

THE INFLUENCE OF TRAUMA ON TESTIMONY: AN ANALYSIS OF THE WORKS OF CHARLOTTE DELBO AND RUTH KLÜGER

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ABSTRACT

Holocaust survivors, such as Charlotte Delbo and Ruth Klüger, often share their testimonies to bear witness to the Holocaust, however, such testimonies are filled with silences which cannot be fully understood by non-survivors. These silences are seen in the form of ellipses and fragments which point to a trauma that cannot be represented by words. Trauma leaves an imprint on the mind which does not allow a survivor to fully escape their past. Schwab's theory of the crypt is used to examine these testimonies and how the traumatic past continues to intrude upon the present. These traumatic experiences create a gap between non-survivors and survivors as there is a general unwillingness for others to listen. However, it is learning of this trauma which helps non-survivors to gain a fraction of understanding of the events of the Shoah so these testimonies can be passed down for generations to come.

INTRODUCTION

Trauma has the ability to influence testimony by impacting the recollection of the events which revolve around the traumatic memory and the way in which these experiences are shared. Traumatic memories are stored differently from regular memories which causes testimonies to involve both remembering and forgetting (Bernard-Donals 1303). Holocaust testimonies often exhibit intrinsically incoherent attributes such as gaps, silences, and disjunctions which can be seen in Charlotte Delbo's *Auschwitz and After* (Schwab 45). These attributes relate to Gabriele Schwab's theory of the crypt and how trauma has the power to inhibit language, leaving parts of the trauma to be silenced. This silence is the source of much controversy as to how these testimonies should be received. As seen in Ruth Klüger's *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered*, the general unwillingness of nonsurvivors to listen or bear witness also pushes these survivors into silence, forcing the collective memory to consist of what historians choose to pass down to future generations (Goertz 172). Trauma is able to rewire the brain, causing events to be perceived differently and re-experienced through vivid flashbacks later in life (Kolk 66). Trauma impacts how a survivor shares their story by looking at how the traumatic memory is stored, the role trauma plays in the development and rewiring of the brain, and the silence in testimonies. These elements also impact why a survivor may share their testimony and how nonsurvivors receive and place these stories in history.

TRAUMA'S IMPRINT ON THE MIND

According to Jason Tougaw, traumatic memory is "a salience, a timelessness and a ubiquity that puts it outside the range of associatively linked experiences, outside the range of comprehension, of recounting and mastery" (586). By being "outside the range of comprehension," Tougaw means that traumatic memory cannot be recalled by will. Instead, the memory would have to be triggered by an event in the present. An example of this would be in Delbo's work where she writes, "I'd been back for weeks, yet I could still smell on me the odor of the camp, an odor of raw sewage and carrion" (151). Her ability to still smell carrion from the camp in her showers weeks later shows how her trauma impacted her present by making her re-experience her past. These sensory fragments of her past continue to intrude upon her present because the trauma has not been resolved. This kind of memory has been linked by psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk to "the stress hormones that the body

secretes to protect itself keep circulating, and the defensive movements and emotional responses keep getting replayed" (66). These stress hormones are putting the body through the same experience it did when it first faced the traumatic experience. It is making a person with a traumatic past re-experience the trauma physically and mentally; it is as if they are really there. This constant cycle of re-experiencing does not allow for closure that many hope to find through erecting monuments and whitewashing the past and collective memory. As Dori Laub and Nanette Auerhahn argue, "particularly gruesome events have such staying power that they can obliterate the survivor's sense of living in the present" (Laub and Auerhahn 36). These events have such a strong impact because the survivor's present centers around the trauma of the past. One may possess freedom from the camps, but they are not truly free.

Trauma has the power to rewire a survivor's brain in a way which forces them to perceive the traumatic event differently from others. Trauma allows them to reenter the past because of the dual reality created by trauma survivors. Bessel van der Kolk believes that dual reality refers to "a reality of a relatively secure present which lives next to a damaging, ever-present past" (197). This dual reality is seen through Delbo's ability to smell the camp weeks after she had left. Her brain sometimes blurs these two realities because it is "altered by the inexorable trauma of her life in the camps" (Tougaw 592). These alterations show that her experiences reshaped the way she perceives everyday objects because she is comparing them to what she knows. She knows the scent of carrion because it is engrained into her system. The olfactory receptors in her nose, which transmit "imprints," take her back to the past and forces her to re-experience it as if it is the present. It is when her two realities are split Delbo believes she is truly living.

Commenting on her memory, Delbo says "so distinct are deep memory and common memory...Without the split, I wouldn't have been able to come back to life" (Kolk 197). This dissociation between Delbo's traumatic self and present self are distinct in the way they process information. This "split" allows Delbo to continue living even though part of her will always be tied to the past through this dual reality. Mentally, the person she is in the present is vastly different from the person who was in the camps, haunted by the horrors that she witnessed. According to Michael Bernard-Donals, this traumatic memory is not processed in the same way as regular memory, her "testimony marks the absence of events, since they did not register on, let alone become integrated into, the victim's consciousness" (1303). The "absence of events" refers to the fact that these memories are never integrated into the consciousness of the victim, so they are essentially "blank" memories because they cannot be recalled by will. They are triggered along with the traumatic self in the dual reality that is created by trauma. This dual reality also plays a role in the silence of the survivors because if a survivor is unable to recall a memory, then they do not have to ability to share it due to it being a "blank memory" (Bernard-Donals 1303).

Trauma, along with altering the memory itself, has the power to impact how memory in general is retained. Studies show that trauma impacts the development of the hippocampus, the part of the brain responsible for memory, and causes a disconnection between the thalamus, the part of the brain which relays sensory and motor functions to the cerebral cortex, with the rest of the brain (Kolk 178). This disruption is due to the emotional brain changing emotional arousal, body physiology, and muscular action. This disconnection impacts these areas which are necessary for proper memory storage and integration of new information. Because of this, "the imprints of traumatic experiences are organized not as coherent logical narratives, but in fragmented sensory and emotional traces," as seen in the work of Charlotte Delbo (Kolk 178). This fragmented narrative allows nonsurvivors to question the authenticity of these testimonies. In her memoir, Ruth Klüger even mentions that those chaotic times "lie under a gray fog, and the voices in the fog are not clearly audible or reliable", and that she does not like to report what she knows only from hearsay (34). By saying this, she admits even she finds some of the chaotic moments in her life to be unreliable because she only recalls fragments of voices rather than entire scenes. While the question of reliability is seen in the cases of Klüger and Delbo, it is not uncommon among other survivors.

According to Dori Laub and Nanette Auerhahn, there are different stages that increasingly distance the survivor from the trauma. These stages are "not knowing, fugue state, fragments, transference phenomena, overpowering narratives, life themes, witnessed narratives, and metaphors" (32). Delbo's work emulates Laub and Auerhahn's idea of a fugue state because her work is set up as a dream narrative, where her testimony is told in fragmented descriptions of events, and this state involves the intrusive appearance of split off, fragmented behaviors and cognitions. As stated in their

article, memories are “relived in highly dissociated, dream- or fugue- like states, with little or no ability to communicate them in words” (Laub and Auerhahn 33). In other words, survivors experience vivid imagery relating to their traumatic event and lose the ability to communicate with language. This can be seen in a number of written memoirs, such as Charlotte Delbo’s *Auschwitz and After*. Using this fugue-like state, Delbo shares her story by taking the reader and placing them inside of the narrator’s point of view. Her pieces share the experiences of 230 women in the camp and are riddled with, as Jason Tougaw writes, “acute descriptions of visual imprints” and “description that combines visual images with olfactory ones” (591). These descriptions allow readers to gain a better understanding of these imprints by drawing readers into the dream-like narration with “her juxtaposition of images...” which “convey the narrator’s inability to verbalize fully and make sense of what is going on” to see for themselves what can only be conveyed through these fragments (Goertz 170).

As Jason Tougaw writes, “Her [Delbo’s] traumatic memory defies meaning because it is a recollection of a series of dream-like perceptual experiences, during which waking cognition was broad and conclusive, on the one hand, and lacking the boundaries that shape perception into meaning on another” (588). These “dream-like perceptual experiences” are examples of Delbo’s fugue state from which she views these traumatic memories. The fugue state can be seen in “Roll Call” where Delbo writes, “Taube blows his whistle. Roll call is over. Someone says, ‘Let’s hope she was dead,’” because of the short lines and erratic use of the narrative voice (101). In this scene, Delbo never discusses what the narrator is feeling at this time, simply what is happening around them through those fragmented pieces of information. The fugue state is not far removed from the trauma itself showing that although she attempted to distance herself from her experiences, the past is still part of who she is. Jason Tougaw also believes that in order to bear witness to the Holocaust, people must “draw on the fluid, boundary-less cognition of dreaming with which we are familiar,” so the gap between what is unthinkable and believable is closed (588). This familiarity of the dream-like state allows readers to feel a greater connection to Delbo’s work because of the general understanding of how dreams are processed and viewed in fragments. These snippets of information give readers a glimpse of the unthinkable and allows them to process them to a point that this trauma is believable, even though there are gaps of detail that are not spoken of in Delbo’s testimony.

According to Bessel van der Kolk, the silence of trauma survivors, including Holocaust survivors, may be partly due to decreased activity in Broca’s area. Broca’s area is the designated part of the frontal lobe that focuses on speech. In his book he writes, “[W]ithout a functioning Broca’s area, you cannot put your thoughts and feelings into words” (43). This decreased activity is the case for people who experience a trauma and remains true for years after that traumatic experience occurred because their bodies are still re-experiencing that same terror, rage, and helplessness they felt during the initial experience. In Delbo’s passage “Dialogue” she writes, “‘And you think we can survive this?’ She is begging. ‘We’ve got to try.’ ‘For you perhaps there’s hope, but for us...’” (15). Although there is communication in this passage, the responses are short and straightforward. The ellipses represent the words this person is unable to say; the horrible circumstances that are too traumatic to recognize. This silence creates a barrier between the reader and the narrator. This barrier is due to the fact that the narrator does not have the words to truly describe or is simply afraid to speak of this trauma; the trauma of losing hope of one’s own survival. The silence in testimonies such as Charlotte Delbo’s may be influenced by decreased activity in Broca’s area, but it may also be influenced by other variables such as locking the trauma away and dissociating oneself from their traumatized self.

The Crypt and the Silence of Testimonies

According to Gabriele Schwab, a psychological crypt is built after a traumatic loss that contains the secrets which are formed in trauma which need to be kept from oneself (45). Signs of the crypt are seen in the gaps, ellipses, fragmentations, and distortions in Delbo’s work when she writes, “Why bother... Why keep on struggling when all of us are to... The gesture of her hand completes her sentence. Rising smoke” (15). When Delbo uses ellipses in this passage from “Dialogue,” she is using the crypt to store and silence the traumatic experience of witnessing people being taken to the crematorium to be burned. Between the lines of conversation there is an understanding between the two people that the reader will never be able to comprehend. As the prisoner uses their hands to explain what words fail to say, there is an immediate understanding between the narrator and other prisoner. This connection is formed through shared traumatic experiences and secrets which have been locked away in the crypt and are no longer spoken of because there is no need to speak of it.

Delbo's descriptive style allows readers a glimpse into the life of a prisoner, but the crypt and lack of firsthand experience lock away any chance there is for the reader to understand the incomprehensible actions which occurred there. The concept of the crypt can be seen again in "The Next Day" when Delbo writes, "They were howling because they knew, but their vocal cords had snapped in their throats," as the vocal cords did not literally snap in the prisoners' throats (34). Instead, these snapped vocal cords represent the trauma that otherwise could only be represented by screams, not words. The inability to speak comes from the traumatic experience of these people who knew that they would die once they reached their destination and were powerless to prevent their fate. Those who survived may have used this crypt, not just for their experiences, but to store who they used to be during these traumatic experiences.

The dual reality among survivors can allow survivors to forge a crypt for their "lost self" because of the dissociative qualities that impacted the way they stored their memory. According to Gabriele Schwab, "melancholia may take over and encrypt the old self while the newly traumatized self is repudiated as contaminated" (45). Schwab means that this new self refuses to acknowledge the trauma of the old self and locks it into the silence of the crypt. This concept can be seen with Charlotte Delbo when she says, "everything that happened to this other 'self,' the one from Auschwitz, doesn't touch me now, *me*, doesn't concern me" (Kolk 197). Regarding the idea of the lost love object, Schwab writes, "[T]he melancholic attachment to lost objects is not confined to the loss of loved ones but can include...the loss of self after trauma" (45). In other words, her lost love object is based upon her attachment to who she was before the trauma and who she was forced to become. This "other self", the one that experienced this trauma, is locked away in the crypt as her encrypted self. This encrypted self is constantly being cut off from the outside world by her "surviving self", or the part of Delbo which refuses to acknowledge the trauma that is still part of her (Schwab 45). It is Delbo's surviving self that allows her to form a new reality, a new life, however, she cannot escape her traumatized self forever.

As Delbo writes about block 25 in "One Day," she loses touch with the new reality she creates which is displayed when she writes, "In front of the door of block 25...we remain standing in the snow. Motionless amid the motionless pain. And now I am sitting in a café, writing this text" (Delbo 25). Delbo shows she is losing touch with the outside world because as her body is in the café, she is actually reliving the events of her traumatic past. This disparity is also seen through the tense shift between the present and past in her work. The "encrypted self" is seen pushing through the "surviving self" through Delbo's use of the present tense but is again pushed away when she reverts back to past tense. Delbo's memoir forces her to re-experience the pain of the camps as she recalls what events she can. Her new self allows her to recognize this trauma because "the body can abandon itself and speak the trauma of disrupted care; it can hurt itself to speak the pain" (Schwab 45-46). This means that as the old self is attempting to break the new self, it is able to abandon the body of the new self and take over the mind, sharing its traumatizing experiences to a certain degree.

Gabriele Schwab's idea of the crypt can be seen in Ruth Klüger's memoir as well. If Klüger has created a dual reality for herself, and locked away her traumatic self, then it can be seen in her poem "Halloween and a Ghost." In this poem, she writes "In a wintry schoolyard the shape of your breath/But I never found out the shape of your death/There being so many ways of killing" (Klüger 81). The narrator's experience with the loss of a loved one intrudes upon her present as seen with her description of schoolyard, which is probably for the children of her present, and her wondering about how her loved one died. To this, Klüger writes, "In my poem the old reality invades the new one, crossing over the unconscious layers that are straddling both when I least expect it, during a harmless children's event" (82). Her "encrypted self" is breaking through her "surviving self" through this blend of realities because although she is physically at a children's event, her mind travels to her traumatic past and questions this death she experienced. The poem shows how this death blends in with her everyday life, and it cannot escape her. Her "encrypted self" forces her to write of a past she tries to lock away in a crypt, which past readers need to know of in order to bear witness.

As Klüger discusses her time in Theresienstadt, she recalls that it was there she found a way to connect with people instead of feeling like an outcast as she did at home in Vienna. Although she did find companionship there, Klüger still describes Theresienstadt as the place "where everything that came from the Germans was pure malice and the good had its only source in us, the prisoners," reminding readers that while there was some good, there was an overabundance of bad as well (86). She goes on to write, "Whose voices are still lodged in my brain — they had to be strangled to silence

them—and blessed be their memory” (Klüger 86). The fact that these voices were still being heard in her head indicates that her trauma, and the trauma of the people she met, haunted her to a point where she had to get rid of them. In acknowledging the fact that she had to metaphorically strangle the voices of her fellow prisoners, she is acknowledging that she had to lock these voices away, so they would no longer haunt her surviving self. She locked the voices away in the crypt because she found them to be a traumatic loss that had to be silenced from her current world. Klüger’s inability to speak of those she has lost to others is prevalent throughout her memoir and is not always due to the crypt, but due to societal norms and a gap between survivors and nonsurvivors.

THE COMMUNICATIVE ABYSS

The gap between survivors and nonsurvivors is what Karein Goertz refers to as “the communicative abyss” which is “the result of unwritten rules of social etiquette and a general unwillingness of nonsurvivors to listen” (172). This abyss is a wall between generations, “but here the wall is barbed wire. Old, rusty barbed wire” (Klüger 65). Bessel van der Kolk believes that no one wants to remember or listen to the stories of trauma from survivors because everyone “want[s] to live in a world that is safe, manageable, and predictable, and victims remind us that this is not always the case” (196). In this, van der Kolk includes victims as well. However, since they are victims of their own trauma, they are unable to live in this picture-perfect world others may conjure for themselves. It is the clashing of these two realities that forces the survivors into silence; the fear of being ostracized for something they have no control over and memories they wish they did not have.

This communicative abyss is seen a number of times in Klüger’s work and impacts how, and if, she shares her testimony to others because “it does not fit the framework of social discourse” (Klüger 92). One example she speaks of is when an old woman urinated on her mother’s lap in the crowded cattle car. Klüger says she hardly gets the chance to speak of this unforgettable moment of her life because it does not fit within the unwritten rules of social etiquette. If she had brought up the claustrophobia she had felt in this transport to her colleagues who were already discussing their experiences with confined spaces, “they would have been bothered, troubled, sympathetic, and thoroughly uncomfortable,” and “they would have resented me [Ruth Klüger] as a spoilsport” (Klüger 93). In this case, the nonsurvivors would not be willing to listen to Klüger’s childhood experience with enclosed spaces because of the relationship it has with the Holocaust. She refuses to bring it up because her traumatic experience would make her seem like a “spoilsport”. This fear of fitting in with social discourse would be brought upon by the reactions of nonsurvivors and force testimonies, such as Klüger’s childhood, into a weight she would have to carry with her alone, not by choice, but by social pressure.

The communicative abyss could silence all survivors, but Klüger was also silenced due to her age at the time of the Holocaust. There is a strong unwillingness to listen to child survivors because, as Karein Goertz believes, “child survivors like herself are often dismissed as having been too young to have spent time in (and survived) concentration camps” (172). This dismissal of child survivors comes from the inability of adults, and others, to connect childhood with the atrocities of war. Klüger shows she experienced this in her childhood when she writes, “The grown-ups pretended that only grown-ups die,” and that is not the case at all (17). The “pretend” is the idealistic view of what the world should be, not how it actually is. However, she was able to recognize that the songs the Nazi boys sang about killing Jewish people included her as well, not just the adults. Her experience supports the confines of social discourse found in the communicative abyss as it would be seen as taboo to discuss her childhood experiences because it is already too difficult for people to think of the mass extermination of people, let alone children. With this being the case, Klüger is not only silenced by the unwillingness for nonsurvivors, especially the younger generation, to listen to the testimonies of trauma victims, she is also silenced by the fact she is a child survivor. With the restrictions of who is able to tell their story, and what they are allowed to say from their experiences, it would be rather difficult for child survivors such as Klüger to give their testimonies without feeling ostracized by the society they are trying to be part of.

While survivors are sharing their truth, their testimonies are scrutinized by those who are basing these testimonies on what is already known. If their testimonies do not match with the facts, then it would bring the entire testimony’s validity into question. Charlotte Delbo acknowledges this in her testimony when she writes, “Today, I am not sure what I wrote is true. I am certain that it is

truthful" (1). This may be because memories become more distorted over time and, according to Bessel van der Kolk, "as soon as a story starts being told...it changes – the act of telling itself changes the tale" (153). This fact would impact the way the testimony is received because if a Holocaust survivor waits years, as many of those in the Fortunoff Archive did, to tell their story, it already became distorted in their silent retention (Laub 79). On the other hand, if they choose to repeatedly share their experiences, the story would change every time it is told. Scientists and other evidence-driven people would be skeptical of these testimonies and why they change. They would also be skeptical of the repressed memories which resurface during these testimonies because "repressed memory has never been shown to exist," therefore, "it should not have been admitted as evidence" (Kolk 185).

Michael Bernard-Donals writes, "If it is true that a traumatic incident is repressed at the occurrence or deformed during testimony, then testimony cannot easily be elided with the act of witnessing" (1303). This statement refers to the trap survivors are caught in when bearing witness to their own testimony: they cannot. This inability to witness their own testimony is due to the tampering of the traumatic memory, and how it takes away from its authenticity, and to some, its validity. According to Dori Laub, no "historical insider could remove herself sufficiently from the contaminating power of the event so as to remain a fully lucid, unaffected witness," meaning that there are no true witnesses because of how traumatizing and detrimental the experiences were to the survivors' memories, causing them to be contaminated by this event (66). The testimonies of survivors may also be contaminated by memory loss. Bessel van der Kolk asserts that "memory loss has been reported in people who have experienced natural disasters, accidents, war trauma, kidnapping, torture, concentration camps, and physical and sexual abuse," which is reasonable due to the role trauma plays with the hippocampus (192). The narration of the trauma would then be interrupted by gaps of memory, or even false memories, which would not fit into a coherent, valid story for people to rely on as historical fact. It is because of the loss of memory, the distortion of memory, and the repression of memory which forces scientists and historians to consider whether or not these testimonies are authentic.

No matter how their testimonies are received, survivors, such as Ruth Klüger, have reasons for wanting to share their experiences. The main reason, however, would be to bear witness to the atrocities of the Holocaust. Elissa Marder states that "literature enables us to bear witness to events that cannot be completely known and opens our ears to experiences that might have otherwise remained unspoken and unheard," to allow readers to understand that in reading such testimonies, they too are bearing witness (3). They are witnessing the accounts of a survivor who lived through the Holocaust and endured the suffering from the Nazis and their allies. Bearing witness to an event, such as the Shoah, places a responsibility to the witness to share these accounts for younger generations to hear to ensure an event such as the Shoah may never happen again. While there was a responsibility to share what they witnessed, this may not be the only reason they shared their stories.

According to Dori Laub, "the survivors did not only need to survive so they could tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories to survive" (63). In sharing their stories, they are breaking the silence that has encompassed their lives for many years. Moreover, they uncover the truth they need to continue living (Laub 63). Klüger fell victim to burying her truth, or as she referred to it, her angel of death. In her poem, "Talking to the Angel of Death," she mentions how she "deserted you like a burdensome husband, buried you like a miscarriage" where "you" refers to the angel of death she had learned about in the Haggadah (Klüger 209). In the epilogue of her memoir she writes, "Now, while I still felt the presence of the angel with the ambiguous face, whom I have known all my life more intimately than I wished, I began" (208). She started to write her memoir because she felt the angel of death which has been with her for years and decided that she needed to write about what was haunting her. This angel of death became her motivator to testify because it has been with her throughout her life.

CONCLUSION

In the case of such a traumatic event as the Shoah, survivors who bore witness to such atrocities underwent neurobiological changes which, in turn, impacted the way they were able to share their testimonies. Trauma has the power to rewire the brain by decreasing activity in the hippocampus and Broca's area, creating a disconnection between the thalamus and the rest of the body, and causing the stress hormones that the body secretes to keep circulating (Kolk 178, 43, 66). Respectively, this

rewired brain would cause the survivor to have trouble with their memory, ability to speak, sensory and motor functions, and calming down from their excitatory state. The traumatic memory would then be recalled differently from the normal memory. It would either be experienced as a flashback or in a fragmented narrative where sensory details are most notable (Kolk 178). The survivor may also create a dual reality in which the encrypted self, known as the traumatic self, is locked away by the "surviving" or "present" self, such as the case for Charlotte Delbo (Schwab 45). This crypt would contain the secrets of other trauma survivors that are not able to be shared with nonsurvivors. This inability to tell their stories may be due to the communicative abyss Klüger experienced or the skepticism of scientists about the validity of their testimonies (Goertz 172) (Kolk 185). While these factors did impact how survivors testified, the reason they testified was to make sure that they, and others, bear witness to the atrocities of the Shoah, and to make sure they can live their lives without burying their truth (Laub 63). When learning of these testimonies, which must be shared, it is important to gain at least a fraction of an understanding of the trauma behind them. This understanding will help prevent anything such as the Shoah from happening again and allow the stories of these survivors, and those who perished, to live on for generations to come so they too can bear witness.

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