Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich, LV z. 1
PL ISSN 0084-4446

Evan Zimroth
The City University of New York*

The Limits (if any) of Holocaust Discourse

Abstract

Despite Adorno's famous 1949 proclamation that to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, poets nevertheless do so continually. Even so, some Holocaust topics, and even language, remain tacitly forbidden. This essay examines taboos of Holocaust linguistic discourse and highlights several contemporary American poets who did not themselves directly experience Holocaust trauma — Sylvia Plath, Sharon Olds, Myra Sklarew, and the more radically experimental Irena Klepfisz — but who use Holocaust topics and imagery for their moral and narrative power. Despite controversy, then, these poets (deliberately, or sometimes unwittingly) stretch the limits of commonly-held linguistic parameters and are creating a new Holocaust discourse.

Holocaust, poetry, discourse, imagery, Plath, Klepfisz

* Professor of English, Associate Director, Program in Jewish Studies
Queens College, The City University of New York, Flushing, New York 11367, USA
Visiting Fellow/Life Member Clare Hall, University of Cambridge, Cambridge CB3 9AL, England.
email: evan.zimroth@qc.cuny.edu

In the years right after the Holocaust, as people realized the enormity of the trauma, the cultural critic Theodore Adorno issued his famous pronouncement: To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. By that he meant that the Holocaust is a holy event; to make art out of it is a desecration. It is unique, and cannot be described by ordinary or even extraordinary human language, nor should one try to do so. The Holocaust is beyond the capacity of language and human discourse, and a violation so profound that to turn it into art is to diminish its significance and trivialize the rupture it produced in the fabric of civilization.

The Holocaust therefore becomes not only fenced off from all artistic endeavour but is something beyond investigation itself, beyond rational description. It is a mystery, and mysteries are not amenable to description. To describe the Holocaust inevitably is to desecrate it. In this view, stated first in 1949 and widely influential, the Holocaust is metahistorical, outside of human history and therefore outside of ordinary human understanding and discourse[1].

In prose essays and storytelling, Elie Wiesel — probably the most influential of Holocaust writers — emphasized the conception that the Holocaust is unique, mysterious, beyond human comprehension. Despite writing and publishing *Night*[2], an autobiographical but fictionalized version of his family's suffering, Wiesel has tenaciously held the position that the subject is sacred, approachable only with awe and reverence. By force of personality and literary power, Wiesel effectively cordoned off the Holocaust. His moral vision protected Holocaust discourse from anything that might taint it or diminish it by making it comprehensible.

Despite Adorno's pronouncement and Wiesels' insistence on the sacrality of the Holocaust, writers of course took on the Holocaust as their subject. How could they not? But they worked carefully so as not to desecrate the memory of the Six Million. And when they trespassed, when writers overstepped the perceived boundaries of acceptable Holocaust discourse, they were vehemently criticized.

My topic is that kind of trespass and taboo, the linguistic violations of the Holocaust. What are the limits of Holocaust discourse, how are they enforced, what happens when they are violated? And what might a new Holocaust discourse look like? The topic is huge; i am touching only a small part of it. In addition, the ground constantly shifts beneath one's feet. We have ever more chronological distance from the event. More importantly,

---

1 For a comprehensive description of Adorno's statement and its consequences, see the *Introduction* by Hilda Schiff to *Holocaust Poetry* (1995).

2 Published 1958 in France as *La Nuit*, 1960 in the USA as *Night*, somewhat different versions.

we now have more historical information than ever before. Since 1991 and the collapse of the Soviet Union, there is a flood of new information from previously closed archives, all now available to researchers. There is also just the basic human fact that the survivor generation is dying. Every day there are fewer survivors, and therefore fewer to bear personal witness to the events themselves, and fewer to enforce any previously (and tacitly) agreed-upon limits.

The Jewish slogan for the Holocaust is „Never Forget". That concept of memory is critical to a Jewish response to the Holocaust. But „Never Forget" is not a simple idea. What does memory mean? Who has a valid memory of the Holocaust and under what conditions? In the long, eight-part poem called 'Lithuania' by the American poet Myra Sklarew, the poet addresses the issue of Holocaust memory, and claims that you can remember an event that didn't actually happen to you: The historical event happened to others, not to you, but under certain conditions you can nonetheless claim it as authentic memory. Interestingly, Sklarew's idea of the seeming authenticity of experience does not depend on actually undergoing the atrocities of the Holocaust, nor on being a witness to them. Rather, her narrator tries to recreate them by a series of both literal and symbolic means.

Sklarew sets her narration „in America… at 3:30 in the morning", as if her narrator has just returned from Lithuania and cannot sleep from jet-lag. „I am trying/to remember something I couldn't/possibly know. I am trying,/as I was two days ago in Lithuania, to move by feel, to know when I was close/to where they /ie., Lithuanian Jews/ had been… I walked until I remembered./But how could I? I had not been here/before". She goes on to give harrowingly detailed accounts of the deaths of Lithuanian Jews. The poem is based on a variety or sources: firsthand accounts of survivors, personal letters by relatives written from Lithuania to the United States as the war began, on diaries kept in Lithuania and somehow retrieved, and on the poet's personal interview with a family member who survived the Kaunas ghetto and the Stutthof concentration camp. These are historical documents. But the poem is also based on what Sklarew calls „the felt absence of Jews in a place that had once been the center of world Jewry" (Sklarew 1997)[3]. In other words, the poet writes from historical documentation but also from what one might call kinetic evidence: the witness of the body, what someone would actually see and feel walking through the geography of occupation and murder.

Sklarew states very clearly what is the basic paradox of post-Holocaust discourse: You can „remember" something that did not happen, or at least did not happen to you. You can claim, as personal and authentic memory, something that happened to others, but not to you. It is not that the event itself is fabricated — it is not, it is historically accurate — but that even though you were not historically, literally, present, you claim that it indeed happened to you. In other words, the trauma of the Holocaust was so profound that as Sklarew (or her narrator) wanders the geographic landscape, it is „as if" she

[3] The quotations are from her long poem and the prose *Preface*. This is a small-press book and not widely available.

experiences it as an imperiled Jew. Or, more paradoxically, she is (simultaneously) both imperiled and safe: imperiled in that had she actually been there, most certainly she would have been murdered; safe because by a fluke of geography she was not there and survived.

As a poem, a poetic narrative of personal experience, Sklarew's *Lithuania* is not only powerful as poetry, but also as documentation of seemingly authentic experience. The writer is Jewish, and thus legitimately identifies herself with those murdered by the Nazis. But she also relies on witness testimony and historical archival material as well as her own attempt to recreate what the victims might have seen and felt, all of which she calls *memory*. Her poem, in its richness of seemingly remembered experience and also historical validity, violates no taboos of Holocaust discourse. Through the richness of what we might call collective memory, *Lithuania* to my mind is a brilliant and moving contemporary poem dramatizing the unending trauma of the Holocaust.

But there is other (American) poetry where the violation of the Holocaust is thought to be profound. a prominent example would be *Daddy* by Sylvia Plath, from *Ariel* (published posthumously in 1966). The narrator of this poem is a young woman who both adores and hates her father, who wants to both murder him and also retrieve him after his death. It is based on Plath's personal history as a child whose father dies, leaving her with deep feelings of abandonment. Rage, helplessness and a profound sense of victimization lead the narrator to identify herself metaphorically with Jewish suffering in the Holocaust. The German language is „an engine/Chuffing me off like a Jew,/A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen./I began to talk like a Jew./I think I may well be a Jew". This metaphoric identification with Jewish suffering has revolted and enraged many readers[4]. After all, Plath was (merely) a middle-class WASP with an elite education, living in a country virtually untouched by war; she had lost her father to disease, nothing more. For her critics, Plath has no moral right to the analogy with Jewish suffering; it cannot belong to her (as it does to Sklarew). It is a privilege she has not earned. Her suffering may be genuine, but the analogy is specious, and the poem, therefore, is immoral (in the eyes of these readers). If you Google „Plath and Jews" you will find hundreds of entries attacking her. It is true that the poem with its violent juxtaposition of personal bereavement and the real, undeniable, horrible suffering of European Jews provokes unease and anxiety. But Plath's explicit and dramatic identification with Jewish suffering carries with it the moral message: the Nazi genocide was not only a collective tragedy but a very personal one. (A tragedy made more complex, in Plath's case, by the fact that her father was Austrian, and his language indeed was German.) The poem's power and poignancy will ensure its survival in the canon of American literature.

Other American poems making the same claim Plath made in *Daddy* — I am a victim of difficult personal circumstance, therefore I am like a Jew at Auschwitz — have not fared as well. For example, the poem *That Year* by Sharon Olds, „a woman many regard as America's greatest living poet" (Macdonald 2008), has been virtually destroyed by Holocaust linguistic taboos. The poem begins with a list of atrocities: the narrator's father is brutally violent and a classmate of hers is raped and murdered. Then the narrator states

4 For an excellent account, see *Sylvia Plath Reconsidered* by John Romano, „Commentary" (April 1974).

that she „started to bleed" — that is, she began to menstruate — and suddenly she links adolescent menstruation, through the image of blood, to the horrors of Auschwitz. The narrator notes „the smoke, the dogs the wires the/rope the hunger", and then startlingly makes the claim that because she had undergone terrors herself, she therefore must (metaphorically) be a Jew. „There was a word for us", she claims, „I was: a Jew". Plath says, „I think i may well be a Jew", but Olds emphasizes that metaphoric identification. „I was: a Jew". But then Olds goes even farther. At the end of the poem she meditates on Holocaust language and says, „there was another word that was not/for the six million, but was a word for me/…I was:/a survivor".

As soon as Olds' narrative makes the claim that a young American girl who studies the Holocaust in school and whose father is brutal is a „survivor", many readers of the poem will become agitated. The personal trauma in the poem is amplified by the word „survivor" beyond any detail — or historical circumstance — actually provided in the poem itself. Wiesel has said repeatedly that the word „survivor" can be used only for Holocaust experience and nothing else. The word „survivor" is sacred, and therefore off-limits, taboo, for any discourse except genuine Holocaust discourse. There was such an outcry against using that seemingly holy word „survivor", that Olds quickly changed the ending of the poem[5]. In other words, the poet herself censored her own poem. The line no longer read „I was:/a survivor" but was changed to read „I was:/like a survivor". The sound is different, the rhythm is different, and the meaning is completely changed. Metaphor becomes simile, and where before there was identity, now there is difference… and distance. The poem (awkward to begin with) in its revised form is much weaker, and now barely works at all. In effect, the poet ruined her own poem because she was told — and she apparently believed — that a certain vocabulary was forbidden, and not hers to use.

Other discourse that (in this view) could be considered sacred and therefore should be used only in a context of genuine Holocaust suffering includes the following vocabulary: *witness*, to *bear witness*, *testimony*, and even the words *perpetrator* and *bystander*. And of course the word *Holocaust* itself. According to commonly-held Holocaust taboos, this vocabulary must be set apart and used only for genuine Holocaust criminality and Holocaust suffering. But of course you cannot wall off words. You cannot forbid people from vocabulary itself, from using language for their own aesthetic and descriptive purposes, whatever they are. And, in fact, despite the fence-builders, this language is indeed part of common speech. In ordinary ways we speak of „cancer survivors" and „incest survivors"; one can speak of a *diaspora* without even thinking of Jews who do not live in Israel, and one can give *testimony* in any criminal trial, or indeed none.

This is how it should be, in my opinion. The Holocaust is too central, too critical, too capacious a trauma, to be walled off and linguistically taboo and forbidden, even if that were possible. The politics of discourse — even Holocaust discourse — should be a politics of inclusion, not a politics of exclusion. Notwithstanding the fact that it was

5 From personal conversation with Olds. The original ending can be found in Olds' first collection, *Satan Says* (1980), and a revised ending in other venues. Olds, unlike other poets, often provides variant versions of the same poem for different editions. See Dwight Garner's *Online Interview with Sharon Olds*, for Salon.com, (1997).

the Jews who were the (almost) exclusive target of Nazi genocide (abetted by various local non-Nazi collaboration), yet it was part of a collective 20th century trauma. There is no immunity from it, even today. *Bloodlands*, by Timothy Snyder (2010), the recent and brilliant historical account of the interplay of Nazi and Stalinist genocide makes the compelling case for bringing the Holocaust out of metahistory and into comprehensible, albeit murderous, human history[6].

For a different kind of poetic, and one which i would argue transcends the usual taboos against making Holocaust discourse more inclusive, i would offer the very original work of the American-Polish-Jewish-Yiddish-lesbian poet Irena Klepfisz[7]. She was born in Warsaw in 1941, surviving the war as a toddler hidden with a Christian family. Her father, Michal Klepfisz, was one of the heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of April 1943 who died defending a position in the sewers under Warsaw; he thrust his body in front of a Nazi machine gun, dying so that his comrades could escape. After the war, Michal Klepfisz was honoured posthumously by the Polish government for his work in the Resistance. So Klepfisz has urgent personal reasons to take on the Holocaust as her subject.

Klepfisz does not write a discourse of memory, either individual or collective. Instead she writes a discourse of immediacy, of the present moment, of Holocaust experience not happening in memory but as if *right now*, in the dramatic present. This commitment to immediacy informs both her technical experimentation and her subject matter. More to the point, she dares to confront subjects other writers avoid. It is not the fear of Auschwitz that she writes about, but what is happening, in the minutiae of human behaviour, inside the camp, even inside the crematorium, moment by moment. Her subject matter — the glaring, terrifying immediacy of Holocaust experience happening right now, especially to women — is so idiosyncratic that there is really nothing like it in contemporary writing.

Even as Klepfisz is one of the most daring of Holocaust poets in her subject matter, she writes in the quietest of voices and with the most modest sensibility. Even the title of her book is modest: *periods of stress*, all in lower case letters, as is almost all of her poetry. The title suggests trauma, possibly public but certainly private trauma, as well as the periods of a menstruating woman. But the typography makes it a tentative title, spoken by a voice that is female, troubled, and very quiet. With this modesty, this tentativeness, Klepfisz explores material almost completely outside of current Holocaust discourse: sexuality, the erotic, and in particular the erotic life of the tormented Holocaust woman, a woman at Auschwitz or Birkenau. Thinking about a woman's sexual experience in this context requires a bravura — and even brazenness — that few poets would be willing to adopt, nor would readers countenance it.

---

[6] The term double genocide is another example, with each side — victims of Stalin, victims of Hitler — seemingly unable to see the validity of suffering of the other. Critics of the term double genocide claim that to study both of these historical phenomena — the claim is that they will be „linked", equated — will inevitably diminish the sacrality, the uniqueness, of the Holocaust. My position, obviously, is that the term is accurate. There were two major genocidal movements in the 20th century, and no area of study regarding them should be prohibited.

[7] Klepfisz's poetry is unfortunately not widely known. The works I am citing here are from periods of stress, a small press collection published by Out & Out Books (New York, 1975).

A striking and completely idiosyncratic poem is „death camp", an appalling subject mentioned almost in a whisper. The poem is unique in that it is set in a crematorium; it imagines what it must have felt like to die in a gas chamber. We know that in the camps and gas chambers women of all ages were thrown together, but Klepfisz dramatizes that fact with the language and imagery of marriage. The young woman narrator in the last moments of her life recognizes the woman dying next to her, an old woman, the wife of a rabbi. Even as she dies, she remembers the older woman's advice: „I could still hear… her advice", she says, „a woman/with a husband… a scholar…" and the voice trails off. In other words, the young woman has been given the traditional Jewish advice — get married, marry a yeshiva boy, marry a scholar. But the narrator hasn't done that, and now here she is, dying in a gas chamber with the older woman.

Stunningly, the poem seemingly recreates as first-person narration what is completely incomprehensible: the bodies thrown together and burned in anguish. But as they are burning, the narrator imagines a sisterhood. „Rebbitzin… rebbitzin/I am here with you…" she screams as they both die. And as they die, the bodies are flung together in a kind of grotesque sexual union: „they flung… her on top… of m … and I could smell/ her hair burning… against my stomach…" This grotesque sexual union — which is almost too horrifying to imagine — is a union of two women, and it is only after they are burned together that they become separate and distinct again, as smoke. It is a horrifying poem, and it works brilliantly. It violates every Holocaust taboo: It is set where no one survives, it is about a grotesque and terrible death, but in its subtext it is also a lesbian love poem, a poem of a woman's union with another woman, under unspeakable conditions.

I have only touched on Klepfisz's Holocaust poetics. But in her seemingly low-keyed way, Klepfisz dramatically expands Holocaust discourse: Her language runs in fits and starts, it slows down and speeds up to a rush, it seems sometimes very casual and at other times it seems to burst under pressure. Her ellipses, the breaks in her lines, also speak to the idea that even in a wild outburst of language, the silences and pauses can also reveal volumes. Her subject matter itself also expands conventional discourse: forbidden, discomforting, idiosyncratic, it is at the same time a valid recreation of the horrors of Jewish suffering under the Nazis. Its particularity as well as its dramatic illusion of immediacy makes the poetry a valuable part of the Holocaust canon, no matter the author's pedigree or personal history. As inevitably the Holocaust recedes from individual memory, it will be these efforts — new historical interpretations, the broadening of consciousness as powerful writers claim Holocaust material as their own, in their different ways — that will keep the tragedy relevant not only as history but as our collective memory.

Bibliography:

Dwight Garner (1997), Interview with Sharon Olds, for Salon.com.

Macdonald Marianne (2008), Interview with Sharon Olds, in „The Guardian", 25 July

Olds Sharon (1980) *Satan Says*, University of Pittsburgh Press.

Schiff Hilda (1995), *Holocaust Poetry*, St. Martin's Press, New York.

Sklarew Myra (1997), *Lithuania*: *New and Selected Poems*, Azul Editions, Virginia.

Snyder Timothy (2010), *Bloodlands*, Random House, New York and London.

Romano John (1974) , *Sylvia Plath Reconsidered*, in „Commentary", April.