Traumatic Verses: On Poetry in German from the Concentration Camps, 1933–1945 (review)

Frederick A. Lubich

Monatshefte, Volume 100, Number 4, Winter 2008, pp. 629-631 (Review)

Published by University of Wisconsin Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/mon.0.0065

Traumatic Verses: On Poetry in German from the Concentration Camps, 1933–1945.

By Andrés Nader. Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2007. x + 258 pages. $75.00.

Since the end of World War II several anthologies of poetry written in different languages by concentration-camp inmates have been published in various countries. In divided Germany both the FRG and the GDR published poetry collections, with the latter especially emphasizing the heroic struggle of (communist) inmates against the fascist (capitalist) oppressor. After 1989, a new wave of German anthologies appeared, this time shifting the focus from hero to victim commemoration, which thereby established the "genre of concentration camp poetry" (31).

What has delayed if not derailed the critical analysis and aesthetic appreciation of these poems are essentially two observations. The first one is Adorno's "after Auschwitz" verdict, whose decades-long controversy Susan Gubar summed up as follows: "The 1949 judgment of T. Adorno was taken to be as axiomatic as the biblical comment against graven images: To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (229). Although numerous renowned writers and prominent literary scholars including Susan Gubar have agreed that over the years Adorno's verdict has been "over-referenced" (229), Nadar continues to invoke his authority, quoting Adornian pronouncements such as: "The so-called artistic rendering of the naked physical pain of those that were beaten down with rifle butts contains, however distantly, the possibility that pleasure can be squeezed from it" (68). Questioning such artistic renditions out of fear that some readers or viewers might derive sadistic enjoyment from them fixates on the deviant fringe of humanity and is an insult to the great majority of decent human beings whose natural response to suffering would be empathy and compassion. If Adorno were right, then the two-thousand-year history of depicting the crucifixion of Christ would have squeezed quite an excess of perverse pleasure out of Christ's agony on the cross. But when it comes to representing the Shoah, scholars continue to succumb to a peculiar *Autoritätshörigkeit* vis-à-vis Adorno's Critical Theory. Referring to his *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft,* Nader writes: "Adorno has written for instance against a deceptive literature that 'shows us humanity blossoming in so-called extreme situations, and in fact precisely there, and at times this becomes a dreary metaphysics that affirms the horror'" (93). From the safe distance of his "Exile in Paradise," as Anthony Heilbut called the sunny refuge of Hitler's refugees, it certainly was easy to demand the aesthetically correct poetry from concentration-camp inmates.

Related to Adorno's aesthetic proscriptions is an observation by Ruth Klüger, a well-known Auschwitz survivor and author of concentration-camp poetry herself: "No great poetry was composed in the concentration camps" (51), she concluded and to underscore her point she debunks her own poems from that time as "aalglatte Kinderverse" influenced by "Klassik, Romantik, Goldschnittlyrik" (67). Against the backdrop of such critical disapproval, Nader's study aims to do justice to poetic texts written by concentration-camp inmates of different religious beliefs and political persuasions by illuminating them from a variety of interpretive perspectives which include psychoanalytically informed close readings, the traditions and theories of mourning and melancholia, and especially the various studies on trauma and post-traumatic stress disorders.

With this complex approach Nader attempts to open up "multiple ways in which these poems speak to us now" (32). He takes Ruth Klüger's concentration-camp memoirs *weiter leben. Eine Jugend* (1994) and her somewhat different English version *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* (2001) as illustrative model through which he highlights its two best-known poems "Auschwitz" and "Der Kamin." In his subsequent chapters Nader expands his exploration of "traumatic verses" through exemplary poems which describe central themes of the camp experience. These include several poems on hunger by various authors; "Die Häftlingsnummer" by the communist Hasso Grabner (1911–1976); "Gelungene Flucht" by the imprisoned resistance fighter Heinz Hentschke (1904–1970); "Unterwegs," "Fünfundzwanzig," and "Friedhof Obodowska" by the Jewish author Afred Kittner (1906–1991); "Gestreiftes Kleid," "Kette der Tage," and "Erinnerung" by Edgar Kupfer-Koberwitz (1906–1991), who was imprisoned for his critical remarks about the Nazi regime; "Der Häftling" by Fritz Löhner-Beda (1883–1942), the Jewish lyricist of Lehar's operas ("Dein ist mein ganzes Herz") who perished in Auschwitz; "Der Steinbruch" and several other poems by the German-Jewish communist Karl Schnog (1897–1964); "Theresienstädter Kinderreim" by the Czech-Jewish poet Ilse Weber (1903–1944) who perished in Auschwitz; "Die Lieder des Grauens" by Georg von Boris (no dates); and last but not least "Im Lager" by the German-Jewish poet Gertrud Kolmar (1894–1943?) who wrote this poem already in 1933, prophetically anticipating her own fate in the Holocaust.

Writing poetry in the camps arose from a variety of needs, ranging from serving as prayer and therapy to a means to keep one's sanity and to establish an imaginary community. The latter is especially characteristic of inmates with strong religious beliefs and ideological convictions who experienced writing as a form of cleansing ("erst wenn ich schreibe was geschah, bin ich vom Schmutz gereinigt"; Schnog, 147) in anticipation of a coming liberation or redemption, beckoning either from the socialist utopia of "Moscow, or the celestial or terrestrial Jerusalem" (45). In addition to writing poetry, remembering and reciting lines from the classical heritage of one's own national culture, such as Dante in the case of Primo Levi or Schiller and Goethe in the case of Ruth Klüger, became a form of intellectual survival and magical self-deception: "Jedes Gedicht wird zum Zauberspruch" (43). However, the great majority of the concentration-camp poems are marked by horror, despair, and that "negative transcendental" (34 et passim) which had become the hallmark of such representative Holocaust-surviving authors as Jean Améry. What many of the analyzed texts have also in common is an unwillingness to name the enemy. Critics like Ruth Wisse have interpreted this as "acts of aggression, annihilating the foe by denying him existence" (66), but Nader comes most likely much closer to the truth when he interprets such erasures as a form of "self-protection" (67).

As sensible as Nader's interpretations are, and as much as his psychoanalytical interrogations shed light on deeper layers of meanings and motivations, at times his textual illuminations could have been further enriched by a contextualization within larger literary and cultural conventions. At a close reading, several of his "traumatic verses" resonate within the aesthetic traditions of poetic masterworks whose literary legacy they continue and—as it were—bring to a logical dissolution and ultimate *reductio ad absurdum*. For example: lines like "es reitet der Tod durch die Reihen" in Georg von Boris's poem "Hunger," which concludes "Es ist zum Erbleichen, wir fressen an

Leichen" (114) reverberate not only with Bürger's ballad "Lenore" ("Hurra! Die Toten reiten schnell!") but also with Georg Weerth's protest song "Das Hungerlied" ("sonst werden wir sonntags packen und fressen, o König, dich!"), thus echoing once more Germany's literary history from *Sturm und Drang* to *Junges Deutschland*. However, now the dark strands of their religious and political subversiveness are twisted into a moribund gallows humor, in which cannibalistic desperation has its last barbaric laugh. Another example of this poetic perversion of literary traditions is Ilse Weber's "Theresienstädter Kinderreim" in which the German nursery rhyme "Rira, rirarutsch, wir fahren in der Kutsch" is spun into "wir fahren in der Leichenkutsch" (119) thus turning the original joy ride into a macabre outing into death. By the same token lines like "Die Tage fallen, wie Hämmer so schwer, und schmieden uns nützlich und platt" (97) from Edgar Kupfer-Koberwitz's poetic cycle "Kette der Tage" evoke the stark imagery of expressionist poetry as well as the demonic screen of Weimar's silent cinema. From Pinthus's *Menschheitsdämmerung*, Murnau's *Nosferatu*, and Lang's *Metropolis* to the killing factories of the concentration camps, modern man had become more and more haunted and hunted, exploited and ultimately destroyed on a scale unprecedented in human history. Within this larger literary and cinematographic context the "traumatic verses" reflect and represent the last stage in Spengler's *Untergang des Abendlandes* in which Nietzsche's sweeping nihilism had transmogrified into a raging annihilation of millions of lives. T.S. Eliot's epic *The Waste Land* had become a concentrationary universe surrounded by camp guards who left no time and space—*pace* Adorno, *vide* Klüger—for the artistic avantgarde among their starving and dying poets. They had barely enough ash-filled air for their last "*cri de coeur*" (10).

In his final chapter "Contemporaneous Poetry in the Third Reich" the author contextualizes his samples of "traumatic verses" with several examples of poetry written by authors of the Inner Emigration as well as the Nazi propaganda machinery, thereby providing illustrative stylistic and thematic comparisons within broader poetic conventions, "wedged uneasily between tradition and modernity" (Monica Shafi, 168). In his "Conclusion" Nader writes about the poetry of the concentration camps: "My hope is that these poems will continue to reverberate and to do cultural work." (180) As heart-wrenching testimony from the abyss, they are everyday snapshots of hell on earth whose traumatic universe will haunt us for many generations to come. If there is any redeeming value in the suffering of all those who perished in the Shoah, then it should be a much deeper, heartfelt appreciation for the gift of life and freedom. In this sense Nader's well-researched and lucidly reasoned work is a very valuable contribution not only to the scholarship of Holocaust Studies, but also to our collective labor of mourning and remembrance. The "traumatic verses" from the abyss might not be the most profound, cutting-edge poetry of the twentieth century, but they are written *de profundis* and with blood, thereby reaching much deeper, plumbing the depth of history's unfathomable (in-)humanity. As such they should be required reading for all of us.

Old Dominion University —*Frederick A. Lubich*