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H-France Review Vol. 11 (August 2011), No. 176

Carolyn J. Dean. *Aversion and Erasure: The Fate of the Victim after the Holocaust*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2010. viii + 103 pp. \$29.95 (cl). ISBN 978-0-8014-4944-4.

Review by Michael R. Marrus, University of Toronto.

*Aversion and Erasure* makes a bold case that historians, literary critics, social scientists, public intellectuals and others have misinterpreted the experience of Holocaust survivors and their place in our understanding of the Jewish catastrophe of the Second World War. Focusing mainly on writing in France and the United States, Carolyn J. Dean of Brown University builds her case in four loosely assembled chapters, together with an introduction and epilogue, calling by implication for a major rethinking of how we deal not only with the Holocaust, but also with other instances of mass suffering for which the destruction of European Jewry provides such an iconic example. Readers of H-France who want a larger theoretical frame for her analysis, particularly with reference to the tortured history of the Second World War, may wish to refer to Henry Rousso's distinction between history and memory. To that contention, Carolyn Dean provides a sophisticated dissenting view: she disputes Rousso's distinction, seeing in it a disparagement of the testimony that at least some survivors of the Holocaust have given about their experience. She is a strong champion of their cause. Unfortunately, although her book is humane, thoughtful and penetrating in its analysis, it is also opaque in its argumentation and will likely be inaccessible to any but specialists who can contend with a high level of abstraction and a sometimes impenetrable style.

Dean targets the claim that there has been a "surfeit of Jewish memory," drawing our attention to the difficulty that many Jewish victims experienced after the war when they tried to communicate their terrible ordeals. Not wanting to understand, or even really to hear, those who encountered survivors were moved by aversion rather than sympathetic engagement. There is now a substantial literature on the failure of survivors to connect with postwar society, and in Dean's view, bolstered by her reading of present-day analysts, this incapacity persists, indeed may even have worsened in recent years—although her book, which is supposed to put attitudes toward suffering into historical context, is notably thin on how this incapacity evolved and may have changed over the years. Impatient with the idea that people promiscuously assume the role of victim in our day, Dean suggests that we live in a culture "that now casts suspicion on all those who claim to be victims or to have been victimized" (p. 55). What we do not like about the latter, she says, is that such claimants (or, rather, those whom we presume, possibly mistakenly, to be such claimants) "become the repository of unconstrained affect and thus of experience not sufficiently worked through" (p. 55).

From the start, critical readers will have a problem. Dean does not spend much time in defining or settling whether there is or is not a "surfeit of memory"—a phrase first used in this context by Charles Maier in a 1993 article. What she rather says is that there is *an idea* that there is a surfeit of memory and that this idea is generally nefarious, with harmful consequences for a proper understanding of the past. What she wants to do is not to categorize or assess victim testimony, but rather to examine "the ongoing historical refashioning of cultural attitudes to victims" (p. 175). Drawing on a long list of authorities who think variously about this complex subject, she criticizes those who argue that being a victim—and because of the emblematic significance of the Holocaust it turns out that Jews figure prominently among those seen this way—"confers identity and prestige" (p. 62). Going further, she

targets the contention that Jewish suffering “takes up too much space” (p.63). Practically speaking, such contentions have prompted some nasty polemics in which Jewish victims of the Holocaust have been undervalued or discredited for their unreliable accounts of the past or their allegedly extravagant claims about the uniqueness of their suffering and pride of place in the understanding of genocide. Dean’s own sources are mainly theorists coming from several disciplines, and readers will certainly be challenged to keep their arguments straight and to remember who is who and who is contending what in this ongoing discourse. Although it is plain what side she is on, Dean never quite says that the “surfeit of memory” idea is wrong. Nor does she test the theorists’ views against the historical record. What she suggests is that, right or wrong, or partly right and partly wrong, the “surfeit of memory” idea says more about us than it does about victims and, moreover, it has wrongful consequences.

Dean devotes a chapter to one of those wrongful consequences which is probably the least harmful, although highly revelatory—and that is an aesthetic preference, among the critics she examines, for what she calls “minimalist” testimony. Among survivors, the “gentle” Primo Levi is preferred over the “angry” Jean Améry; among historical writings on the Holocaust, the purportedly empiricist, matter-of-fact Jan Gross is admired over, say, the more exuberant Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, whose name does not appear in *Aversion and Erasure*, although she has discussed him at length in her previous work (pp. 123-128, 152).<sup>[1]</sup> The reason allegedly has to do with our discomfort with raw emotion and our aversion, to use Dean’s term, to a narrative that communicates trauma. “When Jewish victimhood is deemed to have garnered too much attention,” she writes, “a reductive form of minimalism represents victims as already having mastered the symptoms of their suffering, as already having moved on from their losses, and thus as having had an experience of victimhood that is no longer one” (p. 142).

What readers these days want, Dean suggests, is to have our victims “master” their terrible experiences, and submit their memories to dispassionate, objective historical assessment. Or rather, this is what the “public intellectuals, historians, and literary theorists” who write about victims want. But these interpreters err, she suggests, because they are prone to treat survivors’ memories with “contempt, condescension, and other forms of projection or aversion” (p. 151). (Readers may see a circularity of argument here.) One of the challenges with Dean’s book, we must always keep in mind, is that she is writing about the *discourse* about victims, not so much about victims themselves; about the “rhetorical construction of victims,” not victims as she understands them, or as we should understand them in the light of historical experience. While perfectly acceptable as a subject, the focus on discourse becomes confusing if we try to evaluate the contributions of historians who actually *use* survivor testimony, rather than focus on how to categorize their methodologies or evaluate their unconscious motivations. Thus while respecting his work, Dean casts a jaundiced eye over the methodology of Christopher Browning, who “insists finally on a neo-positivist use of as-empirically-verifiable-as-possible memories and [thus] reintroduces the divide between history and memory through the back door” (p. 147). Dean dislikes Browning’s approach because it “risks creating a presupposition of who is credible and who is not that potentially generates a story as phantasmatic (as characterized by denial, rejection, and repression) as those narratives obsessed by commemoration and the sanctity of survivors” (p. 147). “Phantasmatic,” I should add, is a verbal tick that recurs repeatedly in Dean’s text, and I think it does so out of the author’s evident frustration with what she believes to be unwarranted, extravagant assumptions about survivors.

Dean’s approach takes her into a realm of abstraction that I suspect most working historians will find unfamiliar. Most will not follow her when she concludes that “the conceptually limited opposition between the Holocaust conceived as a figure of post-modern trauma and aporia and the folding of traumatic experience finally back into the everyday is itself a symptom of the failure to address trauma except as other-worldly or, most often, in culturally contained and thus normative forms” (p. 153). Nor are any but the initiated likely to agree that critical reactions to victim testimony are all undermined by “suspicion, envy, attachment, and aversion” (p. 175). After all, sources must always be examined critically; there are special difficulties associated with each. It is possible, as Dean contends, that some

historians' assessment of alleged Jewish passivity is shaped by a "profound discomfort with or contempt for constrained agency and abjection" (p. 160), although we need to remember that the epithet about "sheep to the slaughter" was first used by Jewish insurgents denouncing other Jews for their unwillingness to revolt against the Germans.

Part of the problem may well be one of the questions asked: Browning is less interested in individual survivors' *experience* as he is in using their testimony, along with other evidence, to answer various questions about the Holocaust. Other scholars, for their own reasons, approach testimony with a more direct interest in survivors, and some indeed seek to understand what the precocious and lucid Holocaust victim H el ene Berr called "the ruins . . . in my heart" (p. 183). I think it would be a mistake to assume that a reading of survivor testimony by the one should be the same as a reading by the other. Still, Dean is obviously right to observe that it would be good for all of us to be more aware of our hidden assumptions and inclinations. At the end, I cannot help but think that she is onto something important. We *do* have trouble with victims--and as every conscientious historian of the Holocaust knows, it is a constant struggle, with this and other source material, both traumatic and non-traumatic, to get it right.

#### NOTES

[1] Carolyn Dean, *The Fragility of Empathy after the Holocaust* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004), ch. 2.

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ISSN 1553-9172