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A Response to Anna Pottier's Critique of "'Now many will live by your name': Irving Layton, Memory, and the Holocaust"

I have spent some time considering the theme of Anna Pottier's critique of my essay. While her letter contains several strands of thought, the most crucial appears to be the position of the poet in his poetry—"the lyrical I." Ms. Pottier has penned an articulate defense of this poetic convention and its ability to serve as a voice for the dead. She writes: "The poet speaks forcefully and eloquently, as a *witness* rather than a self-appointed Grand Poobah of Unpleasant Material. Layton spoke on *behalf* of his 'murdered kin.'" I would suggest, however, that these claims require a subtext: What does it mean to serve as witness to an event that you have not lived through? How does one speak on behalf of the dead? *Can* one speak on behalf of the dead? I do not believe that these questions can be expunged from a study of literature's treatment of the past. History is an entity independent from its expression in the present. We are aware of events—the narrative sweep of the past—but cannot penetrate the subjectivism of experience. The dead retain all the integrity of their individualism and it is as contentious an issue to speak on their behalf as it would be to speak for any living community. This is not to argue that our attempts at commemoration be discarded in frustration. Ms. Pottier has misread my essay in this respect. The purpose of my previous essay was to explore *how* traumatic history ought to be addressed. At no point did I suggest that silence, particularly Jewish silence, should be the preferred method.

The source of Ms. Pottier's confusion in this matter appears to be my characterization of Layton's "Departed" as "quiet." Taken in context, the passage reads as such: "This is a quiet poem for Layton, linguistically sparse and restrained. The

disappointed vision of the poem, the poet's failed attempt to recreate an artistic image drawn from the past, leaves the absence he encounters intact." The issue at stake in my essay was how to approach history, particularly traumatic history, without trespass. It seems that there is an inevitable danger in the aestheticization of historical tragedy. Art has the potential to promote a type of covert forgetting—burying the harsher reality of suffering under symbolism and sentiment.

Nor is this a problem limited to the sphere of art. It is a difficult thing to abandon our desire to "fill in" the past. History is murky territory at best because it belongs, simultaneously, to imagination and fact. We are aware of its reality but it is a reality that requires imaginative reconstruction. The past as past is by nature separate; there can be no access to it as is. To think about history is to try and efface some degree of that foreignness. The threat in doing so is that history may become too familiar and forfeit its autonomy. The result is that the past becomes material for the indulgences of the present; it begins to resemble the context of its commemoration, and that is a very poor form of memory. The desire to avoid this is not, as Ms. Pottier suggests, commensurate with a colourless, carefully inoffensive approach to history. I would argue the opposite: abandoning our ownership of the past seems, somewhat paradoxically, the sole means of revitalizing history.

In my reading, Layton's "Departed" succeeds in this extremely difficult endeavour. Consequently, I do not find that Ms. Pottier's interpretation differs so radically from my own. She writes: "A closer look at the text shows Brethour's interpretation to be inexact. The very asking of the question fills or at least disturbs the void. The title 'Departed' points to the disappearance, not to the Jews. Put another way; the Jews are not problematic—but their disappearance is. Layton used the best tool at his disposal, language, to evoke the

void and the criminality that created it." The crux, it seems, of both our readings is that this is a poem concerned with evoking absence. The author is encountering loss and leaving what has been lost intact. I am not lauding Layton for his "silence," but for his thoughtful encounter with the dead. It is the author's self-conscious interaction with history that lends this poem its poignancy.

I would like to expand, however, upon Ms. Pottier's second sentence in this passage: "The very asking of the question fills or at least disturbs the void." The power of discourse to determine the meaning of history is precisely why the *form* of memory is an ethical issue. The "void," as Ms. Pottier terms it, indicates the absence of persons. If our attempts to commemorate "fills or at least disturbs the void" then there is the danger of displacing the persons remembered. What is it that we "fill" the void with? Certainly not the persons themselves; they are beyond resurrection. I would suggest that the only material available, then, is the second, unstable aspect of history: imagination. If this is indeed the case, then what we fill the void with is our own desires and expectations. Assuming the purpose of commemoration is to articulate the individuality of victims, this becomes untenable.

I should stress that I am not interpreting Ms. Pottier's reading of the void as the absence of memory. Perhaps it is necessary to state explicitly that the purpose of this article is to advocate not forgetfulness or silence, but memory. My approach to this subject was and is heavily influenced by the work of Jean Améry. Améry's writing, particularly "At the Mind's Limits," strove to demonstrate that memory is itself a moral action.¹ This is not a "lessons of the past" approach, where history serves as a vehicle for social betterment in the present. Rather, Améry understood the act of memory as a moral necessity. There is, in consequence, a need to fashion a morality of memory. In this context, *how* we remember

¹ Please refer to: Jean Améry, "At the Mind's Limits," *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University P, 1980) 1-20.

dictates the moral success or failure of our endeavour.

Ms. Pottier remarks that she does not agree with Amery, writing: "Unlike the good Mr. Amery, the Austrian essayist who says that 'retaining the memory of the Holocaust is something essentially ungraspable' and, the Holocaust a 'series of acknowledged absences,' Layton did not think silence was an option." It is a gross misreading of Amery to suggest that his reaction to the Holocaust was a prescription for silence. The point and purpose of Amery's work was to condemn society's desire to forget. Amery was also, however, that dangerous thing, an honest man, who had little tolerance for self-indulgence. His essays worked to counter the assumption that every attempt to portray or commemorate the Holocaust was intrinsically praiseworthy. In his essay "Against the Irreversible," the German novelist W.G. Sebald argues that the impetus behind Amery's "At the Mind's Limits" was a reaction against "the alacrity with which literature was now reclaiming 'Auschwitz' as its own territory," an act, he notes, that is "no less repellent than its previous refusal to broach that monstrous subject at all."²

For Amery, the persons best qualified to discuss the Holocaust are those who, like himself, survived. Born to a Jewish father and Roman Catholic Mother in 1912, Amery fled from Austria to France with the intention of escaping internment under the Nazis. The young man later left for Belgium, only to be arrested and tortured for his work with the Resistance. After his initial imprisonment in Fort Breendonk, Amery was moved to Auschwitz, Buchenwald, and finally Bergen-Belsen where he would be liberated in 1945. His essays describing his imprisonment and torture stress the absolute autonomy of individual experience. Central to his work is the realization that the past is composed of personal histories, all of which retain an integrity separate from the present. For Amery, to assume

² W.G. Sebald, "Against the Irreversible: On Jean Améry," *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2003) 143-168. 146.

history is recoverable is to dismiss the hermetic character of individual experience. One cannot successfully translate the life of another into a complete historical record. His essay "Torture" dwells, in particular, on the absolute incommunicability of physical pain. He writes: "Qualities of feeling are as incomparable as they are indescribable. They mark the limit of the capacity of language to communicate. If someone wanted to impart his physical pain, he would be forced to inflict it and thereby become a torturer himself."³

Because torture negates the intellect, reducing its victim to the purely physical, language becomes obsolete. The language of the body as body is non-verbal. As a result, the language of a body in torment can only be communicated through an equivalent infliction of pain. The best one can do, Améry concludes, is to try and approximate the experience. Read in this context, Ms. Pottier's assertion that "Layton serves merely as vocal conduit" for the dead in "To the Victims of the Holocaust" is highly problematic. For Améry, the moral entry-point into history begins with the admission of failure since traumatic histories will never be adequately communicated. This admission of failure is, however, the beginning rather than the end of memory. Having abandoned our presumption to know history we no longer confuse imaginative desire for fact. Here false coherence is exchanged for an endless striving. Because what is lost is unimaginable and subsequently unrecoverable, memory becomes a constant task—continually returning, interrogating, and, in the instance of the Holocaust, mourning. For Améry, history is revived through the acknowledgment of absences that cannot be recreated in symbolic form. It is in this capacity that we come to understand the integrity of the past and of the persons therein. We are compelled to seek after the voices of the dead while recognizing that they are separate from our own. Finally, Améry's work is designed to provoke an estrangement from

³ Jean Améry, "Torture," *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University P, 1980) 21-40. 33.

history and, paradoxically, it is only in and through this alienation that the rehabilitation of historical remembering begins.

This is the context in which I am reading Irving Layton's poems. I am not suggesting that this is the sole means of examining Layton's work. However, Amery's demand for a morality of memory is not easily dismissed. If he is to be believed, there are few pursuits more demanding, or necessary, than that of memory. It is in this contention that I believe Ms. Pottier and myself may find common ground. Her critique of my work betrays an obvious concern with history, particularly in regards to the Holocaust. It is precisely for this reason, however, that I find the content of her response somewhat puzzling. While her interpretation of Layton's work is often compelling, she largely ignores the ethical framework proposed by Amery. He is quickly, and erroneously, dismissed as a proponent of silence. I believe that it is this misreading of his work that propels Ms. Pottier towards her intimations of prejudice on my part. Attempting to read Layton through Amery, I am not "offer[ing] permutations of the same old hoary stereotype: Irving Layton as 'noisy Jew.'" Silence, linked as it is to forgetting, is not included in Amery's moral sphere. Rather, the purpose of my essay was to interrogate the form of our commemorative attempts. Memory, as a moral necessity, cannot yield the autonomy of the past to the present.

I have attempted to respond to what seemed to be the central issue in Ms. Pottier's critique. I will now touch briefly upon another—the offending definition of "Lazarovitch." In this instance, I unfortunately forgot that not everyone shares my fondness for the origin of words. It was not intended to disparage Mr. Layton. It was, moreover, incorrect. Ms. Pottier will no doubt be pleased to hear that "Lazarovitch" means "God-helped." I gladly apologize for this mistake. It was made in good faith and my red cheeks, combined with a promise to check several sources in the future, are hopefully atonement enough.

