

had carved out a precarious literary existence outside the academy, “on the fringes of the economy.” And she was launched on a rigorous mission to understand and evaluate “the experience that takes place when a reader or observer or auditor encounters a work of art: that meeting place between one person’s sensibility and another person’s creation.”

Lesser’s own sensibility is unfailingly independent but never willfully idiosyncratic. She is not shy about being “the learned critic, commenting on the work,” or about sharing what it is like to be “the novice, being molded by that work.” Writing about the Balkan folk dancing that was once her passionate pastime, she finds an analogy to the welcoming but demanding conversation her criticism aims to set in motion. “It was a place,” she recalls, “in which everyone was accepted, but in which discriminations (of grace, skill, knowledge) nonetheless mattered. It was a kind of community that was ideal for someone who was essentially, secretly solitary.” In a culture ever more balkanized between high and low, academic and popular, creative and critical, cerebral and visceral, Lesser reminds us of the distinctions that matter.

—Ann Hulbert

PREEMPTING THE HOLOCAUST.

By Lawrence L. Langer. Yale Univ. Press. 207 pp. \$27.50

It’s hard to believe that, a few brief years ago, people worried that American memory of the Holocaust would fade through lack of interest. These days, movies, memorial museums, Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremonies, and the general roar of what some cynically call “Shoah business” have made the destruction of European Jewry such a common rhetorical touchstone that trivialization, not oblivion, poses the more immediate threat. It’s natural, then, that we now see the emergence of cultural critics who denounce the misuse of the Holocaust, and of a smaller group—call them Holocaust fundamentalists—who oppose virtually all attempts to draw parallels or lessons from the Holocaust or, indeed, to do anything but rigorously contemplate its singularity.

The literary critic Lawrence Langer has

long been prominent in this latter group. Over the years, he has written a shelf of books that treat artistic and literary aspects of the cultural memory of the Holocaust—from survivors’ testimony and memoirs to the art and poetry that emerged from the furnace of suffering—while maintaining strenuous objections to what he sees as “preemption” of that memory by others. His objection, reiterated and elaborated in this brief collection of essays, is to the drawing of connections from the Holocaust to other matters, whether it’s teaching tolerance in schools, pondering moral conundrums about the line between ordinary people and murderers, or highlighting accounts that point to the strength of the human spirit—“the habit of using mass murder as a text for furthering personal agendas about humanity’s capacity for goodness or its ability to resist oppression.”

This is, to say the least, oddly put—what demotes the search for uplift to a mere “personal agenda”?—but the larger point is sound. When parallels are drawn too easily or uplifting accounts are accepted too readily, horror is trivialized. But Langer is stricter yet. He argues that all efforts to find “meaning” of any kind in the Holocaust are intrinsically suspect and reductive, even questions about how we would act in similar circumstances. Of the hundreds of Jews boiled alive in an acid bath, he observes: “There is simply no connection between our ordinary suffering and their unprecedented agony, nor do our trivial inclinations toward sin resemble in any way the minds that designed such terminal torture.”

At some point, such stringency becomes self-defeating. To refuse *all* analysis of an event, to reject *every* possible inference, is finally to insist on silence. So it is almost a relief, late in the book, to find Langer disobeying his own dictum, drawing his own meaning—albeit a dark and despairing one—from the material on which he has spent his career. “The need for a revision, and then a re-vision, of our cherished value systems,” he writes, “is the chief spiritual legacy of the Holocaust.” A grim prescription, perhaps, but not so grim as the insistence that nothing can be learned, said, or remembered about this greatest of crimes.

—Amy E. Schwartz