Holocaust poetry: awkward poetics in the work of Sylvia Plath, Geoffrey Hill, Tony Harrison and Ted Hughes


Abstract

Under the umbrella term 'Holocaust poetry', this book argues that distinctions need to be made between the writing of Holocaust survivors and those who were not involved in the events of 1933 to 1945. This study focuses on the post-Holocaust writers Sylvia Plath, Geoffrey Hill, Tony Harrison and Ted Hughes, while also stressing the links between them and the Holocaust poetry of Paul Celan, Miklós Radnóti, Primo Levi and János Pilinszky. Developing his theory of 'awkwardness' Antony Rowland argues that post-Holocaust poetry can play an important part in our understanding of Holocaust writing by stressing its self-conscious, imaginative engagement with the Holocaust, as well as the literature of survivors. The book illustrates that 'awkward' poetics enable post-Holocaust poets to provide ethical responses to history, and avoid aesthetic prurience. This probing and sensitive reassessment of Holocaust-related poetry will appeal to academics and students working in the areas of Holocaust Studies, contemporary poetry, and twentieth-century literature in general.

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Tony Harrison's poetry is barbaric. In 'Them & [uz]', the schoolteacher refers to the young poet as a barbarian because of his working-class accent; this is not the particular sense of the word that I wish to evoke. Instead, I refer to Theodor Adorno's statement that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric': the philosopher's statement seems to suggest that such activity in the late twentieth century is unethical due to the sheer horror of the Holocaust; aesthetics and atrocity are incompatible. An adequate representation of the Holocaust remains a lacuna in post-war British culture, but this has not deterred a number of poets, including Sylvia Plath, Geoffrey Hill, Jon Silkin and Harrison himself, from engaging with it. To ignore the Holocaust would be to leave it shrouded, as the Nazis intended, in silence.