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## **Interpreting Oral and Written Holocaust Texts**

*Lawrence Langer*

After having spent twenty years reading and interpreting the implications of innumerable survivor memoirs, including exceptional literary achievements like Elie Wiesel's *Night* and Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*, to say nothing of dozens of plays, poems, and novels on this grim subject, one approaches the viewing of videotaped survivor testimonies with a certain perplexity and trepidation. The experienced reader and critic come equipped with tools of the profession, as it were, prepared to confront questions of style, continuity, character, authenticity, tragic vision, moral conflict, and spiritual growth. But what critical "tools" are available to the *viewer* of this unfamiliar form of "testimony," and how does viewing differ from the familiar challenge of reading a written text? Is there such a phenomenon as an oral "text," which invites us to do more than simply sit as passive audience to watch and listen,

shuddering at the unfolding horrors in the narrative without apparent structure and often without chronological sequence, dredged up from memory by a prodding interviewer and the witness's own voluntary determination to find a vocabulary for his or her ordeal? The vast majority of Holocaust survivors are not writers, even amateur ones, so the videotaped interview is the only chance they have to move from invisible silence to visible expression. But just as a written text is "meaningless" without responsible readers, so oral testimony gains validity from viewer response, from the search for a principle of organization concealed in the narrative that even the witness may not be conscious of. Looking at these videotaped testimonies, in other words--and I now have seen more than 150 of them--gradually imposes on one the need as well as the responsibility to become an active participant in the narrative process even though one was not present at the original interview. In the beginning, I was convinced that these testimonies represented spontaneous narratives, unmediated by devices analogous to but not identical with ones we find in self-conscious literary texts. Now I am not so sure, and I would like to offer some illustrations why.

Consider the testimony of Sidney L., born in 1927 in a small town in Poland. His first piece of information is that he was one of nine children--not an extraordinary detail, since many survivors begin with a recital of their family situation. But as the narrative of more than two hours proceeds, this seemingly innocuous fact turns out to be a key to its internal structure. The testimony is virtually uninterrupted by questions; it seems to be a simple recounting of how Sidney L. survived. And on its most obvious level, it is. But its counter flow, its alter ego, as it were, is the rehabilitation through memory of the family that has vanished.

This explains the first hour of the interview, a patient recital of Sidney L.'s family experience in pre-war days, including a description of his grandparents' house and the visits there. At first, one wonders why he alludes so often to the difference in age between himself and his three older sisters, his two older brothers, his younger siblings, including a "kid" sister. It is as if he needs to establish a separate identity for each one of them. The reason becomes clearer with the outbreak of war, which abruptly and violently and permanently alters the family's destiny. Two or three days after the Nazi invasion of Poland, still early in September 1939, his father sends him to buy some tobacco, and when he returns home about ten minutes later, he finds that a stray Nazi bomb has left a crater where his house once stood. He arrives in time to find some men digging out his mother's body. The bodies of three

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sisters and two brothers soon follow. His father and youngest sister are wounded, but survive. His married brother, not living at home, is safe; another brother is uninjured. And himself.

So by his count, five remain. Although other details intervene, the next episode he recalls vividly is returning home one day to see two Gestapo men leading his father and married brother (who lived nearby) into a courtyard, where they are put against a wall and shot. The rest of his narrative recounts his existence until “liberation,” but one main focus is on the fate of his younger sister, whose whereabouts he can trace until early 1943, when she is deported somewhere and disappears without a trace, never to be heard from again. He and his brother remain, and both pass through various labor camps, though the subterranean theme of his narrative is that part of himself vanishes with the death of each sibling, part of his sense of family, community, control over his future. For this reason, his brother plays an increasingly crucial role in his story. Though separated for long intervals, they are reunited in Bergen-Belsen in 1944, when they find themselves to be in adjacent compounds of the camp.

At this point, he tells us, he had a “vision” that they were both going to survive, an instinctive conviction that their reunion had a special meaning for the future. He enters into a kind of dialogue with himself, revealing the process whereby the imagination manufactures the idea of “fate” to protect itself from the ravages of random circumstance. He returns in desperation to what we might call the predictive spirit, that capacity in us which, notwithstanding the counter-momentum of experience, tries to impose a meaningful sequence on the details of one’s life. If it turns out so, if the reunion with his brother did indeed foretell survival for both of them, he will have retrospective proof of his intuition.

But it doesn’t turn out that way, and this provides him with the melancholy coda to his narrative. While he is in the infirmary at Bergen-Belsen, his brother is taken away to another labor camp: “I never saw him again.” In the closing moment of his narrative, Sidney L. tries to express how this disappointment undermined his sense of continuity in life: “There were certain things that I believed--” Here he gestures with his fist, as if in resistance to a contrary universe, though he knows that the gesture is futile. “--and it didn’t turn out to be. I was *positive* that I was going to live with my brother till the end of the war.” He even uses the word “predestined,” but only to expose how its value has been exhausted by his experience of the Holocaust. We are present at the birth of a point of view when the interviewer asks Sidney L.,

“Do you think it was your ability to hold onto that idea [that he and his brother were “predestined” to survive] that got you through to the end?”

The question invites simplified closure and reassuring conclusions, but the witness, drained by the implications of his own narrative, resists the temptation implicit in the question. “I don’t know,” he replies. “In all these things that happened--I played a very small part in everything that happened. There were very few things that I initiated, or planned out on this. This is how it happened: it took me from here and put me there ... it was not my plan; it was not my doing.” He defines his moral situation--or the moral paralysis of his situation--when he says: “I was never given a choice; I was never asked ‘Do you want to do such and such?’”

Thus his narrative emerges not as a story of survival, but of deprivation--deprivation of his personal will, and of the members of his family. What he calls the power of “It” whittles away at his family until no one is left but himself, and only at the end do we realize that all along, while he has ostensibly been telling us how he managed to survive (the interviewer’s question confirms our sense that this has been the substance of his story), the essence of his testimony has been the fate of those in his family who did not survive. His conviction that he and his brother at least were predestined to live is a last attempt to rescue from the ordeal of destruction some confidence in the experience of life; and when this fails, we as audience experience an existence defined not by its own survival, but by the death of others. It is a revelation filled with the vitality of its insight--and the gloom of its finality.

It is also a revelation, repeated again and again in these testimonies, of the crucial importance of continuous viewer complicity in the narrative process. A written narrative is finished when we begin to read it, its opening, middle, and end already established between the covers of a book. But oral testimony steers a less certain course, like a fragile craft veering through turbulent waters without knowing where the safe harbor lies--or whether it even exists.

My other illustrative testimony offers dramatic evidence of the difference between two forms of presentation, since the witness herself has written what she calls a historical novel about her experience of the Holocaust.

Barbara T. draws on her memory of that experience as well as on the book she has written about it. Since she uses both in her oral narrative, we have a chance to respond to each, and to observe the sharp disjunction between her oral testimony and the reading about her ordeal that she interjects into her account. Asked by the interviewer to describe her arrival at Auschwitz, she begins:

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*It was night, but it was light because there were powerful searchlights in the square. The air stank. Some people in the cars had died of thirst, of hunger, of madness. I felt a tremendous thirst. We had no water. And as the doors opened, I breathed in air as if it would be water, and I choked. It stank. And eventually we saw these strange looking creatures, striped pajamas, who got us into a marching line....*

Then an odd thing happens. The witness pauses, half mesmerized by her own narrative, as if returning from another place, and apologizes for her “absence”: “I’m sorry, OK, I . . . I . . . forgive me . . . all right . . . I’m going to . . . I kind of was back there.” Intensely aware of the exclusive *and* inclusive privacy of that moment, which she inhabits simultaneously alone and in the presence of a large potential audience (and the complicit viewer will be as aware as she of this complex interaction), she tries to resume her narrative, and succeeds--but only for a few moments: “Inmates whipped us out of the cattle cars, and they got us into rows of five.”

At this point the interviewer, recognizing the strain, asks “Do you want to talk about that?” and Barbara T. replies: “Yes. I think so. I would like to read it. It’s easier.” She then reaches for her book, opens it to the appropriate page, and begins to read on camera:

*We are dragged out of cattle cars, vomited into an impenetrable black night. Suddenly torches brighten up a black sky and I clearly see the night; it engulfs a square drenched in searing brilliance by powerful floodlights.*

She hesitates an instant, skips a paragraph, and resumes:

*Then screams knife the air and I cover my ears with my hands. Torches keep licking the sky like rainbows, and I quickly close my eyes but I still see the flames through my closed lids and the screams slash through my hands, into my ears, then a horrible stench hits my nostrils, I gasp for air but I choke. I am terrified. I don’t know what to do.*

Certainly the written passage is effective. But it is also transparently literary, alien to the verbal rhythms of the oral narrative. Of the dozens of testimonies I have viewed about arrival at Auschwitz, not one has mentioned being “vomited into an impenetrable black night.” If we compare this self-conscious striving for stylistic impact with Barbara T.’s spoken testimony—“Inmates whipped us out of the cattle cars”—we cannot (or at least *I* cannot) escape the uncomfortable feeling that the book’s idiom is intrusive on and distracting from the more spontaneous flow of the oral narrative. One gets the impression that the witness herself senses the disparity of tones, since she quietly puts the book down and never picks it up again.

Literature prods the imagination in a way that speech does not, striving for analogies to initiate the reader into the particularities of its world. Holocaust literature faces a special challenge, since it must give most readers access to a totally unfamiliar world. When flashlights and searchlights at Auschwitz lick the sky like “flaming rainbows,” the reader is invited to use the simile as a ticket of entry to the bizarre landscape of a death camp. The singular inappropriateness of this image of natural beauty, good luck, and happiness to illuminate arriving at Auschwitz underlines the difficulty of finding an imaginative vocabulary for such an incomparable atrocity. Indeed, this fortuitous juxtaposition of literary and oral versions of the same moment of survivor experience raises some vital questions about interpreting survivor testimony that until now few commentators have sought to confront.

When the witness in an oral testimony leans forward toward the camera, apparently addressing the interviewer(s), but also speaking to the potential audience of the future (and this happens frequently in the tapes), asking: “Do you understand what I’m trying to tell you?”--that witness confirms the vast imaginative space separating his or her ordeal from our capacity to comprehend it. Written memoirs, by the very strategies available to the author--style, analogy, chronology, imagery, dialogue, a coherently organized and developed moral vision--strive to narrow this space, easing us into their unfamiliar world through recognizable literary devices. The impulse to portray reality when we write about it seems irresistible. Describing the SS man who greeted her mother and her on the ramp at Auschwitz, Barbara T. writes: “His pale blue eyes dart from side to side like a metronome,” and once again one has the uncomfortable feeling of the literary transforming the real in a way that obscures even as it discloses. Yet until now we have depended almost entirely on written accounts of the death camp experience to gain insight into the nature of atrocity.

For the moment, I will argue no more than that videotaped testimonies provide the student of the Holocaust with an unexplored archive of “texts” that solicit from us original forms of interpretation. Reading a book that tries to carry us “back there” is an order of experience entirely different from witnessing someone like Barbara T. vanishing from contact with us even as she speaks, momentarily returning to the world she is trying to evoke instead of recreating it for us in the present. Her presence before us dramatically illustrates a merging of the time senses (so often revealed by witnesses in oral testimonies) that is virtually impossible to capture in the pages of a book. Yet this is one of the seminal responses of survivors to the Holocaust ordeal. A

different kind of “continuity” seems to establish itself in many of these testimonies, one alien to the chronological sequence that governs most written memoirs.

Much work remains to be done in the new field of interpreting oral testimonies. Just as generations of commentators have investigated how readers “read” a written text, so we must begin to ask how viewers “view” a videotaped testimony. To be sure, not all testimonies are equally valuable for the student of the Holocaust, any more than are all novels, memoirs, or historical studies. Nevertheless, the patient viewer encounters enough unprecedented challenges to imaginative participation in the ordeal of memory before one’s eyes on these tapes to convince me that they now form an indispensable untapped creative source for our understanding of the Holocaust experience.

## **Beyond Judgment**

*Primo Levi*

*translated by Raymond Rosenthal*

*Primo Levi helps us understand some of the difficulties involved in making the leap from the world of “normalcy” into the “other world” of the Holocaust. In pointing out the complexities of entering the abnormal world of concentration camps, Levi addresses the questions most frequently posed by students and teachers studying the Third Reich: Why didn’t the victims escape? Why didn’t they rebel? Why didn’t they avoid capture beforehand?*

Those who experienced imprisonment (and, more generally, all who have gone through harsh experiences) are divided into two distinct categories, with rare intermediate shadings: those who remain silent and those who speak. Both have valid reasons: those who remain silent who feel more deeply that sense of malaise which I for simplicity’s sake call “shame,” those who did not feel at peace with themselves, or whose wounds still burn. The others speak, and often speak a lot, obeying different impulses. They speak because, at varied levels of consciousness, they perceive in their (even though by now distant) imprisonment the center of their life, the event that for good or evil has marked their entire existence. They speak because they know they are witnesses in a trial of planetary and epochal dimensions. They speak because (as a Yiddish saying goes) “troubles overcome are good to tell.” Francesca

This is oral and written speech. They diverged in their historical development, so. From the produced spontaneous oral speech followsto distinguish between the simple scoring of a written text, carried out by announcers, artists, and sometimes by speakers. Such scoring does not change anything in the text, and although it sounds, it remains the same as it was written. At the same time, the characteristic of written speech is preserved, all its properties. From the oral point, only the intonation contour and possible phonetic expressiveness appear in it. That is, the acoustic properties of speech sounds vary. It is interesting to observe EA Bryzgunova, who compared actor'