
Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg, eds. *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2003. Pp. xx, 485. \$29.95 pb.

In *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation*, James E. Young addresses the “resistance to overly theoretical readings” (336) in earlier studies of Holocaust literature. Sensitive to the reasons behind “the fear that too much attention to critical method or to the literary construction of texts threatens to supplant not only the literature but the horrible events at the heart of our inquiry,” (336) Young has helped to challenge that resistance. An excerpt from *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust* now appears as one of two entries by Young in Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg’s exemplary collection, *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings*.

What is remarkable about this collection of sixty-two essays extends beyond the sheer range and quality of its selections—from early writings such as Kenneth Burke’s 1939 review of the rhetoric of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* and George Bataille’s pre-war writings on “The Psychological Structure of Fascism,” to essays only recently published. What makes this collection particularly useful, both for scholars, and for students is the editors’ recognition that not only do Holocaust studies suffer when we ignore the theoretical approaches that ground those studies, but also that Holocaust studies “can, and indeed ought to, impinge on the practice of theory” (2). The editors acknowledge that consideration of the Holocaust often exposes us to the limitations of various theoretical concepts, “forc[ing] us to reconceive ideals and phenomena we thought we understood” (2). In one example, Dominick LaCapra draws attention to the strictures of some trauma theories when he distinguishes between structural trauma and historical trauma. *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings* includes an excerpt from LaCapra’s *Writing History, Writing Trauma* as just one way of illustrating that an engagement with “theory” is necessary in the development of our understanding of the Holocaust, just as in the study of any history. Another advantage of bringing Holocaust studies into contact with critical theories is that gender issues are foregrounded. Here, Levi and Rothberg point to the benefits of observing how scholars working outside the study of the Holocaust have probed the “intersection of identity categories, including especially the intersection of gender with ‘race’ and ethnicity” (9). They include an excerpt from Pascale Rachel Bos’s work in which she assesses the methodological problems of earlier studies of women and the

Holocaust while she insists that “a careful analysis of gender is indispensable and should become an integral part of any Holocaust research” (179).

Obviously, Levi and Rothberg do not posit a simple notion of “theory.” In their introduction, they outline the “three large areas in which theory after the Holocaust has been elaborated: ethics and history, aesthetics and culture, and the politics of memory” (3). Their introduction concisely surveys the state of Holocaust studies today, evenhandedly describes the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches, and notes how Holocaust studies continue to be divided according to discipline. An example of this can be seen in the “ground-breaking archival work of historians” (4), which exists apart from the “more speculative investigations of philosophers, literary critics, and some psychoanalysts,” (4). Observing that a similar state exists in “the world of theory” (4), Levi and Rothberg suggest that their anthology, undoubtedly useful for courses on Holocaust studies, might be equally useful in contemporary theory courses. With that in mind, they organize their selections into eleven topics: Theory and Experience; Historicizing the Holocaust?; Nazi Culture, Fascism, and Antisemitism; Race, Gender, and Genocide; Psychoanalysis, Trauma, and Memory; Questions of Religion, Ethics, and Justice; Literature and Culture After Auschwitz; Modes of Narration; Rethinking Visual Culture; Latecomers: Negative Symbiosis, Postmemory, and Countermemory; and Uniqueness, Comparison, and the Politics of Memory. The introduction to each section concludes with a short bibliography divided into two topics: Other Works in Holocaust Studies, and Other Relevant Theoretical Studies. Thus the collection’s juxtaposition of selections from a variety of theoretical approaches helps to illustrate that to focus on the Holocaust in isolation limits both Holocaust studies and theoretical studies: “an explicit and open exchange between Holocaust scholars and practitioners of theory and cultural studies will be mutually beneficial” (19).

The final section of the anthology is titled Uniqueness, Comparison, and the Politics of Memory. In their mini-introduction Levi and Rothberg note that arguments regarding the uniqueness of the Holocaust have produced a “historical and political minefield” (441). They offer three different ways of thinking productively about uniqueness, and then include essays that range from Peter Novick and Lilian Friedberg’s very different questions about the place of the Holocaust in American culture, to Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg’s thesis that contextualization and a comparative method can highlight what is singular about the Holocaust. In an excerpt from *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda*, Mahmoud Mamdani analyzes the genocide of the Herero population in German South West Africa in 1904 and asserts that examination of the

Rwandan genocide can also contribute to our understanding of Nazi thinking. As Mamdani notes, “[w]e may agree that genocidal violence cannot be understood as rational; yet, we need to understand it as thinkable” (463). Those who think that the Holocaust cannot be understood might ask themselves what theory underlies that assumption. Those who think that what must be said about the Holocaust has already been said will likely change their minds after reading this collection. For, while the “chronology of the major events of the Holocaust” (19) has been established, the “meaning and implications of the events remain open . . . we cannot ‘know’ the Holocaust once and for all” (19). Although Theodor W. Adorno writes, “All post-Auschwitz culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage” (286), we know from other excerpts included here that Adorno’s thinking about “poetry after Auschwitz” changed. *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings* compels us to recognize that the Holocaust “will accrue diverse and sometimes contradictory meanings, will intersect with non-European and non-Jewish histories, and will be reframed in other intellectual traditions—as in fact has happened all along” (19). As Andreas Huyssen notes, the question “is not whether to forget or to remember, but rather how to remember” (384). How to remember is always a question inflected by theory; how to remember without “slipping into historical relativism” (19) is another.

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James King. *The Life of Margaret Laurence*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 1997. pp. 457. \$34.95 hb.

When biographer James King—author of *William Blake: His Life, The Last Modern: A Life of Herbert Read*, and *Virginia Woolf*—turned his talents to Canadian subjects, beginning with author Margaret Laurence and continuing with publisher Jack McClelland and writer Farley Mowat, some Canadian literature specialists were concerned that King was not qualified to address such a Canadian icon. King pursued his subject with his usual efficiency, however, interviewing friends, relatives, and teachers of Laurence (including her high school English teacher, Mildred Musgrove), even tracking down Barbadian novelist George Lamming, with whom King asserts that Laurence had a brief romance. His list of acknowledgments to “the friends of Margaret Laurence who opened their doors, their memories, and, quite often, their hearts to me” (xiii) reads like a Who’s Who of Canadian letters. The result is a wealth of information invaluable for any student of Laurence’s work and far exceed-