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The Resurgent Past: An Introduction to Holocaust Studies and Holocaust Literature

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ABSTRACT
The aim of the present article is to serve as an introduction to the discipline of Holocaust Studies, specifically in connection with Holocaust literature in the Anglophone world. Relevant themes and concepts are introduced, starting with the difficulty to find an adequate term to name what happened, and relating this task to the debates on the ineffability of the Holocaust and on the role of Holocaust fiction. The article then focuses on two key issues: who has the right to tell and how to do so. The problem of kitsch in the context of Holocaust fiction and other related concepts are also addressed to show how remembrance may also lead to banalisation. The article closes by referring to one of the ways –known as the "perpetrator turn"– in which writers are renewing the traditional metanarrative of the Holocaust. An appendix is also included with basic bibliography for work on Holocaust Studies.

KEYWORDS: survivor testimonies, post-memory, Holocaust kitsch, banality of evil, perpetrator turn.

El resurgir del pasado: una introducción a los estudios y la literatura del Holocausto

RESUMEN
El objetivo del presente artículo es servir de introducción a la disciplina de los Estudios del Holocausto, específicamente en relación con la literatura sobre el Holocausto en un contexto anglófono. Se introducen temas y conceptos relevantes, comenzando por la dificultad de encontrar un término adecuado para describir lo sucedido, y conectando esta tarea con el debate sobre la inefabilidad del Holocausto y el papel de la ficción. El artículo se centra después en dos cuestiones clave: quién tiene derecho a contar/escribir sobre el Holocausto y cómo hacerlo. También se aborda el problema de la literatura kitsch y otros conceptos relacionados, mostrando cómo el recuerdo del Holocausto puede desembocar también en su banalización. El artículo concluye haciendo referencia a una de las maneras —el llamado "giro hacia el perpetrador"— en que los escritores están renovando la metanarrativa tradicional del Holocausto. Se incluye también un apéndice con bibliografía básica.

PALABRAS CLAVE: literatura testimonial, post-memoria, banalidad del mal, Holocausto kitsch, giro hacia el perpetrador.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In a chapter devoted to "The Past", in *The Routledge Companion to Twenty-First Century Literary Fiction* (2019), William Faulkner's famous dictum that "[t]he past is never dead. It's not even past" (85) becomes Robert Eaglestone's starting point for his discussion of the past as

> a key characteristic of post-millennial modernity. Instead of dwindling into insignificance […], the past's grip on the present has become even stronger. Indeed, what I name "the resurgent past" is a distinctive and dominant theme of much contemporary fiction […]. By "the resurgent past", I don't simple mean that novels deal with "things that happened earlier" –almost every novel would fall into this category, from the murder mystery that starts with a corpse in the library to the uncovering of George Wickham's previous behaviour in *Pride and Prejudice*. Instead, I mean that for much contemporary fiction there is an intense concern for the impact of the past on the present. (311)

Among the categories that Eaglestone proposes in order to deal with the presence of the past, there are the past as memory and the past as trauma. These are indeed major ways in which contemporary literature engages with the past. Memory has been, since the late 20th century, a focus of cultural life. In 2006, Jay Winter stated that memory was "in the ascendancy" and that almost everywhere in intellectual life there was "evidence of a sea change in focus, a movement towards the analysis of memory as the organising principle of scholarly or artistic work." (54) Some decades later we are still under the influence of that interest in memory, which has led to an increasing presence of wars and other traumatic events as central themes of literary narrative. Among them, the Holocaust is a recurrent subject in much memory work, not only in literature but in the arts in general, as well as in multiple acts of remembrance like those recently commemorating the 80th anniversary of Liberation Day.

The memory boom of the late 20th century is deeply connected with the rising interest in trauma and the development of trauma theory, which has become an influential approach within literary criticism in sync with the increasing consolidation of a literature of trauma. It was in 1980 that PTSD was first included in the diagnostic canon of the medical and psychiatric profession. This inclusion is regarded as a landmark event, useful to date the origin of contemporary Trauma Studies. The 1980s also witnessed the journey of the concept of trauma from medical and scientific discourse to the field of the humanities in general and literature studies in particular. In the 1990s leading scholars such as Cathy

Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Geoffrey Hartman published ground-breaking works in the field of trauma theory.[1] Each of these theorists, emerged out of Yale University, built bridges between literary criticism and the study of trauma, thus revealing a specific affinity between trauma and literature. Their work was, to an important extent, an answer to the demand for an appropriate tool that facilitated the analysis of Holocaust narratives. Their theories, by now expanded and also contested, have provided concepts and approaches to analyse trauma narratives in general, but what cannot be denied is that the development of those critical and theoretical approaches were, in their origin, connected with the Holocaust and its representation. For decades, the Holocaust has remained a subject that figures prominently in the theory and the literature of trauma.

The Holocaust has been conceptualised as a "caesura" in the history of humanity, "a radical break that necessitates a re-thinking of the relation between past, present and future, as well as completely reconstituting ideas about evil and what it is to be human." (Parry 249) The enormity of the Final Solution was something unseen before, unique.[2] Although some scholars and activists have argued that the Holocaust is an exceptional event –endorsing a notion of uniqueness that is critical of comparison with other traumatic events, especially historical and collective traumas– others, like Dominick LaCapra, approach the uniqueness of the Holocaust in a significantly different way. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra refers to "a non numerical notion of uniqueness. It doesn't mean this happened only once, and in all probability *can* happen only once, but that something happened that was so outrageous, so unheard of, that it is… unique. And in that way you can have something unique that is indeed repeated in history." (160, italics in the original) Precisely because it can be repeated, the Holocaust is still a contemporary issue. Its lessons are too important to

[1] Cathy Caruth's *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996); Shoshana Felman's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (1992, written in collaboration with Dori Laub); Geoffrey Hartman's *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (1996).

[2] As Margalit and Motzkin point out, the question of whether the Holocaust was a unique event in history can be trivialised, as every event is unique in the sense of not being identical with any other event. Yet they rightly insist that the question and the debate around this issue is not trivial (65). Indeed, much has been written about the uniqueness of the Holocaust, although the issue cannot be fully addressed here due to space constraints. For more on this subject, see Margalit and Motzkin (1996), Rosenbaum (1996), Godzich (2009), and Rosenfeld (2015).

be forgotten, especially in today's world as suggested by the themes of Holocaust Memorial Day 2024 –"Fragility of freedom"– and 2025 –"For a better future".[3]

As the Holocaust has become "an event at the limits" on account of its being the most radical form of genocide encountered in history (Friedlander 3), this also means that its representation will unavoidably raise aesthetic and intellectual problems as well as ethical and moral issues. In what follows, I will introduce themes and concepts that are central to Holocaust Studies and the literature of the Holocaust, starting with the difficulty of finding an adequate term to name what happened and connecting this task with the debate on the (un)representability of the Holocaust (can/should it be told/written about?). This debate gets even more complex when fiction enters the scene since, for a long time, factual truth was a prerequisite for Holocaust literature. This accounts for the preference of non-fiction over fiction and the (less frequent, with the passing of time) view of the latter as inappropriate and transgressive. The article will then focus on two key issues in the field: who has the right to tell and how to do so. The problem of kitsch in the context of Holocaust fiction will also be addressed and other related terms, like Holocaust piety, explained. The article will close by referring to one of the ways –the "perpetrator turn"– in which writers are renewing the traditional metanarrative of the Holocaust, typically centred on (the suffering of) victims and excluding complex approaches to innocence and guilt.

2. THE PROBLEMS OF TERMINOLOGY AND THE LIMITS OF LANGUAGE

"Please, excuse me, I use the term 'Holocaust' reluctantly because I do not like it", Primo Levi writes. "But I use it to be understood. Philologically it is a mistake." (qtd. in Hirsch and Kacandes 8)[4] Although the term enables us to be understood, it requires etymological explanation and interrogation. *Holocaust*, from the Greek *holokauston*, originally meant a completely (*holos*) burnt (*kaustos*) sacrificial offering, a burnt sacrifice offered to a god. It

[3] Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) has taken place in the UK on 27 January since 2001. Each year, the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust (https://hmd.org.uk) chooses a different theme as a focus for reflection and also to enable audiences to learn about the past.

[4] Primo Levi was one of close to 6,400 Italian Jews to be deported, mainly to the camps of Auschwitz, Birkenau and Mauthausen. Of these, only a few hundred survivors returned home. Levi, who spent time in Auschwitz, was one of the most incisive intellectuals among those who experienced the Holocaust and survived to tell about it. His many writings include works related to his experience of the Holocaust, but also novels, essays and articles on many different subjects, poetry, short stories, translations and even a play. He died in April 1987. According to the Italian police report, he committed suicide. However, revisionary scholarship has questioned that he killed himself (see Gambetta 2016 on this).

evokes the crematoria of extermination camps and its use to describe the destruction of the European Jews and other victims of Nazism can be traced back to the 1950s. Because its religious origin implies a form of explanation, or justification, or at least sacralisation, many object to its use.

The term *Shoah* has its origin in Israel but its use has become widespread (especially after Claude Lanzmann's 1985 documentary of the same name). *Shoah* in Hebrew means "catastrophe", and some find that it, too, has unfortunate connotations. Does not the term "catastrophe" erase the agency of the crime? The only term in current use that does refer to the agency of the crime is the word *genocide*. The term was coined in 1944 by Polish-born jurist Raphael Lemkin and it became a distinct category in international law. *Genocide* rightly inscribes the Holocaust into a broader history of systematic exterminations on the basis of nationality, ethnicity, religion, or race. On the other hand, the term elides the specificity of Nazi crimes.

The difficulty of terminology is also connected with notions of inexpressibility and the limits of language, which are common to all trauma narratives but especially to those dealing with the Holocaust. For several decades there seemed to be a general consensus that the immediate postwar period was marked by silence, as if silence was the only possible answer to the magnitude of a crime often conceptualised as ineffable, unwritable, even unthinkable. In the 21st century, though, scholars have questioned the idea that the Holocaust was not talked about in any way until well into the 1970s. David Cesarini is one of those that have challenged this myth of silence, arguing and providing evidence that "in the wake of the Second World War the Jewish survivors of Nazi persecution and mass murder were not 'silent' and that, over the ensuing fifteen years, the world was gifted a plenitude of information about the horrors that had so recently occurred in Europe." (2) What cannot be denied, though, is that the question of whether the story can be told was, from the beginning, a topos of Holocaust memoirs and other survivor accounts, as vital now, and as complex, as it was for the survivors in 1945 (Hirsch and Kacandes 2).

This issue is related to a recurrent subject in Holocaust scholarship: the debate on the (un)representability of the Holocaust. Two main trends can be discerned here. On the one hand, there are those who insist that language and the literary imagination are incapable of rendering intelligible the extermination of millions of victims. Thus, for instance, George Steiner claims that "[t]he world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason." (146) Similarly, to Elie Wiesel: "A novel about Auschwitz is not a novel, or it is not about

Auschwitz." (qtd in Horowitz 15) Wiesel also points to the way in which literature might distort the victims' suffering: "We do try to put the experience into words. But can we? That is my question. Language is poor and inadequate. The moment it is told, the experience turns into betrayal." (284) On the other hand, the idea that the Holocaust cannot (and even should not) be represented has been openly challenged by many writers and scholars. They acknowledge that the nature of the Holocaust defies language and that its enormity complicates its telling. And yet, they agree that one cannot turn away from the subject and even declare themselves to be "against a rhetoric of the unspeakable in Holocaust writing" (Mandel 203). As Victoria Aarons puts it: "Capitulation to language's inadequacy is symptomatic of the failure of moral reckoning, an indefensible flight of conscience. To say that we cannot articulate the atrocity of the Holocaust is to imply that we cannot judge the motivating conditions and execution of its atrocities." (38) In the same line, Gillian Rose points out that to argue for silence, for "non-representability, is *to mystify something we dare not understand*, because we fear that it may be all too understandable, all too continuous with what we are –human, all too human." (43, italics in the original)

The differing attitudes towards the (un)representability of the Holocaust discussed in the previous paragraph do not constitute, after all, entirely opposing positions in the debate. One would better approach them from the perspective of the essential contradiction that lies at the heart of Holocaust narrative: the acknowledgement of the impossibility to put the experience into words and the moral reticence about doing so, coupled with a psychological and moral obligation to tell about the Holocaust. Berel Lang defines this in terms of a "negative rhetoric" surrounding Holocaust representation: "We hear it referred to as unspeakable, and we usually hear afterward a fairly detailed description of what is unspeakable, that description intended, of course, to prove that the designation was warranted." (18) Indeed, Elie Wiesel and George Steiner, mentioned above as the authors of well-known statements that place the Holocaust beyond representation, wrote about the Holocaust themselves and exerted a considerable influence on the content and form of Holocaust writing. Jorge Semprún is another case in point, though slightly different in that he argued that the Holocaust was far from unrepresentable, but then he took fifty years to write about his experience as victim and survivor. *Literature or Life* is not only an account of Semprún's life in Buchenwald but also of the subsequent time spent trying to write about it. The work was published in France in 1994, fifty years afer his release. As he explains:

> I came back to life. In other words, to oblivion: that was the price of life. A deliberate, systematic forgetting of the experience of the camp. Of writing, as well. There was no question, in fact, of writing anything else. It would have been absurd, perhaps even ignoble, to write anything at all that would pass over that experience in silence. I had to choose between literature and life; I chose life. I chose a long cure of aphasia, of voluntary amnesia, in order to survive. (195-196)

These were his thoughts after his release from the camp. But when he broke the silence he boldly asserted that "you can always say everything. The 'ineffable' you hear so much about is only an alibi. Or a sign of laziness." (13) This quotation comes from early on in *Literature or Life*, where he argues that what the victims experienced was not "indescribable" but "unbearable". The problem is not one of "articulation" but "density", and "the only ones who will reach this substance [...] will be those able to shape their evidence into an artistic object, a space of creation. Or of re-creation." (13)

Taking the previous discussion on (un)representabilty as a basis, we can make the following reflections, central to Holocaust Studies and literature:

- The important role Semprún gives to art as a vehicle for telling about the Holocaust turns out to be reminiscent of the import often ascribed to artistic recreation in some contemporary discourses on trauma. In an article entitled "Art and Trauma", for instance, Dori Laub and Daniel Podell (992) typically describe trauma as absence, rupture and loss of representation, but they make the point that the difficulty of dealing with traumatic experiences can be confronted by means of art and literature, which also constitute valuable aids to survival. Elsewhere Laub quotes a Holocaust survivor who said: "We wanted to survive so as to live one day after Hitler, in order to be able to tell our story." After listening to many Holocaust testimonies and working as an analyst with survivors and their children, Laub came to believe that such victims of trauma "did not only need to survive in order to tell their story; they also needed to tell their story in order to survive." (Laub 78)
- The debate on the ineffability of the Holocaust throws light on what Sarah Horowitz calls "the figure of muteness" (33-45) as predominant in Holocaust narratives. The trope of muteness refers to the way in which the difficulty inherent in telling about the Holocaust appears within the narrative itself in different ways: non-speaking characters; characters who cannot tell; stories that are absent, truncated, incomplete; discontinuous plots and chronology; deflated rhetoric, opaque prose, halting, stammering, sparse style or hyperfluency that similarly test the possibilities of meaning.

- If Holocaust literature constitutes a limit case, it is also a prime site for testing aesthetic and ethical theories about mediation and representability. This being so, it is no wonder that questions such as who has the right to tell,[5] and how to tell, should be central to Holocaust Studies. It is to them that I will turn in what follows.

3. WHO HAS THE RIGHT TO TELL?

3.1. Survivor testimonies

The first literary representations of the Holocaust were written by survivors, who published diaries, autobiographies, essays, etc., as was the case with Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, Jean Améry, Imre Kertész, Liana Millu, etc. Poetry also served as a vehicle for depicting the horrors of the Holocaust, as proved by the work of Paul Celan, whose "Todesfuge" ("Deathfugue") –one of the first poems published about the Nazi camps– is now regarded as an iconic Holocaust poem and a benchmark of twentieth-century European poetry.[6]

A special right to tell appears to be conferred on a writer if s/he can be shown to have a personal connection with the events dealt with.[7] But up to what point do we share the view that we can only begin to understand what happened through the words of those that were there, those that witnessed the horror or were victims of it? We may agree that survivors have a right to tell, but does this mean that no one else can do it? And what about fictional accounts? The writing of testimonial literature inevitably created an "other": Holocaust fiction. And if writing about the Holocaust is controversial in itself, writing fiction that has it as its subject is far more controversial. The opening of Sue Vice's *Holocaust Fiction* (2000)

[5] This question is sometimes problematically framed, as if the Holocaust was "owned" by someone (victims?, individuals?, nations?). I agree with Hirsch and Kacandes when they point out that competing over ownership of historical events and world calamities may seem inappropriate, even obscene, but there is no denying that the question of to whom the Holocaust belongs comes up repeatedly on public debates (13). It is also central to the study and teaching of the Holocaust.

[6] See Martínez-Alfaro 2014 for a study of Celan's famous poem from the perspective of trauma criticism and in comparative analysis with Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl*.

[7] There are also cases of fraud, as a public figure/an author's personal connection with the Holocaust may be fake. Well-known cases are those of Binjamin Wilkomirski and Helen Demidenko. They published works –*Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* and *The Hand that Signed the Paper*, respectively– with an (apparently) strong autobiographical component, but then it turned out that their connection with the Holocaust was entirely fabricated. In Spain we have the case of Enric Marco. He entered the public sphere as a Holocaust survivor and in 2003 he became president of the Amical of Mauthausen –an association set up to defend the rights of the 9,000 Spanish people who were sent to Nazi concentration camps. A few years later he was unmasked as a fraud since he was not actually a survivor. A movie on the case, entitled *Marco* and directed by Aitor Arregui and Jon Garaño, was released in 2024.

illustrates this point: "Holocaust fictions are scandalous: that is, they invariably provoke controversy by inspiring repulsion and acclaim in equal measure. To judge by what many critics have to say, to write Holocaust fiction is tantamount to making a fiction of the Holocaust." (1)

To some, writing Holocaust fiction is morally wrong; to others, it is a necessary addition: fiction should not be seen as competing with survivor testimony, but rather as evidence of an ongoing engagement with the task of bearing witness. There will come a time when there will be no survivors left, and then literature and the arts will be the only means to recreate an event that should not be forgotten. For a long time, though, the critical preference for testimony over fiction was a fact. By now, well into the 21st century, we can say that fiction has established its legitimacy against the charge that a fictional text is either inadequate or inappropriate when it comes to representing the Holocaust. Holocaust fiction must be vindicated as a means to preserving the memory of what happened but, as Emily M. Budick puts it, it must also be vindicated for what it can achieve as fiction:

> Historical accounts establish one sort of contract with the reader, fictional texts another. A memoir is one kind of text; a fiction is another. My claim is that fiction does a certain sort of narrative work. That work cannot be dismissed or even relegated to a secondary position even if the literary work has multiple other objectives, such a wish for historical commemoration, an expression of personal grief or guilt, or a desire to mourn the victims of catastrophe. (2)

The descendants of survivors have written fiction and non-fiction alike and, in important respects, their works blend history and fiction, memory and imagination. As they did not go through the experiences lived by their forebears, much of what they write builds on creative reinvention aimed at "repositioning" and "reintegration" (Frosh 166) into a history that has left deep scars and runs intergenerationally.

3.2. The literature of the post-generations

As time went by, an important addition to testimonial literature has been the literature of the post-generations. Medical and psychological research has revealed that trauma can be passed from one generation to the next. This is what is meant by the phrase "transgenerational transmission of trauma", which does not only apply to descendants of Holocaust survivors (see Danieli 1998). Growing up with traumatised parents affects the psychic development of the child, who is made to carry a burden related to events s/he did not go through but which mark his/her life in important ways.

Children of survivors of the camps and of refugees from Nazi Germany were collectively or personally exposed to "survivor syndrome" and/or "survivor guilt".[8] They were the sons and the daughters of silence, who were denied knowledge of their family history. There were also those whose parents talked too much, forcing their children to relive their experience daily. Both things are equally destabilising.

Second-generation writers recapitulate the experience of their parents and also tell about their own experiences as illustrated by the autobiographies, biographies, novels, and short stories of writers like Howard Jakobson, Linda Grant, Anne Karpf, Lisa Appignanesi, Carol Ascher, Barry Lane, Barbara Finkelstein, Thomas Friedmann, Michael Kornblit, Sonia Pilcer, David Preston, Lev Raphael, Lore Segal, Julie Salamon, Ellen Summers, and Art Spiegelman. As to the third generation (grandchildren of survivors), they have grown up with more psychological freedom, but many of them still take on the task to bear witness. Moreover, their work also shows that they need to unlock family history in order to build their own identity, to know where they come from in order to understand who they are. This is the case with writers like Daniel Mendelsohn, Jérémie Dress, Jonathan Safran Foer, Nicole Krauss, and Julie Orringer, to name a few.

The plight of survivors' descendants has been explained by Marianne Hirsch in the light of what she calls "post-memory". She coined the term to describe the relationship that the descendants of survivors bear to the trauma of those who came before, "to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right." ("Generation" 106-107, italics in the original) Post-memory "is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection." ("Family Pictures" 8) This provides an interesting frame from which to approach the work of second- and third- generation writers. We cannot say that they have no personal connection with the Holocaust, but we cannot say either that they have first-

[8] "Survivor syndrome" refers to a characteristic group of symptoms, including recurrent images of death, depression, emotional numbness, and feelings of anger, fear, distrust, occurring in survivors of disaster. Psychologically, survivor parents may exhibit any of these symptoms, a tendency toward psychosomatic illness, and the long-term effects of torture and starvation. Moreover, survivors' parenting skills can be deeply affected by their experiences of death and deprivation. Separation anxiety and a tendency to diminish the importance of their offspring's emotional needs are characteristic of survivor syndrome. "Survivor guilt" makes reference to feelings of guilt for having survived a catastrophe in which others died. This guilt is not the result of something one has done or fails to do. It is much more complex, as it makes one feel that one does not deserve to be alive.

hand experience of the events. Writing about the Holocaust is for these writers a way of coping with its effects on their lives and also the result of a felt responsibility for keeping its memory alive now that most survivors have died.

If there is a key work in this context, which figures prominently in most studies on Holocaust literature, that is Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*.[9] Spiegelman's parents were Polish Jews who survived Auschwitz. They moved to the United States and settled in Queens, New York. Art was their second child, the first did not survive. Spiegelman uses the medium of the graphic novel, which was provocative in itself, to deal with the reconstruction of his father's memories of the Holocaust as well as his own experience as a child growing up in a family burdened by those memories, and also by his mother's suicide (though she survived, she eventually took her life). Like many Holocaust narratives, it blends the historical with the fictional in a way that makes classification difficult. On the one hand, one may be tempted to classify this work as fiction, given the fact that the author chooses to depict various groups of people as animals: Jews are mice, Germans are cats, Poles are pigs, North-Americans are dogs, Swedes are reindeer, French are frogs, and Gypsies are bees/moths. On the other hand, it is also true that there is a huge research work behind the book, which contains a wide variety of materials –including maps, graphics and real photographs– and which is, after all, an unconventional history that combines biography (the father's) and autobiography (the son's).

This and other works by children of survivors illustrate Efrain Sicher's assertion that the second generation "bears the scar without the wound" (27).

3.3. Holocaust fiction written by authors who have no immediate connection with the events

These works reveal the existence of an intersubjective space for memory and remembrance related to a trauma that is not just individual (it is/was so for those directly affected by it), but also cultural or collective. To these authors, the Holocaust is not connected with their personal or family past but with collective memory, rather. The Shoah has called into question the nature of humanity and civilization in a way fundamentally different from any other historical event. It has left us a legacy in the form of a collective response to the

[9] *Maus* was originally published in serialised form (between 1980 and1991) in successive issues of *Raw*, an avant-garde magazine edited by Spiegelman and his wife, Françoise Mouly. This initially serialised story was published in two volumes: *Maus I* (1986) and *Maus II* (1991), which were later on collected in a single book entitled *The Complete Maus*. Spiegelman won the Pulitzer Prize for it in 1992.

atrocity. As Geoffrey H. Hartman suggested, the non-participants share with the survivors a sense of breach in our traditional conception of human and civilized nature. This emotional burden, the capacity to act as a witness to the Holocaust, is something that concerns us all. Hartman coined the term "witnesses by adoption" (1996 *passim*) to expand the notion of bearing witness beyond the limits of the individual and the family: one bears witness to the events by writing about them not because they are part of one's personal or family past, but simply because these events are linked to what it is being human.

4. HOW TO TELL ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST?

Berel Lang starts his monograph on *Holocaust Representation* (2000) with a chapter entitled "Art Within the Limits", where he states that, for the "post-Holocaust" period we now inhabit, what remains in dispute

> is the question of how such event, *that* one in particular, can or should be "represented". […] Because if there is characteristically a significant relation between the subject or occasion of representation (in or outside the art world) and the form by which it is expressed, then it would follow that the identifying features of the Holocaust —what makes it distinctive historically and morally– would, and should, also make a difference in the modes of its representation. What the event was, in other words, would also limit or even close out certain possibilities to the artists while opening the way to others. (3-4, italics in the original)

To Lang, as to many others, there are limits to how the Holocaust can be represented. But which are these limits? And who establishes them?

Robert Eaglestone, for instance, agrees with those who think that the past should not be left solely to history and that fiction can help us understand the Holocaust. And yet, he warns that the growth of Holocaust consciousness has also resulted in the emergence of post-Holocaust kitsch, which transforms the past into something "meant to titillate or offer a saccharine ease" (*Broken Voice* 143). A hard word to define, kitsch is, according to Lisa Saltzman,

> easy, sentimental, commercial. Coupled with a representation of history, it transforms its traumas into fictional melodramas, renders its catastrophes sites of catharsis. It foregoes the reflective and enduring encounter demanded by avant-garde culture and offers in its place instant gratification. Kitsch, when coupled with a representation of history, a history of fascism, of the Holocaust, of genocide, makes that history all too assimilable, digestible, consumable. (Saltzman qtd. in Eaglestone, *Broken Voice* 141)

The world described in these texts is simple, apolitical and ahistorical and does not contribute to full engagement with the Holocaust: kitsch purges the memory of the genocide and, in doing so, the connection between the Holocaust and our world is severed. Holocaust texts that can be labelled as kitsch are a "fungus on the memory of the Holocaust, it cannot be prevented," but they shape public memory and, for that reason, they should be the focus of critical commentary (Eaglestone, *Broken Voice* 140). One example is *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. John Boyne's novel was first published in 2006, awarded and short-listed for several literary prizes, and adapted into a best-selling film in 2008. An opera adaptation was launched in 2023. It is an international best-seller and ten years after its publication it had already sold seven million copies. Teachers in different countries use it as a tool to teach about the Holocaust. The novel is immensely popular but also widely criticised for its many historical inaccuracies. It is deemed problematic for many other reasons, like its coarse reduction of the Holocaust to fable, its creation of a false equivalence between victims and perpetrators, and its easy, sentimental rhetoric. In 2020, the Auschwitz-Birkenau Holocaust Memorial and Museum twitted that this novel should be avoided by anyone who studies or teaches the history of the Holocaust.[10]

A related term that has become formally established in the lexicon of Holocaust studies is "Holocaust piety". It was coined by philosopher Gillian Rose in *Mourning Becomes the Law* (1997) –to characterise Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993)– and is generally used to describe particularly sentimental or sanctimonious approaches to the genocide, redemptory forms of Holocaust representation that privilege certain contents and supress others. Rose contrasts Spielberg's film adaptation of Thomas Keanelly's novel *Schlinder's Arch* (1982) with Merchant Ivory's adaptation of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989) as a film devoid of sentimentality that bets on complexity, replacing emotional safety with the undermining of the moral self-certainties of the audience (Rose 54). It cannot be denied, as Matthew Boswell explains, that the culture industry targets mass audiences who, more often than not, "prefer simple and positive messages […] and this shapes a tendency for artists, writers and directors to focus on stories of escape, survival and heroism." (5) As a consequence, the public's preferences gravitate towards the more simple and saccharine

[10] On approaches, materials and resources to teach (representations of) the Holocaust, see Hirsch and Kacandes 2004; Pellicer Ortín, Martínez Alfaro and Fernández Gil 2015; and Pallarés 2024.

instances of Holocaust representation, which include, to give some well-known examples, Roberto Benigni's award-winning *Life is Beautiful* (1997) and the aforementioned *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (novel 2006, movie 2008). Indeed, even if we broaden the focus beyond these instances of post-Holocaust kitsch and Holocaust piety, we will see that there is a specific kind of narrative that has been sanctioned and has consequently become, in Christine Berberich's words, "the predominant metanarrative of the Holocaust" (4). Drawing on Jeffrey C. Alexander (2004), Berberich describes this metanarrative as one that is focused on the victims and that allows readers and viewers to unquestionably identify with their suffering. Such identification is made possible, to a large extent, by the lack of critical engagement with the perpetrators and with the complexities of a multilayered view of both innocence and guilt. One response to this, and a relatively recent development in the literature of memory, is the "perpetrator turn" (Crownshaw 2011, Adams and Vice 2012, Morag 2018), which some scholars have seen as a symptom of a shift "from the victim era […] to the perpetrator era." (Morag 14) This shift may have to do with the temporal distance from the Holocaust, but it is also related to the enduring relevance of questions of guilt and complicity in relation to human-rights abuses, the spread of far-right movements and the rise of neofascist violence in the contemporary world. The growth of historical research into perpetrators and the ongoing popularity of the historical novel, with many of these narratives finding inspiration in recent historiography, are also factors worth mentioning. In addition to all this, there is a growing awareness in academic circles that it is impossible to teach and study the Holocaust and its literature –and to reflect on the always relevant connection between the present and the past– without confronting the issue of the perpetrators.

We may be tempted to think that the Holocaust happened in a time which is not our time, and that perpetrators are our "others", we are not like them. And yet, as Zygmunt Bauman explains:

> *The Holocaust was born and executed in our modern rational society, at the high stage of our civilization and at the peak of human cultural achievement, and for this reason it is a problem of that society, civilization and culture*…. The implication that the perpetrators of the Holocaust were a wound or a malady of our civilization –rather than its horrifying yet legitimate product– results not only in the moral comfort of self-exculpation, but in the dire threat of moral and political disarmament. It all happened 'out there' –in another time, another country. The more 'they' are to blame, the more the rest of 'us' are safe, and the less we have to do to defend this safety. Once the allocation of guilt is implied to be equivalent to the location of

> causes, the innocence and sanity of the way of life of which we are so proud need not be cast in doubt. (x, xii, italics in the original)

For Bauman, the Holocaust should not be viewed as a peculiarity of German history, as something that has to do with Germany or Germanness, or with a past context that is unrelated to our own. That would amount to shifting the blame away from modernity, and it is the need to treat the critique of modernity seriously that constitutes the major lesson of the Holocaust, according to Bauman. Approaching the perpetrators as radical examples of evil and cruelty would similarly exculpate the rest, and would darken a more uncomfortable truth about those who made the Holocaust happen –a truth more in line with what Hannah Arendt found out when attending the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, and which led to the publication of one of the best-known works of this philosopher and political thinker: *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963).

Adolph Eichmann (1906-1962) was a lieutenant colonel of the Nazi SS. He was charged with the task of facilitating and managing the logistics of mass deportation of Jews to ghettos and extermination camps in German-occupied Eastern Europe. After the Second World War, he fled to Argentina, where he lived under a false identity until he was captured in 1960. He was then taken to Israel to face trial in an Israeli court on fifteen criminal charges, including crimes against humanity and war crimes. He was found guilty and executed by hanging in 1962. Hannah Arendt –a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany, first to France and then to the United States– attended the Eichmann trial as a reporter for *The New Yorker* and she was struck by the fact that he lacked all the demonic qualities that the prosecution had attributed to him. Against the traditional concept of evil seen as ultimate depravity, corruption or sinfulness, she argued that the shocking truth that the trial revealed had to do, rather, with "the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil." (287) While it would have been very comforting indeed to see that Eichmann was a monster, the trouble with him, writes Arendt, "was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal." (257) The truth about Eichmann and many others like him is that they silenced the capacity for inner dialogue that is the basis of moral judgement. They were not inherently evil or staunchly committed to an ideology, they were simply shallow, they did what "everybody else" did, they followed orders without pondering on their consequences. They were not "satanic", or psychopaths, and there is no banality in the evil they committed, but they often

were themselves banal, ordinary human beings. In line with this, more recent approaches to the task of representing perpetrators in literature propose, rather, a psychology of ordinary men in tune with Arendt's "banality of evil". [11]

Holocaust Studies and literature have also made room for the plight of perpetrators' descendants, making us reflect on what aspects of it are comparable, and which other are not, to the experience of the descendants of survivors. Do they have a similarly special connection with the events? Can Hirsch's term "post-memory" be equally applied to them? Have they also had to cope with disturbing silences regarding their family past? May they feel equally compelled to unbury that past, to face what happened, even if it hurts, just as it is hurtful to dive into one's family past if one is the descendant of survivors?

Studying and representing, the perpetrators and their descendants invariably leads to the issue of how ordinary Germans were and are affected by the Holocaust. In 2006, Froma Zeitlin focused on a then emerging trend in Holocaust literature, which she called "imaginary tales in the land of the perpetrators": fictional stories that move away from the victims and deal instead with the victimisers, as well as with the legacy of the Nazi period on ordinary Germans. Interestingly, these narratives recreate the day-to-day workings of society in the lives of "ordinary folk" under the Third Reich or some time later in order to probe, from this perspective:

> [t]he all-consuming question that seems to haunt us still: how could it have happened? What did ordinary Germans think and do during this period, when certain classes of persons, especially, but not only, Jews, were progressively made social pariahs, disenfranchised, stigmatized and finally outlawed? How did an apparently normal and diversified society assent to Nazi measures of increasing violence […]? What happened to conscience, moral choice and human decency, even under the fierce pressures of ideological fanaticism […]? What did these ordinary folk know? And what did they care? (215)

[11] There is later historical research that has questioned Arendt's views on Eichmann, presenting him as not so banal but, rather, as an energetic ideologue of antisemitism (see Stangneth 2011 on this). Be it as it may, I think that Arendt's theory on the banality of evil is still relevant today. As Richard J. Berstein (75) points out, Arendt's questions about the meaning of evil in the contemporary world, the ease with which human beings are made superfluous, the frailty of what we call the voice of conscience, and the subtle forms of complicity and cooperation that go along with murderous deeds are not issues restricted to the Nazi past. All the contrary, they are still very much with us and demand that we face up to them over and over again.

Most of these questions, remain, I think, open, but literature and literary criticism create space for thinking them over.[12] As more research has been done in this field in recent years, an increasing number of literary works have been published that approach the Holocaust and its aftermath in connection with perpetrators, perpetrators' descendants and ordinary Germans (during and after the Holocaust). In addition to the books discussed by Zeitlin in her article –Marcie Hershman's *Tales of the Master Race* (1991), Gila Lustiger's *The Inventory* (*Die Bestandsaufnahme*, 1995), and Rachel Seiffert's *The Dark Room* (2001)– others could me mentioned, like Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader* (*Der Vorleser*, 1995) and *The Homecoming* (*Die Heimkehr*, 2006); Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones* (*Les Bienveillantes*, 2006); Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow* (1991) and *The Zone of Interest* (2014); Uwe Timm's *In my Brother's Shadow* (*Am Beispiel meines Bruders*, 2003); Marcus Zusack's *The Book Thief* (2005); Michael Lavigne's *Not Me* (2007); Laurent Binet's *HHhH* (2010); Jodi Picoult's *The Storyteller* (2013); John Donoghue's *The Death's Head Chess Club* (2015); Nora Krug's *Heimat. A German Family Album* (2018); and Catherine Chidgey's *Remote Sympathy* (2022).

According to Roger Luckhurst, "the problem of Auschwitz" has emerged as a "determining catastrophe" that all culture after 1945 must address (5). Imre Kertész –Holocaust survivor and Nobel Prize for Literature in 2002– heard "the broken voice" of our post-Holocaust era "in modern European art" and even asserted that he knew "of no genuine work of art that does not reflect this break." ("Imre Kertész – Nobel Lecture") This "broken voice" resonates across a wide range of literary works, inviting us to reflect on the past, and the present. From this double perspective, this voice encourages us to read and learn about one of the most tragic episodes in world's history, while it continues to raise questions about the limits of representation and the duty to represent.[13]

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[12] In the context of German literature, an entire generic category has been created –*Väterliteratur* (father literature)– to describe those texts that address the legacy of perpetration and Germany's Nazi past (see McGlothlin 143-173 on this). Scholars like Susan Neiman (2019) have explored German *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* –working off the past– and related it to other countries' attempts to come to terms with their past of human atrocities, as is the case with slavery and racism in the United States. Another not unrelated and equally interesting critical perspective is the attempt to develop new discourses and theories of responsibility for past injustices through the figure of "the implicated subject", thus exploring "various modes of historical relation that do not necessarily fall under the more direct forms of participation associated with traumatic events, such as victimisation and perpetration." (Rothberg 40).

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