Introduction: Holocaust Poetry

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‘Why no appraisals of [Holocaust] verse – particularly verse composed in the English language?’, asks Susan Gubar in *Poetry after Auschwitz*.¹ The question appears particularly pertinent, if paradoxical, in the context of her list of canonical authors in the field of Holocaust literature, most of whom are either primarily poets (Dan Pagis, Paul Celan and Nelly Sachs) or prose writers as well as poets (Charlotte Delbo, Primo Levi and Tadeusz Borowski). One answer is that critics have rightly attended to the more sophisticated prose in the work of Delbo, Levi and Borowski. However, this has led to the overshadowing of, for example, the significance of Levi’s ‘Shemà’ as metatestimony in relation to *If This is a Man*, Borowski’s ‘October Sky’ as a complex, dialectical anti-lyric, and Delbo’s shift into poetic form in *Auschwitz and After* when she senses that her prose is simply not up to the task of recounting certain traumatic experiences. Gubar laments that such poetry ‘about the European cataclysm has gone largely ignored’,² mainly because of the widespread academic disregard of verse. (Strangely, some colleagues who justly pore over the intricacies of post-structuralist philosophy take fright at the mention of a pentameter.) Other reasons she gives for the neglect of Holocaust poetry include Theodor Adorno’s famous dictum in 1949 about barbaric poems, which, she argues, resulted in such poetry becoming ‘taboo’.³ Since Gubar posed her question in 2003, however, critics (and *Poetry after Auschwitz*) have begun to set the parameters for the study of Holocaust and post-Holocaust poetry, partly by drawing on the critical vocabulary already in currency in the wider field of Holocaust studies. The critical paradigms now in place for the study of Holocaust poetry include the concepts of postmemory writing (Marianne Hirsch); secondary witnessing (Dominick LaCapra and Dora Apel, amongst others); proxy-witnessing (Robert Jay Lifton and Susan Gubar);

received history and the vicarious past (James Young); and awkward poetics (Antony Rowland).

For Gubar, the history of critical response to such poetry is inextricable from wider reactions to the Holocaust which can be typified as a movement from silence and singularity to proxy-witnessing. In the late 1940s and 1950s there was a ‘conspiracy’ to ‘nullify’ the ‘cataclysm’;⁴ prominent philosophers and writers simply ignored it. (Gubar notes⁵ that this is not entirely true: Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus did respond at length in the early post-war period to the Holocaust, as well as others she does not mention, such as Adorno, Robert Antelme and Arthur Mailer.) This ‘silence’ was followed with an emphasis by authors and artists such as Zygmunt Bauman and Claude Lanzmann on the singularity of the Holocaust, as opposed to the now oft-repeated maxim that the event is both comparable *and* singular. Distrusting a Holocaust industry that ‘desecrates the dead’, many critics contended that the Holocaust ‘should be approached only by those personally involved’.⁶ Adorno’s dictum forms part of this silence and singularity, since it functions as a draconian admonition and a diagnostic: poetry should not, and cannot anyway, be written about the Holocaust. Gubar argues that the German philosopher’s worries arise out of artistic failures to ‘convey the full horror’, and concerns about ‘commercial gains’ and “‘consuming trauma’”.⁷

Fifty years later, ‘the Holocaust is doomed to expire’ if critical debates in Holocaust studies choose to circle around silence and singularity. Rowland’s exposition of awkward poetics in *Holocaust Poetry* responds to the (awkwardly phrased) contention in *Poetry after Auschwitz* that ‘we must keep [the event] alive *as dying*’.⁸ Despite the importance of metanarratives to the study of post-Holocaust poetry, Rowland argues, writing cannot – as Maurice Blanchot stated – “reference its own authenticity”, but at least it can ‘self-consciously discuss the process of inscription’.⁹ For Rowland, Geoffrey Hill’s poetry is exemplary in its awkward engagement with its own fictionality, as in the canonical poem ‘September Song’. The critic’s taxonomy of these awkward poetics includes metrical tension and subversion, the anti-elegiac or anti-lyrical, self-reflexive interrogations of the author or narrator’s role, self-declared inadequacies of representation and embarrassed rhetoric. These poetics – which arise out of the authors’ ‘self-conscious engagement with the ramifications of their non-participation’¹⁰ – often remain in

terse juxtaposition with the lyrical, elegiac, or mellifluous verse (etc.) in individual poems. Rowland's argument anticipates alternative critical contentions: awkward poetics could be regarded as a 'pious attempt to register the difficulties of historical representation, a conundrum that the poet then resolves all too easily through self-castigation'. However, he argues that an alternative to poetry open to its own postures, contradictions and responsibilities is 'an unreflective writing that leaves the "interpretive responsibility" entirely – rather than partly – up to the reader'.¹¹

Gubar and Rowland are both responding in different ways to the efficacy of poetry as a form of Holocaust representation, and its importance in the wider fields of Holocaust and trauma studies. For Gubar, poems make no pretence at totality, and can mark post-Holocaust discontinuities by abrogating narrative coherence.¹² If this comment refers to the stylistics of Holocaust poetry, it appertains to modernist and postmodernist verse rather than the 'confessional' poetics (that Robert Eaglestone and Peter Lawson discuss in this volume) of poets such as Lily Brett: Gubar admits this in her comment that 'Verse *can* violate narrative logic'.¹³ Gubar also lauds the epiphanic quality of (lyrical) poems: these 'spurts of vision' are effective in their engagements with baffling, traumatic experiences. Poetry is also skilled at highlighting the inadequacies of everyday (usually meaning prosaic) discourses, such as propaganda. The genre encourages a 'prayerlike attentiveness' in the process of reading: Levi was attuned to this quality when he chose 'Shemà' as an epigraph for *If This is a Man*, in order to foster a considered response to the ensuing prose testimony.¹⁴ Whilst not escaping the process of "consuming trauma",¹⁵ such reflection potentially develops a more self-critical reaction to the other's experience. After all, the economics of poetry in relation to the process of aesthetic consumption operate in a different way to those of popular film or prose. Poetry is not affected by the same pressing economic factors as museums, Hollywood films or memorials that attempt to engage with twentieth-century events. The ensuing artistic freedoms come at the expense of money and an extensive readership, but poets do not have to be accommodating; they are not – to anywhere near the same extent – at the mercy of audience expectation. Hence poems can function as a form of testimony by focusing on the subject's experience without the distortions of economic trammels prevalent in other artistic genres.

In *Suffering Witness*, James Hatley relates that ‘Any attempt to personalize the events of the Nazi genocide is morally repugnant for [the critic Berel] Lang. He argues that the most distinguishing quality of genocide, its impersonality, is diminished by any poetic writing in which the particularity of one’s voice comes to be the issue of one’s writing’.¹⁶ On the contrary, this is precisely why poetry as testimony is so important for attempts at the reclamation of (figured) individuality in the wake of the Holocaust. Robert Antelme illustrates that the ‘impersonality’ of genocide is compounded in the potentially chilling objectivity of photography and prose: in contrast, the discontinuities of poetry ‘express experience ... express reality as it is constantly lived, contested, and assumed’.¹⁷ Poems do not ‘run so great a risk of creating that naked, “objective” testimony, that kind of abstract accusation, that photograph that only frightens us without explicitly teaching anything’.¹⁸ (Gary D. Mole translates Antelme slightly differently in this volume.) Antelme’s ruminations on his sense that poetry could provide a ‘true’ representation of the experiences of the camps were published in 1948. A year later, Adorno’s more famous declarations about the barbarity and impossibility of post-Holocaust poetry were first encountered. The development of Holocaust poetry and criticism could have been very different if Antelme’s comments had become to be regarded as maxims instead of Adorno’s polemics. There might not, for example, have been such an emphasis on the resistant, modernist aesthetics of writers such as Celan and Adorno. The testimonial poetics of authors such as Borowski might not have been ignored.

After a half-century of criticism in which Adorno’s polemics have, for the most part, been followed like a mantra, what is the future for this area of critical study? Gubar’s canon of Holocaust literature includes several poets, but there is still scope for the study of neglected figures such as Borowski and Antelme. And the canon is always open to reinterpretation: in this volume, Matthew Boswell provides a fresh perspective on Sylvia Plath’s work, arguing – via Eaglestone’s criticism rather than linguistically-innovative poets – that her poems are examples of postmodern poetics. Critics also need to discuss Holocaust poetry in terms of national and international debates around poetic tradition: in Poland, for example, the ‘turn’ against the lyric occurred in the early 1940s after the death of poets such as Trzebinski and Czechowicz, whereas the anti-lyrical, documentary movement had been prevalent in Britain since the mid

1930s. In addition, there is still work to be done on the links between Holocaust poetry and wider debates about poetic movements and literary history: what, for example, is the connection between testimonial poetics and the ‘confessional’ poetry of the 1960s? Have such poetics – and the playful poetics of writers such as Ronald Federman – been overlooked, the critical locus circling instead around ‘sacred’, canonical figures such as Celan? Critical linkages also need to be made between different kinds of poetic testimony outside the current parameters of Holocaust studies, such as between Levi and the satirical poetry of Siegfried Sassoon, the ‘silences’ in Holocaust poetry and the writing of the *hibakusha* in Japan, and the potential connections with post-colonial poetry, where arguments over, say, the suitability of certain literary sub-genres such as the sonnet are reiterated in different contexts.

If Adorno’s maxim still haunts post-Holocaust debates about poetry (and this introduction) like a form of critical melancholia, perhaps the time has come to break the spell. Hatley contended in 2000 that ‘the writing of the *Shoah* must involve a continuing discourse about the inadequacy of that writing’.¹⁹ Perhaps this is the moment to argue for a cessation of such discourse; or, at least, to accept it as taken for granted. Critical work could then begin on writing that goes beyond the paradigms of vexed aesthetics. Jane Kilby has written recently of the ‘beauty of levity’, which does not ‘freight’ language with pathos and pain; instead, it allows ‘language to do more work for us by asking less of it’.²⁰ Perhaps her critique offers a way out of a critical appreciation of the agonised aesthetics of modernist Holocaust poetry and awkward poetics.

Notes

1. Susan Gubar, *Poetry after Auschwitz: Remembering What One Never Knew* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 9.

2. *Ibid.*, 9.

3. *Ibid.*, 9.

4. *Ibid.*, 3.

5. *Ibid.*, 2.

6. *Ibid.*, 6, 3.

7. *Ibid.*, 4.

8. *Ibid.*, 7.

9. Antony Rowland, *Holocaust Poetry: Awkward Poetics in the Work of Sylvia Plath, Geoffrey Hill, Tony Harrison and Ted Hughes* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 9.
10. Ibid., 19.
11. Ibid., 12, 13.
12. Gubar, *Poetry After Auschwitz*, 7.
13. Ibid., 8, emphasis added.
14. Ibid., 7, 10, 11.
15. Ibid., 4.
16. James Hatley, *Suffering Witness: The Quandary of Responsibility after the Irreparable* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 108.
17. Robert Antelme, 'Poetry and the Testimony of the Camps', in *On Robert Antelme's The Human Race: Essays and Commentary*, ed. Daniel Dobbels (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2003 [1996]), 31–7, 34.
18. Ibid., 33.
19. Hatley, *Suffering Witness*, 109.
20. Jane Kilby, *Violence and the Cultural Politics of Trauma* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), xiv.