



Susan Derwin. *Rage Is the Subtext: Readings in Holocaust Literature and Film.* Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012. 144 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8142-1184-7; \$14.95 (cd-rom), ISBN 978-0-8142-9283-9.



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Narratives of Rage and Restoration

Susan Derwin's slim volume presents exactly what the book's subtitle suggests: several readings of selected texts (or parts of texts and individual scenes). These readings thematize the experience of the Holocaust as it has been related by a survivor or from a survivor's perspective. With the exception of the one film included in the study, *The Night Porter* (1973, directed by Liliana Cavani), all the other works are well-known memoirs or quasi-autobiographical writings. They have already been elevated to an almost canonical status in Holocaust literature and subjected to multiple analyses and critical discussions: Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* (1958; first published in Italian as *Se questo è un uomo*, If this is a man, in 1946) and *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986); Saul Friedländer's *When Memory Comes* (1979); and Imre Kertész's *Fatelessness (Fateless)* (1975). In addition, Derwin includes a chapter on Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* (1995), a book that had stirred a great controversy in the late 1990s, as it was exposed as an invented memoir written by a Bruno Grosjean who conceived a new identity for him-

self as a Holocaust survivor.

Whether strictly autobiographical, fictional, or even fictitious, these works are reread in Derwin's book with an interest in the power of testimony. Using Jean Améry's *At the Mind's Limits* (2009) as a starting point, the author explores how the testimonial is being reconstituted and renewed within the text; this is being reconstituted and renewed within the text; this gains a sense of agency in a process that she calls "transformation of rage through narrative-making." The claim is that most critical studies on the Holocaust have been dedicated to the "poetics and politics of mourning, commemoration and to the transgenerational transmission of trauma," and only scant attention has been paid to the ways in which survivors' rage not only shapes the narrative, but also has a reparative effect on both the survivor and the community (p. 15). In Derwin's mostly psychoanalytic interpretations of the texts' symbolic logic, this lacuna is filled: "bearing witness" is consistently understood as a procedure of holding in a double sense—protective holding back of rage as well as the creation of a holding space within which the volatile emotions can

undergo a symbolic transfiguration.

In her opening chapter on Friedl nder's autobiographical account, Derwin employs Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's theory of encrypted memory to review two key memories that stand out in the middle of the book. She demonstrates how Friedl nder's memoir articulates loss as it engenders fantasies that both hide and reveal the trauma. In her second chapter, the author shifts her attention to images of bodies in Levi's two books, bodies that are related to the central categories of "drowning" and "saving." The last and perhaps finest chapter engages in the complex processes of recovery from trauma. In her fine analysis of selected scenes from Kert sz's novel *Fatelessness*, Derwin demonstrates how Kert sz's protagonist creates a "dialogical testimonial narrative," which is a first and most important step toward restoration not only of the individual's autonomy, but also of the community's future.

Somewhat out of synch with the tenor of the remaining chapters that zoom in on rich and important survivors' testimonies is the chapter on the controversial (and implausible, in the author's own assessment) fictional film *The Night Porter*. The main focus in this chapter is on the genocidal rage of the perpetrator (the camp guard Max), rather than on the victim, teenage prisoner Lucia, who is involved in a sexual relationship with Max. The author seeks to convince that even in the case of perpetrator, the narrative reconstruction of past trauma is an integral part of the management—or failure thereof—of present feelings. Similarly disturbing, but for different reasons, is Derwin's choice to engage in a lengthy analysis of Wilkomirski's forged memoir *Fragments*. The author presents a summary account of the controversies

surrounding the authenticity of the 1995 bestseller and then proceeds to explore the *representational* dimensions of the text. According to Derwin, the undermining of Wilkomirski's credibility does not compromise the authority of his steps. Interested primarily in the form of the text as a rhetoric and narrative construct, she brackets Wilkomirski's actual identity in order to focus on the first-person narrator of the performative account and on the process of displacement of affect.

Overall this is a helpful book for teachers who would like to introduce their students to alternative close readings of selected scenes in fundamental autobiographical and semi-autobiographical narratives, such as Levi's, Friedl nder's, and Kertesz's. The control and transformation of emotions within the narratives is presented as key to the understanding of memory, survival, and restoration after the Holocaust. The engaging analyses in individual case studies are precise, insightful, and nuanced. Read as a whole, however, the five chapters of this book resist cohesion and tight unity. It does not become clear what has determined the choice of these particular five authors that have published their works at different periods in the post-Holocaust era and in different languages. Also, bracketed from the scope of the study remains the connection between the works at the center of each chapter, on the one hand, and the larger literary or biographical contexts of these prolific writers, on the other. In the introduction, Derwin states that the authors whose writings she is considering were readers of one another. If this statement were to be understood as a promise that some intertextual links, thematic echoes, and hidden dialogues among the authors would be made explicit in the course of the book, then the reader would be disappointed.

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