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A Different Voice: ‘Vergangenheitsbewältigung’ in Ruth Klüger’s weiter leben and unterwegs verloren

As a Holocaust survivor, Ruth Klüger adds a new facet to the discourse about the Shoah and its aftermath in weiter leben and unterwegs verloren by offering a victim-oriented perspective. She contributes significantly to Holocaust discourse and to Germany’s process of identity formation by engaging readers in a literary and poetic account of events to remind them of the Shoah victims’ perspective. Art opens the way for her to give voice to her unique Holocaust experience, overcome the silence imposed by society’s recent focus on the victimization of the perpetrators, and promote a continued dialogue about the past.

The literary discourse of ‘Vergangenheitsbewältigung’ in German literature has been part of the so-called ‘Väterliteratur’ influenced greatly by the student movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The ‘Väterliteratur’ consisted of autobiographical accounts, written primarily by children of Nazi supporters, and dealt with the authors’ father figures and their role during the Nazi regime. These private accounts drew attention to the politically important issue of a public discourse about the past. Although these autobiographical writings were discussed widely in academia, they never found a broader audience in Germany until Ruth Klüger’s weiter leben (1992) turned into a national best-seller.¹ This autobiographical book and the later volume unterwegs verloren (2008)² present a departure from the ‘Väterliteratur’ literature’s focus on second-hand accounts that sought to understand the role of the perpetrator. Klüger instead highlights the victim’s perspective, a view she believes has been silenced in Holocaust discourse. Furthermore, Klüger’s identity as a Jewish woman shapes the voice she brings to the discussion of the Nazi past.

This essay examines weiter leben and unterwegs verloren and the process and concerns related to conveying a Holocaust account in an artistic format. It also considers Klüger’s use of poetry to come to terms with her survivor experience. In addition the essay analyzes how Klüger constructs and defines her identity which shapes her social interactions and her perceptions of discrimination. It concludes with a discussion of ‘Vergangenheitsbewältigung’ and the importance of
artistic endeavors, such as Klüger’s, for fostering public debate that contributes to national identity construction. *Weiter leben* is an account of Klüger’s childhood in Vienna and her horrifying experiences surviving several concentration and work camps during World War II. In *unterwegs verloren*, she focuses on her years as a student and scholar of German literature at various American institutions and in visiting positions at the Universities of Göttingen and Vienna. Both works feature flashbacks to her time in the concentration camps and her reflections on the nature of memory. Critics have pointed out that Klüger took over forty years to put her experiences into words and write a comprehensive account about her Holocaust experiences. According to recent research on trauma studies, which focuses on the delayed response with which experiences are grasped and memory is recalled, however, this time lag is not an uncommon occurrence.

Klüger’s ability to write about the suffering of the Jews not only constitutes for her a means to come to terms with the past, it also provides, as she says, a voice for the dead, thus ignoring the long-standing taboo surrounding autobiographical narratives that deal with the Third Reich. For decades, the dead were not part of public discussion; rather, the discourse concentrated on the Nazi past, particularly on the role of Nazi fathers and their guilt. Klüger herself often faced this taboo when confronted with public reactions to the number tattooed on her forearm signifying her stay at a death camp: ‘Die Überlebenden der KZ […] sind allen frei gebliebenen Menschen ein Dorn im Auge’ (wl 59). Klüger fights this taboo surrounding the dead by giving a literary voice to the Shoah victims. She reminds readers of, and includes, the dead when she details the horrors of concentration camp experiences. For example, in a reference to Theresienstadt she writes: ‘Transporte kamen an, andere wurden abgeschickt, Betten leerten sich, wurden wieder gefüllt. Die Todesnachrichten rissen nicht ab, gehörten zum Alltag’ (wl 84). Later, in *unterwegs verloren* she remarks on the dead of Auschwitz when she describes the slave quarters she saw during a cruise excursion to a Senegalese island:

Ich bin der einzige Mensch hier, ob Touristen oder Einheimische, ob Männer oder Frauen, der sich daran erinnert, was Sklavenarbeit ist. Persönliche Erfahrung, nix Vorfahren und 18. Jahrhundert. ‘I was a slave girl’. Die Baracke im Auschwitz Frauenlager, wo ich als Zwölfjährige die letzten paar Nächte vor dem Abtransport