

**Schieber, Kadishson, Eva. *Present Past*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2016.**

**Reviewed by Riki Traum, Fairleigh Dickinson University, NJ, USA.**

### **Red, Blood, and Soil**

Reading *Present Past*, by Ava Kadishson Schieber, makes it hard to continue with the daily routine. Her raw, occasionally blunt style, vivid descriptions, and feminist-cum-artistic prism, present another and less-familiar Holocaust testimonial memoir, conveyed by a strong survivor, an artist. This less-familiar yet major characteristic is anchored in Schieber's uncompromising storytelling and artistic testimony that undermine the conventional and familiar tension between a witness's present and past. In this undefined space between her present and past, Ava Kadishson Schieber explores relations between art and memory, and between art and testimony, and redefines the area that, as she claims, was slowly draining from her system (176). What is striking in this collection of stories, poems, and drawings, is the revealing interplay between Schieber's present and past; not only that the multi-dimensional trauma of the Second World War is an ongoing process that resurrects, shapes, and projects on the present, but that the present also shapes and projects on the way the witness-author memorizes her past. Human experience lasts much longer than the tragedy of war, but it is the idiosyncratic voice that bears the responsibility to relentlessly carrying out the testimony, and reassuring or even redefining its place in the present.

The distinctive merit of *Present Past* is its unapologetic point of departure: it is a textual and artistic testimony about the holocaust, conveyed decades after the historical tragedy, while Schieber's point of departure is noticeably her present life. "Maybe the past was already firmly stashed within my memory compartment," she writes in "The Olive Tree" (134), knowing that her vantage point allows her to reconstruct it tolerably, because perhaps "the colors have faded, but the structures of these events have remained" (77). In the title, *Present Past*, Schieber allows the present to precede the past and lead her thoughts. From here, where she now lives, loves, and creates, she boldly returns to the horrific and constitutive parts of her memory. This unique

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literary strategy of examining the present as an equally and well-deserved space of experiences, juxtaposing it with the past, and revisiting the unquestionably wounded past through it, is not only brave, but also defines this collection as autobiographical memoir that traces the writer's memories as intimate, non-causal occurrences, affected by her vantage point from which they are revisited and analyzed. The collection, then, in its artistic expressions traces not only the painful memories, but also the act of memorizing and decoding them.<sup>1</sup>

But there is more to it. Towards the end of her book, in a story titled, "The Infinite Warrior," Schieber touches upon her strong, perpetual strive to exhibit her excruciating memories. This attempt to rationalize and explain the inner irresistible desire to pour out, and display memories, is not only a recurring theme in the book, but also an invitation to the reader to join the journey, absorb the anger, and transcend it. This is where the book becomes a concern shared by Schieber and her community of readers: what to do with such an emotionally charged memory, how to reconcile with it, and share it. In "The Infinite Warrior," Schieber refers to her former neighbor, Jean Peer, and herself as "the children who emerged from the tentacles of the past" (184). This image of the past as an amorphous entity with limbs and the portrayal of Schieber as its child, clarifies the organic bond between the two and the eternal shadow of the past. This metaphor also introduces the lack of a sense of belonging in a continuous present, as a sensation that constitutes the book, along with the determination to fill the gaping void that opened widely during the war and has never closed.

The visceral reaction that the book evokes originates in its multi-layered structure, thematic strata that recur throughout the stories, and a set of prominent defamiliarizations that underlines the abyss between present and past. These three aspects of the book are crucial to the understanding of the testimonial strength of *Present Past*. Womanhood, as a vantage point, constitutes the gender-cum-political stratum, while different aspects of freedom constitute the universal one. The bird, as a highly-charged symbol, dominates and institutes the poetic stratum. The strata are entwined and nourish one another. Along with the short, striking, and intimate stories, the collection includes poems and drawings that complement each other by adding different dimensions and prisms. Together, they become a collage of viewpoints and intersections created by a female artist who wishes to present her memorizing as a process destined to remain

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open and forever examined. Each story is enveloped with drawings and poems, as if they conceal the candid, revealing speech and provide an important pause between the stories. The drawings are minimal and demonstrate the endless possibilities of a single line, and the beauty and expressiveness of simplicity. Even when the lines seem tangled and tortuous, there is always an outlet that is airy, high, and open. Hands and birds hover and float upward.

Floating and birds are two motifs in this collection that also constitute major metonymies of the female witness-survivor who adopts floating as both a stance and a survival strategy. As a universal and highly charged female symbol, the bird evokes a metonymy of female entrapment, liberation, and resistance.<sup>2</sup> In the book, however, the testimonies defamiliarize this obvious relation, and stress the delicate line between physical imprisonment and mental stagnation. Her testimony from her first years after the war, as a young artist who joined a group of film makers, in communist Yugoslavia is captivating: “I was cautiously balancing a painful recent past with my mounting doubts and present political dissatisfaction” (49). But it was during this process of redefinition, and after crossing the Albanian border, when she saw herself in a prisoner who “carried a shackle with a chain ending in an iron ball” (51). “What I never experience was imprisonment,” she confesses, “As we looked at each other, I became a witness to a timeless bond, connecting to horror beyond escape” (52). This universal bond, often expressed through the bird, accompanies her throughout her life. It continues decades later, as an Israeli citizen, when she met Yemeni Jews, and felt how her curiosity expanding: “I realized the similarity, the repetitive patterns featuring the same symbols within ethnic groups” (71), she writes, suggesting that the desire to build a bridge of shared experiences dominated her worldview after the war.

Significantly, freedom is associated with womanhood. The book is imbued with strong and bold women characters who shaped Schieber’s female being. This is another important stratum of the book, since it is derived from a deep political-cum-gender awareness and stance. “For years I not only hid my identity,” she writes, “but my gender as well.” Later she explains the inevitable necessity to suppress her feminine appearance during the war, because “I was aware of the hazard of rape, walking alone through wooded rural areas” (60). For years, being a woman evoked fears and uncertainty, and this book aims, among other things, to repair this wounded, denied being. The female presence in this collection is not only intriguing and

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essential for deep understanding, but also offers an alternative prism through which the reader is invited to perceive Schieber's journey. Womanhood here is presented as a space of possibilities: Nelly Gatter the laundress, whose humiliation has remained a sentimental and physical memory, Samia, the young Serbian, from the postwar communist era, and Amal the Druze, a handicapped woman, who lived in isolation. This gallery of women along with Ava Kadishson Schieber's mother and sister, childhood friends and female relatives, arrived at their feminist views through life experience, wounds, and struggles. For Ava Kadishson Schieber, feminism is not an alternative, but a humanist way of living and bearing emotional charges and scars. This is vividly portrayed through the image of Lot's wife in "The Infinite Warrior." Reflecting on her first visit to the Dead Sea, Schieber remembers how eager she was to find out which of the salt mounds "looked like a sculpted female figure, the one who looked back at the past and turned into a pillar of salt" (172). The petrifying image is translated and translocated to an intriguing interplay between past and present and to holocaust survivors whose past halts and conquers them. Unlike them, Schieber, "... wanted to maintain all my memories, not to discard the depth of death inflicted on me." Floating allows the liberation that she needs to maintain memories without being halted.

Most of the women in this collection are refugees, occasionally isolated, ostracized, or social and political outcasts. Being outcast is a vantage point and mental state, that in later years becomes an outsider stance that contributes greatly to Schieber's artistic vision. Yet, it remains an important part of her female being and projects on the way she conceives other women in her life. These female figures became "agents" of what throughout the years became a source of liberation and transformation. Obviously, being an outcast woman generated a strong sense of misplacement and displacement. Belonging is another recurring theme that Schieber processes here. She eloquently describes her first years in Israel, during the late 1940s, a place for "newcomers":

The older survivors of persecution seemed so disoriented. But even we, the young refugees with less emotional baggage, found ourselves at a loss when we were isolated and not really accepted by the local community. We were called the newcomers and therefore constantly reminded of our past while paradoxically we were told not to talk about our experiences... It was bizarre comfort to live in a place with so many misplaced, expelled, physically and emotionally displaced newcomers... We were trying to establish a common ground in order to belong. It was challenging. (131)

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From here, from this yearning to belong, comes her long and complex relationship with soil and trees as two opposing symbols: soil represents national ownership, struggles, and blood; trees are a “source of engagement,” tranquility, and life. Being an outcast woman who had survived the war determines what Shoshana Felman titles “a strange appointment,” from which the witness-survivor cannot liberate herself by any interchange or representation.<sup>3</sup> The strong gender vision that constitutes one of the most significant layers of the book, unveils a solitary burden and responsibility to be uncompromised, undisguised, and unmistakable. The historical, political, and gender responsibility that this collection carries, to relay its stories and “to transgress the confines of that isolated stance to speak for others and to others” is solitary, and based in actual and subjective life experience that will never repeat. This is probably the core of the testimonial act. As Eli Wiesel wrote: “If someone could have written my stories, I would not have written them. I have written them in order to testify. My role is the role of the witness... not to tell, or to tell another story, is ... to commit perjury.”<sup>4</sup>

Ava Kadishson Schieber knows that no one else could tell her story and that her intimate insights are hers alone. Often, the book reveals the collision and merging of Schieber’s artistic and documentary prisms. These two prisms generate two types of responsibility, but in both, there is a commitment to capture and address strong feelings evoked by events. When Schieber confesses that she was embarking in a perpetual mission to say what she felt obligated to say (184), she refers exactly to that responsibility, in fact, she calls herself a witness: “By virtue of the fact that the testimony is *addressed* to others, the witness, from within the solitude of his own stance, is the vehicle of an occurrence, a reality, a stance or a dimension *beyond himself*.”<sup>5</sup> By the end of the book, the reader has completed a journey composed of not only pieces of memories from the far past, but also their processing in the present.

Language as both a method of communication and a system of lexical codes, is an additional stratum of the book. The poems, apart from being artistic representation, carry an important linguistic function, where language is examined as an open space of interplay between emotions and reason, the abstract and the concrete. While tracing the poems’ abstract and nonlinear evolvment, one cannot avoid recalling Adorno’s contention that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”<sup>6</sup> In a later essay, “Commitment,” Adorno states that literature must not

only resist, but “it is to works of art that has fallen the burden of wordlessly asserting what is barred to politics.”<sup>7</sup> One can apply Adorno’s statement to Schieber’s poems that address the emotive unconscious areas at whose gate rationalistic retrospective analysis deliberately halts. The poems are short and usually written as single units with no punctuation. At their core, one can find strong anesthesia, whose effect is bewildering and mystifying:

floating within the air  
showing the entire rainbow color range  
a soap bubble  
arouse a strange urge to catch  
the splendor  
although it will rupture at the touch  
like an emotion capture (35)

the enjambments and the fragmentary, delayed meanings they generate, create an effect that is almost contrary to that of the stories, that are structurally reach a certain concrete and rational closure. The poems, in contrast, maintain a figurative-cum-emotive quality, whose immediate impact is one of detachment and hovering, the very same hovering that I mentioned earlier. As a form of writing and witnessing, the poems that employ several functions simultaneously and tolerate abstractions and hesitations, “allow for knowing that which is beyond comprehension”<sup>8</sup> in any other form of writing. The expressions are reflective and often react to the story they follow or precede. Here, the author loosens and sets free the tightened speech derived from the responsibility to bring her raw story. In these poems, Schieber follows her associative, creative mind and deliberately liberates herself from the commitment to her addressee, a commitment that characterizes her stories. Here she is committed to the elusive emotion that she wishes to capture. Moreover, the poems allow her to outline an alternative space of communication, in which strong tropes are often derived from a solid thought or notion, and at a point transform into abstract images, remote from their origin. Significantly, the reader cannot trace the beginnings and ends of the sentences, and the effect is circular and intense. One may draw similarities between the evolvment of the poems and the movement in the drawings: circular, with blurred edges, and a surprising ability to transform and reveal new points of reference or overlapping, in every reading.

Moreover, the poems invite unprocessed and intuitive reactions. They stress the immeasurable abyss between memory and reality. The option of death rises in the poems, as a constant torture, as Arlene Kramer Richards claims: “The survivor feels the pain but can work on answering the questions of whether it is better to live or die, be the victim or the perpetrator.”<sup>9</sup> The tropes in the poems and their deliberately disturbing flow, process the attempt to address these insoluble questions. Eros and Thanatos are two forces that coexist in *Present Past*’s poems. The unidentified witness-speaker conveys both states of life and death as changeable and as highly close:

road dust tarnishes my overcoat  
fading images bulge large pockets  
couches behind the sockets of my eyes  
at dusk are swarms of memories  
indulging me with versatility of my hectic journey  
which is bound to cease sooner than later  
and it does not matter  
as my time span beside arduous difficulties  
included an optimum spectrum of lavish hues  
in genuine beauty (171)

The road is dusty, and the images are faded and hardly survive the hectic journey, but out of the difficulty “an optimum spectrum of lavish hues” grows, and we are left with this genuine sense of beauty. Richards is accurate when she states that in the trauma of World War II, “conveying feelings somewhat strengthens the possibility of coping with them. It makes possible a context that is not horrible, which contains the horror even as it evokes the most pain in the listener or reader.”<sup>10</sup> *Present Past* then, offers the numerous possibilities of the artistic prism as one that allows horror merge with genuine beauty. This important strategy is also used by Cynthia Ozick in her well-known story, “The Shawl,” where in the midst of a death march, the reader can experience a delicate string of “genuine beauty:”

Without complaining, Magda relinquished Rosa’s teats, first the left, then the right; both were cracked, not a niff of milk. The duct-crevice extinct, a dead volcano, blind eye, chill hole, so Magda too the corner of the shawl and milked it instead. She sucked and sucked, flooding the threads with wetness. The shawl’s good flavor, milk of linen<sup>11</sup>

The allusion in Ozick’s story is inevitable, for Ozick defines an imaginary line between fear and courage, survival and demise, or floating and collapse. In *Present Past*, the readers cross the very same lines, and they capture the “lavish hues” of the imaginary realm through poetry.

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There is an additional function to poetry, which is no stranger to the poet-witness, in which the poetic expression is a medium of remeasuring lost and repossessing it. In “Poetry and Testimony: Paul Celan, or The Accident of Aesthetics,” Shoshana Felman describes Celan’s “witness” as dispossessed: “one whose journey has originated in the constraint of deportation, in the throes of an ejection from his native country.”<sup>12</sup> Celan, according to Felman’s analysis, is a witness-traveler who examines and assesses “unknown destination of his journey.”<sup>13</sup> The traveler’s stance characterizes the dispossessed poet-witness, who knows that poetry allows the poet (and the reader) to mentally return, sustain, and eventually repossess. This observation corresponds well with Ava Kadishson Schieber’s poetic stance, whose strong sense of dispossession is only intensified by the choice to publish her poems in English.<sup>14</sup> This linguistic choice is obviously an aesthetic strategy that expands the traveler’s stance and the desire to explore an outsider’s vantage point who examines her own intimate life experiences from different, perhaps, a distant point. If Celan’s crucial decision to write in his mother tongue, German, within his voluntary exile, marks the desire “to reappropriate the language which has marked his own exclusion,”<sup>15</sup> then the choice to write in English might be seen as the ultimate attempt to absorb and embrace the present.

If the traveler’s stance defamiliarizes the concept of place, since the witness experiences space with no boundaries, *Present Past* also defamiliarizes time, and by that links itself to a larger community of literary holocaust testimonials. Time here cannot be measured by regular parameters since the memory mixes, erases, overlays, and blurs. Ida Fink’s distinguished confessional statement in the opening of her book, “I want to talk about certain time not measured in months and years,”<sup>16</sup> is relevant here, since it reveals the enigmatic core of a testimony—of any testimony—to capture and thus enliven mute experiences during a catastrophe through speech; to stimulate a plethora of contradictory elements that can be rendered only through the tension between “talking” and “Writing” or between time as a measured period and time as an infinite space. “This time,” asserts Fink, “was measured not in months but in a word. . . we had different measures of time, we different ones, always different, always with that mark of difference. . .”<sup>17</sup> Defamiliarization permits once again transitions and interplays among periods and decades. It is an act of repossessing a time that had been lost during the war.

This “mark of difference” that Fink mentions, is carried forever by the witness-survivor and generates an enormous responsibility to relay the testimony. *Present Past* carries out this responsibility and decodes it through stories, poems, and drawings. Through these artistic and textual manifestations, Schieber reconciles with this mark of difference, decomposes it, and then recomposes it in her own order and form. The burden of the difference is unbearable, but the responsibility to tell is heavier. Towards the end of her book Ava Kadishson Schieber confesses that she is “the sound of one musical instrument within a variation on a perpetuating theme” (151). This recognition conceals both wisdom and ability to bear witness and identify at this stage of her life, her singular voice within this variation on this bleeding and perpetuating theme. She admits that she can never fully understand it, yet is destined to live with the enigma and keep moving forward.

- 1 This intuiting act of memorizing that becomes so effective in *Present Past*, evokes an interesting interview with Ronit Matalon, about her book, *The Sound of Our Steps* (2008), in which she, in reference to Joseph Brodsky, compares memory to a library whose shelves have collapsed, and has no “complete works of,” but rather flickering, “explosions of lights with non-causal relations.” See, Shiri Lev-Ari, “How Love Breaks through destructions,” in *Ha’aretz*, September 11<sup>th</sup> 2007.
- 2 See Ellen Moers, *Literary Women*, (New York: Garden City, 1976); and Cora Kaplan, *Sea Changes Culture and Feminism*, (New York London: Verso, 1986).
- 3 Shoshana Felman. “Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching,” in *Testimony, Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, ed. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 3.
- 4 Elie Wiesel, “The Loneliness of God,” in *D’var Ha-shavu’a*, Tel Aviv, 1984, translated from the Hebrew by Shoshana Felman, quoted in, Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 204.
- 5 Felman, “Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching,” 3.
- 6 Theodor Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society,” in *Prism*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1981), 34.
- 7 Theodor Adorno, “Commitment,” in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, eds. Andrew Arato and Eika Gebhardt, (New York: Continuum, 1982), 313.
- 8 Nancy R. Goodman and Marilyn B. Meyers, *The Power of Witnessing: Reflections, Reverberations, and Traces of the Holocaust*, (New York: Routledge, 2012), xxxix.
- 9 Arlene Kramer Richards, “Blood: Reading the Holocaust,” in *The Power of Witnessing*, Ed. Nancy R. Goodman and Marilyn B. Meyers, (New York: Routledge, 2012), 218.
- 10 Richards, “Blood: Reading the Holocaust,” 218.
- 11 Cynthia Ozick, “The Shawl,” in *The Shawl*, (New York: Vintage Books), 4-5.
- 12 Felman, “Education and Crisis,” 25.
- 13 Felman, “Education and Crisis,” 25.
- 14 Celan was very clear about his linguistic choice to write in German: “Only in one’s mother tongue can one express one’s own truth. In a foreign language the poet lies.” In: Israel Chalfen, *Eine Biographie seiner Jugend, 1979*. Quoted also in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony*, 26.
- 15 Felman, “Education and Crisis,” 27.
- 16 Ida Fink, *A Scarp of Time and Other Stories*, translated by Madeline Levine and Francine Prose, (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 3.
- 17 Fink, *A Scarp of Time and Other Stories*, 3.

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