Auschwitz Past and Present

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This lecture is different from the others in this series. The others have concentrated on either the centuries of Jewish life in Poland before the Holocaust, or the traces of that life. As today, however, is Tisha B'Av, on which Jews remember the destruction of the First and Second Temples, it was felt that such a theme would not be appropriate: rather, we should focus on the fact of destruction, on the process of that destruction.

Although Auschwitz was not the only site of the Holocaust, it was the single largest extermination site. It is today the symbolic centre of the Holocaust. Robert Jan van Pelt has said of Crematorium II: "in the 2,500 square feet of this one room, more people lost their lives here than in any other place on this planet. Five hundred thousand people were killed. If you would draw a map of human suffering, if you create a geography of atrocities, this would be the absolute centre."[1] He has also pointed out "the typological relationship between the Holy of Holies in Solomon's Temple, a forbidden place where a man could attain knowledge at the price of his life, and the gas chamber of Auschwitz, a place forever inaccessible to our knowledge and, perhaps more important, imagination."[2]

So on this day of remembered destruction it is fitting to focus on Auschwitz. But here we are already in difficulties. Which Auschwitz are we talking about? The title of this lecture gives away that we mean at least two things. The Auschwitz of the past – the concentration camp and extermination centre – and Auschwitz of the present, meaning the museum that exists today on the site of some parts of the former camp.

But this, in turn, returns to the nature of the festival in Judaism, both ritual and reenactment, both past and present. Lionel Kochan has pointed out the flexible duality in Jewish festivals: "a dramatic representation of the unique, whereby the past is acknowledged as past, but not for that reason to be distinguished from the present."[3] Jonathan Webber has similarly noted that "The liturgy naturally refers to the pastness of the event, but that pastness is not relevant or not supposed to be relevant for the participants in the ritual."[4]

Tisha B'Av remembers five specific disasters in Jewish history: the news to those in the wilderness that they would not enter Israel; the destruction of the first Temple; the destruction of the second Temple; the taking of the fortress of Betar; the ploughing over of Jerusalem after the war against Hadrian. But it is broadened to recall all disasters. In the same way, Auschwitz today remembers not only the history of that site, but also its present

[1] The words were spoken by van Pelt in his commentary to Errol Morris's film *Mr. Death* (2000), about the work of Fred Leuchter, a Holocaust denier and author of a report claiming to prove the falsification of the data about the gas chambers. The citation in this case is taken from Guttenplan, D.D., *The Holocaust on Trial: History, Justice and the David Irving Trial*, Granta Books 2001, p.150. A slightly different text was cited by David Irving during the trial and can be found in the transcript of Day 9, available at www.holocaustdenialontrial.com.
[2] Van Pelt, Robert Jan, *The Case for Auschwitz: Evidence from the Irving Trial*, Indiana University Press 2002, p.67.
[3] Kochan, Lionel, *Beyond the Graven Image: A Jewish View*, New York University Press 1997, p.90.
[4] Webber, Jonathan, 'The Memorable, The Measurable, and a Good Sense of Timing: Jewish Systems of Chronology and Periodisation' , paper given at the 19th International Congress of Historical Sciences, Oslo 6-13 August 2000, available at www.oslo2000.uio.no

significance: it is also broadened, to mean the whole of the Holocaust, all its victims, even all of man's crimes in the twentieth century. "After Auschwitz" is a phrase with many meanings.

But can we say that we are "after Auschwitz"? It is vital to remember that, in the words of Michael Burleigh, for many people;

> Nazism is not a matter of academic contemplation; but rather something which explains why they have no relatives or children; why they are chronically ill or have severe psychological problems; or why they live in Britain, Canada, Israel or the USA rather than Central Europe.[5]

The very impossibility of 'historicising' Auschwitz does not, however, free us from the obligation to maintain academic rigour. Rather, it is therefore incumbent on us to cultivate as precise a sense as possible of how the Auschwitz of today matches to the Auschwitz of the past. To do justice to the present we must be scrupulous in our dealings with the past. Before turning to this in more detail, however, I would like to return to some other words of Robert Jan van Pelt, from his expert report for Penguin Books, warning of the complexity of this site.

> A historian who makes any judgement about any aspect of the history of Auschwitz must take into account an often labyrinthine context, which is made even more difficult to negotiate because of 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.[6]

What follows, therefore, is complex: in so important a site it cannot – or at least should not – be otherwise. It is this complexity, in fact, and the need to remember the entirety of that complex history, that is my purpose to communicate this evening.

Auschwitz historically was not one or even two camps, but a complex of three main camps located in and around the Polish town of Oświęcim (renamed Auschwitz following its annexation into the Third Reich in 1939), along with a further five agricultural 'branch camps' within a forty square kilometer 'area of interest', and thirty-five sub-camps, mainly in industrial sites in the surrounding region of Silesia. The furthest extent of the Auschwitz complex was the factory owned by Oskar Schindler near what is now Brno in the Czech Republic.

What we see today, therefore, when we go to Auschwitz, is not the entirety of the historical site but an edited version of the two major sites in the complex of camps, a necessary compromise, as remembrance always compromises between now and then. Auschwitz I, essentially a prison camp, which now houses the exhibitions, museum administration, and most of the tourist infrastructure: and Birkenau – the camp where most of the extermination took place. Does this editing matter? Primo Levi thought so. In response to a question from a reader about whether he had visited the site since the war, he wrote the following.

> I didn't feel much of anything when I visited the central Camp. The Polish government has transformed it into a kind of national monument. The huts have been cleaned and painted, trees have been planted and flowerbeds laid out. There is a museum in which pitiful relics are displayed: tons of human hair, hundreds of thousands of eyeglasses, combs, shaving brushes, dolls, baby shoes, but it remains just a museum – something static, rearranged contrived. To me, the entire camp seemed a museum. As for my own camp, it no longer exists.[7]

Although he confessed to "a feeling of violent anguish" when he went to Birkenau, his statement that "As for my own camp, it no longer exists" is fundamental. His anguish in Birkenau, where "the blocks of huts (those that weren't burned when the Front reached and passed this area) have remained as they were" was genuine and yet avoided the fact that the camp, even in 1965, had been subjected to conservation, repair and depredation that fundamentally altered the fabric of the site. The barracks of Birkenau were used for a variety of purposes early

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[5] Burleigh, Michael, 'Introduction' to Burleigh, Michael (ed.) *Confronting the Nazi Past: New Debates on Modern German History*, Collins & Brown 1996, p.3.

[6] Cited in Ashworth, Jaime, *The Iconography of Destruction: A Historical Portrait of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum* ,MA Thesis, Jagiellonian University Centre for European Studies, 2001, p.16. Original report available at www.holocaustdenialontrial.com

[7] Levi, Primo (trans. Stuart Woolf), *If This is a Man/The Truce*, Abacus 1987, p.389-390.

in the postwar period, when both building materials and housing were in short supply in Poland: the vista of chimneys that confounds the present visitor is only partially due to wartime damage[8].

Finally, one has to recognize that Birkenau was not Levi's own camp – and the Monowitz camp was razed to the ground. The chemical factory for which it provided labour was left standing and, with new machinery, became the principal employer in postwar Oświęcim. This process of editing began with the very liberation of the camp as approximately 7,000 survivors were gathered in Auschwitz I to be given medical care and, in many cases, to die, in the Auschwitz site if not in the Auschwitz camp. The gap between past and present had, even then, opened a little. Time, as always, moved forward, leaving parts of itself behind.

Nowhere is this more evident than standing by Crematorium II in Birkenau. Today the building is in ruins, and expert knowledge is required to truly reconstruct in one's mind the almost casual perfection of the killing machine it was. For many the past is only available through the present – through the documents carefully reproduced at the site, through the exacting commentary of the Museum guides, through the model to be found in Block 4 of Auschwitz I[9]. To know the site more directly one must either be a survivor – less and less likely – or possibly an expert able to directly integrate the vast evidence which builds to tell us of the atrocity committed here. Otherwise, one must adopt an attitude of reverent curiosity which, as with a question asked on a festival, partially stores the answer. As Kochan points out, a monument "requires to be decoded before it can speak at all. It is so dumb that the spectator must himself bring to the monument its message."[10]

We need to recognize that it is false to speak of "Auschwitz past" as though it were possible to reclaim it. We need to consider our sources. Shoshana Rosen has said about journeys to Poland by Israelis that "the narrator is not an ignorant traveler going to a place he does not know anything about, or to a place he has not seen before."[11] Any traveler to Poland or Auschwitz comes with intellectual baggage, acquired consciously or unconsciously, which needs to be addressed. This evening, I want to discuss some of that baggage, specifically the images which structure many people's expectations and understandings of the site, and create a peculiar relationship, again, between past and present.

The photograph is a record of a past present. As Susan Sontag has written, there is a "presumption of veracity that gives all photographs authority, interest, seductiveness"[12]; they are "a trace, something directly stenciled off the real."[13] When we see photographs of an event, we know that it has occurred – or at least that something has. As Roland Barthes wrote: "[the photograph] establishes not a consciousness of the *being-there* of the thing… but an awareness of its *having-been-there*."[14] On one level, people come to Auschwitz today to reassure themselves that the event they know through books and photographs had a basis in a concrete reality: that "it happened there"[15] in all senses. One strategy they employ for this is to take photographs of objects they have already seen in the past (in both senses). As Marjorie Perloff has noted in reference to tourist activity in Venice "[they] think they are taking 'authentic' photographs of this or that place, [but] are actually recognizing the 'reality' through the lens of a set of clichés they have unconsciously absorbed."[16]

Gates are popular photographic targets, because of their central role in the camp structure. As Wolfgang Sofsky has written: "The gatehouse was a simple, functional structure, architecturally hardly worth an extra glance.

[8] For more detailed consideration of this issue, see Huener, Jonathan, *Auschwitz, Poland and the Politics of Commemoration, 1945-1979*, Ohio University Press 2003.
[9] By Mieczyslaw Stobierski, a Polish sculptor (and not a survivor of Auschwitz), who produced it for the Auschwitz Museum in the early 1950s. A copy can be seen in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C.
[10] Kochan, *Beyond the Graven Image*, p.79.
[11] Rosen, Shoshana, *In Pursuit of the Void: Journeys to Poland in Contemporary Israeli Literature. The 2000 Aleksander and Alicja Hertz Annual Memorial Lecture*, The Judaica Foundation-Center for Jewish Culture 2001, p.45.
[12] Sontag, Susan, *On Photography*, Penguin 1979, p.6
[13] ibid., p.154.
[14] Barthes, Roland, 'Rhetoric of the Image', in Wells, Liz (ed.) *The Photography Reader*, Routledge 2003, p.120.
[15] Webber, Jonathan, 'It Happened There: The Existence and Meaning of Historical Locations', presentation at The Stockholm International Conference on the Holocaust, Stockholm 26-28 January 2000, available at www.holocaustforum.gov.se
[16] Perloff, Marjorie, 'What Has Occurred Only Once: Barthes's Winter Garden/Boltanski's archives of the dead', in Wells, Liz (ed.) *The Photography Reader*, Routledge 2003, p.36.

And yet as a locus of social power it was the symbol of camp power, its squat monument."[17] The gate into Birkenau is one of the most easily recognizable symbols of Auschwitz and the Holocaust. One particular photograph, taken after liberation, is particularly powerful. Every summer, one can see tourists waiting patiently in front of this structure to take their lonely shot up the tracks into the camp.

And many are disappointed when they get home and find that the image they have recorded, while definitely an image of something they saw and touched, does not match the original they were working from in their minds. This is because this photograph is normally captioned 'the entrance to Auschwitz-Birkenau', though it was taken from inside the camp. There is therefore a curious reversal of Wolfgang Sofsky's argument about gates in the camps – that they were not places of linkage or interface, but "a sign of final and irrevocable inclusion."[18] Just as our knowledge of this site of death is garnered principally from those who survived, in our most famous picture of this gate from which so few returned, we look out of the camp.

The relationship between past and present is also confused in the visitor's desire to photograph this object. Between June 1940 and January 1945 from 1.1 to 1.5 million people died in Auschwitz, approximately ninety percent of them Jews. Most of them arrived in train transports, crammed into cattle cars in conditions that are certainly beyond me to describe. On Tisha B'Av 5702 [22 July 1942], a transport of Jews from Westerbork in Holland arrived.[19] But they did not come to this railway siding in Birkenau, which was not finished until almost two years later, in the spring of 1944. What happened then, however, became the symbol of all the transports, and again images are partly responsible.

On May 26, 1944, a transport arrived from Berehovo, in what is now Hungary and had been Rumania before 1919. The deportees were unloaded and sorted into two columns, four abreast, one of men and boys, the other of women and children. They advanced toward an SS doctor who, with a movement of his hand, indicated where they should go, to his left (to the gas chambers) or to his right (into the camp). This was, by the very abnormal standards of Auschwitz, normal procedure.

What was not typical on this day was that at least one, but probably two, SS men were on the ramp shooting the deportees not with guns, but with cameras. They recorded the unloading, selection and registration of the new arrivals. They recorded how most of them waited in a little wood in sight of Crematoria IV and V while they waited their turn to be gassed. In 1945, one of the deportees, Lilli Jacob, found the collection of photographs in Buchenwald and recognized her family and friends as she turned the pages. She returned to Prague with the album, distributed some photographs to families of those pictured, allowed some of the other photos to be copied, and left for Israel.

In 1956, two Czech researchers and survivors of Auschwitz, Otto Kraus and Erich Kulka, discovered the copies of the album in Prague and, on a visit to Poland, presented the Auschwitz Museum with some of the images, which were incorporated into the Museum's permanent exhibition opened the previous year. They were put in Room 3 of Block 4, intended to show the conditions in transports and the process of selection. They are still there, and are used throughout the Birkenau site to illustrate the terrible events that took place there. They are placed on black stone tablets, carefully sited as close as possible to where the images were taken. The feeling of being 'stenciled off the real' is thus palpable, as one sees the site now and then, as one matches the two together, as one occupies the same space as those in the photo, at the same time knowing that it is a very different space. Such a moment of temporal dissonance is a magnet for photographs and these pictures since their installation have become very visible objects in photographs of the site. The exhibition in this museum in fact uses such images.

The photographs of the photographs on the site, however, expose the artifice. We referred earlier to Lionel Kochan's description of time in the ritual as "a dramatic representation of the unique, whereby the past is acknowledged as past, but not for that reason to be distinguished from the present." In these photographs of photographs, the past is acknowledged as past, but all too clearly at the same time distinguished from the

[17] Sofsky, Wolfgang (trans. William Templer), *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp*, Princeton University Press 1997, p.61.
[18] ibid., p.64.
[19] Czech, Danuta, *Auschwitz Chronicle 1939-1945*, Owl Books 1997, p.201

present – we are aware of what Barthes called the "reality from which we are sheltered."[20] This is not to say that the installation does not work – it does – or that the photographs of it are not moving – they are. But photographs of photographs remind us that the installation is just that, an addition to the site, and highlight the difficulty of comprehending the past without the assistance of the present. As Kochan further writes:

> It must be inevitable that when the events of past time are retained in the memory of one generation and then transmitted to its successors through speech or even inscription, their emphasis and resonance will change. The commemorative act of these later generations will be subjective to their own condition, and therefore in a constant state of flux.[21]

Over time, these Jews from the RSHA transport from the Berehovo ghetto which arrived on May 26, 1944, have become symbols. Martin Gilbert reflected on this during a visit in 1996: "from this single day, so many different days, different circumstances, and even different camps, have been illustrated."[22] He also points out that this was only one of eight hundred days when similar events happened. In Auschwitz present we see only a fraction of Auschwitz past, and the realization that we can only do our best to match the two is perhaps the most appropriate possible memorial.

This is reinforced when one turns to the other gate that provides a focus for tourists, the gate inscribed *Arbeit Macht Frei*, three kilometers away in Auschwitz I. Debórah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt have criticized what they term the canonical status of this artifact.

> For the post-Auschwitz generation, that gate symbolizes the threshold that separates the human community from the Planet Auschwitz. It is a fixed point in our collective memory, and therefore the canonical beginning of the tour through the camp. In fact, however, the arch did not have a central position in the history of Auschwitz. It played no role in the Judeocide. Indeed, very few of the Jews deported to Auschwitz ever saw that gate.[23]

There are problems with this. It is true that by the end of the war the gate was a purely internal one – the main gate to the camp compound is the entrance to the present-day car park, which was to be the central assembly square of the fully developed camp. It is also true that the gate has been the starting point for tours of the Museum. But this is to miss several points.

Firstly, it is true that "very few of the Jews deported to Auschwitz ever saw that gate." But the vast majority of Jews deported to Auschwitz saw little more than Birkenau, the surrounding fields, and the gas chambers. Of those that remained to live in the camp as registered prisoners, many saw this gate and, along with their fellow-prisoners, marched through it twice a day, to and from work. The 'Judeocide' was not limited to the gas chambers of Birkenau. It was also the use of Jewish prisoners as slave labour, and Auschwitz was an exceptionally lethal place to be assigned to slave labour.

Hermann Langbein has noted that in late 1942 the death rate in Auschwitz per month was 20% and that this "does not include those who were gassed immediately."[24] He further points out that in February 1943 the death rate was 25.5% and that, following efforts by the Auschwitz resistance to change the policy of Auschwitz doctors – principally through Langbein's personal influence over Edward Wirths, the chief SS doctor – it dropped to 5.2% in May. This change was sufficient to quarter the overall death rate for the concentration camp system as a whole over the same period. To focus exclusively on the gas chambers is to forget this aspect of the horror: it is, in fact, to partially forget what the survivors went through. There were, after all, no survivors of the gas chamber.

Secondly, to equate the history of Auschwitz with the Judeocide is to write the other actors out of the story. As Dwork and van Pelt concede, "Auschwitz is the most significant memorial site of the Shoah, and it is also the

[20] Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the Image', p.120.
[21] Kochan, *Beyond the Graven Image*, p.89.
[22] Gilbert, Martin, *Holocaust Journey: Travelling in Search of the Past*, Phoenix 1997, p.
[23] Dwork, Debórah, and van Pelt, Robert Jan, *Auschwitz 1270 to the Present*, W.W. Norton and Co. 1996, p.360-361.
[24] Langbein, Hermann, *Against All Hope. Resistance in the Nazi Concentration Camps 1938-1945*, Continuum 2001, p.17.

most significant memorial site of Polish suffering under German rule."[25] The Poles who suffered in the camp were the founders of the Museum after the war: certainly they misremembered and misrepresented the past in some aspects, but they also maintained the site. There would be no present without them, we cannot forget their past.

Thirdly, a focus on the problems of one aspect of the historical compromise that is present-day Auschwitz is in danger of forgetting the huge compromises that have already been made. As mentioned earlier, 'Auschwitz' as a complex of camps would stretch across a substantial portion of Poland and the Czech Republic. While I absolutely support Dwork and van Pelt's emphasis on the maintenance of historical accuracy, one has to see that remembering Auschwitz is the art of the possible; the symbol in the present must necessarily stand for the whole in the past.

It is in that spirit one must understand the groups who pose for photographs beneath the inscription. They wish to superimpose their present life on the past, to show that the gate was not, after all, a sign of irrevocable inclusion. Remembering the destruction entails being alive to do so.

The barbed wire strung between concrete posts around the camps is another easily recognized and commonly-photographed symbol. Many visitors take photographs of this in a very particular spot which continues the theme of the conflict between past and present. Next to Crematorium I, the Museum has made a gap in the wire fence to make it possible to take groups directly to the crematorium. Statements by those who have followed the modern practice of placing their photos on the internet suggest that at least some of them take photos here to remember a moment which is shown in the film at the beginning of the tour, of children liberated in the camp being led between the wires by nurses.

The problem is twofold. First of all, the fence is itself a modern copy, new wire strung between original (through restored) posts. Secondly, the moment of the children's passage between the wires was staged for the cameras of the Red Army, as a symbol of their previous danger and subsequent safety. The tourist who takes this photograph is thus fusing the levels of representation in a memorial ritual – "the past is acknowledged as past, but not for that reason to be distinguished from the present." They also acknowledge the central place of photography in our understandings of the past. In the words of Edmundo Desnoes, "History took place where photographs were taken."[26]

In fact, we must be concerned, along with Allan Sekula, if progressively "significant events are those which can be pictured, and thus history takes on the character of spectacle…[but] a kind of rerun, since it depends on prior spectacles for its 'raw' material."[27] The visitor who sees Auschwitz almost exclusively through a viewfinder is separating himself not only from the past but from responsibility for the present as well.

The tendency to simply record the memory-work of others instead of constructing one's own can be seen again in practice of taking photographs of the monument in Birkenau, as though it were an artifact like any other on the site – as though any of the artifacts did not take their place relative to all the others, what James Young calls a 'narrative matrix'. Unveiled in April 1967 – pointedly exactly twenty years after the execution of Rudolf Hoess in Auschwitz I – its official title is the International Monument to the Victims of Fascism. On it is inscribed the following:

FOR EVER LET THIS PLACE BE
A CRY OF DESPAIR
AND A WARNING TO HUMANITY
WHERE THE NAZIS MURDERED
ABOUT ONE AND A HALF
MILLION
MEN, WOMEN, AND CHILDREN,

[25] Dwork and van Pelt, *Auschwitz 1270 to the Present*, p.359.
[26] Desnoes, Edmundo, 'Cuba Made Me So' in Wells, Liz (ed.) *The Photography Reader*, Routledge 2003,p.313.
[27] Sekula, Allan, 'Reading an Archive: Photography Between Labour and Capital' in Wells, Liz (ed.) *The Photography Reader*, Routledge 2003, p.448.

MAINLY JEWS
FROM VARIOUS COUNTRIES OF EUROPE.

AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU
1940-1945

The message is repeated in twenty-one languages, those of the victims, plus English for the international visitor. The inscription in the appropriate language is the final focus for most guided groups. It is a solid and easily-remembered summary of the past that we remember in the present.

But in fact it is further evidence that the past and the present are not easy bedfellows on this site. When the monument was unveiled in 1967, the inscription read very differently.

FOUR MILLION
PEOPLE SUFFERED
AND DIED HERE
AT THE HANDS
OF THE NAZI
MURDERERS
BETWEEN THE YEARS

1940-1945

The present inscription is the result of an explicit process of negotiation, described by Jonathan Webber as the search for a "vernacular sacred text", with all the compromises that entails.

> It became clear that to compress reference to all the different groups of victims within the space of a single inscription that would at the same time be meaningful and small enough to fit into the space available on the monument was going to be a very difficult task; yet the danger was that any new inscription would not be sufficiently inclusive to cover all relevant interest groups.[28]

The inscription on the monument underlines that there are several pasts remembered here, and the history of the inscriptions reminds us that there have been many presents. How do we reconcile them? Shoshana Rosen has written of the different experiences of Israeli writers visiting Poland, and how that visit – never undertaken lightly – has affected them.

> In some cases, the narrator comes back to the familiar; he reconfirms his previous picture of the place. Or he sees only what he was looking for in the first place, and does not allow the reality to change that picture. In other cases, facing the familiar, the narrator creates his images, his memories, his consciousness and, actually, his past anew. Sometimes the traveler returns in order to see a concrete picture and to go through expected experiences, but meets other unexpected scenes and experiences.[29]

The past and the present are (perhaps) reconciled when we make sense for ourselves of how the past created the present, and how the present creates the past. In this regard, the behaviour of tourists on the Auschwitz site must fall simultaneously into the third and fourth of Rosen's categories. The past must be presented as part of the 'familiar', but must at the same time confront the visitor with what he or she did not know about the site. Finally, a sense of closure must be avoided. The tension between past and present – and future – must be maintained, for it is in the performance of the process of understanding that the truth might perhaps be revealed. To quote the Book of Lamentations:

> You invited my enemies from all around as if for a day of festival;
> And on the day of the anger of the LORD no one escaped or survived;
> Those whom I bore and reared my enemy has destroyed.

[28] Webber, Jonathan, 'Creating a New Inscription for the Memorial at Auschwitz-Birkenau: A Short Chapter in the Mythologisation of the Holocaust' in Jon Davies and Isabel Wollaston (eds.) *The Sociology of Sacred Texts*, Sheffield Academic Press 1993, p.47-48.
[29] Rosen, *In Pursuit of the Void*, p.46.

As long as we see the truth of the statement that no one survived while understanding that someone must have done – in order to tell the tale – we understand how Auschwitz will be always past and present. As long as we remember that a monument "lacks a voice of its own which only some extraneous voice can supply", we may take it on ourselves to supply that voice.