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After Auschwitz and Vietnam War: Testimony, Language Game and the Postmodern Condition

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As we move further into the twenty-first century, our memories about the political upheavals of the twentieth centurybecome increasingly uncertain.There isn't any coherent scheme in place to outline these events (as to how and why they happened) solely based on reason. As a result, one is left with a feeling of disquiet for not being fully able to understand the rationale behind their occurrences. One way to engage and witness again these events is through the testimonies of the survivors. Testimonies which are spoken aloud, received, documented, interpreted, and retransmitted place these events in our memories. However, the way in which a testimony can be interpreted hasitself become a contestable issue since there is a marketplace of memories where some dominate while others don't.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the act of witnessing and writing testimonies about the two major events of the twentieth century namely, the Holocaust and the Vietnam War. The inexpressibility of language, the use of testimonies and memoirs, the relation between narrative and history, and the divergent nature of language when it comes to defining these events forms the crux of this paper. For this purpose, I will compare and contrast Primo Levi's*Survival in Auschwitz* (1956) and Tim O'Brien's*The Things They Carried* (1990), the two testimonies which provide notable frameworks to investigate the language of war. Levi is concerned with the authenticity in answering about what happened during the Holocaust and how to keep the distortion between fact and fiction to the bare minimum. O'Brien's contention, however, is that there is no point in accounting what actually happened in the Vietnam War: "Things happened, things came to an end. There was no sense of developing drama."[1](O'Brien) And yet, there are points of digression in their contentions because of the unreliable nature of language which they use to define these events.

My fundamental argument is based on the assumption thatHolocaust andVietnam War (seemingly part of two very different paradigms) are'events of singularity' meaning that they are different from all other events not just based on some general rules or language but perceived as resisting and at times exceeding the pre-existing cultural determinations. In this sense, Holocaust andVietnam War can be seen as events which the known cultural frameworks fail to penetrate. Instead their constitution (as they exist in a particular time and place) goes far beyond those cultural norms which are generally used to make sense of everyday reality. They constitute, to use Giorgio Agamben's phrase, "a state of exception" in so far that, under such events, the law and fact becomes totally indistinguishable. They create a "zone of indifference" where the outside and the inside blurinto each other and where the

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hitherto unknown laws come into existence on their own.(Agamben 23)

[1]O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990. Web. 12 march 2014. <http://corysnow.files.wordpress.com/2009/12/ttc-full-text.pdf >.

This leads to a decisive presupposition: there are events which demand a new language. In other words, language is to be seen as separate from events since it is designed to comment upon rather than participate in them. In this manner, O'Brienactually challenges the reader's expectations to understand what actually happened in Vietnam War. As Philip D. Beidler states, "telling war stories is 'not a game. It's a form'…it must conform not to truth but to the imperatives of 'sense-making.'"Moreover, the violence perpetuated by war further complicates the issue as it distorts the language rendering the individual in a condition where he is---unable to speak. So after returning from war, Norman Bowker, in *The Things They Carried*, tries his hand at several professions: "He worked as an automotive parts salesman, a janitor, a car wash attendant and a short-order cook at the local A&W fast-food franchise but ultimately, he never found a place to go." (O'Brien) In other words, language failed to fill the lacuna between the event (Vietnam War) and thought-process (Bowker's psyche). In other instance, surreal language is paradoxically used to describe an event of death; Lemon's death was almost surreal and beautiful---"and when he died it was almost beautiful, the way the sunlight came around him and lifted him up and sucked him high into a tree full of moss and vines and white blossoms." (O'Brien) There were moments when O'Brien felt that war was nasty and war was fun. The effect of such usage of language extends beyond the realm of sense and creates an alternative account of actuality. This leads to complications in interpreting the veracity of testimonies.

[1]

Carl Philipp Gottfried von Clausewitz, a nineteenth-century Prussian General was among the foremost thinkers to highlight the dual nature of language, its ability to express some events while failing to describe the others. In*Clausewitz Puzzle*(2007), Andreas-Herbegg Rotheargues about Clausewitz's question "whether war is not 'just . . . another form of speech or writing.'" Rothe contextualizes Clausewitz's point of view by stressing that "while war has no logic of its own it does, as the 'speech or writing' of thought, have its own grammar." (Rothe 151) Clausewitz, being a realist who espoused the rationalist ideas of European Enlightenment, stressedthat "war is the continuation of politics by other means."According to him, war is an expression of politics which can only modify and not alter "the pre-existing general phenomenon of politics." (Rothe 152)Rothe, however, argues that Clausewitz failed to take into account two other tendencies that affect war other than politics: "primordial violence" and "chance within which the creative spirit is free to roam." (Rothe 157) It is important to note here that Clausewitz was partially correct in stating that war has no logic of its own but the rise of concentration camps in the twentieth century disputes his argument that war is merely a continuation of politics. At the end of WWII, we didn't return to a pure originary state, but rather a "new condition" where the earlier norm of 'state of exception' became a permanent reality.In concentration camps, power absolutely destroyed the human beings. As Levi states, in*Survival in Auschwitz,* "…with almost prophetic intuition, the reality was revealed

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to us: we had reached the bottom. It is not possible to sink lower than this; no human condition is more miserable than this, nor could it conceivably be so." (Levi 16)Post-Holocaust, the Israeli occupation of eastern Palestine since 1987, Camp Delta in Guantanamo bay, Cuba and Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad, Iraq for Prisoners-of-War (POW) are some examples which continues to exist as state of exception and follow policies and practices which have resemblanceto those found in Germany in the 1930s.

The brief digression to Clausewitz consolidates the fact that Holocaust as well as Vietnam War were exceptional events and language failed to fully explain them. The incommunicability of the experience of Holocaust, the silence which immediately followed it, gradually took the shape of testimony. "Speech," Hannah Arendt asserts, "is helpless when confronted with violence." (Dawes 158) Levi states "no one here speaks willingly" (Levi 18) because speech is drowned by violence and language, by contrast, becomes an act of resistance. Levi asserts that "we believe, 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 80)

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Silence then becomes a means of survival, an act of witnessingone's own suffering as well as that ofothers. Silence must not be viewed as trivializing the atrocities inflicted before and after the Holocaust. Levi himself states in his later essay "The Drowned and the Saved"(1986) that "the Nazi concentration camp system still remains a *unicum*, both in its extent and its quality. At no other place or time has one seen a phenomenon so unexpected and so complex: never have so many human lives been extinguished in so short a time, and with so lucid a combination of technological ingenuity, fanaticism and cruelty." (Levi 21) Silence then can be seen as constituting the first stage of an "unconscious testimony": a mode of access to the truth in the concentration camp. Shoshana Felman in her seminal book, *Testimony: Cries of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992)cites the example of Irma's dream from the second chapter of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*(1899) and states that her dreams constitute an "unconscious testimony" and the act of writing transforms the unconscious to the conscious or bring the testimony "into the realm of cognition." (Felman and Laub 16) Moreover, the act of writing not only embraces "what is witnessed, but what is begotten by the unconscious testimony of the dream." Thus, the conscious testimony contains the interpretation of Irma's dreams and also serves as "an approximation of a truth that, at the outset, was unknown but that was gradually *accessed* through the practice and process of the testimony."(Felman and Laub 16)Also, silence, as an act of survival, further determines the survival of the testimony, "of the story, at the crossroads between life and death." (Felman and Laub 44)

Dori Laub argues that a listener while reading or listening to the testimony acts as "a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*. The testimony to trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time." (Felman and Laub57) Laub states that the listener should know aboutthe trauma survivors' frequent retreat to silence while bearing the weight of witness.They do so in order to "protect themselves from the fear of being listened to---and of listening to themselves." For them, silence is a "fated exile…a home…a

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binding oath. To not return from this silence is rule rather than exception." (Felman and Laub58)To achieve full remembrance, a survivor needs a listener who will participate and become the "co-owner of the traumatic event." By stating this, Laub places the listener and not the survivor in an authoritative position. This idea resonates with Levi's position who states in *The* Periodic Table(1975)that

> The things I had seen and suffered were burning inside of me; I felt closer to the dead than the living, and felt guilty at being a man, because men had built Auschwitz, and Auschwitz had gulped down millions of human beings, and many of my friends, and a woman who was dear to my heart. It seemed to me that I would be purified if I told its story, and I felt like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, who waylays on the street the wedding guests going to the feast, inflicting on them the story of his misfortune." (Gordon 57)

According to Laub, the only way to make sense of the fragmented memories of the survivors comes with the endorsement of the listener. This process contains some kind of therapeutic value. Narration of the trauma heals the survivor as it moves the weight of the witnessing from the individual to a collective space. O'Brien hesitantly denies this argument and prefers his authoritative position which is based on his decision to describe the trajectory of meanings arising out of his testimony. He is aware of the fact that certain events are beyond the ambit of imagination and so he deliberately indulges in the free-play of meanings. He chooses to narrate his trauma in such a manner that the listener has no choice other than to accept the testimony on its face-value. The end result is probably therapeutic for the survivor but it does not help us to understand the ideological underpinnings of Vietnam War. O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and even Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* cannot claim to fully represent the experience of the events they describe, namely, Vietnam War and Holocaust. As these are autobiographical accounts written by those who themselves were part of the trauma, they cannot provide adequate reasons about why these events took place in the first place. These testimonies cannot impart knowledge about the perpetrators or a suitable model for their absurd behavior. This aspect further undermines the need for a testimony since it fails to make sense of genocide. This fundamental lack of understanding shows that these events can occur again as we lack the knowledge to prevent them. Agamben is fully aware of this dilemma and that is why he sees the postmodern era as 'permanently nihilistic' in nature.

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Andrea Liss in her book, *Trespassing the Shadows: Memory, Photography, and the Holocaust* (1998) cites Jean-Francois Lyotard's attackon the revisionist assaults made by Robert Faurisson who placed doubts on the existence of Holocaust as an event due to the absence of a single witness to gas chambers. Liss contextualizes Lyotard's argument that "the nonphrase that is silence is a resounding sentence." (Liss 8) She quotes Lyotard's famous metaphor of the earthquake:

> But the silence imposed on knowledge does not impose the silence of forgetting, it imposes a feeling (No. 22). Suppose that an earthquake destroys not only lives,

buildings, and objects but also the instruments used to measure earthquakes directly and indirectly. The impossibility of quantitatively measuring it does not prohibit, but rather inspires in the minds of the survivors the idea of a very great seismic force. The scholar claims to know nothing about it, but the common person has a complex feeling, the one aroused by the negative presentation of the indeterminate. Mutatis mutandis, the silence that the crime of Auschwitz imposes upon the historian is a sign for the common person. Signs (Kant Notices 3 and 4) . . . indicate that something which should be able to be put into phrases cannot be phrased in the accepted idioms (No. 23). . . . The indetermination of meanings left in abeyance [en souffrance], the extermination of what would allow them to be determined, the shadow of negation hollowing out reality to the point of making it dissipate, in a word, the wrong done to the victims condemns them to silence—it is this, and not a state of mind, which calls upon unknown phrases to link onto the name of Auschwitz. (Liss 9)

Lyotard's notion of "differend" which is similar to Immanuel Kant's notion of "feeling" and his borrowing of Ludwig Wittgenstein's term"language game" can provide a way to express the impossible.James Williams inhis book *Lyotard: Towards a Postmodern Philosophy* (1998) argues that Lyotard'sdescription ofthe postmodern conditionis to be seen in terms of a multiplicity of language games which have no common set of rules, norms, and values. There are different language games constantly in conflict with each other. The problem lies in the fact that these conflicts are unavoidable and irresolvable. An irresolvable conflict develops (differend) when two language games come into dispute over a specific case creating a situation where it is impossible to do justice to both. This has been termed by Lyotard as the "incommensurability of language games." This incommensurability is apparent to us only "through a feeling, the feeling of the sublime."(Williams 28)Thus, testimonies as acts of witnessing, as acts of sharing knowledge of an event which are also based on language games have no common measure with respect to the case they have to judge; they are mutually and exclusively incompatible.

This leads to the essential question about testimonial writing: what is the point of story-telling at all and then writing a testimony to an event in history? It also casts doubt on the belief that only something good can come of testimonies which belittles the scope of testimonial writings. Lyotard asks "what kind of accounts are just accounts of a given event and hence the basis for just political action?" (Williams 30) Williams argues that Lyotard's concept of the event is based on two crucial factors. First, "events cannot be fully represented" by any means whatsoever. Any justification of an event suffers from a lack and therefore it is "possible for such a justification to be wrong." Second, since it is possible for a particular event to exceed the pre-existing cultural determinations and thereby move beyond the "representation of any language game." (Williams 31) Occurrence of such an event will "mark the boundary of that particular game with another incommensurable game" and a new set of rules will be required to "account for the feeling, to do justice to it." Thus, "the postmodern condition," as Williams states, "is defined by incommensurable language games whose borders are revealed by

feelings." (Williams 32) It delegitimizes metanarratives such as the discourse of human emancipation or a progression towards moral well-being. Even science is displaced from its position of "ultimate arbiter of truth" and is rendered "incapable of legitimizing the other games." (Williams 33) This creates a very disconcerting state where we find ourselves in a fragmented societyamidst language games which are in conflict with each other and there is no absolute certainty of truth which is measured within incompatible moral and social codes. (Williams 37)

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Both Levi (optimistically passive) and O'Brien (passively optimistic)make their difficult choices. Levi makes the choice to survive, to consciously bear witness to Holocaust since

> according to our character, some of us are immediately convinced that all is lost, that one cannot live here, that the end is near and sure; others are convinced that however hard the present life may be, salvation is probable and not far off, and if we have faith and strength, we will see our houses and our dear ones again. The two classes of pessimists and optimists are not so clearly defined, however, not because there are many agnostics, but because the majority, without memory or coherence, drift between the two extremes, according to the moment and the mood of the person they happen to meet. Here I am, then, on the bottom. (Levi 26)

O'Brien also makes a choice to go to war which exposes the core of his own denial. He confesses that he was a coward and so he went to war:"I feared the war, yes, but I also feared exile. I was afraid of walking away from my own life, my friends and my family, my whole history, everything that mattered to me. I feared losing the respect of my parents. I feared the law. I feared ridicule and censure."(O'Brien) The need to tell a war story redeems the experience of displacement that American soldiers suffered at the hands of war. (Chen 20) The reasons behind O'Brien's over-eagerness to tell his stories could be therapeutic (which he hesitantly denies). It could be to ease of the trauma of seeing a Vietnamese baby lying nearby and calling him a "roasted peanut" or just a "crunchie munchies." In the Freudian understanding, "trauma…is given its meaning only when it is experienced a second time, only in retroactive fashion when it is articulated and told to an addressee." (Wright 100)

Vietnam War testimonies begin with the argument that Vietnam is unknowable, that only a dead Gook is a good Gook. O'Brien's testimony presents Vietnam as the new frontier where language fails and victimization and criminalization of American soldiers happen almost simultaneously. This assumption places a burden on the testimony to describe the war experience in a just manner. Since, as Lyotard points out, it is not possible to represent an event in its totality, O'Brien depicts Vietnam as a phantom which can't be seen and only felt by those who went across the paddy fields which were occasionally mortared but for the most part of the time remained silent as the war fought there was "nakedly and aggressively boring."(O'Brien) Language fails and feeling fills the vacant space which stresses the need for new conceptual frameworksto

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understand the limits of the language games. The conflicts, arising out of just modes of representation, about the incommensurability of the language game have to co-exist because they not only help the listener in remembering those fateful events but compel him to find ways of determining the truth which is essentially not available to its own speaker.

Levi's testimony, unlike O'Brien's is never able to fully detach itself from the trauma it narrates. There is no sense of closure in *Survival in Auschwitz* as it seems that Levi is not actually 'remembering' a past experience but 'recounting' a contemporary one. O'Brien returns home with his experience in Vietnam but Levi still remains confined in his Lager because the feeling of liberation from Auschwitz seemed too surreal to be true. As Levi states, "we all said to each other that the Russians would arrive, we were all sure of it, but at the bottom nobody believed it."(Levi 166) At the end, he felt joy closely followed by shame for having witnessed such crimes committed against humanity. His concern for the human condition is far more emphatic than O'Brien's because he never aestheticizes the experience of Auschwitz. He has suffered tremendously and so he narrates his helplessness, his dread in the act of witnessing the drowned ones who succumbed to the brutal conditions in the camp. Although he belongs to the category of those who come under the definition of saved in the chapter "The Drowned and the Saved," he acknowledges the fact that he was saved only in the physical sense. His spiritual and moral side drowned with others in that "gigantic biological and social experiment." (Levi 80)

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For Lyotard, and for many other posthumanist thinkers, "After Auschwitz" as a phenomenon delegitimizes the human condition as one truly universal experience. The memoir's Italian title, Se questo è un uomo ("If This is a Man") hints towards the lack with which nearly every testimony suffers. The truth-claims, the language used to make those claims, the experience and the knowledge generated based on those truth-claims remain partial. O'Brien testifies to Vietnam War with an immediate authority available to him for being the author. This authority itself justifies his narrative. Levi lacks that authority because Auschwitz created such dehumanizing situations that "I" itself became a suspect quality. It is difficult to decipher when "I" slips into "We" and begins to describe the collective state of human beings in the camp. It is only through his detached behavior and the will to survive that he survived Auschwitz. His testimony, as well as those of others, provides the necessary grounding to erect a critique of the postmodern condition.

O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* resists narrative closure, there effect upon the readers is incommensurable. Their testimonies include things which cannot be "phrased," things which are beyond human contemplation since the true witnesses to these events are the ones who succumbed to them. The act of witnessing obliges the individual to confront it with the known parameters and determinants. Since, the differences created by language games are not being expressed (incommensurability of language) and the system in place can see no wrong, the whole process leads to its undoing.(Williams 106) Lyotard's differend stands out notoriously as the "irresolvable conflict" cancelling the scope of justice completely. As a result, there is lack of knowledge which cannot aid us to prevent such an event from happening again. However, these testimonies are important

for the fact that they are reminders of those memories which were not ours to begin with; they are crucial in their representation of, what Tony Davies claims to be, the "vanishing point, the absolute zero of what is thinkable." As readers of these testimonies, it is our imperative to give priority to the feeling associated with these events. It is only by bearing witness to what is associated with these feelings can we find a way of effectively speaking for these events.

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