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Text as Resistance in Holocaust Literature:

Struggles for Personhood in Wiesel, Levi, and Delbo

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Honors Thesis

English Department

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Introduction

The word "Holocaust" conjures images of death, devastation, and dehumanization. Thoughts about the Holocaust rarely coincide with thoughts of creation, inspiration, or life. The Holocaust remains, for the most part, fixed in the public mentality as synonym for destruction, specifically the destruction of human life. The literature that has emerged in the years since the Holocaust, however, is often significantly oriented with the survival, preservation, and perpetuation of humanity. While the devastation and the unjust annihilation of an exorbitant number of human lives can never be edifying, uplifting, or constructive, the literature generated in response to the Holocaust, particularly the memoirs of survivors, explores the endurance and indefatigability of humanity.

Nelly Sachs's poem "What Secret Cravings of the Blood" arguably typifies the sort of concrete imagery commonly associated with the Holocaust; camps of "madness and earth" (l. 2), "foaming mouth[s]" (l. 6) of uninhibited human madness, crematoria chimney smoke creating "ash-gray receding horizon[s]" (l. 17), and tangles of corpses "arms up and down/ legs up and down" (l. 12-13). The unyielding barrage of visual horror present in many samples of Holocaust poetry draws attention to the physical aspects of the Holocaust; the emaciated prisoners, seemingly omnipotent guards, and manifestations of death around every corner. The Holocaust was, however, more than just a physically executed destruction of humanity. It was an ideological war, an operation of precise and finely tuned warfare against the humanity of victims. The Nazis sought to break down families, and bodies, but they did not stop at corporeal destruction. Rather,

they sought to destroy the abstract intellectual and spiritual existence of their victims through dehumanizing processes leading to unceremonious and anonymous death.

Nazi propaganda strove to create a new nationality for Germans- building a new and exclusive community, the *Volksgemeinschaft*, wherein groups such as the Jews and those identified as gypsies, homosexuals, or disabled where considered "Other." The new nationality the Nazis attempted to forge for the German people was one that ate away individuality in an effort to create a general communal nationality. In his "Nazi Propaganda and the *Volksgemeinschaft*," David Welch analyses the effects of the Nazi propaganda's "abhorrent, utopian vision" (Welch, 238) in the effort to "radically restructure German society so that the prevailing class, religious and sectional loyalties would be replaced by a new heightened national awareness" (Welch, 217). Trying to create a singular German identity founded in nationalism, the Nazi propaganda machines used exclusion as a means of unification. Welch explains that,

> fundamental in the propaganda presentation was the attempt to forge an awareness of the notion of 'experience' (*Erlebnis*), the spiritual bond that cemented individuals to [the] new all-embracing ethnic community. The conscious experience of 'inclusion' as a comrade of the community (as opposed to being an 'outsider') was a critical part of the pseudo-religious vision of a 'national awakening' (Welch, 218).

Essentially, the Nazi party's idea of a creating a new understanding of German citizenship was one executed by taking people (from their own society) of select races, creeds, or physical types and ostracizing and punishing them as outsiders or "others." This propaganda, while not a function of the Holocaust itself, ideologically paved the way for the dehumanizing cruelty to of the camps. An essential facet of the new national self-portrait of Germany was the eradication of anything that didn't fit the new community;

"the idea of an organic Volk, resting on the purity of race and sustained by permanent struggle became progressively exclusionary. Those individuals and groups who did not fit into such a 'community' were ruthlessly suppressed and/or murdered" (Welch, 237-238), so, while Nazi propaganda didn't openly call for the Holocaust, it promoted a new understanding of nationality and community in which the kind of atrocities quietly perpetrated on "others" became that much more acceptable.

In the years since the Nazis' failed attempt to destroy both the personhood and existence of the "others," a reactionary body of literature has emerged. Consisting mainly of survivors' memoirs, this literature invites both an exploration of the Holocaust experience through narrative and the technical processes of retelling it, and the way in which that experience impacted the author's understanding of him or herself.

The selection of literature from which to draw particular works in which one might examine the problems of identity cause by the Holocaust experience is vast. In relation to religious identity, humanity, and communal identification, however, the writings of a select few authors stand out. Elie Wiesel's *Night* and *Day*, Primo Levi's *If This is A Man*, and Charlotte Delbo's *Auschwitz and After* are three texts that srtongly relate the personal experience of the concentration camps, centering on the unifying theme of the fragmentation of specific fundamental aspects of self-definition. Despite the fact that these authors belong to different locations, age groups, and cultural backgrounds, each focuses on a different branch of the same central theme.

In some cases, such as Elie Wiesel's *Night* and *Day*, the Holocaust experience impacts religious identity. Wiesel, one of the better-known authors to draw upon personal Holocaust experience, was an Orthodox Jew born in Transylvania in 1928. His

hometown, Sighet, was occupied by German troops in early 1944, and he, along with the rest of the local Jewish population, was sent to the Nazi work camps. He and his father were sent to Auschwitz and later, Buchenwald. Through *Night* and *Day* Wiesel grapples with issues of theodicy, the existence of God, God's silence in the face of suffering if He does exist, and religion's ineffectual role as a reconstructive social structure in his post-Holocaust life. The progression of religious identity that he details is not a simple case of devotion becoming atheism in the face of trauma. Rather it is a reappraisal of a religious identity into which he as an individual can longer fit because of what he has lived and witnessed.

Primo Levi's *If This is A Man* includes both the methods by which the Nazis deprived their victims of the symbols and structures of humanity, and the ways in which prisoners resurrected elements of the outside world in order to resist. Levi was an Italian chemist, born in Italy in 1919. He was also Jewish and part of an anti-Fascist group, so the concept of resistance is a part of his pre-Holocaust identity before it is an element of his post-Holocaust writing. Because of his Jewish heritage and anti-Fascist activity, Levi was arrested by German police and deported to Auschwitz in 1944. *If This is A Man* is a narrative of physical and intellectual endurance, a documentation of the mechanical and dehumanizing techniques the Nazis used to strip inmates of their personhood, and a reappraisal of the concept of the civilized and enlightened European culture in the face of the dehumanizing Holocaust experience.

Charlotte Delbo's writing, on the other hand, pitches readers into the concrete horrors of Auschwitz and the sense of isolation that encompasses being a survivor and an author writing about the Holocaust. Born in France in 1913, Delbo moved to South

America in 1940 to work with a theatrical company, only to return to France in 1941 to join the resistance. In 1942, she and her husband were arrested for anti-Nazi activity, he was executed, and she was sent first to a series of French prisons and then to Auschwitz, where she remained with a group of other French political prisoners until late 1944. Her three-part *Auschwitz and After*, includes a great deal of text relating to the ways in which she and her fellow French female political prisoners created a close community to preserve their cultural and individual significance, followed by the isolation she experiences when feed from Auschwitz and unable to reintegrate into a society that no longer has a place for her changed identity.

The four texts of these three authors form a sampling of a much larger body of literature through which the impact of the Holocaust experience is communicated, recreated, commented upon, condemned, illustrated, and explored. In the course of this analysis each of these works serves as a demonstration of the Holocaust impact on a different facet of the complex folds of humanity. Wiesel's texts address religious identity, as composed of belief and the societal aspect of religion. Levi's memoir deals with the struggle to preserve intellectual subjectivity, and Delbo's memoir focuses on both community's necessity to the preservation of cultural self-definition and the isolation that becomes a major facet of personality afterwards. An examination of these authors and texts shows remarkable indestructibility of human identity, as well as its suggestibility in the context of unbelievable trauma.

Chapter One

Elie Wiesel's *Night* and *Day*: Fractures of Religious Identity

Because of its spiritual, social, ideological, and moral influence, religion must be understood as one of the key components of individual identity (and even the personal reaction against and rejection of religion comprises an equal component). Religious belief, when adhered to, functions as both an internal- personal, intellectual, and spiritual- and external- social, ideological, and communal force. Personal monotheistic religion, encompassing both the core ideological beliefs of a faith and the membership in a community of like-minded believers, shapes the way people view not only themselves but also those around them and humanity holistically. Perhaps because of the intensely individualized nature of religious belief, which in Judeo-Christian terms is often characterized as a relationship with God and the knit communal nature of shared belief, the loss or destruction of either aspect results in an irrevocable shift in the understanding of oneself, as Elie Wiseesel's writings on the Holocaust and theology reveal.

Wiesel's *Night* and *Day* supply a framework through which we can examine the destruction of ideological religious identity and communal religious affiliation specifically because of the author's Holocaust experience. The time span between the two works, the nature of the two (one an autobiographical account and the other a work of fiction), and the predominant themes of God's silence, and the warping of religious understanding during and after the narrator's Holocaust experience, illustrate the dissociation caused by the horrors of both the prison camp experience and the years afterwards. Wiesel's texts document two separate forms personal disconnect from the foundations of religious identification. In *Night* Wiesel traces his early disconnect from

the internal ideological core of his faith; his personal belief in and understanding of God. In *Day* his narrator's experience illustrates a severance from the external societal foundations of religious identity; his relationship with religion as a framework of belief and his relationship with other Jews. Together, the two works create a portrait of religious identity altered in every aspect by the Holocaust.

In *Night*, the autobiographical account of his Holocaust experience, Wiesel shares the ways in which his experiences at Auschwitz and Buchenwald fractured his religious identification as a Jew. He charts a personal transition which critics Ozsvath and Satz characterize as movement "from a securely religious perception [into] rebellion against God, alternating among questions, accusations, and despairing denials" (Ozsvath and Satz, 203). In *The Audacity of Expressing the Inexpressible*, Ozsvath and Satz argue that the religious themes in Night "are in fact, the universal issues of the Holocaust: the necessity to understand and absorb incomprehensible evil [and] the confrontation of God's apparent abandonment of His people" (Ozsvath and Satz, 204). The human mind and sense of spirituality, however, cannot absorb incomprehensible evil any more than a body with a B-positive blood type can absorb B-negative blood, and for this reason the incomprehensible evil he witnesses and experiences first hand shatters Wiesel's previous understanding of the role of religion in his life. The rejection manifests itself through Wiesel's structural decision to intersperse his story with outcries against God.

Wiesel's narrator in *Night*, initially a pious teenager studying Kabala, brings us on his journey to Auschwitz and Buchenwald and makes us witnesses to the nearly total the devastation of his faith in God, the core of his religious identification as a Jew. "The beloved objects that we had carried with us from place to place were now left behind in

the wagon and, with them, finally, our illusions" (Night, 29), he writes. What was once faith in the goodness of God breaks down into an illusion and a rejected belief. In *Elie Wiesel and the Scandal of Jewish Rage*, Naomi Seidman states that the text deals with " the mystery of God's silence in the face of evil" (Seidman, 1), reasoning that silence is the most significant word in this passage, and perhaps in the entire text of *Night*. Silence, during that first night spent in the camp, initially "signals the turn from the immediate terrors to a larger cosmic drama, from stunned realism to theology" (Seidman, 1). Theologically, silence signifies God's inability or refusal to alleviate His peoples' suffering, and, worst of all, His inability or refusal to infuse that suffering, like Job's, with religious meaning. Seidman states that the narrator experiences a loss of faith, and that "faith can be lost in many ways [and] in Wiesel's description, the murder of God does not collapse eternity or strip it of religious mystery. Where the eternal God once reigned, henceforth shall live the eternal memory of the witness" (Seidman, 2). With this reading Seidman evokes the central struggle in the story of Job, namely the battle between individual faith in the "known" or learned nature of God and individual experience of God's actions. If Wiesel is, as Seidman implies, something a Job vis-à-vis the Holocaust, his struggle between studied faith and concrete experience results not in a deepened appreciation of the divine, but in a resonating tremor in his entire schematic of religious understanding. Where once his relationship with God defined the narrator's understanding of his religion, now that definition and understanding cannot withstand the "memory of the witness" (Seidman, 2), that is, the real experience of being unwillingly transported to a death camp and denied all associations with humanity, an experience which a living

God would, according to Judaism, if not prevent then at least use to impart some religious growth.

The problem of theodicy only continues its exponential increase in significance as the balance of goodness and mercy disappears, as it does for Wiesel's narrator in the camps. To him, a God who can allow suffering of such inhuman magnitude cannot be a God at all. He asks, "would this be just a nightmare? An unimaginable nightmare?" (Night, 31). Reality itself cannot support the horrors, the "flames in the darkness" (Night, 28), the beating of mad Mrs. Schächter, the "small faces of children whose bodies [he] saw transformed into smoke" (Night, 34). In fact, in *Wiesel and the Absurd*, Josephine Knopp centres her entire argument around the principle idea that the impossible but true reality of the camps created what she terms the absurd, or "the breakdown of the accustomed order in God's world, the dissolution of a long established relationship between man and God" (Knopp, 214). As much as reality warps and is turned on its head in the concentration camp, Wiesel's religion is also turned inside out by cruelty and inhumanity around him. A God who allows such horrors to occur, the young narrator reasons, cannot be worthy of worship, and, as Knopp observes, allowing such destruction to be inflicted upon His chosen people reflects a break in the ancient covenant between God and the Jews, the understanding God would provide both spiritual and physical protection for his people in return for their adherence to his will. In the camp, men recite the Kaddish, keeping their half of the covenant, but where is God? Silence. Knopp concludes that "any recognition that the covenant might no longer be operative would strike a devastating blow at the very foundations of Judaism and leave the theologically serious Jew isolated, to struggle in an unaccustomed loneliness with an indifferent, or worse, hostile universe."

(Knopp, 213). Now the narrator loses the comfort of both his community and his God, even his ability to believe in God at all; "after Auschwitz, he is joined to the French existentialists in being confronted with the absurdity engendered and given substance by the Holocaust […] the only possible response that remains […] is the denunciation of God" (Knopp, 213). Indeed, within days of his arrival at Buchenwald we see the narrator's identification as an observant Jew begin to unravel. One particular passage exemplifies this dissolution of his understanding of his religion. Early on in the text, the narrator vows:

> Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, that turned my life into one long night seven times sealed.
>
> Never shall I forget that smoke.
>
> Never shall I forget the small faces of children whose bodies I saw transformed into smoke under a silent sky.
>
> Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever.
>
> Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence that deprived me of all eternity of the desire to live.
>
> Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes.
>
> Never shall I forget those things, even were I condemned to live as long as God Himself.
>
> Never. (Night, 34)

This poem, part prayer, and part promise, represents the dissolution of the narrator's ideological identification with his God. The two driving forces are the fire consuming the corpses, and God's apparent silence. The "flames," "smoke," and "bodies," of the crematorium create an insurmountable schism in his ideological understanding of God. They "consume [his] faith forever." They take the rest of his life, his ability to relate to his God and his ability to relate to other Jews as well and "transform [it] into smoke" like

the bodies of the murdered children. Just as Job cries out against God, Wiesel breaks what he views as God's silence. He does it in the course of his memoir with the angry poem, and he does it in the course of his life with the memoir.

Casting himself as the anti-Job, Wiesel "cries out against the destruction of European Jewry, against God's failure to intercede on behalf of His creatures" (Knopp, 212), but receives no answer and no divine intervention. Where once there existed a clear connection between the world, Wiesel, and God, the crematorium and the torture, murder, subjugation, dehumanization and horror of the Holocaust that it represents have overwhelmed and dominated his perception of both the world and his faith. His very sense of self warps along with this ideological disassociation from God. He "[becomes] a different person. The student of Torah, the child [he] was, [is] consumed by the flames… [his] soul [is] invaded-and devoured- by a black flame" (Night, 36). Like God, Wiesel offers no justification to his readers. His text becomes a pageant of his experience, complete with confused anger and silence.

Wiesel's experiences in the camp so twist and throttle his understanding of the nature of God, who, apparently refuses to step in and rescue or imbue theological significance. God is "the nocturnal silence," neither saving his people nor giving meaning to their suffering, and understood in that light, Wiesel's ideological separation from his understanding of God does, as Knopp suggests, appear existential. However, the existentialist tenet of creating ones own meaning in a situation cannot apply to the narrator's situation because he is not an existentialist. He is a Jew, and God's silence does not give him the responsibility of creating meaning. It signifies the end of meaning, the end of God himself.

In fact, the concept of God as a murdered victim becomes a noteworthy component of Wiesel's portrayal of his devastated ability to preserve his Jewish self. In one particularly wrenching scene at Buchenwald, Wiesel and his fellow prisoners witness the execution of a young boy accused of sabotaging a Nazi power plant. Wiesel describes the young boy or *pipel* as having "the face of an angel in distress" (Night, 63). Rather than abuse his power as servant to the overseer of the plant, the boy is "beloved by all" (Night, 63). His innocence does not provide salvation, though. Before his execution he remains in solitary confinement, endures torture, "remain[s] silent" and is led out in chains (Night, 64). "Where is merciful God, where is He?" (Night, 65), asks one prisoner as the Nazis prepare to hang the boy and two other saboteurs. Forced to walk past the fresh corpses still hanging, Wiesel "[hears] the same man asking: 'for God's sake, where is God?' and from [within himself, he hears] a voice answer: 'where is He? This is where-hanging here from this gallows" (Night, 65). The boy's execution symbolizes the death of a God of ideals and illusions in the young narrator's eyes. The purity and innocence in the face of all the surrounding human shamefulness and torment falls victim. The black smoke of the Holocaust once again obscures his sight. If his Nazi tormentors can leave a young boy "for more than half an hour, lingering between life and death, writhing before [the camp's] eyes… his tongue still red, his eyes not yet extinguished"(Night, 65) and God must be dead. A living God could not permit such atrocities, could He?

The question stands, the problem of theodicy tearing through Wiesel's faith when his surroundings echo only the most horrible aspects of mankind, God's image on earth. The problem of how a God who is supposedly good, can allow such evil to happen surfaces time and again throughout the text. Seidman, Knopp, Ozsvath, and Satz focus on God's

silence, as does Wiesel, but he also includes and distances himself from the blind fumblings of his religious counterparts, the other Jews in the camp. Other people's ability to still identify with their God becomes the battering ram to the citadel of Wiesel's besieged and quickly crumbling faith. Others' recitation of the Kaddish, a motif throughout *Night*, never fails to evoke Wiesel's anger at God for allowing the Holocaust to happen. The first time the prisoners say Kaddish, the Jewish prayer meant to affirm faith in God despite loss, death, and painful earthly circumstances, Wiesel responds with silent anger. "Why should I sanctify His name?" he asks, "The Almighty, the eternal and terrible Master of the Universe, chose to be silent" (Night, 33). Months later, on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, Wiesel once again refuses to speak praises to God's name or affirmations of faith. "What are You, my God?" he demands internally, "Master of the Universe, in the face of all this cowardice, this decay, and misery? Why do you go on troubling these poor people's wounded minds, their ailing bodies?" (Night, 66). The following pages overflow with similar unanswerable challenges to the silent Almighty.

Nazis torment people. Fellow prisoners steal from and beat his dying father. Wiesel himself turns his back on the suffering. God, he feels, does nothing, so he fills with anger and "every fiber in [him] rebels"(Night, 67) upon hearing his fellow prisoners praise God in unison. He calls himself "an observer, a stranger" (Night, 68) when watching others pray. He begins to see himself as "alone, terribly alone in a world without God" (Night, 68). Refusing to fast on Rosh Hashanah, he turns eating "into a symbol of rebellion, of protest against Him" (Night, 68). This "unaccustomed loneliness" (Knopp, 213) leads to the what can be termed death of the narrator's religious identity as "one of God's elect [who] from the time when his conscience first awoke, had lived only for God and had

been reared on the Talmud, aspiring to initiation into the cabbala, dedicated to the Eternal" (Seidman, 10). His new understanding of God as one who "[causes] thousands of children to burn in His mass graves… [keeps] six crematoria working day and night… [chooses the prisoners] among all nations to be tortured day and night, to watch as [their] fathers, mothers, [and] brothers end up in the furnaces" (Night, 67) and those who still believe in Him as strangers and outsiders shatters the narrator's own religious understanding of himself. He experiences a death of self-definition, becoming not only an emaciated almost-corpse of a human being, but also an ideological corpse. Upon looking at his own face in the mirror, the narrator feels he sees a dead man. As Seidman writes, "precisely because the image of the corpse in the mirror is so unfamiliar, so unassimilable to the living consciousness of the survivor, that image must live on; the survivor will always be, in some sense, a corpse" (Seidman, 3). The death of the narrator's past religious self stretches out through time. Physically, he lives, but ideologically, his faith and his religious identity are as changed as a living body that has become a corpse.

Where *Night* addresses the relational disconnect between the idea of God and individual religious identity, perpetuated by the horrors of the Holocaust prison experience, *Day* removes us from the Holocaust, but not from its effects. Set a few decades after the end of WWII, *Day* is the semi-autobiographical story of an anonymous narrator who struggles with a post-Holocaust inability to break out of the role of survivor. Much like Wiesel's narrator in *Night*, cut off from the members of his faith who have not lost their ideological strongholds, the *Day* narrator experiences a prolonged isolation from the communities to which he once belonged. The anonymous narrator spends a period of time recovering from a car accident, the result of implied attempted suicide, and

while physically isolated from people by his body cast, he reflects on how his experience in the Holocaust left him in an existential place of spiritual isolation.

In many ways, *Day* acts as a logical continuation of the problems of using religion as defining characteristic of personhood at the centre of *Night*. The *Day* narrator's isolation stems from the fact that his religious identity, too, is a victim of the Holocaust. Because of the changes in his spiritual self, the fact that he, like the narrator of *Night*, no longer floats along on the idea of an all-powerful, loving God who instills meaning in every situation, the *Day* narrator finds himself severed from his community. In a cause and effect conception, just as the evil Wiesel's *Night* narrator witnesses fractures his religious identity, the fact that the *Day* narrator's religious sense of self is comparably fractured isolates him from other people.

After being struck by a taxi in the middle of New York City, Wiesel's narrator awakes in the critical care unit of a hospital. He realizes that he is still alive and "[feels] alone, abandoned. Deep inside [he] discover[s] a regret: [he] would have preferred to die" (Day, 14). The fact that the accident resulted from the narrator's attempted suicide (never openly addressed) is one of the critical thematic points of the text. As Knopp observes in *Wiesel and the Absurd*, "the sacredness of life, as God's gift to mankind, is basic to Judaism and in fact arguably the most basic tenet of the Jewish faith" (Knopp, 215). The narrator's attempt to destroy that gift signals his defiance of the most basic tenet of the Jewish faith and rejection of the entire faith itself. In fact, the narrator's preoccupation with death and attempt to prematurely end his own life show "ultimate defiance of God, explainable only on the basis of recognition, in reaction to Auschwitz, that God encompasses evil as well as good, that in violating His covenant with man, God has not

only withdrawn His protection but has left man free of the restraints of His laws and commandments" (Knopp, 215), essentially a Judaic death of the idols.

With weeks ahead of him in a body cast, the narrator immerses himself in reflections of his various relationships gone wrong because of the damage done to his personality during the Holocaust, his thoughts revolving around the subject of death. In Paris, a decade after the war, he tries to beg off of a blind date, saying, "let me listen to the wind… The sound of the wind carries the regrets and prayers of dead souls. Dead souls have more to say than living ones"(Day, 19). To him, no living person can say anything that will ever equal the silenced messages of his dead fellow victims. Silence in *Day*, like silence in *Night*, holds court in the foreground of the narrator's mind. That silence is always tied to religion, and always points to withdrawal of God.

A woman on a date with the narrator says, "[she] reads [his] articles… [and] they are written by a man who has come to the end of his life, to the end of his hopes"(Day, 20). He responds simply, ""the young today don't believe that someday they'll be old: they are convinced they'll die young"(Day, 20), cementing his place in a generation of aging survivors who, once young, are already dead to the world. Later on, walking the banks of the Seine with a woman for whom he expresses a great deal of desire, he becomes distracted by how the river, "reflecting the sky and the lampposts, [shows] up its mysterious winter face, its quiet cloudiness, where any life is extinguished, where any light dies [and where] someday [he] too will die"(Day, 24). His preoccupation with death, even in the "city of love" with a woman he desires echoes the great distraction created by the destruction of his religious identity.

In his study of Wiesel's work, Maurice Friedman characterizes the *Day* narrator as "one of the spiritual cripples who have lost not their legs or their eyes but their will and taste for life" (Friedman, 487). This narrator is an individual whose life, once perhaps defined by God, is now defined by meaningless spiritual solitude. The life that once had purpose shaded by religion is now as confining as the casts he must wear, even "the love of his mistress, Kathleen, gives him no incentive to live in the present" (Friedman, 486). While the world seeks to define him in religious terms, the narrator grows increasingly stifled and dissatisfied. Remembering one of his first conversations with Kathleen, whom he lies to consistently, denies love, and openly admits using for sex, the narrator focuses on her perception of him, as a survivor, an interpretation of his character loaded with religious terms. "You're a saint," (Day, 40) she tells him. He angrily counters that "[he] is not a saint. Saints don't laugh. Saints are dead. [His] grandmother was a saint: she's dead. But [him], look at [him], [he's] alive. And [he's] laughing…"(Day, 40). Kathleen's use of the word "saint" has two-fold implication. First, that the narrator has the label of religious martyr foisted on him. "Saint" refers both to someone who suffered a wrongful death for his or her convictions and to someone who in life is a moral example, and the narrator is clearly neither. If anything he is the antithesis of a saint. Secondly, no language exists with which to characterize him, or any survivor. The only words Kathleen can use belong to Catholicism and are inadequate.

Those around him view the narrator not as himself but as someone sacred or set apart because of his suffering, marked by religion, condemned because of his [supposed] religion, and expected at the end of the day to preserve that religion. It is not so much his suffering that "pulls [him] farther away from other human beings"(Day, 96) as it is a

religious shell into which he can no longer fit. He is not a saint and he wants to die. He views saints and perhaps even God as dead entities, and a religion of dead saints and absent Gods is nothing to come home to, and the narrator's dissociation from humanity because of this only progresses.

The narrator operates in the waking dream of the Holocaust nightmare. Having lost his reality and faith to it in camps where the unreal thoughts of torture, mass graves, murder, and starvation became reality, he cannot return to the "day" of normal, coffee in the morning, reading the paper at night, maintaining some sense of belief reality that other people experience. Because the lens through which he regards the world and the lens through which the world regards him (foisting a sense of unwanted religiously loaded martyrdom upon him), the narrator becomes a performer in his social interactions reasoning that "anyone who has seen what [Holocaust survivors] have seen cannot be like the others, cannot laugh, love, pray, bargain, suffer, have fun, or forget" (Day, 66). Like the anti-Job aspect of the *Night* narrator, the *Day* narrator functions in a world grounded in experience, rather than belief.

Both narrators are in many ways prisoners; Wiesel in *Night* is literally imprisoned in Buchenwald and the narrator in *Day* is imprisoned by the past. Ultimately, *Night* and *Day* are thematically nearly identical. *Night* tracks Wiesel's unraveling religious identity as he progresses from devout Kabbalism to virtually nonexistent faith in and potent anger towards God. *Day*, set decades after the Holocaust, examines the man's isolation in light of the fact that the religious definitions of the world around him and his understanding of God are completely altered. Both works address the Holocaust's destructive impact on the most vital forms of human identification. The best way to understand the Holocaust's

destructive and, in some cases, fatal impact on these forms of self-definition is to approach them at different points in time. In this case, we have a man's religious identity in crisis at the crucible of his suffering, Buchenwald, and man's relationship with other people and identification with society in religious crisis in the aftermath. In *Night*, the black smoke of the Holocaust, the camps, the torture, violence, and death, is an ever-present barrier and obfuscation between man and his understanding of God (the ideological face of religious identity) exposing the silence of the divine. In *Day*, the smoldering traces of destroyed belief linger on the survivor, preventing him from forging a new identity either to himself or in the eyes of those around him.

Chapter Two

Primo Levi: Intellectual and Cultural Resistance

The Holocaust might, after some simplification, be understood as a basic assault upon the integrity of humanity itself, the very principle of humanity, and every involved individual's humanity. The camps were not simply places of imprisonment and execution for those unfortunate enough to be condemned to them, but closed realities, independent from the rational laws and logic of outside world. They served as stages whereon victims saw their own humanity slowly stripped away in a kind of theatrical mimicry and perversion of the ordered and civilized world from which they had been severed.

While Wiesel raises questions relative to the religious impact of this destruction, the larger scope of Holocaust-oriented literature does not pertain unwaveringly to its religious significance. The "ethnic cleansing" perpetuated during the Holocaust targeted a wide range of people from gypsies and homosexuals to the disabled, the Jews, and any other incidental people viewed as potential threats. Even those who fell under the blanket label of "Jew" did not necessarily religiously or culturally attach to Judaism. Primo Levi, for example, was a man of scholarly rather than religious belief. The Holocaust's effect on his identity took the form of a deeply altered understanding of humanity, rather than of God or the workings of faith.

It is this altered reality of the camps that Primo Levi documents and analyzes in *If This Is a Man* (titled in America *Survival in Auschwitz*), his memoir of his eleven-month imprisonment at Buna, an auxiliary to Auschwitz. *If This is A Man* is the direct translation of Levi's original title *Se questo è un uomo* and throughout the text Levi focuses less on the survival of the body and physical self (as would be indicated by use of

the title *Survival in Auschwitz*) than on the survival of intellectual sense of self and humanity alluded to in the original title. For the remainder of the discussion of this memoir I will use Levi's title, *If This is A Man*, rather than the title selected for the text by American publishers. Both the text of *If This Is a Man* and the critical discourse surrounding it explore the processes by which the Nazis strove to deprive prisoners of their humanity, and the ways in which the prisoners in turn developed their own social structures that developed amongst the imprisoned as a means of resistance.

In *If This is A Man* Levi documents the Nazis' systematic destruction of their victims' humanity and the similarly systematic methods he and his fellow prisoners employed in attempted defense of their humanity. Both the content and construction of *If This is A Man* convey Levi's experience of the dehumanizing camps in a fashion that does not place readers in an audience position, but rather recreates through testimony the past Holocaust experience around the present experience of reading the text. Levi does this in two ways, first by presenting an abstract and even unemotional account of his experience and the struggle between the Nazis and their dehumanizing processes and those among the prisoners capable of resisting, and secondly by doing so via a text which structurally recreates some of those methodical processes.

From the first pages of *If This is A Man*, Levi places the reader in the absurd anti-world of the camps, where human law and natural law have been destroyed and humanity itself has become a privilege. He documents his removal from society to the alternative world of Buna in apocalyptic terms. Foreshadowing the impending forced transition from human to inhuman, he calls his last night before the camp "such a night that one knew that human eyes would not witness it and survive" (Levi, 10). Once inside, he records a

dawn that "came on [him and the other prisoners] like a betrayer; it seemed as though the new sun rose as an ally of [their] enemies to assist in [their] destruction" (Levi, 12). His language evokes the unnaturalness of his experience. Those who run the camp seek to "deepen this experience through… manipulation of every instinctual reaction that can antagonize those engaged in the nightmare of suffering" (Frunza, 43). Indeed, Levi later recalls the Nazis' perversion and manipulation of the natural world intended to facilitate dehumanization; "the outside door opens, a freezing wind enters and we are naked and cover ourselves up with our arms. The wind blows and slams the door; the German reopens it and stands watching with interest how we writhe to hide from the wind, one behind the other" (Levi, 19). The elements themselves seem to work for their captors, reinforcing the illusion that Levi and the others have been transported to some negative reality, where "around [them], everything is hostile. Above [them] the malevolent clouds chase each other to separate [them] from the sun" (Levi, 37) and they are powerless to stop or even understand their sudden transition from a world in which they are human beings and citizens to a world in which their humanity loses its value at the hands of the guards and the SS.

In order to emphasize the unnaturalness of the camp environment Levi also compares it to the outside civilization to which he and his fellow prisoners once belonged, a world which still exists and in which the social structure remains unaltered, save for the erasure of Levi and his companions. He writes:

> For people condemned to death, *tradition* prescribes an austere ceremony, calculated to emphasize that all passions and anger have died down, and that the act of justice represents only a sad duty towards society which moves even the executioner to pity for the victim. Thus the condemned

> *man* is shielded from all external cares, he is granted solitude and, should he want it, spiritual comfort; in short, care is taken that he should feel around him neither hatred nor arbitrariness, only necessity and justice, and by means of punishment, pardon. (Levi, 10)

This passage's characterization of the nature of civilized execution starkly contrasts with the purpose of the camps. There, prisoners are condemned to death without the security of tradition or ceremony, are denied spiritual comfort and (perhaps worst of all) die with the knowledge that justice does not demand or give meaning to their deaths. Their separation from the traditions and social values of the outside world compounds the prisoners' suffering and dehumanization. As Jonathan Druker observes, "in Auschwitz, life [becomes] all the more unlivable because death has lost its meaning" (Druker, 160). Removing victims from their familiar social structure is only one half of the fact, as the camps actually act as an anti-thesis to the civilized society to which the prisoners belonged, a precise and functional man-made hell, of sorts. As Sharon Portnoff notes in her examination of the function of the classical concept of Hell in *If This is A Man*, "Levi experiences a Hell which is unjust, unchosen, and not in accordance with the right order of things" (Portnoff, 80). Shaken into a world whose order and structure is entirely opposite to the outside world, the prisoners face the prospect of a dehumanized death, in which their executioners don't see them as men but as items, "a hundred miserable and sordid puppets […] transformed into the phantoms (Levi, 22). Levi's assessment of execution, however, only sets the stage for the elaborate process of dehumanization for which the Nazis created the camps.

By isolating their prisoners in the camps, the Nazis deprive them of their most basic human rights, and consequently initiate the elaborate dismantling of their humanity,

a deconstruction that even the Nazis' most trivial actions facilitate. Upon the prisoners' entrance to the camp, a German orders Levi and his fellow Italians to undress "put [their] shoes in a certain corner, and […] someone comes with a broom and sweeps away all the shoes, outside the door in a heap. He is crazy, he is mixing them all together, ninety-six pairs, they will be all mixed up" (Levi, 19). The chaos of the shoes, however, illustrates a deliberate infliction of meaningless confusion and vexation, necessary to the camp's purpose: "the camp's function is to diminish the prisoners' humanity by denying their capacity for understanding" (Druker, 150). Throughout Levi's experience at Buna, the guards maintain the environment of fear of and confusion. In once instance, "shouting people throw at [the prisoners] unrecognizable rags and thrust into [their] hands a pair of broken-down boots with wooden soles; [they] have no time to understand and they already find [them]selves in the open, in the blue and icy snow of dawn, barefoot and naked" (Levi, 22) and in another, Levi recounts the fastidious demands placed upon the prisoners on a daily basis. He documents the senseless meticulousness required of each prisoners and blockhouse:

> The rites to be carried out were infinite and senseless: every morning one had to make the "bed" perfectly flat and smooth; smear one's muddy and repellent wooden shoes with the appropriate machine grease; scrape the mudstains off one's clothes (paint, grease and rust-stains were, however, permitted); in the evening one had to undergo the control for lice and the control of washing one's feet; on Saturday, have one's beard and hair shaved, mend or have mended one's rags; on Sunday, undergo the general control for skin diseases and the control of buttons on one's jacket, which had to be five (Levi, 29).

Placing militaristic demands on their victims, the Nazis create an air-tight environment in which every aspect of daily minutia, right down to the number of jacket buttons, falls into

their rigid control. These above listed requirements might suggest an effort to create order for the prisoners, but considering their impossibility (mud-free clothes after a day of working in the mud, finding buttons or machine grease to make ones clothing presentable, making the bed immaculately) they can be understood as daily reinforcements of the prisoners dehumanized, property-like, mechanized role in the camps, intended to make "exile, life and death seem one single reality" (Frunza, 42). The camp's success in this endeavor cannot be questioned. Levi watches "squads of [his] comrades appear, returning from work. They walk in columns of five with a strange, unnatural hard gait, like stiff puppets made of jointless bones; but they walk scrupulously in time to the band" (Levi, 25). They lose themselves to the rigid regulations of the Nazis and become "puppets" made from human bodies. Their "unnatural hard gait," however, points to the fact that their environment and the regulations imposed upon them are aberrations.

The structure of camp life both creates an environment in which the Nazis can most effectively strip away their victims' humanity and provides an intellectual framework for this assault. Consider Levi's account of roll-call: "with the absurd precision to which we later had to accustom ourselves, the Germans held the roll-call. At the end the officer asked 'Wieviel Stück?' The corporal saluted smartly and replied that there were six hundred and fifty "pieces" and that all was in order" (Levi, 12). This episode linguistically transforms the prisoners from people into "pieces" with the value of inanimate objects. Later, too, Levi asks a guard why he may not alleviate his thirst by sucking on an icicle and is told " 'Hier ist kein warum' (there is no why here)" (Levi, 25). Levi comments, "the explanation is repugnant but simple: in [the camp] everything is

forbidden, not for hidden reasons, but because the camp has been created for that purpose" (Levi, 25). Where Wiesel looked to God for meaning in his suffering, Levi recognizes that the meaninglessness of camp life is an intentional assault on the prisoners and that the arbitrary rules and cruel regulations were designed to inflict upon prisoners a "loss of self through reduction to the anonymous masses, reduction to silence, and withdrawal from the human condition" (Frunza, 45). Like the Nazis' deliberate decisions to mix up everyone's shoes, arbitrarily let cold wind blow in on the naked prisoners, and demand nearly impossible levels of conformity and cleanliness in physical daily life, the decision to deprive the prisoners of and all reason (yet another deprivation, like that of warmth, or food, or water) is a powerfully dehumanizing intellectual assault. It forces them to the same intellectual awareness as animals and reinforces the Nazis' desire for absolute control over the remnants of their prisoners' lives.

While Levi's narrative provides concrete examples of the Nazi process of dehumanization, the actual structure of his text recreates the theatrical nature of the inhuman world of the camps. He does this by creating what some critics call a hybrid text, which "does not function with a single structure at its foundation" (Sachs, 757) but rather "draws on the solidarity of literary representation both to re-establish a continuity with the past and to formalize [Levi's] role as fulcrum between the present and the future, as narrator" (Sachs, 773). *If This is A Man* falls into the memoir category, but is structurally reminiscent of a play with "each chapter structured as a kind of vignette [or scene] crystallizing one or a group of elements in both the dismantling of personality and its reconstruction" (Sachs, 759). The chapters lack chronological continuity and are held together, really only by the first and last chapters which act as bookends, beginning with

Levi's arrest for his participation in the Italian resistance and transportation to Buna, and ending with the camp's liberation and his return to his home in Turin.

Stretching beyond a definitive literary delineation, the structure *of If This is A Man* recreates the intellectual uncertainty and confusion of the Holocaust experience by plunging readers from scene to scene and point in time to point in time, regardless of particular chronology. Levi combines, often in the same passage, observations of an experience combined with future knowledge or commentary. Upon his first entrance to the Ka-Be he writes, "someone came and took away my bowl, spoon, beret and gloves. The others laughed. Didn't I know that I had to hide them or leave them with someone, or best of all sell them, as they cannot be taken into Ka-Be?" (Levi, 50). Dayla Sachs describes the blending of past and present tenses in this passages as a "kind of double temporal horizon [that] pervades the text and creates a pathway along which the events of the past come into contact with the knowledge and judgment of the present" (Sachs, 761). The communicated experience is both new, to the reader, and old, to Levi the writer, who adds the question at the end. According to Sachs, Levi "seeks, through a synthesis of different technical narrative modes and an amalgamation of temporalities, to understand more about human life and behaviour" (Sachs, 757). Technically structuring the text to move from chapter to chapter without particular chronological reason recreates the meaningless forced movements of Holocaust victims, orchestrated by those running the camps. Levi's structural choices do not repeat the dehumanizing Holocaust effects on readers. Instead, his "attempt to narrate […] is the inverse of the dehumanization and decimation of men in real life which Levi has been rendering in organized structures through the art of his writing" (Sachs, 773). Levi creates and shares a work drawn from

his own experience and told in his own voice. It is a structural and intellectual affirmation of his own humanity, and a text which will ensure that Levi's voice as he records it will live on after his physical death. Levi's structure and detached narrative style, form the "fulcrum" to which Sachs refers. He recalls his dehumanizing Holocaust experience and, through metaphorical recreation, turns it into something to which readers can relate.

While textually recreating a relatable experience, Levi also creates a shield between the reader and the actual event by maintaining a detached and unemotional tone throughout the text. His narrative style "preserve[s] both the humanizing power of language and also the distinction between literary and actual experience, [and] constructs a new way of communicating: he imaginatively reconstructs- he dramatizes- the actual experience" (Portnoff, 77). More like a poet than a reporter, Levi uses language to show the sensations created by experiences and elicit reactions. Instead of including every minute detail and record of his feelings, as might be the case in a journal-style memoir, Levi withholds his personal reactions, he leaves readers to grapple with their own.

Consider an episode in the Ka-Be, when Levi records how "the nurse points to my ribs to show the other, as if I was a corpse in an anatomy class: he alludes to my eyelids and my swollen cheeks and my thin neck, he stoops to press on my tibia with his thumb, and shows the other the deep impression that his finger leaves in the pale flesh, as if it was wax" (Levi, 42). The concise nature of Levi's account leaves no room for his personal feelings on the experience but, after a full stop and a new paragraph, he writes, "I feel as if I had never in all my life undergone an affront worse than this" (Levi, 43), recording even his reaction in a fashion that is both abstract and emotionally monotone. Levi's detached style "turns the rocks back into images and metaphors, which, far from

softening [the Holocaust's] monstrosity, forces the reader to reenact it" (Portnoff, 82). As Sachs observes, this stylistic choice is "prosaic, not elegiac […] and the metaphoric language and structure [Levi] applies to the Lager all make the Lager recognizable" (Sachs, 770). Levi's refrain from the angry or sad railings, or really any emotional reaction at all, "shows the human responses and ways of behaving and surviving in the Lager" (Sachs, 771). By placing the reader in an active position, to fill in the intentional abstract gaps, Levi creates an intellectual stage on which readers take on a part of the experience.

Levi also provides structural cues, such as the enveloping first and last chapters and concluding every story he begins within a chapter. Thus he creates opportunities for readers to obtain closure, an opportunity that actual victims were not often afforded. Possibly the most significant form of closure Levi offers readers comes from the forms of resistance he documents in *If This is A Man*. Despite the camp's inhumane parallel world, the struggle to preserve humanity shows through the text in two primary form: the prisoners' development of an economic system and shared languages. The economic system at Buna appears in Levi's description of the black market, a "systematic and scientific practice of theft and seizure of positions and the monopoly of the bargaining" (Levi, 72) developed by the prisoners in order to obtain food or clothing from one another. The market recreates the economy of the outside world on a microscopic scale: "at the Market you can find specialists in kitchen thefts, their jackets swollen with strange bulges" (Levi, 73). While the prisoners at Buna are still identified only as numbers, they can reclaim some of their past selves through the market's symbolic economic functions. They become "professional merchants stand[ing] in the market, each one in his normal

corner" (Levi, 72), restoring a sense of economic normalcy to their tightly controlled yet perpetually uncertain lives in the camp. The market, operating in "a complex network of thefts and counter-thefts" (Levi, 77) serves as both a point of recreating order and a subversive system, and as an indirect rebellion, as most of the thefts are from camp property.

While the elaborate black market system illustrates the way in which resistance was itself an assertion of humanity, it pales in comparison to Levi's account of linguistic and intellectual resistance. In his pivotal eleventh chapter, "The Canto of Ulysses," Levi records an afternoon spent fetching soup for other workers with his friend Jean, and his struggle to recall and translate Dante's story of Ulysses while doing so. This episode serves as a personal, rather than communal, assertion of humanity. Trying to teach Dante to Jean, Levi the prisoner takes the first tentative steps toward building a linguistic bridge between himself and another prisoner. In his cultural analysis of the chapter, Jonathan Druker suggests,

> The very act of retelling how Dante's Ulysses affirms [Levi's] humanity by audaciously challenging irrational, inhuman forces greater than himself, produces a momentary sense of liberation for Levi and Jean, who, in their identification with the ancient hero, fleetingly resist the death camp's dehumanization. The brief journey for soup stages a scene of cultural memory and transmission that, in Levi's narrative, promises to give meaning to the two prisoners' pointless suffering. Language, literature, and rational thought are erected here as a putative bulwark against Auschwitz, that is, against all forces antithetical to 'the human' (Druker, 144)

This assessment emphasizes the canto's function as a rung in the intellectual ladder leading to restored humanity. Levi desperately attempts to forge an intellectual and cultural bond with his friend, pleading "here, listen Pikolo, open your ears and your mind,

you have to understand, for my sake" (Levi, 103). Levi's desire to make Jean to understand suggests the legacy of the intellect. Levi the prisoner has no family, no children, and no certainty. His life might end that very day, but if he can make Jean understand the depth and beauty of the Canto, then he will have left an intellectual imprint on another human being. The parallel between his conversation with Jean and his message to readers could not be more obvious. Levi survived Auschwitz, but he must still perpetuate his once-denied humanity in the literary arena.

The canto's text itself provides a general affirmation of humanity, compelling readers to "think of your breed; for brutish ignorance Your mettle was not made; you were made men, To follow after knowledge and excellence" (Levi, 103). The actual transmission of it, however, from one man and one language to another man and a different language, affirms Levi and Jean's individual humanity. Levi continues, " it is vitally necessary and urgent that he listen, that he understand this […] before it is too late; tomorrow he or I might be dead, or we might never see each other again, I must tell him, I must explain to him" (Levi, 104). The struggle to communicate mirrors and validates the struggle for survival in the camp, a gap in memory becomes as great a threat as physical starvation, and Levi would "give today's soup to know how to connect […] the last lines" (Levi, 104). As Druker mentions, the transmission of the language and ideas in the canto gives meaning to Levi and becomes, therefore, a personal rebellion against the camp, whose purpose is to invalidate and end his human existence. Maintaining and sharing the meaning and culture inherent in the passage also serves as form of reconnection to the western world from which Levi and the others are severed. In *If This is A Man* Levi approaches "the 'Final Solution' as a barbaric counterattack on

Enlightenment values and human rights" (Druker, 145), and here, in one moment, Levi defends those values and rights by reclaiming language, literature, and rational thought and turning them into a "bulwark against Auschwitz" (Druker, 144). The man who rejects "the most obvious and facile deduction: that man is fundamentally brutal, egoistic and stupid in his conduct once every civilized institution is taken away [and believes], rather, that the only conclusion to be drawn is that in the face of driving necessity and physical disabilities many social habits and instincts are reduced to silence" (Levi, 87) breaks the enforced silence and asserts his rather than the Nazis' definition of his humanity. With Levi's communication of the canto Buna ceases to be the meaningless and dehumanizing playground of the Nazis and takes on instead a symbolic value in a journey of identification in which Levi is somewhat like Ulysses himself. As Druker argues, "having challenged God and smashed the limits meant to confine humanity, Ulysses's death affirms that his was a self-determined life" (147). Having identified with Ulysses, Levi in turn smashes the limits placed upon him by the Nazis. Levi's translation in effect answers the Nazis who call him and all the other prisoners "pieces," take their possessions, and replace their names with numbers. Levi thus attaches his suffering in the camp to the Western literary tradition in which Dante's is a fundamental voice. In doing so, Levi "restore[s] to [the prisoners and the dead] their personhood by making Auschwitz part of the human condition, and in this way to connect the inside witness with the outside witness" (Portnoff , 81). The act of trying to communicate a poem becomes the ultimate symbol of Levi's struggle in *If This is A Man*, that of defending and restoring his humanity and individuality through interpersonal communication.

While, as previously mentioned, *If This is A Man* also appears under the title *Survival in Auschwitz*, it is the original title that provides the cornerstone for Levi's memoir, mirroring the structure and content of the text. "If" establishes the title as conditional, and it is no stretch to recognize that the manipulated reality of the camp is in itself conditional, dependent on the methodical system implemented by the Nazis. Levi's experience is one engineered by the those capable of severing thousands of people from their social structures, implementing systematic dehumanization tactics, and denying the humanity of their victims by inflicting meaningless suffering upon them. The actual events Levi records communicate these tactics to readers, while his detached style and utilization of practically disconnected vignette-like chapters recreate the memory and disjointed experience of the event. Levi provides a window to the world of resistance, both the general communal system of resistance to be found in the operation of the black market and in his own personal intellectual resistance, executed through his attempt to recall and translate the Canto of Ulysses to Jean. The existence of *If This is A Man*, also serves as a form of resistance. In the same way that Levi records the experiences of his fellow prisoners, often speaking for all of them collectively, and undoes their isolation by making them "a part of a common experience'" (Frunza, 49), his memoir brings that experience to present generations, his poetic style demanding, rather than providing, a reaction. Because Levi omits his emotional reaction from the text, his memoir retains its power as a means of creating a common ground so that those readers who have not experienced the devastation of the Holocaust can muster some kind of reaction of their own. *If This is A Man*, in its documentation of the Nazis' methods of dehumanization and their prisoners' attempts to preserve their humanity, remains as open-ended as the

sentence unfinished in the title. Levi's stylistic restraint and the episodes he recreates ask readers to finish that sentence, and thus secure his once-threatened humanity by connecting it to that of every person who engages with his memoir.

Chapter Three

Charlotte Delbo: Resistance through Community and Text

The context of community acts as a framework for the development of individuality. Social interactions provide experiences with others' personalities which serve as the contrast by which we can better define ourselves. What happens to self-definition, though, when interaction with others becomes part of an unnatural and inhumane experience such as the Holocaust? What happens when the natural structure of community is forcibly removed? How does a woman piece herself back together after the social framework that once shaped and affirmed her understanding of herself is destroyed? Charlotte Delbo, communist, poet, dramatist, and survivor does not promise to answer these questions in her three-part memoir *Auschwitz and After*, but through the text she dramatizes her struggle to retain her humanity, despite the surreal concentration camp universe and Nazism's violent attempts to deprive her, as well her French political prisoner comrades, of their humanity. While she refrains from offering concrete answers, Delbo drops readers into a borderless narrative space, that is, a text reliant on structural elements of poetry, memoir, and dialogue. Delbo often breaks narrative to address readers, and shies away from confining her experience with temporal limitations or any chronological foundation or order, thus creating a "space" or dialogue with the reader in which author and audience are immersed in the past and the present at once, and engaged in a dual literary and theatrical presentation at the same time. This mixed form of narrative simultaneously dramatizes the short- and long-term isolation resultant from Delbo's imprisonment at Auschwitz and reinforces the incomprehensibility of such an experience. Her memoir serves as both a vivid repetition of her experience and an effort

to break the walls of isolation by communicating not every grim detail of the entire experience but the lasting memories and impact.

Throughout the text, Delbo juxtaposes the factors of camp life that dehumanize and isolate her with the ways in which she and other prisoners form a culture and community to resist dehumanization and isolation. The surreal narrative space in which Delbo presents her account serves her well. It recreates the isolation and confusion of her experience and provides a background of nameless chaos, the force of which she and her friends resist by creating and maintaining their own order and culture as a group.

Delbo appropriately begins her story with a poem, "Arrivals, Departures," whose setting recalls the train station from which she and many others were deported to Auschwitz and marks the end of the prisoners being regarded as fully human. In "Arrivals, Departures," Delbo brings readers to "a sort of nowhere"(Yaeger, 3) from which all familiar signifiers such as signs pointing in the directions of various cities have been stripped. It is "a station where those who arrive are those who are leaving, a station where those who arrive have never arrived, where those who have left never come back" (Delbo, 19). Like the limbo between death and eternity, the station is a point of departure, not a destination, despite the fact that people arrive there daily. The space that is "not a station [but] is the end of the track" (Delbo, 20) represents the essence of displacement, death. The group of gathered travelers encompasses every demographic from "paunchy and bald fat bankers who played keep the bank" (Delbo, 20) and "married couples who stepped out of the synagogue the bride all in white" (Delbo, 21) to rabbis, mothers with their children, and "intellectuals: doctors or architects, composers or poets" (Delbo, 21). Delbo lists the countries they represent without pause: "France the Ukraine Albania

Belgium Slovakia Italy Hungary Peloponnesus Holland Macedonia…" (Delbo, 21). This listing alludes to both the mass fate of the prisoners from the far corners of Europe and the inevitable mingling of each of these unique nations under the dehumanizing blanket of Nazi rule.

In some aspects, the train station represents the rest of the memoir. It is a narrative space which really only the narrator herself can navigate. The people she writes about (always "they" and never "we") represent mostly Jews, and Delbo is not Jewish, nor has she been immediately written off for extermination as they have. In a place where people will be separated from their possessions, families, and their humanity, Delbo the narrator stands in retrospective isolation. As Trezise writes in his analysis of Delbo's works, she "appears to articulate the tension between an identification that would universalize the experience of the Jews (and, in principle, of Nazism's other victims) and an estrangement underscoring the unassimilable singularity of that experience" (Trezise, 882). As much as Delbo strives to convey the experience, she remains isolated as a narrator by what Trezise calls the "singularity" of her experience.

Similarly, in an instance when the people at the station become confused, only the narrator and reader know what awaits them: “the guards shout to line up…the … blows make them understand” (Delbo 20). A mother, unaware of the impending events, "hits her child, and we who know cannot forgive her for it" (Delbo, 20). Delbo severs herself from the condemned and aligns herself with those "who know" the fate of those waiting at the station. In his analysis of the role of community in Delbo's work, Thomas Trezise observes, "focusing attention on the enforced ignorance of the deportees is only one of the ways in which Delbo emphasizes their depersonalization, as well as their radical

estrangement from those compelled to witness it" (Trezise, 877-78). Even Delbo's use of third-person pronouns conveys her isolation, both in the first experience of the train station and in the act of communicating it. Trezise argues that by refraining from describing herself, in the first person, as a victim "Delbo opens a 'space' of symbolic substitution that may be occupied, implicitly, by *any* first person" (Trezise, 883). Yet, while the first person space (the authoritative "I" or "we") remains unoccupied, it is not because readers are not invited to occupy it, but because those who rightfully did now no longer exist. They have been horrifically reduced to the "human bone meal which [others] sow upon furrows" (Delbo, 24). Upon arrival to the station, they are forced to "leave their bundles, comforters, and memories on the platform" (Delbo, 20) along with their lives. Delbo's description of the gathered "produces at once [their] literally naked uniformity and a complete isolation from other communities, from one another, and from themselves" (Trezise, 880). At the same time, the description isolates her as one who has witnessed, from the reader, one who has not.

The physical transformation from human to nothing, which begins in the station and lasts throughout the text, illustrates the powerful dehumanizing forces against which Delbo and her fellow prisoners struggle. The human body, deprived of possessions and clothing, becomes the first and greatest victim of the Nazis' attack on humanity. *Auschwitz and After* teems with accounts of the degraded bodies of the dead and the anguishing bodies of the living. In the following passage, Delbo illustrates the collective suffering of her fellow prisoners, in this case the sick and dying crammed into a truck en route to the crematorium:

> They [the dying] shout in our direction without a sound reaching us. Their mouths shout, their arms stretched out toward us shout, everything about them

> is shouting. Every body is a shout. All of them torches flaming with cries of terror, cries that have assumed female bodies. Each one is a materialized cry, a howl- unheard…
>
> We watch with eyes that cry out, eyes full of disbelief.
>
> Each face is inscribed with such precision over the icy light, the blue of the sky, that it remains marked there for eternity.
>
> For eternity, these shaven heads, squeezed against one another, bursting with shouts, mouths twisted by cries we do not hear, hands waving in a mute cry. The cries remain inscribed upon the blue of the sky (Delbo, 36-37).

To Delbo, the dying prisoners stop being singular people and become a collective expression of human suffering. In her mind they lose their individual human value and turn into materialized cries, "cries that have assumed female bodies" (Delbo, 36), a mass of compressed, hairless heads, screaming mouths, and reaching hands. The intensity and inhumanity of their collective suffering is such an offense against humanity that each helpless face "remains marked [on the sky] for eternity"(Delbo, 37). This description implies that the memory of those victims hovers perpetually in the narrator's memory.

Rose Kamel reasons that in her description of the dying, Delbo "articulates the gap […] between meaningless death in *l'univers concentrationnaire* and the ordinary death that ends the course of life in a human environment" (Kamel, 78). The death she encounters in the camp is death without dignity. It is the death not only of human bodies, but of the human connections that enable people to retain their subjectivity. It is a physical death for the victims, but for Delbo those victims are no longer people but one collective and unbelievable shout of pain, perhaps an articulation of the suffering she cannot find words to express at the time. Kamel's argument that Delbo fuses her identity to the identity of the dying supports this idea. Kamel argues that Delbo's "use

of synesthesia, where witness and victim are one- female bodies that cry voicelessly, heads bursting with shouts[,] imprints on the reader's consciousness the lack, then, of an ordinary human environment in a world inhabited only by dummies and truncated women" (Kamel, 70). In one instance, Delbo and her comrades witness the death of a woman whom the SS dogs have attacked. Delbo recalls how "the woman lets out a scream. A wrenched-out scream. We do not know if the scream has been uttered by her or by us, whether is issued from her punctured throat, or from ours. I feel the dog's fangs in my throat. I scream. I howl. Not a sound comes out of me" (Delbo 29). While the woman's suffering scream apparently articulates the suffering of the entire group, it also causes them to suffer along with her. They are unsure whether or not the scream comes from her punctured throat or theirs. The blurring of identities here implies that that they share the same injury. The screams of the victim and the witnesses are indistinguishable from one another. The inseparability of one voice from the group voice and Kamel's idea of synethesia illustrate the surreal melding of victims and witnesses in an environment where Delbo is both a witness to and a victim of a dehumanizing physical reality.

Delbo records countless instances in which she becomes estranged from corporeal reality, instances provoked by the circumstances imposed upon prisoners, such as the morning roll call, which could last for hours and involved prisoners standing unsupported and exposed to the elements. During one roll call Delbo recalls feeling as though her mind and body had been separated: "I regain possession of myself, and of my body, as though slipping back into cold and wet clothes. My pulse is returning and beating, my lips seared by the cold are torn at the mouth's corners. I regain possession of the anguish

that permanently fills me, and of the hope to which I did such violence …"(Delbo, 65). With pain, her body becomes a foreign entity, like clothing. The "possession of anguish" fills her consciousness, overpowering any intellectual thought. Delbo provides many instances of this "possession of anguish" throughout the text. She experiences a thirst so strong that her "parched lips were splitting, [her] gums swollen, [her] tongue piece of wood … without being blind, [she] saw nothing. All [her] senses had been abolished by thirst" (Delbo, 142). While elsewhere in the world, "there are people who say, 'I'm thirsty.' They step into a café and order a beer" (Delbo, 146). Alone and afloat in a personal sea of sensory torment, Delbo's narrator feels her "lips move but no sound comes out. Anguish fills [her] whole being, an anguish as gripping as that of dreams. Is this what it means to be dead? Lips try to speak but the mouth is paralyzed. A mouth cannot form words when it is dry, with no saliva" (Delbo, 169). Her body becomes a strange and painful place, a very personal corporeal manifestation of the larger symbol of the train station. Delbo arrives at the train station in possession of her body, but the suffering inflicted upon it from the moment of departure renders her powerless and marks her, like Cain, with the physical imprint of exile from humanity. Literally, "all were marked on their arm with an indelible number… the tattoos identified the dead…" (Delbo,13). In this case, however, it is not the departure of her life but of the parts of her humanity that left with each instance of suffering.

Within the context of the described physical experience, what Trezise calls the singularity of the witness experience manifests itself. No one but the narrator can wholly understand or share in her experience because it has been encoded in her body alone. As Yaeger observes in her analysis of reader and author intimacy in Delbo's work, Delbo's

"figures of testimony enact specific rhetorical or bodily effects that push us away even as they pull us toward intimacy" (Yaeger, 403). By having her narrator remember and relive the physical suffering of the Holocaust Delbo accomplishes three different effects. She illustrates in vivid and inescapable detail the depth of human torment, shows the isolation invoked by its occurrence in chronological time, and cements the lasting isolation inherent in a physical memory that one cannot adequately communicate to anyone who lacks the kinetic or physical experience.

Scheiber argues that Delbo attempts to "relate her experience, not to hide the reality of the camps through images or enhance it through dramatization, but in order to touch the reader by appealing to his or her senses so that he or she becomes a part of the vision presented, participates in it, is engulfed by it and does not remain an outsider" (Scheiber, 4). Even so, the reality of her experience can never be inclusive. The reader cannot voluntarily stop being an outsider anymore than the narrator herself can voluntarily eliminate the physical pain of cold or thirst.

To resist the isolating pressure of the extremities of physical torment, however, Delbo envelopes herself in her comrades. After the freezing cold agony of the roll call makes her feel inhuman, she "takes [her] place once more in the poor communal warmth created by our [her and the other prisoners'] contact" (Delbo, 65). This passage from individual suffering into a mutual struggle for survival represents "a turning point in which the narrator's fragmented self binds [itself] to the bodies of the other women, who in their collective solidarity offer the only means of survival" (Kamel, 68). Within the context of the community of the other prisoners with whom she lives and attempts to survive, Delbo's narrator can resist the external forces, such as cold, hunger, and pain that

would reduce her to an animal-like status. Delbo belongs to the population of French-speaking prisoners in Block 25. Using their language, an irrevocable tie to their humanity, to develop unity, these female prisoners become a community. Kamel observes that "unlike the deliberate fragmentation the Nazis imposed upon the Jewish prisoners- brought from many countries, without a common language, and therefore without an important prerequisite for solidarity- a common (albeit frayed) language made it possible for the French political prisoners to help each other in all sorts of ways" (Kamel, 68). The members of the insular group provide emotional comfort, a necessary element of survival, to one another. After a selection, when several members of the group know they are going to die the next day, "one of us stepped to the center of the dormitory and said in a loud voice, addressing all of us, 'Friends, we still have some time before lights out. We should read some poems.' The younger ones set up benches. Everyone takes a seat. It's like the first speak to the others of eating and drinking" (Delbo, 121). Because they all speak French they are inherently drawn together, even when facing death.

The women's shared language also enables them to recreate aspects of the culture from which they have been erased. They can comfort each other with poems, or, as Delbo adds, go so far as to perform a play. Delbo calls their recreation of a Molière play "magnificent, because for two hours, during which the chimneys never stopped emitting the smoke of human flesh, for two hours we believed in all of this. We believed it more that we believed in […] freedom" (Delbo, 212). The play, like the earlier recitation of the poems, enables the women to envision their culture and to once again become a part of it, despite the ever-present reality of death and suffering in the camp. Scheiber reasons that "building a community through literature is an integral part of Delbo's poetic" (Scheiber,

5). This statement refers to both the community created by salvaging and sharing the poetry, plays, and stories of their remembered culture, and the community created between Delbo and the reader by Delbo's own repetition of the prisoners' shared history. The performance of the play and recreation of an element of their culture also represents a "resurrection of literature from what was now a hopelessly remote past, [and] continues to expand the narrator's self-perception as an organic part of her comrades' French identities" (Kamel, 68). The more her group of friends comes to represent the missing French culture with which she identifies, the more Delbo herself begins to fuse her singular sense of self with the collective community sense of self. In French, this might be expressed as a transition from "je" to "nous" in writing about oneself. The most notable effect of this fusion is the section of her memoir dedicated to projected interviews with fellow survivors. As Scheiber writes, "speaking for the group was so important to Delbo that her writing stretched beyond her own experience… [she] captured the different voices of women from her convoy and told their stories from the first person in […] a work that is best described as a collective autobiography, amassing facts and details about the 230 women who made up her convoy to Auschwitz" (Scheiber, 5). Perhaps the most perceptive phrase in Scheiber's treatment of Delbo's work is the term "collective autobiography," indicative of a synthesis of selves so complete that one individual's story stands for those of the entire group.

Granted, Charlotte Delbo never stops being Charlotte Delbo, but the remaining parts of her identity visibly graft themselves to her small community during her imprisonment. During their imprisonment together, the women form a close identity-preserving community. It is precisely that temporal constraint that leads to Delbo's

isolation after the Holocaust. After Auschwitz, however, the context for that community falls away as Delbo and her comrades reenter a society, which, like her audience, can intellectually appreciate but never mutually understand the experience they survived. After Auschwitz, separated from one another, the women lose their communal self-appreciation and must "succumb in greater or lesser degree to the blandishments of a patriarchal postwar society that encourages them- understandably- to resist encounters with their deeper memories" (Kamel, 74). In short, in order to avoid the painful memories of Auschwitz, they must forget who they were during their time there. They lose not only the self-concepts they held before Auschwitz, but must recreate themselves yet again, ignoring the communal self that enabled their survival. Mado, a member of Delbo's Auschwitz community, complains, "those who love us wish us to forget. They don't understand it's impossible and that, moreover, to forget would be atrocious… Our loyalty to the comrades we left back there is all we have… Time will not pass. At any moment, carried by a smell, a day from over there returns" (Delbo, 266). Kamel observes that "the women were forever frozen in the time-space continuum of Auschwitz" (Kamel, 65), and Mado's statement that time stops moving emphasizes this notion that, like Billy Pilgrim, Delbo and her comrades' identities have come unstuck in time and they are once again isolated. They cannot identify with their families as before. They are told to forget about the women with whom they could identify in the camp, and what is left?

For Delbo, a writer with a background in the theater, the only logical form her that her last battle against the isolating dehumanization of the Holocaust takes the form of can take is that of an attempt to identify with an audience, her readers. It would, however, be a disservice to Delbo to blindly assume that *Auschwitz and After* is a survivor's effort

to create a literary community around her Holocaust experience. Delbo's memoir is not an attempt to forge a lasting community with readers, in which her personal value anc characteristics will not be compromised. Rather, it is her greatest example of the lasting isolation imposed upon her by her time in Auschwitz. Some critics, like Yaeger, argue that Delbo intentionally alienates readers, while others such as Scheiber, contend that she strives futilely to create a literary environment in which they can share in her experience and identify with her. Yaeger positions Delbo as a hostile guide through Auschwitz. Delbo "provokes our attempts as readers to enter the grid of this camp, to understand its reference points, to greet her words as a tabula that will allow things to be juxtaposed so we can assemble a story, create an order, even imagine similarities […] between our world and that one" (Yaeger, 411). Indeed, Delbo the poetic lines "you cannot understand/ you who never listened/ to the heartbeat/ of one about to die (Delbo, 127), directed specifically at readers, create a barrier between narrator and audience. This distance is, however, not the creation of a hostile narrator who meets "any attempt to walk in proximity, to approach testimony with compassion, with nearness, [with displacement] by an enforced distance, by the introduction of another conceptual domain that does not permit the easy return to narrative" (Yaeger, 413). Instead, it is a literary technique with which Delbo does not even attempt to convey "the heartbeat of one about to die" but rather shares with us the isolation created by that experience. While Delbo's "figures of testimony enact specific rhetorical or bodily effects that push us away even as they pull us toward intimacy" (Yaeger, 403) the overall effect of that narrative is to clarify the unbreakable permanence of Delbo's isolation.

Yaeger's argument that Delbo's narrative contains mainly elements of literary exclusion can be combined with Scheiber's purely inclusive interpretation of the text. Scheiber argues that Delbo uses figurative language (such as the dying transforming into living screams) as "a way of building community with the reader" (Scheiber, 8). Further, she argues that Delbo's description of a dying woman's hand morphing into a mauve star is an attempt "to reach across the chasm of incomprehension to communicate to a group that did not directly experience the event and in doing so establish a community between writers and readers" (Scheiber, 2). While the techniques Delbo uses to illustrate her experience ground the reader in concrete images and provocative sensory descriptions, they also serve as constant reminders of the fact that the only way readers can relate to and begin to appreciate Delbo's experience is through the framework of language. While her experience is a physical one that left its scars on her body and her self-awareness, the experience that we witness is once-removed. We can only begin to comprehend it through literature. No communal bond can develop fully between narrator and those who "cannot understand." Delbo's abrupt writing style and interruptions only remind readers of the fact that she is as effectively isolated as those who did not return from Auschwitz.

Ultimately, *Auschwitz and After* reveals the surreal corporeal horror of Auschwitz, the anti-thesis of humanity. At the same time, Delbo portrays the community through which she was able to retain cultural ties and preserve facets of her self-concept. The tragic aspect of *Auschwitz and After,* however, is not so much the loss of lives or the shocking cruelty to which Delbo was both victim and witness. Rather, it is the isolation she and the other survivors experience in the years that follow Auschwitz, when the community through which they survived has no context and the community to which they

have been returned has no place for the people they have become. Like the narrator in Wiesel's *Day*, Delbo conveys the lack of common ground between herself and those who did not share in the experience. She creates a narrative space in which the reader seems both guest and intruder; one who must try to understand her experience, despite the impossibility of the task. Delbo's text, rather than casting the reader's eyes back, points them forward and into the lonely future for survivors, a path we can see and appreciate, but not follow.

Conclusion

I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.

In her key feminist poem "Diving into the Wreck," lesbian Jewish American poet Adrienne Rich turns the act of exploring an undersea shipwreck into a reclamation of self through the necessary examination, confrontation, and demystification of past destruction. In her poem, the act of memorialization becomes a recovery of the damaged past self. The speaker-explorer takes on the attributes of the lost lives she uncovers, saying, "I am she: I am he/ whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes..." (ll. 77-78). Like Wiesel, Levi, and Delbo writing about their personal experiences of an event of global proportions, Rich exudes an awareness of the necessity of looking into the darkness of a mythically represented past and the significance of shedding light on "the wreck and not the story of the wreck/ the thing itself and not the myth" (ll. 62-63). Similarly, each of the three writers examined in this thesis simultaneously creates a monument to the memory of a lost aspect of the self and, in doing so, perpetuates the recovery and reclamation of personhood. Through their unflinching memoirs, Wiesel, Levi, and Delbo confront the Holocaust experience and its relevance to the present and the future. In the confrontation and exploration of the damage done to his or her sense of self, each author leaves a literary marker of defiance. Each of these authors' necessary exploration of the destroyed aspects of identity, of the "damage that was done," reinforces the lasting aspects of their subjectivity.

Wiesel's documentation of his struggle with his religious identity in the face of God's passivity and silence and religion's institutional failure does not leave readers with the image of a faithless man, but of a man whose religious understanding has been monumentally altered but not destroyed. Both *Night* and *Day* unfold labyrinths of theodicy, the seeming silence of God in the face of human suffering, and religion's ultimate impotence as a communal force in the social reintegration of victims. Through his two narrators' similar struggles with the beliefs in the light of the meaningless suffering and death each witnessed in the Holocaust, Wiesel offers us the picture of a religious identity that has not been shattered in the concentration camp but rather irrevocably altered. His understanding of God, and thus of the role of religion in his life and the core of his identity, develop in what critics call an anti-bildungsroman style throughout *Night*, following a pattern of defeat and silence rather than maturation and expansion. *Day* provides an indirect epilogue to *Night*'s religious journey, tracing the ways destroyed belief inhibit the survivor, preventing him from developing a distinct new religious identity and preventing society from understanding him in anything but the no longer applicable pre-Holocaust religious terms. Despite the bleak outlook for his narrators, Wiesel himself takes a revolutionary step by breaking the silence that so profoundly affected his faith. Instead of abandoning the idea of God or religion, Wiesel protests. He documents the grave changes in his faith, perhaps to show that such a faith persists despite every strike against it.

Levi, unconcerned with religion, writes in a poetic style that exemplifies his cultural and intellectual awareness. As he retells his own story he secures the perpetuation of his intellectual role in the world by recreating his experience in the minds

of those who engage with the text. *If This is A Man,* invites the reader in with concise, often emotionless narrative. Levi writes in an attempt to share his Holocaust experience, both as a story and as literary experience that forces the reader into some of the same psychological spaces through which Levi himself passed. As Levi the narrator shares a portion of Dante with another prisoner, Levi the author shares a portion of his experience with us, the readers, and so creates a cyclic passage of humanity from which Levi's role and significance cannot be removed. The Nazis sought to destroy Primo Levi, but Levi, by writing his memoir, turned their dehumanizing processes upside down, showing himself to be more human, more cultured, and more of an intellectual presence than those who tried to destroy him.

Delbo, similarly, creates a text that is all at once a memoir and a piece of art. I use the term "art" here to indicate a level of textual interaction with creator and audience that simply surpasses active reading. *Auschwitz and After* is a memoir, but the act of reading *Auschwitz and After*, regardless of what one gleans from the content, is in itself an unparalleled experience between reader and author. Ultimately, the text reveals the surreal corporeal horror of Auschwitz, the anti-thesis of humanity as well as the group of women through which Delbo was able to retain her cultural ties as a Frenchwoman and a communist. The most powerful aspect *of Auschwitz and After,* however, must be the isolation Delbo and the other survivors experience in the years that follow Auschwitz, when the community that supported them through loses its context and the community to which they have been returned has no place for the people they have become. Delbo hammers this sense of isolation into readers with a narrative style that is as much a psychological performance piece as a memoir. She creates an experience for the attentive

reader, conveying the lack of common ground between herself and those who did not share in the Holocaust experience. Using language that addresses the reader as both guest and intruder, Delbo forces readers to try to understand her experience, despite the impossibility of the task, demonstrating the possibility and cost of the survival of a sense of self.

In fact, the persistence of various facets of the state of personhood in the face of trauma is the possibility that each author in his or her own style and time attempts to convey. While each author experiences a profound and often devastating change in self-awareness and understanding, and the endings are not always happy endings (with Delbo writing her isolation even more into existence and Levi committing suicide), these texts illustrate the adaptability of human character. The Holocaust forced changes into each author's understanding of his or her own self, and often those changes were deeply disturbing or isolating. In response to the intrusion, however, each author produced one or more work which, to this day, resists the attempted destruction of his or her status as a human being. To borrow an idea from Rich's poem, these texts are maps with purposes. They memorialize the authors' personal struggles, guiding readers through the concrete experience of the Holocaust. These authors reach beyond the limits of cultural history, break God's silence, create literary order to defy imposed chaos, and attempt to create new communities to replace those destroyed. In doing so they not only reclaim their own personhood and memorialize that which they have lost, but also give us texts that resist the gross indecency of the Holocaust, the denial of a human being's personhood. This resistance not only secures Wiesel, Levi, and Delbo's permanent places in the canon of

Holocaust literature, but enables those who did not experience the height of human trauma to understand the inherent resistance of human characteristics.

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