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Sem Dresden. *Persecution, Extermination, Literature.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995. viii + 237 pp. $18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8020-7668-7; $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8020-0722-3.

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Hearing Silence

Persecution, Extermination, Literature argues for the value of a specifically literary approach to the memory of the Holocaust.[1] Dresden wants to show that to discuss representations of Holocaust experience in terms of traditional literary categories and forms is not at all to trivialize or exploit a subject matter that deserves better, but rather to begin thinking seriously about the ways in which we, as concerned readers, might deal with what nevertheless cannot be dealt with; imagine what nevertheless cannot be imagined; bear witness to an event of which most of us can have no direct memory. Dresden wants, in short, to have us reflect upon the unique ways in which literature allows us to hear that irreducible silence which remains even after all the facts have been properly recorded, correlated, and acknowledged.

The necessity of silence has, of course, been invoked many times, in many different ways, in response to the memory of the Holocaust. One thinks immediately of Adorno on the alleged impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz; of Levi on the fear that others will be too incredulous or simply too indifferent to hear or believe the truth of the lagers; even of Himmler's chilling affirmation, from "the other side" and during the course of the crime, that by enacting the *Endloesung* the S.S had begun to write a page of history too sublime ever to be recorded. In *Persecution, Extermination, Literature*, Sem Dresden also makes a sense of silence central to his own approach to the memory and literature of the Holocaust, but precisely in order to resist an oppressive, overly literal understanding of the "unimaginable" status of Holocaust experience that might lead literary people, writers and critics alike, to voluntarily muzzle themselves.

All words, Dresden repeatedly reminds us, all forms of representation and testimony, are marked by an essential weakness: an absolute inability to render the experience of the Holocaust transparent or knowable for the reader. The experience of the death camps is, for Dresden, an exemplary form of "borderline experience": a state in which conscious individuals, deprived of any promise of future life, find themselves nonetheless living, forced to endure and bear witness to their own suspension between the worlds of the living and the dead. "It must therefore be acknowledged," Dresden tells us, "that any description of such a situation is doomed to failure, if only because of the fact that it will always find itself on one or the other side of the borderline and will never hit the dividing line precisely and exclusively" (p. 118).

The representation of such a borderline experience, unfolding between the unknowability of death for the living and the simple silence of the dead, must leave every reader not only with the urgent responsibility of acknowledgment, but also with the impossibility of "knowing how it was." The experience of the Holocaust thus seems to fall outside all common frames of reference, save that of the empty and universal apprehension of death, an apprehension that points only at what cannot be pointed at. Writers and readers should not be ashamed to admit that this essential blind spot of human imagination provides a powerful and inevitable focal point, a point of fascination, for consumers of Holocaust literature. At one level or another, even in the context of narratives that address an event as unutterably traumatic as the Holocaust, a successful work of imaginative fiction must seduce the reader into entering what will always remain, for him or her, an imagined world. As Dresden argues:

It may be true that from a historical point of view there is really nothing to say about those who were dy-

ing at that moment in gas vans or during mass murders, but that does not mean there are no other ways of giving access to their suffering. Since all people are mortal and death is the great mystery of life, death cannot but be called the major subject of interest for a number of people ... (p. 65).

For Dresden, the abyss that necessarily exists between the event of the Holocaust and its evocation does not at all provide an argument against a literary approach to its memory but, to the contrary, the beginnings of a justification. There is a blackness of silence in the facts that no purely "objective" language can develop or illuminate; a dimension of silence and subjectivity which can nonetheless come into play in even the most factual rendition. All forms of Holocaust literature, after all, inevitably share this much in common: they are written, not mechanically recorded. They are therefore involved in something other than the neutral recording of facts, unavoidably generating literary effects of suspense, projection, shifting identification, allusion, and estrangement. Accordingly, even while acknowledging the primacy of actual witness testimonies, Dresden insists that a wide range of texts and documents associated with the memory of the Holocaust–from those written on the spot by victims, to those invented after the fact by professional novelists–can and should be perused and judged for their literary strengths and weaknesses.

Dresden's purpose is evidently not one, however, of providing close or definitive readings of particular works, but rather of surveying an entire field to identify the unique resources that literary modes of writing and criticism can bring to the task of remembrance. Texts by Spiegelman, Keneally, Levi, Wiesel, Herzberg, Borowski, Kosinski, Lind, Hilsenrath, and many others are all explored by Dresden in such typically modernist literary terms as "temporal confusion," "ambiguity," and "indirectness." For example, temporal confusion allows readers to sense the ways in which past traumas can bleed uncontrollably into the "present" in defiance of any chronological order; ambiguity allows for recognition of the complex sense of "unreality" reported by victims; indirectness allows for the suggestion of "truths" which cannot be explicitly formulated or reduced to the level of verifiable fact.

All these techniques might seem like so many moments of obfuscation, so many forms of imprecision, from the perspective of professional historiography, yet they are the very stuff of a specifically literary, imaginative response. Literature, in other words, even when it addresses historical facts, is not a more or less failed attempt to approximate the status of historical record. It approaches another kind of "truth"–a kind of truth that can sometimes be well served by acts of embellishment, omission, or sheer invention that would automatically disqualify a work from any claim to the kind of truth sought by historians.

The relevance of a literary-critical vocabulary for Dresden, then, is that it has evolved precisely for the purpose of articulating those capacities of writing which take us beyond any simple correspondence between objectifiable facts and their representations. Nonetheless, it must be noted, Dresden's attitude is not a simply permissive or relativist one. It is not that any literary fiction which addresses the memory of the Holocaust is rendered virtuous, beyond criticism, by the mere fact of being literary. It is rather that the duties and functions of literature need to be appreciated in their specificity: there is just no point in mechanically applying the criteria of historiography to the work of imaginative writers.

Despite his broad overview, Dresden does not try to erect any generalized set of rules for the instant appreciation of Holocaust literature. He certainly does not preclude critical discussion of the assumptions and motivations of fictional works, indulging in this on several occasions himself. The presence of literary technique does not guarantee in advance the integrity and innocence of a particular work of fiction. Such techniques have their own forms of effectivity, to be sure, different from those of the historian, but they can still be used to manipulate, trivialize, exploit, or mislead, and these are issues of grave concern when dealing with such charged matters of memory.

Reflecting on questions raised by Fassbinder's controversial *Der Mull, die Stadt und Der Tod*, Dresden writes:

... I am convinced that moral judgements and condemnations on the part of literary criticism should be handled with the greatest circumspection. But that does not imply either that they are impossible or that they can be avoided. Disengagement is totally excluded where war literature is concerned; here it continually emerges that forms of ethics and literary actualization include one another (p. 72).

Dresden is canny–indeed, almost uncannily so for an Australian reader–when he writes of the risks involved in attempts to explore the business of extermination from the imagined perspective of the exterminators: "the danger of sensationalism is not minor," he tells us, and "cru-

elty has a mysterious attraction" (p. 198). Nor is Dresden so overwhelmed by faith in the "autonomy of literature" as to be rendered incapable of recognizing that the surprising popular success of some works of Holocaust literature can give rise to disturbing questions about the forms of enjoyment that might be taken from the genre. Such questions, thrown into relief by the phenomenon of success itself, force us to ask whether a declared attitude of "facing the truth" can sometimes support forms of disavowal and evasion. Dresden is not afraid, when he feels the context demands it, to deal in such words as "Christianizing" or "antisemitic."

These are insights that the Australian literary establishment might have benefited from enormously during the so-called Demidenko Debate–a "debate" dominated by the widely broadcast suspicion that any questioning of a novel, even one which advertises itself as bravely revealing the "searing truth" of the Holocaust, is necessarily "totalitarian."[2]

Persecution, Extermination, Literature makes an important and stimulating contribution to the perennial debate between literary-humanists and historians over proper forms of remembrance. Well translated by Henry Schogt, Dresden's writing consistently gives the impression of a humane, humble and erudite sensibility. Nonetheless, where Dresden's book does show its own limitations, for this reader, is in its apparently unalloyed faith in the universal purchase of the kind of liberal humanism it so well exemplifies.

Dresden considers, for example, the extent to which Holocaust experience can be comprehended within such terms as "tragedy" and "the absurd." He is certainly right in finally disqualifying "tragedy" as an adequate umbrella term for the representation of Holocaust experience,insofar as this has always implied reconciliation between the flawed nature of individuals and their eventual destinies. But Dresden never develops this kind of insight in any thoroughgoing way, perhaps to the point of asking whether the language and assumptions that have traditionally dominated Western aesthetics might themselves be put into crisis in the wake of such a typically modern event as the Holocaust. Indeed, many have argued that the Holocaust is an event exemplary of our contemporary condition, precisely insofar as it obliges us to engage in a questioning so relentless, so vigilant, that we are left with no guaranteed, secure, or necessarily "innocent" position from which to conduct the trial.

Dresden, for his part, confesses to a certain reticence when it comes to "theorizing" our relation to the memory of the Holocaust, almost as if he had merely displaced the anxiety others profess about the activity of fictionalizing in this context, resorting instead to an equally inhibiting anxiety about the activity of theorizing. What this means, in effect, is that Dresden's reasoning moves almost entirely within the orbit of already established theoretical assumptions and forms of description.

But what if the typical language of modernist literary aesthetics were itself shaped at a profound level by a thoroughly Christianizing mythology, one which sees writing and reading as ideal acts of sublimated self-sacrifice by individuals attaining to universality through the power of imaginative empathy, and one which therefore inevitably comes to the surface, in all sorts of subtle, occasionally explosive ways in the writing, reading, and critical reception of Holocaust literature? But here the reviewer risks polemicizing for his own views.

Notes

[1]. It should be noted that Dresden raises some critical questions about the sacralizing implications of the term "Holocaust." Although I have some sympathy with these reservations, I continue to employ the term, if only for the pragmatic reason that it has already been well established in public memory.

[2]. Readers unfamiliar with the story of Helen Demidenko/Darville's *The Hand That Signed the Paper* and the scandals that erupted around it in late 1995 will find a good rundown on the matter in the discussion section of the H-Antis WWW home page. Those interested in further reading might turn to William Schaffer, "The Book That Evaded the Question," *Southerly* (Spring 1995): 175-84.

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