
This collection of seventeen texts focuses on the francophone literature of hidden children and children of Holocaust survivors. It is written for the most part by academic specialists of twentieth-century French literature. The first four texts are an exception, since they have been composed by poets and writers of fiction invited to comment on the subject. The idea for this work came from a conference entitled “Ecrire la mémoire de la Shoah—La génération d’après” (Writing the memory of the Holocaust—the generation that came after) in 2004 at Leiden University in the Netherlands.

In its introduction, the editor of this collection states that she is even sceptical regarding the ability to claim a literary genre of ‘hidden children’ and ‘children of Holocaust survivors.’ What literary link is there between Perec, Kofman, Marcel Cohen, Burko-Falcman, Meschonic, Goscinny, Orner, Vargaftig, Wajcman, Modiano, Raczymov, Robin and Wajsbrot? These authors belong to very different French literary movements and also to quite different eras (Georges Perec from the OULIPO movement being the most famous). Consequently, how can these diverse authors be linked to the hypothetical genre of ‘children who survived the Holocaust’ and ‘descendants of Holocaust survivors’? To establish and ground this hypothesis of a well-defined literary genre is not simple. Since literary scholars cannot arrive at a functional and coherent literary definition, they use other disciplines, history and psychology, to interpret the authors instead. Being a Jewish child during the Shoah or born of survivors, and suffering from the trauma of the Shoah is not enough to create a literary genre.

Unfortunately, this editorial project fails because literature should not use history and psychology as the main arguments to develop a new genre. It fails also because it relies on very fragile theoretical psychological foundations and on major contradictions with the project itself. For example, the collection starts with a text from Henri Raczymov, for whom the Holocaust is only a secondary explanation: “Je crois que les choses se jouent d’abord sur un plan
personnel, singulier, familial, et que, pour ce qui nous concerne, la Shoah joue un rôle de surdétermination” (p. 18).

Cécile Wajsbrot advocates the non-distinctiveness of the Shoah:

Refuse the particularisms of the time and place—and this word, Shoah, which has consonants that render the catastrophe strange and foreign—in order to render it universal, acceptable and assimilated by all. (p. 28)

Resorting to psychology and psychoanalysis to portray the writers produces in effect two negatives. First, psychological thinking seems out-of-date and inappropriate. Second, instead of celebrating the writers, they make them appear neurotic. Steven Jaron attempts to explain the silence of the writer Marcel Cohen, a hidden child who does not remember the terrible events, by comparing his psychological mindset to Sigmund Freud’s famous clinical case and decisive article published in 1920, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle.” In this text, Freud tells how his grandson utilized the famous game of “Fort-Da” to overcome the frustration provoked by the absence of his mother. Steven Jaron says that Marcel Cohen, like many of the ‘hidden’ children, could not use the same psychological mechanisms to overcome the suffering experienced during the Holocaust:

These survivors are pushed by the necessity to tell, but they are often profoundly shaken by the difficulty of doing it. They do not always have the same facility as the grandson of Freud to overcome the paradox. Too many obstacles are interposed between the experience of childhood and the era when the witness lived. (p. 68)

Is Jaron suggesting that the suffering of the Jewish hidden children of the Holocaust can be summarised by the fact that they did not live in the same childhood situation as Freud’s grandson?

Susan Rubin Suleiman puts together psychological and stylistic commentaries and is one of the only authors in this work to try to develop a literary theory. She develops concepts to understand the writing of Perec and Federman. Rubin Suleiman thinks that the

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1 “I believe that things play out initially on a personal, specific family level, and the Shoah plays a role that is over-determined.” All translations, if not otherwise indicated, are the reviewer’s.