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SUMMARY

With reference to the concepts *memory*, *remembered history*, and *imagined history* regularities in the historical development of Holocaust literature can be described. In addition to different chronological stages the concepts represent different genre conventions, ranging from testimonies (diaries, autobiographies) to autobiographical novels to, finally, narrative fiction. The first 'literary' responses could not come from other sources than the survivors who, after a period of traumatic speechlessness, put their memories into words. Later, others began to write, in particular the descendents of witnesses who felt the need of remembering the history of their families. Finally, from the 1980s on, the Holocaust as a literary theme lost its poetic restrictions and became an element of the imagination. Notwithstanding their primarily documentary function, testimonies carry the traces of the selective recollection of the writing subject (example: Primo Levi's ironical interventions). Authors of the second and third generation, who try to remember history, frequently use the narrative structure of the quest (examples: Amir Gutfreund, Patrick Modiano, Elsa Morante). A striking element in literary representations based on the imagined history of the Holocaust is the recurrent playing with the identities of victims and perpetrators, the genre of the satire being the most adequate literary expression of that theme (early examples of a satirical representation: Edgar Hilsenrath and Romain Gary; contemporary ones: Arnon Grunberg and Alessandro Piperno).

KEYWORDS

Memory, history, remembered history, imagined history, irony/satire

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MEMORY, HISTORY, IMAGINATION

HOW TIME AFFECTS THE PERSPECTIVE ON HOLOCAUST LITERATURE

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During my research on the Holocaust literature of various European countries and Israel I observed some regularities in its historical development. Although I am not a specialist of Italian literature, perhaps my theoretical reflections can be of some use to historians of Italian literature.

If something happens to a human being, in the first place there is the *experience*. In principle, experiences are non-verbal, but usually the transfer into language takes place almost immediately. Verbalising an experience means to respect the logic of narration, including the phonological, syntactical, and semantic rules of the specific linguistic system. If the experience, however, is a traumatic one, the transfer into language may become problematic. A trauma occurs unexpectedly, means the loss of all safety, may threaten one's life, and is humiliating. With respect to Holocaust traumas Dori Laub argues:

The traumatic event, although real, took place outside of the parameters of normal reality, such as causality, sequence, place, and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during, and no after. This absence of categories that define it lend it a quality of 'otherness', a salience [...] outside the range of comprehension, of recounting, and of mastery. (Felman & Laub 1992, 69)

It is not difficult to imagine that those who have experienced the concentration camps and have lost the categories within which normal reactions develop have a long way to go in regaining both the parameters of 'reality' and a sense of self-acceptance. Speechlessness with respect to the event may be one of the first reactions. Only when the victims are removed far enough from the traumatic experience to tentatively re-experience it within the categories of time, place, and sequence may they find the words to tell their life story. At this point memory, briefly defined as the 'mental repetition' of a past experience functions as a source of knowledge and communication. This repetition is, of course, not identical with the past experience. An undeniable difference is the chronological distance. But there are others: regaining the parameters of reality and the wish to communicate the (traumatic) experience to others out of necessity involves certain transformations.

Memories, in general, do not offer an unmediated access to the past. They have to be re-created in the present. This applies in particular to traumatic memories that are not fully perceived as they occur.¹ The written manifestation of memory is autobiography. Its public character requires a readable structuring and stylistic

elaboration: 'beginning' and 'ending', 'before', 'during', and 'after' are necessary principles of narration.

I reserve the concept of 'memory' for the testimonies of those who experienced the concentration camps themselves. With respect to Italian literature Raniero Spelman mentions as examples of "testimonianze dei campi di concentramento" (concentration camp testimonies) writers such as Primo Levi, Edith Bruck, Liana Millu, Giuliana Tedeschi (1995, 69-101). For the remembering of those who "were not there", and the second and third generation I propose to talk instead of 'remembered history'. This concept indicates that people who had no camp experiences themselves cannot mentally repeat the experiences of the camp but need the memorial narratives of witnesses, for example their parents. If the parents do not figure as obvious story tellers, they must search for traces of the events in libraries, images, and the official *lieux de mémoires*. There are many reasons why the parents are reluctant to recall their traumatic past, not the least being the wish not to pass on their traumas onto their children.

The 'remembered history' of the Holocaust, often the history of their own families, is a frequent theme in the literary production of the so-called 'generations-after'. It often deals with the silenced past, the enormous efforts of the children to unveil and (re)construct what happened to their parents (or grandparents), and their own problems to survive in an environment which, on an amazingly large scale, appears to have forgotten about the fate of the European Jewry in the twentieth century. In 'remembered histories' as a literary genre, literary devices are more prominent than in testimonial memories. Although the historical events are highly respected, the narrator has more freedom with respect to reflecting his own ignorance, his laborious search for the truth and his decisions about dealing with chronology and tracing the characters.

Another stage in the writing of the Holocaust is what I call the 'imagined history'. To date, numerous historical studies about the Holocaust have appeared and a large amount of documentary information has been recorded. Notwithstanding the subjective perspective of any historical report, such information must be submitted to truth claims and be tested. Literature, including 'imagined history', is allowed to follow a different convention. A distinguishing feature of literary writing and reading is the need to negotiate fictionality, i.e. the creation or processing of narrated events which, if they happened at all, have been transformed via processes of de- and re-contextualisation. In many cases literature contradicts official historiography instead of echoing it. Unlike fiction that does not subscribe to the task of commemoration, the fictional elements in Holocaust literature often give rise to critical reactions of readers who are not prepared and willing to suspend the truth claims that are part of the history of suffering and intellectual disaster. This, however, does not prevent writers of the younger generations (but not exclusively the younger ones) from resisting the generic restrictions of autobiographical writing and from claiming their own way of narrating the Holocaust. They want to explore their own limits of representation and feel free to choose a genre, a poetic program, a

new language. Whether they should write in a realistic, ironic, grotesque, or postmodernist mode depends on their own choice.

HOLOCAUST LITERATURE: EXAMPLES OF GENRE CONVENTIONS

'Memory', 'remembered history', and 'imagined history' on the one hand represent different chronological stages with regard to the historical event of the Holocaust and, on the other, different genre conventions, ranging from testimonies (diaries, autobiographies), to autobiographical novels to, finally, narrative fiction. Genre conventions, however, do not exclude strong individual thematic and formal elaborations. Notwithstanding their primarily documentary function, even testimonies carry the traces of selective recollection and the modelling intervention of the writing subject. A comparison between two authors of survivor testimonies, Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi, reveals striking differences. Wiesel has no doubt whatsoever about the existence of God in and after Auschwitz. It is true that he does not abstain from asking why God remained silent, but fully accepts the answer of the Talmud scholar who said: "...et Dieu là-haut pleure" (Wiesel 1994, 111).² Primo Levi, on the other hand, considered the language of prayer inappropriate in a place like Auschwitz. He wrote:

[...] si vede e si sente che il vecchio Kuhn prega, ad alta voce, col berretto in testa e dondolando il busto con violenza. Kuhn ringrazia Dio perché non è stato scelto. Se io fossi Dio, sputerei a terra la preghiera di Kuhn. (Levi 1977, 164)³

Wiesel's narrative is about the victims. He refuses to write about the perpetrators:

Pas les bourreaux. Je ne saurais décrire les Blockführer SS qui nous comptaient à l'appel, ni le Lagerführer qui assistait aux pendaisons. Bizarrement, les bourreaux ne m'intéressaient pas. Les victimes, oui. Les victimes seulement. (Wiesel 1994, 115)⁴

Levi, however, has no qualms about describing an SS officer:

Pannwitz è alto, magro, biondo; ha gli occhi, i capelli e il naso come tutti i tedeschi devono averli, e siede formidabilmente dietro una complicata scrivania. Io, Häftling 174517, sto in piedi nel suo studio che è un vero studio, lucido pulito e ordinato, e mi pare che lascerei una macchia sporca dovunque dovessi toccare. (Levi 1977, 133-134)⁵

I assume that readers intuitively will agree with me that the passage quoted can be read as an ironical one. The difficulty, however, appears when it comes to analyze this ironical quality. Supported by modern theorists of irony (i.e. Sperber and Wilson) I propose to define irony as: 'the transfer of a linguistic utterance from a generally accepted context into a contrasting and unexpected one'. Sperber puts it as follows: "The speaker expresses a derogatory attitude to a meaning he or she merely mentions" (1984, 130). By echoing stereotypical opinions about Germans and Jews

Levi expresses an ironic perception of his situation. In fact, irony is his only protection against total and irrevocable submission, a self-protection in a situation of ultimate threat. If there is no chance of effectively opposing an adversary who is in full possession of power, the only means to maintain human dignity is intellectual superiority. Echoing the norms and values of an adversary is a way of ridiculing their validity.

The search for knowledge, however painful it may be, is a strong characteristic of the authors of the generations-after but also of those who were contemporaries of the genocide but did not experience the concentration camps personally. One example of an author whose novel is based on 'remembered history' with clearly autobiographical elements is the Israeli Amir Gutfreund, born in 1963. His novel *Our Holocaust* (Hebrew: *Shoah Shelanu*, 2000) is his debut. Living in Israel, Gutfreund experiences the consequences of the Holocaust in a comparatively direct way. The author writes against a silenced past. The theme and structure of the novel represent the search for getting access to the memories of the survivors, in order to recall their history. Briefly after the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948, the annihilation of the European Jewry had not been given much attention to, neither in Israeli politics nor in education or literature, in order not to contradict the national narrative of Zionism. The situation gradually changed with the Eichmann trial in 1961, but only in the 1980s the narrative of the pioneers gave way to the narrative of the victims coming from Europe. Gutfreund communicates a message that breaks an important taboo, namely that the victims of the genocide were not afflicted by the slightest human weakness. Carefully and with all imaginable respect, the author deprives the survivors of the aureole of perfect morality. The existential human desire to save one's own life and that of one's beloved requires different strategies than generally accepted morality can offer. In what is called 'The Quarter', a district in Haifa where survivors originally coming from Eastern Europe live, people suffer severely from their past experiences. Often their behavior is maladjusted, their mastery of Hebrew is deficient, their languages being Yiddish and Polish. Gutfreund describes the behavioral codes for regulating life in the Quarter mainly from the perspective of two children, the boy Amir and his girlfriend Effi. They suspect that the adults keep silent about important things and attempt to break the silence and unveil the secrets. The confrontation of two incompatible discourses, that of the children who ask their naive questions and that of the adults who avoid clear answers, expresses the gap between the lack of knowledge on the one hand and the burden of knowledge on the other. The efforts to break the silence are sometimes successful, but, whatever the children come to know, it is not a coherent story but only details, often unconnected. Many uncertainties remain and the feeling prevails that they would never be able to understand the Holocaust, because it happened in a completely different world, with different laws, not accessible to them.

The merciless analysis of Gutfreund, at the end of his voluminous novel, leads to the conclusion that the attractive solution, i.e. to place the Holocaust on another planet, has to be rejected. The children have learnt an important lesson:

The Holocaust was an ordinary event. Ordinary people have committed it and ordinary people have been its victims. (Gutfreund 2003, 620)

Authors who try to remember history frequently choose the narrative structure of the quest. The French novelist Patrick Modiano in *Dora Bruder* (1997) relies on places, dates, and pictures to give an identity to a young Jewish girl whose name he happened to come across in an old newspaper. In an issue of *Paris Soir* of December 1941 the parents of the girl ask for information about their daughter who suddenly had disappeared. In what follows the narrator describes his search for traces of the girl, his repeated walking to places she should have frequented, given the local indications in the newspaper. He goes to archives and, indeed, is successful to collect some important historical facts, as, for example, "Tourelles: 19-6-42 [...] Bruder, Dora: Drancy le 13-8-42" (Modiano 1997, 114).

What remains, however, is a strong feeling of absence and void:

J'ignorerai toujours à quoi elle passait ses journées [...] C'est là son secret. Un pauvre et précieux secret que les bourreaux, les ordonnances, les autorités dites l'occupation, le Dépôt, les casernes, les camps, l'Histoire, le temps – tout ce qui vous souille et vous détruit – n'auront pas pu lui voler. (147)⁶

The narrator's effort to restore Dora's identity are in vain. The hypotheses and associations he makes in combining data and places are his own. They do not reveal the life of Dora; the dead do not speak, nor the 'objective' details. The loss cannot be undone.

Looking at Jewish authors in Italy I propose to classify Elsa Morante's *La Storia* (1974) as an example of 'remembered history'. The History with capital H (of World War II) is represented in the novel as introductory shorthand information of the years 1941-1946. The follow-up of this documentary information about dates and events tells the personal history of Ida Ramundo. Hers is a history of solitude, anguish, and love for her two sons who die at the end. The microcosm of Ida and her family is incisively, detailed, and touchingly described in the voluminous work.

La Storia mirrors the high degree of assimilation of Italy's Jewish community.⁷ Although often well established in the liberal professions and the arts, the Italian Jews were not protected from the racial laws and eventual deportation and murder: "The half-decade of mitigated persecution came to an abrupt end in September 1943" (Hughes 1983, 60). Although Mussolini did not intend the physical extermination of the Jews, after 1943 "began the second and infinitely more brutal phase of Italian Jewry's sufferings" (60).

The character Ida appears to be terrified by her Jewish heritage, of which she experienced the threat but not the support and comfort. Historians of Italian literature are of course in a better position than I am to assess the degree of autobiographical elements in Morante's *La Storia*.

Proceeding to my third category, the 'imagined history' of the Holocaust, one may expect that the rise of this genre occurred at the time that the voice of the victims

had become less prominent or even had been silenced. Generally speaking, imagination in Holocaust literature indeed belongs to the poetic principles of the second and third generation. There are, however, remarkable exceptions as, for example, *La Danse de Gengis Cohn* (1967) by Romain Gary and *Der Nazi und der Friseur* (1977) (*The Nazi and the Barber: A Tale of Vengeance* (1975)) by Edgar Hilsenrath. Both authors, one French, the other German speaking, were young men during World War II. Hilsenrath was deported to the ghetto in Mogilev-Podolsk; Romain Gary, during World War II, served as an officer of the French army; after the occupation of France he joined the air force of De Gaulle in London. Their novels belong to the genre of the satirical grotesque. This means that they are deliberately anti-realistic and playfully carnivalesque in the sense of Michael Bakhtin, who interprets the carnival as a subversive reaction to an illegitimate display of power. Undermining the abuse of power means, as in the case of irony, to defend one's own dignity. The subversive answer to the claims of those in power mitigates the dichotomy of victim and victimizer, life and death, the self and the other. However, in contradistinction to irony the grotesque is to a lesser degree purely intellectual but explores instead the corporeality of the protagonists.

Gary's novel is a play with Jewish and German identities. A former SS officer has been through the denazification process and, as happened in comparable cases in German political reality, in the 1960s occupies a leading position with the police. The past, however, has caught up with him. He has become possessed by a *Dibbuk*. A Jew, named Gengis Cohn, whom the officer ordered to be shot in Auschwitz, has taken over his mind and body. He cannot but appropriate Cohn's opinions and comments. Cohn and the former SS officer are condemned never to leave each other. The attempt to destroy all Jewish identity has had the opposite result: the Jewish identity is now an integral part of German identity. The story, on the one hand, abounds of numerous absurd situations but, on the other, is full of cultural criticism and ethical commitment.

In the novel *Der Nazi und der Friseur* two young boys, Max Schulz and Itzig Finkelstein, are intimate friends. Playing with the stereotypes of racial features, the author provides the Aryan Max with the physiognomy of a Jew, whereas the Jew Itzig looks like a perfect Aryan. During National Socialism Max, as a member of the SS works in an extermination camp and is responsible for the death of many Jews, among them his friend Itzig and his family. After the war he appropriates the Jewish identity of his former friend and continues life as Itzig Finkelstein. He makes a thorough study of Judaism and finally goes to Palestine to become a freedom fighter there for the case of the Jews.

At the time of their publication the novels of both Gary and Hilsenrath were not well received. The opinion prevailed, even among the most leading critics, that one should not write about the Holocaust in this way. Today, however, the novels are much appreciated, reprinted and translated. At a time that survivors after a period of silence began to speak, only their authentic report found acceptance. Production and reception followed different paths. Whereas with respect to the

production of Holocaust literature the phases 'memory' – 'remembered history' – 'imagined history' show incidental overlap, the reception process appeared to be more strictly sticking to the chronological order.

Exceptional during the 1960s and 1970s, the imagined history of the Holocaust came to full blow only two decades later. In 1986 David Grossman (born 1954 in Jerusalem) published the novel *See Under: Love*. In the first part of it, which tells the story of the boy Momik in search of the truth of the Holocaust, the author uses the theme and structure of remembered history: the child trying to unveil the silenced past of his parents. The three other parts, however, rely heavily on intertexts, such as (1) the fictionalized life story of the Polish poet Bruno Schulz,⁸ (2) a parody of *Thousand and One Night*, and (3) the imitation of an *encyclopedia* of which the first entry is 'love' (in accordance with the Hebrew alphabet rather than with the English one). These devices place *See Under: Love* in the literary tradition and, in a sense, have it protected by this tradition. Here the free play of imagination is the primary impulse.

The Dutch author Arnon Grunberg (1971) published the novel *De Joodse Messias* (The Jewish Messiah) in 2004. He was already well-known as the author of *Blauwe maandagen* (1994) (*Blue Mondays*, 1997) and other novels. Grunberg's novels deal with sex, alcohol, troubles within the family and at school. The author unmaskes ideals, illusions, and authorities, even the authority of the Holocaust. His style is full of wittiness, verbosity, over- and understatement, and plays on words. *The Jewish Messiah* is a remarkable mixture of tragedy and comedy. The author leaves the Holocaust at a distance, although it appears to be a decisive element in the history of the main character's family. The grandfather of the high school student Xavier was a Nazi officer who held a position in a death camp. His grandson set out to give the Jews comfort, reduce their pain and become a perfect Jew himself. The first Jew he tried to save from distress was his schoolmate and lover Awromele. Instead of attaining this end, however, he loses his friend, who is murdered by terrorists. The novel is full of ironical situations, jokes, and witty dialogues. But irony can nowhere conceal the essentially tragic foundation of the lives of the many characters, Jews and non-Jews alike. I think that one may easily detect a comparable language of irony and thematic deep structure in Alessandro Piperno's novel *Con le peggiori intenzioni* (2005), which deals with the strained relationship of Judaism and Catholicism in Italy, in particular the problems of intermarriage. In *Con le peggiori intenzioni* pity and love are hidden behind merciless cynicism.

A striking element in literary representations based on the 'imagined history' of the Holocaust is the recurrent playing with the identities of victims and perpetrators. In particular for authors 'who were not there' it apparently remains a tormenting question how it was possible that the Germans – with a philosophical tradition of humanist values and a culture which was very close to that of educated Jews – turned into their most irreconcilable enemies.

Rewriting the history of the Holocaust is a frequently used and genuinely postmodernist procedure of 'imagined history'. American novelists, Jews and non-

Jews alike, have contributed a lot to the genre. As a Dutch author I could mention Marcel Möring with his novel *In Babylon* and his most recent one, called *Dis*, a rewriting of both Dante's *Inferno* and Joyce's *Ulysses*. The non-Jewish Austrian author Christoph Ransmayr wrote *Morbus Kitahara* which is a striking example of rewriting postwar history.

I come to my conclusion. Indeed, time changes the perspective with respect to the possibilities of writing and reading the Holocaust. The first 'literary' responses could not come from other sources than the survivors who, after a time of traumatic speechlessness, put their memories into words. Later, others began to write, in particular the descendants of witnesses who felt the need of remembering the history of their families. Finally, from the 1980s on, the Holocaust as a literary theme lost its poetic restrictions and became open to the imagination. This happened not without consequences: the 'imagined histories' of the Holocaust are more at the mercy of critical judgments than the genres that are deemed to be more authentic ones.

It was surprising, as I mentioned already, that a number of satirical grotesque novels appeared almost at the same time as most of the testimonies, although it is clear that one cannot think of literary genres more opposite to each other than memorial and satirical writing. However, keeping in mind that irony, mockery, and carnivalesque distortions are important sources of knowledge of oneself and the other, one may assume that they are helpful for human beings who are suffering. The intellectual superiority expressed in these modes of writing may be a means for emotionally regaining the respect of oneself. In my view the grotesque genre has been the appropriate counterpart of the testimony. The belated acceptance by literary critics does not contradict my analysis: we all had to learn and are still learning how to cope with inhumanity.

NOTES

¹ See Caruth 1995.

² "God in the highest is crying". The translation of the quotations is mine, unless otherwise specified.

³ "[...] I see and hear old Kuhn praying aloud, with his beret on his head, swaying backwards and forwards violently. Kuhn is thanking God because he has not been chosen. If I was God, I would spit at Kuhn's prayer" (Levi 2000, 154-155).

⁴ "Not the perpetrators. I would not be able to describe the SS Blockführer who counted us during the roll call, nor the Lagerführer who assisted at the hangings. It is bizarre, but I am not interested in the victimizers. I am interested in the victims, yes, only the victims".

⁵ "Pannwitz is tall, thin, blond; he has eyes, hair, and nose as all Germans ought to have them, and sits formidably behind a complicated writing table. I, Häftling 174517, stand in his office, which is a real office, shining, clean and ordered, and I feel that I would leave a dirty stain on whatever I touched" (Levi 2000, 125).

⁶ “I never came to know how she spent her daily life [...] That’s her secret. A poor and precious secret that neither the brute and orderly, occupational authorities nor the Depot, the barracks, the camps, History or time could deprive her of”.

⁷ See: Hughes 1983.

⁸ An Italian rewriting of the life of Bruno Schulz is Ugo Ricciarelli’s novel *Un uomo che forse si chiamava Schulz* (1998).

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