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Avatars of the limit-situation in post-totalitarian witness literature

Laura SASU[1]

The present paper aims at providing several interpretation patterns necessary for an applicative analysis of the concept of limit-situation, as it is revealed by testimonial literature produced by surviving witnesses of totalitarian oppression policies applied in the twentieth century. Approaching the limit-situation from the perspective of literary theory and criticism and relying on the heuristic value of the concept, generates a wide range of associations, from the theory and aesthetics of limit-situations, to the relationship between expression means and the factual nature of experiences, thus configuring a possible topography of limit-situations. Starting with the psychological description coined by Karl Jaspers and further discussing several other philosophical perspectives on the limit-situation the underlying analysis harbours the more precise definition of this type of experience and its relevance to any field of anthropological interest.

Key-words: *post-totalitarian, witness literature, reaction, limit-situation.*

1. Literary testimony of human limits

Post-totalitarian witness literature, a particular type of non-fictional testimonial writing, concerning experiences made man exposed to left-wing and right-wing totalitarian power in the twentieth century, reveals a complete inventory of possible and impossible psychological reactions to the *limit-situations* posed by the oppressive policies implemented by national-socialism and communism for managing the groups of *personae non-gratae,* in concentration camps or political prisons.

The concept of limit-situation itself is both generic, since it accounts for a *anthropological constant* (Lauterbach, Spörl, and Wunderlich 2002) and specific, since it pinpoints its relevant characteristics allowing further analysis upon the particular situations in this category: "The conceptual framework extends from the awareness of universal contingency of human existence to death, as the ultimate experience and paradigmatic limit-situation per se" (Lauterbach, Spörl, and Wunderlich 2002). The experience of the limit-situation – as an exceptional existential moment, but precisely hereby infinitely fecund in its potential of revealing an entire series of avatars pertaining to human existence – is moulded into

[1] Transilvania University of Braşov, laurasasu@yahoo.com.

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the conscience of the reader by the mediation of the sole register where experience can abandon its reflexivity and offer itself to another, the realm of literature. Approaching the limit-situation from the perspective of literary theory and criticism relies on the heuristic value of the concept, especially when applied to the analysis of literary texts. Such analysis generates a wide range of associations, from the theory and aesthetics of limit-situations, to the relationship between expression means and the factual dimension of experiences, thus configuring a possible topography of limit-situations, the experience thereof and their reflection within the field of witness literature.

The discourse is generally characterised by simplicity and sometimes even displaying disinterest towards aesthetic ambitions and stylistic focussing, up to a certain rigidity of the word trapped in a form of harsh hyper-realism, imposed by the nature, severity and factuality of the depicted events. However, usually moulded upon the individual linguistic and stylistic code specific for each witness-writer, this type of discourse often produces testimonies of remarkable expressivity. Starting with Primo Levi, to Alexandr Soljenitîn, from Nicolae Steinhardt to Paul Goma and up to Herta Müller's autofictional writing, the testimonies of these limits of humanity – as the very essence of totalitarianism – are frequently embedded in exceptional forms of literary representation. The testimony of limit-situations imposed by totalitarian power to man, possible and impossible reactions thereto, transgressions of the limit by surviving and integrating it into existential experience pertaining to be shared by the voice of testimony becomes the *locus classicus* of post-totalitarian witness literature.

2. Experiencing the limit in totalitarianism

As a complete testimony of experiencing the limit (transcending it and surviving), this segment post-totalitarian witness literature has both the authority and the credibility necessary for revealing the factual dynamism of human potential, the flexibility of its boundaries and the man's almost unbelievable recovery capacity (both physical and psychological).

2.1. Expansibility of human potential

In Karl Jaspers' philosophical view (developed on the specialised foundation of psychology) the aforesaid capacity of reaching, experimenting and transcending its limits is considered to be defining for the human being: "Man is always something more than what he knows about himself. He is not what he is simply once for all, but is a process" (Jaspers 1999). This process – man – can go through and beyond the limit, can transform it into an existential moment, can integrate it as a new experience, the limit of which will again lie ahead. This cyclical movement at the

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limit, that turns every time the impossible (the limit) into possible (experience) reveals the expansive nature of human potential. The limit places in man's path the very circumstances that will either bring his end, revealing his finitude, or force him to step forward, to discover his *un*limited potential and find himself in the position of *being more than he knew about himself*.

2.2. What is a man?

The limit becomes an essential concept in defining man, who can no longer be defined in the conventional way of rigidly integrating his stable and constant features and capacities within a static framework of a standardised category: the limit presents man in action by forcing him to immediate and profound alteration of his entire constitution.

This is the reason why man, having encountered his limits, is rather difficult to define, having become almost unrecognisable even to himself: *If this is a man* (Levi 2004) wonders Primo Levi, a famous witness-writer and Auschwitz survivor and the same idea of questioning the newly set boundaries of humanity will be uttered by many survivors of the communist oppression.

The limit-situation man is forced into and turned into *Homo Sacer* (Agamben 2006b) by the totalitarian (bio)power and its (bio)politics (as defined by Foucault) makes the concentration camp become the *Nomos of modern age* (Agamben 2006a) and the place where humanity and its limits are redefined and reconfigured.

2.3. (Re)defining man by existential possibility

The paradigm of the limit-situation is often addressed in various contexts and regarding different aspects of modern life by psychologists, philosophers, literary critics, and experts in theology or even law, according to the applicability of the concept in that particular field.

Since the focus of this paper is the literary testimony of the transgression, survival and experience of extreme, luminal situations, the psychological and existential dimensions prevail. As an account of the experience of human limits this type of testimony is atypical, being unique both due to its multiple anthropological implications (of historical, judicial, political, psychological, socio–cultural or philosophical relevance) and resulting directly from its lack of precedence.

The experience of the limit is accounted for and mediated by the word of testimony revealing and emphasizing possible reactions that enable man to transcend the limit, to reconfigure the existential coordinates and to adapt his mental structures so as to render him able to face the limit-situation, turning it into experience and to save both his humanity and his very existence. Therefore, man's reactions to the limit-situation and the experience thereof become coordinates of the very place

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where humanity ceases to exist and is simultaneously recreated in a new form of living, the life of man subsequent to his (quasi)end, commonly referred to by the term *survival*.

2.4. Dynamics around the limit

In a similar meaning, Paul Tillich identifies the limit as the commonplace of experience: "the existence at the limit, the limit-situation, is full of tension and dynamics. The limit is the factual place of experience." (Tillich 1959)

The experience of the limit-situation is the case of post-totalitarian witness literature represented as the permanent destruction of a former form of existence and the subsequent reconstruction of a new viable structure that allows transforming an existential obstacle into experience, thus becoming the very premises and necessary condition for survival: the proper management capacities of the limit-situation are of crucial relevance to whether it becomes a mere end or a new existential point.

2.5. Survival

Some victims of totalitarian extermination or re-education experiments survive after having made this experience (i.e. the so-called *muslim,* survivor of the concentration camp (Agamben 2006a) and the *reeducated* (Mureşan 2011) of the communist prison) and some of these come utter the word of testimony accounting for these experiences in the realm of witness literature.

However, the exceptional status of such experiences is annulled in totalitarianism, the exception often becoming the rule: "Auschwitz is the place where the extreme situation becomes a paradigm of everyday life", argues Giorgio Agamben (2006a). In a similar choice of words, Nicolae Steinhardt further stresses the intrusion of tragedy into common experience as the basic form of existence: "Now tragedy has become trivial, it is part of the environment, as an element in ecology itself" (Steinhardt 2008).

In these cases, depending on man's individual reaction, within the limit-situation coincide both the possible end and the possible starting point of human experience, initiating a constant metamorphosis of limit into existential experience. The human potential of permanently post-positioning the ultimate limit unfolds a complete inventory of possible psychological reactions compatible with resistance, transgression, subsistence and ultimately survival in limit-situations. The capacity unanimously credited for such unrealistic achievement, namely surviving the un-survivable, the limit, is ultimately that of the human mind, encompassing a multitude of psychological and rational processes that are fine-tuned to preserving man alive along with his humanity.

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3. (Im)possible reactions

The key aspects in transcending the limit are closely related to the (im)possible reactions of the subject to the antinomical situation.

Based upon his expertise in psychology, Karl Jaspers identifies a set of possibilities: man is either destroyed by the limit-situation (his sense of action, knowledge and living being completely paralysed) or he avoids the antinomy of the situation (by keeping both constituents valid, or by accepting the compromise of *both – and* and *neither – nor* or simply ignoring one of the two parts) or acknowledges the antinomy of the situation (gaining control by accepting and truly confronting it).

3.1. Neutralising the antinomy

While the first two options do not allow a real transgression of the antinomy of the limit situation, the last one is (according to Jaspers) the way man can truly step onward in his existence, by not neutralising the antinomy and by accepting and confronting it (Jaspers 1919).

Although it implies the strength to expose oneself to uncertainty, despondency and crisis (which will be naturally perceived as suffering) this is the only of dealing with limit-situations. Suffering is not considered to be a limit-situation itself (the subcategories thereof being *struggle*, *chance*, *death* and *guilt* in Jaspers' view), but rather the common trait of situations, that do not find a way of neutralising their antinomies and are hence subjectively perceived as limit-situations (Jaspers 1919).

Just like optimism and pessimism are described as generic abstractions and individual dispositions of the subject, the personal and responsible ways of managing suffering are usually (in common situations) reduced to avoiding the suffering, by not acknowledging it as the ultimate, inevitable truth.

Man retreats cautiously whenever he faces suffering as inevitable. He will annul it "under the silent hypothesis, that it is evitable and eliminable" (Jaspers 1919) and will ignore, repress, rationalize, reformulate or counterbalance it, but he will not accept or confront it. With minor types of suffering and in common situations this psychological circumvention of the limit-situation will succeed.

3.2. Confronting the antinomy

Yet, in exceptional cases, where suffering is not only inevitable but also constant and profound (as those of prisoners of totalitarian regimes) the antinomy of the situation is perceived as ultimate, radical and insurmountable. This is the point where man, not having the option of circumvention, is compelled to react: by *resignation*, by *circumvention,* by *heroic confrontation* or *religious-metaphysical assertion* (Jaspers 1919) of the limit-situation.

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The analysis from a psychological perspective of the confrontation with limit-situations (based upon the theoretical framework proposed by Jaspers) and applying the conceptual pattern to the specific instances of experiences in the totalitarian concentration camp or re-education prison reveals multiple particularities of circumstances where man (completely exposed to totalitarian power) is submersed into a composite of constant, interrelated, simultaneous or successive limit-situations, that imply either man's end or condemn him to a marginal existence, in between life and death, literally on the border of humanity and inhumanity. Yet, despite the extreme proximity of the abyss, man is able to experience this limit that – if it does not completely exclude survival – will become de nucleus of a rather unique type of testimony: the testimony of man pushed into the extremes of his own possibilities.

3.3. Resignation. Adapting to the limit-situation.

Resignation is one example of reaction to the limit-situation. Actually to be more specific it is a lack of reaction resulting from the utter incapacity of internally processing the factual data of the antinomy imposed by the situation. Resignation is described as form of abandonment, yet not a radical, definitive and crucial form. It does not necessarily imply the complete paralysis of all action resources: man will continue to act further in his life, without trying to understand or to make sense of its new coordinates; he will continue living outside any form of suffering, thus "abandoning any meaning, any *telos"* (Jaspers 1919). In most cases, the detainees of totalitarian concentration camps or prisons will rapidly go through different stages of despair, finding in this (lack of) reaction a self-induced numbing of perception as a subconscious defence mechanism that allows subsistence and survival.

By avoiding the direct confrontation of the antinomy posed by the limit-situation, by implicitly abandoning any hope of reducing or eliminating the suffering produced by the limit-situation, resignation allows man to preserve his mental, psychological and physical necessary for subsistence actions, remaining thereby a solution compatible with survival and with transcending the limit. In this respect, it becomes a form of adapting to the conditions imposed by the limit-situation able to ensure – at least temporarily – the continuation of life in that particular form and under the specific circumstances imposed by the totalitarian power.

3.4. Circumvention. Escaping life.

Another possible reaction identified by Jaspers is that of circumvention. More radically positioned in the register of negativity, this reaction starts as an impulse of escaping life, of evasion from the world and from existence altogether, culminating either in an "absolute apathy and indifference" (Jaspers 1919) or in actual forms of suicide. Man finds in this reaction a way of escaping and freeing himself of any

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suffering and of any joy, thus "longing for nothing" (Jaspers 1919). By this attitude, completely oriented against life, man will possibly come to commit suicide. The pattern of complete annihilation of the will of living, described by survivors of concentration camps and communist prisons is easily recognisable in this type of quasi-suicidal reaction. It is perfectly traceable in the testimony regarding the political re-education process as a form of *assisted suicide* (Mureşan 2011), as it has been coined by the historian Alin Mureşan, or as described by Nicolae Steinhardt as "the terrible point when God pulls out his instruments for the operation that no human power can accomplish: to bereave man of his will to live, and terminate him so that he can live as a corpse". (Steinhardt 2008)

3.5. Heroic confrontation. Saving humanity by sacrificing life

The very opposite of the prior reaction, is the heroic confrontation of the antinomy posed by the limit-situation.

Man, awakened to full self-awareness by suffering will rise by a newly acquired power of will (paradoxically found in the depth of suffering and despair) and gain more strength to face the limit-situation, asserting it, obstinately sinking into it until he perishes. This reaction is often described as the experience made *up to the end* (Agamben 2006a) by most survivors, referring to those who did not make it, to those *tasted it bottoms up* (Soljeniţîn 1977) and perished in the extreme circumstances created by the totalitarian regimes.

Sacrificing their lives was often the price they had to pay for saving and preserving their humanity, by making no compromise, by not adapting to the dehumanising circumstances of the situations, by not circumventing the exposure to the limit in acts of suicide, but firmly and obstinately sticking to their principles defining their own humanity and not giving in to the violence of suffering and despair.

3.6. Religious-mystical assertion. Humans and living creatures.

The last possible reaction to the limit-situation listed in Jaspers' classification is described as the religious-mystical response to suffering and despair, as the main perceptions of limit-situations.

Man will experience these in a religious-mystical way, finding this way a possible meaning and comfort. In post-communist witness literature, for example, the religious approach of suffering is a reflected in most testimonies as a common perspective shared by numerous detainees.

Gheorghe Calciu Dumitreasa, a survivor of communist prison re-education presents *suffering as blessing*, as the realm of encountering God and prompts men to ask God not to relieve him from his suffering, but to integrate Himself into it (Calciu Dumitreasa 2007).

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Another example is that of Nicolae Steinhardt who has the revelation of Christianity in the midst of suffering, thus converting in prison from Judaism to Christianity. For him, the prison experience along with all its extremes, despite of all its suffering and despair, becomes the place where Christianity starts making sense (even) to him, a Jew. Suffering remains in his opinion a permanent attribute of human existence:

> We can learn everything, we can know everything, we can learn everything. Except for suffering. We believe we know what suffering is, that we can have no more surprises, that we have walked this path up to its very end. No way! Suffering is always new, infinitely protheic, at any given time fresh. (Steinhardt 2008)

and this view is most likely shared by all survivors of totalitarian extremes.

Steinhardt perceives suffering inherent to the prison experience as an unmediated lesson of realism: "the limit-situation that is represented by prison itself helps us see elementary things" (Steinhardt 2008) otherwise inaccessible to knowledge, even if mediated by so-called verified scientific solutions, such as Marxism or Freudian psychoanalysis, allegedly granting access to ultimate truth. The ultimate truth that he is granted access to by the experience of the limit-situations in the communist prison is the truth of Christianity, the truth of God and the truth of this newly acquired or acknowledged meaning of life.

In the limit-situation posed by the totalitarian prison, man becomes aware of being forcefully squeezed into the narrowness of sub-humanity (or even *non-humanity* (Agamben 2006a) and *anti-humanity* (Bacu 1971). In order to transcend this limitation, in order to preserve his humanity, he can open up to the call of faith, just like Nicolae Steinhardt and so many others.

Survival and preserving humanity is conditioned, in Steinhardt's opinion, first and foremost by faith: "The comforting power also crosses the threshold of cell number 12, where my colleague and me *live as humans, and not as mere living creatures, only when the unseen neighbouring church send us the triumphant message of its bells."* (Steinhardt 2008)

4. Existential integration

The same concept of accepting and acknowledging the limit situation (in the sense of confronting it in an attempt to attribute meaning to the extreme suffering imposed by it) so as to turn it compatible with survival by preserving the meaning of life is also investigated by Viktor Frankl (a prominent representative of the school of phenomenological psychotherapy in Vienna and a Auschwitz survivor himself) in the account of his path *From Death-Camp to Existentialism* (Frankl 2009).

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Quite similarly, Viktor Frankl identifies the tragic triad of human existence in suffering, guilt and death indicating that these limit-situations can only be overcome by responsibly projecting a personal meaning onto them, thus creating the psychological conditions necessary for physical survival.

For Tillich the possibility of an *existential mutation* is conditioned by finding a meaning in despair:

> Despair is an ultimate situation, a «limit» situation. One can simply not pass by it. Its nature is reflected by the etymology of the word *despair*, despondency = hopeless. One cannot see any way out towards the future. Non-being is perceived as absolutely triumphant. However, there is a limit to the latter's triumph, since *non-being* is *perceived* triumphant and *perception* implies *being.* There is sufficient *being left* so as to perceive the irresistible *potency of non-being* and that is the very *despair in despair* (Frankl 2009).

Paul Tillich's argument pinpoints exactly the phenomenon described by the testimonies brought by the survivors of totalitarian oppression policies: some minute amount of humanity still remains within man, even though he may appear completely destroyed and entirely annihilated; there is always a remaining part of his being that rests, that *remnant* of humanity addressed by Giorgio Agamben in his *Remnants of Auschwitz* (Agamben 2006a) despite the apparently almighty triumph of non-being; there is always a crumb of being left, that permits the perception of non-being, that crumb of life that allows men to be living in their own corpses (as witness describe their experience), that crumb of humanity that enables the awareness of their own dehumanisation.

5. Remnants of life and humanity

This ultimate remnant crumb of life and humanity constitutes on one hand, the nucleus of suffering that characterises their existence. It dictates the dimensions and the depth of pain and despair; but on the other hand, it is this very minute amount of being and humanity left in them that grant a chance of survival and the recovery of their humanity.

It is ultimately in his despair, in his awareness of the limit, in his acknowledgement thereof that man finds the necessary resources to confront the boundary, to sink into the limit and reconfigure his entire inner constitution so as to be able to face the antinomy posed by the situation and to transgress it. It is the path, identifiable in most testimonies of the totalitarian concentration and detention universe that ultimately makes the difference between life and death, between humanity and non-humanity.

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This is the path leading man to his limits and occasionally beyond them: the path of transgressing the limit-situation by turning it into experience and integrating it into man's existence as possibility.

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About the author

Laura Sasu is a Lecturer at *Transilvania* University of Braşov, where she teaches Technical English for students in the field of electrical engineering and computer science. Her research interest includes terminology, translation studies, interpreting, as well as comparative literature and the most relevant research results have been published in peer reviewed journals or presented in international conferences.

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