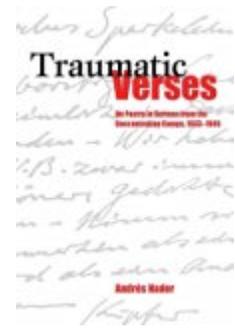


Andrés José Nader. *Traumatic Verses: On Poetry in German from the Concentration Camps, 1933-1945*. Rochester: Camden House, 2007. x + 258 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57113-375-5.

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## The Songs of Horror

As his title suggests, Andrés José Nader takes as his object of study poems written in the concentration camps. His literary historical approach to the texts combines close readings, psychoanalytical understandings of trauma, and investigations of the reception of the poems in the postwar period. Works by Ruth Klüger, Hasso Grabner, Fritz Löhner-Beda, Edgar Kupfer-Koberwitz, Karl Schnog, Georg von Boris, Ilse Weber, and Alfred Kittner are examined in illuminating detail. All the poems under discussion are reproduced again in full in their original German, along with English translations, in an appendix. The appendix and bibliography are particularly useful tools in themselves. The emphasis on individual poems as case studies is accompanied by an ambitious framework of questions: “Why did some inmates engage in aesthetic practices? Why did they work at the most stylized of literary forms, of forms of communication? –Despite the prevailing conditions, or because of them, or for some other reasons? What kinds of poetry did inmates compose? Why poetry? What did they write about in what we call ‘unimaginable conditions’? How did they write? Why would human beings deprived of their agency resort to creative expression, to language games—as we might call them—that adhere to established rules of versification? What do their verses tell us about poetry and language in extremity? What can they tell us about our relation to language and about the ways in which identity is bound up with aesthetic notions? More specifically: What is the significance of cultural production from the camps in the language of

those who created the camps? What is the relationship between the language of the perpetrators and the language of the inmates whose works are treated here?” (p. 2). All of these subjects are addressed in a differentiated and precise way throughout the text, although I would have preferred more regular signposting rather than repeated rhetorical questions, albeit ones containing fundamental issues that literary critics approaching the Holocaust must face.

In a relatively long introductory chapter, Nader suggests how the writing of poetry constituted a reappropriation of German language, and therefore of identity, within the concentrationary universe (following Jean Améry). He argues for the appropriateness of the term “emergency poetry” for verse produced at times of traumatic crisis and suggests that such poetry becomes a way of “making narrative sense” of the horror surrounding the victims (p. 11). Proposing both ways of reading, based on “empathetic unsettlement” (p. 12), and ways of understanding the texts, based on “poetic defiance” (p. 15), Nader advocates ways of analyzing that are inherently dialogical and that see the poems as “imaginative acts” and “self-representations by people who were being denied personal, political, civil, legal, and historical representation” (p. 16). He argues that “only a dialogic reading will be able to show both their situatedness and their representational limits without fetishizing their special status (treating the poems as sacred objects) or dismissing them as narratives that in their inevitable ideological

embeddedness and narrative closure disguise the trauma we expect them to communicate” (p. 19).

It may be more illustrative of the academic context rather than the author’s own standpoint that he repeatedly feels the need to justify his approach and subject matter—I was very quickly persuaded that these texts were worthy of the detailed investigation he subjects them to. On several occasions Nader insists that literary historians have until now ignored writings from the camps, although he does refer to academics who have approached the topic from different angles. The introduction concludes with a useful “annotated bibliographic guide to the field” of anthologies of concentration camp poetry (p. 22), although I am not convinced that it was only from the 1980s that “the new status of individual experience as a legitimate field of scientific and scholarly inquiry” (p. 24) was manifested, given the role of the autobiographical in relation to Holocaust memories.

In chapter 1, the investigation of Ruth Klüger’s poems “exemplifies the interpretative mode applied in the subsequent chapters” (p. 21). Using the framework of Primo Levi and Jean Améry’s writings, Nader discusses the importance of identity in relation to the German language, not to “rank victimizations nor to measure up behaviour or weigh up cultural traditions. The objective rather is to delineate differences among inmates so as to begin to establish a tentative and incomplete socio-cultural field to enable the analysis of the poems” (p. 49). The fascinating publication history of Klüger’s poems, and the ways in which they have, or have not, been included in versions of her autobiography, is read through the lens of her own autobiographical and academic interpretations as well as Nader’s critical analysis. This chapter also exemplifies the strength of the book: the compelling interpretations of the poems and the author’s incisive close reading.

Chapter 2 continues the theme of identity with reference to theories of trauma and looks at the how the poems attempted to counter the materiality of the humiliation, both in terms of the “power to name” (p. 93) and the attempts to “defend individuality” (p. 93). In looking at how the poems create a sense of “defiant hope” (p. 21), Nader considers certain aesthetic qualities of writing in the camps that have also been subject to extensive discussion in relation to poems written after the Holocaust; for example “narrative closure and a degree of glorification of the horror” (p. 93). Chapter 3 suggests that the poems can be seen as a source of understanding what “everyday life” was like in the camps, while avoiding overarching claims to reality or authenticity with respect to

this diverse set of experiences. Discussions of the inmates’ aesthetic responses to time, to their experiences of exhaustion, hunger, brutality, and death, are considered within a broader context of language and experience arising from the horror (such as the figure of the *Muselmann*) and what could often not be said, or heard, in the postwar period (for example, instances of cannibalism in the camps). Chapter 4 confronts the effects of suffering or witnessing torture and the extent to which poetry can be used to imaginarily “reconfigure power relations” (p. 150) and allow for the possibilities of anger as a response to the brutality. Particularly interesting is Nader’s discussion of the changing constellations of the reception of poetry written in the camps, and the ways in which selective republication after 1990 disarticulates the victims’ desire for revenge.

Chapter 5 is intentionally the most provocative within the context of the study and it is the one that I had most methodological difficulty with. It is an overview of the publication of literature during Nazism, and it works well as a good stand-alone chapter for those wanting an accessible yet detailed account of institutional responses to literature during the period. Its inclusion within this study is intended to allow comparisons as to “how different contexts affect the function of poetry,” to “unsettle easy distinctions between the ‘personal’ and the ‘political,’” and it “necessitates a differentiated analysis of the return to formalism, as aesthetic escapism on the one hand, and, on the other, as a viable and perhaps necessary form of expression when language threatens to fail in the face of extremity and personal disintegration” (p. 160). While the comparisons about references to classicism and comradeship of poetry inside and outside the camp are thought-provoking, the conclusions about representations of death and mortality are somewhat less surprising: “a study of modern concentration-camp poetry makes evident a particular relation to death and mortality in the concentration camps that differs significantly from the relation to death promoted by a public sphere saturated with the language of nationalist heroism and kitsch representations of sublime military death or by a romanticist sentimentality” (pp. 175-176). However, what I did in the end find convincing was Nader’s conclusion that the camp poets’ use of conventional and traditional poetic forms is an important counterpoint to the “anti-conventional, avant-gardist lyric” (p. 183) that is often seen as the dominant response to the Holocaust.

Nader argues that these diverse texts could, and should, be considered as a genre. Although, as he also (correctly) insists on the differences between poems and

poets, this stance undoubtedly complicates the picture (p. 158). In addition, reference to other genres (for example, oral history, autobiography, and diaries) in support of his interpretations left me questioning the extent to which certain elements are specific to poems as such: “To write poems in the concentration camps is to seek to ‘make sense,’ it is to counter the lack of sense that the perpetrators imposed on the life of inmates. As communication, whether internal (with oneself) or addressed to an actual or imaginary ‘other,’ a poem connotes a social field, creates a relation between an author and an implied audience, brings to life a narrator, a subject, an narrative” (p. 127).

Given the author’s careful insistence on positionality, the book left me wanting to know more about the gendered aspects of the poetry, an avenue that Nader points to but decides not to follow, despite his insistence on identity, a reference to Holocaust historian Joan Ringel-

heim’s work on the subject, and the introductory epigraph by Hélène Cixious.

Nader’s book is effective both due to the continued immediacy of the poetry and the persuasiveness of the analysis. The significance of the in-depth literary historical investigations is encapsulated in his exhortation: “it seems crucial to remember that any overgeneralizing account of the Holocaust does a disservice to the memory of the victims and impairs our possibly already limited ability to confront the events with responsibility and sensitivity” (p. 70). In addition, the continued relevance of many of the themes in Nader’s book is striking—from the discussions about how totalitarian states engage in processes of dehumanization by placing detainees beyond the law, to the psychological effects of torture. The book reminds us that these issues are not only issues of the past.

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