Symposium: Poetry after Auschwitz

Introduction to Poetry after Auschwitz

Bruce Kadden

The articles in the symposium “Poetry after Auschwitz” grew out of a forum held in the fall of 2010 at Pacific Lutheran University (PLU), a small liberal arts college in Tacoma, Washington. That semester, four classes touching on Judaism were offered concurrently (in three different departments: History, Religion, and English) and two of the professors, who had previously co-taught courses and were strong proponents of interdisciplinary approaches to education, suggested bringing the classes together for a forum that would build on material offered in each class, but focus on a common theme.

The theme, “Poetry after Auschwitz,” was chosen, in part, because one of the instructors, Nicolaas P. Barr Clingan (who taught the history of the Holocaust course) had significant expertise in the writings of the German-Jewish philosopher and literary critic Theodor W. Adorno. While Adorno’s comment that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” is well-known and widely quoted, the context, complexity, and implications of his words merit far greater attention than they often receive. The forum served to examine this statement and to demonstrate how the use of poetry and stories often add significantly to our understanding of the Holocaust and other subjects. Students from the classes were invited to participate in the forum by reading selected poems, as well as in the discussion afterwards. The forum was later repeated, with

BRUCE KADDEN (C81) is rabbi of Temple Beth El in Tacoma, Washington, and teaches the Judaism class at Pacific Lutheran University.
minor changes, as part of the annual Powell-Heller Holocaust Conference at PLU and as part of the Yom HaShoah observance at Temple Beth El in Tacoma. (The forum also played a significant role in discussion amongst the faculty of PLU, which led to the creation of a Holocaust and Genocide Studies minor.)

Barr Clingan’s article examines the historical genesis of Adorno’s so-called “dictum” against poetry: “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” By situating this claim within the context of Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s Critical Theory of Society, it shows how culture (Kultur) more generally was implicated in the Holocaust and draws out this claim’s troubling aesthetic and ethical implications. The essay also considers the controversy over Adorno’s statement and its relation to the poetry of Paul Celan, particularly Celan’s celebrated poem “Todesfuge” (Death Fugue). Rather than rendering a simple judgment against poetry, as often alleged, Adorno articulates the “antinomy” faced by art after Auschwitz, which has rendered art both impossible and necessary in giving voice to suffering.

Bruce Kadden (who teaches Judaism in the Religion Department) examines how a variety of post-Holocaust writers, most prominently Elie Wiesel, have struggled with the challenge of writing about the Holocaust. First examining—and then rejecting—silence as the appropriate response, the article explores how an event that “defied words, language, imagination, [and] knowledge” as Wiesel claims, continues to be explored through writing, both poetry and prose.

Lisa Marcus, who teaches a course on Jewish American Literature, writes about “The Holocaust without Smoke,” through the poem “Bashert” written by Irena Klepfisz. Klepfisz was born in the Warsaw Ghetto and escaped with her mother to the Polish countryside after her father was killed on the second day of the uprising. She emigrated to the United States, earned a Ph.D. in English, and has written poetry on a variety of subjects. Marcus examines how the poetic strategies of “Bashert” challenge those who try to make meaning of the Holocaust. The article also explores Klepfisz’s use of the phrase “Holocaust without smoke,” which she applied to African Americans living in poverty in the South Side of Chicago in 1964.

In “The Moral Responsibility of Survival?: Victims, Poetry, and Conflict after Auschwitz,” Beth Kraig (who teaches a history course on Palestine and Israel) draws upon the ideas of Holocaust
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scholar Rachel Baum to suggest that through closely engaging selected texts by Tuvia Ruebner, a Jewish Israeli poet whose closest family members were murdered by the Nazis, and Taha Muham-mad Ali, a Palestinian Israeli poet whose family was dispossessed from their village and moved to Nazareth in 1948, contemporary readers and listeners can draw important insights about the suffering experienced and harms done by both Israelis and Palestinians during decades of conflict. Baum argues that all people born in the wake of Auschwitz must struggle to avoid simplistic visions of good and evil, of perpetrators and victims. She calls for us to broaden our moral sympathies while resisting all forms of dehu-manization; Ali and Ruebner echo that call with their portraits of victimhood, retaliation, and heightened awareness of human frail-ties and fears.

Sometime after the symposium, Lisa Marcus and I had the opportunity to visit Auschwitz for the first time. I wrote two poems, and Marcus, who visited Auschwitz with her seventy-six-year-old father, created both prose and poetry to reflect on the experience. [Editor’s note: These poems are included in the poetry section of the Journal.]

Together, these articles help us better understand the important role that poetry and other writing might play not just in trying to make sense of the Holocaust, but in many other contexts as well. They invite us to reflect on the role that poetry, literature, and art should have in our own teaching and preaching as we reflect on life, death, and meaning in our world.