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Rendering the Holocaust through Fantasy

A Proposal for a Master's Thesis

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Rendering the Holocaust through Fantasy

1. Aims and General Description

Many scholars and writers question the morality of Holocaust fiction, one of the more prominent being the Nobel Prize laureate Elie Wiesel. Speaking at Northeastern University in 1977, Wiesel stated that writing fiction about the Holocaust would mean "that Treblinka and Belzec, Ponar and Babi Yar all ended in fantasy, in words, in beauty" (Wiesel, Dimensions 7). Wiesel sees even realistic Holocausts fiction as potentially reducing the grim reality of the Holocaust to fantasy and hence as morally problematic. All the more so Holocaust fantasy, which takes unreality as its primary principle.

Nevertheless, over the last half-century the literary community has seen more and more narratives that apply the techniques of fantasy to fictional representations of the Holocaust. In the last decade fantasy has become, for readers and critics alike, a more acceptable, even preferable, sub-type of Holocaust literature. For all the interest, however, no critic has yet examined the variety of fantasy writing in Holocaust fiction and its range of uses. In this thesis I will show how different types of fantasy enable both writers and readers to approach the task of describing the indescribable - the Holocaust of the Jewish people.

2. Scholarly and Critical Background

a. Holocaust Literary Theory

There is an ongoing critical conversation about how the Holocaust can and should be depicted – by history, testimonies, memoirs or fictional narratives. On a generic continuum, Holocaust writing may be seen to move from the most truthful to the extremely fictional: from diaries and survivors' testimony and memoirs to realistic fiction, to more fictional pieces, including myth- and fable-like fiction, some of which include elements of fantasy, and finally full-fledged fantasy, as far removed from reality as writing can get.¹ But why is there any need at all for Holocaust fiction? Why not be satisfied with letting testimonies and memoirs fulfill the mission of making sure the world does not forget the Holocaust?

The evil of the Holocaust is so enormous, unspeakable and unimaginable that a large part of the discussion among scholars is devoted to the question of whether it is at all possible to represent it in *any* written genre. Saul Friedlander, in his introduction to *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution,"* considers the Holocaust to be "an event which tests our traditional conceptual and representational categories, an 'event at the limits'" (3). Similarly, Hayden White, in "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth," argues that the Holocaust, an "experience ... unique to our century," needs a new mode of "realistic representation" (52). By looking at the latest Holocaust fiction, it can be argued (following Daniel Schwarz in his book) that this new mode may be fantasy, in all its varied representations.

Why fantasy? One of the basic questions about Holocaust literature, stated by Gary Weismann in *Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust*, is "how much horror can be described without alienating readers?" (10). Softening the horror in order to prevent alienation might backfire, and the narrative will then not be able to "prevent

¹ Young defines docufiction and realistic fiction as "mixing actual events with completely fictional characters" (52).

forgetting and repetition" (Bosajian 248).² In documentary fiction about the Holocaust, the writer is "seemingly torn between presenting [the events] as a fictional construct and simultaneously asserting that [what happened] was not a fiction" (Young 56). Fantasy can help in efforts to memorialize the Holocaust and its victims because it is "a distancing from the ordinary" (Le Guin 89) and so allows the reader to relate to the horrors without alienating him or her. I will show how different elements of fantasy enable this "distancing" in different ways.

b. Fantasy Theory

Over the years, different critics / theorists have made use of various elements when defining "Fantasy" or "The Fantastic" in literature. Tzvetan Todorov, considered to be the first modern theorist to write about fantasy, focuses on the moment when the reader "hesitate[s] between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described" (33), and argues that "[t]he fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty" (25). Todorov sees this element of hesitation as being at the root of the truly supernatural or fantastic. Defining fantasy according to Todorov would greatly limit the narratives which could be considered Holocaust fantasy, and would eliminate many books that today are part of category. Todorov does acknowledge two other elements, similar to the fantastic but existing outside of the hesitation. The first is the uncanny, where the supernatural events "receive a rational explanation at its [the story's] end" (44). The second element is the marvelous, where the story includes "an acceptance of the supernatural" (52). In this paper I will consider Todorov's fantastic, together with his uncanny and marvelous, to all be elements of fantasy, as is commonly accepted today.

Eric Rabkin, one of today's most prominent fantasy theorists, sees the basic element of fantasy as something much wider than Todorov's definition. According to Rabkin, fantasy

² Bosajian writes about Holocaust literature for youth, but the basic idea is relevant for all audiences.

is an affect, in which "the ground rules of the narrative are forced to make a 180° reversal" from the basic rules of the narrative world (*Fantastic* 12). The fantastic is a way to create change and a new order. Relating to Todorov, he writes that locating the affect of hesitation "in aspects of narrative other than plot" can expand the definition of fantasy beyond "Todorov's 'literary genre.'" (*Fantastic* 118 n. 1).

An element found in many Holocaust fantasy narratives is Freud's uncanny (not to be confused with Todorov's different use of the same word). According to Freud, a narrative is uncanny when a familiar world is suddenly seen to have an element that reminds us of our primal, repressed fears. In his 1919 essay "The Uncanny," Freud defines the *heimlich* as that which is homelike. But, as he explains, the homelike is also hidden within the walls of the home. It is suppressed, first from public view and then from our own thoughts: "Thus *heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*" (Freud, section I). In other words, something familiar changes and develops into the *unheimlich* – the uncanny. The uncanny, on the one hand, brings the story world close to our everyday world, and then it "punches the reader in the stomach" with something so fearful as to be completely inexpressible. This element often is what attracts readers to this type of story.

A genre which includes many elements of fantasy is the fairy tale. The classic fairy tale is short, takes place in an undetermined time and place, has simple characters (either wholly good or wholly bad, not ambivalent), and includes magical characters and/or objects. According to Bruno Bettelheim, "fairy tales ... state an existential dilemma briefly and pointedly. The fairy tale simplifies all situations. Its figures are clearly drawn... All characters are typical rather than unique." Bettelheim, a child psychologist and Holocaust survivor, considers the fairy tale to be a necessary tool for child development because it "confronts the child squarely with the basic human predicaments" (8). The fairy tale's

contribution to psychological development can explain the attraction of fairy tale Holocaust narratives, or of those with fantastic fairy-tale-like elements. Examples of such elements would be magical objects, quests, and the classic fairy tale trope of the transformation of a person into an animal and back into a person.

There is a large amount of overlap between the different fantastic elements mentioned above. Most of my primary sources have more than one fantastic element, each contributing its own meaning to the narrative of the Holocaust. In order to create some order in the different primary sources I will be discussing, I will make use of Marie-Laure Ryan's theories of narrative. Ryan emphasizes that the authors' goal is "not to create alternative possible worlds for their own sake, but to make a point about AW [Actual World]" (48). This is, of course, very relevant for all of Holocaust writing, where every story seeks to memorialize the Holocaust and its victims. In chapter one of *Possible Worlds*, Ryan defines three distinct worlds, the AW (actual world), the TAW (textual actual world, or the story itself) and the TRW (textual reference world). The similarity or difference between the worlds creates what Ryan calls "a topology of mimetic discourse" (28). This topology will help me to differentiate between different types of Holocaust fantasy.

I believe that each of the elements of fantasy I will discuss in this thesis has its own unique contribution to make to the representation of the Holocaust. Different elements attract different readers, thus widening the potential audience and expanding the number of people who are exposed to the Holocaust narrative and who will thus acknowledge and remember it.

3. Methodology and Form

Introduction

In the introduction I will elaborate on the scholarly and critical background above. I will present my thesis that each element of fantasy makes its own unique contribution to the representation of the Holocaust.

Chapter 1 - The Uncanny

In this chapter I will deal with three short stories whose narratives relate to the Holocaust. The stories -- Asimov's "Unto the Fourth Generation," Sargent's "Gather Blue Roses" and Dann's "Camps" -- take place in modern, seemingly normative settings. That is, according to Ryan's topology, AW=TRW. The protagonists are going about their daily lives when they encounter strange, spine-tingling events. I will analyze these stories according to Freud's theory of the uncanny (*unheimlich*) and suggest how these three very assimilated Jewish authors chose to relate to the Holocaust through uncanny fantasy. Quoting interviews by the authors, I will also suggest *why* they chose to use fantasy for their Holocaust stories.

Chapter 2 – The Fairy Tale

Children's fantasy about the Holocaust often has a forceful subtext, aimed at the adult reader. In this chapter I will look at two such books, and analyze them according to Bettelheim, who sees fairy tales as helping children understand universal problems and develop ways of coping with them. The first, *Dear Mili*, is a fairy tale by Wilhelm Grimm with a strong Christian undertone. The book is illustrated by Maurice Sendak, whose illustrations create a Holocaust story out of this classic Christian fairy-tale/fantasy.

Bruno, the young protagonist in *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas: A Holocaust Fable* by John Boyne, lives in a vague time and place, and encounters the horrors of the Holocaust without really understanding them. In addition to looking at this book according to

Bettelheim, I will show that it could be seen as an example of a book that softens the horror too much, as suggested by Bosajian.

Chapter 3 - Magic

Joseph Skibell's novel *A Blessing on the Moon* deals with the Holocaust through an extreme fantasy world. Using Ryan's topology, TAW = TRW, and both are completely different from the AW. The book includes fairy tale elements, such as a rabbi who is transformed into a crow and regains his rightful form only when the moon is returned to the sky, symbolizing the end of a quest and the resolution of problems.

The narrative in *A Blessing on the Moon* is very magical. I will show the prevalence of magic in Holocaust fantasy by relating to other stories -- Lemberg's "Geddarien" with its dancing buildings, the shawl that takes on a life of its own in Ozick's story of the same name, and the fantasy-like, almost magical closing scene in *The Last of the Just* by Schwarz-Bart.

Conclusion

The concluding chapter will summarize the claims made in the introduction and reiterate the benefits of different elements of fantasy in Holocaust literature.

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