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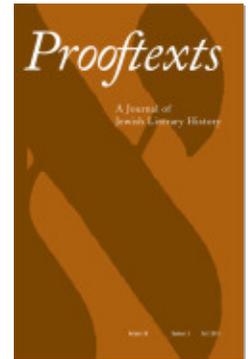
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Impossible Holocaust Metaphors: The *Muselmann*

SHARON B. OSTER

This article challenges the widespread scholarly assumption that the term Muselmann, ubiquitous in Holocaust survivor accounts, denotes a fixed, silent, concentration-camp “type” of prisoner who, nearest to death, was fated to die. Rather, based on evidence from a range of oral testimonies and firsthand accounts, I show that by contrast, Muselmänner did not enter into a new ontological category or a different species. Rather, “Muselmannhood” was, surprisingly, a temporary condition for many who claimed to have been Muselmänner and yet survived. This implies that they were similar to other prisoners in kind, differing rather in degree, along a broad continuum of deprivation, starvation, and proximity to death. Their routinely designated status as ultimate “others” thus reflects a strategy among the living to fend off approaching death, and a renunciation of human solidarity that brought survivors great shame.

Given this new, more fluid sense of the term, I link literary figurations of the Muselmann to other “death-in-life” metaphors in memoirs by Charlotte Delbo, Elie Wiesel, and Ruth Klüger, who struggle to translate the quotidian extremity of death-in-life without resorting to specious euphemism. These writers invoke the Muselmann as their own shadowy Auschwitz double, a mirror of the self-that-died for the self-that-lived, an “impossible metaphor” that yields meaning precisely through dissimilarity. This study contributes to Holocaust Studies an ethical mode of reading the Muselmann among a newly assembled constellation of such impossible metaphors. These failed comparisons, which demand our witness in the form of active interpretation, I argue, mark the “aesthetics of survival” as efforts to translate, however imperfectly, the impossibility of “surviving”—only half-alive, part victim, part witness, even part collaborator—a place from where, as Delbo puts it, “None of us was meant to return.”

If the poem that precedes Primo Levi’s memoir *Survival in Auschwitz* (*Se questo è un uomo*; 1958) is meant as an epigraph, it also confronts us as a command, a threat, and finally, a curse. Levi directly addresses and constructs us as readers,

we, who reside safely on the other side of the barbed wire. His call to action and the express threat to those who fail to meet it encapsulate in fine an ethical demand placed upon readers of Holocaust memoirs:

You who live safe
 In your warm houses,
 You who find, returning in the evening,
 Hot food and friendly faces:
 Consider if this is a man
 Who works in the mud
 Who does not know peace
 Who fights for a scrap of bread
 Who dies because of a yes or a no.
 Consider if this is a woman,
 Without hair and without name
 With no more strength to remember,
 Her eyes empty and her womb cold
 Like a frog in winter.
 Meditate that this came about:
 I commend these words to you.
 Carve them in your hearts
 At home, in the street,
 Going to bed, rising;
 Repeat them to your children,
 Or may your house fall apart,
 May illness impede you,
 May your children turn their faces from you.¹

Published separately as the poem “Shema,” these verses imply a new commandment, revising the most important prayer in Jewish liturgy, *Shema, Yisroel*: “Listen, Israel: God is our Lord, God is One.”² An affirmation of Judaic monotheism, the prayer follows Moses’ recitation to the Israelites of God’s Ten Commandments,

one of many reminders in Deuteronomy of their covenant with God as they prepare to enter the Promised Land.

Like the biblical *Shema*, Levi's poem also asks us to listen to a message of terrible urgency—not of God's oneness, however, but of the brokenness of humanity. It asks us to suspend basic categories of human experience—gender, family, community, food, clothing, shelter—and the meaning of simple words such as *work*, *bread*, *yes*, and *no*. Will we recognize the powerless and reduced Levi as a “man”? Or one entirely stripped of her biological and cultural femininity as a “woman”? Our words seem to conceal as much as they reveal. Levi writes, “We say ‘hunger,’ we say ‘tiredness,’ ‘fear,’ ‘pain,’ we say ‘winter’ and they are different things. They are free words, created and used by free men who lived in comfort and suffering in their homes.”³ Levi's poem suggests that ordinary “free” words no longer suffice to translate the vast gap in experience between survivors and those born long after; it calls for a new order of post-Holocaust language, and a new way to read.

“If the Lagers had lasted longer,” Levi wrote in 1947, “a new, harsh language would have been born.”⁴ Such a language, one we have inherited, arguably *was* born in the Nazi concentration camps, the centers of mass-manufactured death in the all-encompassing ordeal David Rousset dubbed *L'Univers Concentrationnaire*.⁵ Victor Klemperer called it LTI, *Lingua Tertii Imperii*, the invented linguistic system of the Nazi machinery that masked the quotidian nature of death in the concentration camps.⁶ One unique and troubling euphemism born of that system is the peculiar camp moniker for the emaciated and dying, the “Muslims” (*Muselmänner*). Though not a Nazi invention itself, “*Muselmann*”—arguably the *Ur*-figure of reduced humanity in concentration camp testimony—shares with euphemistic phrases like “selection,” “shower” (*Brausebad*), “work will set you free” (*Arbeit Macht Frei*), “special treatment” (*Sonderbehandlung*), and most famously, the “final solution” (*Die Endlösung*), the task of obscuring the workings of the death machine for victims and making them palatable for perpetrators.⁷ Hitler's “profanation of the German language,” as Nachman Blumenthal contends, did conceal criminal acts, infusing the Nazi jargon of mass murder with sentimentality, religious fervor, and juridical validity, making its very use a criminal act.⁸ Yet I want to question Blumenthal's claim that “[c]ertainly no language that can express the horrors, the atrocities, of this period has yet been devised.”⁹ I would argue that this language *has* been devised, and remains in use, though it

requires a new way of reading to expose the extreme brutality its words disguise. The term *Muselmann*, as I will show, is a profound case in point.

Survivor-writers communicate in the language we have, but heighten our attention to particular words, as Levi does, to defamiliarize and revise their meaning through the lens of Nazi atrocity. Within the concentration camp lexicon, the term *Muselmann* refers to the masses of starved, emaciated, near-dead concentration camp victims. When used as a shorthand for the extremity of atrocity itself, however, the term becomes a simplification, and in many cases a misnomer, requiring revision. The term demands our closest attention for it captures the most horrific paradoxes of the concentration camps: the everyday comingling of death and life, and the breakdown of human solidarity between prisoners deemed *Muselmänner* and those who ultimately looked away. The ethical function of this term cannot, therefore, be overstated, whether used in the camps or in post-Holocaust testimony. The term *Muselmann* is unique in Nazi jargon, because it designates the transient, near-death, or life-in-death condition that all concentration camp prisoners endured, that some survived but most did not, and which, for the living, “constituted a permanent element of camp life,” since the *Muselmänner* “died everywhere: standing at roll call, being herded to work, in barracks and outside barracks, on the camp roads and in the camp toilets; they died unassisted or they were beaten to death.”¹⁰ Although referred to in account after account of Auschwitz as a clearly designated group, this group could just as well include the other near-dead, reduced prisoners (those described in different terms), including even survivor-writers themselves. So uncanny, so frightful, is this resemblance among all the dying prisoners that the use of this particular term, *Muselmann*, arguably *created* the unique category of prisoner it was meant to describe, thereby imposing an ethical distance between those still living and those pronounced doomed to die. The name *Muselmann* thus announces a renunciation of sorts, of those placed in a discrete category beyond help and reach, beyond humanity. For survivor-writers upon reflection, subsequently, the term *Muselmann* serves as a profound metaphor for the extreme yet quotidian degradation and proximity of death that characterized the concentrationary universe, that the survivor-writer lived yet outlived, and that, for Levi at least, our “free” language otherwise fails to express.

Levi’s notion that our language fails us points to a second problem that scholars have perpetuated in post-Holocaust critical discourse. Having uncritically

adopted Levi's designation of the *Muselmänner* as "the drowned," we have overlooked many of "the saved," in oral accounts, interviews, and less widely circulated narratives in which survivors refer to themselves as one-time *Muselmänner*. In transcripts of interviews from the Holocaust Oral History Project, archived in The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, for example, survivors such as Herbert Treitel describe themselves as former *Muselmänner*:

TREITEL: "I was a Muselman."

(Wife added, "It's a term well known.")

Yah, very well known. Muselman is the end. They are ready to go to the oven.

INTERVIEWER: People that were in such a debilitated condition.

TREITEL: Deteriorated. This I had already from what I still lost a lot of weight. It was too hard . . .¹¹

In spite of his physical debilitation, Treitel states that he was chosen by an "SS man" for work as an electrician and, as he put it, "that saved my life. Then I was already a person. A prisoner, but a person."¹² Treitel's account implies that as a "Muselman" he was not a "person"—whether socially dead or sentenced to die. When he became useful again and was recognized as such, however, he felt himself a "person" once more. In Treitel's words, he was not "ready to go to the oven."¹³ This one example of a former *Muselman* illuminates the ethical atrocity that so many were deemed and dismissed as fated to die, since this condition turns out to have been, in some cases, temporary. Rereading the literary figure of the *Muselman* within the context of survivor self-representations, I hope to show, reveals a more fluid relationship between the "drowned" and the "saved" than we have acknowledged, and lays bare a painful ethical dilemma for readers who wish to rise to Levi's challenge.

THE DROWNED AND THE SAVED?

Survivor-writers of the Holocaust invariably struggle to "explain the inexplicable," as Charlotte Delbo put it.¹⁴ Writers like herself—Levi, Elie Wiesel, Tadeusz

Borowski—had to reclaim a fresh camp double-speak hardened by use, strip away its deceptive veneer, and rediscover a faith in literal, concrete diction. We see this effort manifest in Levi's early work as he transforms our "free" words through poetic incantation and the curse.¹⁵ Three commands structure the poem's central verses: "Meditate," "Carve," and "Repeat." If chanting the biblical *Shema* is an act of witness to God's existence, then Levi's reader must also step up to witness the reason for which this book was written, and receive the story that Levi kept alive and which, in turn, kept him alive.¹⁶ Yet as he "commends," or commands, his words to us in a gesture of trust, he pulls us into an essentially impossible covenant: turning the page, we consent to, but can never really fulfill, what it demands.

The poem is simultaneously a call to bear witness and a demand for critical interpretation. On the one hand, Levi's story ought to alter us permanently, with tangible, painful effects when, like the Israelites, we "carve" his words into our metaphorical "hearts."¹⁷ As with the biblical *Shema*, this recitation should be private and public ("At home, in the street"), in the morning, at night, and for all time: "teach them to your children and speak of them when you are at home, when traveling on the road, when you lie down and when you get up."¹⁸ Yet whereas Moses' speech to God's Chosen presents "both a blessing and a curse," Levi offers only the curse.¹⁹ Levi's commands become increasingly untenable until with a simple word, "Or," he thrusts the reader away. If Moses threatens those who dare stray into idolatry, who "forget God your Lord, and follow other gods," with being "totally annihilated," Levi levels his final curse, lest we forget.²⁰ If we, his chosen readers, fail to honor this new covenant, what Uri Cohen calls a "new religion of memory of Auschwitz," and to repeat Levi's story ad infinitum, then like God's apostates, we should meet the same cruel fate, the loss of health, home, safety, and family that Levi, himself, an innocent man, just endured.²¹

On the other hand, bearing witness is no silent, passive act; it demands an ongoing dialogue and our active interpretation of survivor accounts. Like other memoirists who negotiate what can and cannot be conceived across the "old, rusty barbed wire" and blown-up bridges that, in Ruth Klüger's terms, divide then and now, them and us,²² Levi puts camp jargon into comparative relations with the terms of free experience. The covenant into which Levi draws us may be destined to fail, but such comparisons nonetheless create meaning through what I call the

“impossible metaphor.” Charlotte Delbo, for example, compares piles of “nude corpses in the snow” to “dummies” in store windows.²³ Both refer to bald, lifeless human figures, but mannequins are typically seen “wearing a dress, shoes, a wig, their arms folded in affected gestures”²⁴—metaphorical vehicles for living women who will someday be bedecked in finery. Delbo’s dummies, by awful contrast, are “[w]hite with brown toenails. There is something ridiculous about these cocked-up toes. Horrifyingly laughable.”²⁵ They are, after all, not factory-made figures but “yesterday’s companions,” with no meaningful reference beyond themselves.²⁶ The comparison is undone as quickly as it is made; yet the metaphor yields meaning through *dissimilarity*, through its failure to translate between vehicle and tenor.²⁷

This rhetorical pattern of radical dissimilarity reaches its nadir in the figure of the *Muselmann*. Like Delbo’s dummies, within camp jargon the term *Muselmann*, biologically speaking, denoted prisoners dying of severe malnutrition, on the brink of death, but also the fated or fatally resigned: “the weak, the inept, those doomed to selection” for the gas chambers.²⁸ The Yad Vashem lexicon finds an additional source for the fated, prostrate figure in the image of the praying Muslim:

German term widely used among concentration camp inmates to refer to prisoners who were near death due to exhaustion, starvation, or hopelessness. The word *Muselman* literally means “Muslim.” Some scholars believe that the term originated from the similarity between the near-death prone state of a concentration camp *Muselmann* and the image of a Muslim prostrating himself on the ground in prayer.²⁹

The comparison between dying Jews and living Muslims may strike us as curious, even potentially tendentious, but we should resist the temptation to project a Jewish–Muslim (let alone an Israeli–Palestinian) political conflict onto the figure of the *Muselmann*.

In a book-length cultural history of Jewish–Arab relations in which he demonstrates that the “Muslim” has long appeared as a “figure of absolute subjection,” Gil Anidjar argues that the *Muselmann* is, in fact, a new iteration of the stereotypical fatalistic Muslim now projected onto concentration camp victims.³⁰ Here I am interested in the move from description into metaphor, and the ethical

implications of the slippage between the physical and the metonymical. If near-dead prisoners were believed to have contributed to their own fate, to have renounced their will and given up, then the *Muselmann* becomes a stand-in, retrospectively, for those Jews who, as Abba Kovner famously implied in his 1941 call for revolt, went “like sheep to the slaughter.”³¹

If we look closely, the Yad Vashem entry also implies another, less obvious ethical claim, namely that *Muselmänner* were victims of *others'* renunciation, due to a contagious fatal condition they seemed to carry:

Many victims, totally lacking the wherewithal to adapt, reached this stage soon after arrival in a camp. Other prisoners succumbed to sickness, physical abuse, hunger, and overwork.

One could identify *Muselmänner* by their physical and psychological decline; they were lethargic, indifferent to their surroundings, and could not stand up for more than a short period of time. Most other prisoners avoided contact with *Muselmänner*, in fear of contracting the condition themselves.

The Nazis running the camps considered the *Muselmänner* undesirable, because they could not work or endure camp rule. Thus, during selections, these victims were the first to be sentenced to death. A person at the *Muselmann* stage had no chance for survival; he or she would not live for more than a few days or weeks.³²

Not only does the term blur generic categories, referring at once to a figure, a medical designation, an anthropological type, an ethical category, or all of these, but a crucial contradiction emerges: “a person at the *Muselmann* stage” suggests a transitory condition, even though “the *Muselmann*” denotes a type, those who “succumbed,” in “decline,” with “no chance.” According to this latter view, the *Muselmann* is never oneself, but one who has become other—beyond morality, thought, hope, and help, as in Jean Améry’s account: “the prisoner who was giving up and was given up by his comrades, [who] no longer had room in his consciousness for the contrasts good and bad, noble or base, intellectual or unintellectual.

He was a staggering corpse, a bundle of physical functions in its last convulsions.”³³ In other words, he was reduced to a material body.³⁴

In spite of the term’s uncertain origin, debatable meanings, and problematic associations, *Muselmann* has been absorbed uncritically into our cultural lexicon as a reified “type,” above all denoting the other, the one who *did not survive*. This is most profoundly the case for Primo Levi, who described the *Muselmänner* in *Survival in Auschwitz* as the “complete witnesses” in whose “stead” we speak, “by proxy.”³⁵ We must, Levi insists, break their silence, bear witness, and heed Simon Wiesenthal’s warning that the SS militiamen not be the only ones left “to dictate the history of the Lagers.”³⁶ The record shows how Nazis attempted to destroy all evidence and witnesses to their crimes: for example, in the case of the *Sonderaktion* 1005, in which prisoners were employed on the Eastern Front to exhume mass graves created by the *SS-Einsatzgruppen* and burn the evidence; the isolation and eventual murder of the Auschwitz *Sonderkommando*; and the blowing up of Auschwitz crematoria by the SS and infamous “death marches” at the war’s end.³⁷ Levi thus describes a recurring dream of “the ever-repeated scene of the unlistened-to story,” epitomizing the urgency to testify and be heard as the very end of survival itself.³⁸ Years later, in the essay “Shame” (1986), however, upon reflection, he found it “monstrous” that he might have been saved in order to “bear witness,” since in his mind only “the worst survived, that is, the fittest; the best all died.”³⁹

Do we uncritically accept that, as Levi implies, the *Muselmänner* represent “the best”? That they are morally superior simply for being the least “fit” to adapt to the Lager’s moral and social degradation? Retrospectively placing himself among the “worst,” those who lacked “the strength and opportunity to act within the Lager in defense of and to the advantage of their companions,” Levi admits experiencing tremendous shame upon liberation, and wrote “in permanent search of a justification” for his rank among the living.⁴⁰ Levi’s urgency suggests that absent substantive physical evidence of Nazi crimes—the maimed, tortured, and gassed bodies not burned, bones pulverized, and ashes scattered into the very landscape—only photographs and other remnants remained “the best.” Levi thus insists that the history of the Lagers is that of the privileged, the exceptional few who lived, not the “true” or “complete witnesses,” the *Muselmänner* on whose behalf he felt he must speak:

I must repeat: we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses . . . we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. 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. *They are the rule, we are the exception*. . . . Even if they had paper and pen, the drowned would not have testified because *their death had begun before that of their body*. Weeks and months before being snuffed out, they had already lost the ability to observe, to remember, to compare and express themselves. *We speak in their stead, by proxy*.⁴¹

The “Muslims,” Levi insists, “the rule,” would have been the most authentic witnesses because they looked directly into the face of death, as Gorgon legend would have it, but turned to stone: “their death had begun before that of their body.”⁴² What is entombed in these stony faces, however, is precisely Levi’s shame for surviving, and his memory of the “mute” living dead. This is the subtext of his comments: not *death*—which all witnessed all around them all day long—but their utter abandonment by those like Levi who survived, and the breakdown of human solidarity this reflects. This is the unique truth to which each silent *Muselmann* was the “complete witness.”

The ethical paradox of the *Muselmann*, then, is how Levi, the survivor, becomes the surviving double. Out of shame for having lived, he feels an imperative to speak “in their stead, by proxy,” the living double of those whom he could do nothing to help, and with whom he once denied having a significant relation. In *Survival in Auschwitz*, encapsulating his memoir’s structural descent into an abysmal inferno, Levi depicted the *Muselmänner’s* downward spiral into death as, notably, a fated one:

All the *musselmans* who finished in the gas chambers have the same story, or more exactly, *have no story*; they followed the slope down to the bottom, like streams that run down to the sea. On their entry into the camp, through basic incapacity, or by misfortune, or through some banal incident, they are overcome before they can adapt themselves; they are beaten by

time, they do not begin to learn German, to disentangle the infernal knot of laws and prohibitions until their body is already in decay, and *nothing can save them* from selections or from death by exhaustion. Their life is short, but their number is endless; they, the *Muselmänner*, the drowned, *form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men* who march and labour in silence, *the divine spark dead within them*, already too empty to really suffer. *One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death*, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand.⁴³

Like Ulysses' drowned mates in Dante's *Inferno*, here, the camp's doomed "have no story" except the one the survivor (Ulysses, Levi) can tell for them.⁴⁴ Significantly, Levi denies identification and insists on differentiation: whatever the imminent causes of their deaths, the drowned seem fated to die by forces greater than themselves, so that "nothing can save them." Nothing or *no one* could save them? As he later admits in "Shame," Levi feels complicit, that he "might be alive in the place of another, at the expense of another."⁴⁵ This postliberation "self-accusation" consists in his having "failed in terms of human solidarity," in "having omitted to offer help" to the weaker companion "hounding you with his demands for help or with his simple presence, itself an entreaty."⁴⁶ Undoubtedly real *Muselmänner* were such "weaker companions." Yet only in 1986 does Levi depict himself as interchangeable with those who died; in the 1947 text, he still set them apart: the "anonymous mass" disintegrating their bodies into "matter" well before they died, the "divine spark," he seemed to rationalize, already "dead within them."⁴⁷

In line with Levi's earlier, more influential account, *Muselmänner* figure in critical discussions as the Lager's quintessential victims, fated to die by definition, their deaths taken, in retrospect, as a matter of course. Like Améry, German sociologist Wolfgang Sofsky sees the *Muselmann* as a "human being in the process of dissolution," due to starvation, emaciation, and social ostracism. On the one hand, the *Muselmann* is the mark of the Nazi regime's "absolute power," the "living skeletons" they created, "genuine inventions of the concentration camp."⁴⁸ "Trapped in a state of mental agony and social abandonment," the *Muselmann* "succumbed to a kind of inner sclerosis. The soul self-destructed, collapsing into total apathy and

torpor. The person lost all ability to act.⁴⁹ Yet on the other hand, verbs of renunciation like “succumbed” and “collapsing” support Sofsky’s claim that anyone lacking “self-discipline” and action quickly became “a nonentity, a no one.”⁵⁰ Those “who no longer can respect themselves forfeit the attention of others,” he argues, creating a cycle of mutual indifference between *Muselmänner* and other prisoners, the one mirroring the misery of the other.⁵¹ The *Muselmann*, in other words, contributes to his own status as a social pariah, a distinct type whose death was inevitable.

Muteness, invisibility, and inevitable death are the qualities ascribed these figures repeatedly by those who, significantly, were not *Muselmänner* themselves, whether post-Holocaust scholars or survivors struggling to articulate what they witnessed. But some *Muselmänner*, contra Levi and Sofsky, actually survived. Their survival, their self-definition as one-time *Muselmänner*, and their very testimonies suggest that they were not part of a fixed, doomed, “type,” but who rather experienced a transient condition of physical deprivation and social death that some survived. We must, therefore, distinguish the silent, ephemeral, ghostlike, *literary Muselmann* from actual people deemed *Muselmänner*, who composed an enormous, ubiquitous, transient population, visible everywhere according to eyewitness accounts, and who were—if the exceptions prove the rule—quite capable of speaking and not always doomed. Judging from the testimonies of those few who survived to give them, *Muselmänner* were not a silent, invisible breed apart. Rather, by their own accounts, they were experientially similar to other prisoners *in kind*, differing only *in degree*, along a broad continuum of deprivation, starvation, and proximity to death.

AUSCHWITZ DOUBLES

Those who lived to tell about their suffering as *Muselmänner* experienced it as a temporal phase akin to the “second self” many survivors tried to leave behind the electrified barbed wire fence. Robert Jay Lifton describes how the creation of a second “Auschwitz self” enabled Nazi doctors to do the work of murder in a “Faustian bargain with the diabolical environment.”⁵² Indeed, Lifton argues, such “doubling” was inevitable, a reaction to confrontations with, unsurprisingly, those deemed *Muselmänner*. “Auschwitz as an *institution*—as an atrocity-producing situation,”

he claims, “ran on doubling,” a psychological necessity to protect “one’s life and work” from being “interfered with either by the corpses one helped to produce or by those ‘living dead’ (the *Muselmänner*) all around one.”⁵³ For Lifton, this doubling was a temporary strategy for perpetrators.⁵⁴ But it also occurred among victims. For Charlotte Delbo, the effects of such doubling were irreversible. She describes having her “Auschwitz double” always right next to her, enclosed within a tough “skin of memory”:

Auschwitz is etched so deeply in my memory that I cannot forget one moment of it. —So you are living with Auschwitz? —No, I live *next to it*. Auschwitz is there, unalterable, precise, but enveloped in the skin of memory, an impermeable skin that isolates it from my present self. . . . No doubt, I am very fortunate in not recognizing myself in the self that was in Auschwitz . . . everything that happened to that other, the Auschwitz [self], now has no bearing upon me, does not concern me, so separate from one another are this deep-lying memory and ordinary memory.⁵⁵

Delbo insists her Auschwitz self is enveloped in an “impermeable skin” and thus “has no bearing” upon her, but occasionally becomes permeable in morbid nightmares: “I feel it throughout my whole body which becomes a mass of suffering; and I feel death fasten on me, I feel that I am dying.”⁵⁶ The threat of death’s grip suggests a “*Muselman* self” of sorts, lying in wait to haunt Delbo. The “deep-lying memory” of a once temporary condition, in other words, never quite ends. She awakens with a start, and it “takes days for everything to get back to normal . . . for the skin of memory to mend again.”⁵⁷ Delbo’s two selves, past and present intruding upon each other, vying for vocal primacy, form the basis of Lawrence Langer’s notion of “deep memory.”⁵⁸ For Langer, “deep memory” knows “what common memory cannot know but tries nonetheless to express.”⁵⁹ But Delbo’s dreams suggest that the two selves, encased in “deep” and “common” memory, respectively, are not so distinct. Much as one wants to keep the traumatic “Auschwitz self” in an alternate time and space—like the desire to maintain the *Muselman* as absolutely other—both conditions are actually more alarmingly fluid in relation to the self. It may thus be more

helpful to speak of what one survivor and self-described *Muselmann*, Bronislaw Goscinski, called “Muselmannhood [*das Muselmanntum*].”⁶⁰

If we view *Muselmannhood* as a temporary condition rather than a fixed category of identity, we can better understand how the term functions in both Holocaust and post-Holocaust contexts. Within their daily torturous routine, concentration camp prisoners, helpless to secure their own well-being, let alone that of others, faced relentless challenges. However regrettable, avoiding those closest to death had practical advantages. Levi voices this logic in *Survival in Auschwitz*, recounting prisoners’ reactions to news of an imminent “selection,” the death sentence in the gas chambers for those deemed unfit to work:

The young tell the young that all the old ones will be chosen. The healthy tell the healthy that only the ill will be chosen. Specialists will be excluded. German Jews will be excluded. Low Numbers will be excluded. You will be chosen. I will be excluded.⁶¹

Subjected to this gruesome parody of justice, no one willingly accepts this “chosen” designation. Everyone wants to avoid *Muselmannhood*. If being chosen as *Muselmänner* signified a contagious contamination by death, then placing those so designated into a different human category created the illusion of containing it.⁶² As sociologist Anna Pawelczynska describes, the *Muselmann* was despised, reviled, and subjected to social death by other inmates:

The living could identify with the dying through compassion or through the vision of their own fate. They could also detach themselves from the dying—ranging themselves with the world of the living, the others with the world of the dead. . . . Only in exceptional cases could a sympathetic person help. By imagining their own fate prisoners lost the remains of their psychic strength, which they needed for self-defense. Prisoners who relegated the dying to the world of the dead could look the other way and pass them by or take their shoes and ration of bread.⁶³

Naming people *Muselmänner* became a survival strategy: fending off the renewal of death and projecting its abjection elsewhere promised one more life. It allowed the “Jew near death,” as David Simpson puts it, to turn the “Jew nearer death” into a non-Jew, a Muslim, the Jew’s “other.”⁶⁴ Perhaps using the term in this way was another cruel Nazi joke. But whatever the expression’s origin, in practical use, such “othering” hastened the social death of those most in need of help, and brought about their actual deaths, whether finally by beating, exhaustion, starvation, or “selection.” Former *Muselmänner* testimonies suggest, after all, that their very survival depended on exceptional cases of help from others, civilians and other Jewish prisoners. These pariahs were not, in other words, universally rejected. The widespread camp use of the label may therefore have assuaged the guilt of those who shunned them.

In post-Holocaust memoirs, this logic gets reproduced somewhat differently. The discursive *Muselmann* embodies the crime to which the survivor, like Levi, wants to testify, given his felt complicity and shame: the disruption of the line between life and death that contaminated all prisoners, but made those at the bottom of the hierarchy especially culpable and “untouchable.” Descriptive figurations of *Muselmänner* as “staggering corpse[s],” “‘living skeletons’ . . . the ‘walking dead,’” “nameless hulks,” “mummy-men, the living dead,” “non-men,” whose “*death had begun before that of their body*,”⁶⁵ all suggest they metonymically capture for memoirists the omnipresent, grotesque, and profane commingling of life and death in the camps. Giorgio Agamben regards this commingling as the “particular horror” that the *Muselmann* “brings to the camp and that the camp brings to the world.”⁶⁶ Yet his formulation risks scapegoating those deemed *Muselmänner* as bearers, rather than receptacles, of all that was abject and imposed upon all camp prisoners. Even more insidiously, it renders them culpable for the gruesome message of Nazi mass murder they continue to deliver. According to *Muselmänner* accounts, by contrast, they did not enter into a new ontological category or a different species, although they were treated that way. What I want to show is how an insistence upon the difference between *Muselmann* and survivor is yet central to the metaphor: survivors like Levi, Wiesel, Delbo, and Klüger invoke the death-in-life figure of the *Muselmann* as their own shadowy Auschwitz double, a comparative mirror for the self-that-lives of the self-that-died, an impossible metaphor for the impossibility of “surviving”—only

half-alive, part victim, part witness, even part collaborator—a place from where, as Delbo puts it, “None of us was meant to return.”⁶⁷

Through this critical rereading, we see how the literary *Muselmann*, the most common and visible of impossible Holocaust metaphors, brings this message of ongoing death-in-life created by the Nazi death machine close to readers who take Levi’s warning seriously, and conveys the most abject qualities of quotidian concentration camp life in what we might call an “aesthetics of survival.” Holocaust memoirists faced the burden of conveying their suffering aesthetically, and their accounts thus place demands upon readers to witness, remember, and retell that suffering, as Levi commands. But we should not confuse metaphor with denotation: what is a figurative “self-that-died” for some was a temporary experience for others. Reading the impossible metaphor of the *Muselmann*, I hope to show, demands that we recognize this distinction; that we listen for, hear, and sit with the acute, unresolved tension between life and death for which the literary *Muselmann* stands, in order to transform our reading into an ethical practice.

AESTHETICS OF SURVIVAL: THE MATTER OF DEATH

A cruel paradox of the survivor account is that it must reproduce in words the degradation of life and death by which the Nazis deliberately, mechanically, and systematically turned human beings into material objects.⁶⁸ Because writers like Levi saw their writing as testifying to atrocious Nazi crimes, we might say that figures of speech, but also concrete, evidentiary figures must emerge from their accounts.⁶⁹ In everyday discourse, figures of speech mystify the matter of death with euphemism—she “passed away,” he “met his maker”—or in poetry, as Hamlet ponders, “For in that sleep of death what dreams may come, /When we have shuffled off this mortal coil, /Must give us pause.”⁷⁰ Speech about death can be abstract, as when Emily Dickinson describes life’s penultimate moment, when “the Windows failed—and then I could not see to see.”⁷¹ Both metaphors—the onset of “sleep,” the failure of “Windows”—substitute concrete vehicles from life for the abstract tenor of death.

Holocaust writers, by contrast, must resist euphemism, itself part of the crime and its discursive concealment. They therefore invert the structure of metaphor by substituting concrete vehicles of death for the horrific quality of concentration

camp “life,” as when Delbo describes an emaciated female prisoner as a “dancing female skeleton.”⁷² Such language is stretched in its capacity to express the terror of death-in-life that was a quotidian, material fact of the camps. Terrence Des Pres uses the phrase “Life in Death”; Alexandre Oler, the juxtaposition “Every Day Life, Every Day Death.”⁷³ One aim of Holocaust testimonies is thus to amass verbal matter, to concretize the daily suffering that camp jargon concealed, and unveil death’s materiality without rendering readers frozen or forced to turn away by what Inga Clendinnen calls the “Gorgon effect,” “the sickening of imagination and curiosity and the draining of the will which afflicts so many of us when we try to look squarely at the persons and processes implicated in the Holocaust.”⁷⁴ In this sense, I am suggesting we read the “matter” of concentration camps rather literally.⁷⁵ The textual pileup of emaciated bodies, the corpses, or *Figuren*, as they were euphemistically dubbed in German—the concrete “forms,” “figures,” Delbo’s “dummies,” “dolls,” or “puppets” to which human beings were reduced—compose the substantive *matter* discharged by the text, the amassed evidence of material intrusions of death into life at the heart of Nazi criminality.⁷⁶

An overwhelming presence of bodies actually did intrude upon lives of Auschwitz prisoners, reaching gruesome proportions after the 1944 transport of 300,000–400,000 Hungarian civilians who, gassed upon arrival, were said to have nearly shut down the crematoria, causing an obscene pile-up of corpses at various camp locations.⁷⁷ But already in 1942, as Filip Müller’s harrowing testimony, *Eyewitness Auschwitz* (1979), describes, the problem of dead bodies in Auschwitz was paramount—that is, the problem of how to strip, clean, lift, move, and, ultimately, cremate or otherwise dispose of so many of them. One of few surviving members of the infamous *Sonderkommando*, Müller was forced to operate gas chambers and crematoria at Auschwitz-Birkenau for three years, and describes his first work detail this way:

When all six ovens were working, Stark hustled us next door to strip more corpses while he stayed behind in the cremation room. . . . By late afternoon the fire had reduced many of the dead bodies into ashes. Yet the bulk of them was still lying about because, with three corpses going into each oven at intervals of twenty minutes, it was impossible to

cremate more than fifty-four in one hour. I calculated that it would take quite a time before all the dead were cremated.⁷⁸

When the ovens failed, Müller and his fellow Jewish prisoners were made to load hundreds of corpses onto trucks and haul them into a specially dug fire pit, or mass grave. The next morning, finding the pit full of ground water, they were themselves thrown in, wading in blood-soaked mud as they attempted “desperately to fling [the] slippery bodies” into the pit’s center, a literal “abyss of death.”⁷⁹ Later, after his forced transfer to the newly constructed crematoria at Birkenau, Müller remarks on the increased efficiency of this facility and others like it for burning bodies:

[The crematorium’s] fifteen huge ovens, working non-stop, could cremate more than 3,000 corpses daily. Bearing in mind that scarcely more than 100 metres away there was another crematorium with the same capacity, and still another 400 metres further on the two smaller crematoria 4 and 5, with eight ovens each, one was forced to conclude that civilization had come to an end.⁸⁰

Müller’s textual reproduction of corpses testifies to mass slaughter. These pained and drained bodies, in Elaine Scarry’s terms, “analogically substantiate,” or confer absolute reality upon, brutal Nazi crimes committed on a scale that simply boggles the mind.⁸¹ The *Muselmänner* also substantiate this power, but, unlike corpses, they cannot be wholly reduced to substance, so long as the *Muselmann* lives. Instead, she or he is a material intrusion of death into life, literally, but in writing also metaphorically, a *figure of the dying*, of unaided suffering, of a sped-up, routinized death-in-process. As a metaphor, the *Muselmann* thus embodies, as it collapses, the tension between two paradoxical senses of the word *matter*—the utterly significant and the discharged material substance, the everyday presence of death-in-life—characterizing the impossible metaphor at the heart of the atrocity.

If in Levi’s early account the *Muselmänner*, the “drowned,” formed “the backbone of the camp,” his metaphor collapses, too, made uncannily literal by the workings of the death machine.⁸² These multitudes *did* provide endless “fuel” for the gas chambers.⁸³ Moreover, in dying, they became real material to fuel the Reich—all

their possessions were seized, gold teeth, hair, even bones for fertilizer—thus becoming yet another kind of matter.⁸⁴ Yet while alive, the *Muselmänner* were treated as if already embodying their inevitable, impending deaths, as Levi put it: “one hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death.”⁸⁵ But does spiritual death count as death? Müller, for example, describes a moment of spiritual death after a long, grueling day of throwing chlorinated lime powder onto a heap of dead bodies that refused to disintegrate in their muddy mass grave. “[A]fter what we had gone through,” he writes, “the spark of life which still glimmered within us had dimmed.”⁸⁶ Müller was not considered a *Muselmann*: despite his harrowing job, he enjoyed a sense of “solidarity” with those who “shared the same fate,” and his ability to “organize,” essentially to steal food and valuable items from crematorium victims, ensured him more life.⁸⁷ Müller’s example suggests that to differing degrees, all prisoners confronted “life-in-death” in the camps. Levi’s phrase “non-men,” however, suggests that to manage their own survival, prisoners projected this problem onto so-called *Muselmänner*, ignoring their pleas for help as if they were already dead, no longer men, which later produced profound shame.

Clinical accounts of the *Muselmann* especially struggle to pin down the transient condition of Musselmanhood as inevitable. Zdzisław Ryn and Stanisław Kłodziński, who published the first study of the “*Muselmann* phenomenon” in 1987, describe the *Muselmänner* as victims of both physical malnutrition and psychological overload, which led many to lose all hope or desire to live.⁸⁸ The first of “two phases” in becoming a *Muselmann*, they describe, is primarily physical: “weight loss, muscular asthenia, and progressive energy loss in movement. At this stage, the organism is not yet deeply damaged,” and hardly any psychological change can be detected.⁸⁹ Ryn and Kłodziński note: “it was difficult to recognize the point of passage [from the first] into the second stage. In some cases it happened slowly and gradually; in others it happened very quickly”; but glossing over this temporal fluidity, they describe the second, increasingly psychological stage, in which the prisoner lost “a third of his normal weight,” “his facial expression also changed,” his “gaze became cloudy and his face took on an indifferent, mechanical, sad expression.”⁹⁰ Even if it were possible to note all the signs of *becoming a Muselmann*, we see here the impossibility of pinning down precisely when one is actually *there*. Instead, we see the language of fading, of disappearing, the consequence of working people to death, consonant with the Nazi

idea that the entire event, “the extermination of the Jewish people,” should disappear from view, without witness.⁹¹ The physiological explanation only seems to rationalize the material vanishing of the race, as it were.

Interestingly, in the course of naming what seem to be symptoms of *Muselmännhood*, Ryn and Kłodziński suggest that being a *Muselmann* is itself a symptom—of dying. In the second stage, for example, physical symptoms include the “pale grey color” of one’s skin, sensitivity to infections, “bristly” hair, pronounced forehead and eye sockets, slowed breathing, and eventually edemas on the body; psychologically, “they became indifferent to everything happening around them. They excluded themselves from all relations to their environment.”⁹² But the phenomenon was also social: “Being a *Muselmann* was a breaking of all bonds to the surrounding world . . . above all, social death, for biological life continued to smoulder; becoming a *Muselmann* was a symptom of approaching death.”⁹³ Worded in this way, physical manifestations of dying led to psychological indifference and acquiescence, which led to one’s social death, and one became a *Muselmann*. Describing symptoms of *Muselmännhood*, Ryn and Kłodziński, in effect, reproduce the “fatalist Muslim” definition we have seen elsewhere.

Conversely, however, dying itself is also symptomatic of having already been deemed a *Muselmann*, since the reactions of others played so profound a role in one’s fate. Ryn and Kłodziński assert that breaking ties with others and failing to make contacts to barter for food were *first* steps in becoming a *Muselmann*, rather than its consequence:

No one felt compassion for the Muslim, and no one felt sympathy for him either. The other inmates, who continually feared for their lives, did not even judge him worthy of being looked at. For the prisoners who collaborated, the Muslims were a source of anger and worry; for the SS, they were merely useless garbage. Every group thought only about eliminating them, each in its own way.⁹⁴

When inmates and prisoners judged and convicted others as “Muslims” not “worthy of being looked at,” let alone of being helped, it advanced the latter’s state of death in life, their downfall, and accelerated their actual deaths.

The problem of describing how one becomes a *Muselmann* is that once the designation has already been applied, a dreadful process of social and then physical death ensues, in which prisoners themselves were complicit. Authors of a glossary on the website of the Wollheim Memorial at the I.G. Farben Building in Frankfurt, Germany, indicate that occasionally this cycle was broken:

[*Muselmänner*] no longer participated in the life of the inmate community, and they were of no interest to resistance groups or other groups of prisoners who helped each other, as they had lost all ability to contribute anything. They were on the lowest rung of the prisoner hierarchy, and other inmates tried to avoid them or sought to keep from working in the same detachment with them; sometimes they were treated as if they were already dead, as objects. But individual prisoners also attempted to bring *Muselmänner* back into the world of the living with food and friendly support, to help them continue to live with their traumas.⁹⁵

If, on the one hand, *Muselmänner* were treated like useless “objects,” camp detritus, on the other, a rare few individuals helped and sometimes (though not always) saved their lives. Lacking this crucial point, Levi’s otherwise ethical appeal to the reader on behalf of *Muselmänner* as “the best” becomes a remorseful apology. As a *häftling*, Levi perhaps saw them while they lived, yet could not, did not, prevent their deaths, however caught he was in the moral “gray zone,” limited to the “choiceless choice.”⁹⁶ As a subsequent survivor-narrator, Levi repeatedly reckoned with this haunting dilemma. To witness designated *Muselmänner* go to their deaths meant complicity in the crime. To write the literary *Muselmann*, however—the metaphor for life in death, death in life—offers a way to register, perhaps atone, for this ethical crisis. We readers then witness the matter of the dead *and* of the living: the destruction of social fiber, fraternal connection, and human bonds in the survivor whose account we read.

“DISSONANT IDENTIFICATION”: WIESEL AND KLÜGER

Even as the *Muselmann* conveys the collapse of death into life, readers who witness this have not, thereby, experienced a similar collapse. If first-person narrators

comprise a naïve acting self and a knowing recounting self, readers can identify with this split narrator and enjoy a vicarious experience of education and growth.⁹⁷ Holocaust memoirs, though told by split narrators, eschew such redemption. Not only would it seem wrong to “gain” from reading them, but such lessons are also made difficult: a traumatic break divides the narrating self from the “Auschwitz double,” to use Delbo’s phrase, within two irreconcilable orders of experience. To convey this break—between past and present selves, narrator and reader—memoirists employ figurations of life-in-death that, like Delbo’s “Auschwitz double,” function similarly to how the *Muselmann* does for Levi, holding out the promise of readerly identification, only to radically snatch it away, a mark of the aesthetics of survival.

In his famous memoir *Night (La Nuit, 1958)*, Wiesel recalls how, during his torturous death march from Auschwitz to Buchenwald in the winter of 1944–1945, he was “dragging . . . this skeletal body which weighed so much . . . I could feel myself as two entities—my body and me. I hated it.”⁹⁸ This split culminates in the final lines of the book, when Wiesel recalls how just after liberation, he gathered the strength to regard his reflection for the first time in a year. “From the depths of the mirror,” he writes, “a corpse gazed back at me. The look in his eyes, as they stared into mine, has never left me.”⁹⁹ The split between Wiesel’s soul and substance became at that moment self-consciously complete: he recognizes not his own familiar face, but that of a “corpse” to which he now refers objectively in the third person. We can imagine a worn, thin, sickly image not unlike that of a *Muselmann*, so physically transformed must Wiesel have been after a year’s worth of deprivation, illness, and starvation. But what exactly “died” in the camps? Wiesel’s metaphorical use of the “corpse” self—at once part of and radically different from his living “self”—suggests a broken continuum between his self-figuration and that of the *Muselmann*.¹⁰⁰ Wiesel relies upon the impossible metaphor of the “corpse” to communicate his own death-in-life, a simultaneous continuity and break with the past and the “Auschwitz double” it engendered.

These moments of temporal rupture and fragmented experience in Holocaust memoirs instruct us how to read them: if survivors lack a coherent relation to their past selves (never mind a coherent narrative), then what kind of continuity can we who were “not there,” as Raul Hilberg puts it, expect to find between our experience

and that of these narrators?¹⁰¹ And yet contemporary Holocaust museums often encourage such identification with victims.¹⁰² Although designed with the obvious good intention of fostering empathy, of personalizing what might otherwise be abstract Holocaust statistics, such exhibits risk promoting a false sense of vicarious experience among museum guests, and a facile understanding of the complex processes at work in any one person's death or survival, all too often out of his or her control. While a visitor may get invested in one individual's fate, identification encourages a prurient desire to complete the plot, reach the outcome.

The problem with the pedagogy of identification lies not in suspect intentions, but in its implementation. The ease with which readers can assimilate or translate others' stories into their own terms, or map them onto their own experience, represents a direct violation of the kind of reading Levi prescribes in his poem. Even empathy, left unchecked, risks what Dominick LaCapra has called "surrogate victimage," the act of taking on another's experience in a kind of "vicarious victimhood."¹⁰³ Only when empathy is combined with a certain objective distance from, and attention to, the voices of others can such exhibits create "empathic unsettlement," a recognition, rather than mere appropriation, of the traumatic experience of victims.¹⁰⁴ Susan David Bernstein similarly argues that "reading through identification" and other forms of "experiential learning" can result in "promiscuous identification," a reading practice that collapses vicarious and real experiences.¹⁰⁵ Failing to make this distinction leads to "assimilating the other into one's own place," appropriating her or his suffering.¹⁰⁶ Promiscuous identification collapses the two narrative "I's," resulting in sentimentality, which, as Ruth Klüger puts it, involves turning away from the other and "toward oneself. It means looking into a mirror instead of reality."¹⁰⁷ To avoid this, Bernstein advocates "'dissonant' identification," a form of engaged reading that avoids the pleasures of "relevance," or what students often describe as "relatability."¹⁰⁸

Dissonant identification, empathic unsettlement: in different ways, these critical practices encourage the kind of reading Levi prescribes, but can we ever have such a relationship to the *Muselmann*? If, as I have been arguing, this figure collapses the realms of life and death that other metaphors separate for comparison and distinction, Klüger makes this literary dilemma an explicit part of remembrance. Her remarkable meta-memoir *Still Alive* (*Weiter Leben: Eine Jugend*, 1992)

eschews the kind of graphic representation that can turn readers away, and thereby forestalls promiscuous identification. Combining eyewitness account with critical, feminist analysis, Klüger ironically alternates recollection with rejection of the entire project of Holocaust remembrance, and foregrounds the problem of narrating impossible stories: “these border situations between life and death are not easily accessible to words. Human speech was not invented or meant for extremes.”¹⁰⁹ She then goes on to describe the very experiences she deems inaccessible to words, however, and interprets this inaccessibility for her readers. There is the time she was trapped in a cattle car with eighty others traveling from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz, for instance, when it suddenly stopped in the summer heat, and Klüger describes the “whiff of panic” that “trembled in the air” of the car, mixing in with its already fetid smell of “sweat, urine, excrement”:

An old woman who sat next to my mother gradually fell apart: first she cried and whimpered, and I grew impatient and angry with her, because here she was adding her private disintegration to the great evil of our collective helplessness. . . . Finally this woman pushed herself onto my mother’s lap and urinated. I can still see the tense look of revulsion on my mother’s face in the slanting twilight of the car, and how she gently pushed the woman from her lap. . . .

I have just described an unforgettable event in my life, and yet I hardly ever get a chance to speak of it. It doesn’t fit the framework of social discourse.¹¹⁰

Writing about this unforgettable event, Klüger breaks that discursive framework, violating the taboo that once silenced her when “claustrophobia” was discussed among colleagues.¹¹¹ While one described being trapped in an elevator, others remembered air-raid shelters of their youth, but Klüger knew that telling her cattle car story, in all its gruesome proportions, “would have effectively shut up the rest of the company.”¹¹²

In Henry Greenspan’s terms, Klüger’s story was neither “hearable” nor “tellable” in that social situation.¹¹³ But in writing, by framing her impossible story within the very story of its impossibility, Klüger makes the story possible to tell. She also renders

our experience of identification dissonant by implying that outside our privileged reading experience, we might be no better than her insensitive colleagues. Writing the story of the impossible story, Klüger prevents it, like her entire “childhood,” from falling “into a black hole” of history.¹¹⁴ Simultaneously, she wards off “readerly sentimentality” without contributing to the “thriving cottage industry of pornography based on the camps.”¹¹⁵ Klüger chooses to leave certain things unsaid, but alluding to their unsayability, implies that they *are* sayable, though perhaps not here, not to us. After all, memory, Greenspan reminds us, “has to be *made* into a story,” but the “made story” is not necessarily the “whole story.”¹¹⁶

Klüger also carefully crafts comparisons to which we can, on some level, connect: “how we can understand anything if we can’t relate to it,” she asks, since even “dissimilarity is instructive.”¹¹⁷ For Klüger, the problem is not that experiences on either side of the barbed wire are too vastly different to compare (though they may, in fact, be worlds apart), but that such comparisons make people uncomfortable. If dissonant identification requires that we embrace the “productive non-resemblance” between self and other, in Bernstein’s terms, then Klüger suggests we go further: try to relate, and avoid indulging a hierarchy such that Auschwitz becomes the ultimate, incomparable trump card of suffering, and those in the gas chambers become the only “true” witnesses.

Witnessing, in other words, involves seeing and recounting a wider range of experiences, from the singular horrific event to the banal “*lack* of events.”¹¹⁸ Recalling another taboo experience, Klüger crosses the very barbed wire she erects, submitting to the banality of everyday language an experience she finds otherwise “impossible to tell,” that of her mother being punished before her own eyes, for yelling at a block elder. Although Klüger narrates the moment, and her experience of it, she elides description of the actual torture:

As punishment she had to kneel on those bricks I have mentioned before, the “chimney” that divided the room. Her position became a torture after a very short while. She was in terrible condition, completely out of control, on her knees, still shouting at the woman who had done this to her. I stood next to her, helpless, witnessing something indecent: my mother being punished. This scene is perhaps my most vivid and lurid memory of

Birkenau. And yet I have never talked about it. I thought, I can't write this down, and planned instead to mention that there are events that are indescribable. Now that I have written it, I see that the words are as common as other words and were no harder to come by. . . . The memory is connected with an overwhelming sense of shame, as if a superego had been dragged into the ditch water of the id.¹¹⁹

Klüger struggles here with the shame Levi described as a failure of “human solidarity,” the realization that that “we had not done . . . enough against the system into which we had been absorbed.”¹²⁰ Her struggle manifests in commentary that circles in upon itself, denies its own possibility, and stages the act of memory’s revision, in order to make this event—“something indecent,” “indescribable”—tellable. “The only way to write about torture is from within the distance of memory,” writes Gabriele Schwab, since the pain of torture “hides in language” that “leaves us outside the quality of felt experience.”¹²¹ Klüger’s alternating account and commentary echoes the pattern of “simultaneous assertion and disclaimer” that for Greenspan characterizes oral Holocaust accounts, a function of translating the violence of Auschwitz into “hearable” terms.¹²² Where those leaps between disparate linguistic and experiential realms become most obvious, jarring, or self-consciously taken, we are reminded of what we are and perhaps are not being told, and of the fact that we are strangers, even if we are asked to listen and witness as we read.

IMPOSSIBLE METAPHORS: KLÜGER, DELBO, AGAMBEN

Klüger’s shifts between narration and commentary combine the extreme and the everyday that characterize the “concentrationary universe,” creating a mode of representation that Michael Rothberg calls “traumatic realism.”¹²³ Rothberg explores how Klüger reformulates the “primary and often-repeated image through which she figures boundaries: barbed wire,” both a metaphor of evil, and a metonymy for the “particular topography” of the concentration camp.¹²⁴ Klüger, Rothberg argues, transforms this image “into a tool for prying open the multiplicity of relations within the camps and between victims and their nonvictimized

contemporaries (both during and after the war).¹²⁵ In other words, Klüger's tendency to mix "identification with dis-identification, familiarity and estrangement," simultaneously connects and separates her from her readers.¹²⁶ The figure of the *Muselmann*, I have been suggesting, creates a similar effect of identification and dis-identification; however, it differs from Rothberg's barbed wire metaphor in that it collapses the two realms it separates and connects: life and death.

Rothberg offers a particularly stunning reading of a scene in *Still Alive* in which, I would argue, Klüger's barbed wire metaphor successfully averts promiscuous identification on the part of readers. During the time of the Hungarian transport, Klüger recalls her mother wanting to give a pair of wool socks to a Hungarian woman and daughter in the adjacent camp, and how she "interfered," insisting she should throw the socks over the barbed wire fence herself:

My mother refused, threw the socks, and they fell short, ending up stuck on top of the wire, where no one could reach them. Regrets on both sides. A futile gesture. Next day the Hungarian women were gone, their camp empty like a ghost town, our socks still impaled on the wire.¹²⁷

Rothberg reads this uncanny mirroring of mother-daughter pairs as a scene of homely familiarity rendered utterly strange. The "porousness" of the barbed wire separating them "allows communication between camps," but also "establishes a limit beyond which gestures are futile, words tinged with regret."¹²⁸ With the barbed wire as a metaphor for the boundary across which Klüger struggles to translate her experience, the "impaled" socks, for Rothberg, mark the Hungarian women's sudden absence, whose "end can be conceived," but "not represented": "Not quite across the line into the ghostly emptiness, but no longer in the possession of the living in the near side, the socks mediate between the everyday and the extreme."¹²⁹ Like the socks on the wire, these two disparate realms are suspended in limbo in Klüger's writing. In my view, if the barbed wire separates life and death, the everyday and the extreme, however, then the socks metaphorize, but also materialize, the collapse of those two realms. Little pieces of impaled civilization on a wire, they remain material evidence of the sharp, painful, stuck, daily interpenetration of death and life that Klüger witnessed, and that she and her mother "survive" unlike their Hungarian Auschwitz doubles.

Whereas Klüger creates, sustains, then collapses the tension between the realms of “then” and “now,” the living and the dead, by exploring death’s material traces, Charlotte Delbo uses the language of sight to force us to look directly at death and decay itself. If metaphors typically transfer the properties of vehicle to the tenor through comparison, Delbo substitutes and thereby equates dead things with living beings, thereby collapsing the distance between tenor and vehicle, life and death, and between her two “selves,” then and now. Among the images that register various levels of collapse appear descriptions of women that closely resemble female *Muselmänner*, although she doesn’t use that exact term.

In Book I of Delbo’s trilogy, *Auschwitz and After*, the brief vignette “The Dummies” that I referred to above directs our gaze to Block 25, the so-called “Block of Death” where women selected to die awaited transportation to the gas chambers, sometimes for days or weeks.¹³⁰ What “matters” at this particular location is the production of corpses, which her testimony reproduces, and which by fulfilling a daily quota contributed to her own survival. More explicitly and directly than Levi, Delbo draws the female *Muselmann* as a double of herself with whom, through visual language, she and potentially the reader are drawn into a relationship of momentary identification:

“Look. Look.”

At first, we doubt that we’ve seen what we’ve seen. It’s hard to tell them from the snow. The yard is full of them. Naked. Stacked side by side. White, a bluish whiteness against the snow. Heads shaved, pubic hair straight and stiff. The corpses are frozen. White with brown toenails. There is something ridiculous about these cocked-up toes. Horrifyingly laughable.

I couldn’t take my eyes off them, embarrassed by the nakedness of those dummies. I had often seen dummies in the store windows, wearing a dress, shoes, a wig, their arms folded in affected gestures. I had never thought of them as naked, without hair. I had never imagined them outside the display window, without electricity to highlight their poses. . . . Every two or three days, trucks arrived to take the living to

the gas chamber, the dead to the crematorium. Madness must have been the final hope of those who entered there. . . .

“Look. I’m sure she moved. That one, next to the last. Her hand . . . her fingers are opening. I’m sure of it.”

The fingers open slowly, the snow blooms like a discolored sea anemone.

“Don’t stare! Why are you staring?”

I look too. I look at this corpse that moves but does not move me. I’m a big girl now. I can look at naked dummies without being afraid.¹³¹

Here where the living are taken to die, the dead to be destroyed, the “dummy” whose fingers seem to move captures Delbo’s gaze: a woman apparently dead, but not quite. Who is speaking here, and to whom? Is Delbo speaking to the dead woman? Is the dead woman staring at her? Or is Delbo yelling at the reader? After all, we are staring, too. Or, alternatively, is the woman, still alive, yelling at Delbo and the reader alike, asking why she and we are staring at her, yet doing nothing to help? In this ambiguous triangulation of gazes Delbo invokes the complex moment of witness; in the dialogue, the coincidence of life and death is illuminated. Via the metaphorical substitution of *dummy* for the naked woman, the multiple levels of cross-identification among Delbo, the dying or dead woman, the mannequin, and of course the reader, work in complex ways to illustrate a simultaneous instance of death-in-life and of social renunciation. The dying woman, like the other naked corpses in the pile, is metaphorically domesticated as a store window mannequin, until she reprimands us for doing precisely what a mannequin demands we do, stare at her body, so that the metaphor breaks down. The naked mannequin—all mannequins—are now transformed in turn: our inability to “unsee” what Delbo has shown us means we can never look at a store window dummy the same way again. Here is Delbo the “twofold being,” split into dead and dying, self and “Auschwitz double,” she, herself, reflecting a corpselike dummy, a mannequin-like corpse on display, who yet lives, moves, looks and then continues to be looked at in our proverbial mind’s eye.¹³² The text forces us to participate in this complex act of “self”-examination, and becomes a simultaneous injunction to witness both a

moment of life in death, and reprimand for doing so, cutting off the very identification it invites.

This complex push and pull between looking and not looking is central to another vignette, “One Day.” Here Delbo describes a woman who breaks ranks—after hours of standing at roll call—to fetch some ice in an open ditch and quench what must be an unfathomable thirst, now struggling to climb out:

There she is in the hollow of the ditch with her hands scratching the ground, her feet looking for support, straining to lift her heavy head. Her face is now turned toward us. Her prominent cheekbones are violet, her swollen mouth a black violet, her eye sockets filled with dark shadows. Her face reflects naked despair.

I no longer look at her. I no longer wish to look. If only I could change my place not to see her. Not to see the dark holes of those eye sockets, those staring holes. What does she want to do? Reach the electrified barbed-wire fence? Why does she stare at us? Isn't she pointing at me? Imploring me? I turn away to look elsewhere. Elsewhere.

Elsewhere. . . . The blanket slips open. It's a woman. A female skeleton. She is naked. Her ribs and pelvic bones are clearly visible. She pulls the blanket up to her shoulders while continuing to dance. . . . A dancing female skeleton. . . . There are living skeletons that dance.

“I don't understand why they won't help me. They're dead, dead. They look alive because they're standing up, leaning one against the other. They're dead. As for me, I don't want to die.”¹³³

The woman in the ditch is a living paradox, a “dancing female skeleton.” Although Delbo depicts her at first as a female *Muselmann* of sorts, she gives the woman voice as we, too, look at her, only then to reverse the gaze and verbal reprimand: the woman reclaims her humanity by turning upon the other women, calling them “dead,” including Delbo, who actually, paradoxically, “survives.” This puts Delbo in

the position of the living dead from the woman's perspective, suggesting their similar, interchangeable positions along a spectrum of *Muselmann*hood.

Delbo lives, her survival contingent upon renunciation of her double. With this female *Muselmann*, or *Muselweib*, as they were called in the women's camp Ravensbrück, Delbo reminds us of this woman's indirect role in Delbo's own *actual survival*—for moments after seizing the ice and gaining ground, the woman is caught by SS guards, whose attack dogs instantly kill her with a few ferocious lunges at her neck.¹³⁴ The visual interchangeability suggests it could have been Delbo who grasped for ice and died there. It also implies why Delbo lives, and yet is “dead”: as Delbo imagines, the woman said she did not “want to die,” yet Delbo took no risk to help her, *did not* take her place, which seems to be all Delbo can think about. The woman's death brought Delbo's own survival a step closer to reality, just as the *Muselmänner* did for Levi. Where Levi atones for his guilt, Delbo dramatizes the interchangeability between “drowned” and “saved” to indicate her shame.

Delbo's story also indicates what “survival” has come to mean for her: a strangely purgatorial reckoning with life and death she both experienced and witnessed. In other words, surviving the camp is no survival at all but a kind of “afterlife” that also constitutes a life-in-death experience, a survival that is forever haunted by the fragility of others' lives whom one did nothing (could do nothing) to protect. Narrated in the present tense, the vignette captures the decisive moment where life yet has the potential to go on, and when agency, intervention, and action have one last chance to assert themselves before it is too late. Delbo recalls trying to look away, to look “elsewhere.” But for the reader, the repetition of “elsewhere” reminds us that there is no “elsewhere” to look. We *must* look on, and as we do, Delbo transfers this sense of life in death, of guilt, shame, and her own nonsurvival to us. The female *Muselmann* materializes for Delbo the inexorable interpenetration of death and life that marked her living then, her “survival” now, and the aesthetics required to convey both.

The impossible metaphor of the *Muselmann* says as much about death as it does about life, during and after the Holocaust. Even as the passage into death of so-called *Muselmänner* kept others alive, the mundane, mechanical production of corpses that defined camp life passed death onto, indeed into, the living—a commingling of the profane and whatever remained of the sacred. For Giorgio

Agamben, the *Muselmann* is therefore the ultimate ethical symbol marking the limit between not just “the living and the dead,” but “the human and the inhuman.”¹³⁵ In *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999), one of the most sustained meditations on this subject, Agamben provides several explanations of *Muselmänner*, ranging from physical to metaphorical or representational, but all relying upon the incontrovertible assumption of “Levi’s paradox,” that the *Muselmann*, the “complete witness,” is one who, by definition, can neither bear witness nor speak, and for whom the survivor must speak “by proxy.”¹³⁶ The *Muselmann* is thus the “true cipher of Auschwitz” whom “no one wants to see’ . . . who is inscribed in every testimony as a lacuna,” in whom we instead see “the fragmentation of [man’s] privileged tie to what constitutes him as human . . . the sacredness of death and life.”¹³⁷ The “particular horror that the *Muselmann* . . . brings to the camp and that the camp brings to the world” is nothing less than the “degradation of death.”¹³⁸ People did not die: “corpses were produced.”¹³⁹ Brutally murdered, then denied proper burial, the *Muselmann* stands at the threshold of the process by which humans were gradually converted into “nonhuman” matter.

I have relied heavily on Agamben’s account of the *Muselmann* as a metaphor for the “degradation of death” and the borderline between living and dead. However, his entire argument of the unspeakability of the *Muselmann*—the *Muselmann* as “cipher” and “lacuna”—rests on an acceptance of Levi’s claims that I have questioned above. Based on this premise, Agamben concludes his book with the imperative that we speak for those who represent the “impossibility of speaking”:

. . . those who assert the unsayability of Auschwitz today should be more cautious in their statements. If they mean to say that Auschwitz was a unique event . . . they are right. But if, joining uniqueness to unsayability, they transform Auschwitz into a reality absolutely separated from language, if they break the tie between an impossibility and a possibility of speaking that, in the *Muselmann*, constitutes testimony, then they unconsciously repeat the Nazis’ gesture.¹⁴⁰

But what if *Muselmänner* actually can speak, and have, themselves, testified? What if many survivors were at one time *Muselmänner* but didn’t know it? Or called it

something else? These questions point to the category of the “*Muselmann* as a rhetorical construction.”¹⁴¹ Strangely, Agamben’s book concludes with excerpts from the ten *Muselmänner* testimonies included in Ryn and Kłodziński’s study that undermine his link between the *Muselmann* and the problem of “unsayability.” If the silent *Muselmann* allows surviving memoirists to convey death in life, to explain their own survival, and possibly to assuage feelings of complicity or shame, then in Agamben we see how philosophy repeats this gesture in the service of rescuing a poststructural, posthumanist definition of survivor subjectivity. If we listen to the surviving *Muselmänner* who have spoken, however—Herbert Treitel, but also Shemshihu Spivack, Lou Dunst, Shaul Sadan, Jan Van Den Berg, Kalman Arieli, Iakov Pulitzer, George Salton, Samuel Gruber, Nathan Krieger, all of whom testified, “I was a *Muselmann*,” or David Matzner who titled his memoir *The Muselmann: The Diary of a Jewish Slave Laborer* (1994)—we realize the temporal nature of, and possibility of surviving, their condition.¹⁴² The only way for Agamben to be right about the *Muselmann*’s unspeakability would be if he were talking about one and the same person, whose past, silent “*Muselmann* self”—a metaphor for experience—could be distinguished from a present, remembering, narrating one; that is, if we could, in fact, separate temporary *Muselmannhood* from the one who experienced it, which as Delbo shows, is impossible to do.

The section of Ryn and Kłodziński’s study titled *Ich war ein Muselmann*, “I was a *Muselmann*,” contains the ten testimonies that Agamben excerpts, given by those who explicitly describe the condition as temporary.¹⁴³ Lucjan Sobieraj says, “I can’t forget the days when I was a *Muselmann*. I was weak, exhausted, dead tired. I saw something to eat wherever I looked.”¹⁴⁴ Feliksa Pierarska explains, “I personally was a *Muselmann* for a short while. I remember that after the move to the barrack, I completely collapsed as far as my psychological life was concerned . . . I was overcome by a general apathy; nothing interested me.”¹⁴⁵ Both describe their exhaustion, but also subjection to an entirely different treatment by others. Bronisław Goscinski describes “the period in which [he] was a *Muselmann*” as having “left a profound impression” on his memory, how others avoided him, his physical afflictions and obsessions with food, but eventual ability to “win the trust of the other inmates” and thereby to gain extra rations of food that saved him from, in his words, “*Muselmannhood*.”¹⁴⁶ Another comment confirms what I have been describing as a continuum of

Muselmannhood: Jerzy Mostowsky, apparently a *Muselmann* from 1942 to early 1943, remarks, “I wasn’t conscious of being one. I think that many *Muselmänner* didn’t realize they belonged to that category. . . . In many cases, whether or not an inmate was considered a *Muselmann* depended on his appearance.”¹⁴⁷ How many other prisoners were also, unknowingly, perceived as and deemed *Muselmänner*? Levi’s words echo—“You will be chosen. I will be excluded”—and we see the designation for what it was: no mere neutral description of reality, but a performative utterance—in effect, a death sentence.¹⁴⁸

CONCLUSION: COMMUNICATION

Sidra Dekoven Ezrahi has remarked that those of us who place the crematoria at the center of what is “authentic” in a Holocaust narrative are traveling with our “stony faces turned Auschwitz,” and that our insistence on “preserving the unique memory of that place as a moment frozen in time, space, and persons” creates a “culture of the unsayable.”¹⁴⁹ She is right: fetishizing the crematorium as the ground zero of the death camps encourages only silence. Focused there, where people were, finally, made matter, we might fail to see the interpenetration of death and life present everywhere else in the camps, the endless suffering only most obviously embodied in the multitudinous, ever-dying, ever-replenished population of near-dead, thoroughly degraded, and socially outcast prisoners, the ubiquitous *Muselmänner*.

We may never overcome the barbed wire separating past atrocities from those occurring in our midst, but if we explore the aesthetic complexities of Holocaust accounts, we stand a chance at building bridges, however broken. Here I return to Levi, who, in an essay titled “Communicating,” already suggested this in 1986. The aim of *The Drowned and the Saved* was, in his words, to answer “the most urgent question”:

How much of the concentration camp world is dead and will not return, like slavery and the dueling code? How much is back or is coming back? What can each of us do so that in this world pregnant with threats at least this threat will be nullified?¹⁵⁰

Because the Nazis waged “a war against memory” and instigated a “negation of reality,” Levi insists on “communicating” as one antidote to crimes against humanity.¹⁵¹ Why do so few people cite this essential essay, whereas Adorno’s famous dictum is cited ad infinitum? Contra Adorno, Agamben, and others, Levi persuasively dismissed the notion of “*incommunicability*”:

It seems to me that this lament originates in and points to mental laziness; certainly it encourages it, in a dangerous and vicious circle. Except for cases of pathological incapacity, one can and must communicate. . . . To say that it is impossible to communicate is false; one always can. To refuse to communicate is a failing; we are biologically and socially predisposed to communication, and in particular to its highly evolved and noble form, which is language.¹⁵²

For Levi, then, we must intervene whenever people talk about “failed or impossible communication” with regard to the Holocaust.¹⁵³ The very ability to communicate was vigorously controlled in the Lager, where knowing or not knowing German could prove fatal, where prisoners became animals to be beaten; and where “there was no substantial difference between a scream and a punch.”¹⁵⁴ The rubber truncheon was dubbed *der Dolmetscher*, the interpreter; non-German speakers were considered barbarians who spoke a “nonlanguage”; prisoners were no longer “men” but *Häftlinge*.¹⁵⁵ For the *Häftlinge*, “not being talked to” often meant not being able to speak, because “your tongue dried up in a few days, and your thought with it.”¹⁵⁶ Levi recalls, too, the “rare good fortune” he had to exchange some letters with his family, which he claims was “one of the factors that allowed [him] to survive.”¹⁵⁷ Levi’s injunction against incommunicability thus brings us back to the commands of the poem “Shema” with which we began. We may stand to fail, but we have no excuse not to engage in dialogue between past and present. This is why, and how, Holocaust texts continue to matter, because they convey, in the figure of the Muselmann, the imperative to witness the material destruction of the boundary between life and death—to look at it, to listen to it, and to speak about it.

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NOTES

- My deepest thanks to Eric J. Sundquist for attentive and generous responses to drafts of this piece, as well as to Mark Eaton, Gary Weissman, the members of the UCLA Americanist Research Colloquium, and the editors and anonymous readers at *Prooftexts*.
- 1 Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, trans. S. J. Woolf (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 11.
 - 2 Deuteronomy 6:4; Aryeh Kaplan, *The Living Torah: A New Translation Based on Traditional Jewish Sources (The Five Books of Moses)*, 3rd edition (New York: Moznaim Publishing Corp, 1981), 517. Levi originally published the poem “Shema” in a 1975 collection titled *L’Osteria de Brema* and then in English as *Shema: Collected Poems of Primo Levi*, trans. Ruth Feldman and Brian Swann (London: Menard Press, 1976). I am using the translation from *Survival in Auschwitz*.
 - 3 Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 123.
 - 4 Ibid.
 - 5 David Rousset, *The Other Kingdom* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1947), trans. from the French original, *L’Univers concentrationnaire* (1946).
 - 6 Victor Klemperer, *LTI: Notizbuch eines Philologen* (Leipzig: Reclam Verlag, 1975).
 - 7 Nachman Blumenthal, “On the Nazi Vocabulary,” *Yad Vashem Studies on the European Jewish Catastrophe and Resistance* 1 (1957): 59–61.
 - 8 Ibid., 66.
 - 9 Ibid.
 - 10 Anna Pawelczynska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz: A Sociological Analysis*, trans. Catherine S. Leach (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 76–77.
 - 11 Transcript of the oral history interview with Herbert Treitel, May 1, 1986, Sarasota, Fla., USHMMRG-50.154*0026, no pagination. The quotation shows how the written transcript appears verbatim.
 - 12 Ibid.
 - 13 Ibid.
 - 14 Charlotte Delbo, *Days and Memory* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 1.
 - 15 Elie Wiesel also makes use of incantation, in the following oft-quoted passage:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in the camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.

Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.

Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.

Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986), 32.

- 16 “Even in this place,” Levi reflected, “one can survive, and therefore one must want to survive, to tell the story, to bear witness.” Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 41.
- 17 “These words which I am commanding you today must remain on your heart” (Deuteronomy 6:6); “Place these words of mine on your heart and soul” (Deuteronomy 11:18), in Kaplan, 517, 528.
- 18 Deuteronomy 6:7. These words are repeated in Deuteronomy 11:17, *ibid.*
- 19 Deuteronomy 11:26, *ibid.*, 529. Both God’s rewards and punishments are described in Deuteronomy 11:13–21.
- 20 Deuteronomy 8:19, and repeated in Deuteronomy 11:17, *ibid.*, 522, 528.
- 21 Uri Cohen, “Consider If This Is a Man: Primo Levi and the Figure of Ulysses,” *Jewish Social Studies* 18, no. 2 (2012): 43.
- 22 Ruth Klüger, *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2003), 65, 93.
- 23 Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995), 18.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 18.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 18.
- 27 Cynthia Ozick rather perfects this technique in her fictional story, “The Shawl,” when describing the young concentration camp prisoner, Stella’s, knees as “tumors on sticks, her elbows chicken bones” (3); or the mother, Rosa’s, breasts, no longer producing milk for her infant daughter, Magda, as “a dead volcano, blind eye, chill hole” (4). Ozick, *The Shawl* (New York: Vintage, 1990).

- 28 Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 88, in footnote. Glossing this term, Levi admits that he “does not know why” it was used in the camps in this way.
- 29 Yad Vashem is the Center for Holocaust Research, Documentation, Education and Commemoration in Jerusalem, Israel. Shoah Resource Center, The International School for Holocaust Studies, “Muselmann,” n.d., http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206474.pdf.
- 30 Gil Anidjar, *The Jew, the Arab: A History of the Enemy* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), 119. A scholar of religion and religious discourse, Anidjar is more concerned with the cultural history of Jewish–Arab relations than with the Holocaust, in which the concentration camp *Muselmann* epitomizes the stereotypical, fatalistic Arab, as figures of “disappearance,” destined to die, “forgotten and forgettable,” except as “sites of memory” for others (143).
- 31 Abba Kovner used this phrase in his famous pamphlet of December 13, 1941/January 1, 1942, calling for underground revolt against the Nazis, as a metaphor for what Vilna youth should not do. See Kovner, “A First Attempt to Tell,” *The Holocaust as Historical Experience: Essays and a Discussion*, ed. Yehuda Bauer and Nathan Rotenstreich (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1981), 81–82.
- 32 Shoah Resource Center, *Muselmann*”.
- 33 Jean Améry, *At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 9.
- 34 See Manuela Consonni, “Primo Levi, Robert Antelme, and the Body of the *Muselmann*,” *Partial Answers* (June 2009): 243–59.
- 35 Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 84.
- 36 Simon Wiesenthal, *The Murderers among Us: The Simon Wiesenthal Memoirs*, ed. Joseph Wechsberg (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), qtd. in Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 11–12.
- 37 From 1942 to 1945, the Nazis undertook the secret operation *Aktion 1005*, “code name for the large-scale campaign to destroy all evidence of the mass extermination of European Jewry,” carried out by Jewish prisoners, who were forced to exhume mass graves in Eastern and Central Europe, and to remove and burn hundreds of thousands of corpses. Because it was a “top-secret” operation, the slave laborers were themselves murdered after completion of the work. See “Aktion 1005,” Yad Vashem, Shoah Resource Center, http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%205721.pdf; and Shmuel Spector, “Aktion 1005: Effacing the Murder of Millions,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 5,

- no. 2 (1990): 157–73. Similarly, the *Sonderkommando*, or “Special Unit” of prisoners put in charge of Auschwitz crematoria, were typically sent to the gas chambers so that no witnesses would survive. See Filip Müller and Helmut Freitag, *EyeWitness Auschwitz: Three Years in the Gas Chambers*, trans. Susanne Flatauer (New York: Stein and Day, 1979). On the death marches, see Daniel Blatman, *The Death Marches: The Final Phase of Nazi Genocide*, trans. Chaya Galai (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011).
- 38 Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 60. In his dream, Levi imagines returning home to find his family indifferent to the story he tries to tell of his imprisonment.
- 39 Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 83.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 73, 82.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 83–84; emphasis mine.
- 42 In his analysis of the Gorgon reference, Giorgio Agamben argues that if the *Muselmann* is “he who has seen the Gorgon,” according to Levi, and the Gorgon has no face, then the Gorgon represents the “impossibility of seeing” and the *Muselmann* has looked upon a vision that “transforms the human being into a non-human.” Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 53–54.
- 43 Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 90; emphasis mine.
- 44 On Levi in relation to Dante’s *Inferno*, see Cohen, “Consider If This Is a Man”; Risa Sodi, “La Terza Via: Dante and Primo Levi,” *MLN* 127, no. 1 (2012): S199–S203; and Dalya M. Sachs, “The Language of Judgment: Primo Levi’s *Se questo è un uomo*,” *MLN* 110, no. 4 (1995): 755–84.
- 45 Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 82.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 78.
- 47 Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 90.
- 48 Wolfgang Sofsky, *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp*, trans. William Templer (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 25.
- 49 *Ibid.*
- 50 *Ibid.*, 199.
- 51 *Ibid.*, 204.
- 52 Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 418.

- 53 Ibid., 425.
- 54 Ibid., 423.
- 55 Delbo, *Days and Memory*, 2–3; emphasis mine.
- 56 Ibid., 3.
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993), 6. Langer argues that “deep memory” allows access to that past, parallel self, which thus “invalidates the idea of continuity, and even of chronology” in Holocaust accounts, precluding any possible redemption of the past by the present (5).
- 59 Ibid., 6.
- 60 Goscinki’s account is recorded in Zdzisław Ryn and Stanisław Kłodziński, *An der Grenze zwischen Leben und Tod. Eine Studie über die Erscheinung des “Muselmanns” im Konzentrationslager, Auschwitz-Hefte*, Vol. 1 (Weinheim and Basel: Beltz, 1987); qtd. in Agamben, 168.
- 61 Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 126.
- 62 Of course, often this contagion was real and not merely perceived, given the epidemic spread of situations and diseases like hunger, scabies, pneumonia, typhus, dysentery, and tuberculosis that killed hundreds of thousands in the various ghettos, and in the many overcrowded concentration camps, particularly from 1941–1942, and again in 1944. On epidemics in the ghettos, see Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *A Holocaust Reader* (West Orange, N.J.: Behrman House, 1976), 214–15; and in the camps, see Sofsky, 206–13.
- 63 Pawelczynska, 77. On “social death,” see Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985).
- 64 David Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 163. Simpson notes that this semantic paradox goes “oddly undiscussed by Agamben” (163).
- 65 Améry, 9; Sofsky, 25, 200; Aldo Carpi, *Diario di Gusen* (Torino: Einaudi, 1993), 17; Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 90.
- 66 Agamben, 70.
- 67 Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 114.

- 68 “‘Industrial genocide,’ the factorylike annihilation of the Jews, transformed human beings into ‘material,’ ‘raw material’ that was ‘exploited,’ and whose residua were disposed of without a trace.” Sofsky, 26.
- 69 I am deliberately using the term *account* rather than *testimony*, following Henry Greenspan’s argument that *testimony*, with its legal connotation, suggests a statement made “once and for all.” After conducting long-term conversations with a small number of Holocaust survivors, however, Greenspan prefers *account*, which allows for contingencies of memory and intimacy. Henry Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Beyond Testimony* (St. Paul, Minn.: Paragon House, 2010). See also Henry Greenspan, “Survivors’ Accounts,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies*, ed. Peter Hayes and John K. Roth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 414–27.
- 70 *Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 1, lines 75–76; William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, ed. Barbara A Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Folger Shakespeare Library, 2002), 127.
- 71 Emily Dickinson, “I heard a Fly buzz—when I died” (591), *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983).
- 72 Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 27.
- 73 Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor* (New York: Pocket Books, 1976), 109; David Olère and Alexandre Oler, *Witness: Images of Auschwitz* (N. Richland Hills, Tex.: WestWind Press, 1998), 39.
- 74 Inga Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 4.
- 75 An uncommon use of the verb *to matter*, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, refers to “senses relating to physical matter or substance”: “to secrete or discharge matter; to ooze matter or pus.” If we take this seriously, then we could say a Holocaust memoir “discharges matter,” both abstract substance—truths of the human condition, facts of history, or of the Nazi genocide—and also the concrete Holocaust materiality of death. See “matter, v.,” OED Online.
- 76 In his film *Shoah*, Claude Lanzmann interviews two Sobibór survivors, Motke Zaidl and Itzhak Dugin, who were given the work detail of digging up and burning the Jews of Vilna in 1944. They explain that “the Germans even forbade us to use the words ‘corpse’ or ‘victim.’ The dead were blocks of wood, shit, with absolutely no importance. Anyone who said ‘corpse’ or ‘victim’ was beaten. The Germans made

- us refer to the bodies as *Figuren*, that is, as puppets, as dolls, or as *Schmattes*, which means ‘rags.’” Quoted in Caroline Alice Wiedmer, *The Claims of Memory: Representations of the Holocaust in Contemporary Germany and France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), 77. Agamben also notes, “we know from witnesses that under no circumstances were [corpses] to be called ‘corpses’ or ‘cadavers,’ but rather simply *Figuren*, figures, dolls” (51).
- 77 On March 19, 1944, Eichmann arrived in Budapest, and divided Hungary into six zones to carry out the deportation of the Jews. With the help of a *Sondereinsatzkommando* he brought from Mauthausen, the Hungarian police, and forced complicity of Jewish leaders, he concentrated the Jewish population into VI Zones for eventual deportation. Starting with 290,000 Jews from Zones I and II on June 7, over 437,000 Jews had been deported to Auschwitz by July 7, 1944. See Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews, 1933–1945* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986), 382.
- 78 Müller and Freitag, 17.
- 79 *Ibid.*, 25.
- 80 *Ibid.*, 59.
- 81 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford, 1985), 14.
- 82 Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 90.
- 83 Speaking generally of “arrivals” to Auschwitz, Delbo describes, “every day and every night the chimneys smoke, fed by this fuel dispatched from every part of Europe.” Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 8.
- 84 Müller describes being beaten for tearing a stocking he removed from a female corpse—Reich property; watching another *Sonderkommando* member pull gold teeth from corpses’ mouths with pliers; and the sorting process of victims’ possessions outside the crematorium, “separate heaps of knives, spectacles, bottles, medicines, and dolls which their little owners had left behind forever.” In Müller and Freitag, 12, 14, 34, 65, 68. On the seizure of Jewish property by the Reich, see Martin Dean, *Robbing the Jews: The Confiscation of Jewish Property in the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and Martin Dean, Constantin Goshler, and Philipp Ther, eds., *Robbery and Restitution: The Conflict over Jewish Property in Europe* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007).
- 85 Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 90.

- 86 Müller and Freitag, 26.
- 87 Ibid., 53, 62.
- 88 Based on a questionnaire survey of eighty-nine Auschwitz survivors, the German title translates as, “At the Border between Life and Death: A Study of the Phenomenon of the *Muselmann* in the Concentration Camp.” While I am in the process of translating this from a German account, I have had to rely on quoted versions of this study in other accounts. Zdzisław Ryn and Stanisław Kłodziński, qtd. in Gottfried Kößler, Matthias Naumann, Werner Renz, Jörg Thums, “Muselmänner,” glossary entry, website of the Wollheim Memorial, I.G. Farben Building, Frankfurt, Germany. <http://www.wollheim-memorial.de/en/muselmaenner>.
- 89 Ryn and Kłodziński, 94. Qtd. in Agamben, 43.
- 90 Ibid., 42.
- 91 In his speech to senior officers of the SS in a secret meeting in Poznań, Poland, on October 4, 1943, Himmler described a “really grave matter” that “in public we will never speak of,” “the evacuation of the Jews, the annihilation of the Jewish people” and the glorious burden of the Nazis undertaking “this heaviest of our tasks in a spirit of love for our people.” He emphasizes the need for this to be a silent victory without witness: “to have stuck this out and—excepting cases of human weaknesses—to have kept our integrity, that is what has made us hard. In our history, this is an unwritten and never-to-be-written page of glory. . . .” Dawidowicz, *A Holocaust Reader*, 132–34.
- 92 Ryn and Kłodziński, 94; qtd. in Agamben, 42–43.
- 93 Ryn and Kłodziński, 147; qtd. here: <http://www.wollheim-memorial.de/en/muselmaenner>.
- 94 Ryn and Kłodziński, 127; qtd. in Agamben, 43.
- 95 Kößler et al., “Muselmänner,” <http://www.wollheim-memorial.de/en/muselmaenner>.
- 96 For Langer, under camp conditions, ordinary morality and heroic acts alike become impossible. See Langer, 26; Levi, “The Gray Zone,” in *The Drowned and the Saved*, 36–69.
- 97 Louis Renza describes the paradox of the autobiographer’s “self-otherness”: “his experiencing his signified past self as at once the same as his present self, continuous with it, and yet strangely, uniquely, as *other* to it. See Louis Renza, “Review of *Educated Lives: The Rise of Modern Autobiography in America*, by Thomas Cooley,” *American Literary Realism, 1870–1910* 10, no. 3 (Summer 1977):

317. Eakin argues that the “fundamental motive for the reader’s interest in autobiography” is to experience “identification” with the autobiographer in order to find answers to “existential questions” that we would pose but that “we are not . . . prepared to write.” Paul John Eakin, *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 36.
- 98 Wiesel, 81.
- 99 Ibid., 109.
- 100 Recalling his first experiences of “selection,” Wiesel writes, “An SS man would examine us. Whenever he found a weak one, a *musulman* [sic] as we called them, he would write his number down: good for the crematory” (66).
- 101 Hilberg concludes, “we historians usurp history precisely when we are successful in our work, and that is to say that nowadays some people might read what I have written in the mistaken belief that here, on my printed pages, they will find the true ultimate Holocaust as it really happened.” Raul Hilberg, “I Was Not There,” in *Writing and the Holocaust*, ed. Berel Lang (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988), 25.
- 102 Both the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. and the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles offer guests entering their exhibits a photo passport card of a victim whose ultimate fate the visitor learns at the exhibit’s conclusion.
- 103 See Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 40, 47.
- 104 Ibid., 41.
- 105 Susan David Bernstein, “Promiscuous Reading: The Problem of Identification and Anne Frank’s Diary,” in *Witnessing the Disaster: Essays on Representation and the Holocaust*, ed. Michael F. Bernard-Donals and Richard R. Glejzer (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 142.
- 106 Ibid., 144. Widespread identification among teenage girls with Anne Frank, for example, a “peculiarly American sacred icon of the Holocaust,” “champions an uncomplicated resemblance” between victim and distant witness, “one that displaces a vexed and more productive non-resemblance” between the “I” that reads and the “I” that “is consumed in the act of reading.” Ibid., 144, 146. On Anne Frank’s popularity, see Cynthia Ozick, “Who Owns Anne Frank?,” *The New Yorker*, October 6, 1997, 76–87.

- 107 Klüger, 66. Klüger is speaking here specifically of the museum culture of former concentration camps.
- 108 Bernstein, 146.
- 109 Klüger, 148.
- 110 Ibid., 92.
- 111 Ibid.
- 112 Ibid., 93.
- 113 Greenspan attributes gaps and silences in Holocaust accounts to the social context of narration, such that what is “hearable” or “tellable” in any given situation may depend on the depth of the relationship and level of comfort and trust between teller and listener, rather than on the degree of trauma in the survivor, or the epistemological limits of the witness. In some cases, the “tellable” is not a “literary problem,” but an “embodied” problem of actual muteness. Greenspan, “Survivors’ Accounts,” 419, 421.
- 114 Klüger, 93.
- 115 Ibid., 184.
- 116 Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors*, 169.
- 117 Klüger, 93.
- 118 Henry Greenspan, “The Unsaid, the Incommunicable, the Unbearable, and the Irretrievable,” *Oral History Review* 14, no. 2 (2014): 236. Greenspan quotes from *Primo Levi: The Voice of Memory Interviews, 1961–1987*, ed. Marco Belpoliti and Robert Gordon (New York: New Press, 2001), 251.
- 119 Ibid., 111.
- 120 Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 78, 76.
- 121 Gabriele Schwab, *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 175.
- 122 Greenspan, “Survivors’ Accounts,” 420.
- 123 Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). See in particular, chapter 3: “The Barbed Wire of the Postwar World,” 107–40.
- 124 Ibid., 130.
- 125 Ibid.

- 126 Ibid., 134.
- 127 Klüger, 103.
- 128 Rothberg, 134.
- 129 Ibid., 134.
- 130 Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 17–19.
- 131 Ibid.
- 132 Delbo, *Days and Memory*, 3.
- 133 Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 25–27.
- 134 According to Sofsky, the term *Muselmann* was most commonly used in Auschwitz, “from where it spread to other camps as well. . . . In Majdanek, the word was unknown. The living dead there were termed ‘donkeys’; in Dachau they were ‘cretins,’ in Stutthof ‘cripples,’ in Mauthausen ‘swimmers,’ in Neuengamme ‘camels,’ in Buchenwald ‘tired sheikhs,’ and in the women’s camp known as Ravensbrück, *Muselweiber* (female Muslims) or ‘trinkets.’” Sofsky, 329, n. 5.
- 135 Agamben, 55.
- 136 Ibid., 82.
- 137 Ibid., 81–82.
- 138 Ibid., 70, 72.
- 139 Ibid., 72.
- 140 Ibid., 32, 157.
- 141 David Simpson points out that these *Muselmänner* stories go “against the grain of Agamben’s theory and of some of the testimonies that they were beyond life, about to die,” 162.
- 142 David Matzner, *The Muselmann: The Diary of a Jewish Slave Laborer* (Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav, 1994). The others named above gave interviews for the Holocaust Oral History Project, the transcripts of which are found in the USHMM Center for Advance Holocaust Studies archive.
- 143 Even in this expression, even given the former *Muselmann’s* testimonies from which he himself quotes, Agamben inexplicably finds verification, not contradiction, of Levi’s paradox (Agamben 186).
- 144 Quoted in Agamben, 166.
- 145 Ibid.

146 Ibid., 169–71.

147 Ibid., 166–67.

148 Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 126.

149 Sidra Dekoven Ezrahi, “Questions,” in Marianne Hirsch and Irene Kacandes, eds., *Teaching the Representation of the Holocaust* (New York: MLA, 2004), 64. Ezrahi sees Lanzmann’s epic film *Shoah* as an account that fetishizes the authenticity of the concentration camp in a “concentric circle” approach to the Holocaust: the film is structured so that all roads lead to Auschwitz, and further, to the innermost circle, the crematorium (54).

150 Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 20–21.

151 Ibid., 31.

152 Ibid., 88, 89.

153 Ibid., 89.

154 Ibid., 91.

155 Ibid., 92.

156 Ibid., 93.

157 Ibid., 104.