SALVATION THROUGH LITERATURE

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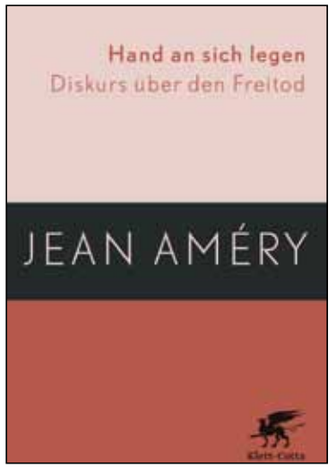
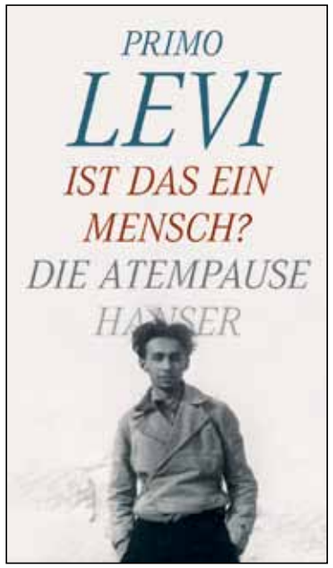
Survival – a basic human instinct. Science proved long ago that our bodies are meant for this alone. Natural sensations such as hunger and pain signal to us that our bodies require attention, and remind us that our survival depends on various factors within our control. But what happens when external forces threaten survival or make it impossible, as is the case for a person who has helplessly found himself at the mercy of an unpredictable, uncontrollable power, which has determined his demise by placing him in a labour or extermination camp? In her project "Erzählen, um zu überleben: an den Grenzen des Sagbaren" ("Retelling to survive: on the boundaries of expressibility"), Marisa Siguan describes the survival strategies adopted by people who have suffered historical traumas and have tried to overcome these by writing literature, providing us with eyewitness accounts and works of remembrance. "Writing an account of life in an extermination camp and sharing it with others is a means of survival. Literature, with its aestheticisation and literary constructions, lies at the heart of this. Simply reporting the facts does not help," explains Siguan, who conducted research at FRIAS as an External Fellow of the School of Language & Literature until March 2012 in collaboration with the interdisciplinary research group "Zur narrativen Bewältigung von Bedrohung, Verlust und Trauma" ("Narrative Coping with Threat, Trauma and Loss"). "In this respect, literature is an act of survival."

One of the research foci of the literary scholar, who teaches at the University of Barcelona, is "camp literature" as a product of the Holocaust, which is seen as an important category of 20th century literature. Survivors of the Third Reich's labour and extermination camps, such as the Austrian Jean Améry and the Italian Primo Levi, recount the horror using oppressive imagery. Siguan shows how this narrative processing of experiences is used as a survival strategy. She feels that two aspects of the process are especially important: "When authors remember, they try to make sense of their past and in doing so, also make sense of their present, simultaneously rebuilding their identities and restoring those of other victims." The psychological process of remembering, describing and recounting an experience is therefore intended to ensure the writer's own survival and at the same time, the written account should prompt the reader himself to remember. "Literature is often created in defiance of death – just think of Scheherazade's storytelling. And telling stories means that somebody is there, listening. It's a way of moving forward", Siguan continues.

She is trying to uncover the literary strategies used by the authors to share the unspeakable. The unspeakable is the trauma hidden behind the descriptions of the experiences lived through, something which Max Frisch referred to as "the white space between the words". Authors needed to find a style of writing which made it possible for the horrors suffered to be at least perceivable in the narrative. For truths are rarely conveyed through linguistic and literary means, a phenomenon which was being discussed by authors and poets belonging to the linguistic scepticism school of thought, such as Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Rainer Maria Rilke, as early as at the turn of the 20th century. So how can something which exists beyond language be retold? In her study, Marisa Siguan names two literary devices which the authors were able to use to make the unspeakable more easily expressible, namely aestheticisation and alienation. Vivid language in particular makes it possible for events to be portrayed which could otherwise not be depicted with words alone. "Imagery played a highly significant role for most authors. They used images which abruptly force the senses to awaken the past in the present," explains Siguan. Images act as ciphered messages of the trauma undergone, symbolising it at the same time. For example, an immediate connection is made between a chimney and the crematoriums at the extermination camps, and this object therefore represents the writer's suffering.

The authors create distance between the reawakened trauma by using the stylistic device of extreme laconism. Siguan points out that the exhausting act of describing the unspeakable can be a shock for the author. Leaving out all the adjectives necessary for an in-depth account therefore creates distance and makes it possible for the horror to be depicted.





Ultimately, leaving long intervals between experiencing and recounting an event is also characteristic of the type of autobiographical literature in which authors come to terms with emotional shock. Only Primo Levi, who spent eleven months imprisoned as a forced labourer in Auschwitz, was capable of writing about his experiences a mere two years after being freed, yet his book, "If This Is a Man", was largely overlooked when it was first published. "A reading audience needs time to develop as well," explains Siguan. Levi's account remained unnoticed until the large Auschwitz trials during the 1960s. "It is not only the unspeakable which is at play here but also the act of listening. And people were not prepared to listen for a long time."

Marisa Siguan's studies have above all shown that using language to both mask and depict horror has created a literary area of conflict, in which sharing the unspeakable guarantees the emotional survival of the traumatised writer. By building a relationship between describing, writing accounts and remembering, and making emotional scars visible by opening them up to others, literature becomes a response to the survival instinct. *(ab)*