

Figurative Language in Delbo's Auschwitz et après

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**Volume 11 Issue 1 (March 2009) Article 3****Elizabeth Scheiber,****"Figurative Language in Delbo's *Auschwitz et après*"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss1/3>>

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**Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 11.1 (2009)**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss1/>>**Thematic Issue *New Work in Holocaust Studies*****Edited by Louise O. Vasvári and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek**

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**Abstract:** In her article "Figurative Language in Delbo's *Auschwitz et après*" Elizabeth Scheiber examines the use of figurative language in Charlotte Delbo's trilogy *Auschwitz et après. Aucun de nous ne reviendra* and shows how metaphors and symbols in the texts not only establish a means of imagining the concentration camps, but also how they create a community between author and reader. In Delbo's work, the ironic symbol of the stretcher as a means of conveying corpses gives the reader insight into the author's psyche at roll call as she witnesses the grim sight of the indignity of death in the concentrationary universe. Similarly, the metaphor of mannequins serves as a means of visualizing atrocity and understanding the author's reaction to it through the use of a visual cue borrowed from the ordinary world. In embracing the presence of figurative language in Holocaust literature, this article proposes that we must give up the myth of textual immediacy, but in return, we gain insight and understanding into the trauma of the survivors.

**Elizabeth SCHEIBER****Figurative Language in Delbo's *Auschwitz et après***

Early in the first volume of her trilogy entitled *Auschwitz et après. Aucun de nous ne reviendra*, Charlotte Delbo establishes what might be seen as an odd metaphor to describe the cadavers piled outside of Block 25 in the Birkenau concentration camp: department store mannequins. The result is reminiscent of surrealism, where a juxtaposition of unrelated objects creates a jarring effect on the viewer/reader. By introducing a piece of the ordinary world into the concentrationary universe, Delbo creates an effect that makes an appeal to our imagination. The implementation of this strange image causes us to rethink many of our suppositions about the use of metaphor and other figures, like symbols, in Holocaust literature. In Delbo's *oeuvre* the metaphor of mannequins is not a gratuitous (that is, merely "literary") gesture, empty of any significance beyond its effectiveness as descriptor. Instead, it is an example of how metaphors can reach across the chasm of incomprehension to communicate to a group that did not directly experience the event and in so doing establish a community between writer and readers.

Many scholars and critics of Holocaust fiction express a distrust of literary devices in narratives. Lawrence Langer perhaps expresses this sentiment best as he worries that literature detracts from the harsh realities of the ghettos, concentration camps, and death: "when literary form, allusion, and style intrude on the surviving victim's account, we risk forgetting where we are and imagine deceptive continuities" (45). Indeed, we usually associate figures with decorative descriptions where plain language could be employed instead. For that reason, we find that metaphors and symbols draw attention to language and point away from the scene represented. For Alvin Rosenfeld, as he examines Elie Wiesel's depiction of Auschwitz, the attraction of figurative language fades before the atrocity of the Event: "there are no metaphors for Auschwitz, just as Auschwitz is not a metaphor for anything else. Why is that the case? Because the flames were real flames, the ashes only ashes, the smoke always and only smoke" (27). Rosenfeld worries that the Holocaust can be misappropriated, used to other ends which do not express the reality of the ghettos and the camps. In quoting these scholars, I do not mean to imply that they are against a literature of the Holocaust. Both have dedicated time and energy to the study of Holocaust literature, including fictional works, and believe that many works make excellent contributions to our understanding of the Shoah. In fact, Rosenfeld declares that "the Holocaust demands speech even as it threatens to impose silence" (14). He emphasizes that silence would be tantamount to a victory for Hitler, and, while it may seem blasphemous to write, silence would be far more blasphemous" (14). Instead of expressing an opposition to figures that depict the Holocaust, these quotes warn readers that earlier forms of expression seem inadequate to the task of representing atrocity. Metaphor in particular meets with mistrust, and James E. Young explains this unease as the result of our expectation that this literature should establish fact: "Since the transmission of facts in Holocaust writing still dominates this literature's function for so many writers, and since metaphor cannot directly transmit these facts, many critics still regard metaphor as not only ineffective but even dangerous for representing the Holocaust" (*Writing and Rewriting* 91). He goes on to say that many scholars fear that metaphor will be used to falsify facts and deceive readers.

Not only does the mistrust of metaphor stem from a fear of being misled by Holocaust writers. Nazi Germany used metaphors to deceive its own people and lure innocent Jews to their death. Although governments and organizations make ample use of euphemistic language to conceal or prettify a harsh reality, the Third Reich's manipulation of language was particularly insidious. For example, they referred to their extermination of the Jewish people as the *Endlösung*, the Final Solution of the Jewish Problem. The Jews underwent *Sonderbehandlung*, special treatment, which meant death by gassing. Before their death by killing squads or in concentration camps, the Jews were "resettled." Buchenwald survivor Jorge Semprún writes that the formula *entlassen* (released) was the typical way of indicating that a prisoner had been executed (149). Many other examples exist of this metaphorical language, a type of euphemism to hide the darker side of nazism. They indicate to us that indeed there is a danger inherent in the project of metaphor, one that we might call the "bait-and-switch." Making a substitution of one expression for another does not mean necessarily creating an equality.

Despite the worry of deception, Young thinks that metaphors are a necessary device to convey the experience of the Holocaust: "Rather than seeing metaphors as threatening to the facts of the Holocaust, we must recognize that they are our only access to the facts, which cannot exist apart from the figures delivering us. ... If carried to its literal end, an injunction against Auschwitz metaphors would place events outside of language and meaning altogether, thereby mystifying the Holocaust" (*Writing*

and *Rewriting* 91). Having established a need for metaphorical language, Young indicates a direction for further study of metaphor: "the critic might be better served by exploring the interpretive aspects of metaphor and their consequences for both the victims and for our understanding of events now" (*Writing and Rewriting* 92). It is in the spirit of Young's suggestion that I propose a reading of Delbo's writings and a deeper understanding of her choice of metaphorical and symbolic language. Delbo's use of literary and figurative language to appeal to our imagination makes her work a rich example to examine. In her trilogy, far from presenting an autobiography in a realistic vein, Delbo uses imaginative forms evocative of nightmares and mixes the genres of poetry, prose poetry, vignettes. She shows no interest in organizing a straight-forward chronology either. The reader is flung into the book in a similar manner that deportees arrived at Auschwitz. Time is unmarked, and Auschwitz remains unnamed. The ramp, where people arrive at the camp, is presented as a sort of nowhere: "The station is not a station. It's the end of a track" ("La gare n'est pas une gare. C'est la fin d'un rail" [11; all translations are mine: while there is an English translation of Delbo's trilogy, in my opinion the translation is in many instances inadequate). The place where the women work is a desolate and empty plain. The atmosphere of the volume is bleak and nightmarish.

It is clear that Delbo does not intend for *Aucun de nous ne reviendra* to be a typical act of "witnessing," that is, a list of facts of what happened, when, where, and to whom. Instead, she searches for forms and language that convey her personal experience in a way that plunges the reader into the same scenario. In her article on Delbo, Nicole Thatcher points to Delbo's desire to reach out to readers and help us penetrate the Auschwitz experience on an emotional level: "[Delbo] is interested not in giving us detailed descriptions but in touching us. With the help of poetic language, she makes us share, as much as possible, her *incredible* experience" ("Charlotte Delbo's Voice" 43; emphasis in the original). It is in this optic that we must read the metaphor of the mannequins as a means of communication. These images are not merely literary devices that detract from the horror of Auschwitz or otherwise distract the reader from the message of atrocity and annihilation, as Langer fears. In her book on Delbo, Thatcher stresses that Delbo's use of language was meant to represent the reality all the more: "She chooses poetic language to relate her experience, not to hide the reality of the camps through images or to enhance it through dramatisation, but in order to touch the reader by appealing to his or her senses so that he or she becomes part of the vision presented, participates in it, is engulfed by it and does not remain an outsider" (*A Literary Analysis* 34). The mannequins are borrowed from Delbo's own childhood memory of a sudden feeling of unreality. While this image is imposed on the text, the metaphor of mannequins does not disturb the text by pointing uselessly to a literary realm. These elements combined with an elegant but simple style of French used in a straight-forward way combine to create an atmosphere where the reader can penetrate the feeling of presence at the event.

To understand the way the metaphor functions, we need to define it and proceed to reasons authors may choose to insert such into their texts. Metaphors stand in sharp contrast to symbols, because the latter rely on presence in a text. A symbol forms from something in the text that is first itself and then, through the process of narrative, gathers explicit or implicit associations. For this reason, symbol does not seem to be as mistrusted in the realm of Holocaust scholarship as metaphor. Symbols are a way for an author to present something real and describe how it affected him or her. In Delbo's text, an example of a symbol is the stretcher. Used as a means of evacuating the dead, the stretcher comes to connote the public and undignified spectacle of death. In addition, a twisted irony attaches to this symbol because of both the writer's and the reader's expectations. Generally, people associate stretchers with medical help. We use them to move a wounded person from the place of an accident to a facility where that person can heal. In Auschwitz, the stretcher takes on the macabre role of facilitating the destruction of humans, since it aids in moving corpses for incineration in the crematoria. Its use, therefore, represents a sick irony to those incarcerated in the camp – and now to the reader through its presence as symbol. At morning roll call, Delbo finds herself desiring death. However, this wish is quashed by the sight of the dead being brought out on small stretchers: "Hallucinatory processions pass by. They are the bodies of the women who died in the night that are being brought out of the infirmary to be taken to the morgue. They are naked on stretchers made of roughly assembled branches, stretchers that are too short. The legs -- the shins -- hang over with their feet at the end, skinny and naked. The head hangs from the other side, bony and shaved. A ragged cover is thrown over the middle" ("Il passe d'hallucinants cortèges. Ce sont les mortes de la nuit qu'on sort des revirs pour les porter à la morgue. Elles sont nues sur un brancard de branches grossièrement assemblées, un brancard trop court. Les jambes -- les tibias -- pendent avec les pieds au bout, maigres et nus. La tête pend de l'autre côté, osseuse et rasée. Une couverture en loques est jetée au

milieu" [108-09]). In this ritual, the corpse becomes no more than legs and head bobbing at the end of the ridiculous stretcher. There is no special ceremony for the dead, and the stretcher is merely an easy means of transportation of the body, not a way to show respect. The body is reduced to a useless object that needs removing so that others can take its place. It is this spectacle and lack of respect that cause Delbo to fight her desire to give in to death: "When the stretcher passes by, I tense up. I want to die but not pass on the little stretcher. ... Repugnance wins out. I don't want to pass on the little stretcher" ("Quand passe la civière, je me raidis. Je veux mourir mais pas passer sur la petite civière. ... La répugnance l'emporte. Je ne veux pas passer sur la petite civière" [109]). All of the absurdity and horror of death is concentrated into the image of the stretcher and Delbo's reaction to it communicates the surreal atmosphere of the camps to the reader.

Metaphor functions differently. Where the symbol depicts a real object that accumulates meanings and associations, metaphor bridges a gap in language and gives expression to something which has so far gone unuttered. In Holocaust fiction, some experiences cannot be easily said in everyday language because the referent does not exist in common society. This constitutes a gap in expression between the incomprehensible and the common world. In his work on metaphor, Karsten Harries described the nature of metaphors: "Metaphors speak of what remains absent. All metaphor that is more than an abbreviation for more proper speech gestures towards what transcends language. Thus metaphor implies lack" (82). Harries's description of the functioning of metaphor makes this device an excellent figure for Holocaust literature. The lack that Holocaust metaphor points to is that of language itself, of language's inability to give full expression to the horrific events witnessed and the effects on those who were present.

In "Les Mannequins" ("The Mannequins" but in Rosette C. Lamont's translation of the book, *Auschwitz and After*, it is translated as "The Dummies"), Delbo does not state this problem, but, rather, the first paragraphs point to the notion that she is trying to describe the impossible: a scene that is incomprehensible, even to those who can look. This five-page passage that describes a stack of cadavers is framed by an inducement to look at the beginning and an order not to look at the end. The verb *regarder* (look) is repeated in the imperative form five times during the first two pages. The scene that the women are meant to see is delayed by a long paragraph about fetching food. As the command to look is repeated, Delbo tells us the reaction of one of the women as she looks, but we do not know what she has seen: "'Oh!' Yvonne P. drops her spoon. She's no longer hungry" ("'Oh!' Yvonne P. laisse tomber sa cuiller. Elle n'a plus faim" [29]). Although we do not know what is there, we know that it leaves Yvonne P. speechless and has cut her appetite. Her reaction conveys to us that the scene (and the feeling it evokes) is one for which language is impossible. As the section continues, Delbo delays telling us what we are meant to see, talking around the subject and avoiding a description of the bodies themselves. Instead, she continues to tell us the usual reaction to the scene: "The barred window looks over the courtyard of block 25, a courtyard closed in by walls. There is a door that opens onto the camp, but if this door opens when you are walking by, quickly you run away, you get out of there, you don't try to see the door or what might be behind it. You run off. We, through the window, can see. We never turn our head that way" (Le carreau grillagé donne sur la cour du block 25, une cour fermée de murs. Il y a une porte qui ouvre dans le camp, mais si cette porte s'ouvre quand vous passez, vite vous courez, vous vous sauvez, vous ne cherchez à voir ni la porte ni ce qu'il peut y avoir derrière. Vous vous enfuyez. Nous, par le carreau, nous pouvons voir. Nous ne tournons jamais la tête de ce côté" [29]). Therefore, the reaction to block 25 is avoidance, physical flight, and averting of the eyes. Whatever is there, no one wants to look or even be present when it is possible to see. Addressing the reader with *vous*, Delbo permits us to avert our eyes and simultaneously she tells us that that we do exactly that when we refuse to face the atrocity she has known. When Delbo and her small group of companions look into the courtyard, the sight is unbelievable: "At first, we doubt what we see" ("D'abord, on doute de ce qu'on voit" [29]). The avoidance of seeing and doubt about what is there point to the need to communicate in some other way. Normal language cannot directly communicate what is seen and felt.

As metaphors serve communication, they also establish a community. Ted Cohen has written that the reason for metaphor is not cognitive (i.e., search for knowledge) or merely aesthetic: it is for the "achievement of intimacy." He outlines three stages in achieving metaphor: "(1) the speaker issues a kind of concealed invitation; (2) the hearer expends a special effort to accept the invitation; and (3) this transaction constitutes the acknowledgement of a community" (6). He summarizes his point by saying, "An appreciator of metaphor must do two things: he must realize that the expression is a metaphor, and he must figure out the point of the expression" (6). The reason, Cohen states is, that, "In general, and with some obvious qualifications, it must be true that all literal use of language is acces-



sible to all whose language it is. But a figurative use can be inaccessible to all but those who share information about one another's knowledge, beliefs, intentions, and attitudes" (7). In this process, Cohen declares that metaphors are similar to jokes which require the realization that it is a joke followed by the understanding of what makes it funny (8). Although he does not address the issue of nazi metaphors in his article, Cohen's work also provides an explanation for this thorny issue in Holocaust studies. He claims that jokes and metaphors not always for positive intimacy: "Do not, therefore, suppose that jokes are always for shared amusement, or metaphors are always for communal insight. Some of the most instructive examples will be ones in which intimacy is sought as a means to a lethal and one-sided effect" (10). In sum, adapting Cohen's theories to the Third Reich, we can conclude that the metaphors adopted by the nazis built a sort of community too, but one which called not only for exclusion of certain groups, but for the eradication of some.

Building a community through literature is an integral part of Delbo's poetic and the use of metaphor is one aspect of her central aim. Thatcher notes the importance of group in Delbo's work: "The importance of the group is translated in Delbo's writing by the use of the collective *nous*: she is speaking for all the women, or at least for a group; she is their representative and has no desire to be singled out" ("Charlotte Delbo's Voice" 45). Taken as a whole, Delbo's *œuvre* accomplishes what Thatcher describes in her book as the author's aim: "She believed that to testify through her writings was something she owed to her dead friends and the millions who had not returned." (*A Literary Analysis* 23) Speaking for the group was so important to Delbo that her writing stretched beyond her own experience. The third part of her trilogy contains the transcriptions of other women's experiences after their liberation. Delbo captured the different voices of women from her convoy and told their stories from the first person. In *Le Convoi du 24 janvier*, Delbo produced a work that is best described as a collective biography, amassing facts and details about the 230 women who made up her convoy to Auschwitz. Finally, *La Mémoire et les jours* moves beyond the experience of French concentration camp victims and portrays the stories of numerous victims of nazi Germany. As Thatcher has remarked in her article: "[Delbo] adopts deliberately that [point of view] of the victims" ("Charlotte Delbo's Voice" 43). In altering her voice and point of view deliberately, it is clear that Delbo aims to depict a larger circle of suffering, and her writing often displaces her own voice as if to underline that she is only one among a crowd of sufferers. On the one hand, this gesture is a nod to the millions who were affected by nazi Germany, but on the other, it de-emphasizes her role as protagonist. As Thatcher has noted in her article: "Delbo is at pains to stress that there are no heroines and certainly that she is not one" ("Charlotte Delbo's Voice" 45).

Uniting Harries's and Cohen's theories on metaphor, creating a metaphor not only fills a lack but also creates a community with the reader. The mannequins constitute a metaphor because they are not present in the context of Auschwitz. Delbo must look for them in another experience, that of the normal world. The lack or gap that they close is that of communication. Delbo seeks a meaningful way to give expression to the scene. Although she can describe bodies with words, the result will not convey the horror she and her comrades felt. She can tell us the reaction, but we cannot feel it. The metaphor helps to close that gap by providing us a way to share the experience. In Delbo's writing, metaphor provides a visual clue from the normal world that allows the viewer/reader to penetrate atrocity. In "Les Mannequins," after Delbo has postponed telling the reader what the women are meant to look at, she finally provides a description of the bodies: "You have to differentiate them from the snow. They fill up the courtyard. Naked. Stacked against each other. White, a bluish white against the snow. The heads are shaved, the pubic hairs straight, rigid. The corpses are frozen. White, with brown nails. The erect toes are ridiculous to see. A kind of terrible ridiculous" ("Il faut les distinguer de la neige. Il y en a plein la cour. Nus. Rangés les uns contre les autres. Blancs, d'un blanc qui fait bleuté sur la neige. Les têtes sont rasées, les poils du pubis droits, raides. Les cadavres sont gelés. Blancs avec les ongles marron. Les orteils dressés sont ridicules à voir. D'un ridicule terrible" [29]). It is a sight that is nearly impossible to imagine, that one does not want to imagine. It is not even until late in the description that Delbo mentions the word *cadavre* (corpse). She prefers to focus on the details of the scene, on the attributes of the bodies that resemble the snow they are lying in. As she moves through the description, it is clear that she is reproducing her own reaction and the slow realization that the objects in the courtyard are indeed cadavers.

An abrupt scene switch introduces the metaphor of the mannequins. Delbo does not tell us that she remembered the mannequins or that the bodies reminded her of the incident she describes. Without transition, she gives us a location and a situation: "Boulevard de Courttais in Montluçon. I was waiting for my father at the Nouvelles Galeries department store. It was summer, the sun was hot on the asphalt" ("Boulevard de Courttais, à Montluçon. J'attendais mon père aux Nouvelles Galeries.

C'était l'été, le soleil était chaud sur l'asphalte" [29]). In this shift, Delbo moves from Poland to France, from winter to summer, from a hostile environment where companions are one's family to a familial environment. The metaphor occurs in a normal environment which readers recognize and understand. In a scene which mimics one in Auschwitz where dead bodies are loaded onto trucks for their trip to the crematorium, Delbo describes the unloading of naked mannequins in front of the store where they are to be used. Unlike the situation in Auschwitz, the men take care of the mannequins, handling them like precious objects (29-30). As she observes the scene, Delbo feels disturbed (*troublée*) by the nudity of the mannequins: "I had often seen mannequins in the shop window, with their dresses, shoes and wigs, arms bent in a affected gesture. I had never thought that they might exist naked, without hair, outside the shop window, the electric light, their gesture. Discovering this gave me the same discomfort as seeing a dead body for the first time" ("J'avais souvent vu des mannequins dans la vitrine, avec leur robe, leurs souliers et leur perruque, leur bras plié dans un geste maniéré. Je n'avais jamais pensé qu'ils existaient nus, sans cheveux, en dehors de la vitrine, de la lumière électrique, de leur geste. Le découvrir me donnait le même malaise que de voir un mort pour la première fois" [30]). Delbo's emotion occurs because her expectations are ruptured. Instead of seeing the mannequins dressed and posed in their mimic of human beings, she is witness to their existence as thing, as an object to be manipulated. She completes her description with that of seeing a dead person for the first time, again underlining the expectation and desire of seeing humans alive and in control, endowed with human agency.

The mention of death immediately completes the process of metaphor and serves as a transition back to the camp. It is an incredible economy of text, just two paragraphs of the "normal world" inserted into the narrative of Auschwitz. Then, the reader must apply the metaphor to Auschwitz, where Delbo finds herself in winter with companions and no longer on the sunny summer street of Montluçon: "Now, the mannequins lie in the snow, bathed in the light of winter which reminds me of the sun on the asphalt" ("Maintenant les mannequins sont couchés dans la neige, baignés dans la clarté d'hiver qui me fait ressouvenir du soleil sur l'asphalte" [30]). The transition is like a slap, as abrupt as the one to "normalcy." Real human bodies have transformed into mannequins: naked bodies, shaved heads, frozen stiff in the Polish winter. The metaphor complete, we readers can imagine what Delbo saw. We can perceive the courtyard stacked with mannequins. Cohen's theory of intimacy bears out: Delbo has invited us to view the cadavers as department store mannequins; we readers expend an effort to join Delbo in her metaphor; as we share in Delbo's vision, we, author and readers, form a community.

The work of metaphor does not end with its establishment. At this stage, the metaphor is simply set up so that the reader understands the author's associations. Now, Delbo can use it as a shortcut. Each time she does so, she re-establishes an intimacy with the reader because we need to agree to remember the initial reference to the metaphor. We agree to recall with Delbo her horror at seeing the naked mannequins. In "Un jour" ("One Day"), Delbo describes a near-dead inmate: "Here is a dead person who comes forward toward her. Mannequin in a striped outfit" ("Voici une morte qui s'avance vers elle. Mannequin dans le vêtement rayé" [47]). Toward the end of the volume, in "Le Mannequin," she conveys the shock of seeing another body through the use of the mannequin metaphor: "On the other side of the road, there is a field where the SS go to train their dogs. We see them go their with their dogs on a leash, attached two by two. The SS that is walking in front is carrying a mannequin" ("De l'autre côté de la route, il y a un terrain où les SS vont dresser les chiens. On les voit s'y rendre avec leurs chiens qu'ils tiennent en laisse, attachés deux par deux. Le SS qui marche en tête porte un mannequin" [142]). She embellishes the metaphor by adding a reference to another lifeless object that resembles humans: "It's a big stuffed doll dressed like us" ("C'est une grande poupée de son habillée comme nous" [142]). Although Delbo's intention is to help us understand the horror of seeing dead humans, she chooses to do so through the surprise and disbelief that she felt. The dead humans do not appear to her -- nor to us -- as humans. They have become "things" to be manipulated. Although this attribution may appear disrespectful of the bodies, it is in fact true to the camp experience.

In "Les Mannequins," Delbo is not content merely to establish the metaphor. Once the visual image has been established, she removes the comfort of the distance allowed by the metaphor with a long reminder of the humanity of the corpses when they were living beings: "Those who lie there in the snow, those are our comrades from yesterday. Yesterday, they were standing at roll call. They formed rows of five. ... They went to work, they dragged themselves off to the marshes. Yesterday, they were hungry. They had lice, they scratched themselves" ("Celles qui sont couchées là dans la neige, ce sont nos camarades d'hier. Hier elles étaient debout à l'appel. Elles se tenaient cinq par cinq en rangs ... Elles partaient au travail, elles se traînaient vers les marais. Hier elles avaient faim. Elles

avaient des poux, elles se grattaient" [30]). She continues the enumeration of the activities of their horrendous lives and speculates on the causes of their deaths. In the switch from metaphorical to normal language, Delbo asks the reader to consider the process of atrocity and annihilation, the process of changing a living being into an object.

Throughout *Aucun de nous ne reviendra*, Delbo poses the problem of *seeing*. At the end of many sections, after describing the atrocity around her, she writes: "Try to look. Try to see what it's like" ("Essayez de regarder. Essayez pour voir" [137-39]). The lines are a provocation to the reader. They are a challenge to those who did not share her experiences to witness (vicariously) the destruction of humans in body and spirit. In the sections on the mannequins, she emphasizes the act of seeing through the repetition of her companions imperative of the verb *regarder*. Implicit in Delbo's emphasis on seeing is the horror of what is seen. Her discomfort at seeing the naked mannequins is in part due to the fact that it is a sight that should not be seen. One is meant to see mannequins in the store window, dressed and in a pose. Likewise, normal experience of death is far from that in the camps. Death is meant to be a private affair, in the home or at the hospital. Death happens with loved ones, family and friends. The body is not supposed to become an object devoid of its living attributes. In the concentration camp, however, death is a public spectacle. The inmates are constantly subjected to the sight of deformed bodies, people who died of starvation, overwork and illness. Anonymous, they are only objects of the gaze, a reminder of what might happen to each of the onlookers.

The insistence on seeing has also ethical implications. Fixing our eyes on horror may imply to us that we should have an appropriate reaction. Delbo and her companions, however, seem transfixed, and Delbo herself registers a lack of emotion as she gazes upon the bodies. As "Les Mannequins" comes to a close, a companion thinks that one of the cadavers has moved, casting doubt on the state of the bodies. The text imitates the reality, in which the women themselves do not know if anybody remains alive. Yvonne P., the companion who had lost her appetite, implores them not to look and asks why they look. However, her own eyes remain fixed on the corpse (32). It is clear that she would prefer not to know just as she cannot help but look at the horror. As another companion induces them to return to their soup, Delbo tells us that she can look but that in the atmosphere of horror she is unmoved: "I look too. I look at that corpse that moves and has no affect on me. Now I'm big. I can look at the naked mannequins without being afraid" ("Moi aussi je regarde. Je regarde ce cadavre qui bouge et qui m'est insensible. Maintenant je suis grande. Je peux regarder des mannequins nus sans avoir peur" [33]). The course of atrocity has led to an inability to feel anything in response to the bodies.

In Delbo's case, the metaphor works on two ends of the experience. First, it is the locus from which she as writer can draw an image that provides a distance and a framework for perceiving atrocity. Then, it becomes the means of conveying this experience to the reader. We understand Delbo's own distance and coping mechanism and we are allowed a distance and a comprehensible view of the experience. It may seem odd that distance would be desirable in literature. Generally, we praise works that erase the distance between reader and author's vision. We seek escape in the written pages and long for words that create the illusion of immediacy. In Holocaust fiction, however, the visions are often horrible and we cannot pretend that what is described is due to the author's personal vision. Holocaust literature, even fiction, always has a referent in the real world.

Accepting the use of figurative language means realizing that an unmediated view of events is impossible in any literature, even Holocaust memoirs. In his preface to *Holocaust Testimonies*, Langer proclaims that interviewing survivors accomplishes an unmediated view of events: "Nothing, however, distracts us from the immediacy and the intimacy of conducting interviews with former victims (which I have done) or watching them on screen" (xii). I would argue that even then we are witnesses to memory and a traumatized psyche, but we are no closer to the event. We must not mistake being present at the inception of narrative with being present at the event being narrated. Harries would perhaps fault Langer's ideal. He claims that metaphor is a reminder that the reader cannot reach an unmediated account of events: "The refusal of metaphor is inseparably connected with the project of pride, the dream of an unmediated vision, a vision that is not marred by lack, that does not refer to something beyond itself that would fulfill it" (82).

Reevaluating our view of and accepting figurative language would mean changing our expectations of Holocaust literature. Young has critiqued these expectations which he describes as the search for fact: "writers and readers of Holocaust narrative have long insisted that it literally deliver documentary evidence of specific events, that it come not to stand for the destruction or merely point toward it, but that it be received as testimonial *proof* of the events it embodies" ("Interpreting Literary Testimony" 403; emphasis in the original). Rather than turn to Holocaust works for evidence, Young declares that



we should simply seek knowledge within them: "even if narrative cannot document events or even constitute perfect *factual*ity, it can document the *actual*ity of writer and text" ("Interpreting Literary Testimony" 420; emphasis in the original). As we see in Delbo's narrative, figurative language is a way of achieving "actual"ity."

In *Figures II*, Gérard Genette addresses the issue of immediacy in literature more generally. He describes figures as being words or expressions whose connotative and denotative meanings within the text do not cancel each other out. Instead, the combination adds another meaning: the figure says that it is poetry (141). In Holocaust works, figurative language not only indicates that we are in a literary realm, it also provides the trace of a scar in the poet's psyche, brought on by cohabitation with annihilation of spirit and body. For readers, figures indicate an attempt on the part of the author to communicate that scar, that death, that destruction. Along with the symbol of the stretcher, the metaphor of mannequins is a way of building community with the reader. Delbo asks the reader to understand the meaning of the stretcher, to accept her vision and her repugnance and to gaze upon the horrifying spectacle of corpses: "Try to look" ("Essayez de regarder"), she challenges us, "Try and see what it's like" ("Essayez pour voir"). And she is, literarily, beside us, helping us see through her words.

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