

Can we imagine what we do not know? Compassionate Imagination and the Shoah

Dorota Glowacka

To remember we must imagine
Georges Didi-Huberman¹

Trying to describe his ordeal of surviving Auschwitz, Aba Beer once remarked, “It takes a poet to describe it. I don’t have the words.”² What does it mean when an eyewitness to the horrors of the Shoah summons poetic imagination to convey the truth of his experience? What does it tell us about the relation between imagination and the duty to remember the past? We acknowledge that, as members of our respective communities, we are responsible not only for preserving the memory of the dead but also for how this memory is being shaped, transformed, and sometimes abused. As keepers of memory, aware of the power of the past to mold the future, we guard it against the trespassers, the disbelievers, and the make-believers, lest they offend the dignity of those who suffered. If, after the Shoah, we are wary of aestheticizing pain and transgressing against the unspeakable, can we agree with writer Aharon Appelfeld that “Only art has the power of redeeming [this] suffering from the abyss”?³ Yet we also need to ask about another limit to the powers of imagination, and that is whether we can truly imagine what we do not know, or what we have forbidden ourselves to know.

It is no longer controversial to accept imaginative representations of the Shoah as a credible modality of bearing witness. They are often preferred to historical accounts and documents because they can evoke sympathy and transmit emotional knowledge. As Marianna Hirsch notes, moreover, memory is never a literal transcript of events; its connection to the past is always mediated by “imaginative investment, projection and creation.”⁴ But not all literary and artistic representations have been accorded the same privilege as witnesses to history. In the realm of Holocaust visual art, for instance, the works by Marc Chagall, Felix Nussbaum, and Bêdrich Fritta have been called upon as authentic documents of the time, yet Charlotte Salomon’s testimonial paintings from the cycle *Life? Or Theater?*,⁵ which she made between August 1941 and August 1942, were ignored for almost sixty years.⁶ When, in 1963, brief selections of her *oeuvre* appeared, they bore the title, *Charlotte: A Diary in Pictures*, and were considered at best to be a visual equivalent of Anne Frank’s *Diary*. Salomon’s work, however, which combined image, text, and music, was an artistically innovative and bold reflection on the transmission of trauma between generations of women in her family and on the social construction of gender in relation to her development as an artist under the darkening skies of National Socialism. The idiosyncrasy of her artistic approach and the frankness with which she delved into the socially proscribed subject matter consigned her art to the margins of both dominant historical narratives and prevailing artistic canons.

If only some imaginative representations are recognized as authentic witnesses and others are not, and the criteria for extending that recognition are constrained by ideologies and social beliefs, shouldn’t we acknowledge a certain ethical shortcoming of our own imaginative faculty? Further, if artworks and works of fiction are capable of producing empathy, but only some experiences and persons become objects of our compassion and grief, maybe our powers of imagination are less unbounded than the philosophers and poets have claimed. If this is the case, then a different ethics of imagining is needed. I would like to call this ethics “compassionate imagination.” It is a way of imagining that is always implicated in the other and that renders us responsible not only for what we have imagined but also for what we have failed to imagine.

For several years now, my imagination has been riveted to one iconic image, which I first saw at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, in Washington D.C. It shows three Jewish women as if posing for the camera, shortly before their execution in Liepaja, Latvia, in December 1941. Haunted by the photograph, I have wondered what these women felt at that moment shortly before their death, when, partly undressed, they were made to stand in front of the camera, most likely held by a German soldier. Perhaps it was my tacit acceptance of such covertly sexualized images of female Holocaust victims

1 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, trans. Shane B. Lillis (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008), 25.

2 Quoted in Michelle MacAfee, “Visitors Can ‘Come without Fear,’” *Chronicle Herald*, May 23, 2003.

3 Aharon Appelfeld, *Three Lectures and a Conversation with Phillip Roth*, trans. Jeffery M. Green (New York: Fromm International, 1994), xvi.

4 Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 153ff.

5 See Charlotte Salomon, *Life or Theatre* (New York: Viking Press, 1981).

6 Cf. Mary Felstiner, *To Paint Her Life: Charlotte Salomon in the Nazi Era* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994); Michael P. Steinberg and Monica Bohm-Duchen, eds., *Reading Charlotte Salomon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006) The first comprehensive exhibition of Salomon’s work took place in 2004, in Germany.

that at first prevented me from noticing a fourth figure—of a little girl wearing a frock and a hat, her head bowed, her small body pressed tightly against the woman on the right-hand side. It took me even longer to pay attention to the details in the background: piles of clothes, soldiers with guns slung over their shoulders, and finally a blurry, pale spot that looked like an old woman, strangely bent-over and probably being helped to undress. For years, I was only noticing the three women in the foreground, seeing a version of a historical event that was told to me through the masculine lens of a camera held by a German perpetrator and then retold at the official sites of remembrance.

David Hume once wrote that when I see someone's suffering, I experience her pain in the act of imagination.⁷ This means, however, that in order to respond with empathy, I must indeed "see" the person who endures the pain. Why was the old woman absent from my field of vision, even though I could "see" her? As Merleau-Ponty has shown, perceptual acts, which I take to be natural and unencumbered, are in fact circumscribed by unconscious habits of knowing. The areas of experience that do not appear to me as intelligible do not emerge within my perceptual field and consequently cannot be captured in memory.⁸ In that case, can imagination break through the wall of epistemic blindness that holds us captive to certain ways of remembering the past while it excludes others? If our participation in the communities of knowledge is enabled by imagination—in so far as communities are themselves always imagined (Benedict Anderson)—can we unleash imagination in order to extend our engagement with the past beyond the dictates of the present?

In Immanuel Kant's classical formulation, imagination is the free faculty of the mind, which "schematizes" or organizes sense impressions and brings them under concepts, that is, renders them comprehensible. It is free because it operates without a rule, always reaching out for new possibilities.⁹ Writing in 1940, Jean Paul Sartre conceives of imagination as the ultimate locus of man's existential freedom. Whereas captive or inauthentic consciousness is lacking "the representation of the possible,"¹⁰ imagination opens up the dimension of yet unrealized possibilities and allows us to transform both ourselves and transform the external world. According to Hannah Arendt, it was this unique human ability to envisage the future and create new ways of living that National Socialism sought to annihilate. This is why imagination, with its spontaneity and unpredictability, is "the greatest of all obstacles to total domination."¹¹ As Arendt enjoins us, after the Shoah, we have an obligation to exercise this faculty to its full potential, so that we will "dread the concentration camp as a possibility for the future."¹² For Arendt, the way forward is through passionate commitment to imagination, that is, by recognizing imagination's ethical call. Israeli artist Bracha Ettinger has been working with another familiar Holocaust image, the photograph of a line of undressed women, some of whom are holding infants, before their execution by Ukrainian auxiliary police, on October 14, 1942, in Mizocz, Ukraine. Ettinger photocopies and enlarges the photograph and then paints over its details, as if lovingly veiling the bodies and transforming a document of atrocity into a work of mourning. The screens of violet and orange bring out what the black and white documentary photograph has obscured: the vulnerability and sensibility of the body, its intimacy and uniqueness, as if the artist's paintbrush sought to undo the humiliating, deadly spectacle. As Ettinger explains in her commentaries, she wants to produce a corporeal memory event, in which the viewer experiences affective connectivity with the women in the painting, so that, in the act of "com-passionate wit(h)nessing," she can reach out to them in grief and compassion instead of perpetuating their horror and shame.¹³

For Ettinger, such a compassionate, imaginative act offers "new possibilities for affective apprehending...where aesthetics converges with ethics even beyond the artist's intentions or conscious control."¹⁴ Our aesthetic capabilities (insofar as the term "aesthetics" is derived from the Greek *aisthēton* or "things perceptible to sense") primally imbricate thought in sense perception, affect, and the materiality of the here and now. According to Ettinger's "matrixial" (maternal) conception of aesthetics, these perceptions originate in the pre-subjective sphere where we are already connected with others. My body exposes me to the other before it properly belongs to me, and, through it, my being is shared even before I properly "am" in the world. Embodied subjectivity emerges relationally, in its vulnerability to violence and proximity to and

7 Cf. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Public Domain Books, 1739), Book II, part II, section VII, "Of Compassion." Kindle Edition.

8 In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty questions traditional accounts of perception, according to which "Perception is not, presumed true, but defined as [immediate] access to truth" (XVI). He argues instead that, as beings situated in the world, we develop perceptual habits. Since they are grounded in sedimented knowledge, which escapes conscious processes of recall, interpretation and intent, they appear to be natural and unmediated. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962).

9 See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J.H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, 1951).

10 Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary. A Phenomenological Psychology of Imagination*, trans. Jonathan Weber (London: Routledge, 2004), 47.

11 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Meridian Books Inc., 1958), 456.

12 *Ibid.*, 441.

13 Cf. Eurydice 1992–1996: *Oeuvres de Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger*, edited by Bracha L. Ettinger. Paris: BLE Atelier.

14 Bracha Ettinger, "Wit(h)nessing Trauma and the Matrixial Gaze," in *The Matrixial Borderspace*, Theory Out of Bounds (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 148.

dependence on others, prior to self-sameness.¹⁵ For Ettinger, this “fragilization” of the subject means that we are also exposed to the pain and trauma of others that co-constitute us. Since I always become human with another, my own being is shattered and my humanity crushed when the other is violated, degraded, and exposed to suffering.

In that case, prior to imagination as an act of individual freedom is “co-imagining” that involves affective co-implication in the other’s pain. Com-passionate imagination (imagination that “feels” with the other) is necessary so that I can conceive of the pain of the other as always incumbent on me. This imagining-with the other requires that I traverse an immense distance across space, time, and life experience, although I can never cross the threshold that separates me from the other, who will always transcend my powers to imagine. The role of imagination is to “potentially create the future...by sharing, by recognizing co-humanity rather than anxiously policing the boundaries of difference.”¹⁶ Artistic imagination is paramount in fostering such responsiveness to others.

Emmanuel Levinas, the great philosopher of ethics and himself a Holocaust survivor, cautions against the excesses of imagination that captivate alterity in the “games of art” and murder the living relation of the face-to-face.¹⁷ Aesthetics, for Levinas, is the corollary of the Western episteme of representation, in which the other is always absorbed into the structures of the same. Yet he also seeks examples of poetry, fiction, and even visual art that do not foreclose the ethical dimension and are instead “a seeking for the other,” as he writes beautifully about Paul Celan’s poems.¹⁸ In his works, Levinas did not reflect on imagination’s capacity to break away from the self-same and open up to the new and the unforeseen. Yet in the acts of compassionate imagination, of which Ettinger’s art is a prime example, the appropriative function of representation is always interrupted by the advent of the unknown other, who is often also the other of official history.

The 70th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising this year was commemorated in Poland with the symbolic opening of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews. The museum will provide a permanent abode for the memory of Jewish history and culture in Poland, the memory that, in the decades following the Shoah, was often exiled and abandoned.¹⁹ Accompanying the inauguration was the exhibition *Polish Art and the Holocaust (Sztuka polska wobec Holokaustu)*, housed at the Jewish Historical Museum, which featured works by Polish-Jewish artists—survivors of the Holocaust (such as Henryk Beck, Alina Szapocznikow, and Jonasz Stern), Poles who were eye-witnesses to the tragedy of their Jewish neighbours (Xawery Dunikowski and Władysław Strzemiński), and contemporary Polish artists (Rafał Jakubowski, Elżbieta Janicka, Mirosław Bałka, Artur Żmijewski, and others) who seek to re-invite the memory of Polish Jews into the Polish landscape of remembrance.²⁰ This art insists that Poles reimagine having lived next door to their Jewish neighbours, in the country where the precepts of neighbourliness were often violated. One of the exhibits, a part of Elżbieta Janicka’s project *Miejsce nieparzyste (Odd Places)*, confronts the viewer with two white squares in dark frames; these are photographs of air that the artist took at the sites of former Nazi death camps (the captions refer to “Auschwitz-Birkenau II” and “Bełżec”). The title of the installation alludes to the Polish government’s policy of segregating seats for the Jewish students at Polish universities in late 1930s, reminding the viewer that the air over the Nazi camps also carries the traces of the ignominious history of Polish-Jewish relations. What appear to the eye as the image of absence are in fact the crowded abundance of ghosts and the condensed presence of air, which the artist imagines as still saturated with ashes. What at first appeared as emptiness begins to suffocate the viewer, who now traverses this bleak landscape with a compassionate eye.

Levinas writes that the other always affects me to the very core of my being, getting under my skin and interrupting my breath. She distresses me in the vulnerability of my own body, exposed to the outside by breathing, by “divesting its ultimate substance even to the mucous membrane of the lungs, continually splitting.”²¹ Such an intimate encounter reveals my absolute need, my “insatiable hunger” for the other. Yet it also gives rise to the need for images that would fill out the empty frame. Janicka’s white square is then perhaps also an image of a window that has been shuttered tight and now must be pried open so that we can see “otherwise” and reach out toward the outside of the dark frame. As Joanna Roszak writes in one of the catalogue essays, “It is worth asking ourselves whom are [these works of art] calling, to whom they give voice. What are they preparing the eye to look at, what are they preventing us from *not* seeing?”²²

15 Cf. Judith Butler’s discussion of “precarity” in Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004); and Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2010).

16 Griselda Pollock, “Aesthetic Wit(h)nessing in the Era of Trauma,” *EuroAmerica* 40, no. 4 (December 2012): 837.

17 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 347.

18 Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names*, ed. Michael Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 46.

19 The building of the Museum is now complete although the exhibits are still in preparation. For details, see www.jewishmuseum.org.pl/en.

20 Cf. <http://dzieje.pl/wideo/wystawa-sztuka-polska-wobec-holokaustu-w-zih>

21 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 107.

22 Joanna Roszak, “Obrazy, podobieństwa/Images Likenesses,” in *Sztuka wobec Holokaustu/Polish Art and the Holocaust*.

Traditionally, imagination is inseparable from the conceptions of art invested in the notion of a solitary subject and totalizing self-other relations. Yet if we must imagine in order to remember, as Didi-Huberman bids us, the task of compassionate imagination is to write and rewrite history so that the invisible can inscribe itself on its pages. If memory depends on cultural means of expression, including art, but the memory of certain individuals or groups cannot be accommodated by socially sanctioned versions of history, then it is the role of imagination (which, new each time, always reaches out for an untried possibility) to break away from the rules that dictate the content and shape of our frames of remembrance. This is how imagination after the Shoah has laboured against the Nazi regime's desire to annul the victim's humanity by eradicating her ability to imagine. Remembering the past thus requires that I imagine myself looking in the face of the old woman in the dark background of the photograph and become a keeper of the memory of the indignity and injury done to her. It is from this imaginative, compassionate encounter with the other that the possibility of a new future, in which we will protect the human and the interhuman, can arise. Arendt wrote that "[w]ithout repeating life in imagination you can never be fully alive."²³ Because I am always indebted to the other in my ability to imagine (but also vulnerable to having this ability taken away), imagination as co-imagination, as imagination-with the other and for the other's freedom from suffering, is prior to imagination understood as the highest expression of individual freedom.

I shall imagine and search for images that will prove hospitable to those men, women, and children whose experiences my memory has disavowed. This is both an ethical and ontological imperative. Otherwise, cast in the grayish, indistinct background of the photograph, the old Jewish woman from Lipijce would never have existed.

Bibliography:

- Appelfeld, Aharon. *Three Lectures and a Conversation with Phillip Roth*. Translated by Jeffery M. Green. New York: Fromm International, 1994.
- Arendt, Hannah. *Men in Dark Times*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Janovich Publishers, 1968.
- . *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Meridian Books Inc., 1958.
- Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London: Verso, 2010.
- . *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004.
- Didi-Huberman, Georges. *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*. Translated by Shane B. Lillis. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008.
- Ettinger, Bracha. "Wit(h)nessing Trauma and the Matrixial Gaze." In *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 123–156. Theory Out of Bounds. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.
- Felstiner, Mary. *To Paint Her Life: Charlotte Salomon in the Nazi Era*. New York: Harper Collins, 1994.
- Hirsch, Marianne. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.
- Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Public Domain Books, 1739.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgement*. Translated by J.H. Bernard. New York: Hafner Press, 1951.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1998.
- . *Proper Names*. Edited by Michael Smith. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.
- . *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1969.
- Pollock, Griselda. "Aesthetic Wit(h)nessing in the Era of Trauma." *EuroAmerica* 40, no. 4 (December 2012): 829–886.
- Rozak, Joanna. "Obrazy, podobieństwa/Images Likenesses." In *Sztuka wobec Holokaustu/Polish Art and the Holocaust. Exhibition catalogue.*, 34–41. Warsaw: Jewish Historical Institute, 2013.
- Salomon, Charlotte. *Life or Theatre*. New York: Viking Press, 1981.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *The Imaginary. A Phenomenological Psychology of Imagination*. Translated by Jonathan Weber. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Śmiechowska, Teresa. "Próby. Nadać kształt milczeniu/Attempts. Trying to Give Shape to Silence." In *Sztuka wobec Holokaustu/Polish Art and the Holocaust. Exhibition catalogue.*, 20–33. Warsaw: Jewish Historical Institute, 2013.
- Steinberg, Michael P., and Monica Bohm-Duchen, eds. *Reading Charlotte Salomon*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006.

Exhibition catalogue. (Warsaw: Jewish Historical Institute, 2013), 41.

23 Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Janovich Publishers, 1968), 97.