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26. The Witness in the Archive

Holocaust Studies/Memory Studies

Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer

“In the past half-century, two works have marked what can be called *conceptual breakthroughs* in our apprehension of the Holocaust,” writes Shoshana Felman in her 2002 book *The Juridical Unconscious*.¹ “The first was Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which appeared in the United States in 1963 as a report on the Eichmann trial held in Israel in 1961. The second was the film *Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann, which first appeared in France in 1985.” These two works, Felman elaborates, changed “the vocabulary of collective memory”—they added a “*new idiom* to the discourse on the Holocaust.” A new idiom, Felman might have said, to the discourse on memory more generally, for in the decades between the Eichmann trial, Lanzmann’s *Shoah*, and Felman’s assessment, the Holocaust has in many ways shaped the discourse on collective, social, and cultural memory, serving both as touchstone and paradigm. For Felman, this new idiom, this shift in “our vocabularies of remembrance,” is witness testimony. Witness testimony locates the possibility of grasping the Holocaust in “the slippage between law and art”—between the closure brought by legal judgment and the open-ended immediacy and presence preserved in a work of art.

Seeing the Eichmann trial, Arendt’s book, and Lanzmann’s *Shoah* as breakthrough texts in the discourses on memory of the last half century can help us to define the provocations and challenges that the Holocaust has brought to memory studies and to ask, conversely, how the notion of “memory” and memory studies have shaped the contours of Holocaust studies. Thus, the trajectory between the trial, the film, and Felman’s book—one of many possible trajectories through which one might approach these questions—foregrounds and sharpens the fundamental contradiction brought by the centrality of witness testimony to cultural discourses about memory: the contradiction between the necessity, on the one hand, but also the impossibility of fully bearing witness

to this particular traumatic past.² If our vocabulary of collective memory has had to shift over the last half century, it is precisely due to this aporia and the evidentiary, ethical, and artistic crises it has spawned. These crises have indeed been at the heart of memory studies, bringing with them a concentration on the figure of the embodied witness, on trauma and transmission, and on the complex relationship between enunciation, listening, and truth.

In what follows, we look closely and critically at the contradictions at the core of Holocaust witness testimony. We argue that the theoretical and philosophical efforts to grasp and define these have provoked a radical rethinking of the workings of memory and transmission: in particular, a foregrounding of embodiment, affect, and silence. Yet we caution that a hyperbolic emphasis on trauma and the breakdown of speech has risked occluding the wealth of knowledge and information transmitted by thousands of witnesses who have been eager to testify to the victimization and persecution they have suffered. We find that the very questions and aporias that have made the Holocaust a touchstone for the study of twentieth-century memory and catastrophe have thus engendered two distinctive interpretive uses of witness testimony—one linked to a troubling idiom of uniqueness and exceptionalism, potentially supporting nationalist and identity politics, the other, to cosmopolitan or transnational memory cultures able to sustain efforts toward the global attainment of human rights.

The Witness

Throughout *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt evaluates, critically, different aspects of the trial. Among other objections, she contends that the trial should primarily have been about Adolf Eichmann and his crimes and not, as it turned out to be, about the horrific suffering of the victims. “Eichmann was on the stand from June 20 to July 24, or a total of thirty-three and a half sessions. Almost twice as many sessions, sixty-two out of a total of a hundred and twenty-one, were spent on a hundred prosecution witnesses who, country after country, told their tales of horror.”³ Arendt criticizes the selection of witnesses and the extensive hearing they received (many volunteered, some had published books and were well known). She finds the victim testimony to be distracting, extraneous to the judgment of the accused. Only one witness, Herschel Grynszpan, serves as a model for her, in the “simplicity,” economy, and narrative skill with which he tells his story: it took him no more than ten minutes to convey the “needless destruction of twenty-seven years in less than twenty-four hours.”⁴ Listening to this witness, “one thought foolishly: Everyone, everyone should have his day in court. Only to find out, in the endless sessions that followed, how difficult it was to tell the story.” For Arendt, it takes righteousness, a “purity of soul, an unmirrored, unreflected innocence of heart and mind” to testify in this

way, but she finds that few possess the moral virtues requisite for such narrative simplicity and clarity.⁵

Critics of Arendt, however, as well as other commentators on the trial, find its essence precisely in the space it provided for the voices and the embodied presence of the survivor-witnesses.⁶ If the Eichmann trial was revolutionary, a milestone in the history of Holocaust memory and memorialization, it is because it allowed for a collective story to emerge through individual victim testimonies and to gain, in Felman's terms, "semantic authority."⁷ The authority, in fact, transcends those victims who were able to testify at the trial; it even transcends those who did not survive to tell their tale. Famously, Gideon Hausner, the prosecutor, opened his own address to the Israeli court not on behalf of the state he represented, but of "six million prosecutors": "When I stand before you, judges of Israel, in this court, to accuse Adolf Eichmann, I do not stand alone. Here with me at this moment stand six million prosecutors. But alas, they cannot rise to level the finger of accusation in the direction of the glass dock and cry out *j'accuse* against the man who sits there. . . . Their blood cries to Heaven, but their voice cannot be heard. Thus it falls to me to be their mouthpiece and to deliver the heinous accusation in their name."⁸ If the Nuremberg trial focused on the war criminals and left out the story of the victims, the Eichmann trial served as a corrective, foregrounding in that courtroom the unwieldy survivor narratives that so annoyed Arendt. "It was mainly through the testimony of witnesses," Hausner later wrote, "that the events could be reproduced in court, and thus conveyed to the people of Israel and to the world at large, in such a way that men would not recoil from the same narratives as from scalding steam, and so that it would not remain the fantastic, unbelievable apparition that emerges from Nazi documents."⁹ While Arendt, and also Judge Landau, protested against the procession of witnesses—their unruly confusions, contradictions, and misrememberings—the prosecutor and subsequent commentators saw the "picture" they "paint," and the collective voice they assume, as the trial's most meaningful legacy. Indeed, it may be Arendt's very discomfort with witness testimony, and the contradictions it reveals, that move Felman to feature *Eichmann in Jerusalem* as in itself such a landmark text. Her conversation and disagreement with Arendt allow Felman to strengthen her claim that "the Eichmann trial legally creates a radically original and new event: not a rehearsal of a given story, but a groundbreaking narrative event that is itself historically and legally unprecedented."¹⁰ For Felman, this is the translation of private stories into one collective story that receives a legal hearing and public acknowledgement and validation.¹¹

At the center of this single collective story was the interrupted testimony of Yehiel Dinor, to which Felman devotes an entire chapter entitled "A Ghost in the House of Justice." Dinor was a concentration camp survivor who had become a writer under the name of K-Zetnik, and who had published a number of works about what he called the "planet Auschwitz." (KZ is the German abbreviation for *Konzentrationslager*.) When

asked about his “pen name” by the prosecutor, K-Zetnik protested that it was not a pen name since he did not consider himself a writer of literature. Instead, echoing and transforming Hausner’s proxy speech on behalf of “six million prosecutors,” K-Zetnik presented himself as a chronicler speaking in the name of and evoking all the concentration camp inmates, or “K-Zetniks,” from the “planet Auschwitz,” whose “look,” he said, “was inside [his] eyes.”¹² The prosecutor’s interruptions of the witness’s evocation of these inmates, and his insistence on asking the witness a few direct questions about his experiences, provoked K-Zetnik to faint on the stand and be taken to the hospital, where he fell into a coma for several weeks. While Arendt sees K-Zetnik’s testimony as a case in her point against victim narratives, the Israeli poet Haim Gouri, who also covered the trial, asserts that in fainting, K-Zetnik “in fact, . . . said it all.”¹³ In Felman’s terms, “what K-Zetnik wants is not to prove but to transmit.”¹⁴ Instead of describing him as a failed witness, as Arendt does, Felman sees him as a terrified, retraumatized witness—one who, in the courtroom and in the encounter with Eichmann, returns to the “other planet” and relives his horrific experiences there before the eyes of the world, collapsing the distance between present and past, between “here” and “over there.” In that sense, his lifeless body can be said to “say it all.” As Gouri concludes, “The things he added afterward would turn out to be merely superfluous detail.”¹⁵

In fact, by inviting survivors to bear witness, the court seems to have made space for the fainting episode of K-Zetnik and even perhaps for the possibility that such an episode might complicate the given understanding of legal evidence. For Felman, it illustrates the “slippage between law and art:” it reflects that unspeakable and unrepresentable realm that stands outside of legal discourse and that can only be transmitted through the body language and the non-verbal performance of the traumatized witness. K-Zetnik’s moment of collapse becomes a paradigm for the aporia of Holocaust testimony—the necessity and the impossibility of bearing witness to the “planet Auschwitz.” Its “testimonial power . . . lay precisely in the pathos—the crying power—of its legal muteness,” Felman asserts, and thus it attests to the new understanding of evidence and the new forms of listening and interpretation that the traumatized survivor of the Shoah has provoked.¹⁶

The disagreement between Arendt and Felman about the trial and their divergent interpretations of Dinour’s collapse reflects the shift in the dominant conception of Holocaust memory and representation in the last half century: indeed they stage the encounter between “history” and “memory” in Holocaust studies. The historian Annette Wieviorka locates this encounter in the shift in the function of testimony that comes with the Eichmann trial but that, in its aftermath, is relevant beyond the context of the law: “Testimony has changed direction. Print has been replaced by the tape recorder and the video camera. At the same time, the function of testimony has also changed. In the years following the war, the primary aim of testimony was knowledge—knowledge of the modalities of genocide and the deportation. Testimony had the status of an archival document. Today . . . the purpose of testimony is no longer to obtain knowledge. Time has passed and the

historian does not trust a memory in which the past has begun to blur and which has been enriched by various images since the survivor's return to freedom. The mission that has devolved to testimony is no longer to bear witness to inadequately known events, but to keep them before our eyes. Testimony is to be a means of transmission to future generations."¹⁷ With the Eichmann trial, Wieviorka says, the witness becomes a "bearer of history," an "embodiment of memory [*un homme-mémoire*], attesting to the past and to the continuing presence of the past."¹⁸ The "bearer of history" illustrates the need for "memory" to supplement "history." As Geoffrey Hartman writes: "Survivor testimonies do not excel in providing *vérités de fait* or positivist history. . . . Their real strength lies in recording the psychological and emotional milieu of the struggle for survival, not only then, but also now." For Hartman, "the immediacy of these first-person accounts burns through the 'cold storage of history.'" They give "texture to memory or to images that otherwise would have only sentimental or informational impact. . . . [Now] . . . emotion and empathy accompany knowledge."¹⁹

If the main function of testimony *now* is not to inform factually but to transmit affectively, it cannot do so by purely verbal means, whether oral or written. K-Zetnik's linguistic breakdown, and the telling nature of his physical collapse, suggest all that he could not express verbally within the frame and the idiom of the courtroom. Jean-François Lyotard has called this disjunction of idioms "the differend": "A case of a differend between two parties takes place when the 'regulation' of the conflict that opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties while the wrong suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom."²⁰ And Jacques Derrida has worked to uncouple the notion of "bearing witness" from the notion of "proof" that tends to "divert" and "contaminate" it, suggesting it "appeals to the act of faith" and is "heterogeneous to producing proof."²¹ In fainting, K-Zetnik performs that appeal and brings that other idiom, located in the memory of his body, before the eyes of the court, and he thus transmits another kind of knowledge, one that exceeds the "facts" of his persecution. In his essay on the memoirs of Auschwitz survivor Charlotte Delbo, Thomas Trezise, echoing Lyotard on the *differend*, shows that "the voice of testimony cannot fully coincide with itself torn as it is between the language of fact and the shattering of the very framework on which the intelligibility of such language relies."²²

The "language of fact" offers information about the past, and can constitute legal evidence and archival documentation. It can also serve as a protective shield enabling survival. Charlotte Delbo distinguishes between two kinds of memory of trauma, the "'ordinary' intellectual memory, the memory connected to the thinking processes" from which she can *speak* of Auschwitz, and the "deep memory" that "preserves sensations, physical imprints," "the memory of the senses." Delbo describes the elaborate ways in which she needs to shield herself from being re-engulfed by the deep memory and thus

the immediacy and lasting presence of Auschwitz: "Auschwitz is there, unalterable, precise, but enveloped in the skin of memory, an impermeable skin that isolates it from my present self. . . . I live within a twofold being."²³

Dinoor/K-Zetnik: The survivor-witness's two names reflect such a "twofold being." Significantly, K-Zetnik's collapse occurred at the moment when he was questioned about his name. In objecting that his name is not a pseudonym, K-Zetnik insists on remaining inside his "Auschwitz self" that is located in the body and outside speech. But, under what conditions, and in what mode, can the traumatized, desubjectified, dehumanized victim bear witness from inside the protective "skin of memory?"²⁴ When Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub write, in their book *Testimony*, that the Holocaust is "an event without a witness," they elaborate precisely on this difficulty of being "a witness to oneself," which, Laub insists, is "central to the Holocaust experience."²⁵ "There was," Laub continues, "historically no witness to the Holocaust, either from outside or from inside the event."²⁶ Laub argues that no one could bear witness from the outside because Nazi ideology was so psychologically invasive and pernicious that "no observer could remain untainted" and all external frames of reference disappeared.²⁷ Thus, what collapsed was the possibility of a victim addressing an Other—one uncontaminated by the magnitude of the event. Without the possibility of an implied listener, the dehumanized victim is unable to bear witness to him or herself, "from the inside." The paradox of the witness's "I" is an essential element of the contradiction between the necessity and the impossibility of bearing witness to the Holocaust.

Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, Felman's second paradigm-shifting work and one, as she shows, deeply influenced by the Eichmann trial, is precisely dedicated to making possible the act of witness "from the inside," albeit in retrospect.²⁸ Visually, its nine and a half hours exclude all archival footage in favor of the faces of surviving victims, bystanders, and perpetrators, and of the places where the events of the Shoah took place. Pursuing most obsessively the actual machinery of extermination perpetrated by the Nazi regime, Lanzmann concentrates many of his interviews on the surviving members of the Sonderkommando, the special squads of Jewish prisoners who were forced to aid in the process of extermination, cleaning gas chambers and ovens, exhuming mass graves. These are the individuals whom Primo Levi called "bearers of a horrendous secret,"²⁹ and it is this secret that Lanzmann, breaking through their protective shield of trauma, most wants them to reveal and to transmit to him and to his cinematic audience.

Viewers of *Shoah* are often surprised at the detailed *factual* questions Lanzmann poses during his interviews; why, we wonder, for example, does he need to know exactly how large the undressing room was or how many steps it took to walk to the gas chamber? In posing these kinds of factual questions to witness after witness, Lanzmann seems to be using testimony to elicit information, in the first sense that Wiewiorka outlines. But the rehearsal of the minute facets of the extermination process may well

serve another purpose altogether. Along with the invitation to repeat songs and sayings, to reenact, bodily, the movements and gestures of the past and to remember its very details, Lanzmann is able to provoke powerful nonverbal bodily reenactments of the kind the world witnessed from K-Zetnik at the Eichmann trial. There are a few uncanny moments in the film, when survivor- and bystander-witnesses do not merely narrate the past but literally seem to be back inside it. Memory, here, gives way to what Lanzmann calls “incarnation.”³⁰

The most disturbing and controversial example of this form of reenactment is the testimony of Abraham Bomba, a barber who cut Jewish women’s hair inside the gas chambers in Treblinka and who, in the film, is interviewed in a barber shop in Tel Aviv while cutting the hair of a male client. Bomba’s hands repeat the familiar gestures of a barber cutting hair, while the filmmaker poses question after question to him about his memories of cutting the hair of groups of naked women shortly before they were gassed. “How did it look, the gas chamber?” Lanzmann asks. “Can you describe precisely?”³¹ When Bomba is then asked how he felt when he first saw the naked women entering the gas chamber, he resists the question: “I felt that accordingly I got to do what they told me, to cut their hair in a way that it looked like the barber was doing his job for a woman.”³² Lanzmann pulls back, asks for more factual detail and suggests, “Can you imitate how you did it?” before returning to his question about feelings and impressions. Bomba resists more directly on this second occasion: “I tell you something. To have a feeling about that . . . it was very hard to feel anything, because working there day and night between dead people, between bodies, your feelings disappeared, you were dead. You had no feeling at all.”³³ But even as he protests against the discussion of feelings, Bomba begins to narrate the most searing story of all—the moment when the women from his own hometown entered the gas chamber and began talking to him. His narrative breaks down completely when he gets to the description of how a barber friend of his from his hometown met his own wife and sister in the gas chamber. Bomba describes this but then stops, insisting that “it’s too horrible.” As he ceases to speak, the camera closes in on his face scrutinizing it insistently. After a moment’s pause, Lanzmann’s prodding voice is heard saying: “We have to do it. . . . We must go on.”³⁴ The witness remains silent and withdraws into himself. His lips are dry, he licks them repeatedly, turning his tongue this way and that in his mouth. He then mutters a few inaudible and incomprehensible phrases in what could be Polish or Yiddish, looking down, shaking his head and avoiding the camera. After what seems like a long while, he wipes his eyes, and continues talking about his friend and his wife and sister in his strongly accented English. But what, one might ask, could he say that his moments of desperate silence and pleading not to go on did not already convey?

Like K-Zetnik at the Eichmann trial, Abraham Bomba is able to bear witness “from the inside”—literally from inside the gas chamber, and from inside his own “Auschwitz self.” But, for him, reaching into the depths of that place means ceasing to speak at all, at

least for a few moments. One certainly wonders whether the “friend” who met his wife and sister was not actually Bomba himself, and whether he can only remember that scene through the protective shields of projection and displacement—in the second person (“you were dead”), or the third (“a friend of mine”). When, in a recent seminar at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York, Lanzmann ventured that “the tears of Bomba are worth gold,” he clarified the values on which his project is based.³⁵ The *ultimate* truth, he implies, the *ultimate* act of witness, comes from inside the gas chamber and from the mute testimony of memory emerging from the body.

Filip Müller, one of the most verbally articulate witnesses in *Shoah*, also breaks down and cries precisely at the moment when he tries to describe the people from his own hometown walking into the gas chambers. In despair, Müller decided to join them in death but the women pushed him back out, demanding that he survive to bear witness. He can *tell* that story in the film, but he can powerfully *transmit* it through his moments of silence and through his hand gestures and tears.³⁶

The disjunctions and non-coincidences that are at the heart of traumatic testimony, the location of the essence of Holocaust experience in the bodily wound, and thus in the deep embodied memory of the survivor, have shaped the debates about Holocaust memory and representation in the last decades.³⁷ They account for a privileging of video testimony as the genre most able to communicate the sense memory of the survivor. Yet, problematically, they may also abstract the moments of muteness and of collapse as those that most closely reveal the “truth” of the event.³⁸ Articulate promoters of video testimony like Laurence Langer even believe that through the embodied presence of the survivor and the bodily reenactment of the camp experience, this genre can give us a form of access to an “unmediated truth” about the Holocaust or to “the thing itself” (Langer’s terms).³⁹ Video testimony includes narrative and bodily reenactment, and its interpreters often focus in greater detail on this latter dimension that written testimony fails to provide. The moments that best illustrate and represent embodied memory tend to be the moments where speech fails and where the distance between past and present seem to collapse. In these moments—moments like Bomba’s speechlessness or K-Zetnik’s fainting—the body of the traumatized witness “from the inside” seems closest to offering access to the unspeakable essence of trauma and its continuity in the present. But when, in the process of analysis and reflection, we cite and repeat those moments, when we thus abstract them from the context of their appearance, we risk projecting too pervasive a structure of meaning onto them.

In these moments, the oral witness goes mute. We see the way this happens when Bomba’s mouth literally runs out of sufficient saliva to go on producing words. Only after a few struggling moments can Bomba put his “Auschwitz self” back inside the protective skin of memory to continue his narrative. Our attention is riveted to the muteness and bodily affect. Such concentrated attention to the deep memory lodged in the body, and to the unspoken and unspeakable dimensions of traumatic recall, can, however, give rise

to a troubling implication: that silence and muteness are more telling and forceful than verbal narratives. Muteness and the mute witness have thus acquired the status of the “true” and “complete” witness to the Shoah, particularly through the influential, but, we find, deeply problematic argument of Giorgio Agamben in his *Remnants of Auschwitz*. For Agamben, the “complete” witness, the only one who can give a true sense of what he calls “Auschwitz” (Agamben refuses the term “Holocaust” or any term like it, using only “Auschwitz”) is the “Muselmann,” who represents humanity at its limits.⁴⁰ In the camp, prisoners designated as “Muselmänner” were the ones who ceased to be human beings, who gave up and knew that they would die. They are the walking corpses, the living dead, the bearers of “bare life.” The “Muselmann” is unbearable to look at, yet he is at the core of the camp, and thus at the core of what Agamben calls “Auschwitz.” In Agamben’s terms, the “witness” is the remnant, the humanity that could not be destroyed, that survived the annihilation, but that cannot speak.

Agamben’s argument is based on his reading of a passage in which Primo Levi, in his essay “Shame,” questions his own authority to bear witness to the reality of Auschwitz and the Nazi genocide: “My religious friend had told me that I survived so that I could bear witness. . . . I must repeat: we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses. . . . We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the ‘Muslims,’ the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance. . . . We speak in their stead, by proxy.”⁴¹ Agamben’s hyperbolic reflection stands in contrast to Levi’s modest and understated disclaimer.⁴² While Levi specifies that the “true” and “complete” witness is the one who did not return because he was murdered, or because he was so traumatized as to return mute, Agamben collapses this distinction and concentrates on the broken and speechless figure of the “Muselmann” as the only authoritative and “complete witness.” It is this figure that embodies the “aporia of Auschwitz” and provokes Agamben to work through the irreducible paradox of testimony: “the one who cannot bear witness is the true witness, the absolute witness.”⁴³ Who can bear witness for all those who can no longer testify on their own behalf, Primo Levi asks. In the Eichmann trial, the prosecutor stood before the court as the “mouthpiece” of “six million prosecutors” whose “voices could no longer be heard.” Levi speaks “in their stead, by proxy.” The ranting K-Zetnik was the proxy witness for those who did not survive to tell their tale. But Agamben’s remnant is speechlessness itself: there is no proxy.

With the liminal figure of the mute, desubjectified witness who can only testify outside language, we reach not only the limit of the human but also the limit of the historical and legal archive.⁴⁴ Mute testimony, deep embodied memory, is not verifiable.⁴⁵ It exceeds the boundaries of documents, records, and other conventional forms of evidence. It shifts

the transmission and knowledge of the past onto an entirely different register. Here, indeed, we reach what Agamben calls the “aporia of Auschwitz,” or the “non-coincidence between facts and truth, between verification and comprehension.”⁴⁶

Truth and Truthfulness

“Aujourd’hui, je ne suis pas sûre que ce que j’ai écrit soit vrai. Je suis sûre que c’est véridique,” writes Charlotte Delbo in the epigram to *Aucun de nous ne reviendra* (*None of Us Will Return*), the first part of her memoir, *Auschwitz et après* (*Auschwitz and After*). It is a phrase she will repeat and use again in another work, *La mémoire et les jours* (*Days and Memory*). But her English translator, Rosette Lamont, translates the sentence differently in the two volumes: “Today, I am not sure that what I wrote is true. I am certain it is truthful” (*None of Us Will Return*), and “This is why I say today that while knowing perfectly well that it corresponds to the facts, I no longer know if it is real” (*Days and Memory*).⁴⁷ In *None of Us Will Return*, Delbo’s sectional title itself situates her testimonial account into a contradictory temporality and reality. The future tense suggests that it is written “from the inside,” where return indeed would have seemed impossible. The “none” and the “us” place the first person voice of the witness both under erasure and into a larger community of witnesses. Perhaps, she implies, none of them did, in fact, return and the present voice of testimony does not correspond to the past persona of the camp inmate, and even less so, to her prewar self. With her epigram, Delbo, now firmly situated in the present of retrospection (“today”), profoundly qualifies the “truth” of her utterance. But how? What is the difference between *vrai* and *véridique*, or, in Lamont’s translation, “truth” and “truthfulness”? On the one hand, Delbo could be saying that today, in the space of the “after” (“Auschwitz and After”), she no longer recalls the exact facts but is certain she is conveying a deeper truth about her camp experience, its essence, its deep memory. Lamont’s first translation, distinguishing between truth and truthfulness, seems to support this meaning. On the other hand, Delbo may be saying the opposite, as the second translation suggests: today, she can convey the factual truth of her experience (*véridique*) but, having encased Auschwitz in its protective skin, and being in the “after,” she no longer can or wants to access the deep memory, the affective and traumatic reality of the past.

Delbo’s ambiguity underscores the complicated status of truth that emerges from the focus on the figure of the survivor-witness “from the inside.” When Hannah Arendt voices her impatience with the witnesses at the Eichmann trial, she questions their ability to distinguish, many years later, between things they might themselves have experienced and things they would have read or heard from others. In a court of law these factual distinctions are crucial ones. But they are also crucial to historians. Searching for “historical truth” in oral testimony—factual accuracy that can be corroborated and not dismissed

or denied—these historians are suspicious of testimonial narratives, of “soft” evidence constructed in individual acts of recall.

Addressing the historical validity of testimonial rendering, the psychoanalyst Donald Spence has clarified a difference between what he has called “narrative” truth and “historical” or factual truth. “Narrative truth” derives from an act of memory and is shaped by circumstances in the present moment in which it is remembered: it “can be defined as the criterion we use to decide when a certain experience has been captured to our satisfaction; it depends on continuity and closure and the extent to which the fit of the pieces takes on an aesthetic finality. Narrative truth is what we have in mind when we say that . . . a given explanation carries conviction.”⁴⁸ In contrast, “historical truth is time-bound and is dedicated to the strict observance of correspondence rules; our aim is to come as close as possible to what ‘really’ happened. . . . We must have some assurance that the pieces being fitted into the puzzle also belong to a certain time and place and that this belonging can be corroborated in some systematic manner.”⁴⁹ This disjunction is sometimes described as defining the difference between “history” and “memory” and the conflicts in Holocaust studies between some historians, on the one hand, and psychoanalysts and literary and cultural scholars, on the other.⁵⁰ But the testimony of the survivor-witness “from the inside” may exceed this distinction altogether. Not only may it get the facts wrong, but it can also resist a coherent story in which the pieces fit together and come to closure. It thus posits the question: Is there a form of truth that is neither “narrative” nor “historical”?

Dori Laub’s example of this excess has become iconic in discussions of truth and witnessing. Laub cites the testimony of a woman who witnessed the failed uprising by Auschwitz prisoners in October 1944. At one moment in her account, he notes, the distance between past and present disappears: “She was fully there. ‘All of a sudden,’ she said, ‘we saw four chimneys going up in flames, exploding. The flames shot into the sky, people were running. It was unbelievable.’”⁵¹ Laub then outlines the debate between historians and psychoanalysts watching the woman’s testimony at a conference. The historians dismissed it for its inaccuracy: they stressed that only one chimney was blown up during the Auschwitz uprising and that her mistake invalidated her account of events. But the psychoanalyst who had interviewed the woman, Dori Laub himself, suggested that she was testifying to a different form of truth altogether, “not to the number of chimneys blown up, but to something else, more radical, more crucial: the reality of an unimaginable occurrence. . . . The event itself was almost inconceivable. The woman testified to an event that broke the all-compelling frame of Auschwitz, where Jewish armed revolts just did not happen and had no place. She testified to the breakage of a framework.”⁵²

With the centrality of the survivor-witness in the discourses on Holocaust memory, many historians have come to appreciate not only the compelling nature of “narrative truth” but also this dimension that emerges in Laub’s example. Laub’s notion of “truth”

stresses aspects of historical experience that are subjective, submerged, even silent—feelings, perceptions, apprehensions, misapprehensions, and “deep memories” that, certainly in the case of the Holocaust, are affected by trauma. Unlike the positivist historians quoted by Laub, many historians, oral historians of the Holocaust, in particular, have found that testimonies, such as the factually inaccurate account from the witness interviewed by Laub, can tell them more about the *meaning* of an event, and about the process of its recall in the present, than about the event itself. Indeed, they are aware of the emotional dynamics of traumatic recall and forgetting, and sensitive to the dialogic nature of oral history—of the listener’s or interviewer’s impact on the telling.⁵³ In taking into account an affective dimension and the meaning of an event for the teller herself, historians are expanding the notion of truth and are coming to a deeper, more encompassing historical understanding of what we might now think of as an embodied form of “truthfulness.” The challenge that such historians still face, of course, is how to defend this enlarged notion of truth without opening the door to revisionism and denial.

Listening and Transmission

The argument between the psychoanalyst and the historians in Laub’s account is an argument about listening to the survivor-witness “from the inside.” The historians know too much, Laub suggests, and their knowledge (of the number of chimneys that blew up, for example, of the betrayal by the Polish underground, or of the squashing of the rebellion and the gassing of the resistance) blocks their willingness to listen to what beyond the factual the woman’s testimony might have transmitted to them. The psychoanalyst, on the other hand, does not let his own historical knowledge interfere with the act of listening. He is trained to perceive that the witness does more than give information about the past, however accurate or inaccurate. The witness “from the inside” relives the experience, and the good listener has to be there with her as she is doing so. The woman Laub interviewed returned to the implausible moment of resistance, and thus, in Laub’s elaboration, “a dazzling, brilliant moment from the past swept through the frozen stillness of the muted, grave-like landscape with dashing meteoric speed, exploding it into a shower of sights and sounds.”⁵⁴ In Laub’s vivid terms, the woman’s testimony enabled the gates of Auschwitz to open again and to allow her listeners in to witness the improbable moment of rebellion, the “breakage of the frame, that her very testimony was now reenacting.”⁵⁵ In other words, Laub suggests that the woman communicates a more essential truth beyond the limits of her words to the one who knows how to listen psychoanalytically: the truth of her enunciation lies in the affect she projects and provokes in her listeners.

Laub has written eloquently about the responsibilities of listening to oral testimony. In response to Primo Levi’s recurring nightmare in Auschwitz, in which Levi returns

home and tries to tell his story, only to have his sister and other listeners get up from the table and leave, Laub writes: “if one talks about the trauma without being truly heard or truly listened to, the telling might itself be lived as a return of the trauma—a *re-experiencing of the event itself*.”⁵⁶ “True” hearing, “true” listening, is then, by implication, a listening for the emotional affective embodied truth of the witness’s story. This *psychoanalytic* listening places the listener herself at risk: “there is a need for a tremendous libidinal investment in those interview situations. . . . Testimony is the narrative’s address to hearing; for only when the survivor knows he is being heard will he stop to hear—and listen to—himself.”⁵⁷

In becoming a privileged genre promising access to the embodied memory of the survivor-witness, oral and video testimony have redefined the act of listening as “secondary witnessing” and have placed enormous burdens on the interviewer. Video testimonies show that memory and testimony are acts in the present, not present accounts of the past. They show how memory enters language, and how it changes in the process. They show how an event lives on, how it acquires, keeps, and changes its meaning and its legacy. They show how the witness changes in the process of telling, or reliving. The listener must hear silence, absence, hesitation, and resistance. She must look and listen, comparing bodily with verbal messages. She must allow the testimony to move, haunt and endanger her; she must allow it to inhabit her, without appropriating or owning it.⁵⁸ Theorists of testimony have spent a good deal of effort to define the fine line between good listening and appropriation.⁵⁹

But there is more. Geoffrey Hartman and Dori Laub have argued that if the victim has been dehumanized by the camp experience, has lost the “you” who enables the “I” to speak, those who listen to witness testimony have the capacity to restore the victim’s humanity and identity. While empathic listening can actually be therapeutic, therefore, “bad listening”—listening that does not take on the responsibility of providing the “you” necessary to restoring the “I”—can retraumatize the witness. Some of our previous examples seem to corroborate this warning: K-Zetnik fainted and went into a coma when the judge interrupted his account and tried to ask specific questions. Abraham Bomba is retraumatized before our eyes when Lanzmann asks him about his feelings and enjoins him to go into the part of the story Bomba had so carefully encased in a protective shield. For both these listeners, testimony served a purpose beyond the healing of the witness. And both, paradoxically, provoke an enactment of trauma—a mute witnessing—that succeeds in transmitting some quality of the “inside.” For more distant spectators and listeners, therapeutic listening and the powerful transmission of affect and body memory seem to be at odds.

But what, in fact, *is* being transmitted in those moments of fainting, muteness or collapse? What does it mean to say that in fainting K-Zetnik said it all? That Bomba’s tears are “worth gold?” What narratives, what memories, does the figure of the survivor-witness from the inside support, and what are the stakes of these narratives? We would

suggest that the moments of mute or traumatized witness that have become so paradigmatic in recent discussion are so open to interpretation and projection that, outside the narrow framework of the psychoanalytic encounter, they preclude therapeutic restorative listening in favor of ascription and appropriation.

Uniqueness and Comparability in Global Time

This conclusion leads us back to the point where we began, Hannah Arendt's critique of the Eichmann trial and her misgivings about witness testimony. But we want to consider another aspect of her argument—her belief that Eichmann should not have been tried in Israel but before an international court; that his crimes were committed *against humanity* and not merely against “*the Jewish people*.” The focus on anti-Semitism and the endless repetition of crimes against Jews throughout history, she argues, relativizes and detracts from Eichmann's particular and unprecedented crimes. Felman considers Arendt's view jurisprudentially conservative. But, from our post-Rwanda, post-Balkan, mid-Darfur perspective, is not Arendt's call for a permanent international criminal court, and for an understanding of genocide as a crime against humanity, remarkably prescient and progressive?⁶⁰

Arendt's position anticipates two key perspectives in Holocaust studies: one viewing the Holocaust as the worst act of anti-Semitism, and therefore principally as a crime against the Jews; the other as the worst act of racism, and, as such, a crime against humanity. In this regard, the testimony of victims, especially as manifested in speechlessness or muteness and in bodily projection, can lend itself to interpretations that directly or indirectly support one or the other of these viewpoints. The figure of the muted, traumatized survivor—the “Muselmann,” K-Zetnik, or Bomba, for example—largely communicating through affect and not words, can become a screen on which the listener or interpreter can project various meanings. Witness testimony from the inside can thus be appropriated and used to undergird the image of Jewish extreme victimization that fuels nationalist and identity politics. Indeed, as Arendt observes regarding the Eichmann trial, Holocaust memory, through spoken and unspoken witness testimony, served to enhance the process of nation-building in the new Israeli state. It was employed to present a Zionist narrative before a “hostile world” and to collectivize Jewish identity.⁶¹ If, in this memory discourse, the Holocaust appears unique and incomparable, it is not by way of a historical argument that points out its unprecedented elements, but on an affective level that contemplates and “co-owns” the immeasurable suffering of its Jewish victims. Calling attention to the increasing currency of the unspeakability trope is thus to lift Holocaust memory out of this new discourse of uniqueness.

Certainly Holocaust memory may also serve a different purpose in our age of globalization. As Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder have optimistically written, it may “provide

the foundations for a new cosmopolitan memory . . . transcending ethnic and national boundaries.”⁶² Shifting focus from the national to the cosmopolitan, and rejecting the claim, largely implicit in Pierre Nora’s influential work *Les lieux de mémoire* (*Realms of Memory*), that the nation-state is the “sole possible (and imaginable) source for the articulation of authentic collective memories,”⁶³ they argue that representations of the Holocaust can impart “authentic feelings” and “collective memory” on a global level.⁶⁴ Memories of the Holocaust—or representations of this event in spoken and unspoken testimony—can thus “facilitate the formation of transnational memory cultures, which in turn, have the potential to become the cultural foundation for global human rights politics.”⁶⁵ In so doing, Levy and Sznajder write,

the cosmopolitanization of Holocaust memory does not imply some progressive universalism subject to a unified interpretation. The Holocaust does not become one totalizing signifier containing the same meaning for everyone. Rather its meanings evolve from the encounter of global interpretations and local sensibilities. The cosmopolitanization of Holocaust memories thus involves the formation of nation-specific and nation-transcending commonalities.⁶⁶

Muteness in the aftermath of trauma, the affect that emerges through testimony—these are the human elements of survival that can become the links between the diverse catastrophes of our time. And yet, as we have seen, powerful affect also lends itself to a hyperbolic discourse of uniqueness and exceptionalism. A cosmopolitan memory of the Holocaust, we would suggest, cannot be built on the affect of victimization only, but must include the responsibility of the perpetrators, the complicity of bystanders, and the willingness of the descendants of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders alike to claim the legacy of a traumatic past. Expanding Holocaust memory and decontextualizing it from its European specificity—turning *the Holocaust* into *a holocaust*, as Levy and Sznajder suggest—can only be achieved if the uniqueness and exceptionalism attributed to its victim suffering for nationalist ends is abandoned and the field of memory is broadened to include other victims, other perpetrators, and other bystanders involved in acts of mass violence and persecution.⁶⁷ Such an expansion does not in any sense aim to diminish or relativize the experiences and suffering of European Holocaust survivors or to detract from the vast evidentiary and moral contribution their spoken as well as muted and bodily testimony has provided and continues to provide for us. On the contrary, its goal would be to incorporate these memories into an enlarged global arena, making room for additional local, regional, national, and transnational testimonies about slavery, colonialism, genocide, and subordination. These diverse scenes of memory and testimony and their role in activist and legal struggles for remembrance, recognition, restitution, and justice—in South Africa, Rwanda, the Hague, Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala, for example—offer a political urgency for memory and testimony that reflect back to Holocaust

remembrance and inscribe it into today's global language of human rights. It is here that we can find the influence of transnational memory studies on Holocaust studies.

Such a broadened, universalized archive of memory, consisting of witness testimony and other primary and secondary sources, may then indeed permit us to apply the future-oriented lessons that many have derived from the Holocaust more globally. Truly responding to the ethical provocation that witness testimony has transmitted and conveyed across generations and political boundaries would then entail our determined and collective efforts to prevent or to stop genocide and ethnic cleansing from being committed again.