



Orietta Ombrosi. *The Twilight of Reason.* Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2011.
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Reason's Remainder: A Philosophy of Testimony after Auschwitz

In the nearly seventy years since the end of World War II several generations of philosophers have had to pose for themselves the impossible question, how to philosophize after Auschwitz? Orietta Ombrosi's *The Twilight of Reason* thus arises on the scene not only to address the question itself, but to read the seminal thinkers who have already tackled the issue head on. She has four main resources in this endeavor: Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, and Emmanuel Levinas. There are as well more than passing references to Primo Levi, Hannah Arendt, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Maurice Blanchot. Her book is motivated by two main concerns: 1) that this question has lost its urgency with time's passage, and 2) that the question itself may stymie thinking, trapping us in the "electrified barbed wire which entangles the culture or philosophy of afterwards" (p. 202). Her book thus responds by generating what she calls a "philosophy of testimony," a method for thinking about and after the Shoah that takes into account the damage done to reason by the event itself. The central claim of the work is that the concept of testimony, in its emphasis on the singularity of account and its form of address to and for another, provides us with the necessary resource for correlating the thought of her four main subjects and for using their thought to find a way out of the dilemma of thinking "afterwards."

While it seems odd at first that Ombrosi develops a philosophy of testimony from the work of four thinkers who, while profoundly affected by the Holocaust, either

died before or were spared the worst of the catastrophe, it is finally this choice, which is the book's greatest virtue. Unlike Giorgio Agamben, who oddly goes unmentioned in the book, Ombrosi is not primarily concerned with Primo Levi's oft-cited paradox of Holocaust testimony, that the one who "has seen the Gorgon," the one who did not return, is the only true witness.[1] For her, the importance of testimony arises less from its role as report or representation than from its function as a constellating mechanism. Drawing much of her method from Walter Benjamin, particularly the "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940), Ombrosi puts her emphasis on testimony's capacity to create linkages between the "here and now" and a past which *demand*s to be redeemed (p. 86). Adorno, Horkheimer, and Levinas are all three thinkers, for Ombrosi, who, insofar as they commit themselves to discerning the new task of thinking in the wake of Auschwitz, make writing an act of testimony and a response to testimony, a practice of devotion to the memory of all those who were lost. This means not only making a temporal link between the event and all that comes after, such that all thought must respond to Adorno's new Categorical Imperative—to think and to act so that the disaster is not repeated—but also requires that reason inaugurate a new relation to sensibility, rather than reducing sensibility to sense. This philosophy of testimony through its attention to singularity, to the suffering of the other, preserves suffering as the wound in reason.

Ombrosi does not develop her argument for a philos-

ophy of testimony systematically, but rather out of a series of readings, and while Benjamin's role here seems primarily methodological, the chapter on him comes third, after what Ombrosi calls "The Prelude" and chapter 1. In general the book has some concern for chronology, treating Levinas, Adorno, and Horkheimer's early writings on the Nazi threat separately from later post-war reflections but seems equally motivated by a concern to create thematic linkages between the thinkers themselves. The organization of the work is, I think, its biggest challenge as the thread of argument and narrative are frequently interrupted and it is occasionally difficult to discern how and why all the pieces belong where they have been placed.

The book originally published in French in 2007 begins with a preface by Catherine Chaliè, the eminent French philosopher and Levinas scholar who directed Ombrosi's thesis at Paris X. She provides a succinct rendition of how the four thinkers illuminate Ombrosi's main concern, but the act of juggling all four seems to provide even Chaliè with a logistical challenge, for the four can neither be grouped as post-Holocaust thinkers, nor as products of the Frankfurt school, nor as survivors. Their relation cannot be mapped in terms of straightforward influence nor as a dialogue, but rather the connections must be forged through their contributions to a philosophy of testimony.

In her prelude, Ombrosi finds a compelling means to link at least three out of the four—Horkheimer, Adorno, and Levinas—through the figure of Odysseus, who appears in the work of all three as a "prototype of modern rationality," a figure for European reason's will to mastery, of the self and the other. What Horkheimer, Adorno, and Levinas share is the impetus both to critique the culture that culminated in the Holocaust and the task to think reason otherwise. Chapter 1 then threatens each of the thinkers' critique of culture, examining Horkheimer and Adorno's seminal work *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (1944), and Levinas's "Reflections on Hitlerism," which Levinas wrote in 1933. Besides the difference in scope and chronology between these two works, the chapter must contend as well with the thinkers' difference in method: Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of anti-Semitism combines sociological, economic, and psychological forms of explanation while Levinas's impressionistic short essay never even mentions anti-Semitism, and offers something like a philosophy of history in miniature. Unlike Horkheimer and Adorno, Levinas is not yet providing a critique of the Enlightenment, rather he defends the Enlightenment tradition but argues that in its

failure to consider the challenge that embodiment poses to freedom, it does not yet have an adequate response to the neo-pagan glorification of vitalism arising out of Nietzsche's philosophy and culminating in Hitlerism. (Levinas will later suggest that he was referencing Heidegger's philosophy in the essay as well, but it is present only by inference.) Ombrosi is indeed sensitive to the differences between her thinkers but the attention she must pay to parsing the differences undercuts her capacity to develop a constructive argument through synthesis.

The following chapter and the "interlude" that follows do important constructive work by developing Ombrosi's two key concepts: remembrance and testimony. However neither of these concepts arises from an engagement with Horkheimer, Adorno, or Levinas, but rather from Walter Benjamin and Paul Ricoeur. Chapter 2, entitled "On the Threshold: Walter Benjamin," is in fact the book's most synthetic enterprise and its most conceptually successful chapter. Here Ombrosi elegantly weaves together some of Benjamin's most difficult essays and fragments and develops a theory of remembrance such that remembrance is a means of transforming the present, "the here-and-now" (*Jetztzeit*) of the moment—into a *threshold*, a redemptive practice which refuses to submit to an order that allows the past to slip into oblivion (p. 86). Ombrosi titles the next section "Interlude: A Philosophy of Testimony," and it is here that she argues for a "philosophy of testimony as a hermeneutic of testimony" which allows her to read Adorno, Horkheimer, and Levinas as testimonial thinkers (p. 112). It is the singularity of the witness as indeed *the* means of constellation that makes the concept of testimony important for Ombrosi. Testimony is developed as a site of confrontation, where thought comes in contact with "reality, materiality, the singularity of suffering" (p. 115).

Ombrosi devotes the book's final two chapters to reading Horkheimer, Adorno, and Levinas's postwar thought as a meditation on the question: How can philosophical reason bear witness to the singular, material reality of the victim's suffering? Adorno's attention to singularity in *Negative Dialectics* (1966) is thus developed as a parallel operation to Levinas's model of ethical subjectivity. Here Horkheimer, seems a bit of an outlier, but Ombrosi's reading of Horkheimer's meditation on mourning develops him very clearly as a testimonial thinker, in her sense of the term. Most impressive in these last two chapters is Ombrosi's reading of *Otherwise than Being* (1974), particularly of the difficult notions of obsession, persecution, and martyrdom as characteristics of subjectivity arising out of Levinas's treatment of sen-

sibility.

In sum, Ombrosi's book is both analytically and synthetically impressive. It is ambitious in its constructive aims and scope. There are moments, however, when its very ambition seems to present a challenge both to Ombrosi and to the reader. Even the title seems to strain to contain all of its aims and the complex organization of its table of contents speaks to the tension between Ombrosi's interpretative endeavor and her attempt to assert a new paradigm for post-Holocaust thought. For a book, however, whose theme is the stumbling block that

Auschwitz poses for philosophical thought, this seems more than appropriate. Like her authors, Ombrosi too allows singularity to register resistance to conceptualization. In this story Odysseus does not return home to Ithaca.

Note

[1]. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999); Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Vintage, 1989), 83.

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