



The Ethics of Survival in Contemporary Literature and Culture

Edited by
Rudolf Freiburg
Gerd Bayer

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CHAPTER 1

Survival: An Introductory Essay

Rudolf Freiburg and Gerd Bayer

SURVIVAL AS AN OMNIPRESENT ISSUE IN LIFE AND LITERATURE

“They are in you and in me; they created us, body and mind, and their preservation is the ultimate rationale for our existence. [...] they go by the name of genes, and we are their survival machines.”¹ From the materialistic perspective of biology, survival seems to be an automatic genetic device deeply installed into the dynamic programme of life by evolution leading to a kind of “biologized” ethics.² As a feature of the *élan vital* or the *vis vitalis*, the genetic drive to survive seems to be consistent with Charles Darwin’s and Herbert Spencer’s insights into the dynamics of evolution, namely that those who survive have functions which “happen to be most nearly in equilibrium with the modified aggregate of external forces”.³ Biology defines survival as a life-long struggle and a permanent process, an everyday affair, a *perpetuum mobile* of existential provenience, a ‘mechanical operation of the spirit’ of nature which reduces all ‘animals’, including those called ‘humans’, to well-oiled machines trained to survive deadly

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perils without a will of their own, uncannily reminiscent of the Cartesian concept of ‘beast machines’.⁴

However convincing and elegant this biological explanation of survival may appear, it does not pay enough attention to the multidimensionality of survival as an issue in ‘conscious lives’ of human beings.⁵ With regard to human nature, survival is more than a merely mechanistic, biological process easily to be defined in the sterile language of scientists. In the human world, survival is closely affiliated with complex questions concerning such different areas as history, politics, psychology, theology and religion, society, culture and of course ethics, to name but a few. The omnipresence of the issue of survival cannot be ignored: as long as we live—in a certain sense—we all are survivors; individual survivors of an extremely troublesome day or night, of a disease or an accident, but—and here the topic reveals its infinite potential—also especially after we (maybe as a group or society) have survived natural cataclysms such as pandemics (the actual Covid-19 pandemic included), earthquakes, tsunamis or man-made catastrophes such as wars or genocides, or probably the worst of all, the Holocaust. And the human desire to survive is in fact so strong that it even transcends worldly life and aims at an imagined existence ‘beyond the grave’, manifesting itself as the wish to be resurrected after death.⁶

The omnipresence and the significance of the issue of survival in life are impressively covered in literary texts. Sensitized for the relevance of the *topos* of survival, readers will detect it almost everywhere. The renowned ‘masterworks’ of world literature are populated by ‘survivors’: Homer’s *Odyssey* (eighth–seventh centuries BC), Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* (1605/1615), Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1857), Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879–1880), Leo Tolstoy’s *Resurrection* (1899), Thomas Mann’s *Joseph and his Brothers* (1926–1943), Ian McEwan’s *Enduring Love* (1997), Jon McGregor’s *Even the Dogs* (2010) and Julian Barnes’s *The Noise of Time* (2016); the list could go on endlessly. The literary representation of survival comprises purely imaginary stories and fictions based on authentic experiences, biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, parables, allegories and testimonies. Even the most fictional stories like, for instance, Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) or Kevin Brooks’s *The Bunker Diaries* (2013) reveal valuable insights into the conditions, processes, ethical issues and consequences of actual survival, since they represent an exemplary situation which mirrors the universality of the general survival context, defined as the ‘microeconomic mode’ by Jane Elliott, a

paradigm with an intense exemplary nature “so that the world writ small enables us to understand the world writ large”.⁷ Literature of this kind allows the vicarious experience of approaching the field of liminality, of humans existing in a danger zone, but they exude the aura of “faux-laboratory settings”,⁸ under which “protagonists must make agonized binary choices between horrific options, each of which involves intense physical and potentially deadly consequences. In its fullest manifestations, the aesthetic effect of this mode is brutal in every sense of the word: crude, harsh, ruthless, unrelenting, and unpleasantly precise.”⁹

Fictions based on authentic experience, which may encompass biographies, autobiographies and memoirs, claim a higher degree of seriousness, frequently accompanied by either explicit or implicit warnings, moral exhortations, political agendas, suggestions for social reformation or the necessity to revise obsolete value systems. The borderline between the first and the second category of these ‘survival stories’, however, is far from being clear: when the claim to authenticity is revealed as being not as strong as the reader thought it to be, or when it can even be unmasked as a mere ‘fake’, the reader’s reaction will definitively be changed. Defoe’s *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), an instance of the first case, the ‘realistic’ description of the struggle to survive the plague in London in the seventeenth century, remains completely convincing and instructive for quite a while until one recognizes that the author could not have witnessed the events with his own eyes.¹⁰ Readers will probably react with indignation and disdain when they find out that a survival story, especially one referring to the Holocaust, was forged, as was the case with Benjamin Wilkomirski’s allegedly authentic autobiography *Fragments: Memoirs of a Wartime Childhood* (1995).¹¹ Judged from an ethical point of view, such forgeries are both dangerous and contestable, since they may be misused and become grist to the mill of right-wing deniers of the Holocaust.

Parables and allegories of survival are legion in world literature: the mythical story of Prometheus, punished by Zeus for bringing fire to men, Tantalus and his legendary torments, the myth of Sisyphus, who must forever heave a boulder up a hill only to see it roll down again after he has reached the top, the story of Philomela, whose tongue is cut out so that she cannot speak about having been raped. Myths like these exemplify essential aspects of survival to such a degree that throughout the ages they were accepted as paradigmatic stories suitable to all situations, since as myths they allow a huge potentiality of adaptability to different existential crises where life is at stake. The Bible offers a rich gallery of parables and

allegories, describing such diverse survivors as Noah, Job and Joseph in the Old Testament, or telling the stories of Lazarus, the Good Samaritan or Christ's crucifixion and ensuing resurrection in the New Testament. The many survival stories in legends, sagas and folklore prove that memories of 'survivors' are deeply engraved into the collective memory of mankind, to such a degree even that the *topos* can claim the status of an archetype. Even in contemporary trauma contexts, these allegorical texts with their more or less mythical auras are reanimated, they are widely used as 'prefabricated' narrative stereotypical illustrations of suffering, grief, endeavour, endurance and resilience, and they often replace an individual's testimony, when the sufferer—due to a severe traumatic experience—has completely lost his or her capacity to speak. As 'microeconomic modes', the parables and allegories condense a complex experience to a minimal narrative form which offers various interpretations. In her book *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* (2001), Ruth Kluger, for instance, refers to the Viennese legend of 'Drunken August', who in the dark fell into a ditch filled with corpses only to step out of it on the next day as if nothing had happened, and comments on this parable of survival with the memorable words "We are different. We don't get off so cheaply; the ghosts cling to us".¹² And a legendary story also serves her as an illustration of her own precarious feelings after survival; pointing out the psychological accessory symptoms of survival, she remembers the story of the "Rider of Constance":

In New York the fear of death which had haunted me in Auschwitz gradually turned into its opposite, into depression, the temptation of death. There is an apt German legend about a winter so cold that Lake Constance was frozen solid, which never happens in reality, since the lake is much too large. One night, according to the story, a horseman unwittingly crossed it. When he got to the other shore and had firm ground under his feet he looked back and realized where he had been, what he had done, and how unnatural his survival was. Tradition says he died of shock on the spot. I sympathized with that horseman.¹³

The most significant genre for the literary representation of survival is the 'testimony', which has been intensely analysed by the relatively young discipline of trauma studies.¹⁴ The testimony has an oscillating character; it intends to give insight into the 'reality' of a traumatic experience, signalling at the same time that it will never be capable to do so precisely, because

the impact of the trauma has violated the capability of ‘witnessing’.¹⁵ “Trauma brings about a dissociation of affect and representation: one disorientingly feels what one cannot represent; one numbly represents what one cannot feel.”¹⁶ The testimony is a product of the ‘traumatic memory’ of an individual “possessed by an image or an event”,¹⁷ varying from all other forms of literary endeavours by a specific dialectics of approaching the moment of crisis and simultaneously distancing itself from it by using techniques of postmodern writing, symbolism and *cryptophoria* or by including gothic elements and ghost stories.¹⁸ Testimonies indicate both a ‘failure of the mind’ of the survivor and a general ‘failure of language’,¹⁹ since survivors may not be able to really understand and describe with words what happened to them. They feel impelled to return to the traumatic event again and again, in order to find some ‘meaning’ in it.²⁰ In testimonies, the ‘witnesses’ in a certain sense ‘create themselves’, by leaving the space of silence behind and by establishing an “internal ‘thou’”, a ‘listener’, to whom they can tell their stories.²¹ The testimony does not vie with the ‘factuality’ of historiography, it may even contradict some of the historiographer’s truths.²² In testimonies, “issues of biography and history are neither simply represented nor simply reflected, but are reinscribed, translated, radically rethought and fundamentally worked over by the text”.²³ In its own particular aesthetics of dynamic vagueness, however, it remains paradoxically close to the ‘subjective truth’ of what the individual had to suffer, however distorted some details may appear:

Writing trauma is a metaphor in that writing indicates some distance from trauma (even when the experience of writing is itself intimately bound up with trauma), and there is no such thing as writing trauma itself if only because trauma, while at times related to particular events, cannot be localized in terms of a discrete, dated experience. Trauma indicates a shattering break or cesura in experience which has belated effects. Writing trauma would be one of those telling after-effects in what I termed traumatic and post-traumatic writing (or signifying practice in general).²⁴

The function of literature does not limit itself to a mere mimetic process of imitating survival in textual form. For many survivors, literature offers a kind of solace, reminiscent of Boethius’s *Consolatio Philosophiae* (sixth century); the deep feeling of complete isolation and separation from the ‘normal’ world, which often accompanies survival, can at least slightly be mitigated if the survivor is able to think of antecedent instances of

suffering in literature. Primo Levi's memories of Auschwitz are enriched with references to Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* (1321); placed in the '*l'univers concentrationnaire*',²⁵ in a 'limbo' that defies description in 'his own words', he falls back to a beautiful and terrific poetic collocation of the "dance of dead men" in order to portray the dismal scene before his eyes and he compares the prisoner's torments with those of Tantalus.²⁶

The imaginary homeland of literature and culture could be a psychological support and solace in the camps, but it was by far no guarantee for survival; on the contrary, life in the camps was especially hard for those prisoners who possessed an intellectual background. It was probably the group of intellectuals, professors, teachers, lawyers and doctors who suffered most. Intensely humiliated in their personalities, a profound alienation from their familiar world of cultural education set in. The relationship between literature and survival is Janus-faced: for a small group of the inmates, the remembrance of literary texts offered a momentary chance of escapism from the harsh reality of the camps, the majority, however, preferred not to think and remember at all, to concentrate on the process of survival exclusively, finding no consolation in the rich cultural heritage they had brought with them.

No one has given a more succinct and haunting analysis of the intellectual's life in the camps than Jean Améry, who testifies to the complete breakdown of his former personality and identity. During his time in the camp, he is on the verge of losing confidence in everything he has believed in so far; the sages of philosophy, to whom he as an agnostic (before and after the experiences in the camp) might have turned in different situations of distress, now appear to him as ridiculous "failing household gods",²⁷ as helpless as himself, and he openly admires those believers who resort on their religious or political certainties.²⁸ For him, the attempt to transcend the reality of the camps and escape into an intellectual sphere is completely impossible: "In no other place did the attempt to transcend it prove so hopeless and so shoddy".²⁹ The intellectual capacity to understand the brutal actuality of reality intensified the high degree of tortures all prisoners were exposed to.

THE DEFINITION OF 'SURVIVAL'

'Survival' has a wide scope of meaning.³⁰ Most speakers use the term in order to express the "continuing to live after some event [...]; remaining alive, living on"³¹—the act of surviving something dangerous, often

life-threatening like accidents, calamities, wars or earthquakes. The meaning of the term also includes the following definition: “Continuance after the end or cessation of something else, or after some event; *spec.* continuance of a custom, observance, etc. after the circumstances or conditions in which it originated or which gave significance to it have passed away”.³² In the German language, there is an interesting use of the term, especially in its reflexive form and as an adjective (*‘sich überleben’*, *‘überlebt’*), which expresses the notion of ‘obsolescence’, the idea that something or someone does not fit into the present time any more, circumscribing a deep, frequently existential, dynamic process of intense alienation. Survival is a complex process, for which a general definition can hardly be given. At all events, however, survival requires an ‘object’ (or event) that has to be got rid of or left behind, and these objects such as disease, injury, trauma, war or catastrophe are defined by a high potential of explicit or implicit harm which can be inflicted on human beings.

A definitive feature of survival is ‘agency’, a rather paradoxical notion in a context which—due to the prevalence of suffering—is usually associated with passivity. The term ‘suffering agency’, used in contemporary analyses of survival, aptly illustrates this paradox,³³ since the ‘passive’ sufferer has to remain extremely ‘active’ in order to survive.³⁴ This ‘passive activity’ consists of mourning (*‘Trauerarbeit’*, facing the loss of the former life culture and social recognition), but it also implies endurance, alertness, resilience, ‘involuntary willingness’ to stand blows and injuries, the energy to consolidate or reform value systems, and the capacity to adjust dreams and hopes to the unavoidable factuality of the ‘here and now’ (the harsh, insurmountable ‘reality’ described by Améry). The definition of survival should also heed the fact that survival does not ‘cease’ after an existential crisis has been ‘left behind’. The stereotypical phrases which define the ending of fairy tales, “And they lived on happily ever after (and died together on the same day)”, assume a cynical undertone in this context and have to be replaced by the recognition of—what I choose to call—‘the dialectics of survival’.³⁵

The specific temporality of survival also causes Jacques Derrida to ponder the semantic nuances of ‘surviving’ and ‘survival’, when he differentiates between the process of *survivance* and the supposedly completed pastness of *la survie*. Writing under the impression of his own fatality following his falling ill with cancer, Derrida in his last interview reflects on the way in which survival can, in some cases, outlast the individual. He even suggests that the notion of survival provides an underlying rationale

to most of this writing and thinking: “I have always been interested in this theme of survival, the meaning of which is *not to be added on* to living and dying. It is originary: life *is* living on, life *is* survival”.³⁶ For Derrida, surviving is the element that intrinsically links life and death: “We are all survivors who have been granted a temporary reprieve”.³⁷ The consequences of this insight, in particular for an intellectual whose work is based on writing, affect the attitude in which writing and publishing simultaneously connect finality and continuity, paradoxically linking life and death: “Each time I let something go, each time some trace leaves me, ‘proceeds’ from me, unable to be reappropriated, I live my death in writing”.³⁸ Indeed, for Derrida, survival implicates both existential modes in that it extends beyond the merely physical limitations of human life: “I would not want to encourage an interpretation that situates surviving on the side of death and the past rather than life and the future”.³⁹ Since such a view on surviving (*survivance*) reflects back on any premortal stage, it also affects an understanding of how to live, it creates an acute urgency in experiencing the quality of existence: “survival is not simply that which remains but the most intense life possible”.⁴⁰ To be a survivor, then, is to live life intensely and mindfully.

THE SURVIVAL OF INDIVIDUALS

The significance of survival is an implicit commentary on the value of life:⁴¹ life in general, social life and individual life. Traditionally, the ethics of survival discuss the dynamic interferences of individuals, groups and an adversarial environment. From an individual perspective, the survival theme is intensely affiliated with discourses of ‘natural law’ and ‘natural right’.⁴² As an individual, a human being is separated from the outer world, in both physical, psychic and intellectual ways. The skin of the body is the borderline between ‘me’ and the ‘other’ person, the bones of the skull metaphorically ‘de-fine’ the area of a person’s psychic and intellectual ‘autonomy’. Transgressions of the first borderline, as the horrible ‘first blow’, described by Améry, a violation of the skin, or an eye injury, prove the essential vulnerability of human beings,⁴³ symbolize the invasion of ‘otherness’, into one’s most intimate universe, an event Hans Blumenberg described as an encounter with ‘the absolute’.⁴⁴ As a biological response to this confrontation, the genetic automatism of releasing unconscious survival instincts is triggered. But these instincts are also accompanied by an intellectual justification of any form of activity appropriate to reach this

first and foremost goal. This impulse to defend one's integrity, triggered by the 'selfish genes' and frequently sublimed into acts of secret protest, resistance and resilience,⁴⁵ finds its philosophical explanation and legitimization in the writings of natural law philosophers,⁴⁶ whose influence can be traced back to Aristotelian and Platonic doctrines.⁴⁷ Believing in the factuality of intrinsic values all human beings share, the *ius naturale* establishes an alternative system of rules and principles that may overwrite the regulations of the 'positive law', the product of political power, no matter where and when this positive law was established. From the perspective of such seminal representatives of the *ius naturale* such as Samuel von Pufendorf, Hugo Grotius and Thomas Hobbes, the natural law may abrogate any positive law, if an individual's existence is in danger of death:

And because the condition of man [...] is a condition of Warre of every one against every one; in which case every one is governed by his own Reason; and there is nothing he can make use of, that may not be a help unto him in preserving his life against his enemyes; It followeth, that in such a condition every man has a Right to every thing; even to one another's body. And therefore, as long as this naturall Right of every man to every thing endureth, there can be no security to any man, (how strong or wise soever he be), of living out the time, which Nature ordinarily alloweth men to live. And consequently it is a precept, or generall rule of Reason, *That every man, ought to endeavour Peace, as farre as he has hope of obtaining it; and when he cannot obtain it, that he may seek, and use, all helps and advantages of Warre.* The first branch of which Rule, containeth the first and Fundamentall Law of Nature; which is: *to seek Peace, and follow it.* The Second, the summe of the Right of Nature, which is, *By all means we can to defend our selves.*⁴⁸

Natural law with its inherent 'categorical imperative' of self-defence is based on the concept of man as an autonomous being, and in this respect, it precedes the mentality of the Enlightenment movement of the eighteenth century. The decision to survive a crisis and to defend one's own 'inviolacy' with all means is both, an 'instinctive' and a 'rational' decision, a distinctive feature of human beings by which the automatic biological and genetic reactions to danger of death are ethically seconded. In the context of human survival, Enlightenment philosophy appears as a sustained effort to secure mankind's survival, shaping reason into a tool which—according to Sir Francis Bacon's famous definition—serves for the "use and benefit of man",⁴⁹ by improving the conditions under which human beings are doomed to live. The Enlighteners' fight against prejudices, superstitions

and wrong notions—against the idols of the ‘tribe, the cave, the theatre and the market-place’, in Bacon’s words⁵⁰—is a rationalistic stratagem of survival, leading to the foundation of the Royal Society in England and bringing about a plethora of discoveries (among them that of the solution of the problem of the ‘Longitude’), detections and inventions which have indubitably contributed to improve survival in the modern world. However, it must be counted among the darkest chapters in the intellectual history of mankind that rationality, this strong tool, invented for the benefit and survival of men, was tragically perverted and ended up in a desolate state, commonly referred to as the ‘dialectics of rationality’.⁵¹

The tight and complex nexus between surviving, individuality, identity and rationality permeates most survival stories and shapes the tradition of the ethics of survival clearly based on a staunch belief in the ‘autonomy of man’. But this autonomy is often limited by the forces of mythology and religion. Especially until the period of the Enlightenment, but even in the following centuries the topic of survival had strong mythological and religious connotations. Before the impact of rationalistic philosophy transformed the general view of the world into a scientific observation of reality, both mythology and religion were looked upon as legitimate explanations for the enigmatic character of life; birth, death, happiness, danger, but also accidents, misfortunes, calamities and diseases were regarded as the material manifestations of an abstract metaphysical intention either by pagan mythological divinity, by the Christian God or the Gods of other religions. In the Western world, the concept of the *nemesis divina*, the divine lust for revenge and punishment, played a vital part in attempts to find reasons for all kinds of disaster. Fate or predestination are likely to cancel the belief in the close affiliation between survival and free will. The nature of the biblical God defined by his omniscience, omnipotence and omnipresence rules out the possibility that catastrophes and calamities human beings experience could be interpreted as ‘accidents’; they reveal a higher purpose as lessons or warnings,⁵² being meaningful in themselves, because they implement a divine secret plan concealed from the eyes of the mortals. In the ‘book of nature’, calamities are the ‘moral fables’ with clear messages revealed.⁵³ The classical explanatory system of disaster is of course the doctrine of ‘theodicy’, the attempt to justify the ways of God to Men.⁵⁴ In mythological contexts, it is not in the power of man to secure his survival; a human being is the cue ball of the whimsical goddesses of fate, who mystically spin the threads of man’s life. An insurgency against God’s will or predestined fate cannot but end in tragedy.

Two paradigmatic texts are briefly described to explain the difference between religious contexts of survival and their counterparts, stories which follow a rather agnostic philosophy. In Defoe's *Journal of the Plague* year, belief is an essential precondition for survival. The narrator clearly believes in God, he bases his decision to stay in town, when the plague causes so many people to die, on the interpretation of subtle 'signs', which he seems to have received from Heaven. The story is interspersed with prayers to God, who is asked for solace, support and strength. Survival depends on God, and the sinner is doomed to die. Defoe's narrator leaves no doubt about this simple recognition. In a drastic scene, he describes how a group of drunkards and licentious people make fun of one of the plague's victims, who lost his family during the epidemic, and the rabble even dares to utter blasphemous words. It is with no small degree of satisfaction that the narrator describes how the blasphemers 'were punished by God' only days later, when they, too, died of the plague.⁵⁵

Whereas in Defoe's survival story catastrophes display an inherent teleology of divine provenience, the principle of radical contingency prevails in Voltaire's famous satire *Candide* (1759). Candide and his mentor Pangloss live in a world of violence, rape and war, and although all their experiences can be summarized as an unbearable sequence of injuries, tortures, loss and disasters of all kinds, Pangloss recommends Candide to still believe in the 'best of all possible worlds'; Voltaire, who luxuriously quotes Leibniz's formula of theodicy, presents a grim story of survival where the survivors have kept their life but lost all their happiness. The implication is clear: if survival is in God's hand, it must be a rather inhuman God who sends his creatures on such a journey of loss and pain. Voltaire's story suggests atheism as a counterweight to theodicy.⁵⁶ For Voltaire, survival is not a matter of divine providence, survival is defined by the accidental processes of radical contingency.

THE SURVIVAL OF GROUPS

The survival of groups does not differ in a substantial way from the survival of individuals, but the general conditions are changed. The sudden encounter of a group with the 'absolute', the experience of an unexpected disaster may be as horrible as the traumatic experience of an individual, but nevertheless it is a 'shared experience', and this awareness of a 'community' may offer a kind of solace and support.⁵⁷ The survival of groups is a complex issue, fusing elements of emotion and rationality together,

using psychological stratagems of encouraging each other in the common attempt to survive. This feeling of an intense solidarity is probably the cornerstone of a well-functioning group; its identity rests on complex processes of social practices to intensify the feeling of 'belonging together', cherishing common notions and pursuing the same goals. These social practices, which may be accompanied by attitudes of xenophobia and violent acts of excluding others from the community, can be so strong that they turn a group into a hysterical 'mass' of individuals who have sacrificed their own individuality in favour of the group, as frequently happened in those periods of history when the group spirit was infected by fascistic ideology. But apart from this disdainful mode of group dynamics, a community following unitary principles, sharing the same value systems and acting according to a plan based on common decisions has a fairly good chance to survive many crises. Now single tasks can be distributed to individual members of the group, a successful 'team spirit' may end in the choice of an apt 'leader' who shoulders the duty of coordinating, controlling and adjusting the single acts necessary for overcoming an existential crisis.⁵⁸ The achievements of such a 'survival group' depend on solidarity, honesty, resilience, loyalty to the common goals, the willingness to suspend one's own personal wishes in favour of group interests and the persistent readiness to become a 'cog in a wheel' for a machine programmed to survive. Communication between the members of a group plays a significant role.⁵⁹ The more homogenous, or better 'uniform', the group appears, the greater chances it has to survive catastrophes or pandemics.

But this success comes at a high price. The group may still claim autonomy, but the individual members of the group have to face a gradual loss of liberty and privacy.⁶⁰ As Michel Foucault has analysed with his habitual laserlike precision, 'control', 'surveillance', 'discipline' and 'self-discipline' are the usual companions of establishing stratagems of survival in a group.⁶¹ Under extreme conditions, a society may thus gradually be transformed into a kind of prisonhouse, with the citizens as prisoners who find 'shelter' in this building but simultaneously lose their freedom. To put it more succinctly, the prisonhouse is rather a 'panopticum', a vitreous monument of surveillance, where single inhabitants feel surveilled so intensely that they 'voluntarily' give up any activity which does not conform with common principles or common 'ethics'.⁶²

THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE 'GROUP': THE ETHICS OF SURVIVAL

Although groups show astounding similarities, they differ in various aspects: solidarity, communication, team spirit, the feeling of unity so that in some cases one can hardly define the arbitrary constellation of individuals; sometimes they even seem to be yoked together by chance or fate. In his novel *Enduring Love* (1997), Ian McEwan presents the famous 'balloon scene': several individuals thrown together by chance set out to help an unfortunate pilot, who eagerly tries to keep a helium balloon on the ground; the danger is high because the balloon has landed near an escarpment with a young boy remaining inside the basket. Several helpers arrive at the scene, each of them grasping a rope to keep the balloon down. But then a vicious gust of wind makes the balloon rise again, suddenly the men 'tread air'.⁶³ And each of them has to decide within seconds to let loose or to continue to hold on; if no one lets loose, the balloon will come to the ground again, but if only one of them gives up, the balloon will continue to rise. With the exception of a doctor all men decide to save their own lives. The balloon rises quickly, the doctor holds on for some minutes, then falls down to the ground and is killed. When the narrator later analyses this scene he diagnoses the 'lack of team spirit' and the absence of a 'leader' and summarizes the experience in the words "there was no team".⁶⁴ McEwan's scene presents a clearly dysfunctional group.

But there are worse groups than dysfunctional groups. A group without a leader, no team spirit and no feeling of solidarity is easily transformed into a hostile group.⁶⁵ The individual, who normally finds shelter in the community of like-minded people, suddenly faces his 'fellow beings' as strangers, not to say enemies. The balloon scene exemplifies the antagonism between selfishness and altruism, illustrating the term well known in ethics: 'the trolley dilemma'. Fascistic societies interested in the creation of a uniform nation where all mavericks and 'underdogs' are systematically ostracized are extremely likely to produce such paradoxical 'groups' in their prisonhouses, concentration camps or Gulags. The testimonies of the Holocaust are teeming with reports of 'group life' in the camps, which is frequently compared to the forced co-existence of poor souls in Hell.⁶⁶ It is the combination of two archetypes, that of 'Robinson Crusoe' and that of a 'living Hell' that Philip Roth addresses when he interviews Primo Levi and asks him about his fate in the camps:

What's recounted there reads to me like the story of Robinson Crusoe in Hell, with you, Primo Levi, as Crusoe, wrenching what you need to live from the chaotic residue of a ruthlessly evil island. What struck me there, as throughout the book, was the extent to which thinking contributed to your survival, the thinking of a practical, humane scientific mind. Yours doesn't seem to me a survival that was determined by either brute biological strength or incredible luck. It was rooted, rather, in your professional character: the man of precision, the controller of experiments who seeks the principle of order; confronted with the evil inversion of everything he values. Granted you were a numbered part in an infernal machine, but a numbered part with a systematic mind that has always to understand. At Auschwitz you tell yourself, 'I think too much' to resist: 'I am too civilized'. But to me the civilized man who thinks too much is inseparable from the survivor. The scientist and the survivor are one.⁶⁷

Levi agrees that he felt like Robinson but insists that he not only fought for his own survival but for that of his sick comrades too.⁶⁸ This correction of Roth's suggestion is remarkable because Levi here defends the notion that there were traces of humaneness, empathy and charity even in the camps. Although similar observations can be verified in the testimonies of other Holocaust survivors, the prevailing notion one gets from reading their reports is the gradual and universal loss of the feeling of group solidarity. Survival in such a group comes close to the idea of 'survival against the interest of the other members of the group'. The bitter maxim 'Every man for himself' is one of the most essential lessons Elie Wiesel has to learn when he enters the concentration camp,⁶⁹ and—due to similar experiences—Alexander Donat calls the camp a world in which "the doomed devoured each other".⁷⁰ This harsh observation, which circumscribes the Hobbesian notion of the lupine nature of man (*homo homini lupus est*), could have been meant metaphorically, but some witnesses seem to remember actual instances of cannibalism.⁷¹ In a certain way, the camps could be looked upon as a sinister microcosm of human life and human survival under extreme conditions. Levi compares them to 'laboratories' where human behaviour can be studied minutely, and he emphasizes the camps were a frame for a "gigantic social and biological experiment",⁷² where the fight for survival can be observed in its most primeval shape.⁷³ Some descriptions go even further and cynically call the camp a "perfect Skinner Box", where human behaviour can be predicted with the precision derived from behaviouristic studies.⁷⁴

Under the fiendish conditions of the life in the camps, the age-old antagonism between instinct and reason, between biological and genetic drives and morality and ethics, selfishness and altruism is extremely exacerbated. The strategic reduction of human beings to their biological essence, sadly described as ‘bare life’ by Levi, transforms a man into a figure Giorgio Agamben has called ‘*homo sacer*’.⁷⁵ The notions of hunger, thirst, coldness, sickness, pain, fatigue and fear, which people develop under ‘normal’ civilized conditions in a society based on principles of empathy and mutual support, assume an unimaginable, extremely dark undertone in the testimonies of Holocaust survivors. Even if most survivors eagerly attempted not to allow such a personal deterioration that would transform them into ‘*Muselmänner*’, it was extremely difficult to reserve a rudiment of human dignity under these circumstances. The fascist politics of depersonalization found its extremity in the camps, and the never-ending sequence of bodily ordeals, biological needs, pain and fear led to a re-evaluation or even utter destruction of ethical systems. Of course, Emmanuel Levinas’s ethics, based on the responsibility for the other and his face,⁷⁶ never loses its validity, not even under such harsh conditions, but probably nobody could live up to this or any other ethical system, neither that of Kantian deontology nor that of utilitarianism, because he or she simply did not have the strength or the courage to do so.

One simple precondition for Levinas’s ethics is the implication of his moral maxim that a human face has to be recognized as a ‘human face’, but in the camps everything was systematically planned in order to deprive inmates of their human shape. Pain, hunger, disease, fear and constant ordeal turned personalities into living corpses; only very few were successful in keeping a dignified appearance, some gave up washing themselves any more; their faces were covered by dirt and dust. An extremely execrable stratagem to reduce human dignity to nil was the affront by breaking taboos, what Des Pres calls the “Excremental Assault”:⁷⁷ the unbearable hygienic conditions, the spare water available in the camps, the scarcity of toilets, the absence of toilet paper, the omnipresence of excrements transformed human beings into walking cadavers, exuding a terrible stench. This strategic alienation, which often caused an ensuing self-alienation for the victim, was planned to create an ontological distance between the guardians and the prisoners, and it facilitated the tormenting and killing of the cynically ‘dehumanised humans’ in an appalling way. The Nazis used a cynical form of scatology as an instrument to prevent survival.

This does not mean that exceptions to this ‘normalcy’ of the harsh ethics of survival did not occur,⁷⁸ but they were comparably rare, as everyone can comprehend. The ethics of survival are based on a re-evaluation and ‘reformation’ of coherent ethical systems, coming close to the doctrines of ‘natural law’. As Levi has described it, the values of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are consistently under attack and have to be redefined.⁷⁹ People can ask themselves to what extent it would be possible to stand pain before they would give in to the terrible mechanisms of betraying their personality, their moral and most cherished ethical notions under torture. One can probably not exclude the possibility that ‘one would do anything’ after the infliction of pain exceeds certain limits.⁸⁰

Stealing is certainly regarded as a transgression in most civilized societies, but for the survivor of extreme calamities stealing bread becomes the moral imperative of natural law, for instance redefined as a harmless ‘*Mundraub*’ in the German language. But stealing bread from another starving prisoner reveals its dubious ethical quality and may lead to a feeling of guilt, when the ‘deed’ is remembered later. The ethical dilemmas of prisoners become even more drastic when the other person’s life is at stake, for example, if one may only get the necessary ration of food or to see the next day when one is willing to betray a comrade to the guardians or the ‘*kapos*’. About the gas chambers, camp survivors reported that—when the doors of the deadly room were opened again—the strongest persons could be seen lying on the top of the heaps of corpses because they trampled on the weaker prisoners in their agony of suffocating, creating one of the most ghastly icons of the fight for survival in the face of death.⁸¹ Nobody can evaluate this situation from a moral or ethical point of view, it is beyond human imagination and human value systems, probably singular in its sheer atrocity. Biologists would certainly refer to the survival automatism of the body, and neuroscience would highlight the fact that the brain—falling back on primeval evolutionary algorithms—in such a moment of distress would incapacitate any residuals of rationality, morality or ethics.

The survival of the fittest revealed itself in various bizarre manifestations sometimes blurring the line between ‘perpetrators’ and ‘victims’; Harry Haft, for instance, a Jewish boxer from Poland admired for his athletic body, his strength and his skills in the ring, was ordered to fight against other inmates of the camp; if he won, he could count on extra rations of food which secured his survival.⁸² Some of his opponents in the boxing ring did not survive the cruel fight; if they were injured, they were

sent to the gas chambers.⁸³ Even if it was against his ‘will’, the ‘victim’ Haft was transformed into a tragic ‘perpetrator’. Levi describes some representatives of the category of ‘survivalists’ in the camp, but the term ‘survivalist’, which exudes a special charm in the equivalent German ‘*Überlebenskünstler*’ (with a stress on the ‘art of survival’), has lost any glory in the context of the camps. Levi’s ‘Schepsel’, ‘the engineer Elias Lindzin’, ‘Henry’ and also the ‘strong dwarfish person’ he tells of are representatives of what he calls the ‘primitive state’ of existence, cultivating techniques of deception, primeval self-discipline, simulation of power, Darwinian assimilation and a reckless selfishness bordering on amorality.⁸⁴ Personalities whom, as Levi says, he would not like to see again in his lifetime.

The question of survival and heroism is often discussed, and Des Pres reminds his readers that the Holocaust survivors were no heroes:

If by heroism we mean the dramatic defiance of superior individuals, then the age of heroism is gone. If we have in mind glory and grand gesture, the survivor is not a hero. He or she is anyone who manages to stay alive in body *and* in spirit, enduring dread and hopelessness without the loss of will to carry on in human ways. That is all.⁸⁵

Des Pres’s observation may be right, but—at least when inmates were willing to care for each other, to share their little food with each other, or to support and help someone who was even more needy than themselves—these deeds of benevolence and empathy definitively come close to a kind of moral and ethical heroism under these hellish conditions.

THE DIALECTICS OF SURVIVAL

The ritual repeats itself in various shapes: the survivors of mining disasters are acclaimed by journalists and congratulated on their ‘luck’; in interviews, the survivor of the attack on the Twin Towers comments on the unimaginable bliss he feels after being rescued and thanks the fire fighters; the survivor of a Tsunami publicly prays to God that his life has been saved; a group of Holocaust survivors is saluted on occasion of a memorial ceremony. On first glance, survival seems to be closely associated with ‘happiness’, ‘luck’, ‘bliss’ and ‘felicity’: the terrible past has been overcome, the future promises happy prospects. But the notion of the ‘happy survivor’, the person relishing in his ‘success’, is deceptive at best. Survival

reveals a darker side, a dialectics which renders all idyllic imaginations of a comfortable ‘afterlife’ absurd. It is true, someone who has survived a car accident may have the feeling to be ‘born again’ and his life may prove to be as valuable as it had been before. But especially the survivors of extremely traumatic experiences caused by ‘fellow-men’ often witness a dubious ‘resurrection’ from death, feeling “tarred and feathered for life”, to borrow a memorable expression from Julian Barnes.⁸⁶

In the camps there was an uncanny feeling of being ‘alive and dead’ at the same time; the intense perception of pain, hunger, thirst and coldness was accompanied by the weird experience of time standing still. The a-temporality of the extreme condition inspired the notion of merely being walking corpses, moving carcasses. And it is the fiendish aftermath of extreme trauma that clocks never resume their former trustworthiness after severe injuries; traumatic experiences cannot be overcome without difficulties, they remain an integral part of one’s whole personality, “like a bullet lodged in the soul where no surgery can reach it”.⁸⁷

In traumatic memory the event somehow registers and may actually be relived in the present, at times in a compulsively repetitive manner. It may not be subject to controlled, conscious recall. But it returns in nightmares, flashbacks, anxiety attacks, and other forms of intrusively repetitive behaviour characteristic of an all-compelling frame. Traumatic memory (at least in Freud’s account) may involve belated temporality and a period of latency between a real or fantasized early event and a later one that somehow recalls it and triggers renewed repression or foreclosure and intrusive behaviour. But when the past is controllably relived, it is as if there were no difference between it and the present. Whether or not the past is reenacted or repeated in its precise literality, one feels as if one were back where reliving the event, and distance between here and there, then and now, collapses.⁸⁸

Time sequence is cancelled by traumatic experiences, the past threatens to become an everlasting past, turning the present ‘book of life’ into a palimpsest where the subtext of the past is so strong that it permanently overwrites the actual life story. Flashbacks illuminate the present ‘here’ and ‘now’ with dark colours and transform it into an ephemeral moment behind which the contours of the terrible past emerge with unmitigated intensity. The loss of trust prevails in the ‘new life’:

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.⁸⁹

The loss of personal autonomy that followed upon the humiliations in the camps is never remedied. The vulnerability and precariousness of human life,⁹⁰ felt in its extremity in the concentration camps, conquer the rest of the survivor's existence, inspiring the notion that the life he leads is no longer really 'his own'. He has to share it with those whom he cannot forget, the ghosts of the past, the spectres of the common experience of suffering. The voices muted in the gas chambers or stifled by the terrible executions are still to be heard, the figures can still be seen wandering forever in their absurd suffering. It would be premature to define this new form of suffering as "concentration camp syndrome";⁹¹ it is not so much a symptom of disease but a sign of the will to survive. On the one hand, it may be 'resentment' which "nails" every survivor "onto the cross of his ruined past",⁹² but there is also a strong element of mourning and (unnecessary) 'guilt'. Elegy accompanies survival with a sad undertone; sometimes as persistent as an unbearable tinnitus, melancholy brings about darker colours of life distorting the clear contours of what other people might regard as 'reality'. The traumatized survivor sees the real world as a blend of empiric factuality with strong elements of both surrealism and unreality, finding their literary expressions in gothic elements.⁹³ The loss of coherence, the tendency towards fragmentarization, disrapture, absence of orientation, disintegration of value systems and logic, represented impressively by postmodern techniques of writing,⁹⁴ frequently become an integral part of the survivor's new 'life'.

The title of the German edition of Kluger's book *weiter leben* alludes to this dialectics of survival, suggesting interpretations such as 'I am allowed to live on' as well as 'Do I have to live on?' They manifest the dubious quality of life after a catastrophe. Kluger vividly describes her life-long nervousness and restlessness, the obsession of the drive to leave any place behind in an effort of permanent flight.⁹⁵ In his essayistic reflection on suicide, Améry aphoristically states that the 'world of a happy person is different from that of an unhappy person';⁹⁶ any state of 'happiness' is infiltrated by traumatic memory and the loss of trust in its persistence. Melancholy and a sense of guilt (even if it only exists in the eyes of the person concerned) form a toxic mixture leading to deep depression, utter despair and sometimes even the wish to commit suicide. The *topos* of the 'suicidal Holocaust survivor', paradoxical at first glance only, reveals its

deepest meaning when one reads the life stories of Jean Améry, Bruno Bettelheim, Paul Celan and Primo Levi,⁹⁷ stories of survival abruptly ended by ‘voluntary’ death. The alienation forced on the prisoners of the camps was so intense that—together with the ensuing self-alienation—reality, even the reality after the catastrophe, has become ‘*un-heimlich*’, to use a Freudian term; it refers to the idea of an existential homelessness, which finds a literary expression in Albert Camus’s books,⁹⁸ the feeling of not ‘belonging’ to any place, situation, time or environment any more. The awareness that despite being ‘alive’ one has fallen through the safety nets of the basic sense of trust creates challenges for the rest of one’s life. There may be instances of genuine guilt (who would dare to judge?) but often the feeling of guilt remains vague though persistent; Kluger dedicates a whole paragraph to the *topos* of the survivor’s guilt:

Survivor guilt does not mean that you think you have no right to live. Speaking for myself, I never believed I should have died because others were killed. I hadn’t done anything bad to anyone. Why should I pay? It’s a question of debt rather than guilt, though these ideas are closely bound together, as in the Lord’s Prayer (“Forgive us our debts”) or in the word *debit*, and in German the words are related, the one *Schuld*, guilt, the other *Schulden*, debt. One remains a debtor and yet doesn’t quite know to whom one owes the debts. 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. One is debtor and creditor at the same time and is doomed to perform surrogate actions, alternating between giving and demanding: senseless actions in the flickering light or reason.⁹⁹

Kluger finds appropriate words to fend off any suspicion of guilt, but, nevertheless, her further meditations upon survival betray a clear unwellness; the survivor cannot but compare his ‘fate’ with that of his fellow sufferers, and even from them he is separated:

Now comes the problem of this survivor story, as of all such stories: we start writing because we want to tell about the great catastrophe. But since by definition the survivor is alive, the reader inevitably tends to separate, or deduct, this one life, which she has come to know, from the millions who remain anonymous. [...]

We who escaped do not belong to the community of those victims, my brother among them, whose ghosts are unforgiving. By virtue of survival,