

JEAN AMÉRY

At the Mind's Limits

CONTEMPLATIONS BY A SURVIVOR
ON AUSCHWITZ AND ITS REALITIES

*Translated by
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Contents

- Preface to the Reissue, 1977 / vii
Preface to the First Edition, 1966 / xiii
At the Mind's Limits / 1
Torture / 21
How Much Home Does a Person Need? / 41
Resentments / 62
On the Necessity and
Impossibility of Being a Jew / 82
Translators' Notes / 102
Afterword by Sidney Rosenfeld / 104

ceive on the outside; not a bit of it brought us practical guidance. In the camp, too, we did not become "deeper," if that calamitous depth is at all a definable intellectual quantity. It goes without saying, I believe, that in Auschwitz we did not become better, more human, more humane, and more mature ethically. You do not observe dehumanized man committing his deeds and misdeeds without having all of your notions of inherent human dignity placed in doubt. We emerged from the camp stripped, robbed, emptied out, disoriented—and it was a long time before we were able even to learn the ordinary language of freedom. Still today, incidentally, we speak it with discomfort and without real trust in its validity.

And yet, the time in the camp was not entirely without value for us (and when I say us, I mean the nonreligious and politically independent intellectuals). For we brought with us the certainty that remains ever unshakable, that for the greatest part the intellect is a *ludus* and that we are nothing more—or, better said, before we entered the camp we were nothing more—than *homines ludentes*. With that we lost a good deal of arrogance, of metaphysical conceit, but also quite a bit of our naïve joy in the intellect and what we falsely imagined was the sense of life. In his newest book, *The Words*, Jean-Paul Sartre said at one point that it took him thirty years to rid himself of traditional philosophical idealism. I can guarantee that it did not take us as long. Mostly, a few weeks in camp sufficed to bring about this philosophical disillusionment, for which other, perhaps infinitely more gifted and penetrating minds must struggle a lifetime.

And so I dare to say that we didn't leave Auschwitz wiser and deeper, but we were no doubt smarter. "Profundity has never clarified the world, Clarity looks more profoundly into its depths," Arthur Schnitzler once said. Nowhere was it easier than in the camp, and particularly in Auschwitz, to assimilate this clever thought. If I may quote once more, and once again an Austrian, then I would like to cite the words that Karl Kraus pronounced in the first years of the Third Reich: "The word fell into a sleep, when that world awoke." Certainly, he said that as a defender of this metaphysical "word," while we former camp inmates borrow the formulation from him and repeat it sceptically as an argument against this "word." The word always dies where the claim of some reality is total. It died for us a long time ago. And we were not even left with the feeling that we must regret its departure.

Torture

WHOEVER visits Belgium as a tourist may perhaps chance upon Fort Breendonk, which lies halfway between Brussels and Antwerp. The compound is a fortress from the First World War, and what its fate was at that time I don't know. In the Second World War, during the short eighteen days of resistance by the Belgian army in May 1940, Breendonk was the last headquarters of King Leopold. Then, under German occupation, it became a kind of small concentration camp, a "reception camp," as it was called in the cant of the Third Reich. Today it is a Belgian National Museum.

At first glance, the fortress Breendonk makes a very old, almost historic impression. As it lies there under the eternally rain-gray sky of Flanders, with its grass-covered domes and black-gray walls, it gives the feeling of a melancholy engraving from the 1870s war. One thinks of Gravelotte and Sedan and is convinced that the defeated Emperor Napoleon III, with kepi in hand, will immediately appear in one of the massive, low gates. One must step closer, in order that the fleeting picture from past times be replaced by another, which is more familiar to us. Watchtowers arise along the moat that rings the castle. Barbed-wire fences wrap around them. The copperplate of 1870 is abruptly obscured by horror photos from the world that David Rousset has called "l'Univers Concentrationnaire." The creators of the National Museum

have left everything the way it was between 1940 and 1944. Yellowed wall cards: "Whoever goes beyond this point will be shot." The pathetic monument to the resistance movement that was erected in front of the fortress shows a man forced to his knees, but defiantly raising his head with its oddly Slavic lines. This monument would not at all have been necessary to make clear to the visitor *where* he is and *what* is recollected there.

One steps through the main gate and soon finds oneself in a room that in those days was mysteriously called the "business room." A picture of Heinrich Himmler on the wall, a swastika flag spread as a cloth over a long table, a few bare chairs. The business room. Everyone went about his business, and theirs was murder. Then the damp, cellarlike corridors, dimly lit by the same thin and reddish glowing bulbs as the ones that used to hang there. Prison cells, sealed by inch-thick wooden doors. Again and again one must pass through heavy barred gates before one finally stands in a windowless vault in which various iron implements lie about. From there no scream penetrated to the outside. There I experienced it: torture.

If one speaks about torture, one must take care not to exaggerate. What was inflicted on me in the unspeakable vault in Breendonk was by far not the worst form of torture. No red-hot needles were shoved under my fingernails, nor were any lit cigars extinguished on my bare chest. What did happen to me there I will have to tell about later; it was relatively harmless and it left no conspicuous scars on my body. And yet, twenty-two years after it occurred, on the basis of an experience that in no way probed the entire range of possibilities, I dare to assert that torture is the most horrible event a human being can retain within himself.

But very many people have preserved such things, and the horrible can make no claim to singularity. In most Western countries torture was eliminated as an institution and method at the end of the eighteenth century. And yet, today, two hundred years later, there are still men and women—no one knows how many—who can tell of the torture they underwent. As I am preparing this article, I come across a newspaper page with photos that show members of the South Vietnamese army torturing captured Vietcong rebels. The English novelist Graham Greene wrote a letter about it to the London *Daily Telegraph*, saying:

The strange new feature about the photographs of torture now appearing in the British and American press is that they have been taken with the approval of the torturers and are published over captions that contain no hint of condemnation. They might have come out of a book on insect life. . . . Does this mean that the American authorities sanction torture as a means of interrogation? The photographs certainly are a mark of honesty, a sign that the authorities do not shut their eyes to what is going on, but I wonder if this kind of honesty without conscience is really to be preferred to the old hypocrisy.

Every one of us will ask himself Graham Greene's question. The admission of torture, the boldness—but is it still that?—of coming forward with such photos is explicable only if it is assumed that a revolt of public conscience is no longer to be feared. One could think that this conscience has accustomed itself to the practice of torture. After all, torture was, and is, by no means being practiced only in Vietnam during these decades. I would not like to know what goes on in South African, Angolese, and Congolese prisons. But I do know, and the reader probably has also heard, what went on between 1956 and 1963 in the jails of French Algeria. There is a frighteningly exact and sober book on it, *La question* by Henri Alleg, a work whose circulation was prohibited, the report of an eyewitness who was also personally tortured and who gave evidence of the horror, sparingly and without making a fuss about himself. Around 1960 numerous other books and pamphlets on the subject appeared: the learned criminological treatise by the famous lawyer Alec Mellor, the protest of the publicist Pierre-Henri Simon, the ethical-philosophic investigation of a theologian named Vialatoux. Half the French nation rose up against the torture in Algeria. One cannot say often and emphatically enough that by this the French did honor to themselves. Leftist intellectuals protested. Catholic trade unionists and other Christian laymen warned against the torture, and at the risk of their safety and lives took action against it. Prelates raised their voices, although to our feeling much too gently.

But that was the great and freedom-loving France, which even in those dark days was not entirely robbed of its liberty. From other places the screams penetrated as little into the world as did once my own strange and uncanny howls from the vault of Breendonk. In Hungary there presides a Party First Secretary, of whom it is said that under the regime of one of his predecessors torturers ripped out his fingernails.⁵ And

where and who are all the others about whom one learned nothing at all, and of whom one will probably never hear anything? Peoples, governments, authorities, names that are known, but which no one says aloud. Somewhere, someone is crying out under torture. Perhaps in this hour, this second.

And how do I come to speak of torture solely in connection with the Third Reich? Because I myself suffered it under the outspread wings of this very bird of prey, of course. But *not only* for that reason; rather, I am convinced, beyond all personal experiences, that torture was not an accidental quality of this Third Reich, but its essence. Now I hear violent objection being raised, and I know that this assertion puts me on dangerous ground. I will try to substantiate it later. First, however, I suppose I must tell what the content of my experiences actually was and what happened in the cellar-damp air of the fortress Breendonk.

In July 1943 I was arrested by the Gestapo. It was a matter of fliers. The group to which I belonged, a small German-speaking organization within the Belgian resistance movement, was spreading anti-Nazi propaganda among the members of the German occupation forces. We produced rather primitive agitation material, with which we imagined we could convince the German soldiers of the terrible madness of Hitler and his war. Today I know, or at least believe to know, that we were aiming our feeble message at deaf ears. I have much reason to assume that the soldiers in field-gray uniform who found our mimeographed papers in front of their barracks clicked their heels and passed them straight on to their superiors, who then, with the same official readiness, in turn notified the security agency. And so the latter rather quickly got onto our trail and raided us. One of the fliers that I was carrying at the time of my arrest bore the message, which was just as succinct as it was propagandistically ineffectual, "Death to the SS bandits and Gestapo hangmen!" Whoever was stopped with such material by the men in leather coats and with drawn pistols could have no illusions of any kind. I also did not allow myself any for a single moment. For, God knows, I regarded myself—wrongly, as I see today—as an old, hardened expert on the system, its men, and its methods. A reader of the *Neue Weltbühne* and the *Neues Tagebuch* in times past, well up on the KZ literature of the German emigration from 1933 on, I believed to anticipate what was in store for me. Already in the first days of the Third Reich I had heard of the cellars of the SA

barracks on Berlin's General Pape Street. Soon thereafter I had read what to my knowledge was the first German KZ document, the little book *Oranienburg* by Gerhart Segers. Since that time so many reports by former Gestapo prisoners had reached my ears that I thought there could be nothing new for me in this area. What would take place would then have to be incorporated into the relevant literature, as it were. Prison, interrogation, blows, torture; in the end, most probably death. Thus it was written and thus it would happen. When, after my arrest, a Gestapo man ordered me to step away from the window—for he knew the trick, he said, with your chained hands you tear open the window and leap onto a nearby ledge—I was certainly flattered that he credited me with so much determination and dexterity, but, obeying the order, I politely gestured that it did not come into question. I gave him to understand that I had neither the physical prerequisites nor at all the intention to escape my fate in such an adventurous way. I knew what was coming and they could count on my consent to it. But does one really know? Only in part. "Rien n'arrive ni comme on l'espère, ni comme on le craint," Proust writes somewhere. Nothing really happens as we hope it will, nor as we fear it will. But not because the occurrence, as one says, perhaps "goes beyond the imagination" (it is not a quantitative question), but because it is reality and not phantasy. One can devote an entire life to comparing the imagined and the real, and still never accomplish anything by it. Many things do indeed happen approximately the way they were anticipated in the imagination: Gestapo men in leather coats, pistol pointed at their victim—that is correct, all right. But then, almost amazingly, it dawns on one that the fellows not only have leather coats and pistols, but also faces: not "Gestapo faces" with twisted noses, hypertrophied chins, pockmarks, and knife scars, as might appear in a book, but rather faces like anyone else's. Plain, ordinary faces. And the enormous perception at a later stage, one that destroys all abstractive imagination, makes clear to us how the plain, ordinary faces finally become Gestapo faces after all, and how evil overlays and exceeds banality. For there is no "banality of evil," and Hannah Arendt, who wrote about it in her Eichmann book, knew the enemy of mankind only from hearsay, saw him only through the glass cage.

When an event places the most extreme demands on us, one ought not to speak of banality. For at this point there is no longer any abstrac-

tion and never an imaginative power that could even approach its reality. That someone is carried away shackled in an auto is "self-evident" only when you read about it in the newspaper and you rationally tell yourself, just at the moment when you are packing fliers: well of course, and what more? It can and it will happen like that to me someday, too. But the auto is different, and the pressure of the shackles was not felt in advance, and the streets are strange, and although you may previously have walked by the gate of the Gestapo headquarters countless times, it has other perspectives, other ornaments, other ashlar when you cross its threshold as a prisoner. Everything is self-evident, and nothing is self-evident as soon as we are thrust into a reality whose light blinds us and burns us to the bone. What one tends to call "normal life" may coincide with anticipatory imagination and trivial statement. I buy a newspaper and am "a man who buys a newspaper." The act does not differ from the image through which I anticipated it, and I hardly differentiate myself personally from the millions who performed it before me. Because my imagination did not suffice to entirely capture such an event? No, rather because even in direct experience everyday reality is nothing but codified abstraction. Only in rare moments of life do we truly stand face to face with the event and, with it, reality.

It does not have to be something as extreme as torture. Arrest is enough and, if need be, the first blow one receives. "If you talk," the men with the plain, ordinary faces said to me, "then you will be put in the military police prison. If you don't confess, then it's off to Breendonk, and you know what that means." I knew, and I didn't know. In any case, I acted roughly like the man who buys a newspaper, and spoke as planned. I would be most pleased to avoid Breendonk, with which I was quite familiar, and give the evidence desired of me. Except that I unfortunately knew nothing, or almost nothing. Accomplices? I could name only their aliases. Hiding places? But one was led to them only at night, and the exact addresses were never entrusted to us. For these men, however, that was far too familiar twaddle, and it didn't pay them to go into it. They laughed contemptuously. And suddenly I felt—the first blow.

In an interrogation, blows have only scant criminological significance. They are tacitly practiced and accepted, a normal measure employed against recalcitrant prisoners who are unwilling to confess. If we are to believe the above-cited lawyer, Alec Mellor, and his book *La Torture*,

then blows are applied in more or less heavy doses by almost all police authorities, including those of the Western-democratic countries, with the exception of England and Belgium. In America one speaks of the "third degree" of a police investigation, which supposedly entails something worse than a few punches. France has even found an argot word that nicely plays down a beating by the police. One speaks of the prisoner's "passage à tabac." After the Second World War a high French criminal investigator, in a book intended for his subordinates, still explained in extravagant detail that it would not be possible to forgo physical compulsion at interrogations, "within the bounds of legality."

Mostly, the public does not prove to be finicky when such occurrences in police stations are revealed now and then in the press. At best, there may be an interpellation in Parliament by some leftist-oriented deputy. But then the stories fizzle out; I have never yet heard of a police official who had beaten a prisoner and was not energetically covered by his superior officers. Simple blows, which really are entirely incommensurable with actual torture, may almost never create a far-reaching echo among the public, but for the person who suffers them they are still experiences that leave deep marks—if one wishes not to use up the high-sounding words already and clearly say: enormities. The first blow brings home to the prisoner that he is *helpless*, and thus it already contains in the bud everything that is to come. One may have known about torture and death in the cell, without such knowledge having possessed the hue of life; but upon the first blow they are anticipated as real possibilities, yes, as certainties. They are permitted to punch me in the face, the victim feels in numb surprise and concludes in just as numb certainty: they will do with me what they want. Whoever would rush to the prisoner's aid—a wife, a mother, a brother, or friend—he won't get this far.

Not much is said when someone who has never been beaten makes the ethical and pathetic statement that upon the first blow the prisoner loses his human dignity. I must confess that I don't know exactly what that is: human dignity. One person thinks he loses it when he finds himself in circumstances that make it impossible for him to take a daily bath. Another believes he loses it when he must speak to an official in something other than his native language. In one instance human dignity is bound to a certain physical convenience, in the other to the right of free speech, in still another perhaps to the availability of erotic partners of the same

sex. I don't know if the person who is beaten by the police loses human dignity. Yet I am certain that with the very first blow that descends on him he loses something we will perhaps temporarily call "trust in the world." Trust in the world includes all sorts of things: the irrational and logically unjustifiable belief in absolute causality perhaps, or the likewise blind belief in the validity of the inductive inference. But more important as an element of trust in the world, and in our context what is solely relevant, is the certainty that by reason of written or unwritten social contracts the other person will spare me—more precisely stated, that he will respect my physical, and with it also my metaphysical, being. The boundaries of my body are also the boundaries of my self. My skin surface shields me against the external world. If I am to have trust, I must feel on it only what I *want* to feel.

At the first blow, however, this trust in the world breaks down. The other person, *opposite* whom I exist physically in the world and *with* whom I can exist only as long as he does not touch my skin surface as *border*, forces his own corporeality on me with the first blow. He is on me and thereby destroys me. It is like a rape, a sexual act without the consent of one of the two partners. Certainly, if there is even a minimal prospect of successful resistance, a mechanism is set in motion that enables me to rectify the border violation by the other person. For my part, I can expand in urgent self-defense, objectify my own corporeality, restore the trust in my continued existence. The social contract then has another text and other clauses: an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. You can also regulate your life according to that. You *cannot* do it when it is the other one who knocks out the tooth, sinks the eye into a swollen mass, and you yourself suffer on your body the counter-man that your fellow man became. If no help can be expected, this physical overwhelming by the other then becomes an existential consummation of destruction altogether.

The expectation of help, the certainty of help, is indeed one of the fundamental experiences of human beings, and probably also of animals. This was quite convincingly presented decades ago by old Kropotkin, who spoke of "mutual aid in nature," and by the modern animal behaviorist Lorenz. The expectation of help is as much a constitutional psychic element as is the struggle for existence. Just a moment, the mother says to her child who is moaning from pain, a hot-water bottle, a cup of tea is coming right away, we won't let you suffer so! I'll prescribe you a medi-

cine, the doctor assures, it will help you. Even on the battlefield, the Red Cross ambulances find their way to the wounded man. In almost all situations in life where there is bodily injury there is also the expectation of help; the former is compensated by the latter. But with the first blow from a policeman's fist, against which there can be no defense and which no helping hand will ward off, a part of our life ends and it can never again be revived.

Here it must be added, of course, that the reality of the police blows must first of all be accepted, because the existential fright from the first blow quickly fades and there is still room in the psyche for a number of practical considerations. Even a sudden joyful surprise is felt; for the physical pain is not at all unbearable. The blows that descend on us have above all a subjective spatial and acoustical quality: spatial, insofar as the prisoner who is being struck in the face and on the head has the impression that the room and all the visible objects in it are shifting position by jolts; acoustical, because he believes to hear a dull thundering, which finally submerges in a general roaring. The blow acts as its own anesthetic. A feeling of pain that would be comparable to a violent toothache or the pulsating burning of a festering wound does not emerge. For that reason, the beaten person thinks roughly this: well now, that can be put up with; hit me as much as you want, it will get you nowhere.

It got them nowhere, and they became tired of hitting me. I kept repeating only that I knew nothing, and therefore, as they had threatened, I was presently off, not to the army-administered Brussels prison, but to the "Reception Camp Breendonk," which was controlled by the SS. It would be tempting to pause here and to tell of the auto ride from Brussels to Breendonk through twenty-five kilometers of Flemish countryside, of the wind-bent poplars, which one saw with pleasure, even if the shackles hurt one's wrists. But that would sidetrack us, and we must quickly come to the point. Let me mention only the ceremony of driving through the first gate over the drawbridge. There even the Gestapo men had to present their identification papers to the SS guards, and if, despite all, the prisoner had doubted the seriousness of the situation, here, below the watchtowers and at the sight of the submachine guns, in view of the entrance ritual, which did not lack a certain dark solemnity, he had to recognize that he had arrived at the end of the world.

Very quickly one was taken into the "business room," of which I

have already spoken. The business that was conducted here obviously was a flourishing one. Under the picture of Himmler, with his cold eyes behind the pince-nez, men who wore the woven initials SD on the black lapels of their uniforms went in and out, slamming doors and making a racket with their boots. They did not condescend to speak with the arrivals, either the Gestapo men or the prisoners. Very efficiently they merely recorded the information contained on my false identity card and speedily relieved me of my rather inconsiderable possessions. A wallet, cuff links, and my tie were confiscated. A thin gold bracelet aroused derisive attention, and a Flemish SS man, who wanted to appear important, explained to his German comrades that this was the sign of the partisans. Everything was recorded in writing, with the precision befitting the occurrences in a business room. Father Himmler gazed down contentedly onto the flag that covered the rough wooden table, and onto his people. They were dependable.

The moment has come to make good a promise I gave. I must substantiate why, according to my firm conviction, torture was the essence of National Socialism—more accurately stated, why it was precisely in torture that the Third Reich materialized in all the density of its being. That torture was, and is, practiced elsewhere has already been dealt with. Certainly. In Vietnam since 1964. Algeria 1957. Russia probably between 1919 and 1953. In Hungary in 1919 the Whites and the Reds tortured. There was torture in Spanish prisons by the Falangists as well as the Republicans. Torturers were at work in the semifascist Eastern European states of the period between the two World Wars, in Poland, Romania, Yugoslavia. Torture was no invention of National Socialism. But it was its apotheosis. The Hitler vassal did not yet achieve his full identity if he was merely as quick as a weasel, tough as leather, hard as Krupp steel. No Golden Party Badge made of him a fully valid representative of the Führer and his ideology, nor did any Blood Order or Iron Cross. He had to *torture*, destroy, in order to be great in bearing the suffering of others. He had to be capable of handling torture instruments, so that Himmler would assure him his Certificate of Maturity in History; later generations would admire him for having obliterated his feelings of mercy.

Again I hear indignant objection being raised, hear it said that not Hitler embodied torture, but rather something unclear, “totalitarianism.” I hear especially the example of Communism being shouted at me. And

didn't I myself just say that in the Soviet Union torture was practiced for thirty-four years? And did not already Arthur Koestler . . . ? Oh yes, I know, I know. It is impossible to discuss here in detail the political “Operation Bewilderment” of the postwar period, which defined Communism and National Socialism for us as two not even very different manifestations of one and the same thing. Until it came out of our ears, Hitler and Stalin, Auschwitz, Siberia, the Warsaw Ghetto Wall and the Berlin Ulbricht-Wall were named together, like Goethe and Schiller, Klopstock and Wieland.⁶ As a hint, allow me to repeat here in my own name and at the risk of being denounced what Thomas Mann once said in a much attacked interview: namely, that no matter how terrible Communism may at times appear, it still symbolizes an idea of man, whereas Hitler-Fascism was not an idea at all, but depravity. Finally, it is undeniable that Communism could de-Stalinize itself and that today in the Soviet sphere of influence, if we can place trust in concurring reports, torture is no longer practiced. In Hungary a Party First Secretary can preside who was himself once the victim of Stalinist torture. But who is really able to imagine a de-Hitlerized National Socialism and, as a leading politician of a newly ordered Europe, a Röhm follower who in those days had been dragged through torture? No one can imagine it. It would have been impossible. For National Socialism—which, to be sure, could not claim a single idea, but did possess a whole arsenal of confused, crackbrained notions—was the only political system of this century that up to this point had not only practiced the rule of the antiman, as had other Red and White terror regimes also, but had expressly established it as a principle. It hated the word “humanity” like the pious man hates sin, and that is why it spoke of “sentimental humanitarianism.” It exterminated and enslaved. This is evidenced not only by the *corpora delicti*, but also by a sufficient number of theoretical confirmations. The Nazis tortured, as did others, because by means of torture they wanted to obtain information important for national policy. But in addition they tortured with the good conscience of depravity. They martyred their prisoners for definite purposes, which in each instance were exactly specified. Above all, however, they tortured because they were torturers. They placed torture in their service. But even more fervently they were its servants.

When I recall those past events, I still see before me the man who suddenly stepped into the business room and who seemed to count in

Breendonk. On his field-gray uniform he wore the black lapels of the SS, but he was addressed as "Herr Leutnant." He was small, of stocky figure, and had that fleshy, sanguine face that in terms of popular physiognomy would be called "gruffly good-natured." His voice crackled hoarsely, the accent was colored by Berlin dialect. From his wrist there hung in a leather loop a horsewhip of about a meter in length. But why, really, should I withhold his name, which later became so familiar to me? Perhaps at this very hour he is faring well and feels content with his healthily sunburned self as he drives home from his Sunday excursion. I have no reason not to name him. The Herr Leutnant, who played the role of a torture specialist here, was named Praust. P - R - A - U - S - T. "Now it's coming," he said to me in a rattling and easygoing way. And then he led me through the corridors, which were dimly lit by reddish bulbs and in which barred gates kept opening and slamming shut, to the previously described vault, the bunker. With us were the Gestapo men who had arrested me.

If I finally want to get to the analysis of torture, then unfortunately I cannot spare the reader the objective description of what now took place; I can only try to make it brief. In the bunker there hung from the vaulted ceiling a chain that above ran into a roll. At its bottom end it bore a heavy, broadly curved iron hook. I was led to the instrument. The hook gripped into the shackle that held my hands together behind my back. Then I was raised with the chain until I hung about a meter over the floor. In such a position, or rather, when hanging this way, with your hands behind your back, for a short time you can hold at a half-oblique through muscular force. During these few minutes, when you are already expending your utmost strength, when sweat has already appeared on your forehead and lips, and you are breathing in gasps, you will not answer any questions. Accomplices? Addresses? Meeting places? You hardly hear it. All your life is gathered in a single, limited area of the body, the shoulder joints, and it does not react; for it exhausts itself completely in the expenditure of energy. But this cannot last long, even with people who have a strong physical constitution. As for me, I had to give up rather quickly. And now there was a crackling and splintering in my shoulders that my body has not forgotten until this hour. The balls sprang from their sockets. My own body weight caused luxation; I fell into a void and now hung by my dislocated arms, which had been torn high from behind and were now twisted over my head. Torture, from Latin *torquere*, to twist.

What visual instruction in etymology! At the same time, the blows from the horsewhip showered down on my body, and some of them sliced cleanly through the light summer trousers that I was wearing on this twenty-third of July 1943.

It would be totally senseless to try and describe here the pain that was inflicted on me. Was it "like a red-hot iron in my shoulders," and was another "like a dull wooden stake that had been driven into the back of my head"? One comparison would only stand for the other, and in the end we would be hoaxed by turn on the hopeless merry-go-round of figurative speech. The pain was what it was. Beyond that there is nothing to say. Qualities of feeling are as incomparable as they are indescribable. They mark the limit of the capacity of language to communicate. If someone wanted to impart his physical pain, he would be forced to inflict it and thereby become a torturer himself.

Since the *how* of pain defies communication through language, perhaps I can at least approximately state *what* it was. It contained everything that we already ascertained earlier in regard to a beating by the police: the border violation of my self by the other, which can be neither neutralized by the expectation of help nor rectified through resistance. Torture is all that, but in addition very much more. Whoever is overcome by pain through torture experiences his body as never before. In self-negation, his flesh becomes a total reality. Partially, torture is one of those life experiences that in a milder form present themselves also to the consciousness of the patient who is awaiting help, and the popular saying according to which we feel well as long as we do not feel our body does indeed express an undeniable truth. But only in torture does the transformation of the person into flesh become complete. Frail in the face of violence, yelling out in pain, awaiting no help, capable of no resistance, the tortured person is only a body, and nothing else beside that. If what Thomas Mann described years ago in *The Magic Mountain* is true, namely, that the more hopelessly man's body is subjected to suffering, the more physical he is, then of all physical celebrations torture is the most terrible. In the case of Mann's consumptives, they still took place in a state of euphoria; for the martyred they are death rituals.

It is tempting to speculate further. Pain, we said, is the most extreme intensification imaginable of our bodily being. But maybe it is even more, that is: death. No road that can be travelled by logic leads us to death, but

perhaps the thought is permissible that through pain a path of feeling and premonition can be paved to it for us. In the end, we would be faced with the equation: Body = Pain = Death, and in our case this could be reduced to the hypothesis that torture, through which we are turned into body by the other, blots out the contradiction of death and allows us to experience it personally. But this is an evasion of the question. We have for it only the excuse of our own experience and must add in explanation that torture has an indelible character. Whoever was tortured, stays tortured. Torture is ineradicably burned into him, even when no clinically objective traces can be detected. The permanence of torture gives the one who underwent it the right to speculative flights, which need not be lofty ones and still may claim a certain validity.

I speak of the martyred. But it is time to say something about the tormentors also. No bridge leads from the former to the latter. Modern police torture is without the theological complicity that, no doubt, in the Inquisition joined both sides; faith united them even in the delight of tormenting and the pain of being tormented. The torturer believed he was exercising God's justice, since he was, after all, purifying the offender's soul; the tortured heretic or witch did not at all deny him this right. There was a horrible and perverted togetherness. In present-day torture not a bit of this remains. For the tortured, the torturer is solely the other, and here he will be regarded as such.

Who were the others, who pulled me up by my dislocated arms and punished my dangling body with the horsewhip? As a start, one can take the view that they were merely brutalized petty bourgeois and subordinate bureaucrats of torture. But it is necessary to abandon this point of view immediately if one wishes to arrive at an insight into evil that is more than just banal. Were they sadists, then? According to my well-founded conviction, they were not sadists in the narrow sexual-pathologic sense. In general, I don't believe that I encountered a single genuine sadist of this sort during my two years of imprisonment by the Gestapo and in concentration camps. But probably they *were* sadists if we leave sexual pathology aside and attempt to judge the torturers according to the categories of, well, the *philosophy* of the Marquis de Sade. Sadism as the disordered view of the world is something other than the sadism of the usual psychology handbooks, also other than the sadism interpretation of Freudian analysis. For this reason, the French anthropologist Georges

Bataille will be cited here, who has reflected very thoroughly on the odd Marquis. We will then perhaps see not only that my tormentors lived on the border of a sadistic philosophy but that National Socialism in its totality was stamped less with the seal of a hardly definable "totalitarianism" than with that of *sadism*.

For Georges Bataille, sadism is to be understood not in the light of sexual pathology but rather in that of existential psychology, in which it appears as the radical negation of the other, as the denial of the social principle as well as the reality principle. A world in which torture, destruction, and death triumph obviously cannot exist. But the sadist does not care about the continued existence of the world. On the contrary: he wants to nullify this world, and by negating his fellow man, who also in an entirely specific sense is "hell" for him, he wants to realize his own total sovereignty. The fellow man is transformed into flesh, and in this transformation he is already brought to the edge of death; if worst comes to worst, he is driven beyond the border of death into Nothingness. With that the torturer and murderer realizes his own destructive being, without having to lose himself in it entirely, like his martyred victim. He can, after all, cease the torture when it suits him. He has control of the other's scream of pain and death; he is master over flesh and spirit, life and death. In this way, torture becomes the total inversion of the social world, in which we can live only if we grant our fellow man life, ease his suffering, bridle the desire of our ego to expand. But in the world of torture man exists only by ruining the other person who stands before him. A slight pressure by the tool-wielding hand is enough to turn the other—along with his head, in which are perhaps stored Kant and Hegel, and all nine symphonies, and the World as Will and Representation—into a shrilly squealing piglet at slaughter. When it has happened and the torturer has expanded into the body of his fellow man and extinguished what was his spirit, he himself can then smoke a cigarette or sit down to breakfast or, if he has the desire, have a look in at the World as Will and Representation.

My boys at Breendonk contented themselves with the cigarette and, as soon as they were tired of torturing, doubtlessly let old Schopenhauer be. But this still does not mean that the evil they inflicted on me was banal. If one insists on it, they were bureaucrats of torture. And yet, they were also much more. I saw it in their serious, tense faces, which were not

swelling, let us say, with sexual-sadistic delight, but concentrated in murderous self-realization. With heart and soul they went about their business, and the name of it was power, dominion over spirit and flesh, orgy of unchecked self-expansion. I also have not forgotten that there were moments when I felt a kind of wretched admiration for the agonizing sovereignty they exercised over me. For is not the one who can reduce a person so entirely to a body and a whimpering prey of death a god or, at least, a demigod?

But the concentrated effort of torture naturally did not make these people forget their profession. They were "cops," that was *métier* and routine. And so they continued asking me questions, constantly the same ones: accomplices, addresses, meeting places. To come right out with it: I had nothing but luck, because especially in regard to the extorting of information our group was rather well organized. What they wanted to hear from me in Breendonk, I simply did not know myself. If instead of the aliases I had been able to name the real names, perhaps, or probably, a calamity would have occurred, and I would be standing here now as the weakling I most likely am, and as the traitor I potentially already was. Yet it was not at all that I opposed them with the heroically maintained silence that befits a real man in such a situation and about which one may read (almost always, incidentally, in reports by people who were not there themselves). I talked. I accused myself of invented absurd political crimes, and even now I don't know at all how they could have occurred to me, dangling bundle that I was. Apparently I had the hope that, after such incriminating disclosures, a well-aimed blow to the head would put an end to my misery and quickly bring on my death, or at least unconsciousness. Finally, I actually did become unconscious, and with that it was over for a while—for the "cops" abstained from awakening their battered victim, since the nonsense I had foisted on them was busying their stupid heads.

It was over for a while. It still is not over. Twenty-two years later I am still dangling over the ground by dislocated arms, panting, and accusing myself. In such an instance there is no "repression." Does one repress an unsightly birthmark? One can have it removed by a plastic surgeon, but the skin that is transplanted in its place is not the skin with which one feels naturally at ease.

One can shake off torture as little as the question of the possibilities

and limits of the power to resist it. I have spoken with many comrades about this and have attempted to relive all kinds of experiences. Does the brave man resist? I am not sure. There was, for example, that young Belgian aristocrat who converted to Communism and was something like a hero, namely in the Spanish civil war, where he had fought on the Republican side. But when they subjected him to torture in Breendonk, he "coughed up," as it is put in the jargon of common criminals, and since he knew a lot, he betrayed an entire organization. The brave man went very far in his readiness to cooperate. He drove with the Gestapo men to the homes of his comrades and in extreme zeal encouraged them to confess just everything, but absolutely everything, that was their only hope, and it was, he said, a question of paying any price in order to escape torture. And I knew another, a Bulgarian professional revolutionary, who had been subjected to torture compared to which mine was only a somewhat strenuous sport, and who had remained silent, simply and steadfastly silent. Also the unforgettable Jean Moulin, who is buried in the Pantheon in Paris, shall be remembered here. He was arrested as the first chairman of the French Resistance Movement. If he had talked, the entire *Résistance* would have been destroyed. But he bore his martyrdom beyond the limits of death and did not betray one single name.

Where does the strength, where does the weakness come from? I don't know. *One* does not know. No one has yet been able to draw distinct borders between the "moral" power of resistance to physical pain and "bodily" resistance (which likewise must be placed in quotation marks). There are more than a few specialists who reduce the entire problem of bearing pain to a purely physiological basis. Here only the French professor of surgery and member of the Collège de France, René Leriche, will be cited, who ventured the following judgment:

"We are not equal before the phenomenon of pain," the professor says.

One person already suffers where the other apparently still perceives hardly anything. This has to do with the individual quality of our sympathetic nerve, with the hormone of the parathyroid gland, and with the vasoconstrictive substances of the adrenal glands. Also in the physiological observation of pain we cannot escape the concept of individuality. History shows us that we people of today are more sensitive to pain than our ancestors were, and this from a purely physiological standpoint. I am not speaking here of any hypothetical moral power of resistance, but am staying within the realm of physiology. Pain remedies and narcosis have

contributed more to our greater sensitivity than moral factors. Also the reactions to pain by various people are absolutely not the same. Two wars have given us the opportunity to see how the physical sensitivities of the Germans, French, and English differ. Above all, there is a great separation in this regard between the Europeans on the one hand and the Asians and Africans on the other. The latter bear physical pain incomparably better than the former . . .

Thus the judgment of a surgical authority. It will hardly be disputed by the simple experiences of a nonprofessional, who saw many individuals and members of numerous ethnic groups suffering pain and deprivation. In this connection, it occurs to me that, as I was able to observe later in the concentration camp, the Slavs, and especially the Russians, bore physical injustice easier and more stoically than did, for example, Italians, Frenchmen, Hollanders, or Scandinavians. As body, we actually are not equal when faced with pain and torture. But that does not solve our problem of the power of resistance, and it gives us no conclusive answer to the question of what share moral and physical factors have in it. If we agree to a reduction to the purely physiological, then we run the risk of finally pardoning every kind of whiny reaction and physical cowardice. But if we exclusively stress the so-called moral resistance, then we would have to measure a weakly seventeen-year-old gymnasium pupil who fails to withstand torture by the same standards as an athletically built thirty-year-old laborer who is accustomed to manual work and hardships. Thus we had better let the question rest, just as at that time I myself did not further analyze my power to resist, when, battered and with my hands still shackled, I lay in the cell and ruminated.

For the person who has survived torture and whose pains are starting to subside (before they flare up again) experiences an ephemeral peace that is conducive to thinking. In one respect, the tortured person is content that he was body only and because of that, so he thinks, free of all political concern. You are on the outside, he tells himself more or less, and I am here in the cell, and that gives me a great superiority over you. I have experienced the ineffable, I am filled with it entirely, and now see, if you can, how you are going to live with yourselves, the world, and my disappearance. On the other hand, however, the fading away of the physical, which revealed itself in pain and torture, the end of the tremendous tumult that had erupted in the body, the reattainment of a hollow sta-

bility, is satisfying and soothing. There are even euphoric moments, in which the return of weak powers of reason is felt as an extraordinary happiness. The bundle of limbs that is slowly recovering human semblance feels the urge to articulate the experience intellectually, right away, on the spot, without losing the least bit of time, for a few hours afterward could already be too late.

Thinking is almost nothing else but a great astonishment. Astonishment at the fact that you had endured it, that the tumult had not immediately led also to an explosion of the body, that you still have a forehead that you can stroke with your shackled hands, an eye that can be opened and closed, a mouth that would show the usual lines if you could see it now in a mirror. What? you ask yourself—the same person who was gruff with his family because of a toothache was able to hang there by his dislocated arms and still live? The person who for hours was in a bad mood after slightly burning his finger with a cigarette was lacerated here with a horsewhip, and now that it is all over he hardly feels his wounds? Astonishment also at the fact that what happened to you yourself, by right was supposed to befall only those who had written about it in accusatory brochures: torture. A murder is committed, but it is part of the newspaper that reported on it. An airplane accident occurred, but that concerns the people who lost a relative in it. The Gestapo tortures. But that was a matter until now for the somebodies who were tortured and who displayed their scars at antifascist conferences. That suddenly you yourself are the Somebody, is grasped only with difficulty. That, too, is a kind of alienation.

If from the experience of torture any knowledge at all remains that goes beyond the plain nightmarish, it is that of a great amazement and a foreignness in the world that cannot be compensated by any sort of subsequent human communication. Amazed, the tortured person experienced that in this world there can be the other as absolute sovereign, and sovereignty revealed itself as the power to inflict suffering and to destroy. The dominion of the torturer over his victim has nothing in common with the power exercised on the basis of social contracts, as we know it. It is not the power of the traffic policeman over the pedestrian, of the tax official over the taxpayer, of the first lieutenant over the second lieutenant. It is also not the sacral sovereignty of past absolute chieftains or kings; for even if they stirred fear, they were also objects of trust at the same

time. The king could be terrible in his wrath, but also kind in his mercy; his autocracy was an exercise of authority. But the power of the torturer, under which the tortured moans, is nothing other than the triumph of the survivor over the one who is plunged from the world into agony and death.

Astonishment at the existence of the other, as he boundlessly asserts himself through torture, and astonishment at what one can become oneself: flesh and death. The tortured person never ceases to be amazed that all those things one may, according to inclination, call his soul, or his mind, or his consciousness, or his identity, are destroyed when there is that cracking and splintering in the shoulder joints. That life is fragile is a truism he has always known—and that it can be ended, as Shakespeare says, “with a little pin.” But only through torture did he learn that a living person can be transformed so thoroughly into flesh and by that, while still alive, be partly made into a prey of death.

Whoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world. The shame of destruction cannot be erased. Trust in the world, which already collapsed in part at the first blow, but in the end, under torture, fully, will not be regained. That one's fellow man was experienced as the antiman remains in the tortured person as accumulated horror. It blocks the view into a world in which the principle of hope rules. One who was martyred is a defenseless prisoner of fear. It is *fear* that henceforth reigns over him. Fear—and also what is called resentments. They remain, and have scarcely a chance to concentrate into a seething, purifying thirst for revenge.

How Much Home Does a Person Need?

THE ROAD led through the wintry night in the Eifel, on smugglers' routes to Belgium, whose custom officials and policemen would have refused us a legal crossing of the border, for we were coming into the country as refugees, without passport and visa, without any valid national identity. It was a long way through the night. The snow lay knee-high; the black firs did not look any different from their sisters back home, but they were already Belgian firs; we knew that they did not want us. An old Jew in rubber overshoes, which he was constantly losing, clung to the belt of my coat, groaned and promised me all the riches of the world if only I allowed him to hold on to me now; his brother in Antwerp was an important and powerful man, he said. Somewhere, perhaps in the vicinity of the city Eupen, a truck picked us up and drove us deeper into the country. The next morning my young wife and I stood in the post office at the railway station of Antwerp and telegraphed in faulty school French that we had arrived safely. *Heureusement arrivé*—that was in the beginning of January 1939. Thereafter I crossed so many borders illegally that even now it still seems strange and wondrous to me when I pass a customs post in my car, well provided with all the necessary travel papers. In the process, my heart always beats rather heavily, obeying a Pavlovian reflex.

After we had arrived so “safely” in Antwerp and had confirmed this in a cable to the members of our family who had remained at home, we