Literary Refractions of Jewish Collective Memory after Eichmann

Linda Kinstler, 2013

The Grua/O’Connell grant enabled me to travel to Jerusalem and Tel Aviv in January 2013 to research my senior thesis, which examined the influence of Hannah Arendt’s coverage of the 1961 Eichmann trial on post-Holocaust literature. I spent two weeks in Israel, splitting my time between the two cities, which each represent very different parts of contemporary Israel.

I spent the first part of my trip in Jerusalem, where I stayed at the Austrian Hospice in the center of the Old City’s Muslim Quarter. Jerusalem is the seat of the Israeli government, and the holiest city for both the Jewish and Muslim faiths--visiting the city allowed me to gain a perspective on how religion figures into the state government, and to understand how the occupation of Palestinian territories impacts daily life. One of the most formative parts of my trip was my visit to the Beit Ha’am, Jerusalem’s cultural center, which houses the theater where the Eichmann trial was held. One of Arendt’s harshest criticisms of the Eichmann trial was that it was a “show trial” meant to cast the new Israeli government in a good light, so visiting the scene of the event allowed me to better understand her writings. I also visited the Israeli National Archives, which contain the original transcripts, video, and photographs from the 1961 trial. Part of my investigation of Arendt’s impact stemmed from a film adaptation of her book by the French-Israeli director and activist Eyal Sivan, who used the same archival material to film “The Specialist,” a critical film on the trial.

In Tel Aviv, I visited Sivan’s latest exhibit, “Towards a Common Archive,” which collected testimony from veterans of the 1948 war for Israeli independence, which is known as “al-Nakba” or “the catastrophe” in Arabic. The exhibit was highly relevant to my thesis, because it aimed to reveal the “procedural looking away” from catastrophe and culpability that Arendt (and W.G. Sebald and Philip Roth after her) identified in post-war Germany, and--controversially--Israel as well. I interviewed Sivan on his work, and published my findings in an article for the World Policy Journal, available online here: http://www.worldpolicy.org/blog/2013/01/22/toward-common-archive-reframing-roots-palestine-and-israel).

While I was in Tel Aviv I met with Hana Wirth-Nesher, professor of English and American studies at Tel Aviv University, and Samuel L. and Perry Haber Chair on the Study of the Jewish Experience in the United States. Wirth-Nesher is a leading scholar in the field of American Jewish literature, and is one of the most well-respected critics of Philip Roth worldwide. She read my chapter on Roth in advance of our meeting, and gave me incredibly helpful input on how to further expand and legitimate my claims. While at Tel Aviv University, I also visited the Museum of the Jewish Diaspora. Overall, the experience enabled me to grasp the paradoxical, contradictory experience that is life in contemporary Israel, and to understand how the political situation figures into the literature of Arendt, Sebald, and Roth--all of whom turn back to the Holocaust, and to the post-war period in which the Eichmann trial was held as a way of processing the current situation.

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