



Andrea Reiter. *Narrating the Holocaust.* Translated by Patrick Camiller. London and New York: Continuum, 2000. viii + 311 pp. \$84.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8264-4737-1.



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A Taxonomy of Holocaust Survivors' Narrative

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Survivors' narratives are a staple of Holocaust literature. Tales about living in ghettos, in hiding, in concentration camps, and even in death camps have appeared steadily since 1945, filling shelves in libraries as well as mainstream book stores. Sometimes deliberately fictional, but most often earnestly autobiographical, these memoirs are usually composed by people who have not written anything more than a personal letter, and they are usually the only book the author will ever write. Often devoid of literary sophistication, their energy is carried by the force of narrated events that seem beyond comprehension to both teller and reader. Even so, such narratives are almost always organized according to pre-existing literary models, they follow generic conventions, and they use rhetorical devices common to the more literary tales that serve as their models.

Most critical works discuss Holocaust survival narratives in relation to their historical context, as well as to their closeness in style and tone to the taped testimonies at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Fortunoff Collection at Yale University, or the Spielberg

project. In these studies, issues of personal authenticity and the ethics of behavior under extreme stress outweigh more "literary" considerations. Even such astute critics as Lawrence Langer spend little time dealing with such issues as literary classification (genre criticism) and narrative linguistic devices (rhetorical criticism). Perhaps these stories have had so much resonance as historical, psychological, and moral documents that traditional literary treatments would seem to trivialize them. However, a work of painstaking literary classification has now appeared that deals exclusively with such texts and such issues.

Andrea Reiter's *Narrating the Holocaust* seeks to develop a taxonomy of generic and rhetorical devices used in Holocaust survivor narratives. For Reiter it is not enough to measure "the text against what actually happened," as she claims Langer does; for her, "the linguistic form of the story takes priority over the event itself" (p. 3). In order for any writers—"literary" or not—to construct a narrative, they must locate a form from among the models familiar to them. Although Reiter frequently refers to such authors as Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel, she focuses

her attention on writers largely unknown to American audiences. Her “research base is some 130 texts that appeared in book form between 1934 and the late 1980s, most of them by authors writing in German” (p. 10). Two texts on which Reiter lavishes attention are Fred Wanders’ *Der siebente Brunnen* and Albert Drach’s *Unsentimentale Reise*, neither of which has, to my knowledge, been translated into English. Because of the relative obscurity of these works even to German readers, Reiter spends much time summarizing individual texts. Although probably necessary, this strategy makes reading her book straight through somewhat laborious.

In the book’s opening chapter, “Communication,” Reiter confronts the various reasons why authors choose to relate certain experiences rather than others in their stories. Their greatest challenge lies in finding a language commensurate with the extreme situations they endured: “Most of the survivors had to contend with four especially dramatic events: arrival, release, death and torture” (p. 20). Reiter discusses each of these situations individually, quoting liberally from texts, to establish them as the narrative categories dealt with most often in survivors’ memoirs.

In “Genre,” Reiter devotes a chapter to discussing how authors choose particular ways of ordering narrative events by following generic conventions. Holocaust narrators have used such genres as, among others, the journal, the report, or the Hasidic tale. The latter, for instance, uses a legendary tone and structure to lend credence to events that often surpass the normal capacity for belief. That genre also allows the writer to develop ethical and even teleological conclusions in the manner of Biblical and Hasidic storytelling. A good example of this type of narrative is the novel by Wanders mentioned earlier. American readers may know Yaffa Eliach’s *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust*.

In the following chapter (“Coming to terms with experience through language”), Reiter examines how authors have struggled to make ordinary language convey such extreme experience. She shrewdly quotes the seventh proposition of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: “‘What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence’” (p. 84). Survivors have always been caught between the need to testify, to bear witness, and the near impossibility of writing about the “unspeakable.” In attempting to write about that which defies telling, most survivors have mostly not looked for new forms of narrative or language; they have rather made use of forms already available through their read-

ing experience, including a reliance on metaphor and the various forms of symbolism. They use these tropes primarily to mitigate the alienating effects of their experience while not destroying objectivity. One particularly striking metaphor can serve as an example. For the starving inmates in Grete Salus’s *Niemand, nichts-ein Jude* (1958) bread was a “solid island in a sea of watery soup” (p. 113). Reiter also points out that survivors remaining in Germany have continued to use German as their language of testimony; but those who have emigrated have frequently chosen to use another language in spite of George Steiner’s controversial observation that “German is the only foreign language in which any attempt can be made to say something insightful, something responsible about the Shoah” (p. 96). Reiter’s discussion of humor and irony suggests that the former exists primarily at the level of the event, frequently manifesting itself in a kind of situation-comedy, whereas irony represents a more reflective turn of mind and usually appears in the survivors’ later assessments of their lives.

In “The Narrative of Lived Reality,” Reiter describes how authors have sought an appropriate formal structure capable of containing concentrationary realities. Not surprisingly, “the concentration camp texts follow a chronological order [that we typically find in autobiographical narratives]. They begin with the initial internment, or (more rarely) with the events that led up to it, and end with the liberation” (p. 150). In addition, authors have to establish a distanced perspective between themselves and the narrated reality, and this becomes easier to do the more temporal distance they have from the actual events. Narrative distance also increases the writer’s ability to avoid “a pathos-filled aestheticization of the camp experience” (p. 167). Reiter finds that such authors are more likely to use literary than historical associations, given the fact that the camp experience seemed to lack any historical referent. Classical literature has often dealt with the incomprehensible, and this has provided the occasion for such well-known allusions in Holocaust narratives as Primo Levi’s chapter on Dante in *Survival in Auschwitz* or Elie Wiesel’s use of the crucifixion scene (Christ on the cross between two thieves) as a structural model for the hanging of the *pipul* in *Night*.

Reiter’s brief concluding chapter discusses why authors have committed themselves to writing Holocaust narratives. Her discussion of the need to witness and the effects of trauma do not add much to what we already know. Reiter also recognizes that to use the camp experience as a scene of education or as a place where we can discover the meaning of life has frequently been recog-

nized as a dubious ambition. But the survivors' need to go on talking is something more basic than that; for to go on talking is, in fact, to go on living.

Although I have mixed feelings about the experience of reading this book, *Narrating the Holocaust* is the kind of initiatory work that someone had to write, and for that we should thank the author. Any study that classifies, organizes, and creates a taxonomy is bound to have its dull

patches, but I believe it is important that someone has been willing to treat Holocaust narratives as something other than sacred texts. To construct a means whereby we can develop a rhetorical analysis of "non-literary" texts establishes a beginning for our understanding these narratives in a context that is more than theological, historical, psychological, or philosophical. As such, this book should prove a welcome addition to the libraries of all students of Holocaust literature.

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