

## “EACH BODY IS A SHOUT”: METAPHOR AND THE FEMALE BODY IN CHARLOTTE DELBO’S *AUSCHWITZ AND AFTER*

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Author:  
Kathryn Zierold

Faculty Sponsor:  
Ellen G. Friedman  
*Department of Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies*

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### **ABSTRACT**

In her three-part memoir *Auschwitz and After*, Holocaust survivor Charlotte Delbo writes of her experiences as a political prisoner in the concentration camps – as well as those of other women – and records moments of brutality and violence inflicted upon women by the Nazi regime. Written in the form of individual narratives – or *petits récits* – Delbo’s memoir focuses on how women were targeted *as women* and shows how women’s bodies became sites of violation during the Holocaust. In her article “Women and the Holocaust: Analyzing Gender Difference,” Pascale R. Bos, an associate professor at the University of Texas at Austin, examines the ways that survivors represent themselves in their narratives and concludes that, “whether survivors are aware of it or not, and whether they like it or not, notions about gender . . . and ideas about the role of gender oppression during the Holocaust do filter into the self portraits they produce” (28); in other words, gender significantly influences *how* Holocaust survivors tell their stories, which is important to remember when reading Holocaust narratives, especially those written by women. In her memoir *Auschwitz and After*, Delbo varies her writing styles – specifically, the degree to which her writing is metaphorical or literal – in an attempt to, initially, ease herself and her readers into the brutal realities of women’s experiences in the camps before, eventually, completely submerging writer and reader in a world in which women’s bodies are transformed into sites of violation.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Typically, descriptions of violence against victims of the Holocaust tend to be generalized – many scholars and critics arguing that examining the ways women, in particular, suffered under the Nazi regime privileges women above men (Kaplan 38) and ignores the ways that *all* Jews were targeted – but there were specific methods of torturing women that directly assaulted their femininity. In her chapter entitled “Mengele, the Gynecologist, and Other Stories of Women’s Survival,” American Holocaust literary scholar Sara R. Horowitz speaks of “gender wounding,” which she defines as “a particularly female suffering communicated . . . by [Holocaust] survivors who experienced a ‘shattering of something innate and important to her sense of her own womanhood’” (Ephgrave 27). Similarly, Nicole Ephgrave, in her 2016 article “On Women’s Bodies: Experiences of Dehumanization during the Holocaust,” details the dehumanization Jewish women, specifically, experienced during the Holocaust and claims that women’s bodies became a site of Nazi violation (17): Jewish women endured amenorrhea, rape, and invasive gynecological examinations (14), crude body searches and body shaves (21), and forced sterilization (24). Pregnant women and women with children, especially, suffered extreme hardships:

Women were subjected to involuntary abortion (as well as taking away children or killing them outright) . . . expectant Jewish mothers were signaled out for sadistic torture before a cruel death . . . once women in the ghettos and concentration camps realized that pregnancy meant certain death, clandestine abortions and infanticide became lifesaving alternatives. (Ephgrave 25)

Since women experienced gender-specific violence during the Holocaust, it makes sense that many female survivors – including Delbo – detail in their narratives the trauma and suffering they endured in the camps *as women*. Ultimately, then, gender simply cannot be ignored when looking at camp experiences, for the Nazi regime targeted women in ways that directly attacked their womanhood and

femininity – the one thing that women tried their hardest to hold onto in a time when everything else was stripped away from them.

At the beginning of her memoir, Delbo relies on her past experiences – those from her life before the Holocaust – to make sense of the violence she and the other women experience in the camps – and, in the process, creates a kind of buffer between the gruesomeness and horror of her experiences and her readers. While describing, for example, a pile of female corpses lying in the snow – “naked. Stacked side by side. White, a bluish whiteness against the snow. Heads shaved, pubic hair straight and stiff” (17) – Delbo recalls a distant memory in which she and her father watch a truck deliver mannequins – “dummies” – for a store’s display window: “the dummies were bare, their joints clearly visible. The men . . . carried them carefully, laying them down near the wall on the hot sidewalk” (17-18). Several sentences later, Delbo writes, “now the dummies are lying in the snow, bathed in a winter light which reminds me of the sunlight on the asphalt” (18). When forced to confront, then, the violated and disregarded female bodies within the camps – so wildly different than anything she’d encountered in her life before – she recalls images of mannequins from her past as a way of trying to understand her present situation. Just as Delbo will do throughout the rest of her narrative for her readers, Delbo eases *herself* into the horrors and realities of life in the camps – in order to make sense of “the lack . . . of an ‘ordinary human environment,’ a “world inhabited only by dummies” (Kamel 70).

### USE OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

As part of this sort of initiation process – for both herself and her readers – Delbo employs figurative language – namely, metaphors and similes – to convey the Nazis’ unthinkable assault on women’s bodies. She describes one woman with legs “so thin that . . . they looked like swinging bean poles, scarecrow legs” (24); another woman who, wrapped in a blanket and jumping to stay warm, is “a female skeleton” – “naked,” “ribs and pelvic bones . . . clearly visible,” and “small, gaunt” feet – “a dancing female skeleton” (26); and yet another with a “scrawny body” (28), “a dummy in a striped uniform” (27). Delbo also writes of the women “whom we will find dead when we awaken” and notes how “each dead woman is as light or as heavy as the shadows of the night” (57). In his 2000 article “Unbearable Witness: Charlotte Delbo’s Traumatic Timescapes,” English and Comparative Literature professor Michael Rothberg writes, “in not attempting to find words for the ‘unthinkable,’ Delbo succeeds in representing an aspect of the *experience* of the victims” (142). Delbo’s use of figurative language, then, grants readers access to *a piece* of the horror women endured in the camps while, at the same time, maintaining space between the readers and the realities of the women’s experiences. Just as Delbo slowly reacquaints herself with and eases herself back into the trauma of her Holocaust experience, she does the same for her readers because she knows firsthand the true extent to which women’s bodies became sites of violation under the Nazi regime. As if concerned about the well-being of her reader, Delbo – in these early moments of her memoir, at least – couches her most disturbing and harrowing images in metaphorical language and eases her audience into facing the violation of women’s bodies head-on.

In another wrenching scene early in *Auschwitz and After*, Delbo relies on figurative language to convey her physical distance – but also her emotional distance – from a horrific scene unfolding before her eyes. During roll call one day, Delbo writes of several trucks that pass by “full of women,” all of whom “shout in our direction”: “their mouths shout, their arms stretched out toward us shout, everything about them is shouting. Each body is a shout. All of them torches flaming with cries of terror” (33). Although Delbo places the living and the dead in close proximity to one another throughout her narrative, she makes clear her physical distance from this violation of women’s bodies in this particular moment. Calling each woman a shout – a typically loud human reaction filled with emotion and angst – and a flaming torch – an object that burns bright so that others can see – Delbo poetically and simultaneously captures the women’s distress and trauma and shows readers, yet again, women’s bodies as sites of violation. Delbo’s use of figurative language creates space between herself and this experience, and she grants her readers that same distance – the use of another metaphor, then, serving as a mechanism for allowing herself and her readers a kind of emotional breather.

**ABANDONMENT OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE**

As Delbo continues writing, though, she gradually – and, ultimately, completely – abandons any use of figurative language and, instead, relies on literalness and bluntness to convey the terror and degradation felt by the women. During roll call one morning, the doctor appears to “renew [his] supply of guinea pigs in the medical-experiment block” (53) where he “cut[s] open our [the women’s] bellies” (53) and “sterilize[s] [them] in the surgical ward” (95). Delbo also recounts instances of violence inflicted upon women by the SS: one woman walked “beyond the limit by less than twenty steps,” so “the SS raised his gun and took aim” (69). Another woman is dragged to block 25, to her death:

Her knees scrape the ground. Her clothing, pulled up by the tug of her sleeves, is wound round her neck. Her trousers – men’s trousers – are undone and drag inside out behind her, fastened to her ankles . . . her loins are exposed, her emaciated buttocks, soiled by blood and pus, are dotted with hollows. She is howling. Her knees are lacerated by the gravel. (86)

When the numbers do not “come out right” during roll call, too, Taube “leaves with his dog to go through the blocks,” and when he returns, “he whistles softly to call the dog that follows him. The dog is dragging a woman by the nape of her neck” (101). Delbo’s only option while in the camps is to confront the violence and terror enacted head-on, and she forces her readers to do the same: she abandons her use of figurative language and, in the process, forgoes any kind of buffer that distances the reader from the brutal realities of women’s experiences during the Holocaust. In her 2018 article, “Dismembering Remembering: Mourning with Disgust in Delbo’s *Auschwitz and After*,” interdisciplinary writer and scholar Amanda K. Greene argues that Delbo’s graphic descriptions of the dead women’s bodies brings readers into “uncomfortable contact” with the bodies even though “the experience of trauma” that Delbo and her comrades endured “cannot be mimetically reproduced or transferred” (489). And while “the impossibility of a full witnessing of the experiences of the Holocaust” (Rothberg 143-144) remains, by removing these figurative boundaries initially established by Delbo, she ultimately forces her readers to confront the same horrors women confronted in the camps as their bodies became sites of violation; after all, Delbo and the other women were not allowed any sort of distance from the horrors of the camps, so why should she continue to grant that kind of privilege to her readers?

It is important to note, though, that Delbo makes clear in her narrative that, over time, she and her comrades become somewhat desensitized to the violent experiences of women in the camps. While returning from roll call, Delbo sees “dead women strewn about on the snow, in the puddles,” and she notes that “sometimes we had to step over them. They were just ordinary obstacles so far as we were concerned” (35). Behind block 25, too, Delbo could see a “heap of naked corpses and the glittering eyes of the rats” that were “devouring them,” yet Delbo and her comrades “looked at them without fear” (41). And at morning roll call, a “procession” of women “naked on stretchers” passes by – “the legs – the shinbones – hang over the side with their thin, bare feet at the end. The head hangs over the other side, bony and shaven” (66) – and the individuals carrying the dead women simply “fling the body on the pile,” “return with an empty stretcher,” and “pass by again with a new corpse” (67). In Greene’s aforementioned article, she considers how “forms of sensation and transmission . . . might circumvent” the inaccessibility of “the pain of another” and concludes that “disgust, as an intense bodily sensation . . . has a privileged access to this corporeal landscape that can carry it across bodies and between subjects” (486). In these moments of indifference for Delbo and other women, then, feelings of disgust have subsided and, instead, numbness and detachment have taken over. For the reader, though, disgust and terror never disappear, and it is precisely this continual feeling of despair that allows readers a glimpse into a world that is otherwise unknown and unreachable. Significantly, too, scholar Sara Ahmed writes, “to be disgusted is after all to *be affected by what one has rejected*” (Ahmed qtd. in Greene). As time progresses for Delbo and the women, the violation of women’s bodies becomes commonplace – perhaps even something that they came to accept – but for the reader, as the narrative continues, reading about the brutal treatment of women’s bodies in the camps can never be accepted. So while readers continue to

grapple to make sense of the trauma women endured during the Holocaust, Delbo's writing serves as a reminder that, for the women, it was what it was.

### **CONCLUSION**

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At the very end of *Auschwitz and After's* second volume, Delbo writes a poem that removes entirely the space between writer and audience and addresses the reader directly:

You who are passing by  
well dressed in all your muscles  
how can we forgive you  
that all are dead  
You are walking by and drinking in cafés  
you are happy she loves you  
or moody worried about money  
how how  
will you ever be forgiven  
by those who died  
so that you may walk by  
dressed in all your muscles  
so that you may drink in cafés  
be younger every spring (229-230)

Whereas her memoir starts, then, by relying on figurative language that establishes a metaphorical barrier between her readers and the horrors of life in the camps, Delbo gradually, strategically strips those barriers away until she and her audience occupy exactly the same space—engage, in this poem, at least, in a kind of pseudo-conversation. All the while, though, Delbo writes with empathy and compassion, knowing that what she and the other women experienced in the camps as their bodies became sites of violation would haunt those who read her story. Intuitively, it seems, Delbo understands the importance of *how* she writes the female experience during the Holocaust just as much—if not more—as *what* she writes. Despite all the violence Delbo witnessed and experienced in Auschwitz, as a woman, her innate sense of empathy and nurturance remained, and, ultimately, it is her compassion that compels her to take hold of the reader's hand—just as a mother would, perhaps, gently hold onto her child—and show them—in the most sensitive of ways possible given the circumstances—the violation of women's bodies under the Nazi regime. When reading Holocaust narratives written by women, it becomes clear that their styles and ways of deliverance vary greatly; however, within the pages of their story, one will be able to find empathy and love, compassion and care—even in the smallest of ways. Ultimately, then, women's experiences during the Holocaust are unique to them *as women*, and the ways that they tell their stories—the ways that they naturally provide glimpses into their nurturing nature—provide scholars and students, readers and listeners with a new perspective into the ways women experienced and processed the horrors of the camps—and, by extension, how female Holocaust survivors remember and speak of the violence inflicted upon their bodies.

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