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Tracing Theory on the Body of the “Walking Dead”: *Der Muselmann* and the Course of Holocaust Studies

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The history of philosophical positions about the meaning of Holocaust victim experience can be organized around three general stances identified by the moral implications that follow: the “redemptive,” “nihilistic,” and “narcissistic” positions. Further, each stance includes a distinct view of the *muselmann*—that category of Holocaust victim generally referred to as the “walking dead”—that serves to confirm its larger theoretical claims. These categories have served as a helpful pedagogical tool when teaching a wide variety of texts in the field of Holocaust studies, and students can identify the limitations of each position in terms of the caricature of the *muselmann* on which it rests. Lastly, organizing a syllabus around these three positions encourages a certain intellectual progression from moral judgment, to moral uncertainty, to renewed engagement with the world.

All the *muselmans* 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 . . . 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 . . . 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.

Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*¹

Philosophical contributions to the field of Holocaust Studies have primarily involved an interrogation of the meaning of Nazism and the experience of its victims by scholars in a variety of fields. The history of the different approaches reveals three distinct positions about the *meaning of meaning*; or the possibility and significance of drawing lessons from an historical event of exceptional violence and brutality.² Corresponding to each position is a particular view of the *muselmann*, that category of prisoner commonly referred to as the "walking dead," which serves to confirm the legitimacy of the larger theoretical claim.

In my experience the pedagogical model of three distinct philosophical positions in Holocaust scholarship has provided students with an organizational method for studying the vast number of works and perspectives in the field. It is possible to identify each position in terms of certain moral implications that can be drawn from its respective portrayal of the *muselmann*; thus, one position leads us to a logic of redemption, another to nihilism, and a third to narcissism.³ I do not mean to suggest that every text that falls into one of these three positions necessarily intends or implies one of these moral stances. Rather, they emerge as distinct possibilities from three different conceptions of the *muselmann* which inform three different views on how we can proceed with ethics in the wake of the Holocaust. If these moral stances are found wanting or excessive, then they also inspire students to be critical about the texts they read and to identify problems with the various caricatures of the *muselmann* that give rise to these positions. And this exercise in critical thought can also lead students to develop their own insights about Holocaust victim experience and so become more personally invested in the question of

¹Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Touchstone, 1996), p. 90.

²I do not mean to suggest that every philosophical response to Nazism can be identified with one of these three positions, which serve to characterize general trends within scholarship rather than the entirety of arguments about the meaning of Auschwitz.

³I have also made use of these categories to describe trends in Holocaust scholarship in a separate essay entitled "Finding Man in the *Muselmann*," which appears in the book *Metacide: In the Pursuit of Excellence* (New York: Rodopi Editions, 2010).

how we can assign meaning to an experience marked by the loss of meaning, or the loss of those values and ideals that infuse our lives with purpose and sense.

Approaching the field of Holocaust studies through the lens of three distinct theoretical stances may also help students recognize some common philosophical commitments in otherwise widely divergent texts. Further, I have found that organizing a syllabus around texts that take my students through each of the three dominant positions on the meaning of Nazism and the *muselmann* encourages a certain intellectual progression from judgment, to moral uncertainty, to renewed engagement with the world.

The term *muselmann* was a part of the camp slang at multiple Nazi camps and was used to refer to those prisoners who could no longer work or struggle to live, who appeared vacant and comatose while still alive though minimally aware of their surroundings. However, there are discrepancies in victim testimonies about where the term arose, the nature of the condition to which it refers, why it occurred, and how prevalent it was in the camp population as a whole. Though generally recognized as a medical condition resulting from severe malnutrition, the term *muselmann* also denotes a state of despair that is co-existent with the total withdrawal from the environment, from any possible relation to the other. As Wolfgang Sofsky explains, “It is debatable whether the *Muselmann* can be properly grasped using established nosological categories. Although hunger is the basis for numerous diseases, misery is not an illness. Nor is the extinction of the field of consciousness, nor social isolation, nor persecution. . . . It is an object not for psychology, but rather for a social anthropology of misery.”⁴ The figure of the *muselmann* looms large in victim testimony and yet evades the light of both theory and science. Perhaps for this reason the *muselmann* is that case upon which each theory about the meaning of Auschwitz stands and ultimately falls.

Three Philosophical Approaches Toward the Holocaust

In the previous section I claimed that it is possible to identify three distinct philosophical positions about the meaning of Holocaust victim experience in terms of their respective conceptions of the *muselmann* and the moral implications that follow. I identified these positions in terms of the moral stances that may follow from them: the “redemptive,” “nihilistic,” and “narcissistic” posi-

⁴Wolfgang Sofsky, *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp*, translated by William Templer (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 200.

tions. It is important to emphasize that these are general categories meant to organize a vast amount of scholarship and are in no way meant to exhaust the variety of philosophical theories about the meaning of victim testimony. However, the originality of any position can be gauged by its contrast to these three dominant trends in scholarship. The scholars that I associate with each general stance have all made important contributions to the field of Holocaust studies, and I will argue that the limitations of their theories may be grasped in their respective caricatures of the “walking dead.”

The defining feature of the “redemptive” approach is the claim that Holocaust victim experience offers compelling evidence of the strength of the human spirit in an extreme situation designed to destroy it. This claim leads to three further conclusions: 1) since it was possible for victims to resist their spiritual decline, we must affirm the values that allowed them to do so, 2) the depravity of Nazism must be recognized as an attack upon these values of the Good, the True, and the Just, and 3) we can draw important lessons from Holocaust victim testimony that confirm the validity of our moral categories and western worldview.

Scholars who have adapted this stance include Viktor Frankl, Terrence Des Pres, and Bruno Bettelheim, all of whom claim that the average camp inmate was able to improve his chances of survival through conscious efforts to retain hope, faith, and a will to live amidst conditions that seemingly negated the value of all three. And for all of them the correlation between these efforts and the increased possibility of survival restores the power and importance of the human spirit and the moral worldview after their assault in the camps. And in order to confirm these claims all three scholars maintain that it was possible for a prisoner to resist the decline into the state of the *muselmann* through a determined effort to survive and remain human; those who ceased to resist the process of dehumanization that marked the logic of the camp soon fell into the condition of the *muselmänner*.

As Bettelheim explains in his essay *Surviving*, “Only active thought could prevent a prisoner from becoming one of the walking dead (*Muselmänner*) whom he saw all around him—one of those who were doomed because they had given up thought and hope.”⁵ Even in his book *The Informed Heart*, where he provides a nuanced account of camp life and emphasizes the role that chance and luck played in the ability to stay alive, Bettelheim insists that in-

⁵Bruno Bettelheim, *Surviving And Other Essays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 293.

mates declined into *muselmänner* only when they “gave up” trying to survive, or “had given the environment total power over them.”⁶ For Bettelheim, the effort to resist the camp’s influence was the moral imperative that saved men from becoming *muselmänner*: “That is, as long as a prisoner fought in any way for survival, for some self assertion within and against the overpowering environment, he could not become a ‘moslem.’”⁷ Frankl also insists that “only the men who allowed their inner hold on their moral and spiritual selves to subside eventually fell victim to the camp’s degenerating influences.”⁸ For these scholars survival in the Nazi camp was an act of will, the expression of human spirit against the force that aimed for its destruction. In this sense the survivors redeem our faith in humanity, in the strength of the spirit to overcome evil. When students read works by scholars who put forth the redemptive position, most feel as if their faith in the power and reality of our ideals is confirmed, and so too their capacity to be the judges of good and evil.

By way of transition to the second position my students read the essay *At the Mind’s Limits*, by the former victim and philosopher Jean Améry, where he expresses admiration for those prisoners who were better able to adapt to the camp’s environment through their fidelity to political or religious ideals:

Both the Christians and the Marxists, who already on the outside had taken a very subjective view of concrete reality, detached themselves from it here too in a way that was both impressive and dismaying. Their kingdom, in any event, was not the Here and Now, but the Tomorrow and Someplace, the very distant Tomorrow of the Christian, glowing in chiliastic light, or the utopian-worldly Tomorrow of the Marxists. The grip of the horror reality was weaker where from the start reality had been placed in the framework of an unalterable idea. Hunger was not hunger as such, but the necessary consequence of atheism or of

⁶Bruno Bettelheim, *The Informed Heart: Autonomy in a Mass Age* (New York: The Free Press, 1960), p. 151.

⁷Bettelheim, *The Informed Heart*, p. 152.

⁸Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, trans. Ilse Lasch (New York: Touchstone, 1959), p. 78. For Terrence Des Pres (*The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1976]), the *Muselmänner* represent those who were “murdered in spirit as the means of killing them in body” (p. 88), and each prisoner had a choice to retain hope and thus spirit or “quit and join the *Muselmänner*” (p. 90); “. . . as long as the spirit does not break, the survivor keeps mute faith in life . . . just the shock of realizing that one was becoming a *Muselman* was enough to inspire new will” (p. 92).

capitalistic decay. A beating or death in the gas chamber was the renewed sufferings of the Lord or a natural political martyrdom.⁹

And, he might have added, the *muselmann* was the forsaken. Améry admires those who were able to retain their values in the camp, but they do not convince him of the truth of those values or the strength of the human spirit. Instead they testify to the power of delusion and indifference to the suffering of others. In Auschwitz it was possible to affirm the human spirit only by excluding the *muselmann* from the human community; likewise it was possible to affirm faith only by excluding the *muselmann* from the world-to-come. This exclusion of a certain category of victims from moral consideration leads most of my students to reject the otherwise neat and appealing conclusions of scholars who advocate the redemptive position.

Scholars who adopt a somewhat nihilistic position toward the meaning of Holocaust victim experience suggest that it does not testify to the strength but to the utter destruction of the human spirit and the impotence of our moral concepts. Representatives of this position include Jean Améry, Lawrence L. Langer and Maurice Blanchot, all of whom suggest that one cannot draw lessons from Holocaust testimony as the Holocaust shattered the foundations of our moral universe and the relevance of any and all categories through which it could be explained or represented. Further, they also suggest that it is problematic to retain faith in moral concepts *after* Auschwitz insofar as their futility—both in Nazi Germany and in the camps—points to their ultimate irrelevance. Thus the only appropriate response to the question of the meaning of Auschwitz is to affirm its incomprehensibility, our inability to make sense of it or derive moral lessons from the ashes of millions who died without reason.

Langer expresses these sentiments in a passage at the end of his groundbreaking work *Holocaust Testimonies*:

The Holocaust does little to confirm theories of moral reality but much to question the reality of moral theories. We can of course dismiss this historical moment as a terrible but temporary aberration, during which human nature veered off course for a time but then rediscovered its true compass and restored direction to its moral voyage. But we do this only by ignoring the hundreds of voices of former victims, the details of whose memories frustrate such a placid view. Their shrunken moral universe, full of ambiguities concerning the basis for personal conduct, mocks conceptual efforts, from Plato to the present, to determine

⁹Jean Améry, *At The Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), p. 13.

the relationship between duty and the good life, what it is right to do and what it is good to be.¹⁰

Throughout this text Langer argues that oral testimony provides a more authentic depiction of the radically compromised life that Holocaust victims led, a life of “choiceless choice” that undermined the possibility of moral agency.¹¹ Further, he claims that oral testimony reveals the impossibility of full recovery from this life, the memory of which assaults and divides the survivor into two distinct “selves.” Thus, Langer suggests that it is cruel and dishonest to evaluate the behavior of Holocaust victims through our moral concepts and theories. Indeed, we can affirm them in the aftermath of the Holocaust only by ignoring the voices of former victims, who are traumatized by the inaptness of those concepts to their own experience. We cannot derive redemptive meaning from an experience whose horror is marked by the loss of meaning and moral sense.

Those scholars whom I associate with the nihilistic position tend to either overlook the figure of the *muselmann* or else regard it as evidence that there is no possible commonality between those who suffered *then* and those who try to understand it *now*. Améry actually claims that we must exclude the *muselmann* from our consideration of victims, as he was simply “a staggering corpse, a bundle of physical functions in its last convulsions.”¹² However, he also claims that nearly *all* of the prisoners at Auschwitz suffered from the loss of theoretical thought and aesthetic sensibility,¹³ and so indicates that the *muselmann*—characterized by the complete loss of thought and will—was simply the final product of a process that served to transform camp inmates into the “walking dead.” At the end of his reflections “on the mind’s limits,” he rejects the possibility of drawing any positive lessons about human nature from Holocaust victim experience. He explains that

[w]e did not become wiser in Auschwitz, if by wisdom one understands positive knowledge of the world . . . we did not become “deeper,” if that calamitous depth is at all a definable intellectual quantity. It goes without saying, I believe, that in Auschwitz we did not become better, more human, more humane, and more mature ethically. You do not observe dehumanized man committing his deeds and

¹⁰Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 198.

¹¹Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, p. 26.

¹²Améry, *At the Mind’s Limits*, p. 9.

¹³Améry, *At the Mind’s Limits*, p. 19.

misdeeds without having all of your notions of inherent human dignity placed in doubt. We emerged from the camp stripped, robbed, emptied out, disoriented—and it was a long time before we were able even to learn the ordinary language of freedom. Still today, incidentally, we speak it with discomfort and without real trust in its validity.¹⁴

That in Auschwitz some men lived and died with greater dignity, resolve, and hope than others does not prove the power or importance of these virtues, for in Auschwitz the real finally refuted the ideal. At the end of his painstaking analysis of oral testimony that illustrates the impossibility of full recovery or survival from Auschwitz, Langer reaches the same conclusion and throws into doubt the validity of our moral pretensions about freedom, ethics, and human dignity.

Assuming this same stance, the philosopher Maurice Blanchot wrote his meditations on Auschwitz and titled them *The Writing of the Disaster* (*L'Écriture du désastre*). This collection of fragments does not convey something about Auschwitz as a disaster, but instead bears witness to the collapse of every conceptual structure that might allow us to understand what is meant as a "disaster." He writes in an early fragment:

The disaster, depriving us of that refuge which is the thought of death, dissuading us from the catastrophic or the tragic, dissolving our interest in will and in all internal movement, does not allow us to entertain this question either: what have you done to gain knowledge of the disaster?¹⁵

And in a later fragment: "There is disaster only because, ceaselessly, it falls short of disaster."¹⁶ Despite its fragmentary style, Blanchot's work does represent an alternative posture to the Holocaust; refusing the conventions of narrative and logic, Blanchot uses language against itself to expose its own plasticity, its own non-relation to anything essential, real, or true. Langer cites this work in his book *Holocaust Testimonies* because it testifies to that excess that cannot be named, it forswears the attempt to understand that which cannot be understood. Blanchot's meditation aims to avoid, as he writes in one entirely italicized fragment, "[t]he danger that the disaster acquire meaning instead of body."¹⁷

¹⁴Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, pp. 19–20.

¹⁵Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 3.

¹⁶Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p. 41.

¹⁷Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p. 41.

There is a sort of ethical injunction behind this position, this refusal to explain that which escapes thought, related to the proper recognition of those who suffered. For the effort to understand, to search for the meaning of Auschwitz, assimilates useless, meaning-less suffering within a meaningful narrative that allows us to make sense of the Holocaust as a tragic, historical event. When we search for historical causes or examine the psychology of Nazis, we assume a possible explanation of why and *for what reason* people were made to suffer the unimaginable, unspeakable horror of mechanized mass death. We do so only at the cost of “body,” or at the cost of recognizing that the violence done to the bodies of victims was senseless, without cause, reason, or meaning. In a sense, we must allow their suffering to disrupt our need for meaning in order to pay heed to it. And in this sense the *muselmann* is the model *par excellence* for victim experience, for it represents a state wholly other than any we could imagine, understand, or endow with meaning.

The filmmaker Claude Lanzmann explained the focus of his groundbreaking 1985 film *Shoah* in such sentiments when he wrote: “There is an absolute obscenity in the very project of understanding. Not to understand was my iron law during all the eleven years of the production of *Shoah*.”¹⁸ Eschewing narrative for a series of interviews with bystanders, perpetrators, and victims of Nazism, *Shoah* does not aim to explain or represent the Nazi assault but to frustrate our ability to make sense of it. The film presents the fragmented testimonies of witnesses unable or unwilling to accurately testify, and so represents the impossibility of representing the Nazi genocide.

Indeed, all the scholars that I associate with the nihilist position suggest that the meaning of Auschwitz cannot be considered apart from the impossibility of its representation, and that the failure of signification reveals a negative meaning that throws into doubt the validity of our concepts and ideals. To the extent that our categories fail to represent the facts, to the extent that the facts overwhelm any possible meaning for our moral worldview, the horror of Auschwitz is marked by the collapse of meaning and understanding, the futility of the intellect against the reality of meaningless death and useless violence. Auschwitz remains the unspeakable and the unknown, and we who seek to grasp its meaning must confess our ignorance and our impenetrable distance from this site of extremity. Indeed, we continually confront the uselessness and poverty of all of our categories when confronted with the image of gas chambers and crematoria.

¹⁸Quoted in Cathy Caruth, ed., *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 204.

When my students read works by scholars who espouse these sentiments, they often experience a profound sense of moral confusion attended by feelings of helplessness and despair. They ask a series of profound questions that do not admit of any answers: If we are not able to adequately represent, and so judge, the behavior of victims and perpetrators in Auschwitz, then what is the proper moral response to its horror? If (the writer and former victim) Primo Levi is right and there existed in Auschwitz a "gray zone" between good and evil that now undermines the possibility of full knowledge and the capacity of judgment, how do we retain faith in our moral worldview?¹⁹ If it is possible that our moral categories do not apply to an extreme situation of mechanized mass death, how is it still possible to affirm their objectivity and universality? Since our categories do not apply to the *muselmann*, to someone overcome with suffering, how do we affirm their truth and general validity? Further, if it is not possible to understand or faithfully represent the condition of the *muselmann*, how do we testify to his suffering and prevent such a condition in the future? Is it possible to draw any useful lessons from a situation of useless and gratuitous violence that cannot be represented through moral categories and theoretical concepts?

Such questions provoke an epistemological crisis in which the very terms that we use to understand our moral obligations are thrown into question, and it appears as though we have no choice but to affirm our impotence in the face of useless violence. Indeed, many students feel as though they are teetering on the edge of nihilism, and they even start to resent their newfound knowledge of the impossibility of cognitive and moral certainty about an event that seems to demand clarity. For we are not engaging in a Socratic dialogue, and I cannot reassure them that our inquiry will eventually lead to greater knowledge of the good, the true, and the just. Instead, it appears as though any inquiry about the good is wholly misplaced in relation to Auschwitz. This discovery threatens their personal sense of vocation, for how can they do good works if they can't trust their moral judgment or power of reasoning? How can they attend to those whose condition they cannot understand?

And so, our hearts heavy with resignation, we begin our study of Giorgio Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz*, in which he makes a sharp distinction between ethical and juridical categories in the first chapter, entitled *The Witness*. He explains:

¹⁹Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 36.

One of the most common mistakes—which is not only made in discussions of the camp—is the tacit confusion of ethical categories and juridical categories. . . . Almost all the categories that we use in moral and religious judgments are in some way contaminated by law: guilt, responsibility, innocence, judgment, pardon. . . . This makes it difficult to invoke them without particular caution. As jurists well know, law is not directed toward the establishment of justice. . . . Law is solely directed toward judgment, independent of truth and justice. This is shown beyond doubt by the *force of judgment* that even an unjust sentence carries with it.²⁰

After struggling with the pessimistic conclusions of the nihilistic position, my students tend to view Agamben's insistence on the difference between moral and legal categories as nothing short of a revelation. For they realize that our moral response to suffering does not depend upon our ability to judge those who suffer, and that our moral responsibility does not exhaust itself in identifying those who are responsible for violent and evil acts. Instead, following Agamben, they consider how our preoccupation with guilt, responsibility, and judgment has in fact prevented our ability to draw the very lessons from camp life that could better serve our moral worldview and our ethical response to those in need. For our concern with *judging* the perpetrators of genocidal violence allows us to believe that the problem of Auschwitz—the reality of useless, administrative violence—can be overcome through legal channels.

Agamben does not suggest that we dispense with judgment, but rather that we recognize that our moral response to useless and gratuitous suffering is only hampered by our preoccupation with guilt and innocence. As he explains: "To assume guilt and responsibility—which can, at times, be necessary—is to leave the territory of ethics and enter that of law. Whoever has made this difficult step cannot presume to return through the door he just closed behind him."²¹ Our ability to bear witness to suffering has little to do with our desire to find out who is legally accountable for such suffering, and our call to attend to those in need is strengthened when we suspend the desire to judge them.

Referring to the two general positions that I have referred to as the redemptive and nihilistic stances, Agamben states: "Some want to understand too much and too quickly; they have explanations for everything. Others refuse to understand; they offer only cheap mystifications. The only way forward

²⁰Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), p. 20.

²¹Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 24.

lies in investigating the space between these two options."²² Agamben lays the ground for a new philosophical approach to the Holocaust, one that does not attempt to conceptually comprehend nor deliberately obscure the nature of Auschwitz but, rather, to bear witness to the form-of-life which suffered under its assault. For Agamben the *muselmann* is the term for that form-of-life produced by the Nazi camps, though it is also a symbol for every victim of state-sponsored violence who is excluded from the *polis*, forced to lead a life that is neither political nor natural. For Agamben the Holocaust is not altogether other or incomprehensible insofar as it represents the dark shadow of our ethical worldview; it was not so much a rupture as the unintended but perhaps inevitable outcome of our social and political institutions which are founded on the ancient distinction between "life" and the "good life." In his work Agamben suggests that the *muselmann* is the corporeal reification of that notion of "bare life" against which we can judge the value of the "good life" reserved for citizens of the state.

Agamben's perspective correlates with what I have called the narcissistic position toward Holocaust victim experience, whereby the study of Nazism is approached as an exercise in self-knowledge. By identifying this approach with a narcissistic stance, I do not mean to throw doubt on the importance of the scholarship to which it refers. I mean only to characterize the general orientation of self-reflection that informs a certain philosophical approach to the Holocaust based on the question of how this past sheds light on our present.

Other scholars who adopt such an orientation toward Nazism include Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, as well as contemporary scholars Zygmunt Bauman, Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, and Adriana Cavarero. For these scholars, Nazism reveals the dark undercurrent of the western tradition stripped of the pretense of some natural "moral sense." The ashes of victims are the final judgment against the slaughter-bench of modern political history.²³ For Agamben, Nazism testifies to dominant trends in western politics and, in addition, the experience of its victims testifies to fundamental traits of the modern human condition.

In his work *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* Agamben traces the roots of Nazism to a form of radical *biopolitics*, an ancient strategy of sovereign power that aims to include the terms of life itself in its sphere of control

²²Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 13.

²³In his work *On the Philosophy of History*, Hegel refers to History as the "slaughter-bench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of States, and the virtue of individuals have been victimized . . ." (New York, Dover Publications, 1956), p. 21.

through excluding certain individuals from civic participation or the good life. These individuals are banished to a “state of exception” in which the law is indefinitely suspended, such as a prison or a camp. In a radically biopolitical state the protection of the good life and national security coincides with the production of what Agamben calls “bare life” (*nuda vita*), or a politicized form of depoliticized life that can be killed with impunity. Agamben maintains that we have inherited the biopolitical agenda of Nazi Germany, which explains the direction of modern democratic governments in which the “care of life” coincides with the “fight against the enemy.”²⁴ Agamben suggests that the political distinction between “life” (*zoē*) and the “good life” (*bios*) founds the western state and, in particular, establishes the intimacy between violence and the law.

In his work *Remnants of Auschwitz* Agamben extends his comparative analysis between Auschwitz and the present to an analysis of how Holocaust victim experience and, specifically, the condition of the *muselmann* reflects aspects of our own condition that we deny at the cost of social progress. Further, our inability to recognize ourselves in the state of the *muselmann* is an expression of our dependence upon the distinction between the human and inhuman that sustains the economy of state-sanctioned violence in the present. And the *muselmann* represents both the necessary product of a robust conception of the human and also its negation. For the *muselmann* represents the apparently impossible co-existence between the human and the inhuman, life and death that—for Agamben—nevertheless bears similarity to our experience of *shame* or the *loss* of ourselves (our agency, will, and hope) when we are overcome by conditions outside of our control.²⁵

We insist that the *muselmann* is not human because we cannot recognize the human in one so vulnerable, weak, and helpless; this misrecognition allows for the assertion of the robust, humanist self otherwise thrown into question by the legions of the “walking dead” who, in Primo Levi’s words, were “overcome” before they could adapt themselves. In this way our insistence that the *muselmann* is less than fully human—or was effectively de-humanized—transforms this category of victim into a negative measure against which we derive the properly human and affirm the importance of dignity. According to Agamben this approach mirrors that of the Nazis, who held their own conceptions of a properly dignified or distinctly human life:

²⁴Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 147.

²⁵Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 110.

Simply to deny the *Muselmann's* humanity would be to accept the verdict of the SS and to repeat their gesture. The *Muselmann* has, instead, moved into a zone of the human where not only help but also dignity and self-respect have become useless. But if there is a zone of the human in which these concepts make no sense, then they are not genuine ethical concepts, for no ethics can claim to exclude a part of humanity, no matter how unpleasant or difficult that humanity is to see.²⁶

Agamben connects our de-humanization of the *muselmann* with our de-humanization of others who are excluded from the moral and political domains as prisoners, enemy combatants, or patients. And our propensity to exclude certain people from the human community is connected to our denial of our own vulnerability and shame. Agamben suggests that we displace our existential shame through our disgust and judgment of others. For when we judge others as evil or less than human, we project our shame onto others, as if to convince ourselves that it is possible to fully assume our subjectivity through the de-subjectification of others. In this sense he explains that "[w]hoever experiences disgust has in some way recognized himself in the object of his loathing and fears being recognized in turn. The man who experiences disgust recognizes himself in an alterity that cannot be assumed—that is, he subjectifies himself in an absolute desubjectification."²⁷ For this reason Agamben claims that after Auschwitz ethics must begin "precisely at the point where the *Muselmann* . . . makes it forever impossible to distinguish between man and non-man."²⁸

Agamben rejects those moral categories that fail to describe the state of the *muselmann* as both false and complicit; they are false because they assume the distinction between the human and the inhuman and they are complicit because this very distinction perpetuates cycles of administrative violence that aim to produce and re-produce the negative inhuman as an image against which to judge or confirm our own humanity. For Agamben the *muselmann* is "the guard on the threshold of a new ethics," an ethics that does not proceed through the act of moral judgment.²⁹ Agamben's phenomenological meditation on the state of the *muselmann* not only reveals the insufficiency of our standard moral categories, but also points the way toward a new ethical posture better able to bear witness and attend to the suffering self.

²⁶ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 64.

²⁷ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 107.

²⁸ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 47.

²⁹ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 69.

After reading his meditation on the *muselmann* as the foundation for a new ethics based on the position of the witness, my students tend to feel far less hopeless about their individual roles in a genocidal world. Their ability to assume a sense of vocation, to attend to those in need, is no longer bound to their ability to fully understand or judge the condition of others. After we let go of our need to draw distinctions between types of human beings, once we come to recognize man in the *muselmann*, we can assume our vocation from the position of a witness, rather than that of a savior or judge. This is essential, so that our efforts to attend to others remain faithful to their own intent, rather than transmuting themselves into misplaced affirmations of our own power and freedom. Agamben suggests that this remains a possibility when we retain a certain vocabulary to describe our moral duty in terms of dignity, respect, and humanity. For these words have meaning only in relation to groups of individuals who are thought to lack these very qualities, and so require certain moral judgments that divide and isolate us rather than restore and recover our community.

The Muselmann as the Specter of Holocaust Studies

Though I have found that it is helpful to organize the variety of philosophical responses to Auschwitz by what I have termed the redemptive, nihilistic, and narcissistic positions, this should not suggest that the works of an individual scholar cannot overlap, or that the three positions follow a strict historical progression.³⁰ Rather, these three distinct positions or approaches can be identified in the works and memoirs about the Third Reich, and each has found expression in cultural representations of Nazism since the end of World War II. The excesses and flaws of these positions can be grasped through their caricatures of the *muselmann*, representations offered to provide some evidence for their theoretical claims about the meaning of Nazism.

Scholars who adopt the redemptive position tend to argue for the continuity of our values through attesting to their real power to assist (some) victims in the struggle to survive and retain hope: because it was possible to

³⁰The most apparent example of an author who cannot be identified exclusively with a single position is Hannah Arendt, who at times suggests that our moral concepts are still relevant and asserts that we have an obligation to judge Nazis as having committing a great evil, and at other times suggests that these same concepts are anachronistic in light of the modern world and the rise of totalitarianism. Further, she echoes a “narcissitic” sentiment through her suggestion that we re-conceive our traditional categories in light of the “banality of evil” in the modern world.

retain values and dignity then, there is a basis for our faith now. In his essay on the "gray zone" Levi provides a thorough retort to Frankl's view that *even* in Auschwitz man could "search for meaning" and so resist his spiritual decline: "It is naïve, absurd, and historically false to believe that an infernal system such as National Socialism sanctifies its victims: on the contrary, it degrades them, it makes them resemble itself."³¹ The effort to understand and judge the experience of former victims through the lens of our moral categories distorts the conditions of life in Auschwitz, where adaptation required disintegration. Further, Améry insists that it was only through turning *away* from the reality of the camps that one could retain faith in a transcendent reality that explained the horror of the camps or allowed one to better cope with it. In other words, after Auschwitz we affirm our moral world only if the *muselmann* remains for us what he was back then; a specter who cannot be seen.

In his essay entitled *An Idiot's Tale* Omer Bartov surveys a group of texts about Nazism that all convey a similar mood of cultural pessimism. He includes Langer's *Holocaust Testimonies* in a list that also includes Christopher Browning's *Path to Genocide*, Alain Finkielkraut's *Remembering in Vain*, and Pierre Vidal-Naquet's *Assassins of Memory*. Bartov claims that they share something in common insofar as they all "fill the reader with an almost unbearable sense of despair and helplessness regarding not only the past but also the present." These works convey the message that the Holocaust is a tale that signifies nothing. "Indeed," he says, "it is precisely the meaninglessness of the event, made all the clearer now with the benefit of hindsight, the utter uselessness of it all, the total and complete emptiness in which this hell on earth unfolded, that leaves us breathless, bereft of the power of thought and imagination. And what is especially frightening is the impossibility of learning from the Holocaust, of drawing any lessons, of putting its facts to any use."³² In the course of his essay Bartov suggests that although these works represent a tremendous contribution to the historical record and cultural representation of Nazism, they leave us at a standstill, unable to say anything or learn anything from a real event, which then appears as an idiot's tale.

To the extent that *every* testimony reveals the impossible distance between us and them, and so learning the fate of *every* victim leaves us in a similar state of speechless despair, the nihilistic stance ensures that the *muselmann*

³¹Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 40.

³²Omer Bartov, "An Idiot's Tale," in *Murder in our Midst: The Holocaust, Industrial Killing, and Representation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 89.

remains anonymous, as his condition is assimilated to the condition of all former victims. Further, his story cannot be told, heard, or understood. He, above all, represents the idiot of the idiot's tale, that category of man for whom our categories do not apply, and so who appears senseless and dim.

Agamben accepts that Nazism represents the unsayable, that which exposes the limits of our values and concepts, though he does not accept the conclusion that there is nothing more to be said, and that we remain at an impassable distance from the events in question. He states that “[l]istening to something absent did not prove fruitless work for this author,”³³ as “[w]e . . . ‘are not ashamed of staring into the unsayable’—even at the risk of discovering that what evil knows of itself, we can also easily find in ourselves.”³⁴ And so Agamben begins his meditation on the state of the *muselmann* through reminding us that former victims testify to the impossibility of seeing the *muselmann*, and then draws a correlation between what we cannot see in the *muselmann* and what we refuse to see about ourselves; that we are, at every moment, subjects subject to de-subjectification. In this way the *muselmann* comes to represent a caricature of ourselves.

The redemptive stance to Auschwitz gives us false hope, while the nihilistic stance leaves us without any hope at all; the narcissistic stance trades hope for shame. In this way the course of Holocaust studies reveals phases of denial, dejection, and confession in the effort to grasp what the events back *then* mean about the way we live our lives *now*. In this way our analysis of Auschwitz has also served our own self-analysis, and the *muselmann* has remained a specter who cannot be seen. My hope is that organizing stages of scholarship around conceptions of the *muselmann* not only is helpful for my students but also conveys an important aim of Holocaust studies to testify in the absence of testimony, to name and record and grieve for millions who died anonymous, mechanized deaths. In this sense the *muselmann* names a state for which we have no name and which we cannot afford to forget.

³³Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 13.

³⁴Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 33.