



Sara Emilie Guyer. *Romanticism After Auschwitz*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007. xiii + 364 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-5524-5.

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The Study of Literature after Auschwitz

Ever since Theodor W. Adorno's famous—if at times misconstrued—claim that one could no longer write poems after Auschwitz, scholars have grappled with the vexing questions posed by poetic production after, about, and despite the Holocaust. The plentiful resulting studies have opened up, and at times, narrowed, the field of Holocaust historiography. These studies share the premise that an event in German history has influenced poetic reflections that, in turn, transcend national boundaries. A second aspect that unites many existing works is their engagement with the history and culture of the event, or to borrow Sara Guyer's words, "the study of living culture" (p. 217); these studies, even if they devote themselves exclusively to literary representation, inevitably reflect upon a historical culture as well.[1] Guyer pursues a different approach in *Romanticism After Auschwitz*; here, she sets out to reframe the ethical questions surrounding the writing and studying of poetry after the Holocaust. While some readers may think that she attempts to get away from history and firmly enshrine her argument in poetry and poetic tradition, this conclusion proves a bit too simplistic. Inquiring about the possibility of any poetic tradition after Auschwitz, the author seeks to dispel the perceived opposition between "the study of poetry and the study of a living culture" (p. 270). Arguing further that "we cannot even think about the formation of the ethical subject ... without recognizing the lyrical formation of this subject" (p. 218), Guyer concludes that "Romanticism returns in the texts that oblige us to remember, but also in the texts that af-

firm that we cannot remember" (p. 224). In the end, there is no history without poetry.

Guyer's main concern is probing the survival of rhetorical figures, that is, the continued viability of tropes she first examines in the context of mostly British Romanticism and the particular textual manifestation of these devices in post-Holocaust times. The focus on a single national tradition of Romanticism is perplexing, given, on the one hand, Romanticism's reach as an intrinsically modern and transnational phenomenon that defined European cultural and literary production in the early nineteenth century, and on the other, the disputed role of Romanticism under the Nazis.[2] Guyer focuses on the rhetorical device of prosopopoeia—a lyrical figure conveying animation to the lifeless and rendering voice to the speechless. She traces how and why such post-Holocaust writers as Primo Levi, Giorgio Agamben, Robert Antelme, and Paul Celan, among others, employ this literary rhetorical device as a trope of survival. Guyer's other, perhaps secondary interests are intertextuality—especially the citation of Romantic texts in post-Holocaust poetry—and a general re-reading of Romanticism through the lens of writings about the Holocaust. In light of these facets of Romanticism and survival, the intention of Guyer's book appears either diffuse or overly complex. Indeed, her line of argument will be hard to follow for anybody not well versed in the methods and intricacies of deconstruction, a brand of literary criticism itself connected to the study of Romanticism

through *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (1984), an important work by Paul de Man. Furthermore, readers are well advised to brush up on the fundamentals of rhetoric, in order to engage all the rhetorical figures that Guyer skillfully enlists to understand the nuances of prosopopoeia (such as personification, apostrophe, or paronomasia, to name a few).

As readers who research and teach in the areas of German Romanticism and literary representations of the Holocaust, respectively, we consider the following aspects key to understanding Guyer's book: First, her reading is fueled by an insight initially articulated by Romantic writers and that subsequently became a central tenet of modern(ist) fiction and poetry, namely the claim that there can be a *productive gap* between representation and event. That is to say, in a reversal of Realist writing, poetic creativity (and the ability to speak) arises from the knowledge that a (historical) event can never be adequately represented in language.[3] Second, critics of Romanticism have made influential efforts to tie such gaps to a series of rhetorical figures. These tropes play a prominent role in the works of post-Holocaust writers, especially in their attempts to combine poetry with the ethical task of testimony. Recognizing these subtle patterns in Guyer's argumentation is possible, but made more difficult in part because of the book's vague and potentially misleading title. After all, it is not primarily the survival of Romanticism that is at stake here. The title of Guyer's doctoral dissertation, on which this book is based, more accurately describes the book's scope.[4]

The tome is divided into eight sections of roughly equal length. The first three divisions display immediately the strengths and weaknesses of the overall study. The introduction centers on a beautiful and close textual reading of Levi's 1984 poem "The Survivor" ("Il Super-site"), laying bare its intertextual references with Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1817). Guyer's detailed reading rightly underscores Levi's thematic indebtedness to the English Romantic by emphasizing the poem's theme of a return from an unsettled past that accompanies survival. Providing a historical context, Guyer singles out Levi's refutation of Adorno's belief that poetry could not ever be created again after Auschwitz. She wisely likens the position of the survivor in Levi with the wedding guest who is accosted by the ghost and she pinpoints Levi's own role as survivor and his creative need to bear witness for those "true witnesses" who were never able to give their testimony. The Italian textual readings are accompanied throughout by helpful parallel English translations in parentheses.

These are also employed for the author's analyses of original French and German texts.

Although Guyer's close tracing of the use of prosopopoeia fills a void in Holocaust scholarship, two major weaknesses of her study as a whole appear in the book's following first chapter: her uncritical citation of de Man and her introduction of William Wordsworth. Guyer's elaborate use of de Man to interpret Wordsworth's *Essays upon Epitaphs* (1810) takes into account de Man's failure to acknowledge Auschwitz in a satisfactory way. Nevertheless, she continues defensively to argue for employing de Man: "but this does not mean that we can dispense with his most radical thought of language as a result" (p. 41). The frequent use of de Man throughout her study without a caveat or a single reference to his flagrantly antisemitic writings during World War II or his total silence thereafter about having written them is unconscionable. Although Guyer's dissertation was originally written for rhetoricians, her book is meant for an educated readership that will expect mention of de Man's racism. And, although Guyer's elaborate analysis of the *Muselmänner*, the listlessly walking dead inmates in the camps, in Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz* (2000) is convincing, her introduction to chapter 2, which deals with Wordsworth, lacks tangible Holocaust links.

On the other hand, the elaborate treatment of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* (1818) in the third chapter is most helpful. The persuasive inter-readings of *Frankenstein* and Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner" illustrate, quite literally, why the rejection of figure—that is, the erasure of the gap, the unspeakable, the poetic non-representation of facts—and an aestheticized depiction of experience run the risk of producing monstrous accounts of the Holocaust (for example, the beautification of death). Similarly, chapter 5 (which discusses Wordsworth's experiences of sleeplessness and wakefulness) serves to explicate the temptation of invoking experience in order to outline its limited effectiveness in post-Holocaust poetry; however, what appears arbitrary in place and length is the chapter's interpolation in the otherwise straightforward and convincing second part of the book. With its specificity and directness, it is more successful than the first half.

Chapter 4, entitled "Anthropomorphizing the Human," rightfully emerges as a core chapter, both in substance and convincingness of argument. Guyer's treatment of Antelme's only book, *The Human Race* (1947), the author's autobiographical account of his near-death

experiences in Buchenwald, Gandersheim, and Dachau, illustrates her thesis beyond reproach. Not unlike the condition of the *Muselmänner* in Agamben's work, Antelme's own half-living/half-dying state (until being rescued by François Mitterrand) is analyzed to the fullest. Here, Guyer also provides a nuanced, critical reading of de Man's juxtaposition of anthropomorphism with trope and exposes the rhetorical limits of de Man's approach. Consequently, she reads Antelme's text as an example where "the anthropomorphism of the human emerges as the naming of the human as an infinite capacity for being destroyed" (p. 140). The detail of this portion allows it to be the longest of the study's nine chapters, with the last sentence previewing Guyer's conclusion about the lyric subject as the precondition for the ethical subject. In Antelme's text, she concludes, we find a "remnant of romanticism.... The Lyrical figure that allows one to speak in one's own proper name and returns one to the night emerges as a figure of survival" (p. 140).

Like the chapter about Antelme, the sixth chapter ("Breath, Today; Celan's Translation of Shakespeare's Sonnet 71") lies at the heart of Guyer's thesis. In 1964—for the four-hundredth anniversary of the birth of William Shakespeare—Celan was asked to translate twenty of the poet's sonnets. By concentrating on his translation of the seventy-first sonnet, Guyer illustrates Celan's attraction to both the "unreadability" of the sonnet and its relation to survival.

In title and metaphoric reach, the chapter resonates nicely with Sarah Kofman's post-Holocaust writing, *Paroles suffoquées* (1987), even as it implicitly points out the stark differences. Particularly effective is Guyer's pondering of the provocative and complicated question that she had first raised in conjunction to *Frankenstein*, and which all Holocaust poetry faces: how to avoid over-aesthetization. She asks: "How could [Celan] bear a poem that treats the opposition between understanding and death as an aesthetic rather than a historical trauma?" (p. 168). Guyer goes on to offer a carefully carved-out, elegant reading of the poem, enlisting and critiquing the rich reservoir of readings of Celan's poetry (for example, by Martin Heidegger, Aris Fioretos, Ulrich Baer, and Werner Hamacher). Celan's unique approach of directly addressing an intimate "you" and his ceaseless "puncturing and punctuating" confines the poem's addressee. Through this lyrical apostrophe, with some of the original Shakespearean images dropped and Celan's new imagery added, the "dead mark and the living breath" (p. 186) of Shakespeare come across—one form of life interrupted by another.

In the penultimate chapter of the study, Guyer examines Celan's translation of Jean Cayrol's script for Alan Resnais's *Nuit et Brouillard*, composed in 1956, when the poet was at the height of his powers. Justifiably, she concentrates on how Celan is able to circumvent the original text's sentimentality. Instead of sentiment, Celan, according to Guyer, creates interruption. The poet's "disarticulation" (p. 215) of Cayrol's seamless text stands in sharp contradistinction to the original, thus allowing the rhetorical figure of prosopopoeia to remain. Guyer is most helpful in drawing attention to these too often neglected translations, and it is too bad that sloppy copy-editing inserted small, occasionally confusing omissions in German words and citations in two otherwise very insightful chapters devoted to Celan.

The study's short conclusion—centering on Lucy Dawidowicz's 1937 decision to give up her study of poetry and pursue the history of the Yiddish press—avoids the important issues that the study articulately has raised: Why do great European post-Holocaust writers, in crossing national literary borders, concentrate on prosopopoeia? Why does the use of this trope underscore the key question of who the "true witnesses" to the Holocaust actually are? What actually are the thematic and stylistic commonalities that the survivor-writers covered by Guyer share and what is their intertextual indebtedness to English Romanticism? To respond to these issues will be left to readers and scholars who engage Guyer's book.

Notes

[1]. Examples include, but are not limited to, the books that Guyer works with and against. Scholarship that addresses poetry after Auschwitz and is important for Guyer's argument includes, among others, various studies by Geoffrey Hartmann, who has written on both Romanticism and the problems of witnessing, as well as by Susan Gubar and Shoshana Felman; all these texts are listed in Guyer's extensive bibliography. Essential materials for teaching the literary representation of the Holocaust are Peter Demetz, *After the Fires: Recent Writing in the Germanies, Austria, and Switzerland* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1986); and Marianne Hirsch and Irene Kacandes, *Teaching the Representation of the Holocaust* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2004). On German-language poetry and the Holocaust see Andres Nader, *Traumatic Verses: On Poetry in German from the Concentration Camps, 1933-1945* (Rochester: Camden House, 2007). See also the book that Guyer consults for her reading of Celan: Ulrich Baer, *Remnants of Song:*

Trauma and the Experience of Modernity in Charles Baudelaire and Paul Celan (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

[2]. The few cursory references to early German Romantics have no bearing on the scope of Guyer's argument. With respect to the National Socialist appropriation of Romanticism, see for example, Cornelia Klinger, *Flucht–Trost–Revolt: Die Moderne und ihre ästhetischen Gegenwelten* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1995); and Rüdiger Safranski, *Romantik: Eine deutsche Affäre* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1995).

[3]. In de Man's theory, this insight is frequently expressed as the privileging of one trope over another, such as allegory over symbol. Birgit Tautz, "Allegorien der Zeit, Symbole der Zeitlosigkeit: Überlegungen zum Narrativen in der Frühromantik," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 71 (1997): 110-126.

[4]. Sara Guyer, *Surviving Figures: Romantic Rhetoric and Post-Holocaust Writing* (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2001).

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