

CHARLOTTE DELBO'S AUSCHWITZ AND AFTER: EXPLAINING THE INEXPLICABLE

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ABSTRACT:

How to convey in writing what goes beyond understanding? How to narrate experiences that surpass our abilities to make sense? In this paper I will explore these questions in the testimony of the French writer, resistance leader, and Auschwitz survivor Charlotte Delbo. Stemming from her determination to "carry the word", Delbo's writing manages to convey her inenarrable experiences into a recognisable account in which we cannot but directly engage in her story. As in most Holocaust testimonies, the brutality of Delbo's life in the camp represents a serious challenge to conventional narrative patterns, confronting them with experiences that lack any meaning, and which would never fit into the everyday narrative of our lives. In addition to this, this type of writing requires that the subject return to the camp, which explains Delbo's coexistence with herself back then and there. In my discussion I will examine how Delbo manages to vanquish this double difficulty in a writing that is traversed by the relation between her past and her present selves. Firstly, I will briefly consider how narratives relate to experiences, examining the difficulties of this relation that testimonies surviving the Nazi regime have brought to the front. Bearing on this, I will draw from Bakhtin's ideas to analyse Delbo's writing. Concretely I will focus on the dialogic dynamics of her split self and the way that the contrasts emerging from their interaction turn our certainties and our meanings inside out, insufflating the horror of her experiences into the normalcy of the words we read.

KEY WORD:

Holocaust, narratives, self, dialogicality

*You don't believe what we say
because
if what we say were true
we wouldn't be here to say it.
we'd have to explain
the inexplicable. (Ch. Delbo, 1995)*

THE IMPORTANCE OF NARRATIVES AND THE CHALLENGE OF TELLING

Stories are one of the most basic pieces of our everyday reality. We tell them, we listen to them, and it is like this that we understand what happens to people and to ourselves. Stories thusly shape our ways of make sense of our realities and ourselves. In these stories, two different factors should be taken into account: Historic and Sociocultural frames of knowing, as Foucault would put "*epistemes*", and the idiosyncratic dimension, i.e. our "*uniqueness*". The interaction of these two, more often than not, goes unnoticed and we hardly come to trouble when hearing or telling the stories surrounding us. Yet, the weight of these stories, their patterns and the language they are conveyed in, is essential as it constitutes the ways in which we construct our perceptions. The American scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2001) point to this when explain the way in which we learn about ourselves: "Subjects know themselves in language, because experience is discursive, embedded in the languages of everyday life and the knowledges produced at everyday sites" (p. 25). The knowledge that we have, or feel, as our own "*self*" cannot be thought of in isolation, neither according to exclusively idiosyncratic factors. Language and the socio-cultural knowledge of our historical frames, "*produced at everyday sites*", influence the ways in which we interpret our lives, and hence, our stories.

Interpretations and ways of understanding are basic here, as they are the first step in our organisation of a story. Furthermore, as the American narrative psychologist Jerome Bruner (1995) remarks: "We experience the world because we understand it in certain ways, not vice versa. Meaning is not after the fact; it is something we experience, as it were, after a first exposure to nature in the raw. Experience is already an interpretation." (p. 19). Our experiences, our feelings, our memories, and in definitive our lives, are not merely imposed upon us: they are the result of the meanings we give, the interpretations we make, and the stories we hear, and tell. And here, as pointed above, we are not alone: idiosyncratic factors intertwine with our canonical narratives.

Our cultural frames thusly facilitate our telling tasks, providing us with frames of references that simplify our stories. Referring to them we can easily interpret, experience, and tell about it. But, what would happen if our narrative models would not fit with the realities we have gone through? What to do were language not be able to provide us with orders to render these experiences as accountable? What could we do if our interpretive patterns could not assist us when struggling to make sense of them?

These are some of the questions inherent to what is generally known as Holocaust literature. After Second World War, many were the voices that struggled with these questions, seeking in literature a source of expression and facing these questions in order to give their account of what happened. Reframing his much quoted "To write after Auschwitz is barbaric", Adorno would insist on the importance of telling in order to prevent Auschwitz from happening again. Together with his, many were the voices following the appeal of the assassinated historian Shimon Dubnov who called the Jews to "Take note and write, write about everything". Nonetheless, with the determination to write we find almost without exception the challenge that represents bringing ultimate experiences to a shareable account. Part of the world cultural memory as it may be, the testimonies of the Holocaust have become part of History on the basis of myriad stories stemming from individuals struggling on their own to overcome the difficulties of their writings. The lack of normative frames, of sense to give to what had happened to them, was directly related to their own difficulty to understand and interpret this into experiences. The harshness of their writing was not merely concerning how to write, but also, how to elaborate an understandable testimony. Worse of all, the resistance to understand was not only theirs, but also their readers'. In one of his interventions Primo Levi (2011) recalls how the rejection to the knowledge coming back from Auschwitz was anticipated already by the Germans. Even before the conflict was over, uncertain news started to spread around. They were vague but coherent, he remarks, but the enormity of the massacre they conveyed made people question their veracity, tending to the discredit. Levi recalls how the German soldiers would tease their prisoners:

No importa cómo termine esta Guerra, la Guerra contra vosotros la hemos ganado nosotros; ninguno de vosotros quedará para dar testimonio, pero incluso si alguno logra escapar, el mundo no le creerá. Habrá sospechas, discusiones, investigaciones de historiadores, pero no habrá certezas, porque con vosotros vamos a destruir las pruebas. Y aunque quedase alguna prueba, y alguno de vosotros sobreviviese, la gente dirá que vuestro testimonio es demasiado monstruoso para ser creído: dirán que son exageraciones de la propaganda aliada, y nos creerán a nosotros y no a vosotros. Seremos nosotros los que dictemos la historia. (104).

The brutality of this threat shatters the very bases of their potentials as human beings: the possibility to tell from individual voices devoid of any normative schemes, to account for this hitherto never experienced dimension of human nature. Levi's example illustrates an additional threat, probably the worst, to the determination to survive in order to tell. This determination was the last resource of many who, like Delbo, were determined to live to "Explain the inexplicable".

CHARLOTTE DELBO

Charlotte Delbo is born in Vigneux-sur-Seine, not too far from Paris, in August of 1913. Her early interest in politics led her enrol the French Young Communist Women's League. Later in her life, after seeing the results of Russian dictatorship she would officially leave the party, remaining nonetheless strongly left in her thought as her critic of French colonialism would leave clear in her "Les belles lettres". Two years after having joined the Communist Women's League, she married the active communist George Dudach. After her marriage she studied Philosophy at the Sorbonne, but not for too long. Philosophy was forsaken for her real passion: theatre. And not too long after, this passion took her to South America as the assistant of the French director and producer Louis Jouvet. When France became occupied by the Germans Delbo was still there. Yet, she would not remain safe for too long. When hearing about the execution of a friend of hers Delbo decided to return to France to be with those fighting in the resistance. When telling about this episode to the translator of "Auschwitz and After", her friend Rosette Lamont, Delbo would simply explain: "I had to join my husband and his friends, fight together with them, live and die with them." (Lamont 2000-2001).

Once in Paris she joined her husband and actively participated with him in the activities of the resistance. Their main aim was to fight the numbness of people who may fall for the illusion of the German organization and order. They printed and disseminated Anti-Nazi pamphlets, and also contributed to the publishing of an underground journal, "Lettres Françaises". They were part of the group of another active communist, George Pulitzer. Due to the outstanding role that Delbo performed, working side by side with men, her figure in the resistance is nowadays being considered from feminist positions. However, Delbo did never identify herself as a feminist. Furthermore, after the war she would explicitly allude to her not-gendered writing, claiming the "complete equality" with which men and women were treated. The camp's discriminations were not about gender, after all, but about who was on which side.

Delbo and her husband were actively participating in the resistance until 1942. Together with Pulitzer, they were arrested by the Gestapo. Delbo's husband was shot a few months later. Charlotte could visit him in his cell to bade him farewell in a visit that later would inspire her piece "Une Scène jouée dans la mémoire". Delbo was imprisoned till the end of 1942, and in January a train took her to Auschwitz. This convoy carried 230 women (most of them being not-Jews but related to the resistance movement), and only 49 returned. They entered the camp singing "La Marsellaise", firmly determined to not give in in their attitudes toward the Nazi regime. The account of this journey and a collection of brief biographies of some of these women became Delbo's novel *Convoy to Auschwitz*, published initially in 1965. Delbo's experiences often crystallised in writing, adopting different genres ranging from

poems to theatre. Her camp experiences often take different forms, being articulated for instance as theatre plays like "Who will carry the word" ("Qui Rapportera Ces Paroles?") and in the trilogy "Auschwitz and After". It is on the latter that my analysis will focus. "Auschwitz and After" comprises three different books: "None of us will return", "Useless Knowledge" and "The measure of our days". Delbo's style presents a certain postmodern influence, her words resonate with uncanny echoes and language manages to bestow on the reader a feeling of impossible understanding. Concurring with the discredit with which German soldiers tortured Levi in the camp, Elie Wiesel (year) tells us that right after the liberation survivors tried to elaborate an account of what had happened. Then, they had to face the fact that for those who had not known Auschwitz and Treblinka would never be able to understand: "People refused to believe. Truth was frightening so survivors kept silent. They asked themselves, "Why bother? (2001: ix)".

Delbo did not certainly remain silent, although she somehow shared the conviction about the impossibility for someone to fully conceive what she aimed to tell. The first book, "None of us will return", opens "I am not sure that what I wrote is true, I am certain that it is truthful." The truthful nature of her narrative does not fail to make the reader "see", being highly visual and full of confronting images that the reader cannot but directly picture from her use of everyday elements. This book sought to depict the "universe concentrationnaire", as Delbo would put it when explaining to her friend, the scholar C. Lamont:

Although I did not know it at once, I came to the realization that I wrote this text so that people might envision what I' univers concentrationnaire was like. Of course it wasn't 'like' anything one had ever known. It was profoundly, utterly 'unlike.' And so, I knew I had to raise before the eyes of a future reader the hellish image of a death camp: senseless killing labour, pre-dawn roll calls lasting for hours, death-directed, minute-by minute, programming. We were made to stand for hours on end in the snow, on ice, envying those of our companions who had died that night in the bunks they shared with us. I hope that these texts will make the reoccurrence of this horror impossible. This is my dearest wish. (In Lamot, 2000-2001)

BREAKING CERTAINTIES: "TRY TO LOOK. JUST TRY AND SEE"

As we have seen up to here, the challenge that life in the camp imposed on survivors surpassed their being in the camp and extended to their being back, recovering and rebuilding themselves both physical and, no less importantly, psychologically. The process of telling was mined with difficulties yet, writing became imperative for most survivors, a necessity to honour those who died and to prevent this horror from happening again. Also, writing has proved to act as an important "acting out" strategy, facilitating the process of trauma recovery (Crossley 2000; Hunt 2010). Interestingly

enough, in Delbo's case writing went smoothly, her pen flowing easily: "I wrote "None of Us Will Return" as soon as I regained some strength. What amazed me is that, when I started writing, the text poured out of me, out of the depths in me in which it must have been stored. There were almost no revisions to be made. It seemed strangely easy, almost too easy." (in Lamont, 2000-2001) Because of the extreme fluidity with which this first book came out, Delbo decided to not trust it completely, leaving it in a drawer to re-read at some point. Only, that it remained there for close to twenty years. It finally became published for first time in 1965. The necessity to do justice with her testimony made her overcome the resistance to open the drawer that would take her back to Auschwitz: "Later, when I re-read the manuscript, and decided to continue, I thought of it as the testimony of a witness, a testimony and a testament. I wanted above all to honour my comrades, those who did not survive, and those who, having returned, were trying to build a life." (ibid)

The "need to build a life" directly relates to writing about it, as Delbo did, venting out the contents lest they remain sealed up inside, isolated but potentially lethal. The suppression or "annihilation" of the self is a common mechanism with which many survivors managed to endure the lack of sense of their ultimate situations. Once being back, subjectivity requires restoration, memory is to be reconstructed and if experiences are to take form, interpretation is a must. When engaging in this process bearing a potential reader in mind, things get even more complicated as the writer needs to reach and understanding that lacks the direct access to the contents being told. The narratives stemming from this writing are to tell about experiences that need to be recognisable. There are nonetheless no normative patterns or socio-cultural scenarios available here and the references are not even fitting into what had hitherto been conceived as human nature. To write under these circumstances is something that each one tackles from their own individuality. This explains the rich diversity in the testimonies left by the Nazi regime.

Primo Levi explained his deliberated use of the "lenguaje mesurado y sobrio del testigo, no el lamentoso lenguaje de la víctima ni el iracundo lenguaje del vengador: pensé que mi palabra resultaría tanto más creíble y útil cuanto más objetiva y menos apasionada fuese". (2012: 12). Delbo, on her part, deploys a somewhat different technique. As Langer (1995) puts it in the foreword of "Auschwitz and After", "She writes as a heroine and not as a victim" (ix). Delbo follows Levi, she does not seek revenge in her writing, neither being pitied for what she had to go through. The principle that guides her writing is *Essayez de regarder. Essayez pour voir*: Delbo wants us to "Try to look. Try to see." Explicitly in these words, this imperative signs some of her pieces in an exhortation that leaves us haunted by the images we have just read.

With her images, Delbo seeks to shatter our "knowledge". Let us see how in one of her best known poems:

O you who know
 Did you know
 That hunger makes the eyes sparkle that thirst dims
 Them
 O you who know
 Did you know that you can see your mother dead
 And not shed a tear
 O you who know
 Did you know that in the morning you wish for death
 And in the evening you fear it
 O you who know
 Did you know that a day is longer than a year
 A minute longer than a lifetime
 O you who know
 Did you know that legs are more vulnerable than eyes
 Nerves harder than bones
 The heart firmer than steel
 Did you know that the stones of the road do not weep
 That there is one word only for dread
 One for anguish
 Did you know that suffering is limitless
 That horror cannot be circumscribed
 Did you know this
 You who know. (1995: 11)

Delbo's reader is placed in the position of the knower right from the start, but only to be dethroned from it by means of the shattering of what we know. As explained in the beginning, narrative patterns stem from our knowledge of reality, things we learn to know from our socio-cultural environments and our own experiences. There are things that we automatically process as "natural or logic". Such as the ones that Delbo shatters here leaving us devoid of our comfortable position. She uses associations strongly printed on our understandings which we easily recognise: our mother's death and crying, a day being shorter than a year, a minute being nothing compared with a life, eyes are vulnerable whereas legs are strong, bones are harder than nerves, and so on. And yet, in her writing Delbo blurs all these recognitions of ours, they are not valid anymore: her knowledge disarticulates ours. Although we are almost forced to picture the everydayness of the knowledge she departs from, a mother, a heart, a leg, Delbo disfigure our images with hers, using them as a point of departure to convey her the magnitude of her experiences. Sometimes this strategy takes a different type of visual impact, directly and brutally confronting the reader in verses like: "A corpse. The left eye devoured by a rat. The other open with its fringe of lashes." (1995: 35) The impact of this piece hits hard with a terrible vision. The effect is accentuated by the contrasts nested in its structure: the harshness of the corpse, and its eaten eye oppose lashes, an element typically associated to beauty, which everyone visualises without thinking.

Charlotte Delbo signs: "Try to look. Just try and see." That is how Delbo compels us to follow her to her being back there, a position that permeates her writing and that I will examine in what follows.

WRITING AS A SPACE: DIALOGUES WITH THE SELF, POPULATING THE WORDS

Drawing from the ideas of the Russian semiotician Mikhail M. Bakhtin, in my analysis I will explore how in her writing Delbo engages in a self-interaction involving her writing self and the self about whom she writes. This dialogical dynamics characterises our self-narratives (Cabillas, 2009), and mark our ways to construct our selves *in* writing, and *by means* of writing. Delbo herself would distinguish between two different selves: her "Auschwitz self" and her "Post-Auschwitz self". To the question of whether she still lived in Auschwitz, she would reply: "No, I live next to it". Delbo explains us how she separates these two different subjectivities:

Auschwitz is so deeply etched in my memory that I cannot forget one moment of it... Auschwitz is there, unalterable, precise, but enveloped in the skin of memory, an impermeable skin that isolates it from my present self. Unlike the snake's skin, the skin of my memory doesn't renovate itself. (...) I am very fortunate in not recognising myself in the self that was in Auschwitz, I feel that the one who was in the camp is not me, is not the person who is now here, facing you. (1995: 11)

Despite the skin of memory, nonetheless, the present self is by no means separated from the past. Symbolised in the form of a skin, in "Days and Nights" Delbo depicts her saving barrier as thin, and not renovating itself. The security it grants her, as she herself will admit, is by no means total. Despite the safety that resonates in her lack of self-recognition, her self in Auschwitz is still there, present and inalterable, "etched in her memory". The engraving of the self is such that this self-isolation sometimes fails to protect her:

The skin enfolding the memory of Auschwitz is tough. (...) Even so it gives way at times, revealing all it contains. Over dreams the conscious has no power. And in those dreams I see myself, yes, my own self such as I know I was: hardly able to stand on my feet, my throat tight, my heart beating wildly, frozen to the marrow, filthy, skin and bones; the suffering I feel is so unbearable, so identical to the pain endured, that I feel it physically, 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. (1995: 13)

Tough as self-control may be, Delbo's skin protection is not a shelter in the oneiric terrain. In there, the self of back then seizes the present one, possessing it in the form of an embedded physicality. This phenomenon, not uncommon in trauma disorders, illustrates the division that splits subjectivity into defensive mechanisms. What is interesting in Delbo's case is that in her writing she elaborates a narrative account in

which these feelings are gathered and articulated into her present perception of the self that she was then. This is remarkably important if we consider the self-annihilation with which many Holocaust survivors report having experienced their subjectivities. The work of the Russian semiotician Mikhail M. Bakhtin sheds some light about the relationship between Delbo's different selves. Concretely, in his Law of Placement Bakhtin refers to the impossibility of occupying different spaces simultaneously; our existential position determines our *voice*, i.e. our perspective. The American scholar Michael Holquist (1990) explains the implications stemming from this law: "Everything is perceived from a unique position in existence; its corollary is that the meaning of whatever is observed is shaped by the place from which it is perceived." (21) Drawing from here recent works on the dialogical self theories (see for instance Hermans, 2002) suggest that the constant change of positions and even the dialogues established among them, are what constitute the dynamics of our selves. This is of interest in Delbo's narrative as it reveals how her writing is directly stemming from the two different selves that she herself differentiates: the one who writes and the one in the camp:

I am standing amid my comrades and I think to myself that if I ever return and will want to explain the unexplainable, I shall say: "I was saying to myself: you must stay standing through roll call. You must get through one more day. It is because you got through today that you will return one day, if you ever return." This is not so. Actually I did not say anything to myself. I thought of nothing. The will to resist was doubtlessly buried in some deep, hidden spring which is now broken, I will never know. (...) I thought of nothing. I felt nothing. I was a skeleton of cold, with cold blowing through all the crevices in between a skeleton's ribs. (1995: 64)

Illustrating the necessity of suppress one's subjectivity, Delbo tells us that when being in the camp the problem was not so much how to preserve one's self or, even less to wonder what sort of self one was. The real problem was the abjectness derived from the lack of humanity to which they were subjected, becoming physically and mentally dead despite being alive. Delbo nonetheless manages to occupy the position of a self that was so suppressed. In her writing she comes back to the camp and revisits what this felt like, physically and mentally. In the immediacy of the present with which this extracts opens, Delbo positions herself there, "amid her comrades". From there, she tells, anticipating her future discourse, and making her present past. After intimating us her inner thoughts with a convincing veracity, she shifts her position: the writing Delbo is the post-Auschwitz one. And from there, she tells us that what we have just read is false. That back then she did not even have anything to say, or think: she did not feel and she did not think. She was a "skeleton of cold." The two different selves interact in a writing that stems from their respective positions, each of them telling and both accounts constructing the narrative on two different voices which Delbo subtly

intertwines in her writing. As the space in which these different perspectives interact, writing both mediates and represents the construction of Delbo's memory. This is one of the reasons explaining the interest of writing as a cultural device and its role as the mediator our self-construction. As a representing tool, writing fosters reflexivity (Ong, 1986). The distance that it introduces allows us to separate not only from our mental contents (emotions, sensations, articulated or not) but also from our own ways of considering them. We occupy different positions and look from them, tell from them and, write from them:

I am other. I speak and my voice sounds like other than a voice. My words come from outside of me. I speak and what I say is not said by me. My words must travel along a narrow path from which they must not stray for fear of reaching spheres where they'd become incomprehensible. Words do not necessarily have the same meaning. You must hear them say "I almost fell. I got scared." Do they know what fear is? Or "I'm hungry. I must have a chocolate bar in my handbag." They say, I'm frightened, I'm hungry, I'm cold, I'm thirsty, I'm in pain, as though these words were weightless. (1995: 264)

The otherness with which Delbo opens here unveils precisely the gap that separates her different selves. The depth from which the words stem make them sound different, as if they belonged to someone "outside" of her whom she does not recognise. Yet, the meaning of those words is hers. It is her Auschwitz's self who speaks them and it is precisely the echoes of this voice what allows her to establish the contrast between herself and the rest of us. Let's see how.

The language in which she speaks is again a common one: short, easy, her sentences read fast. As before, Delbo emphasises this everyday-ness of this language with common phrases that the reader easily recognizes as part of his or her reality: I'm frightened, I'm hungry, I'm cold, I'm thirsty, I'm in pain. All these terms are easily recognizable and almost without thinking we bring them to our own experiences, recognising them. And it is precisely on the basis of this normality that Delbo separates herself, and her own experiences, from the everyday-ness that we have felt in these words. Grammatically, Delbo's writing locates the common use of these words to the furthest pronoun possible: "They". With the shared distance of this third plural person, Delbo displaces us and ours experiences, separating us from "They" and positioning us right facing her, in directly addressing us as "you". This separates us from the normality of the others, and from the everydayness of their words, carrying us with her to the separated position from which she writes. In her narrative she brings us to her way to inhabit these words. Delbo forces us to feel the echoes that her Auschwitz self has imprinted on these words and which marks them with indelible tones. With no explanations, Delbo manages to make us feel that "words do not necessarily have the same meaning".

The contrasts between normalcy and the radical lack of it that marks the unintelligibility of her experiences pulsates in Delbo's "Auschwitz and After". As Bakhtin (1984, 1986) Delbo populates language in utterances in which her two voices are telling in a constant effort to show us, to make us "see". The separation between us and her is difficult to bridge, and her writing is aware of that. Adopting our perspective, she departs from it only to turn it inside out, in an attempt to "explaining the inexplicable".

You'd like to know

Ask questions
 But you don't know what questions
 And don't know how to ask them
 So you inquire
 About simple things
 Hunger
 Fear
 Death
 And we don't know how to answer
 Not with the words you use
 Our own words
 You can't understand
 So you ask simpler things
 Tell us for example
 How a day was spent
 A day goes by so slowly
 You'd run out of patience listening
 But if we gave you an answer
 You still don't know how a day was spent
 And assume we don't know how to answer. (1995:275).

CONCLUSION

When occupying the semiotic space of writing to interpret and give sense to our experiences, we engage in a process of narrative organisation from which our account is to emerge. Describing and organising, in our narrative task we are aided by our social and cultural frames of references. It is in this way that in our everyday life, we tell stories, we listen to them, and we use them to *know*. Contrasting this, Delbo's account takes us to a radically different horizon of meaning, in which we are disoriented: we see, but we cannot know. Delbo leaves us haunted by echoes from experiences we cannot fathom and images we have not been able to avoid looking at.

Delbo's writing stems from the two positions of her Post-Auschwitz and Auschwitz selves. Her voice knows well the scope of our intelligibility, and hence she is aware of the necessity of challenging these limits in order to make us "see". For this aim she comes back and tells from there, with the images and feelings from the camp, the people she was with, the feelings she had or lacked, confronting us with a voice whose

perspective we cannot but follow full of awe. Yet, it is thanks to this that she manages to *explain the inexplicable*.

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