

The story behind art. 13 in book

# *The Call of Memory:*

*Learning About the Holocaust Through Narrative*  
*An Anthology*

Karen Shawn and Keren Goldfrad, Editors  
William Younglove, Associate Editor

*Ben Yehuda Press, 2008*



continued, "I can't understand what upset him. He was in such high spirits and was so happy to hear that you survived the war. Perhaps the jail experience upset him. After all the things he has done for others, risking his own life, and then to be imprisoned—that must have been too much for him. Don't you think so?"

"Of course, we understand," Orenstein answered. "We have nothing but great respect and admiration for your husband, and we are ready to stand by him. That much we owe him."

There was nothing more the Orensteins could do in Vienna, where they felt uneasy and out of place; they planned to return to Sweden the following day. The war was over, and the Nazis were defeated; still, they felt surrounded by them, and they were uncomfortable.

"Why do you think Reiner risked his life to save us?" Orenstein asked his wife as soon as they were back at their hotel room that evening. "I can't believe he could have done it for selfish reasons. One really has to be decent and courageous at heart, don't you think?"

After a moment Mrs. Orenstein answered, "Whatever his reason was, were the roles reversed, I still wonder if any of us could equal him in his deed. The only thing that puzzles me is his speech; I still don't know whose eyes follow him and why. But I have no right to ask. That's his business."

The Orensteins sat up most of the night reminiscing about their time in hiding in the dark studio, only three years earlier; it seemed much further away somehow. They continued to wonder about the fates of their deported relatives and friends, whom they still felt they had betrayed.

"There are no words to express the guilt," Mrs. Orenstein said after some discussion, and she began to cry. Her husband comforted her and urged her to sleep.

It was still early when the telephone woke them. Trude Reiner asked them to stay on in Vienna. A terrible tragedy had taken place, she told them. Helmut was dead. He had accidentally shot himself that morning while dismantling a gun.

## By the Railway Track

*Zofia Nalkowska*

*Translated from the Polish by Diana Kuprel*

Yet another person now belongs to the dead: the young woman by the railway track whose escape attempt failed. One can make her acquaintance only through the tale of a man who had witnessed the incident but is unable to understand it. She lives on only in his memory.

Those who were being transported to extermination camps in the lead-sealed boxcars of the long trains would sometimes escape en route. Not many dared such a feat. The courage required was even greater than that needed to go hopelessly, unresisting and meek, to a certain death.

Sometimes the escape would succeed. The deafening clatter of the rushing boxcars prevented those on the outside from hearing what went on inside.

The only means of escape was by ripping up the floorboards. In the cramp of jammed-in, starved, foul-smelling, filthy people, it seemed an improbable gambit. Even to move was impossible. The beaten human mass, wriggling with the rushing rhythm of the train, reeled and rocked in the suffocating stench and gloom. Nevertheless, even those who, weak and fearful, would never dream of escaping themselves understood their obligation to help others. They'd lean back, pressing against one another, and lift their shit-covered legs in order to open a way to freedom for others.

Successfully prying open one end of the floorboard raised a glimmer of hope. A collective effort was required to tear it up. It

took hours. Then there remained still the second and the third boards.

Those closest would lean over the narrow aperture, then back away fearfully. Courage was called for to crawl hand and foot through the chink into the din and crash of iron, into the gale of the smoking wind below, above the gliding bases, to reach the axle and, in this catch-hold, to crawl to the spot from which jumping would guarantee the best chance at salvation. To drop somehow, some way, in between the rails or through the wheels. Then, to recover one's senses, roll down unseen from the mound, and escape into the strange, temptingly dark forest.

People would often fall under the wheels and be killed on the spot, struck by a protruding beam, the edge of a bar, thrown forcefully against a signal pole or roadside rock. Or they'd break their arms and legs, and be delivered thus unto the greater cruelty of the enemy.

Those who dared to step into the roaring, crashing, yawning mouth were aware of what they risked. Just as those who remained behind were, even though there was no possibility of looking out through the sealed doors or high-set windows.

The woman lying by the track belonged to those who dared. She was the third to step through the opening in the floor. A few others rolled down after her. At that moment a volley of shots rang out over the travelers' heads—an explosion on the roof of the boxcar. Suddenly the shots fell silent. The travelers could now regard the dark place left by the ripped-up boards as though it were the opening to a grave. And they could ride on calmly, ever closer to their own death, which awaited them at the crossroads.

The smoke and rattle of the train had long since disappeared into the darkness.

All that remained was the world.

The man, who can neither understand nor forget, relates his story once again.

When the new day broke, the woman was sitting on the dew-soaked grass by the side of the track. She was wounded in the

knee. Some had succeeded in escaping. Further from the track, another lay motionless in the forest. A few had escaped. Two had died. She was the only one left like this, neither alive nor dead.

She was alone when he found her. But slowly people started to appear in that empty space, emerging from the brick kiln and village. Workers, women, and a boy stood fearful, watching her from a distance.

Every once in a while, a small chain of people would form. They'd cast their eyes about nervously and quickly depart. Others would approach, but wouldn't linger for long. They would whisper among themselves, sigh, and walk away.

The situation was clear. Her curly, raven hair was obviously disheveled, her too-dark eyes overflowed the lowered lids. No one uttered a word to her. It was she who asked if the ones in the forest were alive. She learned they weren't.

The day was white. The space open onto everything as far as the eye could see. People had already learned of the incident. It was a time of terror. Those who offered assistance or shelter were marked for death.

She begged one young man, who was standing for a while longer, then started to walk away, only to turn back, to bring her some Veronal from the pharmacy. She offered him money. He refused.

She lay back for a while, her eyes shut. Then she sat up again, shifted her leg, clasped it with both hands, and brushed her skirt from her knee. Her hands were bloodied. Her shattered knee a death sentence. She lay quietly for a long time, shutting her too-black eyes against the world.

When she finally opened them again, she noticed new faces hovering around her. The young man still lingered. So she asked him to buy her some vodka and cigarettes. He rendered her this service.

The gathering beside the mound attracted attention. Someone new would latch on. She lay among people but didn't count on anyone for help. She lay like an animal that had been wounded

during a hunt but which the hunters had forgotten to kill off. She proceeded to get drunk. She dozed. The power that cut her off from all the others by forming a ring of fear was unbeatable.

Time passed. An old village woman, gasping for breath, returned and, drawing near, stole a tin cup of milk and some bread from beneath her kerchief. She bent over, furtively placed them in the wounded woman's hand, and left immediately, only to look on from a distance to check whether she would drink the milk. It was only when she noticed two policemen approaching from the village that she disappeared, drawing her scarf across her face.

The others dispersed, too. Only the slick, small-town guy who had brought her the vodka and cigarettes continued to keep her company. But she no longer wanted anything from him.

The police came to see what was going on. They quickly sized up the situation and deliberated on to how to handle it. She begged them to shoot her. In a low voice, she tried to negotiate with them, provided they keep the whole thing quiet. They were undecided.

They, too, left, conferred, stopped, and walked on further. What they would finally decide was not certain. In the end, however, they did not care to carry out her request. She noticed that the kind young man, who had lit her cigarettes with a lighter that didn't want to light, followed after. She had told him that one of the two dead in the forest was her husband. That piece of news seemed to have caused him some unpleasantness.

She tried to swallow the milk but, preoccupied, set the cup down on the grass. A heavy, windy, spring day rolled over. It was cool. Beyond the empty field stood a couple of huts; at the other end, a few short, scrawny pines swept the sky with their branches. The forest, their destination, sprang up further from the railway. This emptiness was the whole of the world she saw.

The young man returned. She swallowed some more vodka and he lit her cigarette. A light dusk brushed across the sky from the east. To the west, skeins and smudges of clouds branched up sharply.

More people, on their way home from work, turned up and were told what had happened. They spoke as though she couldn't hear them, as though she were no longer there.

"The dead one there's her husband," a woman's voice spoke up.

"They tried to escape from the train into the forest. But they shot at them with a rifle. They killed her husband, and she was left alone. Shot in the knee. She couldn't get any further.

"From the forest she could easily have been taken somewhere. But here, with everyone watching, there's no way."

The old lady who had returned for her tin cup said those words. Silently she watched as the milk soaked into the grass.

So no one would intercede by removing her before nightfall, or by calling a doctor, or by taking her to the station so she could get to a hospital. Nothing of the kind would happen. She could only die, one way or another.

When she opened her eyes at dusk, there was no one around except for the two policemen who had come back and the one who would no longer go away. Again she pleaded with them to kill her, but without any expectation that they would do so. She covered her eyes with her hands so as not to see anymore.

The policemen still hesitated about what to do. One tried to talk the other into doing it. The latter retorted, "You do it yourself."

Then she heard the young man's voice saying, "Well then give it to me."

Again they debated, quarreled. From beneath her lowered eyelids she watched the policeman take out his revolver and hand it to the stranger.

A small group of people standing further back watched as he bent over her. They heard the shot and turned away in disgust.

"They could at least have called in someone. Not do it like that. Like she was a dog."

When it grew dark, two people emerged from the forest to get her. They located the spot with a bit of difficulty. They assumed she was sleeping. But when one of them took her by the shoulder, he understood at once that he was dealing with a corpse.

Zofia Nalkowska

She lay there all that night and into the morning, until just before noon, when a bailiff arrived and ordered her buried together with the other two who had died by the railway tracks.

"Why he shot her isn't clear," the narrator said. "I couldn't understand it. Maybe he felt sorry for her. . ."



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*A Teacher's Guide*

Karen Shawn and Keren Goldfrad, Editors  
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## The Narrating Camera: Zofia Nalkowska's "By the Railway Track"

Orly Lubin

"The greatest writers are incapable of describing what the Holocaust means," states Elie Wiesel (2002) in *After the Darkness: Reflections on the Holocaust* (p. 5), and his comment is double-edged: How is one to convey the enormity and extent of the Holocaust? How can a reader relate to such unimaginable horror?

Nalkowska's "By the Railway Track," anthologized in Shawn & Goldfrad (*Anthology*, 2008, pp. 181–186), seems to be written in accordance with textbook advice: Do not try to tell the entire story; limit your tale to a single event and person. Do not try to explain; understanding will arise from the emotions the story evokes. Tell your story in the first person, or, if you were not a witness, tell it through a witness-narrator so readers can more easily believe and sympathize. Do not force judgment; show the complexity of evaluating morality—let readers feel, realize, how different their world is, so much so that none of our values or norms apply.

"By the Railway Track" is, indeed, shocking and may leave the reader overwhelmed, even numb. As horrible as it is, however, the reader does not doubt the story—after all, it is told by an eyewitness, the narrator, who himself admits to not understanding, thus helping the reader admit her own inability to comprehend and react. The individual suffering makes vivid the entire tragedy and allows the reader to feel strongly for the wounded woman and her death. Even the narrator requires sympathy, lost as he is in the memory he "can neither understand nor forget" (p. 182).

### The Danger of an Emotional Reaction

While reading "By the Railway Track," however, a reader may experience an absence of emotion itself, of any knowledge of the thoughts and feelings of the protagonist and those surrounding her or of what effect the event—the "incident" (p. 181)—has on them. This absence overshadows other emotions the story evokes, thus undermining the above. The story is told as if viewed through a camera lens positioned at a distance, and only that which can be recorded is narrated: the scenery, one piece of land on which the focus of the camera is locked, its frame never changing, the lens never moving to another site or following those who can come and go. Verbal exchanges that can reach the far-removed camera are reported, but not the undecipherable whispers, too far to be heard. The actual killing of the young woman is blocked by the shooter bending over and cannot be



described. The “camera” cannot penetrate the characters’ hearts and minds and thus cannot know what the young man, “who . . . continued to keep her company,” (p. 184) feels; it can only show us what it sees—that learning from the woman herself that one of the dead was her husband “*seemed* to have caused him some unpleasantness” (emphasis added) (p. 184). The “camera” reports only that which is easily understood: common gestures: the policemen’s hesitation, the villagers’ turning away from the body; thoughts visible through actions: “the situation was clear” to the villagers, who refrained from saving the woman; the policemen “quickly sized up the situation and deliberated” (p. 184); or obvious observations: “They spoke as though she couldn’t hear them” (p. 185).

This distancing from the minds and hearts of the characters results, inevitably, in lack of empathy. It is difficult for readers, through the usual literary conventions of empathy, to imagine themselves as either the wounded woman or the villagers. It becomes impossible to put oneself in their place, to adopt their thoughts and feelings and try to imagine how such an event would feel: for the woman, her wound, her loss, her impending and inevitable death; or for the villagers watching it unfold. As readers are pushed away, so to speak, from the domain of empathy, they lose the ability to feel sympathy. The loss of digested emotions, however, serves to expose the danger embedded in them. Without the protection, relief, and comforting self-esteem that come from empathy, they are left exposed to the demand posed by that other interpretative alternative: to evaluate the incident not as an emotional encounter but as one of responsibility.

The author distances the reader from the event both through the mediation of a narrator-character and by abstaining from revealing any thought, emotion, or even understanding. The narrator, the author informs us, saw the incident, but “couldn’t understand it” (p. 186). By this distancing, the author demands a confrontation with the choices made by her narrator, the villagers, the policemen, the wounded woman, and the young man who shoots her. Through the moral issue specific to this single event, she gives rise to the troubling broader issues of how to tell the story of the Holocaust, how to judge the attempts to resist or to escape, and how to evaluate responsibility: that of the tortured prisoners for one another and that of the bystanders, witnesses who are not only the onlookers in the narrative but, through the use of the narrating “camera,” are now the readers as well.

Toward the end of her argument on the effect of photographs of war and suffering, Susan Sontag (2003), in her last book-length essay, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, reminds us that

images cannot be more than an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalizations for mass suffering offered by established powers. Who caused what the picture shows? Who is responsible? Is it excusable? Was it inevitable? Is there some state of affairs which we have accepted up to now that ought to be changed? All this, with the understanding that moral indignation, like compassion, cannot dictate a course of action. (p. 117)

Nalkowska writes a story; by creating an effect of a “narrating camera” and by using gazing, looking, and seeing as markers of power relations and of catalysts of action, she achieves Sontag’s awareness of the working of compassion as a different, interfering force, which diverts attention from the forceful demand addressed to the witness to acknowledge her responsibility and to take action.

### Emotions Relieved from Responsibility

A comparison with a different translation from the Yiddish by Spiegel (in Glatstein, Knox, & Margoshes, 1973, pp. 361–363) reveals the effect of the literary devices that lead to lack of emotions in the story. In few minor changes and additions, Spiegel’s slightly different version of the same story directs the reader’s emotions and hence judgments. A man “reported the incident to the authorities” (p. 363); he thus sets an example by doing the right thing and is relieved of the moral accusation of not reacting actively and humanely. The same effect is achieved when the villagers justify their inaction, blaming the woman’s exposed location. There she lies, elaborates Spiegel’s translation, “visible from a distance” (p. 361) “in full view of the onlookers” (p. 362). “If it had happened in the woods, we could move her easily” Spiegel quotes the “old peasant woman” (p. 363). In Kuprel’s translation, on the other hand, the old woman only states the general, impersonal, uncommitted remark: “From the forest she could easily have been taken somewhere” (Shawn & Goldfrad, *Anthology*, p. 185); somewhere, by someone, somehow.

Both translations explain that nightfall (in our translation), darkness (in the other) is necessary; but where Kuprel states merely, “Nothing of the kind [any form of help] would happen” (p. 185), Spiegel’s translation explains: “The inhabitants were not prepared to cope with such an unforeseen tragedy” (p. 363). By replacing the formal, remote “incident” with the emotionally loaded “tragedy,” Spiegel creates a fertile ground for empathy with the villagers, who were, simply, unprepared. Two men finally come for her “under cover of darkness” (Spiegel, p. 363) or Kuprel’s straightforward “when it grew dark” (*Anthology*, p. 185). The foregrounding of the importance of darkness in both versions exempts the villagers from the obligation to help the wounded woman.

In Spiegel’s translation the bystanders are also quite emotional. The young man does not feel “unpleasantness” (p. 184) but is, in fact, the one who tells the wounded woman that her husband is among the dead, and “his voice was husky with pity” (p. 362). The old woman “looked sadly,” not “silently,” “at the milk spilled on the grass” (p. 363); and upon hearing the shot, the villagers turned away “sadly” (p. 363), not “in disgust” (*Anthology*, p. 185). Finally, Spiegel’s translation ends with an additional sentence, following the question from the man who reported the incident: “But why did he shoot her? ... Then from someone came the answer, ‘There is such a thing as compassion’” (p. 363).

Action and moral responsibility are replaced by emotional reactions: pity, sadness, and compassion. The killing is now fully justified as a compassionate act, explained as such by the woman’s own request to be killed, absent in our translation: she begs them to shoot her “instead of turning her over to the enemy” (p. 362).

The young man, by shooting her, relieves the policemen from the only choice presented—turning her over to the enemy and an even worse fate. He relieves himself and the villagers from the immoral choice to not help her and relieves the woman herself from an unforeseen but undoubtedly terrible fate. We do not feel anger or remorse at the action taken by the young man; we are coerced to support his action emotionally by the rhetoric of compassion, which returns in the final sentence to seal our doubts and judgment through numbing cliché reactions such as empathy, relief, compassion, and the stated fear of a painful death at the hands of the enemy.

In our translation, on the other hand, “she tried to negotiate with them, provided they keep the whole thing quiet” (*Anthology*, p. 184). The language of commerce and politics, together with the exchange offered—the killing in exchange for not reporting that people escaped and remain in the vicinity—are marks of community life, of an obligation to the collective. The policemen, same as the villagers, had an option: to kill her, not as an act of compassion but as a responsible response to the times and the situation, a response that will benefit both negotiating parties. They will not have to deal with the authorities, except for burial; they will be active and prove their superiority. She, meanwhile, will have saved those who managed to escape, and, especially important, will save herself from being the give-away, her live presence the mark of the possible presence of others to be hunted and murdered.

Now the shooting takes on a different meaning. It is part of a deal that the young man is the only one to fully understand and execute. When, in the dark a few hours later, the two men come to take her away, thinking her still alive, the reader is left with a dilemma: Was the shooting, after all, necessary? If the woman would have disappeared during the night, the villagers, even the policemen, would have been relieved of the duty to make moral decisions, and the woman would be still alive. “Why he shot her” (p. 186) is no longer clear to us. “Maybe he felt sorry for her” (p. 186) is offered as an explanation, a justification. However, this does not solve the moral issue; it is only a possibility. Other reasons for the shooting—the deal, her treatment at the hands of the enemy—still hover.

Now the reader needs to select the moral and immoral reasoning from among three different sets offered by the story or to organize all three hierarchically. The Kuprel translation does not state any one with certainty nor does it weave together “the greater cruelty of the enemy” with the actual shooting. Rather, the shooting is not only unexplainable, but it is also the source of the villagers’ disgust as they turn away and are quoted as one collective, impersonal voice that says, “They could at least have called in someone. Not do it like that. Like she was a dog” (p. 185). The villagers try to disengage, to disassociate themselves from the incident; “they” could have called “someone,” but to do what? Might they have called a priest? No, the dying woman was a Jew! Whom, then, might they have called and to what end? Obviously, the villagers would rather not be implicated, contaminated, by the murder.

The Spiegel translation, true to its attempt to justify morally the killing on grounds of compassion, has the villagers turn away not in disgust but in sad-

ness. "It would have been better if we had called for help," someone says. "To shoot her like a dog ..." (p. 363). It is an emotional comment referring to communal complicity in the shooting, which might have been mitigated by a higher authorization or permission to do the deed. The speaker would like to share the responsibility, but he is willing to take upon himself and his community some of it, knowing that the shooting is justified. She was, indeed, shot like a dog, but they all are, nevertheless, implicated by compassion.

### Indecisive Men, One Active Woman

This indecisiveness is not only part of the unsolved moral dilemma but is also one of the story's rhetorical devices and the main characteristic of the villagers' actions. They would have acted, if it had only happened in the forest, says the old woman. She brings milk and places it in the wounded woman's hand, "left immediately," and observed "from a distance ... [to see] whether she would drink the milk" (*Anthology*, p. 184). She disappears "when she noticed two policemen approaching" (p. 184). The young man refuses the wounded woman's first request for Veronal, but "renders her [the] service" (p. 183) of buying vodka and cigarettes; the policemen "deliberated" and remained "undecided," "left, conferred, stopped, and walked on further" (p. 184); the villagers come and go, gather in groups and disperse and move about from one spot to another. The young man lights her cigarettes, stands, and starts to leave, only to turn back and remain, her only company, "the one who would no longer go away" (p. 185). Finally, the policemen again "still hesitated. ... debated, quarreled" (p. 185) and even the shooting is both determined, on the part of the young man, and questioned, by the villagers.

The only one who is resolute, certain, and active is the young wounded woman. In a role-reversal combining stereotypes of gender, race, health, and dichotomies of home and homelessness, winners and losers, the story lets the fleeing Jewish woman be active rather than passive, determined rather than hesitant, decisive rather than undecided. In opposition to all, it is the wounded woman who is decidedly taking control over her life, beginning with the escape.

She was not the first to jump from the boxcar; she was not the last, either. She was the third, and there were others after her. After she is shot, "It was she who asked if the ones in the forest were alive" when "no one uttered a word" (p. 183). She begs for Veronal and asks for vodka and cigarettes. She purposefully drinks the vodka and negotiates her death. She chooses to tell the young man about her dead husband, she tries to drink the milk, and she begs to be killed.

Her description as an unusually determined and brave woman begins after we know she is already dead. Her escape from the train calls for the kind of courage "even greater than that needed to go hopelessly, unresisting and meek, to a certain death" (p. 181). There is courage in going hopelessly to one's death, but certainty, even of death, does give comfort. It is uncertainty that calls for more courage. Thus, when the prisoners remaining on the train hear the shots and realize that those who tried to escape failed, they "could ride on calmly, ever closer to their own death" (p. 182), the certainty of their death ever so strong.

### What Is Courage?

The wounded woman's choice is to take the risky action, and the author cannot hide her admiration. However, as the story continues, she also exposes her critique of romanticizing courageous acts. The woman's courage leads only to a death that is ugly and degrading, unnecessary and preventable. In fact, it is only in death, not by her attempt to escape nor her negotiations to be killed, that the young woman serves her community. Her presumed death serves as a calming factor for those who, afraid to try the uncertain, can "now regard the dark place left by the ripped-up boards as though it were the opening to a grave" (p. 182) and stop romanticizing bravery and resistance; and her killing prevents the authorities from looking for others who survived.

Although the challenges of escaping are minutely detailed, the technical language of this description enables a critical, coldhearted approach to the death that awaits them all. "She could only die, one way or another" (p. 185). All their deaths, finally, are ugly just the same; only her death, imagined by the prisoners on the train or real to the villagers, not her singular courage, can help the many. Her initial courage, to opt for the uncertainty of escape, is now replaced by another courageous choice: to opt for certain death. The hierarchy stated at the beginning—courage to escape being rated higher than courage to go without resisting—is now reversed.

### The Politics of the Gaze: Responsibility

Nevertheless, the author does not interfere even when such a major transformation of values occurs. It is the protagonist who realizes the danger in which she put her fleeing mates and perhaps those left on the train, who might be punished once the escape is discovered. It is through yet another difference the woman has over the other characters that the author reveals the route to understanding responsibility, and this trait is also a reverse stereotype. Unlike the normative mode of representing women in Western culture, this author gives us a protagonist in control of her own gaze and with the power to look. Through her look and her refusal to look, she structures her world. She chooses when to look and when to shut or cover her eyes "so as not to see anymore" (p. 185). She does not gaze at the people surrounding her; maybe she does not dare, because her gaze does not represent any real physical or psychological power she might hold over them. Her gaze does, though, allow her to evaluate her situation. She "noticed new faces hovering around her," "but didn't count on anyone for help" (p. 183). She "noticed that the kind young man" (p. 184) followed the policemen as they departed. "She watched the policeman take out his revolver and hand it to the stranger" (p. 185).

Through her limited gaze she sees the entire world. After the train "disappeared into the darkness," "all that remained was the world" (p. 182). This world in its entirety that is separated from the train and its "cargo," the "non-world," is the subject of her gaze. When she shuts her eyes, it's "against the world" (p. 183). It is only after her acts of courage fail that the world shrinks to the size of her actual frame of vision and appears as it really is: "This emptiness was the

whole of the world she saw" (p. 184). Now the very same gaze limits her world; it becomes the channel through which she takes in her surroundings and confronts her responsibilities to herself and to her community, her surviving friends in the forest.

The political role of the gaze in creating responsibility is highlighted by the villagers' refusal to gaze, to look, or to see. They "stood fearful, watching her from a distance." "They'd cast their eyes about nervously and quickly depart" (p. 183). The old woman, who refrains from looking when she brings milk and when she returns for the tin cup, recites her defensive speech to the others who, like herself, "spoke as though she [the wounded woman] ... were no longer there" (p. 185), as though they cannot see her.

The wounded woman is either visible to all or concealed by her executioner from the "people standing further back" who "watched as he bent over her" (p. 185) and only heard the shot. That the woman is exposed but distant, avoided, and finally concealed from the onlookers defends them from the responsibility to help her. She is exposed so they can see her, but for the very same reason they cannot help her; she is distant, too far for them to help or see her clearly. It is only when she is entirely concealed that they can really *see* her and condemn the killing; otherwise, when seeing is possible, they avert their eyes or find refuge behind "the power that cut her off from all the others by forming a ring of fear [that] was unbeatable" (p. 184).

### Between Looking and Seeing

The story does not formulate the relations among looking, seeing, and responsibility, nor does it spell out what this responsibility entails and whether it should manifest itself as action. The author mentions only one responsibility. When she details the escape, she notes that the prisoners "understood their obligation to help others" (p. 181). From where does this obligation come? Surely moral issues were not the primary concern of the "human mass" (p. 181) in the boxcar. They might be interested in helping some to escape so that they themselves will have some space; they might hope for the escapees' success, which will mean there can still be a future; or they might even become calmed by the escapees' deaths, they, who "back away fearfully" (p. 182) from the opening who will not have thus missed an opportunity to stay alive.

None are "obligations"; rather, they are self-serving reasons or lack of reasons to stand in the way. "The lesson of the camps is brotherhood in abjection" (p. 17) says Rousset (quoted in Levi, 1997, p. 216, and in Giorgio Agamben, 1999). The author herself does not pretend to substantiate the morality of the supposed obligation of solidarity, nor does she try to solve the moral issue of the villagers' obligation. If the woman who escaped is risking her life and the lives of others to no avail, why should the villagers be required to risk theirs, when it is clear to them they will achieve little or nothing at all?

In "One Day," one of the fragments in her book *Auschwitz and After* (1995, pp. 25–29), Delbo narrates her own witnessing of a woman trying to climb up from a ditch from among the ranks of several thousand women watched over by

an SS officer. The woman can barely hang on; she is nothing but bones; but as she struggles, Delbo, the witness, imagines her thinking, "They look at me yet do not seem to see me. They cannot possibly see me, or they wouldn't stand there gaping. They'd help me climb up" (p. 26). Delbo differentiates between looking and seeing; to look does not necessarily mean to see; but to see, it seems, means responding to that which is seen by taking action. The narrator witness tries not to look so as to avoid seeing:

I no longer look at her. I no longer wish to look. If only I could change my place in order not to see her. Not to see the dark holes of these eye sockets, these black 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. (p. 27)

The witness's attempts to avoid seeing fail; wherever she turns, she is looking at something or someone she can either not see, and thus eliminate, annihilate; or see, and then have to answer to the demand for action. There is no way she can help; if she moves, she'll be shot dead by the guard. Nevertheless, her gaze is not hers alone; it is resting, even if reluctantly, on a view that has moral value. The inability to help, or the futility of action, does not exempt the onlooker from actually seeing and taking some action. Hence eyes are diverted in the attempt to avoid looking so as not to see, and excuses are made, most of them blaming the victim's incompetence (the wounded woman should have made it to the woods, the villagers imply).

The ultimate manifestation of that from which one averts one's eyes is the camps' *Muselmann*. "[W]itnesses confirm this impossibility of gazing upon the *Muselmann*," says Agamben (1999) in his book *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Carpi (in Agamben, p. 41) defines the *Muselmann* as "living dead"; Agamben adds that it is "the extreme threshold between life and death, the human and the inhuman, that the *Muselmann* inhabits" (p. 47). The *Muselmänner* have lost not the will to live but the ability to will; it is this that makes them not only the unspeakable but the even more distancing *not-to-be-looked-at* following Laura Mulvey's famous definition of women's role on screen: "their to-be-looked-at-ness". The avoidance of looking, hence of seeing, may be explained by the effect of "a look into the future" that the *Muselmänner* leave with the spectator.

Delbo's woman, struggling up the slope of the ditch, is the image of the *Muselmann*; Nalkowska's protagonist is not. She is, indeed, "neither alive nor dead" (*Anthology*, p. 183) but does not become a *Muselmann*. They are entirely different in at least one major respect. Whereas the *Muselmann* cannot become, as Agamben defines him, a sacrificial offering that will, as Rene Girard (1977, 1978) shows, die in the service of the community, the wounded woman not only becomes a sacrificial victim for the good of the community but also makes it into her own, self-constituting decision—something (the act of deciding) that the *Muselmann's* very definition obliterates.

### Witnessing

"By the Railway Track," finally, is a discussion of the only moral action left when all moral judgment needs to be set aside: to bear witness. The story foregrounds not so much the necessity and obligation to testify or the heroism and sacrifice of the witness who testifies, but the conditions and the complexity of both. How does one tell about the Holocaust without reducing it to an easily understood emotional event and without relying on aesthetics? Is "true" testimony of the Holocaust possible at all?

[W]e ... did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it, but they are ... the submerged, the complete witnesses ... The destruction brought to an end, the job completed, was not told by anyone, just as no one ever returned to describe his own death. (Levi, 1989, pp. 83–84)

"It is not really possible to *tell the truth*, to testify, from the outside [of the camp, of the Holocaust]. Neither is it possible ... to testify from the inside," claims Felman in *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992, p. 232.). Laub, her co-author, further explains that "what precisely made a Holocaust out of the event is the unique way in which, during its historical occurrence, *the event produced no witnesses*" (pp. 80–81). The combination of physical extermination together with the facts that "the inherently incomprehensible *and* deceptive psychological structure of the event precludes its own witnessing, even by its very victims"; and that "no observer could remain untainted, that is, maintain an integrity—a wholeness and a separateness—that could keep itself uncompromised, unharmed, by his or her very witnessing" leads Felman and Laub to conclude that no testimony is possible because there is no witnessing.

The protagonist of "By the Railway Track" is the living-dead who occupies the threshold, the very site of witnessing; she is the complete witness, as she, too, will soon see "the policeman take out his revolver" (*Anthology*, p. 185). It is a moment of not shutting the eyes, although her gaze is her own and she controls it; it is a moment of touching bottom. She herself, the witness, cannot testify; she can only stare at the gun. Her witnessing, not yet transformed into language, precedes language. It is up to the author to now "bear witness to a missing testimony" (Agamben, p. 34).

This round-about way of bearing witness, the only possible way, is fleshed out through yet another "detour" through the narrator. However, even this double mediation is not easily transformed into testimony. Hence, the absence of emotions; it is witnessing without the pretense of understanding that which is being witnessed. The narrator, being there and seeing it with his own eyes, is the optimal witness, the only one who can testify and the only one worth listening to, because he does not understand and thus cannot add, change, or aestheticize his testimony as is Montaigne's definition of a good witness. He bears witness to a missing testimony that the "complete witness," the wounded woman, did not, could not give.



### The Spectacle

Neither the narrator nor the author has witnessed two events, one of which even those remaining on the train cannot witness because "there was no possibility of looking out through the sealed doors or high-set windows" (*Anthology*, p. 182): the escape itself. It is reported prior to the narrator's testimony, by the author, in a factual manner of an uninterested, uninvolved reporter. The other event is the shooting. This is, for the living-dead woman, the moment of seeing the Gorgon and not surviving this gaze. At this moment, she is transformed into a sacrifice, a memory, a corpse. Thus, the story shows the workings of three apparatuses: the first is the apparatus of sacrifice. It is an act performed for the good of the community but is always futile. It is always the demise of the individual and never the salvation of the many.

The second is the apparatus of committing an event to memory, thus transforming witnessing (an untainted gaze) into testimony (an untainted report) into narrative. However, this process also imprisons the commemorated: "One can make her [the young woman's] acquaintance only through the tale of a man. ... She lives only in his memory" (p. 181). The woman, the only active person throughout the incident, is confined, finally, to a place only in a man's memory, in a narrative organized by a mind "unable to understand."

To become a narrative, then, requires the third apparatus: the death of the bearer of the testimony, the carrier of the story. Narrated, non-embodied witnessing is a memory that is but a trace of a physical, corporeal existence. For that memory to keep alive, it needs to be repeated, like the annual, ceremonial repetitions of the survivors' personal stories, bearing witness to missing testimonies.

"Yet another person now belongs to the dead" (p. 181). The story opens when she is thus, a dead woman leaving traces in a man's mind, and we are already warned that this mind "is unable to understand." By the end of the story it is clear what is not understood: the process of the one complete witness becoming a missing testimony, the process of becoming a witness to that missing testimony, the process of sacrificing in the service of the community, and the process of turning the living dead, whom all try not to see, into a dead body that is the redemption of the killing community. Their deed of compassion exempts them from the responsibility to save and leaves them with the responsibility to witness and narrate a tale.

The gaze exposes the path from the heights of a courageous, resisting woman to the abyss of a sacrificial dead body committed to male memory and subject to compassion rather than responsibility. Her courage and sacrifice do not save her from becoming, like all other victims of the Holocaust, a missing testimony, now the responsibility of those who survived—and of those who read her story—to bear witness.

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