

David Kirby

Review Article

Catastrophe as Text

Approaches to Auschwitz: The Holocaust and Its Legacy. By John K. Roth and Richard L. Rubenstein. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987. Pp. 420. \$19.95.

Libra. By Don DeLillo. New York: Viking, 1988. Pp. 456. \$19.95.

It is hard to imagine an educated person whose mind does not wander occasionally to the Nazi death camps, and the questions asked are those that are asked of the great novels and plays, questions involving structure, intent, tone, meaning. The perdurable themes are there—courage, suffering, redemption—and they are dramatized in an Aristotelian theater of pain. From beginning to end, the Holocaust is theatre, at least for those who were not there. That is why one's mind returns to it, yet always rejects it: the Holocaust, like any text, speaks to us precisely because it is outside of our experience (at least, the experience of most of us) and in this way defines and illuminates that experience. And that wouldn't be true, or so one might reason, if the Holocaust had actually "occurred" in the way that natural events like earthquakes and tidal waves occur. Small wonder that some revisionists insist that the camps are a figment of the Zionist imagination.

With the publication of *Approaches to Auschwitz*, it won't be so easy to deny the reality of what was meant to be the Final Solution. This book is a comprehensive, multidisciplinary study of the Holocaust's roots, its day-to-day realities, and its legacy. The authors' strength lies in straight talk on an unpleasant subject, and perhaps for that reason, this book does not encourage the sort of scrutiny one brings to would-be masterpieces. The prose is unadorned, and certain sections are necessarily cursory; it treats only the most literal inter-

preters and neglects such masters as Primo Levi and Leslie Epstein. As a powerful goad to memory and reflection, however, *Approaches to Auschwitz* has the potential to change future generations' views of the death camps and remind even the most smug of readers that, as the authors remind us in a telling understatement, "it is . . . easy for talented people to lose their places in the world."

It is easy because, sooner or later, random historical forces come together in a way that makes the tragedist's concept of ineluctable fate seem as real as anything in the natural world. Unarguably, the best part of *Approaches to Auschwitz* deals with the historical background of the Nazi era. The story begins in the aftermath of the Judeo-Roman War of 66-70 A.D. and Rome's empowering of the only group acceptable or to it, the pacifist wing of the Pharisees. The Jewish pacifists bet the survival of the race against Caesar's tolerance—a wise wager, it seemed, and one that became a model for Jewish survival until a new Caesar arose in Germany with the goal of total extermination.

Meanwhile, as Rubenstein and Roth point out, Christianity had gone from being a Jewish sect and object of Roman persecution itself to a government-within-the-government of the declining Roman Empire. As the power of the Church grew and spread throughout Europe, so did the defamation of Jews; as the political prizes became more and more valuable, factionalism increased, culminating in the rebellion of Luther. By challenging Roman Catholicism, Luther gave unwilling aid to the Church's main opponents, the Jews; in addition to his assaults on Rome, then, Luther had to exceed the already-high level of institutionalized anti-Semitism. Here are some excerpts from a typical sermon by Luther:

We are at fault in not slaying them. Rather we allow them to live freely in our midst despite all their murdering, cursing, blaspheming, lying, and defaming. . . .

What shall we Christians do with this rejected and condemned people, the Jews? . . .

First, to set fire to their synagogues or schools and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn, so that no man will ever again see a stone or a cinder of them. . . .

Second, I advise that their houses also be razed and destroyed. . . .

[The] final objective . . . must be the total removal of all Jews from our midst.

In fact, the last sentence is not from Luther but is from a letter by Hitler; I have included it here to illustrate the continuity of German anti-Semitism over the centuries.

But Germany never had a monopoly on anti-Jewish feeling. In post-revolutionary France, for example, the Catholic Church, seeing itself reduced by the state to the same status as Jews and Protestants, struggled to clarify the "inferior" nature of these two groups and thus helped institutionalize French anti-Semitism between 1789 and 1945. In Russia, the state-sponsored pogroms of 1881-1884, designed to kill Jews seen as unassimilable foreigners, or at least force them to immigrate, had essentially the same goals as the Nazi violence of half a century later.

Even countries that have prided themselves on their good-guy status lent a hand to the Final Solution. For Americans, surely some of the most uncomfortable reading in *Approaches to Auschwitz* deals with the contribution of the American eugenics movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Rubenstein and Roth observe, the United States was the first country to pass laws (in twenty-one states between 1907 and 1928) calling for compulsory sterilization aimed at limiting the reproduction of social deviants and maintaining the purity of the white Anglo-Saxon and northern European stock. In the 1920s, the German embassy in Washington furnished Berlin with its findings regarding sterilization policies in American mental and penal institutions; in July, 1933, less than six months after Hitler came to power, an order was signed providing for the compulsory sterilization of men and women suffering from hereditary diseases. By 1940, patients in German mental hospitals and psychiatric clinics were being killed rather than merely sterilized and their families informed that the victims had not only died of natural causes but also been cremated immediately to reduce the possibility of contagion.

In addition to providing some of the pseudo-scientific underpinnings of the Final Solution, the United States, along with other Allied nations, helped Hitler by its well-known reluctance to accept any significant number of Jewish refugees. This attitude not only hurt the Jews directly but encouraged Hitler in his belief that they were indeed unwanted refuse and that he, as a new Caesar empowered by the forces of history, could do with the Jews as he pleased.

Not all of this is new information, but no one has pulled it together and presented it as well as Rubenstein and Roth have. Does this mean that future generations will view the Holocaust more accurately? At least that possibility has now been created, thanks to these two scholars.

However, the task is not an easy one. The problem is that there is usually no place for catastrophe in our normal frame of reference.

Trauma fractures our lives; anyone who has ever been in an automobile accident remembers the event as dreamlike or unreal, and it is in the very nature of catastrophes for them to be experienced on the same level as, say, an absurdist play or work of fiction. In one of the most important and neglected essays of recent years, novelist Don DeLillo, writing in the December 8, 1983 issue of *Rolling Stone*, argued that, in November 1963 in Dallas, Lee Harvey Oswald did for the world what Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot did for literature: he ushered us away from "the sense of a coherent reality most of us shared." In the 5.6 seconds it took for Oswald to fire the shots in Dealey Plaza, the ordinary person entered forever "a world of randomness and ambiguity, a world totally modern in the way it shades into the century's 'emptiest' literature, the study of what is uncertain and unresolved in our lives, the literature of estrangement and silence."

As with the Holocaust, no one foresaw the assassination and therefore no one can quite believe it happened as reported; of either phenomenon one might say that

the lines that extend from that compressed event have shown such elaborate twists and convolutions that we are almost forced to question the basic suppositions we make about our world of light and shadow, solid objects and ordinary sounds, and to wonder further about our ability to measure such things, . . . to see things as they are, recall them clearly, explain to waiting faces what happened.

The one insurmountable difficulty with accepting such events as the Holocaust and the Kennedy assassination as real is that to do so, says DeLillo, would mean "one of those shifts in global consciousness that only psychotics find bearable."

Of the many documents that have resulted from the assassination, two of the most notable are the twenty-six volume Warren Commission Report and DeLillo's recent novel *Libra*. With its exhaustive analysis of everything even remotely connected to Oswald's life, right down to his pubic hair ("the root area was rather clear of pigment, and contained only a fair amount of cortical fusi, which was unusual"), the Warren Report is itself a novel, like one of those prolific narratives that anticipate and then embody that textual and psychic fragmentation called Modernism: *Don Quixote*, *Moby Dick*, *Ulysses*, *Gravity's Rainbow*. The problem, of course, is that fragmentation and proliferation take the reader farther from the truth (if it exists at all) instead of closer to it.

This explains why, after writing the *Rolling Stone* essay which proved that the truth about the Kennedy assassination will never be

known, DeLillo wrote *Libra* to assert that Oswald was a patsy in a plot by CIA rogues to kill the president. Since the novel's publication, several studies have appeared suggesting more strongly than ever that Oswald was the lone and unaided assassin, and future generations will probably agree that, after all, the Warren Commission was right. If such a conclusion can be reached, however, much will be owed to DeLillo and *Libra*, perhaps by the people least prepared to admit it. For with its sweep and detail and, most important, its sense of how an ineluctable coherency arises eventually out of even the most random of human lives, the novel will convince a generation of readers, not *how* the assassination happened, but *that* it happened. If truth is indeed stranger than fiction, fiction is also more believable than truth. No wonder that, even after twenty-six years, so many questions about the shooting remain unanswered. Convinced of the assassination's place in their own histories, perhaps the scholars of the future will at last be able to supply the answers.

And perhaps the fact that the "Literary Responses" section of *Approaches to Auschwitz* is unsatisfactory is due to the fact that the great Holocaust novel has not been written yet.