After Auschwitz

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In their edited volume, *The Sociology of Sacred Texts*, Jon Davies and Isabel Wollaston suggest two crucial questions for interrogating cultural artefacts: First, taking 'the given text as the basic datum and object of analysis' the researcher must decide what the text is.[1] Usually this means establishing the earliest version of the text and identifying subsequent amendments, elisions and alterations. Second, the researcher wants to know *who* the text is: 'What are the social relations of production which . . . lie behind, or give rise to' the text?'[2]

I propose this as a start point because, before challenging either the notion of 'after Auschwitz' or any of the 'dicta' which have become associated with it, we need to decide *what* we are after and *who* created this. Given the highly contested nature of Auschwitz as site or symbol, we must at least try to understand how this contest has arisen.

So, what are we after? Answers to this question come in two basic varieties: First, the historical reality of 'KL Auschwitz'; second, the symbol Auschwitz has become. Deciding where one ends and the other begins is problematic as, to coin a phrase, Auschwitz came by its significance honestly: it *was* the single largest and most developed killing centre in World War II (at least in Europe) and, even by the most conservative estimates, the site of one-sixth of the deaths in what has come to be known as the Holocaust.

But the history of Auschwitz is not simply the history of the Holocaust. As Robert Jan van Pelt has observed, Auschwitz had a myriad of functions, which at times overlapped, at times ran at cross purposes, and at still other times reinforced each other. Van Pelt has identified ten functions and their approximate duration, presented here in table form.

	1940				1941				1942				1943				1944				1945			
A concentration camp to serve local German security needs			■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■			
A production site for gravel and sand			■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■				
An execution site for the Gestapo Summary Court in Kattowitz			■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■				
An experimental farm			■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■			
A forced labour pool for the construction of the IG Farben plant in Monowitz							■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■			
A forced labour pool for the construction of an IG Farben company town							■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■								
An execution site for certain categories of Soviet prisoners							■	■	■	■	■	■	■											
A selection and extermination site for Jews									■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■				
A forced labour pool for various German factories built in the region									■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■			
A transfer station for Jews selected for work in the Reich																	■	■	■	■				

'Functions of Auschwitz'. Devised by author on the basis of Robert Jan van Pelt's expert report for 'David Cawdell Irving vs. Deborah Lipstadt and Penguin Books'.

Even the most cursory glance is enough to justify confusion. Partly this stems from the complexity of Auschwitz itself, and partly from the 'artificial and ahistorical' tendency identified by Nikolaus Wachsmann to refer to 'the' concentration camp' as though the plethora of institutions

[1] J. Davies & I. Wollaston, 'Introduction', in J. Davies & I. Wollaston (eds.), *The Sociology of Sacred Texts* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), p. 15.
[2] Ibid, p. 15.

encompassed by the term can be easily reduced to a single theoretical construct.[3] As Wachsmann makes clear, while the histories of individual camps can be viewed and analysed together, any general conclusions must be tempered with the awareness that the experiences of particular groups within individual camps differed greatly, and that the development of each camp was to an extent independent of the general trend.

Further, Wachsmann also alludes to a particular problem of Auschwitz: namely that, while it cannot be understood without reference to the system of which it was a part, it also, in the public imagination, eclipses all other camps. He suggests that this is because 'everything was more extreme in Auschwitz: nowhere else did so many prisoners die; and no camp held more prisoners'.[4]

And van Pelt's list, it should be emphasised, is not complete. It excludes the extermination of approximately 20,000 Sinti and Roma, and fractures the (non-Jewish) Polish experience of Auschwitz into its constituent parts in the first five rows. In addition, as van Pelt acknowledges, this 'often labyrinthine context' is further complicated by the 'intentional camouflage of certain aspects of the camp's history during the war and the wilful destruction of archival and other materials at the end of the war'.[5]

This is further complicated by geography. Visitors to the museum are presented with a neat 'Auschwitz' consisting of Auschwitz I, the original concentration camp, and Birkenau, where most of the extermination took place. In fact, the 'Auschwitz' we visit today is a highly edited version of the original complex. At its greatest extent, 'KL Auschwitz' consisted of three main camps: Auschwitz I, which was the administrative centre; Auschwitz II-Birkenau, the site of the major extermination facilities; and Auschwitz III-Monowitz which, in addition to a small camp to build the adjoining chemical factory, also administered a network of thirty-five sub-camps, as well as five agricultural 'branch camps' within the forty square-kilometre 'area of interest' shown here. The most distant camp in the Auschwitz camp was the factory owned by Oskar Schindler outside Brno in what is now the Czech Republic. The reality could not be fully memorialised without creating a scar across Europe, let alone Poland.

When we visit the site today, we are confronted with a necessary compromise between now and then, which is further complicated by the imagination of the visitors. As Jonathan Webber has written, many people come to Auschwitz expecting that 'to the extent that Auschwitz [exists] in real physical space, it [is] little more than a desolate, silent and lonely field somewhere in Poland, where tall grasses swaying in the wind [have] now come up to cover their appalling guilty secret'.[6] In fact, as visitors discover, much of the site is either intact or restored to some extent: many visitors are surprised by the apparent completeness of the site. But here the question of *who* the text is becomes important. Auschwitz since 1945 has been 'rewritten' to fit two principal narratives, which have frequently been seen as conflicting.

The most obvious narrative – from a Western European perspective – is that of the Holocaust. Approximately 1.1 million Jews were deported to Auschwitz, and the vast majority of them were killed immediately on arrival. In the words of van Pelt, 'If you would draw a map of human suffering, if you create a geography of atrocities, this would be the absolute centre.'[7]

It is the Holocaust that supplied the site with the objects that stick in the minds of most visitors: the belongings of those who were deported to Auschwitz and their very bodies plundered for the enrichment of their murderers. Glasses, shoes, suitcases; even two tons of human hair found after the war to contain traces of cyanide: this was shaved off the corpses of the victims and spun into cloth. The rest of the bodies, visible for miles around, formed columns of fire by night and smoke by day. The ground records this: smoke knows no fences, spreads beyond the strictest confines. The ashes and bones still flow through the rivers; they can still be found just below the grass. The

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[3] N. Wachsmann, 'The dynamics of destruction: the development of the concentration camps, 1933-1945', in J. Caplan & N. Wachsmann (eds.), *Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany: The New Histories* (Oxford: Routledge, 2010), p. 17.
[4] Ibid, p. 31.
[5] R. van Pelt, 'The van Pelt Report', quoted in J. Ashworth, 'Auschwitz Past and Present', Galicia Jewish Museum, Krakow, (27 July, 2004), p. 2. For the 'full version' of van Pelt's thinking, see van Pelt, *The Case for Auschwitz: Evidence from the Irving Trial* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).
[6] J. Webber, 'The Future of Auschwitz: Some Personal Reflections', in Religion, State and Society (20) 1 (Oxford: Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies, 1992), p. 82.
[7] van Pelt, quoted in D. Guttenplan, *The Holocaust on Trial: History, Justice and the David Irving Trial* (London: Granta Books, 2001), p. 150.

words of the Bible, 'The voice of the blood of your brother Cain calls to me from the earth,' can be applied here with awful literalness.

This narrative of Auschwitz is common currency. Through testimony, museums, films, television programmes, or memorial days, Auschwitz is engraved onto European consciousness as the centre of the Holocaust, the endpoint of a thousand years of Jewish history in Europe. Czesław Miłosz praised Thomas Mann for seeing *Heart of Darkness* as 'inaugurating the twentieth century': 'Europeans had for a long time been hiding certain horrors in their colonial backyard, until they were visited by them with a vengeance.'[8] Just fifty miles south-west of where Joseph Conrad spent his childhood, we find the heart of our own darkness.

But Auschwitz is also the site and, crucially, in its guise as museum, the product of more local memories. Approximately 70,000 non-Jewish Poles died there between 1940 and 1945: Auschwitz is also their largest cemetery. What the Polish Exhibition in Auschwitz I terms 'the struggle and martyrdom of the Polish nation', took place here, too. And, after the war, it was the Polish survivors who chose to ensure that the site was preserved, and the Polish government which took financial responsibility for that preservation. The manner in which they did this has been the subject of fierce debate. It has been argued that they raised the narrative of Polish suffering to an undue prominence and minimised the ordeal of European Jewry, relegating it to the secondary status of 'citizens of occupied nations', without acknowledging that the reason many from France, or Holland, or Italy, found themselves in Auschwitz had nothing to do with their citizenship and everything to do with their racial status in the Third Reich as Jews. It has been alleged that they appropriated symbols and meanings of the site in an effort to enhance their status as 'Christ among Nations' – a deeply offensive message to some Jews who see the crimes at Auschwitz as (at least in part) the crimes of Christianity.

In fairness, some conflation of narratives did take place. Janusz Wieczorek, the Chairman of the Council for the Preservation of Monuments to Resistance and Martyrdom, did refer, in a guidebook published in 1968 (as Poland was expelling the majority of those Jews who had stayed after World War II), to the 'six million victims – men, women and children – martyred, murdered by the Nazis', as 'the price, paid by the Polish nation for its love of country and of liberty'.[9] Jewish voices have pointed out that the record of Polish treatment of Polish Jews before, during, and after the war makes such conflation at best disingenuous and at worst mendacious.

It must be pointed out that, as time has gone on, more and more Polish voices have made similar calls: first in a tone of reluctant contrition and then in more explicit apology. To paraphrase Jan Błoński (himself paraphrasing Czesław Miłosz), the poor Poles have looked at the ghetto and, for the most part, acknowledged that their suffering, while great, did not match that of the Jews. Further, they have, in the wake of the controversy surrounding Jan Gross's book, *Neighbours*, begun to acknowledge that as well as being bystanders or fellow victims, they took their turn as perpetrators as well.[10]

I worry, though, that this process goes too far and results, in part, from a misunderstanding of how the text of Auschwitz was in fact written after the war. The official formula to describe the victims was indeed 'four million citizens from the occupied countries of Europe', committing the sin of conflation. In the museum, however, this was rendered as 'twenty-eight nationalities' – using the Polish word *narodowość* (indicating cultural belonging) as opposed to *obywatelstwo* (indicating

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[8] C. Milosz, *The Witness of Poetry: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures 1981-82* (London: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 51. I have followed the peculiarities of individual publishers in the reproduction (or not) of diacritics in Miłosz's name.

[9] J. Wieczorek, 'Foreword to the First Edition' in Council for the Preservation of Monuments to Resistance and Martyrdom, *Scenes of Fighting and Martyrdom Guide: War Years in Poland 1939-1945* (Warsaw: Sport i Turystyka, 1968), p. 9.

[10] J. Błoński, 'The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto' in J. Kott (ed.), *Four Decades of Polish Essays* (Evanston Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1990), pp. 222-235. The article was originally published in *Polin: A Journal of Polish-Jewish Studies, Volume* 2 (1987). Błoński is paraphrasing the title of Miłosz's 1943 poem, 'A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto', to be found in a variety of anthologies. The literature on Polish-Jewish relations is vast and complex, but A. Polonsky, *Polish-Jewish Relations since 1984: Reflections of a Participant* (Krakow: Austeria, 2009) is a useful introduction. The volume edited by Polonsky and Michlic, *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004) is a good compendium of primary and secondary material relating to the issues raised by J. T. Gross, *Neighbours: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland, 1941* (London: Arrow, 2003) [Initially published in Polish in 2000].

citizenship). The museum authorities, in this period predominantly survivors of the camp, were not interested in concealing the nature of what had taken place in Auschwitz. Kazimierz Smoleń, a non-Jewish survivor of four and a half years in the camp and author of the permanent exhibition, and Director of the museum between 1955 and 1990, said at the outset of his exhibition scenario that the murder of the Jews was the central event in the camp and the one that the museum was most bound to remember.[11]

The museum did, however, have to accommodate itself to a communist regime which preferred to erase *narodowość* in favour of anti-fascist citizenship. The friendship between Smoleń and Józef Cyrankiewicz, another Auschwitz survivor and Prime Minister of Poland between 1954 and 1970, meant that the museum could take liberties with the official narrative.

The official 'Polish narrative' of Auschwitz was, in fact, dismissive of many of the most important strains of Polish memory of the site: the communist authorities were never comfortable with the canonisation of Maximilian Kolbe by John Paul II, whose 1979 sermon praising Kolbe's 'victory of faith and love' is best seen as a call to Polish society to throw off communist rule rather than an attempt to 'Christianise' Auschwitz. John Paul II drew attention to the inscription in Hebrew on the Birkenau Memorial, noting that no-one could pass by this stone with indifference, because 'the very people who received from God the commandment "thou shalt not kill" itself experienced in a very particular way what is meant by killing'.[12]

To those listening, who lived among the ruins of Jewish civilisation in Poland as part of their everyday lives, no more needed to be said. The hole left in Polish society by the years 1939 to 1945 is not just the outline of a *mezuzah* in doorposts, but the awareness in Poland that a vital part of what the society had been – should be now – was and is no more. Further, the awareness that, however they pointed to those who saved Jews (more than anywhere else in Europe, notwithstanding a cruel occupation), fundamentally Polish society had connived with the occupier and left a defensiveness which forty-five years of communist rule did nothing to defuse. It is important to remember that Rapoport's memorial to the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was erected in 1947, though the museum commemorating the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 did not open until sixty years later, in 2004.

Outside Birkenau, the plaques erected by the town to the villages razed to the ground – their bricks used to build barracks in Birkenau – remind us (or at least should remind us) that Auschwitz was not created out of nothing, nor is the country in which it now exists merely a blank canvas for atrocity. We have to remember, in the words of Wladyslaw Broniewski, that, 'On [this] land/ [were] millions of graves/ through [this] land/ came the fire/ through this land/ came misfortune/ on [this] land/ was Auschwitz.'[13]

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[11] K. Smoleń, *Scenariusz wystawwy stalej Państwowego Muzeum w Oświęcimiu* (1954), Auschwitz Museum Archives, ref. S/Smoleń/6.

[12] John Paul II, 'In the concentration camp at Oswiecim (Auschwitz)', in *Return to Poland: The Collected Speeches of John Paul II* (London: Collins, 1979), pp. 124-129. It should be noted that the homily was actually given in Birkenau, and that the conflation of Auschwitz and Birkenau was seen as provocative – though it should equally be pointed out that Jewish inmates were held in Auschwitz I just as civilians, deported from Warsaw after the failed 1944 uprising, were held in Birkenau.

[13] Author's translation of fragment of Broniewski's poem 'A Word about Stalin' (1949), as displayed in Block 15, Auschwitz I. An alternative translation by June Friedman of a slightly longer fragment can be found in A. Zych (ed.), *The Auschwitz Poems: An Anthology* (Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Oswiecim 1999), p. 79. Although all questions of translation are fundamentally subjective since the gap between original and target language will never entirely be closed, I question Friedman's translation as lacking something of the original. Though, it should also be noted that I have followed her in translating 'Oświęcim' into 'Auschwitz', a change which arguably obscures the specifically Polish memory central to the poem.

Auschwitz I, Block 15: 'The Struggle and Martyrdom of the Polish Nation'. Photograph - Author 2009

Broniewski's verse, of course, does more than complicate the Polish experience of Auschwitz: it opens the can of worms marked 'Adorno' and the German philosopher's putative 'dictum' that states, 'It is barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz.' I am not going to address the point made elsewhere that this is not actually what Adorno said; my concern is the body of work that attempts to adhere to it.[14] First, there is the cheap debating point: it does more justice to Adorno to understand 'Auschwitz' here as signifying what Auschwitz *meant* as a symbol of the depths to which humanity had sunk. In short, in the dictum prohibiting poetry, the word, 'Auschwitz', is itself used poetically to stand for more than what Auschwitz was. This alone is sufficient to suggest that Adorno's later retraction of the comment is worthier of our attention. But even if we took Adorno as meaning 'Auschwitz', I hope that I have made clear the complexities contained within that word. There is no convenient master narrative for what Auschwitz was: as van Pelt makes clear, the exercise of identifying narratives as separate is futile, since they overlapped and contradicted each other. Therefore, we have to find a way of comprehending the whole.

But this, of course, is impossible, since the most important parts of what Auschwitz was are incomprehensible. I have spoken elsewhere of the Attorney Perl in Amir Gutfruend's novel, *Our Holocaust*, who rejects the narrator's suggestion that the Holocaust is incomprehensible. Not at all, responds the survivor:

> People were as they are today. Everything worked according to the regular rules. It was not a different world. It was our world, familiar and examined. My Laura came to Belzec on a train whose travel time was precisely the distance of the route divided by its average speed. The gas in the chambers behaved according to the laws of gas formulated by the chemist Avogadro. The engine output determined the speed at which the gas diffused through the given volume of the chambers. And from there, physiology. The duration of time until death was determined by certain parameters: the ratio of gas to air, lung supply, the rate of metabolism in the body. Even Laura's final seconds, inside, can be described. Everything she went through during her final breaths. Doctors and experts have helped me to understand. And I talked with a survivor from the Sonderkommando who was somehow saved from death. His job was to clean the excrement and blood from the gas chambers. He described, at my request, everything he saw inside the chambers themselves. So you see, I know everything. I can go on with her until the last moment.[15]

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[14] K. Hofman, 'Poetry after Auschwitz – Adorno's Dictum', in *German Life and Letters*, 58 (2) (April 2005) is an excellent summary of the problems attending the mistranslation of Adorno, though he avoids considering whether, fifty years later, the damage is undoable.

[15] A. Gutfreund (trans. J. Cohen), *Our Holocaust* (New Milford: The Toby Press, 2006), pp. 157-158.

But he cannot because he did not. And if he could, he would not be here. As Primo Levi wrote, the survivors are 'an anomalous minority', the few saved in comparison to the scores drowned. 'They are the rule,' he wrote shortly before he killed himself, 'we are the exception.'[16] All of his fellow writers about their experiences in Auschwitz came up against this and other barriers to expression. All questioned whether there was anything after Auschwitz, or whether all that they truly were had remained in the camps.

In the face of this sort of dilemma – in the knowledge that we will never truly be after Auschwitz, since its meaning is always unfolding, as each generation tries and fails to make sense of it – poetry is not just permissible: it is required. Webber described the process of rewriting the inscription on the Birkenau Monument in the early 1990s as the creation of a 'vernacular sacred text'[17] which had to 'compress reference to all the different groups of victims within the space of a single inscription'.[18] He realised that in the final analysis the meanings the International Auschwitz Committee was being asked to supply were 'not empirical, but symbolic'.[19] In supplying symbolic meaning, the empirical will always fail, for who can comprehend the ineffable in concrete terms?

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[16] P. Levi (trans. R. Rosenthal), *The Drowned and the Saved* (Abacus: London, 1989), p. 64.
[17] Webber, 'Creating a New Inscription for the Memorial at Auschwitz-Birkenau: A Short Chapter in the Mythologisation of the Holocaust', in J. Davies & I. Wollaston (eds.), *The Sociology of Sacred Texts*, p. 45.
[18] Ibid, p. 47.
[19] Ibid, p. 58.