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Literary Mediation, Responsibility, and Ethical Understanding of the Afflicted

Other

Proximity as the Relational Mode

In *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, Emmanuel Lévinas writes:

The other as other, as a neighbor, is in his presence never equal to his proximity. Is not his presence for me already supported in proximity, and never supported patiently enough? Between the one I am and the other for whom I am responsible there gaps open a difference, without a basis in community. The unity of the human race is in fact posterior to fraternity. Proximity is a difference, a non-coinciding, an arrhythmia in time, a diachrony refractory to thematization, refractory to the reminiscence that synchronizes the phases of a past. The unnarratable other loses his face as a neighbor in narration. The relationship with him is indescribable in the literal sense of the term, unconvertible into a history, irreducible to the simultaneousness of writing, the eternal present of a writing that records or presents results.¹

The force of this metaphysical ethics does not lie primarily in its answering an ontological question as to how the world is constituted, but rather in its being an ethical or existential perspective showing what a responsible thought of the other person reasonably requires of me as a moral subject. By inviting me to see that proximity to

¹ EMMANUEL LÉVINAS, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, translated by Alphonso Lingis, Dordrecht 1991, p. 166.

others is the relational mode I move within, and thereby raising a question of my continuously having to respond to others in my life, understanding how I do it, and understanding what I become through the ways in which I do it, Lévinas' ideas will be taken in this study to respond to a personal ethical concern rather than to an ontological one.² As a perspective on responsibility, Lévinas' metaphysics will be the springboard of my investigation, in which I try to articulate what a responsible (and what an irresponsible) thinking and reading of Primo Levi's memoir of survival in Auschwitz *If This is a Man* involves in relation to two aesthetic responses to it.³

Before introducing the objectives of my study, Levi's memoir as well as the two aesthetic responses to it, it is necessary to spell out more closely Lévinas' ideas of responsibility for other persons. It is important to do this both in the sense of understanding what can be valued in Lévinas' metaphysics and in the sense of understanding the direction from which his critique of aesthetics and mediation is invoked. His thought on proximity and otherness could be explained as following:

(1) Lévinas argues that presence – the other person being face-to-face with me, or appearing “for me” – is not equal to what proximity with the other person who is my neighbor means. The other person's being face-to-face with me is, according to Lévinas, “already supported in proximity”.⁴ Thus, the meaning of proximity cannot be constituted

² Although there may be an ontological question at stake in Lévinas' metaphysics, I will not take a stance on an ontological concern. For an illuminating discussion on these issues see BENNETT GILBERT, On Breaking Up Time, or, Perennialism as Philosophy of History *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 12:1 (2018), pp. 11–15.

³ PRIMO LEVI, *If This is a Man*, in *The Complete Works of Primo Levi: Volume 1*, edited by Ann Goldstein, translated by Stuart Wolff, New York 2015.

⁴ LÉVINAS, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 166.

in, or be reduced to, my face-to-face relationship with her. Although having logical primacy as to the way we are with each other, face-to-face is but one way of how the other appears, and thus proximity cannot be exclusively entangled in face-to-face appearances.

(2) Furthermore, according to Lévinas, the meaning of proximity – my relation with “the other for whom I am responsible” – requires no further justification by, for instance, a fraternal community, because relationships between persons are already a presupposition for a fraternal community to make sense. Thus, in a manner similar to Immanuel Kant’s *Groundwork of The Metaphysics of Morals*, the perspective Lévinas forwards is a metaphysics to the extent that he explicates no particular relation between me and you, but a general relational mode against which our particular relations, despite their great varieties and singularities, will be ethically understood and judged.⁵ For example, if I meet a stranger in the street, there is a certain kind of relationship between me and her; she is a stranger to me, and I perhaps to her. But before that, our relationship already meant something in terms of what it generally means for two humans to be with each other, where we are each other’s neighbors or fellow beings, and in that sense find ourselves in a togetherness where it is possible for us to be strangers to each other. None of us entered the others life from nowhere.⁶ We were other to each other, two different human beings, before we met and had a relationship as strangers. Thus, although the relation I have with her may be a very particular relationship between us, we also

⁵ IMMANUEL KANT, *Groundwork of The Metaphysics of Morals*, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy*, edited by Mary J. Gregor, Cambridge 1999, pp. 86–91.

⁶ MATTHIAS FRITSCH, *Taking Turns With the Earth: Phenomenology, Deconstruction, and Intergenerational Justice*, Stanford 2018, pp. 65–66.

understand that an I-You relationship is not one that only the two of us can have, despite the fact that no one other can have the particular relationship that we have. In other words, Lévinas' meaning of proximity – being for the other regardless who that other is – marks a metaphysical ethics in line with Kant's, as he circumscribes a mode against which we will understand and judge the meaning of human action.⁷

(3) Lévinas argues that “the unnarratable other loses his face as a neighbor in narration”.⁸ This can, on the one hand, be taken in line with Jacques Derrida's thought that the disappearance of the face of the neighbor is an unconditional consequence of writing in general.⁹ But on the other hand, Lévinas' is concerned with responsibility. It means that a responsible thinking of the other person is not our feeling comfortable by concluding that she has unconditionally lost face in narration, but rather that this tendency of breaking proximity with her exists as a consequence of narration, and furthermore that it is our responsibility as readers not to convert the other person's face into appearances or narrative images.¹⁰

⁷ LÉVINAS, *Otherwise than Being*, pp. 9–15. Cf. KANT, *Groundwork of The Metaphysics of Morals*, pp. 43–44.

⁸ LÉVINAS, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 166.

⁹ Cf. JACQUES DERRIDA, *Signature, Event, Context*, in *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass, Chicago 1982, pp. 316–317.

¹⁰ Letting the other speak to me, and speaking for her, steadily involves this ethical demand. It is sometimes a demand that may feel unbearable for us. GERT-JAN VAN DER HEIDEN, *The Voice of the Past in the Present: On Dialogue and Testimony*, *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 8:3 (2014), pp. 440–444. Cf. JONAS AHLKOG, *The Crisis of Testimony in Historiography*, *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 12:1 (2018), pp. 67–68.

In this study, I concur with Lévinas' articulation of a metaphysical responsibility for the other person as a general relational mode. But this means that I must also raise important hermeneutic concerns that necessitate an answer before one can go on. Is there not a remarkable difference between talking face-to-face with another person, and reading, say, a text of or about her?¹¹ Is it necessary to ground interpretation of texts, or proximity with other people, in notions of a metaphysical responsibility? An answer to the first question is that there obviously are many differences between face-to-face relations and texts. I can look in the eye the person I stand in front of, I cannot ignore her in the sense I can put away a book I am tired of. The book, by contrast, cannot answer back when I ask it a question, cannot be angry or humiliated. The book is at best a trace or appearance of the expressive other person, or a manifestation of her having once lived; the only thing we have left of her being there and alive.¹² An answer to the second question is, of course, that nothing necessitates a metaphysical ethics. That answer, however, does not necessarily deny that a perspective of metaphysical responsibility sheds light on aspects of responsibility one would otherwise perhaps not recognize or see.

To be clear, then, Lévinas does not mean that there are no differences in our particular interpersonal relations regarding in what ways we relate to what other people express, say, or write. Still, he argues that there is a sense of my thinking of (or being

¹¹ HANS-GEORG GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. London 2006, p. 153; DERRIDA, *Signature, Event, Context*, p. 316.

¹² For an important explication of the phenomenological categories of “trace” and “telling” see JONAS AHLSSKOG, *The Evidential Paradigm in Modern History*, *Storia Della Storiografia* 71:1 (2017), p. 117.

with) the other person that is not changed by how the other person happens to appear to me or how the relationship happens to be manifested. Therefore, he says:

The obligation aroused by the proximity of the neighbor is not to the measure of the images he gives me; it concerns me before or otherwise. Such is the sense of the non-phenomenality of the face.¹³

Intuitively, this claim that responsibility for the other person is not primarily entangled in how she appears for me – for example in the image or representation she gives me or I give of her – counters many of our customary hermeneutic, literary critic, and poststructuralist ideas on mediation. For in these, the medium determines how a textual or narrative account must be taken.¹⁴ But if responsibility concerns both thought and practical action, we may think otherwise of what it would mean to responsibly attend to the words of the other person. We can do this by circumscribing a perspective in which I am bound by the other person in a way that cannot be undone by the medium, even if the medium sometimes appears to disrupt, change, or affectively empower our relationship. This realization of how I stand with the other person, in danger of falling for various mediational temptations through what is written of or by her, is what ethical understanding demands of me.

¹³ LÉVINAS, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 89.

¹⁴ See for example ROLAND BARTHES, *The Reality Effect*, in *The Rustle of Language*, translated by Richard Howard, Berkeley 1989, pp. 146–148; HAYDEN WHITE, *Literary Theory and Historical Writing*, in *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect*, Baltimore 2000, p. 8–9. See also GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, p. 153; DERRIDA, *Signature, Event, Context*, pp. 316–317.

In this essay, I will inquire into the tendency or temptation to aestheticize what the survivor, the afflicted other person, tells that she has lived through, which is brought about by some of our customary aesthetic ideas on mediation. I show in what ways aesthetics tends to break proximity, and what this breaking entails. Thus, although occasionally touched upon, the investigation will not do completely justice to the mediational philosophies that regard the aesthetic form as a possibility to disclose our responsibility for the other person; and the argument I propose is not in principle in opposition to those philosophies.¹⁵ Under scrutiny is rather the aestheticizing temptation invoked by literary critic reflections on survival accounts, and in particular Primo Levi's memoir of survival in Auschwitz *If This is a Man*. The discussion on responsibility for the other person will be carried out in relation to two predominant aesthetic responses to this memoir. The first response I analyze is Slavoj Žižek's idea that experiences of suffering and evil in general constitute a mediational predicament,¹⁶ which has certain consequences for how one should understand and evaluate any account concerning similar dreadful experiences. The second response under scrutiny is Hayden White's idea that Levi's memoir is to be understood and evaluated according to how the

¹⁵ JACQUES DERRIDA, Poetics and Politics of Witnessing, in *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, edited by Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen, New York 2005, p. 70; GERT-JAN VAN DER HEIDEN, *The Voice of Misery: A Continental Philosophy of Testimony*, New York 2019, pp. 257–261; GEORGES DIDI-HUBERMAN, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, translated by Shane B. Lillis, Chicago 2012, pp. 80–84.

¹⁶ SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK, «Description Without a Place»: On Holocaust and Art, *Diaphanes* 1 (2009), pp. 141–143.

narrative is constructed.¹⁷ I argue that in both cases, responsibility and ethical understanding of the survivor are essentially understood as aesthetic judgements entangled in the images (representations) that the narrative account is supposed to provide the reader with. Thus, Žižek's and White's responses stand in sharp contrast to Lévinas' perspective of proximity as an ethical mode in which appearances, images, and representations, have no primary hold for my being with "the other for whom I am responsible".¹⁸

The Predicament of Mediating Affliction

Engaging in an analysis of Žižek's and White's ideas, it is important to emphasize that the critique I forward in this study is not directed toward the ethical potentiality of aesthetics in general, but is rather an evaluation of the ethical implications of two particular, yet rather customary, aesthetic ideas. I wish not to say that, for instance, artworks or novels cannot shed light on problems, or even teach us matters, connected to our practical lives; or that an experience cannot be shown by the means of an artistic expression. I wish also not to say that aesthetics, traditionally concerned with beauty, has nothing at all to do with the good. I will rather show that there are certain ethically problematic, even irresponsible, implications of the aesthetic ideas that Žižek and White exemplify – an irresponsibility that connects to the unease of how Levi's lived experiences in *If This is a Man* should be taken.

¹⁷ HAYDEN WHITE, Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality, *Rethinking History* 9:2-3 (2005), pp. 148–150.

¹⁸ LÉVINAS, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 166.

What is this experience of unease I speak of? It could be put as an experience of restlessness when confronting descriptions of suffering, death, and evil; or perhaps anything that feels at a certain distance. If I hear of the war in Syria on TV, or if I read of the earthquake in Portugal 1755, it is sometimes difficult to think with Lévinas that the person (or persons) who lived through these difficult experiences is my fellow, is there, and is another I stand by and respond to.¹⁹ It is difficult to think that proximity with her demands something of me. This could raise the following thoughts for me: Is it at all meaningful to think that I have responsibility for the absent other if she is somewhere else, perhaps dead, not here? How real are these experiences?²⁰ Are they manipulated for some reason? Regardless of how real they are, is it not impossible to describe, understand, or relate to them because of their extraordinary nature? For what reason are the experiences described at all?²¹ And while I think all these thoughts, an uneasy feeling jars upon me, namely that I do the other person an injustice by thinking these thoughts about her. Am I not hereby unthinking her as a real person I respond to, unprepared to see that I actually have a relationship with her, and must find a way to answer for her?

This thinking of the other can be difficult. When I am face-to-face with another person, it does not strike me to think that the other person may or may not be there, alive, with all that this means; it is rather a presupposition for my being and talking with her that she is another than I am who speaks to me. But when I hear or read something,

¹⁹ SUSAN SONTAG, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York 2004, pp. 57–58.

²⁰ SUSAN BRISON, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*, Princeton 2002, p. 59.

²¹ Cf. LUC BOLTANSKI, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media, and Politics*, translated by Graham Burchell, Cambridge 2004, pp. 159, 177.

this thinking of the other is much more fragile. If I hear of the war in Syria, it is as if my question of doubt of what is told, also challenges the reality of the other persons I stand in relation to. My relationship with the people involved, living and passed away, suddenly becomes as uncertain as the matters reported or told. How did I come to a point where I doubt my relationship to her as other than me? Is not the very thought of the reality of the other person living, or having lived, or having lived through an experience, imperative to an ethical understanding of anything she says?

This experience is more than my personal distress. It is a customary way of being at a distance. Not seeing, even willfully erasing, the other from the visual field. Being at a distance from certain horrifying events, and from others, or from oneself.²² Being comfortably at a distance; satisfied with how human action is or is not compatible with certain criteria of intelligibility, where one can easily say that one does not understand what the other says, or has gone through. An intellectual playground, a logical game, where little or no ethical engagement is at stake, no thinking that one can do injustice to the other person in thought by doubting her. Not recognizing how the way I am with others, or how I think about them, will change me.

The reason I highlight this existential distress is to show that philosophical and aesthetic responses can be understood as an attitude to other persons. In line with Martin Buber, one could say that the I who is, say, doubtful of what is shown on TV regarding the war in Syria, is not the same I as the one who stands in relation to another person as

²² SIMONE WEIL, Human Personality, in Selected Essays 1934-1943: Historical, Political, and Moral Writings, translated by Richard Rees, Oregon 1962, p. 28; .BRISON, Aftermath, p. 50–53; SONTAG, Regarding the Pain of Others, p. 8.

a Thou.²³ This is to say, I am different depending on how I am with you. If I raise doubt of the pictures and stories of the war in Syria by claiming to engage in media critique and thereby search for ideological or rhetorical features in what is shown, I can likewise be said to take a critical distance from the other person living through affliction or misery by way of my analytic attitude. This, however, is a disruption of our relationship that I myself have caused, and it shows that I do not care for seeing you in the misery you express, but rather that I see your misery as a thing subject to ideological or rhetorical analysis. Thus, how I am with you affects who I am. To understand this existential mode is to understand in what direction our aesthetic and philosophical responses to Levi's memoir *If This is a Man* lead us, when we read and try to understand what he tells us.

In the aesthetic and philosophical literature, the existential unease I described as my own experience – being distressed by descriptions of suffering and evil, taking distance from other people – is often tied to two intertwined elements. (1) The extraordinary nature of experiences of suffering and evil, and (2) the role of mediation with regard to these extraordinary experiences. These two elements together are usually constitutive of what one could call a *mediational predicament* which has the following logic. There are experiences that are so dreadful and incomprehensible that there is a difficulty of putting words to them, of describing, representing, or even thinking of them in meaningful human terms.²⁴ The experiences seem to be resisted by our “ordinary

²³ MARTIN BUBER, *I and Thou*, translated by Ronald G. Smith, Edinburgh 1937, pp. 62–63. See also AHLKOG, *The Evidential Paradigm in Modern History*, pp. 117–119.

²⁴ BRISON, *Aftermath*, pp. 51–52. See also IRIS MURDOCH, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, London 2003, p. 499.

modes of thinking”.²⁵ Thus, as Susan Sontag remarks with regard to our beholding pictures of suffering people, “The rest of us are voyeurs, whether or not we mean to be.”²⁶ In confronting pictures of afflicted people, we tend to be blocked in a manner that is not primarily intellectual.²⁷ And this is in itself an existential difficulty, a difficulty of being with the afflicted other person.²⁸

It would be wrong, however, to argue that the mediational predicament is univocal, for the predicament can be taken in at least two different ways. On the one hand, the mediational predicament can be understood as an *experience*, that is, as another person’s or my own feeling that words and thought come to an end, where I, as a moral subject, have to reconsider how I respond to the other person in my relationship with her.²⁹ On the other hand, however, the mediational predicament can be taken as a *condition* of language or thought as such; i.e., because language and thought come to an end, it justifies our thinking that this disruption is the inherent status of language and thought in general.³⁰

There are important differences depending on whether one takes the mediational predicament as either an existentially difficult experience or as a condition of language

²⁵ CORA DIAMOND, *The Difficulty of Reality and The Difficulty of Philosophy*, *Partial Answers* 1:2 (2003), p. 12.

²⁶ SONTAG, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 42.

²⁷ JEAN AMÉRY, *At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*, translated by Sidney and Stella Rosenfeld, Bloomington 1980, p. 20.

²⁸ BRISON, *Aftermath*, p. 53; DIAMOND, *The Difficulty of Reality*, p. 12.

²⁹ AMÉRY, *At the Mind’s Limits*, p. 20; BRISON, *Aftermath*, pp. 51–53.

³⁰ ŽIŽEK, «Description Without a Place», p. 154. Cf. BOLTANSKI, *Distant Suffering*, pp. 159–160, 176–177.

or thought. Simone Weil, for example, reflects on a matter that resembles the mediational predicament, but she thinks of it as an experience in our relationship with afflicted people. Affliction, she argues, is one way we use to distance ourselves from other people, by turning inward, away from those others who experience misery and need care. We tend, she says, to be deaf to the afflicted others, and the afflicted to each other and themselves, because of our unease of being with them. It is easier to be at a distance from suffering other persons; sometimes easier in our personal pain to be deaf to others in pain, not willing to recognize others or to give them a voice.³¹ All this while knowing that a just way of being with them is certainly not by being indifferent to them:

To listen to someone is to put oneself in his place while he is speaking. To put oneself in the place of someone whose soul is corroded by affliction, or near danger of it, is to annihilate oneself. It is more difficult than suicide would be for a happy child. Therefore the afflicted are not listened to. They are like someone whose tongue has been cut out and who occasionally forgets the fact. When they move their lips no ear perceives any sound. And they themselves soon sink into impotence in the use of language, because of the certainty of not being heard.³²

The experience that the afflicted feel of being *let down* by language, “because of the certainty of not being heard”, is exactly the idea, or experience, which the mediational predicament presupposes as a given condition of language or thought in general. Žižek,

³¹ WEIL, *Human Personality*, pp. 27–29; SIMONE WEIL, *First and Last Notebooks*, translated by Richard Rees, New York 1970, pp. 326–328. Cf. BRISON, *Aftermath*, p. 51.

³² WEIL, *Human Personality*, p. 28.

for example, is one of the proponents of this idea.³³ Weil, by contrast, talks of the afflicted being let down (or betrayed) by language as an ethical failure in us as moral subjects to relate to them justly and lovingly – either one does not hear the sufferer speak, or when she speaks one does not listen to her.³⁴ Thus, Weil describes a general difficulty of being near the suffering other as a tendency in us to turn our backs on those who live through misery. The afflicted feels incapacitated, even betrayed by language, but it is not *language* in itself that betrays the miserable. If she is let down, she is let down by someone; namely by me who stands in relation to her. I am responsible for possibly letting her down, perhaps betraying her. I am responsible for her feeling this way.

In a famous lecture on the Holocaust and literature, Elie Wiesel comes closer to saying that the mediational predicament is not only an existentially difficult experience, but also a condition of the medium, of language and thought as such. For him, there is a general impossibility of encompassing and describing the Holocaust, which is dependent on the qualities of discourse:

“The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration” is a contradiction in terms. As in everything else, Auschwitz negates all systems, destroys all doctrines. They cannot but impoverish the experience which lies beyond our reach. Ask any survivor and he will tell you, and his children will tell you. He or she who did not live through the event will never know it. And he or she who did live through the event will never reveal it. Not entirely. Not really. Between our memory and its

³³ ŽIŽEK, «Description Without a Place», p. 154–155.

³⁴ WEIL, *Human Personality*, p. 28; WEIL, *First and Last Notebooks*, p. 326.

reflection there stand a wall that cannot be pierced. The past belongs to the dead and the survivor does not recognize himself in the words linking him to them. We speak in code, we survivors, and this code cannot be broken, cannot be deciphered, not by you no matter how much you try. A novel about Treblinka is either not a novel or not about Treblinka. A novel about Majdanek is about blasphemy. *Is* blasphemy. Treblinka means death, absolute death, death of language and of hope, death of trust and of inspiration. Its secret is doomed to remain intact. How can one write about a situation which goes beyond its very description?³⁵

Even if Wiesel's concern is mainly a critique of the possibility and irresponsibility of taking literary inspiration from the Holocaust, which is to say, a critique of the temptation to use these experiences and real events as material for artistic expressions, he comes very close to grounding a condition regarding the impossibility of writing or thinking about the Holocaust. Writing, he says, cannot but mean an impoverishment of the reality one seeks imaginatively to share a form with. At worst, it is a form of "blasphemy"; irresponsible and unjust to the persons who have lived these experiences through.

Nevertheless, in his rather radical defense of the survivor's experience of finding or having no words, Wiesel also says something more. He argues that because the nature of the experiences and events are so horrifying, any description or thought of them must unconditionally come to an end. This is not far from saying that language and thought as

³⁵ ELIE WIESEL, *The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration*, in *Dimensions of The Holocaust*, edited by Elliot Leifkovitz, Evanston 1977, p. 7.

such harbor these shortcomings, which make the suffering person's experiences impossible to describe or understand.³⁶ This, however, is the mediational predicament taken as a general condition of language or thought. The medium is, according to this line of reasoning, what makes us distanced from the other persons in pain, what makes us relate to them with a lack of sincerity. The best thing one can do as a moral subject is to recognize this unconditional rupture.

The ambiguity in Wiesel's line of reasoning, however, is that his reflection could be read in line with the customary aesthetic idea that any discourse, just by virtue of being different from the reality it is attached to, is but a *representation* of reality. In Wiesel's lecture, one can either get the impression that one person's description of living through affliction cannot alone circumscribe the situation of the Holocaust, which involved many more people. Or, one can get the impression that the situation of the Holocaust is something different than, or external to, or more horrifying than, what is described, a reality beyond the representation, which the representation nonetheless refers to.³⁷ Wiesel writes: "Between our memory and its reflection there stand a wall that cannot be pierced."³⁸ "How can one write about a situation which goes beyond its very description?"³⁹ If there is a barrier between description and reality, where description unconditionally impoverishes reality, the reality of the experience of living through the Holocaust, how is this different from thinking that any discursive act is *merely* a kind of

³⁶ Cf. WIESEL, *The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration*, pp. 5–7.

³⁷ BARTHES, *The Reality Effect*, pp. 146–148; WHITE, *Literary Theory and Historical Writing*, p. 22. Cf. BOLTANSKI, *Distant Suffering*, pp. 159–160.

³⁸ WIESEL, *The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration*, p. 7.

³⁹ WIESEL, *The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration*, p. 7.

representation of reality? It would, I wish to say, be important to our understanding of the other person to emphasize that a person's *description* of living through an experience is not to be taken as separated from that person having lived through the described experience, but instead as a constitutive part of what that very experience continuously means or is.⁴⁰ This ethical understanding, however, is not possible so long as we are confined to the idea that that language is but a representation of a reality beyond discourse.

As when Weil who reflects on an experience of the afflicted people not being heard, Wiesel too is first and foremost describing an experience – an experience of feeling that language and thought is too meagre, an experience of being let down by language, of finding no appropriate words or thoughts.⁴¹ But although it makes sense for a person to say that living through affliction is far more horrifying than any description of that experience can ever be, it is still the meaning of a real person having this *experience* of feeling let down by language or thought that we who stand in relation to her who speaks to us need to take to heart as an ethical ransacking of ourselves. Her having this experience cannot be a reason for me to turn my back on her.

The Unspeakable Must be “Shown”

With these two very different ways of understanding the mediational predicament in mind – as either an experience, or as a general condition of language and thought – I will now shift perspective and turn to Žižek's use of this predicament in his development of an aesthetic idea. The important ethical perspective I wish to stress is what happens to

⁴⁰ BRISON, *Aftermath*, pp. 44, 56.

⁴¹ DIAMOND, *The Difficulty of Reality*, p. 12.

our proximity with others, and furthermore to us as moral subjects, if we take on the aesthetic idea Žižek proposes as a response to the afflicted other person. This existential standpoint needs to be constantly kept in mind in order to understand in what direction Žižek's aesthetics moves us regarding the mode of metaphysical togetherness and responsibility for each other we are situated in.

What then does Žižek's aesthetic idea consist of? He starts out an essay on Holocaust and art by writing:

The famous last thesis of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* – “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” – involves an obvious paradox: it contains a superfluous prohibition, since it prohibits something which is already in itself impossible. This paradox truthfully reproduces the predominant attitude toward the aesthetic representation of the Holocaust: one should not do it, because one cannot do it.⁴²

This statement hinges on Wiesel's claim regarding the impossibility of taking literary inspiration from, describing, or representing, the Holocaust. Žižek, however, uses this predicament of language and thought as the framework of his further discussion of what a responsible and respectful discourse on the Holocaust, or of suffering and evil in general, should involve. Thus, he continues:

Almost none of us is able to endure, even less to enjoy, a snuff film showing real torture and killing, but we can enjoy it as a fiction: when truth is too traumatic to

⁴² ŽIŽEK, «Description Without a Place», p. 141.

be confronted directly, it can only be accepted in the guise of fiction. A direct documentary about the Holocaust would be obscene, even disrespectful towards the victims. When used in this ways, the pleasure of aesthetic fiction is not a simple escape, but a mode of coping with traumatic memory: it is a survival mechanism.⁴³

What transpires in this utterance, again, is the aesthetic idea that there is a cleavage between language and reality. Thus, on the logic that Žižek's proposes, any use of language (even when called "description") must be understood as a *kind* of representation of an experiential (or even external) reality, a reality that always goes beyond the discourse itself. There is, as Wiesel said, a "barrier" between language and reality. In Žižek's view, the Holocaust amplifies the mediational predicament and further confirms the disruption between language and reality.

This is important. On this basis, Žižek argues that regardless of the kind of discourse one uses, be it personal descriptions or (literal and emotional) aesthetic representations, the ineffable *nature* of the experiences of suffering and evil implies that we can only *show* their shape.⁴⁴ Furthermore, because these experiences cannot be spoken of, one must ascribe ethical potential to the kind of language use that is best suited for the task of "showing" the contours of the experience of affliction. Thereby, (literal and emotional) aesthetic representation ethically overpowers other types of discourse, by its having, in principle, the best capacity to *transcend* what is said – "showing" or circumscribing the limit of the speakable. In the last analysis, Žižek

⁴³ ŽIŽEK, «Description Without a Place», p. 142.

⁴⁴ Cf. WIESEL, *The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration*, pp. 5–7.

suggests that aesthetic representation is our only responsible and respectful response, not only to what experiences of suffering and evil generally may mean in human terms, but, more importantly, to the persons themselves who have lived through affliction:

This is why we need to correct Adorno's famous saying here: it is not poetry that is impossible after Auschwitz, but rather *prose*. Realistic prose fails, where the poetic evocation of the unbearable atmosphere of the camp succeeds. That is to say, when Adorno declares poetry impossible (or, rather barbaric) after Auschwitz, this impossibility is an enabling impossibility: poetry is always, by definition, "about" something that cannot be addressed directly, only alluded to.⁴⁵

What does it mean to say that "realistic prose fails" whereas "the poetic evocation" succeeds in face of the afflicted other person having lived through the Holocaust? We must think of the structure of this idea.

If the failure of realistic prose refers to the failure of historical or sociological investigations of the Holocaust, then one could argue that a failure means that the account is untrue to the facts, and by extension that it does injustice to the persons who have lived through the Holocaust. But to argue that the realistic prose of a historical or sociological account fails is a rather different thing than to contend that the realistic prose of a person who expresses her suffering by writing a survivor narrative fails. In the latter case it would be very unclear how we find ourselves in the position to say that the discourse failed, as well as what that proclaimed failure then demands of us or enables

⁴⁵ ŽIŽEK, «Description Without a Place», pp. 142–143.

us to say about it. Even a very fragmentary sentence by another person speaking to me is not necessarily a failed expression.⁴⁶ By not being able to speak, by stumbling on words, by refusing to speak about certain matters, she can express, for instance, that she is traumatized and still in pain.⁴⁷ To say that the one in pain fails in expressing her pain is, with Weil, to turn our backs on her who is in pain. In the last analysis it is a failure in me; in my not understanding our relationship.

Why then does Žižek argue that realistic prose fails, and what does that claim entail? When he speaks of the failure of any realistic prose he speaks of its failure as a failed *artistic expression*. Realistic prose does not fulfil the standards of “showing” the contours of suffering, transcending the expressed; it does not succeed in artistically disclosing the experience of affliction. But if we, on this logic, determine the failure of a survivor account as a proclaimed artistic failure too, a failure of the survivor to express or show her living through affliction, it means that the ethical value of any human expression or discursive act, is in itself evaluated as an aesthetic judgement.

The difficulty at stake, however, is invoked in what it means to determine, appreciate, and devalue every use of language on artistic criteria. There is something ethically devastating in this aesthetic idea, especially if it is taken as a response to the afflicted other who expresses herself by telling a story. If she puts forward a fragment, or

⁴⁶ Cf. DIDI-HUBERMAN, *Images in Spite of All*, pp. 80–82, especially his reflection on the fragmentary “tear-image,” the image that tears us apart.

⁴⁷This uneasy demand to hear another speak – even if she cannot do it and even if we do not hear her sound – is what Primo Levi speaks of on several occasions in his memoirs. LEVI, *If This is a Man*, 82–87. Cf. PRIMO LEVI, *The Truce*, in *The Complete Works of Primo Levi: Volume 1*, edited by Ann Goldstein, translated by Stuart Wolff, New York 2015, pp. 225–226. Cf. VAN DER HEIDEN, *The Voice of Misery*, p. 50.

a plain description, her discourse is, according to Žižek's idea, failed. It is at all times overpowered by poetry or other aesthetic discourses, even if the poet is not a traumatized subject herself. This, however, makes Žižek's relation to the other who expresses affliction by telling a story completely conditioned by aesthetics. More importantly, it shows that he fails to differentiate between what it means to respond to another human *expressing* her suffering to him and what it means to respond to an artwork *showing* suffering.

Responsibility as a personal demand on me will appear to be very different depending on what kind of expression we take a discursive act to be. If the survivor account is taken as an expression of suffering, responsibility falls upon me by my being with the suffering other to whom I respond. Proximity with her already binds me in a relationship of responsibility for her, by my having to respond to her. But if the survivor account is taken as an artwork showing suffering, responsibility falls upon me by my putting certain aesthetic demands on her. I can only take her seriously *if* she does something for me; if she so to speak, shows herself worthy of being taken seriously. In the first sense responsibility is unconditional, in the second it is conditional upon what the sufferer is capable or showing me.

In other words, if we follow Žižek's aesthetic idea and put aesthetic conditions on the sufferer it will mean something in our relationship with her. We could imagine what it logically entails through an ordinary example. A stranger who I happen to meet tells me that she fell on the stairs yesterday. Today she feels better, but she got a bad concussion. If I would respond to her by contending that what she tells me is a really bad description because it does not "show" what it means to fall on the stairs and be hurt, or that her description does not illuminate what falling on the stairs generally means in

human terms, she would probably think I am insensitive or really odd. From where did these conditions and demands on her come into our relationship? In truth, we seldom respond to each other in this way. This, however, is the aesthetic response translated into ordinary language. If I were to respond to her in this way it would show that I pay attention to something very different from her, and thus I do not take her falling on the stairs seriously. I do not care for her when she turns to me, and I cannot recognize what this proximity demanded of me. My aesthetic interest blurs my vision. I must, of course, pay attention to her words, but the question is how I do it.

In the light of this discussion, one could disentangle the contention that an ethical understanding of Levi's memoir is first and foremost determinable on its being an aesthetically *splendid* or *lousy* representation of living through the Holocaust. It is, I wish to say, not this formal characteristic of Levi's account – but Levi himself – that binds me to ethical seriousness. Taking on the attitude that Žižek proposes is at worst to lose proximity with the other person in my evaluating the artistry of the discursive act Lévi has undertaken.

Lévinas' articulation of proximity as a mode of metaphysical responsibility for the other person shows how this aesthetic interest may bend my focus and mark my injustice toward the other person. Lévinas argues that there is a *relational* difference involved in how I attend to the words of another. On the one hand, I can attend to Levi's words as "said" – as having a "what", an "essence", a "sense" that is my *interest*. This seems to be the case for Žižek who is interested in how Levi's account is formed to show the contours of the experience of suffering. On the other hand, I can attend to his words as a "saying" – Levi being a fragile other *speaking* to me.⁴⁸ In line with Jacques

⁴⁸ LÉVINAS, *Otherwise than Being*, pp. 15, 49. See also EMMANUEL LÉVINAS, *Diachrony and*

Derrida and Gert-Jan van der Heiden, one could correctly say that attention to Levi's words as said may disclose my realizing my responsibility for him.⁴⁹ Attention to what Levi has said may show, for instance, where I was tempted to lose proximity with him by focusing too much on what was said. But with Lévinas, this realization is invoked against the background that Levi as an expressive other than I bound me beyond his expression and that his face could not be confined to appearances, or formal identities; namely confined to *what* he said. "It is", Lévinas says, "precisely in his image that he is no longer near".⁵⁰ In confining the other to an image, "contact is broken".⁵¹ The other person in her "saying", then, is in danger of being reduced to a "said", being betrayed by *what* she says; and therefore, our commitment to her goes, as Lévinas says, beyond our appeal to forms, "beyond forms".⁵²

From this perspective of a metaphysical responsibility for the other person, there is a remarkable difference in ethical understanding regarding the way we attend to the images (forms) of the expressive other being. The ideality of otherness is that the face of the other person may not be encompassed as a formal identity. If it is, we risk reducing her "saying to the said and all sense to interest",⁵³ which is to say, a place where the meaning of what the other says becomes a self-interest for me. To take the example with the stranger falling on the stairs again, even if I care for her by being concerned with

Representation, in *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, translated by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav, London 1998, p. 164.

⁴⁹ DERRIDA, *Poetics and Politics of Witnessing*, p. 70; VAN DER HEIDEN, *The Voice of Misery*, p. 257.

⁵⁰ LÉVINAS, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 89.

⁵¹ LÉVINAS, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 89.

⁵² LÉVINAS, *Otherwise than Being*, pp. 15, 49.

⁵³ LÉVINAS, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 16.

what she says, I cannot argue that her description of falling is excellent or lousy without making this attention to a self-interest for me. What is and is not self-interest, however, must be a task of ethical understanding, and this understanding is what is demanded of me in my relationship with her being another person who requires my response.

Lévinas says, “Proximity appears as the relationship with the other, who cannot be resolved into ‘images’ or be exposed in a theme”.⁵⁴ The point of this iconoclasm is not that proximity and attention to others are completely unbound to formal identity, representation, or image, but rather that responsibility for the other person concerns an ethical understanding of the ways we attend to the images or appearances of the one we think of. And this ethical understanding which is my responsibility and is a demand on me, can in itself not be resolved on aesthetic criteria as to how well the other person expresses herself.

Experiences of Suffering as “Literature”

In Žižek’s reasoning, ethical understanding of *If This is a Man* is confined to an aesthetic interest in how well this discursive act shows the contours of the experience of affliction. He is interested in Levi’s account in terms of its being a representation (image) of a reality beyond. This aesthetic interest is directly derived from, for instance, Wiesel’s experience of a mediational predicament, in which the relationship between discourse and reality is understood as an insurmountable “barrier”.⁵⁵ The reality of living through the Holocaust is framed as an impossibility to think or put in words.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ LÉVINAS, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 100.

⁵⁵ WIESEL, *The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration*, p. 7.

⁵⁶ ŽIŽEK, «Description Without a Place», pp. 154–155.

Nevertheless, the aesthetic interest that Žižek invites seems also to be brought about by the thought that survival accounts is a literary genre. Wiesel famously argued, “if the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony”.⁵⁷ The concept of survivor accounts constituting a literary genre of “witness literature”⁵⁸ further blurs the line between different discursive acts and invites the tendency to think that everything under the umbrella of “literature” can be justifiably evaluated as artistic expressions. This tendency is, for example, involved in the theoretical perspectives that consider realistic prose – such as ethnography and historiography – as essentially branches of literature, analyzable on their artistic qualities.⁵⁹ What this implies is that even if witness literature (like ethnography and historiography) means there are components at play other than those of the realistic novel, every type of literature is taken as artistically constructed in order to conjure up representations or images of reality.⁶⁰ In truth, this is the idea Žižek proposes in his claim that (literal and emotional) aesthetic representation ethically outruns realistic prose on the basis of artistic qualities.⁶¹

⁵⁷ WIESEL, *The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration*, p. 9.

⁵⁸ HAYDEN WHITE, *Figural Realism in Witness Literature*, *Parallax* 10:1 (2004), pp. 113–124.

⁵⁹ For the emphasis on textuality in anthropology see JACQUES DERRIDA, *Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Science*, in *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass, London 2002, pp. 356–359; PAUL RABINOW, *Representations Are Social Facts: Modernity and Post-Modernity in Anthropology*, in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus, Berkeley: 1986, pp. 242–246. And in historiography see BARTHES, *The Reality Effect*, pp. 146–148; WHITE, *Literary Theory and Historical Writing*, pp. 8–9.

⁶⁰ BARTHES, *The Reality Effect*, pp. 146–148.

⁶¹ ŽIŽEK, «Description Without a Place», p. 143.

Turning now to the second case of my study, Hayden White's response to Levi's *If This is a Man*, this aesthetic interest transpires clearly:

The significance of Levi's book lies less in any new 'truthful' information he gives about the camps than in the artistry (by which I mean literary, poetic and rhetorical devices) he employs in order to conjure up a compelling image of a cosmos utterly horrifying and at the same time horrifyingly present as a possibility for everyone of our time. Do I mean to imply that Levi's account of his year in Auschwitz is a fiction in the sense of being a pure invention? Of course not. My point is that by using the kinds of literary devices employed by writers of fiction—including topoi, tropes and figures, schemata of thought, characterization, personification, emplotment, and so on—Levi manages to demonstrate to his readers the difference between a merely truthful account of an event, of the kind provided by most survivor witnesses, and an artistic treatment of a real event in his past which transcends the truth – reality distinction.

Primo Levi's book is true in a fictional sense, in the sense that the *image* of Auschwitz conjured up by Levi's poetic prose is 'faithful' as well as being 'true' to the range of feelings induced by the experience of an extraordinary *historical* condition of subjection and humiliation.⁶²

It is on the basis of the aesthetic form of Levi's *If This is a Man* that White contends this book has its value in being an "artistic treatment of a real event" in contrast to other survivor witnesses who provide "a merely truthful account of an event". This, however,

⁶² WHITE, *Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality*, p. 149.

sheds light mainly on two important things. (1) White leans on the common aesthetic idea of a distinction between discourse and reality; Levi's narrative account is understood as a representation (image) of reality. (2) White's analysis concerns exclusively the relationship between the "truthful information" Levi provides, and the "artistry he employs". This shows that White takes a particular interest in the (epistemic) content or the (aesthetic) form of the story Levi tells. In line with Žižek's reasoning, then, White too contends that the artistry of *If This is a Man* makes it affective and valuable; the account is constructed in such a way that it "transcends the truth – reality distinction".

When considering this attitude to Levi, I ask what this aesthetic interest in the artistry of *If This is a Man* means? It is, for sure, aesthetically possible for me (even justified within this kind of literary theory) to compare different narratives by saying that one of them is an "artistic treatment of a real event" in contrast to the other "survivor-witness accounts", but simultaneously this statement will mean something in face of those persons who express the affliction they had lived through. What does comparison mean in face of them? If responding to the person who has lived through affliction is our point of reference, it would mean that a comparison on artistic criteria is not only meaningless but also dubious. It shows that our concern is to compare elements in a story, which is a rather different thing from caring for the person who expresses herself by telling a story.

This difficulty of comparison could be exemplified by what is possible to do with a novel and with other kinds of narrative accounts, and it requires an example. There is a remarkable ethical difference between arguing that, from a theoretical point of view,

Bernhard Schlink's novel *The Reader*,⁶³ is aesthetically better or worse than another fictive book written against the background of the reality of the Holocaust, and by the same token comparing survivor accounts. If our attention is on the "artistry" of these accounts by virtue of their being artistic expressions, or literature, we fail to ask what kind of human expression a novel and a survival account meaningfully is.⁶⁴ We would need to explicate what the difference between these kinds of accounts is, if survivor accounts by virtue of their being *human expressions* follow the rules of literature, and if it is a literary-critical understanding we need. To raise these concerns when having the life of the expressive other person as our sole point of reference is to invite instead an ethical understanding of how to take a particular human expression or discursive act. That understanding implies, in this case, that a comparison of survivor accounts would be as insincere as if when someone told me she fell on the stairs, I responded that at some point I heard or read a much better description of that. As a moral subject standing in relation to another person who expresses her living through the Holocaust, what is it I do by starting to compare, to attend to how she describes certain matters better than others? No, Jean Améry's *At The Mind's Limits* is not better or worse than Levi's *If This is a Man* (or for that matter not better or worse than Didi-Huberman's account of living a life after the Holocaust).⁶⁵ Even if comparing novels and comparing survivor accounts is *theoretically* possible, the second comparison is ethically uneasy – not by virtue of

⁶³ BERNHARD SCHLINK, *The Reader*, translated by Carol B. Janeway, New York 1997.

⁶⁴ It needs to be noted that some constructivist theories emphasize the importance of this ethical distinction. Cf. KALLE PIHLAINEN, *The Moral of the Historical Story: Textual Differences in Fact and Fiction* *New Literary History* 33:1 (2002), p. 56.

⁶⁵ GEORGES DIDI-HUBERMAN, *Bark*, translated by Samuel Martin, Cambridge 2017.

“survivor-witness accounts” being narrative accounts about experiences of suffering, but by virtue of their being expressions of a speaking other who suffers, for whom I answer, in face of whom comparison on aesthetic criteria have no place. To describe “Levi’s account of his year in Auschwitz” as “artistic”, “poetic prose”, or “literature”, or to claim that Levi’s account is more “artful” than the other survivor witnesses’, or better or worse in some other sense, shows that my interest is, if not purely then at least predominantly aesthetic, to the point of my aestheticizing what the other person has lived through.

Another aspect of ethical understanding appears when asking what significance the artfulness of Levi’s account is supposed to have. Again, it is possible to think that aesthetics enhances the possibility of disclosing our relationship of responsibility for the suffering other; but if this is White’s true concern, such a reflection would even more powerfully take a detour in critique of the immorality of comparison.⁶⁶ Thus, it is unclear what White searches for beyond the aesthetic interest of formal comparison as such. If this claim to the beauty of Levi’s account compared to the others simultaneously is a determination of the (aesthetic or ethical) seriousness I need to have when responding to Levi, or a claim that he, in contrast to the other survivors, shows this world better than they do and therefore requires a more refined response from my part, I have fallen for an aesthetic temptation of devaluing another person expressing the suffering she has lived through on her possible aesthetic failures. It is exactly the sort of

⁶⁶ Derrida importantly describes the witness as one who expresses herself in a unique language, which means that it will be our responsibility to find a way to respond to her. DERRIDA, *Poetics and Politics of Witnessing*, pp. 65–70.

temptation that being with the other, or possibly speaking for her who can only express herself fragmentarily, should force me to resist.⁶⁷

The ethical importance of Lévinas' explication of a relationship of responsibility for the other means that the ugliness or beauty (the form) of the words, or the subject matter, of the other we are bound to stand near, is not a reason for us to attend to that person differently or less seriously. Not all people are good at describing fragments from their lives or are even willing to tell others about it, and for some this is too agonizing to do. Fragmentarity and silence can have no primary ethical significance for proximity as a mode of responsibility, our being caught up in a life with others. Despite the fact that people experience things differently, describe their experiences differently, and more or less coherently, our relationship of responsibility for the other is not made different by these varieties.

Forming the Reality of a Shared Life

The problems discussed so far are to a large extent brought about by the thought that discursive acts are (literal or emotional) representations of a reality beyond language. Žižek's suggestion that the reality of the Holocaust is beyond language, tangible only through aesthetic representations,⁶⁸ as well as White's suggestion that Levi's memoir "conjures up" an "image" of a horrifying "cosmos",⁶⁹ essentially means that the mediational difficulty is one of how to either *imitate* or *show* reality. From their perspective, to say that Levi's account should not be understood as a *representation* of

⁶⁷ Cf. VAN DER HEIDEN, *The Voice of Misery*, p. 257–261.

⁶⁸ ŽIŽEK, «Description Without a Place», pp. 142–143.

⁶⁹ WHITE, *Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality*, p. 149.

reality is unintelligible. For the literary critic mind it is imperative that Levi's book is published and intended for a readership like any other kind of literature. By publishing a narrative account, a literary critic may argue, Levi already intends towards showing shapes and images of the world; representing what the Holocaust looked like by the means of the artistry of his writing.

In this respect, one could also raise another hermeneutic concern. To argue that Levi's memoir gives an "image" of an experience, need not necessarily mean that the memoir is a *representation*. In line with Robin G. Collingwood one could argue that although Levi's account is not a (literal or emotional) representation in the sense we speak of imitational art, his account still invites an "imaginative experience", or an imaginative move along "human forms", in our confrontation with the work.⁷⁰ Moving along human forms would mean that we bring our imagination to the picture, and are challenged by what is revealed, depending on what we are capable of seeing.⁷¹ Thus, "the imaginary experience which we get from the picture is not merely the kind of experience the picture is capable of arousing, it is the kind of experience we are capable of having".⁷² On this view, responsibility falls as a demand on the beholder.

The question is still why we need to think of *If This is a Man* as an "image" in any of these senses at all, just by virtue of its being a narrative account? Thinking of Levi's account as providing a picture or image can easily lead us astray if we forget what status another human speaking to us has in our ethical lives, namely if we forget

⁷⁰ ROBIN G. COLLINGWOOD, *The Principles of Art*, London 1958, p. 148.

⁷¹ Cf. GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, pp. 60–61.

⁷² COLLINGWOOD, *The Principles of Art*, p. 150.

how the other person *speaking* to us is constitutive of our reality, as well as what listening to her demands of us.

Let me say something more about this. Levi writes:

All the *Muselmänner* [the weak people, the inept, worthless to labor] who go to the gas chambers have the same story, or, more exactly, have no story; they have followed the slope to the bottom, naturally, like streams running down the sea. Once they entered the camp, they were overwhelmed, either through basic incapacity, or through misfortune, or through some banal incident, before they could adapt; they are beaten by time, they do not begin to learn German and untangle the fiendish knot of laws and prohibitions until their body is already breaking down, and nothing can save them from selection or from death by exhaustion. Their life is short, but their number is endless; they, the *Muselmänner*, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always the same, of non-men who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to truly suffer. One hesitates to call them living; one hesitates to call their death death—in the face of it they have no fear, because they are too tired to understand.

They crowd my memory with their faceless presence, and if I could encompass all evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image, which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, head bowed and shoulders bent, on whose face and in whose eyes no trace of thought can be seen.⁷³

⁷³ LEVI, *If This is a Man*, p. 85.

It is, for Levi, agonizing to try to stand near what has happened, his own and others' behavior in the camp, which repeatedly comes to his mind as pictures, silhouettes of faceless people. In moments of silence, ever since, a force strikes him to the bone – “the pain of remembering, the old fierce anguish of feeling myself a man again, which attacks me like a dog the moment my consciousness comes out of the darkness. Then I take my pencil and notebook and write what I could never tell anyone”.⁷⁴ These words are the words of a wounded other. They are the words of someone living through struggling with nothing more than an “image” of his fellow beings being empty and dead inside, of those unknown others who never spoke, who were left to “drown” in the fierce fight for survival. Levi is not capable of speaking about this to anyone, so therefore he writes it down.

In terms of being the expression of a suffering person this story is not an image; it is entangled in Levi's continuously living through agony. The “image” of the *Muselmänner* that torments him is integrated with his living through the Holocaust, and *If This is a Man* as a narrative account is an expression of the horrors that continue to shatter him as a survivor living on. In this sense, as Susan Brison remarks, it is clear that a survivor telling a story is part of her living through the traumatic experience and not a mere *demonstration* of it.⁷⁵ But hearing another speak to us is an ethical demand on our understanding that we fail to recognize if we follow White's characterization of *If This is a Man*, where he suggests that we should understand the narrative as an example of Levi's skillful use of aesthetic strategies in order to “conjure up a compelling image of a

⁷⁴ LEVI, *If This is a Man*, p. 135.

⁷⁵ BRISON, *Aftermath*, pp. 56–57.

cosmos utterly horrifying”.⁷⁶ Through White’s claim that Levi’s account is a representation or image *of something*, one simultaneously presupposes that there is a reality independently of what Levi or others are living through, remembering, and telling. And only against that background can one meaningfully argue, with White, that Levi’s account is a “compelling image”,⁷⁷ for it is supposed to be an image of something other than itself. The reality that Levi describes is for White real in the sense of being shown through the medium of literary fiction, which is to say, real in the same sense as any other literary account about the Holocaust *shows* the real. “Stories are,” says White, “not lived; there is no such thing as a real story. Stories are told or written, not found”.⁷⁸ But with regard to Levi’s story it would be possible to say that the story is lived in the sense that it continues to be integrated in his life which is formed by what he has lived through, and that contrary to White’s emphasis of the fictionality of the medium of narrative, it would be important for us to recognize that Levi’s telling is entangled in him as a speaking other person differently than a literary artwork is entangled in its author. There is, one could say, a deeper difference between the survivor account and the literary artwork that is not determinable on their literary appearances, but is rather determinable on what they mean to our sharing a life with the survivor.

Wilhelm Dilthey emphasizes a variant of this important ethical issue as he argues:

It suffices to observe that the way in which a lived experience is there for me is completely different from the way in which an image stands before me. The

⁷⁶ WHITE, *Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality*, p. 149.

⁷⁷ WHITE, *Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality*, p. 149.

⁷⁸ WHITE, *Literary Theory and Historical Writing*, p. 9.

consciousness of a lived experience is one with its nature, its being-there-for-me and what in it is there for me are one. The lived experience does not stand over against an observer as an object, but its existence for me is indistinguishable from what in it is there for me.⁷⁹

This differentiation between a “lived experience” and an “image” is equally valuable even though our scrutiny concerns written manifestations. The reflection could be said to encapsulate the essence of what makes a survivor account different from a literary artwork. If the phenomenology of a survivor account essentially connects to its being a lived experience and not primarily to its being an image, it means that we must understand just how these phenomena are rooted in human life differently. Dilthey suggests that although particular stories of lived experiences, or memories of “living through an experience”,⁸⁰ are different “manifestations of life”⁸¹ in our shared lifeworld, it does not mean that a *more real* world, or reality, is given independently of, or parallel to, these manifested human life concerns.⁸² Rather, lived experiences and their manifestations are, fundamentally formative of the *Zusammenhang des Lebens*, or contexture of life, which we as humans share and understand as *reality*.⁸³ Thus, even if Dilthey does not, on this occasion, explicate any further distinctions between different lived experiences, or stories thereof, he says that lived experiences and their related

⁷⁹ WILHELM DILTHEY, *The Formation of The Historical World in the Human Sciences*, in *Selected Works* Volume III, edited by Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi, Princeton 2002, 160–161.

⁸⁰ DILTHEY, *The Formation of The Historical World in the Human Sciences*, p. 251.

⁸¹ DILTHEY, *The Formation of The Historical World in the Human Sciences*, p. 226.

⁸² DILTHEY, *The Formation of The Historical World in the Human Sciences*, pp. 248–251.

manifestations not only *share* the form of reality in the sense of being *images* within it, but themselves shape our historical lifeworld, the shared contexture of life that any individual concern in life simultaneously presupposes as its given.⁸⁴

In this respect, White's argument that Levi's account is a "compelling image" of our world estranges us from the ethical significance of the distinction that Dilthey stresses. To take the novel as an example of a literary artwork, the world constructed and affectively imposed on us by an "image" may, perhaps, be sufficient for *The Reader*, which is written to open up a "compelling" fictive, but no less profoundly human, psychological space with regard to how people *might have* thought and felt in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Thus, when White passes the aesthetic judgement "that the *image* of Auschwitz conjured up by Levi's poetic prose is 'faithful' as well as being 'true' to the range of feelings induced by the experience of an extraordinary *historical* condition of subjection and humiliation",⁸⁵ the description is accurate with regard to Schlink's novel but is essentially misplaced with regard to Levi's account. An account can only be *true* to the "feelings induced by an experience" if it is a representation or image of them, it would be meaningless to argue that the account is true to the lived experiences it is or manifests. By thinking that *If This is a Man* is an image like *The Reader*, or that it "conjures up" such an image, one fails to see what is given differently in these accounts, and consequently one overlooks how we must respond to them differently.

⁸³ DILTHEY, *The Formation of The Historical World in the Human Sciences*, p. 250.

⁸⁴ DILTHEY, *The Formation of The Historical World in the Human Sciences*, pp. 249–254.

⁸⁵ WHITE, *Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality*, p. 149.

This difference, however, can be further deepened by showing the sense in which the survivor account and the literary artwork form our reality differently. In the case of *The Reader*, Schlink is living in the German society dealing with the questions of guilt that his story presupposes and in that sense his fiction is dependent on his own lived experiences; or, as Dilthey would say, his book must be rooted in our contexture of life as being a manifestation of life within it. This, however, means that Schlink's book is a manifestation of his own lived experiences only so far as it is given as a *fictive* book authored by him. It is not a personal account or any other type of manifestation within our shared contexture of life.⁸⁶ *Qua* artwork, however, it is not according to Dilthey's reasoning a manifestation of the author's lived experiences, but stands there, and has meaning, in terms of its being an image,⁸⁷ which means, nonetheless, that it stands there as an image in the life we share after the Holocaust.⁸⁸ Thus, there is a crucial difference between (1) Schlink's authorship manifesting his own lived experiences, which shape our shared contexture of life, and (2) his artwork being anchored in our shared contexture of life, which the artwork shapes by being an *image* within it.

The honesty of Schlink is that he understands and shows this; he is not suggesting that we should take his story of the former SS guard Hanna Schmitz' personality and deeds as lived experiences.⁸⁹ They are characters or archetypes in a story – images in and of our world. There is no demand to hear Hanna Schmitz speak, for Schlink is describing a possible moral-psychological human reality of struggling with

⁸⁶ DILTHEY, *The Formation of The Historical World in the Human Sciences*, pp. 226–227.

⁸⁷ DILTHEY, *The Formation of The Historical World in the Human Sciences*, pp. 227–228.

⁸⁸ DILTHEY, *The Formation of The Historical World in the Human Sciences*, p. 222.

⁸⁹ SCHLINK, *The Reader*, pp. 127–128.

what was done in the past so far as fiction can do it in a world that is settled. But contrary to the world of *The Reader*, the world of Levi's is neither settled nor fictionally possible because he expresses how it *is* to live in our world, and how our world *is*, as the account is in itself a manifestation of Levi's lived experiences – of Levi continuously “living through an experience”.⁹⁰ In other words, the reality that Levi lives in and forms with his story of how it is to be in this world, is in itself the very “human form” that *The Reader* as a fictive book presupposes in order to make sense as being a story in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

It is important to an ethical understanding of Levi that his telling about living through the Holocaust is understood as a constitutive part of both himself and of the very experience he describes, which forms our reality in a different sense than a mere representation or image of it does. As Brison says, for the survivor “not to be heard,” on these terms, “means that the self the survivor has become does not exist for these others”.⁹¹ Listening to another person and taking her seriously cannot mean that the horrors of what she has lived through are real merely in a literary or imaginary sense of either representing, showing, or sharing a “human form”. Levi's lived experience is the very form that any image of it must share with it, it is not in itself to be regarded as an image of itself. But in order to avoid this problematic and possibly irresponsible thought, we would preferably not speak of Levi's account as an image at all.

Thinking of the Other

⁹⁰ DILTHEY, *The Formation of The Historical World in the Human Sciences*, p. 251.

⁹¹ BRISON, *Aftermath*, p. 62.

What does thinking of the other person demand of me? If, as Dilthey says, “the consciousness of a lived experience is one with its nature, its being-there-for-me and what in it is there for me are one”,⁹² then the given of our shared contexture of life will announce itself as given partly after what the survivor, Levi, has lived through or said. The mode of responsibility for the other person that I have stressed in this essay in line with Lévinas thought, however, is that a person living through an experience, or her speaking to me about it, on the one hand is formative of how our world is given to us by the life of the other person, in her speaking to me. And on the other hand marks our ethical realization that we were bound by the other person also before anything was lived through or spoken by her. To see these two glimpses of the relationship of responsibility for the other person means that Levi’s world must be our world in a way the world of the image cannot be.⁹³ Levi is another person speaking to me. To be with him in this way is imperative to an ethical understanding of anything he says.

⁹² DILTHEY, *The Formation of The Historical World in the Human Sciences*, p. 161.

⁹³ LÉVINAS, *Diachrony and Representation*, p. 164.