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## Enabling Impossibility

Making, Unmaking, and Remaking the Voices of Abu Ghraib Survivors in  
Philip Metres' *Abu Ghraib Arias*

*Wahr spricht, wer Schatten spricht.*

—Paul Celan

## Raiding Unsharability

And so each venture

Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate,  
With shabby equipment always deteriorating . . .

—T. S. Eliot, “East Coker”

In his 2008 essay “Remaking/Unmaking: Abu Ghraib and Poetry,” Arab American poet Philip Metres described his then ongoing project—a series of poems called “--u --r--” —as an attempt “to make audible the muted voices of the tortured Iraqis at Abu Ghraib” (1597). The project was based on the victims’ testimonies, and, as Metres explained, it had started “as a way to read the testimonies in the first place, because they were too painful to read straight through” (1601). He then “engaged in a process of writing by erasure,” of appropriating the transcripts of the testimonies and “removing language until only certain remnants of the voices of the abused prisoners remained, scattered throughout the page” (1601). This technique, he wrote, was his “attempt to enact Elaine Scarry’s notion of torture as unmaking on the level of syntax and narrative. For Scarry, in *The Body in Pain*, the act of torture is not ultimately an act to extract information from a detainee but a procedure intended to destroy human subjectivity” (1601). Metres’ hope was that, by enacting the unmaking of the victims’ subjectivity on the level of form, the poems could restore the voices of those who, both in the acts of torture and in their photographic evidence, had been reduced to “naked and dominated” bodies (1596).

If the aim was to respond to, and represent the horrific acts that took place in the Abu Ghraib prison in a way that, first, would not replicate “the humiliation that the photographs intended to force on its subjects,” and, second, would restore the voices of the victims’ “silenced bodies,” then poetry, precisely because of its “relation to the spoken word,” seemed to be a powerful medium

(1599). On the other hand, a truthful artistic response to the suffering of the victims, i.e., one that would neither “fetishize” nor “gloss over” it (1601), would necessarily involve making the physical pain that they had to endure visible, or audible, to others, and, in this respect, poetry’s “relation to the spoken word” seems more of a drawback than an asset. According to Scarry, physical pain is “unsharable,” and, in fact, it ensures this “unsharability through its resistance to language” (4). This resistance to language, she goes on, derives from the fact that “physical pain—unlike any other state of consciousness—has no referential content,” that is, “it takes no object,” it “is not *of* or *for* anything” and, consequently, “resists objectification in language” (5). In this light, the “rarity with which physical pain is represented in literature,” though “striking,” can hardly be surprising (11). As Scarry points out, art “consistently confers visibility on other forms of distress.” However, differently from physical suffering, “[p]sychological suffering, though difficult for any one person to express, *does* have referential content” and therefore “*is* susceptible to verbal objectification” (11). Still, to say that language succeeds in representing even psychological pain—or, for that matter, any emotion or experience at all—is anything but safe. According to T. S. Eliot, a man who spent (or, as he puts it, “largely wasted”) twenty years “Trying to learn to use words,” “every attempt” to represent experience through language is “a different kind of failure,” “a raid in the inarticulate / With shabby equipment” (173-175, 179-80). Add this to physical pain’s particular resistance to words and it only makes sense that, as Virginia Woolf points out, “language at once runs dry” even in the face of a mere shiver or headache (15). To make matters worse, Scarry argues that “[p]hysical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned” (4). “[I]ts resistance to language,” moreover, “is not simply one of its incidental or accidental attributes but is essential to what it is” (5). Against such odds, language does not seem to stand much of a chance. Nevertheless, it is in Eliot, for all his seemingly pessimistic view on the possibilities of poetic representation, that one finds a word of encouragement: “For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business” (189). In other words, as “shabby” as the equipment may be, and as much as physical pain not only resists it but also destroys it, it is still literature’s job to try to objectify this experience, to communicate it in order to make the pain in “other people’s bodies” do more than just “flicker before the mind, then disappear” (Scarry 4).

It is this difficult—if not impossible—task that Metres’ poetic project took on in its attempt to make the pain of the Iraqi torture victims visible, and their voices audible. A task that, as Scarry points out, has more than only poetical implications. According to her,

when physical pain is transformed into an objectified state, it (or at least some of its aversiveness) is eliminated. A great deal then, is at stake in the attempt to invent linguistic structures that will reach and accommodate this area of experience normally so inaccessible to language; the human attempt to reverse the de-objectifying work of pain by forcing pain itself into avenues of objectification is a project laden with practical and ethical consequence. (6)

This is why, in the case of a poetic project that aims to respond in a truthful and ethical way to a barbaric act such as torture, its “linguistic structure”—its form—is crucial. “Form is never more than an extension of content,” Charles Olson credits Robert Creeley with having said (52). If the content of Metres’ “--u --r--” poems—retitled “(echo /ex/)” when they were published in 2011 as segments of a larger project called *abu ghraib arias*—was to be the unmaking (and hopefully the remaking) of the victims’ subjectivity, then the very form of the poems had to be an extension of this process of unmaking. In *The Body in Pain*, Scarry argues that the event of torture is, “in the most literal and concrete way possible, an appropriation, aping, and reversing of the action of creating itself” (21). Following her argument, my aim here will be to discuss how Metres’ “(echo /ex/)” poems, by enacting on the level of form the *unmaking* of torture, can be read as “an appropriation, aping, and reversing of the action of” uncreating. A reversing that, through its poetic *making*, becomes a *remaking* of the tortured prisoners of Abu Ghraib. To do so, I will begin by discussing the “making” of the victims’ voices that is inherent (I claim) in the very transcripts of the testimonies that served as source material for Metres’ poems. Then, I will close read some of the “(echo /ex/)” poems against the backdrop of Scarry’s notions about torture in order to discuss Metres’ decision of appropriating these transcripts and “writing by erasure,” of unmaking them as a way of enacting what the detainees were put through. Finally, I will look at how the poems—themselves a making—not only enact the unmaking of torture but also the remaking of the victims.

### **“Making” the Victims’ Voices**

. . . what renders a report of a raped woman (or any other narrative of trauma) truthful is its very factual unreliability, its confusion, its inconsistency.

—Slavoj Žižek, *Violence*

As already mentioned, Scarry argues that the most essential attribute of physical pain is that it is “language-destroying.” Torture, she explains, “inflicts bodily pain that is itself language-destroying, but torture also mimes (objectifies in external environment) this language-destroying capacity in

its interrogation, the purpose of which is not to elicit needed information but visibly to deconstruct the prisoner's voice" (19). It is precisely to this process of deconstruction (of unmaking) that the Abu Ghraib victims were subjected, a painfully dehumanizing and silencing process that the photographic evidence of the torture, for all the impact and importance that it arguably had (and still has), somewhat reinforced. The sworn statements given by some of the detainees—which were obtained and published by *The Washington Post* in 2004—, on the other hand, can be seen as instances in which, through their courage to speak out, this process of deconstruction is somewhat reversed and their voices, and thus their humanity, somewhat reconstructed. As Metres points out, one thing that attests to the power of these testimonies is the simple fact that they are very disturbing and painful to read. Upon reading them, however, a few other aspects also seem troubling, or at least problematic, though in a different sense. Take for example the statement given by Ameen Sa'eed Al-Sheikh. Somewhere in the middle it reads, “. . . they started to interrogate me. I lied to them so they threaten me with hard punishment. Then other interrogators came over and told me, ‘If you tell the truth, we will let you go as soon as possible before Ramadan,’ so I confessed and said the truth” (Danner 226, my emphasis). In terms of content, this passage is problematic because it presents Ameer Sa'eed as someone who, when first interrogated, lied, and then eventually ended up telling the truth after being threatened with “hard punishment.” It is easy to see how this could be interpreted (as it probably was and still is) as a justification for the “interrogation techniques” that were employed in Abu Ghraib. After all, Sa'eed's sworn statement suggests that he was in fact hiding information, and that all he needed in order to disclose it was a little “incentive.” And, keeping in mind that this kind of “information” has always been framed by both the U.S. media and government as crucial to the very safety and freedom of American citizens, how would it not be justified to do what was needed in order to retrieve it from those who had but did not want to disclose it? In this context, whether intentionally or not, torture is somewhat framed as being all about “intelligence-gathering,” the very nonsensical idea that Scarry aptly deconstructs in *The Body in Pain*. Another aspect that is problematic about this particular passage is that, as Scarry points out,

[t]here is not only among tortures but even among people appalled by acts of torture and sympathetic to those hurt, *a covert disdain for confession*. This disdain is one of the many manifestations of how inaccessible the reality of physical pain is to anyone not immediately experiencing it. The nature of confession is falsified by an idiom built on the word ‘betrayal’: *in confession, one betrays oneself and all those aspects of the world—friend, family, country, cause—that the self is made up of*. (29, my emphasis)

That is, the statement not only frames torture as a somewhat justifiable form of “intelligence-gathering,” but also ends up framing Ameer Sa’eed as kind of a traitor, and one who reveals his “betrayal” through his own words, in his own voice. “The first mistake credits the torturer, providing him with a justification, his cruelty with an explanation. The second discredits the prisoner, making him rather than the torturer, his voice rather than his pain, the cause of his loss of self and world” (35). Through these two misinterpretations combined, “the moral reality of torture [is turned] upside down,” and the person in pain is perceived by the world at large not with compassion but contempt (35, para. 37).

Another very problematic aspect has to do not so much with the statements’ content but rather their form. Transcribed as “body texts” that are flushed to the left margin, their very format on the page conveys an idea of unity, cohesion and accessibility (interestingly, Word describes left-alignment as a format that “makes the document easier to read”). Apart from a few grammatical slips here and there, one has no problem deriving meaning (even if very troubling and painful meaning) from them. Overall, they offer fairly cohesive narratives of the detainees’ experiences. On the one hand, this can be seen as positive in so far as the accessibility of these narratives—along with their publication and wide dissemination on the web—enabled them to reach a great audience and raise a great deal of awareness about what went on in Abu Ghraib in the name of “Freedom,” and to do so through the voices of the survivors rather than through images of their bodies. On the other, it is important to bear in mind that, according to Scarry, the memories of individuals “who have themselves been in great pain and whose words are later available” are often no more than “verbal fragments,” “hurled into the air unattached to any framing sentence” (6). In other words, since the kind of brutal and relentless physical pain that is inflicted in torture obliterates a person’s whole being and psychic content, a survivor’s firsthand account is expected to be somewhat fragmentary. In a similar vein, this is why, for Slavoj Žižek,

what renders a report of a raped woman (or any other narrative of trauma) truthful is its very factual unreliability, its *confusion*, its *inconsistency*. If the victim were able to report on her painful and humiliating experience in a clear manner, with all the data arranged in a consistent order, this very quality would make us suspicious of its truth. (3, my emphasis)

In short, “the witness able to offer a clear narrative of his [traumatic] experience would disqualify himself by virtue of that clarity” (3-4). Considering this, it seems legitimate to challenge the left-aligned and body-text frame in which the victims’ voices are rendered in the translated transcripts

of their testimonies—a frame that conveys *verbosity* rather than *meagerness*, *unity* rather than *fragmentation*. It seems legitimate to ask, moreover, whether the cohesion of the translated transcripts come from the original (and probably oral) statements themselves or, on the other hand, whether these statements looked, or sounded, very different prior to their transcription and translation. I want to be very clear that, in raising these questions, I do not intend to engage in a conspiracy-theory type of discussion that claims that the testimonies were fabricated or something along these lines (not because I do not believe that something like this could happen, but simply because it would be mere speculation). Most importantly, I do not intend to diminish in any way the strength of spirit and courage involved in the survivors' act of speaking out. Rather, I want to ask questions about how their voices were (and can be) textually framed—what form they were given—and what the framing implies, i.e., how form can qualify or disqualify content and the perceptual and political implications that this can have when the representation of something like torture is at stake. Here, Creeley's statement that “[f]orm is never more than an extension of content” seems again relevant. Alongside Scarry and Žižek's arguments, it suggests that, in the case of the Abu Ghraib victims, “verbal fragments,” “inconsistency” and “confusion” might actually be even more truthful and powerful in making their pain visible, and their voices audible, to others. In addition, such fragments would also offer us a chance of learning “not only about pain but about the human capacity for word-making” because, as Scarry puts it,

[t]o witness the moment when pain causes a reversion to the pre-language of cries and groans is to witness the destruction of language; but conversely, to be present when a person moves up out of that pre-language and projects the facts of sentience into speech is almost to have been permitted to be present at the birth of language itself. (6)

It is in this light that I want to discuss Metres' decision to appropriate the transcripts of the testimonies, which “make” the victims' voices in certain way, and *unmake* them. At first, this may have been simply a way to read these painful accounts, and, later on, a way to enact Scarry's ideas about torture as unmaking on the level of form. However, inherent in his decision was the fact that, by rendering the same content—the very same language—in a radically different format, the outcome would necessarily be different. And that is precisely what I want to focus on next, that is, on how Metres' “(echo /ex/)” poems, when compared to the full transcripts of the testimonies, have a very different effect on the reader and thus very different perceptual and political implications as far as responding to, and representing the detainees' experience and restoring their voices.

## Unmaking the Testimonies

Celan's poems articulate unspeakable horror by being silent, thus turning their truth content into negative quality.

—Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

In the previous section, I discussed how the process of transcribing, translating and, most importantly, formatting the victims' testimonies—that is, giving them a certain form—can be seen as a process of “making” that frames their voices in problematic ways. In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler calls attention to the fact that the act of framing—a picture, a text, a person—is always an act of contextualizing, commenting on, extending, or offering an interpretation of that which is being framed. In other words, by organizing and presenting something in a certain way, a frame also leads to a certain interpretive conclusion about the thing itself (para. 8). However, she also points out that, because of the way in which (pretty much) anything framed can be reproduced and disseminated, frames are “more fallible than [they] might at first appear” (9). When a frame circulates, it necessarily departs from a given context and not only lands in, but “also creates new contexts by virtue of that landing” (9). Moreover, “[a]s the frame constantly breaks from its context, this self-breaking becomes part of [its] very definition,” and it is precisely this “self-breaking” nature of the frame that makes it vulnerable “to reversal, to subversion, even critical instrumentalization” (10). Butler's understanding of frames/framing along these lines offers us a great analytical tool for thinking about Metres' poetic strategy of appropriating and tampering with the transcripts of the victims' statements. Once he moved them from one context to another, the very frame that sought to contain them could potentially be called into question, and even subverted as a means of reframing the detainees' experience in a different, and maybe even more empowering way. Whether or not he had this in mind is, I think, beside the point. The fact is that, by engaging in a process of “writing by erasure” as a way of enacting Scarry's ideas about torture as unmaking, he was actively reformatting and reframing the very content of the testimonies, which, in turn, would necessarily have a different effect (and affect) on others reading, or hearing, the detainees' voices. In the “(echo /ex/)” poems, one encounters the detainees' words as fragments scattered over the page. Some are distinctly readable, others barely, their greyish traces fading into the white background. Some are entirely erased, their absence made visible by the blank spaces they once occupied; others are blacked out, silenced like the subjects to whom they belong. Others yet, always italicized, come not from the detainees' testimonies but from the Bible, more specifically from Genesis. “As I revised the poem,” Metres explained, “I was shocked by how biblical the testimonials felt . . . As a way of bringing to the surface what was embedded in the text,

I added interstitial lines from Genesis. Torture is an act of decreation, an inverse of the stories of creation and destruction from Hebrew scripture” (1601). The addition of words from Genesis gains even more significance in light of Scarry’s argument that torture, through the combination of its physical and verbal acts—the infliction of bodily pain and the interrogation—, “acts out the uncreating of the created contents of consciousness” (38). Torture is “the deconstruction of creation” (22), and it is precisely this relationship between the “making and unmaking of the world,” as it appears in the subtitle of *The Body in Pain*, that the “(echo /ex/)” poems enact by juxtaposing fragments of the victims’ voices with fragments of the story of how God created (and then flooded) the world:

. . . because they did not ask me, but it was very bad. They stripped me of my clothes, even my underwear. They gave me women’s underwear, that was rose color with flowers in it and they put the bag over my face. One of them whispered in my ear “today I am going to fuck you,” *thy name shall be* and he said this in Arabic. Whoever was with me experienced the same thing...cuffed my hands with irons behind my back to the metal of the window, to the point that my feet were on the ground and I was hanging there for about five hours just because I asked about the time, because I wanted to pray... took all my clothes and took the underwear and he put it over my head. After he released me I don’t know if they took a picture of me because they beat me so bad I lost (5-16)

Here, in the first of the “(echo /ex/)” poems<sup>1</sup>, the body of the text—and by extension the voice of the detainee—is still fairly whole, but we can already see big portions of it starting to recede into the background. What stands out, and thus what the reader is primarily confronted with, is the broken sequence, “they did not ask me . . . They gave me . . . my ear . . . *thy name shall be* . . . hanging there . . . over my head” (5, 6, 8, 9, 12, 15). The line from Genesis, centered and italicized as it is, stands out even more, and immediately calls to mind the relationship between naming (and being named) and creating (and being created). Here, however, the act of naming is accompanied by an image of dissociation and deconstruction. The victim’s ear is there to be given or taken away at (someone else’s) will, rather than owned, and even his name, and thus his self to some extent, has been lifted from his body and, just like his ear, does no longer belong to him but to “they.” The act of being endowed by someone—God or parents—with a name is thus juxtaposed with the act of having one’s name lifted from one’s body and then hanged (just like a bag or piece of

underwear) over one's head, *erasing* rather than *affirming* one's identity. In this light, the poem evokes the relationship between naming and creating but also between naming and erasing, a relationship made disturbingly clear in one of the detainees' sworn statements, which, according to the official document, was "PROVIDED BY [name blacked out]" and begins with "Detainee # [number blacked out]" stating: "I am the person named above," that is, "I am" [redacted] (Danner 247). Moreover, this process of erasing (of unmaking) the detainee's voice and subjectivity, which the fading passages of the poem formally respond to, is also attested by their content. Although the black and italicized lines are the first to stand out, it is the partially erased and more obscured ones (as Jean Baptiste Basquiat knew well) that ultimately draw one's attention—lines such as "They stripped me / of my clothes, even my underwear," "they put the / bag over my face" or "they beat me so bad I lost" that graphically and painfully attest to the symbolic, psychological and physical unmaking of torture that the formal aspects of the poem enact (5-6, 7-8, 16). An unmaking that, in the fourth "(echo /ex/)" poem, has reached a more dramatic stage:

. . . my broken  
*ark which he had made*

I lost

I lost

G came and laughed

*lo, in her mouth*

it will break again

arms behind

broken because I can't

sever pain . . . (3-12)

The first thing that instantly catches the eye is the fact that, differently from the previous poem, this one resembles a carcass much more than it does a body. Much of the appropriated text has been completely erased, and all that we are left with is a few words and lines, a few bones and body parts, scattered over the page. The second thing that stands out is the repetition (the echo, as the title suggest) of certain words and terms such as "broken," "break," "broken" and "I lost," "I lost", which speaks to the relationship between the act of being physically and mentally broken

and the act of losing oneself—one’s self, voice, world—as a result. This is further enacted by the abrupt interruption of certain lines that stop short of conveying what they seem to want to convey, such as when the victim says “my broken” but is unable to name what is it that is broken, all the while being certain that “it will break again” (3, 9). In an even more dramatic rendering of this, we hear, “broken because I can’t / sever pain” (11-12), which can be read in at least two ways. In one reading, the sentence is left unfinished, and we are left wondering, “can’t what?” The impossibility of knowing how the sentence ends is, however, precisely the point; if the implicit *what* could be named, then it would no longer be an impossibility. This impossibility is further reinforced by the “sever pain,” which, in this reading (with which Word’s “Spelling & Grammar” seems to agree), is a misspelling of the *severe* pain that is inflicted on the victim; a pain that, as mentioned, is “unsharable,” and that ensures this “unsharability” through its resistance to verbal expression. Broken by pain, the victim “can’t” . . . And, *precisely* “because [he] can’t,” he is broken. In the second reading, the sentence is in fact finished, and what the victim “can’t” do is to “sever pain,” i.e., to cut himself off from the pain being inflicted on his body—yet another impossibility, and one that ensures his very unmaking. As Scarry points out, “[i]t is the intense pain that destroys a person’s self and world, a destruction experienced spatially as either the contraction of the universe down to the immediate vicinity of the body or as the body swelling to fill the entire universe” (35). Either way, the victim’s body in pain is his only reality, and, “because [he] can’t / sever pain” from his body, or rather to sever his self from his body in pain, he is “broken.” That is, it is “the prisoner’s sentience”—the fact that he cannot help feeling—that “destroys his world,” and, conversely, it is “his absence of world” that “obliterate[s] the prisoner’s sentience” (38), leaving behind a broken self with a broken voice. Broken to such an extent that, in the eighth “(echo /ex/)” poem, all we see and hear is

				me
		he		me
				he
he		me		
I			he	
he			he	he
		he		me
				I
	he		he	he
			I	I
				G . . . (1-8)

Here, there are not even broken sentences, but only single and monosyllabic words—all personal pronouns with the exception of a single “G”—left on the page. These are either first (“I” and “me”) or third (“he” and “He”) person pronouns. Immediately striking is the fact that only the “I” appears in both its subjective *and* objective case. In other words, only the “I” can become (or be made into) the object of an action, can be subjected to someone else’s will—a disturbing notion that is rendered quite explicitly in the fifth poem:

On the third day	G	came
made me		no clothing
wires on my fingers		penis
bag over my head		
		saying
electric		
flash of the camera		
<i>in the garden</i>		
		and I fell down
<i>thy voice</i>		
made me stand		
		made me . . . (1-11)

As in the eighth poem, here a subjective “I,” the victim’s, is made into an objective “me,” who, in turn, through the infliction of excruciating pain—“wires on my fingers penis” (3)—, is repeatedly made (the phrase “made me” appear three times) to do whatever the torturer demands. The torturer, on the other hand, whether a “he,” “He” or “G,” always maintains his subjective position. According to Scarry,

[h]owever near the prisoner the torturer stands, the distance between their physical realities is colossal, for the prisoner is in overwhelming physical pain while the torturer is utterly without pain; he is free of any pain originating in his own body; he is also free of the pain originating in the agonized body so near him. He is so without any human recognition of or identification with the pain that he is not only



. . . no one would see

*then your eyes shall be opened*

father and son

his father naked

into the toilet

“go take it and eat it”

*and your eyes shall be*

dogs G brought the dogs (3<sup>rd</sup> 8-14)

Things that no one would, or should have to see, let alone experience, but that the detainees had to. Things that, in some cases, can be somewhat put into words, but also things that are either too horrific and traumatic to be vocalized or, what may be worse—as in the previous example in which certain passages are blacked out—are censored in order to protect not the victims but the perpetrators. This question of seeing, and of ultimately being reduced to what was seen, is further complicated by the fact that, as we hear from one of the detainees, “I was there without me seeing” (9<sup>th</sup> 15). In one possible reading, this line simply evokes the bags that the detainees often had to wear over their faces. In another, particularly if one takes into account the blank space separating the two halves of the sentence, the line enacts the unmaking of the victim’s subjectivity, one that breaks his self’s “to- / gether[ness]” and makes it possible for the “I” to be present without the “me” (9<sup>th</sup> 5-6). An unmaking that, through the relentless infliction of physical pain—“all this beating / to stitch the string the needle”—, succeeds—“the operation / succeeded” (6<sup>th</sup> 14-17)—in obliterating the victim’s voice to such an extent that, by the time we reach the last of the “(echo /ex/)” poems, all we find on the page is

“  
 , , ,  
 , .  
 ,  
 .  
 ,  
 .  
 “  
 .  
 ”



“(echo /ex/)” poems turn to in their final attempt to articulate the horrific unmaking (of language, voice and self) suffered by the Abu Ghraib prisoners. In light of this last and most dramatic act, it makes sense to think of Celan. According to Theodor Adorno, “Celan’s poems articulate unspeakable horror by being silent, thus turning their truth content into a negative quality” (qtd. in Schmidt 120). The same can be said about the “(echo /ex/)” poems, which, unlike the transcripts of the detainees’ testimonies, also “articulate unspeakable horror” by “turning their truth content into a negative quality,” into traces of silence and blank spaces. In doing so, they leave it up to the reader, as one detainee puts it, to “take the negative from the night / guard”—the negative of the photographs, surely, but also the “negative quality” of their voices—“and you will find everything I said was true...” (7<sup>th</sup> 7-8).

### Remaking the Victims’ Voices

Who are the authors of this attempted reversal, the creators or near-creators of a language for pain?

—Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*

I hope that my close reading of some of Metres’ “(echo /ex/)” poems has been helpful in shedding some light on the ways in which they enact, on the level of form, Scarry’s ideas about torture as *unmaking*. As briefly discussed in the introduction, Metres’ poetic strategy in dealing with the pain endured by the Abu Ghraib victims is important because, as Scarry points out, a lot

is at stake in the attempt to invent linguistic structures that will reach and accommodate this area of experience normally so inaccessible to language; the human attempt to reverse the de-objectifying work of pain by forcing pain itself into avenues of objectification is a project laden with practical consequence. (6)

Although she is talking about physical pain in general, the same applies to the attempt to “invent linguistic structures that will accommodate” the experience of torture. Torture, relying on the infliction of physical pain in conjunction with the interrogation, *unmakes* the victim’s world, self and voice. As he explained, Metres’ poems are an attempt to *remake* the tortured Iraqis’ selves and voices, and they do so (or try to) precisely by unmaking their testimonies as a way of enacting the unmaking of torture. In this light, they are, to borrow Scarry’s terms, an attempt to reverse the unmaking work of torture by forcing *torture itself* into avenues of making—into poetry—, a project that is anything but unproblematic. One of the first questions it invites is, “[w]ho are the authors of this attempted reversal, the creators or near-creators of a language for pain,” and, more specifically, a language for torture? (6, my emphasis). One possibility is for the victims themselves

to take on this role. The sworn statements of the Abu Ghraib detainees, their act of speaking out, are such an example. However, I have already called attention to a few very serious complications involved in the “making” of their testimonies—the fact that, for one thing, the interviews, whether oral or written, were conducted by the very state and military apparatus that made the acts of torture possible in the first place. The fact that, for another, the detainees’ statements were originally given (and possibly transcribed) in Arabic and then translated into English, which means that many of their attributes and nuances may have been lost, if not changed, in the process. In other words, given that the process involved various people and steps, it is possible to imagine that the statements were not only transcribed and translated but also edited as a way of making them more cohesive, which, in turn, would make them easier to read and work with. As I have tried to make clear, none of this diminishes the detainees’ courage to speak out, and the pain, shock and revolt that arise from reading and engaging with the transcripts of their testimonies. However, when the invention of a “linguistic structure” that will aptly respond to the horrors of Abu Ghraib is at stake, it is not only a question of *whose* voice is heard, but also *how* it is heard, i.e., how it is framed. In the case of the official transcripts of the testimonies, though we do get to hear the detainees’ voices, we do so only after they have been mediated and framed by the very powers that, as mentioned, made these horrors possible in the first place. When reading them, what we encounter is not, as Scarry leads us to anticipate, a “meager” “total number of words,” “hurled into the air unattached to any framing sentence” (6), but something quite different, quite cohesive and structured—a fact that, as already discussed, can have very practical, perceptual and political implications. A second possibility regarding the “creators or near-creators of a language” for torture involves someone else speaking on behalf of the victims. In this case, however, the question is, *who* is allowed to speak *on behalf of whom*, and *how* to do so in a perceptually and ethically successful way, i.e., one that makes the victims’ pain, voices and selves, visible, or audible, to others? Here, one has only to think of Kenneth Goldsmith’s recent reading of a poem called “The Body of Michael Brown”—an appropriation of Brown’s autopsy report—to see how problematic the act of speaking on behalf of victims of violence (or, in this case, of almost literally appropriating their body) can be. Goldsmith read the poem at a conference at Brown University and, after the thirty minutes it took him to finish, he felt that “the reading had been powerful—‘How could it not have been, given the material?’ he said. He believed he had demonstrated that conceptual poetry could handle inflammatory material and provoke outrage in the service of a social cause.” For many people, however, the reading had been powerful-ly offensive, and “[w]hat seemed to offend people most about [it] was that [Goldsmith] appeared to have used Michael Brown’s death for his own purposes” (Wilkinson). However unsuccessful Goldsmith’s attempt may have been, conceptual

poetics does indeed offer, as Metres seems to have recognized, a unique and powerful avenue of *making*. In the “(echo /ex/)” poems, Metres does not speak on behalf of the torture victims of Abu Ghraib, but rather sets a stage in which they themselves get to speak. He manages to do so precisely by resorting to a poetic strategy that is most dear to conceptual poetry, that is, appropriation—what he appropriates, however, is not the Iraqis’ bodies, but rather their voices. He appropriates and unmakes them to the point in which all there is left on the page is a painful and all-encompassing silence, punctuated here and there with the cries and groans to which they have been ultimately reduced. What the “(echo /ex/)” poems asks us to do, then, is to listen to these fragments of speech and traces of silence. They ask us to witness the unraveling of the process through which pain cuts a person off from the ability to extend his or herself into the world. They ask us to witness the very moment in which a person—and the poem itself—departs from language into deafening silence, and to consider that, “[i]n such a departure, every poem becomes the simple advance of what is otherwise unspeakable” (Schmidt 113). In addition, as Scarry points out,

something can be learned from these verbal fragments not only about pain but about the human capacity for word-making. To witness the moment when pain causes a reversion to the pre-language of cries and groans is to witness the destruction of language: but conversely, to be present when a person moves up out of that pre-language and projects the facts of sentience into speech is almost to have been permitted to be present at the birth of language itself. (6)

This idea echoes the early title of Metres’ project—“--u --r--” (somewhat retained in the later *abu ghraib arias*). As he pointed out, aside from attempting to “register the erasure of Abu Ghraib from our popular memory” and demonstrating “the ways in which the voices of these men were disappeared,” the title “evokes the ancient city of Ur, in Babylon (modern day Iraq), the birthplace of civilization” (1601). In this light, while the “(echo /ex/)” poems do invite us to confront the painful reversion of creation brought about by torture, they also and conversely (literally so if, with Eliot still in mind, one reads the last poem as both an end and a beginning<sup>2</sup>) invite us to confront the reversion of uncreation—a reversion brought about by turning the *unmaking* of torture into the *making* of poetry. What the “(echo /ex/)” poems achieve, I claim, is thus remarkable. By enacting the erasure and silencing of the detainees in the level of form, they manage to reverse this erasure and, as Metres hoped, to “make the invisible audible,” to “lend an ear, and give voice, to the silenced bodies” of the victims (1599).

## Enabling Impossibility

That is to say, when Adorno declares poetry impossible (or, rather, barbaric) after Auschwitz, this impossibility is an enabling impossibility.—Slavoj Žižek, *Violence*

Whenever confronted with a literary work that “talks about” violence in a linear, cohesive, easily readable and swallowable way, i.e., in a form and language that looks and sounds familiar, I have to admit that I am a bit skeptic. It seems that, if the aim is to raise public awareness about a given act, then it makes sense for a novel, story or poem to be as accessible as possible in order to reach the greatest possible audience. However, if the aim is not only to raise awareness *about* the act, but also to represent and respond to the *act itself*, then “talking about” it, i.e., taking it on as a subject matter, is not enough—language and form need to respond to it accordingly. They need to be, to borrow Creeley’s term, an *extension* of the act to which they are trying to respond. As an example of this, I always think of Louis Aragon’s poem “Suicide.” How does one “talk about,” respond to or represent such an unsharable experience? How does one render the “unbearable inevitability” (Dworkin 50) that suicide can take on for a person who is experiencing such agony that, as David Foster Wallace puts it in *Infinite Jest*, he or she “will kill herself the same way a trapped person will eventually jump from the window of a burning high-rise” (696)? In Aragon’s case, he does so by transcribing the inevitable sequence of the alphabet, thus making the poem itself bear the “unbearable inevitability” of suicide:

abcdef

ghijkl

mnoqpr

stuvw

xyz

As I have tried to show throughout this paper, this is precisely what Metres’ “(echo /ex/)” poems do in relation to torture. With these kind of carefully wrought poetic responses in mind, I tend to agree with Žižek when he says that

Adorno’s saying, it seems, needs correction: it is not poetry that is impossible after Auschwitz, but rather *prose*. Realistic prose fails, where poetic evocation of the unbearable atmosphere of a camp succeeds. That is to say, when Adorno declares poetry impossible (or, rather, barbaric) after Auschwitz, this impossibility is an

enabling impossibility: poetry is always, by definition, ‘about’ something that cannot be addressed directly, only alluded to. (4)

Whether “Adorno’s saying” (probably too often misquoted and misunderstood) “needs correction” or not is beside the point. What is of interest here is that Žižek’s passage brings us full circle to the point in which this paper began—the question of the impossibility of responding to, or representing physical pain, and thus torture, through language, the very thing that it not only “resist[s] . . . but actively destroys” (Scarry 6). In the face of such an impossibility, it seemed hard to imagine that Metres’ poetic project could end up as anything other than what Eliot calls “a different kind of failure” (175). However, as I have insisted throughout this paper, by enacting the unmaking of torture on the level of form, Metres’ “(echo /ex/)” poems enable the impossibility of making the pain of the Abu Ghraib torture victims visible, or audible, not so much by objectifying it *through* language, but rather by making *language itself* (and its absence, its negative—its shadow, as Celan would have it) enact what pain does to it, and to the subjectivities of those being cut off from it. In addition and just as importantly, they enact a reversion of the unmaking work of torture, thus potentially restoring—remaking, finally—the voices and selves of the tortured Iraqis and (re)framing them not as muted and dominated bodies, but as survivors and storytellers.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> There are eleven “(echo /ex/)” poems in the *arias*, all with the exact same title. Since I will be close reading a few of them and quoting lines from many others, all references (parenthetical or otherwise) will include ordinal numbers for the sake of clarity.

<sup>2</sup> “What we call the beginning is often the end / And to make an end is to make a beginning. / The end is where we start from” (“Little Gidding” 58).

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