

Representation of the Impossible

Fethi Benslama

Gil Anedjar - The Jews
The Arabs: A History of
the Claim

The need to think the Shoah from the point of view of the psyche is a fact announced by Primo Levi already in 1947. In the preface of *If This Is a Man*, he says this about the book: "It has not been written in order to formulate new accusations; it should be able, rather, to furnish documentation for a quiet study of certain aspects of the human mind."¹ What is remarkable in this claim is not only that it is a stimulus for his account to be made into an object of study, but so early and so clearly it formulates the task that this statement on the Lager assigns to those who receive it. It is not a matter of trying the crime but of instructing and teaching by means of a consignment for knowledge of the human soul which differs from judgment or is, at least, of a different order of judgment than that of the tribunal.

the following

(superstition vs
fakes)

Now that the circumstances of the extermination of the European Jews are largely known,² Primo Levi's offer to "to furnish documentation for a quiet study of certain aspects of the human mind" steadfastly demonstrates to what piercing demand it corresponds, for the reality of the extermination—even when established via its historical and judged representation—only deepens the questioning and the [désarroi] concerning its causes and meanings. Fifty years later, the *Illic est kein Warum* [There is no why here]³ still projects its dark rays on civilization and adds to the unthinkable anguish of repetition. Especially since the daily reminders of genocides in the contemporary world maintain us permanently, beyond its historical singularity, in the orbit of the Shoah: "As if," Jean Améry wrote, "Hitler triumphed posthumously."⁴

As a psychoanalyst, today, how can I receive Primo Levi's offer? As participation in this collective reflection on the ethics of representation, I have decided to think through the terms of this claim in order to attempt a preliminary and modest [repérage] of a question that is inevitable as soon as one studies the soul: the relation between representation and affect and drive, on the one hand, and the spatial displacements that his thought necessarily implies as soon as one realizes that there is a passage between the Lager experience, witnessing, and the thought process based on those accounts.

In regard to facts of common human reality, we can suppose that the signified is relatively stable, that the referent is more or less shared, that imagining the lived experience of the other is possible. But the radicality of the Lager situation confronts us with unfathomable rifts. I recall the following remark by Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930):

As strong as the fright might be... [to be completed]⁵

If we follow Freud, there are situations in which no *Einführung* is possible—no contact with what another has felt, no sharing, no imaginary reckoning about what the other has endured, "impossible [from Freud quote above]". This impossibility not only creates, as many survivors report, an obstacle to the transmission of the Lager experience, but it pinpoints what collapses in the *antvers concentrationnaire*: a commonality with other men.

¹ *If This Is a Man*, p. 9 [Fr. has "âme humaine" for "human mind"].

² Especially through the immense work of the historian, Raul Hilberg [to be finished].

³ A statement that Primo Levi quotes in the following context [to be finished].

⁴ Jean Améry [13 in *Par-delà*].

⁵ Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, [276 in t. XVIII French].

This interruption upsets our relation to language, disorients the surest methods and utterances of our knowledge, and leads us toward what Jean-Jacques Moscovitz has so aptly termed "awkwardness" [*la maladresse*] in thinking about the Shoah.⁶ In a way, this awkwardness is inevitable since our *towardness* [*adresse*] turns in the vicinity of evil, of the nothingness and the absence of foundation proffered in the terrible apostrophe, "There is no why here." Words, adequate means of speaking the destination of the "why" fail us.

The notion of "the Lager experience" is thus totally inadequate, for how can one suppose a *passage through the peril* (*ex-periri*) when it is a question of extermination? Even in the case of the survivors, as their testimony and their existences long afterward attest, one cannot speak psychically of a *passage*. Extermination camps cannot afford experience—unless it is on the part of the Nazis—, but rather something like an *isperience* where the subject *remains exposed to the peril*, affected by the will to destroy him and by the interruption that separated him from other men to the final moment of his life. Brushed aside or repressed, the affects connected to this *isperience* may submerge the subject and lead him to the desperate gesture against which he struggled so much in the Lager and, outside, through testimony and thought.

The Collapse of "Commonality"

I would initially like to formulate some questions regarding the rupture or the collapse of *commonality* and to sketch a critical argument on which I will attempt to elaborate.

First, to what order of representation does the collapse of *commonality* in the Lager *isperience* belong? Is it conscious and/or unconscious? Is it immediately representable? Under what conditions does it become so?

Second, of what is this representation made for he who undergoes the ordeal, for he who writes it and testifies to it, for he who tries to think it through on the basis of testimony? May we allow it to be assumed that the representation circulates from one site to another without loss, without transformation, without interruption?

Third, is it necessary to accept that the collapse of *commonality* be named "the inhuman," "the non-human" or "the a-human," following various appellations proposed and theorized at least since Hannah Arendt, all of which intend thus to signify the radicality of a condition in which a rupture with the category of human intervenes? Myriam Revault d'Allonnes, for example, who notably places herself in the wake of Arendt, has maintained that belonging to the human species was conditioned by the imaginary recognition of one's fellow human and that if this imaginary were to be interrupted, that individual's belonging to the human species would be stripped from him. This formulation approximately quotes the conclusion of a recent article whose title, "Tested by the Lager: *Fellow-Imagination*," is quite explicit.⁷ The author goes as far as to confer epistemic status to this orientation: "It would be appropriate to follow the red thread running through a many decisive texts in the history of philosophy of this imaginary recognition of the fellow human apprehended as condition for belonging to the human species" (563).⁸

⁶ Jean-Jacques Moscovitz, "Après la rupture de l'histoire." *Cyber revue de psychanalyse*, www.psychanalyse.net.org 2000.

⁷ Myriam Revault-d'Allonnes, "À l'épreuve des camps: l'imagination du semblable." In Catherine Coquio, ed.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 563.

If we follow Freud, it is true that what appears as “impossible” *Einfühlung* identifies an imaginary relation to the other that finds itself severed by a real that separates him from his fellow humans and creates an incommensurable *discordance* with other men.

The problem is that if we base the concept of man or that of inclusion in humanity on nothing more than imaginary constancy (something that Freud never claimed), this results in consequences of extreme gravity drawing us into confusions with disastrous effects.

It is obvious that the imaginary is constitutive of the subject. But does this authorize one to reduce his belonging to humanity or to the human species to the register of the imaginary? *Does an interruption in one's imaginary relation to the other exclude the latter from the category to which one belongs?*

Is it not precisely because the Nazis had reduced man to an imaginary formation that they attempted to destroy [man] in Jews and remodel [man] through themselves as “pure race”? Nor do we have the least doubt that this imaginization of man produced a real destruction. But if we subscribe to the statement that the men of the Lager became *non-men*, then the destruction of which they were the object connects with and realizes the Nazi imaginary of man.

Concerning the representation of the Shoah, a clarification is in order with respect to what is expressed as *non-human, a-human, inhuman*.

When we say that deported men—whether exterminated or survivors—underwent both physical destruction and a negation of their human quality, that they experienced an interruption in their civilized relationship to their fellow man and that this extreme cruelty **disrupted [a *dérangé*]** within them their human identity, we remain in the register of what could be called the discordant rupture in the representation of man. We borrow the notion of “discordance” from Damourette and Pichon in their study of the two forms of negation in the French language.⁹ This negation is used in clauses governed by verbs expressing fear and **constraint [empêchement]**. Now, this is not the case for the theorizations that I have just criticized which aim, rather, to produce *forclusion* which is the other negation by which a real fact is excluded. **[Those positions theorize]** what occurred in the Lager as **a forclusion of the human in man**. The author who has gone the furthest in this direction is undoubtedly Giorgio Agamben in his essay entitled *Remnants of Auschwitz*¹⁰ to which we shall return later.

For such a forclusion to be possible, someone's human identity must exist as in a place within and must be susceptible to dislodging and rejection onto the outside (*for*). Now, when one says that a man is a man, as A is A, the third term, “is,” intervenes. As Émile Benveniste has shown, even when a language has no verb for *to be*, its function is marked either by a copulative **[copule]** or a pause: a spacing or space, *a lack* that is both identity and difference one within the other.¹¹ This third term in which is anchored the identity-difference relationship of a man with respect to humanity and other men is the most intimate one for each of us and constitutes the subject as such. This anchoring eludes capture by oneself and by another, for it is not simply imaginary nor real, but rather a relationship between those registers that exceed the hold of the symbolic. Some proof of this lies in the way the proper name functions since linguistic indexing may well designate one man but not as some “there is the man” (*ecce homo*) sending him to be crucified. It effaces him as well, removing him from the real. This is what allowed Ulysses to present himself as “no one” in order to elude capture by the Cyclops. The equation of this

⁹ Jacques Damourette and Édouard Pichon, *Des mots à la pensée. Essai de grammaire de la langue française* (Paris: D'Arthey, 1970).

¹⁰ Giorgio Agamben.

¹¹ Émile Benveniste, “Être et avoir...”

escape is made up of the name, the body, and the person which is both an affirmative and a negative instance: there both is and is not someone. "There is there isn't" is a game made possible by the space between self and self within Ulysses: between oneself (the real), one's name (the symbolic), and one's representation (the imaginary). The one-eyed creature was fooled because he [mécroît] the lack that allows the play of the signifier between something and nothing. Inversely, man identifies himself to this process of affirmation and negation in the play of identity and difference and this identification opens the escape-route by which he may disappear [s'évanouit] to himself and to the other.

The most extreme cruelty is relentless with [s'acharne contre] that which escapes localization, inclusion or determination in a certain register as we have described. If from this standpoint the Shoah was "the final solution to the Jewish question," according to Nazi terminology, it is because the theory that prepared it was founded on the idea that contrary to other races, Jews had no determined Gestalt or type and that they were, thus, able to incarnate all types and meld into any people.¹² That is why it was necessary in order to hunt them down to assign them to a body type. "The Jew still dwells inside us," Hitler explained. "But it is easier to fight him in his bodily form than in that of invisible demon."¹³

One could define *perverse capture*, which is the craziest and most destructive act of perversion because it does not stop at murder but aims to master the *nothing* through a person's body as the attempt to take what is untakeable from a man or a group. It is an attempt to reduce the constituent lack to nothing, even if this is impossible. Auschwitz put this attempt to practice on an industrial scale.

An attempt but not an accomplishment, for the Nazis did not destroy the humanity of the Jews but rather the image of a Jewish humanity reduced to their imaginary and which they projected upon real Jews who had become the supports for that image. Nazi extermination madness lies in flinging this imaginary reduction into the real in order to achieve their image of "the Jew" which is not other than the negative of the Nazi man himself.¹⁴

To Survive One's Own Life

We may reach both the possibility and the impossibility of the *representation of perverse capture* through the witness. In more ways than one the witness who survived the Lager was even more exposed to this temptation than those who perished. The notion of *inexperience* is applicable to the witness in all its breadth of duration and variation under the test. The witness was exposed to the peril of extermination, he exposed himself to the distress of survival and exposes himself still to the upheaval that bearing witness provokes. Let us lend the term *testimonial backlash* [revers testimonial] to what tears at someone when he undertakes to undo the defensive processes that he was forced to adopt in order to survive and when he tries through speech to break out of vital immanence in order to rediscover meaning annihilated by the destitution of the why. The error that he weaves in the very act of bearing witness threatens to wind him as if the redeployment of the human *untakeable* in all its dimensions destabilized the survivor, infinitely.

¹² Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le Mythe nazi*, La Tour d'Aigues, Editions de l'Aube, 1991.

¹³ Hermann Rauschning, *Hitler m'a dit*, Somogy-Librairie générale française, 1979, p. 316.

¹⁴ This is patent in Nazi discourse. Cf. Victor Klemperer, *LTI La Langue de l'île Reich*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1996.

The representation to which the witness affords us access is thus not the representation of a thing or a moment and is not a unique exposition in one fell swoop: it is composed of several times, several memory strata and elaborative levels constantly supplemented by their effects. It is assuredly a work of representation. The witness not only seeks to transmit a content, to communicate a message about human cruelty; he also tells how he became a work of representation in the sense that psychoanalysis perceives this as an essential demand in order to keep the *psyche* [*psychisme*] alive in correlation with the body of drives and emotions. Testimony is not a representation of cruelty: it testifies to representance tested by a cruelty whose destructiveness goes beyond murder and aims at the space of play between presence and absence, life and death.

Safeguarding psychic life may require, for example, that in life-threatening situations the subject repress, displace or transform affect—all the more crucially in proportion to the intensity of the affective charge. It is not difficult to believe that the Lager subject is affected with destructive, massive, and permanent hatred. This implied that in order to survive he must escape this affect by protecting himself from identification with the victim or the refuse that one wants him to be. This is what Robert Antelme stresses through the statement, "No one here will ever be his own SS to himself."¹⁵ On the other hand, however, the task of self-preservation obliges him to remain as close as possible to that hatred, to continually invest in the representation of himself as "killable," in the immanence of his liquidation, in order to ceaselessly locate the escape route. This means that the ability that anyone in ordinary life has to ignore one's mortal destiny is denied the deportee. One thus begins to see that bearing witness about this situation cannot be a simple marshalling of memorial recordings but is, rather, an elaboration through which the subject is called upon to painfully revise a psychical function of survival—a revision that may involve the recognition of affects either repressed or modified in line with archaic tasks linked to drives of self-preservation.

Bearing witness opens the survivor to another task, in a sense: that of surviving his own life. Upon his return from the Lager, Robert Antelme wrote to Diotrys Mascolo: "To have been able to free up words that were barely formed or that lacked maturity, in any case, words that formed simply on the basis of my breath—that happiness, you see, wounded me for good."¹⁶ The survivor is thus wounded by his testimony: perhaps by the liberation of a word coming in the form of reprisal after having been held so very tightly close to the vital concern or perhaps by sharp thrust of words recovering negation and retreat, the right to death accorded by the language that the executioner rendered impossible.

If, as Jean-Luc Nancy has invited us to do¹⁷, we are to analyze the conditions of a representation of the Shoah, it is not only to measure it by the standard of metaphysics of representation and its subject (understood as subject of consciousness able to produce voluntary memory), but in order to introduce complexity from a psychoanalytic perspective in which representation is not the receptacle of an absent object but, rather, a component in a [*dispositif*] of multiple locations, levels, and systems for inscription. Representation in the Freudian apparatus of the soul cannot be approached while ignoring affect, while leaving out the drive of which it is the expression, without specifying mechanisms such as repression and denial, without making the distinction between representation of words and representation of things, without the difference, in other words, between consciousness, pre-consciousness, and the unconscious, and

¹⁵ Robert Antelme ... p. 95.

¹⁶ Diotrys Mascolo

¹⁷ See Jean-Luc Nancy, "La Représentation interdite"...

especially without taking into consideration the function of representance insofar as the drive imposes it on the psyche as work. An ethics of representation of the Shoah would thus consist in putting what is said and reported about the destruction of men to the test of these writing systems of the soul.¹⁹

Bruno Bettelheim cleared a way as early as 1943 with an article entitled "Individual and Mass Behavior in Extreme Situations."²⁰ Having himself been deported to Dachau and Buchenwald, Bettelheim lived through the psychic transformations that the Lager conditions impose and drew from them a model for his analysis of infantile autism that he developed, notably, in *The Empty Fortress*.²¹ This model is founded upon the notion of the "extreme situation" that leads to a comparison between he who was called "Muslim" in the Lager (I will return to this term) and the autistic child. A clinical model that presumes that the "Muslim" might have been subjected from the outside to what the autistic might have lived through precociously from the inside is limited in several respects. To begin with, the "Muslim's" psychic apparatus was already fully constituted when Lager violence shattered and confronted it with the limits of what is possible, while in the autistic child the psychic apparatus could only partially form—before being able to integrate certain normal functions and processes of elaboration, in any case. (Unless one considers that in the case of he who was called "Muslim" there was not only abandonment of secondary narcissism investment and regression to that of primary narcissism—i.e., of a pre-objectal nature, focused on the object of need—, but also regression of the apparatus of the soul itself such that it could no longer allow representance.²¹) Another limitation stems from the fact that this psychogenetic model does not account for the political dimension at stake in Lager destruction. And this is precisely one of the decisive points attacked by the Lager mechanism [*ditto*] since it annihilated the guarantee afforded by the collectivity to individual narcissism—the correlative of originary identifications.²² Finally, this model founded on the pathology of autism and infantile psychoses is insufficient for reflecting on survival or, as Bettelheim himself calls it, the fact of "remaining a human being."

What Primo Levi terms a "document" is thus a locus of intense survival elaboration with unpredictable consequences for the witness. Based on testimony heard and the questioning of witnesses about the effect of their bearing witness, Régine Wainzater, in an article on the testimonial process, showed how the witness must carry out a painful and intense work consisting of an attempt to make up for figural deficiency and ensuring that what happened can be thought of as having indeed happened to him and not to someone else.²³ "Everything," wrote Charlotte Delbo, "that happened to that other woman—the one in Auschwitz—no longer affect or concerns me, so [completely] separated are deep and ordinary memory."²⁴ As if Lager destructiveness and the effort to survive had split the subject into several individuals and as if the testimonial process consisted of making them identify once again with each other or, at the very least, recognize each other in their split condition [*ne s'ignorent pas dans leur déchirement*]. Here, it could be said that the struggle for survival drags the splitting of the subject of representation into the Shoah. The disidentification that this splitting for survival brings about

¹⁹ Cf. the series of works edited by Nathalie Zaltzman ...

²⁰ Bruno Bettelheim ... *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 38

²¹ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Empty Fortress*.

²² Géraldine Corf de Dadoeche ...

²³ Nathalie Zaltzman has notably oriented her developments concerning the destruction...

²⁴ Régine Wainzater, "Ouvrir les images..."

²⁵ Quoted by Wainzater.

and that saves the subject by allowing him to attribute what he lived through and did to another "himself" may become a drama at the moment of bearing witness if, in the process, he happens to meet what he avoided about or rejected from himself. "To testify," writes Waintrater, "is to risk a new version of one's story, in an unknown and sometimes foreign assemblage that competes with the traumatic one. The risk derives from the witness gathering information from himself and rediscovering what he might have tried and often succeeded to lock up in some corner of his memory where no one—not even himself—has ever penetrated. The violence of reunification lies in this linkage operation and the danger that the witness runs of blaming himself, of proving unable to look upon himself with 'sorrow' and 'pity'.²⁵ Here, we perhaps grasp the risk of what Primo Levi called "a dispassionate study."

There is thus no guaranteed continuity or agreement between surviving and bearing testimony. Moreover, not all survivors testify. True, testimony may be the moment of an elaboration of the trauma that survival constituted—a moment taking effect in one's address to another: he who would read or study testimony and who might be called "the living one." *The living* might be the place where the witness assumes that his document will open upon another truth—the truth outside the Lager where it can encounter the meaning of others who are in the world. Yet the living one²⁶ has not seen or lived through the breaking of limits whose ordeal the survivor has undergone. There is innocence, ingenuousness, even blindness in him with regard to the ingeniousness and perversion of cruelty. A necessary interlocutor, the living one is so difficult to join with, so insurmountable the distance between [*le monde et l'immonde*] of the Shoah seems. The witness must also come face to face with the unimaginable for the other in order to transmit something to him, as Primo Levi stresses when he recounts a dream he had near the end of his detention in which he tells close ones what has happened to him and realizes that they are not listening to him.

For the witness, testimony harbors a traumaticity that resides in the effort to transmit, itself. This is due perhaps not only to the other's incredulity, but also because in receiving in the course of elaboration his own representation inverted with respect to the person it is meant for, he grasps the disproportion of what occurred and begins to get the inkling that survival is not the triumph of life but a confrontation with a disaster to come.

Here, another altogether crucial problematic opens up: that of the transmission of the memory of genocide to subsequent generations—what Janine Altounian has called *survivance*. Here is how the author defines it at the beginning of her book: "Survivance could be the term for an unconscious strategy that the survivors of a collective catastrophe and their descendants put into place in order to rebuild on precarious pilings a possible life among those who live 'normally' in the world on whose shores they have washed up."²⁷

The act of he who commits genocide leaves psychologically destructive genealogical missives of representance which will act upon generations and whose ravages will be all the greater for negation, silence or effacement of the destruction and those who were responsible for it. The unrepresentable then carries the effectiveness [*l'agir*] of cruelty beyond its action. This is why Pierre Földes says of murder aimed at the *genos* that it is "a crime that carries with it the unprecedented [*insigne*] diabolical perversity of being capable of perpetuating itself from

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ I am thinking here of Claude Lanzmann's film ...

²⁷ Janine Altounian

generation to generation without our being able to reconstruct its event or reconstitute its stakes."²⁸

The "Muslim": Primo Levi, Bruno Bettelheim, Giorgio Agamben

The Shoah causes representation to vacillate mainly around the stakes of man's destruction and his survival under the auspices of the questions: How can man resist his own destruction? To what extent can he remain a man? At what point does he cease to be one? Where do this possibility and this impossibility come from? What does a man become "non-man" signify? The very titles of these books by Robert Antelme—*The Human Species*²⁹—and by Primo Levi—*If This Is a Man*—indicate the centrality of this vacillation that Maurice Blanchot, reflecting on Antelme's book, condenses in the hyperbolic phrase about "destructible, indestructible" man. "Man is indestructibility and yet he can be destroyed," writes Blanchot. "Antelme's book helps us move forth, I believe, in this knowledge. But one must fathom the weightiness of such knowledge. To know that man can be destroyed certainly has nothing reassuring about it; but it is truly crushing to realize that despite this and because of this, in this very movement, man remains that which is indestructible because we no longer have any chance of being rid of ourselves, nor of our responsibility."³⁰

This single sentence of *The Human Species* clearly indicates its author's position: "the executioner can kill a man but can never change him into something else."³¹ Thus he affirms that leaving the human species is impossible both for the victim and for the executioner: "There is no ambiguity," he writes, "we remain men, we will end as men [...]. It is because we are men like them that the SS will be definitively impotent before us."³² Belonging to the human species is, for Antelme, irrevocable and remains the only ethical and political possibility of resistance against those tempted by a [*forçage de l'impossible*]. The human species designates a medium that no one can erase from the body, from memory, from the being of the other and one's own, even though the extremity of man's destruction can be reached. Whence the need to think about the destructible and the indestructible simultaneously, without dialectizing them, for there can be no synthesis here. Then representation vacillates, for its coexistence between opposites hyperbole assumes incessant movement—movement without resolution or, if there be a pause, immediate resumption and reversal. (It can be shown that the functioning of the Freudian concept of the soul corresponds perfectly to the hyperbole.)

All of the Lager testimonies that we have at our disposal—and Primo Levi's in the first instance—show the extent to which certain individuals can bear the unbearable and survive by ceaselessly attempting to conquer the possibility of "remaining a man." But they also show how quickly the resistance of others is undermined and how they shift to the other side of what the survivors consider a border-crossing of humanity—a swing to the side of the "non-man." He who ceases to struggle and enters the zone of death while he lives, he who gives in, really, to the will of the executioner—this anti-survivor—was called "the Muslim" in the Lager jargon.

The so-called "Muslim" therefore designates an extreme in the representation of destruction—an extreme for those who chose to survive and bear witness—for, in his total

²⁸ Pierre Fédida.

²⁹ *op. cit.*

³⁰ Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini*.

³¹ Antelme, 230.

³² *Ibid.*

submission to the Lager logic which they ceaselessly attempt while realizing that its functioning is implacable to counter, he directly threatens them. The representation of the Shoah cannot be investigated without investigating what was called "Muslim," since this was the name of the end of man in the Lager.

Although numerous studies of Lager testimony, starting with Bruno Bettelheim who made of the "Muslim" an autistic from the outside and the autistic a "Muslim from the inside," sporadically evoke what I dare not call "the figure of the Muslim" (the word came to designate man who no longer has a *figura*), I have no knowledge of reflective work devoted to this question, to what this denomination covers up and carries on as representation of the limits of man in the Lager and beyond. Giorgio Agamben's essay, *Remnants of Auschwitz* is the first major one, after Bettelheim's. The first philosophical essay, in any case, to devote its core to this theme, but also to propose it as paradigm for reaching a new "ethical land" (he uses the term *terra ethica*, p. 69) which he calls *Muselmannland* and of which Primo Levi would have been the land surveyor and cartographer.

My approach to Agamben's essay will be largely critical, precisely in respect to this point of the "Muslim." This will necessarily result in my leaving **unclarified** many aspects of a reflection that attempts to make very difficult inroads in an arduous region of the greatest importance considering the stakes indicated here. This essay by Agamben comes as an extension of *Homo sacer*, a book that attempted to tie together several threads of contemporary philosophical research in human life and politics. Agamben's moves are of particular interest to psychoanalysts who have, according to my readings, received them quite well.

I begin, then, with a preliminary question: Is it as true as Giorgio Agamben would have us believe that for lack of a better expression I will henceforth call the motif of the "Muslim" is so crucial to Primo Levi's testimony and reflections on the Lager? I also indicate here, once and for all, that in this context I place the term "Muslim" in scare-quotes—something that Agamben does not do systematically in his work: Primo Levi introduces this necessary reserve as to the crux of the problem that interests us here, i.e., the problem of a forclusive negation of the human in man.

Primo Levi devotes only a few passages to the motif of the "Muslim" in *If This Is a Man*, notably in Chapter 9, entitled "The Drowned and the Saved." He begins with a footnote that reads: "This word, *Muselmann*, I do not know why, was used by the old ones of the camp to describe the weak, the inept, those doomed to selection."³³ What else does he say in this main passage on the subject? He says that they are a mass of men, the majority, who do not manage to adapt to the tough law of the Lager, who let themselves disintegrate without "organizing," without struggle, in a solitude and an obedience that facilitate their rapid extermination. At this point Levi essentially undertakes a description and presentation of the image of what he recalls of the man abandoned by himself and everyone else, irremediably, without recourse because he submits to the terrible law and order of the Lager.

Primo Levi leaves description *per se* behind and turns to considerations of a different, let us say metaphysical nature, when he writes of "non-men who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand."³⁴ Non-men men, non-living living, not-dead dead, empty, alone, without thought: what these terms name, under the motif of the "Muslim" is absence, the

³³ P. Levi, *op.cit.* 88.

³⁴ (90)

presence of a living absence, men absented from themselves, from others, from the world or, rather, from the out-of-this-world, if it is not [*l'immortelle*] where they have landed. It is to the extent that man is capable of absence that he is capable of presence, presentation and representation. But this capacity is not only of the order of voluntary absenting; it is also the possibility of the collapse of presence, of one's presence to oneself and to the world. Presence is destroyed in those men called "Muslims." And Primo Levi expresses this destruction as the retreat of the divine: "the divine spark dead." This is an undeniable case of the classical theological topos of the retreat of presence. Did those men cease, for all that, to be men? What is it to cease to be a man?

This question—both simple and terrible—is the question on which Giorgio Agamben's essay is based. And yet, it is the question that he will inhibit and elude by the very motif of the "Muslim" in that this motif will remain unthought. Moreover, this motif will allow the question to remain hypnotized and serve to represent the full and thick presence of the "non-man," the complete realization, the incarnation of a beyond the human that the Lager produces through the so-called "Muslim."

Primo Levi speaks of "non-man" as do other witnesses of the Nazi camps who use either this expression or others, like "inhuman," "dehumanization," etc. These usages are made by witnesses who describe how they survived hatred and extreme pain and how, in order to survive, they had to guard against the temptation of letting go, how they had to muster the primary narcissism so strongly tied to self-preservation, to confront the contestation of their humanity organized by the Nazis, in short, how they had to reject anything from themselves or from others that might draw them to their end. Such words indicate a move of violent disidentification from one's peers or from a part of oneself that allows itself to perish in order to maintain identification with other or another part of oneself that wants to preserve itself in life. "Non-man" would thus be the "no" directed at man that allows the work of extermination to accomplish itself in him. It is the word that says "no" to destruction that comes from so nearby, the scream that endeavors to repulse what approaches both from outside and from within, which is altogether akin [*semblable*] to oneself, to draw one toward annihilation. With an expression of Robert Antelme's, we could say that it is man's "no" to man in the process of becoming "his own SS to himself."

The problem at this level is of the passage between the plane of *experience* and the plane of thought. Under what condition can words to express visceral horror be transformed into philosophical concepts? Can "the living," in other words, turn the words of the witness's survival into the words of philosophy disregarding the change in place, context, and world that such a transformation entails?

The motif of the "Muslim," in fact, will allow this question to be eluded and for the expression "non-man" to be moved from the connotative to the denotative, making it an absolute designation. This is what explains [Agamben's] use of the term "Muslim" without scare-quotes: rid of this reserve or this warning of its tropic use, the nickname is transformed into name, lending it the determinative and performative value of a presence in the reality of "non-man." One must ask the question of the relationship between the nickname and survival (Levi writes: "this word [...] was used by the old ones of the camp").²⁵

²⁵ The French translation of Levi uses the verb "survivre" here, which allows Agamben to suggest, just above, that there might be a relationship between "survive" and "survive" [Tt.].

Let us read the utterance by which Giorgio Agamben states his thesis: "Auschwitz is the site of an experiment that remains unthought today, an experiment beyond life and death in which the Jew is transformed into a Muslim and the human being into a non-human" (52; 64).²⁶

This general statement that applies an industrial transformation to all Jews in the Lager will open onto a series of variations on the same theme:

—"The Muslim is not only or not so much a limit between life and death; rather, he marks the threshold between the human and the inhuman" (55; 67-68)

—"There is thus a point at which human beings, while apparently remaining human beings, cease to be human. This point is the Muslim, and the camp is his exemplary site" (55; 68).

—"The Muslim [...] is literally the *larva* that our memory cannot succeed in burying, the unforgettable with whom we must reckon (81; 105).

—"The Muslim is the non-human who obstinately appears as human; he is the human that cannot be told apart from the inhuman (81-82; 105)

—"What is at stake in the 'extreme situation' is, therefore, 'remaining a human being or not,' becoming a Muslim or not" (55; 68).

—"The Muslim also becomes an improbable and monstrous biological machine, lacking not only all moral conscience, but even sensibility and nervous stimuli" (57; 70).

Interpreting Bruno Bettelheim, Giorgio Agamben writes: "The Muslim is therefore the one who has abdicated his inalienable freedom and has consequently lost all traces of affective life and humanity. This passage beyond the 'point of no return' is such a disturbing experience and, for Bettelheim, becomes such a criterion of moral distinction between human and non-human as to deprive the witness not only of all pity, but also of lucidity, bringing him to mistake what ought never to be confused. Thus Höss, the commander of Auschwitz condemned in Poland in 1947, is transformed for Bettelheim into a kind of 'well fed and well clothed' Muslim" (56-57; 69-70). What is interesting about this passage is Agamben's observation that the excess resulting from the Bettelheim's shift between connotative to denotative register causes the survival witness's words to refer to victim and executioner with the same name. Today, it is true that no one would say that an autistic person was a non-human. Yet in none of Agamben's subsequent developments, will any consequence be drawn from what he has detected in Bettelheim's writing.

Agamben's underlying thesis, in fact, aims to establish the "Muslim" as the prototype of a transformation proper to modern times—one that is experienced first and foremost in the Lager—whose goal is the production of an essentially biological man. Thus he says, of the camps, that "they are not merely the place of death and extermination; they are also, and above all, the site of the production of the Muslim, the final biopolitical substance to be isolated in the biological continuum" (85; 110).

Here, I will curtail the many formulations one can find in this work of the motif of the "Muslim," each one of which deserves patient commentary, to move forward to the result of this process [démarche]: the Muslim (the way Agamben writes it) would be the name of both the horror consisting in having effectively, really produced non-man from man and also that of the concept by which one gains access to a perfectly circular thought—man and non-man is the same thing, destroyed and living is the same thing. "The human being is the inhuman; the one whose

²⁶ The English translation uses *Muslim* in italics and without scare-quotes; the French uses "musulman" in Roman and without quotes [Tr.].

humanity is completely destroyed is the one who is truly human" (176).²⁷ How could such a formulation—one that essentially says that man is all and its opposite, something and its negation—lead to a new ethics? And why should Muslim become the name of this totality or tautology?

But why should Jews, in the midst of the horror of extermination, have felt the need to borrow or lend themselves the name, the adjective, the nickname of "Muslim"? Does this not bear some fundamental ethical meaning regarding the relationship between self and other before the immanence of one's own destruction? What does borrowing the name of the other save? Giorgio Agamben does not ask these questions because they were resolved from the outset by an etymological explanation of the adoption of the name "Muslim." The Jews in the Lager supposedly used the term for those among them who let themselves drift without struggle toward extermination for *Muslim* in Arabic means "he who submits to God without restraint." A quick inquiry would have shown that this etymology, which privileges the sense of subjection, is partial, whereas the root, *slm*, means "the sound" [*le sau*], he who has traversed a danger, is saved and is thus in peace of salvation. This is altogether the opposite of the fate dealt to the camp "Muslim." This is the same root as the one that gave, in Hebrew, *shalom*. It is so close, very close. And it is rather in the region of this proximity that one should question why the Jews who were "damned" (as Levi called those who let themselves go to their demise [*perte*]) were called with the name of the other.

The author contemplates other explanations such as that of the *Encyclopædia Judaica* under whose *Muselmänn* entry we find the following: "Used mainly at Auschwitz, the term appears to derive from the typical attitude of certain deportees, that is, staying crouched on the ground, legs bent in 'Oriental' fashion, faces rigid as masks." Agamben himself finds such explanations unconvincing.

So we run through this etymological tour without any in depth argument attempting to elucidate the motif and the motivation for this label.

The reading hypothesis that I propose is simple. If one restores the noun "Jew" in all of Agamben's statements where it might have appears instead of the nickname "Muslim," the idea of man become non-man becomes unbearable for this idea would incarnate Nazi discourse. Jews in the Lager called that part of themselves that they perceived as apt to realize the Nazi imaginary annihilation of the Jew. And they did so in order to reject it yet without renouncing it entirely.

The signification of this act is as follows: I am not the Jew who has become refuse, the Jew on whom the SS program is in the process of being accomplished; or, rather, he is not entirely me, but the closest of the furthest away. This procedure that has something of *Abraham's* ferocity about it (obviously not an exclusively Jewish quality) both allows disidentification and the maintenance of a certain low-water mark [*étage*] of identification: there is something of the Muslim in the Jew in *extremis*; another ways of saying it that the Muslim is the Jew *en abyme*.

Empathy has been broken: there is no longer any empathy for the same. Total disavowal of all human community is not, for all that, the result: instead there is a sort of *dispathy* if we consider that the negation of *pathy* allows something like identification within disidentification or feeling within unfeeling to show through. *Dispathy*, in short, would signify the negation (*Verneinung*) of identification.

²⁷ The English translation has "inhuman" instead of "non-human"; the French has "non-homme" [Tt.].

"Muslim" is the nickname of that which can no longer be accepted in the human community of surviving Jews. He is not, for all that, banished from humanity but sent into the exile of an intermediate [*mitoyenne*] community. For if we recall that the Greek word *metonymia* means change of name, then Muslim is, strictly speaking, in a metonymic relationship to Jew in the language of Abraham.

The "Muslim" is thus not the non-man fabricated by the Nazi Lager, but the Jew forced by the executioner to part with the wounded part of himself and to mutilate himself in order to survive. In clinical psychoanalysis, Sandoz Ferenczi has described a mechanism of annihilation of the feeling of self in the child suffering deep trauma. Rather than collapse [*somber*], the child will prefer to throw off the most damaged part of himself and consider it foreign to his psychic reality.³⁸

Except that this rejection is not complete, in the case of the Jew in the Lager. He does not efface his own gesture and become amnesiac but, rather, entrusts the gesture to the guardianship of the name of the intermediate other. *The "Muslim" of the Shoah preserves the memory of the rejection of the Jew's survival with respect to himself.*

Of course, this operation supposes a prejudice on the part of European Jews considering the Muslim as despised [*méprisé*] other. But psychoanalysis is well aware of the importance of the imaginary function of this other (which Jacques Lacan indicated by the letter *a*) which is both inside and outside and which in certain circumstances partially assumes horror and abjection (object *a*). We can also restore its symbolic dimension by recalling the Moslem and Jewish dependency vis-à-vis Abraham, the father, meaning that no brother can pretend to possess the totality of the symbolic heritage of the Other. Since the development of monotheism Jews and Muslims have represented lack of being from the Other's point of view. It is not the same with Jews and Christians since they are in the same relationship of filiation with the son. This changes the economy of Abrahamic fraternal hatred in situating the devastation on the side where difference is least apt to symbolization. The appearance of the anti-Semite confirms this (and I am not speaking of latter-day and reactive anti-Semitism which is everywhere).

In the Lager, "Muslim" was an *imaginary* presentation of the Jews' lack of being which they conceded as the price for survival in face of the Nazis who wished, through destruction, to make this lack a horribly mastered *real*. Each time this lack is made objectively present in reality, i.e., denied the human being in its structurally symbolic value, there is an attempt at perverse capture.

If I were to translate this process into the language of the Odyssey, "Muslim" would be the equivalent of Ulysses' answer to the monster: "No one," i.e., an imaginary self proffered in order to survive.

We can now more readily circumscribe what makes Giorgio Agamben's expression subject to criticism. A *living*, thinking individual utilizes a *survivor's* defense mechanism as substance and truth of his being. I recall the declarative sentence containing his thesis: "Auschwitz is the site of an experiment that remains unthought today, an experiment beyond life and death in which the Jew is transformed into a Muslim and the human being into a non-human." This is the expression of a transubstantiation. In a strictly theological sense, Agamben's book may be read from cover to cover as a writing under the primacy of an operation that changes the Jew into a Muslim and the Muslim into a non-man, and the contrary. Need we remind ourselves that the transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ is not understood in Christianity as a metaphor? That this is not understood symbolically or

³⁸ Sandoz Ferenczi, ...

imaginarily, but as a jump from one reality to another? In eliminating the scare-quotes, the author eliminates, precisely, the imaginary index of this usage which all of the witnesses preserved. And the witnesses preserved this because they know that without this reservation it would be a hallucination or else a schizophrenic utilization in which the word understood in the literal sense dominates the relation to the thing.

The imaginary Muslim of the Jews in the Lager is therefore not a passage beyond the frontier of the human. This Muslim would rather correspond to something like a *rhetoric of survival*, an maneuver that nicknames for survival. It is not a matter of undoing the action, but the psychic act of the killer, the exterminator.

In commenting on Ulysses' response to Polyphemus (the term is so apt here), Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe notes that in Greek "No one" is expressed as *outis* or *oudeis*, Ulysses' name, in other words, barely deformed. It is a play on words, a pun, a *Witz* in the sense that Freud confers to the term, as an economic function of energy. Except that in the rhetoric of survival the joke acquires an aim beyond the pleasure principle governing laughter. Its *extent [portée]* is the disappearance and reappearance of the subject through language before the attempt by another to master his life. With respect to this goal the signification of the names is secondary. This is what Lacoue-Labarthe underscores when he recalls that Ulysses is "a name which itself is no more or less significant than mythical names are in general." For in the metonymic game (the ancient denomination of Greek metonymy) the stake is identity considered to be definitive in the sense that one's name is stuck to one definitively, sealing one's being and one's body without remainder. A *beingbodyname* is what the Nazis wanted to do with the Jews. The rhetoric of survival show that is cannot be done or, rather, that its *Witz* introduces the nothing between [*le rien entre*], the spacing between being, body, and name. Here we are tempted to take up what Nietzsche undoubtedly noticed when he said: "Actually I am all of the names of history."

In the sense of a rhetoric for survival, "*Muslim*" was thus a *Witz* made by the Jews of the Lager in response to the melancholy of their extermination—an extermination that is substantial or biological only to the extent that it aims to the Jewish name of the being man.