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Abigail Rine

George Fox University, arine@georgefox.edu

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REVIEW ARTICLE

MAKING THE SILENCE SPEAK: ANGELA MORGAN CUTLER'S *AUSCHWITZ*

CUTLER, ANGELA MORGAN. *Auschwitz*. Ullapool: Two Ravens Press, 2008. 370 pp. £9.99. ISBN 978-1906120184.

IN THE INTRODUCTION to their collection *The Holocaust and the Text*, Andrew Leak and George Paizis discuss how our relationship to the Holocaust is about to change. Once the remaining first-hand witnesses, both victims and perpetrators, reach the end of their lives, “the memory of those events will no longer be embodied in a real human presence”.¹ We are on the brink of losing our “incarnate” connection to the Holocaust, and the burden of memory will soon lie with those born into a world where the Holocaust has always already occurred.² How, then, are we to speak from this distance, from this position of unavoidable ignorance? Angela Morgan Cutler’s novel *Auschwitz* (2008) emerges as a response to this question, a response that is consciously situated in the “gap between knowledge and understanding”.³ This article offers a review and critical analysis of *Auschwitz*, locating its difference from other Holocaust narratives and employing the theories of Hélène Cixous and Emmanuel Levinas to discuss Cutler’s narrative mode of re-presenting the incomprehensible.

Auschwitz opens on a bus ride from Krakow to Oświęcim, the small Polish town that contains the most infamous of Holocaust sites. This is a fitting opening, as the novel itself is a journey toward Auschwitz, not as a place, but as a name. Cutler’s autobiographical novel is an attempt to locate this word – AUSCHWITZ – to explore the enormity it represents. She is not concerned, primarily, with the historical Auschwitz, but rather with what it means, and does not mean, in a post-Holocaust context. Although she reaches the *place* of Auschwitz within the first few pages, the name and what it contains remain much more elusive; the whole of the novel recounts her struggle with the word, her inability to reach or express understanding. As Cutler herself recognises, the unspeakability of the Holocaust, of Auschwitz, has become something of a truism. Describing the ubiquity of Auschwitz narratives in the opening of the novel, she asks herself:

So how to write another? How to find a way to write more, to say that there is nothing else to say? – and what a cliché that’s become. That there’s nothing left to say: this gets you nowhere, only more and more stories that give me no clues, no direction, no blueprint.⁴

Although Cutler continues to assert that she has “nothing to say” about Auschwitz, the novel unfolds between her negations.⁵ She approaches

Auschwitz in its unsayability; her response to her own question – how to write another? – is not to resolve her confusion, but to give it a voice. Cutler’s strategy in approaching Auschwitz is to break open her own text, to disrupt the narrative with a cacophony of voices and styles that each, in its own incomplete way, tries to name the unnameable. What makes this novel work is its disavowal of resolution and completion, its resistance to fixed meaning.

“It has to be a mess. . .”

In many ways, *Auschwitz* is a difficult book to read – and intentionally so. Cutler is attempting to locate a language, a narrative form that can capture at least part of her experience, an experience that is, above all, one of confusion. As a reader, I welcomed this open disorder on the grounds that no book entitled *Auschwitz* should be easy on the reader, or the writer. This book, in its disjointed and non-linear form, is likewise difficult to summarise, as several distinct threads twist together to form the novel: the intermittent travelogue recounting Cutler’s experiences visiting Auschwitz, Minsk and Berlin; the correspondence between Cutler and the Franco-American author Raymond Federman (Moinous); Cutler’s holocaust-related dreams; and, throughout all of these, Cutler’s experience of conceiving and writing her novel. Perhaps the best synopsis is one that describes each of these threads and the way they tangle together.

I found Cutler’s travel narratives to be the most compelling aspects of her novel; perhaps because, having been to many of the places described, I held a clear mental picture and could remember my own conflicting reactions: is it okay to eat while visiting Auschwitz? To cry? *Not* to cry? Is it normal to reach a point of saturation – to say to oneself, *I don’t want to learn any more?* Cutler’s apt observation that “the scale” in Auschwitz “is all wrong” indicates that the place of Auschwitz is too small for the enormity the name encompasses (p. 17). Her reflection underscores the distinction between the place and the name, describing the illusory experience of touring Auschwitz and being led to believe that it is merely a place, one that can be fully grasped by the senses and thereby understood. Cutler tangibly interacts with Auschwitz; she takes Auschwitz into herself, the images, smells, sounds, and records what these sensations elicit in her memories. Though Cutler is able to see and touch Auschwitz, this does nothing to assuage her confused reactions. The barbed-wire fence, the room-sized nest of hair, the tangle of spectacles, the piles of shoes, suitcases, prosthetic limbs – these exhibits baffle her senses, widening the distance between *now* and *then*, between knowing and unknowing. Cutler’s strength is in allowing this distance, even as she resists it.

Cutler’s travel account also evokes the unavoidable shame that comes from being a tourist in Auschwitz. She describes her attempt to “ease [. . .] onto the bus without being seen” and her discomfort at having to repeat the name “Auschwitz” to buy a ticket (p. 9). She says the name sheepishly, guiltily, feeling the need to distinguish herself “as a different kind of tourist, a different kind of

voyeur” (p. 10). Even the colour of her skirt – turquoise – is a source of self-doubt: how should one dress for Auschwitz? There is shame merely in the ability to come to Auschwitz freely and leave unscathed. We can visit Auschwitz on sunny summer afternoons, wearing bright colours; we can touch the dank walls of the gas chamber and eat lunch in the Auschwitz café; we can do this because Auschwitz the place is no longer Auschwitz the name. We approach Auschwitz as tourists, because there is no other vantage point available to us. We want to *understand*, because understanding would exonerate us; we would no longer be on the outside, at a distance, sensing our own ignorance, our own complicity. This experience of tourist guilt seems almost inescapable; there is culpability in looking, just as there is culpability in refusing to look. To tour Auschwitz is to feel implicated, to face the human capacity for cruelty. Cutler’s travelogue raises a number of perhaps unanswerable questions regarding the possibility of a voyeurism that is respectful, even ethical. This is yet another level to the larger question taken up by this novel: how can we look, write, speak, remember without appropriating?

Interspersed between Cutler’s travel narratives is a series of emails exchanged primarily with the writer Raymond Federman, whom she calls Moinous (“me/us”), a name that within itself suggests a plural voice. This aspect of the novel is central to Cutler’s project, as it interrupts and splinters the overarching narrative. As Federman contends to Cutler: “you cannot write about Auschwitz in a normal organized controlled way – it has to be a mess – the writing must be as obscene as Auschwitz was/is” (p. 41). While Cutler is travelling around Europe, many of her emails are lost or delayed, presenting visible gaps in the exchange. This use of email, specifically emails that are jumbled and fragmented within themselves, draws attention to the gaps, the unspoken – within this narrative and all Holocaust narratives. Cutler remains acutely aware of the limits of herself and the limits of language; so much, necessarily, goes unsaid. This medium of email exchange is also what allows multiple voices to penetrate Cutler’s narrative. Cutler’s novel remains resolutely committed to the particular, as opposed to the universal, and the use of other viewpoints guards against the emergence of a single, unitary authority on the Holocaust. This questioning of closed narratives enables a new discourse on the Holocaust to emerge, one that is dialogic in nature. Cutler’s stylistic technique declares that there can be no single answer, no totalising narrative of the Holocaust; it must instead be a continuous conversation.

According to Robert Eaglestone, this is the kind of Holocaust discourse that aligns with the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. In his analysis of Levinas’s non-representation of the Holocaust, Eaglestone asserts that “Levinas declines to represent or to tell stories about the Holocaust because he believes that, in some way, any mode of representation will betray the events of the Holocaust”.⁶ Levinas, as a survivor, is in no danger of forgetting the Holocaust, but what of those who never lived through it? As Eaglestone observes, “we are trapped in an aporia”.⁷ We cannot adequately represent the Holocaust, but neither can we

risk the silence of Levinas and leave the Holocaust unrepresented. A possible response lies in Levinas's own philosophy, which he views as an "interruption" in Western thought, a disruption that relies on the very tradition he is trying to disturb.⁸ These philosophical interruptions resist all closure, positing philosophy as an ongoing, open-ended conversation. Eaglestone suggests that we use this model to speak of the Holocaust, to put the Holocaust in a dialogue that welcomes interruptions and resists a totalising narrative. We must speak between quotation marks that suspend any ultimate conclusions or last words. This method allows us to represent the Holocaust, but demands that we "abandon the nostalgia of a final answer, or the desire for a complete history, for the openness of an infinite discussion".⁹ With multiple voices intruding into her narrative, Cutler's cacophonous method of representing Auschwitz escapes the aporia of Levinas, permitting representation without betrayal.

In addition to her exchange with Moinous, Cutler includes other correspondences – letters, emails, conversations – in her novel. Many of these are an attempt to piece together the story of her husband's grandparents, who were deported to the Minsk ghetto and subsequently shot. All these exchanges illuminate an element of human connection that is so vital to Cutler's work. Though Cutler is not Jewish, her interactions with Federman and her mother-in-law, among others, allow her to take one step closer to the events of the Holocaust. Her connections to first- and second-hand witnesses of the Holocaust are not ones of blood or ethnicity; they are human connections, chosen and cultivated bonds. The scattering of emails, letters and personal anecdotes exposes a web of seemingly disparate lives that nonetheless form a connection, and through that connection, voice some of the unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust. Cutler's attempts to approach and engage the Holocaust from her non-Jewish position underscores that the effects of the Holocaust are not limited to a single group of people; the Holocaust, to a certain extent, happened to the world, and it is the burden of the world to respond.¹⁰

Perhaps the most surprising element of Cutler's novel is the recurrence of humour, mainly appearing in her email exchange with Federman. In one email, Federman describes how, through his fiction writing, he has been able "to invent a language" for himself, "to bring the story out of this silence" (p. 45). In particular, it is through the "sad laughter" of his writing that Federman has found the key to both expression and survival (p. 45). Germans, he says, are able to understand his writing, because he makes them laugh, and "in laughing, they understand that the only way to survive, even if you have a sordid history and a sordid past behind you, is to laugh" (p. 45). Laughter and literature, then, are presented as means of survival and reconciliation (p. 306). This is a tantalising idea, and Cutler plays with it in her narrative by allowing the humorous, the absurd, to surface. After her visit to Auschwitz, Cutler attempts to send an email to Moinous using a Polish keyboard. The result is, expectedly, a jumble of misspelling and ubiquitous consonants:

we tghen went to berkenau and sat beside a pond full of ashesz – waht a factory of death
[. . .] sorry abouty this – this

impossible keyboard [...] making me that someone in the corner is watching porn on their screen – I wondered why he was so quiet. (p. 90)

These scrambled and distorted English words attempting to convey Cutler's experience of Auschwitz are amusing (particularly for someone who has tried to type on such a keyboard), while at the same time a reminder of the playful frailty of language. The humorous elements of Cutler's novel create an unusual opportunity for the reader – to be immersed in a subject such as the Holocaust, while being given the freedom to laugh.

The remaining threads that weave through *Auschwitz* are Cutler's dream narratives, intermittent prose descriptions of the dreams she has while researching and writing this novel. This inclusion of dreams demonstrates that, though we are born afterwards, the Holocaust is part of us; it has "seeped" into our minds, our imaginary, to the point of penetrating our dreams (p. 96). Some of the dreams include compelling, even haunting images, such as couples being tricked into marriage ceremonies at Birkenau and then buried alive, with only their heads above ground. Another dream features the poignant refrain: "Listen. Continue" (p. 88). Though I appreciate their inclusion, I found the dream narratives to be the most opaque elements of Cutler's novel. I often felt lost while reading them; the words and images flew past me, and I was unable to grasp them fully. This lack of understanding may not be to Cutler's discredit, however. Perhaps putting the reader in a position of misunderstanding is exactly what Cutler intended. To allow the novel to flow into the world of dreams, a world unbound by logic or reason, further pries open the terrain of Holocaust discourse.

Resisting genres

The primary way Cutler's novel differs from most Holocaust narratives is her orientation to history. Berel Lang, in his analysis of Holocaust genres, asserts that "Holocaust writing characteristically 'aspires to the condition of history'".¹¹ To put it differently, the principal aim of most Holocaust narratives is to achieve "historical authenticity"; capturing historical truth functions as the end-all purpose of writing.¹² Lang goes on to locate three main genres in Holocaust writing: those that distinguish themselves from historical writing, yet claim historical accuracy; those that indirectly deal with the Holocaust, assuming historical veracity without overtly claiming it; and those that explicitly claim to be historical accounts.¹³ Cutler's novel does not fit easily into any of these categories. *Auschwitz* does not relate to the Holocaust merely in subtext, nor is it a historical account of the Holocaust, or a fictionalised version of historical events. Cutler resists all three genres by dealing directly with the Holocaust, but not from a position of historical authenticity. Throughout her novel, she relates to history through the processual unfolding of her writing, but she throws in names, dates, statistics haphazardly, often to highlight what escapes the brute historical facts. She does not claim a sole commitment to historicity; in fact, Cutler seems much more concerned with

what she does not, cannot, will never know about the Holocaust. She does, at times, orient her narrative towards the individual histories of extended family members, but never to the events of the Holocaust as a whole. Towards the end of *Auschwitz*, Cutler describes the ambiguity that persists even within historical accounts, such as the case of soap made from Jewish victims:

There were people, I said. Historians who wrote fat books on the subject. Some later denying all they had written. Some retracted it all. All they'd said. Were saying. Not all. Some. Some said what they'd written and documented and authored regarding the soap in fact at the time of writing was "Not based in reality". [...] And does it matter if the soap is true or not? (pp. 305, 308)

In Cutler's narrative, history is not presented as a seamless, unified truth on the subject of the Holocaust. Whether the human soap historically existed or not, Cutler suggests, it should remain within Holocaust discourse as a horrific symbol of dehumanisation. History, though an essential part of Holocaust representation, must not be the sole discourse. Cutler's novel asserts that emotions must be preserved alongside facts and statistics; art and literature cannot be reduced to history, but should be allowed to cultivate the naked facts, to give them breath and blood.

This task, not merely to educate but to awaken, is a task of vast importance, according to Leak and Paizis. Despite the fact the Holocaust remains "present in public consciousness", racism, xenophobia and even anti-Semitism continue to pervade far-right political discourse, with visible influence in the body politic.¹⁴ The real danger we face as a culture is not the negationism of the Holocaust deniers, but mass complacency – a public that knows about the Holocaust, but has ceased to care. Leak and Paizis assert that "to continue to represent (re-present) the Holocaust, and to debate and theorize the modes of its representation(s), is and will continue to be, for a long time, urgent".¹⁵ Cutler repeatedly voices her awareness of the danger of complacency, at one point citing a survey to Moinous that concluded "NEARLY half of Britons have never heard of the Nazi death camp Auschwitz" (p. 230).¹⁶ This survey indicates that perhaps the cultural presence of the Holocaust is overestimated, that it is a nebulous presence at best and one easily ignored. Even among those who have knowledge of Auschwitz, who have heard the horror stories and the baffling death counts, there remains that inevitable "gap between knowledge and understanding".¹⁷ Cutler, who rigorously educates herself about the Holocaust through the course of writing her novel, reflects that knowledge alone can never bring one close enough to the event:

I feel myself dizzy with numbers and names and places, and no matter how many times [...] I read it from the papers we were given, it is hard to hold on to any of it for more than a moment. (p. 266)

Cutler's novel, along with the observations of the Holocaust theorists cited here, indicate that not only is there a dearth of education about the Holocaust, but education is not, in itself, a sufficient response. Eaglestone observes that many Holocaust narratives leave the reader "unreflective [...]" as if the Holocaust were

a simple thing, about which one could offer sentimental homilies”.¹⁸ These are the narratives that constitute a betrayal, according to Levinas. The distance Cutler describes and allows between herself and Auschwitz is an attempt to resist this betrayal. Cutler is acutely aware that her knowledge of the facts does not bring her understanding. Her answer is to speak from the gap, to learn and write with a listening ear. To pretend or assume that we have reached Auschwitz is to reduce the reality of Auschwitz, yet to lapse into futility, to abandon any approach to Auschwitz because the words fall short, is to allow the stories to diminish into silence. As Leak and Paizis observe, the more we become inundated with revelations of the horrors of the Holocaust, the less impact these revelations have. The task for writers, a task taken up by Cutler, is not merely to expose the facts of the Holocaust, but to keep the emotions viable, to jar the reader into reflection.

The book, the axe

This kind of writing – jarring, stabbing, wounding writing – is the kind of writing advocated by Hélène Cixous in her book *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*. Writing, she says, is the “axe” that breaks what Kafka describes as “the frozen sea inside us”.¹⁹ Writing should not merely educate or entertain; writing should *shatter*. In this book, Cixous describes the arduous process of writing texts that are axes, locating this process in three “important moments of apprenticeship”: the School of the Dead, the School of Dreams, and the School of Roots (p. 7). The most defining element of Cutler’s novel is her visible writing process; in fact, this process *is* the novel, and her exposure of the work of writing brings the reader into deeper conversation with the text. I would like to give Cutler’s exposed writing greater treatment here, through the illumination of Cixous, by analysing *Auschwitz* in its capacity to shatter.

In *Three Steps*, Cixous likens the writing process to a downward ascent, “a *descending* movement, because the ascent, which evokes effort and difficulty, is toward the bottom” (p. 5, italics in the original). Writing, Cixous insists, comes not from “outside”, but from “down below”, from “deep inside” (p. 118). Writing is above all a *struggle*, a downward “climb” into “the lowest and the deepest” (pp. 118, 5). The first step on this ladder of writing is to “obey the call” of the text, to say yes to writing (p. 5). For Cutler, this is no easy feat; as she describes, “the real work is saying yes to this. Saying yes to this name, to this book. But still, still I don’t look, still I don’t look the name, still I don’t look the name nor the book in the eye” (p. 21). Throughout the entire novel, Cutler resists her topic, she resists the name and enormity of Auschwitz. Yet it is through this resistance that the novel is born:

I am only writing in my notebook to say there is nothing to say about my visit to Auschwitz, and so day after day my notebook gradually fills and I realise that in not writing the book, I am writing the book. In saying no to the book, pages and pages are now making themselves known. (p. 35)

Saying “yes” and “no” to the book simultaneously allows Cutler to approach her subject through language, without trespassing, without attempting to contain the whole of Auschwitz in her own words. Cixous declares that “the only book that is worth writing is the one we don’t have the courage or strength to write”; the texts we must write, then, are the texts that overwhelm and elude (p. 32). *Auschwitz*, the book Cutler does not know how to write, unfolds between her dual refrains of refusal and assent, between “there’s nothing to write about” and “go on anyway” (p. 223).

Once the writer responds to the call of the text, or in Cutler’s case, as the writer *continues to respond* to this call, s/he enters the first of Cixous’s writing schools: the School of the Dead. To begin to write, Cixous asserts, “we must have death” (p. 7). Death, for Cixous, is the ultimate unknown; it is a mystery that pervades our thoughts, our imaginary, yet remains impenetrable. Death is unknown, but it is a *known* unknown. We can speak and write of death; we can approach its mystery, but without complete understanding, because “we don’t know, either universally or individually, exactly what our relationship to the dead is” (Cixous, p. 12). This relationship to death, to the dead, must be rethought through writing, for writing is the process that allows us to approach what we “cannot know” before we have written:

The thing that is both known and unknown, the most unknown and the best unknown, this is what we are looking for when we write. We go towards the best known unknown thing, where knowing and not knowing touch, where we hope we will know what is unknown. (Cixous, p. 38)

The known unknown of Cutler’s text is Auschwitz. She writes towards Auschwitz, “blindly, with words”, towards the name that is familiar yet unspeakable (Cixous, p. 38). This kind of writing must always be an *approach*, an effort *towards*, without complete achievement. In Cixous’s terms, we must “write *in the direction*” of the truth of death, the truth of Auschwitz, because the whole of this truth cannot be told (pp. 36–7, italics in the original). Cutler captures this idea in her novel with a single image: the pond at Auschwitz-Birkenau. During her visit to Birkenau, she stumbles upon the pond by accident, the pond that holds the ashes of tens of thousands of gassed victims. Gazing into “the ash-filled water that reflect[s] nothing back”, Cutler realises the truth of something Moinous had told her: “Auschwitz cannot be written directly – one must make circles around it” (pp. 231, 42). To write towards death is to orbit its truth, to approach the opaqueness that “reflects only the need to keep staring and searching” (p. 231). In circling the ash-pond, Cutler attempts to find a balance between encountering and fully understanding. She continues writing towards Auschwitz – without the expectation of arrival, evoking Cixous’s observation that “writing is not arriving; most of the time it’s *not arriving*” (p. 65, italics in the original).

The writing taught in the School of the Dead enables the surfacing of the unutterable and permits the writer to approach what cannot be said. This kind of writing has ethical implications for Cixous; it is how we resist complacency,

which she calls “the worst of all crimes” (p. 13). Writing, as “this effort not to obliterate the picture, not to forget”, allows us to face “the *unpardonable in ourselves*” (pp. 7, 15, italics in the original). As Cixous observes, atrocities like the Holocaust do not begin with war; they begin “in the relationships between people” (p. 19). Auschwitz, as a blanket signifier, must not obscure the thousands of individual hands and voices that enabled its infamy. To write, as Cutler has, of Auschwitz *now*, not Auschwitz *then*, is “dangerous” yet necessary, “because Auschwitz is always there in every human being” (Cixous, p. 19).

The second “moment” of writing described by Cixous is found in the School of Dreams. To enter the School of Dreams is to sever all “moorings” with the “already-written, the already-known” (p. 59). Dreams open us to the world of the dead and allow them to speak. Cixous is not speaking of dreams in a strictly metaphorical sense; she is highlighting the ways in which dream imagery can fuel writing, granting access to what the conscious mind holds beneath the surface. In the realm of our dreams, we freely cross borders without restriction; the “opposition between inside and outside” disappears (p. 81). Dreams present without trying to explain; there is no reduction to fixed meaning, no closed logic. The imagination runs loose and wild. Cutler, by including accounts of her own dreams within her narrative, depicts an encounter with the incomprehensible that occurs at the level of the incomprehensible. Through articulating her dreams, Cutler relinquishes to her unconscious the burden of representing Auschwitz, where the mind, finally, does not seek to comprehend fully. To write from the rampant images of dreams is to write “obliquely”, to abandon authorial control and open space for the unspeakable within oneself to be heard (Cixous, p. 100). Just as dreams evade our understanding, the texts that shatter are those that “escape”, that overrun their own boundaries, unbound by beginning or end (Cixous, p. 98). From dreams we learn “not to be afraid of not being the driver, since it is frightening, when we write, to find ourselves riding a crazy book” (Cixous, p. 100). The tumultuous surge of Cutler’s writing springs from the School of Dreams. In order to circle a subject like Auschwitz, she writes obscenely, in disordered fashion – from her depths and without self-censorship.

The third step on Cixous’s ladder of writing is the School of Roots. Here, writing is portrayed as digging, burrowing down deep, past the order and ruthless logic of the world, beneath the law. It is in this school that Cixous introduces her notion of the “imund”, the unclean. Playing with the French word for “world” (*le monde*) she describes the imund (*l'immonde*) as that which is rejected from the world. To be imund is to “no longer belong to the world” or live by its rules; to write the imund is to write beyond the logic of the law, past its arbitrary and absolute “because”:

Because. As you know, this is the secret of the law: “because.” This is the law’s logic. It is this terrible “because,” this senseless fatal “because” that has decided people’s fate, even in the extremity of the concentration camps. People were divided, some were sent to gas chambers while others were “spared” for a later date, “because.” It is this *because* that rules our lives. It pervades everything. It can even reach the fragile world of translation. (Cixous, p. 117, italics in the original)

Writing that resists the finality and authority of this *because* is imund, a kind of writing that comes from “deep inside”, from the “nether realms”, that defies all “mental, emotional, and biographical clichés” (Cixous, pp. 118–19). As Cutler is warned by a friend as she begins her book, Holocaust writing is rife with potential cliché:

*If you write this, Feldman says,
do NOT let it be said fearfully
Certainly NOT despairingly
Therefore NOT painfully
NOT for godsake starvingly
NOT weepingly
NOT resignedly
NOT, please, horribly, hideously, moribundly.* (p. 8, italics in the original)

To avoid clichés, the imund writer must resist traditional categories and write through the limitations of the text, to approach the unspeakable. Cixous writes that the imund book is written “with the hand running”, and Cutler echoes this idea in describing her own book as one that is “written on the hoof, on the run” (Cixous, p. 156; Cutler, p. 133). An imund writer “takes life and language by the roots”, and writes excessively, through the constraints of beginning and end, beyond conclusions (Cixous, p. 156). Cutler writes the imund book by breaking apart her own text and undermining the supremacy of any one perspective, allowing her authorial “I” to be swallowed in a chorus of other voices. She does not *conclude* her text; she does not end by wrapping up all loose ends into easy answers. She closes with a shrug – “I’m memorialised-out” – unsure how to finish with so many open questions remaining, “questions that [...] keep undoing and repeating and turning in on themselves” (pp. 369, 261). The novel’s final image, offered without preface or interpretation, is that of a lone woman walking across a frozen lake as Cutler flies overhead, out of Berlin. This is a fitting non-ending, reminiscent of Kafka’s complacent frozen sea; the reader is left with no hard answers, just the picture of an unending trek across ice.

Cutler’s journey towards Auschwitz can be read as a journey down Cixous’s ladder of writing, through the Schools of Death, Dreams and Roots. Cutler writes from the depths, towards the known unknown, in an effort to resist what Leak and Paizis observe as a crisis of complacency regarding the Holocaust. In this way, her book becomes an axe, and Cutler emerges among those whom Cixous calls the “writers of *extremity*, those who take themselves to the extremes of experience, thought, life” (p. 34, italics in the original).

Conclusion

If Cutler’s aim is to present a language and a narrative form that evoke our complex and confused relationship to Auschwitz, to the Holocaust, I would say that she succeeds. This book does not entertain; it is not a comfortable read.

This book is one of Cixous's axes, a book that jars, baffles and disorients the reader. Cutler's attempt to avoid cliché and sentimentality are evident in her resistance of narrative itself. She keeps her prose-writing in the present tense; unfinished, always happening. She finds words to evoke emotion and setting, while at the same time rejects the adequacy of those words to avoid any sedimentation of meaning, any final conclusion. Resisting established genres, Cutler adamantly defies the closed story arc, beginning–middle–end, as well as any coherent moral-of-the-story; there is no trite lesson to be learned here, because there is no one in a position to teach it. All told, this book *is* a mess, but a beautiful and haunting one, a mess that pulls the reader into the arduous work of representing what remains inconceivable. To write about the Holocaust is to confront its daunting silence, to, as Moinous describes, “make that silence speak” (p. 45). In writing *Auschwitz*, Cutler faces the limits of herself, her perspective, and allows her own words to fall short. The unresolved complexity of Cutler's narrative, its currents of conflicting emotions, goes some distance in approaching the complexity of Auschwitz and the incomprehensible memories it represents.

ABIGAIL RINE

School of English
University of St Andrews
St Andrews
Fife KY16 9AL
United Kingdom

NOTES

¹ A. Leak & G. Paizis (eds.), *The Holocaust and the Text: Speaking the Unspeakable* (London, 2000), p. 3;

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ A. M. Cutler, *Auschwitz* (Ullapool, 2008), p. 5. Further references to Cutler's text are indicated parenthetically.

⁵ Cutler first remarks that there is “nothing to say” about Auschwitz on the opening page, and this sentiment is repeated multiple times within the novel, throughout her writing process.

⁶ R. Eaglestone, “From Behind the Bars of Quotation Marks: Emmanuel Levinas's (Non-)Representation of the Holocaust”, in: *The Holocaust and the Text*, ed. Leak & Paizis, p. 99.

⁷ Ibid, p. 103.

⁸ Ibid, p. 104.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Although Cutler's narrative, like most Holocaust accounts, focuses primarily on the Jewish victimisation, she does mention the fact that the Nazis also targeted other groups for extermination, such as communists, homosexuals and the mentally ill (p. 305). She does not include other ethnic groups who were targeted, such as the Roma. This is, perhaps, another way in which Holocaust discourse could open up, allowing more room for the stories of non-Jewish victims, so they are not merely mentioned in passing, or relegated to footnotes.

¹¹ B. Lang, “Holocaust Genres and the Turn to History”, in: *The Holocaust and the Text*, ed. Leak & Paizis, p. 19.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 19–20.

¹⁴ Leak & Paizis (eds.), p. 5.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁶ Cutler, p. 230. This survey was conducted by the BBC in February 2004. Its findings indicated that 45% of adult respondents claim never to have heard of Auschwitz. Among women and young people, the figure climbs to 60%. Among those who have heard of Auschwitz, 70% feel their knowledge is only cursory. See <www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2004/12_december/02/auschwitz.shtml>.

¹⁷ Leak & Paizis (eds.), p. 3.

¹⁸ Eaglestone, “From Behind the Bars of Quotation Marks”, p. 101.

¹⁹ H. Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, trans. S. Cornell & S. Sellers (New York, 1993), p. 17. All subsequent references to Cixous refer to this text and are indicated parenthetically.