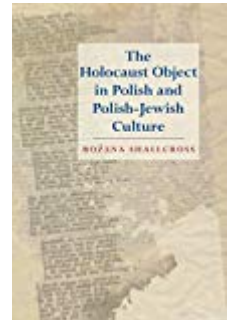


Bożena Shallcross. *The Holocaust Object in Polish and Polish-Jewish Culture.*
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“One bed, one wardrobe, one chair, one clothes hanger, one washstand, one mirror and one picture”: all that was sold to the Koch family for thirty marks during one of the auctions organized to Aryanize Jewish property during Nazi rule in the Third Reich. The 2008 *Menschliches Versagen (Human Failure)*, a documentary by a German director Michael Verhoeven, allowed us to have a look at neatly written pages of well-ordered registers, proof of state-sanctioned theft. The archival books were only recently brought to light, together with the public shame of the third generation of owners of Holocaust objects. In Poland in 2012, *Golden Harvest*, a book by Jan Tomasz Gross and Irena Grudzińska-Gross, reminded us of a more primordial, beastly, and non-modern version of the plunder of the Jews, when local communities rushed to dig valuables from among the rotting corpses of Nazi victims. Two powerful enunciations mark important points on the timeline of the research on Holocaust materiality. Bożena Shallcross’s book is timely, appearing in the middle of the period mentioned, giving us

yet another approach to the history of “Jewish objects.”

Instead of a direct engagement with Holocaust materiality, Shallcross proposes a turn to literary accounts of the fate of Jewish possessions. Texts from the war or its immediate aftermath by Władysław Szlengel, Zuzanna Ginczanka, Zofia Nałkowska, Czesław Miłosz, Jerzy Andrzejewski, and Tadeusz Borowski are interpreted as early, if not the very first, attempts to bear witness to the material dimension of the extermination of the Jews. To Shallcross, objects are not separate from humans; as owned by them, even extensions of them, they co-constitute their identity. Taken forcefully from their owners, Aryanized (or Polonized, or Lithuanized, etc., as beneficiaries of Jewish loss can be found in every country where victims used to live) or recycled, they can and—as the author insists—should be deciphered as traces of their owners’ own lives.

Such deciphering is, in Shallcross’s hands, first of all a semiotic action: the Holocaust objects

are understood as cultural texts. Their physical condition requires refined interpretive skills and far more than a general literacy in texts. The objects are fragmented, broken, reprocessed—barely legible detritus of Jewish life in its once-fuller materiality. “These fragments ... speak on behalf of past wholeness,” if only we as readers of them are well versed in literary rhetoric: “objects typically serve as metonymic representations of their owners and users” (pp. 2, 3). Looking closer into what co-constitutes the identity of a targeted victim, Shallcross privileges “paraphernalia,” things “ordinary and humble”—“suitcases, kitchen pots, footwear”—rather than “precious collectibles” or “canvasses by old masters” (pp. 3, 1, 2). She focuses on a certain class of Holocaust objects, namely, things that never left Nazi-occupied territories: it is in the East that these “poor objects,” of too low a value to be shipped to the West and auctioned, remained. The benefits of this approach lie in the way they reveal the intimate quality of ownership—proximate, touched by human skin—powerfully communicated in a poem by Ginczanka (translated by Shallcross) that lists “dresses,... couches, mattresses, comforters and carpets” (p. 38). Tactility, the haptic past of the objects in question, enhances their closeness, even their physical contiguity with the victim’s body (as suggested by Borowski’s “Man with the Package” [1948]). The body, turned by the perpetrators into a recyclable raw material, thus becomes in Shallcross’s interpretation another “Holocaust object,” indeed the ultimate one, in the process of objectification of the Jews during the war.

The typical state of what I call “Holocaust objects of the East” (Jewish “rubbish,” Jewish corpses) is precariousness. Bodies and things burn, rot in the earth: “lungs”; “bones”; and “paper, rubber, linen, leather, flax, fiber, fabrics, cellulose, snakeskin, wire” (from Miłosz’s poem “A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto” [1943]) alike (p. 90). Two terms used by Shallcross seem especially important for her discussion of the materiality in these critical states of objecthood. *Agalma*

—things hidden (bodies hidden)—set in motion an agalmatic mechanism of searching, collecting, and on the other end safekeeping. Cadavers pillaged for gold are for Shallcross the most radical objects in her narrative, even more so than corpses recycled in a laboratory in Danzig from Nałkowska’s short story “Professor Spanner” (1946).

A human body endangered by a descent into objecthood is paralleled by the risk of text to fail its communicative function due to its own stubborn materiality. The decision to search in archives for the original manuscripts of the texts discussed is an important contribution, joining efforts to read Holocaust literature in multiple dimensions, such as—to name the most significant Polish contributors so far—Paweł Rodak’s and Sławomir Buryła’s research on the materiality of wartime texts, especially memoirs, and Jacek Leociak’s analyses of Warsaw ghetto writings (see *Wojna—doświadczenie i zapis: Nowe źródła, problemy, metody badawcze*, edited by Buryła and Rodak [2006] and Leociak’s *Tekst wobec Zagłady: O relacjach z getta warszawskiego* [1997]). Shallcross stresses that documenting the Shoah was prohibited, even punishable by death. Thus, texts from the period of extreme violence bear more meaning than expressed in their words alone. Since these manuscripts were so drastically exposed to destruction, their own physicality parallels the physicality of their creators, threatened by death. The second key term, *Precarium*, is therefore in Shallcross’s interpretation an object in shaky, uncertain, unstable condition, permanently endangered by annihilation.

Bodies can be thus things, and things can be so close to bodies as to be co-substantial and united with them. Objects are texts to be read and texts are objects to be touched. Texts and things are “two sides of the same coin” (p. 11). This elegant chiasma builds the foundation for elaborate, multifaceted readings of poems and short stories, richly encrusted with associations from many fields, demonstrating the author’s breadth and

eloquence. The book's reasoning is supported by erudite observations from the fields of semiotics, deconstruction, and psychoanalysis, among others. Walter Benjamin's dialectical image, Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer*, Michel Foucault's biopolitics, Jacques Lacan's the Real, and Martin Heidegger's *Jetztzeit* frame her thinking, along with terms borrowed from Aristotle, Gottfried Leibniz, Martin Buber, and Emmanuel Levinas, to name only a few inspirations. Associations and digressions, taking us as far as Leonardo da Vinci's apocalyptic imagination from *The Deluge* and Socrates's suicide from *Phaedo*, together with Borowski-esque gestures to the public, give the book an essayistic quality, marking the author's personal style.

The meditation on Jewish objects, the work of a literary scholar and a cultural historian, openly reveals its own "primal scene" that catalyzed the drive to write: the indignation and disgust at the mountains of things displayed in Auschwitz, stripped of any agency to tell the personal story of the past owner. In sharp contrast, an emotional and deeply moving coda mentions another humble object from the rubble left in Eastern Europe after the Holocaust: a "professor's penknife" from a Tadeusz Różewicz poem by the same title. The personalized story of the knife, handmade by Mieczysław Porębski in the time of his imprisonment in the camp, is juxtaposed with heaps of mute objects. The penknife, "neither a nostalgically informed souvenir, nor a museumed, depersonalized referent to genocide," has a mnemonic potential Shallcross would like to demand for all "Holocaust objects" (p. 135).

The Holocaust Object in Polish and Polish-Jewish Culture emerges at a time that is increasingly spoken of as the end of the era of the witness. With the end of the public presence of survivors of the Holocaust, representation takes on a new burden, as Ulrich Baer—among others—convincingly argues in his *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma*.^[1] Elsewhere, a radical

turn to materiality in genocide studies is advocated by practitioners of the forensic turn (see *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth*, edited by Eyal Weizman [2014]). Proponents of "post-humanities," following Bruno Latour, have taught us already a great deal about the agency of objects. Shallcross's book in this context reveals its potential of an intermediary: it turns our attention to objects but refrains from reaching for the most radical theories available to understand the material world. Her analysis is in many ways an elegant, classical hermeneutical reading of Polish literature, engaging many new tools to open up the texts. She brings poems and short stories that have been at the core of the discussions of Holocaust literature in Poland for the last two (like Ginczanka and Szlengel) or seven (like Nałkowska and Borowski) decades to the attention of a wider, international public. Her book is a significant contribution to current discussions of the Shoah, providing important insights into a broad range of themes that linger at a core of our debates. "One bed, one wardrobe, one chair, one clothes hanger, one washstand, one mirror and one picture" will make us think again of the past, when its immediate human witnesses are gone.

Note

[1]. Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 69.

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