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**Writing the Cry of the Body:
Embodied Memory in Charlotte Delbo and Sarah Kofman**

The women pass by near us. They are shouting. They shout and we do not hear anything...
Their mouths shout, their arms stretched out toward us shout, everything about them is shouting.
Each body is a shout. All of them torches flaming with cries of terror, cries that have assumed
female bodies. Each one is a materialized cry, a howl – unheard.
Charlotte Delbo 33

To speak: it is necessary – *without (the) power*: without allowing language, too powerful,
sovereign, to master the most aporetic situation, absolute powerlessness and very distress, to
enclose it in the clarity and happiness of daylight.
Sarah Kofman
Smothered Words 10

Of Bodies and Words

Charlotte Delbo and Sarah Kofman both struggle with how to speak and write about their experiences during the Holocaust. For both women, language turns out to be inadequate to the task of describing their suffering and problematic insofar as it is linked with the desire for closure and resolution. Nevertheless, they admit the need to speak *something* and seek a way to remember so that the Holocaust does not become an unheard howl. Their writings consequently display gaps and resistance to narrativity, resisting any sense of coherence, unity, or finality in an effort to find a means of hearing. This is akin to what Jan Zwicky calls lyric memory, in which “Lyric attempts to listen – to remember – *without* constructing, without imposing a logical or temporal order on experience. *This*, it says. *This*. *And this*. *And this*.” (Jan Zwicky essay 98). As is clear from Delbo, one must listen to the “materialized cry” of the body as an essential figure of memory. In the struggle for voice, the body becomes a witness – a new voice – and its presence in memory is at the same time a ghost of material being and a voice of its own that does not

engage in the mastery of written or spoken language. In other words, the body cannot hide its fragility, vulnerability, and precarity, and presents a non-narrative, lyric response to the circumstances in which it is enmeshed.

Delbo and Kofman understand precisely this merging of embodiment, witness, and memory as they represent the body in traumatic circumstances. They evoke the body under stress, marking the moments where, when all other speech breaks down and only the “silent cry” emerges, the body bears the brunt of witness, solidarity, and sheer material being; their attention to the body illuminates the gaps that cannot be contained by language. Speaking of the body’s vulnerability becomes a means of speaking without power and mastery while acknowledging the diversity of trauma it experiences.

However, despite a melding of focus, their evocation of the body differs greatly: Delbo, a French resistance fighter, contemplates the suffering bodies of the women with whom she endures Auschwitz. At various moments, she both remembers and re-members parts of their body, observing one woman’s black curls or another one’s beautiful shoulders, and thus implicitly notes how these pieces of the body relate to a specifically female existence within the camps. Kofman was a young child at the outbreak of the war in France. Having been raised in a strict Jewish home, Kofman grapples with the realities of hiding, including having to eat non-kosher food being served by the woman who shelters her. In Kofman’s writing, her body signals a tension not just between foods, but between contrasting paradigms of thought, especially between the Judaism of her youth and the Christian and Greek philosophy of her hiding place and her later schooling. It also attests to the continued “indigestibility” of her father’s death and the unpalatability of her relationship with her mother, the latter a paradox in terms of Kofman’s

philosophical goal of “excavating” the maternal in the work of famous philosophers (Glowacka 50).

Though both women write the body from drastically different perspectives, Delbo and Kofman work to give a body, a material shape, to their experiences within certain institutional circles – namely, collective French history and philosophy – that have tended to marginalize the female body. Both women engender their texts in these masculine milieus as they simultaneously explore the bounds of representation. I argue that Delbo and Kofman grapple with the trauma of their experiences through an attention to the gendered body in memory, and, more precisely, that this focus on embodied memory functions to challenge the institutional discourses out of which these women write. In mourning the bodies of her dead comrades, Delbo writes the female body into France’s collective history, a national account that effaces the contribution of women resistance fighters in the struggle for freedom. Kofman, indelibly marked by her Jewish childhood in hiding and the lifelong mourning of the loss of her father, problematizes the boundaries between philosophy and biography by means of the unstable relationship that links her philosophical work with her few published scraps of autobiography. Both women implicitly re-write larger structures of male collective memory by exploring their embodied responses to the trauma of the Holocaust through the fragmented bodies of their work.