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Language within the Battle between History and Memory in David Albahari's *Götz and Meyer*

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The dilemma of transmitting traumatic experiences has haunted the intellectual world for most of the twentieth century. It has taken on an even greater importance after the events of World War II, especially the systematic extermination of peoples achieved in Nazi concentration camps. By the 1990's many have come to realize that both the personal first-hand accounts of holocaust survivors and the attempts of historians and anthropologists to describe the logistic details of procedures or their impact on collective memory will always contain a lacuna. Giorgio Agamben explores the lacuna present in testimony of survivors—the inevitable paradox of the living being unable to actually tell about the act dying. He approaches the problem from a number of metaphysical perspectives, observing idiosyncrasies of personal and collective memory, going beyond the obvious fact that the survivors cannot tell about the experience of those who suffocated in the gas chambers.¹ Although most professional historians rarely question the ability of facts, obtained in prescribed manner, to narrate the past, a similar lacuna has been recognized by writers in other fields, such as anthropologists, psychologists, and literary theorists, even in these narratives. David Albahari presents his narrator with this same problem in *Götz and Meyer*. He exaggerates the existence of this lacuna by starting the narrator with no initial knowledge of the past he is trying to recreate. As the language and literature teacher pieces together the fate of his family that perished at the hands of the Nazis in Belgrade, he uses concrete historical facts coming from archival documents, the few personal accounts of survivors, and his own imagination. The first and the last—history and imagination—work together to take over the narrator's being with the memory of the past.

The archival and research information fuels his imagination, which, in turn, acts as a tool for him to instill the memory of what happened to the Jews

¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The witness and the Archive*, transl. Danile Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 21–49.

of Belgrade in the young students. Although this may seem as a successful synthesis, the reality of the confusion and lack of knowledge that the narrator is left with by this experience is clearly revealed in the very last pages of the novel. By leading the narrator to the realization of impossibility of re-telling the whole truth of his relatives' fate, Albahari sets up a conflict between the history and memory—the factual history and the imagined memory. Although the narrator begins with the aim of establishing the former, he ends by choosing the latter, realizing that historical knowledge gives him no real understanding. Memory and remembering—although the two terms do not have an implicit relation in this novel—offer the key to breaking the repetition of the meaninglessness of history. Yet, the narrator's eventual failure to find the face of the terror, or the true souls of Götz and Meyer, reveals the unavoidable problem of retelling or reliving this kind of trauma through language. It is important to remember that I am not using either of these two terms in their common understanding. Memory, as I already mention and will expand on later, signifies for the narrator the imaginary recreation of the events and people, whereas history is seen as almost an animate force perpetuating those events.

The Force of History

From the very beginning the narrator blends historical knowledge and personal experiences, uniting, but confusing the two. The search for his family members that have vanished is initiated by his own feeling of loneliness, but ends up being a quest to prevent further meaningless deaths, which would inevitably occur in history. He knows nothing of his family's past besides their names. Unable to rely on living relatives, he turns to the archives and history for help, but is suspicious of its ability from the very being. He recognizes that it is not personal, and "has no time for feelings, even less for trauma and pain, and least of all for dull helplessness, for the inability to grasp what is happening."² In this one sentence, Albahari sets up the main conflict in the rest of the novel. First of all, he is personifying history, making it able to care on not care. He says it does not have time for feelings, not that it is devoid of them. The quest of the narrator in the first half of the novel is to make history personal. This may actually be the root of his eventual "dull helplessness." Although in this particular sentence he is speaking of the emotions of the Jewish victims, he is also describing his own state, in the beginning of his search and at its end. He accuses history of not being able to advance beyond

² David Albahari, *Götz and Meyer* (London: The Harvill Press, 2004), 35; all other references to Albahari's novel will be given in parentheses in the text.

the factual characterization of each event. The fact is, though, he has to rely on history because he cannot rely on anything else beside his compassion. Because in fact he has no memory, and so it seems that memory becomes the counter-part and the antithesis of history.

In order to grasp the multitudes of technical details, which he is unable to do through the scientific process, the narrator realizes the necessity to become part of the past, taking on the identities of this historical narration, to fully comprehend their experiences (58–59). Although he is looking to recreate his family, he immerses himself completely in the persons of Götz and Meyer. At one point he explains that “to truly understand real people like [his] relatives, [he] had first to understand unreal people like Götz and Meyer” (65). He is literally taking the reality of his relatives for granted, while questioning whether humans such as the energetic SS officers could exist. As a result, we find out many more details about these two individual than any single one of the “real” member of the narrator’s family. In fact, out of all of the characters that he “becomes” within the course of the narration, Götz and Meyer are the two whom he becomes to embody the most. We notice this through Albahari’s use of suppositions and similes when the narrator measures up the standards of life for the inmates at Fairgrounds camp, and the direct narration of the teacher with the executioners and even as them.

Through the narrator’s blending with the identities of the Nazi officers, we discover his ultimate conflict with the suffocating logic and precision of historical facts. As hard as he tries, he can never grasp the humanity and the reasoning behind the beings and actions of the two opposing protagonists. He imagines their family lives, hobbies, conversations, pastimes, and even convinces himself that they were indeed human (67). This exact fact of their humanity and ordinariness (91) is what makes it hardest to comprehend how they were able to do what they did. The facts of history, which recorded their jobs, not their personal lives, conflict directly with the narrator’s concept of life and people, bringing him to a conclusion of conflict. To him,

Götz and Meyer are logical precisely because they defy all other logic... I resemble to myself that old rabbi of Prague who built a manlike creature of clay and breathed life into it, with the difference that I am trying to construct Götz and Meyer out of airy memories, unreliable recollection, and crumbling archival documents. (72)

In a string of associations that are so essential to the narration of this novel, Albahari shows the connection between the force of history, logic and the SS officers, who are all suffocating the narrator. He cannot comprehend

Götz and Meyer, but he can comprehend their incomprehensible nature. The logic behind their actions is out the realms of comprehension, and so creates its own justification—it is a means to itself (90). The only way he knows, being in his way a logical human being, how to comprehend this alternate world is by seeing through the eyes of its members, but by doing that he is aware that he will release the monster of history and forebode that he will not be able to control it as well as rabbi Loew was able to restrain the Prague Golem. The two men begin to personify the force of history, posing yet another obstacle in the narrator's quest to personalize. The search for his relatives gains another goal—to stop history from repeating itself.

As history becomes increasingly antagonized, the narrator's present becomes its antithesis. At the end of a page-long attempt to mathematically and "logically" explain why Gotz and Meyer's assignment in Serbia was the most efficient solution for the "fate of the Jews in Belgrade," the narrator admits, in response to the comparison of methodology of the truck and mass executions, that

one rarely comes across such crystal-clear and iron-firm logic. Had I been able to apply similar logic to my life, it probably wouldn't have looked like a messy train schedule gone awry, which was the nearest image of its, or rather my, condition. This was best seen in my attempt to bring order to myself by introducing order to my family tree, and it all ended in nothing by even greater trouble. (84)

The last two sentences bring to opposition the notions of logic—which here belongs to the rationale of the Nazis—and reality, or life. Order is linked to logic here, representing the kind of effect a historical analysis, filled with mathematical calculations, is supposed to have on his research. Yet, the narrator makes it clear that neither his present life, nor his ability to understand the past—the lives of the "real" people in it—is improved by order. It is only diminished. This re-states over and over again his early realization of "the absurdity of every representation of life, and any representation of reality [not being] the same as reality itself" (44). During the ultimate test of this theory, and at the peak of his own mental deterioration, the narrator reminds his students and himself that living life is not the same as an "artwork in which you have a choice" (131). Real life lacks choice and thus will never be the same as looking at life with the hindsight of a historian. One can never explain the present of that life as it becomes the past through the lens of the present, for in real life there is no choice and "there is nothing else except what is going on, whether you like it or not" (131). The narrator realizes himself that history,

pure facts, logic and orderly analysis will not get him closer to the truth about lives in the past, because they will always fall short of explaining their reality and humanity, which does not follow logic.

Imagination and the Problem of Personalizing History

Up until the field trip with his class, the narrator recognizes the difference between the circumstance that he imagines and documentation. In the first half of the novel, he reminds the reader that his description of the emotions of the victims, or the small details about the lives of their executioners have never been written down. But he always begins by stating the facts that he does know. Hence he is drawing a picture of his own design from the basic outline of the archival records, filling in some unknown parts—such as the SS officers' dogs and families, and the way the Jewish children would eat chocolates—and creating some completely speculative stories, such as the conversations Gotz and Meyer would have with him, for example. The further he advances towards embodying the past, the more he had to imagine in order to regenerate the memory of a past he could not remember.

The creation of Adam emerges as the narrator's attempt to escape the process of losing himself in history, as well as that of his relatives being lost in history to him. This is the one piece of the narrator's imagination, the only branch on his family tree, which is completely fabricated. And yet, he is the one member of his destroyed family, whom he can identify with person. This is not the same identification as happens with him and the two SS men, though. He is the idealized vision of the past, the solution to history. The narrator infuses Adam with super-realistic knowledge to make him the keeper of memory, the ultimate witness. He observes all with the hindsight of a future observe while experience the trauma of the events first hand—a depth of understanding and 'real' knowledge that is not afforded either to those who live through trauma or those who remember it after separation of time. And when asked why "someone has to see it all and remember every humiliation, every escape into madness and flight from dreams, every bit of frostbite or bruise from being struck by the butt of a gun or kicked by a boot," the narrator reveals his fundamental conviction, that it is because "Memory ... is the only way to conquer death" (137). Adam embodies this principle by literally escaping the death that was meant for him and that swallowed up all of the "real" relatives of the narrator; thus also he is able to escape history.

The dream about the gas truck, which the narrator provides him with, allows him to have a choice, making him the only character able to break the narrator's earlier conviction that life gives none. The complete separation of Adam from both the rigidity of history and the confusion of reality makes him

into the witness, which Albahari has been waiting for to give a true account of what happened. Disregarding his non-existence and ultimate death, Adam is the first member of the narrator's family who is able to tell the lost teacher something about what happened that spring. For example, he "claimed that at that point you could hear birds, but I don't know whether he can be believed" (148). The narrator's doubts about Adam's testimony serves only to prove it is real, at least in the eyes of the narrator. Albahari sends Adam as an archangel of memory to both the narrator and his students to expose the lacuna of re-telling trauma of the past, and to offer one last attempt at the redemption of the future.

It seems as if the narrator has finally chosen imagination of history as he follows Adam on his journey of survival. Yet the boy's death, although glorified beyond all the others, makes the narrator realize the faultiness of this one-sided approach, and the need for him to bring history, imagination, and memory back together. Adam's death makes him almost go back to the side of history, having been completely drained by the experience that his imagined memory created. He even begins to doubt his imagination, saying, "I have never seen a soul, and I can only imagine one, just as I picture Götz and Meyer, whom I have also never seen" (161). The depression that sets in, though, leads him to the last ditch attempt to escape the inevitability of disappearance and to triumph over the killers of his ancestors, who are killing him as well. He sees suicide, making the choice of death himself becomes to him "a symbolic liberation from Gotz and Meyer, a statement of my superiority and their defeat" (162). Thus he chooses to triumph over history, but in fact, he never fulfills this wish. Just as with the majority of his experiences throughout the novel, he verbalizes this one too, thus stripping it, in part, of its validity and effectiveness.

Failure of Language and Theory of Witnessing

In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben discusses the nature of testimony as an account of reality given by a "witness." The book contains a direct analysis of the accounts given by the survivors of the holocaust and, therefore, a linear parallel is drawn between the two roles and as Agamben says, "witnesses are by definition survivors."³ This is not true of all witnesses, and Agamben describes the two Latin roots of the word "witness." While one, *terstis*, defines a witness as an unbiased third-party opinion, the other, *superstite*, "designates a person who has lived through something...and can therefore, bear witness to

³ Agamben, 33.

it.”⁴ The survivors of Auschwitz fall, naturally, into the later category and this is how the two terms come to be seen as synonymous with each other. Agamben argues, in the chapter entitled “The Witness,” that the testimony of the survivor can never be one that is a true narrative of what actually occurred.

The argument is two-fold. From the first perspective, a survivor is necessarily someone who did not experience the event that is being described as he or she necessarily belongs to “an anomalous minority.”⁵ If the testimony is an account, for example, of the deaths in Auschwitz, the survivor could not have experienced it if he or she lives to tell the tale and is, hence, necessarily one level removed from what he or she is testifying to. It is a story told about others who cannot include the self, or as Agamben calls it, “a discourse ‘on behalf of third parties’.”⁶ While the survivor is given front stage, it is truly this third-party who experienced what he or she will never be able to describe. Therefore, the “complete witnesses” are “those who did not bear witness and could not bear witness.”⁷ Memory, therefore, in the form of testimony, may seem to fill a gap that history leaves open, but this memory cannot contain the accuracy that the narrator longs for. Memory, in the case of the survivor, only exists in virtue of the absence of true experience and is therefore eternally lacking in ultimate knowledge. The narrator in *Götz and Meyer* is an exaggerated example of this inability to be a survivor who gives a testimony. He is a survivor, in some form, suffering the after-effects of the death of his relatives but he has no direct experience of the actual atrocities that he is trying to describe. The narrator longs to see the faces of the killers of his relatives but memory cannot provide it for him because it, itself, lives on the fact that it is has not known these faces, “the outsider is by definition excluded from the event.”⁸ Adam, though seen by the narrator as the complete witness, has a knowledge that is comprised solely on the basis of testimony and is therefore lacking. In a jarring playing out of Agamben’s words, Adam cannot use such testimony to survive because it does not allow for a re-application to experience because it was never created by its like.

The second part of the argument, however, is even more invasive into the style of testimony. Agamben refers to it as the “incomprehension of an honest mind,”⁹ and it refers to the inability of the perfect witness to tell his or her tale

⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

accurately. True testimony, in this form, only takes place through what Agamben calls “the non-language that one speaks when one is alone, the non-language to which language answers, in which language is born.”¹⁰ If one is a witness to the events of Auschwitz, language will never suffice as a tool of testimony; the events that have been experienced are not ones which may be recounted. Agamben is adamant to point out that these are not the shortcomings of language itself, but are for “entirely other reasons.”¹¹ The only form of witness that may remain is that given by a child that Agamben describes who had never learnt language because of his three-year old life in Auschwitz but left his mark through the incomprehensibly repeated word *mass-klo* or *matisklo*, never understood by the other survivors, but the non-linguistic mark of a true witness. Agamben says,

Language, in order to bear witness, must give way to a non-language in order to show the impossibility of bearing witness. The language of testimony is a language that no longer signifies and that, in not signifying, advances into what is without language, to the point of taking on a different insignificance—that of the complete witness, that of he who by definition cannot bear witness.¹²

The narrator in *Götz and Meyer* finds himself in a similar lacuna in which language is unable to provide him with the means that he needs to understand the killings of his relatives. He becomes brutally aware of the shortcomings of language in his repeated efforts to “picture” his killers, his knowledge of them through the things he has read or heard of does not allow him to “know” them. This is where the role of the imagination blurs with memory, thereby separating it, to an even greater extent, from reality. He leaves the realm of history to search in his memory which will, as we have seen, necessarily fail him (even if he was an actual witness/survivor of the events he chooses to remember). Even within memory, he is still left unquenched because his memories are restricted by language and he needs to supplement them with an image that will make them real. This is Agamben’s different “insignificance” because the verification of reality is no longer a goal, thereby making the whole procedure, on some superfluous level, unimportant. The narrator’s only goal at this point is to make sense of the undecipherable words that he is surrounded by. He is constantly searching in his imagination for an image or a picture to supplement the words that he has heard and has created. Although

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹² *Ibid.*

repeating it a multitude of times later, Albahari begins the book and the narrator's search with the same words

Götz and Meyer. Having never seen them, I can only imagine them. In twosomes like theirs, one is usually taller, the other shorter, but since both were SS noncommissioned officers, it is easy to imagine that both were tall, perhaps the same height. (1)

The need to see them, to understand what they looked like and the lives they led, is a need to move beyond language, a recognition of the fact that a "testimony" will never be decipherable. Despite its claim on language, its words are incomprehensible to both speaker and listener and this is where the non-linguistic world can finally prevail. The only salvation is to be found in a picture, a re-enactment of the scene, an image.

Meeting Fate and the Final Choice of Memory

The most obvious re-enactment in this novel is that performed by the students, through the power of the narration of their teacher. Ultimately, though, I see two other images, described in the end and the beginning of the novel, as the true re-enactment of history, because those truly do go beyond words, whereas the field trip, although immensely powerful emotionally, still relies on the language of its guide. The first significant image of non-verbal narration is the first time we hear about what happened inside Götz and Meyer's truck. At this point the narrator provides us with no historical facts or identities of anyone present in the scene, but describes the suffocation of the victims as only sounds, "the dull thumps and muted cries audible from the back of the truck" (18). The narrator begins with this image. Later he will build on it to narrate and imagine the actions, words and sometimes emotions felt by the participants on both sides, but his initial understanding is non-linguistic. It is audible but similar to the baby described by Primo Levi, it is not language, thus allowing for an experience that is fuller. We also see, that the narrator, and arguable the author himself, having hit the dead end of historical narrative and having being in part disillusioned by re-creation of memory, returns to the non-verbal imagery that he began with. Just as a blind man—unable to see or understand the reality of Götz, Meyer, his dying relatives, or his own loneliness—Albahari ends the book by having his narrator plunge right back into the darkness, attacking history, Götz, Meyer, and his own death. This time, though, he is prepared to face the incomprehensibility of life as well as death, and is no longer letting fate come to him, as his parents did, but "lunge[s] through the dark" to meet it.

The story of the events of spring of 1942 that the narrator describes to himself through research and imagination are finally completely converted to memory when he makes his students and himself re-experience them. This is no longer history which they would learn from a textbook. Neither is it a testament they could hear from a survivor. Albahari, through the experience of his characters, creates a new form of narration of trauma, by taking the *terstis*¹³ and making them experience the original traumatic event. The field trip is guided by the narrator's words, but the impact on them goes beyond language, it is emotional and physical, taking over their bodies and minds and, for the three girls, maybe their souls: "I turned, faced the students who had sunk into other people's bodies" (152). This experience, which the narrator has concocted by combining real facts, imagined facts about real people, and a complete figment of the imagination, is transformed into a memory, which by definition has to have happened. The experience is now a memory of the children, no matter what history has to say about it. Thus the narrator in the end uses history to create memory—something existing outside of language or verbal description—and in this way tries to work against history's cyclical nature.

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¹³ *Terstis* or *testis* is one of the Latin words for "witness," originally used to describe the person who in a trial is the third party between the two opposing sides, in contrast to the other word *superstes*, which denotes a person who has lived through an even beginning to end. Agamben draws attention to this etymological distinction to point, in fact, to the fact that third party and experiential understandings can be both seen as type of witnessing.