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The Holocaust and the Art of Drawing

Legacies of Silence: The Visual Arts and Holocaust Memory

Imperial War Museum, London

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The book was published by the Imperial War Museum and Philip Wilson Publishers

From April through August 2001 a drawing exhibition was held at the Imperial War Museum that centered around a body of graphic works produced in internment, in ghettos, deportation centers and extermination camps, between 1939 and 1945. An artist with a specialist interest in the continuity of drawing traditions, curator Glenn Sujo strives, as maintained in the press release, “to re-establish the legitimacy of work produced by victims and survivors of the Holocaust within 20th century art history. Their work is considered in the context of artistic precedents, both Jewish and Christian, such as Otto Dix, Käthe Kollwitz, Paul Klee, and Jankel Adler.” The exhibition was accompanied by a book described by the curator, in a conversation, as his aesthetic “creed.” In the introduction he writes: “Consistently, I looked for evidence of a dialogue with *drawing as drawing*, with its tactility, rigorous analysis of line, economy of means and tonal nuances (alluding to shades of psychological depth and meaning).”

Two innovative points, to my mind, surfaced while reading the book. One is the possibility of referring to the Jewish fate in visual terms; the other, related point, is setting the Holocaust within the boundaries of aesthetic thought. The

impossible linkage of these far-removed poles, verging on sacrilege, is perhaps made possible through the thin line of drawing – the book’s protagonist. The book furnishes a less familiar perspective on the Holocaust, through the art of drawing; moreover, it exposes the quintessential capacities of drawing.

One of the most piercing pages in the book juxtaposes Jacobo Pontormo’s 1518 drawing *Dead Christ* and Léon Delarbre’s 1945 drawing *Mort de Misere* from the Dora-Mittelbau camp. Both depict bodies with their heads falling backward following death by torture. The former, an epitome of anatomic drawing, places suffering within the cycle of meaning that bridges between classical sculpture and Christian painting. The body is well-shaped like that of a Greek athlete, and it is slanted as if about to rise up, hinting at an anticipated resurrection. The head is indeed dropped back, but the face, the eyes and the mouth seem to be turned to the Father-God, as if asking: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Léon Delarbre’s corpse is also portrayed at an angle, albeit one that is tantamount to an insult thrust at the European humanist tradition: We observe the figure from between its legs, through its genitalia; the upper part of its body draws away from us, falling into a total void. The bed of pillows supporting the corpse in Pontormo’s drawing is replaced here with a surface consisting of other, similarly anonymous and orphaned corpses. “The pace and urgency of line,” says Sujo, “link Pontormo and Delarbre across time, instilling life into their forms.” However, Delarbre’s drawing is forced to address forms of the human body unprecedented in art, for there is a canon for skeleton drawing and a canon for sketching the muscles and the flesh enveloping it that shape the body’s casing, but there is no set of rules on how to depict a “bag of bones”.

Discussing the Holocaust through art necessarily triggers controversial questions pertaining to the interrelations between Holocaust and fiction. In response to the question how are we to preserve the memory of the Holocaust, the curator quotes Jorge Semprun: "Through the artifice of a work of art, of course." In a similar vein, he also quotes Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi: "I have no doubt whatever that its [the Holocaust's, N.D.] image is being shaped not at the historian's anvil, but at the novelist's crucible."

Personally, I have little faith in the idea of documentation, yet with respect to the Holocaust I find it hard to read fiction; it seems absurd. During those years imagination overpowered life, it swallowed the world.

This wild imagination, for me, concerns not necessarily mass murder, which is not rare in human history, but rather the notion of "transport" – namely, moving entire communities to reside in hellish places whose rules are incomprehensible. What usually astonishes me are the strange rules whereby one could endure and survive; the various privileges, such as the very existence of a hospital in Auschwitz. In this sense I was particularly interested in those drawings in the book that depict life in the camps, among them Leo Haas' *The Technical Drawing Studio* that portrays a meeting of a group of artists working together in a studio in the Terezín camp. The figures, most of them crowded around the table, appear to be sticking their heads into the drawing papers as if wishing to disappear in them. There is no model in the room, and the draughtsmen cling to the act of drawing itself with a type of urgency that is articulated via the "breathtaking fluency" of Leo Haas' fervent line.

Among the "fiction" novelists writing about the Holocaust, one whose writing conveys a sense of credibility is Primo Levi. One may say that his books are characterized by a sketch-like quality. Fortunately, they do not purport to be

documentary-photographic, which would have rendered us, the readers, as possessing a voyeuristic curiosity; neither are they narrative fabrications that attempt to compete, unsuccessfully, with history's monstrous imagination. Drawing, at least in the traditional sense, is concurrently in the eye of the beholder and in the universe. It is the eye tracing the contours of the object, accompanied by the motion of the hand that holds the pencil. It is where the universe and the eye converge via mediating means. An object emerges that a-priori incorporates the subjective point of view. The graphic artist re-creates the already existent. The frugality of drawing makes it an apt tool for recounting those times.

In my visit to London this spring, during which I saw the Holocaust drawings exhibition, I also visited an exhibition of Botticelli's drawings for Dante's *Divine Comedy* at the Royal Academy of Arts. Dante's *Inferno* is the cultural prototype for a depiction of hell; it is part of the Christian cosmogony, and as such, is dominated by the divine logic whose presence is reinforced in Botticelli's exquisite, refined visual version. Botticelli employs the same lines and the same rhythm when drawing all three volumes of the *Commedia* – *Inferno*, *Purgatory* and *Paradise* – together forming a single masterpiece of wisdom, both in the divine sense and in the sense of the Renaissance ideal of Human Reason, one of whose quintessential representatives was artist Sandro Botticelli himself. Inspired by Glenn Sujo's book, I wonder whether and in what way could the artists, concentration camp inmates, utilize an intricate drawing doctrine, passed down from the Renaissance?

In his well-known essay "Primo Levi Goes for Soup and Remembers Dante" (*Raritan* vol. 13, no. 4, 1983), alluding to the chapter "The Canto of Ulysses" in Primo Levi's book *Survival in Auschwitz*, Zvi Yagendorf writes: "Not only does

Levi's story bears the burden of a personal and a collective suffering, but it repeats a venerable scene of traditional instruction in which Italian *liceo* students read and memorized a famous (and uplifting) passage of Dante about Ulysses speaking out of the fires of hell. Remembered or reconstructed by Primo in the *Lager* on the way to fetch the soup, that passage of verse (and by implication that classroom tradition) is subjected to the test of the modern hell which rivals the punishments of the *Inferno* but justifies them as an instrument of racial and political hygiene rather than as the practice of divine wisdom."

While walking together to fetch the soup, Primo Levi tries to teach his young companion Italian, but according to Yagendorf who follows Levi's story: "What would be the point of teaching the language through words which express the subjection of slaves to the violence of their oppressors and the needs of their own bodies? Instead a great scene of instruction and storytelling presents itself to Primo's mind [...] that slaves can make themselves free by daring to contemplate words whose burden is the incitement to adventure and the exercise of the will."

Yagendorf mentions Osip Mandelstam who wrote that the rhythms of the *Commedia* are walking rhythms, the walk of Dante and Virgil through the Circles of Hell, compared in the essay to the walk of Primo Levi and the *Pikolo* (the messenger of the work *Kommando* in the camp) to bring soup. Walking is an allegory for freedom, and perhaps the act of drawing stands for a walk on a small-scale, the line's journey on the paper, while recollecting and learning from the Great Masters in a moment of concentration and illumination in the midst of *Inferno*. It is equivocal whether such a view, that credits art with the power to raise a man's head under such circumstances, contradicts the other experience, that regards the Shoah as a fall from the grace of culture into an indescribable

black pit, or that as human beings we are doomed to oscillate forever between the darkness of our bodies and the light of language. In one of the drawings in the book – Jan Borke’s *The Deportees* – a gloomy group of stooped people in heavy coats are seen walking away from the viewer toward a narrow passage between two tall houses sketched in dramatic perspective. Perspective, the symbol of Renaissance enlightenment, is inverted here, coming to signify a “dead end”.