

**Marie SILKEBERG**

## **A Listening Language**

A listening language.

The time of the aftermath.

It is said that Dante said that writers are those who remember words longer than other people. Maybe, he even said, a little longer.

It opens a moment of time. This little. Longer. Before they are erased, forgotten, suppressed, burned, swallowed, appropriated, etc.

What to do with this time?

“What do you do with your freedom?” a friend told me she was asked when she came back to Sweden after some time in Beirut.

A call: to being as much as to speak, to write. And to find out the difference. Between your place in the world and others’. The privileges as a first world citizen. You should not be trusted. You know that. At least.

An unwritten poem could be an opening of a field of questions, the time of the questions. Who will speak in it? With courage, fear, rage? What will they say?

Roger Berkowitz writes in *Thinking in Dark Times*: “For Arendt, dark times are not limited to the tragedies of the twentieth century; they are not even a rarity in the history of the world. Darkness, as she would have us understand it, does not name the genocides, purges, and hunger of a specific era. Instead, darkness refers to the way these horrors appear in public discourse and yet remain hidden.”

*In the face of life’s horror – luckily most people notice it only on occasion, but a few whom inner forces appoint to bear witness are always conscious of it – there is only one comfort: its alignment with the horror experienced by previous witnesses.*

Elias Canetti: *Kafka’s Other Trial*

Quoting and reworking this quotation by Elias Canetti, Shoshana Felman writes:

*How is the act of **writing** tied up with the act of **bearing witness** – and with the experience of the trial? Is the act of **reading** literary texts itself inherently related to the act of **facing horror**? If literature is the **alignment between witnesses**, what would this alignment mean? And by virtue of what sort of agency is one **appointed to bear witness**?*

Shoshana Felman: “Education and Crisis”  
in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*

To be appointed. To arrive too late. Answer too late.

To give voice or to connect to voices.

“The tragedy of being a woman, the tragedy of being a Ukrainian, the tragedy of being a human being,” said Oksana in Kiev, 1995.

“For every time I went there, I lost more hope,” said Marusa in Berlin, 2004, about her journeys into the besieged Sarajevo.

Being born after crucial events, wars, we can’t imagine or think that they are happening right now.

Not before Syria became a refugee crisis in Europe, did what has been going on for four years enter the consciousness of people.

Cities destroyed, millions of people, refugees inside the country, hundreds of thousands killed, just one witness, named Cesar, documented 11,000 victims who died under torture in one of the Syrian government’s 25 security offices’ prisons.

It has made me silent. Tired. A tiredness I’ve never experienced before. A sadness. It is not my country, not my people. I’ve never visited Syria.

I’ve been to demonstrations against the chemical attacks in Gouta in 2013, for instance, and the memorials of them, consisting of only 35 people, mostly Syrians.

The silence has been immense. The stupidity.

*Only I possessed, and still possess, the moral truth of the blows that even today roar in my skull, and for that reason I am more entitled to judge; not only more than the culprit but also more than society – which thinks only about its continued existence. The social body is occupied merely with safeguarding itself and could not care less about a life that has been damaged. At the very best, it looks forward, so that such things don’t happen again. But my resentments are there in order that the crime become a moral reality for the criminal, in order that he be swept into the truth of his atrocity.*

Jean Améry: *At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*

The voices of the others. Where the silence hides.

Enjoy your privileges; soon you’ll not have them.

To repeat the same words, meaning: I’ve heard you.

*Suddenly I said to Riedel, This part has to be left out, there’s no way we can make use of it. Then he gripped my hand and said, you have a fever. No, I said, no, you realize we can’t include this “Forgive me for crying.” Why did the investigating judge say something so awful as “There’s no reason to be afraid”? Forgive me for crying.*

Ingeborg Bachmann: *The Book of Franz*

Life listens, and waits.