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Shaping Losses: Cultural Memory and the Holocaust [book review]

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After Holroyd’s years of determinedly solid research all over the world, after a bulldog English determination not to give in, is \textit{Works on Paper} worth reading? Yes, because it is an antidote to the learned astronomers of criticism derided by the greatest Londoner, Samuel Johnson, in favor of the more fundamental human qualities of emotion, imagination and, by implication, will.

\textit{George Simson}


The Holocaust is weighty, both as a cultural power and as an inexhaustible source for loss and guilt. It appears so momentous, so blindly other, that we can either lose ourselves in its overpowering vastness, or carefully reconstruct our identities without thinking too much about “dead Jews.” I, for one, have followed the latter course, but Epstein and Lefkovitz’s edited volume on cultural memory and the Holocaust have made such a willful act far more difficult. Indeed, the various essays in the volume argue that conflicting memories and narratives inform Holocaust remembrance. To evade or embrace are no longer, and really never have been, our cultural options for encountering human tragedy. Instead, moments of absence and presence, loyalty and betrayal, guilt and freedom shape and inspire cultural memories of loss. The title of this book, \textit{Shaping Losses}, evokes these conflicting pressures, and speaks to the deep human need to shape and control the very things that remain beyond our grasp. The Holocaust is just that kind of thing that we continually reconfigure, even as we know that it evades all borders, and defies all shapes.

Epstein and Lefkovitz have configured their text on cultural memory into four parts: 1) Journeys: Recollection and Return, 2) Images: Photograph, Film, Sculpture, 3) Voices: Memoirs and Stories, and 4) Legacies: Paradox and Ambivalence. The most powerful and quietly elegant piece in the volume is Irene Raab Epstein’s recollection of her experience just after surviving the concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen. Raab Epstein (the editor’s mother) recalls her friendship with Edith, another camp survivor, and their short but intense, if not fragile relationship. The writing is compact, clear, and discloses only what we need to know: “In my hospital room in Karlstad, the high point of my day was the arrival of the mail.” After recounting one such letter from Edith, in which all hope for a “normal life” had been “crushed and everything seems dark again,” Raab Epstein concludes her essay: “That was the last time I ever heard from Edith Domber.” For the reader—or at least
for this one—Edith lives beyond Raab Epstein’s account to provoke dream-like images of friendship, death, broken promises, and a whole range of personal reflections triggered by a writing style that invites reader response.

I emphasize this sense of playful and private openness because the editors labor to close it down. In the introduction to the volume, Epstein and Lefkovitz tell us exactly what Raab Epstein is up to: the story reminds us that “any effort to shape loss cannot give voice to the silence of the dead or begin to imagine what meanings the millions of the murdered might have contributed to the world.” This may be true, but I would not have read it out of the story if Epstein and Lefkovitz had not already read it in. One senses that the editors—both children of Holocaust survivors—are protecting their parents. I would have preferred a more exploratory introduction, one that broadened the powerful thesis of the collection:

Giving some form to emptiness is, however flawed, a necessary betrayal, and we therefore find ourselves obliged to engage in the process as though to fulfill a sacred duty. It is a duty to participate in the making of cultural memory and not leave it to others. (8–9)

The betrayal, in this case, is participating too much, and thereby limiting the cultural memory of other readers.

There are many fine essays in this volume, including Froma Zeitlin’s reading of Henri Raczymow’s Un Cri sans voix and Jaroslaw Rymkiewicz’s Umschlagplatz (Part 3: Voices), and Lefkovitz’s moving and profoundly honest account of inherited memory as a “repetition compulsion” (Part 4: Legacies). Excellent as well is Carol Zemel’s essay on Roman Vishniac’s photographs of East European Jewry (Part 2: Images), in which “cultural identity is standardized, drenched in melodrama and pathos, and driven into stereotype.” Vishniac’s photos present the familiar trope of the Jew “as exotic other and eternal sufferer” (85). Julia Epstein’s “Remember to Forget: The Problem of Traumatic Cultural Memory” (Part 3: Voices) broadens the volume by exploring common tensions in exilic identity, and seeks “connections to those who have lived through other genocides” (196). Whatever their differences, human tragedies evoke traumatic cultural memories that explore absence, loss, and the discontinuities in identity formation. Epstein turns to Toni Morrison’s account of “disremembering” in her Beloved to explain the kind of remembering that best “activate[s] the consciousness with respect to incontrovertible, unredemptive loss” (188). Disremembering “commemoratively reinforces the meanings of the past through a collective remembering” (192), and hints at a cathartic retrieval of the past while not sliding into
The insightsful essays are balanced, unfortunately, by more difficult reading. These works surely contain profound thoughts and important insights, but I admit that I do not know what they are. Sara Horowitz, for example, uncovers a fascinating allusion to wounded tongues in post-Holocaust Jewish memory, but the conclusions she draws from the disturbing and gendered image move beyond anything I can discover in the images themselves. Then there is Claire Kahane’s “Geographies of Loss,” and Marianne Hirsch and Susan Rubin Suleiman’s “Material Memory: Holocaust Testimony in Post-Holocaust Art.” As I read both essays, I continually return to a question Julia Epstein poses in her essay: “Are these elegant turns of phrase merely semantic muddles, or do they designate something fundamental about the ways in which we are shaped by memory and the ways memory functions as the core of identity?” Both essays, I am convinced, discover important tensions in cultural memory, but their linguistic style tends to obscure the productive richness of their ideas. The contrast between these essays and the opening one by Irene Raab Epstein is dramatic, and reveals a good deal about the variety of language games employed to discuss the absence and presence of tragic loss.

Epstein and Lefkovitz have collected an admirable mix of essays on Holocaust memory that are critically honest, intensely personal, and courageously reflective about the scope and meaning of unbearable tragedy. This book tests its readers in multiple ways, and moved this reader to relive formative memories that still agitate and disturb. These are challenging essays to read, in no small part because they speak beyond the Holocaust tragedy to explore the deep human need to shape loss and to memorialize absence.

Ken Koltun-Fromm


In the acknowledgements which preface her book on Austrian réémigrés, Jacqueline Vansant informs us that “in addition to learning the dialogic nature of writing a book, I have also come to realize the importance of not taking myself too seriously when working on a very serious project.” Indeed, what is striking about this contribution to exile and memoir studies is the modesty of its approach, always seeking to allow the émigrés to speak for themselves, while nevertheless providing a lucid structural and analytical