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Remembering and Imagining the Holocaust: The Chain of Memory
(review)

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also reveals in an embarrassing typographical error just how unfamiliar she is with the key (auto)biographical theorists that should have grounded her study: “Mais ici, nous ne sommes plus à l’époque de Saint-Augustin, de Montaigne, de Pascal ou de Rousseau, où l’écrivain ose révéler dans son intimité et ses secrets. L’écrivain moderne ‘Brouille les cartes, pratique un subtil dosage de mensonge et de vérité, et remanie le matériau de sa propre vie. L’ultime avatar de cette pratique est l’auto fiction [*sic*], cette mise en fiction de la vie personnelle, telle que Serge Dobrovsky [*sic*] l’inaugure à la fin des années 70” (50).

That she misspells Doubrovsky’s name and never mentions the work of Philippe Lejeune—which is essential to understanding the autobiographical “pact” underpinning what it would seem Delphine really wants to show—is telling. Yet Delphine’s work not only lacks depth. It is marred by additional typographical errors and several troubling inconsistencies. Why vacillate, as she does for example, between the use of “auteure” (78) and “auteur” (9), “écrivaine” (138) and “écrivain” (12)? While an occasional error of agreement can certainly be forgiven, Delphine’s inconsistent capitalization of Liking’s middle name—“Were Were Liking” (170), “Were were Liking” (78), for instance—is distracting and hard to overlook.

Delphine’s copy editors apparently did not seriously reread the manuscript before publishing it. Do the few redeeming features of her simplistic work warrant even a first read by others? Probably not.

Brian Gordon Kennelly

Christopher Bigsby. *Remembering and Imagining the Holocaust: The Chain of Memory*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006. vii + 407 pp. ISBN 0-521-86934-X, \$35.00.

This volume offers literary-intellectual portraits of a fair number of authors associated with what is now a well-established canon of Holocaust-related literature: Rolf Hochhuth, Peter Weiss, Arthur Miller, Anne Frank, Jean Améry, Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, and Tadeusz Borowski. Yet the heart piece of this “meditation on memory and on the ways in which memory has operated in the work of writers for whom the Holocaust was a defining event” is a superb and enthralling discussion of W. G. (“Max”) Sebald (1944–2001), to whose memory Bigsby has dedicated this volume. Bigsby heads the School of American Studies at the University of East Anglia, where Sebald taught from 1970 and held a chair in European Literature from 1988 until his untimely death in a car accident. Bigsby’s engagement with Sebald is clearly a labor of love, and published on its own it would have made for a slim but elegant and extraordinarily perfect monograph. As it stands, though, this book is a rather

more uneven affair. While it offers a solid, sophisticated, and dense introduction to issues relating to the (literary) memorialization and representation of the Holocaust that scholars in the field may find useful, what this book does not offer, the chapter on Sebald apart, is all that much that is new.

The other chapters are all solid and instructive as far as they go, but they rarely transcend already established debate. The chapters on Rolf Hochhuth and Peter Weiss are by far the weakest. Given how heavily they gravitate around Sebald's grappling with these two authors, one cannot help wondering to what extent they may have evolved out of initially rather more concise, dense, and successful sections within Bigsby's discussion of Sebald that could have been crucial, had they stayed there, in making the Sebald study all the more viable as a monograph in its own right. Inevitably perhaps, Bigsby is most original when discussing what is most recent. Many of the chapters make a somewhat torn impression, as though they were trying to both construct and deconstruct the canon more or less in one go. Because so much of the book reads like a textbook-style survey (albeit an extremely sophisticated one), its original departures from the current state of debate repeatedly seem more like slightly unmotivated afterthoughts. There are exceptions, though. Bigsby's discussion in the chapter on Anne Frank of Philip Roth's *The Ghost Writer* and Ellen Feldman's *The Boy Who Loved Anne Frank*, for instance, or of Anthony Sher's grappling with *Primo Time*, are intensely thought-provoking and real gems.

Among Bigsby's chief preoccupations, it is perhaps worth singling out three recurrent themes. The first concerns the nature of memory and testimony. Bigsby is keen to emphasize (and rightly so, of course) that perception and recollection do not somehow represent reality in a pristine and unadulterated fashion that is only subsequently contaminated by the uses to which these recollections are put. Perception and memory themselves are already "both . . . subject to need and desire, both of which are in the service of an imperial self which pulls all experience towards a suspect centre" (53). How we perceive and remember reality is always already shaped in numerous ways by circumstance and by our attempts (however desperate) to make sense of reality (and indeed, on a more fundamental level, to maintain the very notion that we are actually capable of making sense of it). The more senseless the reality that needs to be faced and the more traumatic the circumstances, the more of an issue this obviously becomes.

Second, Bigsby is particularly interested in the way in which authors have actively confronted the problems raised by aestheticization as a means of representation in this context. He quotes at length from a comment by Sebald elaborating on the notion that "Writing is by definition a morally dubious

occupation. . . . There is a horrible moment when you discover, almost with a sense of glee, something that, although itself horrid, will fit in exactly with your scheme of things” (80). Similarly, Bigsby’s interest in Ellen Feldman’s *The Boy Who Loved Anne Frank* springs in particular from the fact that it is “a novel that contains a critique of its processes in which the author seems on the one hand to want to have her cake and eat it while on the other suggesting the fraudulence of her own conceit” (253–54).

Third, Bigsby repeatedly takes issue with the suggestion that survival in the death camps depended on selfishness and disengagement from the suffering of others. Here I wonder whether Bigsby may have fallen prey to something of a misunderstanding. The simple truth of the matter is that there was simply no way of determining what course of action offered a likely guarantee of survival. Some tried to maintain a sense of solidarity, others ruthlessly abandoned it. Of the prisoners in both groups, the overwhelming majority were murdered or died, and a tiny minority survived. Whether the choices they made in this respect were actually the reason for their death or survival can rarely be established definitively, even when survivors clearly feel that they do owe their survival to the solidarity and magnanimity of others. The point here is that the principle of solidarity essentially belongs to a world one can make sense of and a life one can take control of—exactly the sort of world, in other words, that the death camps were designed to negate and annihilate. Selfishness, then, was not a practical orientation that made survival more likely, but it reflected a mindset that was in an important (and appalling) sense more appropriate to the reality of the death camps, while the temptation to stand on one’s own dignity or that of others indubitably constituted a mortal risk.

Bigsby is a formidable stylist, and much of this volume, particularly the study on Sebald, is breathtakingly acute and polished. Yet the text has not been edited with equal care throughout. There are also a few dubious suggestions and fairly remarkable mistakes. Alfred Döblin (the subject of Sebald’s doctoral thesis) died in 1957. His son, “who committed suicide rather than be captured by the Germans” (32)—i.e., when they invaded France in 1940—would therefore have had some difficulties burying him. Bigsby claims that Peter Weiss “was conscious of the ease with which the citizen could be enrolled in a suspect national cause” because he had “himself been a participant in Nazi youth movements” (171). He has the November Pogrom of 1938 (“*Kristallnacht*”) take place in October, and the deportation of Herschel Grynszpan’s parents not a fortnight before the pogrom but “the previous year” (216). Primo Levi supposedly “devoted an entire chapter to Améry in *If This is a Man*” (278), yet as Bigsby himself points out, Levi in fact “could not recall him or his appearance” (280).

Otherwise, though, Bigsby's discussion is consistently competent (which is no mean achievement in a book of some 400 pages). It displays a high degree of perceptiveness and compassion, and students could certainly do a whole lot worse than choosing this volume as a general introduction to issues relating to the (literary) memorialization and representation of the Holocaust.

Lars Fischer

J. Lenore Wright. *The Philosopher's I: Autobiography and the Search for the Self*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006. 217 pp. ISBN 0-7914-6914-X, \$24.95.

Autobiography is by definition self-reflective. Autobiographies written by philosophers are also reflections on the nature of the self and of self-examination, or so argues J. Lenore Wright in *The Philosopher's "I": Autobiography and the Search for the Self*. Philosophical autobiography constitutes an especially significant genre, according to Wright, because "autobiographies written by philosophers can help us recognize and reject misleading views of the self and reevaluate the meaning of self-examination" (13). Autobiographical writing automatically raises certain questions about the self—about how one can be both the subject and the writer of the text, both the examiner and what is examined. In the hands of philosophers, these questions become part of the very fabric of the autobiographical exercise.

Wright hopes to accomplish three main objectives through her reflection on philosophical autobiography: first, to "clarify the role that the first-person plays in self-examination"; second, to provide a genealogy of the self, tracing how notions of the self have developed over time; and third, to demonstrate the extent to which human existence is bifurcated existence, and to track cultural responses to this fact (8). While she draws on a remarkably large range of resources in her analysis, Wright's main focus is on Augustine's *Confessions*, Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Rousseau's *The Confessions*, Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*, and Hazel Barnes's *The Story I Tell Myself*.

The book comprises four chapters. The first provides an overview of the salient features of philosophical autobiography, and introduces the central theme of the bifurcated self. The act of autobiographical writing, Wright argues, splits the self into an Inner/ontological/writer self and an Outer/rhetorical/subject self. The former is, roughly speaking, the introspected "I," who is perceived as persisting unchanged over time. Wright describes this self in terms of "essence." The Outer self, by contrast, is an embodied, embedded, public figure; the protagonist of the autobiography. Wright describes this self in terms of "identity."