

Grasping Reality with Both Hands

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Kaufman: Adorno & Duncan on Aesthetic Illusion and Sociopolitical Delusion—Noted

Robert Kaufman: *Poetry's Ethics? Theodor W. Adorno & Robert Duncan on Aesthetic Illusion and Sociopolitical Delusion* <https://www-jstor-org.libproxy.berkeley.edu/stable/pdf/27669156.pdf>: 'Probably the least bearable story my father told me—in June and July 1987, when we recorded almost thirteen hours of oral history during the last months of his life—was not one that I had expected would be the most difficult. But this story turned out to be—for me and, to all appearances, much more so for him—far worse than his recounting of other terrible incidents: beatings; a whipping administered by an SS man (in response to an allegation that my father had engaged in sabotage) that appeared as if it might be continued until death; the loss of a friend and political comrade at the very end of the death march from Auschwitz-Birkenau back to Germany that they had both, until then, somehow survived; and too many more to mention here, though all of the sort very commonly found in survivor narratives...

...As it happened, he began telling me this particular story on an afternoon when the tape recorder was momentarily not at hand, and it immediately became clear that he did not wish to stop and wait for me to retrieve it; nor was he going to want to tell the story again. It went as follows:

My father was in a boxcar filled with male prisoners. (I think I remember that it was the transport on which he came, in September 1944, to Auschwitz Birkenau from Theresienstadt, but I cannot be sure; it is possible that it was a transport traveling between camps inside Germany after the death march, in the winter or spring of 1945.) The car was crowded but not so packed that—as sometimes was the case—the bodies of those who had passed out could hardly fall, in many instances being instead held upright by the press of others around them.

Men who were sick, exhausted, or both dropped to the floor, not rising thereafter; those standing tried to conserve what strength they had to face whatever awaited them after the trip. At one point a man standing just beside my father, a stranger, collapsed onto the floor, where he lay quiet and motionless; like everyone else, my father looked straight ahead or upward. The configuration of those standing shifted, adjusting to the space opened by the man's fall.

After about twenty minutes, my father felt himself being pinched on the shin or calf. I remember my father telling me: It was the guy, he wanted with the pinch to tell me he was still alive. My father steadied himself, leaned down, and, lowering only one arm so he would not fall himself, managed to raise the man, who half leaned against my father and one or two others standing near them. My father remembered no words being exchanged. He said the man stumbled off the boxcar when the train reached its destination. He never saw the man again; he was sure the man did not survive.

I'm well aware, and I believe that my father had reason to be far more aware, of much that might be said for the ethics or humanity of this act in the face of the situation's hopelessness. But that would have been cold comfort for my father; actually, it would have been, and was, less: it was no comfort at all, for there was none to be found, and my father's exhibiting what looked like shame, anger, and disgust during his recounting of the incident was unlike almost anything else I saw in him during the making of the oral history or, for that matter, during the many occasions through the years when he spoke less formally about the war...

.#noted #2020-07-16

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