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Who Needs Holocaust Studies? Writing Structurally, Reading Corporeally

In the text I argue that Holocaust studies, to an extent, are part of the global trend within contemporary human studies to include issues such as body of the author, corporeal aspect of a narrative, and autobiographical context etc. in its theory. This trend, however in the case of Holocaust studies remains in close correlation with the paradox inscribed in the genre of a (Holocaust) testimony as the main model for any Holocaust text: being “in” and “out” of it, conveying the “objective” truth and confirming it by virtue of a witness “who was there”. Based on this observation and after quoting examples of Holocaust writing in disciplines such as historiography or literary studies, (considered as specific genres of Holocaust writing, nevertheless governed by narrative rules equal to those present within genres such as diary, novel etc.) I come to the conclusion that the paradox has become the core feature of the discipline which aims to define its own boundaries by creating a separate, yet familiar methodology and language corresponding to the paradoxical ontology of the texts it analyses.

Keywords: Holocaust studies, theory of knowledge, philosophy of knowledge, corpo-reality

Introduction

There's a long lasting debate within Holocaust studies between what may be called the particularists and the universalists.¹ The most spectacular point in the debate was the Hayden White–Berel Lang controversy which, although it took place over two decades ago, aptly summarises the binary coding of the whole debate. It can be put down to the first one of them saying that when we write, read or think about the Holocaust, we employ the very same narrative structures that we do in case of every other event in history and the other one claiming – that we don't.²

Therefore to an extent and in a rather crude oversimplification it is possible to translate that controversy to a binary code of contemporary epistemology: Hayden White is the constructivist, Berel Lang – the realist. Of course, when we get to the bottom of things, they are not as clear-cut as we'd like them to be. For example, Lang, in the key chapter of his *Act and Idea in The Nazi Genocide* (Lang 1990) (note the performative identification of the idea and the act) entitled “Ethical Content as Literary Form” (note the Tynianow-like identification of the content and the form), points out that:

[Literary] Writings are, in effect, lenses through which all present knowledge and judgment – indeed, all that can be imagined – of the Nazi genocide are made possible; without their provision of evidence and a community of discourse, even personal experience of memory would be insufficient (ibid., 118).

These words sound almost as if one was reading *Metahistory*, Hayden White's main *oeuvre*, i.e. just as if Lang was saying “the epistemological frames of our concept of the Holocaust are what literary, autobiographical, historical and other narratives told us”. And although at the end his argument is quite the opposite (the point of his book is that there is only one ethically adequate form for Holocaust testimonies: document), I will argue that this stance, so troublingly distant from how we think of literature today, yet not completely ignorant of it,

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2 The debate took partly place during a conference organised by Saul Friedländer. The proceedings have been published in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”* (Friedländer 1992). The articles presenting some of the threads of the discussion are *The Representation of Limits* (Lang 1992) and *Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth* (White 1992).

in fact metonymises a deeper paradox founding the Holocaust literary studies as a separate discipline. The paradox is that the Holocaust studies constitute a branch of knowledge very often believed to be a conservative one but, at the same time, it seems to follow and include the newest, sometimes revolutionary trends in philosophy and literary studies: animal studies (Dominick LaCapra), women studies (Joan Ringelheim, Bożena Karwowska), and postcolonial studies (Marianne Hirsch) etc. Therefore each approach to the Holocaust writing from within the discipline is marked by an attitude reminiscent of Derek Attridge's (2004) concept of "singularity of literature", only with an ethical twist which may seem almost like moral blackmail. For example Ruth Franklin in *A Thousand Darkneses* notes that:

when faced with an ostensibly nonfiction book having to do with the Holocaust, the default response of scholars and critics, as well as the general reading public, has been to extinguish the critical faculty and retreat to a position of all-accepting deference (Franklin 2011).

Whatever one calls it: "blackmail", "topos of unspeakability" etc., Holocaust studies do request that Holocaust writing be treated as "something else", and as such it can also be perceived as a reflection of the trouble that human studies in general face when they employ notions such as "experience": the problem of being "in" and "out" of it, conveying the "objective" truth and confirming it by virtue of a witness "who was there", being inside one's own recount of his life which transcends the experience and the interpersonal means of communication (see Young 1988). In effect one cannot but help and notice that however Holocaust writing (understood here as virtually all kinds/genres: literary writing, diaries, memoirs, historiography, literary-theoretical analyses etc.) may have emerged from the historical perspective in a close correlation with or, as some may claim, even owing them its popularity (Rothberg 2009), its contemporary status is firmly based on a topos of uniqueness, separating the aforementioned paradox from similar ones exposed by other fields of studies. To put it briefly: it is, as Michael Rothberg convincingly argues (*ibid.*, 6), possible to perceive memory of the Holocaust from a multidirectional perspective, i.e. as a memory completing and completed by other (trauma) narratives (Armenian genocide, massacres in Sudan etc.), but the discipline itself creates its own identity on a more competitive than conciliatory level. Even when it takes part in a wider trend within human studies in general (as stated above) or employs notions, methods

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and tools taken from other disciplines (which I will try to present in the following parts of the article). The Lang-White debate is exemplary for that state of facts in that one would expect “the realist” Berel Lang to act reluctantly towards any operation on a Holocaust text employing any cultural studies’ interpretative tools related to “the ethical turn” or the “corporeal turn” but in consequence he himself as an (academic) Holocaust writer uses tools created within other genres of academic discourse (“discipline”) in response to these shifts within human studies.

Who needs the Holocaust experience?

Johnathan Culler in *The Literary in Theory* (2007) addresses the issue of communal identity and the way it went since Benedict Anderson’s seminal approach in the context of the everlasting struggle of the humanities to survive:

Literature may have lost its centrality as a specific object of study, but its modes have conquered: in the humanities and the humanistic social sciences everything is literary. Indeed, if literature is, as we used to say, that mode of discourse which knows its own fictionality, then, insofar as the effect of theory has been to inform disciplines of both the fictionality and the performative efficacy of their constructions, there seems a good deal to be said in favor of Simpson’s account of the situation of disciplines (Culler 2007, 41).³

His attempt to put humanities back on the disciplinary top list leads him to an interesting observation on a very particular thing about the Western literature:

in the common plot [where] characters, we say, “discover” who they are, not by learning something about their past but by acting in such a way that they become what then turns out, in some sense, to have been their “nature” (ibid., 34).⁴

3 The author refers to David Simpson’s book *The Academic Postmodern and the Rule of the Literature* (1995) in which he argues that most of academic disciplines employ notions created within human studies and in particular – literary criticism.

4 The passage is already known from the author’s seminal work *Literary Theory*. I quote his newest book in order to point to the new context it receives in the aspect of the attempt to re-establish the position of the humanities.

His point is that there is more to literature than just the self-awareness, the knowledge of its limits – there is also the experience transcending both the individual and the community which, at the same time, can be communicated only by social means.

By that logic we always read literature – and literary theory – as something presenting the process of becoming that something, something that includes its identification with its final state of existence. It's like reading an autobiography. Or better yet – reading autobiographically: the epistemological stance of the reader is that of someone knowing the end of the story. But since the end of the story, the real end of the story is death, her or his reading is always incomplete. In Paul De Man's terms: reading a text autobiographically means to put a body and a face on it and to grasp the mortality inscribed in it as an inherent modality of reading.

It seems fairly easy in the case of Holocaust studies – the autobiographical has already been there for decades. That is certainly the case of Berel Lang who in the already quoted chapter from *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* demands a structuralist-like impartiality, but in the *Introduction* provides the reader with a confession seemingly logical from the point of view of his argument on intransitive writing, but nevertheless quite unexpected and, if read from outside the discourse of the Holocaust, almost unnecessary:

I was not myself immediately caught by the Nazi genocide. I was born in the United States in late 1933, and over the next twelve years, which saw the rise and then defeat of Hitler's Germany, the Jewish community in the small Connecticut town in which I lived, did not know, or in any event did not pay much attention to, what was happening during that time to the Jews of Europe (Lang 1990, xxi).

Lucy Dawidowicz, the author of another Holocaust studies classic, *The War Against the Jews 1933–1945*, did not get as personal as Lang. But neither did she fully repress the urge to focus on personal experience as an inevitable part of that particular field of research:

This is not a value-free book. The very subject matter of the Final Solution precludes neutrality. In writing about a nation that transgressed the commandment “Thou shalt not murder”, it is impossible to be what Charles Beard characterized as “a neutral mirror” (Dawidowicz 1975, xl).

That kind of a particular relation between the Holocaust researcher and his or her text is the subject of Gary Weisman's *Fantasies of Witnessing*

who in order to prove his point lists many other examples. One of them is the case of Lori Hope Lefkowitz, a Holocaust researcher from Northeastern University, who

writes that when asked about her parents, says that her mother was in Siberia during the war, and, because Siberia is “borderline survivorship”, quickly adds that her father was in Auschwitz and Buchenwald (Weissman 2004, 21).⁵

It’s just as if Lang, Dawidowicz or Lefkowitz needed some kind of an “authenticity certificate” testifying that – e.g. in Lefkowitz’s case – a parent had personally experienced the Holocaust, and thus transmitted to her what she felt was the “real” bodily Holocaust experience. And that state of the matters goes beyond the everlasting conundrum of the scientist as a second-order observer and reaches Holocaust film, literature etc. Sue Vice (2000) in her *Holocaust Fiction* argues that it is surprisingly rare for Holocaust literature to be commented upon as literature, i.e. as any other kind of writing. And she reminds us that after making *La vita é bella*, Benigni felt compelled to inform the public that his father had been in a labor camp; after publishing *Sophie’s Choice*, Styron felt the urge to point out that although he may not have been Jewish himself; his children certainly were. Apparently, Holocaust discourse demands some deeper connection between subject and object. This connection cannot be an abstraction like moral responsibility, but must be something real, or better yet, corporeal.

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Body language of a Holocaust text

Such an identification is also the corner stone of Holocaust studies according to Robert Eaglestone who proposes however an interesting twist to this premise: in *Holocaust and the Postmodern* (2004) he contends that indeed, identification is an undeniable hallmark of Holocaust literature and the debates surrounding it, but in a sort of apophatic way: Holocaust writing is trying very hard – says Eaglestone – to distance the reader from the experience, or at least mark that distance and make noticeable the chiasm between post-Holocaust “now” and the Holocaust “then”: “Many forms of prose writing encourage identification and while testimony cannot but do this, it at the same time aims to prohibit identification, on epistemological grounds” (Eaglestone 2004, 42).

5 The author refers to Lefkowitz 2001, 223.

A vast part of Eaglestone's theory consists of identifying these grounds, i.e. the techniques used by Holocaust literature in order to do what he says it does. These are, among others:

- **Using History**, which includes a technique he calls "History in Reverse": "In Holocaust testimonies of course, the reader knows the events – at least in broad outline – and knows also the narrator survives them" (Eaglestone 2004, 46);
- **Narrative Frames**, such as "Formal Frames" – for example the essay used by Primo Levi, as a form reflexively distancing the reader and the narrator from the events his text refers to (ibid., 48–49);
- **Epiphany** – "a moment of »showing« or »revealing« some truth" (ibid., 54) etc.

One has to notice that none of Eaglestone's terms is a proper literary term. You will find an entry "narrative frame" in glossaries, but understood as a more specific technique: a story within a story rather than a separate genre such as an essay; "History in reverse" might as well be just called "irony" (a term which actually appears in Eaglestone's description later on) and as for "epiphany" – there are too many theoretical contexts to pin this one to just one of them, but in a book entitled *Holocaust and the Postmodern* we could rather expect notions such as "aporia".

And that title does actually point to the fact of the matter: we can observe these interesting operations on common literary terminology precisely because of the order of things inscribed in the title of this book; the Holocaust, not the Postmodern, sets the disciplinary language used by Eaglestone, who, by the way, as a Professor of Contemporary Literature and Thought at Royal Holloway, University of London, knows best that each of the terms he proposes has its literary-theoretical flip-side. But the literary terms appear inadequate for that kind of literary discourse. Why? Because of the role of a Holocaust researcher he assumed to write that particular book. By using a separate language Eaglestone marks his identity as a Holocaust literary critic, doing exactly what he himself describes: distancing the two selves – the one that speaks Holocaust and the one that speaks about the Holocaust. The latter would say "narrative frame" in Kertész's *Liquidation*, meaning a series of stories containing one another; he would say "irony" in Borowski's short stories or "aporia" in Jean Améry's writing, whereas the former knows that while it's all good as long as you use the Holocaust to prove your point; when you enter the domain of Holocaust literature, your task is to prove that Holocaust is "something else". And that you need a proper language to mark it.

One can list a large number of other such cases: Eaglestone proposes the already quoted “histories in reverse”, Barbara Engelking (1996) introduces the notion of an “abyssal situation” in the ghetto, instead of more common terms such as “extreme”, “liminal”, “final” etc. Let us just think of the word “Holocaust” and the everlasting debate it provokes on whether we should let it enter this new semantic field, or substitute it with yet another old word in new meaning: “Shoah”, “Khurban” etc., which seems almost symbolic for that phenomenon.

The body/text problem

The idiolect of Holocaust literature oscillates between being part of the discursive community of human studies and becoming an autonomous “something else”. Terry Eagleton contends in this context:

It is by being on the “inside” of a body or language, not by over-leaping them as so many barriers, that we can encounter one another and intervene in what is misleadingly known as the outside world (Eagleton 2012, 143).

It is noteworthy that he decided to use body as a point of reference in his attempt to answer the somewhat pompous question “What is literature?”. What is particular about **Holocaust** literature is that the above mentioned personal identification within Holocaust academic writing does very often assume a form of a bodily involvement in the text – that is what Amy Hungerford argues for in her *The Holocaust of Texts* (2003). She opens the book with a well known story of Meyer Levin, author of a rejected stage adaptation of Anne Frank’s *The Diary of a Young Girl*, who in an open letter to “The Washington Post” wrote that rejecting a Holocaust text is murder not only on a text, but on Anne Frank, on her dead body (Hungerford 2003, 2). One can observe this phenomenon of identification not only in the later post-war stages of the evolution of that particular kind of writing, but also in texts written during or almost immediately after the war. The cover of first editions of *We Were in Auschwitz* written by Tadeusz Borowski, Anatol Girs (who figures in the book rather as an editor than an author), Krystyn Olszewski and Janusz Nel Siedlecki (1946)⁶ was a cloth taken from real striped uniforms

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⁶ 6643 Janusz Nel Siedlecki, 75817 Krystyn Olszewski, 119198 Tadeusz Borowski (1946). The names of the authors followed their Auschwitz numbers; the publishing house was a one-time institution created to support the tracing service the authors launched in Munich and although its name indicated Warsaw,

worn by prisoners in Auschwitz. The title should thus read: **we** were in Auschwitz – the book you hold is not **about** us, it **is** us, wrapped in the striped uniforms just as our own bodies once were.

Holocaust literature – including Holocaust academic writing – aims to become an autonomous body in every possible way: by confessing one’s connection to the Holocaust or, paradoxically, by stressing the lack thereof (as does Berel Lang in the already quoted passage from his *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* – basically saying that he writes about the Holocaust, because as a kid growing up in Connecticut he had no connection to the Holocaust), or by constructing the Holocaust idiolect (“precarium”, “abyssal space”, “histories in reverse”, “backshadowing” etc.) and by many other devices. One of the most interesting example in Polish Holocaust studies is the work of Michał Głowiński, who as a literary theorist in his article *Cztery typy fikcji narracyjnej* (1986) [Four types of narrative fiction], a fundamental text of the Polish structuralist school, employs the speech act theory in order to present fiction as a mode of everyday communication, including literature, political propaganda and everyday situations, but as a Holocaust literary scholar in his introduction to *Stosowność i forma* (2005) [Adequacy and Form] he writes: “documentary writing has no right to become fictional writing: when it does so, in less dramatic cases we face a slight aberration, in more drastic ones – a fraud” (Głowiński 2005, 10). The discrepancy between the two approaches results from everything but inconsequence of the scholar. Quite the opposite: it marks his deep understanding of the way the discipline of Holocaust studies works. One could even imagine Głowiński opting for both sides of the Lang-White realist-constructivist controversy – and being equally convincing about it in both cases.

This disciplined entropy is, accidentally, what Arthur Danto (2001) constitutes the body/body problem as he calls it (as opposed to the body/mind problem): we operate our bodies by means of a stream of chaotic impulses, to which we attribute a suspiciously coherent narrative.⁷ According to Danto our body is a chaotic text with rare moments of harmony. He presents how thinking of the body in Cartesian terms does not necessarily mean drawing a neat distinction between the mind and the body – it does not mean thinking of the flesh as a ship piloted by the intellect. We do not **have** the bodily functions we **are** bodily

it was based in Germany. The book has been published in English by Welcome Rain Publishers (Siedlecki, Borowski and Olszewski 2000).

7 See especially the title essay *The Body/Body Problem*, aimed to “ask whether a position to the effect that the mental is irreducibly different from the physical” (Danto 2001, 184) and how do we perceive our bodies participating in that process.

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functions, just as we do not think of moving an arm, we just move the arm (Danto 2001, 195):

The mind, construed as embodied – as *enfleshed* – might perhaps stand to the body as a statue does to the bronze that is its material cause, or as a picture stands to the pigment it gives form to – or as a signified stands to signifier, in the idiom of Saussure. And to the degree that “inside” and “outside” have application at all, it is the mind that is outside, in the sense that it is what is presented to the world (Danto 2001, 197).

If we apply Danto’s explanations to the above presented embodiment of the Holocaust discourse – keeping in mind Eagleton’s view on the notions of “the inside” and “the outside” of a body and of a discourse – we cannot but come to a conclusion that this all must mean much more than merely being “in” the (Holocaust) discourse by testifying “I was there”. It means assuming the idiolect of the Holocaust designed to make the autonomy of a discursive body an epistemological fundament of the discipline.

Conclusion

Holocaust literary studies want to be a separate discipline, incomparable to any other, no matter how many tools of various human studies disciplines or schools they apply to studying the topic. Because – as Alvin Rosenfeld contends in the already quoted fragment from his *A Double Dying* – it’s not about the topic, but about embodying the discourse. This attempt is clearly visible throughout the history of this discipline, which also includes its more conservative threads. In 1982 Alan Berger criticised what he claimed to be then the predominant model of Holocaust teaching:

we in the West have adopted the teacher-student model. The teacher’s skill or knowledge exercises prestige. He is irreplaceable only if, in Joachim Wach’s words, “It is merely that none can actually be found to take his place.” The teacher’s life is irrelevant to, and may actually compete with the skills that he wishes to communicate (Berger 1982, 175).

This commentary comes after comparing the vice of “objectivity” to the attitude of Nazi academics (from Mengele to Heidegger) and ends with the following conclusion:

If teaching and learning [the Holocaust] are once again to become humanizing experiences, then professors must reconceive their goals and how to achieve them without doing irreparable violence to personal virtue and human responsibility (Berger 1982, 176).

By that Alan Berger, judging from his diffidence toward schools of thought employing notions such as “embodiment”, “experience” etc., would rather steer away from considering Holocaust studies as an example of a discipline immersed in the “body/body problem” (to recall Danto’s phrasing), willy-nilly. This seems to point to the fact that being bodily “in” the problems being narrated/taught/studied is a precondition of an ethically adequate approach to Holocaust writing.

In the aforementioned attempt to find an answer to the question “What is literature” Terry Eagleton, in order to prove his point (which is that the rules of literature are no less strict than the rules of reality), analyses the issue of being “in” a text and refers to:

One of the most astonishing cultural events of the twentieth century, when tens of thousands of workers, soldiers, students and artists re-enacted the storming of the Winter Palace. (...) Many of the soldiers and sailors involved in this theatrical fiction had not only participated in the events they were commemorating, but were actively engaged at the time in the civil war in Russia. Revolutions, as Marx is aware in the 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, seem to involve a curious crossing of fact and fiction (Eagleton 2012, 121–122).

That the same goes for revolutions in scientific structures and within scholarly disciplines is almost self-evident, at least if we are willing to take the pragmatists’ word for it: you need a good fiction to sell your fact. The way it applies to Holocaust literature, art and studies seems however a bit more complex. Janina Struk (2004) in her *Photographing the Holocaust* reports a very telling phenomenon: while shooting *Schindler’s List*:

A Polish female extra in the film objected to a scene where she was asked to shout abuse at the Jews on the premise that this was not how she remembered the occupation in Kraków to be (Struk 2004, 183).

It’s just as if one of the soldiers and sailors from Eagleton’s example was to object to the re-enactment by saying “it’s not where I stood in 1917, it’s not a gun I held back then, that’s not the profanity I yield at them tsarists”. But it didn’t matter and it does matter in the case of the Holocaust – as Janina Struk shows in her example. It matters

because the Holocaust discourse is the discourse of embodiment which includes its spherical paradox of being universal (everyone has a body, more or less similar to other bodies) and unique (everyone is this body and not another one, no matter how similar it might be; cf. Peter Sloterdijk's *Bubbles* [2011]).

In *Together, apart* Zygmunt Bauman (2003, 128) writes: "few exceptions aside, our culture, according to leading German sexologist Volkmar Sigusch »leaves us not with artes eroticae, but scientia sexualis«". He goes on to say that this science, this quasi-institutional attempt to rationalise communities, distances us from togetherness and from each other, leaving us with an unfulfilled desire. Holocaust literary studies incorporated this desire, making it their fundamental device: to inherit the experience of the Holocaust and to mark its *Entfremdung*, to enter into a discourse with other disciplines and to remain completely autonomous, to identify and contradict identification, to speak of unspeakability and to be a novel about the Holocaust which is neither a novel nor about the Holocaust; to write poetry after Auschwitz without writing a single poem after Auschwitz. In brief: to be a chaotic body with rare moments of harmony.

Concluding, we should briefly return to Culler's take on the Western European plot: it's always incomplete, for it cannot include its own conclusion – death. But after all that has been said here one has to notice that this incapability is also what makes it intercommunicable and thus – possible; death is the only common element of a community, or rather: the only unifying element which does not destroy a community. As Jean Luc-Nancy (1991, 12) contends, the Nazi concept of a unified Aryan community was precisely what destroyed the German society. In effect it destructed its unity because the glue holding it together was homogeneity instead of diversity. Only death, as his Heideggerian argument goes, is the sole element of life, which is equal and diverse at the same time: it is always experienced through the experience of the others. Holocaust studies seems to have made this assumption one of their core elements as a discipline. The only trouble is that we are very rarely able to see it: the shape of the discipline allowing it to prosper along with other, more open and less conservative ones is also its blind spot. In effect most of the Holocaust scholars want Holocaust writing to be realist and figural without being either figural or too real. Why should we need this quasi-paranoid discipline after all – a discipline which compensates for the lack of its own methodology by borrowing another discipline's and claiming it as its own? Because as such, Holocaust studies are the human studies' social other. They remain not only a crucial discipline of the 20th century's history and philosophy, but become very useful

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to human studies in general in the same way most ingenious poets are: you could spend hours telling them how great their poetry is and what it means to the world but some of them, maybe even the most ingenious of them, wouldn't understand a thing about it.

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Abstrakt: W artykule bronię tezy głoszącej, że nauka o Zagładzie jako dyscyplina wytwarza szczególne napięcie pomiędzy autorem tekstów należących do tej dziedziny (badaczem) i obiektem jego narracji (badań). To napięcie, w pewnym stopniu obecne także w innych dziedzinach humanistycznych pod postacią rewaloryzacji autobiografizmu, narracji somatycznych itp., w przypadku badań nad Zagładą pozostaje w ścisłym związku z zasadniczą modalnością-gatunkiem tego rodzaju pisarstwa – świadectwem – i jego paradoksalnym wymogiem narracyjnego umieszczenia się wewnątrz własnej narracji (obecność zaświadcząca) i pozostawania poza nią (zakładana zdolność narratora do spójnej i bezstronnej opowieści). Próbując udowodnić powszechność tego paradoksu w holocaustowych narracjach historiograficznych, literaturoznawczych i innych, dochodzę do wniosku, że staje się on quasi-gatunkowym wyznacznikiem tej dyscypliny, która opierając się na wspomnianym paradoksie (sygnalizowanym m.in. poprzez proliferację kategorii takich jak np. niewypowiedzalność) dąży do ustanowienia własnego badawczego języka i własnej metodologii. Choć jest to często metodologia i terminologia zbieżna z powszechnie stosowanymi narzędziami badań historiograficznych, literaturoznawczych i innych, to w ramach omawianej dziedziny zyskuje ona status narzędzi osobnych, właściwych jedynie dziedzinie *Holocaust studies*.

Słowa kluczowe: badania nad Zagładą, teoria wiedzy, filozofia poznania, narracje somatyczne