

AUSCHWITZ

Poetry of Alienation

Eli Mandel

THIS ACCOUNT OF THE WRITING OF A POEM, “On the 25th Anniversary of the Liberation of Auschwitz: Memorial Services, Toronto, January 25, 1970,” is occasioned as randomly and as obsessively as the poem itself. This is January 1984, almost 14 years after the event. There is no obvious reason to return to it, except a continuing unease, a sense of unpaid debts, unexplained reasons, an uneasy self.

Exorcism and liberation. To free oneself of a nightmare. Of history. There is a literature for this — alienation, a writing of what the world rejects, what cannot be tolerated, what is despised, spit out. Not very long ago Julia Kristeva wrote an essay that touches on this writing, on abjection, *Powers of Horror*. About “something to be scared of,” filth, defilement, abomination. An account of the unclean, a linguistics of repression. The language (not-language) of the unsayable, outer-utterances, obscene, unseeable: Dostoevsky, Joyce, Artaud, Céline, Borges. Why would one want to write it? This is an account of such an unsayable poem, a series of inevitable evasions.

August 1946. I had returned to Saskatchewan from Europe, the war. Europe lay in ruins. But that was history. I had come home to study and to write. I would go to university to sort out my sense of things. The question of how and indeed whether to write of the recent past in any significant way lay heavily on me as it had to lie on anyone who felt that here was a subject of dimensions that troubled the soul and yet lay untouchable in front of oneself. On the one hand, it was finally remote from one’s experience, the real root of it. On the other, worse, to touch it was in some way defilement, to be involved in the ruin of humanism, in the very barbarism that George Steiner writes of so lucidly.

I had come home. Like many young men I was deeply troubled and almost completely unaware of the source of the trouble or nature of it. Something in Europe had sickened me. And yet it wasn’t the war itself, of which I had seen something. That seemed detached, remote. Part of a distant history. Those awful *photographs* towards the end of the war as the liberation occurred during the spring of 1945 and the evidence of the camps began to manifest itself before the

eyes of the astonished and horrified world. Corpses. We had supped on horrors enough earlier. I had seen bombings in London and Antwerp, had watched fleets of bombers, flying fortresses, sweeping across the sky to remote targets in the East, had heard with astonishment the sound of rockets arriving *after* they had exploded. Commonplaces. I had read newspapers in the grand square of Brussels of the world entering a new era, had seen the photographs of the corpses. Remote.

I had come home. Before me there were the usual tasks of one who returns. Among other things, I was expected to visit an uncle and aunt in Estevan, the town where I had been born and brought up, to tell them of my last moments with their son in London, England, three weeks before his death in Europe, in Normandy. I was the last of the family to see him alive. On the way to Estevan, I stopped at his sister's home in Weyburn. There, on an oppressively hot summer day, alone in the house, moody, depressed, I picked up a book, idly glancing at its introduction. It was Thomas Mann's "Introduction" to *The Short Novels of Dostoevsky*. The words leaped at me from the page. Mann is defending Nietzsche's position in *The Birth of Tragedy*:

The truth is that life has never been able to do without the morbid, and probably no adage is more inane than the one which says, that 'only disease comes from the diseased.' Life is not prudish and it is probably safe to say that life prefers creative genius-bestowing disease a thousand times over to prosaic health . . . certain attainments of the soul and intellect are impossible without disease, without insanity, without spiritual crime. . . .

The reversal — sanity-health/insanity-poetry, illness-poetry/health-prose — struck me as stunning. My own malaise had become a sign. It marked me as one ruined by the war, no longer seeking prosaic health but rather certain attainments of the soul and intellect. A wildly romantic position, no doubt. But in those days I was reading Kafka, Dostoevsky, Mann and, above all, Joyce of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. I loved Stephen Dedalus and could recite whole passages of the book, about the fabulous artificer, the hawk-like flying man, the "soaring impalpable imperishable being" forged anew by the artist in his workshop. This was the time when Nietzsche and new critical theories of the *reality* of art, "its mode of existence as a work," together formed a basis of what I thought made a poetics, contradicting and confused though it was. At any rate, it was a position that enabled my identification with the forces of history themselves. That night, at Weyburn, I wrote what I knew to be my first poem. It was ten years later before I fully understood the implications of that moment, and almost a further ten years before I could possibly begin to undertake the task of attempting an account of where I believed the real obscenity stood.

Part of the problem to begin with lay in the very poetics that made possible the kind of paradoxical inversions with which I first began. They (the inversions)

rested very much in the notion of their reality, their “mode of existence.” And the troubling unwritten poem remained in its character the opposite of “being,” a kind of “non-being” or negativity. The poem I write of, “On the 25th Anniversary of the Liberation of Auschwitz,” is itself an example. As its title makes abundantly clear, it was written sometime after January 25, 1970 (within two weeks, I would guess), and though it has been widely reprinted and anthologized since, I don’t think I have *read* it to audiences at public occasions more than six or seven times. It demands “certain attitudes, a certain ritualistic setting — a certain *detachment* or ceremonious remoteness” — to make its statement. That notion is not at all by the way, as I’ll try to show later. In addressing the question in art, in poetry, of the Holocaust, we are not, to begin with, addressing questions like any others. It is set apart from any experience we can discuss. It exists on its own grounds of being — or rather of non-being. “Since the Holocaust, we’re convinced the universe is not the same,” says David Weiss Halivni, an adjunct professor of religion at Columbia University. “There is a blemish on creation and that blemish may lie dormant, but who knows when it will erupt and devour us.”¹ There is an old Jewish tradition that to speak of evil may evoke it, so great is the power of language. So we approach the question of great evil in fear and trembling and with great awe, that we may propitiate the spirits and not wake them. Writers on the Holocaust use such imagery — of a crack in creation, a flaw, a blemish. It has been said it happened because God turned his back on man for one moment. And always the threat extends to language itself, as if language is implicated in some way, as if to speak of defilement is to be defiled, while to glamorize it — as art always threatens to do — is to trivialize it and let its sinister power emerge. The event, it seemed to me, put enormous strains on language so that poetry of the Holocaust would have to be in a “special language,” a new form unheard of.

THIS SENSE THAT THE HOLOCAUST touches on the very nature of writing itself, that it raises difficulties and troubles for the writer himself, has metaphysical, religious, and political dimensions. So we were told by theoreticians and survivors alike, George Steiner and Elie Wiesel, for example. By 1967 I had read Steiner’s eloquent and piercing essays, *Language and Silence*, which provided the first conceptual account of the dilemma the Holocaust presented to the writer: “We come after,” said Steiner, “We know that a man can read Goethe and Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach or Schubert, and go to his day’s work at Auschwitz in the morning.” He drew the extraordinary conclusions: “The blackness of it did not spring up in the Gobi desert or the rain forests of the Amazon. It rose from within, and from the core of European civilization.

The cry of the murdered sounded in the earshot of the universities. . . ." Ideological murders. A commonplace now, but to grasp it then seemed beyond comprehension. Under the stress of implication (Adorno's "No poetry after Auschwitz") language cracked. By the 1970's Susan Sontag was telling us of "fascinating fascism," film and poetry toyed with an awful camp kitsch. I remembered Leonard Cohen's equating of comic book mythology and Nazism. Elie Wiesel scorned the TV series "Holocaust" for trivializing horror.

A further more intense dilemma presents itself to the writer: the survivor. Like the camp itself the survivor is set apart from life as we know it or can write of it. There are two temptations for the survivor himself, silence and speech. Silence, because what must be told is beyond the telling. Any account of the unrealizable is, in some deep sense, a failure, a trivialization. How is it possible to convey what is impossible to convey? But to witness too is a temptation, full of paradox. Wiesel puts it this way:

I have written 25 books and every one has been a failure. The feeling is always of inadequacy. I feel it at the beginning of a book, and at the end I'm confirmed. And yet I really believe I have to write. There's a certain compulsion. I owe it to the living. I find words by accident. Therefore, this accident must have meaning.

For a long while after I first encountered Wiesel's work I disliked it intensely. He made a subject impossible, but necessary, morally urgent for me. "A survivor's testimony" he said in one of those utterly, infuriatingly moral remarks that had the force of inescapable logic, "is more important than anything that could be written about survivors." I felt a furious bafflement, the need to write, the impossibility of writing. If writing about the Holocaust was virtually impossible for him, what could it be for me, for whom the experience existed not literally but historically? For me, the camps were part of history. Pictures. Those awful photographs. The obscene evidence emerging from mass graves as World War II ended.

"To suffer and then to suffer for not having suffered." Wiesel is talking of survivors. But something stirred. Not reality but *derealization* might now be the necessary subject or mode itself of poetry. By 1970 I had begun to think of the technical problems involved in working out the poetics. Once someone had spoken to me of Europe as the place of the dead, what I later would speak of in *Life Sentence* as "The Plague Cemetery." How to touch death as death and to know it for what it was so that it would identify me, this became the problem. It was, I realized, a technical problem in poetry because it meant — in contemporary terms — the unwriting of what I had been writing for twenty years. It meant then, a process of personal and formal dissolution. the breaking apart of personal, psychological *structures*, and moral categories, the imperatives of tradition. The place of death, Europe and the Jews, I had identified as tradition, fathers, all that named me, connected me with the past, the prophetic, Hebraic, Judaic sense —

in its alien and tragic sense not in its ethical and legalistic aspects. If the camps recorded death, it was that death I had to record, an attempt too horrible to contemplate. But the possibility of re-enacting that death began at the same time to occupy me. Its substitutions, the graves of the war dead, in Europe, for example, the place of the Jewish dead on the prairies, a father's grave.

I won't talk about the silence or the nerve needed to wait, not suffering. On January 25, 1970, there came a phone call from an Auschwitz survivor asking me to take part in the Auschwitz memorial service by reading the poem on Babi Yar by the Russian poet Yevtushenko. I went to the YMHA on Bloor and Spadina. A winter day, snow melting. As I entered the hall, past a mock entrance to the gates of Auschwitz with its infamous sign "Arbeit Macht Frei," survivors in camp uniforms, a wax mannikin prisoner, directing us to our places, I had the uncanny sense that it was my own past I was entering. The disorientation, through the ceremony of pictures/slides, speeches (Sigmund Sobolewski, mayors, survivors) was virtually unbearable. Through the long afternoon the poems, reminiscences, remarks continued, the eerie electronic music of Penderick's *Dies Irae* providing a sinister counter point. I had become fragmented, broken into many pieces — now and then, here and there. Toronto, 1970; Europe, 1944; Estevan, 1930. And the photographs. Family albums.

I cannot recall to the day when it occurred to me I had been given a solution to a technical problem. There was a way to write the poem to be thought of as "Auschwitz." It would be a series of displacements: structurally, grammatically, imagistically, psychologically. *It would be a camp poem by not being a camp poem.* Stuttering. All theatricality. All frantic posturing. All pointed to a resolution that would not be a resolution, a total ambiguity in which two different moments (Toronto, 1970 and Estevan, 1930) dissolved into one another seamlessly, becoming at that instant another time, the unimaginable place of the killing ground itself.

This wasn't planned out. It exists only in its process. One Sunday afternoon at our apartment on Eglinton Avenue west I sat down at my desk and rapidly with few pauses began to type. When I finished, though there were revisions necessary, I knew (I heard in the poem) a new possibility in poetry lay before me. It would be a year or two before a new book with all these possibilities in it would appear. The poem itself appeared before that in *Canadian Forum*. The book I completed on the Costa del Sol in Spain in winter, 1972. In 1983, in winter, with my wife and daughter I walked from a train at the station to a memorial of the concentration camps at Dachau, Bavaria, West German Republic, past the entrance gates. An infamous sign there says in Gothic lettering, *Arbeit Macht Frei*. In the frozen fields of snow, a few dark figures moved. An icy cold wind blew over desolate ground. One day, I thought, I will be writing about this moment.

NOTES

- ¹ The quotation and those of Elie Wiesel are from "Bearing Witness: The Life and Work of Elie Wiesel," *The New York Times Magazine*, October 23, 1983. "On the 25th Anniversary of the Liberation of Auschwitz: Memorial Services, Toronto, January 25, 1970, YMHA Bloor and Spadina" first appeared in *Canadian Forum*, in revised form in *Stony Plain* (Erin: Press Porcépic, 1972), in *Dreaming Backwards: Selected Poems, 1953-81* (Toronto: General, 1981), as well in J. L. Granatstein and Peter Stevens, eds., *Forum: Canadian Life and Letters from 1920-70: selections from 'The Canadian Forum'* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1972); Robert Weaver and William Toye (eds.), *The Oxford Anthology of Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Oxford, 1981); Gary Geddes and Phyllis Bruce, eds., *Fifteen Canadian Poets Plus 5* (Toronto: Oxford, 1978), a revised edition of *15 Canadian Poets* (1970); and Gerri Sinclair and Morris Wolfe, eds., *The Spice Box* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1981).

