

READING RHETORIC THROUGH TRAUMA:  
CHARLOTTE DELBO'S *AUSCHWITZ AND AFTER*

BY

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## **ABSTRACT**

Despite many clear points of connection, the field of rhetoric has largely remained silent on the notion of trauma, or overwhelming experience. I seek to establish the ways in which trauma simultaneously creates the exigency for rhetoric and complicates its task, using Holocaust survivor Charlotte Delbo's groundbreaking memoir *Auschwitz and After* as a case study. I argue, drawing upon the work of Susan J. Brison, that the externalization of her memories in narrative form allows Delbo to reclaim the self devastated by trauma; the text, however, shatters conventional expectations of what constitutes a coherent narrative, as set forth by Walter Fisher in his narrative paradigm. I conclude that *Auschwitz and After* is significant in that it enacts the trauma it seeks to transmit, a necessary approach in the face of the loss of reason and language engendered by the Holocaust.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Since Sigmund Freud first proposed a theory explicating the notion of trauma in the 1890s, the phenomenon has been explored in the disciplines of psychology, history, literature, and cultural studies.<sup>1</sup> Particularly since the late twentieth century, there has been a veritable explosion of work on the importance of the traumatic in understanding the modern era. Trauma, which is “an event...defined by its intensity, by the subject’s incapacity to respond adequately to it and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organization,”<sup>2</sup> has “progressively become a key notion in discussions that interrogate the links between social history, subjective experience, and cultural representation.”<sup>3</sup> Shoshana Felman even refers to the twentieth century itself as “post-traumatic,” as it “survived unthinkable historical catastrophes.”<sup>4</sup> The field of rhetoric, however, has remained stunningly silent on the relevance of trauma for the study of human communication and persuasion. This is particularly striking given the myriad ways in which the concept of *crisis* has influenced the development and application of rhetorical theory and criticism.<sup>5</sup> Rhetoric might not have evolved at all were it not for the crises (political, cultural, social and individual) that create the exigencies for rhetoric, in

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Caruth, *Trauma*; Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History*; Van der Kolk, *Psychological Trauma*; Leys, *Trauma*; LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*; Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*; Roth, *Memory, Trauma, and History*; Antze, *Tense Past*; Farrell, *Post-traumatic Culture*; Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*.

<sup>2</sup> Laplanche, *The language of psycho-analysis*, 465–469.

<sup>3</sup> Traverso and Broderick, “Interrogating Trauma,” 4.

<sup>4</sup> Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., David A. Frank, “A Traumatic Reading of Twentieth-Century Rhetorical Theory: The Belgian Holocaust, Malines, Perelman, and de Man”; John Poulakos, “Toward a Sophistic Definition of Rhetoric”; Gaonkar, *Contemporary rhetorical theory*; Millar, *Responding to crisis*.

the sense characterized by Lloyd Bitzer as a situation urgently calling for a rhetorical response.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, many of the watershed historical events of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (including the two World Wars, the Vietnam War, and September 11<sup>th</sup>) have been described as traumatic, and have also become the sites of extensive rhetorical analysis.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the relationship between trauma and rhetoric is ripe for exploration.

The intent of this thesis is to make explicit the ways in which trauma simultaneously creates the exigency for rhetoric, and alters the ways in which its task must be fulfilled. I explore the possibility that rhetoric requires rethinking or redefining in the face of one of modern history's most salient examples of an historical trauma: the Holocaust. Dominick LaCapra refers to the Shoah as the "point of rupture between the modern and the postmodern,"<sup>8</sup> demonstrating its particular power as a traumatic event. The Holocaust stands as a "limit event"<sup>9</sup> that calls into question the possibility for language to capture the most extreme of human experiences. I propose that in the context of trauma, rather than marshaling language in favor of reasoned argument or discourse, rhetoric must – to the extent possible – face and work through the *loss* of reason and language. I draw upon Susan J. Brison's argument that the construction of narrative is necessary to restore the self that is undone by trauma. I also argue that it is through the *disruption* of the traditional standards for narrative that trauma can be transmitted, using

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<sup>6</sup> Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation."

<sup>7</sup> For seminal examples, see Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*; Burke, "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'"; Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*; Gustainis, *American Rhetoric and the Vietnam War*; Kenneth S. Zagacki, "Rhetoric, Failure, and the Presidency: The Case of Vietnam"; Michael J. Hyde, "The Rhetor as Hero and the Pursuit of Truth: The Case of 9/11"; Silberstein, *War of Words*.

<sup>8</sup> LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust History, Theory, Trauma*, xi.

<sup>9</sup> Gigliotti, "Unspeakable Past as Limit Events: The Holocaust, Genocide, and the Stolen Generations."

Walter Fisher's "narrative paradigm" against itself to demonstrate how one survivor of trauma achieves this.

I analyze French resistance leader and Holocaust survivor Charlotte Delbo's memoir, a trilogy entitled *Auschwitz and After*, as the primary text and case study.<sup>10</sup> Delbo's work provides an excellent microcosm for what it means to write of trauma; she employs "a remarkable style of direct confrontation that lures us into the maelstrom of atrocity while simultaneously drowning all intellectual defenses."<sup>11</sup> Dominick LaCapra suggests that Delbo "resisted narrative closure and engaged in hesitant post-traumatic writing as an act of fidelity to victims of the Holocaust."<sup>12</sup> LaCapra and others have analyzed and discussed Delbo's memoir in many different contexts, but my project differs in its deployment of a rhetorical perspective and the effort to identify the text as a specific rhetorical act, one that makes a larger statement about trauma and communication. I find that Delbo's writing enacts the trauma that it seeks to transmit, providing a crucial example of how rhetoric can operate in the face of trauma: by calling attention to the problems inherent in transmitting overwhelming experience, and yet refusing to succumb to them, but rather working through them. Delbo demonstrates that

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<sup>10</sup> In a thesis exploring notions of language and communication, I must take a moment to address the fact that Delbo's memoir was originally written in French, and that I am working from an English translation. I do not believe this compromises my analysis. The translator, Rosette C. Lamont, knew Charlotte Delbo personally, has written several articles about the author and translated another of her books, and conducted relevant original research in the process of translation. Lamont's connections and dedication to Delbo's work suggests that she can be trusted to have produced a faithful translation that maintains the integrity and spirit of the original. Additionally, I believe that Delbo's work is extremely important and thus warrants as much examination as possible, including that conducted by English-speaking students and scholars. Finally, *Auschwitz and After* is as powerful a text in English as it is in French, and so its translation does not diminish the arguments I have made here.

<sup>11</sup> Langer, *Auschwitz and after*, xiv.

<sup>12</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 70.

language must, in Paul Celan's words, "pass through its own answerlessness"<sup>13</sup> in order to provide an appropriate response to the devastating nature of trauma.

The rest of this introduction provides relevant theoretical and historical background information on trauma and the Holocaust, and situates my project within the extant scholarship and within rhetorical theory.

### ***Historical Context***

As understood in the relevant literature,<sup>14</sup> a *trauma* constitutes an event that overwhelms the normal capacities for understanding and assimilating experience in its uncontrollable and terrifying nature. The word *trauma* itself comes from the Greek word for *wound*.<sup>15</sup> Freud proposed that trauma occurs when an event breaks through the "protective shield" that allows an individual to process and interpret experiences. The extreme input of stimulus shocks the individual's cognitive system, and he or she faces "the problem of mastering the amounts of stimulus which have broken and of binding them, in the psychical sense, so that they can be disposed of."<sup>16</sup> The fractured way in which the individual experiences the trauma stems from the person's *unpreparedness* for the overwhelming nature of the event. This means that the event cannot be incorporated properly into existing mental schema; as a result, the mind may return to the traumatic event in an attempt to "master the stimulus retrospectively."<sup>17</sup> This phenomenon, which

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<sup>13</sup> Caruth, *Trauma*, 53.

<sup>14</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*; Caruth, *Trauma*; Van der Kolk and Van der Hart, "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma"; Leys, *Trauma*; Spiegel, "Trauma, Dissociation, and Memory"; LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*.

<sup>15</sup> Kirmayer, *Understanding Trauma*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 33–34.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

Freud calls “repetition compulsion,” can occur in multiple different forms, such as nightmares or flashbacks to the original event.

What differentiates trauma from other horrible events in a person’s life is the combination of a complete shock to the cognitive system and the threat to the individual’s agency. According to Susan J. Brison, “There is a much clearer professional consensus among psychologists about what counts as a traumatic event than there is among philosophers concerning the nature of the self. A traumatic event is one in which a person feels utterly helpless in the face of a force that is perceived to be life-threatening.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, trauma necessarily disrupts the moment at which it occurs, complicating the process of memory storage and retrieval, which is what triggers phenomena like repetition compulsion.

Significantly, trauma tends to rob the individual of the capacity to describe what happened linguistically. Language is one of the mental schemas that fall short in the attempt to assimilate the overwhelming experience.<sup>19</sup> Trauma “is seen as something that takes place outside of language. In that sense it is not experience at all, in that it cannot be made sense of or recounted in language. In Lacanian terms, it is an encounter with the real.”<sup>20</sup> This phenomenon has been documented by clinical psychologists working with victims of trauma, and has also become a cultural marker for events conceptualized as traumatic.<sup>21</sup> The loss of language is frequently explained in relation to dissociation, or “splitting of the ego,” a psychological defense mechanism against traumatic events by which the victim detaches from the reality of the experience and fails to organize or

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<sup>18</sup> Brison, “Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self,” 40.

<sup>19</sup> Van der Kolk and Van der Hart, “The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma,” 176.

<sup>20</sup> Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 213.

<sup>21</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 239; Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*.

integrate the memory in the typical way.<sup>22</sup> This process “appears to be the mechanism by which intense sensory and emotional experiences are disconnected from the social domain of language and memory, the internal mechanism by which terrorized people are silenced.”<sup>23</sup> This loss of language and failure of integration into memory defines trauma: According to Slavoj Žižek, “The essence of the trauma is precisely that it is too horrible to be remembered, to be integrated into our symbolic universe. All we have to do is to mark repeatedly the trauma as such, in its very ‘impossibility,’ in its non-integrated horror, by means of some ‘empty’ symbolic gesture.”<sup>24</sup> Scholars such as Dominick LaCapra have invested much attention into the question of how to represent or transmit that which cannot be spoken.<sup>25</sup> Trauma thus calls into question the nature of language and its relationship to external reality.

As soon as trauma problematizes language, it naturally begins to implicate rhetoric. One of the most widely understood and commonly utilized rhetorical devices, the enthymeme, serves to illustrate the obstacles that trauma creates for rhetoric. Aristotle introduces the enthymeme in *On Rhetoric*, referring to it as a “rhetorical syllogism... a rhetorical induction a paradigm.”<sup>26</sup> Aristotle’s work serves as the foundation upon which other rhetorical theorists have built. Bitzer defines the enthymeme as “a syllogism based on probabilities, signs, and examples, whose function is rhetorical persuasion. Its successful construction is accomplished through the joint efforts of speaker and audience.”<sup>27</sup> The enthymeme requires a cooperative effort because the rhetor “does not

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<sup>22</sup> Leys, *Trauma*, 147; Spiegel, “Trauma, Dissociation, and Memory.”

<sup>23</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 239.

<sup>24</sup> Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, 272.

<sup>25</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*; Leys, *Trauma*.

<sup>26</sup> Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, line 1356b.

<sup>27</sup> Bitzer, “Aristotle’s Enthymeme Revisited,” 408.

*lay down* his premises but lets his audience supply them out of its stock of opinion and knowledge.”<sup>28</sup> In Fisher’s words, the premises of the enthymeme “must be *audience approved* assumptions, facts, inferences, attitudes, or values if it is to be persuasive.”<sup>29</sup> The problem, of course, is that in the instance of trauma, the content of the premises lie outside the bounds of human experience; thus, the inferences supplied by the audience will necessarily be flawed, incomplete, or missing altogether. If trauma cannot be captured using generally accessible symbols or language, then the attempt to unify “a speaker’s or writer’s line of reasoning with the premise or premises assented to by an audience”<sup>30</sup> will fall short. The absence of shared understanding between rhetor and audience disrupts the necessary connection between the two that forms the basis of the enthymeme.

Trauma also comes to bear a clear relationship with rhetoric when the traumatic experience produces literature, for example in the form of memoir or testimony written by the victim. Paul de Man argues that rhetoric lies nestled in the impossibility of distinguishing or deciding between literal and figurative meaning, and equates “the rhetorical, figural potentiality of language with literature itself.”<sup>31</sup> In the case of a first-person account, trauma produces a rhetorical text, necessarily raising questions of what modes of discourse are appropriate to the transmission of overwhelming experience. I argue that rhetoric must confront and work through the loss of language and reason in order to convey trauma properly; Delbo’s writing offers an instance of this working-through.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 407. Emphasis in original.

<sup>29</sup> Fisher, “Uses of the Enthymeme,” 201.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in LaCapra, *History & Criticism*, 17.

Delbo's memoir concerns her experiences as a prisoner of the Nazi concentration camps, which constitute a particularly acute instance of an atrocity that shatters existing frameworks of meaning. The Holocaust is widely understood as a defining historical trauma, an event that changed our understanding of the world and of the human capacity to commit horrifying atrocities. In fact, it is nearly impossible to find scholarship on trauma that does not at least refer to the Holocaust as a seminal example; in Ruth Leys' words, the Holocaust appears "to have been *the* crucial trauma of the century."<sup>32</sup> For many, the Holocaust is the event that demonstrated the limits of systems like language to capture overwhelming experience. Writes Márcio Seligmann-Silva, "At the center of this discussion [of trauma and representation], there is Shoah – as a powerful black hole. This *border-event*, which is preeminently the catastrophe of humanity and which has already become the *definiens* of the twentieth century, reorganizes all reflection on reality and on the possibility of its representation."<sup>33</sup> The shattering implications of the Shoah bring into stark relief the problems that trauma creates for language and representation: a trauma like the Holocaust calls into question the very possibility of rhetoric. The problem lies in "the impossibility to reduce this event to the merely discursive... the need for a 'stable narration' cannot be fulfilled as far as Shoah is concerned."<sup>34</sup>

The particular problems for representation posed by the Holocaust stem from the sheer magnitude of destruction wrought, and especially from the radical evil perpetuated by human beings against other humans. The cruelty and inhumanity of Hitler's plans, and the brutal ruthlessness with which his orders were carried out, seem unthinkable. Elie Wiesel, the Nobel Prize-winning Holocaust survivor, writes that "Auschwitz negates all

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<sup>32</sup> Leys, *Trauma*, 15.

<sup>33</sup> Seligmann-Silva, "Catastrophe and Representation: History as Trauma," 145.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 146.

systems, destroys all doctrines.”<sup>35</sup> Auschwitz, the largest of the German concentration camps, has become a metonym for the Holocaust itself, and in particular for the most appalling atrocities that the Nazis committed against innocent people. These horrors have highlighted the difficulty of representing or communicating those events that occur at the limits of human experience, and thus call for an examination of the ways in which rhetoric must adjust in order to transmit trauma.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

Because of the nature of the events that have come to define the era, the twentieth century has come to be characterized as “peculiarly afflicted and affected by the experience of extremity and cataclysm.”<sup>36</sup> The rhetorical theories developed over the course of this period must certainly be understood in light of the historical milieu in which scholars worked. I contend that historical trauma like the Holocaust must re-shape how we understand and apply such theories.

In many ways, crisis can be seen as lying at the heart of modern rhetorical theory. As David A. Frank notes, many of the examples that Bitzer uses to illustrate the concept of rhetorical exigence are drawn from twentieth century historical traumas, such as Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Declaration of War and the assassination of John F. Kennedy – events that were “marked by urgency” and consisted of “a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done,” and which also constituted major catastrophes in public and historical memory. According to John Poulakos, rhetoric comes into being fundamentally as a result of some event of rupture: “Under normal circumstances, that is, under

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<sup>35</sup> Mandel, “Rethinking “After Auschwitz””: Against a Rhetoric of the Unspeakable in Holocaust Writing,” 204.

<sup>36</sup> Gray and Oliver, *The memory of catastrophe*.

circumstances in which we are composed and things are ‘under control,’ there is no pressing need to speak. But during times of stress, we feel compelled to intervene and, with the power of the word, to attempt to end a crisis, redistribute justice, or restore order.”<sup>37</sup> That is, rhetoric tends to evolve out of some breakdown of the natural order. Richard Vatz has criticized this premise, arguing that “Situations obtain their character from the rhetoric which surrounds them or creates them,”<sup>38</sup> rather than the converse. Nevertheless, the salient element of rhetorical creation upon which Vatz focuses continues to be the quality of *crisis*. The notion of “crisis rhetoric,” itself, has evolved into a sub-field of rhetoric, examining the discourse surrounding and responding to episodes of political and organizational crisis. Furthermore, according to Dilip Gaonkar, the “rhetorical turns,” or points at which rhetoric has been recognized for its unique and special relevance to other scholarly pursuits, have habitually occurred in times of crisis.<sup>39</sup>

These connections demonstrate that *crisis* plays an important role in rhetoric. However, *trauma* goes beyond the notion of crisis; as described above, it requires the connotation of overwhelming experience and the rupture of existing frameworks of meaning. As such, trauma has significance for the very structures underlying rhetoric. Fisher notes that rhetoric “presents its arguments first to the rational part of man, because rhetorical discourses, if they are honestly conceived, always have a basis in reasoning.”<sup>40</sup> Trauma, as it constitutes a catastrophic breakdown and reason and logic, radically complicates this basic formulation of rhetoric. No appeal to rationality makes sense in the context of trauma. Of course, a person is also persuaded “by what he knows that he

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<sup>37</sup> John Poulakos, “Toward a Sophistic Definition of Rhetoric,” 39.

<sup>38</sup> Vatz, “The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation,” 159.

<sup>39</sup> Gaonkar, *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory*, 210.

<sup>40</sup> Fisher, “Uses of the Enthymeme,” 201.

knows, or thinks he knows, [and] by his sentiments, attitudes, and values.”<sup>41</sup> As explained previously in reference to the enthymeme, trauma also disrupts these aspects of persuasion, as it makes shared understanding between orator and audience impossible. Thus, I reinvestigate the role of rhetoric as it regards trauma.

David Frank, in his article “A Traumatic Reading of Twentieth-Century Rhetorical Theory,” sees trauma as a productive lens through which to examine rhetoric. He is the only scholar who examines the contours of trauma in relation to rhetoric; as such, his work provides an important foundation for my own. Frank cites five sources of evidence for the “signs of trauma [with]in rhetorical theory.”<sup>42</sup> First, he notes the influence of historical context on the development of modern rhetorical theories, citing Delacampagne’s observation that

Two world wars, the revolution of 1917, Nazism and Communism, Auschwitz and Hiroshima, the Cold War, the end of the colonial empires, the struggle of oppressed peoples in the Third World and elsewhere, the collapse of the Soviet Union... are too charged with consequence, in every field of learning, for a great part of contemporary philosophy not to have been affected by them.<sup>43</sup>

Frank also argues that trauma and crisis constitute the exigence for many scholars’ theories in the twentieth century. He cites Gayatri Spivak, Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida as theorists who “place the Holocaust at the center of twentieth-century Western thought, and acknowledge that the trauma... remains a primary exigence.”<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Thomas Conley writes that “If there is a single

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> David A. Frank, “A Traumatic Reading of Twentieth-Century Rhetorical Theory: The Belgian Holocaust, Malines, Perelman, and De Man,” 313.

<sup>43</sup> Delacampagne, *A History of Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, xviii.

<sup>44</sup> David A. Frank, “A Traumatic Reading of Twentieth-Century Rhetorical Theory:

theme binding Richards, Burke, and Weaver together, it is the sense of crisis they shared. All of them saw the world ‘going to hell in a handbasket,’ and for good reasons.”<sup>45</sup> Frank and Conley both see the crisis of World War II as having motivated, in various ways, the rhetorical theories of Richard McKeon, Stephen Toulmin, Chaïm Perelman, and Jürgen Habermas. According to Frank, each scholar strove, in his own way, to formulate theories of rhetoric and communication that could adequately respond to and account for the catastrophe and loss of reason wrought by World War II. Frank notes that Richards, Burke, Weaver, Toulmin, Perelman, and Habermas all made statements to the effect that they “sought to rectify reason, language, rhetoric, and argument in the aftermath of war and trauma.”<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, he argues that evidence for the importance of trauma to other rhetorical theorists’ work can be found in their writings and the statements of those who knew them personally.

The final source of evidence of trauma in rhetorical theory, according to Frank, comes from “the rhetorical theories themselves, in primary texts, tertiary articles, footnotes, and citations.”<sup>47</sup> Specifically, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, by Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, uses a variety of rhetorical exigencies drawn from World War II in the formulation of a new rhetorical theory. Frank also contends that Paul de Man’s theory is “arrested in an endless melancholy that does not name the object of his mourning.”<sup>48</sup>

My argument differs from Frank’s in that I do not seek to identify the source of

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The Belgian Holocaust, Malines, Perelman, and De Man,” 314.

<sup>45</sup> Conley, *Rhetoric in the European Tradition*, 281.

<sup>46</sup> David A. Frank, “A Traumatic Reading of Twentieth-Century Rhetorical Theory: The Belgian Holocaust, Malines, Perelman, and De Man,” 314.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 315.

trauma in the formulation of rhetorical theory, although I recognize the importance of this project; rather, I apply Fisher's fully developed theory to the notion of trauma and its representation in a specific case study that allows me to use the theory *against* itself.

The first theory that I use is Susan J. Brison's argument that trauma "undoes the self by breaking the ongoing narrative, severing the connections among remembered past, lived present, and anticipated future. In telling a first-person trauma narrative to a suitable listener, the survivor is, at the same time and once again, a second person, dependent on the listener in order to return to personhood." Though Brison does not write from the perspective of rhetorical studies, her argument has broad resonance for the realm of rhetoric, especially in its focus on issues of narrative and agency. I contend that *Auschwitz and After* expresses both the loss of the self engendered by trauma and the process of reclaiming that self by externalizing the overwhelming memories in the form of a narrative. That narrative necessarily takes a fragmented and disruptive form, a consequence of the deep psychic wounds from which it is born.

The primary rhetorical theory that I use is Fisher's narrative paradigm. This model operates around the assumption that human beings are fundamentally storytellers, and that "symbols are created and communicated ultimately as stories meant to give order to human experience and to induce others to dwell in them to establish ways of living in common."<sup>49</sup> Fisher argues that people make decisions according to the "probability" and "fidelity" of the narrative presented. Probability refers to the coherence and consistency of formal features of the narrative, such as characters and actions. Fidelity is determined by the extent to which the audience finds the narrative to be true to what they have

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<sup>49</sup> Fisher, "Narration as Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument," 6.

experienced in their own lives.<sup>50</sup>

The narrative paradigm is useful in part because it helps me to situate Delbo's *Auschwitz and After* as one "story" among the many that structure our lives. This story, however, is unique in its form and content. I argue that the explicit *absence* of narrative probability and the confusion of narrative fidelity make Delbo's text meaningful. *Auschwitz and After* consists of "poems whose interspersed disrupts any rigorous narrative continuity, [and] its prose assumes the form of relatively short and discrete texts whose own narrative interrelations are not predominantly linear... Delbo engages in a fragmentary articulation of trauma and survival."<sup>51</sup> The formal features of the text are thus deliberately *not* consistent or cohesively linear, and comprise rather an affront to narrative probability. *Auschwitz and After* also inherently challenges narrative fidelity; the vast majority of the audience (Delbo's readers) cannot relate the contents to their own lives and experiences – both because they have not lived through the Holocaust, and because these events exist "at the limit" of human thought and belief. I thus argue that the disruption of traditional narrative structure and the ways in which Delbo confounds the reader's expectations and assumptions *enact* trauma within the text, and in so doing, demonstrate what it means for an artifact to work through (to the extent possible) the problems that trauma creates for rhetoric. I engage in a close textual analysis of Delbo's memoir, explicating the rhetorical choices and strategies that disrupt the reader's expectations and assumptions in order to transmit the trauma that Delbo survived. In Chapter 2, I discuss how Delbo's writing in *Auschwitz and After* reveals the loss of the self to trauma and the re-forming of the self through mastery of the memory and the

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Trezise, "The Question of Community in Charlotte Delbo's *Auschwitz and After*," 859–860.

reclamation of agency, and of a dialogic relationship to others, facilitated by bearing witness. In Chapter 3, I engage with Fisher's "Narrative Paradigm" and demonstrate the ways in which *Auschwitz and After* deliberately disrupts that model in order to establish a form of meaning that accounts for the traumatic nature of Delbo's memories. I conclude in Chapter 4 with a discussion of the status of Holocaust testimony and of the significance and implications of Delbo's work and of this thesis.

## **Chapter 2: Trauma, Narrative, and the Self**

### ***Trauma, Memory, & Self***

Susan J. Brison contends that an important component of trauma lies in its “undoing of the self,” which involves “a radical disruption of memory, a severing of past from present and, typically, an inability to envision a future.”<sup>52</sup> The disruption of memory has been widely discussed and analyzed as the defining feature of trauma. We generally understand traumatic experiences to be processed in a manner distinct from, and much more problematic than, other events, which we integrate seamlessly into existing mental schema. Clinical psychologists Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, building upon the work of French psychologist Pierre Janet, explain that “under extreme conditions, existing meaning schemes may be entirely unable to accommodate frightening experiences, which causes the memory of experiences to be stored differently and not be available for retrieval under ordinary conditions.”<sup>53</sup> This is what Cathy Caruth refers to as “unclaimed experience,” as it is “experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor.”<sup>54</sup> The unexpected and disruptive nature of the experience makes it impossible to integrate into memory and narrative as normal.

According to Brison, trauma “undoes the self by breaking the ongoing narrative, severing the connections among remembered past, lived present, and anticipated future.

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<sup>52</sup> Brison, “Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self,” 39.

<sup>53</sup> Van der Kolk and Van der Hart, “The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma,” 160.

<sup>54</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History*, 4.

In telling a first-person trauma narrative to a suitable listener, the survivor is, at the same time and once again, a second person, dependent on the listener in order to return to personhood.”<sup>55</sup> Brison thus identifies disrupted narrative as the crux of trauma and completed narrative as the foundation of recovery. The relationship between narrative and memory is well-established: “Locke famously identified the self with a set of continuous memories, a kind of ongoing narrative of one’s past that is extended with each new experience.”<sup>56</sup> Pierre Janet, whose work on trauma and memory paved the way for much twentieth century thinking in psychoanalysis, made perhaps the strongest version of this argument, as he contended that memory “is an action: essentially it is the action of telling a story.”<sup>57</sup> As discussed above, Janet’s conception of “normal,” or non-traumatic, memory involves the integration of experiences into existing mental schema; part of this process requires the ability to represent the experience using narrative language.<sup>58</sup>

Trauma is defined by helplessness in the face of a life-threatening force. This threat, and the fear that it produces, constitute a blow to the very core of the victim’s being. According to Judith Herman, “Traumatic events violate the autonomy of the person at the level of basic bodily integrity. The body is invaded, injured, defiled. . . . Furthermore, at the moment of trauma, almost by definition, the individual’s point of view counts for nothing. . . . The traumatic event thus destroys the belief that one can *be oneself* in relation to others.”<sup>59</sup> In other words, trauma constitutes the loss of oneself.

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<sup>55</sup> Brison, “Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self,” 41.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> van der Kolk, Brown, and van der Hart, “Pierre Janet on Post-traumatic Stress,” 368.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*; Van der Kolk and Van der Hart, “The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma.”

<sup>59</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 53.

## *Loss Of Self in the Revealing Trilogy Titles of Auschwitz and After*

Delbo's work demonstrates the radical loss of self engendered by the trauma of Auschwitz, and also speaks to the re-formation of the self through articulation of the narrative. Delbo's sense that she lost herself in the Holocaust is very clear; Lawrence Langer notes that the theme of *Auschwitz and After* "was best expressed by one of Delbo's fellow deportees when she interviewed her years after their return: 'I died in Auschwitz, and no one knows it.'"<sup>60</sup>

Each of the parts of the trilogy comprising *Auschwitz and After* bears a title that speaks to Delbo's experience of losing herself. The first, "None of Us Will Return," is perhaps the starkest statement of what becomes of the individual at the mercy of the SS in a concentration camp. The title "negates or puts into question the future tense in order to interrogate the possibility and meaning of survival and return."<sup>61</sup> Delbo writes toward the end of this first book, "What difference does it make since none of them will return, since none of us will return."<sup>62</sup> The obvious paradox posed by this remark is that some prisoners, Delbo herself among them, *did* return from Auschwitz, freed with the Allies' victory at the end of the war. What she means, then, is that after the trauma of what Michael Rothberg calls the "concentrationary universe,"<sup>63</sup> Delbo and the others are no longer exactly who they were before. Indeed, she writes in *Days and Memory*, "I am very fortunate in not recognizing myself in the self that was in Auschwitz. To return from there was so improbable that it seems to me I was never there at all... I feel that the one

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<sup>60</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, xviii.

<sup>61</sup> Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism*, 156.

<sup>62</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 96.

<sup>63</sup> Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism*.

who was in the camp is not me, is not the person who is here, facing you.”<sup>64</sup> To Delbo, those who return from Auschwitz no longer embody their former selves; they have been utterly transformed by the trauma of what they have seen and experienced.

The title of the second book of the trilogy is “Useless Knowledge.” With this phrase, Delbo makes clear that what she and her fellow prisoners learned from their extreme suffering at the hands of the Nazis has no meaning or utility for life as it should be: “You find out soon enough / you should not speak with death / for it is useless knowledge. / In a world / where those who believe they are alive / are not / all knowledge becomes useless / for the one possessed of that other knowledge / it is far better to know nothing.”<sup>65</sup> No one should have to learn the ways in which Delbo and other Holocaust victims found to survive. The knowledge produced in Auschwitz “did nothing to unify, edify, or dignify life... Its vast accumulation drove home [Delbo’s] point: for the most part, what happened in the Shoah divided, besieged, and diminished life forever.”<sup>66</sup>

The third book in the trilogy, called “The Measure of Our Days,” is concerned with the “after” of *Auschwitz and After*. In it, Delbo takes on the perspectives of the others with whom she was imprisoned, her “comrades,” in the time after they return from the camps. As “Mado,” Delbo writes, “It seems to me I’m not alive. Since all are dead, it seems impossible I shouldn’t be also. All dead... How could those stronger and more determined than I be dead, and I remain alive? Can one come out of there alive? No. It wasn’t possible.”<sup>67</sup> These lines recall the theme of “None of Us Will Return,” that despite physically returning from Auschwitz, Delbo and the other survivors lost themselves in

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<sup>64</sup> Delbo, *Days and Memory*, 3.

<sup>65</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 225.

<sup>66</sup> Roth, “Post-Shoah Restitution of a Different Kind,” 245.

<sup>67</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 257.

the camps to such an extent that they counted themselves among the dead. “The Measure of Our Days” refers to the strange quality of the world after the Holocaust, and the fact that the survivors’ lives became a distorted shadow of what they had been before. Of the immediate reality of her return from the camps, Delbo writes, “With the utmost difficulty, the ultimate effort of my memory—but why speak of memory since I had none left?—an effort I cannot name, I tried to recall the gestures you must make in order to assume once again the shape of a living being in this life. Walk, speak, answer questions, state where you want to go, go there. I had forgotten all this. Had I ever known it?”<sup>68</sup> In short, the survivors’ days – and everything about their lives – could not be measured or understood in the same way as they had been prior to the war.

### *Loss of Self in the Text of Auschwitz and After*

Delbo’s account reveals that the loss of self is intimately connected to the toll that trauma takes on memory. She tells of reciting phone numbers and recalled poems to herself while in Auschwitz in order to keep her memory active: “Since Auschwitz, I always feared losing my memory. To lose one’s memory is to lose oneself, to no longer be oneself.”<sup>69</sup> This comment accords with Brison’s conception of “the undoing of the self by trauma,” the loss of the “ongoing narrative”<sup>70</sup> required to comprise a self. Delbo thus feels very deeply the impact of the trauma’s disruptive effect on memory.

Delbo also writes of the prisoners in Auschwitz, “Each one had taken along his or her memories, the whole load of remembrance, the weight of the past. On arrival, we had to unload it. We went in naked. You might say one can take everything away from a

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>70</sup> Brison, “Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self,” 41.

human being except this one faculty: memory. Not so. First, human beings are stripped of what makes them human, then their memory leaves them. Memory peels off like tatters, tatters off burned skin.”<sup>71</sup> Memory is one of the fragile human functions that the Nazis took from the prisoners in their total assault on those deemed to be undesirable and disposable. At the core of the trauma of Auschwitz lies the loss of memory, the deprivation of the narrative capacity.

In “The Measure of Our Days,” Delbo’s friend Mado gives a slightly different account of the role of memory in the camps. She notes,

Over there we had our entire past, all our memories, even memories from long ago passed on by our parents. We armed ourselves with this past for protection, erecting it between horror and us in order to stay whole, keep our true selves, our being... Each one of us recounted her life thousands and thousands of times, resurrecting her childhood, the time of freedom and happiness, just to make sure all this had existed, and that the teller was both subject and object.<sup>72</sup>

In Mado’s account, the prisoners did not lose their memories in the camps, but rather held tightly to them as a bulwark against the evil surrounding them. The difference between these two perspectives serves as a poignant reminder that no two experiences of the Holocaust were the same. Nevertheless, the significance of memory to the self is consistent in both Delbo’s and Mado’s views. Mado adds the element of *agency* in her desire to be “both subject and object.” Memories from before deportation reminded the women in the camps that they were individuals with their own “character, tastes, ideas,”<sup>73</sup> rather than the nameless masses that the Nazis wanted them to be. The subject/object

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<sup>71</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 255.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

distinction is significant to Brison, who contends that “Working through, or remastering, traumatic memory... involves a shift from being the object or medium of someone else’s (the perpetrator’s) speech (or other expressive behavior) to being the subject of one’s own.”<sup>74</sup> For Mado in “Days and Memory,” the telling and re-telling of personal memories in the camp serves as a microcosm of this working through, an attempt to “recognize ourselves, preserve something of what we were, not letting this situation dent us, annihilate us.”<sup>75</sup> Here, memory is the only defense against the total loss of self. Remembrance counteracts the Nazis’ attempts to erase the prisoners’ identities.

Delbo ties the loss of memory directly to the loss of self in a chapter at the end of “None of Us Will Return” called “Springtime.” She writes that in Auschwitz, she can no longer remember the beauty of spring outside the camps: “My memory is more bloodless than an autumn leaf. / My memory has forgotten the dew. / My memory is drained of its sap. My memory has bled to death. / This is when the heart ought to stop beating—stop beating—come to a stop... Far beyond the barbed-wire enclosure, spring is singing... And we lost our memory. // None of us will return.”<sup>76</sup> Delbo feels the need for memory so strongly that she connects it to life itself, suggesting that losing the ability to recall the texture of life before the camps is tantamount to death and is directly responsible for the fact that even the deportees who survive will never “return.”

*Auschwitz and After* also demonstrates myriad other ways, unrelated to memory, in which the concentration camp prisoner loses oneself to trauma. Indeed, “In [Delbo’s] vision, the self is inseparable from the cold, hunger, and exhaustion that slowly erode its substance, until the crust of dignity formerly enclosing a human being loses its protective

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<sup>74</sup> Brison, “Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self,” 39.

<sup>75</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 258.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

value and decays.”<sup>77</sup> The absence of basic human necessities and comforts in Auschwitz battered the victims’ bodies and souls in every possible respect.

One poignant example can be found in Delbo’s description, from *Useless Knowledge*, of her unbearable thirst:

I’d been thirsty for days and days, thirsty to the point of losing my mind, to the point of being unable to eat since there was no saliva in my mouth, so thirsty I couldn’t speak, because you’re unable to speak when there’s no saliva in your mouth. My parched lips were splitting, my gums swollen, my tongue a piece of wood. My swollen gums and tongue kept me from closing my mouth, which stayed open like that of a madwoman with dilated pupils in her haggard eyes. At least, this is what the others told me, later. They thought I’d lost my mind. I couldn’t hear anything, see anything. They even thought I had gone blind. It took me a long time later on to explain that, without being blind, I saw nothing. All my senses had been abolished by thirst.<sup>78</sup>

This thirst consumes Delbo so completely that every part of her person – her voice, her vision, her ability to think – is debilitated by it. Eventually, Delbo’s friends in the camp help her to find and drink some water. After she drinks an entire pail, she “felt life pouring back into me. It was as if I were regaining consciousness, feeling my blood circulating through my body, my lungs breathing, my heart beating. I was alive. Saliva was returning to my mouth... My ears could hear again. I was living.” The agony of Delbo’s thirst had been so complete that she was near death, in both a physical and an existential sense.

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<sup>77</sup> Lawrence L Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 104.

<sup>78</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 142.

Thirst is also the subject of a part of a chapter of “None of Us Will Return” bearing the word as its title. In it Delbo writes, “Reason begins to waver. It is crushed by thirst. Reason is able to overcome most everything, but it succumbs to thirst.”<sup>79</sup> In this story, the narrator’s obsession with thirst drives her to consider drinking the leftover water in which a blockhova (a female concentration camp officer) has washed herself: “I recoil. Soapy tea in which they wash their feet. On the edge of insanity, I gauge the full extend of the madness to which thirst has driven me.”<sup>80</sup> Later, she risks her life by breaking away to drink from a nearby brook, but this does not sate her, and the torment continues. The taste of that muddy water is one of the memories that remains with Delbo in the present; she writes, “No, it is not marsh water, it is a brook... It is not swampy water, but it tastes of rotting leaves, and I feel this taste in my mouth even today as soon as I think of this water, even when I do not think of it.”<sup>81</sup> This is a “deep memory,” engrained in Delbo’s being, returning without bidding.

Delbo also writes of losing the powers of her mind while in the camp, a function of the deprivation of basic human rights and necessities: “You may say that one can take everything from a human being except the faculty of thinking and imagining. You have no idea. One can turn a human being into a skeleton gurgling with diarrhea, without time or energy to think. Imagination is the first luxury of a body receiving sufficient nourishment.”<sup>82</sup> Prisoners at Auschwitz could not take comfort in the life of the mind,<sup>83</sup> for they had to focus on the immediate concern of survival: “One couldn’t be sustained by one’s past, draw on its resources. It had become unreal, unbelievable. Everything that

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>83</sup> See Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*.

had been our previous existence had unraveled... What did we speak of? Material, usable things. We had to omit anything that might awaken pain or regret. We never spoke of love.”<sup>84</sup> These lines mirror Brison’s contention that the unraveling of the self involves “a severing of past from present.”<sup>85</sup> The experience of Auschwitz marked a radical split between the prisoners’ lives before deportation and their new reality in the camp, in which concepts like love and the details of ordinary existence no longer had any place and thus became unreal. The fundamentally different nature of the camp alters everything for the prisoners, including their lives afterward.

Of course, Delbo’s friend Mado contradicts her claim about the inability to draw on the past when she talks of reliving and re-telling her memories from before the camp in order to stave off this very loss of thought. It is possible that Mado was able to sustain her imaginative faculties while Delbo found she could not; it is also possible that Mado’s account of holding onto her memories applies to the time before total exhaustion, illness and deprivation took over the prisoners’ bodies. Either way, there can be no doubt about the importance of thought and imagination to a person’s conception of self, and these capacities were certainly under assault in Auschwitz.<sup>86</sup>

Brison writes that the unraveling of the self caused by trauma involves, in addition to the disruption of memory and the severing of past from present, “an inability to envision a future.”<sup>87</sup> “The Measure of Our Days” outlines the survivors’ struggle with such a difficulty. Of her first moments in Paris after the return voyage, Delbo writes, “I had no idea what to do and where to begin. The whole project was beyond me. Better to

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<sup>84</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 168.

<sup>85</sup> Brison, “Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self,” 39.

<sup>86</sup> See Arendt, *Men in Dark Times; The Human Condition; Between Past and Future*.

<sup>87</sup> Brison, “Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self,” 39.

give it up. Give up or postpone. First, I had to think... To think? How can you think when you have no words at your disposal, when you've forgotten all the words? I was too absent to be desperate. I was there and it would be wrong to say I did not know what to do. I did not think, nor did I wonder whether there was anything to do."<sup>88</sup> These initial moments of bewilderment foreshadow the incredible complexity of re-integrating into society after years of imprisonment. The future, the notion of life after Auschwitz, is incomprehensible to Delbo and to many of her fellow survivors. The very premise of the title, *Auschwitz and After*, suggests that the latter is perhaps as problematic as the former. In Lawrence Langer's words, "There was an Auschwitz, and there was an afterward, and unless you understand that the two terms do not represent a chronology, you cannot begin to enter the abyss of the place we call Auschwitz."<sup>89</sup>

Even after her initial disorientation has dissipated somewhat, Delbo continues to struggle with the meaning and contours of life after Auschwitz. In one poem she writes,

I fought against injustice  
it gripped me  
handed me over to death  
I fought against death  
fiercely  
so that it could not whisk me away from life  
but death  
seeking vengeance  
robbed me of the will to live

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<sup>88</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 236.

<sup>89</sup> Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust*, 18.

and handed me a certificate  
signed with a cross  
I have it here  
to be used by me next time.

My heart lost its hurt  
its reason for beating  
life was returned to me  
and I am here in front of life  
as though facing a dress  
I can no longer wear.<sup>90</sup>

The materials of existence that would before the war have comprised Delbo's future now make little sense to her, or take on a form of futility. She finds that things like books have lost their relevance: "I could no longer read because I felt I already knew what was written in this book, and I knew it in an altogether different way, a deeper, more trustworthy knowledge, manifest, irrefutable... Everything was false, faces and books, everything showed me its falseness and I was in despair at having lost the faculty of dreaming, of harboring illusions."<sup>91</sup> Here again we see Delbo's feeling of having lost her more cerebral functions, the elements that compose the self. The loss of such faculties is one of the hallmarks of trauma, which constitutes a threat to the most important aspects of identity. Furthermore, the concentration camps have etched the "deep way" in which Delbo knows the world onto her body and mind. This is what Delbo refers to as *mémoire*

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<sup>90</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 240.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 238–239.

*des sens*, or “sense memory,” which, according to Langer in his foreword, “preserves and tries to transmit the *physical* imprint of the ordeal, enables us to approach the unthinkable.”<sup>92</sup> The constant presence of her memories of Auschwitz shapes Delbo’s interactions with the world.

Delbo does not recover her former self immediately upon returning from Auschwitz; the process of restoration requires time and effort. As we shall see, one component of becoming herself again involves the development and composition of her narrative, the re-externalization of the memories that plague her.

### ***Narrative and Re-Making the Self***

If much of *Auschwitz and After* thus speaks to the undoing of the self that Delbo and her comrades experienced in the camps, the question becomes: what role does the narrative play in remaking the self? Brison writes, “By constructing and telling a narrative of the trauma endured, and with the help of understanding listeners, the survivor begins not only to integrate the traumatic episode into a life with before and after, but also to gain control over the occurrence of intrusive memories.”<sup>93</sup> Indeed, beginning with Pierre Janet, trauma scholars<sup>94</sup> have generally emphasized the role of narrative reconstruction in the process of recovery: “In order to take appropriate action a person needs to attach a verbal representation to the experience: ‘It is not enough to just be aware of a memory: it is also necessary that the personal perception ‘knows’ this image and attaches it to other memories.’”<sup>95</sup> The ability, initially disrupted, to assimilate the

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>93</sup> Brison, “Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self,” 46.

<sup>94</sup> See, e.g., Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*.

<sup>95</sup> van der Kolk, Brown, and van der Hart, “Pierre Janet on Post-traumatic Stress,” 368.

experience into existing mental schema and thus to describe what has happened using narrative language enables the victim to achieve a level of control over the memory.<sup>96</sup> This is frequently a component of the clinical therapeutic process for trauma survivors.<sup>97</sup> This assumption of control, the re-taking of agency, comprises what Brison refers to as “reintegrating the survivor into a community, reestablishing connections essential to selfhood.”<sup>98</sup>

The significance of narrative to Delbo’s effort to restore herself to herself, and to interact meaningfully with the outside world, can be seen in her actions after liberation. Delbo began to write almost immediately upon her return to France; she finished writing “None of Us Will Return” within a year, completed “Useless Knowledge” the next year, and finished “The Measure of Our Days” in 1949, within four years of being freed from the camps.<sup>99</sup> The remarkable speed with which Delbo completed *Auschwitz and After* is only more striking in light of the fact that Delbo was not a writer before her deportation; she worked in theater in and in politics, and was printing and distributing pamphlets for the French Resistance when she and her husband were arrested and deported. And yet, after the camps, Delbo became a prolific writer, continuing to produce plays and essays as well as her memoirs up until her death in 1985. Delbo is not the only Holocaust survivor to have become a writer only after her imprisonment; Primo Levi, who wrote the seminal *Survival in Auschwitz* (originally called *Se questo è un uomo*), was a chemist firmly entrenched in the hard sciences before he was arrested, and yet while in the camps and upon his release felt the overwhelming compulsion to write: “The need to tell our

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<sup>96</sup> Van der Kolk and Van der Hart, “The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma.”

<sup>97</sup> McCann, *Psychological Trauma and the Adult Survivor*.

<sup>98</sup> Brison, “Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self,” 40.

<sup>99</sup> Sánchez-Pardo, “Who Will Carry the Word?,” 38.

story to ‘the rest,’ to make ‘the rest’ participate in it, had taken on for us, before our liberation and after, the character of an immediate and violent impulse, to the point of competing with our other elementary needs.”<sup>100</sup>

Delbo expresses a similar urge. Notes Langer, “Delbo’s ambition as a writer about the Nazi concentration camps is enshrined in one of her favorite expressions, which became the ruling principle of her art: *Il faut donner à voir*, which we might translate as ‘they must be made to see.’... She... resolves to reveal to her readers ‘the way it really was.’”<sup>101</sup> Similarly, Brett Kaplan writes, “Charlotte Delbo’s *oeuvre* is committed to analyzing the possibilities for memory’s translation into narratives from which non-survivors can learn; her mission is... the imperative to make us (non-survivors) see what it was like ‘over there.’”<sup>102</sup> Langer and Kaplan thus claim that Delbo’s primary motivation to “make others see” comes from a desire for those who were not in the camps to understand, to the extent possible, the atrocities that occurred. However, I argue that Delbo’s impetus to write of her memories is as much internal as external: According to Brison, traumatic recovery “involves a shift from being the object or medium of someone else’s (the perpetrator’s) speech (or other expressive behavior) to being the subject of one’s own.”<sup>103</sup> I find that for Delbo, the process of bearing witness by writing *Auschwitz and After* comprises a form of recovery from the trauma, insofar as such a recovery is possible, by allowing her to re-master the past and thus become the subject of her own speech once more. As we will see, however, the internal drive is fundamentally also external, as it situates Delbo in relationship to other people: namely, her readers.

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<sup>100</sup> Levi, Woolf, and Roth, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 9.

<sup>101</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, x.

<sup>102</sup> Kaplan, “Pleasure, Memory, and Time Suspension in Holocaust Literature: Celan and Delbo,” 321.

<sup>103</sup> Brison, “Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self,” 39.

I have outlined above the ways in which Delbo felt that she lost herself to the trauma of the camps, and thus became the object of the Nazis' violence and their attempt to erase the prisoners' agency. *Auschwitz and After*, as a testimony of those events, is the product of Delbo's efforts to reclaim her own agency; it is fundamentally what Brison calls a "speech act of memory,"<sup>104</sup> in which Delbo bears witness to what she saw and experienced in the camps, exerting control over the events as she reformulates them in her own narrative and captures them within her own voice. Delbo writes, "The survivor must undertake to regain his memory, regain what he possessed before: his knowledge, his experience, his childhood capacity to dream, imagine, laugh,"<sup>105</sup> demonstrating the significance of this process of working through the trauma and recouping the features of identity lost in Auschwitz. The recovery, however, requires a new way of expressing experience, a mode of communication that accounts for the radically disruptive nature of trauma; as I will explore in the next chapter, Delbo's rhetorical strategy seeks to *transmit* the trauma it depicts.

Brison argues for the importance of the other, the listener, in the trauma victim's process of mastering the narrative: "The act of bearing witness to the trauma facilitates [remaking the self], not only by transforming traumatic memory into a coherent narrative that can then be integrated into the survivor's sense of self and view of the world, but also by reintegrating the survivor into a community, reestablishing connections essential to selfhood." The act of testimony cannot, in other words, be achieved alone; it requires the active presence of an 'other' who can be part of a dialogical relationship. The involvement of a receptive 'other' establishes the rhetorical status of Delbo's testimony,

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>105</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 255.

as the field of rhetoric considers the ‘other,’ in the form of the audience, an essential element of any rhetorical act.<sup>106</sup> In the context of a memoir, the reader takes the position of the ‘other.’

Dori Laub, a psychoanalyst who has researched trauma extensively, writes that the “process of constructing a narrative, of reconstructing a history and essentially, of re-externalizing the event” is possible “only when one can articulate and *transmit* the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back again, inside.”<sup>107</sup> Delbo’s *Auschwitz and After* constitutes the transmission of the story to her readers, allowing her to re-externalize the experiences she describes and thus to reclaim them. The process, however, requires a radical approach to narration.

Delbo demonstrates the importance of the other, the one who will read her text and complete its transmission, frequently by addressing the reader directly. In describing some of the most horrific scenes from her time in the camps, she appeals to us, “Try to look. Just try and see.” She writes this line after describing “a corpse. The left eye devoured by a rat. The other open with its fringe of lashes.”<sup>108</sup> On the very next page, Delbo tells of a prisoner “unable to follow any longer,” walking with the teeth of an SS dog sunk into his backside: “The man is walking. He has not uttered a sound. Blood stains his trousers’ stripes. It seeps from inside, a stain spreading as though upon a blotter. / The man goes on walking with the dog’s fangs in his flesh. / Try to look. Just try and see.”<sup>109</sup> Finally, a third scene:

A woman dragged by two others, holding on to her arms. A Jewish woman. She

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<sup>106</sup> See, e.g., Biesecker, “Rethinking the Rhetorical Situation from Within the Thematic of Différance.”

<sup>107</sup> Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 69.

<sup>108</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 84.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

does not want to be taken to block 25. She resists. Her knees scrape the ground. Her clothing, pulled up by the tug of her sleeves, is wound round her neck. Her trousers—men’s trousers—are undone and drag inside out behind her, fastened to her ankles. A flayed frog. Her loins are exposed, her emaciated buttocks, soiled by blood and pus, are dotted with hollows.

She is howling. Her knees are lacerated by the gravel.

Try to look. Just try and see.<sup>110</sup>

These are views from the epicenter of Auschwitz, the very nadir of humanity’s darkest hour. These are the anecdotes that make the reader cringe and want to turn away. Delbo anticipates such a reaction and pre-empts it, begging us to face the anguish and to *try* to comprehend the horrors of Auschwitz, even if full understanding is impossible.

In a similar fashion, Delbo addresses “O you who know” in a poem that questions the extent of what those who were never in the camps could know of them. She contrasts the reality of the concentration camp with life outside it, asking, “O you who know / did you know that you can see your mother dead / and not shed a tear.”<sup>111</sup> Here, Delbo refers enthymematically to the “useless knowledge” that separates survivors from other people, the loss of normally functioning emotion.<sup>112</sup> In so doing, Delbo creates distance between herself and the reader, who lacks the necessary basis for understanding what it means to see one’s mother die in Auschwitz. Such distance is an inevitable feature of the relationship between the survivor and the non-survivor.

The poem ends, “Did you know that suffering is limitless / that horror cannot be

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 254.

circumscribed / Did you know this / You who know.”<sup>113</sup> Delbo confronts her readers with what they do not know of what life was like in the camps, simultaneously establishing the conditions for the possibility of understanding and reaffirming the impossibility of truly bridging the gap. The paradox of such (im)possibility lies at the heart of Delbo’s disruptive, unconventional and non-linear rhetorical strategy, which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. Later in *Auschwitz and After*, Delbo returns to this theme, writing: “And so I came back / You did not know, / did you, / that one can come back from there // One comes back from there / and even from farther away.”<sup>114</sup> The connection between Delbo and her reader is even clearer in these lines: The implication is, You did not know this, *so I will tell you*. The drive behind the telling is dual; Delbo seeks to reclaim her own agency by externalizing her memories, but she also imparts an important message to her readers, as she is determined to make them see (“*Il faut donner a voir*”): she offers a glimpse of the horror and misery of the concentration camps, and simultaneously emphasizes that much of what she lived through cannot be grasped. Furthermore, the effort to “make them see” carries with it an implicit demand that readers face their own complicity in the horrors of genocide. Whether the audience could have done more at the time of the Holocaust or simply faces the obligation to act against future atrocities, Delbo’s words bring the reader into a world that, although it cannot fully be understood, demands a principled response.

Another move seeking to alter the erroneous impressions of non-survivors comes in a chapter entitled “So This Is What You Believed.” Delbo writes, “So you believed that only solemn words rise to the lips of the dying / because solemn rhetoric flourishes

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<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

naturally on deathbeds,”<sup>115</sup> evoking the gravity and ritual that surrounds death under normal circumstances. Of course, nothing about the concentration camp is normal; therein lies the challenge of Delbo’s task in writing her memoir. She cannot simply tell her story as if it were any other, and the reader cannot approach her work as a straightforward narrative. Of death in the camps, Delbo writes, “Naked on the charnel house’s pallets, almost all our comrades said, ‘I’m going to kick the bucket.’ / They were naked on a naked board. / They were dirty and the boards with pus and diarrhea. / They did not realize that they were making the task of the survivors more difficult when they would have to report their last words to their relatives.”<sup>116</sup> Once again, Delbo upends the outside world’s assumptions, revealing the ways in which Auschwitz stripped away all semblances of humanity and dignity. By contradicting what readers previously thought or believed and replacing those perceptions with clear, graphic depictions of “the way it really was,” Delbo forges a dialogic relationship to her readers, in which she transmits the truth (and, necessarily, the trauma) of the concentration camps.

This relationship between Delbo and her reader, however, is always fraught with the difficulties of transmission. As will be discussed further, Delbo’s writing style marks one way in which she emphasizes the complications inherent in the dialogic relationship. Occasionally, she also addresses non-survivors directly. In “Prayer to the Living to Forgive Them for Being Alive,” Delbo writes, “How can we forgive you for being alive . . . / You who are passing by / well dressed in all your muscles / how can we forgive you / that all are dead.”<sup>117</sup> These lines expose a sense of frustration towards non-survivors who live their lives unblemished by the horrors of the concentration camps in

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 229.

the wake of millions of mindless murders. Delbo calls the living to account for their own survival, when so many others were denied the opportunity. She goes on to plead, “I beg you / do something / learn a dance step / something to justify your existence / something that gives you the right / to be dressed in your skin in your body hair / learn to walk and to laugh / because it would be too senseless / after all / for so many to have died / while you live / doing nothing with your life.”<sup>118</sup> The appeal to people to justify themselves sheds new light on Delbo’s task in transmitting her memories, revealing that her poignant descriptions of the concentration camps may be designed to call attention to the injustice and bitter irony of others “doing nothing with their lives” while Delbo’s friends and family died brutal deaths. Intertwined with that accusation there is another one, an even more wrenching indictment of the living: “You are walking by and drinking in cafés / you are happy she loves you / or moody worried about money / how how / will you ever be forgiven / by those who died / so that you may walk by / dressed in all your muscles / so that you may drink in cafés / be younger every spring.”<sup>119</sup> Delbo sees pedestrians on the street living merrily, oblivious to the pain and anguish of the victims of Auschwitz, and cannot reconcile the injustice of what she has seen. She wonders how these passersby could have let the unthinkable happen, and uses her memoir to call them to account for their actions (or, perhaps more appropriately, their inaction).

Thus, the relationship between Delbo and her readers is riddled with the complexities of all encounters between survivors and non-survivors. Nevertheless, the formation of the relationship, fraught as it may be, is vital to the transmission of Delbo’s memories.

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

## *Others' Inability to Listen*

A troubling phenomenon in this relationship, encountered by many survivors, was the strange and hostile response of the rest of the world to the reality of their pain. Writes Yael Danieli, “After liberation, as during the war, survivors of the Holocaust encountered a pervasive societal reaction consisting of indifference, avoidance, repression, and denial of their Holocaust experiences. Like other victims, survivors’ war accounts were too horrifying for most people to listen to or believe. Their stories were therefore easy to ignore or deny.”<sup>120</sup> Those who had lived through the trauma of the Holocaust generally felt this indifference deeply and wrestled with how to interact with a world that seemed unwilling even to acknowledge what they faced, let alone listen to their stories. Ruth Kluger, another survivor and memoirist, writes that an aunt of hers in the United States told her, ““You have to erase from your memory everything that happened in Europe. You have to make a new beginning. You have to forget what they did to you. Wipe it off like chalk from a blackboard.’... I thought, she wants me to get rid of the only thing I own for sure: my life, that is, the years I have lived.”<sup>121</sup> Non-survivors asked survivors to give up the self that they were fighting so hard to re-claim after losing so much in the concentration camps.

Delbo’s friend Mado expresses a similar problem; her husband, whom she married after the war and who had not been in the camps, tells her not to speak of her memories: “You see, it’s all wrong. Those who love us wish us to forget. They don’t understand it’s impossible and that, moreover, to forget would be atrocious... I can do nothing to help him imagine what it was like. It’s impossible, even if it took us a whole

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<sup>120</sup> Danieli, *International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma*, 4.

<sup>121</sup> Klüger, *Still Alive*, 178.

lifetime to talk about it. So I simply don't speak about it."<sup>122</sup> The gulf between survivors and those who had not been imprisoned created an additional barrier to recovery from the trauma.

Even when non-survivors did want to learn of the survivors' experiences, Delbo indicates that language could not necessarily capture what they wanted to say, and that words no longer had shared meaning. One poem from "The Measure of Our Days" reads:

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

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<sup>122</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 266–267.

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.<sup>123</sup>

Thus the attempt to communicate could fall short even if others were willing to listen.

Delbo notes that a crux of the problem lies in the nature of the experience: "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... because everything there is inexplicable."<sup>124</sup> This is, of course, the fundamental characteristic of trauma: its ineffability. The notion that "everything there is inexplicable" underpins Delbo's approach to her memoir and requires constant emphasis, as the reader, too, must come to grips with that fact.

Furthermore, with these lines Delbo draws upon the conflict of having lost herself, her feeling that she was "floating in a present devoid of reality" or Mado's claim that she "died in Auschwitz but no one knows it,"<sup>125</sup> while trying to navigate the world of the living. For if she "never returned," as her memoir insists, how could she be there to converse with those who were not in the camps? Between Delbo's perceptions of her own devastation in Auschwitz and the physical reality of her survival lies a wordless chasm. As Jenny Edkins writes, the "aporia between speaking and not speaking, between the compulsion to bear witness and the impossibility of doing so, is for Giorgio Agamben the very structure of testimony. Survivors of the camps bore witness to something it was

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 275.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 276.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 237, 267.

impossible to bear witness to.”<sup>126</sup>

### *The Importance of the Text*

In the context of the intractable difficulties that Delbo encountered in the attempt to communicate with others after her return from the camps, the necessity of her memoir becomes even clearer. It seems that she could not master her memories simply by telling them to other people; and yet, they would remain traumatic and un-integrable so long as she kept them to herself. And so, with *Auschwitz and After*, Delbo bears witness.

Philippe Lejeune argues that one who writes about his or her life enters into an “autobiographical pact,” which is a “form of contract between author and reader in which the autobiographer explicitly commits himself or herself not to some impossible historical exactitude but rather to the sincere effort to come to terms with and to understand his or her own life.”<sup>127</sup> In entering this pact with her readers, Delbo ensures that there will be someone listening, an “audience able and willing to hear”<sup>128</sup> her memories and participate in the process of mastering them.

As Brison suggests, “The study of trauma... provides support for a view of the self as fundamentally relational—vulnerable enough to be undone by violence and yet resilient enough to be reconstructed with the help of others.”<sup>129</sup> It is through her writing that Delbo can reconstruct the self that she lost in Auschwitz, by reclaiming agency over her memories and transforming them into narrative form; in so doing, Delbo also establishes a discursive relationship to other people, which had seemed impossible in the

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<sup>126</sup> Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 177.

<sup>127</sup> Lejeune and Eakin, *On Autobiography*, ix.

<sup>128</sup> Brison, “Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self,” 46.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

immediate aftermath of her return. However, in order to perform these extremely significant moves, Delbo does not simply thread words together in the form of a traditional memoir. Rather, the task of transmitting trauma requires a radically different approach to writing – and, consequently, to reading. The next chapter elucidates the ways in which *Auschwitz and After* enacts the trauma that it seeks to transmit.

## **Chapter 3: Narrative Disruption**

### ***Fisher's Narrative Paradigm***

Walter Fisher's theory of the "Narrative Paradigm" is based on the premise that "human communication should be viewed as historical as well as situational, as stories competing with other stories constituted by good reasons."<sup>130</sup> To Fisher, humans speak to each other and create shared meaning by telling stories about their lives. Fisher contends that the two features that inform others' responses to a given story are narrative "probability," or the coherence and consistency of the story's formal features, and narrative "fidelity," which refers to the degree to which the listeners are able to relate the narrative to what they know to be true from their own lives.<sup>131</sup>

The narrative paradigm has been subject to criticism from several prominent scholars. John Lucaites and Celeste Condit argue that we must distinguish among the poetic, dialectical, and rhetorical functions of narrative and apply different criteria to each.<sup>132</sup> Michael McGee and John Nelson find the narrative paradigm to be "unduly loose and problematical,"<sup>133</sup> in part because they believe Fisher sets up an unnecessary opposition between rationality and narrativity. Barbara Warnick posits that Fisher's own theory lacks narrative probability because he makes contradictory and equivocal claims regarding rationality, the focus for critical assessment, and argumentative warrants.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Fisher, "Narration as Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument," 2.

<sup>131</sup> Fisher, "Narration as Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument."

<sup>132</sup> Lucaites and Condit, "Reconstructing Narrative Theory: A Functional Perspective."

<sup>133</sup> McGee and Nelson, "Narrative Reason in Public Argument."

<sup>134</sup> Warnick, "The Narrative Paradigm."

Robert Rowland criticizes Fisher's definition of narrative as being too broad, and rejects the arguments that narrative rationality is distinct from the "narrative world paradigm" and that a public expert is fundamentally a storyteller.<sup>135</sup> Nevertheless, despite these limitations, even critics such as Rowland and Warnick concede the value of the narrative paradigm, and Fisher's work has continued to be influential in rhetorical studies.

In this chapter, I analyze Delbo's memoir through the lens of the narrative paradigm. I find that *Auschwitz and After* intentionally disrupts conventional standards of narrative coherence and rationality. By contrasting Delbo's rhetorical methods with Fisher's standards, I demonstrate that the deliberate defiance of what we normally expect from a story comprises the unique strategy by which Delbo transmits the trauma of her memories.

The unusual style of *Auschwitz and After* has been widely noted. Charlotte Delbo's acclaimed literary reputation "derives from the at-once emotionally searing and formally challenging quality of her work: in an effort to capture the extremity and long-term traumatic impact of the Nazi camps she experiments with documentary form."<sup>136</sup> Notably, the text belongs to no fixed genre: it consists of both prose and poetry, alternating unexpectedly between the two, and even sections that appear to be prose read more like poetry. Rose Kamel even calls *Auschwitz and After* an "anti-memoir" in its deliberate thwarting of autobiographic and narrative conventions.<sup>137</sup> I argue that in the unusual and difficult nature of its formal features, Delbo's text performs the trauma it seeks to transmit – shattering pre-existing expectations, assumptions, and frameworks of

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<sup>135</sup> Rowland, "Narrative."

<sup>136</sup> Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism*, 199.

<sup>137</sup> Kamel, "Written on the Body: Narrative Re-Presentation in Charlotte Delbo's *Auschwitz and After*," 65.

meaning. These disruptive features, however, necessarily challenge narrative probability, which Fisher defines as the “formal features of a story conceived as a discrete sequence of thought and/or action in life or literature... i.e., it concerns the question of whether or not a story coheres or ‘hangs together,’ whether or not the story is free of contradictions.”<sup>138</sup> *Auschwitz and After* is deliberately *not* consistent or coherent in many ways, and therein lies its power as a rhetorical artifact. According to Felman and Laub, “Texts that testify do not simply *report facts* but, in different ways, encounter – and make us encounter – *strangeness*.”<sup>139</sup> Delbo forces the reader to encounter textual strangeness in order to bear witness.

### ***Challenges to Narrative Probability – Temporality***

The first way in which *Auschwitz and After* defies narrative probability is in the complexity of its temporal structure. Delbo “avoids the linear time scheme,”<sup>140</sup> those neat distinctions between past, present, and future by which most of us live our lives and create temporal coherence. Within the very first pages of “None of Us Will Return,” Delbo complicates the relationship between past and present: “But there is a station where those who arrive are those who are leaving / a station where those who arrive have never arrived, where those who have left never came back /... / And when they have gotten there / they think they’ve arrived in Hell / maybe. And yet they did not believe in it.” In these lines, arrival is neither past nor present. The temporal status of arrival is deliberately uncertain, a choice that creates ambiguity in the narrative and establishes the

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<sup>138</sup> Fisher, “The Narrative Paradigm,” 349.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Kamel, “Written on the Body: Narrative Re-Presentation in Charlotte Delbo’s *Auschwitz and After*,” 65.

unreality of the prisoners' concentration camp experience. We learn immediately that we cannot necessarily trust events to unfold in the manner of a traditional narrative, with clear temporal delineations.

A segment called "Roll Call" appears early in *None of Us Will Return*. It is the first of many short stories by this name, as the monotonous roll calls were administered daily by the SS in Auschwitz and other concentration camps. The repetition of this trope mirrors repetition compulsion, or the return of traumatic memories to the victims. Such repetition also disturbs the "coherence" of the narrative, as the constant return to the roll call seems to interfere with the story's progression: the tale cannot move forward if it keeps coming back to the same place.

The first "Roll Call" begins with the description of a moment that has just occurred in the moment of the narrator's recollection: "SS in black capes have walked past. They made a count."<sup>141</sup> The next observation, however, complicates the narrative structure of describing an event that occurred in the past: "We are waiting still."<sup>142</sup> Here, instead, we find that the waiting is continuous, ongoing. These events are not really in the past. Next, Delbo writes, "We are waiting. / For days, the next day. / Since the day before, the following day." In these lines, time essentially has no meaning; each day is like the one before. All that remains meaningful is the *waiting*, which recurs in both the past and the present (and the future: "the following day.") Eventually, Delbo returns to a *specific* day: "Since the middle of the night, today. / We wait. / Day is breaking. / ... Today we are waiting longer than usual. The sky grows paler than usual."<sup>143</sup> These unexpected transitions among different tenses illustrate memories that will not remain

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<sup>141</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and after*, 22.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

confined in the “past” as we would like to conceptualize it. Rather, they continue to invade the present and complicate the narrator’s – and, thus, the reader’s – relationship to the passage of time. In so doing, they enact the difference between common memory and what Delbo calls “deep memory” (or *mémoire profonde*), which “reminds us that the Auschwitz past is not really past and never will be.”<sup>144</sup> Here, in place of a tidy narrative of events that have happened and are finished with, the reader faces a constantly shifting account of events that will not *stay past*: Trauma, as Edkins defines it, “is that which refuses to take its place in history as done and finished with. It demands an acknowledgement of a different temporality, where the past is produced by – or even takes place in – the present.”<sup>145</sup> The traumatic past will not remain behind us, but interferes constantly with the present, complicating traditional distinctions between temporal forms; Delbo’s “Roll Call” enacts such temporal disruption in its refusal to remain confined to a single, unifying tense.

We find an even more intense production of this form of traumatic temporality in the vignette called “One Day.” As Ernst van Alphen notes, this title suggests “the conventional beginning of a chronologically ordered account.”<sup>146</sup> The first few paragraphs also seem to uphold such a structure, as they use the past tense to depict a woman attempting to climb an embankment covered in snow: “She was clinging to the other side of the slope... Her whole body was taut, her jaws tight, her neck with its dislocated cartilage straining, as were her muscles—what was left of them on her bones. Yet she strained in vain—the exertion of one pulling on an imaginary rope.”<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, xi.

<sup>145</sup> Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 59.

<sup>146</sup> E. van Alphen, “Caught by images,” 213.

<sup>147</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and after*, 24.

After a thorough description of the struggling, emaciated woman, Delbo writes that she “fell to the bottom of the ditch.” The next line suddenly breaks from the past tense and shifts into the present:

She turns her head as if to measure the distance, looks upward. One can observe a growing bewilderment in her eyes, her hands, her convulsed face. ‘Why are all these women looking at me like this? Why are they here, lined up in close ranks, standing immobile? 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. Why don’t you help me, you standing so close? Help me. Pull me up. Lean in my direction. Stretch out your hand. Oh, they don’t make a move.’<sup>148</sup>

Here, Delbo shifts not only tense but point of view: she moves from the perspective of an external observer describing events to that of the woman herself, passing judgment on these same observers. From there, she returns to the third-person point of view of one standing nearby (she describes the woman trying to wave for help, then collapsing), and then to the plural first person: “All of us were there, several thousand of us, standing in the snow since morning... Standing motionless since the middle of the night... We did not move. The will to struggle and endure, life itself, had taken refuge in a shrunken part of our bodies, somewhere in the immediate periphery of our hearts.”<sup>149</sup> Thus, the reader learns the answer to the question posed by the woman in the snow: Those standing nearby do not move to help her because they feel numb, unable to summon the will to respond or perhaps even to identify with her plight. The reader also learns what happened before the moment at which the story begins, when the woman

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 24-25.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 25.

tries to climb the snowbank; the narrator says that she “broke rank without hesitation, without hiding from the SS standing stiff in her black cape, her black boots, keeping close watch. She took off as though she were somewhere else, on a street where she might cross from sidewalk to the other, or in a garden.”<sup>150</sup> That this explanation comes now, rather than before the description of the woman’s struggle on the snowbank, is significant: once again, Delbo eschews the chronologically coherent narrative in favor of a destabilizing stream of seemingly disconnected perspectives, which echoes the disruptive power of the traumatic events depicted. As Rose Kamel notes, “In avoiding linearity, with its insistent pull toward a closure that imposes on time a conventional narrative structure, Delbo’s anti-memoir remains circular.”<sup>151</sup> Like the traumatic memory that circles back on itself, there is no satisfying movement towards a conclusion in this story.

The narrative in “One Day” becomes even more jarring several paragraphs later, when the onlookers see the woman put a handful of snow in her mouth:

She sucks her snow, yet seems to have lost interest in it. Snow does not quench thirst when you have fever... Her hand drops, her neck bends. A fragile stalk that must break. Her back hunches, shoulder blades protruding through the worn fabric of her coat. It’s a yellow coat, like that of our dog Flac which had grown thin after being ill, and whose whole body curved, just before he died, looking like the skeleton of a bird in the Museum of Natural History. This woman is going to die.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 25-26.

<sup>151</sup> Kamel, “Written on the Body: Narrative Re-Presentation in Charlotte Delbo’s *Auschwitz and After*,” 66.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 27.

The perspective is now Delbo's rather than that of the entire group of women. Her memory of a family dog's death becomes part of the 'present' that Delbo narrates:

She no longer looks at us. She is huddling in the snow. His backbone arched, Flac is going to die—the first creature I ever saw die. Mama, Flac is at the garden gate, all hunched up. He's trembling. André says he's going to die.

'I've got to get up on my feet, to rise. I've got to walk. I've got to struggle still. Won't they help me? Why don't you help me all of you standing there with nothing to do.'

Mama, come quick, Flac is going to die.

'I don't understand why they won't help me. They're dead, dead. They look alive because they're standing up, leaning one against the other.

They're dead. As for me, I don't want to die.'

Her hand flutters once more, like a shout—yet she is not shouting. In what language would she shout if she were to shout?<sup>153</sup>

The memory of Flac's death and the horrifying reality of watching a woman die in agony become inextricably intertwined; furthermore, the perspective of the narrative shifts momentarily back to the dying prisoner's thoughts as she sees thousands of women stand motionless, and sees that they have in some ways already lost their lives, while the life drains from her own body. All of this, however, comes with no warning to the reader, who must piece together what is happening from the disparate narrative elements of the text. What becomes clear is that Delbo cannot separate the prisoner's death from Flac's, "the first creature I ever saw die." Delbo continues to weave in references to Flac through

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

the end of the chapter, as the SS set a vicious attack dog on the dying woman, sealing her fate.

The difficult and unexpected way in which Delbo writes this chapter reflects the nature of the experience she recalls. Watching another human being meet her painful death, while unable to intervene out of fear for her own life, constitutes a trauma emblematic of the Auschwitz experience. According to Cathy Caruth, the primary feature of trauma is that it “is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known... Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on.”<sup>154</sup> In Freud’s articulation, the overwhelming nature of the trauma “is caused by lack of any preparedness for anxiety.”<sup>155</sup> In “One Day,” the narrator’s unpreparedness for the trauma of seeing a woman die in agony is evidenced by her recollection of a dog’s death – her only frame of reference for such an exigency. The text transfers Delbo’s unpreparedness, and the overwhelming nature of the event, to the reader: Each paragraph all but requires a re-reading to understand what is going on and whose perspective is depicted at any given moment. The full impact of the story and its various elements is essentially *unknowable* upon the first reading: it is “experienced too soon, too unexpectedly,” like the trauma experienced by Delbo in Auschwitz.

There are two lines in “One Day” that further complicate the narrative and its temporality; one appears in the middle of the chapter, one at the end. When the narrator sees the woman begin to die, she looks away, and glimpses a different woman in front of

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<sup>154</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History*, 2.

<sup>155</sup> Freud, Strachey, and Zilboorg, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 36.

“block 25” (where many prisoners die), a woman described as a “living skeleton.” The next line reads, “Presently I am writing this story in a café—it is turning into a story.”<sup>156</sup> As van Alphen notes, “‘Presently’ (*maintenant*) marks a present, the moment at which the text is being narrated or written. The description of the woman’s death struggle, however, also slips into the present: the past tense is again and again exchanged for the present tense. There seem to be two ‘presents’ which don’t seem to exist after each other, but next to each other.”<sup>157</sup> In place of a logically sequential narrative, this story is multi-temporal, again emphasizing that the memory cannot be considered ‘past’ in any meaningful sense. While the terms of Fisher’s narrative probability call for chronological consistency in order to establish coherence, it is precisely the *abdication* of such narrative conventions that makes Delbo’s text meaningful. The assumption that rational linearity is necessary for a good narrative proves false in the context of externalizing memories as traumatic as these. In order to transmit the disruptive nature of her experiences to the reader, Delbo must create disruption within the text. By complicating the temporal lucidity of the story, Delbo establishes the complexity of her narrative and passes some of the intrusive qualities of her memories onto the reader.

Delbo returns again to the “present” moment of writing the text at the end of the chapter; she describes the prisoner’s horrifying death and the SS officer’s unfeeling response, noting that she and the other onlookers “remain standing in the snow. Motionless amid the motionless plain.” Then, after a line of blank space, comes the line: “And now I am sitting in a café, writing this text.”<sup>158</sup> Delbo here calls attention to the status of the narrative: in describing the events that transpired in Auschwitz, she is

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<sup>156</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 26.

<sup>157</sup> van Alphen, “Caught by Images,” 214.

<sup>158</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 28.

creating distance between herself and the memory – a distance with which she does not necessarily identify, since she does not conceive of her memories as remaining in the past. Writes van Alphen, “When her words are forming a story the narrated events are situated at a distance, that is, in the past. Such a mode of narrating does not do justice to her immediate and visual experience *in the present* of these events, which consists of nothing else but ‘onlooking.’”<sup>159</sup> Delbo, writing in the café, is simultaneously achieving a distance from the events (by transforming them into a narrative) and unable to separate her present self from the past.

A final way in which *Auschwitz and After* demonstrates an unstable relationship to time (and an according narrative improbability) concerns what Brison calls “the shrinking of time to the immediate present”<sup>160</sup> or the trauma survivor’s inability to conceptualize a future. Judith Herman has written that, for Holocaust survivors, the obliteration of the future begins in the concentration camps, where “thinking of the future stirs up such intense yearning and hope that prisoners find it unbearable; they quickly learn that these emotions make them vulnerable to disappointment and that disappointment will make them desperate... The future is reduced to a matter of hours or days.”<sup>161</sup> Throughout “The Measure of Our Days,” the third part of the trilogy, Delbo expresses the difficulty she experienced in trying to readjust to the notion of the future after the camps: “How could I reaccustom myself to a self which had become so detached from me I was not sure I ever existed? My former life? Had I a former life? My life afterwards? Was I alive to have an afterwards, to know what afterwards meant? I was

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<sup>159</sup> van Alphen, “Caught by Images,” 214.

<sup>160</sup> Brison, “Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self,” 44.

<sup>161</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 89.

floating in a present devoid of reality.”<sup>162</sup> Facing life after Auschwitz, Delbo cannot conceptualize her future in any meaningful way, or connect it to the life she lived before her deportation. As discussed previously, the trauma of the camps has violated her sense of self, and that loss extends to the capacity to construct a vision of a life that lasts beyond the next few hours, or that consists of more than mere survival. It is another moment that demonstrates that the search for linear coherence cannot account for the complexities of the prisoners’ stories.

Similarly, Delbo’s friend Gilberte describes her feeling of total helplessness and disorientation upon the prisoners’ arrival in Paris; she tells of waking up in an unfamiliar room and not knowing what to do. “I went back to bed. There was nothing else to do. I remained there a long time. How long? I couldn’t say. I had no notion of time passing, only that I’d been in the room a long, long time.”<sup>163</sup> Concepts such as ‘afterwards’ and ‘future’ are incoherent to Delbo and her comrades after the camps; again, time does not operate as it does normally in traditional narrative texts. Delbo’s frequent emphasis on time and its abnormal functioning, both within the camps and after liberation, illustrates that what Fisher calls a “discrete sequence of thought and/or action” that “hangs together...free of contradictions”<sup>164</sup> is intentionally out of sequence in the context of a Holocaust memoir. It is only by constructing her narrative in an atemporal fashion that Delbo can truly convey what she and her comrades went through. Thus, throughout *Auschwitz and After*, the deliberate disruption of narrative conventions regarding linear time acts as a meta-commentary on the interruptive, even incoherent, nature of traumatic memory.

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<sup>162</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 237.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>164</sup> Fisher, “The Narrative Paradigm,” 349.

## *Challenges to Narrative Probability – Narrative Voice*

Delbo also challenges narrative probability in her refusal to use a consistent narrative voice, a strategy that challenges Fisher's claim that the story must be "free of contradictions." Much of *Auschwitz and After* is written in the first person plural, as she describes the collective experiences of the prisoners such as the endless monotony of the mandatory roll calls: "SS in black capes have walked past. They made a count. We are waiting still. / We are waiting."<sup>165</sup> With the use of "we," Delbo "positions the reader within the perceiving plural consciousness of the narration."<sup>166</sup> In other words, the first person plural not only shifts the viewpoint of the narrator to a more collective perspective, but also that of the reader, who may subconsciously feel stronger identification with the narrative. By no means, however, does Delbo confine herself only to the first person plural; she also employs many other forms, and shifts among them frequently, as when she writes of the relationship between the men's and the women's camps in Auschwitz, "We loved [the men]... Some of us, who had a husband among them, saw only him, met instantly his glance among the crisscrossed looks in search of us. Those who had no husband loved all the men without knowing them. / Not one of them was my brother or lover. I did not love the men. I never looked at them. I avoided their faces."<sup>167</sup> Here, Delbo shifts between the plural and the singular first person, describing first an experience shared by many of the women in Auschwitz, then clarifying her own perspective, which directly contradicts the former – despite her use of the term "we." The startling inconsistency highlights both the commonalities among the

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<sup>165</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 22.

<sup>166</sup> Hamaoui, "Art and Testimony: The Representation of Historical Horror in Literary Works by Piotr Rawicz and Charlotte Delbo," 247.

<sup>167</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 117.

female prisoners' stories, and the uniqueness of each individual Holocaust survivor's (or victim's) accounts. Delbo simultaneously identifies with and rejects the collective experience. The apparent contradiction is necessary to fulfill Delbo's objective of *il faut donner a voir*, "making them see": she does not want to express only her own experiences, but to create a picture of the group of prisoners as a whole in order to transmit as much "useless knowledge" as possible.

Occasionally, Delbo writes in the second person. In poems throughout the memoir she addresses, in turn, "You who have wept two thousand years / for one who agonized for three days and three nights,"<sup>168</sup> "O you who know,"<sup>169</sup> "You who are passing by,"<sup>170</sup> and "You [who] cannot understand... You who never listened / to the heartbeat / of one about to die."<sup>171</sup> Each of these poems speaks to a particular type of person: Christians, the other prisoners of the concentration camps (including the dead), oblivious bystanders, and non-survivors, respectively.<sup>172</sup> The reader, however, is party to all of the messages, called to encounter her testimony. The reader is "both interpellated and not, called into the position of the guilty witness,"<sup>173</sup> for we must accept the positioning of "you" even where it does not apply. Indeed, the appeal to "O you who know" seems to address those who could not possibly be in the position of the reader, because many of them will be dead: those who know "that suffering is limitless / that horror cannot be circumscribed"<sup>174</sup> are the victims of the concentration camps, and most did not survive.

The reader must bear witness for those who cannot, must attempt to understand the

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 127, 229.

<sup>172</sup> Creet, "Calling on Witnesses," 1.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>174</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 11.

horror. The address to those who cannot be addressed constitutes another conscious contradiction, violating narrative probability in order to expose the limitations of standard storytelling in the framework of the Holocaust memoir.

There is, additionally, deep internal significance to Delbo's use of the second person. As discussed in the previous chapter, *Auschwitz and After* constitutes a vital component of Delbo's return to a complete self and one who is integrated with others. If, as Julia Creet argues, "We are constituted as subjects to each other (and therefore subjects at all) in the moment of the utterance,"<sup>175</sup> then the decision to directly address the reader – the only subject capable of actually receiving the message – marks a significant moment in the restoration of the self. The shifting "you," therefore, carries enormous consequence for Delbo's form of testimony. The apparent contradictions that emerge throughout *Auschwitz and After* complicate the reader's relationship to the text in order to emphasize that transmission of Holocaust memories cannot be achieved using conventional narrative structures.

### ***Challenges to Narrative Fidelity***

The nature of the contents of *Auschwitz and After* present an inherent challenge to narrative fidelity, which refers to "whether the stories [the audience] experience[s] ring true with the stories they know to be true in their lives."<sup>176</sup> Fisher defines narrative fidelity in terms of five components: fact, relevance, consequence, consistency, and transcendence. "Fact" concerns the values (both implicit and explicit) embedded in a message; "relevance" questions whether those values are applicable to the matter at hand;

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<sup>175</sup> Creet, "Calling on Witnesses," 3.

<sup>176</sup> Fisher, "Narration as Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument," 8.

“consequence” interrogates the external or real-world effects of adhering to the values within the narrative; “consistency” relates to whether the audience finds the values to be harmonious with their own experiences and views; and “transcendence,” which Fisher elevates as the most important criterion, asks whether the values of the message can be universalized to form the basis of ideal human behavior.<sup>177</sup>

It should be unambiguous that Delbo’s text fundamentally cannot meet the requirements of narrative fidelity. Only Holocaust survivors who lived through similar atrocities could relate the contents to their own lives; for others, the tales of Auschwitz cannot “ring true.” There should be no experiences in most readers’ lives that even remotely resemble those chronicled in the memoir. Delbo writes of the attempt to relate her experiences to others, “Do not say they cannot hear us / they hear us / they want to understand / obstinately / meticulously / the edge of their being wishes to understand / a sensitive border at their edge / but their deepest self / their inner truth / remains remote / flee as we think we’re catching it / retracts contracts escapes / do they withdraw and fall back / because they hurt / where we no longer hurt. . .”<sup>178</sup> Here, she speaks to the efforts on the part of both survivors and non-survivors to create meaningful communication about what the prisoners lived through, and the way in which that understanding remains elusive. Readers will also be unable to draw upon their own lives in the attempt to comprehend the deepest truths about Auschwitz and its aftermath, creating an enormous impediment to the text’s achievement of narrative fidelity. The criteria of “fact” and “consistency” pose particular problems.

For Delbo, the process of writing presumes an objectivity that is, in actuality,

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<sup>177</sup> Fisher, “Toward a Logic of Good Reasons,” 379–380.

<sup>178</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 269.

impossible. Indeed, the epigram to “None of Us Will Return” reads, “*Today, I am not sure that what I wrote is true. / I am certain it is truthful.*” Delbo thus reveals her discomfort with the notion of absolute truth with regards to her memories of the concentration camps. Of course, Fisher’s notion of “fact” in this context concerns the *values* of a message rather than its basis in “truth” per se; but the latter necessarily implicates the former, as it makes little sense to abide by a set of values not based on truth. It is clear from the outset, therefore, that *Auschwitz and After* will complicate narrative fidelity. The epigram to “Useless Knowledge” further calls into question the possibility of locating valid “facts” in the memoir: it consists of a quote from French poet Paul Claudel that reads, “*We came from too far to merit belief.*” It is another indictment of the notion that readers will be able to identify and apply appropriate values within the memoir.

It would, furthermore, be difficult to pin down a set of “values” espoused in *Auschwitz and After*, as the text concerns the prisoners’ loss of themselves and consequently the evaporation of most rational human values. For instance, when Delbo writes, “Did you know that you can see your mother dead / and not shed a tear”<sup>179</sup> she tells us that survival in the concentration camp meant suspending or suppressing previously held principles and ideals. Similarly, when the women talk amongst themselves, “Everything that had been our previous existence had unraveled... We had to omit anything that might awaken pain or regret. We never spoke of love.”<sup>180</sup> Even (what passes for) casual conversation in the camp cannot concern the values that no longer have a place in their lives. The disconnect between most human values and experiences and

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 168.

the harsh, grim realities of “life” in the camp guarantees that readers will be unable to find narrative fidelity in *Auschwitz and After*.

“One Day,” the aforementioned story of the female prisoner’s brutal public death, exemplifies the disruptive narrative style through which Delbo conveys her traumatic memories, and the ways in which that style challenges narrative consistency. As the narrator watches the struggle, she moves constantly between the woman’s point of view and her own: “‘I don’t understand why they won’t help me. They’re dead, dead. They look alive because they’re standing up, leaning one against the other. They’re dead. As for me, I don’t want to die.’ Her hand flutters once more, like a shout—yet she is not shouting. In what language would she shout if she were to shout?”<sup>181</sup> Delbo envisions the woman’s thoughts from her position as a bystander and shifts seamlessly between the imagined monologue and her own responses. Later in the chapter, in the woman’s final moments, these two voices become even more closely intertwined: “The woman lets out a cry. A wrenched-out scream. A single scream tearing through the immobility of the plain. We do not know if the scream has been uttered by her or by us, whether it issued from her punctured throat, or from ours. I feel the dog’s fangs in my throat. I scream. I howl. Not a sound comes out of me. The silence of a dream.”<sup>182</sup> The onlooking prisoners feel the woman’s pain as their own, and hence narrative stability is interrupted. The story does not “hang together” because it is not one story but many: that of the dying prisoner, that of Delbo and her memory of her dog Flac, that of the group experience of the women forced to stand and watch. There are, in “One Day,” two levels at which narrative fidelity, and specifically Fisher’s notion of “consistency,” can be interrogated. The first is

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<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 28–29.

the experience of the onlooking prisoners, observing the dying woman's anguish in real time. As Delbo's narrative reveals, the scene lacks fidelity even at the moment she and the others witness it. Delbo cannot separate the experience from her memories of Flac's death; the brutal act so violates her own values that she automatically associates it with the only other painful death she has seen up close. The only "consistency" possible is thus experienced as a traumatic flashback. The second level of fidelity concerns the reader, who (in almost every case) most likely cannot begin to conceive of the depth or manner of pain and suffering encountered by the dying woman and her fellow prisoners. The audience also cannot plausibly find the values embedded in the narrative consistent with their own, as the story is one of inhuman cruelty and its effects upon those who might suffer the same. One would hope that such treatment does not resonate or "ring true" with any reader. Delbo thus emphasizes the impossibility of narrative fidelity in this context.

The entire book of "The Measure of Our Days" also represents a break from traditional narrative structures and an affront to narrative probability, as it "relates the stories of numerous survivors of the Nazi camps by juxtaposing narratives in diverse voices. Presented with little or no authorial comment, these narratives offer no singular master discourse on what it means to survive Auschwitz."<sup>183</sup> Instead, each chapter offers the perspective of one of Delbo's comrades and his or her individual struggle with reintegrating into society after returning from the camps. The form is unique in that much of the material comes from direct interviews that Delbo conducted; yet she translates her friends' words into the same prose/poetry narrative style in which the rest of *Auschwitz*

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<sup>183</sup> Rothberg, "Between Auschwitz and Algeria: Multidirectional Memory and the Counterpublic Witness," 164.

*and After* is written. Furthermore, the narrators in these chapters sometimes use the second person to address Delbo, as when Gilberte says, “I realized that you, the Parisians, had families waiting for you, and with the formal procedures completed you were in their hands. No one said, ‘What about Gilberte?’ Or else, when you noticed I wasn’t there, I had disappeared, engulfed by the crowd. You must have been as bewildered as I was.”<sup>184</sup> Such addresses operate in an entirely different manner than the use of the second person in other parts of *Auschwitz and After*, creating identification between author (the intended subject of the statement) and reader (who occupies the position of the signifier ‘you’). This perpetual disruption of agency throughout the text has several implications. First, it shatters the stability of the reader’s position. He or she is constantly recast, compelled to identify with a new perspective, including Delbo’s own. We see once again the insufficiency of traditional narrative techniques in the communication of the message. Second, the uncertainty *performs* the difficulty encountered by Delbo and her comrades in struggling to regain their own agency after their liberation. I have argued that the creation of the narrative constitutes an important component of the reclamation process, as Delbo becomes the subject of her own speech; the narrative instability of the text suggests that the process is neither easy nor simple. Delbo passes some of that confusion onto her readers, a meaningful act of transmission. Finally, the inconsistency in authorship suggests that we should not take Delbo to be the ultimate authority on the Auschwitz experience, a point that will be developed further below.

“The Measure of Our Days” also represents a break in the notion, espoused by narrative fidelity, of internally consistent values. The multiplicity of voices contained therein guarantees contradictions. For example, in her chapter Mado says,

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<sup>184</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 242.

My husband is here. I can do nothing to help him imagine what it was like... So I simply don't speak about it. I never discuss it with him. For him, I'm there, actively, orderly, present. He's wrong. I'm lying to him. I'm not present. Had he been deported too it would have been easier, I think. He'd see the veil over the pupils of my eyes. Would we then have talked together like two sightless people, each one possessing the inner knowledge of the other? It might have been easier because I wouldn't have had to keep anything back.<sup>185</sup>

In direct contrast, Louise's chapter begins, "I don't know why Mado took it into her head that things would have been easier had she married a deportee. Look at me and my husband... After twenty years of marriage there's only one deportee in this couple. He's the deportee... Not one of us returned whole. But he's the only one who's entitled to getting ill. At any rate, we couldn't both be sick at the same time. So, you know, being married to a deportee. . ." <sup>186</sup> Louise's words sharply contradict Mado's assumptions, revealing that even among the survivors there exists no single set of values and challenging our expectations to the contrary. The inconsistency produced by Delbo's inclusion of her comrades' postwar narratives disrupts the effort to draw broad conclusions or "lessons" from what the survivors say. Through the diverse and sometimes conflicting words of this set of prisoners, Delbo indicates that we must be cautious in our inferences about the victims of the Holocaust and their experiences. As fellow survivor Ruth Klüger writes, "It is different for each one of us, depending on what went before, on what came afterwards, and on what happened to each during his or her time in the camps. Though the Shoah involved millions of people, it was a unique

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 267.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 332.

experience for each of them.”<sup>187</sup>

### ***Rethinking the Narrative Paradigm***

Texts such as Delbo’s compel a reconsideration of the narrative paradigm and its possible applications. Fisher contends that people make decisions based on the narrative rationality (both probability and fidelity) of the story, or in other words that a narrative acquires meaning and persuasive power based on these features. This paradigm fails to grasp the complexities of stories like this one, in which the content and objectives of the narrative cannot resonate with our accepted standards and values, but instead challenges them and makes us uncomfortable. *Auschwitz and After* defies both narrative probability and narrative fidelity, and its power stems from the ability to use that paradigm against itself. I argue that it is precisely in the shattering of these narrative conventions that *Auschwitz and After* acquires its significance as a rhetorical text: in the breakdown of narrative rationality lies the ability to transmit, so far as is possible, the trauma of Auschwitz. Just as Delbo’s experiences in the camps cannot be captured in traditional language or narrative structures, what makes the memoir a powerful narrative cannot be understood in terms of narrative probability or fidelity; rather, it requires the disruption of those notions to grasp what is at stake here.

The significance of Delbo’s work thus stems from the way that it performs the overwhelming experience it seeks to convey. Traumatic events such as the Holocaust clearly create the exigency for rhetoric, as they alter the world and individual lives in ways that call for both action and speech. Simultaneously, however, trauma complicates the ability to marshal the appropriate language, as in fact there may be no “appropriate”

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<sup>187</sup> Klüger, *Still Alive*, 166.

language to capture the experience. *Auschwitz and After* demonstrates that the fitting rhetorical response requires an approach to narrative that enacts disruption, in order both to give the reader a sense of the character of trauma and to convey the fundamental inexpressibility at the core of traumatic experience. The refusal of narrative conventions gives Delbo's memoir unique power as a rhetorical text that speaks not only through its words but also, and perhaps even more so, by way of its form and structure.

## **Chapter 4: Conclusion**

This thesis has examined Charlotte Delbo's *Auschwitz and After* as a text that can illuminate both the rhetorical dimensions of literature produced by an historical trauma like the Holocaust, and the ways in which rhetoric must adjust to account for the complexities of such trauma. I have argued that the process of bearing witness through the text facilitates Delbo's effort to re-claim herself after the trauma of the concentration camps and to establish a dialogic relationship to others, and that Delbo's text produces meaning through the disruption of traditional assumptions and expectations of narrative, using Walter Fisher's theory as an exemplar. I have detailed the features of the work that make it an exceptional case study in the intricacies of rhetorical action in the face of trauma.

### ***The Status of Holocaust Testimony***

In the effort to understand *Auschwitz and After* as a rhetorical text, it is worthwhile here to note the work's status within the literature and testimony of the Holocaust. By virtue of the "unspeakable" nature of trauma and particularly of the Holocaust, the very existence of survivors' memoirs presents an ontological question about the possibility and meaning of bearing witness.

At issue in the discussion of Holocaust memoirs is the possibility or impossibility of testimony, or of bearing witness to the trauma of the concentration camps. Scholars and survivors have struggled with the question of what it means to convey an event that has not quite been experienced, to write of horrors that we have deemed ineffable. Any Holocaust memoir must encounter and work through the essential unfeasibility of its task.

Notes philosopher Giorgio Agamben, “It became clear that testimony contained at its core an essential lacuna; in other words, the survivors bore witness to something it was impossible to bear witness to.”<sup>188</sup> Similarly, Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer write that the “fundamental contradiction brought by the centrality of witness testimony to cultural discourses about memory,” and especially to discourse about the Holocaust, is “the contradiction between the necessity, on the one hand, but also the impossibility of fully bearing witness to this particular traumatic past.”<sup>189</sup> Delbo makes clear that she feels the paradox deeply: “The very fact we’re here to speak denies what we have to say.”<sup>190</sup> The inexpressible nature of the Holocaust, the unreality (even unfeasibility) of returning to life after the concentration camps, and the weighty knowledge of all the victims who died and will thus never be able to speak all work against the survivors’ attempts to bear witness to the atrocities.

It would seem, then, that Holocaust memoirs occupy a strange position: deemed to be ontologically impossible, yet considered overwhelmingly significant to our understanding of the genocide, and to the Holocaust survivors’ own postwar lives. How do such works resolve these tensions? Suggests Lea Fridman Hamaoui, “The transcription of extreme experience into spoken, written, and especially literary language disrupts conventions of belief and disbelief upon which speakers and listeners, readers and writers are agreed. The literary work of art representing extreme experience must negotiate a new contract with the reader.”<sup>191</sup> In other words, each memoir navigates the

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<sup>188</sup> Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 13.

<sup>189</sup> Hirsch and Spitzer, “The Witness in the Archive: Holocaust Studies/Memory Studies,” 391.

<sup>190</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 257.

<sup>191</sup> Hamaoui, “Art and Testimony: The Representation of Historical Horror in Literary Works by Piotr Rawicz and Charlotte Delbo,” 243.

problems of witnessing and of transmitting trauma in its own unique, individual way; just as no two survivors' experiences were the same, no two writers chronicling those experiences approaches the inherent difficulties of their task in the same manner. Despite these challenges, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub consider literature "a precocious mode of witnessing—of accessing reality—when all other modes of knowledge are precluded."<sup>192</sup> Literature offers the capacity for creating understanding through a variety of expressive forms; the structure and style of a literary work speak as strongly as its content, and a wide range of devices such as metaphor, irony, and imagery all serve to enhance meaning beyond the words themselves. Literature also has the power to reach an audience broader than the narrow set of interactions to which an individual is limited in a lifetime. The memoir thus stands at the intersection of impossibility and radical possibility; as we have seen, *Auschwitz and After* clearly embraces and exemplifies this strange status.

### ***The Question of Recovery***

It is tempting, in light of the arguments presented here about the role of narrative in working through trauma and recovering the self, to view *Auschwitz and After*, or any Holocaust memoir, as an artifact of the author's healing from the traumatic events. Such a conclusion, however, would be hasty. First, there is little we can know or presume about the status of any individual's recovery process as external observers. Second, Delbo's emphasis throughout her memoir on the constant return of her memories and the attendant anguish she associates with them suggests that true, complete healing from the trauma is likely impossible. As Langer writes, "Delbo's survivors never escape their

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<sup>192</sup> Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, xx.

realm of death; their journey through the underworld does not lead to a myth of renewal but to the haunting legacy that... challenges us to grasp the impact that mass murder has had on our efforts to reaffirm a reverence for life in the post-Holocaust era.”<sup>193</sup> Indeed, on one of the last pages of the trilogy is a poem that simply reads, “I do not know / if you can still / make something of me / If you have the courage to try. . .”<sup>194</sup> These lines imply that Delbo’s uncertainty in herself is lasting, despite the power of the narrative in restoring her agency. Thus, *Auschwitz and After* should not be read as a tale of triumph over trauma, but rather as one of the enduring wounds of the past, and as a challenge to our traditional modes of understanding that past.

### ***Final Thoughts***

The second-to-last poem of *Auschwitz and After* bears what I read as a warning to readers, including (perhaps especially) future generations: “When the revolution comes / I’ll draw my brain / from my cranium / and I’ll shake it over the city / snow will fall out from it / a snow of dust / of dirty dust / the color of the present time / which will tarnish the flag’s scarlet hue // And if it takes too long in coming / I won’t even have the strength for that much.”<sup>195</sup> The message seems clear: The events chronicled in the memoir must never be allowed to occur again, and we have not yet done enough to defend against them. Given Delbo’s work with the Communist party, the references to “the revolution” and to the scarlet color of the flag allude to a particular political orientation, but the more salient point is that Delbo believes that the “useless knowledge” from the concentration camps, contained in her mind and in now her writing, should deeply affect whatever

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<sup>193</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, xviii.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 352.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.

comes next: we cannot hope for a different future unless we understand the past (and, as noted above, its failure to stay past). There is also a note of profound pessimism in the last lines; political change may be so gradual and the world so slow to grasp the implications of Auschwitz that the lessons imparted by survivors will be lost forever. The poem comes as a warning to the reader not to read the memoir lightly, not to gloss over the broader implications of the unthinkable events chronicled therein. We cannot ignore the notion that the “color of the present time” is that of dirty dust; Delbo is admonishing us that our awareness of the Holocaust is not deep enough. Thus, *Auschwitz and After* has enormous consequence beyond the literary and the rhetorical, extending to the political and social spheres as well.

Much of the significance of this thesis stems from the relative silence on the issue of trauma within the discipline of rhetorical studies. Given the ways in which trauma implicates language and communication and the traumatic nature of many events examined by rhetorical critics, it is important to forge connections between the two fields, as I have done, by analyzing texts that come from a site of trauma and bringing to light their rhetorical dimensions. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, there is also an opportunity to consider the ways in which rhetorical theory itself may have been influenced by historical and individual trauma. Such ideas should be analyzed further.

I hope to have established that rhetoric certainly has a place in any discussion of trauma. Texts produced out of trauma are necessarily rhetorical, as they respond to an exigency and speak to an audience; rhetorical theory has much to offer the analysis of such work. The applications of theories like Fisher’s can shed light on the ways in which survivors of trauma cope with and work through the problems of language and agency

posed by overwhelming experience. *Auschwitz and After* will, unfortunately, be far from the last work to face the task of transmitting such horrors. Given the trauma that continues to plague the modern era, this work will remain extremely relevant.

*Auschwitz and After* offers a particularly compelling case study of what it means to transmit trauma rhetorically. The ubiquitous command “Never Forget,” coined in the wake of the Holocaust, places an ethical obligation on society to remember the twentieth century’s greatest atrocities; Delbo’s work ensures that we *cannot* forget, and therein lies its power.

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### EDUCATION

- M.A.** Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC May 2012  
Communication, Emphasis in Rhetorical Studies  
Thesis Advisor: Alessandra Beasley von Burg, PhD
- B.A.** Emory University, Atlanta, GA May 2010  
Major in Comparative Literature (Highest Honors), Minor in Linguistics  
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### EMPLOYMENT

- Graduate Assistant Debate Coach**, Wake Forest University 2010-2012
- Debate Institute Instructor**, Emory University, Dartmouth College 2009-2012
- Assistant Debate Coach**, The Westminster Schools, Atlanta, GA 2008-present
- Office Assistant**, Emory University 2006-2010
- Information Desk Attendant**, Dartmouth College Summer 2007

### HONORS & AWARDS

- Crowe-Warken Coaching Award** 2011  
Awarded to the coach of the winner of the U.S. Naval Academy Crowe-Warken Memorial Debate Tournament
- Clio Prize** 2010  
Best senior seminar paper, Department of History, Emory College of Arts and Sciences
- Phi Sigma Iota** Inducted 2010  
International Foreign Language Honor Society
- Phi Beta Kappa** Inducted 2009  
Academic Honor Society