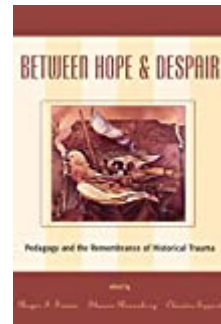


H-Net Reviews

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Roger I. Simon, Sharon Rosenberg, Claudia Eppert, eds. *Between Hope and Despair: Pedagogy and the Remembrance of Historical Trauma*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001. vi + 256 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8476-9462-4; \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8476-9463-1.



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In *Between Hope and Despair*, Roger Simon, Sharon Rosenberg, and Claudia Eppert bring together a collection of profoundly thoughtful essays on the challenges facing, and posed by, the acts of memory with which we confront historical trauma. It is mandatory reading for those teachers, scholars, artists, and therapists who find themselves dissatisfied by the glib, emblematic, heroic, or narrowly utilitarian discourses in which such trauma so often becomes enshrouded. The historical episodes canvassed by these authors are quite diverse, and their approaches are, if anything, even more diverse. Rinaldo Walcott, for example, analyzes narratives by contemporary American descendants of the survivors of the Middle Passage, while Rachel N. Baum targets the specifically second-generation character of recent literary responses to the Holocaust. Julia Salverson presents theatrical pieces about landmines, Rosenberg offers a re-interpretation of a public monument, Mario Di Paolantonio confronts the juridical discourse of national reconciliation, and Jody Ranck critiques the trauma services offered by humanitarian aid agencies in Rwanda. While it is convenient to treat them as addressing particular historical episodes, in no case do the standard calendars of events associated with these episodes take center stage. Instead, these essays seek to engage critically, often psychoanalytically, with the proximal or distal mnemonic aftershocks of the events, hoping to encourage what the

editors call “ethical learning.”

It is to the credit of the compilers that a strong, coherent theme can be found running through this text, a theme that presents itself to the reader not as an afterthought, but with mounting clarity as each article is assimilated. This is a book about problems of identity, of a personal identity threatened, undermined, and ultimately reconstituted by what one contributor, Deborah Britzman, has called “difficult knowledge.”[1] Knowledge of loss, one’s own or another’s, destabilizes the ego in a process described in Freud’s seminal essay “Mourning and Melancholia.”[2] This instability can lead to the essentially narcissistic phenomenon of melancholia, in which the subject dwells on the loss of self, substituting this loss for the loss of something external to it, and thus shielding itself from the contingencies of the external other. In mourning, by contrast, the other is acknowledged, and with it the externality of loss. Mourning can be worked through. The mourning subject engages with the world, and with the loss inherent to it, in a way the melancholic subject cannot. As Simon, Rosenberg, and Eppert suggest in their introduction, “perhaps what all of the chapters finally move toward is a critical and risk-laden learning that seeks to accomplish a shift of one’s ego boundaries, that displaces engagements with the past and contemporary relations with others out of the nar-

row, inescapably violent and violative confines of the 'I' to a receptivity to others.... Remembrance is ... a means for ethical learning" (p. 8).

Much attention is thus devoted to identifying and critiquing attempts at remembrance that fail, in this sense, to further ethical learning. Analyzing a student performance of a play on land mines in Bosnia, Julia Salverson finds that the actors "were not seeing themselves in the picture; and, consequently ... we as audience members were neither asked nor able to implicate ourselves ... we ... were looking out at some exoticized and deliberately tragic other" (p. 59). In her re-reading of a Vancouver memorial to the victims of the 1989 Montreal Massacre, Sharon Rosenberg complains that "remembrance has become attached to strategic efforts to intervene in politics of the now ... what is foreclosed in this 'strategic remembrance practice' ... is the possibility of encountering and facing the very shock of the murders" (p. 77). In different ways, both Rachel N. Baum and Andrea Liss problematize the stewardship of memory by those born after the Holocaust, with Liss worrying about "the silence that the law of the voice of the legitimate witness would impose on the voice of the post-Auschwitz generation as 'inauthentic'" (p. 119). And Rinaldo Walcott reveals the inadequacies of an afrocism in which attention to the heroism of Middle Passage survivors masks the identities and needs of contemporary African Americans.

The strategic, the emblematic, and the heroic all come together in what Jody Ranck calls the "humanist meta-narrative of moral progress" (p. 187). Prospects for ethical learning could not look more bleak than when, "after fifty years of 'Never Again,'" the Rwandan genocide "is allowed to take place under the watchful eyes of the 'humanitarians'" (pp. 188-189). In a way, the failure is compounded by the trauma services offered to Rwandan survivors, in which the attempt to address their suffering within the bounds of a medical discourse runs the risk of deflecting the moral questions.

Such criticism is surely worthwhile in its own right. In my own experience teaching an advanced undergraduate philosophy course on the ethical interpretation of genocide, I have been struck by the desperation with which even the best students search for silver linings, constructing redemptive fictions as morally inert as they are hopeful. This book is a repository of pedagogical strategies with which to reveal the limitations of such constructions.

One also wants ethical learning to transcend the purely critical. The contributors to this volume offer a

range of positive proposals. Walcott, in his reading of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for The Widow*, finds hope in the protagonist's ability to come to terms with the American constitution of her body, acknowledging in the process both the horrors of the Middle Passage and the otherness of her African ancestors. Rosenberg, for her part, suggests that a monument originating in a movement toward narrowly strategic remembrance can nonetheless be "re-read" in ways that both challenge and extend the original strategic agenda. In differing ways, both authors' suggestions aim at allowing us to mourn the other, rather than dwelling on some lost aspect of self, while still implicating ourselves.

But this is extremely difficult to do. There is an apparent contradiction between the need to mourn the other and the call for ethical engagement with the other, and the authors are not to be blamed if they cannot always successfully balance the two. I suggest their efforts are often complicated by the discourse of victimhood in which they are entrenched. Searching for a "psychic locus" for the remembrance of historical trauma, Roger I. Simon asks, "how might the memories of others be 'remembered' as a wound that wounds me" (p. 13)? Similarly, Britzman asserts that, in pursuit of ethical learning, "our pedagogical efforts must ... begin with a study of the difficulty of making significance from the painful experience of others" (p. 29). Britzman also describes Meyer Levin's "fall" into melancholia as a kind of "accident" (p. 35). Taking such quotations out of context, one might think that a much broader class of historical traumas was at issue, including not only genocide and mass murder, but natural disasters as well: all cause suffering on a massive scale, suffering whose significance must be discovered. But the distinction between actions and events is helpful here. Natural disasters are mere events, not actions—no one is responsible for them. Intrinsic to the traumatic character of mass murder, however, is the fact that murder is a deliberate act, and as such is perpetrated by agents who, like all other agents, can only be described in the language of (instrumental) rationality.

We recall Kant's argument for the impossibility of a diabolical will and Hannah Arendt's analysis of evil's banality.[3] Some argue that it is unintelligible to suppose that we do evil *because* it is evil; instead, we do evil because we mistakenly think it is good. The mistake is one that even decent people (in Himmler's phrase, "anständige Menschen") can make, especially when situated in a bureaucratic context in which responsibility is distributed to the point of individual deniability. Empathizing with victims, being wounded by their wounds,

is painful, but the ethical challenge is more pointed when we force ourselves to question either our own decency or its moral worth. Doing so involves engaging not only with the victims, but also with the perpetrators. And such engagement is, indeed, “risk-laden” (p. 8). The editors are right that ethical learning is dangerous, but even the nature of the danger is sometimes hidden. It is difficult for the individual to confront his or her limitations, or to recognize the degree to which individual moral constitution is a function of a larger social context. It is even more threatening to realize that no individual moral constitution is immune to the potential for evil. To lose confidence in the inviolability of our own moral integrity, as we must if ethical learning is to take place, is dangerous indeed.

Still, the fact that a danger is hidden does not prevent us from fleeing from it. That ethical learning involves confronting the flaws inherent in our own agency is witnessed by our tremendous psychic resistance to it. Rosenberg recounts how a memorial inscription to the memory “of all the women who have been murdered by men” awoke fiercely defensive responses by men who “felt attacked” despite their own innocence (p. 81). For all that the memorial is, in Rosenberg’s phrase, “strategic”; it poses a potentially constructive challenge to the ethical self-understanding of innocent, decent men—though there is no challenge from which one may not choose to turn aside. (Also see Di Paolantonio’s contribution [p. 160]). In Ranck’s essay we see perhaps the most direct challenge posed in this book to the reader who wishes to see him- or herself as a decent, humane person. It is not that the humanitarian aid offered to the Rwandans is not genuinely humane. It is rather precisely its humaneness that insulates us, the benefactors, from knowledge of our own complicity. (For a similar analysis of the insulating function of humanism, see Jonathan Dollimore, *Sex, Literature and Censure*.)[4]

It is clear that the attainment and assimilation of such knowledge ranks among the primary goals of these authors, even when this is not always immediately appar-

ent. Witness Simon’s reference to Levinas in glossing the Hebrew word *zakhôr*, a ritual remembrance practice in which “I am ‘thrown back toward what has never been my fault or my deed’” (p. 10). It remains to be seen whether such remembrance, applied to atrocities of genocidal proportions, can offer any sense of hope without also restoring a more insidious “humanist metanarrative of moral progress” (p. 187).

The ten essays in this volume are all highly interdisciplinary. Readers must be prepared to meet the authors halfway, and even so, regardless of the reader’s specific disciplinary background, it may be rough going. Historians and literary scholars, even those who have scaled the heights of contemporary theory, may not be familiar enough with Freud for the arguments to be immediately transparent. Those familiar with psychoanalytic theories may also have this difficulty, along with others. I believe they should all give it a try. There is a great deal to be learned, not only in the arguments themselves, but also in connections between sources and theoretical approaches not often linked.

Notes

[1]. Deborah Britzman, *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects: Toward A Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

[2]. Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in *Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud* (New York: Norton, 2000), vol. 14, pp. 239-259.

[3]. Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (*Die Religion Innerhalb Der Grenzen Der Blossen Vernunft*), trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper, 1960); and Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 1994).

[4]. Jonathan Dollimore, *Sex, Literature and Censorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), esp. chap. 7.

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