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Michael Rothberg. *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation.* Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 2000. Pp. xi, 323. $19.95 pb.

On the cover of Michael Rothberg's *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* is a drawing by Art Spiegelman. The drawing, "Saying Goodbye to *Maus*," appears twice, once as a small black and white framed image; the second image serves as a partial, enlarged, and coloured background. The cover design points to what Rothberg identifies as the "question at the heart of this book" (1), a question which is really a double question: how do we comprehend the Holocaust, and what is the relationship between that comprehension and contemporary culture? In the drawing, Spiegelman represents his comic book protagonist, Artie, as a mouse. Standing behind Artie looms a smiling Disney Mickey Mouse; in front of Artie, held in his human hands, is a more realistically drawn mouse. What is puzzling in this drawing is not just the representational status and relationship between the three mice figures, but how we recognize any of them as mice. As Rothberg points out, the third mouse may well be a rat, and Artie, the survivor's son drawn as mouse, despite his stylized mouse facial features, wears human clothes and cradles the mouse/rat with human hands. While a naïve viewer, ignorant of the high value placed on *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* in recent postmodern discussions of Holocaust representation, might wonder at the absence of any Holocaust markers in the drawing, to Rothberg the absence is itself key to the problem of representation that *Traumatic Realism* explores:

> This image provides an allegory of the contradictory position of the post-Holocaust artist — an artist who produces formally experimental works about genocide for the smiling, two-dimensional face of the entertainment industry, but everywhere confronts the detritus of the real. (2)

It is not just the uncertainty regarding genre (Spiegelman's well-known objection when *The New York Times* placed *Maus* on its fiction list) that attracts Rothberg's interest.[1] Rothberg uses the drawing from *Maus* to argue persuasively for the need to reflect on the modes of representation in all approaches to the Holocaust, to insist that whatever advantages are gained by studying the Holocaust in isolation, such study can also provide insight into broader cultural questions, i.e., "a more general contemporary fascination with trauma, catastrophe, the fragility of memory, and the persistence of ethnic identity" (3). Wanting to

open a dialogue between Holocaust studies and cultural studies, believing that the Holocaust is best approached through interdisciplinarity, Rothberg asserts that many recent attempts at interdisciplinarity are actually multidisciplinary, approaches in which specialists in one field barely pay attention to what specialists in another have to say. Further categorizing such approaches as either realist or anti-realist, Rothberg portrays much in Holocaust studies as a matter of choosing sides: either the event is knowable, a matter of facts like any other historical event that can be represented by traditional mimetic means; or the event is unique, in some sense outside history and ultimately unknowable (the view of Elie Wiesel, as well as Claude Lanzmann with his insistence on the obscenity of understanding). The ease with which many confuse representation with the historical event, so that what is initially referred to as a unique event is soon transformed into proclamations regarding the appropriateness of only one form of representation for this event further indicates how questions of representation enter into all responses to the Holocaust. So Lanzmann, director of *Shoah*, dismisses Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, and then several years later, Spielberg disapproves of Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*.

Instead of choosing sides, Rothberg seeks "to preserve the tensions between these conflicting understandings of the significance of the Shoah" and argues that "it is precisely the simultaneity of mutually exclusive claims made on understanding that constitutes the importance of the Nazi genocide for considerations of the history, culture and politics of modern societies" (3). He theorizes that both the realist and anti-realist approach are based on "particular conception[s] of the relationship between the everyday and the extreme" (4), and characterizes as traumatic, "the peculiar combination of ordinary and extreme elements that seems to characterize the Nazi genocide" (6). Identifying three fundamental demands, "a demand for documentation, a demand for reflection on the formal limits of representation, and a demand for the risky public circulation of discourse on the events" (7), Rothberg links these demands to an understanding of realism, modernism, and postmodernism, and how these terms in turn can be understood as responses to the demands of history. Rothberg even suggests that the three literary categories also offer a way of understanding key Holocaust figures: the survivor as realist; the bystander as modernist; and the latecomer, whose self-consciousness about the memories she inherits makes her both a postmodernist and a member of what Marianne Hirsch calls the "postmemory" generation.

Rothberg returns to Spiegelman in the final two chapter analysis of Postmodernism; however, it is the memoirs by Ruth Klüger and Charlotte Delbo as representative of what Rothberg terms traumatic realism that are the centre, both structurally and philosophically, to his

text. These chapters are preceded by detailed readings of "Modernism 'After Auschwitz,'" the quotation in the title drawing attention to the significance of Theodor Adorno, whose pronouncement, "[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (14), Rothberg argues has been frequently misunderstood. But after detailed readings of Adorno and Maurice Blanchot, two well-known philosophical writers often cited in Holocaust studies, Rothberg assesses the limitations of their modernism, and offers traumatic realism as an attempt to develop new forms of discourse more appropriate to the particular representational problems posed by the Holocaust. What is intriguing about Rothberg's concept of traumatic realism as mediating between the realist and antirealist positions, of demonstrating how the ordinary (the mundane, the factual, that which can be recorded) and extraordinary (what cannot be said) is threefold: first, his reminder that traumatic narratives are historical, not simply accounts of individual psychological illnesses; secondly, his ability to reclaim a space for realism, one that is informed by his postmodern suspicion of any claims of direct access to "the real," and thirdly, the way that the texts that he most praises are female-authored. For if "traumatic realism . . . attempt[s] to produce the traumatic event as an object of knowledge and to program and thus transform its readers so that they are forced to acknowledge their relationship to posttraumatic culture" (103), if traumatic realists go further than Adorno and Blanchot who as modernists interrogate limits of representation but offer no new forms of representation, then it is worth considering not only how traumatic realism positions itself in relation to questions about mimesis raised by modernism and postmodernism, but how it does so through innovative memoirs authored by women. If Ruth Klüger's *weiter leben: Eine Jugend* (1994) and Charlotte Delbo's *Auschwitz and After* (1995) demonstrate the political usefulness of traumatic realism, "refus[ing] to accept the postmodern version of the bystander's lament whereby 'we didn't know' is transformed into 'we can't know'" (140), we might also consider why Klüger's text is not yet translated and why Delbo's memoir was translated only five years ago. The politics of gender may not be that useful in understanding what happened in the Holocaust, but such politics may be very useful in understanding which Holocaust representations have come to inform our understanding. Rothberg highly praises Klüger's insistence on the multiplicity of experiences in the camps (setting it beside the flawed because overly generalized theories of Lawrence Langer and Tzvetan Todorov). He similarly praises Delbo for her double refusal: refusing to write a redemptive ending and refusing to "give up on attempts to communicate the extreme" (155). Rothberg rightly refuses to generalize about the place of gender in Holocaust representation on the basis of only two examples. But when Rothberg makes Klüger and Delbo his cen-

tral texts, and begins his conclusion with an analysis of a short story by Grace Paley, he challenges traditional understandings of the Holocaust (where regardless of being on the uniqueness or universal side of the debate, most of the canonical texts are male-authored), and provides one more reason why anyone interested in the Holocaust, and in cultural studies, should pay attention to this book.[2]

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NOTES

[1] In a letter to *The New York Times Book Review* when *Maus* appeared on the fiction bestseller list, Spiegelman protested, "It's just that I shudder to think how David Duke — if he could read — would respond to seeing a carefully researched work based closely on my father's memories of life in Hitler's Europe and in the death camps classified as fiction" (LaCapra 145).

[1] Given the marginal status of children's literature, the place of Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl* in children's reading may only confirm the masculinity of the Holocaust canon.

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Brenda Maddox. *Yeats's Ghosts: the Secret Life of W. B. Yeats.* New York: HarperCollins, 1999. Pp. 474. US $32.00, Can $46.50.

In the "Introduction" to her new biography of Yeats, Brenda Maddox comments that Yeats invented himself so many times and so successfully that he is "difficult to capture between two covers" (xiii). This elusiveness, and, I might add, allusiveness, becomes especially apparent because Maddox focuses not only on his marriage to George in 1917 and the spirit communicators that the couple quickly encountered, but also, though not exclusively, on the many different relationships Yeats had with various women in the years preceding and following. We encounter, for example, the most detailed analysis so far of the haunting influence his mother had on his life both before and after she died. Maddox's treatment recalls the spectre of the mother tormenting Stephen in Joyce's *Ulysses.* The relationship with the sisters Yeats, Lily and Lolly, is also presented in more detail than appears in many prior biographical treatments of Yeats such as those of Ellmann, Jeffares, Hone or the recent excellent biography by R.F. Foster which, of course, in its defense, covers only the first half of Yeats's life. Though William M. Murphy's fine book *Family Secrets* does provide us with a parallel treatment of Lily and Lolly and their artistic enterprises, Maddox is better at telling the story of the poet and his mother. Also moving in and out between the covers with Yeats in *Yeats's Ghosts* are, among others, such women as Olivia Shakespear, in several incarnations, Mabel Dickinson, Margot Ruddock, Edith