

Book Reviews

Antonio Iturbe, *The Librarian of Auschwitz*, trans. Lilit Žekulin Thwaites (New York: Godwin Books/Henry Holt & Co., 2017); iii + 424 pp. Original Spanish, *La bibliotecaria de Auschwitz* (Madrid: Planeta, 2012); 538 pp.

Dita Kraus, *A Delayed Life* (London: Penguin/Random House, 2020); 474 pp.

Here are two books on the same person, two different approaches to history and two views of the horrors of the Holocaust. First came Antonio Iturbe's novel *The Librarian of Auschwitz* in Spanish in 2012, and then eight years later Dita (*née* Edita Adlerova) Kraus's memoirs, *A Delayed Life*. Even though they are not the same, at least, formally, in that a novel is a work of fiction, even when it is based on (or inspired by) a real person and a historical life; and a memoir is true to the personal recollections of the person who writes it, becoming thus an historical testimony to real events and taken as a document to be studied in the light of facts and other archival data. Yet the relationship between these two books is more complicated than that. Both are true in different ways about the Holocaust and both are creative responses to the memories of a real person who lived through the horror that was Auschwitz, as well as first Terezin and lastly Bergen-Belsen. At this stage in the history of the Holocaust and of Holocaust literature, they are both important by themselves and in relation to one another. Only mad people and evil politicians deny the reality of the Shoah: the basic facts are beyond doubt. What the Holocaust means may be argued about. How it was experienced is not only as various as there were individuals who died there, who survived, and who have tried to recall their responses at an ever receding time, so that new generations not only know what happened and what it felt like, but can remain connected with the people who survived and could speak and write about their experiences.

What are the facts that lie behind the people, places and events in these two books? According to Bernice Lerner:

The British Second Army had liberated Bergen-Belsen on April 15 [1945]. What they found in the then-largest concentration camp was indescribable. Still the Belsen trials first witness, Brig. H.L. Glyn Hughes, the military officer who had assumed responsibility for medical relief at Belsen, tried to give a picture. In Camp One, five compounds contained more than 41,000 emaciated inmates in

severely overcrowded, filthy huts. Seventy percent of them required immediate hospitalization. Of these, Hughes estimated 14,000 would die before they could receive treatment. Ten thousand unburied corpses lay in mounds on the ground, among the living in some huts, and floating in concrete ponds of water. Epidemics of typhus, tuberculosis and gastroenteritis raged. Camp Two contained another 15,000 starving prisoners.¹

Dita and her family, friends and fellow Jews were in the second camp. The book of memoirs has only passing mention of the horrors discovered in the death camp, though there are brief descriptions of the distasteful, stinking and disgusting experiences she went through. The novel offers supposedly objective descriptions of the indescribable horrors spoken of in Brig. Hughe's testimony. However, they are placed in Chapter 30 near the end of book, where also the façade of fiction falls apart and Iturbe speaks in his own voice about why and how he prepared himself to write Dita's life.

Thus there are several deep historical, problematic psychological issues and Jewish rhetorical difficulties to be encountered in a comparison between these two books, one inspired by, the other written out of the memory of the same person. It is not necessary for a scholar or a novelist to find something new and different to say about the Holocaust. The various ways memories evoked and the figurative scenes constructed can provide subtle emotional perspectives. These differences strengthen the notion of millions of individuals and not merely impersonate types of personalities. The variations also ensure that the significance of what is recollected, described, and embodied ensure that nothing like the Shoah ever happens again. And yet what is unique and unrepeatable does not necessarily touch on the essentials of human nature or species evolution and spiritual development of the Jewish people that was tested in the hellish cauldron of all the horrors which constituted the attempt at total genocide and cultural destruction. As Amelia B. Edwards puts it in her ghost story, 'The Phantom Coach' (1864): "The words that I was about to utter died upon my lips, and a strange horror—dreadful horror—came upon me."²

¹ Bernice Lerner, 'The Trial Before Nuremberg', *Jewish News Syndicate* (4 September, 2020), at <https://www.jns.org/opinion/the-trial-before-nuremberg/>, accessed 12/12/2020.

² Amelia B. Edwards, 'The Phantom Coach', in *Great Horror Stories*, compiled by Rosamond Morris (London: Octopus Publishing Group, 2002), p. 453. This collection has been republished many times since 1936 and under various titles.

Rather than specific images and detailed descriptions, the fictional voice in made-up stories such as this one repeat the word *horror* and its variations (*horrible, horrid, horrifying*) or synonyms (*terror, terrible, ghostly, ghastly, or hideous*). Where a grotesque manifestation of evil and malevolence appears, there is a culminating role for the key word, as in Jeffrey Parnol's short story 'Black Coffee' (1929):

And what he saw was an oval face framed in black hair a face full and unshrunk, yet of a hideous ashen-grey, a high, thin, aquiline nose with delicate proud-curving nostrils, and below, a mouth, blue-lips, yet in whose full, cruel lines lurked a ghastly mockery that carried with it a nameless horror.³

As for psychological investigations into the minds that created and those which responded to the Holocaust, already in his 1865 short story 'To Be Taken With A Grain Of Salt' Charles Dickens opens with this quasi-fictional warning:

I have always noticed a prevalent want of courage, even among persons of superior intelligence and culture, as to imparting their own psychological experiences when those have been of a strange sort. Almost all men are afraid that what they could relate in such wise would find no parallel or response in a listener's internal life, and might be suspected or laughed at.⁴

Putting aside what specific type of fictional narrator introduces this horror story and concentrating on what Dickens could have meant by "psychological experiences"—a few lines later he speaks of them as "remarkable mental impressions"—we find here one factor in the epistemological and rhetorical question of what is true (historically accurate words and images vividly presented) about fiction; or rather, what kind of truths (morally responsible, psychologically appropriate and juridically convincing) can storytellers generate in their fictions. On the surface, this *persona* merely claims, in accord with the title and the ensuing horror tale, that ordinary people hesitate to speak of their extraordinary moments when they encounter something that is normally considered unreal, untrue and probably only imaginary. But it is not just the commonplace motif of signalling that the appearance of ghosts, the inexplicable coincidences that shake up normal certainties and the power of words in a Gothic mystery to conjure up emotions that perhaps lie dormant in otherwise civilized and

³ Jeffrey Parnol, 'Black Coffee', in *Great Horror Stories*, p. 475.

⁴ Charles Dickens, 'To Be Taken With A Grain Of Salt', in *Great Horror Stories*, p. 432.

modern minds may for a moment within the structures of the tale seem to be true. There is also hint that the *frisson* of fear that the reader or listener feels—crawling under his or her skin, making the hair stand up at the back of the neck or causing a change in the rhythms of the heart—is real.⁵ All this is, of course, much too sentimental and superficial to relate directly to the problem of how a witness or imaginative artist attempts to put into words the unimaginable horror or “inexplicable terror” of the Holocaust. Somethings are beyond ordinary language, imagination and conception: “a hideous and undefinable terror.”⁶

Nevertheless what else is there for the survivor to say about what happened to her or the novelist to write to try to shape the inchoate swirl of unspeakable events and feelings that he has gleaned from previously published books, elicited in conversations or conjured up out of his own literary imagination? It is, after all, “a horror past all expression.”⁷ For various reasons in Europe during the nineteenth and early twentieth century popular culture produced a plethora of tales of mystery, terror and horror.⁸ In particular, the tales of the early twentieth-century American author H. P. Lovecraft stand out in giving literary expression to “things and places that are beyond representation,” that are, in the words of James Kneale, “haunted by the impossibility of mimesis.”⁹ For the Jewish people, the ultimate time of horror is the Holocaust and the place of unimaginable and inexpressible horror for Dita Kraus is Auschwitz. Because there has been a disconnect between the ordinary languages spoken by the millions of Jews who endured the extremes of privation, humiliation and degradation and the words put down paper by survivors and other witnesses, as well as in the scholarly discourse of professional historians, the texts that are created are usually a tissue of fragmented, broken utterances, desperate grasping at expression mostly lost in injured and painful memories, and sometimes delicately

⁵ Norman Simms, ‘The Creepy Images of Modern Life’, *Mentalities/Mentalités*, vol. 30, no. 1 (2018).

⁶ John Galt, ‘The Black Ferry’, in *Great Horror Stories*, p. 487. This story, first published in 1831, is sometimes found under the title ‘The Book of Life’.

⁷ William Wymark Jacobs, ‘The Three Sisters’ [1911], in *Great Horror Stories*, p. 548.

⁸ Reasons include a felt-need to recapture past experiences of intense passion, the artistic attempt to break apart the social and literary conventions of bourgeois realism, the scientific search for a way into the thick wall of censorship blocking access to childhood and infantile abuse and trauma, etc.

⁹ James Kneale, ‘From Beyond: H.P. Lovecraft and the Place of Horror’, *Cultural Geographies*, vol. 13 (2006), p. 106.

crafted fictional hints and allusions.¹⁰ Kneale argues that the places most apt for communicating between the experiences of horror and the breakdown of standards of credible mimesis are thresholds.¹¹

Dita's own autobiography lurches from time to time, from a point on the boundary of transition from childish terror and confusion to mature reflection and partial understanding, from a denial of emotional intensity to an acceptance that life in the various camps she was sent was traumatic. Each time she entered new places—refugee camps, transit stations, kibbutzim, Israeli towns and cities—she experienced discomfort, unhappiness and unresolved grief and sadness continue. Iturbe's novel, circumscribed in time and place, presents its characters, their thoughts and conversations finds their occurrence happening in liminal spaces, corners of small rooms, narrow, shaded areas between barracks, in crowded wooden bunks. While speech sometimes moves from person to person, there are profound differences by culture, age, gender, hierarchies of privilege and vulnerability to punishments and the imminence of death by disease or violence.¹² There are many things about Dita's memoirs that at first seem disconcerting, especially in the change in tone, not only in the slide from the innocence of childhood through the moodiness of adolescence, the sense of emotional confusion during the horrors of the Holocaust, the disappointments and frustrations of married life and motherhood, but also in the different degrees of despair, hope and reconciliation to her fate. But these imbalances and awkward shifts are understandable when we take into account that Dita spoke with Antonio Iturbe while he was writing his novel and she read through *La bibliotecaria de Auschwitz* after it was published and translated into English. In several important ways, not all necessarily conscious on her part, in her memoirs the real Dita Kraus responds, corrects and comments upon the Spanish novel.

¹⁰ Kneale, 'From Beyond', p. 112.

¹¹ Kneale, 'From Beyond', p. 113.

¹² Matt Lebovic, '75 Years Ago this Week, Typhus Fever Met its Match at Bergen-Belsen', *Times of Israel* (18 April, 2020) at, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/75-years-ago-this-week-typhus-fever-met-its-match-at-bergen-belsen/>, accessed 12/12/2020. This article expands on Brig Glyn Hughes on the conditions he found when opening the extermination camp in 1945 and adds the measures he took to save as many lives as possible: "Belsen was unique in its vile treatment of human beings. Nothing like it happened before in the history of mankind. The victims of this infamous behaviour have been reduced to a condition of subhuman existence."

The differences indicate the variant strategies of creating and shaping a fictional narrative and recalling one's memories and trying to understand what happened in one's life. In ensuring accuracy, even in a book composed by someone other than a survivor, in a fictional description of one individual's experience of the Shoah, the responsibility not to trivialize, exaggerate or misconstrue the place of that individual in the larger picture of what happened collectively to the six million victims is paramount. As time passes and the generation of survivors and their progeny begins to disappear, the public memory comes to depend on artists for emotional poignancy and vivid depictions. In other words, to ensure that what happened does not fall away into the past as just one more unpleasant event; but remains alive as both a cautionary tale and a memorial to those who perished in such obscene circumstances. Another kind of accuracy obtains, however, in regard to personal testimonies. The experience from within the mind of the survivor places before present and future readers, professional historians and the general public, the confused, emotive and hesitant recollections. The subsequent life experiences, the changing contexts of memory and the various purposes for speaking out and writing down such memorials need to be taken into account as part of the long history of the Holocaust.

Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman discuss the problems of historiography and aesthetics in regard to the Holocaust:

[Theodor] Adorno declared that, in the wake of the Holocaust, all culture fails before the reality of atrocious suffering, rendering obscene all pleasure-giving forms of representation. Yet he also admitted that suffering demands representation and that the aesthetic might be its only voice.¹³

In her book, Dita Kraus writes out her whole life, from her earliest memories of being weighed as an infant to her most recent recollections of life as an elderly woman in Israel. What happened during the Holocaust becomes one part of her long life and memories. So too are the years between liberation from the DP and transit camps she was sent to, her return to Prague, the attempt to live under the communist regime soon set up there, and then the difficult journey to the newly-founded State of Israel. In the Promised Land, she endured difficult times in immigration settlement camps and then tried

¹³ Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman, 'Concentrationary Memories: The Politics of Representation, 1945-85', *AHC, Cautionary Memories Project*, University of Westminster, London (23-25 March, 2009), at <https://www.westminster.ac.uk/events/concentrationary-memories-the-politics-of-representation-1945-85>, accessed 12/12/2020.

to fit into a kibbutz with her husband and son, and then moved out to a small town and after to a big city. Except for a few moments, it seems, she is never really comfortable or happy anywhere. Bad luck dogs her every step. The years as a victim of the Holocaust were just a part of a much longer series of more or less horrible ordeals to be endured, though clearly the losses and trauma incurred continue to colour how she experienced everything afterwards. Every move comes with its own kind of pains and the need to struggle through awkward, uncomfortable and humiliating circumstances; yet she perseveres—and lives to tell the tale. Awkwardly, perhaps more in the translation than in the original Spanish text, Dita learns that “sometimes you have to grab luck by the throat” (*The Librarian of Auschwitz*, p. 283).¹⁴

In later years I read articles by psychologists about the emotional damage the holocaust caused the survivors and began to understand what had happened to me. I sensed this blunting of my emotions for many years and I am not sure if I ever recovered completely (*A Delayed Life*, p. 246).

But almost all the fragments of memory, even those she regards as turning points, are not pure, unedited remarks caught within the moment. They are often introduced from a later perspective—Dita tells us how she feels about them in the now of her recollecting. Nor are all remembered moments the same. She claims most are like drops of water absorbed into the river of time, indistinguishable from each other. A rare few, however, have a special quality, though they are only a few seconds in duration: “They were like drops separated from the stream of life, permanently fixed outside time, unforgettable” (*A Delayed Life*, p. 82).

These strange “indelible” memories also form a pattern, too, but in retrospect not as they actually happened. It is as though everything occurred in its own time and yet did not constitute an instant of all-consuming experience, they seem like tokens or tantalizing signs of things to come; images that come into focus long after the event. When she says that being transported with her family to the Potemkin-type city of Terezen “was the most significant delay of my life” (p. 115), we do come to know at which

¹⁴ The classical saying is: ‘You have to grasp Opportunity by the forelock’. The chance to take advantage of circumstances comes only once in a lifetime because time is a swift flowing river and Opportunity (sometimes male, sometimes female) is bald on the back of the skull; so you have to recognize it quickly and grab hold before it races away. In a good novel or story, casual expressions are important and link the current text into a long heritage of ideas, situations and figurative language.

stage of her life she came to this realization. It was certainly a disruption, a turning point, and certainly a break from what she experienced before. The statement comes at the end of chapter ten and the close of the first section of her memoirs.

This was a pivotal moment. A step that changed her received notions of family and place.¹⁵

Afterwards, in the second part, come the horrors of ghetto, concentration camps and the struggle to survive, when things and people no longer have the same appearance, and she is no longer the innocent and naïve girl she was. Everything looks weird and crazy and she has trouble recognizing her father (p. 137). What she sees no human being, let alone a child, should witness (not just brutality, murder and degradation but an excremental vision of reality), so that what she says is a terrible understatement: “A very, very unpleasant memory—I wish I could erase” (p. 140). Rarely does she confide in the reader that all her subsequent life she is bothered by intrusive, painful dreams (p. 167).

A more poignant disclosure comes when she catches herself in shifting away from the matter at hand, without recognizing the way her Jewishness seizes on the apparently trivial or irrelevant detail as the rabbinical entry into the meaning of a portion of the sacred text.

As always, I find myself digressing, turning away from the sights I don't want to remember, or rather something in me, some defence mechanism, diverts my thoughts to other channels. Every time I start speaking of the Holocaust, I seem to be drifting to those post-war experiences (*A Delayed Life*, pp. 196-197).

The main metaphor here is time as a river she is flowing down, during which voyage she must fight her way against the current. But she also imagines herself in a struggle to avoid re-experiencing the traumatic shocks she endured and that mark out the contours of her life. The rabbinical midrashic commentators worked out a rhetoric in which precisely those points where the text of life seems to struggle against itself and to expose the wounds of such a contest in syntactic lapses, logical gaps or even orthographic anomalies are the portals through which their interpretive debates force them to enter. At this point, Dita speaks of the collective experience of the horrors that constitute the *Shoah*. Yet she cannot frame her remarks either in

¹⁵ Iain Sinclair, “‘Mobile Invisibility’: Golems, Dybbuks and Unanchored Presences’, in *Rodinsky's Room*, eds Rachel Lichtenstein and Iain Sinclair (London: Granta Books, 1999), p. 178.

midrashic terms or in the language of later psychologists who deal with the long-term effects of post-traumatic stress.

Although they are directly connected to our suffering, they are still peripheral, as if I could relate only to the edges but not to the wound itself. The more bearable experiences, the humorous incidents, scenes of friendship come to mind trying to eclipse those that I cannot bear to face (*A Delayed Life*, p. 197).

The wit that comes through in seemingly unimportant moments of calm, in jokes and in sentimental moments of togetherness seem digressions, disguises or denials of all the humiliations and pains; yet they are full of meaning as they embody the age-old Jewish history of surviving. They are what makes it possible to live with the worst of what occurred, so that later she can speak the truth, keep the reality from collapsing into maudlin clichés and unbelievable banalities, which, as we shall see, happens in Iturbe's novel: "But I feel I must come to grips with them too. They are also true, those darkest pictures that exist in the hidden crevasses of memory. I must plunge beyond the barrier and bring them into the light of conscious reality" (*A Delayed Life*, p. 197).

Speaking from a much later and more mature perspective, this passage is a riposte to Iturbe and all those who, consciously or not, try to exploit the Holocaust for their own aims. These highly sophisticated last sentences stand out from the rest of the memoirs as the purpose for writing out a single life experience without trying to ram it into pre-conceived structures, to allow the hesitations, the slides from moment to moment, from place to place, to let normal language fall apart before the unspeakable and unimaginable horrors. Fully half of the memoirs are those events following her liberation from the death camps. In a sense, the specific scenes of the Holocaust recede into the things that happen after she becomes an adult; only some of these later recollections are keyed towards her adolescence as a prisoner of the Nazis. In another sense, less stated than implied, everything that makes her who she is as a mother, kibbutznic and Israeli are part of her personality and are expressed in what she thinks and feels. On a few occasions, she is quite candid in saying that words are not her best medium of expression and whatever she has written is inadequate: "Human language doesn't contain terms to describe Auschwitz the magnitude of those horrible experiences would require a new vocabulary. The language I know has no words to describe what I feel" (*A Delayed Life*, pp. 227-228). She, of course, means natural languages, such as Czech, German, Yiddish, Hebrew and English, cannot conceptualize or embody what she has experienced. This is why the

novelized version of her life, with all its literary flourishes and historical embellishments, seems so thin compared to her own efforts at recollection and expression.

However, in regard to Dita Kraus's theme of the delayed life, the sense of the fullness of reality for herself comes late, she claims, only later while writing her own book and after interviewing with Antonio Iturbe¹⁶ and still later reading his fictional version of her time in Auschwitz and other Nazi camps; only then does she recognize that everything was always delayed. As the story of her life twists out of what seems like its normal and inevitable course (childhood, adolescence, school, play, work), it spins away from her conscious grasp of where it is going and what it means war, moves into cramped apartments, transport to concentration camps, liberation, hospitals, Displaced Persons camps); eventually, it starts to wind down and once more a recognizable pattern emerges (arrival in newly independent Israel, work in a kibbutz, married life in a small village, the birth of a son and two daughters, their illnesses, loss of a husband and children), she inserts chapters out of chronological order about her marriage to Otto, her work-mates and her friends.

Before the book of memoirs closes, she also writes about her talks in Israel, Europe and Japan about her experiences during the Holocaust in the various camps she stayed in. But the deferment of her life ends and a sort of closure is reached only in her 89th year, the date when she meets and reads Antonio Iturbe's novel and tries to put together, with editorial aid, the fragmented incidents in her life. Then she can reflect, evaluate and understand what happened—and who she is. Despite all the losses, sufferings and frustrations, she is contented with her lot as a Jewish grandmother, having reconciled herself to being both Czech and Israeli—a survivor recognized for her ability to tell her story and that of all those people who did not survive. Yet the incidents she records in her memoir do not flow coherently and progressively. They weave in and out of different moments

¹⁶ Donna Freitas, 'Q & A with Antonio Iturbe', *Publishers Weekly* (12 October, 2017), at <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-authors/article/75060-q-a-with-antonio-iturbe.html>, accessed 12/12/2020. Iturbe tells Freitas that he did not consider the age of readers when he was writing the book. "My surprise has been that, since the first edition in Spain, I began receiving messages of appreciation from, young readers—by the way, mostly girls—because they identified so strongly with story. For me, this response from young readers who've claimed the book as their own has been incredibly satisfying. I'm not afraid of the future because every day I see we have a wonderful younger generation."

of memory and reflection. As we shall see, what is a passing incident that barely takes a page (p. 144) to recount in her memoirs had become a central organizing metaphor as indicated in the title of Iturbe's novel, that is, the very brief period when Dita put together less than a dozen miscellaneous books and became the librarian of Auschwitz. In terms of truth content, it might as well have been another passing moment when she became the maker of doll's clothing while a slave worker in Hamburg or an apprentice cobbler on a kibbutz in Israel. The Spanish novelist can pick and choose characters and events, reshape and focus on imagined circumstances and dramatic conversations, feelings and interactions, even dreams and disembodied emotions.

There are many clunky transitions from the present moment of the narrator's reportage of scenes and conversations into flashback memories what went on before the protagonist arrived in Auschwitz from Terezin and sometimes further into her memories of her life in Prague. When new characters enter into the story, they are finally described and their backgrounds sketched out, the narrator is omniscient as to their own thoughts and feelings. All these interruptions and digressions tend to impede the flow of the narrative. Moreover, when people speak to each other and silently to themselves, they make formal speeches; they explain explicitly and at length what they feel they must say. Here the novelist's voice turns clearly into that of a history teacher who wants to ensure that readers know all that happened during the Holocaust and why, as though the audience were coming across it for the very first time, had never heard or read about it, and unfamiliar of all the standard and often clichéd tropes developed in the past three-quarters of a century.¹⁷ Though we cannot tell whether the problem lies with the original

¹⁷ Some reviews and notices state that the book is meant for young or adolescent readers aged thirteen and above; others do not. Many reviewers, bloggers and commentators speak of how much they "love" the novel. For them, the main thing is how it teaches the "magical power" of books (novels) to create imaginary worlds, sanctuaries from the awful realities, without stressing what Iturbe actually shows as Dita's way of learning to see beyond and through her own insignificance as a child caught up in horrid circumstances; how great novels (like *The Magic Mountain*) train the mind to understand how such horrors exist and can be confronted, even if only for short periods of time, before suffering and death close in on them. This sentimentality in the reviews compounds my own sense that Iturbe's book is not so much poorly constructed, awkwardly expressed and, despite certain passages of interesting

Spanish or the translated English, there are too many anachronisms in what purports to be idiomatic conversation; such jarring expressions ('kids' instead of children, for instance, 'lucked out' instead of was lucky) bring with them our own contemporary attitudes and feelings, especially in regard to the bodily functions, sexuality and pupil-teacher relations. These expressions seem out of tune with Middle European minds—even those of young children—brought up in the 1920s and 1930s.

When an elderly and usually dignified gentleman successfully attempts to divert the attention of a threatening SS officer and so keep the young Dita safe during an inspection, no one catches his ploy and they consider him a doddering old fool. Even the narrator who normally explains everything never comments on the cleverness of the trick and the risk Prof. Morgenstern takes in calling attention to himself. None of them seem able to see him playing the role of the *shlemiel*—fawning, asking stupid questions and acting out what the Nazis assume is a Jewish character—nor understanding how clever, sensitive, heroic and selfless he is. Not until the last hundred pages of the novel, however, after having read *The Good Soldier Schweik*, does Dita come to understand how playing the fool (what Socrates would call the *ieron*) can help get her through stressful situations and take control of matters where a young girl would not normally be listened to by other children or adults. The characters and situations in the books she reads—and which the narrator re-tells to the modern readers—help Dita begin to understand what is happening to her and how to negotiate her way through the many difficulties that remain to be encountered, even after liberation migrating to Israel and raising a family. The realization, too, that the identity of a Jew has many faces and many hiding places within itself comes slowly to, along with maturity and the ability to reflect on the special role she has to play as a survivor.

When he [Morgenstern] reaches Dita, without stopping or breaking step so as not to annoy those behind him, he suddenly becomes serious and gives her a wink. Then he continues on his way and goes back to performing his bowing routine, with that little crazy-old-man laugh of his. It was only a matter of seconds, but as she was looking at him Dita saw the professor's expression change, and his face was different as if, just for a moment, he'd raised his mask and allowed her to see his real self. It wasn't the faraway look of a crazy old man, but the

background information, untrustworthy, but misconstrued by readers safely reading it from their comfortable and unimaginative and shallow perspectives.

composed expression of a completely serene person (*The Librarian of Auschwitz*, p. 231).

As suggested above, Iturbe's novel seems to have many stylistic flaws and technical infelicities, yet on the whole it is a good introduction to the events that occurred in Auschwitz during the Holocaust. However, what kind of readership comes to the subject without at least some familiarity with the accumulated knowledge provided in popular films and newspapers? Perhaps very young people lack this basic modicum of shared awareness. Perhaps some non-Jews in Spanish-speaking countries, but surely not those literate readers who choose to purchase or borrow Iturbe's book. Perhaps, then, those poorly informed and naïve individuals in the USA and Great Britain who shockingly show up in the category of responders to surveys as not recognizing the name Auschwitz or mistaking basic historical facts. Even then I doubt it. Why? because much of the background text to Dita's story is made up of *précis* and *resumé* of books kept in her tiny library, titles she recalls having read or been read to at home, from children's stories through H. G. Wells' *History of the World* to Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* and Jaroslav Hašek's *The Good Soldier Švejk*. Much space is given over to retelling scenes from these last two novels in particular, with Dita imagining herself as taking part in the fictional action, and learning to understand the adult world through identification with the leading characters.¹⁸

There is also an ethical question that arises from the way Iturbe centres his novel on the real-life history and personality of Dita Kraus, who cooperated with the Spanish author through interviews and emails, insofar as fiction reshapes the autobiography and the historical events. Many secondary characters some who also share their names with actual victims and victimizers who interact with Dita, but whose inner lives, memories and social attitudes are created by the author as though Iturbe was made privy to their minds, even those who are based on people who were murdered by the

¹⁸ This is no simple process of mirroring the greater in the smaller character or having a naïve child believe she can feel profound adult passions. Some writers of children's fiction own they avoid research altogether, including speaking with survivors or survivors' children, but merely glean a few facts and then re-imagine the horrors of the Holocaust through the lens of traditional folk tales and literary fairy stories. As though, in this way, a dybbuk or golem served as a symbolic superhero to help the young audience (or sentimental adult reviewers) glide through the unspeakable and inconceivable last moments in a gas chamber, at best occluded in a film such as Laszlo Nenes's *Son of Saul* set in Auschwitz-Birkenau in October 1944.

Nazis. Nearly halfway through *The Librarian of Auschwitz*, there is a series of encounters—creepy, horrible, grotesque—with Dr. Joseph Mengele, the “angel of death.” But gradually each of these two historically-inspired personages is shown to think about the other in ways which defy probability. Two sensibilities flit past each other, one in search of victims the other seeking to hide from torture. Not just Jew and Nazi, female and male adolescent and adult, subordinate and weak, but also between the vague, frightening dangers inherent in the situation and terrifying recognitions, attention-grabbing furtive glances and the forbidden aura of sexual attraction and profoundly disturbing dread.

And at that very moment, she senses a presence behind her. When she turns around, the tall black figure of Dr. Mengele is standing two paces away from her. He’s not whistling; he’s not making any sound or movement. He’s just looking at her. Maybe he followed her here (*The Librarian of Auschwitz*, p. 341).

The menacing vagueness and the terrible ambiguity of her thoughts point towards the nineteenth-century horror stories we discussed earlier, and to the repressed sexuality they secretly or unconsciously signal. Though Iturbe spends over a page rationalizing away Dita’s fears, reducing them to adolescent egotism, nevertheless what the text reveals makes the power of the deep-seated horror in the scene vivid, even palpable: “Dita watches his tall, black, horrible figure move away. And then it comes to her: *He doesn’t remember me at all. He has no idea who I am. He was never pursuing me...*” (*The Librarian of Auschwitz*, p. 342).¹⁹

Not only does it seem that someone is playing with the readers’ sensibilities and sensitivities, and especially a reader familiar with the generic markings of horror stories, but the deflation of expectations cuts away the historical probabilities of the imaginary scene. The dramatic tension built up to describe their relationship, the fifteen-year-old Jewish girl and the middle-aged Nazi sadist, goes beyond the limits of moral principles recognized as appropriate to books about the Holocaust, whether formal scholarly studies or historical novels. Too much is made explicit and overly articulated, so that what is presented becomes bathetic. Instead of implication, innuendo, obliquity and subtle allusion, a mode of providing the reader with hints, suggestions to be meditated on and incomplete spoken sentences, silent thoughts and implied reactions in the facial expressions and

¹⁹ Italics in the original as well as the marks of suspension.

physical gestures of those crowds of prisoners and guards who fill up the space of Auschwitz.

The implications of such gothic horror crawling through the mists of Auschwitz—mud-soaked trysting places, ever-present spies in watch towers, lurking prisoners eager to denounce and profit by the faults of others—seem to come into focus on a secret love affair between a Jewish prisoner and a young SS guard. All these “transgressive horrors”²⁰ seems to happen in darkness and gloom, the fear of being caught and the thrill of a forbidden sexual attraction, with each of these strange young people having to deny who they are to carry on such a relationship and not fully able to understand or trust the other. As soon as they decide to make their escape, they do not find the exhilaration of freedom just across the various boundaries they have to cross; but they enter in effect a world which is already their graveyard.²¹ The death camp is piled into a mass of twisted bodies dying or dead, condemned people kept in cellars in cells too narrow to stand up in, would-be escapers hidden under piles of lumber ready to crash down upon them, everywhere mangled and mashed corpses with every kind of bodily fluid and excrement.

Lovecraft’s thingless names and nameless things mark the limits of representation and imagination, including geographical imagination. Lovecraft’s textual thresholds do not simply express his racist fears, they produce the narratives that dramatize his fears of contact and change.²²

There is virtually no scene or recollection of this sort in Dita’s memoirs. As in a classical tragedy, scenes of violence and horror usually happen off-stage, while inner suffering and intimate states of agony are alluded to, sometimes years later in retrospect. But these grotesque and horrible actions do appear in *The Librarian of Auschwitz*, along with developed episodes that occur out of Dita’s sight and awareness. In the final pages, however, the horrors do mount up, both the words and the imagery. The Nazis reduce the amount of food ladled out, allow the prisoners to die in their own excreta from typhoid and other diseases, and hardly bother to dispose of the disintegrating corpses. In the midst of this charnel house, unknown to anyone of the main named characters—as though in an obligatory nod of recognition—lies the dying

²⁰ Kneale, ‘From Beyond’, p. 114.

²¹ Kneale, ‘From Beyond’, p. 118.

²² Kneale, ‘From Beyond’, p. 120.

Anne Frank, whose story and later historical significance due to her published diary, Iturbe retells.²³

Iturbe occasionally crosses over from his didactic presentation into these corners of horror. His normal mode is explanatory, and he proves more often than not untrustworthy, or at least ethically questionable. He imagines a scene in which the children in the family camp celebrate the Passover against all regulations not to perform religious ceremonies. The adults, adolescents and a few of the older children remember being with their families and sitting around the *seder* table. Using ad hoc substitutes for the symbolic items at the table and listening to the recollected words of the Haggadah, the scene unfolds, culminating with a child choir singing Ludwig van Beethoven's *An di freude* ('Song of Joy') from his Ninth Symphony. The events are described in Iturbe's omniscient narrative voice.²⁴ The trouble is he gets almost everything wrong, and tries to make the food, the wine, the stories, the witty rabbinical explanations, and the messianic hope into a foreshadowing of Christ's Last Supper. The Jewish writers of the little booklet of liturgical texts and directions for actions wrote it centuries after the founding of Christianity and deleted all mention of Moses to ensure no one would take the great prophet's deeds as a foreshadowing of Jesus. Miracles are performed, the commentary asserts again and again, not by a hero or angel but by God Himself. And if anything, the young people would have sung '*Chad Gaddya*' (a kind of riddling poem about a kid [a baby goat] a father bought for two *zuzzim*), the traditional Aramaic concluding song to the meal. The author probably never attended a Pesach meal. The description of the *seder* goes on for four pages, and is embarrassing to read, especially in the light of so much praise by young people, their teachers and adults who wish to purchase the book for their own children.

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²³ Iturbe, *The Librarian of Auschwitz*, pp. 382-383.

²⁴ Iturbe, *The Librarian of Auschwitz*, pp. 300-303.

Graham Turner, *The Power of Silence: The Riches that Lie Within*, 2nd edition (New York: Bloomsbury 2013); 254 pp; ISBN: 978-1620401026.

Carole Cusack has been pressing me to review this book for some time and I have never been sure about the right place for doing so. We will try here, because it does have some interesting implications for *Literature & Aesthetics*. The book is basically about religions and silence, though concerned less about mystical states than the place silence has in formal religious life. In the Indic tradition, the primal *rishis* utter the *Vedas* out of the Silence, in Islam the daily prayers (*salat*) are meant to be uttered in “the silence of the heart,” with Sufis holding that the best way to get in touch with the divine is through silence. For all the chanting in Hindu and Buddhist meditative schools, and intoning of Jewish, Christian and Muslim prayers, moments of silence are often attested as most precious. And yet as Graham Turner takes us *inter alia* through the monastic silences of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, and “the rigours of Zen,” his stress on “power” (which in his sense is very opposite to “the seduction of empire,” as a subtitle of another Turner book indicates) is very practical. He realizes how socially significant are the silent worship times of Quaker meetings, The Society of Friends being extraordinarily effective in responsible action. Gandhi clinches for him (also in another of his books) how politically crucial silence can be for stopping the foolish use of bullets in ‘conflict resolution’, and Turner takes seriously the collective shift of consciousness in the ‘New Age’ by some attention to Transcendental Meditation. But he is especially instructive on silences which give “a chance to hear yourself,” that by our “letting go” relieve stress, and blockage of noise and talk means “opting for the quiet life.” Mountain climbing is one his tempting recommendations!

The reflections are highly pertinent for artistic creativity, and though Turner is not strong on this side of things, I will test this potentiality in his work. At the onset, wisely, he knows that silence is not everyone’s ‘cup of tea’, in fact for the Americans he has a mind to persuade otherwise; sustained silence makes them “feel meaningless,” and would seem “like an entrance into emptiness” (p. 4). Personally, I can only say how grateful I was to have scholarship money to get off to a university college, where I did not have to listen to my brother’s radio at home while he prepared designs as an architectural student. No poem came with ‘interfering noise’ (birds, breeze, and waves excepted), and for composing or painting I had to seek or ask to be quietly alone. I still wonder when answers to daily difficulties are found in the deep silent recesses of sleep. But we should appreciate human differences, and the relativities. Like me, for whom magical quiet moments in the Australian morning and twilight can overtake the soul in

breathlessness, Irish-immigrant poet Victor J. Daley cherished *Dawn and Dusk* (1898); yet young critic Christopher Brennan made unsettling noises to fault his similes, metaphors and verbs, and (at the time) preferred poetry to rouse, as “a fist thrust under one’s nose” (*Prose* [1965 edn], pp. 190-191). With my Dutch ancestry I can put up with the contemplative or endearingly homely power of still-life painting, though even in the perfecting of its silences, with a bird unable to chirp from the canvas, we are left in some accepted, self-satisfying bourgeois corner, when the creativity in us wants more dash of colour and vital experience. The ‘Golden Gospel of Silence’, then, has its own special place in spirituality and psychotherapy, and perhaps ends up an earthly ultimate with our Final Repose. Its place in aesthetic ‘power’, however, is obviously less predictable. The party can go all night, until to someone’s relief “a silence fell with the waking bird, and a hush with the setting moon” (as Tennyson’s *Maude* [vii] has it), but the dancing might have been so good that it was worthy of the cinematography of Alexander Sokurov.

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Kavita Mudan Finn and E. J. Nielsen (eds), *Becoming: Genre, Queerness, and Transformation in NBC's Hannibal* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2019); 321 pp; ISBN: 9780815636366.

Bryan Fuller's *Hannibal*, a television adaptation of Thomas Harris' books featuring Hannibal Lecter, ran on NBC from 2013 to 2015. Although the show only aired over a span of two years, its cultural impact was significant, being lauded by fans and critics alike as a masterwork of horror. The show follows the titular Hannibal Lecter, a psychiatrist in Baltimore known for his lavish dinner parties, which, unbeknownst to his guests, serve up the remains of the victims of his serial killings. Perhaps the biggest draw to the series, and the element which sets it apart from other adaptations of Lecter, is the cannibal's relationship with the FBI profiler Will Graham, whose empathy disorder provides him insight into the minds of serial killers. The show focuses heavily on this relationship and the complex dynamic shared by Hannibal and Will; as the series progresses, they walk a precarious line between being one other's simultaneous antagonist and love interest. Since its original run, the series has attracted a large fan following, of which Finn and Nielsen's *Becoming* is an academic manifestation. The book is highly comprehensive in its considerations of the series, honouring the nuances of the series while not shying away from asking difficult questions of it. The book notably opens with a foreword from Janice Poon, the food stylist on *Hannibal* whose work has been endlessly praised for its contributions to the atmosphere of the series. She identifies the book's careful criticism of the series as being in its own way an appreciation. In deconstructing *Hannibal*, *Becoming* honours every part of it.

One particularly fascinating theme touched on by a number of the book's chapters is that of genre. *Hannibal* is innovative as an adaptation in many ways, including its format as a serialised television series as opposed to a film or book, both of which can be consumed in a single sitting. Jessica Balanzategui, Naja Later and Tara Lomax's chapter 'Hannibal Lecter's Monstrous Return: The Horror of Seriality in Bryan Fuller's *Hannibal*' discusses how a week-to-week television show offers a special kind of dread. The audience cannot skip to the final page to preemptively find out who lives and who dies; they must instead wait for the next week's episode. In an excellent stroke of analysis, they tie this television seriality to the episodic nature of serial killings, including those performed by Hannibal in the show. In doing this, they reveal that *Hannibal*'s very format sets it up for success in horrifying its audience. This chapter works in tandem with Chapter Five,

Evan Hayles Gledhill's 'Monstrous Masculinities in Gothic Romance: Will Graham, Jane Eyre, and Caleb Williams'. While the show was marketed a horror/thriller title Gledhill argues that it is better described as a gothic romance. The selected intertextuality demonstrated in this chapter is excellent. Together, these two chapters work to uncover the success of *Hannibal*'s genre as a gothic love story with a serial format to keep the audience engaged and horrified.

Of course, one cannot discuss *Hannibal* without touching on its queerness. This aspect is obviously considered in Gledhill's chapter on gothic romance, but Ellie Lewerenz's 'Adapt. Evolve. Become.: Queering *Red Dragon* in Bryan Fuller's *Hannibal*' and Evelyn Deshane's 'The Great Red Dragon: Francis Dolarhyde and Queer Readings of *Skin*' provide a fuller view of how the series captures experiences of queer sexuality and gender. The former chapter is an excellent analysis of how both Hannibal Lecter and Will Graham are made queer and how their dynamic is strengthened by it, but it was Deshane's insightful chapter that particularly caught my attention. She discusses the series' Francis Dolarhyde in comparison to the villain of the classic *Silence of the Lambs*, Buffalo Bill. The portrayal of Buffalo Bill as an assigned male attempting to make a "woman suit" has long been criticised by the queer community for its transphobic implications. Deshane acknowledges this troubled history and makes the case for Dolarhyde acting as a new, improved version of gender troubles in the canon. The analysis is very well written and offers a highly novel interpretation, one perhaps not considered by most who approach the series.

In discussing innovative takes on the series, I must also make note of Samira Nadkarni and Rukmini Pande's 'Hannibal and the Cannibal: Tracking Colonial Imaginations', which discusses the cannibalistic Other and its necessity for whiteness, leading into an illuminating discussion of the implications of a non-white casting for Hannibal Lecter. The last major theme of *Becoming* is the fandom of *Hannibal*, and *Hannibal* as fandom. This encompasses Chapters 12 and 13 of the book. They prove to be a valuable contribution to scholarship surrounding fandom. Particularly interesting is the framing of *Hannibal* as a fan work in its own right, with series developer Bryan Fuller being a fan of Harris' original series and transforming it, through his own queer lens, into *Hannibal*. This opens up a fascinating avenue of inquiry into adaptation as fan work.

Becoming: Genre, Queerness, and Transformation in NBC's Hannibal is an excellent compendium of essays regarding a landmark television series. It touches on a wide range of themes and does not shy away from examining

the many avenues of enquiry that the series manifests, including issues of sexuality, gender, race, and violence. *Becoming* consumes *Hannibal* elegantly and wholly, presenting its findings in a carefully crafted work of which Lecter himself would be proud.

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