American Poets Writing About the Holocaust

The Holocaust, commonly deemed as perhaps the greatest mass trauma of human history, is a frequent subject explored in contemporary literature. There are a multitude of narratives available to the general public that serve as informational guides in learning about the Holocaust. However, creative work concerning the Holocaust also exists, and is often mixed in amongst the academic texts, making it occasionally difficult to discern what is objective truth and what is fictionalized. This issue is further complicated by a handful of American poets' writings about the Holocaust when they never experienced it. The trend of writing Holocaust poems, specifically prominent amongst American confessionalism writers, raises important questions of ownership and ethical boundaries. Primarily, to what extent is it ethical and just for people write about an event they did not directly experience? Ultimately, it is important for us to keep writing about the Holocaust to the extent that we need to keep this history alive, but we have to be incredibly cautious with our treatment of the subject in order to prioritize truth and honor survivors. When considering poetry in which the Holocaust is the subject, one must consider the ethical boundaries of writing about such horrific subject matter when the poet is so far removed from its horrors.

A recurring issue in all literature involving trauma is language's inability to convey the true extent of suffering. Thus, language is not sufficient when it comes to fully encapsulating the greatest horror of human history, the Holocaust. Gloria Young, in her article titled, "The Moral Function of Remembering: American Holocaust Poetry," refers to writing about the Holocaust as dealing with "a subject matter that is unspeakable; language itself is inadequate, stretched to the breaking point, shattered into syllables, or collapsed into stuttering" (Young, 62). Due to the nature of human communication and the extremity associated with the Holocaust, being unable

to use language to describe what happened means there is virtually no other way to help people understand what one witnessed. Furthermore, not only does the Holocaust often feel indescribable, but the Holocaust can also seem inconceivable. Al Strangeways, in his article titled, "'The Boot in the Face': The Problem of the Holocaust in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath," addresses the unreal nature of the Holocaust when he notes that it "assumed a mythic dimension because of its extremity and the difficulty of understanding it in human terms, due to the mechanical efficiency with which it was carried out, and the inconceivably large number of victims" (Strangeways, 383). Tragically, these mythic proportions have resulted in the formation of a subsect of people often coined as Holocaust deniers, or people who deem the Holocaust so inconceivable that they insist it never happened at all. It is not a far leap to assume that Holocaust deniers feed off the poetic liberties taken by poets who did not directly experience the Holocaust; these poets unknowingly give them embellished texts that deniers could hypothetically comb through to find discontinuities that serve as evidence for their argument. Thus, writing about the Holocaust becomes nearly impossible, as there are not words strong enough to carry the weight of what happened in the Holocaust and any use of less, with any poetic liberties taken, will serve as fuel for Holocaust deniers and pain for Holocaust survivors. Jay Ladin, in his article titled, "'After the End of the World': Poetry and the Holocaust," summarizes this dilemma well when he deems Holocaust poetry as "a high-stakes act that commands, by poetic standards, an unusual degree of attention" (Ladin). Quality Holocaust poetry cannot be written quickly or carelessly. Rather, Holocaust poetry requires more attention than any other subject matter due to the seemingly unspeakable nature of the subject.

When one does endeavor to write a poem about the Holocaust, one runs the great risk of perpetuating clichés and misrepresenting someone's lived reality. Ladin echoes this sentiment by

asking if poetry can "represent the Holocaust at all, or do [the poems] simply propagate morally and culturally vitiating clichés?" (Ladin). If the ladder is true, the poems that contain the clichés are distorting the audience's perception of what actually occurred, diluting the experience into a literary device that will move the poem forward. It would stand to reason that if someone did not directly experience the Holocaust, they more than likely aren't capable of writing about the events to a degree that does not soften the terrifying nature of a survivor or victim's experience. That being said, it is common for the Holocaust to be the basis of a poem coming from a poet that had no direct tie whatsoever to the event. Ethically, this is questionable. One must ask themselves to what extent a poet can take poetic liberties, such as embellishing details or imagining a scenario that is not based on historical evidence, before they cross the line between representation and misrepresentation. Joshua Jacobs dives into the ethics behind writing about the Holocaust in his article titled, "Mapping after the Holocaust: The 'Atlases' of Adrienne Rich and Gerhard Richter." Jacobs notes that given "the Holocaust's absolute alterity[,]" writing poetry on the subject "compels an ethically absolute responsibility to make faithful attempts at testimony" (Jacobs, 1). While Jacobs makes a valuable point, his statement raises further questions of what it means to make a "faithful" attempt and to what extent people who were not present can provide testimony about the Holocaust. This is a pervasive issue with American poets in particular, who, as a country, did not enter WWII until a few years after it started. Moreover, it is often said that the American public were supposedly generally unaware of what was occurring in the Holocaust. With no direct witness and lack of real-time experience, American poets often made up for this by projecting themselves into the trauma through their imagination. Cary Nelson, in his article titled, "Teaching and Editing at World's End: Collective Trauma and Individual Witness in American Holocaust Poetry," further illustrates this when he

notes that in order to write about the Holocaust, some American poets "took on the burden of creating post-traumatic memory in themselves" (Nelson, 222). This is unsettling for a number of reasons, but perhaps primarily because survivors of the Holocaust do not have the choice to accept or deny the trauma forced upon them. It is simply their lived reality.

American poets writing about a trauma they did not experience, therefore, can be extremely unsettling to not only the survivors but also to general readers who know this context. A prime example of this is Sylvia Plath, particularly her poem titled, "Daddy." Plath, notorious for the nature of her suicide and her poems leading up to it, often used Holocaust imagery throughout her poems, seemingly to emphasize the height of the suffering she was experiencing. It is important to acknowledge that, as Ladin notes, Plath was "an American non-Jew with no autobiographical connection to the Holocaust" (Ladin). This is especially important to note in the context of "Daddy," a poem in which she explores the relationship between herself and her father. While the poem ends with Plath mentally liberating herself from her father, it is crucial to recognize the literary devices and steps she takes to get to that point. Within "Daddy," she writes:

> I thought every German was you.
> And the language obscene
>
> An engine, 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. (Plath, 6.4-7.5)

Plath's decision to compare herself to a Jewish person in a concentration camp is a particularly bold move which almost always projects a considerable amount of shock onto the reader, especially knowing Plath's lack of connection to the Holocaust. While insinuating that her father

was like “every German” and comparing herself to a Jewish person very clearly communicates the power dynamics at play in the family, it feels incredibly distasteful to compare her personal struggles to the ostracization, persecution, and murder of six million people. It is also imperative to note that the group of Jewish people the Germans first victimized were Jewish Germans, thus abstractly removing Jewish Germans from their nationalities. Moreover, demeaning Jewish people to simply “Jews” is derogatory given the history of the word being used so commonly as an offensive slur. Given how this would have been something Plath was aware of, her use of the slur furthers her agenda of victimizing herself. Additionally, the use of the phrase “every German” also implies that every German was involved in the genocide of the Jewish people rather than members of the Nazi party. Needless to say, Plath’s use of the Holocaust in her poems affected the public’s perception of her and her work. Strangeways commented on the public’s reception of Plath’s use of Holocaust imagery when he notes that “Plath’s whole oeuvre is frequently and superficially viewed as somehow ‘tainted’ by the perceived egoism of her deployment of the Holocaust” in poems such as “Daddy” (Strangeways, 370). While Strangeways refers to Plath’s self-assurance as “perceived” egoism, to utilize the greatest horror in human history as a metaphor requires a degree of egomania readers do not often encounter. Yet, it is worthwhile to further explore Plath’s logic behind using Holocaust references and imagery. Strangeways, perhaps in defense of Plath and her evident egoism, identifies the motives behind Plath’s choices as “her very ‘real’ sense of connection [...] with the events, and her desire to combine the public and the personal in order to shock and cut through the distancing ‘doubletalk’ she saw in contemporary conformist, cold war America” (Strangeways, 375). While her real connection may be questionable given her identities, one can definitively say that Plath succeeded in igniting shock in the general public.

While Plath and many others used the Holocaust as a metaphorical device to serve as a comparison in brutality, other American poets experimented with form and structure to make Holocaust poems. Most remarkably, W.D. Snodgrass utilizes the dramatic monologue in his poem "Magda Goebbels (30 April 1945)." Anne Harding Woodworth, in her article titled, "Crafting Evil in W. D. Snodgrass's: The Fuehrer Bunker," describes Snodgrass's poem as "a nursery-rhyme poem in twelve stanzas" that is "an effective mismatch between poem and content" (Woodworth, 245). While the disconnect is alarmingly apparent and effective in creating discomfort, the reader may question if writing about systemic murder in the Holocaust as a nursery rhyme is appropriate, especially given Snodgrass's lack of personal connection with the Holocaust. Prior to even reading the poem, the reader is given an ample amount of information: the poem will be from the perspective of Magda Goebbels, a close associate of Adolf Hitler's, on the day of Hitler's suicide. Snodgrass's poem begins with an important, informative epigraph that reads: "*(After Dr. Haase gave them shots of morphine, Magda gave each child an ampule of potassium cyanide from a spoon.)"* (Snodgrass, 608). Given the epigraph, the reader is aware before they even start the poem that they are about to read about the murder of children. Snodgrass's choice to give away the "plot" of the poem at the very beginning is a strategic one, as it allows the reader to focus primarily on the language being used and the way the material is presented, rather than try to decipher what the poem is about. Throughout "Magda Goebbels (30 April 1945)," Snodgrass weaves a narrative that highlights the true horror of Magda's actions. In the second and third stanza of the poem, Snodgrass writes:

> This is the bed where you can rest
> In perfect silence, undistressed
> By noise or nightmares, as my breast
> Once held you soft but fast.
> This is the Doctor who has brought
> Your needle with your special shot

To quiet you; you won't get caught
Off guard or unprepared.
I am your nurse who'll comfort you;
I nursed you, fed you till you grew
Too big to feed; now you're all through
Fretting or feeling scared. (Snodgrass, 608)

Snodgrass's reveal to the reader that the children being poisoned are Magda's own, as indicated by her reference to breastfeeding them, is perhaps one of the most heartbreaking moments of the poem. Due to the fact that Magda killed her children on April 30th, 1945, this is a true historical event that is often overshadowed and forgotten in lieu of Hitler's suicide. Christian Ord, in his article titled, "A Most Unmotherly Act: Magda Goebbels, The First Lady of the Third Reich," further contextualizes the occurrence in noting that Magda was motivated by the ending of the Third Reich, not wanting her children to live "in a world without Hitler" (Oord). With this context, the reader may ask oneself what Snodgrass's motivations were in writing this poem. The primary concern that appears is that Snodgrass is humanizing members of the Nazi party; specifically, a woman who murdered her own six children. On one hand, humanizing members of the Nazi party serves as a reminder that the Nazis were real people capable of this evil. On the other hand, feeling any type of empathy or sympathy for a person who not only was a member of the party that carried out the greatest horror of human history, in addition to murdering six children in devotion to Hitler, is near, if not completely, unbearable. Snodgrass's positioning of this emotional dilemma feels cruel to the reader, however. It is as if Snodgrass is asking them to either sympathize with the group that was responsible for the slaughter of eleven million people and rationalize a mother killing her own children, or sit with the idea that a mother would kill her own children because she did not want to see a political reality that did not align with her own.

Writing about the Holocaust, especially as a non-spectator, has expectedly high stakes and dire consequences. It is not surprising to imagine that Holocaust survivors likely take great

offense to poets capitalizing off a trauma they suffered through. This becomes especially painful when considering poets who created work to appear as if they had directly experienced the suffering, generalizing the horrors of the world for consumption. Leon Wieseltier, in his article titled, "In a Universe of Ghosts," informs the reader of the way Holocaust poetry transformed the lives of survivors when he notes that "they became reluctant to talk freely about what happened, to open wounds before strangers. They were right. The degradations of the camps had made them into a new kind of human being. They were the mutants of modern history" (Wieseltier). By stereotyping survivors and not truly understanding their pain or experiences, American writers have greatly discouraged survivors in relaying the narratives that could correct this. This vicious cycle is further complicated when considering the argument that the only people who truly experienced the Holocaust were the ones who died in it. Berel Lang, in his article titled, "On Poetry and Holocaust in 'Holocaust Poetry,'" describes this argument well when he writes: "partly because of the limited knowledge that most victims had of the extent or detail of the Holocaust (even if they were in one of the death camps themselves), partly because of the limits to feeling or consciousness itself, it is not the Holocaust [...] that its victims experienced" (B. Lang, 324).While I am certain that some survivors would disagree with that sentiment, Lang's statement leads readers to question if anyone, then, could accurately write about the Holocaust if the only ones who have the power to are dead. Lang's statement, therefore, highlights the difficulties of representation and testimony in a post-Holocaust world.

If the only people who could truly represent the Holocaust died within it, the question of who has the right to deliver Holocaust narratives, whether their own or someone else's, arises within popular discourse. When looking specifically at American poets who did not directly experience the Holocaust, it seems, as if on the surface, that they would have no claim to any

narrative or testimony whatsoever. On one hand, it could be argued that it is the responsibility of everyone alive today to keep the Holocaust alive through conversations and writing, regardless of if they have a tie to the event or not. Jessica Lang, in her article titled, "*The History of Love*, the Contemporary Reader, and the Transmission of Holocaust Memory," asserts that "Holocaust survivor depends on members of succeeding generations both to remember the past and to live anew, to relate to history that has not been directly experienced by them and, also, to create their own individual histories" (J. Lang, 48). If we are to take this sentiment to be true, this means that American poets should keep writing about the Holocaust in order to not only honor survivors, but also to keep history from repeating itself by keeping the memory of the Holocaust alive. On the other hand, it is very permissible to argue that Americans have no stake in creating these narratives portraying a lived reality they never occupied. In fact, their creative writing about the Holocaust can be viewed as damaging not only to the experiences of survivors, but also to the facts of history. Nelson comments on this when he acknowledges the abundance of American Holocaust poetry, noting that "the underlying message seems to be that every American is equipped to write his or her own Holocaust poem, that Americans own any subject they wish, that a community entitled to Holocaust witness coincides with our national borders" (Nelson, 240). Here, Nelson indicates to the reader that America's adoption of Holocaust narratives is an unethical appropriation given their remove from the subject matter they are pretending has stemmed from their own personal experiences. Nelson's tone and diction further indicates that he disagrees with this underlying assumption, and seems to suggest that this assumption is actually a source of great entitlement.

A reader can infer that the exception to Nelson's condemnation of Americans writing about the Holocaust would be second and third generation survivors. While they did not directly

experience the Holocaust in the sense that they personally witnessed the concentration camps in operation, these people do have an intimate connection with the events that conspired. As more time passes between our current reality and the Holocaust, the less first-generation survivors there are of the Holocaust. That being said, when one aims to keep the Holocaust in memory and at the forefront of conversations, a credible source can easily be the descendants of those who suffered through the Holocaust. While it is not a direct testimony, it is the most accurate source of information being actively generated. Jessica Lang acknowledges the limitations of this when she writes, "[third generation Holocaust writers] mark a second transition, or another remove from the eyewitness: the first transition from eyewitness to a recounting by the witness now becomes, as Holocaust enters history, an indirect relation to the original eyewitness" (J. Lang, 46). Unfortunately, one cannot stop the passage of time and death is inevitable, so the public has to cherish the older, direct witness narratives and take the narratives relayed by the descendants of Holocaust survivors as the closest to truth they can get. It is imperative, at this juncture, to take a step back and remember what the objective of Holocaust poetry is and should be. One argument to be made is that "the work of Holocaust poetry is to interfere with the resolution of atrocity into history, to prevent the Holocaust from collapsing into chronologies and catalogues, to keep the past painfully present and unaccounted for by the stylized boredom of well-oiled sentiments, endlessly iterated horrifying details, and moral clichés" (Ladin). Given this statement, combined with Jacobs' earlier rhetoric concerning ethical responsibility, it seems that perhaps the true objective of Holocaust poetry is to keep the memory of it alive by making faithful attempts at testimony.

As the Holocaust recedes in time, the general public will interact with literature that concerns the subject matter at an increasingly diminishing rate. It is therefore terribly important

to remember the age-old sentiment that if one does not remember history, one is doomed to repeat it. Ladin makes a cautionary call to action by emphasizing the urgency of defining truth when he notes that “the historical and imaginative writings that have kept the Holocaust alive as a defining historical event have had an unintended side effect. The more the Holocaust is represented in language, the more conventionalized and clichéd [...] the language of Holocaust representation becomes” (Ladin). It is, therefore, the responsibility of the living to honor the dead in reading the most accurate testimonies of the Holocaust that are known, as well as not further perpetuating the clichéd representation.

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*Both of these texts were accessed as online versions rather than their original PDF's, hence the lack of page numbers or variance in such. I was unable to find a PDF copy of the actual publication for either of these articles.