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THE TEMPORAL DIMENSIONS OF HOLOCAUST TRAUMA

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
—T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton"

Keywords*: temporality; tensed and tenseless theory of time; trauma; Holocaust; Cynthia Ozick*

Abstract*: Temporality is an intriguing issue: time governs our lives; yet, when we are asked to explain this concept, we are hard-pressed to answer. Difficulties concerning our ordinary, everyday understanding of time arise even with regard to the familiar tripartite division of human experience into the categories of past, present and future. Although scholars have been unable to arrive at a satisfactory definition of this notion, there seems to be consensus in arguing that the different moments of time are linked to each other by a relation of interdependence rather than by one of independence.*

In this paper I intend to show that traumatic episodes violate the principle of causality implicit in understandings that privilege a relation of interdependence between the different moments of time. Insofar as trauma is an overwhelming event that is not fully grasped at the moment of its occurrence (but rather in delayed responses), this is an experience that alters the relation between past, present and future and, consequently, the ways in which we define ourselves. Here I shall focus on the Holocaust and the problems that its victims have had when requested to explain their experience, for which I shall resort to Cynthia Ozick's Holocaust novella Rosa*.*

Introduction

The Holocaust constitutes one of the central occurrences of our age owing to the unprecedented magnitude of this event: never before had a state, under the responsible authority of its leading political party, used an industrialised killing apparatus to systematically murder an entire people (its men, its women, its children and even its infants) (qtd. in LaCapra 49). The plan devised by Adolf Hitler not only arrogated to itself the right to decide who was entitled to live and who was not but also violated the Enlightened values that had come to be considered the pillars of modern civilisation; that is, the core of our human condition. The Holocaust did not only undermine the rational ideas inherited from the eighteenth century; it also revealed the destructiveness of which humanity is capable (two-thirds of European Jewry as well as many other "undesirables" were annihilated and all the traces of the Yiddish culture that had flourished in Germany were erased) and, in addition, it made manifest that there was an

urgent need to reconsider the approach to the central elements of our culture: philosophy, theology, literature, history, temporality, etc.

The post-Holocaust world has, therefore, grown aware of the moral obligation to examine the ways in which the dark kingdom set by Hitler affected how we define ourselves with regard to the past, the present and the future. Taking into account the effects that the Nazi genocide had on our self-consciousness, in this paper I intend to explore the hermeneutics of *Dasein*—using Martin Heidegger's terminology. My thesis is that Holocaust survivors' understanding of Being was severely altered because of their traumatic experiences, to the extent that after going through camp imprisonment many of these people were incapable of defining their lives by the long established three-tiered view of time: past, present and future. Accordingly, they began to organise their existence attending to a slightly different temporal sequence, as it is best exemplified by Rosa Lublin (the main character of Cynthia Ozick's Holocaust novella *Rosa*), who, unable to engage in life after her traumatic experience in a Nazi concentration camp, begins to see existence in the following terms: as an everlasting duration.

The Intriguing Nature of Time

In order to fully assess the extent to which the Nazi epoch marked and continues to mark us and our condition as humans, I shall first need to analyse a factor that plays an important constitutive role in identity formation (both at the individual and the social level): temporality. As far as this matter is concerned, it is one that has intrigued society throughout history. Already at the earliest stages of culture (in classical Greece) there were attempts to unveil the mysteries of time. Heraclitus, Plato and Aristotle—just to mention a few philosophers—showed a profound interest in the concept of time, which they approached mainly by studying the change of seasons and the development of devices for measuring time. Efforts to arrive at an understanding of this intimately familiar notion continued over the centuries and into our present age, which may explain why the term fills rows and rows of library shelves. Recently, philosophers, scientists, anthropologists, etc. have dealt with the notion in more systematic and controlled ways. At any rate, attempts have been to a large extent inappropriate: temporality has consistently eluded the greatest scholars, who have been unable to define it in a totally satisfactory way. The world continues, therefore, to be puzzled by the enigmas revolving around time: What is time? Could there be time without change? How can time be defined? Is time a discrete variable or is it rather a continuous one? How do humans experience time? Does time objectively flow?

One of the first people to notice the elusive nature of time was the Church father St. Augustine, who in his famous autobiography *Confessions* admitted the following: "What then is time? If no one asks me, I know: if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not" (235). St. Augustine's unfortunate attempt at providing a definition of the notion of time has a parallel in more recent approaches to the subject, as, for example, in Zygmunt Zawirski's reflections on the intriguing mystery of time. Like St. Augustine, this philosopher insists on the elusiveness of temporality. His interest, however, is not so much on the problematic of establishing limits to the term but rather on the difficulty of apprehending time itself: "The past has ceased to exist, the future has not yet arrived, and the present is only a point of contact between the past and the future. We cannot grasp any part of time . . ." (qtd. in Szumilewicz-Lachman 64).

The question of time is, thus, an odd one: we live governed by time but when it comes to say what it is we are hard-pressed to answer satisfactorily. The difficulty of shedding light on the idea of temporality can be explained by the fact that many different variables conflate in this notion. Indeed, this is a complex, multifaceted concept and, hence, one which can be studied from several perspectives. For instance, anthropologists have questioned themselves about the ways in which human beings define

themselves with regard to time. Religions have been concerned with issues of time representation (linear vs. cyclical time). For philosophers there is initially the dilemma of establishing whether time is an attribute of the external world or, rather, a property of the human mind; to phrase it otherwise: Does time really flow or is time's passage merely an illusion? Industrialised societies are obsessed with time measurement, which is the reason why clocks, calendars, alarms and schedules play such an outstanding role in our contemporary world. Biological theories of time are interested in cultural differences in our biological clock. Physical sciences have apprehended time mathematically—as something which can be measured.

Difficulties concerning our ordinary understanding of time arise even with regard to the familiar tripartite division of human experience into the categories of past, present and future. The central question is whether or not the structure of tensed language (*was*, *is* and *will be*) has an ontological correspondence with our everyday perception of time. While tensed theorists of time, as for example Quentin Smith, contend that the moments of time are objectively past, present and future and that events change according to those tensed determinations, tenseless theorists (John Ellis McTaggart, D. H. Mellor, Bertrand Russell) maintain that such an ordering of time does not "attribute any intrinsic properties to things in the world" but rather describes events from the perspective of a given observer; that is, it simply "indicate[s] an event's temporal position relative to the speaker" (Tooley 305). Unhappy with such an approach to time, advocates of a tenseless view of time argue that the only objective temporal facts concern relations of precedence and simultaneity between events: "earlier than," "simultaneous with" and "later than."

Just as scholars have been unable to choose between these two rivalling theories (not knowing which gives a most appropriate explanation of temporal dimensions) and have been puzzled by other matters connected with existence in time, they have been at odds when trying to reach a consensus regarding the existing connections between the different moments of time. For some, there is hardly any relation among the various modes of time—each covering a reality of its own: what is not (the past), what is (the present) and what is not yet (the future). Yet, as pointed out by Edmund Husserl, adopting such a perspective risks leaving us with a void. Inasmuch as the past is viewed as what has gone and the future as what cannot be thought of, we are left only with the present and this equals to being left with an infinitesimal nothingness (qtd. in Dalla Barba 111). Therefore, if the present, which is a time category that lasts no more than an instant, is defined without reference to the past or the future, what remains is a point lacking dimension. There is a sense in which this implies negating time and, accordingly, it means stripping away the possibility of allowing Being to transcend its very self; i.e. to stretch beyond the actual moment and accommodate aspects of our experience with those that were or/and are to be. Aware of the limitations of such a view, most generally scholars have conceived of temporal dimensions not as independent structures but rather as interdependent, as bearing a relation of subordination among them. The present, taken to be a metaphysically privileged time because it is the only mode in which change occurs, is placed at the centre of the temporal structure and juxtaposed to it are the past and the future.

Apprehending temporality in such a way is felt to be as fundamental to our experience of reality as anything else. It provides order, coherence and meaning to the body of social and personal events orienting our lives (including not only what is happening now but also what happened and what is to happen). Through recollection, we move back to the past and have access to the information stored in our memory. Travelling to this prior moment in the life history of our Being allows us to bring to the forefront lived experience, some of which is fundamental in order to decipher the meaning of our present Self. The process works almost identically in the other direction: through anticipation we envision the ways in which our present actions will develop (in an attempt at giving meaning to our present life). Robert C. Neville explains this as follows:

> The present could not be itself without the conditions of the past to give it specificity, to supply initial data, and without the normative structures of the future to provide possible outcomes to be decided on. (179)

The phases of our past, present and future life maintain thus a relation of interdependence between each other, a factor which is considered a necessary preliminary condition to arrive at a global temporality—meaning one which encompasses the past, the present and the future.

Trauma and Time Perception

As pointed out in the introduction, in this paper I intend to show that there are situations that turn inside out such an understanding of temporality. My focus is particularly set on the destabilising qualities of trauma. I maintain that, owing to their inassimilable nature, traumatic experiences have the capacity to alter the way we define ourselves with regard to time and, thereby, the way we perceive reality. This perspective is in line with trends that hold that trauma devastatingly disturbs the sense of Being-in-time; or, put otherwise, that it breaks up the unifying thread of temporality and, in the process, that which Heidegger considers the ontological ground of one's Being. Finally, I would like to point out that in order to fulfil such an analysis, I have chosen an event that stands as a paradigmatic case of trauma: the Holocaust.

According to the schema described above, the present relates backwards to the past and forwards to the future by a relation of interdependence which is largely based on a causality principle (our past experiences have determined the form of our present life and, similarly, our present actions determine our future). More interesting for our purposes here, implicit in such a way of thinking about time is the idea that events flow inexorably from the past into the future or, in other words, that time involves motion or movement. Even if this is a rather intuitive and probably mistaken way of understanding time, the reality is that this conceptualisation is key in organising and systematising our ordinary activities.[1] In fact, it is interwoven with how we plan, strategise and coordinate our personal experience with the experience of others. That is to say, it determines the ways in which we interact with the external world. The influence that this approach to time plays in our lives is such that were time to stop, then our notion of experience as well as our ability to understand, organise and process such an experience would crumble.

The view held here is that this is precisely the situation to which traumatic experiences lead. Insofar as the traumatic self is unable to assimilate the event at the moment of its occurrence and can do so only later (after a period of latency), this is a pathology that destroys the conceptualisation of past, present and future time in the terms that I have been referring to. Trauma, indeed, produces an internal breach that damages existing mental structures; and this produces, in turn, an impairment of basic human skills, including the capacity to apprehend time. With regard to the past, the subject does no longer move backwards freely but rather s/he is constantly "possessed by an image or event" (Caruth 5). The same is true for the future: it is not viewed as an agent of potentially but rather as a site of ceaseless repetition, a realm where the traumatic obsession is repeated over and over again. There is, therefore, an infiltration of the past in the present and future. In relation to this, Caruth argues that "the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, *in its refusal to be simply located*" [emphasis added] (9). There is another sense in which trauma alters our perception of time: traumatic events, though limited in their duration,

[1] Scientists contend that there are reasons to believe that it is only in our consciousness that we experience time as flowing—an argument that implies that out of this realm (i.e. out of our minds) all moments of time exist without flow.

seem to acquire a limitless duration owing to the fact that they recur once and again in the form of dreams, hallucinations, paranoia, etc. The present is besieged by the harrowing memories of the past, so that the boundaries between these two modes of time blur—and the same happens with regard to the future.

The type of time alterations described above are singularly manifest among the victims of the Holocaust, which is the reason why I consider that this event is a most interesting case study when dealing with the ways in which time perception is affected by traumatic episodes. Most notably, life in the camps diminished inmates' identity and deteriorated their health; yet, it also caused serious problems in terms of time sequencing. The pre-Holocaust world was so removed from the sordid reality which prisoners were forced to live in that it was almost impossible for them to establish a relation with the vibrant life that they had led prior to the rise of Nazism. They were not only deprived of their past but also of the future. Imprisoned in a hellish world that held out no hope for them (only a sure death), inmates were denied the illusion of anticipation; i.e. they were denied the possibility of envisioning the future. Holocaust survivor Charlotte Delbo has commented extensively on this existence out of time: "We are *in a place where time is abolished*. We do not know whether we exist, only ice, light, dazzingly snow and us, in this ice, this light, this silence" [emphasis added] (32). Unable to establish a connection between their present existence and both a prior or a later time, camp prisoners were left with a sordid present—one which they felt to last not an infinitesimal instant but rather a never ending lapse of time. Delbo has referred to this as follows:

> What is closer to eternity than a day? What is longer than one day? How can we tell that it is passing? Clods of earth follow clods of earth, the furrow lengthens, the carriers continue their rounds. And the screams, the screams, the screams.
> What is longer than a day? We know that time is passing because the fog slowly lifts. Our hands are less numb. Vaguely, far off, a bit of sunlight. It tears off tatters of fog. The ice softens and melts. .(47)

The slowing of time was, in fact, one of the most common time alterations among camp inmates. The present, indeed, seemed to freeze into eternity. Lawrence L. Langer explains this by arguing that time stopped being chronological and acquired instead a durational quality:

> Chronology anticipates something. Duration anticipates nothing. Birth is a culmination of developing time. Its features are growth and nurture, expectation, the organization of various biological, chemical, and physical forces into life. Like history, it represents a gestation from the past in the service of the future. The disaster of the Holocaust violates such chronology in nature, and this moment shares a glaring light on the reversal and disruption accompanying the disaster. (18)

Once the Holocaust was over, many survivors remained trapped in durational time. Defying the limits of their own temporality, the harrowing events of the past reverberate in the present (in the post-Auschwitz world), forcing victims to perpetually relive their traumatic experiences; i.e. to live eternally in the dark kingdom established by Hitler. For survivors thus past, present and future muddled up into a single time—one that "leaps out of the chronology, establishing its own momentum, or fixation" (Langer 15). Within this temporal frame, the past does not stay properly buried but rather emerges in unexpected ways and the future announces nothing new, only repetition.

Fiction as a Venue to Deal with the Temporal Distortions Caused by Trauma

Time and trauma figure prominently within the concerns of our contemporary society, a circumstance which explains why both aspects have become two major thematic preoccupations in modern fictive works. It should be noticed, moreover, that there is some degree of connection between the two, which is the reason why in no few occasions both subjects are studied in relation to each other. This is the case in such fictional renderings of the Holocaust as Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow* or Alan Isler's *The Prince of West End Avenue*. In relation to this, it is possible to argue that time distortions appear commonly in trauma narratives about the Nazi genocide; and this is because fictions are a good venue for the exploration of temporality. In order to illustrate this, I shall provide a critical analysis of Cynthia Ozick's Holocaust novella "Rosa," a work in which the protagonist's capacity to perceive time is seriously altered because of the traumatic experience she underwent while imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp. After experiencing the unimaginable, Rosa—the main character of the story under consideration here—lives in a misaligned temporality which impedes her to envision a time before and a time after the central moment in her life: the brutal murder of her baby daughter Magda. The value of the novella lies in the fact that the story recreates narratively the altered temporality in which Rosa Lublin is living. In this way, Ozick deceives readers into believing that they too are trapped in the time of the Holocaust. As I intend to show, time alterations operate at two levels: first, at the level of the protagonist's consciousness and, second, at the level of the novella's narrative structure.

Regarding the level of Rosa's consciousness, from the very beginning there are hints that point to the fact that this woman is a paradigmatic case of an altered temporality. Trauma (basically, the murder of her daughter at the hands of a Nazi officer), which called into being a prior narrative by Ozick ("The Shawl"), continues to reverberate in this sequel. Some thirty-five years after the death of Magda, Rosa continues to relive the most dramatic moment in her life over and over again—to the extent that she has problems in re-establishing a sense of time (she is unable to organise experience along a temporal line). More precisely, she mixes the time of the Holocaust with the time in which she is living at present, that is, the post-Holocaust era. For her, the Nazi past is not a distant realm displaying characteristics of its own; but rather a time that reaches into the present, bringing along its conduits—with unrestrained intensity and vividness—the horrors lived back in Nazi Germany. The harrowing quality of the haunting images that besiege the protagonist becomes singularly apparent when analysing instances of free indirect thought. Insofar as these passages coincide with those moments in the story in which the narrator has less control over Rosa's speech, readers are allowed to delve into her temporally-impaired psyche and hence to feel with her this misaligned conceptualisation of time. This kind of traumatised time is clearly discernible in the hallucination episodes that occur frequently throughout the text. For example, after walking into a hotel's private beach, which happens to be fenced with barbed wire, Rosa figures herself being again in a Nazi camp:

> When she came back to the gate, the latch would not budge. A cunning design, it trapped the trespasser. She gazed up, and thought of climbing; but there was barbed wire on top.
> [. . .] Her wrists were trembling. To be locked behind barbed wire! No one knew who she was; what had happened to her; where she came from. Their gates, their terrible ruse of their keys, wire brambles, men lying with men . . . She was afraid to approach any of the other mounds. No one to help. Persecutors. In the morning they would arrest her. (48-49)

This implies that Rosa has lost human's basic capacity to perceive time as a succession, as chronology; instead she understands it as duration. Everything, even the most insignificant detail, seems to acquire an everlasting quality. In this sense, it should be noticed that her discourse is replete with markers of repetition: "*Every day* without fail it *blazed* and *blazed*" (14); "But now I see, even after the worst *there's still more*" (14); "Summer *without end*" (28); "One letter was from Stella and the other one

was one of those university letters, *still another one, another sample* of the disease" (31); "Survivor. Even when your bones get melted into the grains of the earth, still they'll forget human being. *Survivor and survivor and survivor*; *always and always*" (36-37); or "*The same everywhere*, along the rim of *every continent*, this gurgling, foaming, trickling" (48). It seems as if time had lost the capacity to bring renewal. In fact, it has become a dimension doomed to bring sameness; and, inasmuch as it is based on repetition, it cancels renovation, movement, newness—leaving us with an everlasting time: the one modelled by the Nazis. The following passage is illustrative of Rosa's particular way of perceiving time: "'[There is] the life before, the life during, the life after'." Present life is "'life after . . . a joke, [and] before is a dream'"; there is only during left (58). Trapped in "the during of the Holocaust," Rosa lives out of present time: she has serious difficulties in envisioning both the present and the future. Accordingly, even if she physically survived the ordeal, she is mentally trapped within barbed wire.

Ozick's novella goes further in its attempt at showing the temporal distortions caused by trauma. Certainly, the scope of the work is not limited to Rosa's consciousness; the structure of the story itself recreates the difficulty of perceiving time after going through a traumatic experience. Ozick plays with narrative time in such a way that it succeeds in making readers believe that Miami, the location where this story takes place, is an updated version of a Nazi camp. Although the United States are supposed to be "'no place for barbed wire on top of fences'" (51), Ozick seems to be trying to emphasise that the country has turned out to be a concentration camp—just like the one that serves as a setting for "The Shawl." There are certain similarities that contribute to enhancing the parallelism. While walking in the streets of Miami, Rosa finds out that there are beaches fenced off with barbed wire. The camps set up by the Nazis lacked proper sanitary conditions and were places where there was not much to eat. Surprising though it may seem, the situation has not changed very much in "Rosa." The protagonist is said to live an isolated life in a dingy one-room apartment, which is described as "a dark hole, a single room in a 'hotel'" (13). This is not much better than "the place without pity" where we last saw her living (5). Furthermore, in "The Shawl" hunger was an ever present reality. For instance, Stella, Rosa's niece, was said to be ravenous to the point that she "gazed at Magda like a young cannibal" (5). In "Rosa," hunger is not such an extremely serious condition. At any rate, Rosa describes the people living in Florida as "scarecrows blown about under the murdering sunball *with empty rib cages*" [emphasis added] (16). Rosa herself is said to eat quite little: "half a sardine, or a small can of peas heated in a Pyrex mug" (13). Moreover, Rosa's blue striped dress is highly significant since it resembles the clothes prisoners were forced to wear in the camps. The narrator, stepping into Rosa's mind, affirms: "stripes, never again anything on her body with stripes! She swore it, but this, fancy and with a low collar, was Stella's birthday present, Stella bought it. As if innocent, as if ignorant, as if *not there*" [author's emphasis] (33). The reader thus is made to feel that the Holocaust is not a historical event that can be restricted to just one time and place; rather, it is an experience that prevails. In order to convey this idea Ozick uses flashbacks, a narrative technique by means of which she manages to drag us into the Nazi era: the flow of time is slowed down and, as a result, readers' idea of chronology is cancelled. In short, readers are made to feel as disoriented (in terms of temporal location) as Holocaust prisoners.

Conclusions

To conclude I would like to consider the ways in which Rosa—and by extension Holocaust survivors, in the name of whom she speaks—lends herself to an analysis based on Heidegger's understanding of Being and time. This philosopher's lifelong project was to unveil the meaning of Dasein—a German concept which can be translated as "existence" and which he uses to refer to ourselves as Being-in-the-world (from which we may infer that it has both temporality and spatiality). Since the

purpose of this study is to consider the ways in which human beings define themselves with regard to the past, present and future, I shall leave aside Heidegger's theory of space and shall focus only on the temporal aspects of Being-in-the-world. Insofar as the essence of Dasein is existence, it is possible to argue that it is not a static entity but rather one that has "potentiality-for-being," meaning that individuals have the capacity to project themselves towards the future and thereby towards their own death. The notion of anticipation brings, in turn, awareness about our own finite existence. Enclosed in this daring revelation is Dasein's capacity to project itself either authentically (by attunement to death as an existential possibility) or inauthentically (by attunement to death as an impossibility). Interestingly, in letting death be, the meaning of Dasein is disclosed clearly: that it cannot have all the possibilities, that is, that we, as human beings, are finite; and, this draws attention about the need of engaging Dasein in that which is still possible: the things of the world, towards which we should take a resolute (meaning active and participatory) stance. However, this is not possible for Holocaust survivors. Given that their capacity to project towards the future has been hampered, they cannot envision their existence as one limited by the boundaries of death. Most singularly, because they are not faced by this ever-threatening menace—but rather live constantly within its maws—they do not feel the necessity of engaging in life resolutely, which, by the way, they take to be an impossible task: being already dead, makes them unfit for engaging actively in the world. This is most clearly seen in Rosa's indifference towards anything having to do with the present: Stella, Persky or her life in Florida. Holocaust survivors, therefore, cannot define their existence in the terms posited by Heidegger in *Being and Time*. As a matter of fact, they are doomed to live within an altered temporality that is characterised, as pointed out throughout this article, by the quality of duration.

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