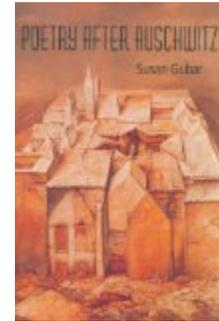


Susan Gubar. *Poetry after Auschwitz: Remembering What One Never Knew*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003. xxi + 313 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34176-1.

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A Seminal Book on Holocaust Literature

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Susan Gubar's book *Poetry after Auschwitz: Remembering What One Never Knew* is an outstanding study concerning the role of verse in representing the Holocaust. Gubar laments that excellent and poignant verse about the Shoah has long been neglected. The renowned scholar is quick to point out that she does not pretend to write a comprehensive book covering all Holocaust verse. Gubar selects poems that support her assertions and contain "aesthetic ambition or historical seriousness" (p. xvii). She discusses the role of art in preserving memory and hopes that her study will stimulate further analysis of Holocaust poetry and resurrect excellent poetry from obscurity. The author challenges Theodor Adorno's famous statement that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (quoted p. 4), countering with the idea of proxy witnesses (those who employ previous survivor testimony) composing verses about the Holocaust. Gubar's employment of sources is varied and exhaustive; she skillfully incorporates research from diverse fields to complement her arguments. Furthermore, at the beginning of each chapter, the author deftly relates the chapter's content; she also employs an excellent choice of examples from Holocaust poetry to substantiate her points.

Gubar begins her study by declaring that the Holocaust is dying. She does not simply mean that the survivors of the Shoah are getting older and that many have died; instead, she indicates that many people do not want to discuss, write about, or even think about the atrocities

that they have endured or witnessed. Although a significant aspect of Holocaust studies involves memory, some people desire to erase suffering from their memory. In the decades after the Shoah (the late 1940s through the 1960s), social scientists in Europe neglected to explore the causes and ramifications of the Holocaust, the French government hindered the prosecution of Vichy officials, Polish officials fired Jews from their jobs, and the German Evangelical Conference declared that the Holocaust signified that Jews needed to accept Jesus Christ as their savior—suggesting that the Jews were at least partly responsible for their own suffering by not being Christians. Gubar shows that this denial and lack of memory extend well past the 1960s. For example, Topf of Wiesbaden, the firm that built the Nazi crematoria, continued to manufacture such ovens through the 1970s without changing its name, and Nazi officer Kurt Waldheim served as United Nations Secretary-General and later as President of Austria.

Gubar claims that many survivors neglected to speak or write about the Holocaust because of the pain and horror caused by the atrocities, the emotional numbness that they experienced, the idea that they themselves could not believe the evils that they witnessed (Gubar quotes from Aharon Appelfeld), and the emergence of Holocaust deniers. Gubar believes that 1959-1963 was a pivotal time for Holocaust studies because of the premiere of the film *The Diary of Anne Frank*, the translation of Elie Wiesel's *Night*, and the publicity surrounding the Eichmann trial. Subsequently, several great Holocaust scholars emerged,

studying significant Holocaust writers such as Primo Levi, Nelly Sachs, Paul Celan, Anne Frank, Charlotte Delbo, and Tadeusz Borowski. Nonetheless, there are, as Gubar correctly points out, people such as Claude Lanzmann and Berel Lang who worry that creative, fictional, or figurative works about the Holocaust could trivialize or undermine historical accounts and studies. Gubar offers several interpretations of Adorno's famous comment about writing poetry after Auschwitz. She warns that the Holocaust could die if people adhere to the belief that the only truly significant writings about the Shoah are those penned by survivors and eyewitnesses. She believes that the aforementioned concerns have greatly inhibited people from writing creative works about the Holocaust. Gubar states, "No matter how well-intentioned, the first generation of Holocaust scholars threatened to eradicate the Shoah by stipulating that the bankruptcy of analogizing or generalizing meant only those personally victimized could speak for or about the event" (pp. 4-5). Gubar argues convincingly that in Holocaust studies there is too great an emphasis upon verisimilitude. She believes that because memory of the Holocaust is dying, it is essential that people write about it, for failing to do so would be tantamount to a Nazi victory. However, writers should be wary of "the sinister potential of our own rhetoric to imperil the humanity of its subjects" (p. 7). Gubar means that those who write about the Holocaust need to refrain from self-serving, macabre, melodramatic, and superficial rhetorical strategies. Poetry is the form she advocates because it lacks the fluidity and the closure of a prose narrative and thus is more consistent with the fragmentation deriving from the psychological, moral, religious, and political tribulations that existed during the Holocaust.

In the second chapter, "Masters of Disaster," Gubar follows Adorno's own caveat to his statement, claiming that it is the failure to create art after the Holocaust that serves as an act of barbarism. She mentions Lawrence Langer's concept of "the principle of discontinuity" (p. 29), in which survivor parents are emotionally separated from their children who do not—or cannot—understand the pain and suffering that they have endured. The chapter involves the question that reflects the book's subtitle, "how does one remember what one never knew" (p. 29)? Children of survivors cannot adequately relate to the horrors endured by their parents, while survivors themselves often experience difficulty in sharing such information. Gubar believes that art, such as poetry, can diminish the gulf between survivors and their children. Thus writing verse and cre-

ating other forms of art about the Holocaust is essential. She observes that poets writing about the Shoah after the war have composed verse about the morality of creating art about atrocities and the inability of language to adequately express such inexpressible horrors. Gubar mentions that some poets are wary of composing verse about the Shoah because they, like some Holocaust scholars, are concerned about making a career or somehow benefiting from tragedy and suffering. They "consistently mistrust their right to speak, even as they attest to the means by which they speak. Their scrupulous scrutiny of their own warrant for composing and their wariness about retrospection manifest how creative analyses of the Shoah resist exploitative rhetoric" (p. 30). Some non-survivors who wish to create art—or produce scholarly writing—about the Holocaust are concerned as to whether they have such a prerogative. Who possesses such a right? The author asserts forcefully that reflection on the Holocaust cannot be limited to the years in which Hitler maintained power because the ramifications of the Shoah extend far beyond 1945, thus entitling those who were not direct victims or witnesses to write their thoughts and create art on the subject. Gubar's chapter focuses on suicide as an example of the ramifications of the Holocaust. In a poignant and personal section, she discusses three instances within her family and then examines other Holocaust-related suicides, such as Art Spiegelman's depiction of his mother's death portrayed in the "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" section of *Maus*.

Having established her general thesis that poetry helps to bridge the distance between survivors and members of the second generation as well as to preserve the memory and understanding of the Holocaust, Gubar then focuses on individual works of art. She provides an excellent discussion of Mauricio Lasansky's *Nazi Drawings*, Eva Hoffman's autobiographical *Lost in Translation*, and the poetry of Nelly Sachs, Paul Celan, Irena Klepfisz, and others. A theme that connects these works is the relationship between parent and child, in particular the loss of a parent or a child: "images of mothers and children suckled by panic" (p. 71).

Gubar subsequently focuses on photography and poetry concerning photographs in a chapter about veritable methods of representing the Holocaust. She states that the "testimonial value [of photographs] as records of the disaster's multiple calamities consists in documenting the empirical truths of genocide and thus forestalling any who would deny it. But photographic pictures inevitably displace the materiality of the past, decontextualizing a scene from its settings and fragmenting it" (p. 99). Gubar

then argues a debatable point—that the repeated exposure to photographs can desensitize the viewer. Although this claim is not unique and is, perhaps, plausible, many photographs are so horrific and troubling that it is difficult to imagine spectators becoming desensitized to the atrocities captured in these pictures, no matter how often people stare at them. The discussion of photographs leads to a section on ecphrasis, “the verbal description of a specified visual work” (p. 103). Gubar again turns to the verse of Irena Klepfisz. In “Solitary Acts,” a collection of poems concerning the poet’s aunt, Klepfisz fears that she has neglected to pore sufficiently over old, yellow, and faded photos from the past. Although the poet can vividly describe the photographs, there is something lacking—an inability to fully recover the past. Nonetheless, while some survivors possess no visual record of their family members who died during the Holocaust, the poet (and her mother) have photographs that serve as witnesses to their family members who were fortunate enough to remain alive. In another example, Gubar examines three of Roman Vishniac’s poignant photographs from *A Vanished World*. One touching picture shows the young girl Selma in the Lodz Ghetto in 1938, and Gubar does an excellent job in her discussion of it and the concomitant poem by Kirtland Snyder. Snyder writes a poem about Selma, who proudly and smilingly carries home a pot of soup and a bottle of milk. Even though Snyder has written a poem about the girl, Selma’s cultural era remains separate from that of the poet. Something is inevitably missing, impenetrable. Snyder characterizes Selma as a smiling and happy girl who holds her milk and soup, yet the poem suggests through significant details that behind her smile, she and her family are suffering.

The next chapter in Gubar’s book employs both history and poetry to discuss “documentary verse.” A fine example is Anthony Hecht’s “More Light! More Light,” which derives from Hecht’s reading of Eugen Kogon’s *Theory and Practice of Hell*. Kogon, a survivor of Buchenwald, writes of a situation in which a Pole refuses to bury alive two Jews, so the Nazi officer forces the Jews to bury alive the Pole, disentomb him, and then enter the hole themselves. Gubar observes that Hecht’s poem “acknowledges that personal testimonial provides validation for those imaginative approaches to the Shoah that rest on its truth-claims” (p. 147). The chapter also includes an outstanding reading of Denise Levertov’s poem “During the Eichmann Trial.”

Gubar proceeds to discuss verse in which the poet assumes the voice of the dead. She states that Sylvia Plath has been severely criticized for using voices of the dead in

her verse about the Holocaust, imagining herself as a victim. But Gubar suggests that “Plath viewed the Shoah as a test case for poetry and, indeed, for the imagination as a vehicle for conveying what it means for the incomprehensible to occur” (p. 181). Plath’s use of prosopopoeia, appropriating the persona of a Holocaust victim, allows her to explore the limits of both what poetry can express and what we can imagine.

In Chapter Seven, entitled “Could You Have Made an Elegy for Every One,” Gubar notes astutely that the traditional elegy, which focuses on redemption and resurrection, does not correlate with the elegy in Holocaust verse, which is darker and lacking in consolation; the deaths defy comprehension. Although a traditional elegy such as John Milton’s “Lycidas” or Matthew Arnold’s “Thyrsis” eulogizes a particular, known individual, a Holocaust elegy often commemorates the deaths of unknown people, large numbers of people who cannot be identified or quantified, with deaths caused by unknowable situations. There is no sense of renewal, solace, or redemption when millions have perished. Gubar compares the Holocaust elegy to “the bleakest sections of the biblical Book of Lamentations” (p. 208) and suggests that the Shoah has affected the elegy genre itself. As examples, Gubar discusses poems such as Geoffrey Hill’s elegy “September Song” and Gerald Stern’s “Adler.”

Gubar concludes with the chapter “Poetry and Survival,” which concerns empathetic imagination and identification. Following Percy Bysshe Shelley in his *Defense of Poetry*, she links identification and the power of the imagination. In this context, Gubar discusses Anne Michaels’s fictional work *Fugitive Pieces*, a novel integral to her study because “Michaels’s fictional portrait of the poet as a survivor elucidates the survival of poetry after Auschwitz” (p. 242). In the novel, Athos, a Greek archaeologist, rescues a young Jewish boy, Jacob. The man and the boy learn to identify with (and thus understand but not become) the other. Gubar believes that this identification or “empathetic unsettlement” (Dominick LaCapra’s term), “helps explain the stance the poets take toward their subjects, the themes they address, the forms of their verse, and the sorts of effect poetry after Auschwitz can have on its readers” (p. 243). The author means that poets empathize rather than sympathize with the survivors and victims they write about. Michaels acknowledges the distance between herself and the people she writes about (and the experiences they endure), which is evident because she is a woman writing about male protagonists. Yet her empathic imagination allows her to create a wonderful and poignant book about

Holocaust poetry after Auschwitz.

Susan Gubar's *Poetry After Auschwitz* is a sensitive and superb treatment of Holocaust literature; the author breaks new ground as she analyzes poetry that has been largely neglected by scholars. She treats Holocaust art with sensitivity, introspection, respect and humanity in a clear, readable, and elegant prose. Gubar's book will prove to be a seminal work in Holocaust studies.

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