

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/4

Between Holocausts by Duane Vorhees
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Review by Jacques Fleury

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WHO AMONG US is unfamiliar with the holocaust, forever etched in history and to some, their memory?

In Duane Vorhees's introductory poem from his latest work *Between Holocausts*: "A Mind Rewinds" Vorhees captures something indescribable, when he writes:

My psyche is littered with living Its/ Disregarded superegos still whine/ Od and Ob hiss between young green vines/Bony hilltops strain to catch day's first light/ their bloodguilt insufficiently contrite/My psyche is littered with living Its..." Perhaps he is describing Sephardic warriors of yore and in extant ...who were "disregarded" [and] deemed "insufficient".

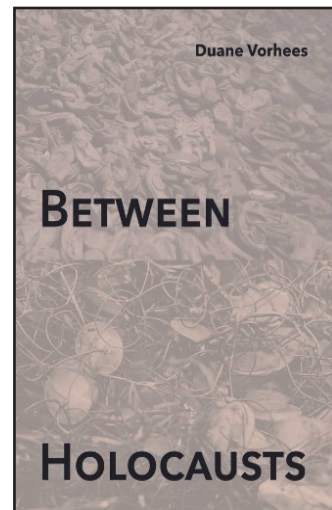
I found the book's neurodivergent style instructive, creative, intuitive, alarming and haunting...as it grapples with a subject matter such as the holocaust with a sort of classic poetic indirectness that reads like a literary puzzle with a cartage of sometimes obscure literary symbolisms and references that compels further investigation.

Take the use of "midnight", which in literature can symbolize death, despair, hope, a place between life and death. For example, in poetic forefather Walt Whitman's poem "A Clear Midnight" midnight represents death as a peaceful ending of the day. Whereas in contemporary Chinese literature, midnight can suggest despair OR hope, emblemizing the emotional incongruity in the culture.

The repetitious nature of the poems make for a particularly eerie experience, like an ominous cautionary tale emanated from the sagacious tongue of someone GRAND. Whether grandfather or grandmother, you want to lean forward in attention and anticipation. The author achieves preternatural phenomena in the way that he presents his writings, which I found quite refreshing.

Scholastic philosopher St. Thomas Aquinas of Sicily– who synthesized Christian theology with Aristotelian philosophy, contended that the "supernatural" comprised of "God's unmediated actions" while the "natural" is "what happens always or most of the time" and the "preternatural" is "what happens rarely, but nonetheless by the agency of created beings..."

In "WHAT I DID LEARN", Vorhees goes full throttle for the macabre and melancholy in this "preternatural" self-revelatory poem. I say "pre-



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ternatural" because having been voraciously reading early 20th century poetry like Robert Frost and E.E. Cummings since the 8th grade, I have never come across a Vorhees-like style and I consider myself as having been around the "poetic block" a few times...in WHAT I DID LEARN, he writes:

"My music group's hit singles/stopped so many songs ago/I've learned my shakes and wrinkles and still I wait for wisdom..."

As I read these words I felt like exposed viscera on legs, figuratively inside/out vibes...for I too am learning "my shakes and wrinkles" yet still "I wait" to acquire the wisdom that I presumed would come with the drudging accumulation of years.

Like Frost, Vorhees investigates complex social and philosophical themes with mastery but with a poignant bout of relatable and humbled vulnerability which is the plight and euphoria, conundrum and exaltation of any type of artist.

Could Vorhees be described as an itinerant troubadour, who in the Middle Ages were the shining knights of poetry?

Troubadour from an old Occitan (an ancient province that stretched from south of France from east to west) word meaning "to compose"? Perhaps. Or maybe he's just a guy with something to say about some things that matter to him, and he conceivably hopes that they matter to you as well.

The poems read like a heuristic and Socratic exercise replete with mythical biblical and literary symbolisms.

While we're at it, why not add Mimetic Theory to the list? This terminology is described as a theory of human behavior and culture that explains how human desire and imitation lead to conflict and violence:

What better way to exemplify the ideologies of mimetic desire-conflict and scapegoating than the horrific and fugly HOLOCAUST!

Here is a synopsis of Mimetic Theory, its inception and evolution:

- **Origin** *The theory was developed by French philosopher, literary critic, and anthropologist René Girard (1923–2015).*
- **Process** *Mimetic theory moves through four stages:*
 - **Mimetic desire:** *People imitate others and want what other people want.*
 - **Conflict:** *People compete for the same goods, leading to conflict.*
 - **Scapegoating:** *A group singles out an individual or problem as the source of their problems and violently expels or eliminates them.*
 - **Cover-up:** *Human culture springs up around the scapegoating mechanism to cover up the founding murder.*

Throughout history, scapegoating has been the instigator of many atrocities. From the inception of slavery, to Adolf Hitler's holocaust exterminating millions of Jewish people and what he considered "undesirable" people to the Chinese Exclusion Act of the late 19th century and now Haitian immigrants, both having been branded as "dog and cat eaters" which makes it easier to draft laws against them for you must dehumanize to make it easier to vaporize them from the planet, right?

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Although the book is replete with an infelicitous subject matter, after reading it, your resistance to transfiguration could conceivably be an exercise in futility; you will emerge from the chrysalis of self-consciousness to a wise sage having been dug up from the darkness of an egregious past and exposed to ebb and flow of a reformatory present through poetic light and historical literary erudition.

Nothing is nugatory, every word, every nuance seems carefully selected. Vorhees is serving fluid paradoxical wordplay and intrigue, cajoling the reader to read on and hopefully decode the cleverly coded script.

Vorhees writes with ingenuity, authenticity and authority. A **MUST** read for anyone willing to trek a trip down a dark path with a promise of light ahead. The stuff of LIFE! A familiar trope done in an unfamiliar way...a literary TRIUMPH!