holocaust representation. She identifies major themes of how the Holocaust has been portrayed in three distinct periods.

In Part II, the authors grapple with the intertwinement of fiction and history and the role of both in making difficult moral choices (by writers, survivors, historians…). Focusing on a historically accurate novel by a contemporary French writer, biographer, and journalist, Benn Williams explores how fiction feeds from history and how historians can learn from fiction, although controversial entanglements can occur. Evangelical Christian writers joined the ranks of Holocaust authors in the 1970s and have enjoyed great popularity with their followers ever since. In chapter five, Yaakov Ariel concentrates on biographies, memoirs, and historical novels to trace the representation of the Holocaust and the Jews in evangelical writings. Among the many themes that Ariel addresses are how evangelical writers portrayed true Christians and their actions during the war, the conversion of Jews and Nazis to Christianity, or how true Christians kept their faith in concentration camps and used it to their and everyone else's advantage. In chapter six, Ruth Franklin questions how to approach Elie Wiesel's well-known *Night*. Franklin takes the reader on a journey through its different versions, including the original Yiddish manuscript, which was translated into French and then translated again, twice, in English, to focus on the issue of fact versus artistic license in a memoir.

The three chapters in Part III shed light on other literary genres like comic books, film, and poetry. Few realize that the destruction of the Jews was first mentioned in a comic book before the end of WWII. In chapter seven, Tal Bruttmann uses this piece of information to begin his discussion of comic books and their treatment of the Holocaust, which is often controversial. In the eighth essay, Jehanne Dubrow focuses on the

theme of wish fulfillment in Holocaust art, literature, comic narratives, and poetry. While these genres address diverse forms of wish fulfillment, such as recreating the past, saving loved ones who died during the Holocaust, or creating alternative endings to the war, they do so in very different ways. By using a number of examples, Dubrow familiarizes the reader with the key distinctions of each genre. Samuel Fuller is the focus of chapter nine. Before becoming a notable film director, he was an American soldier who witnessed—and filmed—the liberation of the Falkenau concentration camp and the horrors of the camp's contents. Christian Delage's essay highlights important events that shaped Fuller's professional development as a film director. Most importantly, Delage asks how one can reconstruct historical events when one is simultaneously witness and director.

The final two components complement one another. In the epilogue, the ambiguity of the very definition of "Holocaust literature" is revisited and a tentative working definition is proposed. Next, the book's essays are placed into the larger context of current research trends in Holocaust studies. Lastly, avenues for further research in this field are sketched out. Stimulating future research is the driving force behind the final component as well. In their own edited collection, Andrew Leak and George Paizis note that "any representation of the Holocaust looks both backwards and forwards."[10] For the benefit of readers and researchers worldwide, looking both backwards and forwards, Benn Williams has compiled an international bibliography of personal narratives (diaries, memoirs, journals, and letters), novels, poetry, drama, and short story collections, composed in twenty languages, that deal with the Holocaust. This bibliography epitomizes what this entire collection of essays hopes to accomplish: to add new voices to the discussion of Holocaust literature, and to offer fresh insights on known and lesser-known wartime and postwar authors, hybrid genres, visual narratives, representations, and poetry in order to reach both backwards and forwards.

[10] Andrew Leak and George Paizis, "Introduction," in *The Holocaust and the Text. Speaking the Unspeakable*, edited by Leak and Paizis (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 14.

PART I:

MIXING GENRES, HISTORIES, AND REPRESENTATION

CHAPTER ONE

CAR CELA DEVIENT UNE HISTOIRE: REPRESENTATION OF THE HOLOCAUST IN THE IMAGINATIVE AND COLLECTIVE MEMOIRS OF CHARLOTTE DELBO

ELIZABETH SCHEIBER

Charlotte Delbo's writing occupies a unique place in Holocaust literature, employing a variety of genres and styles in non-traditional memoirs. Her trilogy *Auschwitz et après* and her *Le convoi du 24 janvier* recount essentially the same experience in markedly different ways.[1] The Trilogy portrays events from a first-person perspective as it combines prose and lyric poetry in an imaginative memoir that draws on surrealism and the theater of the absurd, resulting in an account of the individual-lived experience. At the same time, Delbo universalizes her message by extending her narrative voice to her convoy as a whole and expressing the atrocity committed on other victims (like the Jews and Roma Sinti) that she witnessed. In the third volume, Delbo continues this universalizing effect by relating the stories of others, in fact lending to other survivors the space to record their voices. *Le convoi* relates many of the same episodes in a briefer, journalistic style followed by the biographies of women who shared a train journey to atrocity. In depicting her convoy, Delbo aims to symbolize all such convoys and therefore this work too contains a universal message. What differentiates these works is a sense of

[1] Originally published by Les Editions de minuit in 1969, *Auschwitz et après* has been published in English as Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and after*, trans. Rosette C. Lamont with an introduction by Lawrence L. Langer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). Originally published in 1965 by Editions du Minuit, *Le convoi du 24 janvier* has been translated as *Convoy to Auschwitz. Women of the French Resistance*, trans. Carol Cosman with an introduction by John Felstiner (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997). All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

historicity, in other words, the act of creating an objective historical document (albeit one that speaks from a personal perspective) versus writing a work of poetry that communicates the feeling of trauma and tragedy. Although it was never Delbo's stated purpose, her work suggests a multi-faceted and choral approach to understanding the Holocaust.

History and Poetry in Holocaust Fiction

Perhaps no other literature is as rooted in time and place as that of the Holocaust. While normal memoirs and fiction may be examined through the lens of history, and indeed are usually enriched by our knowledge of contemporary events, Holocaust writings are categorized by their subject matter, itself embedded in time and place: the physical and psychological conditions in the ghettos and camps of the Second World War. Generally, writers and readers consider such writing a form of *witnessing* which, in a legalistic sense, implies adherence to truth and demands historical accuracy. Readers of Holocaust works usually do not approach them for pleasure or entertainment. Instead, they turn to such works to learn about this dark time in human history. In his *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust,* Holocaust scholar James Young goes further, saying that many scholars demand that texts deliver evidence of the events themselves:

> Unlike other historically based literature, however, the writing from and about the Holocaust has not been called upon merely to represent or stand for the epoch whence it has derived, which would be to sustain the figurative (i.e. metonymical) character of its 'literary documentation.' But rather, writers and readers of Holocaust narrative have long insisted that it literally deliver documentary evidence of specific events, that it come not to stand for the destruction, or merely point toward it, but that it be received as testimonial proof of the events it embodies[2]

In part, the tendency to treat Holocaust texts as "proof" of events stems from the intentions of the writers themselves. The impetus to write stems from their participation in these exceptional events, and their main purpose in writing is to "inform" the world about the horrors they experienced. The theme of "survive to tell what happened" is prevalent in Holocaust memoirs, and writers insist on their personal connection to events as a way to offer "proof." Writing *L'espèce humaine*[3] in 1947, Robert Antelme,

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[2] Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 10.

[3] Originally published by Gallimard in 1947, it has been translated by Jeffrey

member of the French resistance and survivor of a Buchenwald subcamp called Gandersheim, describes in his preface the need to tell his experiences as they were lived and to be heard by those that had not shared them: "Nous voulions parler, être entendus enfin. [...] nous ramenions avec nous notre mémoire, notre expérience toute vivante et nous éprouvions un désir frénétique de la dire telle quelle."[4] With these words, Antelme insists that it is possible to recount the events "as they were" without literary or stylistic considerations. He also seems to feel the need to insist on the veracity of what follows because he lived it and thereby guarantee his authority: "Je rapporte ici ce que j'ai vécu."[5] Similarly, Primo Levi, writing *Se questo è un uomo*,[6] just after his return from Auschwitz, expresses a similar need to tell what he had experienced: "Il bisogno di raccontare agli 'altri,' di fare gli 'altri' partecipi, aveva assunto fra noi, prima della liberazione e dopo, il carattere di un impulso immediato e violento..."[7] As he closes his preface, Levi insists on the truth of what we are about to read: "Mi pare superfluo aggiungere che nessuno dei fatti è inventato."[8] Both Antelme and Levi strive for unadorned and straight-forward approaches.[9] Antelme's work aims at pure chronology with a few admitted lapses of memory while Levi's follows a general chronology with a few thematic chapters. In the tradition of memoirs, neither attempts imaginative wanderings, remaining in the realm of reality and fact.

Straight-forward memoirs were not the only approach to relating the events of the concentration camps. Former communist and resistance fighter, Jorge Semprun chose to fictionalize his experiences of Buchenwald, and his theories about atrocity writing form much of the

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Haight and Annie Mahler (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998).

[4] "We wanted to talk, to be finally heard. [...] We brought back with us our memory, our experience all fresh and we felt a frenetic desire to talk about it the way it was." (Antelme, *L'espèce humaine*, 9)

[5] "I report here what I lived." (Ibid., 11)

[6] The Italian version first appeared in 1947, published by the amateur publisher Franco Antonicelli. Einaudi took over the publication some eleven years later. The British version, appearing in 1958, maintained the Italian title *If this is a man*, while in America, it is known as *Survival in Auschwitz* (New York: Touchstone, 1996).

[7] "The need to tell 'others', to make 'others' participants, had taken on among us before and after liberation the aspect of an immediate and violent impulse..." (Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, 9)

[8] "It seems superfluous to me to add that none of the facts has been invented." (Ibid., 10)

[9] To what extent they were successful is open to debate. The important point is their attempt to remain as faithful to unadorned writing as possible.

narrative impulse alongside events themselves. In Semprun's view, most accounts provide snippets of overall life in the Lager without contextualizing the whole or conveying a totalizing message. When Semprun portrays narratives of *anciens déportés*, he generally prefers not to transcribe them. Instead, he depicts his own negative reaction within the narration.[10] In *L'écriture ou la vie*,[11] for example, one character, Manuel, unaware that the author had been at Buchenwald, recounts his experiences at Mauthausen. Although Semprun recognizes aspects of his own deportation in Manuel's stories, as well as the differences between the two camps, he nonetheless focuses on the lack of coherence in his companion's stories:

> C'était désordonné, confus, trop prolixe, ça s'embourbait dans les détails, il n'y avait aucune vision d'ensemble, tout était placé sous le même éclairage. C'était un témoignage à l'état brut, en somme, des images en vrac. Un déballage de faits, d'impressions, de commentaires oiseux.[12]

In his own writing, Semprun avoids what he calls "l'énumération des souffrances et des horreurs."[13] Fiction appears to him as the ideal route to express the evil he encountered at the camp, because only fiction will allow him to get beyond his own experience and portray a more important message: "Il me faut donc un 'je' de la narration, nourri de mon expérience mais la dépassant, capable d'y insérer de l'imaginaire, de la fiction. Une fiction qui serait aussi éclairante que la vérité, certes. Qui aiderait la réalité à paraître réelle."[14] Semprun constructs plots from a

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[10] It should be understood that Semprun does not criticize Levi, to whom he showed respect in his work, or Antelme, whom he does not mention at all. Primarily, his criticism concerns oral accounts. Nonetheless, his writings state that straight-forward memoirs are not the best way to convey the feeling of being in the camps.

[11] Although Spanish, Semprun has lived in France and written most of his work in French. The French version appeared in 1994, published by Gallimard. The English version is called *Literature or Life*, trans. Linda Coverdale (New York: Penguin, 1998).

[12] "It was jumbled, disjointed, too wordy, it would get bogged down in detail, there was no overview, everything was given the same emphasis. It was, in sum, a testimonial in a raw state, some higgledy-piggledy images. A display of facts, impressions, idle commentaries." (Semprun, *L'écriture ou la vie*, 310)

[13] "Listing the suffering and horrors." (Ibid., 217)

[14] "I need therefore a narrating 'I,' nourished with my experience but going beyond it, capable of inserting into it the imaginary, some fiction. A fiction which would

significant episode (the train journey to Buchenwald or a "typical" Sunday, for example) whose meaning radiates out to moments in time before deportation and after liberation. His works express not only the deportation situation but how those experiences live on and pollute his life after his return to France.[15]

In Holocaust studies, fictionalization is generally met with mistrust. In part, the subject matter itself (genocide, extreme human suffering under horrible conditions) may raise questions about the ethics of "inventing" horror even if the purpose is to educate the public on life in Auschwitz. Countering such arguments, it can be pointed out that authors like Semprun and Borowski adapt actual experiences to fit their narrative ends. Historian Inga Clendinnen makes the claim that the connection of the author to his subject matter does give authority to his narrative:

> I am persuaded that the authority of a Tadeusz Borowski or an Isaac Babel or those other writers who present us with 'fiction' made out of experience owes a great deal both to the fact and to our knowledge that they have 'been there'; that they are reporting (and selecting, shaping, and inventing) out of direct observation.[16]

For Clendinnen, authority in these works is not the issue. Instead, it is the readerly expectations of fiction, which requires suspension of disbelief for what we believe are imaginative situations. Clendinnen sees fiction as a type of game in which we as readers have no responsibility to the characters because they are inventions: "I may tremble for its people, I may weep for them—but I want to relish their anguish, not heal it."[17]

Another more pressing issue concerning fiction is simply what we might call truth claims. Even allowing that an author "who was there" fictionalizes her experiences, readers of Holocaust fiction must somehow grapple with the historical truth, a situation which leads one to wonder which characters and events actually occurred and which ones are

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be as enlightening as the truth of course. Which would help reality seem real." (Ibid.)

[15] Auschwitz survivor Tadeusz Borowski also chose to fictionalize his experiences in short narratives collected under the title *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, trans. Barbara Vedder (New York: Penguin, 1976). Like Semprun, he weaves a narrative around an event, but unlike Semprun, his stories about Auschwitz remain within the framework of the camp, as if no liberation had occurred.

[16] Inga Clendinnen. *Reading the Holocaust* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 169.

[17] Ibid., 170.

creations of the author's imagination. The Holocaust fiction-writer's pact with the audience is that the events recounted are "true to experience" but not necessarily "true." Holocaust fiction thus exists somewhere between truth and invention in a way that seems to run counter to what many consider "witnessing." Holocaust scholar Sara Horowitz expresses the fear that it will undermine the truth:

> The commingling of fact with fiction, reality with artifice, memory with imagination, seemingly undermines the pursuit of truth, so vital to witnessing: of knowing *what* happened in that night world, *to whom, by whom,* and *how*. Unlike a bare chronology, which aspires to the facts as such, the literary text—in avowing its own artifice, rhetoricity, and contingent symbol-making—threatens to shift and ultimately destroy the grounds by which one measures one set of truth claims or one historical interpretation against another.[18]

Horowitz's quote also underlines another problem inherent to Holocaust fiction: that the rhetoric and artifice will displace the events themselves. Readers will focus more on plot, style, and figures to the detriment of the Holocaust itself. Scholar Lawrence Langer also found written accounts, including memoirs, problematic because of this:

> Writing about Holocaust *literature*, or even written memoirs, as I have done in my previous works, challenges the imagination through the mediation of a *text*, raising issues of style and form and tone and figurative language that—I now see—can deflect our attention from the 'dreadful familiarity' of the event itself.[19]

The fear that the text can displace the content of the work is understandable. Often, discussions of texts lie in the realm of theory, where texts and authors recede. For Holocaust literature, such a move threatens to occlude the suffering and death of millions of people and the trauma of those who managed to survive such suffering.

Despite such concerns, there is an advantage to highly imaginative works of the Holocaust: because they foreground their composition, they do not purport to *be* the reality they wish to portray. They cannot "stand in for," in Young's words, the events themselves. There is an honesty

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[18] Sara R. Horowitz, *Voicing the Void: Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 20. Author's emphases.

[19] Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), xii-xiii. Author's emphases.

between reader and author about our ability to understand the events being described. In her discussion of fiction, Horowitz acknowledges this situation:

> ...more than other forms of narrative representations, literature foregrounds its own rhetoricity. In fiction and poetry, language is acknowledged and explored not as a transparent medium through which one comes to see reality but as implicated in the reality we see, as shaping our limited and fragile knowledge.[20]

Memoirs, on the other hand, may have too literal a relationship with the reality they wish to portray since the pact they imply is that the events in the book are true, at least as far as the author remembers. We, as readers, may forget the limitations of the author's memory and the mediation of language in shaping their memoirs. For these and other reasons, many current scholars are less concerned with the historical facts of the works they read than with what a literature of atrocity does accomplish. Young defends a kind of truth distinct from facts that narrative can express: "...even if narrative cannot document events, or constitute perfect *fact*uality, it can document *act*uality of writer and text."[21] In a similar vein, Nathan Bracher posits that that writer's task is not to establish the reality of Auschwitz but to "arrive at a knowledge that is likely to engage us, that is, to incorporate it into our vision of the world..."[22] For the scholar, it is necessary to ask questions about the work's relationship to historical events and draw conclusions about the meaning of the work.[23]

This brief survey of theories about Holocaust literature and its relationship to facts and truth, not intended to be exhaustive by any means, describes some of the issues inherent in the field. Primarily, I wanted to point out some intentions and considerations in authorial choices and certain ethical concerns in choosing a genre. It is no longer time to prescribe what kind of literature of the Holocaust should exist. The fact is, these forms do exist, written by the survivors themselves, and children and grandchildren of survivors are telling their own or their relatives' stories. Despite Adorno's famous dictum no poetry after Auschwitz, there is a variety of texts ranging from memoirs to novels and short stories to poetry.

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[20] Horowitz, *Voicing the Void*, 17.
[21] Young, *Writing and Rewriting*, 37. Author's emphases.
[22] Nathan Bracher, "Histoire, ironie et interprétation chez Charlotte Delbo: Une écriture d'Auschwitz," *French Forum* 19, no. 1 (1994): 81-93, here p. 83.
[23] Ibid., 81.

Such diversity of texts and justifications for them suggest that only a multiplicity of readings can provide us a view of what we call the Holocaust. For a subject which is indisputably impossible to comprehend completely and whose authors so often state that there are no words to describe what happened, no single story, no single genre can communicate what happened.

Delbo's own project recognizes that multiple genres can express her experiences better than a single one since her work overlaps areas of history and literature and espouses poetry and prose. It would be wrong to call any of her work "fiction" since she does not engage in imaginative plot-building. However, it is far from a chronological, contextualized memoir. Instead, it might be better to call her work simply poetry, or poetic memoirs. She provides the reader no preface explaining her purpose like Antelme or Levi, and she does not engage in extended commentary about her literary choices like Semprun.

Although her reasons are not so directly stated, it is easy to understand why Delbo chose to write. First, as so many Holocaust writers, she simply wants to tell the world what happened. Both the Trilogy and *Le convoi* inform us about the two years in deportation, providing insight into what it felt like to be there and what kinds of horrible events were experienced and witnessed. Second, both works pay tribute to the women incarcerated at Auschwitz, both the survivors and the deceased. In *Le convoi* this is done in extended form and concerns the group as a whole, but the Trilogy too recounts the courage and solidarity of the women closest to the author. Third, the works discuss the aftermath of the experience, what it is like to live with the memory of the Holocaust when these women returned to "normal" life.

In the sections that follow, I will focus on the messages of Delbo's two forms of writing. Specifically, I will examine the individual and universal messages the works convey and the style in which they accomplish their messages. It is my contention that both history and literature are necessary to understand the Holocaust, and readers need to be attentive to the methods and messages of each type of work.

Le convoi du 24 janvier

In its method of research as well as its style, *Le convoi* constitutes a work of history instead of literature. Delbo and other survivors from her convoy gathered their memories of the camp, examined archives, and interviewed relatives and friends of the deceased. In writing, the author uses plain language, recognizes gaps in the record, and includes an appendix with

statistics, facsimiles of letters, and photos. Unlike her Trilogy, *Le convoi* does not convey the sensations and feelings of being in the camp. Instead, it pieces together as factual a picture as possible, with dates, names and places, of the women of Delbo's convoy, their families and circumstances.

Although it constitutes a work of history, *Le convoi* does not purport to explain or interpret events. Instead, it provides a report of what happened to the individuals in the convoy. Because of this format, Nicole Thatcher views this work as more than merely a historical text. It was a way for Delbo to pay homage to the hundreds of women who died during incarceration:

> [It] can be viewed as a document providing socio-historical information. But the form adopted – a short account of what happened to this group of women, followed by individual biographies—points to a different intention. [...] For Delbo, this book was a memorial, the fulfilment of her duty towards the dead as well as to the '*revenantes*,' the returnees.[24]

In addition, she declares that the work replicates the roll-call that the women endured every day subverting the Nazis' dehumanizing effect and converting roll-call into a positive experience:

> But instead of the call of numbers which reduced the detainees to non-persons, the women are given back their humanity with their names, their own specific story, thus underlining their belonging to the place and society they come from and their participation in history.[25]

Le convoi as memorial extends further than the individual women of Delbo's convoy. It is also a record of familial and community tragedy. In point of fact, *Le convoi* is a polyvalent book, serving as historical record, homage to dead friends, reminder of the atrocities of war.

From the beginning, Delbo's tone in *Le convoi* differs from that of the Trilogy. *Aucun de nous ne reviendra* begins with an often quoted phrase expressing incredulity at the events she is about to recount: "Aujourd'hui, je ne suis pas sûre que ce que j'ai écrit soit vrai. Je suis sûre que c'est véridique." (I 7)[26] Like so many survivors, she felt that her experience

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[24] Nicole Thatcher, *A Literary Analysis of Charlotte Delbo's Concentration Camp Re-Presentation* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000), 70.
[25] Ibid., 72.
[26] "Today, I am not sure that what I have written is true. I am sure it is truthful." To differentiate between the three works of the Trilogy, I will use roman numerals:

resembled a nightmare. While she knows that events happened, she struggles to understand how they could have happened. Commenting on this passage, Nicole Thatcher stated: "Thus, the tattoo on Delbo's arm, as she explained, confirms the reality of her experience, the fact that events like tattooing happened, but her own grasp of this reality was more difficult to pin down..."[27] On the other hand, *Le convoi* begins with a line from Giraudoux's *Electre* pronouncing the truth of the book that follows while insisting on historical accuracy: "Voici comment tout s'est passé, et jamais je n'invente" (*Le convoi* 7).[28] On the following page, a short paragraph acknowledges several individuals who helped collect information in order to compile the work. Signed with Delbo's initials, the paragraph makes it clear that the women consulted archive materials and interviewed families in their research.

After the front matter, the book opens with a short history of the convoy's course from arrest to liberation. Punctuated by a death count, the section not only tells what happened to the women, it also describes the physical conditions in the camp and explains why so many women died within the first months of deportation. Embedded within the text, Delbo includes a paragraph that shows the disbelief that her and others' explanations met. After giving the number of women remaining as 70 on April 10, 1943, Delbo writes about the incomprehension of non-deportees: "Ceux à qui nous racontons cela maintenant ne comprennent pas que tant d'entre nous soient mortes si vite. Nos explications ne le leur font pas comprendre" (*Le convoi* 15).[29] In the following paragraph, Delbo describes the effects of the change from a temperate to a continental climate in mid-winter without proper clothes and the long hours of roll call in the snow. In addition to the extreme temperatures, women's systems were weakened by poor diet and lack of sleep. In part, Delbo's description of incomprehension serves as an alert to what she is about to write. She wants the reader to realize that she is about to tell us something that others have failed to grasp, and we need to try to understand. In part, too, Delbo is informing the reader that the experience is difficult to conceive, that she is, truly, describing the incomprehensible. In fact, she admits on the preceding pages, her own convoy's inability to understand what was in store for them. When a Dutch woman inquires about her convoy and tells

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I for *Aucun de nous ne reviendra*; II for *Une connaissance inutile*; III for *Mesure de nos jours*.

[27] Thatcher, *A Literary Analysis*, 31.

[28] "Here is how everything happened, and never do I invent."

[29] "People we tell this to now don't understand how so many of us died so quickly. Our explanations do not help them understand."

them that after a month only thirty will be alive, they think she is trying to dishearten them and break their spirit. They themselves are determined to be strong as they brush aside the woman's remark that roll call is a cause of death: "Des heures debout? Il n'y a pas de quoi mourir. Notre courage était fait d'une grande ignorance" (*Le convoi* 14).[30]

While the opening section is ostensibly the tale of a group and is told using the plural pronoun *nous*, it is not without a first-person voice. Delbo speaks in the first person from time to time, and she refers to individuals as well. Her hair shaved off and her belongings confiscated, Delbo moves on to the showers where she barely recognizes her companions who had undergone a similar ordeal:

> Je cherchais mes amies et ne reconnaissais personne. Nue et tondue, aucune n'était plus elle. Moi aussi j'étais nue et tondue. Viva m'a reconnue: 'Viens ici. Viens t'asseoir près de nous,' d'une voix joyeuse, comme on hèle dans la foule un jour de kermesse. J'entends encore sa voix (*Le convoi* 13).[31]

The journalistic style (in contrast to the imaginative passages in the Trilogy) and the use of details about specific people make certain episodes more vivid. Furthermore, the use of the "I" voice in providing a point of view anchors the account more concretely.

"Le départ et le retour," in addition to other sections throughout the volume (like "La Course," for example on page 37), provides context to the women's lives as well as acknowledgement of the hardship they endured, but the true memorial to the individuals of the convoy follows in the biographical entries which constitute the main text. Each woman receives her own section, ranging in length from a sentence to several paragraphs depending on what is known of the individual. The name appears in bold letters, set off slightly from other text, as it might be on a monument. Delbo includes married and maiden names and even nicknames when there is one. Within the body of the biography, salient points about the women's lives are mentioned, forming a sort of *état civil*. When possible and appropriate, Delbo tells where each was born, what her profession and family situation were, and whether she was involved in

[30] "Hours standing? That's nothing you die from. Our courage was made of a great ignorance."

[31] "I was looking for my friends and I didn't recognize anyone. Naked and shaved, none of them were themselves anymore. I too was naked and shaved. Viva recognized me: 'Come here. Come sit next to us,' with a joyful voice, like one uses to call out in the crowd on a festival day. I can still hear her voice."

resistance activities. An Auschwitz number, set off from the rest of the text, symbolizes a break between pre- and post-camp lives and stands in for incarceration in the camps. After the number, we learn the individual's fate. For those who survived, Delbo describes their post-liberation lives. For women who perished, the details of their death are given, when known. Often, dates and details are sketchy or approximate. For example, Delbo writes of Jeanne Couteau that "Elle est morte du typhus, au revier de Birkenau, au début d'avril" (*Le convoi* 77)[32] and of Yvonne Courtillat that "Elle est morte parmi les premières. Aucun témoignage" (*Le convoi* 76).[33] Sometimes Delbo writes that none of the survivors have a memory of the person or events in question. Of those, the most poignant is the last entry of the volume of a woman known only as "Mado." Delbo reports that this woman appeared to have joined their convoy on the eve of their departure and most likely found herself in a train car of women who perished in the camp. They have no information of her last name or even her Auschwitz number. The last words of the volume just before the appendix seem to indicate that the purpose of the work as a whole is to remember: "Personne n'a eu le temps de la connaître. Aucune de celles qui restent ne se souvient d'elle" (*Le convoi* 290).[34]

The explicative nature of *Le convoi* extends to an almost apologetic tone in "Aucun témoignage." In this section dedicated to those entries that lack specific information about the death of an individual, Delbo describes the hopeful expectations of family members that survivors will be able to tell them how their loved ones died and what their last words were. According to the author, the lack of information about these deaths is like "une blessure seconde" (a second wound) (185). Delbo then explains that deportees remained in groups of eight, and sometimes no one in a group survived, especially women over forty. Also, while some were dying, the others themselves were sick and exhausted. The short passage provides an understanding for the choice of format in *Le convoi*. Each woman, even if her exact death is unknown, receives her due through an entry that describes her pre-camp life.

Through the cumulative effect of biography, *Le convoi* represents an "average" convoy and achieves a broader message of universal tragedy and atrocity. As a result of the accumulation of details about the diverse group of women who shared the train journey to Auschwitz with Delbo, a

[32] "She died of typhus, in the Birkenau infirmary, in the beginning of April."
[33] "She was among the first to die. No testimonial."
[34] "No one had the time to get to know her. None of those remaining remember her."