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Jonathan L. Sherwood

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OTHERWISE THAN TESTIMONY, OR: HOW MIGHT TESTIMONY TESTIFY?

JONATHAN L. SHERWOOD

“Post-testimonial Holocaust Writing,” this title and theme prompts a number of questions. “Post- testimonial”: are we speaking here of writing done after the time and era of testimony that nonetheless directly concerns the Holocaust (for example, Cynthia Ozick’s “The Shawl”)? Literature fashioned after or according to already given testimonial evidence (say, Keneally’s *Shindler’s List* or Spiegelman’s *Maus*)? Or writing about the Holocaust, even written by survivors, that is purely fictional (for example, *The Forgotten* by Wiesel or the stories of Arnost Lustig)? Is the concern of this theme the fate or future of “Holocaust Testimony” as a vehicle for witnessing to the genocide against the Jews in a time after the era of direct testimony from survivors closes? Allow me to phrase my own thought concerning this panel’s theme of “post-testimony”: perhaps we are already and always “too late” for testimony, perhaps it is something we have never properly had. Allow me to explain: does not the incessant phrase of the survivor—“you will never understand”—already put as after or beyond or somehow outside a notion of testimony that is solely and simply devoted to the notion of giving over information. With this phrase—“you will never understand”—the mechanics of attestation are jammed. How, then, does testimony testify? If we are always to be outside of understanding, than what happens in hearing? What do we witness in the witness of testimony? So, in my all-too-brief-time, I want to think

about what we might be after with this notion of “post-testimony”, and, therefore, of “testimony” itself.

What I want to suggest is that the question of “testimony/post-testimony” is not simply a temporal one, that is, a question of what will happen to Holocaust testimony when the last survivors pass away. I take my initial cue from that great thinker after the quandaries of testimony and attestation, Søren Kierkegaard. He argued in *Philosophical Fragments* that, as concerns attesting and understanding, the auditor at two thousand years remove is no better or worse off than the apostles who may have heard the very words of Jesus.¹ Kierkegaard troubles the historical-critical question of being “too late to believe and understand” by claiming that even the apostles were “too late”, that the problem is not one of time and immediacy but rather of the very difficulties inherent in intersubjective communication itself. So, if the problem is in the dynamics of attestation, we can ask, in what manner, precisely, does testimony testify? Let us begin with a brief poem on memory by the Jewish survivor Paul Celan:

ICH KANN DICH NOCH SEHN ein Echo,
ertastbar mit Fühl-
wörtern, am Abschieds-
grat.

Dein Gesicht scheut leise,
wenn es auf einmal
lamphenhaft hell wird
in mir, an der Stelle,
wo man am schmerzlichsten Nie sagt.

I CAN STILL SEE YOU: an echo,
tactile with antenna-
words, on the ridge of
parting.

Your face quietly shrinks away
if suddenly
there is lamplike brightness

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

inside me, at the point
where most painfully one says, No.²

The poem begins positively enough: “you, I can still see, you can still be seen by me.” The poem itself, the antenna of words, feels as fingers do, “*ertasten*,” towards the echo of a you, an echo now on the ridge of parting, the knife’s edge of a taking leave. There, in the illuminated place of never, there the face, your face, shies away or shrinks back—*es scheut*. This verb signals not just a demure reticence, as in Michael Hamburger’s translation “Your face quietly shies” suggests, but also a withdrawing in dread, a fearfulness, a shunning, a skittering off—“your face shuns the point of brightness in me that would illuminate it, your face absences itself here in the light of my memory-point, at the sharp-edge of parting, the never-place or border where you are, but not, where you are only as an echo.” A “you” seen, felt, but as just beyond seeing and feeling, negatively identifiable as a painful absence.

As Freud poignantly puts it in his essay “Mourning and Melancholia”, in mourning that verges towards the melancholia he calls pathological, the shadow (the echo?) of the lost object falls upon the ego.³ This lost other hovers, is nearby, but precisely as a shadow, a shade, a ghostly semaphore. This reminds us of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice and certainly there are echoes of this story in Celan’s poem. The one lost, the one addressed or summoned to appear through the nether shafts of memory, Eurydice, the one who is now a shade or shadow, casts a shadow, an echo of memory, such a one is re-collected, gathered again to be returned to the light that would illumine a face, the face of the beloved, the absent. And yet, it is in this turning toward or heeding this recollected shadow-face, in trying to both summon and see it, that it, the face, precisely withdraws, shrinks away, that its spectral reality, as Freud taught, is revealed. Celan’s

² Paul Celan, *Gedichte in zwei Bänden II*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1975), 275 (my translation); also, *Poems of Paul Celan*, trans. Michael Hamburger (New York: Persea Books, 1988), 298-99. My translations of the two poems by Celan that I consider in this paper build from and alter Hamburger’s translations.

³ Sigmund Freud, *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989) 586.

poem indicates, then, it indeed testifies as testimony with its antennae-like words, but towards a spectral and vanishing visage, within the never-space of loss. The light of Orpheus' song, like Celan's poem of memory, seeks to sing the lost back into the light and life, but it is there, within this light of song, that the summoned shrinks back and away. As Krzysztof Ziarek notes regarding Celan's works of memory in his fine study, *Inflected Language: Towards a Hermeneutics of Nearness*, this turning towards another "is less a meaning of otherness itself than a semiosis of listening, that is, a sense no longer '-meaningful' or thematizable under the rubric of otherness but also not reducible to simple passiveness or receptivity."⁴ Thus, our interest in this poem is less in the seeing but in the semiotics of not seeing or, in the case of testimony, of not hearing.

DAS GESCHRIEBENE höhlt sich,
 das
 Gesprochene, meergrün,
 brennt in den Buchten,

 in den
 verflüssigten Namen,
 schnellen die Tümmeler,

 im geewigten Nirgends, hier,
 im Gedächtnis der über-
 lauten Glocken in—wo nur?

 wer
 in diesem
 Schattengeviert
 schnaubt, wer
 unter ihm
 schimmert auf, schimmert auf, schimmert auf?

THE ALREADY-WRITTEN hollows itself, already-
 the
 spoken, sea-green,
 burns in the coves,

⁴ Krzysztof Ziarek, *Inflected Language: Towards a Hermeneutics of Nearness: Heidegger, Levinas, Stevens, Celan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994) 186.

in the
liquefied names
leap the porpoises,
in the eternalized Nowhere, here
in the recollection of the over-
loud bells—but where?

who
in this shadowquadrant
pants, who
beneath it
shimmers, shimmers, shimmers?⁵

The never-place, “the eternalized Nowhere, here?”, a space measured in shadows, the words of recollection, “THAT WHICH WAS WRITTEN,” a self-hollowed and burning speaking-forth—such are the accumulated associations of testimony we find in this second poem by Celan. This nowhere-here marked off or framed by shadows or shades is the quarter or court wherein testimony would take place but it is an impossible court, a hollowed-out nowhere, the razor’s edge of loss. And what of the strange sound from within this testimonial poem, a panting: something *schnaubt*, something snorts or labors for breath. Who? Who here....but where?...in the spectral frame of the testimonial word, in this shadow-quadrant, labors to breath and who is it that begins to shimmer there? A wordless sound, this panting and snorting. What face slinks away amidst and despite the deafening and “over-loud” toning and ringing of memorial recollection and our unceasing attempts to recall and memorialize, to summon the lost, to properly mark their loss in the shadow court of testimony?

This poem shifts significantly in tone between the third and fourth strophes. There is first the already-given: the written, the spoken, the names and bells of remembrance, the *Geschriebene* that recalls the biblical *es steht geschrieben* or “thus it was written” of Luther’s translation. So, the question in this poem is not one so much of the absence or lack of

⁵ Paul Celan, *II*, 75 (my translation); also, Hamburger, Paul Celan, 250-51.

remembrance, memorialization and testimonial speech. These are already given. But the written hollows itself, spoken words burn, the names loosen and float and the bells of remembrance ring. The preterit subsistence of these already-given tokens of testimony is interrupted, all of a sudden, by two questions, where and who, questions which cast the poem beyond or, rather, all the more back into the realm of testimony. They stop short and reframe the decaying subsistence of testimony, questioning the nature of this already-given work, as if we had already known or presumed to know from where the voice of trauma issued or who was there laboring to speak. The twice invoked “who” in this last strophe leads us back again towards a semiosis of listening rather than of what is heard. The mono-audio-logical investment of manifest authority in the voice and the transmitting event of hearing is displaced by the poem’s end, leaving us uncertain of the surety of this voice and what we think we might hear from it.

I suggested above that in relation to testimony, that is, the giving and receiving of testimony as an event, we are already and always “too late.” By this, I do not mean that the events have already occurred, that there is “nothing we can do about it now” or even that we have “missed” the opportunity to hear in the passing away of survivors. Rather, there is a kind of belatedness built into the very occurrence of testimony. It is the “space” of this lateness, this shadow-stage of the drama of hearing, that we are concerned with here. When the late Emmanuel Levinas wrote about the “appearance” of the face or visage of the other, it was with locutions such as “the trace of an immemorial past”, an “untamable diachrony of non-historical, non-said time”, or an “irrecuperable delay.” The sense of these phrases seems close to what we have been following through Celan’s poems. “I opened...he had disappeared,” quotes Levinas in *Otherwise Than Being* from the Song of Songs, wherein the bride searches the city wide for her groom.⁶ Late at night, in the midst of slumber, the lover knocks on the door: “Open to me, my sister, my darling, my dove, my perfect one,” he says, and extends his hand around the door but is

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 88. Levinas is quoting from The Song of Songs, 5:6.

gone by the time the door is opened. The beloved is aroused, leaps up to answer, a response to a call without hesitation, a leaping toward the portal but already too late, a leaping up prior to being prepared, before one is ready: "I am not clothed," she says, you have taken me by surprise. The alterity of the other, the proximity of the other that can not be recuperated, to borrow a phrase of Celan's, by "the strong clocks that justify the splitting hour." Levinas describes this alterity:

Beyond the disclosure and exhibition of the known alternate, surprised and surprising, an enormous presence and the withdrawal of this presence. The withdrawal is not a negation of presence, nor its pure latency, recuperable in memory or actualization. It is alterity, without common measure with a presence or a past assembling into a synthesis in the synchrony of the correlative.⁷

For Levinas, there is no ever being "wakeful enough" in one's effort to meet the other at the threshold. One hears a call, yet already the caller is gone and already one is irremediably roused from one's slumbers and led out into a searching and vagrant night, one leaps across the razor's edge of parting and into a night of search and longing. But the beloved is not met there, at the threshold—a vacant embrace. This "already gone" is the "irrecoverable delay" that leaves a "trace of an immemorial past," a past called immemorial because it is absent even from this trace—echo of a voice, empty portal, vanishing visage. Thus it is that the relation to the alterity of another, what Levinas calls "proximity," "is not a state, a repose, but, a restlessness, null site, outside of the place of rest. It overwhelms the calm of the non-ubiquity of a being which becomes a rest in a site."⁸ This relation to an other is the question of "who" and "where" beyond the stasis of the "already-given". This encounter with the other is a non-encounter, or rather, an "otherwise-than-encountered." As Levinas

⁷ Levinas, *Otherwise*, 90.

⁸ Levinas, *Otherwise*, 82.

writes, “proximity does not enter into the common time of clocks, which makes meetings possible. [It] is a disturbance of the rememberable.”⁹

In this sense, this other-encounter is always a disturbance in memory, a memory of memory’s disturbance, rather than some thing that memory simply grasps, has, holds onto and recollects. The other is remembered as a disturbance in or interruption of what Levinas, borrowing a phrase from Spinoza, calls one’s *conatus essendi*, one’s perseverance in being. From the start, and this can not be over emphasized, one is already “too late” vis-à-vis the other, the relation is already belated, I have always been surprised, always taken “off my guard” and am never ready enough, am too naked. I always turn too soon to look back, before the time is ripe or I am prepared, but this too soon is already too late and the time, in fact, is never ripe. Memory or recollection is not a *Wiederholung* in the sense of the repetition of the same. Rather, it iterates a disturbance in the same, it calls one out of the bed of repose, return and sleep. Can we even say that memory is the hollowing out of remembrance?

We began with testimony and the testimonial poems of Celan, poems I take as explorations of traumatic memory. There we find dynamics of memory at work that variously delineate the vanishing of the testimonial *Sache*, the thing or matter of memory about which testimony is concerned: the visage that turns from the light of memory, the echo, the laboring-to-breath something, that which shimmers beneath the shadow-court of the already-written. So, we can say regarding testimony, that it itself is “too late”, that it itself is hollowed out, that it is a memory of the immemorial, a memorial to that which cannot be quite memorialized or remembered. In linking Celan and Levinas in this paper, I want to emphasize a kind of echoing between the two. In Celan’s poems there is the strange iteration of an irrecuperable memory. Similarly, in Levinas’ thinking this theme of an interrupted or disrupted encounter occurs intersubjectively. Memory, as I said above, becomes the disturbance of memory or the memory of memory’s disruption; memory is precisely something that, as Levinas wrote, cannot be disclosed, recuperated, actualized or exhibited. Such is

⁹ Levinas, *Otherwise*, 89.

the loss of loss. And such is the memory of loss, or the loss of the memory of loss, the mourning of the inability to properly mourn, the jamming up of remembrance and mourning. Regarding the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice, Maurice Blanchot wrote this in *The Space of Literature*: Orpheus is “no less dead than [Eurydice]—dead, not of that tranquil worldly death which is rest, silence, and end, but of that other death which is death without end, the ordeal of the end’s absence.”¹⁰ Strange shadow of the lost object. A call that surprises as an irremissible demand, yet a call that is without exception unassumable— impossible mourning, impossible testimony, impossible remembrance. Too late comes the mourner to mourning, too late comes the poet to memory, too late comes the receiver of testimony to her desire to properly hear. “You will never understand”.

This is what Levinas calls the “iteration of exposure” or the strange institution of disturbance, a disturbance both in my memory of the other and in my own being. The exposure in belatedness to the shying away of the other, the flying after this other—our reception of testimony is precisely in not receiving it. This awaiting- towards is an awaiting never alert or awake enough, it is an awaiting on that precisely which cannot come, which does not properly arrive—my having the other in recollection. I think that Levinas meant something like this when, in an all-too short essay on Celan’s poetry, he identified within it a certain “insomnia in the bed of Being, like the impossibility of curling up to shut one’s eyes.” This is the inability to return to a somnolent existence after the vanishing of an other, this is the state of being too late. So, I think that the question implicit in the theme of this panel—“What to do when the era of testimony passes”—misses something crucial. It precisely misses the point that we have always been “post-testimonial”, that testimony has never been present to us as something in our grasp, that there is always something in testimony of an attestation, in the full sense of Heidegger, to the *unheimlich*, the uncanny, the not-at-home: it disturbs, it rouses us into “who?” and “where?”, beyond any simple answering. I offer these

¹⁰ Maurice Blanchot, “Inspiration”, in *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 172.

thoughts not out of an interest in modish or pedantic approaches to something as upsetting and difficult as Holocaust testimony. Rather, this meditation has been directly inspired by my own experiences of moral and philosophical confusion and turmoil in the face of the double bind of these twinned admonitions: “Never forget” and “You will never understand.” Within the knot of that bind, there opens the space in which the other shies away and in which I, forever displaced, set out into the night on its track.