

Telling the Holocaust: Questions and Connections

A narrative is the semiotic representation of a series of events meaningfully connected in a temporal and causal way.

(Onega and Landa 1996, 3)

Driven by thirst, I eyed a fine icicle outside the window, within hand's reach. I opened the window and broke off the icicle but at once a large, heavy guard prowling outside brutally snatched it away from me. "Warum?" I asked him in my poor German. "Hier ist kein warum," (there is no why here), he replied, pushing me inside with a shove. (Levi 1996, 29)



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Narrative, the telling of stories, is premised upon rationality, upon understanding a sequence of events by relating its sequentiality to processes of cause and effect – processes that are, as Onega and Landa put it, “meaningfully connected.” But the reality of the Holocaust was one in which the

Nazis attempted to deny their victims the ability to make any such meaningful connections. In their ‘Editors’ Afterword’ to Sara Nomberg-Przytk’s *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land*, Eli Pfefferkorn and David M. Hirsch note that “[t]he cause and effect link, for example, that defines our relationship to our surroundings was rendered inoperative in the concentration-camp environment. The relative freedom that enabled a person to arrange his life within a causal context was brutally denied to the concentration-camp inmate” (Nomberg-Przytk 1985, 166–7). As a result, imposing narrative order upon what happened in and around the camps often seems to be difficult or impossible, both for survivors and for others. “It is one of the still unresolved problems of that body of writings called Holocaust literature that the events seem to overwhelm all attempts to impose formal order, either of literary history or literary criticism” (Nomberg-Przytk 1985, 165).

That word ‘order’ has a certain chilling force. “Ordnung muss sein!” How often survivors quote these words when recounting some piece of insane logic on the part of their Nazi persecutors! It is ironic that the most accessible ‘formal order’ traceable in the Holocaust is the inhuman one imposed by the perpetrators, planned out in detail, and executed rigorously by those who would later claim that they were “only obeying orders.” Must narratives of the holocaust choose between experience that excludes order, and order that excludes the experience of victims?

In the event, survivor accounts typically combine a report of the total absence of logic experienced in the camps with heroic attempts to understand why victims were being treated as they were.

This was the very worst thing that had ever happened to me. I could not see why I should be put into prison or why, at the age of fifteen, I was such an undesirable person because I was Jewish. It was all a senseless persecution and I felt very bitter. I wished I knew why this was all happening to us. (Schloss 1998, 58)

It is because that impulse to know ‘why this was all happening’ is fundamental to narrative that survivors’ attempts to tell *stories* about their experiences constitute a fundamental challenge to the Nazi attempt to establish realms from which the word ‘why’ has been expelled. This is not to say that the survivors’ stories ever fully explain why; it is, rather, to recognize that even in a situation in which the desire to know why was never satisfied, survivors found ways to adapt narrative’s powers to their own valuable ethical and aesthetic ends. These adaptations produced narratives that reproduce that sense of being in a black hole in which ‘there is no why’ while recording that their authors challenged, and continue to challenge, this prohibition by asking questions and drawing connections. The *question* and the *connection* – the two issues raised in my opening quotations – are central to the rational (and thus the moral) force of such accounts. I stress ‘questions’ – not necessarily answers, and ‘connections’ – not necessarily a comprehensive sequence of cause-and-effect. Such narratives repeatedly confront the reader with work to be done: rather than providing comprehensive accounts, they require the reader to attempt to answer questions, to make connections, and thus to seek an understanding of that which seems incomprehensible.

Let me conclude with a couple of examples. First, questions. Consider the following account by Norwegian Jew Julius Paltiel of an event that took place while he and others were being transported in appalling conditions through Germany on their way from Auschwitz to Buchenwald at the end of the war.

We are standing in open cattle trucks, with dead eyes and weary in spirit. It is cold – certainly more than 20°C. below zero. We cross the border into Germany. The train stops under a pedestrian bridge, on which a group of young German boys stand and laugh at the extraordinary train cargo.

A prisoner shouts out to them: “Have you any food for us?”

The boys stare at us, then run away. Shortly afterwards they return with stones, which they throw at us. What sort of young Germans are these that throw stones at starving human beings in open cattle trucks? How can they behave in such a hateful manner to us? Had we been animals they certainly would not have thrown stones. Are they totally devoid of morality? They cannot avoid seeing that we are human beings in extreme need. The boys laugh. I am shocked.

(Komissar 2004, 103 [my translation])

Fifty years after the event (his account was first published in 1995), Paltiel insists on posing the same questions he posed at the time. Time and

again, the moral force of survivor accounts can be located in this refusal to accept that “Hier ist kein warum,” a refusal that forces readers as much as the survivor-writers to search for explanations.

Secondly, connections. Consider the following passage.

After emerging on to the road you have to pass a little house with green shutters. Awkward little hearts have been roughly cut out in their centres, and white ruffled curtains are half-drawn over the windows. Under the windows grow delicate, pale roses. A mass of funny little pink flowers peeks out of the window-boxes. On the steps of the veranda, shaded with dark-green ivy, a little girl is playing with a big, sulky dog. The dog, obviously bored, lets her pull him by the ears, and only from time to time shakes his heavy head to chase away the flies. The girl wears a little white dress, her arms are brown and suntanned.

In isolation the scene has a fairy-tale quality to it, a quality that even in isolation carries along with its sickly ‘charm’ a faint but distinct sense of dread. The passage continues as follows.

The dog is a black Dobermann Pinscher. The girl is the daughter of the Unterscharführer, the boss of Harmenz, and the little house with its little window-boxes and its ruffled curtains is his house.
(Borowski 1976, 60–61)

The passage is from Polish Auschwitz survivor Tadeusz Borowski’s semi-fictional story “A Day At Harmenz,” and the narrative sequence forces the reader to make some unsettling and disturbing connections. No questions are overt here, but many are implicit (and their being implicit makes them only more urgent and unavoidable). How can we reconcile the first seven sentences with the final two? What possible way is there of connecting the kitschy sentimentality, the clichéd domesticity, the petit-bourgeois niceness, with the gas chambers and the crematoria? Here is another Norwegian Auschwitz survivor, Herman Sachnowitz, writing about Kommandant Schöttel, the chief executive of the *Buna* camp: “Whenever Schöttel heard music, however, he became soft as butter. He had tears in his eyes and seemed to dream himself far, far away” (132). We are left with the disturbing thought that the horrors of the Holocaust took place not in spite of the awkward little hearts, the window boxes and the cloying fantasy world of sentimental tears-in-the-eyes musical appreciation, but in part because of them. Faced with a fairy-tale world of sentimentality and kitsch we should suspect that a repressed world of bestial violence and horror is not so very far away. And it is a narrative that has forced us to confront this possibility.

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