WRITING AGAINST SILENCE.
JEWS WRITERS OF THE GENERATION-AFTER IN THE NETHERLANDS, GERMANY, AUSTRIA, AND FRANCE: A COMPARISON

Elrud Ibsch

In the admirable novel *Ayen ‘Erekhi: Ahava (See Under: Love)* by David Grossman, the main character, Momik, remembers his parents’ attitude towards the Shoah: “what I did get at home was the wisdom to survive, which is something you don’t learn in school, and which can’t be described in the polite language of Ruthy’s […] a wisdom that can only be communicated in silence, in suspicious contractions around the eyes and mouth.”1 “Silence,” in this quotation, means that even within the intimate circle of family life, where “everything can be said,” the experience of the Shoah makes a difference. Grossman is no exception. For numerous writers of what is nowadays called the “generation(s)-after,” those who have no “primary” memory2 with respect to the annihilation of European Jewry, “silence” is a leitmotiv. More recently, in Amir Gutfreund’s novel *Sho’ah Shelanu* (Our Holocaust), the attempts of the children to break the silence of the adults is a main theme.

The semantics of “silence” with reference to the Shoah, however, is not restricted to the family situation as described by Grossman and Gutfreund—although that is a very important context and is strikingly represented in Dutch-Jewish literature—as I will try to make clear in what follows. “Writing against silence” means also taking into account the difference between the silence of the victims and that of the perpetrators and bystanders. Particularly in the case of German and Austrian Jewish writers, it means to write against the perpetrators who refuse to confess their guilt. In addition, “writing against silence” alludes to the absence of a speaker: the dead cannot speak. If there is no speaker, then necessarily there is no historical narrative. Authors who deal with the absent narrative must make an enormous effort to fill the void, to

---

give a voice to the voiceless. Writing against the silence of the dead is what we find among a number of French novelists.

In their learning process, children are dependent on their parents as the intermediaries of experiences that they did not go through, but of which they should not remain ignorant. No Jew living in our time can be ignorant about the Holocaust. In many cases, however, parents did not function as “normal” intermediaries. There are various reasons for the parental silence. Nowadays one reason is briefly indicated as “survivor guilt” (which, in fact, is a very complicated phenomenon); other reasons are the painful memories of murdered family members, the desire to forget the past, the wish to begin a new life, and, above all, the wish not to pass the parents’ traumatic experiences on to their children.

Children (and grandchildren) of survivors, if not supported by the memorial narratives of their parents, must “invent” their own “secondary” memory of the Shoah. Only traces of the events are accessible to them in libraries, through images, at the official “lieux de mémoire,” and last but not least, in their own imagination. With “imagination” we enter the domain of art and literature.

Jewish literature, whether written in the Netherlands or elsewhere, finds itself in a triple-bind situation. First, it subscribes to the general conventions of literary writing, which comes down to the observation of two principles: the creation and acceptance of worlds other than—but in continuous dialogue with—the real world, and the exploration of the possibilities of language. Second, Jewish literature observes local traditions. French Jewish literature, for example, fits into the French experimental tradition, and Georges Perec, for instance, has been one of the leading writers of the experimental group called Oulipo. Finally, Jewish literature is Jewish. It is impregnated with Jewish history and catastrophe, but also with Jewish sacred texts and their written or oral interpretations, and by Jewish humor and self-irony.

Dutch Jewish literature of the younger generation strongly bears the hallmark of autobiographical writing and remains close to the poetic principles of psychological realism. It largely concentrates on family life. This implies that internal Jewish issues are at the foreground; the background, of course, is constituted by the historical events of

---

3 See D. G. Roskies, Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture (Cambridge, Mass. 1984).