

Opacity and Light

The Anecdote in Accounts of the Concentration Camps

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Writing about testimonies from the concentration camps poses a fundamental problem to those who undertake this task, for one cannot lightly broach the still-living history of the Nazi camps. Auschwitz "is not a subject for a colloquium"¹ or, at least, not a subject like others. For the deportees themselves, speaking up is not easy. In whose name can they speak, in the name of what can they remember, how can they say it and to whom? Such are the first questions which arise like so many obstacles to communication. How to express the inexpressible? Such is the problem lying at the heart of all the testimonies, inasmuch as their credibility but also their possibility of existing depend on it. As Yves Reuter points out, the question of form appears in its most crucial aspect here²:

Neither history nor textual theory can overlook the *concentration camp testimonies*, extreme discourses of an extreme experience. To be concerned with form is not at all secondary. The obsessive "how to say it" of the accounts in this case seems of capital importance to me.

Indeed the form concerns the very possibility of communicating to "others" a trauma they have not shared. How can one make oneself understood when the "community of speakers" finds itself divided by such things as Auschwitz, Struthof or Buchenwald? Documents and photos still testify to the reality of the camps, but for those who returned from them it was necessary very quickly to learn to keep silent, or to find a means to speak "in another way" to make oneself understood. But those who did not live through it are not privileged to the unimaginable nature of the camps. This is how it struck the people who returned from the camps and whose tales already appeared themselves to be unreal or exaggerated and became more and more so. Robert Antelme

cites (as a preface) this obstacle as the primary motivation for his testimony:

As soon as we began to tell our stories, we felt we were suffocating. Even to ourselves, what we had to say began to seem unimaginable.

This disproportion between the experience we had lived and the account it was possible to make of it was only confirmed by the rest. We were indeed dealing with one of those realities which it must be said surpasses the imagination. It was then clear that it was only by choice, which is to say once again through the imagination, that we could say something about it.³

To find the form is to find the means to describe the incommensurable, the unmeasurable. But it is also to attempt to express a wretched horror – a slow, day to day horror which had nothing spectacular about it. A gulf seems to have opened up between the expectation of “sensational” accounts (blows, tortures, atrocities) and the often-told accounts of soups made of ends of bread. How to describe the brutalization, repetition and loss of meaning without losing both the focus of the account and the interest of the reader? How to report the excess of horror while remaining credible oneself? In the many accounts of those who have wanted to explain or bear witness, the question itself of form, expression, or, to use Yves Reuter’s term once more, the *communicative strategy* arises in a particularly acute manner.⁴

In his article “L’anecdote dans les témoignages concentrationnaires” (The anecdote in accounts of the concentration camps), Yves Reuter notes the importance of the anecdote. Seen as an “account” and “act of communication,” the anecdote is in his opinion an essential element without which the whole of the matter could not be expressed. Defined, in a minimal way, as an “account set in a discourse embodying and referring to reality,”⁵ the anecdote is “an account bearing a relatively autonomous significance”⁶ which allows one to go beyond the limits of the discourse in which it is inserted by presenting things in a different light. Indeed it allows one to recapture the day to day situation in the camps in powerful narrative units which in themselves reconstruct a disintegrated reality. Inasmuch as it is a minimal account, the anecdote presents itself as a unity of meaning whose coherence “signifies a victory over the referents.”⁷ Reuter rightly points out that the very components of the accounts – their actors,

events, temporal situations – have nothing indifferent about them: their existence implies a victory over the negation of the individuals and the events in the camps. In this light the anecdote itself appears as a survivor; it reconstructs the account of a story whose tale should never have to have been told:

If we also consider that these testimonies are atypical, “floating discourses,” we can then perceive that the anecdote forms a coherent tale at the very least. It is as if the lost macro-coherence finds refuge in the last resort of the micro-coherence, all the more important because it really describes the unknown and the unspeakable, which – for the Nazis as well – should never have had to be described. Herein perhaps lies the fundamental meaning: existing when everything has been done so that one will not exist. The survivor is a fragment of a decimated population and the anecdote a fragment of a discourse in search of itself (p. 118).

This conclusion puts clearly into focus the role of the anecdote in the “communicative strategy” of the accounts of the concentration camps, but it also demonstrates, according to Reuter, that the anecdote is overdetermined by the reality of the referent to which it refers. The *immediate* assimilation of the “global universe” of the camp to the “global discourse” of the testimonies seems problematic to me inasmuch as the difficulty of communicating the former is not necessarily caused by the fragmented speech of the latter. Likewise the importance of the “micro-accounts” (the anecdotes) in the global discourse is not only determined by the “floating”, “atypical” nature of the latter. It is also determined through the active play of their insertion: the micro-accounts construct a horizon of communication as much as they are its product. The anecdote’s ability to show the never-before-seen would appear to be not so much a twisting, or a “diversion” of the unexpressible, as a “dynamic of distance,” a strategic place or bias through which the history of the Nazi camps is able to express itself and take shape.

The dynamic of the anecdote resides both in the textual play of its insertion and the contextual anatomy of its narration. Succinctly defined as the “brief account of a curious little incident,” (Robert), the anecdote presents itself in its minimal form as the *account of an isolated event, understandable in itself*. Just as a newspaper clipping constitutes a unit which is both autonomous and dependent, the anecdote, as a *clipping from an event*, refers to an historical truth which surpasses it and which, at the same time, it

reports within the very space of its narrative detachment. The anecdote twists the story of an event into the event of a story, in such a way as to immediately render the story an accomplice to the act of its enunciation. For Joel Fineman, the anecdote represents the historiographic place for the integration of an event and a context. It is the literary form *par excellence*, capable of evoking reality while possessing at the same time an undeniable impact, or visibility.⁸ If historiography, for Fineman, is concerned with anecdotes as a form of writing, their dual dimension as “literary and referential” tends at times to put their historical veracity into question: they are “only” stories. At once compact and conflictual, the anecdote seems to participate in the history of the Nazi camps while forever chipping away at the impossibility of the account which, as we have seen, does not come easily. As a coherent account (if there ever was one), it introduces into the discourse that frames it a pause, a limit, a point (as opposed to an anchor) of articulation, from which the ensemble of the communication takes shape.

The communicational stake which presides over the writing of the anecdote in accounts of the concentration camps may be “globally” recaptured in the conflictual space between the story as a personal experience and the story as information. The question of the form of the concentration camp accounts and their “atypicality” does not arise only in regard to a universe deprived of speech, but also as concerns the predominance of the documents and reports which constitute the authorized sources of the history of deportation. The deportee who has no photos to show or precise information to relate finds himself, with his experiences and his tales, not only stripped, but even suspected, if not openly accused, of lying: the mere fact of having survived does not authorize one to bear witness. It is thus not only the nature of the experience which creates problems, but also *its status of experience as such*, so that it becomes necessary to justify and recreate both its “right to speech” and its “right to difference.” The gulf Antelme saw open up between the lived experience and the “account possible to make of it” demonstrates the nature of the problem. The difficulty in telling comes, perhaps, as much from the real “destructuring of speech and personality” (Reuter) as from the destructuring of the traditional chain of experiences which must be reconstructed with respect to the more probing discourse of history and, above all, of *information*.⁹ Some testimonies have diffi-

culty leaving the circle of elders and their families and touching a wider public. If they do manage, then they must situate themselves in relation to a double function: that of the veracious document and that of the sensational document. In cases where the anecdote represents a "bridge" between the reality lived in the camps and the tales made from them, I propose to examine the implications of its visibility according to three "globally" different approaches: the systematic (Kogon), the documentary (Allainmat), and the personal (Antelme). Although heterogeneous and filled with lacuna, this project will attempt to demonstrate in what manner and substance the truth of the camps passes through images and finds its modalities in them. The study of the anecdote's discursive impact and the modes of its insertion should permit me to demonstrate how it reflects the question (the quest) for truth in the problematic space of its own visibility.

The Illustrative Anecdote

After the war, memoirs and "reports" abounded. They served as the basis, with "documents," for various trials, but also for the seemingly numerous works on the concentration camps in general. The neutrality of these writings and the scrupulous demobilization of their narrators when faced with the objectivity of the facts raises other problems of meaning: what do these incidents, which show nothing if not "the whole truth," illustrate? Once the facts have been established and the trials ended, they have difficulty making the violence or the brutalization immediate. Their publication remains confidential: they are not intended for nor do they reach the general public. A certain number of classic works on the world of the concentration camps distinguish themselves by their methodical approach. They present the universe of the camps in a *systematic* fashion. Less "limited," more reflexive than any report, they no longer present us with a veracious account *about* Buchenwald or Auschwitz but *Buchenwald and Auschwitz* themselves.¹⁰ In this way Jean Baumel presents the "general principles" of the camps, David Rousset presents the "concentration camp universe" and Eugen Kogon the "system of concentration camps."¹¹ With quite different styles they all propose *exact and all inclusive* reports which do not present the facts first, but rather their principle supports. Eugen Kogon has gone quite far in this respect. He underlines the scope of his work in the preface:

In order to attain its human and political goals, this work should present the naked truth: *things as they were* and nothing else, without leaving anything out, without inventing *ad usum delphini*, without remaining silent. No fragments, experiences, this and that, but *the whole system*.

The abstraction of his method does not in any way interfere with the course of truth; on the contrary it makes possible an explanation of the ideology of the camps and the revelation of their principles, which escape the ineluctable vicissitudes of individual experience. In presenting the camps as a "rational" mechanism, he makes them exemplary, explainable and surmountable. Divulging all information, presenting the event explained as a whole, such is his mission – so that the thing might never be repeated. The lessons of history, of hope itself, are rational matters. The wisdom of the just, which feeds on experience, here can only remain mute, and impotent.

At the heart of this type of discourse, isolated incidents or "anecdotes" play an essentially illustrative role: the individual case is the result of a general principle of which it demonstrates the effective reality in concrete terms. Eugen Kogon's work is undoubtedly the most representative of this "order of discourse" inasmuch as it systematizes the very idea of system. The table of contents, which is ten pages alone, highlights the mechanism: each part ("SS and concentration camps", "Number and types of concentration camps in Germany", "Different categories of prisoners", "Planning of the concentration camps", etc.) breaks down into subdivisions (the chapter about the day to day use of time also treats the wake-up call, morning gymnastics, breakfast, role call, etc.). Each point is shown as part of a whole, and Kogon along the way uses individual cases to highlight the principle. An example illustrating the system of punishments in the camps allows us to see the level on which he introduces anecdotes:

The under officers, the malicious Kapos or foremen, at times even the civil employees of the arms factories, took pleasure in denouncing a prisoner, allegedly for "laziness at work," an accusation it was always possible to justify in one way or another. It was not unusual, on these occasions, that the prisoners' numbers became confused, so that the punishment struck a man doubly innocent. It was absolutely impossible to try and justify oneself. When a prisoner attempted to do so, they said that he was accusing an SS of lying. One day a newcomer was given the number of a prisoner who had been set free and who

had been the object of a report. In his place his successor, who suspected nothing, received twenty-five lashes.¹²

This incident, which forms a single and detachable unit, all the better illustrates the general rule it quite well develops: injustice, aberration, submission. To say that such a case limits itself to giving a *historical* and concrete example of general assertions would nevertheless fail to account for the *discursive* dynamic of the whole. The anecdote is situated at the end of a gradual development of which it constitutes both the culmination and the dissolution. In fact the episode participates in the thematic of injustice which each assertion pushes a little further: the gratuitous maliciousness leads to pure and simple confusion; the easily justifiable accusation leads to the impossibility of rectifying the most flagrant mistake. The anecdote inserted here thus pushes the rule to absurdity, recasting it through the duality of presence/absence, which permits us to measure the blindness of the system and eventually to laugh at it.

One can well see how the isolated incident represents a *historical unit* as much as a *semantic unit* upon which the illustrative dialectic depends. The anecdote goes beyond the frame which surrounds it, inasmuch as it spills over into absurdity, but it does so in a contained fashion since it is satisfied simply to complete the initial impulse of the account. Without really distinguishing itself from the surrounding discourse, the account in some ways makes it work: it provides a conclusion which pushes the system to its limits. This success implies a relatively autonomous semantic configuration which permits the radicalization, even the modification, of a thesis without overtly taking on this role. The weight of the anecdote is measured by the *impression* it produces, and its discourse is of a manifestly different order than the reasonable order of the developed thesis. It creates a *sensation* whose particular impact surges through the discourse as a whole. How can one dismiss the absurd notions engendered by the account of punishments? There is nothing extraordinary about this incident, but it strikes the imagination and etches itself into the reader's memory.

A second example should allow us to consider the dynamic relationship between the anecdote and the thesis it illustrates in another light. Here Kogon describes the functioning of the gas chambers, sparing no detail:

The device of asphyxiation by gas was very simple and yet refined. The installation was similar to a shower; and that was precisely what they were to call it for future victims. In a room where people undressed, notices written in all the European languages asked the prisoners to fold their clothes neatly and to tie their shoes together, so that nothing would be lost. After the shower, said the signs, there would be hot coffee. From this room a passage led directly to the "showers" where, once the doors were closed, prussic acid gas flooded from the showerheads and ventilation shafts. Depending on the quantity of gas used, death by asphyxiation took four to five minutes. During this time dreadful cries were heard from children, women and men whose lungs were slowly eaten away by the gas. If, once the chambers were opened, a body still showed any signs of life, it was quickly clubbed to death. Then the kommando prisoners [. . .] removed the corpses, taking off their rings and cutting their hair, which was sent by the bagful to be used in factories. Then they heaped up the corpses in piles of ten. After the rounds of the SS head corporal Moll, who ran the crematoriums of Auschwitz, the bodies were thrown in the ovens or in the burning pit. Moll liked to put naked women in the burning pit to watch them fall into the fire after being shot in the belly. One day he found a ring on a prisoner of the special kommando: to punish him he had him doused in gasoline and burned alive. He liked to hang a man by the hands; then he would take out his revolver and shoot him until his arms were broken; then he had him hung by the feet, and began again. The camp inspector Schillinger forced an Italian dancer to dance nude in front of the crematorium. Seizing her chance, she approached him, grabbed his gun and shot him. In the fray which ensued the woman was also killed, but at least she escaped death in the gas chambers. Once Moll took a family of six: he killed the firstborn, then the older children, and finished up with the father and mother.¹³

Contrary to his usual procedure, here Kogon lists horrors with no direct relation to the installation of the gas chambers. Moll creates a link between the description – distressing inasmuch as it opts for both an internal and external view – of a death apparatus and a series of striking anecdotes relating to the sadism of the SS at Auschwitz. Unlike the preceding case, the stories are shocking in themselves. No need for a thesis here to prepare the reader; the incidents are explosive and all the more so for their cumulative effect. The accumulation of depraved and unnamable acts ends up creating a system and thereby becoming not illustrative but exemplary of the SS. The exemplarity is based, in part, on the absence

of any direct link to a thesis and also on the strong autonomy of the cases, which assigns to them alone the contrastive thrust of meaning. The accumulation of these accounts which repeat, in different arrangements, the culmination of the inadmissible and the "bestial," ends up reflecting an entire system, which it brings back to an *ad hominem* level.

Though exemplary, this anecdotal series no more establishes any rule than it relates directly to any thesis. The illumination it brings to the description of death by gas occurs not in spite of displacement but thanks to it, as if one could not fully *speak* the horror of the gas chambers, and therefore needed a remove in order to *show* its fundamental perversion. The anecdotes thus intervene in a triple register of opposition: first, they present specific cases of sadism while the the gas chambers only took care of anonymous "great crowds"; secondly they do this in the manner of a *spectacle*, and bring the consideration of the system into the system of the spectacle; and finally, while the nonspectacular character of the gas chambers is measured by its refusal to confront death face to face (and from which the horror comes to us filtered, heard *from outside*), the anecdotes, on the other hand, present the spectacle of brutal aggression. In short, although they seem to lead away from the systematic description of the gas chambers, the anecdotes do so to make the atrocity *all the more visible*, and particularly to unveil what might remain unacknowledged: namely, the dimension of the presentation, the dimension of the mourning beyond each impending death, the dimension of the suffering of each person beyond the collective mourning. It seems that only the cumulative effect of the anecdotes succeeds in recreating the *effect of the system* in the reader. At the same time they bring it into the realm of consciousness, that of sadism or perversion.

It is not merely a question of a known realm, but of a place where *action* is still possible: at the very core of the spectacle, donning her seductiveness like a glove, the Italian dancer reverses the roles and avenges her death in advance. The system of the gas chambers, on the other hand, by eliminating the face to face encounter with death (the spectacle of the other's death as much as death's perspective in the eye of the torturer) thus makes all possibility to react or protest disappear. From the blows falling on the back of the prisoner who suspects nothing (*ahnungslos*) to the

gas chambers asphyxiating people who believed they were taking a shower there, the system always functions on the basis of a lack of knowledge; it rests on an “innocence” which is not only ethical but also epistemological. This is what makes its description break down at times, becoming impossible to carry through (cf. Reuter). The spectacular anecdote thus appears as the possibility of giving meaning to the order of knowing, of settling back into the *effect of knowing*. It takes over for a system when objective description, as all-inclusive as it may be, loses its visibility and does not succeed in mobilizing the reader.

Yet while the spectacular participates in an argumentative strategy, while it is useful sometimes to *show* rather than *describe* or *demonstrate*, it is clear that Kogon resorts to the story because of an imperative: to pass on the message. It is inadmissible that the concentration camps should leave people indifferent. Let us not forget that he is breaking the law of silence that dominated postwar Germany and that the camps and their trials were still recent. His decision to generalize stems from a desire to tear the history of the camps away from multiple experiences, *dies und das*, which were effectively dipossessed of all legitimate knowledge, yet his recourse to anecdotes gives to the understanding of the whole a visibility and a sensitivity which the general exposition lacks and which, at the same time, legitimizes it. This discursive dynamic always rests on the specific, “contained” aspect of this spilling over. For if it should become too visible, the spectacular becomes vulnerable and risks losing its credibility.

The Spectacular Anecdote

Likewise announcing the whole “truth” in its loud title, the work of Henry Allainmat also means to present this truth by alternating anecdotal *mises-en-scene* with historical documentation.¹⁴ The totality he relies on refers less to a system than to the possession and mastering of a complete *information*. The disclosure of a great number of unretouched documents (photos, letters, depositions, lists of the dead, etc.) leads to dramatic presentations often full of pathos. The structure is zigzag, humorous. A mixture of genres, oppositions, redundancy, “striking” effects of speed and style both “lifted” and telegraphic (the “direct”) include this work in a vast confraternity of so-called journalistic writings. The following

excerpt, taken from chapter four ("Serial murders"), very well sums up the highly anecdotal quality:

As soon as they arrive the prisoners are taken to the crematorium where the showers and disinfection are installed.

First window: they leave their valuables there.

Second window: they leave their civil effects there.

The shower: they come out quickly and slip on convicts' garb while they are pummelled with blows from a screaming mob of Kapos and Blockführer.

Newcomers are not the only ones to pass through the disinfection "ceremony."

The deportees returning from the adjoining camps, unfit or unwell, must also go through it.

August 1944. A pile of cadavers is dumped in front of the crematorium.

Suddenly the pile begins to move. By itself.

A man disengages himself. He is in a semi-conscious state. But he is still alive.

Leaning on one arm, he tries to crawl and free himself from the pyramid of corpses.

– Die!

The Scharführer Antkonviak has noticed him. He falls upon him and kicks him violently in the head.

The dying man falls back on the sinister pile.

This time he is really dead. (p.p. 4647)

After the shower, the prisoners [...] are assigned to a "grinding" barracks.

They must immediately get used to what is to come [...]

The political deportee Ludwig Bilski, born in Essen, once from barrack 7, reserved for newcomers, distinguishes himself particularly.

In 1943 he so abuses an elderly orthopedist from Lorraine with blows of a club that the prisoner dies.

[...] Bilski is also imaginative. Following a blunder, he forces Leparquier, a French deportee dressed in his overcoat, to do gymnastics in front of a white hot stove.

When Leparquier is bathed in sweat, Bilski takes him outside in shirt-sleeves, even though it is -15 or -20 degrees.

The prisoner never recovers and dies on May 7.

Another Frenchman, Guilhem, dies under the lashings of a belt.

And Bilski is not alone.

He has created a trend (etc.) (p. 47)

This excerpt affirms its documentary virtues by mentioning the actors by name and the circumstances involved: date and place are indicated with an “unimaginable” exactitude. Moreover, the slightly jerky style lends the document the truth of directness: on the one hand a lack of flourishes, on the other, a lifelike quality. Well informed, this account is not neutral. Allainmat’s truth is based as much on the exactitude of the circumstances as on their narrative representation. The truth of the camps is drawn from life, the account becomes its *performance*: the tense used is the present. In the first part of our excerpt, the reader follows step by step (paragraph after paragraph) the different stages of the “disinfection”; the reader’s time overlaps into the time of the account, which nevertheless limits itself to an informative dryness. The anecdote which then intervenes contrasts with the initial theme on every level: it is neither historically nor thematically related to the “workings of the operations” and constitutes a digressive block all the more appreciable as it is comparatively developed. As we saw with Kogon, it shows us the violent spectacle of death, but it does so through the bias of a radical acceleration which started with the routine of the arrival, the issue under discussion, and leads up to the abomination of the “end” which constitutes the only truth of the camps. The profound shift which takes place makes it possible to denounce the Struthof by mobilizing an event, and pausing over a shocking image.

Though digressive, the anecdote is related to the guiding thread by free association (from the newcomers one “descends” to the unfit and unwell, and then on to the dying). It likewise enters the continuous flow of information at the core of which the injection of incidents always seems justifiable. “August 1944” here constitutes the best entry as far as content, putting us face to face with the upsurge of reality. The historical truth has all the more effect as, through its irruption the account creates (performs), in the reader’s time, *the event of the event* whose referent suddenly appears in its full presence.¹⁵ The incident presents itself as such, with no indication of its argumentative function (exemplary? illustrative?). Having no direct link, it creates one itself and develops a strong narrative autonomy. This account, whose relative

banality could also be mentioned, here becomes a total event which Allainmat charges with suspense ("Suddenly, the pile begins to move. By itself"), charges with meaning ("a heap of corpses", "the pyramid of corpses", the "sinister heap") and closes in on itself ("But he is still alive" / "This time he is really dead").

"Comprehensible in and of itself" (Benjamin), it does not allow for any doubt as to the "reliability" of the event. The final formulation nonetheless creates an underlying hiatus: whereas the account is told from the perspective of an outside narrator whose sympathy is inferred, through qualifiers such as "violent" or "sinister," the last sentence maintains its "objectivity" while suggesting, with "*this time he is really dead*" the idea of satisfaction, of a "completeness" not without irony. The suggestion rests on a floating intertextuality, the formulation evoking an account of a battle in an epic tale (the suspense sustaining the anecdote likewise moves in this direction). This ironic direction provides the spectacle with an immediate relief inasmuch as the cruelty of the event clashes with the discursive frame which surrounds it.

The second series of anecdotes more clearly shows the ironic mechanism of the illustration. It represents a primal and gratuitous violence each time, whose frequency shows *in praesentia* its shocking and systematic nature. These accounts, whose word-by-word speed of execution cadences the brutality, correspond to an elliptical presentation whose circumspection takes an apparently constructive turn. "To distinguish himself particularly", "to have imagination" or "to create a fashion" are expressions with positive connotations. Indeed the narrator goes from a neutral description (on the first line) to an objectivity "sympathizing" with the prisoners (the verb "abuse" sets the tone). These axiological movements are inscribed under cover of a marked objectivity and thus articulate a certain connivance. Devoid of any subjective stamp, the anecdotes activate an implicit recognition: the reader reestablishes the "just value" of things with all the more certitude as the suggested disciplinary order fully collides with the primal and gratuitous brutality presented to us. The "community of speakers" which one saw thwarted in postwar France seems newly reunited under the flag of the nation: between 1945 and the publication date of the work (1974) it seems to have become possible to raise deportation to the level of spectacle. Allainmat's account tries to

be exact and verifiable inasmuch as the events staged alternate with the documents as such. An exactness of information characterizes the anecdotes themselves, whose circumstantial precision we have already seen. In a parallel fashion, they develop a redundant character bordering on stereotype. Without surprises and often predictable, they participate in a humoristic structure which brings forth, with stylistic and compositional variation, the ever renewed presence of the same thing.

The staging of reality is a performance whose "live words" and "brute facts" bring in their wake an overwhelming truth which is nonetheless reduced, limited, univocal. The live words would be, as Derrida writes, "the *lure* of mastered presence," a lure with which Allainmat's truths do not concern themselves.¹⁶ For to privilege odious incidents, to line them up in a kind of perpetual onepmanship, would be to risk losing the dimension of silence, loss, of that which, in a certain way, escapes us.

In response to the question of how "to communicate" the story of the camps, we have up to now discussed two major approaches. Whether by the systematic approach (Kogon) or by performance of the events as spectacle (Allainmat), these works respond to the imperative of truth by including a massive quantity of documents and authorized facts. It is not by chance that concentration camp literature overflows with photographs, reproductions, numbers and tables. Nor is it by chance that certain authors "play" with the fluctuation between the fictive and the documentary.¹⁷ The question of documentary fiction is no doubt linked to the mass media's taking over of the history of the camps. The question only appears, it would seem, in works such as that of Eugen Kogon or David Rousset, where a sense of urgency comes both from informing and understanding. In these works the anecdotes play an illustrative role: they bend to the hierarchy of the whole, ready pointedly to indicate its limit. With Allainmat, the shock of truth appears more problematic inasmuch as it rests in part on the *déjà vu*. The anecdotes, alongside the documents and on the same plane, take on an autonomy we would have trouble qualifying as illustrative or exemplary inasmuch as they present facts without a thesis and create no rule except for their own redundancy. Immediacy, visibility, and proximity become the lures of a total truth. The anecdote-event finds itself both objectified and ideologically

recreated; it is both the repetition of sameness and singular irruption, with each account becoming the place (or rather the instant) for a performance. For as effective as they may be, these performances nonetheless suffer from the visibility of their "montage." The injection of exact facts and the "integral" disclosing of documents in this way calls attention to the reliability of the undertaking. In a parallel fashion, the document "re-marks itself," becoming a viewer in its turn, as if the information could only "sink in" by showing itself as such, exhibiting itself as an *immediate truth*. In this sense documents and accounts both perform the event in an analogical manner, as if the event only happened as the result of an impact, the event of an event, representation.

In terms of their "semantic configuration," anecdotes are uncommon events whose content is nonetheless already known. To render the violence of clubbings, or lashings, is to render an effect which in no way shakes our common view of violence, on the contrary. In a sense it is "normal" for the torturer to be a surly brute or a refined pervert, but the repetition of the same pattern results in making its stereotypical nature visible. As precise as they might be, events staged in this fashion risk becoming a parody of themselves.

The Specular Anecdote

The difficulty of communicating the unimaginability of the camps derives perhaps less from the visible excess of violence than from the decomposition of a daily existence which offers nothing to grasp onto and thereby becomes indescribable. The very possibility of marking it, of re-marking it, seems flattened. The problem is less that of saying the unspeakable than of expressing the inexpressible, taking stock of events beginning with the crumbling of normal practices of perception. This is perhaps due to the fact that the experience of the camps marked the very forms of the *sensations* of the men who lived it, and for this reason the *sensational* remains foreign to it: how does one make visible that which throws into confusion not such and such an image, but the very code or receptivity that makes vision possible? The sensational is never just a more extremely rendered sensation. It is the order of sensation itself which is at stake here: not the most extreme, but the most banal, which is to say that which organizes the very

banality of our lives. In other words, nothing is more difficult than to make visible that which allows us to see. Like the details themselves, the anecdote seems to make it possible to construct, after its primary insignificance, the path of loss. The anecdote is the event and its interpretation, both immediate and mediate, the reflected event whose meaning begins to take shape with its own deflation. As such, the anecdote is the prolongation of the awareness of failure (through which the account opens up and becomes “unblocked”), but at the same time it constitutes a resistance. Its visibility is not merely given to us in a block, in a gripping contrast; it is also part of an itinerary of meaning.

It is in these very clear terms that Robert Antelme explains, on the jacket cover, the nature and the scope of his work *L'Espèce humaine*¹⁸ (“The Human Race”):

I attempted to retrace the life of a kommando (Gandersheim), and a German concentration camp (Buchenwald).

Today we know that, in the German concentration camps, there existed all possible degrees of oppression. Even leaving aside the different types of organization which existed between camps, the different applications of a single rule could disproportionately augment or reduce the chances of survival.

I am recounting here what I lived. The horror is not gigantic. At Gandersheim there was no gas chamber, no crematorium. The horror there was obscurity, absolute lack of reference, loneliness, unending oppression, slow annihilation. The goal of our struggle would prove to have been only the frenzied demand, and almost always itself solitary, to remain, up until the end, men. The heroes we know, from history or literature, whether they created love, solitude, the anxiety of being or non being [. . .] we do not believe that they ever came to the point of expressing, as a sole and final demand, an ultimate desire to belong to the species.

To say that in the end one found oneself challenged as a man, as a member of the human race, might appear as a retrospective sentiment, an explanation after the fact. It is nevertheless what was the most immediately and constantly felt and lived, and furthermore it is exactly what was wanted by the others. The questioning of a man's quality as man provokes an almost biological demand to belong to the human race [. . .].

The thesis of this work conceives of itself as inseparable from a *lived* event which the author distinguishes from any *knowledge*

("today we know") available on the camps. He likewise distances himself from a vaster understanding: that of history and literature, whose epic character is not really denied but rather engulfed, flattened. He does not speak of truth, and there is no question of atrocities. Everything leads to an almost banal issue – belonging to the species – which is suddenly called into question. The aftermath (the interpretation) and the lived (the experience) come profoundly together in and through the account which gives them movement. The experience cannot easily be dissociated from a "sensitive reflection" which comes, Antelme writes in his preface, through the effort permitted by the imagination, insofar as only the *imaginary trajectory* of the memory seems able to forge the gap (the displacement) of the unimaginable.¹⁹

Unlike the anecdotes studied thus far, whose meaning became clear through a contrastive concision, the "micro-accounts" in Antelme's work usually assume a marked fullness inasmuch as the repercussions they involve are not given, but rather translated and reflected. The reflection is an integral part of the account because, far from restricting the interpretation after the fact, it is essential to its comprehension. The event is never a "given," a fact. Thus follows the anecdote of a civilian who, in the warehouse in the basement of a factory, one day approaches the narrator and simply says "langsam" to him. Such is the lowly, miniscule event which nonetheless unleashes a thundering sign and brings an entire interpretative movement in its wake:

The civilian who commands us is Rhenish. He is quite large, blond. He always wears a soft brown cap pushed back. He must be about 45 years old. He seems sad, his gait is heavy, slow, absent. He seems bored. He could be ill, with a chronic, tenacious but not very serious illness.

One day he came toward us in the bay. He watched us work for a moment, expressionless. Then he drew near and said in a calm, quite clear voice:

– *Langsam!* (slowly)

We turned toward him as if he had unleashed a thundering sign. We looked at him without speaking, without making the slightest sign of complicity. He looked at us as well, saying nothing else. He did not smile, did not wink. He left.

Langsam! That was enough.

To say *langsam* to people like us, who were here to work and to die, meant saying that one was against the SS. We shared a secret with this German from the factory which he shared with no other German in the factory. When he speaks with the other civilians who are for the most part Nazis, we alone know that he lies to them. When they are no longer with him, he will go toward other prisoners and say *langsam* to them. He will let this fall from time to time, after having examined those before whom he still holds himself in reserve, and he will leave adding nothing.

He is bored. He pretends to be interested in the fabrication of cockpits. But he has known for a long time that these will be used to kill other Germans for no reason. He knew it before the war. This is his air of boredom, his illness. One might have guessed it. Now we understand it all, knowing what we now know, that this boredom is quite revealing. The SS might have shot all the Germans who seemed bored. One might almost think he was not careful enough.

Often he stops in front of a factory window and looks out at the countryside for a long time. In the evening, passing near us, while we sweep the corridor in the basement, he avoids looking at us. He *had* to say *langsam!* (p. 59)

The recording of the detail (*langsam!*) calls for an interpretation with multiple ramifications. First of all it consists of *the explanation* of its implications on a level that, far from being obvious, needs to be reconstructed. Destined for the reader, it refers as well to the person of the narrator, whose speculations of the moment are sent back into the time frame of the account. Furthermore, the use of these implications in turn produces a new scenario which ends up “revealing” the true picture: “he *had* to say *langsam* to us” (the emphasis is ours).

One might see a relative disproportion between the shortness of the past-tense account and the length of its interpretation. It seems nonetheless that the way the one refers to the other is circular rather than binary: the hypothesis of illness is a first “interpretation” which then rectifies the reflection on “*langsam*”, which in turn opens a new narrative series whose foresight flows directly from the preceding reasoning. This consists in using the implications and connotations of the injunction “*langsam*.” The resulting clarity comes as much from the logical implications as from the imaginary hypotheses which draw all their conclusions from implications and thereby take possession of them. Appearances

(the air of boredom), the exchange of “expressionless” glances, here seem to reflect the game of speculation which flows from the account as much as the account flows from it. Similar to the words “without making the slightest signs of complicity,” the glances mark the opacity of the communication. It is an uncertain opacity, unsaid, unexpressed, precisely because it infiltrates the uncertain course that it sparks in the workings of the imagination, which opens into knowledge, but also into a twisted power.

This latency, which rests on an ability to see and hear in a blind and deaf universe (but also for us who read the exemplary events, on the ability to inscribe into the rank of events), is explained by Antelme a little further on. A few days later, he recounts, the Rhenish man came and shook his hand. But the gesture constituted less of an “encouragement” than a necessity: he “had” to do it. The interpretation which follows departs from the frame of the narration in which it had been contained up until that point and gives an imperative and historical dimension to the recording of the anecdote (and the anecdotal) in the work:

He had come to share in our power. The barkings of thousands of SS could do nothing, the whole apparatus of ovens, dogs, barbed wire, and famine could do nothing about this hand-shake.

[. . .] This secret, solitary gesture, did not nevertheless have a private character, as opposed to any public, immediately historical action of the SS. Any human relation between a German and one of us was the sign itself of a concerted revolt against the SS order. [. . .] These relations could have such consequences that it was impossible even to dream of establishing them without taking into account the enormous interdiction against which it was necessary to rise up in order to do so; it was necessary to be so separate from the community still reinforced by struggle [. . .] that, once begun, these relations immediately continued into history, as if they were the paths themselves, narrow and clandestine, that history here was forced to borrow (p. 81).

Yet if Antelme forces us to reconsider the importance of “private” or anecdotal history with regard to the reality of the camps, it seems that he also somewhat misplaces the tenor. In linking the little incident to his interpretation, the event on which he focuses his “remarks” is primarily *that of the interpretation* inasmuch as it is through the interpretation that the little event appears historically. The imaginary interpretation is incorporated in the continuation of a “perception of the world,” a perception whose mute persis-

tence constitutes perhaps the first and last resistance to a system based on the blindness of both slaves and masters. In this way it leads us to reconsider the visibility of the event from the point of view of its subjective perception (and not only of its referent): not only does it remove itself from the (*stereotyped*) *pre-visibility of the spectacular*, but it makes a *discussable experience out of day to day repetition*. One might nevertheless reproach him, as Antelme himself indicates, for creating a meaning after the fact, a meaning split off from "factual truth." We shall therefore content ourselves with one final, still more striking, example:

Many died during the three months we spent in Buchenwald, especially the elderly: two guys each held the corners of a blanket which contained a load. They passed by yelling "Be careful!" People made way, they were carrying the load to the morgue. Sometimes buddies followed. They went as far as the morgue, which was at the end of the big latrines; one window gave on to the big path which led there. They pressed their faces against the window, putting their hands on either side of the face to protect themselves from the false daylight, but they could see nothing. People who had known each other for twenty years, fathers and sons, brothers, were separated in this way. He who remained sometimes roamed around the morgue, but the door was closed and through the window one could see nothing (o, 34).

The banality of death, on which so many have insisted, is "unveiled" here in all its opacity: what is seen remains contained in the blankets and behind the windows through which, Antelme insists, "one could see nothing." Also, and the detail is not unimportant, there is a geographic proximity of the morgue to the "big latrines." Against this indifferent canvas another memory comes forth:

I remember the first I saw die. We had already been at roll call for a few hours. Dusk was falling. On a knoll of the Small Camp, a few feet from the first line of prisoners, there were four tents. The sick people were in the tent which was opposite us. A flap of the tent was raised. Two guys who held a blanket by the ends came out and set in on the ground. Something appeared on the spread-out blanket. Gray skin stuck on bones: the face. Two violet sticks stuck out of the shirttails: the legs. He said nothing. Two hands were raised from the blanket and the two guys each seized one and pulled. The two sticks were standing. His back was turned to us. He bent over and we saw a large black gash between two bones. A jet of liquid shit gushed toward us. The thousand guys who were there saw the black gash and the arc of the jet. He saw nothing, neither his buddies nor the Kapo guarding us

who grumbled *Scheisse!* as he rushed toward him but did not touch him. Then he fell.

We did not know, when the two guys came out, that someone was in that blanket. We were only waiting for the SS. It was time for role call. We dozed standing. It was endless, like every role call. And the jet gushed out, the shit that the buddy had held in this half-sleep. A thousand guys together had never seen such a thing.

The buddy was stretched out on the blanket. He did not move. His eyes were open. He was alone on the knoll. The thousand standing looked first to see if the SS were coming, then at him. They bent over him, but they did not know if he was dead [. . .]

The kapo approached. He was huge; on his face in particular one saw an enormous lower jaw. He touched the buddy's body with his foot. Nothing moved. He waited another moment. He bent over the blackened face. The two carriers likewise bent over. The thousand guys watched the three figures bend over the blanket. Then the kapo got up and said: *Tod!* He made a sign to the two carriers. They lifted up the blanket which dipped a little toward the ground and went back into the tent (p.p. 34–35).

In this dramatic scene (reappearance, regrouping and displacement of the "actors," passing of time) organized around two events, the narrator hardly intervenes at all, and the meaning of the incident remains suspended on its emotive impact. This impact does not come only from the shocking character of the reality represented (from the "referent"). It comes in particular from *the obscenity of the vision* whose minute description (which breaks with the usual evocations) is rendered directly while the thousand prisoners *consume and reflect* the very act of seeing. Public resonance of a private act blind to itself, the account organizes itself in such a way as to censor itself. The same goes for what follows, when the sight of the man does not allow for the *immediate knowledge* of whether he is dead or not. There is a certain irony in presenting this scene as a "vision" of death inasmuch as one sees only (morbid) signs of life: death remains a total absence of signs. It is only after going through the task of interpretation, of reading, that the kapo (who knows how to detect) can at last declare "*Tod.*" His hesitation nevertheless reveals the power of death whose deplacé posture surprises (unveils) the system in its own game (that of degradation) and momentarily holds it in check. This takes nothing away from the fear of the thousand pris-

oners waiting for the SS, or the silence, or from the death itself which is immediately covered to be carried away. This takes nothing away from the malaise caused by this account whose specular structure reflects, in a way, our own act of reading.

From the “neutral” discourse of reports to the circles of interpretation in Antelme’s work, the thread of experience seems to be lost in the edifice of history and the vehicles of information, surreptitiously returning in the labyrinths of a reflexive writing. The “unsayable” of the camps comes no doubt from the opacity of the system which it is a matter of unveiling in its entirety (the historical approach of Kogon), in its immediacy (the documentary approach of Allainmat) or, on the contrary, in the necessary mediation of “givens,” which reintroduces the – subjective – field of the experience. There is nevertheless a rule which presides over the composition of these accounts, an ethic: that of *truth*. A truth which implies, among other things, that the events are, if not verifiable (something most often impossible), at least trustworthy or attested. The “referential modelization”²⁰ of the anecdote predominates, and it is first of all as a verifiable incident that it intervenes. The “pure truth” such as one finds it in the reports seem nonetheless ill-equipped to pass on the message and respond to the exigencies of communication. *Veracious*, these accounts must also be *credible* and *evocative*: the horror they relate must be proportionate to the horror people can imagine. Truth, credibility, and sensation appear, however, hardly compatible inasmuch – as deportees have often said and repeated – as people either do not believe them, or lose interest in their tales. The “pure truth” finds itself indissolubly caught in the bars of communication. Or, more precisely, truth is nothing more than communication: there is communication in truth because it is also possible to have truth in communication (it was both truth *and* communication that the Nazis tried to reduce to their saddest expression in the concentration camps).

If the anecdotes are as important as they are in this context, it is first of all because they seize reality in a narrative tension in such a way as *in effect* to recreate it. This effect is all the more probing as the reader knows that he is dealing with “true stories.” The anecdote’s double literary and referential constitution seems to designate it as a privileged instrument of communication of the reality of the camps. It even seems able to recreate in “reality” an *immedi-*

ate narrative impact inasmuch, precisely, as the account propels the event forward. The anecdote exacerbates the visibility of things, their simple “semantic configuration” marked as a vehicle of clarity.²¹ What the anecdote causes to appear here, what it reveals and problematizes, is thus the framework of the account, of the event and of its meaning: What would an in-sensible event be? what would happen to an event without an impact? Either by its concision or its simplicity (which is folded over but once) the anecdote makes the *uniqueness of the event and the univocality of meaning* concur.

But the meaning, in fact, does not come easily, and the configuration of events is not obvious. If one believes the testimonies, it seems as if in the camps meaning becomes elusive and events tend to lose their visibility by falling into a hollow, unfeeling everyday life: “January, February, snow, death. I remember very little,” writes Micheline Maurel.²² Antelme notes it as well: to perceive things, as minute as they might be, constitutes an act of resistance against the whole system. This tripping up of meaning does not however signify that nothing is happening, but that on a day to day level only nothings happen: soups that are thin or (rarely) thick, changes, barter, vermin, etc., constitute the canvas of days in the camps. The extreme uniqueness of the anecdote thus allows it, more than any other narrative genre, to grasp the question of normalcy and to re-center it through “little acts,” which might appear devoid of interest to us, of the particular value they had then. In this way the anecdote crosses a major barrier to communication: it shifts between two worlds with a great economy of means. In the end it is enough for the anecdote to confront two apparently incompatible elements for it to reveal both the reality of a world and that which separates us from it. But the “semantic configuration” of the ordinary shows itself to be perfectly reversible: the contrastive work of meaning allows as much for the singularization of ordinary little acts as for bringing out the *extraordinary* in them. This is where the difficulty lies for anyone who tries to tell of life in the concentration camps: how to make one grasp that the ordinary becomes extraordinary the moment it is systematically emptied of all its usual order? If the universe of the concentration camps remains relatively opaque to us, in spite of the number of documents and testimonies, this is due less to its “inexpressible” character than to the problem of meaning and the

nature of the experience it implies. If one tries to illustrate, or shed light on, such opacity, then the illustrative anecdote seems to impose itself, not only as a participant in a discourse on truth (if it really happened that way), but also in a discourse on the imperceptible (it was only a small event, a nothing, hardly signifying) as soon as it becomes *memorable*. . . . Only the most ordinary discourse thus succeeds in signifying the extraordinary, inasmuch as the experience of the vacuity of the camps (to be emptied of one's own humanity) already somewhat invested the day to day experience with the extraordinary. One must not, however, believe in the innocence, in the absence of opacity, of the anecdote itself: it is through a narrative and rhetorical processing of the event that it succeeds in casting the facts raised or the theses illustrated in enough shadow to set them into relief, to give them a perspective. It is through a presentation of meaning that the anecdote illustrates the loss of meaning, just as it is only in light that opacity has the chance to appear.

Translated from the French by Sophie Hawkes

Notes

1. Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Pardonnez*, Paris, Editions du Seuil 1986, p. 34, cited by Yves Reuter, "L'anecdote dans les témoignages concentrationnaires," *L'anecdote (Actes du Colloque de Clermont-Ferrand, 1988)*, Assn. of publications of the Faculté de lettres et sciences humaines of Clermont-Ferrand, 1990, p.p. 109–120, cit. p. 109.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Robert Antelme, *L'Espece humaine*, Paris: Gallimard, 1957, Second edition, p. 9.

4. Reuter, *op.cit.*, p. 110. This is not to say that accounts are impossible, but that the intrinsic difficulty of these testimonies makes certain strategies of communication all the more necessary.

5. Reuter, *op.cit.*, p. 110.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Reuter, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

8. Joel Fineman, "The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction," in H. Aram Veesser (editor), *The New Historicism*, London: Routledge, 1989, pp. 49–76.

9. The affirmation of the distancing of experience in favor of information is nothing new. In his essay on "The narrator," Walter Benjamin states: "One of the reasons for this loss is clear: the the gradient of experience has diminished; and it appears even to be tending toward zero. It is enough, each morning, to glance at a newspaper to ascertain that from the day before the course of experience has sunk

even lower [. . .] An evolution began with the World War and since then this process has not ceased to accelerate. Did we not note after the Armistice that the fighters returned from the front mute, not richer but poorer in communicable experience? What one was to read later in the mass of war books had nothing in common with this experience, which was passed by word of mouth." (*Essais 2, 1935–1949*, Paris: Denoël, p. 56) Information and experience form two opposed communicational modes according to Benjamin: information would be the near rather than the far, the true more than the authorized, the "comprehensible in and of itself" (*an und für sich verständlich*), the plausible exactitude without surprises, the event explained in its newness rather than "gathered" during the long term in which it participates.

10. Buchenwald, *Ein Konzentrationslager*, Frankfurt-am-Main: Röderberg-Verlag, 1984; *Auschwitz, Geschichte und Wirklichkeit des Vernichtungslagers*, Hambourg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch, 1978.

11. Jean Baumel, *De la guerre aux camps de concentration. Témoignages*, Paris: C.G.C. & La Grande Revue, 1974; David Rousset, *L'Univers concentrationnaire*, 1946; Eugen Kogon, *L'Enfer organisé: Le système des camps de concentration*, Paris: La Jeune Parque, 1947 (the original German edition was published in 1946).

12. Kogon, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

13. Kogon, *op. cit.*, p. 154–155.

14. Henry Allainmat, *Auschwitz en France. La vérité sur le seul camp d'extermination en France*. Le Struthof, Paris: Presses de la Cité, 1974.

15. I wish to clarify that I am not discussing or casting doubt on the historical truth of the incidents, but studying the communicative stakes of a textual mode of (re)presentation of the "true reality."

16. Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967, p. 201.

17. "Claude Lanzmann, in his many interviews, explained that *Shoah* was neither a fiction, nor a documentary. One hesitates over the terms that are usually so convenient. What to say about Joseph Rován's title *Contes de Dachau* ("Tales from Dachau") or how to describe the work by Charlotte Delbo, *Le convoi du 24 janvier* ("The convoy on January 24th"), composed of biographical notices?" Reuter, *op. cit.*, p. 111. (The work by Rován was published by Juilliard in 1987; the work by Delbo by Editions de Minuit, 1965.)

18. Antelme, *op. cit.*

19. See the quotation above.

20. We borrow the term from Wladimir Kryszynski, *Carrefours de signes: essais sur le roman moderne*, La Haye: Mouton, 1981.

21. This does not mean that there is first reality and then meaning. As has been demonstrated in other theories of cognition and communication, reality is caught and constituted in narrative and communicational structures in which one cannot economize.

22. Micheline Maurel, *Un camp très ordinaire*, Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1957, republished 1985, p. 143, cited by Y. Reuter, *op. cit.*, p. 113.