

Pillars of Salt: Memory, Victims, and the Problem of Survival

KEVIN PETERSON



WRITER'S COMMENT: I have long had an interest in narratives about disasters—narratives in which the narrator is in the precarious position of a survivor who must reconstruct the event and come to terms with his or her own survival. In the past, I have mostly focused on apocalyptic fictions to satiate this curiosity, though in Professor Kuhn's fantastic "Women Writers" course I was given the opportunity to explore the problem of survival in two texts that deal with a very real historical reality: the Holocaust. In the essay I sought to go beyond the typical sentimentalized interpretations of Holocaust memoirs and to really dwell within the uncertainty presented by both authors—after all, it is only in such grey areas that we can even begin to fathom what the events were like and what it's like to question the value of one's own survival.

—Kevin Peterson

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: That Kevin Peterson is an extraordinary student was clear from the beginning of the comparative literature class on Women Writers I taught in winter quarter 2010. In contrast to his more talkative classmates, Kevin tended to be quite reticent, listening attentively to class discussions—and then intervening with a comment that brilliantly tied up a line of argument or else undid it, sending the discussion in a very different direction. Despite his considerable verbal acuity, Kevin's real forte is writing. The three papers he wrote for this class were among the finest examples of undergraduate writing I have encountered in my thirty years of teaching. In each case Kevin exceeded my expectations, not only synthesizing complex primary and secondary readings, but also imbuing his interpretation with his distinctive imaginative stamp. Nowhere is his ability to produce nuanced, original readings of texts more apparent than in the essay you have before you, in which Kevin uses Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse Five as a point of entry to a remarkable and sophisticated analysis of Ruth Kluger's belated Holocaust testimonial Still Alive and Anonymous's memoir about mass rapes by the Red Army during the siege of Berlin at the end of WW II.

—Anna K. Kuhn, Department of Comparative Literature

EARLY ON IN KURT VONNEGUT'S *Slaughterhouse-Five* he explains, quite simply, that "there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again. Everybody is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds." He then preempts the reader's obvious next question, asking "and what do birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like 'Poo-tee-wee?'" (19). This characteristic of tragedies, namely their utter incomprehensibility, is also touched upon in Ruth Kluger's distantly retrospective Holocaust memoir *Still Alive*, in which she laments the traditional discourse on the Holocaust, explaining that its repeated recollection "[has] a way of leveling the horror," just as "appeals from Amnesty International never quite get across what they are telling you because the familiar words, black ink on dry white paper, interfere with the mute and essentially wordless suffering . . . they aim to communicate" (18). However, in the case of both Vonnegut and Kluger, as well as in Anonymous' diary *A Woman in Berlin*, there is a desire to give words to the suffering—to try to bridge the gap between tragedy and victimization and to achieve some semblance of understanding, however temporary and subjective. In both *Still Alive* and *A Woman in Berlin* this vocalization and transcription is an assertion of control, as both writers lay claim to their *authority* (in its truest sense) and work through the utterly horrific events that they experienced, in order to deny their own victimization—a process that is repeatedly associated with a sense of community in both works. However, this sense of community is cultivated in very different (though similarly unorthodox) ways, as Kluger denies her own victimization in relation to a community of the dead, and Anonymous denies victimization in relation to the victimizers themselves by asserting a shared humanity between herself and the Russians. In both instances the binary opposition between victim and perpetrator is shown to be a tentative one—one that is undermined by an unsentimental examination of real suffering.

From the outset of Anonymous' *A Woman in Berlin* the narrator, who at first seems to take pride in her position as an endangered German citizen, asserts a powerful and independent subjectivity. She recalls quoting lines of poetry in letters to her European friends as a way of "flexing [her] muscles—in part to make [herself] feel strong—by telling them how intense it was to live here, amid all the danger." She admits that she "felt a kind of forbearance writing that, as if [she] were an adult initiated

into the deep secrets of life, speaking to innocent children in need of protection” (15). This contradictory feeling of empowerment through victimization further develops a sense of community with her fellow Germans in Berlin, as she admits that “talking in line, I find myself coming down a level both in the way I speak and in what I say, immersing myself in the general emotion—though this always leaves me feeling a little slimy and disgusting.” However, she also concedes that “[she doesn’t] want to fence [herself] off, [that she wants] to give [herself] over to this communal sense of humanity; [she wants] to be a part of it, to experience it” and “to be like everyone else, to belong to the nation, to abide and suffer history together” (18). This notion of “suffering history together” is integral to the narrator’s understanding and reconciliation of the subsequent rapes that occur in Berlin, as she is able to see them as a collective experience for the women of Berlin that ultimately reaffirms her belief in her own strength and intelligence. After the first series of rapes she writes that “the day’s been packed to the brim. The net result: I’m healthy, bold, and bright; for the moment my fear is mostly gone,” concluding “so the saying’s true after all: ‘what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger’” (44). This amazing perseverance stems from the narrator’s ability to focus on the present and appreciate her health and, quite fundamentally, the fact that she is still alive. Earlier, she notes that women’s “strength” is “always [focusing] on the task at hand,” emphasizing that “we’re happy whenever we can flee into the present to escape worrying about the future” (33)—this emphasis on the present becomes invaluable, as she is able to dissociate herself from a tremendous sense of suffering and victimization by taking each challenge as it comes and by exerting whatever control she can over the given situation.

The narrator’s key realization, however, comes as she begins to acknowledge the shared humanity between herself and the victimizers—indeed, she discovers early in the Soviet occupation a key characteristic of Russian men: that they “too, are ‘only men’—i.e. presumably they’re as susceptible as other men to feminine wiles, so it’s possible to keep them in check, to distract them, to shake them off” (48). She thus resolves to deny victimization by exerting the considerable amount of control she has as an attractive woman, reasoning that she will “have to find a single wolf to keep the pack away,” asking “after all, what are my brains for, my little knowledge of the enemy’s language?” After this resolution she notes that “physically I feel a little better, though, now that I am doing

something, planning something, determined to be more than mere mute booty, a spoil of war” (64). This assertion of subjectivity and agency does, however, come with a simultaneous acknowledgment that the Soviets have distinct subjectivities and personalities—she writes “at least I speak with them as one person to another, at least I can tell who’s truly evil from who is bearable, can picture them as separate human beings, distinguish them as individuals” (77–78). This acknowledgment of common humanity allows her for the first time to “have a sense of being witness,” of making some sense of the situation based on a realistic evaluation of the human motives of her would-be rapists. She does, however, acknowledge the obvious benefits of being a woman who does not speak Russian, as to “them the Russians are more alien; they can talk themselves into the idea that these men aren’t people but savages, mere animals. They can bury their feelings deeper” (78). This irresolvable opposition thus stands as the very discursive field from which the narrator assesses her own sense of victimhood.

On the other hand, she can not overlook the physical trauma and emotional toll the rapes have on her: “I make myself stiff as a stone, shut my eyes, concentrate on my own body’s veto, my inner No” (76); and “as long as I’m nothing more than a spoil of war I intend to stay dead and numb, without feeling” (91). Ultimately she attempts to straddle both sides of the opposition, shutting her body off to any experience of the rapes (thus lessening the affect the Russians can have on her), as well as using her knowledge of the Russian language to mediate the conditions of her violation, in one instance reminding Petka that “he was no ‘hooligan’ but a considerate, refined man of tender feelings” (123). The narrator’s successful appropriation of both stances ultimately frees her from any sort of victimization, as she comes to value her life in the present (scolding the women around her by saying “What’s the matter, I’m alive, aren’t I? Life goes on!” (59)) as well as to resolve to live on after the Russians leave Berlin, concluding that “the dark and amazing adventure of life is beckoning,” and that she will “stick around, out of curiosity and because [she enjoys] breathing and stretching [her] healthy limbs” (176). This radical affirmation of life in the face of horrific trauma thus highlights the intricate process of denying victimization, as she invokes a sense of community and introspection by facing the realities of her life completely, without sentimentality or self-pity.

A similar invocation of community in the face of tragedy is seen in Ruth Kluger's *Still Alive*, though the narrator identifies not with her victimizers but with fellow victims that do not have the ability to make sense of their own tragedies—the dead. From the outset of Kluger's memoir she resists a simple binary between victim and perpetrator, instead developing two distinct types of discursive communities—one with the Germans and one with the Jews who did not survive the Holocaust. Her relationship with the German people (or perhaps with any anti-Semite, be they German, Polish, or Viennese) develops early on as an inherently antagonistic one, in which she refuses to conform to the performative role of the submissive victim. She remembers the virulent anti-Semitism in Vienna as a child, noting that “while the consequences of anti-Semitism were a considerable problem for us Jews, the thing itself, the hatred, was a problem of and for anti-Semites, and for them alone.” She sums up her attitude as “deal with it as you can,” explaining that she is “not going to become a paragon of virtue or put on nice-girl manners in order to shame and convert [the anti-Semites]. As if [they] want to be converted” (20). This awareness of the performativity of the role of victim comes up again in Vienna when a man gives her an orange on the tram, as she makes clear that she “didn't like the role of the passive victim who could be comforted with small demonstrations of kindness,” stating that she “wanted an assertive, oppositional role, at least in [her] thoughts,” and that “an orange, no matter what it stood for, was no help as [her] life became progressively more restricted and impoverished” (49). This complete denial of victimhood thus stems from an attempt to understand the mentality of even someone who tries to help her, as she views any pitying of her and her situation as a victimizing action—indeed, she refuses to generalize about the people who continually place her into the role of the victim, as they include Viennese during the war, Nazis at the camps, and even Americans and Germans well after the war ended.

The last instance in which she seems to acknowledge the inherently performative role of a victim is at the labor camp when the Nazi overseers refer to her by a nickname, a nickname she labels as “cute, only I don't feel cute—these Germans were my enemies. I was all in favor of not being tormented by them, but for intimacies it was too late,” concluding that it would have been tolerable “if at least there had been a concrete advantage for us. But wasn't I the calf with which you play, knowing it's going to be slaughtered before it gets to grow into a cow? I didn't want

to be a calf” (116). This refusal to engage in the power dynamics of the traditional victim/perpetrator schema runs parallel to her insistence that the German people open up a real discourse on the Holocaust and acknowledge what really happened without lapsing into ambiguity and generalities. The instances in which this insistence is most clear are in her frank descriptions of her mother’s “petty cruelties,” as she calls them. She explains that she “[feels] no compunction about citing examples of [her] mother’s petty cruelties toward [her],” though her “hearers [immediately] act surprised, assume a stance of virtuous indignation, and tell [her] that, given the hardships [they] had to endure during the Hitler period, the victims should have come closer together and formed strong bonds.” However, Kluger disrupts this moralistic view, which would certainly be the traditional view of Jewish solidarity and community during the Shoah, and instead concludes that “this is sentimental rubbish and depends upon a false concept of suffering as a source of moral education” (52). Later she defines sentimentality in similar terms, noting that “the main characteristic of sentimentality is deception, including self-deception: the inclination to see something other than what’s in front of you” (95–96).

This complete repulsion of sentimentality thus stands as the central tenet of her memoir (and indeed the guiding principle of the establishment of both of her discursive communities), and is based upon a desire to open a dialogue about the Holocaust that focuses on “the nuances of reality and its gritty surfaces,” which need not “disappear in a fog” (73) just because it is easier to ignore the horror of the events. This insistence on dialogic openness, though extremely progressive in relation to the traditionally framed victimizers of the Holocaust, is perhaps even more radical in its relation to the Jews that were indeed killed and to whom Kluger feels a particularly indebtedness, as they give her victimization a point of comparison that, in the end, allows her to transcend such victimization altogether.

Early in the memoir Kluger tries to cope with the presumed death of both her brother and her father, wallowing in the uncertainty of their deaths and ultimately concluding “the dead set us certain tasks, don’t they? They want to be remembered and revered, they want to be resurrected and buried at the same time” (31). This sense of tormented stasis seems to drive her desire, throughout the memoir, to not be cast as a victim, as she views such victimization as sentimentality and self-pity which,

ultimately, is willful self-deception. While thinking about the true purpose of preserving the camps as museums she explains that “the ghosts cling to us,” asking “do we expect that our unsolved questions will be answered if we hang on to what’s left: the place, the stones, the ashes? We don’t honor the dead with these unattractive remnants of past crimes.” She speculates that “perhaps we are afraid [the ghosts] may leave the camps, and so we insist that their deaths were unique and must not be compared to any other losses or atrocities,” emphasizing that “we would be condemned to be isolated monads if we didn’t compare and generalize, for comparisons are the bridges from one unique life to another” (64). This remarkable insistence on community thus stems from a desire not to isolate and reify the suffering of the Holocaust victims, as is the traditional discourse on the tragedy, but to insist on its comparability and on its value in relation to the development of a true community of dialogic openness.

Later in the narrative Kluger again insists that we not demand from the dead what we ourselves can not provide, namely an unsentimental account of why some survived. She argues that the common question of “why no panic broke out during the executions . . . [is] another way of asking why there was no resistance, and that in turn implies that there should have been.” She then answers that “it seemed to [her] impertinent of the living to ask of the dead that they should have acted or behaved in a certain manner that suits us, that makes their death more bearable to us,” either by “offering the heroic gestures of a senseless fight or displaying equilibrium of martyrs,” concluding “they didn’t die for us, and we, God knows, don’t live for them” (82). This refusal to engage in the traditional discourse on Holocaust victims seems based on a complete denial of her own relative suffering, as she refuses to feel victimized when there were other people (her father and brother included) who died without being able to make sense of their own deaths.

Rather than trying to understand her death (or even any victimized suffering), Kluger compulsively tries to comprehend her equally incomprehensible survival; she is caught between wanting to blame obvious human decisions for her suffering and wanting to acknowledge the real suffering of those who died and who do not have any voice to open up such a discourse. Near the end of her memoir she implicates the reader in this discursive community, explaining that “we who escaped do not belong to the community of those victims, my brother among them,

whose ghosts are unforgiving.” Instead, “by virtue of survival, we belong with you, who weren’t exposed to the genocidal danger, and we know that there is a black river between us and the true victims.” At this late stage in her memoir she thus clarifies: “therefore this is not a story of a Holocaust victim and becomes less and less so as it nears the end” (138). The real victims are those who have no voice, and who have no responsibility to make the survival of the others any easier or more comprehensible. She later reworks the traditional victim/perpetrator schema to allow for the “true” victims in her estimation, as she explains that “one would like to take from the victimizers to give to the victims, but one doesn’t know how. For you owe me—I am a victim—but I owe them—for they are dead, more victim than I” (146). This circular dynamic of indebtedness and victimization thus destabilizes any simple notion of victimhood, offering instead a more nuanced view of communal responsibility based on a frank acknowledgment of the gritty realities of the Holocaust as well as the process by which we attempt to make sense of suffering and victimization—that is, the writing of the memoir itself.

Kurt Vonnegut alludes to the biblical story of Lot when, in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, he tries to make sense of his own survival in relation to the real victims who died. He explains that there “were vile people in both” Sodom and Gomorrah, and that “the world was better off without them,” but Lot’s wife, who “was told not to look back where all those people and their homes had been,” does look back, which Vonnegut loves “because it was so human.” He concludes that perhaps “people aren’t supposed to look back,” branding his own chronicle of looking back, the novel itself, as “a failure,” though he notes that it “had to be, since it was written by a pillar of salt” (22). This insistence on the precarious position of survivors seems apropos to both Kluger’s and Anonymous’ texts, as they attempt to make sense of something through writing which may ultimately never have any clear-cut meaning. However, both writers seem to relish this uncertainty, as it is closer to the real-life experience of the tragedies than any sentimentalized account of the events. By insisting on the gritty reality, both writers thus destabilize traditional notions of victimization and suffering—by looking back they seem to have really been looking forward, as their texts insist upon an open discursive community that will emphasize the similarity and utter humanity of the events as opposed to any distanced notions of pity and ambiguous misunderstanding.

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