

**Elke Preul, Berlin**

## **Circle around the absence**

Review

**D. M. Thomas, *Pictures at an Exhibition*.** A novel. London, New York, Bloomsbury, 1993.

With *Pictures at an Exhibition* D.M. Thomas returns for the second time to the subject of the Holocaust. But while in *The White Hotel* the story unfolded towards the massacre at Babi Yar *Pictures at an Exhibition* starts with scenes from the concentration camp at Auschwitz and is then followed by fragments of different lives in Great Britain in the 1990s. The Holocaust is no longer the foreshadowed fate, as one witnessed in *The White Hotel*. Instead the Holocaust serves as a frame which binds together different lives and events. But it is more than just a frame. The events of the Holocaust are like a brace that tightens around the lives of the characters, up to the point where the pressure inside the brace is on the verge of explosion. Everything said and done in the novel therefore becomes charged with almost unbearable tension.

### **Almost unbearable tension**

The novel starts with Chaim Galewski's memoirs. Galewski describes his acquaintance with the SS-doctor Lorenz who asked Galewski to cure him from his nightmares and headaches by using psychoanalytic technique. The reader is not only confronted with the everyday atrocities committed in the camp but also with a terrifying insight into the persecutor's psyche. The narration breaks off and the reader is thrown into the year 1990 somewhere in Great Britain. In the following chapters the story circles around a small group of people who all somehow know each other. The centre of this group are the psychoanalyst Oscar Jacobson and his wife Myra. Underneath their various relationships in today's Great Britain lies the common experience of the Holocaust. Throughout the different chapters Thomas scatters hints which indicate their connection with the introductory chapter of the camp. But these hints never point to a specific direction. The reader hears in on different analytic sessions. But unlike the sessions reported by Galewski, we only hear the voice of the patient and his assumptions. The authority for the interpretations, which is the analyst, remains silent. There are also various letters and postcards sent to and fro between the different characters. But, again, the reader only gets to know one side of the correspondence.

As the story unfolds it becomes obvious that the characters are trapped in a sort of biographical spider web. They are all tied to this web and no matter where they turn they are again and again confronted with each other and the history they have in common. The tension rises until one of the entrapped characters breaks up and attacks the centre, the analyst, Oscar Jacobson.

### **The untrustworthy narrator**

After this climax the story returns to the camp narration. This time not for further analytic sessions but to sketch the almost friendship-like relationship between Galewski and Lorenz in

"the last summer" of Auschwitz. And also to enforce the picture of the untrustworthy narrator, Chaim Galewski. It turns out that he has generated from the 'normal' Häftlingsarzt to a collaborator who has adopted the concentrationary universe completely. He has become the perfect victim caught up in the terrible system of committing crimes in order to survive, with hardly any moral doubts.

Reading the novel is like looking at a collage, made from different materials are combined in order to gain a new perspective on them. New meanings might unfold via this technique. The same can be stated for *Pictures at an Exhibition*. At first sight the combination seems accidental - Thomas's selection from different genres more like a random product. But the more the story unfolds the more the reader is struck by the obvious or hidden structural and textual connections. The materials themselves seem to fuel each other again and again with new tension and meaning. But what is the tie between these different materials?

Thomas establishes a narrative web which is not held together by the threads but by the holes in it. The tie in this case is not made of any touchable material but by a very forceful absence. The most striking hole - or tie - is a gap of 50 years. With this gap all the characters of the present become blurred and uncertain. The reader is forced to leave his/her critical viewpoint and has to reconstruct the possibly hidden connections between the past and the present. The reader is completely left without any trustworthy narrator to whom he/she might turn for reliable information concerning the identities of the characters. While one undertakes this search for continuity one is always searching in the grey pool of perhaps and maybe. One will never get a chance to pin down exactly who was who 50 years ago. It seems that almost everyone has good reasons to hide their original identity.

### **The grey pool of perhaps and maybe**

The reader experiences the problem of representation. Whenever we deal with the past we have to keep in mind that the past will always remain absent and can never be presence as such. We are forced to realize that actually we, with our representations of the past, give (or rather create) meaning to the past. It is exactly this absence which fuels our imagination and our desire to know. But as stated above the past will always remain absent and therefore it is impossible to know fully - although we keep on trying.

If we transfer the problem of representation from the time level to the level of the content it becomes quite clear that the novel is not only dealing with the unbridgable gap between past and present and the everlasting absence of the past. It is also dealing with the void created by the deaths of millions of people during the Second World War.

Regarding the problem of representation from this angle we will not find the answer for our questions but we will find why our desire to know will always remain unfulfilled but will also keep us searching for answers. This void is like the empty centre of a vortex, around which everything circles. Those who have died won't be able to speak and those who have survived can always only report what happened by remembering from this side of the gap, e.g. from the present. Therefore we are forced to circle around the absence. We can only collect as much material as possible to become an idea of the outline, the outer borders of the void. But the centre will always remain unrepresentable to us.

Thomas is not voting for the termination of our dealing with the topic or our search for truth. His great achievement lies in the text's ability to give us a glimpse of the overwhelming impact history has on our life in the present. We are unable to get hold of the past but its absence is certainly there, is present.

**Donald Michael Thomas, *Pictures at an Exhibition*.** A novel. New York, London, Bloomsbury, 1993. 278 pp.

### **Short biographical note**

**Elke Preul**, born in 1970, studied history and literature at the University of Oldenburg (GER) and at the University of Coventry (GB). The main focus in her studies were the different representations of the Holocaust in historiography and literature. In 1995 she participated in the Tempus-project "Civil Society and Social Change in Europe after Auschwitz", supported by the EC. In this project Preul took part in the preparation of the exhibition "Representations of Auschwitz – 50 Years of Photography", shown in August 1995 in Cracow. In 1999 and 2000 she participated in a research on representation of trauma in visual arts. Elke Preul has finished her studies in Literary Theory and History in July 2004. The topic of her graduation thesis was on British historiographic novels representing the Holocaust.

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