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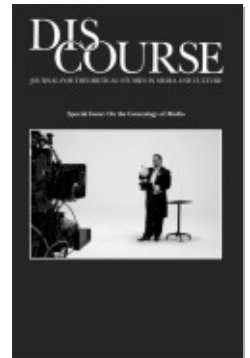
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Fiction, Death and Testimony: Toward a Politics of the Limits of Thought¹

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Fiction, Death and Testimony: Toward a Politics of the Limits of Thought¹

Felipe Victoriano

The classic example is the doorway that continued to exist so long as a certain beggar frequented it, but which was lost to sight when he died. Sometimes a few birds, a horse, have saved the ruins of an amphitheater.

—J. L. Borges, *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*

In 1915, shortly after the outbreak of World War I, Freud wrote a brief essay entitled, “Our Attitude Towards Death,” in which he confronted something that was definitively imposing itself in Europe: death as a daily experience. His tone is conclusive and urgent: “Death is no longer to be denied; we are compelled to believe in it” (47). Prior to the war, Freud believes, fiction had constituted a different mode of relation to death, a place of compensation in which “the condition for reconciling ourselves to death is fulfilled, namely, if beneath all vicissitudes of life a permanent life still remains to us” (46). In fiction, “we find the many lives in one for which we crave. We die in identification with a certain hero and yet we outlive him and, quite unharmed, are prepared to die again with the next hero” (46–7). Since 1914, however, the war began to break down the profile of European culture, establishing a different relation to death:

People really die and no longer one by one, but in large numbers, often ten thousand in one day. It is no longer an accident. Of course, it still seems accidental whether a particular bullet strikes this man or that but the survivor may easily be struck down by a second bullet, and the accumulation of deaths ends the impression of accident. Life has indeed become interesting again; it has once more received its full significance. (47)

What is interesting about this brief essay is that, for Freud, the opposition between fiction and death finds its content in the experience of the war. The extreme experience of the time consists in realizing that “People really die.” The *factum* of war put into question a certain relation between fiction and death sustained by an attitude which had not previously considered war—“the accumulation of deaths”—as a relevant psychic fact. Fiction therefore fails precisely when death is manifested as a brutal occurrence exceeding the limits of representation out of which the “I” had formerly related to the death of the other. In Freud’s essay war thus inaugurates a field of reflection on death, but one which must exclude fiction in order to preserve the “truth” of that event. Death takes a step beyond fiction, thereby establishing the structure of representation through which a generation in war would contemplate itself.

For Freud, the event of the war had removed the structure of social representation from his generation: death had become a common, accumulative fact, but at the same time something whose unimaginable limit had never before been registered. Twenty-five years after “Our Attitude Towards Death” was published, the Second World War brought yet another horizon to death, introducing concentration camps, gas chambers and the atomic bomb as some of the new referents in which unimaginable death found a place in the world. This time, not only would “the accumulation of deaths” make visible the opposition between fiction and death—between representation and fact—but it would establish a limit to the modern comprehension of the world, since the very notion of “accumulation” had its foundation in the technical rationality by which knowledge itself operates. The criticism of the notion of progress developed by Walter Benjamin, for example—“this storm” which prevents the angel of history from “awakening the dead” (257)—configured a field of reflection on catastrophe as the real instance delimiting the conditions of possibility of thought itself. The generation which lived “in rooms that have never been touched by death” (94) quickly had to confront a world in which death occurred as something inapprehensible and yet incontestably real,

both familiar and unfamiliar: death as the uncanny. That generation—Freud, Kafka, Heidegger, Blanchot, Levinas, Benjamin, Adorno and many others—saw perish the very intellectual field in which it had been formed. Its members were witnesses to an instant in which thought was exceeded by the *factum* of death: the catastrophe confronted by this generation was the fact of death beyond thought. As never before, death demonstrated the fragility in which the world now found itself. As Benjamin wrote:

A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body. (84)

Concentration camps, crematoria, the technical sophistication in the organization of the Holocaust, all forced a generation to think its own conditions of possibility, which involved generating thought around this unspeakable *factum* of death which took place in the world at the same time that it subtracted itself from that world. According to Giorgio Agamben, “the ambiguity of our culture’s relation to death reaches its paroxysm after Auschwitz” (80) due to the inauguration of a “biopolitical space” through which the constitutive difference between death and life would find a paradoxical dimension. Whereas for Freud, the rupture between fiction and death made life once again “interesting,” giving it “once more [. . .] its full significance,” Agamben identifies Auschwitz as the place where a new administration of that difference between life and death makes its appearance: “an unprecedented absolutization of the biopower to *make live* intersects with an equally absolute generalization of the sovereign power to *make die*, such that biopolitics coincides immediately with thanatopolitics” (83). It is out of this tension between life and death, Agamben asserts, that Theodor Adorno’s celebrated phrase—“After Auschwitz one cannot write poetry”—becomes legible (Agamben 80). The Holocaust produced a rupture between representation and death, thereby delimiting the space of comprehension through which an entire generation had reflected. The horror of death brings to completion the process of secularization—the desacralization of life—in the West, as death becomes an artifact of specialized technical organization, occurring as an accelerated productive process: the massive production of corpses.

As Maurice Blanchot observed: “knowledge which goes so far as to accept horror in order to know it, reveals the horror of knowledge” (82), to the extent that the very state of thought *of* Auschwitz—thought of the limit—maintains a secret complicity with

catastrophe. There will be no poetry, certainly, because, henceforth there will be “a limit at which the practice of any art becomes an affront to affliction. Let us not forget this” (Blanchot 83). Nonetheless, a new figure will appear at the very heart of the crisis between representation and death: the witness. The witness of the Holocaust is the survivor of an event which put catastrophe beyond the field of the imaginable, thereby constituting the final vestige of that event. The witness is obliged to speak of what only occurred for him or her, in circumstances in which that singularity was exposed to a limitless threat. The one who bears witness to horror must therefore stand in relation to that without which there is no relation: an act which consists of producing the very conditions of possibility of one’s own speech, but at the interior of a representational universe which death has surpassed.

This essay will seek to thematize the relation between fiction and death, taking the witness as the only one capable of crossing that aporia to which contemporary thought owes itself: the experience of catastrophe as the catastrophe of thought. Such a task would involve linking death and fiction from a place which only the witness has been able to access: “survival” as a limit experience, but this experience understood as a crisis of the very singularity through which the witness speaks. In the following pages, fiction will be proposed as an activity through which death once again becomes thematized. The essay will chart out several moments of contemporary thought in which the duality of death and life finds its most essential signification: the witness as the limit of life, since at that limit the event of death was unexpectedly delayed, leaving the witness to perpetually await it. At the same time, however, the witness is the limit of death, since we might say that life is the only gift that death gave to the witness in exchange for that awaiting. The witness lives life to tell *us* “that” truth which we will never be able to hear, since its legibility depends on an experience of which there is no memory. Jorge Luis Borges brilliantly problematized this in a short prose work entitled, “The Witness”:

Things, events, that occupy space yet come to an end when someone dies may us stop in wonder—and yet one thing, or an infinite number of things, dies with every man’s or woman’s death, unless the universe itself has a memory, as theosophists have suggested. In the course of time there was one day that closed the last eyes that had looked on Christ; the Battle of Junín and the love of Helen died with the death of one man.
(*Collected Fictions* 311)

The witness, according to Borges, is one who denounces the state of continual loss in which the world has found itself. Thus, narration is the final act of preserving that which will disappear with

the death of the witness, since the witness is that singularity which attempts to produce speech at the same time that it seeks to detain the state of perpetual lapse in which this singularity is founded. To put it in other words, the witness operates where fiction finds its pre-formative, virtual function, because fiction is an activity which acknowledges the symbolic wound inflicted by death on the horizon of representation. For Borges, this final aporia assumes the form of a question: "What will die with me the day I die? What pathetic or frail image will be lost to the world? The voice of Macedonio Fernández, the image of a bay horse in a vacant lot on the corner of Serrano and Charcas, a bar of sulphur in the drawer of a mahogany desk?" (311). This essay takes these questions, and their possible thematizing, as its point of departure.

1. Fiction and Death

Questions of fiction and death are central concerns in a story by Jorge Luis Borges entitled "Emma Zunz," which narrates an event which took place in 1922, presumably in Buenos Aires. In an act of justice, Emma Zunz assassinates Aaron Loewenthal, one of the managers in the Tarbush & Loewenthal textiles factory where she works. What is first evident about the story is the coincidence between the title and the name of the protagonist. Emma Zunz appears to be the key to "Emma Zunz." However, the name says nothing except the singularity that it names: the fact that "Emma Zunz" is narrated through Emma Zunz, and that through her an act of justice—Loewenthal's death—is realized. Emma Zunz (E.Z.) knows that Loewenthal attained his position by dubious means, one of which took place years earlier, in 1916, and involved a false accusation of theft against her father, Emanuel Zunz (E.Z.). Borges lets us believe that the event took Emma's father to Brazil, where he clandestinely fled under the pseudonym of Manuel Maier. We know that Emma is not unaware of the fact that beneath that name lies her father's identity. Neither then would she be unaware that his death, reported to her by a letter as a suicide, masks the intention of forever silencing the secret that she patiently holds on to: the cashier's embezzlement scheme and her father's last oath "that Loewenthal was the thief." (216)

Certainly, Emma Zunz is the name by which we can identify Maier; also, because of her name neither Loewenthal nor anyone else knows that her father has died, because he died under the name of Manuel Maier, and not Emanuel Zunz. Furthermore, Emma knows the secret which links the death of her father and

Loewenthal. Thus, Borges constructs “Emma Zunz” in such a way that the plot remains subject to an irreplaceable singularity and is only distinguishable out of that proper name. Nonetheless, this singularity is only visible with the death of her father; that is, it is only for Emma that this death took place as “the death of the father.” Borges’ story thus weaves what we could call the point of tension between singularity and death: the death of Emanuel Zunz has only taken place for Emma Zunz, but this “has only taken place” is more radical than that if we consider that death is always that of the other, since the singularity in which it occurs is already condemned to be extinguished with it, leaving death *itself* without a witness. In this way, death is always an event destined to arrive from the other, obliging us to establish a relation with that which threatens our singularity from within. It is in this way, to cite Jacques Derrida, that “death must be taken upon oneself” (*The Gift of Death* 45); death must be represented from the very field of impossibility that it opens in us:

In order to put oneself to death, to give oneself death in the sense that every relation to death is an interpretative apprehension and a representative approach to death, death must be taken upon oneself. One has to *give it to oneself by taking it upon oneself*, for it can only be mine alone, irreplaceably. That is so even if, as we just said, *death can neither be taken nor given*. But the idea of being neither taken nor given relates *from* or *to* the other, and that is indeed why one can give it *to one self* only by taking it *upon oneself*. (45, italics in original)

In “Emma Zunz” death likewise comes from the other: on the 14th of January, 1922, the letter arrives, postmarked Brazil and signed by one of Emanuel Zunz’s pension companions, a certain Feino Fain. Its contents are spare: “Sr. Maier had accidentally ingested an overdose of *veronal* and had died on the third day of the present month in the hospital at Bagé” (215). On that 14th of January, her father’s death erupts as a catastrophe. For Emma Zunz, the death of Manuel Maier “was the only thing that had happened in the world, and it would go on happening, endlessly, forever after” (215). And it really does, to the extent that it institutes the thought of death: death is made thinkable precisely when it appears unto thought as an impossibility of thought. We might say, metaphorically that this impossibility is a letter that never ceases to arrive, in that what this letter communicates—the death of the father—cannot be apprehended except paradoxically, in the form of a total impossibility of apprehension. As Derrida puts it,

The approach or apprehension of death signifies the experience of anticipation while indissociably referring to the meaning of death that is

suggested in this apprehensive approach. It is always a matter of seeing coming what one can't see coming, of giving oneself that which one can probably never give oneself in a pure and simple way. Each time the self anticipates death by giving to it or conferring upon it a different value, giving itself or reappropriating what in fact it cannot simply appropriate. (*The Gift of Death* 40)

Thus, the muteness of death, its cold night, becomes thinkable: death inside an envelope, written in the clumsy hand of Fain, the invisible pension companion who speaks of Maier's death as a clumsy suicide: an error in the use of *veronal* is suggested from Rio Grande, 11 days after death supposedly struck Emanuel Zunz in the Bagé hospital. We might say that death is articulated and charged with meaning through the signs that ultimately configure it. The father's death appears "concealed" under the name of Manuel Maier, but it is thanks to this name that death appears with tragic persistence on the 22nd of January: "In the growing darkness, Emma wept for the suicide of Manuel Maier until the end of the day," writes Borges (215), telling us that the act of dying has become transmissible and, because of this, certainly imputable.

The story's dénouement is well known: death arrives as a fact that exceeds thought, but which obliges thought to articulate around it. Emma Zunz *must* kill Aaron Loewenthal. Through the assassination of Loewenthal, her father's death, of which that one brief letter is the only remainder, will become a decipherable event. Emma Zunz needs to think of the death of Manuel Maier as the death of Emanuel Zunz, which is to say, she needs to articulate the obscure circumstances that surround the death of Maier through an experience capable, on the one hand, of giving meaning to the death of her father and, on the other, of meting out the justice demanded by this tragic event. Emma Zunz arranges a meeting with Loewenthal on the pretext of giving him valuable information about the union at his factory. The meeting will take place in Loewenthal's office, where she knows that there will be a revolver hidden in his desk drawer. Before the meeting, however, Emma Zunz goes to the port and arranges to be raped by a sailor of unknown origin. Borges leads us to believe that Emma Zunz has carefully planned her rape, because she has pretended to be a young prostitute looking for money. After consummating the act, she tears up the bills that the sailor has paid her, deeming them impure. In this way, her experience is a rape, but only for Emma. This is seen in at least two ways. In the first place, she has "selected" the sailor of unknown origin precisely due to the purely instrumental character he represents: a foreign sailor whom she

will never see again and someone completely unknown to her, including the name of the language he speaks. In the second place, the experience of the rape will be indiscernible from this fact, since what is at play in the story is not that she has been wronged by a sailor of unknown origin, but the contrary: that this stranger gave to her the experience of being wronged, *independently of whether or not that wrong took place*, since the death of the father had already put her “integrity” in danger. By this means, Emma plots her own singularity.

Thus, on the night of the meeting, she will grab the revolver from Loewenthal’s desk and fire repeatedly at his chest, and the rape will subsequently allow her to claim that she shot Loewenthal in self-defense after he summoned her to the office with the intention of raping her. After all, the rape certainly took place, albeit in other circumstances and with other names, and the experience of rape, as such, had been “a true experience.” The rape that Emma Zunz experienced was true and real; the justice imposed by Loewenthal’s execution was also real, and certainly true. However, what Borges allows us to see is precisely the truth of experience outside the causal order of events, for the death of Emma Zunz’s father is an extraordinary experience defined by the very absence of its event. Death is, and was, for Emma Zunz, a letter. In other words, the truth of her rape did not lie within the experience of the rape itself, but rather in Emma Zunz’s relation to that letter which communicated the death of Maier.

So, Emma Zunz *could not but* kill Loewenthal: not simply because the latter was responsible for Maier’s death, but rather because Maier’s death was an event that removed the link between truth and experience from the realm of representation. In this sense, Emma Zunz *must* kill Loewenthal: her experience of rape may give the murder a certain verisimilitude, but it is the act of murder that, in the wake of her father’s death, gives verisimilitude to her experience of rape. In Borges’ story, we can see how death institutes an experience that we cannot access—for an individual death is irreplaceable, but, at the same time, it is through death that we can experience the very limit of our representations. In fact, we are left with the necessity of articulating it. It has to do with what might be called a “politics of mourning”: to make transmissible what lingers as a radical loss, to the extent that all mourning consists of reactualizing this limit which death traces with respect to the state of comprehension in which we remain before it. Furthermore, as Derrida claims, “[. . .] there is no politics without an organization of the time and space of mourning, without a topolitology of the sepulcher” (*Aporias* 61), due to the fact that

mourning signifies a “*work of mourning*,” an activity destined to reelaborate the symbolic wound that the death of the other provokes in us. Such a politics still skirts the very limits of our comprehension: death is articulated in a place where thought loses itself in the thought of its complete loss.

Borges thematizes in “Emma Zunz” what we could call the point of tension between experience and death. In effect, Emma Zunz thinks the death of Emanuel Zunz out of herself, out of the singularity proper to her name, “taking it *upon oneself*,” as Derrida puts it, “the identity of the oneself is *given* by death” (*The gift of death* 45). However, this identity, at the same time that it is “given by death,” is also a gift of death, since it “comes from a gift received from the other, from the one who, in absolute transcendence, sees me without my seeing, holds me in his hands while remaining inaccessible” (40). In this way, death happens for Emma Zunz in the form of a letter, destined to transport, through writing, what will certainly be illegible: my death (death itself) *in* and *with* the death of the other. Fiction appears, then, as a space of articulation where death is put to work, paradoxically, in the function of that identity which it threatens. Death inscribes an experience through which we inherit our own death, to the extent that this experience inaugurates a space where mourning and fiction are internally implied. In effect, the death of the other is constitutive for me, so mourning signifies assuming my own mortality as a condition of existence; that is, to take charge of *my own death*. In this way, as Derrida suggests, “I mourn therefore I am, I am—dead with the death of the other, my relation to myself is first of all plunged into mourning, a mourning that is moreover impossible” (*Points* 321). This impossibility, paradoxically, makes possible a thought of death.

2. Mourning as Generational Politics

Mourning is the “natural” relation to death. Through mourning, we work through and around the loss of the other, we rewrite that loss, in order to therefore lose the loss itself. Mourning is paradoxically destined to lose its own condition of possibility; that is, to work over the eternal lack of the other at the point where the other has become radically inaccessible. On the one hand, mourning “works,” allowing the singularity of the one who has died to be forgotten, since that singularity, as essentially unsubstitutable, becomes dangerous. On the other hand, it is thanks to the irreplaceability of the other’s death that there is mourning, since the

work of mourning consists in accepting death as an irreversible fact, but only at the point of thereby anticipating our own limit.

Thus, for example, the eulogy and the suicide note belong to contrasting genres. While the former attempts, with arrhythmic oratory, to cross that point where we are left without words, the latter is left to us, exempting us from the responsibility of facing the deceased, of having to see in him/her the very limit to our representations. Thus, whoever is ready to retie the thread that death tears out of meaning does so in order to demonstrate that no autobiographical will exists, since such a will rests on the illusion that the event of death, a sudden movement without individual memory, would be entirely appropriated. Hence, the eulogy is a primordial act of mourning to the extent that it will always be articulated by a lack which has become a gift: the absolute power of what remains of “the life of the other,” precisely when the other has become nothing but the mark of her own absence.

The speech delivered before the coffin appropriates the absence of the dead person’s voice, but only so that it may cite such an absence, when to cite the absent is already an act of giving the last word to someone who can only respond with fixed phrases, with the leftovers of a thought which, for the one who cites, would otherwise remain in a state of irresistible temptation. Nothing, then, prevents us from thinking that a eulogy is a translation: it speaks for the dead one by speaking through his muted mouth. In this way, the words of the eulogy reach out in search of inheritors to a voice that has become transmissible thanks to the efficiency of the memorial service, thanks to the successful configuration of the testamentary scene. A certain authority is imposed due to the discovery that death is conclusive and that an appeal would no longer have its lively tones, its appearance or its naturalness.

On the other hand, whoever is prepared to read the testament, whoever opens the letter left by the deceased (or, perhaps, only whoever understands that her/his mission consists in transmitting a distant voice as if it contained a will of its own), is obliged to transmit one’s own presence as part of the plot of the other’s death. An effective funeral—a ceremony which, in the final analysis, has instituted the regime of solemnity with which we tend to address the dead—is not one that establishes the death of the other as a testamentary scene, as an obligation to speak *on behalf* of the deceased, but rather one that expropriates the death of the other *from* that scene. That is to say, the obligation to give death a place where everything can become dangerously inheritable. While one scene demands inheritors, instituting an act that we might call a “full act of transference,” the other scene exempts

them, to the extent that whoever dies, does so as a constitutive act, a reconciliation with death, in that funereal ceremony plotted *out of* his or her own agony. In this sense, whoever is impelled by the obligation to transmit the letter left by the deceased recognizes the tragic labor of becoming an instrument for precisely that person who has made the act of dying a successful instrumental gesture. Hence, biographies are nothing but fictions, fabrications nurtured on account of the impossibility of appropriating what the act of dying does to life: all biography is written lacking that fatidic instant in which the other converted itself into an object of writing.

This issue, along with other less marginal matters, is taken up in Horacio González' *El filósofo cesante: gracia y desdicha en Macedonio Fernández* (The Unsalaryed Philosopher: Wit and Misfortune in Macedonio Fernández), which explores the work of a writer to whom Borges owes a certain literary paternity. Macedonio (tradition has come to refer to him by his first name, perhaps because of the "mystical" status he has acquired in Argentine literature) was a prolific writer, and of his works there remain a not insignificant number of articles, letters, novels, treatises, and poems—all genres for which he cultivated a certain enthusiasm and a deliberate negligence. In effect, his literary projects were often infinite, not on account of being unrealizable, but rather because the projects had as their inspiration the complete abandon which their author zealously practiced in the act of writing. Macedonio Fernández wrote his essays and novels in literally every place he could: stray pages that he would forget in each change of residence, streetcar tickets, even candy wrappers which he would discreetly leave on tables in Buenos Aires cafes.

The eulogy that Borges gave at Macedonio's funeral became famous. "The former"—González says—"bore witness to the latter's voice and as such converted him into the figure that we inherited, one of a man whose thinking 'obeyed his voice'" (12). Borges' words were a first effort at thinking about the blow of deferral that accompanies death's irruption, but, at the same time, those words also became complicit in organizing the space in which such a blow comes to acquire meaning. In addition to Borges, Petit du Murat, Molinari and Fernandez Latour—names which participated in that literary and intellectual generation which Macedonio's death came, in some way, to configure, were among those who spoke at the interment in the cemetery of Buenos Aires that February morning. Despite it all, only the words of Borges in the face of Macedonio's corpse have managed to endure through time. Certainly, the secret of that endurance is found not in what Borges *said* on this occasion, but on what his words *did*. In

effect: “In those funeral rites, however, Borges also brought forth laughter,” assures González, but laughter made into a subversive act, intended to dismantle the silence imposed in the face of death, and to divert the solemnity of the ceremony toward a more confessional tone. If laughter constitutes an act of interruption of seriousness which must persist in all funeral ceremonies, we must therefore understand the laughter that Borges pulled out of the audience as a mode of displacing the ritual farewell to the dead toward a place of greater ductility in the appropriation of his legacy.

In his farewell, then, Borges said of Macedonio Fernández: “In those days, I imitated even his manner of transcription, even his passionate and devout plagiarism [. . .] to not imitate that canon would have been an incredible negligence” (González 13). What appears as a “revelation” in Borges’ speech was thus the refusal to admit as a flaw the fact of once having imitated the deceased. Nothing, then, stops us from thinking that, on that February morning, what we might call the “heritage” of Macedonio Fernández is established. We owe, at least, to these words the fact that Macedonio Fernández is “the enigma” out of which Borgesian fiction emerges, namely the possibility of “parody within the citation itself” (Piglia 72). In effect, by infusing plagiarism or imitation “with a peculiar substance that creates sacred value where normally there would be a reproach” (González 13), we might say that Borges establishes a place of articulation, capable of giving over to thought the death of the other, but, simultaneously, a place where the *praxis* focused around the act of death institutes the possibility of thought. Thus: plagiarism, imitation, copy, transcription and apocryphal failure, are configured by Borges within the Latin American creative horizon as the secret instances that found the canon.

In this way, “Borges, without either guilt or torment, closes the old dynastic question implied in his ‘plagiarism’ of Macedonio by adding plagiarism both to the general ledger of cultural heritage and to the particular balance sheet of his adolescence” (González 13). Then, with a literary generation trapped between the act of transcribing its own precursors and the negligence of creating in spite of Macedonio Fernández, literary activity becomes complicit with an incontestable heritage (plagiarism, the copy), which is now revealed by Borges’ ability to speak in spite of Macedonio Fernández, that is to say, to make Macedonio’s distant and sacred mystical voice into an object of translation. So a certain tradition is established: one that imitates the sacred, an eminently literary

tradition always disposed to capture the remains of unwritten thoughts.

In a similar vein, we might say that one tradition is consummated in the funeral of another, in such a way that the departing tradition allows itself to be spoken for by the very tradition that, in overseeing the pomp of the funeral, stamps its cold obituary. Both the eulogy and the suicide note hold a relationship to death. While the former indicates that death is an irreversible darkness without memory, the latter suggests that death is permeable and imprecise, leaving tradition with the necessity of defining the very limits of its constitution. In effect, to know how to read the obituaries, the graves, the funereal episodes in which one era or tradition bids farewell to another is to know how to measure the present limits of knowing, its “conditions of possibility” which are left in print as a secret citation of its own death. As Derrida suggests in *Specters of Marx*: “nothing could be worse, for the work of mourning, than confusion or doubt: one *has to know* who is buried where—and *it is necessary* (to know—to make certain) that, in what remains of him, *he remain there*” (9, italics in original).

Certainly that is what the genealogical gesture, as such, inaugurates: the constitution of a field of forces that blurs the union between birth and death, leaving one generation facing the dilemma of celebrating its birth, or, as we might say, weeping for the death of the father. Both are provisional events, since mourning resolves itself by laboring over what death comes to signify for the buriers: whether they are the inheritors of the significations or their creators. The dilemma, then, is that of speaking in the presence of the deceased while already thinking of death as a problem, since that is where a certain precariousness between the permanence and temporality of being appears as the condition of an era.

3. The Witness

“I think of that young prisoner of Auschwitz,” writes Maurice Blanchot in *The Writing of the Disaster*. The young man “had suffered the worst, led his family to the crematorium, and hanged himself; after being saved at the last moment [. . .], he was exempted from contact with dead bodies, but when the SS shot someone, he was obliged to hold the victim’s head so that the bullet could be more easily lodged in the neck” (82). To all those who asked how he had managed to endure, he responded in the same way: “that he ‘observed how men carry themselves in the face of death’” (82). About this, Blanchot writes:

I will not believe it. As Lewental, whose notes were found buried near a crematorium, wrote to us, 'the truth was always more atrocious, more tragic than what will be said about it'. Saved in the last minute, the young man of whom I speak was forced to live that last instant again and each time to live it once more, frustrated every time of his own death and made to exchange it every time for the death of all. [. . .] (82)

So that the man saved in the instant of death cannot but repeat the moment in which he is placed in safety. Yet this repetition, the obligation of living that instant time and again, cannot take place except on the condition of a displacement that, as such, always illuminates a lack destined to attest to the death which was going to occur and did not: namely, the death of all. So Dori Laub is not mistaken when he elaborates a notion of Holocaust as an "event without witnesses" (80). The witness—who, furthermore, is the survivor, to the extent that testimony and survival are, in this context (as Derrida argues in *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* [45]), inseparable—is not only that person who is left speechless in the face of the Holocaust, but also the one who leaves language in a state of incomprehensibility. In this sense, the witness' act of testimony is precisely an experience that occurs in the presence of what has become un-narrateable. I *cannot* die in place of the other; therefore someone/someone else dies, each taking with him forever the secret of my own death. To the extent that the experience of death is an event without witnesses, the death of the other always *signifies* my own death, that is to say: what is destined to befall me with utter imminence, but which, however, is deferred. In this sense, the truth of the witness—truth here being understood as the mode in which modern juridical discourse is legitimated—will never be true, since, anything the witness might testify will always amount to the deferred imminence of his own death. This is how Jacques Derrida puts it:

If there is a place or an instance in which there is not witness for the witness or where no one is witness for the witness, it would be death. One cannot testify for the witness who testifies to his death, but, inversely, I cannot, I should not be able to, testify to my own death, only to the imminence of my death, to its *instance as deferred imminence*. (*Demeure* 46, italics in original)

Hence Blanchot tells us in reference to the young survivor who claimed to have observed how men carry themselves in the face of death:

His response [. . .] was not a response, he could not respond. What remains for us to recognize in this account is that when he was faced

with an impossible question, he could find no other alibi than the search for knowledge, the so-called dignity of knowledge: that ultimate propriety which we believe will be accorded us by knowledge. And, in fact, can one accept not to know? We read the books on Auschwitz. The wish of all, in the camps, the last wish: know what has happened, do not forget, and at the same time never will you know. (82)

“Never will you know.” The conclusion is accurate if one considers that not only has modern historiography constructed its truth, historical truth, precisely by spiriting away the impossibility of knowing, but also that this impossibility goes against the very grain of the modern notion of truth. The place of truth is always sustained by an original darkness, the truth of what happened. This gives rise to a displacement that attempts to rehabilitate knowledge from its total inapprehension of experience. That displacement would not only express an absolutely dispossessed state of comprehension, but also the subject’s impossibility of preserving his own experience in the same manner in which it erupted: the subject is that which yields an experience, but only if we understand that experience to be the mark of a vacated subjectivity that a later knowledge will attempt to reclaim. In effect, following Giorgio Agamben, “the aporia of Auschwitz is, indeed, the very aporia of historical knowledge: a non-coincidence between facts and truth, between verification and comprehension” (12). The dilemma of the survivor, of the witness, would consist in having horror fixed within his gaze, rather than having his gaze fixed on horror. As Federico Galende writes, “the witness is not the one who witnessed events with his own eyes, but rather the one who, in the face of events, *averted* his gaze” (35). The notion of the witness that emerges from the Holocaust is more complex than the concept to which we are normally accustomed. The witness is the one who has lost the capacity to transmit his or her own experience because he or she is no longer the one who lived the event that has led to the incapacity to bear witness. In the words of Alain Brossat, the witness is that subject who “signs over the reality of an inconceivable real,” to the extent that “he extracts his paradoxical authority by speaking in the name of a living being who no longer speaks, by testifying in the name of an incapacity to speak” (130).

However, for there to be a witness, the “signing over of the inconceivable” requires a moment of inscription which deprives the inconceivable of its absolute irruption. Such an irruption has no subject; that is to say, there is no one present who might later survive intact and testify. The survivor is witness to the inconceivable and, as such, finds himself destined to testify to the inconceivable as his condition of possibility, and this is his afterlife. The

paradox of the witness, as Giorgio Agamben suggests in more general terms, is that “on the one hand, what happened in the camps appears to the survivors as the only true thing and, as such, absolutely unforgettable; on the other hand, this truth is to the same degree unimaginable, that is, irreducible to the real elements that constitute it” (12). The witness is that person who gives testimony about something to which it turns out to be impossible to testify, but to the degree that “the impossible” is not the ultimate attribute of Holocaust, but rather the subject’s experience-less relation to it. Testimony takes shape, then, in the non-place of language’s articulation, for it must articulate the inconceivable within language at the same time that it must leave language in the position of referring to it. On the one hand, as an act of language, testimony is regulated by the paradoxes which govern exchange and circulation. It finds itself subject to that economy of meaning that makes experience transmissible and death thinkable. On the other hand, testimony is the act of language that attempts to “recover” the experience of a subject who was present at the moment of his desubjectification, that is to say, the deferred instant of his death as a real limit to any language. We might say that the witness is in permanent relation to this paradox: he is determined by a field of meaning that he is destined to put into disarray. Testimony is simultaneously an act of potency and impotency. It is an act determined by its own and internal narrative possibility, given that testimony must create its own conditions of enunciation, invent its own language and affirm itself in an incommensurable performative act. As Idelber Avelar recently pointed out:

The task of constructing narratability must be understood [. . .] less as the elaboration of a coherent, diagetic sequence about the past, one that can be uttered [. . .], and more as the postulation of narrative as a possibility, in other words, the postulation of a virtual *place of witness*, as with the child survivor of the Holocaust who clung to the photograph of his mother, knowing that there, in that photograph, he was promised the act of testimony that the atrocity had tried to eliminate. (262, italics in original)

For this reason, Blanchot tells us that where knowledge fails in its attempt to capture the specificity of Holocaust, an alibi is imposed: we were always there, from start to finish. Perhaps *we* are not the same, but something must have been preserved. There always remains the possibility of “appropriating” that which stubbornly resists at the same time that it gives itself up. But such an appropriation, which can be nothing but knowledge striking against its own limit, at once institutes the promise that that which

occurred beyond language presents itself as the truth while it remains absent. The truth of the Holocaust—that urgent and necessary truth which all mass death should establish—remains ungraspable, to the degree that the experience is left without a subject and the witness without an experience. Thus, *to know* the Holocaust could be to represent what experience has previously dismantled: the very subject of that experience. That subject will never be witness to a truth that occurred in the world, since the witness was certainly that person who one day saw a world that no subject could possibly inhabit. Dori Laub writes that “a witness is a witness to the truth of what happens during an event,” but he writes this in order to demonstrate that, after the Holocaust, the truth of what took place remained in a radical absence of witnessing. In effect, the witness to the Holocaust has lost his or her capacity to “bear witness,” not only because, as Laub puts it, “the Holocaust created [. . .] a world in which one *could not bear witness to oneself*” (82, italics in original) to the extent that the subject is confronted by his own desubjectivization, but also because the very concept of truth in which “bearing witness” acquires sense has been destroyed.

In a famous story titled “Funes the Memorious,” Borges narrates an encounter with what we might call the perfect witness. His perfection lies in his prolific memory, capable of capturing everything in a single act of recollection. Funes then takes a whole day to remember the previous one, leaving the present subordinated to the transit of what has already taken place. Thus, Funes never had time, since all his time consisted in the passing of an earlier time through his memory, in having to repeat—just like Blanchot’s young prisoner—the dead instant as the present instant. Here is where one can clearly appreciate the dilemma of the witness. Again, the witness is that person who articulates the death of the other as the limit to his afterlife, that is to say, that person who puts thought in relation with that liminal experience which is death. So, whoever is willing to give testimony, whoever has attempted to relate or, simply, to elevate his word beyond what was destined to be the instant of its disappearance, must have first been capable of constructing a relation to language. The fundamental structure of testimony lies within this relation, since all testimony speaks of that experience which took place in the world, but which did not yield *an* experience: one’s own death. Unlike the case of Funes, memory is not an attribute of the witness. The witness is not one who remembers everything that must be forgotten in order for history to be possible, but rather one who has forgotten the truth of history so that he may testify. The truth of history is certainly

not what happened but rather that which, without happening, put life in danger. One might say that the witness is that person who thinks through death, not because death is an incomprehensible event, but because its incomprehensibility is precisely what makes thought possible.

On the night that he sees, from behind the morning light, the face of Funes suddenly unveiled, Borges writes, “to think is to forget differences” (*Obras* 89). Borges’ character Ireneo Funes dies of pulmonary congestion and, perhaps, amidst raw nightmares. His death, casual and instantaneous, occurs with crude irony: death has become oblivion, in the same moment transforming all thought into a relation with death. In this sense, Funes’ death, sometime around 1889, arrives as oblivion, to the extent that the act of forgetting is the key to freeing thought from subsuming itself in what Nietzsche called the “excess of history.” However, it does this while reestablishing for thought its peremptory condition, its innate fragility: leaving it trapped, having to think through death as its condition of possibility. Hence, “the dread” that afflicts Funes, the multiplication of useless gestures on the last night that he is seen, is due to the fact that his infallible memory, congested by the useless unfolding of the real, has suddenly made death unthinkable: difference, as such, opening outwards toward infinity. Fiction has become an exhausted and mundane activity. But isn’t perhaps death already unthinkable, and fiction already exhausted and mundane?

“Funes the Memorious” and the Nietzsche of “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life” (1874) might be said to have something in common. The conclusion of Nietzsche’s essay posits that 19th century man suffers from the illness of being excessively historical and sick with lucidity. Man, bursting with knowledge and historical conscience, is no longer capable of creating. Hence fiction has a necessity for oblivion, which is to say, a necessity of omitting the world’s differences for the sake of having a world. In effect, “I thought that each one of my words (that each one of my gestures) would last forever in his implacable memory,” (90) writes Borges, fearing, in this, to have perceived something of himself suspended within a present without thought, in a perpetual biography, perhaps wishing with that to say that thought is a way of forgetting the fateful destiny of death. And, just as Funes “noted the progress of death,” (90) but at the cost of not being able to think through it, Borges thinks through death, making of Funes the memorious an imprecise landscape of memory, a piece of time condemned to an irreparable mortality.

Translated by Aaron Walker and Carl Good

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