

Book Review

S. Dresden: *Vervolging, vernietiging, literatuur*. Meulenhoff - Amsterdam, 1991.

When Meryl Streep received the Academy Award (Oscar) for best actress in 1982, for her role in the movie "Sophie's Choice", in which part of the action takes place in Auschwitz, the contrast of the glittering festive Hollywood crowd and the scenes of the film that were shown in honour of the actress was so shocking that I switched off the television set. This episode left me with a strong feeling of guilt, because I should not have watched that program as long as I did. In a more general form the question can be worded as follows: do the concentration and extermination camp experiences lend themselves to being treated in visual arts and literature?

In a study whose importance cannot be overestimated, Sem Dresden - professor emeritus of French literature at Leiden University and former president of the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences (Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen) - discusses this question and many others. The subject of persecution and extermination in their most brutal and cruel form makes it impossible to use the customary criteria to judge the works of art and other documents versus the creative aspect of fiction. Some, like George Steiner and Theodor Adorno, reject literature as a means of expression. Only the immediate testimony of chronicles and diaries would be acceptable and guarantee authenticity and truth. Yet as Dresden points out, there is a considerable overlap of the various types of writing. Memoirs written in retrospect, with the hindsight that *ad hoc* descriptions of what is going on cannot have, select in a different way what is important and what is not. Moreover, the actual circumstances of writing are worlds apart: on the one hand a continuous threat of being found out, a lack of paper and writing utensils, on the other hand the security of the post-war years, but with the burden of what could be called survivors' guilt. Do the form and style of memoirs such as those written by Primo Levi put them in the realm of literature, and

if so, which criteria should one use when deciding if a work is literary?

A further complication arises when the question is asked: who can write about the events of 1939-1945? Even if a literary treatment is accepted, the requirement of authenticity seems to exclude all those who were not directly involved. Apart from the problem of sensationalism and trivialization that is more likely to present itself in the work of outsiders, there is in principle no objection to their writing about what happened, provided they have reliable documentation. Here one of the major stumbling blocks comes to the fore. As Dresden remarks, persecution and extermination as they have taken place in World War II are beyond the imagination, and beyond what human languages are able to express. What the Jews suffered at the hands of the Germans and their Nazi helpers of various occupied countries is unique, and every comparison with their fate is false. The terms holocaust and genocide are used so carelessly these days that they become almost devoid of meaning. The depth of their plight in ghettos and camps is beyond reach: writer and reader face an impossible task when they try to recreate the reality of that almost hermetically closed world.

In a situation where people were trapped and doomed, ethical and moral values often clashed with the will to survive. In addition it was very difficult not to get entangled in the snares set by the S.S., which forced its victims to collaborate in their own destruction. The whole question of so-called collaboration by Jews should not be seen in the same light as that of non-Jewish helpers of the Nazis. For the latter it was a matter of free choice, whereas for many Jews it was not. The situation was very confusing; in some instances a cold cynical decision may have thwarted the German aim of killing all the Jews, whereas heroic self sacrifice sometimes made things easier for the S.S. Therefore moral indignation about what, in normal circumstances, would be objectionable behaviour is in most cases unjustified: there is no black and white in the Jewish Councils

and in the Sonderkommandos in which Jews worked in crematoria and gas chambers. Even those who did not belong to these generally condemned groups often had to compromise. Each individual case is different and atypical and each survivor an exception to the rule. Yet by adding up all the literary and non-literary testimonies, one comes closer to an understanding of the incomprehensible suffering of all Jews.

The German tormentors and their helpers, of course, play the key role in the extermination. Yet their mechanical, robotlike behaviour does not lend itself to literary description. Where the correct, inhuman, unemotional carrying out of the program breaks down, either sadistic cruelty occurs or, in very rare cases, the individual turns his back on the S.S. and its camp regime and ceases to play a role in the extermination process. One of the very few literary works dealing with the double life of the S.S. executioner who leads an exemplary family life is *La mort est mon métier*, published in 1952. The author, Robert Merle, analyzes the split personality of Rudolf Höss, commandant of Auschwitz. Dresden is right, however, to warn us against the French saying *Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*, for no matter what the traumas of his youth and his hardships during S.S. training may have been, the S.S.-er keeps a partial personal freedom that Jews did not have.

It is impossible to do justice in a review to a book as comprehensive and as subtle as *Vervolging, vernietiging, literatuur*. Such books should be read by as many people as possible. Dresden's approach is free of sentimentality, yet he is deeply involved, and writes with great feeling. As is to be expected the scholarly documentation is impeccable. The material the book covers is not limited to Dutch literature, so that the general character of the psychological, sociological and literary theoretical observations is stressed.

This courageous innovative book, learned yet very accessible, received the prestigious literary Busken Huet prize for 1992 in the Netherlands and was nominated for the European literary prize of the same year. Issue no. 57 (1992) of the review *Raster*, entitled "De Literaire Getuige - S. Dresden", offers a wealth of additional information about Dresden and his ideas and a reaction to his book by four editors of the journal.