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Teaching and Editing at Worlds' End: Collective Trauma and Individual Witness in American Holocaust Poetry

CARY NELSON

ABSTRACT

American poetry movements have regularly sought to solidify their collective self-image and public face as aesthetic and political communities by producing movement anthologies. Later generations often seek to codify the past in the same way. Such anthologies are inherently topical, but one topic—the Holocaust—has not served well to instantiate a literary community. It was in the nature of the death camps to obliterate all human meaning and all vestiges of community. As a result, a collection of Holocaust poetry cannot embody contemporary community; if anything, it represents a kind of anti-community. Teaching Holocaust poetry consequently presents severe challenges to the humanistic expectations of students and faculty alike—and defines the humanities at their most fierce.

A moonscape from creation's day,
Sand and stones, bushes, bare clay.
Grayed grasses, wild cries of alarm.
Here where all suffer final harm.
(Karl Schnog, "The Stone Quarry")¹

We, the rescued,
From whose hollow bones death had begun to whittle his flutes,
And on whose sinews he had already stroked his bow—
Our bodies continue to lament
With their mutilated music.
(Nelly Sachs, "Chorus of the Rescued" 25)²

The gravest and most painful testimony of the modern world, the one that possibly involves all other testimonies to which this epoch must answer [...] is the testimony of the dissolution, the dislocation, or the conflagration of community.
(Nancy, *Inoperative Community* 1)

I.

When American poets began to write Holocaust poems in great numbers, as they did beginning in the 1960s and 1970s and still more extensively in later decades, they did so under the shadow of anguished witness from European poets,

¹ Translated from the German original, which can be found in Nader (220-21). I offer a different translation from that in *Traumatic Verses*. Schnog was in Buchenwald when he was liberated by the U.S. Army.

² Translated from the German by Michael Roloff. Sachs was a German Jew who fled to Sweden in 1940.

brief examples of which serve as my first two epigraphs. Many of the American poets writing were not, of course, members of the wartime generation. While some took on the burden of creating post-traumatic memory in themselves, that alone did not guarantee their work either authenticity or originality. Inherently belated—not by way of Harold Bloom's notorious claims about personal combat with predecessors, reiterated throughout his *The Anxiety of Influence*, but rather with inescapable historical and generational belatedness—they worked at a distance combining rupture, erasure, difference, and diminishment. Moreover, the most influential of the American wartime generation who wrote Holocaust poems—Randall Jarrell, Sylvia Plath, Anthony Hecht, Charles Reznikoff—had found distinctive voices that demonstrably altered the worldwide history of Holocaust poetry. The next generation of American poets were thus doubly belated. They wrote at a historical remove and under the shadow of major achievements.

By the 1990s, the sheer quantity of American Holocaust poems had made them a notable component of contemporary American literature. Throughout the twentieth century, such outpourings of poems on a single topic had tended to create a collective sense of community, often with a sense of shared commitment and belief. To be sure, the more powerful poem cohorts often had more than a purely literary origin and purpose. From the poetry of the New Negro Renaissance of the 1920s to the revolutionary leftwing poetry of the 1930s to the poetry of the Black Arts movement in the 1960s to the anti-Vietnam poetry of the 1960s and 1970s to the feminist poetry of the 1970s, these poem cohorts were often linked to social movements (cf. Nelson, *Revolutionary Memory* 141–80). They helped both to create and to promote these social movements. Simultaneously inspiring and inspired by them, the poems are not fully separable from their cultural and political origins and effects.

More exclusively literary movements also created poetry cohorts that defined discursive communities. Imagism is an early example. Imagism had what amounted to a subcultural literary politics with no real world political consequences. A literary community can also have what amounts to a fantasy politics. Contemporary Language poetry, I would suggest, clearly shaped a collective vision, and it has a complex and interesting subcultural literary politics with political referentiality in the conventional sense of politics, but it has no real world political effects. In any case, a true literary community involves a sense of linguistic interplay, as poets either write variations on the same or similar topics, echo diction from one another, or ring changes on one another's rhetoric and metaphors. Necessarily unstable and mutable in their own time, literary communities can appear far more stable in retrospect, their bonds seeming more stable to future generations than to contemporaries. Their status as literary communities can thus come into existence through the process of institutionalization—and be strengthened, weakened, or modified for future generations as a result. Indeed, literary communities themselves can be objects of canonization.

Whether linked to social movements or not, literary collectivities or communities often promote their cohesiveness with anthologies. If collectives are often considered more fleeting, anthologies often urge on us the appearance of the social and linguistic cohesion of a literary community. Retrospective anthologies

certainly help give credence and coherence to an earlier poetry cohort, but it is notable that anthologies also appear in media res. Anthologies such as *Some Imagist Poets* (1915), *Caroling Dusk* (1927), the three volumes of *Unrest* (1929–1931), *Black Fire* (1968), *No More Masks* (1973), and *In the American Tree* (1986), helped define and promote contemporary literary and cultural movements.

One of the legacies of the last generation of scholarly reflection and technological change, however, is a growing awareness that we can no longer confidently define what an anthology is. We have learned that a large digital archive can be an anthology. A repertoire of plays performed can be an anthology, even if not collected in book form. So too can a book series published over time constitute an anthology. As I will attempt to show in what follows, an anthology might also be the record of a seminar's work, and might, therefore, embody a version of the seminar's experience and even create a temporary community for a body of poetry that otherwise resists one.

Yet in the wake of the Holocaust such a notion of collectivity is riddled with a sense of impossibility. However suffused with conflict, death, irony, and hopelessness, there are nonetheless embattled communities evoked in the literature of war, urban decay, and throughout literary dystopia. Not so the literature of the Holocaust. It is the limit case for the modern world's dreams of community and culture since the country's founding, but it is not clear that they survived the Holocaust intact, though American poets who write about the Holocaust are by no means all aware what history can do to their work. Of course there can be no community without communication, and effective Holocaust poetry aborts and obliterates communication at every point. Everything it displays or references about the death camps with the clarity it merits must be fundamentally incomprehensible. We can neither understand it, nor truly internalize it. It remains either an encapsulated other we cannot integrate into ourselves, or a force that simply sweeps us aside.

Both writing and reading Holocaust poetry fall within the work of mourning, but it is mourning without end. All Holocaust poems can offer contemporary readers is a kind of world weary melancholy in the face of the survival of a thoroughly compromised civilization. For post-Holocaust generations the direct experience of survivor guilt has gradually been replaced by the more universal burden of life lived without rationale for or confidence in sustaining values.

If there was a sense of community in the Holocaust seminar I taught in 2006 and 2009, it was because we had resisted the ultimate message of that body of poetry. Our seminar community was not a victory over death but rather evidence of our withdrawal from death's embrace. There was an uneasy sense that we could only be true to the poetry by wholly accepting its bleak epistemology, while at the same time realizing we would inevitably fall short of doing so. As I made clear from the first day of class, the actual experience of being in a concentration camp is inaccessible. Nor would we likely want to live in that world if we could. Indeed, an experience of the camp could only be complete if we believed it would never end, that escape was impossible. There is no true concentration camp tourist voyeurism. Related claims could be laid against the poetry, which

could never be the thing itself, it being necessarily involved in a project of mediated representation.

A Holocaust poetry anthology should properly take on the same uneasy burden of constitutive impossibility, thereby separating itself from all other poetry anthologies. Despite this, however, we still seem inclined to think of the anthology as a coherent literary genre that can define a community both for a historical referent and for its contemporary readers. One thing is clear: If you define this or any other contemporary genre entirely on the basis of previous historical periods, you are likely to be deceived. And if you embrace a set of earlier period anthologies uncritically, generating transhistorical principles in what amounts to belles lettres enthusiasm, the limitations of vision will multiply. Despite editorial efforts to promote anthologies as self-evident entities, that is never quite what they are. The Holocaust has made that erasure of generic confidence decisive. If properly eliminates confidence that any anthology is assured of creating the community it seeks.

Whether I can live up to my caveat about the necessary historical specificity of anthologies in what follows remains to be seen. But I will test it within a subgenre of anthologies—poetry anthologies, specifically with one on twentieth century American poetry that I edited myself and one on Holocaust poetry which the participants in a seminar that I taught contemplated editing. Both derive from what sometimes seems that barely remembered century, the last one. Neither of these anthologies, however, is a vehicle for sociability; let alone celebratory community, though one might have taken some anthologies from earlier periods to be just that. Both these anthologies are efforts to test readers' tolerance for the burdens of history; the second example, the Holocaust anthology, most intensely so. It should be designed to induct you into the society of the damned, to make your life unlivable. Its referents are lethal, and the understandings it promotes are simultaneously undermined and condemned. A Holocaust anthology properly cannot even assemble an oxymoronic community of the lost. Witness to the end of humanity—to the loss of any fundamental unifying human characteristics and to the end of all reliable value—it cannot cohere, except as a withering counter-value to everything affirmative we have ever allowed ourselves to believe. If, as I suggested above, you fall short of the full import of Holocaust poetry, then you might in its wake seek forms of community that appear to incorporate acknowledgment of historical disaster. But that lessens and ameliorates the lessons of the Holocaust, and is worse still, for post-Holocaust contemporary American poets, for whom the link to the historical capacity to testify is broken.

III.

But I will begin more briefly with the less daunting example, the *Anthology of Modern American Poetry* that I edited for Oxford University Press which gives considerable space to more long-running forms of historical trauma, from war to slavery and the trauma of race relations in the United States. When I was editing that collection, I took it as an opportunity to put in people's hands a collection that would substantially revise the modern American poetry canon. As Paul

Lauter suggested repeatedly in *Canons and Contexts* and then put into practice in editing the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, there is no better way to cement such a change than by encouraging people to teach repeatedly a revised canon. Whether it is still possible to capture the attention of the general public—as Ritus Griswold, Francis Palgrave, and Louis Untermeyer each did with poetry anthologies in their own time—is another matter. In any case, as I point out in “The Economics of Textbook Reform” (*Office Hours* 165–80), my transformational aim for my anthology of twentieth-century American poetry did not mean abandoning most canonical authors, though some would be represented by less commonly anthologized texts. Rather, for the most part it meant combining the traditional canon with long forgotten, neglected, or previously unpublished texts that I and many other scholars had discovered and revived. But it was also inescapably a personal anthology; I made the choices in consultation with many other anthologies and critical books, but I did not actually consult anyone in detail. I was not looking for a consensual collection. I was testing and retesting my personal taste and cultural agendas against the widening field of my reading.³

I also had a larger agenda at work: to foreground American poets' engagements with history, politics, and social life, elements of our poetic heritage frequently suppressed by conservative cohorts in the discipline of literary studies. Thus part of the historical context of my editing was an effort to counter a disciplinary bias, one perhaps most prominent among poetry scholars. But I also had a broader cultural aim: to create a community of poetry readers who shared a commitment to a long-term tropically inflected tradition of historical engagement. Although Marjorie Perloff would assert in a *Symptome* review that my only criterion for inclusion was Communist Party membership, in truth such poets in the collection as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Allen Tate, and John Crowe Ransom did a superb job of disguising their CP allegiances if they had them. But poems of political and social engagement range across many issues—race, class, and gender being among them. Sometimes that meant choosing a poet's most characteristic and well-known work, say Robert Hayden's “Middle Passage” and “Night, Death, Mississippi,” and sometimes it meant picking a less typical poem. At a 2008 conference at the University of Iowa, Robert von Hallberg would claim that Hayden's best work was the poetry that did not address race, that indeed gave no hint he might be an African American poet. I cannot agree with von Hallberg, at least on the first point, though Hayden's poems about race do not telegraph his own racial identity.

³ Oxford itself, in effect, was risking about \$200,000 on the marketability of my personal preferences. It never occurred to me to worry about the monetary investment, but I did worry about whether the anthology would succeed. My Oxford editor did panic at the end and list the readers for the manuscript as coeditors. None of them had been asked to do more than approve publication and thus made no actual suggestions for the book. So I was more than a little shocked to find them listed as coeditors when I received page proofs. I objected rather forcefully, and the names were dropped, though they still survive on some websites. Oxford presumably thought they could protect sales by making the project seem a collective one. In any case it has gone through several printings and continues to sell well after a decade, despite the large resale market.

But sometimes I chose an uncharacteristic poem by a given poet, a poem with more edgy social or political engagements than much of the rest of the poet's work. So Robert Pinsky is there with "Shirt," a rather uncharacteristic labor poem, and with "The Unseen," a Holocaust poem. Mark Doty let me know he was uneasy in being represented by his aggressive, nearly apocalyptic "Homo Will Not Inherit," but in truth, had I chosen a second Doty poem at the time it would have been the equally political and rhetorically flamboyant poem "Esta Noche" about a transvestite dancer. Both poems, I might note, are in Doty's 2008 new and selected poems, *Fire to Fire*. He thus clearly considers them part of his own poetic canon, even if he would not choose them as the two poems most appropriate to represent his work. One of my colleagues asked why I did not pick a Doty poem about Beethoven instead; I believe the whole anthology answers that question. Meanwhile, I included Hart Crane's "Episode of Hands," an overtly homosexual poem that Doty derides in one of his essays. I have enjoyed teaching "Episode of Hands" and accept no shame for including it. Even this brief summary of motivated choices and consequent ironies shows that anthologies are artifices, not neutral or objective representations of any given historical terrain. If they put forward the illusion of bonded community, that too is a construction.

Perhaps because the project was so self-consciously constructed, there are no inclusions I would now omit from *Anthology of Modern American Poetry*, but there are omissions I regret. Foremost among those would be Aaron Kramer's remarkable 1952 twenty-six-poem sequence "Denmark Vesey," about a failed 1822 slave revolt in South Carolina. It is perhaps the most impressive poem about African American history ever written by a white American, and its surreal, dehumanizing, and expressive violence draws inevitable comparisons with the Holocaust. As Michael Thurston writes about "Vesey's Nightmare," one of the more harrowing poems in the sequence, it is reminiscent "of reports out of the postwar Nuremberg Trials of Nazi relics made of human remains" (502). "Vesey's Nightmare" describes a Charleston banquet at which plantation owners devour the bodies of their slaves:

The lovely brocade their ladies wore
Had once been Negro grandmothers' hair;
The gems that blinked on their arms like stars
Were bright Negro eyes that had lately shed tears. (50)

The plantation owners' view of black Americans and their bodies as raw material to be processed and consumed echoes as well through the whole long internal history of genocide. In retrospect, not only the sequence's stark thematics, but also its intricate rhymes and stanzaic forms, should have brought it into the anthology.

Yet while editing the book, I simply did not listen carefully enough to Kramer's music. I did not spend enough time with him to succumb to his rhymed, lyrical strengths. Several poems omitted from the anthology have since sent me a box with all their books in it, challenging me to read them more fully. I would now find space for William Heyen as a result. When I do a second edition there will be others additions as well, though the controlling criteria are unlikely to change.

Despite my history with the Oxford *Anthology of Modern American Poetry*, I would not necessarily choose to be a lone wolf editor for every new project I might undertake. But a completely consensual anthology covering a hundred or more years—an alternative way of editing the Oxford anthology—has a good likelihood of being too conventional. When Larry Grossberg, Paula Tretcher, and I were editing *Cultural Studies*, we solved that problem by agreeing that any one of us could choose essays for the book whether the others agreed or not. That is part of what ensured the book's diversity. Of course, the cultural studies collection has always been something more than a book to the 900 people who attended the 1990 conference "Cultural Studies Now and in the Future." The substantial excerpts from the question and commentary sessions are memorializing fragments of still longer debates that people experienced at the time. In much the same way, the poems in a Holocaust anthology growing out of a seminar would be at once ghosts and gifts of the seminar participants' discussions and experiences.

Whether the editing principle we used for *Cultural Studies* would work for a poetry anthology I am not sure, but it might serve well a small group of editors if space and budgetary constraints allowed. Certainly no single universal aesthetic, no common language, can fully encompass any complex set of national poetic traditions. But that was not my goal with the Oxford *Anthology of Modern American Poetry*. A common language cannot be more than an idiolect. But it might be the idiolect you want to promote, the language you would have others speak. That was my aim with the traditions I tried to chart in the Oxford.

I have, however, thought about the need to edit a possible poetry anthology on the Holocaust quite differently. The poem "Shulamith Writes *Fuck You*" by the contemporary American poet Jehanne Dubrow—first published in Dubrow's *The Promised Bride* and reprinted in Charles Fishman's anthology *Blood to Remember*—is one I would include in that anthology. Most of the lines have an irregularly placed caesura. In an email to a graduate seminar in which I taught the poem, Eric Anderson classified it among poems that "surge with deflated anger":⁴

Fuck you you chimney stack
you living body made to choke
on Prussian blue blue face burned black
you rigor mortis turned to smoke
fuck you you topos bent to make
a rhymed barbarity go fuck
yourself you charcoal comic book
you linearity train track
which travels south while time runs back
to nil fuck you you stains of ink
across the page you stack
of bleeding languages that stink
you gangrene words fuck you black milk
fuck you for all the worlds you broke
(Dubrow 119)

⁴ Comments from seminar participants are published or summarized here (and their names used) with permission. My thanks for that and for Michael Rothberg's suggestions for revising the paper.

This is, as anyone who knows modern poetry at all will immediately recognize, a Holocaust poem. The chimneys in the opening line are from Auschwitz and other Nazi death camps. The “black milk” in the penultimate line is the haunting, grating, unresolvably contradictory “Schwarze Milch” of Paul Celan’s signature Holocaust poem “Todestuge” (“Death Fugue”) from his 1952 collection. “Death Fugue” has acquired virtually sacred status in Holocaust studies. And of course the Shulamith of the title is not only the Shulamith of the “Song of Songs” from the Hebrew Bible and a figure symbolic of the Jewish people, but is also reminiscent of a recurring refrain in Celan’s poem, which evokes contrasting German and Jewish female archetypes, one now marked with Nazi idealization and the other haunted by the crematoria: “when dusk falls to Germany your golden hair / Margarete / your ashen hair Shulamith” (Celan, *Poems* 31). Here in Dubrow’s poem Shulamith voices in part a feminist protest against being taken up in a whole economy of representation, of being used as ideal and destination in a journey that ends at Auschwitz and in poems about the Holocaust.

As Ashley Booth noted in a post to the seminar, the poem embodies a level of anger perhaps only possible once the full scope of the Holocaust became apparent years later. That anger, along with the frustrated impossibility of offering full witness, is embodied in the poem’s silences. The single most famous theoretical challenge to Holocaust poetry is of course Theodor Adorno’s 1949 dictum that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (34). Dubrow’s poem explicitly references Adorno’s line and uncannily answers him by testifying to its truth. She accepts the burden of barbarity and seeks to embody it through obscenity; not only through the repeated use of the *f*-word but also through its yoking with the material barbarism of Holocaust violence and the contamination of all subsequent Holocaust discourse with its ordinary and cumulative obscenities.

Although regularly marked with full and partial rhymes, partly hewing to an iambic metric, the poem is itself an example of the rhymed barbarity it castigates. Thus “you rigor mortis turned to smoke” effectively hurts the stiff bodies from the gas chamber into the ovens. It is perfectly accurate, but stripped of mourning and melancholy. And the line “blue face burned black,” suggesting gassed bodies then incinerated, is not only intolerably alliterated and thereby brutally aestheticized, but also linked to (and violated by) the Prussian blue of the previous phrase. That was Adorno’s point as well, that all post-Holocaust efforts at elevated understanding are now always already doomed and indicted. That does not make poetry unnecessary. If we choose to live, it is impossible and necessary at the same time.

Dubrow also invokes the argument that the relentless rationality of final solution planning and execution exemplified the ultimate madness of enlightenment reason when she condemns “your linearity,” a linearity that traverses not only space—but also time—in an epistemological, philosophical, and all-too-material regression to nothingness. That passage in the poem probably also alludes to Martin Amis’s 1991 Holocaust novel *Time’s Arrow, or the Nature of the Offence*, in which the narrator experiences time passing in reverse. In Dubrow’s poem all other Holocaust poems in their many languages are indicted with her own: “you stains of ink / across the page you stack / of bleeding languages that stink / you gangrene words.” The mystical dictum of the word made flesh gets a macabre re-

alization in the Holocaust: Words now fester and decay, the palimpsest of layered meanings accumulated over time is now no more than an evocation of those stacks of bleeding bodies so familiar from liberated camp photography. She indicts the materiality of Holocaust history and the anguished poems of testimony, ending with the special, nearly unendurable indictment of the towering poetic signpost on the way to Celan’s post-Holocaust suicide.

Obviously I believe this is an exceptionally strong poem, simultaneously intricately crafted and outrageous, and I would certainly include it in what I am now addressing: a hypothetical Holocaust poetry anthology aimed at connecting with a properly broken cohort of readers, a cohort of readers present in the same time but otherwise disabled, denied decisive agency. But I doubt I would have had the courage or insight to include “Shulamith Writes *Fuck You*” on my own. I had hardly noticed the poem on first reading, having dismissed it as merely vulgar and formulaic, which of course it is, but it is also something more. I owe my interest in the poem to my students, in this case especially to Ashley Booth and Okla Elliott. Part of the argument Elliott made in class was technical:

Every line except #11 (“across the page you stack”) is iambic tetrameter (often textbook-strict iambic tetrameter). Line #11 itself is iambic trimeter, so even in this break from her strict structure, she is using another rather strict structure. And there is perhaps a strong formal reason for this move. Since the poem is 14 lines, metered (albeit tetrametrically instead of pentametrically), and written entirely in (sometimes slant) monohyme, even the most dogmatic among us has to call this a sonnet of some species (and the more liberal-minded among us would have called it a sonnet due to the 14 line length). We could, therefore, view the one non-tetrametric line, which comes roughly at the traditional location for the volta, as a volta of sorts. And thus, in the same way that Dubrow is funhouse-mirroring the traditional form of the sonnet via the tetrameter, the medial spaces, and the irregular monohyme, we could view this as another such tactic, wherein she uses the form to signal the turn, not the content as traditionally would be the practice. In effect, all of her formal strategies complicate the dialogue her poem is engaging in with both Holocaust poetry tradition and the larger Western poetic tradition in general.

I have twice taught this graduate seminar on international poetry of the Holocaust. I was lucky on both occasions to have students in the group from a variety of departments, including Comparative Literature. That meant we had seminar members fluent in German, Hungarian, Polish, and Russian, languages critical for Holocaust studies.⁵ I also had creative writing MFA students in both seminars. Not only are they often very adept at close reading and reflecting on poetic intent, they also have less to lose and thus can be refreshingly irreverent. In fall 2009, the semester in which all the seminar members quoted here participated, my students selected Dubrow’s poem for praise. We discussed it at length, collaborated on a close reading, analysis, and evaluation of it, and came collectively to the conviction that it belonged in the hypothetical Holocaust anthology we kept using as a destination throughout the semester. Making decisions about this hypothetical Holocaust poetry anthology lent additional seriousness to the value judgments we were making, giving us the sense that we could take wider cultural responsibility

⁵ The first time I taught the seminar one student translated fifteen previously untranslated Holocaust poems from Polish to English and commented on them.

ity for our conversation, and provided an illusion of permanence to our claims of quality.

I went through some crises of confidence in editing the Oxford, but nothing comparable to the doubt and unease I have experienced with Holocaust poetry. The poetry of violence always presents difficult ethical challenges, whether it is poetry about the slave trade, the Armenian holocaust, domestic violence, or war. But no other subject unfolds within quite so fierce an injunction as Adorno's. And no other poetry community is founded on its own impossibility. A host of questions descend on the editor of a Holocaust anthology: Have you succumbed to a sentimentality that diminishes this exceptional subject? Is the poem's net of tropes as distinctive as it seems? Have you been taken in by weaknesses you share with the author? Does the author have historical warrant for his or her stance? Does every line succeed, for a Holocaust poem cannot readily suffer a failed passage? Is your very insistence on originality a bankrupt impulse in the wake of the Shoah? Are all notions of poetic consolation or transcendence voided by the legacy of the Holocaust? Is the poem really anything more than a Holocaust cliché? Does the poem betray an unwarranted mastery over its subject? Is the poem sufficiently new and surprising to shatter any complacency we bring to it?

No doubt every anthologist endures crises of confidence, whether through reflexive critique or simple anxiety. An anthology is properly a polemical intervention, whether it aims to alter, consolidate, or commemorate a discursive terrain. What is more, even if your doubts about whether you have gotten it right are turned into inner certainty, the anthology itself can carry no such aura of conviction. Everything included that is unexpected arrives in the reader's world naked and unproven. There being little point in editing an anthology that meets with universal antagonism, it is not as if you do not care. I do not mind attacks from ideological opponents, or even occasional "What were you thinking?" responses by friends to particular choices. American poet Joy Davidman's 1944 "For the Nazis" (734) is the poem in the Oxford *Anthology of Modern American Poetry* that gets that response most often. I quote the opening stanzas:

When you see red
it will be too late;
the night will be dead,
the sun will not wait;
say, can you see
what the sunrise will be?
When you command
The sea to stand still
At the safe edge of the sand,
Do you think that it will?
Say, do you know
where the high tide will go?

Despite my students' reservations, I still find the poem remarkable in its mixture of rhetoric and rage, along with its ironic displacement of Nazi ambition onto the laws and rhythms of nature. But an anthology edited with love, hope, conviction, and cultural ambition that simply fails to sell and slips into silence and oblivion

is not desirable compensation for hard work. Having had 50,000-copy sales and 300-copy sales for books I have edited I can testify to the difference in terms of social relations and cultural impact.

Succeeding economically or not, oddly enough, may be less critical with a Holocaust poetry anthology. It would itself be an effort to create the right act of collective poetic witness, a self-undermining monument directed toward placing an appropriate set of rhetorical burdens on the reader. It is in a special sense an anthology about the impossibility of poetry. It should properly maximize the difficulty of writing the next Holocaust poem, not make it easier. Despite Barbara Benedict's amusing model of the anthology as an opportunity for "dip, sip, and skip" reading (232), the risks in reading a well-edited holocaust collection are not lessened by discontinuous sampling. Every time you sip, you risk an encounter with wounded wonder. If you dip into a well-edited Holocaust anthology, you will be buffeted simultaneously by winds from heaven and hell. As you skip to another poem, you should leave a trail of your own blood behind you. And what chorus of reviews and reader responses would one wish for from a project designed to problematize communication past its epistemological limits.

No other class over forty years worked quite like the seminar I twice taught on Holocaust poetry. It was hard to draw students to enroll in it. Most could not imagine spending fifteen weeks on such a painful topic. Each week's readings were an excruciating burden, sometimes including hundreds of poems from which each student was to choose what he or she felt were the best. Then what might have begun in personal taste had to be defended in emails and in the seminar, with clearly defined standards and criteria grounded in close readings. The precise character of a poem's historical witness, and its capacity to unsettle preexisting assumptions by rhetorical inventiveness and narrative surprise were constant criteria. Sometimes evaluation and experience, however, were at odds, since the poems were unremittingly painful, and thus there was open acknowledgement about how necessary the weekly seminar was—because it was a place to work through the intricate, particular rhetorics of pain. As one student would write, "after a week of reading sometimes hundreds of poems alone, reflecting on them alone, writing about them alone, you crave the community of others who are struggling through them like you." One of the participants would later tell me the seminar "was a bonding experience, but a horrific one." Another would describe himself as "nostalgic for the class, a feeling complicated, of course, with the same conflicting forces of attraction and repulsion that characterize the relationship I developed with Holocaust poetry." Students said over and over again that the readings would have been intolerable without the class as a vehicle for release and resolution. Yet we were haunted by the sense that even our fleeing community violated the lessons learned from the poems themselves.

When we were discussing the challenge of translating Holocaust poetry, I raised the example of anti-Semitic Nazi poetry distributed after Hitler came to power. The question was whether to translate it in a flat, literal style or in such a way as to capture the appeal to an enthusiastic Nazi reader. I offered one poem in a literal translation. Elliott volunteered the alternate version. Three years later he told me he still felt invaded and contaminated by the language he had crafted.

The other key component of the course comes into play here. In addition to a final term paper, each student wrote twelve 500-2,000-word essays over the course of the semester that were distributed to all seminar members via email. Some people consistently produced essays at the longer end of the spectrum. Despite the burden these essays represented, most found them necessary as well. It was important to derive some coherence out of and some perspective on each week's readings. But the most consistent purpose of the weekly posts was to make a chosen poem more painful, to help it exact more seriousness and a higher degree of difficulty from other readers. In doing so, the students were seeking to remain true to Holocaust historical principles. As Eric Anderson pointed out in an email, one standard "for judgment is to assess how close a poem ventures to what Claude Lanzmann deems the 'ring of fire'—the impossible interiority of the Holocaust that surmounts any possible means of representation."⁶

The weekly posts sought overall to make a poem exquisitely wounding. As Anderson wrote, "to some degree, a 'good' Holocaust poem must fracture our standards for Holocaust poetry; standards that are, I argue, determined by the history of poetic aesthetics. Often the poem can break these standards only by offending us. And the poem can offend us by crossing certain borders of representation." Every class session seemed critical; nothing mattered more while we were there. We all thought the three-hour sessions were some of the very best hours of the week. And we always talked about what would and would not make it into the anthology.

One may get a sense of the intensity of the seminar from some of the challenges Phillip Ernstmeier raised in the course of a series of emails to the class. These are also among the conclusions other readers might draw from a Holocaust anthology:

- Death for these poems is not a torment at all. To have escaped, to have been spared, is to have been swallowed by an oblivion darker than the death into which those who were murdered disappeared [...].] to have perished among one's own is more desirable than to have lived to experience the solitude that remains without them. *The life that managed to evade death, if it can be inhabited at all, is unfit for living.*
- How can one speak of being rescued when deliverance only transports those saved from abyss to abyss?
- The speaker's world is a necropolis, populated by the victims for whom no monument commemorates their grave. Within it, he answers to the call of the dead whose voices others do not hear.
- The survivors do not only live off their bodies; *the life of their bodies is that which their bodies expel in order to live. They consume their own death.*
- How can I fulfill my responsibility to the victims of the Holocaust when my responsibility remains bottomless?
- Giving or receiving forgiveness after the Holocaust has been rendered impossible for those interpellated by the blood of the dead. It is not that the horrors cannot be forgiven, as though they (and not others) were essentially unforgivable; it is that none are in a position to grant forgiveness [...].] *those who would forgive first need forgiveness themselves?*

⁶ Claude Lanzmann is the director of the nine-and-a-half hour documentary film *Shoah* (1985), an oral history of the Holocaust.

⁷ On the issue of forgiveness see Améry.

Of course, observations like these typically arose in the context of the week's readings, readings that included both Holocaust poems like those quoted above as epigraphs and theoretical essays from Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg's anthology. I cannot do full justice to the poetry analyses, given their length, but a few excerpts will help. They give us a clear sense of the character of the collective work and dialogue of the seminar, show us how individual responses dovetail, and document the special pressures Holocaust poetry places on readers. Moreover, these representative responses suggest how collectivity in this context enhances and intensifies the character of reading and communication. The seminar continually led all of us to face conclusions we might well have resisted on our own.

Several people chose to write about what Patrick Fadelly called Lily Brett's "spare, documentary, even cinematic, stripped-down language, refusing metaphor." Fadelly further argued that

perhaps the most immediately gripping feature of Brett's poetry [...] is its physical arrangement on the page. Brett makes room for silence, for the white space that encroaches on the words of her testimony. In her sparest poems ("Invisible," "The Toilet," "Possessions of The Rich," "The Last Day") one-word lines mark the standard metric, with every syllable set over against an overwhelming silence of white, with each word therefore emphasized as an act of specific rebellion, a defiant and difficult testimonial speech-act in the face of a witless and witness-less wall. One begins to read the space in her poems not as a passive medium upon which her words are inscribed, but as the active, threatening presence of an absence—not an expectant whiteness, pliant to what is only-as-yet-unsaid, but a concrete instantiation of Celan's "Schnee des Verschwiegenen" ("Mit Wechseldam Schlüssel," *Poems* 58), the snow of that concealed by silence: a whitewashing, a covering hush. As the page thickens with all that is unrevealed (all that is left unspeakable not only by victimizers and those whose silence testifies to collaboration, all that was concealed through the Final Solution itself, one goal of which was to leave only the white silence of ash, to eradicate all witnesses and all traces of itself), Brett's words begin to take on a physical force—especially noticeable when read aloud—as though each syllable were coming at the cost of great struggle, every sound pushed through a constant hum of intervening static, forgetfulness, denial, and loss.

The child of Holocaust survivors, Brett was born in Germany and now lives in the United States. She began writing these spare poems in the 1980s, decades after Robert Creeley had made the style famous. But the techniques take on a different register in the context of the Holocaust. As Anderson put it, "as readers read and the poem is constructed, the readers' eyes descend ever deeper 'back' or 'down' into the landscape of total destruction." Here is "The First Job" in its entirety:

The
first
job
of
every
Sonderkommando
unit
was
to
kill

the
unit
they
were
replacing
the
unit
they
were
replacing
mostly
went
willingly. (67)

Stripped of metaphor, “The First Job” proceeds haltingly, pausing sequentially at spare words that each carries an intolerable freight, until the final word, “willingly,” which evokes not only the soul-destroying work of the *Sonderkommandos* but also the Holocaust generally that life itself may no longer be worth living for anyone. Along the way, “unit” is the brutalized sign of a euphemistic collectivity beyond endurance: a group of Jews charged with disposing of their own murdered people. The word “unit” also invokes the wider organized madness of death camp structure, its logic severed from any human sympathy, from the roundups of Jews to the scheduling of death camp trains to the lines leading up to the gas chambers to the organized disposal of bodies. “Replacing” twice evokes an interchangeable-ity past obscene, while also embodying the logic of Nazi instrumentality. What precisely is being replaced? What human options were replaced when the first unit was formed? Is anything on earth now irreplaceable? Elliott remarked in class that Brett’s poems reminded him of the elongated, emaciated *L’homme qui marche* series of human figures that Giacometti sculpted shortly after World War II. Ernstmeier commented on yet another of these minimalist poems:

Lily Brett’s “The Last Day” suggests that it cannot be. Written in a style of extreme enjambment, seldom including more than one word for every line, the poem does not only encourage readers to linger over singular and solitary words. Forming a frail column down the left margin of the book, spectral, almost invisible, right on the brink of being swallowed by the chasm of the book’s gutter, the form of the poem visually registers the emaciated figures of the Holocaust survivors encountered by the Allies after the Nazis withdrew from the extermination camps. Skeletal, only a wisp remains. Moreover, if the enjambments are heeded, if the breath follows them, this emaciation of the poem produces a disjointed rhythm that mimics survivors’ stunned, lackadaisical responses to their deliverance. Sluggishly it unfolds, staggered by intervals of silence, one after another, one upon another, wearied, lurching, lifting, letter by letter, the sentences of one who knows not where she is, is nowhere, where nowhere is.

In the face of this intensity, unsurprisingly, during the course of the semester a few students skipped a class, reporting later that the readings had been so disturbing that they could not face discussing them. There was also the phenomenon of unexpected shock. We all came to class with a sense of which poem represented

the greatest emotional challenge, but each of us often found that the discussion invested a different poem with still greater power. Sometimes that was fulfilling and sometimes it was unsettling, in the sense that a poem would often provoke unexpectedly powerful emotions and intellectual challenges. The class represented a collective phenomenon, but one that was also substantially unstable.

Another poem that we agreed would make it into our hypothetical anthology is Ilse Weber’s “A Nursery Rhyme from Theresienstadt” (“Theresienstädter Kinderreim”); where Weber was held from 1942 to 1944 before being taken to Auschwitz and murdered that October. The poem reworks a traditional children’s song. It is translated from the German by David Keir Wright. It is, once again, a poem an American poet of a belated generation quite possibly could not have written, dependent as it is both on direct experience and on historical testimony, indeed on an intense, declarative irony that a later generation would be hard pressed to emulate:

Heave! Look out ahead!
Here comes the wagon with the dead.
Heave! Look out ahead!
The wagon with the dead.
We stop right here and stop right there,
We drive dead bodies everywhere.
Look ahead!
The wagon with the dead.
Heave! Look out ahead!
Destroyed and gone—all that we had.
Heave! Look out ahead!
Destroyed and gone, I said.
The end of joy, our home’s away,
Our luggage left the other day.
Look ahead!
We’re coming with the dead.
Heave! Look out ahead!
They’ve hitched us to the cart instead.
Heave! Look out ahead!
They’ve hitched us up instead.
If all our pain were put on it,
We wouldn’t even move one bit.
Look ahead!
A wagon full of dead. (227)

The simple, genuine wonder of the child speaker in the source poem, the traditional folk song “The Golden Coach”—“By coach we travel / and on the donkey we ride” (in Nader 118)—is turned into mock wonder at the macabre, at social space given over to death and horror: “Look ahead! / We’re coming with the dead” the second stanza ends, as if it announces the ice cream wagon is heading down the street. The poem has its contrary wonder, of course, in a visceral shock that human behavior could have come to this, and it culminates in the impossible, intolerable image of men and women themselves harnessed to drag the wagon carrying their own dead.

I have been choosing Holocaust poems that work well on being read out loud and heard for the first time. There are of course more rhetorically dense and intricate poems that met with our strong approval as well. And there are widely anthologized Holocaust poets who properly belong in any collection of the best work, from Abraham Sutzkever and Dan Pagis to Nelly Sachs and Lily Brett, from Anthony Hecht to Randall Jarrell. It is not as if we had to invent a Holocaust anthology from scratch. Nonetheless, the subject did produce unusual challenges. It is impossible, notably, in a single essay to reproduce the experience of reading hundreds of Holocaust poems in a period of weeks.

We were ruthless in rejecting from our collaborative anthology what we took to be failed Holocaust poems. It would be easy to give examples that would instantly win agreement, but it may be best to cite a poem more complexly freighted with the burdens of Holocaust history. Here is the opening stanza of Tsipi Keller's "The Shower," first published in the journal *Present Tense* in 1987 and reprinted in Marguerite Striar's anthology *Beyond Lament* (247). Keller was born in Czechoslovakia but now lives in the United States as well. The epigraph sets the poem in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in April 1945, when it was liberated. A former concentration camp inmate is now taking a shower:

With such care she moves her hand
Over her skin, her bare breasts,
White and heavy in the cold sun,
Her nipples, a mother's nipples,
Like small towers defy the wire.
With such care she spreads lather
Between her breasts, moves her hand
As though her body weren't hers.

As Janice Tong noted in her post, "one cannot help but notice the hypersexualized prose Keller uses to depict the scene of a showering woman—an intimate act made public through the poem." The third stanza reveals that the soldiers who liberated the camp are watching the woman shower. "No matter," Keller writes, "These men are soldiers who fought for her." Tong, however, registers the unpleasant implications: "Although the movement of spreading lather is marked 'with such care,' the lines read rather crudely. In what is supposed to be a habitual act of self-cleansing, the shower scene, however, seems too performative, meaning that the woman's erotic behavior appears unnatural and feels staged as if it were pleasing an audience." None of this is well controlled in the poem. Tong notes, for example, the peculiar and unwarranted analogy between the woman's nipples and the camp watchtowers. Keller fundamentally underestimates the effect of the soldiers' gazes and, surprisingly, seems oblivious to the resonance of a reference to showers in a Holocaust poem. That the liberators and the poem's readers both almost unwittingly occupy the position of the guards is worth exploring, but that is not what the poet here succeeds in doing.

As with much historical poetry, judging a Holocaust poem requires deciding whether its testimonial stands up to the requirements of witness. Is the poem true to the essential character of the events to which it refers? Testing a poem's technical resources against what are fundamentally political and ethical criteria is a

difficult and unsettling task. An aporia always falls between the two categories. Complete confidence is impossible. How much more so, then, when the referent itself is incomprehensible, beyond understanding? Yet there are times when one reaches consensus collectively about whether a poem is compelling or has failed.

As one would perhaps expect, a fundamentally misguided translation can also produce a weak or failed Holocaust poem. I believe Jerome Rothenberg's translation of Celan's magisterial "Death Fugue" (Celan, *Selections* 46-47) at several points meets that criterion. Michael Hamburger opens his translation straightforwardly, allowing the temporal signposts to blend into one another: "Black milk of daybreak we drink it at sundown / we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night" (Celan, *Poems* 31). John Felstiner instead chooses "daybreak" and "midday" to similar effect: "we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night" (Celan, *Selected Poems* 31). But Rothenberg mixes morning with the awkward, distracting, and frivolous coinages "dusktime" and "dawnitme." Worse still is his unwarranted addition to Celan's repeated phrase "der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland." Hamburger opts simply for "death is a master from Germany." Felstiner first uses "Death is a master from Deutschland," then lets the three repetitions each be further taken over by the original German. Rothenberg, absurdly, offers us "Death is a gang-boss aus Deutschland."

In one of the odd turns these seminars took, we felt free to mock the poems that failed our collective judgment, though not without attendant guilt. It was a necessary nastiness. As Elliott wrote to the seminar, "To say that certain Holocaust poems are bad, especially when the author is a survivor, is to say something like the following: 'Hey, I get that the experience was unimaginable, but you are not up to the artistic task of depicting your own experience, you are simply not doing the experience justice.' [...] Does moral authority, which survivors certainly have over me in this, trump aesthetic judgment?" Nonetheless, authors who failed the test of the subject matter merited no kindness. There was an informal, ongoing competition for the single worst Holocaust poem. The analysis of bad poems, as one student wrote, was also cathartic: "Never have I laughed so hard in a course as when we encountered a really, really bad Holocaust poem." The inclusion of many weak or thoroughly bad Holocaust poems, many by American poets, served another specific function for students: It clarified why other poems succeeded and gave students access to a winnowing process that most literature courses eliminate by assigning only major works. Indeed a full assessment of Holocaust poems' relationship with history probably requires an opportunity to make such judgments.⁸ At the same time, the press of subject matter and compositional circumstances was considerable, so that judgment entangled all of us in the same historical relationships.

The poet Miklós Radnóti, an assimilated Hungarian Jew, was on a death march in 1944. Already famous, he was now reduced to a work detail where those who collapsed were immediately shot. He carried a tiny notebook in his jacket pocket in which he penciled his last poems in moments of respite. The final one

⁸ Should a Holocaust anthology include a specific section of bad poems? One student thought so.

recounts a friend being shot and Radnóti describing it as his own imminent fate. The one passage in German, which translates as “he is still moving,” is said to be Radnóti’s identification of his ultimate murderers:

I fell beside him, his body twisted and then,
Tight already as a snapping string, sprang up again.
Shot in the neck. “And that’s how you’ll end too,”
I whispered to myself. “Lie still, no moving.”
Now patience is blossoming into death. Then I could hear
“*Der springt noch auf!*” ring out above me.
Blood mixed with mud was drying on my ear.⁹

And so he is killed and buried in a mass grave. A year later his wife, who survived, joins a group that finds the site amidst rough bracken and unearths the bodies. The tiny, blood and bodily fluid-stained notebook is recovered, and the poems published in Hungarian. It was issued in a facsimile edition, which meant that the poem was shadowed by its manuscript image of a penciled text blurred by the fluids of bodily decomposition.

We compared some seven English translations of the final four short poems he called “postcards.” The Hungarian originals are exquisitely crafted. He was one of the Holocaust poets who embraced formal verse as a bulwark against death and barbarism, who took on the discipline of craft in a symbolics of resistance amidst the hopelessness of worlds coming to an end. Other Holocaust poets did so partly out of necessity. Ruth Klüger wrote rhymed poems as a young girl in a camp in part because she had neither pencil nor paper, and rhymed poems were easier to memorize. She survived and later transcribed her poems from memory and emigrated to the United States.

We all agreed that completely severing an anthology evaluation from the extreme circumstances of composition and recovery would be obscene. The texts of Radnóti’s “postcards” were tied to his life and it would be inexcusable to break those connections. As Booth wrote in that week’s post, “I cannot comment or critique any of the poems we read this week. This biography seeps into my reading of all the poems. It’s just too raw. I cannot step back objectively from any of this work.” Anya Hamrick reflected on these issues in detail after reading Charles Reznikoff’s book-length poem sequence *Holocaust*. The book’s neutral, objective style, she reports, “kept me emotionally distanced and prevented me from having any semblance of emotional identification with the victims.” But she gradually began “to catch glimpses of the very different kind of witnessing he required of his reader. [...] Reznikoff requires one to occupy the role of a juror who registers the objective facts of the case without allowing emotions to get in the way.” Thus “there is no escape for the reader from the hellish vision depicted.” Indeed one reads Holocaust poetry at the conjunction of history and doubt. As Fadely put it, the poems “reveal to readers their own mental and emotional borders.” This

made evaluation very painful when we rejected the work of poets who were murdered or were survivors whose skill never matched their anguish. At the same time, there can be no such thing as an exclusively aesthetic triumph in Holocaust poetry. A victory for eloquence would have to bring with it the burdens of history and be broken by them.

The poetry of the Holocaust is a cultural, psychological, and epistemological whirlpool that draws into it every dystopian poem from our past. Every anti-war poem, from the civil war through the world wars to Vietnam, every poem about a historical atrocity, is drawn into the Holocaust’s force field and given merciless fulfillment. And the jingoistic popular poems from so many wars are torn apart, dismembered, by Holocaust poetry’s fierce witness to the ultimate consequences of race hatred and organized violence.

In the wake of the Holocaust there simply is no “place of community at once beyond social divisions and beyond subordination to technological dominion,” to quote Jean-Luc Nancy’s characterization of desires at work in the age of globalization (1). There is, of course, a bitter sense in which the death camps produced new spaces of collective belonging, decisively dissolving all preexisting categories of class, culture, and nation. But that bitter legacy discredits all utopian longings and leaves bankrupt theories of new social organization.

The long aesthetic traditions embraced by poets like Radnóti and Klüger are simultaneously instances of culture resisting barbarism and witness to culture’s last moments, as barbarism overwhelms any meaning rhyme and meter ever had and eviscerates their future. Of course the Germans had been building to that abyssal destination for more than half a century by way of rhymed and metered anti-Semitic popular poetry. The Nazis brought the dark, but certainly not universal, side of German poetic traditions—the anti-Semitic poems in books and pamphlets, on bank notes, and on poem postcards dating back to the nineteenth century—to fulfillment during operation Barbarossa in 1941. The SS took responsibility for commissioning anti-Semitic poems in Russian, printing them on fliers, and distributing them throughout the Ukraine, seeking a community of Russian anti-Semitic readers as they wantonly murdered Jews.

Meanwhile the class was also pretty hard on other Holocaust anthologies. Aaron Kramer’s *The Last Lullaby* met mostly with disapproval, despite my effort to reserve qualified praise for its collective near demolition of the lullaby genre. Hilda Schiff’s concise *Holocaust Poetry* proved reliable, as did the poetry selections in Lawrence Langer’s multi-generic *Art from the Ashes*, but Marguerite Striar’s 500-page *Beyond Lament: Poets of the World Bearing Witness to the Holocaust* and the second, enlarged edition of Charles Fishman’s massive, 600-page *Blood to Remember: American Poets on the Holocaust* both contained numerous markedly substandard poems. Langer’s less-than-book-length poetry selection is limited to six poets and keeps each poet’s work together. Striar scatters a given poet’s work throughout various thematic groupings, a choice I find ill-advised with Holocaust poetry, where poets’ sometimes tortured bodies deserve their integrity, though some seminar members disagreed. In Fishman’s case, I cannot comprehend a huge anthology of American Holocaust poems that omits Randall Jarrell, Sylvia Plath, and Jorie Graham, among many others. The anthology amounts to a

⁹ This version of Radnóti’s poem is a pastiche of elements I borrowed from several existing translations (cf. *Clouded Sky; Complete Poetry; Foamy Sky; Under Gemini*). For a facsimile of his last notebook, see his *Camp Notebook*. For biographical information see Ozsváth’s *In the Footsteps of Orpheus*.

gathering of occasional American Holocaust poems, a more fundamental barbarity than even Adorno might have imagined. The underlying message seems to be that every American is equipped to write his or her own Holocaust poem, that Americans own any subject they wish, that a community entitled to Holocaust witness coincides with our national borders—all views I consider misguided. The risk in comprehensive, single-editor Holocaust poetry projects seemed confirmed.

As I contemplate editing a Holocaust anthology, I find that I want and need the collaborative courage and advocacy of others for an editing project inescapably instilled with doubt about whether any values, any standards, have survived our harrowing by twentieth-century history. My seminar did not always agree about the ultimate value of individual poems, but most often we did. Certainly we agreed that nothing simplistic works in Holocaust poems. Often the poems that succeeded did wholly unexpected things, bringing us close to events, metaphors, or perspectives beyond anticipation. And the variety of poems—and the uncanny risks they took—that met with approval during discussion produced a starting point for an anthology that would make life more difficult for its readers but also deepen their awe at the capacity to counter nightmare with compromised speech. It would not be a common language, for the poems would break against one another. It would little resemble the mutual and sometimes echolalic textual communities one finds in other anthologies. And the work of gathering them would have to be collaborative, the product of debate and discussion, of embarrassments hazarded, advocacy lost and won in compressed encounters amplifying decades of critical analysis.

We could not help but feel sometimes that the unquantifiable collaborative interpretation we did was sustained in a fragile space set apart from the neoliberal, instrumental values increasingly dominating higher education. In many ways the seminar was thus also an aggressive holdout from the pressures increasingly applied to college teaching in general and humanities teaching in particular. The organized assessment, accountability, and productivity measurement movement aims to focus higher education on testable outcomes. Having nearly overwhelmed K-12 education, it now seeks to quantify higher education as well. I am opposed. I offer my Holocaust seminar as an example of the humanities *at their most fierce*, as a telling critique of the ideology of outcomes assessment and its mechanized, uniform philosophy. The movement is gradually undermining academic freedom. Teachers assess their students and their personal success all the time, sometimes obsessively, both during a course and years later. A faculty member who teaches a freshman course in architectural design tells me her best assessments come four years later when she evaluates her students' senior projects. My most reliable assessment of graduate students takes place when I look at their careers ten years after graduation.

Some of the most powerful intellectual and emotional experiences of my life have come in classroom discussions, when we struggle with the impossibility of answering difficult questions. I am not willing to have legislators, administrators, and corporate flacks reduce all this to job training or to quantifiable results. Much of what I devote my professional life to is increasingly endangered. It would, for example, be irresponsible—and dangerous—to offer my Holocaust seminar as a

large lecture course, seeking high enrollment to satisfy some productivity metric. The students and I need to share our responses in an intimate setting, and I need to follow the level of stress individual students display.

One inescapable purpose of the course is to help all of us confront the infinite human capacity for evil and to evaluate poetry's capacity to bear witness to it. I track the course's success at meeting those aims in every week's emails and discussions, but I would not debase the process or the results by testing my students. Nor is there a proper form of assessment beyond reflection, debate, and writing to judge how severely my students have been challenged culturally, psychologically, and intellectually. I am interested in learning how their work and their lives have been changed, and I track that through ongoing conversations, by evaluating their final projects, and by long-term interaction.

III.

Anne Frank is famously applauded for asserting that people are basically good, but she did not have the opportunity to reaffirm her faith after Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. Holocaust poetry demonstrates that human beings are not basically *anything*, that they await culture, family, society, institutions, and accident to be shaped into what they are. All physically possible actions and behaviors, all arguments capable of articulation, fall within the parameters of the human. Nothing is guaranteed. Nothing is prohibited. Nothing is too monstrous to wear a human face. The seminar relentlessly shows how the music of literary witness is undone by the facts it confronts. As I have suggested, this places a burden of pain on me and my students; it makes it less easy for us to live our lives. It complicates our self-understanding and our understanding of others. It should haunt the years as we go forward.

Are such outcomes to be assessed? Such an assessment would be absurd. These are extreme goals for a course, but I relate them to suggest how fundamental are the emerging threats to academic freedom, faculty and student rights, and shared governance by forces widespread in both Europe and the United States. The struggle to define and protect our freedoms in higher education is made ever so more critical because they are not guaranteed; they are not lodged within transcendence. Nothing is. Transcendence is itself a contingent product of history. Teaching the Holocaust helps us see how its lessons reverberate through everything we do.

Because the experience of reading hundreds of Holocaust poems is nearly unendurable, the class offered an opportunity for all of us to discover the power and value of collaborative work, the work of analyzing the poems together in detail. But I have no interest in calibrating the character of our fragile classroom community. Though the seminar hones our skills in close reading, an effort to detach that skill from its historical context in the Holocaust would be irresponsible.

Some urge us to compromise with the assessment and quantifiable outcomes movement. Let's us own it and do it right, they urge. Not for what I do. Not for what I teach. Not for what I am calling 'the fierce humanities,' for teaching that

seeks not merely learning, but unlearning, that seeks to unsettle knowledge and assumptions in ways more fundamental than any exam can test. At the most well-known Holocaust memorial in Berlin, you walk among a large field of massive granite blocks ranged row upon row. But the stone pathways among the monoliths are not level. They undulate. And the blocks themselves are not perfectly squared. They are subtly angled and off kilter. It is a monument to seriality and rationality unhinged, to uncertain knowledge, to human reason faltering and failing.

It is often said that the Holocaust represents the dark side of the Enlightenment, the abstraction of reason, planning, and enumeration and their severance from value. How many cans of gas does it take to kill a million Jews? Is it more efficient to gas them or strangle them? In the basement beneath the gas chambers at Buchenwald, you can count the hooks on the walls that served the strangling option. Keep a count. Assess the costs and benefits. Of course, the enlightenment fantasy of rationality's exclusive triumph has myriad legacies, and it would be irresponsible to assert that they are comparable. Nonetheless, the lesson of the Holocaust should give us pause when we indulge in the fantasy that consciousness and learning can be quantified.

For my Holocaust course—and for the fierce humanities in general—the assessment, accountability, and quantifiable outcomes movement is nothing less than a benighted enlightenment fantasy of mastering the unmasterable, of quantifying what cannot be measured. If you want to adopt its protocols in your course, that is fine. That's academic freedom. Just do not try to impose them on me. That is academic freedom as well.

The obvious alternative is to take the path away from history and memory, to ignore the Holocaust and the other brutal legacies of the past. But then we will repeat it on a lesser scale, forgetting the Holocaust's predecessors and its genocidal echoes, from the Armenian genocide of 1915, to the 1937 Japanese rape of Nanking, to the 1994 Hutu slaughter of Tutsis in Rwanda. The path I am suggesting is rather to internalize the lessons of the Holocaust, to realize that values are neither transcendent nor guaranteed, and accept the terrain of uncertain and unending struggle that both the Holocaust and poststructuralism leave to us.

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