

Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature

Volume 6
Number 1 *Winter 2007*

Article 7

Winter 2007

Review of Andrew Leak and George Paizis, eds., The Holocaust and the Text: Speaking the Unspeakable.

Margarete J. Landwehr
West Chester University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrc>
[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Recommended Citation

Landwehr, Margarete J. (2007). Review of "Review of Andrew Leak and George Paizis, eds., The Holocaust and the Text: Speaking the Unspeakable," *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*: Vol. 6 : No. 1
Available at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrc/vol6/iss1/7>

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College. <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrc/vol6/iss1/7>

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

Andrew Leak and George Paizis, eds., The Holocaust and the Text: Speaking the Unspeakable. New York: St. Martin's, 2000. ix + 196 pp. ISBN 031222866X.

Reviewed by Margarete J. Landwehr
West Chester University

"Today I am not sure what I wrote is true. I am certain it is truthful."
Charlotte Delbo's comment on writing about the Holocaust sums up one central issue of Holocaust writing: the tension between historical knowledge and understanding, between facts and a representation of those facts, that not only is accurate but allows the reader to grasp their significance. For example, as Andrew Leak and George Paizis observe in their Introduction, Holocaust narratives, like all historical narratives, deploy such fictional devices as emplotment in order for facts "to speak themselves." Emplotment establishes causal links between events rather than simply situating them in time and thus adds a level of interpretation to these events. Since the reality of Auschwitz was anti-reason itself -- "*Hier ist kein warum!* (There is no "why" here!)" -- and representation of Auschwitz includes an attempt to arrive at a rational understanding of events that defy understanding, narrativization of them would constitute a falsification. Artists who portray the Holocaust have distinctive ethical concerns of truthfulness and authenticity. Consequently, some Holocaust survivors and scholars take the view that artistic representation can only betray these events.

In the initial chapter, Berel Lang acknowledges that no representation of the Holocaust will ever be quite adequate, asserting that the question to ask is not whether the Holocaust is speakable, but how to justify what is spoken. After establishing that Holocaust writing characteristically "aspires to the condition of history" and that historical authenticity is what these Holocaust writers purport to realize, Lang outlines three categories. The first group professes historicity and includes such diaries as the recently published *I Will Bear Witness* of Victor Klemperer of Dresden, as well as more mediated forms: memoir, autobiography, oral history and, what Lang calls "non-fictional fiction," that rely on the reader's belief in their verisimilitude. The diary constitutes the exemplary form of this type of representation inasmuch as it excludes revisions, in contrast to the memoirs or autobiographies which depict the past through the filter of memory. The second category consists of works in which the Holocaust appears with only a subtext or context of historical reference whose indirection can be understood in Aharon Appelfeld's aphorism that "one does not look directly into the sun." The largest proportion of writings in this category comes from poetry, for example, Paul Celan's "*Todesfuge*" ("Death Fugue"). The third type of Holocaust genre is historical writing itself, from Raul Hilberg's *The*

Destruction of the European Jews to Hannah Arendt's Eichmann in Jerusalem.

Yet, Lang observes, historical narratives, like fictional ones, employ a specific point of view that gives shape and, ultimately, interprets events. For example, Raul Hilberg, a railroad buff from childhood, would find in the transport system of Nazi Germany a crucial clue to the mechanism and design of genocide. Lang concludes that just as historical narratives borrow such literary devices as emplotment (Hayden White) and a specific point of view, so, too, "in some sense literary representation promises allegiance to history." Citing Aristotle's distinction between an impulse toward the universal in poetry and toward the particular in history, Lang notes that poetry is still attached to history in that "the universal encompasses the particular."

If Lang's discussion provides an overview of issues of authenticity in Holocaust writings, the other chapters focus on more specific topics. Thus, in Chapter Two, Robert Gordon deals with Italian deportation writings, and in Chapter Three Anna Hardman discusses representations of the Holocaust in women's testimony. The subsequent chapters focus on specific writers, among them Aharon Appelfeld, Patrick Modiano, Marguerite Duras, and George Steiner.

In his analysis of narratives on deportation to Nazi camps written by Italians from 1945-47, Gordon traces thematic and stylistic commonalities among the works, including references to Dante's *Inferno*, the central focus on national identity, and the influence of such American writers as Faulkner, Dos Passos, and Hemingway on these neo-realists, who frequently included documents, photographs, and references to newsreels and newspaper reports in their texts. Regarding Holocaust narratives in general, Gordon observes that fiction "serves better to recall and communicate than bare fact" because "[a]cts such as storytelling, anecdote, dialogue are the key means to preserving a sense of subjectivity, of distinction amongst the prisoners in a system of undifferentiated persecution." He continues: "For if suffering produces solidarity and unity, it is also experienced as a leveler, a destroyer of differences in identity." Gordon concludes with a brief overview of gender differences in Italian Holocaust narratives. If male writers are concerned with issues of national identity, heroism and submission and other group dynamics in the prison system, then women focus on friendships, childbirth, intimate human interrelation and mother/daughter bonds.

Hardman's feminist essay serves as a counterpoint to Gordon's in that she emphasizes the common experiences of men and women expressed in the camp narratives and advocates instead a focus on individual differences. She cites Myrna Goldenberg's article that compares how women and men were brutalized and concludes with: "different horrors, same hell." Hardman

critiques Goldenberg's tendency to "homogenize women's experiences," which runs counter to much contemporary feminist theory with its emphasis on difference. Although Hardman concedes that survival was a more urgent issue for women than men, as more women than men were deported and more women than men were killed in the camps, she claims that reducing the diversity of women's experience of the Holocaust to its impact on their sexuality is misguided. Similarly, she cites women's accounts that detail how women's bonding provided better chances of survival, but questions highly selective readings of other texts in which "traditional women's values" such as supportiveness, compassion, nurturing, tenderness and sensitivity are emphasized and any accounts of numbness or indifference to atrocities are ignored.

By way of illustration, she claims that Goldenberg misrepresents Isabella Leitner's narrative by focusing on the pact which she had with her sisters to sustain each other and neglecting Leitner's breaking of that pact later in order to survive. Hardmann claims that Leitner's statement, "Somebody must live to tell the tale," justifies Leitner's feeling that survival entailed putting her life above the lives of her sisters. To sum up, Hardman challenges assumptions about what constitutes distinctly "feminine" and "masculine" survival strategies and claims that there exist strong parallels between the ways in which men and women attempted to survive.

Robert Eaglestone's essay on Emmanuel Levinas's "non-representation" of the Holocaust offers one of the most insightful and relevant discussions of the difficulties inherent in Holocaust narrative. Judged by Zygmunt Bauman as "the greatest moral philosopher of the twentieth century," Levinas seeks to answer the question: Can we speak of morality after the failure of morality? Levinas refuses to represent or recite narratives about the Holocaust, because he believes that any mode of representation would betray the events of the Holocaust. He claims that artistic representations of the Holocaust are irresponsible misrepresentations, because he believes that when we respond to images of suffering in film or literature we are responding to dead celluloid or mere words and not to the actual suffering. Thus, artistic representation is based on the absence of those it purports to represent and, according to Levinas, this makes responses to this "shadow" inauthentic and in bad faith. Levinas also finds historical representations of the Holocaust deeply problematic, as history passes over the deaths and suffering of individuals. The "I" has been turned into an event of history. Thus, one is left with this seemingly insurmountable aporia: one cannot adequately represent the Holocaust, yet one cannot let it go unrepresented. Eaglestone puts the dilemma succinctly: "If art and history -- the only modes of representation open to us -- will always betray the suffering of the Holocaust, how can we speak, or at least justify our speech?" For Levinas, there is no closure or final philosophical resolution to this question. If the complete history or the true representation of the Holocaust is impossible, we must "abandon the

nostalgia of a final answer or the desire of a complete history, for the openness of an infinite discussion."

In her analysis of Emanuel Litvinoff's *The Lost Europeans*, Robert Harris's *Fatherland*, and W. G. Sebald's *The Emigrants*, Ann Parry examines the paradoxical situation of postwar Holocaust works that attempt to represent the "unrepresentable" and links European representations of the Shoah with the ways in which European thought has constructed the image of the Jew. She draws upon Jean-François Lyotard's "Heidegger and 'the Jews'" in which the French philosopher argues that the latter are represented as outsiders who, in terms of European national identity, are "unassignable" without their own language and nation. Lyotard concludes that this representation of Jews as foreigners is "crucially related to their being the ever-present but 'unconscious anxiety' of the West." Furthermore, Lyotard views Auschwitz as the failure of reason that cannot be represented and compares the unrepresentability of the Shoah to the Kantian concept of the sublime as an excess "which overflows the framing power of the imagination 'to invest, fix, and represent'" (Parry citing Lyotard). Consequently, writer and reader are located in a "sphere beyond tragedy"; all art can do is bear witness to the unsayable. Employing this philosophical framework, Parry analyzes how Jews and the Shoah are represented in the works cited above. For example, the hero in *The Lost Europeans* becomes aware that Jews belonged "nowhere in the strictly stratified society of England" and that they are merely "one species among a host of refugees." The question of representation of the Shoah serves as a powerful theme in both *Fatherland* and *The Emigrants*. The dystopian political thriller, *Fatherland*, which portrays Europe in 1964 after a German victory, represents a re-writing of history in which the "politics of extermination on the political scene," a state of affairs that Lyotard considered unrepresentable, becomes an all too frightening reality. All of Sebald's narrators in *The Emigrants* re-engage in the traumatic past of their Jewish subjects. Ethical and aesthetic questions of representation torment the narrator of the final story, "Max Ferber": "Often I could not get on for hours and days at a time, and not infrequently I unraveled what I had done, continuously tormented by scruples that were taking tighter hold. These scruples concerned not only the subject of my narrative, which I felt I could not do justice to, no matter what approach I tried, but also the entire questionable business of writing"

In her article on contemporary Holocaust fiction, which includes Helen Demidenko's *The Hand That Signed the Paper*, D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*, and Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow*, Sue Vice focuses on point-of-view and authenticity. She opens the discussion with an overview of the scandal caused by Demidenko's novel. Readers assumed that her work, whose characters include a war criminal awaiting trial for his participation in the massacre of 34,000 Jews at Babi Yar and whose characters voice anti-

Semitic views, is a fictionalized autobiography of her own immigrant Ukrainian family. When it was discovered that Demidenko was actually a woman of British descent named Helen Darville and that she gleaned information from various sources, including survivor testimonies and Ukrainian reports of Soviet atrocities of the 1930s, without acknowledging those sources, an uproar ensued. When Darville's publisher sought legal advice, the verdict was that postmodern fiction does not need to document its historical sources and that no breach of copyright had occurred. Vice points out that Darville's work is a polyphonic novel -- a term used by Bakhtin to describe a narrator who has no privileged information and whose "voice" is on the same level as the voices of the other characters. In his critique of Darville's novel, Robert Manne demands a "clearly identified and morally unambiguous authorial voice" -- that is not a polyphonic voice -- in works that deal with the Holocaust. He claims that if Darville's novel is read "without knowledge or curiosity," it could be a dangerous text. Vice, on the other hand, concludes that those Holocaust novels that are controversial and might even cause offense may be more fitting and interesting representations of the Holocaust because they provoke discussion.

The significance of authenticity in Holocaust narratives became the focus of an intense debate when Binjamin Wilkomirski's alleged autobiography, *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*, reviewed in Andrea Reiter's essay on Holocaust narratives from a child's perspective, proved to be a forgery. (Reiter herself doesn't discuss his deception, because proof of the forgery wasn't made public until 2000, the year *The Holocaust and the Text* was published.) Appearing in 1995 as *Bruchstuecke (Fragments)*, the work was compared favorably to Elie Wiesel's *Night* and Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*. In "Memory, Authority and Identity: Holocaust Studies in Light of the Wilkomirski Debate" (*Biography* 27, Winter 2004), Andrew Gross and Michael Hoffman discuss the significance of this forgery in the study of Holocaust narratives. In the summer of 1998, a Swiss journalist, Daniel Ganzfried, accused Wilkomirski of inventing his autobiography and claimed that he wasn't even Jewish and was born as Bruno Grosjean. A Swiss historian, Stefan Maechler, pursued an independent investigation in the spring of 1999 and made his findings public in 2000: they verified that Wilkomirski was born out of wedlock to Yvonne Grosjean in Switzerland and was placed in a series of foster homes in which he experienced abuse. In 1979, Wilkomirski met an Israeli psychologist, Elitsur Bernstein, with whom he began work to recover "repressed memories": a form of therapy that has been very controversial in the United States. *Fragments* apparently consists of these "recovered memories." Maechler claims that Wilkomirski/Grosjean retained his childhood traumas, but substituted events from his early childhood with events drawn from the Holocaust, a topic he had obsessively studied. Many believe that Wilkomirski truly believes his own story.

In an article entitled "The Memory Thief," in the *New Yorker*, Philip Gourevitch discusses the emotional power of testimony, and, hence, the reason so many felt betrayed by Wilkomirski's work. Gourevitch links the impact of testimony to its emotive power, to its authority. In the debate over the value of Wilkomirski's work, his defenders privilege this authority over authenticity. While conceding that *Fragments* is probably a forgery, they praise its ability to evoke powerful responses in readers. Gourevitch claims that most recent representations of the Holocaust emphasize the personal over the political and historical and thus substitute "sympathetic moral righteousness" for a more objective analysis of the causes of genocide. He points to the exhibits in the Holocaust Museum in Washington in which visitors are encouraged to put themselves in the place of the victims. In *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, Alison Landsberg, on the other hand, argues that it is important for people who have no direct relationship to the Holocaust to remember it in a personal way and claims that the traditional (detached and unemotional) way of studying history, which she names the "cognitive mode," is inferior to the "experiential mode" of personal memory.

In his chapter on the writings of Aharon Appelfeld, Leon Yudkin reframes the debate between authenticity and authority in terms of aesthetics: "Any mimetic effort true to its subject would cease to be aesthetic production, literary material, and becomes gruesome chronicle. The literature that represents the Holocaust . . . has to go beyond representation of the facts" He holds up Appelfeld's novels as paradigmatic for Holocaust fiction that is not mere "gruesome chronicle" in that they frequently do not directly represent or even invoke the Holocaust. Rather, the Holocaust remains a "constant presence by implication." Appelfeld often employs a narrator who "mediate[s] between the experience of the survivors and the reality of the reader." Thus, although Appelfeld himself rejects the label of "Holocaust writer," Yudkin argues that his stories of Holocaust survivors who live on the margins of society offer an alternative model for a Holocaust narrative whose indirect references to the Holocaust raises it above a mere factual depiction of horror.

In his analysis of Patrick Modiano's autobiographical fiction, *La Place de l'étoile* and *Dora Bruder*, Samuel Khalifa explores how Modiano "was the first in France to confront an alienating memory and, in doing so, to break the mould of traditional historiography." Like Marcel Ophüls's film, *Le Chagrin et la Pitié* (*The Sorrow and the Pity*), Modiano's works undermine the myth of the French Resistance and point to the moral responsibility of the Vichyists as active collaborators with the Nazi regime. Born in 1945, Modiano, whose Jewish father avoided deportation, considers himself a product of the occupation and views his duty to remember through his works as a quest for identity. Modiano is concerned with aesthetic effect and a moral imperative rather than historical factuality: "Of course, the Occupation

I deal with is a mythical one. I didn't want to paint a realistic picture of the Occupation but instead to evoke a certain moral climate of cowardice and confusion. Nothing at all to do with the real Occupation. No historical accuracy, but instead, an atmosphere, a dream, a fantasy." The autobiographical "grafting" of his life is more explicit in *Dora Bruder*, in which Modiano makes an appeal to a collective remembrance of the "truth" of Vichy collaboration rather than to the adherence to historical details.

The collection concludes with Martin Crowley's analysis and comparison of Robert Antelme's account of his experiences in the Buchenwald and Dachau concentration camps in *L'espece Humaine* and of his wife's, Marguerite Duras's *La douleur*, in which she recounts her wait for her husband in Paris. The anguish of the waiting narrator is presented as a doubling of Robert L's suffering as she begins to mimic physically his agony. Both Antelme's and Duras's controversial insights regarding humanity offer some of the most thought-provoking material of the entire collection. In a text from November 1945, Antelme recognizes the urge toward violence as essentially human. In a short piece entitled "Vengeance," he perceives the mistreatment of German prisoners of war as a manifestation of that violence which those opposed to the Nazis had been fighting: "Hundreds of thousands of comrades died in the German camps for the sake of the victory of the simple notions of justice, freedom, respect for one's fellow man By mistreating prisoners of war, or by quietly letting them die of hunger, we betray these notions, which represent the most valuable content of the victory. . . ." Similarly, Duras declares in *Les Yeux Verts (Green Eyes)* that Nazism should be understood as embodying qualities which we need to integrate into our fundamental notion of humanity. Nazism represents, for Duras, not an aberration from the human, but rather, a failure to acknowledge a tendency to violence as part of a common humanity. In other words, she claims that there is a crucial difference between those who acknowledge the violence of their desires and those who fail to understand this violence as part of a common humanity. Duras believes that this failure to acknowledge violence as part of being human, that is, as potential behavior in each human being and in oneself, ironically, could contribute to violence.

On the whole, this collection of essays serves as a good reference book on literary representations of the Holocaust and could be employed as a college textbook in a course on Holocaust literature. Although the quality of the articles varies, most of the chapters offer insightful arguments on the difficulties inherent in any fictional portrayal of the Holocaust as well as a variety of aesthetic solutions to the dilemma of presenting an authentic account as opposed to narrative that evokes a deeper understanding in the reader of the horrors and suffering of the Holocaust. Issues common to discussions of aesthetic works, such as mimesis versus verisimilitude, a text's authenticity versus its emotional power, and ethical issues of exposing

individuals' private suffering to a public sphere gain urgency and ethical relevance when related to Holocaust narratives.