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Rendering the Holocaust: Review of Biggsby, Christopher, Remembering and Imagining the Holocaust: The Chain of Memory

Wilson, Nathan

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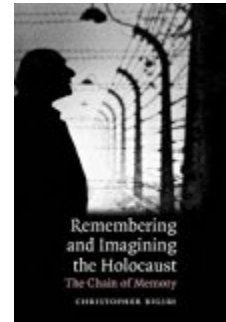
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Christopher Bigsby. *Remembering and Imagining the Holocaust: The Chain of Memory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. vii + 407 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-86934-8.

Reviewed by Nathan Wilson (Department of History, York University)
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Rendering the Holocaust

With this volume, Christopher Bigsby intended to celebrate the life and work of the late writer and academic W.G. Sebald. What he produced, however, is a superb, beautifully written meditation, Bigsby's preferred description, on memory and the Holocaust and the manner in which remembrance affects and informs the work and lives of writers. The volume is insightful, poignant, and free of the turgid syntax that often mars this type of discussion and, in this sense, is not beyond the reach of some advanced undergraduates, although specialists in the field will no doubt find it more rewarding.

Apart from introductory and concluding remarks, the volume is a collection of nine essays (portraits, really) about Sebald, Rolf Hochhuth, Peter Weiss, Arthur Miller, Anne Frank, Jean Améry, Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, and Tadeusz Borowski. The Holocaust is the thread connecting one writer to another, all of whom were touched in some profound way by that horrific, twentieth-century event. Via these nine portraits, then, the volume does four things.

First, it wrestles with one of recent history's most difficult questions, best expressed by the late Richard Grunberger, who asked, "How was it possible for a civilized country like Germany to relapse into a state of barbarism without precedent in the annals of Man?" [1] No clear, definitive answer to this question will ever be available. On one hand, the Holocaust speaks more about humanity in general than it does about something inherently German. "The threat of the Nazis," Bigsby tells us, "is seen as deriving not from their difference from others but their

similarity" (p. 158). On the other hand, Germany cannot escape its ties to the Holocaust. Grappling with the experience of the Third Reich in postwar Germany therefore looms large in each portrait. Shown images from the Holocaust in his childhood classroom, for instance, Sebald was compelled to explain them when no context had been given.

Second, Bigsby's volume poses the disturbing question of "Who owns the Holocaust?" (p. 21). This troubling query, which is repeated throughout, resonates most loudly in chapter 6, "Anne Frank: Everybody's Heroine," and chapter 11, "Memory Theft." In chapter 6, Bigsby details the omissions and changes to Frank's diary through its numerous editions and translations, demonstrating the appropriation of memory to serve various purposes. In this sense, Frank became a vessel through which different identities and experiences could be expressed. In the transfer of her diary to the stage, for instance, Anne became merely one character among many—her "life is no longer her own" (p. 232). In chapter 11, the appropriation of memory takes center stage as Bigsby recalls the stories of Benjamin Wilkomirski and Laura Grabowski, who passed themselves off as Holocaust survivors. "These people are guilty of memory theft," writes Bigsby. "They have appropriated history, shifting themselves to the centre of a grand narrative of human betrayal by themselves betraying beneficiaries of the suffering of others, basking in the sympathy of those for whom the Holocaust is a mystery to be respected for its motiveless ferocities and for whom its victims have earned a special place if not in heaven then in human at-

tention” (p. 374).

Third, Bigsby ponders memory’s purpose. From Sebald to Borowski, all of Bigsby’s subjects were compelled to bear witness, to share what they witnessed with the wider world via the printed word. The purpose their memories served, however, was not always clear. “What, after all, was to be remembered, and why? Was the past to be a burden carried into the future and, if so, for how long was it to be borne?” (p. 16). For some, the memories served both as commemoration of the dead and as warning against a possible relapse into barbarity, which all feared on some level. Levi, for example, remarked in 1983 that through his writings he felt as though he was “developing a case for the prosecution, not a call for revenge but an act of witness” (p. 293). Wiesel turned his memory against those who would distort the Holocaust, imbuing his memories with “certain moral imperatives having to do with upholding an idea of the decency of the victims” (p. 320). In testifying, however, all wrestled with the believability of memory, so to speak. The Holocaust had produced an inverted world—a world so “profoundly outside the parameters of normal thought and experience that some spoke of inhabiting another planet so that to understand life there it became necessary to reconstruct an entire ecology, an alien social system, a morality largely contained and defined by the exosphere of this place where people died by ice and fire, where the rise of the sun meant neither warmth nor hope” (p. 14). While “others could empathize,” they would, nevertheless, come off “like blind men speaking of colour”

(p. 270). Each of Bigsby’s personalities, to some degree, doubted their memories.

Fourth, and finally, the volume ruminates on the inadequacy of language to convey the horror of the Holocaust properly. Sebald, for instance, was acutely aware of the “near impossibility of generating a language capable of capturing [the Holocaust’s] totality” (p. 42). And Levi believed language incapable of properly rendering its horror (p. 297). Bound by the conventions and restrictions of the written language, each survivor inevitably reached for metaphors and analogies to help convey his or her experiences. Ultimately, however, Bigsby believes this step means “retreating from the thing itself” (p. 14). Acts of remembering and imagining become intertwined in the process. Each of Bigsby’s writers also faced the question: Could language, the same language used in the concentration camps, now reinstate humanity where once it had been used to justify inhumanity? As Bigsby recounts, this “was the scale of the task that Sebald saw as confronting him” (p. 64). Indeed, “language itself must bear a taint which spreads out in all directions” (p. 65). Bigsby’s volume is a tremendous addition to the literature on Holocaust and memory. Scholars in this field will surely come to recognize this book for the huge contribution it makes.

Note

[1]. Richard Grunberger, *Germany 1918-1945* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1966), 188.

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