FALL 1999
Volume 51, Number 4

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Responsible for Every Single Pain: Holocaust Literature and the Ethics of Interpretation

> At no time has the earth been so soaked with blood. Fellowmen turned out to be evil ghosts, monstrous and weird. Ashamed and dismayed, we ask: Who is responsible?
>
> Abraham Joshua Heschel (1943)

THE STUDY OF LITERATURE is widely presupposed to be the interpretation of texts. As an object a book can sit around for years, resting comfortably on a library shelf, but as a *text* it does not exist at all unless it is read, interpreted, understood. A book is printed and bound; a text is worded and meant. The problem, then, is to discover the meaning beneath the words. With the aim of study never in dispute, the critical wars of the last fifty years have been largely methodological: one side chants that a text means just what its author intended; the other that its meaning exceeds the author's intention; and meanwhile, smaller units gather under the banners of differing and rival approaches to getting beneath the words. But what if a literary text makes a claim on its readers that is logically prior to meaning? What if it has an existence that is not merely independent of interpretation, but threatened by interpretation?

Imagine listening to a 70-year-old woman as she reads from the diary that she began to keep—in a little blank book she found at Sachsenhausen—in April 1945, when she was eighteen. She recites the Hungarian as her husband translates sentence by sentence into English:

> The train stopped at Auschwitz. And the next moment happened to me the most horrible thing in my life. Now came the moment when I was torn from my mother. She pleaded with a German soldier: "We want to go together." But he was heartless; he pushed her aside. I had only a few seconds to look back and see my mother and sister. Another soldier—that animal—shoved me along: "Go, go." Since then I have not seen my mother's brown eyes and I have

not felt any love. There has been no one to mean well by me. Every man looks after himself. In the whole world only a mother's love is selfless.[1]

Here is a text, as brief as a lyric, for which the training and working habits of academic criticism leave me unprepared. Is interpretation the appropriate response? And if so, how do I proceed? Do I point out to the woman what she has just said? Do I draw attention to her assumptions and rhetoric? Do I observe that she turns the ideology of difference back onto the German soldier, finding him—just as the Germans found the Jews—subhuman and immoral? Do I remark upon the gendered quality of her account? Imagine that the woman begins softly to weep. That her husband joins her. That she goes to him, saying, "You are thinking of your mother too?" That they cling to each other. How am I to respond?

Geoffrey Hartman, who helped to found the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimony at Yale University, has reflected as deeply as anyone upon the problem of responding to survivors. He insists it is not enough to listen, not enough even to empathize; survivor testimony is "a text in need of interpretation." And interpretation is the appropriate response, because it thwarts the tendency either to be numbed or to be moved overmuch. The worst possible outcome is to allow the "reactivated connection between survivors and their experience," the courage they display "in allowing themselves to recall a living death," to cause "paralysis or secondary trauma" in their listeners. An emotional identification, while necessary, "need not exclude a thoughtful, analytic response" (140). Survivor testimony "should not be used to substitute emotion for thought, or tears for the scholar's resolute and continuous inquiry into the character of the perpetrators, their methods, the nature of the system, or other issues of conscience" (qtd. in Miller 274).

As his use of the word *should* reveals, what Hartman proposes is an ethics of response to Holocaust texts. And as the word *should* also reveals, his ethical impulse is deontological. That is, he prescribes a rule: you shall not substitute tears for analysis in interpreting Holocaust testimony. In doing so, Hartman dichotomizes tears and inquiry, emotional identification and rational analysis, in a way that has become commonplace and perhaps even foundational in interpretive theory. The best-known version of the dichotomy belongs to Paul Ricoeur, who distinguishes a hermeneutic of recollection from a hermeneutic of suspicion. Under the guidance of recollection, interpreters understand that any human experience, no matter how extreme, has meaning for those who go through it. The task of interpretation then is to suspend amazement at the uncritical acceptance of this surface meaning and to enter into the experience. Under the guidance of suspicion, by contrast, interpreters assume that experience has a deeper, truer meaning—a meaning that is concealed from those who go through it. The task of interpreta-

[1] Edith Grossman Hollender, Unpublished Diary, May 1, 1945. Translated by Morris Hollender. Read aloud to (and recorded by) me in Watertown, Mass., in August 1997. Although Sachsenhausen was a male camp, women were imprisoned there during the last weeks before it was liberated on April 27, 1945.