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Book Review: The Memory of Pain: Women’s Testimonies of the Holocaust

The Memory of Pain: Women’s Testimonies of the Holocaust, Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2011
Camila Loew
Reviewed by Adam brown, Deakin University

The work of a number of feminist scholars over the past thirty years has gone some way to ameliorating the general paucity of Holocaust research into the experiences and representations of women; however, certain paths still remain only lightly travelled.

Mainstream films from wartime features such as The Mortal Storm (1940) through to Steven Spielberg’s Hollywood blockbuster Schindler’s List (1993) and beyond continue to paint collective memories of the Holocaust with a heavily gendered brush. Even those Holocaust texts that do incorporate women’s experiences often do so by inscribing the event with patriarchal meanings. In regards to the dissemination of Holocaust (survivor) testimony, there is also still some way to go in bringing the predominantly male-oriented ‘canon’ of Holocaust testimony into perspective. Well-known authors whose names can be commonly seen on bookshelves and school reading lists include Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, Jean Améry, Imre Kertész and Tadeusz Borowski. The crucial importance of the work of such figures is undeniable, yet the fact that dominant understandings of Nazi persecution and the ‘camp experience’ pivot on the suffering and resilience of ‘man’ is problematic.

Camila Loew's The Memory of Pain: Women's Testimonies of the Holocaust is a timely study of the literary writings of several women who provide significant viewpoints on both wartime events and experiences, and how these might be communicated to subsequent generations. Loew's book is structured and written in an impressively clear and concise style, revealing a deft and thorough understanding of the field. The introduction provides a highly readable and succinct review of key issues, themes and debates relating to the study, including a valuable critical perspective on preceding scholarship on women and the Holocaust. Loew points out in a nuanced manner that while critics accused early feminist Holocaust researchers such as Joan Ringelheim of ‘turning the Holocaust into something secondary to feminism, or of a revisionism that arose from a morally incorrect question, the banality of sexism’ (5), some of the subsequent responses to the over-emphasis on men's experiences provided essentialist readings that reinforced problematic ideas about female behaviour and often (re-)projected male experiences as dominant. Loew resists what she highlights as a misleading focus on biological functions and sexuality alone, broadening her discussion of women writers and the Holocaust to explore not only gender, but also themes of genre, memory, identity, ‘objectivity’, ethics, resistance and, perhaps above all, the ‘literary dimension’ of the texts in question.

In respective chapters, Loew examines the writings of Charlotte Delbo (whose work is widely disseminated and might almost be placed in the ‘canon’ noted above), Margarete Buber-Neumann, Ruth Klüger and Marguerite Duras. Not all of these women are Jewish and not all suffered direct Nazi deportation to, or persecution in, the camps (Duras was married to Robert Antelmle, who was deported to Dachau for resistance activities and...
later wrote The Human Species (1947); nonetheless, all offer a unique perspective on how wartime suffering can be understood and how it can be communicated. Importantly, Loew notes that the authors discussed were chosen for the ‘literary quality’ of their writings; ‘conventional’ diaries or journals are not a substantial concern of the book. Yet while Loew does not aim to provide a comprehensive assessment of women’s writings on the Holocaust, her acute observations serve to provide a rich framework that can be applied to a broader selection of texts than her small sample. This applies also to testimonies by men also – as Loew writes, ‘the paradoxical status of the witness to trauma, or the relationship between language and pain... are not exclusive to one gender or another, but relevant to both’ (189). Indeed, the analysis demonstrates that the works under investigation complicate the very notion of testimony, which rests atop a web of fluid and shifting generic boundaries. Drawing also on the writings of Levi and others, Loew provides a comparative analysis that reveals a keen eye for detail, engaging closely with testimonial narratives that deserve to be much more widely read than they are in the present day.

Loew’s focus on the ethical dimension of testimony reveals how the different modes of representation adopted by women writers allow them to negotiate their own and others’ trauma or (what Loew more often terms) ‘pain’ in sophisticated ways. As Loew points out, an examination of how literal experience is transformed into, by and through the literary highlights the ‘hybrid genre’ of ‘Testimony’, replete with ‘discursive strategies and resources through which [it] takes experience and moulds it into language not only to communicate [experience], but to express it within the framework of a project that is always already subjective, poetic, and political’ (186). The analysis of the work of Delbo, Buber-Neumann, Klüger and Duras reveals that gender is an indelible part of this process, and that the testimonies of these women constitute a form of ‘resistance’ not only against the threats to the continued memory of Nazi atrocities (190), but also a means of challenging dominant gendered narratives of the events.

In these ways, Loew’s The Memory of Pain makes a significant contribution to the evergrowing corpus on the intersection(s) between Holocaust Studies and Gender Studies. New studies of the important work of Primo Levi appear almost (if not actually) every year, yet such widespread attention should and must not overwhelm the attention given to the work of other authors, particularly women, the importance of whose attempts to ‘represent the unrepresentable’ is indisputable. Indeed, more research is needed in this area, not least of all on the subject of the (less prolific and literary, but no less noteworthy) testimonies of women complicit in the activities of the Nazi German regime and its collaborators. Early in her book, Loew writes that testimony ‘can be read as individuals’ search for a form to complete the gaps – the silences, the paradoxes, the incomprehension, the scars – of history’ (2), and her selection and discussion of the literary work of four diverse women authors exposes a variety of rich literary forms that offer a great deal to the ongoing negotiation of ‘Holocaust memory’ in the twenty-first century.