

To Lick a Poisoned Heart

Since the 1970s the issue of paying witness has been at the heart of reflecting on violence in history. Especially after the extermination of the Jewish communities by the Nazis but also following the gulag revelations, witnesses described the terrifying experience of the hitherto unseen brutality and evil endured by the victims. The European concentration camp tragedy, given its scope and depth, the silence surrounding it imposed by the executioners and its apparent gratuitousness, has become a no man's land, the "black hole", as Primo Levi calls it.

The black hole has such a gravitational density that it swallows those approaching it. We and our time are still very close to Auschwitz. Ours is a present mutilated by what occurred in Europe between 1932 and 1945. However, I believe that we are incapable of remembering. This is actually the line that separates personal testimony from collective memory. No one can testify on behalf of witnesses. Theirs is a knowledge bound to vanish. To vanish with the biological extinction of the survivors who became witnesses. Although the surfaces on which this testimony has been recorded – writing and to some extent cinema – represent the most complete form of cultural transmission, in this case they are still sandy surfaces on which this testimony both endures and becomes disfigured with the erosion of time. The future of what is written or said on them is uncertain. Fragile.

This testimonial fragility has led to re-approaching the issue of how to ingrain this "black hole" of humanity into the collective memory. Historical knowledge and commemoration have addressed, from two highly different positions, how to construct this collective memory of barbarism. But it has done so unsuccessfully, although history as a discipline of knowledge has been nourished by a solid and useful set of descriptions, accounts of the trials and hypotheses about how to interpret them of wide cognitive scope. However, it has not managed to create a corpus of information capable of building what we call the "collective memory of the past" effectively; that is, with the ability to articulate efficient responses to similar situations, and prevent them. Commemoration has apparently been more successful at summoning. Hence, presidents of different governments visited the death camps, as did two popes – one asking for forgiveness for what men had done to men, another wondering why God had tolerated Auschwitz. These are perhaps gestures that honour them or exalt the institutions they represent, but which certainly do not compensate the dead or their unimaginable sufferings. Since Sophocles' *Antigone* we have known that the dead must be honoured, and that the unburied strengthen uncontrollable furies. Those dead – those of the *lager*, those of the gulag – are unburied. Day after day, they are still murdered before our eyes and with the complicity of our silence. They are indifferent to our commemoration. Their tortures do not diminish with the memorial celebration. Precisely because we cannot know what those dead experienced – the "Muslims" and those who did not have time to convert to it – we cannot mourn. The breaking of humanity embodied by Auschwitz eternalises the suffering of the dead while stigmatising us, the Europeans, with the mark of Cain. Because Auschwitz and the gulag were European affairs. Only amnesia comes easily, but this amnesia is therefore guilt. Auschwitz and what it represents make any "collective memory" impossible, expelling it to the anguishing territory of good intentions or dull and comforting sentimentality.

Perhaps Josep Maria Cabané is aware of all this. And he faces the amnesia and rebels against it, against the violence towards the victims. Perhaps he still believes that it is indeed possible to create a historical memory that enables the cry "Never again!" to become an imperative action. However, Cabané has come late and perhaps has not

realised. Now everything is ready: the ghetto emptied, the houses burnt, the bodies of the dead destroyed. He has come late, but he has still come. So what is to be done? It is a devastating situation. He has appeared in a place where he cannot do anything and it is not his concern. He was not expected; he was not the one expected by those who were about to die. He is a stranger and therefore a potential accomplice. Passing through this possible complicity is traumatic but there is no other road for those who come late.

A small group of resistance fighters in the Warsaw ghetto experienced in no uncertain terms what coming late means. Responsible for looking for weapons in the Polish part of Warsaw, they left the ghetto for a few days during the uprising of the Warsaw Jews. They were unsuccessful and when they were able to return the Nazis had crushed the resistance and the few survivors who remained. Lanzmann closes his film *Shoah* with the testimony of two of the survivors of this uprising. I recall two fragments.

Yitzhak Zuckermann, second in command of the Jewish Combat Organisation (JCO), the group that in January 1943 led the ghetto uprising, and Simha Rotten were tasked with two different missions by the JCO of leaving the ghetto and asking for help from the Polish resistance. It was six days before 19 April 1943, when the Nazis decided to begin the “action” – this was the word behind which the Nazi killing machine often sheltered – to end the resistance and raze the ghetto. Zuckerman and Rotten were only able to return when it had already been annihilated. They came late for the final battle, for their final battle.

In the film, Zuckerman says almost nothing. He listens to the testimony of his companion, a testimony which is strikingly definitive. He states:

“I began drinking after the war. It was very difficult... Claude [Lanzmann], you asked me about what my impression was. If you could lick my heart, it would poison you.” How to forget the memory of his rebellious companions who killed themselves before falling into the hands of the Nazis, the question about whether the gesture of the uprising was politically correct, and the experience of such an inconceivable collapse? How to survive it? In Lanzmann’s film there is no image, albeit from an infinite distance, that is closer to the reality of being a “Muslim” of the *lager*: someone who has been dead for some time, although still biologically alive.

For his part, Rotten explains how he went back to the ghetto in the early hours of 9 May, the day after the Germans had destroyed the last centres of resistance, often burning them alive. Rotten walks through a spectral landscape where there is nobody, and where the senses could only capture the smell of burnt human flesh. The last words of Rotten’s testimony – and of the film – explain this experience of coming late: “I remember a moment when I felt a kind of tranquillity, of serenity, when I said to myself: ‘I am the last Jew, I am going to wait until dawn, I am going to wait for the Germans.’”

I have explained elsewhere the problems that these two testimonies pose for the historical European conscience. The challenge they make to us is serious. But this is not the point here, and I mention them only because they show that those who come late never forgive themselves and, therefore, suffer a definitive mutilation.

If Cabané’s work possesses “truth”, if it speaks to us, it is probably because it also refers to a mutilation. In some of his pieces, such as the faces violently mutilated by blows with an axe (*Saying Nothing*, 2003-06), the signified is submerged in the signifier, with a brutality that razes everything to the ground. There is nothing to be said. The whole tradition of the gaze – compassionate, artistic – succumbs to these eyes that still look but have been pulled out mercilessly from their faces. Cabané is not the first to think about this; however, here, he has come on time. Between the Fayum portraits, which Cabané knows well, and these eyes there have been extinctions and exterminations. One of them has created the “black hole”. Cabané’s work now inhabits this black space.

He has, therefore, come. How? Because of the trauma and the rebellion against the trauma, through the exploration of the mutilation sensed in the body itself. What emerges from the black of the painting is a barely perceptible face, or rather a death mask, or perhaps the image of death throes. Those who come late also feel the weak cry for help of those slowly dying. Rotten explains that, after leaving the ghetto's sewers, he suddenly heard the scream for help of a dying woman who he could not find. The mask painted by Cabané can only emerge from listening to a similar voice; a voice anchored in a past that constantly revives, and of a present that belongs to the artist because he has conquered it by confronting the inner trauma. If it were necessary – and I think it is – perhaps the legitimacy of these works by Cabané lies here. The painter who comes late, but comes, and listens. He is ready to listen amidst the destruction.

In *The Dead Class*, the most important play by Tadeusz Kantor and which established what he called “the theatre of death”, a group of elders goes back to the school where they studied and sit at their old desks. They do not know they are dead. These phantoms also haunt Cabané's painting. A painting of death. There is a piece that surprises those who look at it in the painter's studio. It is a small blackboard (*The Erasure*, 2005), material recycled from the rubbish where Cabané finds some of the elements with which to work. On this old blackboard, the remains of one of those modest schools of the old quarter in Barcelona which were pompously called “education centres”, Cabané has chalked the perimeter of the Warsaw ghetto. The main sections can be identified: the small ghetto, the large ghetto, the wall around the graveyard. It is perhaps the most elementary of a set of pieces based on the Warsaw ghetto. The series is not only articulated around the theme but also the technique, all of it based on the combination of the ideas of destruction and the recovery of remains after the destruction: of fragmenting and recombining. Only this humble blackboard is different. On it, the artist has “gone backwards”, has gone back to the classroom, to a childish world that the blackboard evokes as a world both of discovery and confinement. The school of the later years of Franco's regime. I imagine him now, recalling this work, going back to school, no longer capable of returning to “that” – incapable, because he has gone through the trauma and there is no way back –, taking the chalk and drawing the perimeter. Of what? As Rotten said: “I believe that human language is incapable of describing the horror we experienced in the ghetto.”

The painter cannot remedy this incapacity of language. This is why he chooses the gesture of leaving an imprint today of the incapacity of expressing *that* horror. Cabané cannot express it because it is unspeakable, and also because he has not experienced it. Cabané insists on contributing with his work to a memory of what the extermination was and the radical violence which preceded it, prompted it, carried it out and later sought to conceal it. He adds to his effort to remember the Spanish civil war, the exile and the murder of Spanish Republicans in Mauthausen and in other Nazi concentration camps. This desire to update, while artistically revealing what happened and still happens, is as decisive and radical as Cabané's hand holding a piece of chalk – the same hand, let us remember, which before had held the axe and had wildly mutilated the faces painted on wood, the secular icons of a previous artistic phase. This hand, which has participated in a symbolic destruction, collects a remnant of a school in a neighbourhood broken by the aseptic “modernisation” of the city, places it in the studio, uses the piece of a chalk to leave a vestige of the executioners' violence endured by the victims, the emptiness of the ghetto and the artist's emergence from trauma, confronting his own life. And this simple gesture of making a mark close to the perimeter of the

ghetto is certainly a way of reaching it. This dual movement – the sketching hand, and the fact of going there – is what disturbs the viewer.

But at the same time, this blackboard also reflects the incorporation of this knowledge into the education of the new generations, and Cabané's conviction that his commitment as an artist is framed within the creation of works that involve his experience of extermination, and can transmit it. It is not about illustrating but rather about creating an artefact where his experience, of which the extermination is the structure and the phantom, is materialised. As in the dead classroom haunted by Kantor's spectres, who have not realised they are dead and who with their presence are calling on the viewers' biological and elementary state of "being alive", Cabané's blackboard is a mirror. When as viewers – that is, as a forewarned audience, informed of what the extermination was, ready to commemorate by mourning the death of the victims, even to accompany our own victims, in Gusen, in Mauthausen, in Buchenwald – we mirror ourselves on Cabané's blackboard, we find that our face is the perimeter of the Warsaw ghetto. This artefact speaks to us about this enigma, which is that of memory, of the condition of the artistic representation of that pain.

I have said that Cabané believes that through painting, installations, the visual arts in short, it is possible to contribute to constructing a collective memory of what fascism and its consequences were. He believes that this memory that art may construct can help the current generations to come to terms with, to be aware of and continue the testimony of a tragedy which, in its most personal and human manifestation, we cannot make our own because we cannot recognise ourselves in it; such is the anthropological rupture of Auschwitz. Perhaps he is right, perhaps this is the real way for we Europeans to realise, come to terms with and accept that all the place names cited here are also spaces of European culture, as it was within this culture that the conception, execution and attempted concealment of the extermination took place. Benjamin argued that all documents of culture are also documents of barbarism. A question emerges and disturbs: can a document of barbarism become a document of culture? How?

Nevertheless, the artist's capacity to confront this question will categorically depend on his research to be able to extract and map out territories of subjectivity which, at the risk of failing or even becoming ethically unacceptable with regard to the victims, attempts to go through a black hole to return to this side, that of language and expression, with a voice that enunciates a journey which is unique and only exists when it becomes an artistic work. Because of this characteristic of uniqueness, this work cannot be the testimony of anything other than the recombination of the trauma that has led the artist towards the mouth of the concealed well, of the destruction of the "previous artist" he was, of the fall into the well, of emerging reconstituted not as Josep Maria Cabané – this civilian figure that unites two moments of the same artistic expression – but rather as the sum of his current works. These works can express the barbaric, violent, and dark aspects that have been experienced in the pain of the trauma of confronting the phantom in the psychological analysis, of the experience of the threatening blindness against which he fought for months, of having come to see and to measure the extermination camp, and of the determination to transform this descent into the map of his blind research, which speaks of the Cabané who has created these works. From my point of view, this is the exiguous and necessary field of the memory of Auschwitz and of the memory of Mauthausen: of the obligation of continuing to pay witness. Only in this way is memory "possible". The alternative is historical knowledge, the disciplined and rigorous narration of what happened and how, of the always difficult reconstruction of the alternatives that failed against the triumph of totalitarianism, of the processes that

led to it, of the resignation that paved the path to fascism, of the difficulty of confronting it and the message of hope in the future brought by those who did. But this is not the language of art.

Being merciless is a condition of any artistic work that wishes to appropriate extermination. This is not the time to be merciful; back then, when we were merciless, we needed to be merciful. We have come late. The bitterness that Zuckerman feels has poisoned his heart. Anyone wishing to lick it would be poisoned. We cannot lick his heart. We cannot be merciful. The way we express ourselves today can only survive in exile from mercy.

Josep M. Lloró, 2006