

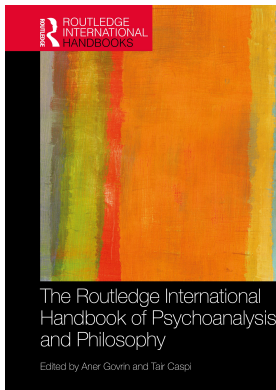
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8

TRAUMA AND LANGUAGE¹

Dana Amir

The psychoanalytic literature on trauma refers extensively to the major role of the other in bearing witness to a trauma the victim often has not, and could not have, witnessed himself or herself. Authors from various theoretical fields (Laub and Auerhahn, 1993; Oliner, 1996) describe trauma as something that has taken place “over there, far away”, an event that does not belong to the experiencing “I”. Trauma, both collective and individual, is often conceptualized as an external event, detached from the narrator who experienced it. Survivors of trauma claim that they live in two worlds: the world of their traumatic memories (a kind of everlasting present) and the real world (the concrete present). Usually they neither wish nor are able to integrate these two worlds. As a result, the traumatic memory is preserved frozen and timeless, and psychic movement becomes automatic, aimless and senseless (Laub, 2005). At the heart of the traumatic experience there is an experience of excess that escapes representation and leaves a lacuna within consciousness (LaCapra, 2001). Caruth (1996, pp. 91–92) writes about the traumatic paradox in which the most direct contact with the violent event may occur only through the very inability to know it. Trauma is not only an experience, but also the failure to experience that experience: not merely the threat itself, but the fact that the threat was recognized as such only a moment too late. As it was not experienced in time, the event is condemned not to be fully known (Caruth, 1996, p. 62). As such, it returns to claim its presence, trying to cover an experiential void through compulsive repetition. Van der Kolk et al. (1996) argue that while terrifying events may be remembered extremely vividly, they may equally resist any kind of integration. These memories remain powerful but frozen, un-transformable by either circumstantial processes or the passing of time. They are subject to neither assimilation nor developmental change since they are not integrated into the associative network. As a result, they remain concealed, retaining their magnetic force in their detailed and contradictory clarity, in the condensed vagueness that envelopes them. Rather than undergoing the transformation that leads to a personal narrative, traumatic experiences are imprinted as primary impressions that do not receive verbal representation (*ibid.*, pp. 282, 296). As Modell (2006) suggests, trauma tends to freeze the past and therefore deprives it of the plasticity it needs if it is to connect to the present (Modell, 2006; Stern, 2012). Memories of trauma are not only rigid and concrete, but unmentalized. As such, they remain “raw”: neither adaptable nor generative (*ibid.*).

Dori Laub (2005), in a paper titled “Traumatic Shutdown of Narrative and Symbolization”, quotes Moore (1999) who argued that the traumatized subject cannot know that the traumatic

event has taken place until an other supplies it with a narrative. A person can know his or her story only when he or she tells it to what Laub calls “the inner thou” (internal other). But since trauma critically injures both the internal and external other, namely the addressee of any di-logical relationship, it ruins the possibility of an empathic dyad in the inner representation of the world, leaving the subject with nobody to address, either inside or outside himself or herself.² This catastrophic loss of the good object compels the victim to internalize the only available object, the aggressor himself, as a malignant self-object (Kohut, 1971) with whom he or she identifies. Laub further argues that the fragmenting effects of the traumatic experience can be better understood if we postulate the presence of unbound, un-neutralized death instinct derivatives. Conscious memory is the first casualty of these unbound death instinct derivatives. Furthermore, erasure of traumatically lost objects and of the traumatic experience itself, may lead the survivor to complete oblivion, or to doubt the veracity and authenticity of his or her own experiences, compromising his or her entire sense of identity and continuity. Laub contends that it is the traumatic loss of the (internal) good object and the libidinal ties to it that releases the hitherto neutralized forces of the death instinct and intensifies the clinical manifestations of its derivatives. “In the absence of an internal responsive ‘thou’, there is no attachment to, nor cathexis of the object” (2005, pp. 316–317).

Shoshana Felman (1992) similarly reflects on Albert Camus’s *The Plague* (1975):

[The protagonist] has to learn on his body what a holocaust – a situation of “total condemnation” – is: [. . .] an experience that requires one to live through one’s own death, and paradoxically, bear witness to that living through one’s dying; a death experience which can be truly comprehended, witnessed only from inside (from inside the witness’s own annihilation); a radical experience to which no outsider can be witness, but to which no witness can be, or remain, outsider.

(p. 109)

Traumatic experiences often activate a psychic process of self-annihilation. Their acidity creates a type of psychic holes which absorb the unbearable traumatic substances along with the subject who contains them, to the point of a total collapse of inner barriers. This collapse of barriers leaves the subject imprisoned in a territory of *negative possession* (Amir, 2012, 2014, 2016a, 2018), where the traumatic contents are neither digested nor worked through. The only chance of recovery from this condition lies in the possibility to deposit the traumatic substances in another subject who cannot be annihilated by them. This is the core of bearing witness.

The Language of the Victim: The Metaphoric, the Metonymic and the Psychotic Modes of Witnessing

Metaphor and metonymy are two forms of semantic shift, that is, two modes of transition from one semantic field to another. Metaphor is the use of a word or an expression in a borrowed rather than in its simple, original sense, or the use of the characteristics of one concept in order to illuminate another. Metaphor is based on analogy, on a relationship of similarity between two semantic fields. The sentence “My love is a rose” does not imply that the rose itself is the beloved one but that something in the beloved’s features resembles that of a rose. Metonymy, by contrast, is a figurative tool that illustrates something by replacing it with something else that is situated close to it in time or space, or that belongs in the same context. The result is not logical in the simple sense and can only be understood through the proximity between the two elements. This is how the expression “the White House” comes to stand for the notion of “the president’s

spokesperson”. As opposed to metaphor, in metonymy there is no transfer of characteristics between the two elements (the president’s spokesperson does not share features with the White House). The connection between them is associative only, in a way that allows us to perceive the one as representative of the other.

In his article “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances” (1956), Roman Jakobson presents metaphor and metonymy as polar opposites rather than parts of the hierarchical order in which they are more commonly seen. He stresses the *similarity* that metaphor installs between its signifiers versus the *contiguity* typical of metonymy. Each of these modes of transposition, he argues, relies on different cognitive skills. While metaphor is based on the cognitive ability to convert, metonymy implies the ability to connect and contextualize, that is, the ability to create continuity and to identify something as part of – and following from – a context. Jakobson divides the aphasic patients with whom his article is concerned into patients who suffer from impaired identification of similarities and those whose ability to combine and contextualize is affected.

Lacan’s (1958, 1977) distinction between metaphor and metonymy diverges from Jakobson’s. Though, following the latter, he associates metaphor with the axis of linguistic selection and metonymy with that of combination, metaphor for him acts to constitute meaning while metonymy resists meaning: the metonymic drive is related to the desire to recover the lost “Real”. Metaphor, by contrast, is associated with “the symptom”, whose creation is a constructive process in which new meaning emerges. Metaphor therefore maintains analogous relations between its subjects, while in metonymy subjects entertain relations of contiguous association. Metaphor is related to the ability to take a distance, thereby enabling the discussion of something that belongs to one conceptual field in terms that belong to another. Metonymy, by contrast, constitutes relations of continuity, that is, relations that maintain no distance.

Following both Jakobson’s and Lacan’s ideas, I would like to suggest a distinction between a metaphoric and a metonymic mode of witnessing, further adding a psychotic mode (divided into two sub-modes) which is completely outside the range stretching between the former two.

The term “metaphoric mode of witnessing” refers to those parts of the testimonial narrative where there is a shift from the “first person” to the “third person” of experience, or from the *experiencing I* to the *reflective I*,³ further enabling the shift from the “position of the victim” to the “position of the witness” (Amir, 2012, 2014, 2016a, 2018). The metaphoric mode, by its very nature, creates movement and is based on movement. Unlike the other three modes – the metaphoric mode struggles against traumatic stagnation through creating a three-dimensional space based on the shift from the first person to the third person and back. Its metaphoric quality lies therefore in the fact that it involves an act of representation and the creation of new meaning, producing an integrated narrative within which the traumatic events are not merely repeated but also undergo transformation.

As against the metaphoric mode, the metonymic mode of witnessing remains a “first person” mode of report. It produces a text that preserves and enacts the traumatic memories and the traumatic features, and is thus characterized by the same sense of isolation, fragmentation, disorientation and lack of coherence that are typical of the traumatic experience itself. In that sense, the metonymic mode illustrates the very materials to which it testifies. It is based on the compulsive repetition of the experience itself, in the absence of the ability to represent it or reflect on it. So while the metaphoric mode of witnessing enables the shift between the first and the third persons of experience, the metonymic mode is located in the first person mode of report. It uses no distancing, maintaining a living continuum with the traumatic memories and through it also with a sense of selfhood. The metonymic mode lacks any reflective aspect. It enacts the traumatic experience without transforming it, incorporating it without being capable

of transcending it. In the metonymic mode of witnessing, any transcendence is experienced as a split between the person and his or her identity.

To these two modes, I would like to add what I refer to as “the psychotic mode of witnessing”. This mode of witnessing attacks every possible link with the trauma, separating between the person and his or her memories, as well as between the person and his or her own sense of selfhood. This modality includes two sub-modalities, or two subcategories: “the *Muselmann*⁴ subcategory” and “the excessive subcategory”.

The *Muselmann* mode of witnessing has only rare narrative manifestations, since it essentially attacks both the ability to narrate and language itself. The post-Holocaust literature includes diverse expressions of this mode in the form of survivors’ accounts, some of which appear in the form of a semi-psychotic type of discourse, both intra-psychic and inter-psychic, a discourse that annihilates any contact with the psychic reality and the pain it involves. This mode of witnessing is founded neither on the ability to shift between the first and the third person of experience (like in the metaphoric mode) nor on the capacity to stay exclusively in the first person of experience (like in the metonymic mode). In fact, it destroys both the first person and the third person, and thereby the very possibility of an experiencing subject. This testimonial mode joins the traumatic “Real” without being able to distance itself from it on the one hand, or to create a vital link with it on the other. When the dominant mode of testimony is the *Muselmann* mode, trauma turns into a *negative possession* (Amir, 2012, 2014, 2016a, 2018): a psychic condition that annihilates both the capacity to represent the traumatic event as well as the ability to preserve vital contact with it.

Primo Levi (1959) writes:

All the *Mussulmanns* who finished in the gas chambers have the same story, or more exactly, have no story; [. . .] the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand. They crowd my memory with their faceless presences, and if I could enclose all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of a thought is to be seen.

(p. 103)

In the *Muselmann* mode, trauma operates like an impoverishing, reductive, and sterilizing mechanism, turning the entire internal discourse into one that separates both between the subject and the traumatic object as well as between the subject and his own self. In this state, the subject can neither distance him or herself from the trauma – nor approach it. This form of survival is not that of the “living dead”, but rather that of the “neither dead nor alive”.

The excessive subcategory, by contrast, is a much more illusory one. Here the traumatic object becomes an addictive and gratifying object in its own right, one whose totality replaces the functional sense of being. In this mode of witnessing, traumatic excessiveness is available to consciousness neither by way of an elaborate link (as in the metaphoric mode) nor by way of repetition (as in the metonymic mode). Witnessing in this case involves the traumatic memory becoming a “saturated object” (Bion, 1962a, 1962b, 1959, 1970), an object that resists transformation and to which the obstinate adherence becomes malignant. The illusiveness characteristic of this mode is related to its deceptive combination of a highly developed rhetoric on the one hand and a massive “attack on linking” (Bion, 1959) on the other. Adherence to the excessiveness of suffering and the traumatic object’s imperviousness to new meanings or any other

processes of change turn traumatic repetition into “a thing in itself” (*das Ding*). As opposed to the *Muselmann* mode, which annihilates both the first person and the third person of report, the excessive mode creates a pseudo–first person, a pseudo–third person and a pseudo–movement between them.

Lacan (1958) discusses the formation of subjectivity as being based on an experience of lack. The subject, according to him, is constituted at the point in time when he or she enters the “Symbolic order” through the mother’s interpretation of the Real. Along with the experience itself, the infant is given an interpretation that renders the experience meaningful by introducing it into the order of language. Experiences that are attributed to an “identical category” come together to form what the child experiences as that category: pain, tickling, cold, missing. There is, however, always a remainder or surplus that stays outside this junction. This surplus, lost in the process of symbolization and thus remaining outside the order of language, becomes the object of desire. Psychic motion is always directed towards this object of desire, and it is through this motion that the subject is constituted *qua* living subject. In contrast to the common concept of the satisfying object, Lacan introduces the lack of the object as constitutive to the creation of the subject in the first place. No psychic motion will ensue without the experience of lack (Amir, 2014, 2016a, 2018).

The excessive mode of witnessing creates, through the consummate totality of the traumatic object, an illusion of fusion without lack, fusion which allows a lingering in the Real at the cost of the formation of both subject and subjectivity. The deceptiveness of this mode of witnessing is related to its intensive linguistic nature: while the register of the Real precedes language and in many ways also opposes it, the overt manifestation of the excessive mode is not an absence of language. On the contrary, it often presents articulate and well–developed language, with a wealth of rhetorical features. But underneath the rhetorical surface, this is a language that attacks rather than produces linking; a saturated language, one that under the guise of “full testimony” presents what Cathy Caruth (1996) calls “empty grammar”: a grammar that empties the event, thus does not allow for its subjects to undergo transformation. And so while the excessive mode might well be replete with metaphors, the metaphoric mode, as I will show, might in fact be comparatively minor and minimalistic. Rather than by the presence or absence of overt linguistic characteristics, like metaphors, these two modes are distinguished by means of whether they are employed to link or to split.

Every testimonial narrative constitutes a certain combination of these four modes, marking zones of psychic transformation versus zones of saturated thinking, zones of linking versus zones of compulsive repetition, zones in which testimony annihilates the witness versus zones in which it constitutes him or her as such.

Agamben (2002) writes:

To bear witness is to place oneself in one’s own language in the position of those who have lost it, to establish oneself in a living language as if it were dead, or in a dead language as if it were living. [. . .] What cannot be stated, what cannot be archived is the language in which the author succeeds in bearing witness to the incapacity to speak. In this language, a language that survives the subjects who spoke it coincides with a speaker who remains beyond it.

(pp. 161–162)

Since every testimonial narrative is an intersection between “what cannot be stated” and what is actually spoken, every act of testimony is simultaneously a collapse and a formation of language: a collapse of language, since bearing witness to what cannot be testified renders testimony a

meaningless event, or one that conveys “archival meaning” (Agamben, 2002) only; and a formation of language, since where language succeeds to speak not in spite of the lacuna but in its name, not beyond it but through it, it becomes a real event of testimony, one that constitutes the subject of witnessing as such.

In each of these testimonial modes, language collapses in a singular way.

The metonymic mode collapses into repetition, allowing no room for reflection. It creates an experiential continuity between subject and traumatic event, thereby preserving a psychic outline, but in fact remains trapped in this outline without the freedom to retrospectively reconstruct the traumatic memory.

The excessive mode collapses into rhetoric. Via linguistic excessiveness, it creates an artificial bridge over the traumatic lacuna, but this excessiveness does not create a vital link; rather it constitutes a hollow, addictive syntax which fixates the traumatic object at the center while pushing the reflective subject to the margins.

The *Muselmann* mode collapses into the traumatic abyss itself. Here is where testimony is at its fullest and emptiest simultaneously: one that is present only in the form of its absence.

The metaphoric mode collapses into language while also constituting language. To this Agamben alludes when he speaks of the ability to intersect what is said with what cannot be stated: the *Muselmann* with the survivor. This is the only mode that can contain the uncanny “background noise”, which cannot be transformed, along with the “speaker who remains beyond it” (Agamben, p. 162). The movement between different states (the position of the victim and the position of the witness, the experiential I and the narrating I, the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich*) which the metaphoric mode enables, creates the necessary intersection of dead language with living language. Amos Goldberg (2012) writes that “trauma is directed opposite to the trajectory of a life story” (p. 102). One can therefore think of the metaphoric mode as the site of struggle between the formative power of the life story and the destructive power of the trauma, with the latter prevailing.

The Language of the Perpetrator: Screen Confessions and the “Newspeak”

The perfect crime, as Jean-François Lyotard (1989) claims, does not consist of killing the victim but rather of obtaining the silence of the witness, the deafness of the judges and the inconsistency of the testimony. If one neutralizes the addressor, the addressee and the significance of the testimony, the result is that there is no referent: no crime has been committed. When, in other words, the witness is blind, the judge is deaf and the testimony has lost coherence and meaning, the crime goes unregistered and hence allegedly never happened.

The present section focuses on the ways in which the perpetrator “erases the referent” by silencing her or his inner witness and inner judge, turning the entire testimonial text into a false representation of a coherent discourse that in fact undermines its own validity. This erasure, as will be shown, is achieved by the emergence of a double language, one marked by a dissociation between its explicit and its implicit meaning. While claiming to generate meaning and adhering to a chronological sequence, this language creates what George Orwell (1949) called *Newspeak*: a language that rewrites factual and emotional history alike. This Newspeak yields a phenomenon that I call *screen confessions* (Amir, 2017): voluntary confessional texts produced by perpetrators of their own free will, which share the main characteristic of subtly and unconsciously subverting themselves. The notion of screen confessions was chosen to allude to Freud’s *screen memories* (1899). Unlike the notion of screen memory – which refers to the way in which a relatively marginal memory covers another emotionally charged one that cannot be remembered – the notion of screen confession refers not to memory itself, but to how it is construed in language. Omitted

from this kind of confession are not the concrete facts, but their meaning. Distortion or error do not inhere in the factual details, but in the syntax that interferes in different ways with the original (true) utterance, taking away its meaning even if all of its components are accurate and correct.

This brings to mind Fromm's (1941/1994) notion of the social character. In his discussion of the ways in which a given culture or society mediates what can or cannot penetrate consciousness, Fromm discusses three such socially conditioned filters: language, logic and social taboos. In the case of language, Fromm points out that the ability of certain affective experiences to enter consciousness is dependent on the degree to which a particular language can accommodate the potential experience. The whole structure of language, its grammar, syntax and so on, acts as a kind of boundary for aspects of experience (Durkin, 2014; Fromm, 1941/1994). Thus, language colludes with cultural and social taboos by means of preserving the culture's "unspeakable" from being both thought and uttered.

Theodor Adorno (1951) writes:

The leaders are generally oral character types[. . .]. The famous spell they exercise over their followers seems largely to depend on their orality: language itself, devoid of its rational significance, functions in a magical way and furthers those archaic regressions which reduce individuals into members of crowds.

(p. 132)

What is this linguistic magic?

The perpetrator's language serves, in fact, as a *pseudo-language* (Amir, 2010, 2014): a language that produces a correct speech that lacks truthfulness. While being perfectly eloquent, it actually serves as a partition between the individual and her or his inner world, and eventually comes to hermetically insulate the person from the truth s/he cannot bear – instead of being the tool by means of which this truth can be thought and expressed.

The first thinker to discuss the perpetrator's unique (pseudo-)use of language was Hannah Arendt (1963), who focused on Eichmann's consistent use of stock phrases and self-invented clichés as well as his reliance on officialese (*Ámtssprache*) and the euphemistic *Sprachregelung*, all aimed at presenting his actions as marginal, on the one hand, and inevitable on the other – as part, that is, of a general mechanism that does not allow for the individual's responsibility for her or his actions. The accomplices in the plan to annihilate the Jews used a neutral verbal mode – "final solution", "mercy death", "euthanasia" and "special treatment" – instead of "extermination". This particular deployment of language, Arendt argues, played an important part in keeping the general public in the dark. But it also served, and not less importantly, to allow those who participated in the genocide to avoid confronting the clash between their current actions and their former moral norms (p. 86), enabling them in that way not to know their own deeds.

One can say that this deployment of language opens an abyss between signifier and signified. This abyss makes it possible to hygienically articulate unspeakable acts – but, over and beyond their being addressed in this way to the external audience, such a linguistic split also facilitates an internal split, within the speaker, between act and thought. Not only is the erasure of the link between signifier and signified thus made possible, but also the erasure of the link between the deliverer of the word and the word itself. Eventually, both the subject upon whom these acts are visited, as well as the subject who perpetrates them, are annihilated as subjects of language.

Arendt writes:

Whether writing his memories in Argentina or in Jerusalem, whether speaking to the police examiner or to the court, what he [Eichmann] said was always the same,

expressed in the same words. The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to *think*, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else. No communication was possible with him, not because he lied but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all safeguards against the words and the presence of others, and hence against reality as such.

(p. 44)

Elsewhere, Arendt quotes Eichmann commenting on himself: “Officialese is my only language” (pp. 43–44). Arendt made a brave and subversive effort, in many ways ahead of its time, to understand this singular “pathology” of the perpetrator’s language. As she listened to this language, she noticed in it various forms of inversion. She described, for instance, the “trick” Himmler used to overcome the “animal compassion” every normal human being experiences in the face of physical suffering – a sensation that also visited Germans who witnessed their victims’ pain:

it consisted in turning these instincts around, as it were, in directing them towards the self. So that instead of saying: what horrible things I did to people!, the murderers would be able to say: what horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties, how heavily the task weighed upon my shoulders!

(p. 93)

This inversion of positions is, indeed, one of the key “syntactic rules” of the perpetrator’s language. Often in testimonies (e.g., those given to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission), the perpetrators consider themselves victims of the regime rather than responsible for it. Himmler’s solution, however, represents a much higher level of sophistication. Here we have a linguistic solution that transforms the one who *causes* the suffering into *the object* of suffering, while completely dropping the actual object of suffering (i.e., the victim) from the entire syntactic structure. Now the perpetrator – who caused the suffering – occupies both ends of the statement, constituting both subject and object of the act. Where is the victim? In this scene, dominated throughout by the perpetrator, the victim has become a marginal figure, reduced to being the thing by means of which the perpetrator causes the suffering which he, due to his total commitment to his mission, has to endure (Amir, 2017).

The victim’s elision from the syntactic structure is by no means accidental. Rather, it reflects the subtle and consistent ways by which the perpetrator’s language eliminates the meaning of the very events it describes. However, it is not only the victim whom this language obscures. In the end, through a circular move, it makes the perpetrator himself or herself, *qua* speaking and thinking subject, superfluous. Himmler erases not merely his “animal feelings” toward his victims’ suffering (as Arendt put it), but also his most vital feelings concerning himself – splitting, in Waintrater’s (2015) words, the living I from the speaking I.

One telltale sign of perpetrators’ language, evident across all types of testimony, whether of collective or of individual perpetrators (Dilmon, 2004, 2007), is the use of the grammatical passive form. The accounts of Nazi officers, for instance, show frequent use of passive rather than active constructions, evidencing frequent occurrences of “were shot” or “were forced” rather than “I shot” or “I forced”. Unsurprisingly, the testimonies of those who refused orders are marked, in contrast, by the use of the first person singular and the active mode. This ostensibly negligible feature conveys the manner in which language is enlisted to hide and camouflage perpetrators’ responsibility and the fact that they acted voluntarily – even where this language is deployed to reveal the truth.

Another characteristic of perpetrators' language is the constant creation of a false hierarchy of values, one in which a low moral value is featured to conceal the breach of a high moral value. One illustration of this false hierarchy can be found in a letter (quoted in its entirety in Daniel Goldhagen, 1996) by Captain Wolfgang Hoffmann, who was responsible for the slaughter of tens of thousands of Jews, but who protested indignantly against the claim that he or his men could have robbed Poles of food. This ostensibly marginal contradiction in fact discloses his way of construing the traumatic reality, a construal in which the amorality of the massacre is camouflaged by a pseudo-moral vigilance. In this manner, the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" is silenced not by denying the murderous acts themselves but by the vociferous defense of the precept "Thou shalt not steal", which thus comes to serve as a cover-up.

Many SS officers after World War II admitted that they were motivated by a feeling that, if they managed to overcome their repugnance toward their own actions, this would make them more faithful soldiers in the service of a greater power for the sake of which they must overcome their "human limitations". This is another linguistic circularity characteristic of perpetrators' speak: the expression "human limitations", which usually refers to a person's difficulty in restraining her or his hostile feelings and summoning the best of their humanity, is here transformed into a perception of human-ness itself as a limitation that prevents one, with its "inferior" and "animal-like" emotions such as compassion and remorse, to carry out the required actions against humanity. As defined by Bollas' (1992) paper on the fascist state of mind, "professionalism" is the ability to overcome human identifications, to go beyond any feelings of love or hatred, and to execute orders "hygienically" simply because they are orders.

An appalling illustration of this type of "professionalism" is Milgram's (1974) (in)famous experiment, which, portraying itself as concerning processes of learning, led participants to administer increasingly powerful electric shocks to members of the research team, presented as participants who seemed to give the wrong answers. Sixty-five percent of the participants administered the maximum – apparently lethal – electric shock. Many participants perspired, stuttered, trembled – indicating that they were not unaware of what they were doing and the possible consequences, yet they did as they were told. The operative instruction that caused them to push the button was "the experiment requires that you continue". These words, carefully chosen – rather than characterizing the task as one in which a singular subject is acting on another singular subject – frame the setting as one in which an object acts on behalf of the experiment on another object; they silence, at least as far as it concerns the "true participants" (the ones who administer the electric shocks), the two subjects involved in the situation. But something else, too, is happening here: the longer the chain of command, and the less significant the role of the person in this chain, the easier it is for this person to deny the overall meaning of the orders s/he obeys. As the chain grows longer, the details of the act it accomplishes grow vaguer, fuzzier and more incomprehensible. When all a person is required to do is push a button during a scientific experiment, s/he will not consider themselves the cause of another person's pain, a person who momentarily is also perceived as an object hooked up to the other end of an electric wire rather than a fellow human being, and who – like the one who pushes the button – is nothing but a component in an experiment, an object in the service of something larger: the research, the experiment, science itself.

Perpetrators' language's denial has countless forms and manifestations. One such manifestation can be found in the testimony of Albert Fisher, a staff member at Lublin during World War II. In his testimony, Fisher describes another staff member, Max Dietrich, who was known for his extreme cruelty towards the Jewish prisoners. His testimony, quoted in Goldhagen (1996), focuses on one incident where a prisoner was beaten by Dietrich until he lost consciousness. Dietrich then forced other prisoners to pour water on his face, and, when he woke up, forced

him to eat his own feces. At this moment, Fisher states: “I left because it disgusted me”. The testimonial text creates here an interesting, though almost invisible, ambiguity: it can be understood as a statement of disagreement with Dietrich’s cruel actions, but it can also be received in its simple concreteness. Fischer did not turn away because his friend’s cruelty disgusted him, but because the sight of the man eating his own feces made him sick. Thus, the overt declaration of “turning away”, allegedly “taking a stand”, may mask the possibility that what made him turn away was not his empathy towards the human prisoner but rather the opposite: his inability to bear this unbelievable horror-show of the prisoner’s naked humanity (Amir, 2017).

Another kind of denial can be found in the transcripts of interviews by Claude Lanzmann with Benjamin Murmelstein⁵ in the documentary “The Last of the Unjust” (2013), dealing with Jewish collaboration with the Nazis in World War II. At one moment Murmelstein recounts how Hans Guenther, the German ghetto commander, called him in and asked what he thought about the film made of Theresienstadt⁶ after Murmelstein’s renovations of the ghetto, a propaganda film which misleadingly presented the place as the Nazis’ paradise for Jews. Murmelstein tells Guenther that he thinks the film is “terrible”: “Though I can understand why it doesn’t show decrepit old people with one foot in the grave, it’s ridiculous to show a camp where people just sing, who would believe that?” This moment is fascinating in terms of how it works as a screen confession. Here Murmelstein can be seen to “switch sides”, looking at things, that is, from the Nazis’ point of view rather than that of the Jews. He understands that as the Nazis see it, the point is to create a credible presentation, not one that is too utopian and unrealistic. But this moment, when he comments “terrible”, is ambiguous: from the Jews’ point of view, the film is terrible because it presents a fake image that glosses over the horrors with which they live. From the perspective of the Nazis, however, the film is terrible not because it fails to capture reality but because it fails to achieve its purpose, that is, it fails to disguise that reality. While Murmelstein offers his answer to Guenther as proof of his “putting himself on the line by telling the truth”, as he declares, the truth he presents here is not the one he pretends to present. Thus, when he declares “I did not collaborate with their comedy”, he actually exposes his very collaboration with the tragedy (Amir, 2019b).

Efrat Even-Tzur and Uri Hadar (2017), following Lacan and Žižek, suggest a distinction between the identification of the perpetrator with a “living father” and his or her identification with a “dead father”:

The identification of an agent of Law [. . .] with a “Living Father” [. . .] expresses such a belligerent and tyrant subject position that it does not seek any legitimacy or justification of its authority. The father is “living” in a sense similar to the vitality of the tyrant father of the primeval tribe in “Totem and Taboo”, who takes pleasure in his power to rule, intimidate and determine arbitrary rules that he is not subjected to personally. On the other hand, the identification of an agent of Law with a “Dead Father” is identification with a fair, equal law that does not represent personal interests and desires. The father is “dead” or “castrated” in the sense that he does not experience absolute *Jouissance* but is, too, restricted by the law (Lacan, 1959/2006, 1960/2006; Žižek, 1994, 1999).

(p. 5)

Taking Even-Tzur and Hadar’s ideas one step forward: the split between the “Living Father” and the “Dead Father”, or between the sadistic and obedient, may occur not only *between* perpetrators (who may divide into those who identify with the “Living Father” and find a sadistic pleasure in their power versus those who perceive themselves as merely obedient and take no

pleasure from it), but also *within* perpetrators. One may assume, therefore, that both modes of identification exist within every perpetrator with varying dominance, and that confessional texts of perpetrators may thereby expose not only their dominant mode of identification, but also the relation and interaction between the two modes.

The screen quality of the perpetrator's confession is thus associated with the fact that it has a twofold function: while the explicit act of confession restores the position of the "Dead Father"—who is restricted by the law—the implicit act of confession comes to camouflage the "Living Father" who takes pleasure from his power. While the explicit act aims to constitute the subject as a subject within language, its implicit counterpart erases the subject as a subject within language. In order to maintain this complex structure, the perpetrator must at one and the same time confess and subvert this confession. These dyads (the living Father vs. the dead Father; the speaker as a subject of language vs. the speaker as a subject erased by language; language as an act of linking vs. language as an attack on linking) can be seen to make up the entire "language rules" used by perpetrators of all kinds. For instance, the use of passive constructions along with the third person and first person plural, rather than active constructions and the first person singular, not only removes the speaker from the event s/he describes, but also aims to extend the splitting between the "dead Father" and the "living Father", thus keeping out of consciousness the pleasure that the use of the first person singular and the active constructions would reveal. The use of "we" distributes pleasure among the many, while the use of the passive helps speakers to place themselves in a masochistic position in order to mask their own sadism. The common displacement of the victim position from the victim to the victimizer serves the same purpose: as the victimizer shifts attention to the injustice of the law—what Kant and Arendt called "reflexive judgment" (i.e., responsibility for personal injustice and the personal regime or law that allowed one to act in this particular way) is set aside. The ambiguity and circularity of the perpetrator's language has a similar goal: taking the guise of logic and morality, they allow one to construct a false logical and moral hierarchy (Amir, 2017).

In his article "The Fascist State of Mind", Bollas (1992) argues that, in this mindset, the space previously taken up by a plurality of meanings in the symbolic order is colonized by slogans. As long as the internal regime was democratic, words and symbols were free to associate with other words and symbols. But when representation becomes obstructed, signifiers lose this freedom. The elimination of the symbolic and the pluralistic is the fascist regime's first act of murder: this is because the symbolic, always unbinding any fixed meaning and undermining any act of solidarity, is the true subversive element of thought. Arendt (1963) observes similar qualities in Eichmann's language: "He was genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché" (p. 44). A cliché is not merely a turn to the lowest common denominator, as is commonly assumed, but also comes to make thinking itself superfluous, fixating it as a field of saturated meanings (Bion, 1962a, 1962b). "Language can function as a living system of signs which grants meaning to the encounter between the internal world and reality", writes Roth (2017), "and it can also serve as a 'fossil' in and of itself—a 'dead' sign system, which 'points toward' but never establishes a 'link with' what is signified. In this case, the sign functions without its symbolic quality" (p. 186). Screen confessions are not only linguistic fossils, as Roth argues, but also take on a radioactive quality, as Gampel (1999, 2017) has put it. As such they have an impact that goes beyond the immediate to the intergenerational; they influence, over and beyond their "official" recipients, those who are their passive audience and who unwittingly absorb the radiation.

When the disease is the splitting of language, the one possible basis for recovery is to reclaim language. Such reclaiming, in the case of perpetrators' confessions, implies restoring the function of the inner witness, the function of the inner judge and the function of creating meaning so that

the testimonial event will turn from a pseudo-performance into a vital event – one in which the subject, facing her or his concrete or imaginary victims, will be fully present.

The Intersection of the Language of the Victim and the Language of the Victimizer

Much like the language of the victim, the language of the victimizer is characterized by different modes of testimony. In victimizers' testimonies, whether voluntarily or forcibly delivered, one can notice metaphorical or transformative areas of testimony, that is, testimonial areas which create a vital link between the subject and the weight and meaning of his or her deeds. Other testimonial areas are characterized by a metonymic poetics, one in which the subject unconsciously repeats, within the testimonial text, the characteristics of the events to which he or she testifies. Within this category one can find, for instance, testimonial texts that empty out the human characteristics of both perpetrators and victims, thereby transforming both sides into objects rather than subjects. In the same manner, there are areas of false causality which justifies acts of violence. This false causality in fact repeats the very deceit it attests to, one in which the perpetrators commit violent acts that have no sensible justification – under the protection and screening mechanisms of legal and military rhetoric. Further metonymic characteristics of perpetrators' testimonies are the creation of a false moral hierarchy in which a low moral value is featured to conceal the breach of a higher moral value; the accompanying of the overt description of the concrete facts by all sorts of covert denial of their moral and emotional meaning; the displacement of the position of the victim to the perpetrator himself or herself; and, finally, various expressions of pseudo-regret and false gestures of contrition, producing an illusion of compassion in testimonies whose hidden agenda is to undo the evil rather than to recognize it (Amir, 2019b). These characteristics have one main thing in common: they metonymically enact, in the testimonial language itself, the contents to which this language testifies.

There is a mutual intersection of the language of the victim and the language of the perpetrator at the level of the excessive testimonial mode as well. While the excessive rhetoric of the victim creates a "hermetic narrative" (Amir, 2016b), one in which the audience constitutes in fact a captive, muted audience, convened for the purpose of passively validating the narrative merely by its presence – the excessive rhetoric of the perpetrator creates a false representation within which both the listener and the speaker are excluded as thinking subjects. Similarly to the way in which the victims' excessive testimonies poke a rhetoric wedge between the testifying subject and the trauma to which he or she testifies, perpetrators' screen testimonies poke a rhetoric wedge between them and their deeds to which they attest. The result is a sophisticated, meticulous and convincing narrative, based on what seems like a perfect logic, which actually excludes the speaker and the listener as subjects of thinking and language, "an event without a witness" (Felman and Laub, 1992) – one from which the most reliable witness, the speaker him or herself, is absent.

Contact with traumatic zones, on both sides of the barricade, tends to create a certain quality which I call the "malignant sublime". Immanuel Kant (1763–1764) demarcated the *beautiful* from the *sublime*. As a part of the natural world, *the beautiful* fulfills a clear purpose: it stimulates our power of judgment. *The sublime*, belonging in the metaphysical rather than the physical realm, namely in the domain of absolute rather than relative values, obviates our power of judgment. The notion of the "malignant sublime" refers to a tendency to confer "absolute value" on relative experiences. Where absolute values prevail, an autoimmune attack on thinking is triggered, perpetuating the status of the absolute victim and the absolute perpetrator rather than

allowing both sides to transcend this repetitive scenario by recognizing the relativity of their positions and stands.

Aleksandar Hemon concludes his autobiographical essay titled “Pathologically Bilingual” with the following words:

at a certain level, all literature is multilingual. In each literary text registers overlap, ambiguities and multiple possibilities abound. No language can have a single source. It is always a massively collective endeavor that does not stop at borders or walls. All languages overlap or spill into one another, just like people.⁷

This is exactly what transcending the state of the *malignant sublime* is about: to escape from the monolingual trap of “absolute value” into a state in which recognition of the overlapping regions of language replaces the oppressive walls that divide one language from another; in which linear directionality is replaced by a rhizomatic multiplicity (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972); in which different narratives are allowed to spill into one other without erasing each other; in which it is possible to declare that suffering, like literature, is always multilingual.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is based on a research supported by The Israel Science foundation (Grant no. 679/13,194/17).
- 2 Gerson (2009) refers to this as “the dead third”: “The ‘dead third’ is conceptualized as the loss of a ‘live third’ upon whom the individual had previously relied, had entrusted with faith, and in relation to whom or which, had developed a sense of personal continuity and meaning. In this regard, the third [. . .] serves the elemental function of solidifying an individual’s sense of person, place, and purpose. [. . .] Under such circumstances, the living thirds in which the person was nested now become a nest of dead thirds from which he or she cannot escape” (ibid., p. 1343).
- 3 I draw on Astrid Erll (2011b, see also 2011a in this context), for whom “the distinction between an ‘experiencing I’ and a ‘narrating I’ already rests on a (largely implicit) concept of memory”, or in other words, on the idea that there is a difference between pre-narrative experience on the one hand, and, on the other, narrative memory which creates meaning retrospectively.
- 4 *Muselmann* (pl. *Muselmänner*, German for “Muslim”) was a term used among captives of Nazi concentration camps to refer to those of their fellow captives who, suffering from a combination of starvation (known also as “hunger disease”) and exhaustion, had become apathetically resigned to their impending death.
- 5 Benjamin Murmelstein functioned as head of Theresienstadt’s Judenrat. The third and last incumbent, he kept the Theresienstadt concentration camp going until the very last days of the war.
- 6 Constructed in 1941, Theresienstadt concentration camp, also referred to as Theresienstadt ghetto, was a unique location, which the Nazis selected to serve as a showcase – a “model ghetto”, as Eichmann called it. In fact, it functioned as a concentration camp from which Jews were transferred to Auschwitz.
- 7 <http://www.specimen.press/articles/pathologically-bilingual/>

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