

Alan Rosen, ed. *Literature of the Holocaust*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. xii, 324 p. ISBN 9781107008656. £55 / US \$85 (hardback).

Books such as *Literature of the Holocaust* can do two presumably very different things. They can either attempt to become encyclopedias to all that has been hitherto written about the Holocaust (which might be implied by a somewhat audacious, presumably-all-encompassing title) or reflect a lively debate without closure, presenting various, sometimes contradictory views on the subject. In a way, *Literature of the Holocaust* does both.

The book obviously fails – and it must fail – to present the “literature of the Holocaust” as a whole. This failure (a failure inevitably shared by analogous attempts, as argued by Alan Rosen in the chapter “Anthologizing the Holocaust”) is, however, subtly inscribed in the very structure of the book. Its voices, varying in style, approach, aim, and methodology, accurately reflect Holocaust writing, which is bound to be fragmental, broken, and inherently incomplete. It acts as a guide to this particular kind of writing (the book includes a rich bibliography for further reading), but is most of all a collection of various national approaches to the subject. Robert C. Gordon offers the Italian perspective, Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska the Polish outlook, and Jeffrey Mehlman the French stance. Alessandro Porticelli proposes thematic/ genetic/ methodological approaches to oral narratives, and Eric J. Sundquist addresses the Holocaust and fictional/historical writing.

The misleadingly promising title of the book elides the apparent incompleteness or even incoherence of its internal taxonomies. We find, for example, two different views on Elie Wiesel’s writing – one representing him as Hungarian, another as an author of French literature. This doubling mirrors the main topoi of Holocaust discourse: chaos, discordance, and fragmentation. Although the reader is encouraged to experience the book following the impeccable logic of its three parts (“Wartime Victim Writing,” “Postwar Responses,” and “Other Approaches”), the assumed coherence soon falls apart. Even within the second, presumably most homogenised middle part, focused on postwar literary writing, the individual approaches to various national “Postwar Responses” differ in structure or methodology. Adamczyk-Garbowska, for example, divides the evolution of Polish Holocaust writing into politically-oriented periods, while Gordon structures his tale of the Italian literature of the Shoah around most influential writers shaping the memory of the Holocaust in a given period. This “inconsistency” reflects major geopolitical, historical, and cultural differences between these national/language groups: while Polish literary life has been

subjugated to a strict political agenda for many a postwar decade, the Italian artistic discourse has had a long and persisting tradition of being founded by artistic Demiurges (in this case: Levi, Bassani, Millu, and others). Each of the contributions, moreover, analyses issues only partially common to Holocaust writing as a whole: for example, guilt within German Holocaust discourse (described here by Stuart Taberner), different from guilt in Hebrew literary writing (marked by a specific form of contempt for the Jewish victims, as examined by Sheila E. Jelen in her contribution) or – to go back to the previous examples – a very blurred division between (Jewish) victims and (non-Jewish) bystanders or (German) oppressors within Polish literature. At this point, one exceptional chapter among other brilliant contributions merits (all too brief) mentioning: “French Literature and the Holocaust” by Jeffrey Mehlman. Rather than cataloguing major trends, works, authors, etc., within the French Holocaust discourse (which the text, somewhat on the margin, does as well), the author expresses and re-presents, so to say, the complexity of the French (literary) experience of the Holocaust, not limited to the stereotypical binary code “Vichy vs. La Resistance,” but engaging deep layers of French literary tradition – the tradition which armed it with rich means to express the trauma and, at the same time, burdened it with the very richness (e.g. the “de Sade complex” or the case of Maurice Blanchot’s philosophically-based collaboration, or the crooked way in which Elie Wiesel’s *Night* entered French literature, being almost unnoticeably Christianised along the way...).

In each of its three parts, the book keeps its promise: to chronicle “not the history of the Holocaust, but rather the wartime and postwar response to the victims’ plight” while focusing “on the individual,” to quote from Alan Rosen’s “Introduction” (2). The “individual,” however, goes beyond the victim’s voice and the writers’ responses to it. It applies to the contributors themselves; each re-presents the individual approach to the trauma proposed by a genre (by means of oral history, song, or anthology) or a nation. In fact some minor slips – such as the ambiguous expression “The Fictional Baluty Suburb” (135), for Baluty is and was a REAL suburb of Lodz – might result from the fact that the book is indeed a collection of individual responses to the responses to the Holocaust. Indeed, the “Baluty” example comes from the chapter entitled “The Holocaust in English-Language Literatures,” which, by definition, encompass works rarely written by victims themselves; they were thus founded mostly on third-person documentary or fictional writing. The intimate experience of reading English-language literature of the Holocaust is by no means diminished by this minute mistake; if



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anything, it represents the Western lack of detailed knowledge of the East.

Bearing in mind the internal diversity of the book, one might only regret that it has not been titled *Literatures of the Holocaust*. But, then, wouldn't the audacity, the inherent audacity and the immanent failure of anyone who tries to encompass the WHOLE of Shoah and its writing, be even greater?

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