Reflections on holocaust and Holocaust

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Historical examinations of the Shoah allow us to perceive it both as a culmination of centuries of preparatory groundwork in Europe and as a failure of civilization itself. The necessary examination of particular causalities, occurrences, and outcomes related to the "Final Solution" implemented in the 20th century must not deter us from considering historically delimited holocaust events within the disaster of humankind that is the Holocaust. The particulars, documented by occupants and eyewitnesses of the camps and by Third Reich archives, mitigate against the denial of the catastrophe. Even so, as the contributions to this issue of the *Rocky Mountain Review* make clear, the Shoah exposes both the human propensity for genocide and the wide range of highly complex human responses to the Holocaust, including an unwillingness to confront it.

Assembling an issue of scholarly research on language and literature related to the Shoah carries with it some of the same difficulty attached to writing about the Holocaust itself. Irving Howe notes, "to think about ways in which the literary imagination might 'use' the Holocaust is to entangle ourselves with a multitude of problems for which no aesthetic can prepare us" (175). The failure of aesthetics adequately to grasp the complexities and magnitude of the Holocaust has as its obverse the rise of an aesthetic of the Holocaust. This aesthetic includes possibilities for an uncritical allure, an idea also broached by Susan Sontag with her attribution of the modifier "fascinating" to the historical baseline of fascism (73). Among the many contributions of Theodor Adorno, cited frequently in this volume, is his ability to foresee in writings about the Shoah the potential for an unhealthy relationship between the spectator and the represented. Thus Ilona Klein, in her essay on film and literature by Roberto Benigni, Peter Kassovitz, and Jurek Becker, articulates the junctures at which the cinematic narrative of concentration camp experience in Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful* relies on a common understanding of the terribleness of the camps—and a fascination with that terribleness—while at the same time projecting a willingness on the part of both filmmaker and spectator to be content with a sanitized representation of the camp and its horrors. Klein's research contrasts Benigni's work to Jurek Becker's novel *Jakob the Liar* and the film by the same title, and inquires whether the fictionalized holocaust that befalls

the family in Benigni's narrative detracts from rather than elaborates our ongoing recognition and discovery of the Holocaust.

The contributors to this issue confirm that just as the necessity to examine historical events as chronology within political boundaries does not obviate the timelessness of the Shoah, the particular or personal holocausts that are commemorated by writers and creative artists do not divert from or replace the Holocaust of which they are a part. Much has been written about the slippery relationship between the particular and the general in terms of Shoah studies, the particular often a helpful means of grasping the enormity of the general. Both recent historical/biographical work and recent fiction about holocaust and Holocaust bear out the ongoing dynamic of this relationship. Francine Prose, in her study of the Anne Frank diary, *Anne Frank: The Book, the Life, the Afterlife*, comments about her subject:

> I kept marveling at the fact that one of the greatest books about the Nazi genocide should have been written by a girl between the ages of thirteen and fifteen—not a demographic we commonly associate with literary genius. How astonishing that a teenager could have written so intelligently and so movingly about a subject that continues to overwhelm the adult imagination. What makes it even more impressive is that this deceptively unassuming book focuses on a particular moment and on specific people, and at the same time speaks, in ways that seem timeless and universal, about adolescence and family life. (5)

Ilona Klein's study in this issue reminds us of the potential for family drama in the midst of the Shoah to distract attention from a historical tide that wiped out entire families. In this same vein, the enormity of the Holocaust also presents readers and viewers with opportunities to focus on particularity as a means of avoiding or denying larger realities. With regard to Anne Frank, Francine Prose points out that the diary, with its carefully crafted renditions of family drama and poignant personal dreams, ends prior to the young author's internment at Auschwitz, raising the possibility that it can be read and discussed without directly confronting the context of the Final Solution (260). Clearly the critically thoughtful viewer and reader is crucial to our evolving understanding and acknowledgment of the Holocaust. Critically thoughtful response to *Jakob the Liar* is called for in deliberate ways by novelist Jurek Becker and filmmaker Peter Kassovitz through the multiple endings of their works, which encourage reflection, contrast, participation, decision, and dialectically progressive awareness. And it is precisely the absence of an eyewitness account of the concentration camps in Anne Frank's diary that enables rather than discourages consideration of the genocide by readers of the diary and by teachers of the Holocaust. The forced conclusion

of the diary invites consideration of events that occurred after the diarist ceased to write, making it is possible to acknowledge and to inquire about the intersection of holocaust and Holocaust through the reader's overlapping appreciation of the diary's literary, historical, and personal elements.

In a similar manner, consideration of the perpetrator of genocide, as opposed to its victim, might likewise skew a broad historical appreciation of events if the individual case study is a focus that distracts from or fails to acknowledge the magnitude of the Shoah.

Jonathan Littell begins his epic novel *The Kindly Ones* with this appeal: "Oh my human brothers, let me tell you how it happened. I am not your brother, you will retort, and I don't want to know. And it certainly is true that this is a bleak story, but an edifying one too, a real morality play, I assure you" (3). Littell's first-person narrator is a former Nazi officer writing about the atrocities of war from the postwar security of a lace factory where he is the supervisor. The writer of this narrative immediately anticipates the problematic juncture of the particular and the general, the holocaust and the Holocaust, contrasting the singular "brother" with the inclusive designation of his readership as "human brothers." He acknowledges the grimness of the war narrative to follow and even anticipates the desire of the reader not to know, while at the same time, through his conjunction "but," connecting the devastation intimated by his forthcoming narrative to the possibility for moral edification. The paradox implied by the narrator in Littell's novel—promising enlightenment through painful revelation—mirrors the symbiotic yet paradoxical relationship between life and death isolated by Sandra I. Dillon in her study of Paul Celan's "Deathfugue" and Nelly Sachs' "O the Chimneys." As Dillon points out with regard to Sachs, the poet employed rhetorical devices to evoke the chimneys of the death camps as habitations of those who live and those who are dead, allowing the crematory smoke of a particular time and place to permeate the consciousness of successive generations of the living, indeed to become a part of life in the ongoing aftermath of the Shoah. Littell's introductory words "Oh my human brothers" make an appeal at the outset not just to the narrower ideal of fraternity, rather also to humankind, to that broader and more inclusive category of existence that can accommodate brotherhood and that is also quite capable of eschewing it: "I am not your brother, you will retort." The passion and desperation of both Sachs' and Littell's opening lines, the desire for the chimneys to speak to the living and for humans to embrace brotherhood, give testament to the ongoing struggle that Dillon explicates in Holocaust poets who deploy language as a means of representing what many believe impossible to represent.

This same dilemma of representation was confronted by inmates writing in the Theresienstadt transit camp, which Sandra Alfers documents in her article about

the poetry that was produced there. Her focus in particular on a composition by Peter Kien, "Ein Psalm aus Babylon, zu klagen," demonstrates the often unrecognized value of reading poetry that was written *in* the camps rather than merely *about* them. In his poem Peter Kien turns Theresienstadt into Babylon, a place of exile that more readily meets with reader comprehension than does the perverseness of a way station on the trajectory toward extermination which included as part of its regimen the celebration of culture.

The impossibility of representing the Shoah overlaps with an unwillingness both to represent it and to acknowledge responsibility for it. Irving Howe cites the World War II-era Jewish historian Ignacy Schipper, who predicted that many people would prefer not to believe the genocide occurred, since the Shoah represents a failure of civilization itself (183). Implicit in Schipper's comment, reportedly made from the Majdanek concentration camp, is not just a reluctance to acknowledge a failed collaborative human enterprise (a civilized world), rather also a proclivity to deny personal and individual contribution to the disaster. Hannah Arendt's writings offer the most penetrating exploration of the relationship between the individual and the larger genocidal program of the Holocaust, in part with her assertion that "the greatest evil perpetrated is the evil committed by nobodies...." Referring with "nobodies" to "humans refusing to be persons" (111), Arendt's claim is a provocative reminder that the holocaust experiences of a figure such as Adolf Eichmann, tried and convicted for crimes against humanity, creates the obverse to the impact of Anne Frank on our understanding of Holocaust. Anne Frank's insistence on being a person, her refusal, in contrast to Eichmann, to forfeit individuality in favor of a claim of group affiliation, endows her suffering with a magnitude borne of particularity. Anne Frank's individual claim to humanity illuminates more than her affiliation with the six million murdered. Her individual demise exposes the severity of the overall assault on humanity, that general failure of civilization articulated by the historian Schipper. Similarly, the consequences of Eichmann's claims merely to have "obeyed orders" serve as a magnifier, illuminating and exposing the considerable contribution to the Holocaust made by his eagerness to shed rather than claim particularity, to use his individual role as evidence of inconsequence rather than significance. In contrast, the insignificance Francine Prose and others might have predicted for Anne Frank is belied precisely by the uniqueness of the writer's personal holocaust, and it is impossible to ascribe to her Arendt's descriptor of "nobodies ... refusing to be persons." Intersections between, on the one hand, the particular holocaust of the attic hideaway or the bureaucratic functionary, and on the other hand the Holocaust of our civilization, demand ongoing investigation and re-examination.

Each postwar generation negotiates its own relationship to the phenomenon of genocide, a human proclivity that in Europe, Asia, Africa, and other parts of the world continues to prove its relevance not just to the early 20th century, but to the late 20th and early 21st centuries as well.

In this regard Katja Fullard's research on Günter Grass and Dieter Wellershoff is especially timely. Her study examines revelations by both authors late in their careers concerning their respective roles in the Third Reich. This move by Grass and Wellershoff, who engage both fictional and non-fictional tools to tell their stories, is not entirely unlike the decision by Littell's obscure first-person narrator in *The Kindly Ones* to take up pen and paper in order to confront and expose a fictional past. Informed readers recognize the retrospective narrative of Littell's novel as potentially authentic, precisely because of its bleakness. They also understand the potential loss of credibility inherent in retrospective autobiographical writing by Grass and Wellershoff, two authors who helped resurrect German literature after World War II, especially when that retrospection focuses on the Third Reich. Fullard articulates the distinction that has emerged in Germany during the last few decades between personal innocence and collective participation, and how societal attitudes and circumstances configure themselves at different stages in history either to punish or to normalize individual culpability in the context of the larger historical tide. In so doing, Fullard enlightens us not just about the particular paths of two writers, but about the ongoing production and reception of Holocaust literature, a literature that must include the fictional and autobiographical accounts of both Jewish and non-Jewish eyewitnesses and that makes readers as well as writers the memory keepers of the Shoah.

This issue of the *Rocky Mountain Review* demonstrates how the literature of the Holocaust necessarily comes to being in a multiplicity of genres, venues, and time frames. Among these literary manifestations are the postwar lyrical reflections that Sandra I. Dillon demystifies in her study of the rhetoric of Celan and Sachs. Holocaust genres also include postwar cinematic approaches by Benigni and others. Ilona Klein variously identifies these works as contributing to historical forgetfulness through passive avoidance of what Littell's narrator calls "a bleak story," or combating that amnesia with active reader/viewer participation that can weave a fictional holocaust narrative into the vivid reality which is the fabric of the Holocaust. Chronologically, the subject matter in this issue is bookended in the more distant past by transit camp poetry composed by inmates at Theresienstadt as early as 1941 and collected and analyzed by Sandra Alfers. On the more recent end of the chronological span, Katja Fullard reveals how more than fifty years were required before the activities of well-known German writers who were

young in 1941 made their way to the surface and emerged directly or indirectly on the printed page. In different ways and for different reasons, the murdered Theresienstadt poet Peter Kien shares with luminaries Günter Grass and Dieter Wellershoff an aspect of obscurity.

Reflective reading of the essays in this issue will illuminate the obscure and place the luminous into shadowy context. Just as writers after Auschwitz could only continue to write, ongoing research and writing about the language and literature of the Holocaust finds an ever-expanding horizon through the productive expectations of continuous readers. Reflections on holocaust and Holocaust encourage successive generations of readers to add their own insight and understanding to the compendium of human knowledge, human expression, and human action that is the continuing narrative of the Shoah.

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