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Bernhard Schlink, *Der Vorleser* and the question of guilt

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Introduction

The truth of what one says lies in what one does. (B. Schlink, *The Reader*)

Countries such as Italy and Spain, and even Austria, have been almost too hasty in sloughing off their violent and tyrannical Fascist pasts;¹ in contrast, the national guilt debate seems to rage on regardless in Germany.² A prime reason for this is the unique nature of National Socialism, which was able to unite the State, a political movement, a race and a people, and harness its industrial strength in order to carve out an empire and crush whole nations. It is also exceptional that it was in a highly civilized nation in the heart of the 'old continent' that Nazism flourished and eventually triggered the deadliest catastrophe in modern civilization. Nor can we ignore the

¹ Cf. Bernhard Schlink, *Vergangenheitsschuld. Beiträge zu einem deutschen Thema*, Diogenes, Zurich 2007, p. 84. Works by Bernhard Schlink are referenced by page number and according to the following abbreviations: Bernhard Schlink, *Vergangenheitsschuld. Beiträge zu einem deutschen Thema*, Diogenes, Zurich 2007 = VG; Bernhard Schlink, *Vergewisserungen. Über Politik, Recht, Schreiben und Glauben*, Diogenes, Zurich 2005 = V; Bernhard Schlink, *Gedanken über das Schreiben. Heidelberger Poetikvorlesungen*, Diogenes, Zurich 2011 = GS; Bernhard Schlink, *Der Vorleser*, Diogenes, Zurich 1995 is cited with reference to the English translation by Carol Brown Janeway, Bernhard Schlink, *The Reader*, Phoenix, London 1997 = TR.

² Debate regarding national pasts occurred in Europe throughout the 1990s; France, Italy and the GDR were no longer exclusively regarded as countries where resistance had flourished; Austria and Poland were no longer seen as mere victims, while Switzerland and its banking system were also mired in guilt. This new awareness, however, was not perceived in terms of a dual victim-perpetrator role on a national level. On this debate, cf. Jens Kroh, *Transnationale Erinnerung. Der Holocaust im Fokus geschichtspolitischer Initiativen*, Campus, Frankfurt am Main 2008; Jens Kroh, *Das erweiterte Europa auf dem Weg zu einem gemeinsamen Gedächtnis?*, in *Das Unbehagen an der Erinnerung. Wandlungsprozesse im Gedenken an den Holocaust*, edited by Ulrike Jureit, Christian Schneider and Margrit Frölich, Brandes & Apsel, Frankfurt am Main 2012, pp. 201-216; Klaus Leggewie and Anne-Katrin Lang, *Der Kampf um die europäische Erinnerung. Ein Schlachtfeld wird besichtigt*, Beck, Munich 2011.



fundamental difference between largely verifiable historical circumstances and the complex human and existential anguish caused by those very events. This is what Giorgio Agamben calls the “non-coincidence between facts and truth, between what is ascertained and what is understood”; legal correctitude and even the punishment of the guilty, do not seem to satisfy the quest for justice.³ The jarring discrepancy between the relatively small number of murderous criminals who were finally tried and found guilty, and the millions upon millions of victims and their interminable suffering, becomes yet another contradiction consigned to history. Contemporaries such as Hannah Arendt, Karl Jaspers, Eugen Kogon, Werner Krauss, Viktor Klemperer and Theodor W. Adorno – who coined the very term ‘processing the past’ in the classic *Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit* (1959) – all put these themes at the centre of their work.⁴ Socio-ethical principles and legal-political norms of reference were re-established after the Second World War, but it was the dramatic ‘unique’ nature of German guilt that came to determine the criteria for how victims should be intended. Despite there being some differences between the two Germanies,⁵ a general consensus emerged in the closing decades of the last century. As we read in Bernhard Schlink’s *Der Vorleser* (1995) it was above all the events of 1968 that caused the first generation to “fall silent in revulsion, shame, and guilt”,⁶ while their children took it on themselves to process the past with “scholarly [...] political and moral fervor.”⁷ Reactions of “shock

³ Giorgio Agamben, *Quel che resta di Auschwitz. L'archivio e il testimone*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin 1998, p. 8.

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility* (1945) and also *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1961); Karl Jaspers, *Die Schuldfrage* (1946); Eugen Kogon, *Der SS-Staat. Das System der deutschen Konzentrationslager* (1946); Werner Krauss di PLN, *Die Passionen der balykonischen Seele* (1946); Viktor Klemperer, *LTI. Notizbuch eines Philologen* (1947); Theodor W. Adorno, *Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit* (1959).

⁵ Jeffrey Herf, *Zweierlei Erinnerung. Die NS-Vergangenheit in geteilten Deutschland*, Propyläen, Berlin 1998. Cf. also Ralph Giordano, *Die zweite Schuld oder von der Last Deutscher zu sein*, Rasch und Röhring, Hamburg, Zurich 1987, on German “second guilt” regarding the lack of elaboration of the past.

⁶ TR 102. Cf. also VS 13f.

⁷ TR 91.



and indignation” combine to silence any dissenting voice even “before [anyone] had the chance to demur.”⁸

However, such commitment does not result in reconciliation with the past. And hence it is no surprise that the question of German guilt has continued to surface at fairly frequent intervals. As Ernst Nolte’s much discussed *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* article of June 6th 1986 headlined, this is “the past that will not pass”.⁹ In fact the remonstrations had commenced in the 1950s with the publication of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, persisted through the 1960s with Peter Weiss’s *Die Ermittlung* (The Investigation), Rolf Hochhuth’s *Der Stellvertreter* (The Deputy) and Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich’s *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern* (The Inability to Mourn).¹⁰ This continued in the following decade when the television series *Holocaust* was broadcast and then in the 1980s with the so-called *Historikerstreit*, prompted by Ernst Nolte who was accused of ‘revisionism’ by Jürgen Habermas.¹¹ Successively, there was also the *Historikerinnenstreit*, focusing on the role that women had played in the Nazi regime.¹²

Bernhard Schlink himself claims that immediately after the Fall of the Berlin Wall, ‘compensatory zeal’ shifted to the political crimes perpetrated in the GDR.¹³ And yet the old controversy again spilled over in the 1990s when Daniel Jonah Goldhagen’s book was published,¹⁴ in

⁸ TR 101.

⁹ “Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will”, “FAZ”.

¹⁰ The conference of the German Association of German Studies in October 1966 was devoted to the subject of *Nationalsozialismus in Germanistik und Dichtung*.

¹¹ On the controversy over German guilt from the post-war period to the present day, cf. *Lexikon der Vergangenheitsbewältigung in Deutschland. Debatten- und Diskursgeschichte des Nationalsozialismus nach 1945*, edited by Torben Fischer and Matthias N. Lorenz, Transcript, Bielefeld Verlag 2008.

¹² The debate began with the differing views of Gisela Bock and Claudia Koonz: Gisela Bock, *Die Frauen und der Nationalsozialismus – Bemerkungen zu einem Buch von Claudia Koonz*, in «Geschichte und Gesellschaft» (1989), n. 15, pp. 563-579; Claudia Koonz, *Erwidern auf Gisela Bocks Rezension von “Mothers in the Fatherland”*, in «Geschichte und Gesellschaft» (1992), n. 18, pp. 400-404.

¹³ Cf. VS 54f. and 82f. Cf. also *‘Es geht nicht um Christa Wolf’. Der Literaturstreit im vereinten Deutschland*, edited by Thomas Anz, Spangenberg, Munich 1991.

¹⁴ Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners. Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, Alfred A Knopf, New York 1996.



the following year with the quarrel between Martin Walser and Ignatz Bubis,¹⁵ not to mention during the construction of the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin.¹⁶ In 2008, to cite just one example, the debate flared up again following the publication of Jonathan Littell's novel *The Kindly Ones*, written from the perspective of a perpetrator. Frank Schirrmacher, lead editor of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, set up an online reading room for Littell's novel, announcing, "This work has launched a debate. And we intend to conduct it. Precisely because the last word has not yet been said." (February 2nd 2008).¹⁷

Since the beginning of this century – as part of a process of German 'renationalization' which for some time now has no longer been a cause for concern within a greater Europe¹⁸ – our ideas regarding the Nazi regime and the Shoah appear to have changed.¹⁹ In recent years it has been institutions, banks and the *Bundesländer* that have been called upon to pay damages to the victims. Meanwhile, the scope of the research undertaken has also been extended, taking in cultural and gender studies as well as public history. Additionally, the

¹⁵ Cf. Aledia Assmann, *Geschichtsvergessenheit - Geschichtsversessenheit. Vom Umgang mit deutschen Vergangenheiten nach 1945*, Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, Stuttgart 1999, and also Aledia Assmann, *Das neue Unbehagen an der Erinnerungskultur. Eine Intervention*, Beck, Munich 2013.

¹⁶ Cf. Julius H. Schoeps, *Ein Volk von Mördern? Die Dokumentation der Goldbagen-Debatte und die Rolle der Deutschen im Holocaust*, Hoffmann und Campe, Hamburg 1996; *Das Holocaust-Mahnmal. Dokumentation einer Debatte*, edited by Michael S. Cullen, Pendo, Zurich 1999; Ernst Piper, *Gibt es wirklich eine Holocaust-Industrie? Zur Auseinandersetzung um Norman Finkelstein*, Pendo, Zurich 2001; Michael Naumann, 'Es muß doch in diesem Lande wieder möglich sein...'. *Der neue Antisemitismus-Streit*, Ullstein, Munich 2002; *Ein Buch, ein Bekenntnis. Die Debatte um Günter Grass' "Beim Häuten der Zwiebel"*, edited by Martin Köhbel, Steidl, Göttingen 2007.

¹⁷ Cf. Simonetta Sanna, *Jonathan Littell's The Kindly Ones: an ongoing debate*, in «Studi Germanici», (2014), n. 6, pp. 81-100

¹⁸ On the 'dialectic of normalization' and the end of the German *Sonderweg*, cf. Jürgen Habermas, *1989 im Schatten von 1945. Zur Normalität einer zukünftigen Berliner Republik*, in Jürgen Habermas, *Die Normalität einer Berliner Republik*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1995, pp. 167-188.

¹⁹ Regarding this, cf. *Der Nationalsozialismus und die Shoah in der deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur*, edited by Torben Fischer, Philipp Hammermeister and Sven Kramer, Rodopi, Amsterdam-New York 2014, and also Joachim Garbe, *Deutsche Geschichte in deutschen Geschichten der neunziger Jahre*, Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg 2002;



recollections of individuals who survived those years have sometimes been weighed against the prevailing adherence to victims' memories, as was seen, for example, with the late confessions made by Günter Grass.²⁰ This was not only because many Germans also felt that they had been victims – of the bombings, of long-term imprisonment, of the sexual violence perpetrated in the final months of the war, of the forced removal from their homelands²¹ – but also

Elena Agazzi, *Erinnerte und rekonstruierte Geschichte. Drei Generationen deutscher Schriftsteller und Fragen der Vergangenheit*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 2005; *Wende des Erinnerns? Geschichtskonstruktionen in der deutschen Literatur nach 1989*, edited by Barbara Beßlich, Katharina Grätz and Olaf Hildebrand, Erich Schmidt, Berlin 2006; *Keiner kommt davon. Zeitgeschichte in der Literatur nach 1945*, edited by Wolfgang Hardtwig and Erhard Schütz Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 2008; *Gedächtnis und Identität. Die deutsche Literatur nach der Vereinigung*, edited by Fabrizio Cambi, Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg 2008. On this recent “passion” for history, cf. Aleida Assmann and Ute Freewert, *Geschichtsvergessenheit – Geschichtsversessenheit. Vom Umgang mit deutschen Vergangenheiten nach 1945*, DVA, Stuttgart 1999; on the issue of the “relation between global interpretive schemes and localness”, see Norbert Frei, *Die Zukunft der Erinnerung. Geschichtswissenschaft, Gedenkstätten, Medien*, in *Verbrechen erinnern. Die Auseinandersetzung mit Holocaust und Völkermord*, edited by Norbert Frei and Volkhard Knigge, Beck, Munich 2002, p. 375; Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *Erinnerung im globalen Zeitalter. Der Holocaust*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 2001 (here, p. 22); on the difference between the Jewish and non-Jewish experience, cf. Amir Eshel, *Zeit der Zäsur. Jüdische Dichter im Angesichts der Shoah*, Winter, Heidelberg 1999; *Deutsche Nachkriegsliteratur und der Holocaust*, edited by Stephan Braese, Hanno Loewy, Doron Kiesel and Holger Gehle, Campus, Frankfurt am Main-New York 1998; Stephan Braese, *Die andere Erinnerung. Jüdische Autoren in der westdeutschen Nachkriegsliteratur*, Text + Kritik, Munich 2010 (2001¹); *Deutsch-jüdische Literatur der neunziger Jahre. Die Generation nach der Shoah*, edited by Sander L. Gilman and Hartmut Steinecke, E. Schmidt, Berlin 2002; *Literatur und Holocaust*, edited by Gerd Bayer and Rudolf Freiburg Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg 2009; on the differences between historical and literary, or indirect, narratives of Nazism, cf. *Der Nationalsozialismus – die zweite Geschichte. Überwindung – Deutung – Erinnerung*, edited by Peter Reichel, Harald Schmid and Peter Steinbach, Beck, Munich 2009.

²⁰ Cf. the highly emotive account of Jörg Friedrich, *Der Brand. Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940-1945*, Propyläen, Munich 2002, and also Hans Erich Nossack, *Der Untergang* (1948) on the destruction of Hamburg, and the essay by W.G. Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (1997).

²¹ Cf. Dan Diner, *Gegenläufige Gedächtnisse. Über Geltung und Wirkung des Holocaust*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 2007; Klaus Naumann, *Der Krieg als Text. Das Jahr 1945 im kulturellen Gedächtnis der Presse*, Hamburger Edition, Hamburg 1998; *German as Victims. Remembering the Past in Contemporary Germany*, edited by Bill Niven, Palgrave



because the normative nature of the collective view, along with a reaction of general anger, ended up impeding the processing of individual memories as well as any corresponding admission of guilt, free from conditioning. Jan Assmann reminds us that the German term *Erinnerung* (remembrance) is linked to internalization, a recalling or bringing something to consciousness, but it must be said that this process does not appear to be the rule.²²

Moreover, as Bernhard Schlink himself notes, by 2025 nobody guilty of the crimes perpetrated between 1933 and 1945 will be alive,²³ and neither will any of the original victims. The “*experienced past* of survivors” that we can witness is destined to become a “*completed past*, removed from direct experience”,²⁴ the *lived* past vanishing as the older generation disappears. It is also this shift in perspective which allows, or obliges, us to admit that things do not square up. On the one hand, as Schlink says, new generations should not be encouraged to think that contemporary German history starts with the post-war years,²⁵ but should be able to integrate the Third Reich into their own collective and individual experiences, also because “wherever a life does not balance, neither will identity or relations with others”.²⁶ On the other hand, the very fact that the Shoah and the Second World War were “the last phenomena in history in which everyone took part in one way or an-

Macmillan, New York 2006; Harald Welzer, *Von der Täter- zur Opfergesellschaft*, in «Universitas», 58 (2003), pp. 1214-1230; Martin Sabrow, *Held und Opfer. Zum Subjektwandel deutscher Vergangenheitsbewältigung im 20. Jahrhundert*, in *Das Unbehagen an der Erinnerung*, edited by Ulrike Jureit, Christian Schneider and Margrit Frölich, cit., pp. 37-54. Cf. also *Jenseits von Steinbach, Zur Kontroverse um eine Vertreibungszentrum im Kontext des deutschen Opferdiskurses*, edited by the Arbeitskreis geschichtspolitische Interventionen, Berlin 2010.

²² Jan Assmann, *La memoria culturale. Scrittura, ricordo e identità politica nelle grandi civiltà antiche*, Einaudi, Torino 1997, p. 126. Cf. also Aleida Assmann, *Das neue Unbehagen an der Erinnerungskultur. Eine Intervention*, Beck, Munich 2013, which discusses the reasons for dissent and the shift in the culture of memory as a new feature of civil society.

²³ Cf. VS 11.

²⁴ Reinhard Koselleck, *Nachwort* in Charlotte Beradt, *Das Dritte Reich des Traums*. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1994, pp. 117-132, qui 117.

²⁵ VS 15.

²⁶ VS 123.



other: Germans and Jews, eastern and western Europe, America and even Asia and Africa” means that they are an integral part of “the history of us all”.²⁷ However, their universality or their comparability is of quite a different nature (and this is further support to the argument that highlights the unique nature of the crimes and of German guilt, and explains why the debate about German guilt seems never-ending). Perhaps no other event in modern history allows us to dig so deep to the very roots of guilt and find there an evil that affects us all. But this issue, which is the common thread in the following discussion, is not only at the heart of Bernhard Schlink’s reflections in *Vergangenheitsschuld. Beiträge zu einem deutschen Thema* (2007), but also in *Der Vorleser* (1995),²⁸ a novel that had a mixed reception in Germany.

The book enjoyed immediate success abroad, however, and was translated into 50 languages, while Stephen Daldry’s film adaptation (*The Reader* with Kate Winslet, Ralph Fiennes, David Kross and Bruno Ganz) was released in 2008. In Italy the novel received the 1997 Grinzane-Cavour prize and two years later became the first German book to make it into *The New York Times* best-seller list, receiving a similar accolade in Japan in 2000. In 2001 the *Chevalier dans l’Ordre de la Légion d’Honneur* was conferred on Schlink, while in Germany he was awarded the *Bundesverdienstkreuz* in 2003, by which time *Der Vorleser* had become established as a school text.²⁹ Nevertheless, the novel had only really come to the attention of the German press

²⁷ VS 121-122. On the Holocaust as an event that might replace the myth of the French Revolution, cf. Aleida Assmann, *Das neue Unbehagen*, cit., p. 156s.

²⁸ The following works were published in 1995: Günter Grass, *Ein weites Feld*; Erich Loest, *Nikolaikirche*, Thomas Brussig, *Helden wie wir*, Marcel Beyer, *Flugbunde*, Christoph Ransmayr, *Morbus Kitabara*. In “Einleitung: Zur deutschen Literatur 1995”, in *Deutsche Literatur 1995. Jahresüberblick*, edited by Franz Josef Görtz, Volker Hage and Hubert Winkel, Reclam, Stuttgart 1996, pp. 5-27. Winkler notes a “return of history” in the narrative. On the changes since 1995, cf. Hubert Winkel, *Gute Zeichen: Deutsche Literatur 1995-2005*, Kiepenheuer & Witsch, Cologne 2005.

²⁹ Cf. the didactic materials of Juliane Köster, *Der Vorleser*, Oldenburg, Munich 2000; Magret Möckel, *Bernhard Schlink: “Der Vorleser”*, Bange, Hollfeld 2001; Sascha Feuchert and Lars Hofmann, *Bernhard Schlink, “Der Vorleser”*, Reclam, Stuttgart 2005; Michaela Egbers, *Bernhard Schlink: “Der Vorleser”*, Stark, Freising 2014.



in 2002.³⁰ Scholarly criticism also arrived late, and some doubts were expressed. Above all, objections were raised about the character of Hanna, and thus about the novel's lack of an unequivocal viewpoint; concerns were raised about its 'moral ambiguity' in that it did not respect any clear demarcation line between victim and perpetrator.³¹ And yet *Der Vorleser* is an original novel, reposing the difficult question of the *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*³² by actually endowing Germany's past

³⁰ The debate arose at the same time as the controversy over *Im Krebsgang* (February 2002) by Günter Grass and *Tod eines Kritikers* (May 2002) by Martin Walser. Cf. Tilmann Krause, *Keine Elternanstreibung. Ein Höhepunkt im deutschen Bücherherbst: Bernhard Schlinks Roman über die 68er und die deutsche Schuld*, in «Der Tagespiegel», 3.9.1995; Dagmar Plötz, *Vom Verlust der Unschuld: "Der Vorleser" – ein deutscher Roman*, in "Freitag", 17.11.1995; Rainer Moritz, *Die Liebe zur Aufseherin. Bernhard Schlinks Roman "Der Vorleser" – ganz einfach ein Glücksfall*, in «Die Weltwoche», 23.11.1995; Willi Winkler, *Vorlesen, Duschen, Durcharbeiten. Schlechter Stil, unaufrichtige Bilder: England begreift nicht mehr, was es an Bernhard Schlinks "Der Vorleser" fand*, in «Süddeutsche Zeitung», 30-31.3.2002 and 1.4.2002; Jan Süselbeck, *Heimliche Drebbücher. So eine Überraschung: Jüdische Texte und Filme, welche die Geschichte der Shoah aus einer anderen Perspektive als der Bernhard Schlinks wahrnehmen, haben in Deutschland einen schlechten Ruf*, in «literaturkritik.de», 16.3.2011, which talks of a "sentimental pamphlet".

³¹ Cf. Omer Bartov, *Germany as Victim*, in «New German Critique». 80 (2000), pp. 29-40; Ernestine Schlant, *Die Sprache des Schweigens. Die deutsche Literatur und der Holocaust*, Beck, Munich 2001; Moritz Baßler, *Der deutsche Pop-Roman. Die neuen Archivisten*, Beck, Munich 2002; William Collins Donahue, *Holocaust Lite. Bernhard Schlinks NS-Romane und ihre Verfilmungen*, Aisthesis, Bielefeld 2011; Karin Tebben, *Bernhard Schlink, "Der Vorleser." Zur ästhetischen Dimension rechtsphilosophischer Fragestellungen*, in «Euphorion», 104 (2010), n. 4, pp. 455-474. Cf. also Sandro Moraldo, *Bernhard Schlink*, in *Kritisches Lexikon zur deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur*, edited by Heinz Ludwig Arnold; Manfred Heigenmoser, *Bernhard Schlink. "Der Vorleser". Erläuterungen und Dokumente*, Reclam, Stuttgart 2005; Hans-Joachim Hahn, *Repräsentationen des Holocaust. Zur westdeutschen Erinnerungskultur seit 1979*, Universitätsverlag Winter, Heidelberg 2005; Miriam Moschytz-Ledgley, *Trauma, Scham und Selbstmitleid: vererbtes Trauma in Bernhard Schlinks Roman "Der Vorleser"*, Tectum-Verlag, Marburg 2009; Dieter Kampmeyer, *Trauma-Konfigurationen: Bernhard Schlinks "Der Vorleser", W. G. Sebalds "Austerlitz", Herta Müllers "Atemschaukel"*, Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg 2014.

³² Cf. the widening horizons apparent in recent studies, among which Erin McGlothlin, *Second-generation Holocaust literature: legacies of survival and perpetration*, Camden House, Rochester-NY 2006; Meike Herrmann, *Vergangenwart: Erzählen vom Nationalsozialismus in der deutschen Literatur seit den neunziger Jahren*, Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg 2010; Amir Eshel, *Zukünftigkeit: die zeitgenössische Literatur und die Vergangenheit*, Jüdischer Verlag, Berlin 2012.



with the function of *stéresis*, that is, emptiness or absence, which encourages the search for “ever new discoveries and new demands for integration.”³³ To this effect, Schlink masterfully blends traits of the autobiographical novel, the *Bildungsroman*, love story and social novel.

The plot of *Der Vorleser* contrasts two generations: the parents, who were actively complicit with the Nazi regime, and their children.³⁴ Hanna Schmitz, born in 1922, is an anomalous example of those who worked in the Nazi death camps and it is only during her trial, in the second part of the novel, that she faces up to the question of individual choice which she has hitherto not contemplated. Michael Berg represents the new generation. Born in 1943 to a family opposed to Nazism, he feels involved in Hanna’s guilt and is unable to reconcile personal and collective memory,³⁵ the image of the woman he loves with that of a torturer. Over the course of the novel, the different ways in which the two lives unfold are set against one another, but are destined to become entwined in the various phases of their unusual love story. While Hanna eventually accepts the burden of guilt and, in so doing, frees herself, Michael seems to be overwhelmed by family and social conditioning. Recognition of what his life is becomes a temporal moment in his development and the process of writing; integration, or rather, the structural moment, is, on the contrary, left to the reader. It is our duty to transform the *Anfarbeitung* of Michael/the first person narrator into a genuine indi-

³³ VS 84. Meike Herrmann, *Vergangenwart*, cit., p. 122, also claims that the elaboration of the past and generational conflict is the theme of *Der Vorleser*. However, this argument is not supported by an analysis of the text in that Herrmann’s aim is to detect meta-historiographical features and theories regarding memory in the texts under consideration.

³⁴ The Israeli psychoanalyst Dan Bar-On identifies three generations in *Furcht und Hoffnung. Von den Überlebenden zu den Enkeln. Drei Generationen des Holocaust*, Europäische Verlagsanstalt, Hamburg 1997. Cf. also the distinctions introduced by Norbert Frei, *1945 und wir. Das Dritte Reich im Bewußtsein der Deutschen*, Beck, Munich 2005.

³⁵ The family provides a privileged framework in that it links personal and private memory with official and public discourse, thus becoming ‘an area of contact in time’, as Aleida Assmann has observed in *Unbewältigte Erbschaften. Fakten und Fiktionen im zeitgenössischen Familienroman*, in *Generationen: Erfahrung – Erzählung – Identität*, edited by Andreas Kraft and Mark Weißhaupt, UVK, Konstanz 2009, p. 49-69; here p. 56.



vidual experience, open to the contradictions and the fractures of the present.

From a poetical perspective, this theme of the search for identity provides *Der Vorleser* with its plot structure and is linked closely with the *leitmotifs* of reading and writing. On the one hand, the theme of guilt is intended to provide the central impetus to these psychological dynamics, but it is also stimulates an exploration of a more effective link between memory and democracy, the hallmark of any modern society.³⁶ On the other hand, it is the very ambiguity in how the message is conveyed, that is, a dynamic based on the multilayering of the tensions inherent in the opposition of good and evil, between what is just and what is unjust and even between love and violence, that effectively strengthen the aesthetic-cognitive function of the novel and the active role of the receiver. The poetics of *Der Vorleser* will be discussed in section 7, while the two divergent paths taken by the two main characters will be the focus of sections 2 to 6. Observations taken from essays written by Schlink will be quoted as appropriate. These are reflections of a general nature, but are inserted here in reference to the novel and its characters.

Two generations compared

*in praeteritum non vivitur*³⁷

The story told in *Der Vorleser* can be summarized briefly if we keep to the bare facts. The novel is divided into three parts and further subdivided into 46 short chapters. It relates the events in the life of Michael Berg from 1958 to 1994, particularly the phases of his relationship with Hanna. In the first part (1958-59) Michael, a high school student from a good family, meets Hanna, 21 years his senior, and they embark on a relationship. Hanna suddenly leaves the city at the end of summer, while the boy, whose interest in Hanna seems to be on the wane, is plagued by a sense of guilt.

³⁶ Helmut Dubiel, *Niemand ist frei von der Geschichte. Die nationalsozialistische Herrschaft in den Debatten des Deutschen Bundestages*, Hanser, Munich 1999.

³⁷ VS 80.



In the second part (1966-69), Michael is a Law student and is attending the trial of several women whose job it was to decide which female prisoners should be sent to the gas chamber; they are also accused of the deaths of hundreds of other prisoners who were imprisoned in a church and perished in a fire. One of the defendants is Hanna, who between 1943-45 was a guard at Auschwitz and at another concentration camp near Krakow. Hanna shoulders most of the blame and is sentenced to life imprisonment. Michael, shocked that he once loved a murderer, also learns from the trial that she chose young women from the camp to read to her aloud; he thus realizes Hanna's other secret: she is illiterate. Michael later graduates, takes part in the student revolts of '68, marries a colleague and has a daughter, but he realizes that he is still tied to Hanna; he is both attracted to and repulsed by her.

In third phase (1974 and 1994), Michael now has a successful university career, but separates from his wife and again makes contact with Hanna. Most importantly, he starts reading to her again, recording classics of world literature on tape for her to listen to in prison. In 1978, Hanna starts to learn to read and write using his recordings as a guide; she then starts to send him brief letters, but Michael does not reply. Just before her release in 1984, he receives a letter from the prison warden asking him to help Hanna reintegrate into society. Despite various qualms, Michael visits her and sees a woman that he hardly recognizes. The night before she is due to be released, Hanna commits suicide. Michael later visits her prison cell and finds a collection of essential texts relating to the Shoah, both from the victims' and the perpetrators' perspectives. The warden also gives him Hanna's savings which she has left to two survivors of the fire, a mother and her daughter, who now live in the United States; Michael subsequently visits them. In 1994 Michael, now a writer, finishes work on the story of his complex relationship with Hanna.

On closer reading, the parallel paths taken by the two main characters can be seen to be quite different. It must immediately be said that the character who is capable of developing is Hanna. While her personality initially appears to coincide perfectly with her social role – in Jungian terms we would say that she hides behind her *persona* –



both in her role in the Nazi death machine and in the subsequent post-war period (Part One), during the trial she begins to examine the possibility of making different choices (Part Two). In the nun-like isolation of her prison cell, Hanna gains her freedom: she not only learns to read – and applies that new skill to learning about the past – but also takes on the sole burden of blame for the fate of the victims, to such an extent that she chooses death rather than liberty (Part Three). Her choices amount to a journey towards meaning.

In this regard, it is revealing that commentators have criticized Schlink for making Hanna illiterate, or dyslexic, feeling that this is incompatible with her role in the concentration camp and thus restrictive as far as her “typological comparability” is concerned.³⁸ This, in my opinion, is a misapprehension where stereotype prevails over motivation. While there is a social kind of unease which distinguishes Hanna at the start of the action, this is later seen as a part of the path that she takes away from socio-cultural conditioning, allowing her to face her own vulnerability and guilt. In making the enormous effort to learn to read and write, she makes a truly individual choice and at the same time finds a new social role. Schlink does not draw upon set character types, but observes this “atypical character”,³⁹ who makes the world “more varied and less uniform”, proposing in her absolute individuality “not a reductive, but a complete picture”.⁴⁰ Hanna, trapped at the beginning in a collective identity, a matrix of violence and injustice, frees herself through processing the guilt, ac-

³⁸ Manfred Durzak, *Opfer und Täter im Nationalsozialismus. Bernhard Schlinks “Der Vorleser” und Stephan Hermlins “Die Kommandeuse”*, in «Literatur für Leser», 23 (2000), n. 4, p. 209. Cf. also Micha Ostermann, *Aporien des Erinnerens - Bernhard Schlinks “Der Vorleser”*. Bochum: Dolega/Ostermann 2004, p. 66f.; Bettina Greese, Almut Peren-Eckert and Sonja Pohsin, *Unterrichtsmo- dell. Bernhard Schlink. “Der Vorleser”*, Schöningh, Paderborn 2000, p. 140; Karin Tebben, *Bernhard Schlink, “Der Vorleser”*, cit., p. 467; William Collins Donahue, *Der Holocaust als Anlass der Selbstbemitleidung. Geschichtsschüchternheit in Bernhard Schlink “Der Vorleser”*, in *Rechenschaft. Juristischer und literarischer Diskurs in der Auseinandersetzung mit den NS-Massenverbrechen*, edited by Stephan Braese, Wallstein, Göttingen 2004, p. 177-197 (here p. 179). Helmut Schmitz, *Malen nach Zahlen? Bernhard Schlinks “Der Vorleser” und die Unfähigkeit zu trauern*, in «German Life and Letters», 55 (2002), n. 3, pp. 296-311.

³⁹ G 16.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 18 and 24.



quiring a conscience and thus her own individuality.⁴¹ It is no coincidence that Hanna explores this dynamic from her prison cell which “she had moved [to] of her own accord” to live as if she were in “a convent”, as the respected prison warden relates. Nevertheless, *Der Vorleser* does not transform Hanna into a “heroine of guilt” as Sigrid Löffler claims in the *Literarisches Quartett* (December 1995);⁴² while it is true that Hanna redeems herself, her guilt – and also her individual solitude – are finally beyond alleviation, and they cause her to make the tragic decision to commit suicide.

The character who is destined to become herself, thanks to an amalgam of love and guilt, is thus Hanna rather than Michael, the representative of the new generation. Like post-war German society, Michael seems to avoid facing any crisis of conscience,⁴³ privileging the characteristics and the skills expected of the individual. This is seen in the way that he is assimilated successfully into his family, and social, political and cultural circles. Indeed he does not free himself, despite all the advantages he has, not even in spite of his guilt feelings and his love for Hanna, a relationship which could also be interpreted in Kierkegaardian terms as his “thorn in the flesh”.⁴⁴ In a heady moment of love, it is Michael who dedicates a poem to his beloved which ends with a hymn to their mutual interdependence: “... Then / am I me / and you are you”. Yet even in this moment, filled with such intensity of feelings about their relationship, the poem is influenced by *external* models such as Rilke and Benn. Michael is destined to betray the promises he makes, and deep down he realizes this. He continues not only to doubt Hanna’s love, but he will eventually sacrifice that love to “prescriptive notions”, based on

⁴¹ Cf. the biting criticism of Willi Winkler qtd. in «Süddeutsche Zeitung», who claims that Schlink has written a ‘Holo-Kitsch’: “In his own unsubtle way, Schlink works on the cliché of the concentration camp commandant who loves his wolfdog and plays the violin, ultimately welcoming Hanna too into this realm of poets and thinkers.”

⁴² Cf. Bettina Greese *et al.*, *Unterrichtsmodell*, cit., p. 140.

⁴³ Cf. Niklas Luhmann, *Die Gewissensfreiheit und das Gewissen* (1965), in Id., *Ausdifferenzierung des Rechts. Beiträge zur Rechtssoziologie und Rechtstheorie*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1999.

⁴⁴ Cf. Cornelio Fabro, *Introduzione to Diario*, vol. I – X, Morcelliana, Brescia 1980, vol. I, pp. 29-31.



“external criteria” such as “age, social advancement, influence and the correct balance”.⁴⁵ What is more, as he is unable to see his experiences as contributing to an integrated whole, he ignores any submerged images, impulses and thoughts that Hanna threatens to bring to the surface, that is, any individual, single and unrepeatable element that cannot be seen in terms of a collective system of values. For this reason, Michael is not only unsuccessful in freeing himself from the guilt of the older generation, but adds his own guilt to it.

And yet, unlike Hanna, Michael has many advantages in life, also given the fact that his father is a moral philosopher and the author of books on Kant and Hegel. At high school he is interested in ancient and modern literature, goes on to study Law and take part in the political unrest of '68 before becoming a professor in the History of Law (specializing in the legal system of the Nazi regime) and finally a writer. Despite all this, it is Michael who is crushed by family and social conditioning in such a way that even his high level of knowledge is never integrated into a larger picture of desires and needs, but seems to be undermined by abstractions and conformity. The verbs *wissen* and *kennen* run through the text: Michael *knows* everything, but only Hanna, who previously knew nothing, faces up to the painful process of recognizing and accepting her terrible wrongdoings, managing to transform them into true, individual guilt.

Rather than discussing events chronologically, the following sections will focus on the different paths taken by the two main characters as seen from Michael's point of view. As regards Michael himself, the following specific points will be explored: his family circumstances and the initial phase of his relationship with Hanna, his education and his experiences of the events of '68 and the trial, and the consequences of their relationship. As regards Hanna, the focus will be on how she develops in the second and third parts of the novel, both during the trial, when she talks in first person, and in prison where we learn about her life mostly through the account given by the prison warden.

⁴⁵ G 39 and 40, which discusses *Klassenschranken, Rollendefinitionen und Umgangsformen*.



Michael Berg: Part One

Not only can happiness be missing in a life, but also there is also “one’s own *decisive guilt*, without which a person can never achieve completeness” (C. G. Jung). This is exactly the case of the central male character of *Der Vorleser*, who prefers to adhere to general ethical norms and the principles of collective morality. Indeed, Michael keeps both his knowledge (*kennen, wissen*) of himself and others at a distance and this includes his relationship with Hanna. On the one hand he is “full of fear about who [he] really was”, and on the other he even thinks his lover might only be “what she was to me at an actual distance”. He is also afraid of “everything that had happened between us coming to the surface”. He does not want to recognize his fears, even though giving them a name might allow him to come to terms with them. In any case, the unprocessed emotions and experiences that he has had since childhood continue to condition his present and his feelings. Even his marriage to Gertrud and his subsequent relationships are blighted because he continues to ignore his own deepest needs just as he ignores those of the women. He thus manages to avoid facing up to the past and admitting his pain, but he also avoids gaining crucial self-knowledge.

His family

The most obvious external influence on Michael Berg is that of Adenauer’s Germany, which was, to quote Schlink, characterized by a “spiritual desert and political narrow-mindedness”.⁴⁶ Michael’s family, however, belongs to the German *Bildungsbürgertum* and they have a spacious house with a large library and a grand piano. His father is a moral philosopher, a scholar of Kant and Hegel; unable to teach during the Nazi regime because he refused to remove Spinoza from the university syllabus, he worked as a proofreader for a small publisher. However, looking after the children – apart from Michael there is a brother three years his senior and two sisters, one older, one younger – is the total responsibility of his wife.

⁴⁶ V 77.



The story starts with the narrator talking about being ill when he was 15 years old. It was the autumn of 1958, and he states that he felt ill “in a way that was completely different”.⁴⁷ Many years later, a psychoanalyst with whom Michael has a relationship comments on the fact that he hardly ever mentions his mother when he talks about his past. However, it is his mother who actually provides the initial impetus in the story. Once he is feeling better, Michael goes to visit the woman who had helped him when he was taken ill a few months earlier, but reckons “I don’t think that I would have gone to see her”⁴⁸ if his mother had not suggested it. The feelings of gratitude that he has a few days later, after he has made love to Hanna, are also associated with his mother; these are “one of my few vivid recollections” from when Michael was four years old. From a symbolic point of view, the “vivid recollections” actually regard a scene of ritualized seduction, rooted in the mother’s unconscious wish for her son to remain bound to her. This underlying memory has not been processed and will eventually determine his perceptions and his emotions, conditioning expectations and the way that he relates to Hanna:

My mother had pushed a chair up close to the stove for me to stand on while she washed and dressed me. I remember the wonderful feeling of warmth, and how good it felt to be washed and dressed in this warmth. I also remember that whenever I thought back to this afterwards, I always wondered why my mother had been spoiling me like this.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ TR 2. Regarding the crime of sexual abuse of a minor, cf. *Interpretationen Deutsch. Bernhard Schlink, “Der Vorleser”*, interpretiert von Michaela Egbers, Stark, Friesing 2014, p. 42; Dieter Kampmeyer, *Trauma-Konfigurationen*, cit., p. 43. Miriam Moschytz-Ledgley, *Trauma, Scham und Selbstmitleid*, cit., p. 41, claims that this is “a criminal act”. However, her viewpoint is both generic and general, also in regard of the theme of Hanna’s illiteracy, which is seen here as a tendency towards idealizing the generation of perpetrators – defensive reaction on the part of the younger generation. On the contrary, Schlink works more on the individualization of character. On the theme of abuse, also mentioned by the daughter who survived the fire (p. 115), see section below.

⁴⁸ TR 3.

⁴⁹ TR 26.



What is more, the libidinal investment in his mother is sublimated as the mother also determines normative precepts of censorship, so much so that she is frequently associated with the “admired pastor” and Michael’s older sister (in their judgmental roles). As such, she generates feelings of guilt. What is more, the ambivalence of the maternal figure who is seductive, yet at the same time incorrupt, is unaffected by the presence of the father. The latter is lacking or absent,⁵⁰ to the extent that he says nothing whenever his “mother talked to him about the children or the household.”⁵¹ On the one hand, the domestic environment is characterized by a traditional division of roles and a static equilibrium that eventually conditions Michael’s relationships throughout the rest of his life; on the other, his parents’ relationship seems lacking in any sensual or emotive attachment. In fact his father “could only think about work: he was a professor of philosophy, and thinking was his life – thinking and reading and writing and teaching.” Michael would have liked “that we, his family, had been his life”, but he can clearly see that his father’s life “is elsewhere”.⁵²

The description of the times and places that precede his second, decisive meeting with Hanna also appears to hark back to a domain of repressed instincts: “[b]eing ill when you are a child or growing up” is almost an “enchanted interlude”; the boy’s room seems to be full of grinning monsters, while “[d]esires, memories, fears, passions form labyrinths in which we lose and find and then lose ourselves again.”⁵³ Even when you have recovered, you can still be “trapped” there. His later reflections on the action as it unfolds only confirm his helpless bewilderment when faced with the power of subconscious models and unprocessed patterns that still influence how he perceives the present. In fact Michael maintains that he is convinced that action does not consist of the carrying out of one’s own con-

⁵⁰ Cf. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, Alfred A Knopf, New York 1976, p. 160.

⁵¹ TR 28.

⁵² TR 28.

⁵³ TR 16.



scious intentions, but derives from independent sources which reproduce old patterns or models.⁵⁴

Therefore a moral education, as he himself hypothesizes, eventually turns against itself;⁵⁵ this is seen not only in his meeting Hanna, which distances and seems to cut Michael off from his parents, but also through the actual hiatus in the development of his identity in which psychical instances have undergone a process of distortion. In future, the internalization of familiar norms will lead him to focus on professional success and socially acceptable targets, as if his life is directed towards an application of what Freud calls the super-ego. The id, in contrast, is ignored, confining his emotional life to a pre-established pattern. Nevertheless, his meeting with Hanna who, unlike Michael, develops, could have triggered the emergence of an individual morality based on an integration of conflict which would therefore have provided it with flexibility.

The meeting with Hanna

If “love means seeking unconsciously what has been missing and often finding unconsciously what we already knew”,⁵⁶ then Hanna is destined to be a substitute for the original maternal figure; this becomes the double negative of the mother who is both wicked and undermining. Moreover, Michael is unable to accept the opportunity that Hanna offers him to repair that division between the representatives of light and dark, and acknowledge that the pole of negative energy is part of his psyche, the part populated by *grinning monsters* and “[d]esires, memories, fears [and] passions”.⁵⁷ The schematic nature of the general norms to which he conforms prevents him from

⁵⁴ On the conditioning of perceptions, cf. *Aufarbeitung der Diktatur - Diktatur der Aufarbeitung? Normierungsprozesse beim Umgang mit diktatorischer Vergangenheit*, edited by Katrin Hammerstein, Ulrich Mähler, Julie Trappe and Edgar Wolfrum, Wallstein, Göttingen 2009, in particular pp. 9-13; also Ulrike Jureit and Christian Schneider, *Gefühlte Opfer. Illusionen der Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 2010.

⁵⁵ As with Michael and his younger sister who encourages him to steal from department stores.

⁵⁶ Christiane Oliver, *I figli di Giocasta*, Emme Edizioni, Milan 1980, p. 115.

⁵⁷ TR 16.



accepting diverse experiences which his conscience interprets as something other than the self. Conversely, his inner ‘labyrinth’ gives rise to its own drive, to the point that Michael cannot escape from it: “Something [the *id*] – whatever that may be – goes into action: “it” goes to the woman [...]”⁵⁸

Symbolically speaking, the division between the elements of light and dark is reflected in the description of the building in which Hanna lives and which always reappears in Michael’s dreams. The façade gives an idea of old-style splendour and respectability, and it makes him imagine that “grand people would live in such a grand building”.⁵⁹ The front door is flanked by pillars, while the corners of the architrave are adorned with lion’s heads. The house “was always just as shabby and just as clean”; the building is not only darkened by train smoke, but inside there are dark mysterious rooms that emanate a variety of smells. Overall the house gives the idea that the inhabitants are “deaf or dumb or hunchback or lame”.⁶⁰

From his first meeting with this unknown woman, we are aware of the imbalance between the woman’s decisive, rather brusque ways (she calls Michael *Jungchen*, “kid”) and the boy’s shyness. What is more, it is these instinctive and undifferentiated impulses, contrary to the ethical standards of the mother, that prevail. While ashamed of his weakness, Michael is also struck by Hanna’s carnality as he curiously breathes in the woman’s characteristic smell that will end up staying with him for the rest of his life.

Hanna lives in a tiny apartment with a small living room and a windowless kitchen which also contains a bath. While she concentrates on her ironing, the boy is free to look at her “very strong, feminine body”,⁶¹ and when she later changes, Michael watches her through the crack in the door:

⁵⁸ TR 18.

⁵⁹ TR 5.

⁶⁰ TR 5. Trains are a recurrent image in *Der Vorleser*: trains heading for the concentration camps seem to allude to Hanna, while a train travelling across the country is in Michael’s final dream.

⁶¹ TR 13.



I couldn't take my eyes off her. Her neck and shoulders, her breasts, which the slip veiled rather than concealed, her hips [...], her leg, pale and naked, then shimmering in the silky stocking. She felt me looking at her. [...] I can't describe what kind of look it was – surprised, skeptical, knowing, reproachful.⁶²

Despite the fact that he then flees the house, the boy has received an erotic imprinting: years later he is still asking his “girlfriends to put on stockings”, but what they interpret as a “desire for [...] erotic extravagance” was something different in Hanna: “She hadn't been posing or teasing”, and could, in fact, appear slow-moving, weighed-down and awkward. It was more as if she was “oblivious to the outside world”, as if “she had withdrawn into her own body, and left it to itself and its own quiet rhythms”, almost as if she was making “an invitation to forget the world in the recesses of her body.”⁶³

Michael returns to Hanna's place the following week. When he dirties himself with coal he has fetched, he is transformed into an out-and-out *dunkler Bruder*,⁶⁴ almost as if he has to go through the *black work* (*nigredo*) phase corresponding to the ‘unclothing’, that marks the death of the ego. Becoming conscious of negative factors and unconscious complexes through self-examination and the revisitation of memory precedes any reconstruction. Hanna invites him to have a bath, but – unlike his mother – she also undresses and joins him: “when I had smelled her smell and felt her warmth and her strength, everything fell into place.”⁶⁵ And thus the relationship begins with its precise ritual of “reading, showering, making love”. Hanna “took possession of me as a matter of course”, and though the boy learns to reciprocate, he admits “I never completely mastered it.”⁶⁶ Only on the sixth or seventh meeting do they exchange names. With Hanna, Michael is put in contact with things that are

⁶² TR 12.

⁶³ TR 14.

⁶⁴ Cf. Toni Wolff, *Einführung in die Grundlagen der komplexen Psychologie*, in *Studien zu C. G. Jungs Psychologie*, Rhein, Zurich 1959.

⁶⁵ TR 23.

⁶⁶ TR 31.



hidden within him, yet he is unable to integrate them.⁶⁷ Furthermore, the division of roles echoes the division that exists between his parents and, above all, it prevents more authentic forms of communication. Hanna herself – diffident and trying to escape her past – wants to be accepted by Michael, but, as we shall see, resists all attempts at communication, saying almost nothing about herself as if “it were not her life but somebody else’s.”

The phases of their love can be related briefly. Periods of growing happiness are interspersed with disagreements, just as during a long illness “we lose and find and then lose ourselves again”.⁶⁸ Let us concentrate for now on the disagreements. The first one is over Michael’s idleness and the fact that he is missing classes to spend more time with Hanna. Her response to this is to throw him out: “Get out of my bed. And if you don’t want to do your work, don’t come back.”⁶⁹ Michael promises to start working hard, but there are questions that remain unanswered: “Was she thinking of me? Or of herself? [...] Or was it that she didn’t want a failure for a lover? [...] What was I to her?”⁷⁰ In the end, Michael not only passes his exams with flying colours, but also earns the trust of his teachers and his parents, as well improving his reputation with his classmates.

Another argument starts when Michael catches the tram on which Hanna is at work (she is a conductor) and she gets the impression that he is ashamed of her. In this case too, the boy does not grapple with the main issues that are raised and he implicitly seems to admit that Hanna is right when she says, “You didn’t want to know me”.⁷¹ Michael is unable to perceive what is unspoken, to face the other as the *other*, in her own specific subjectivity, just as he is unable to face the other within himself: “And I became uncertain. Could she be right, not objectively, but subjectively? Could she have, must she have misunderstood me? Had I hurt her, unintentionally, against my will,

⁶⁷ Michael, for example, claims to be happier imagining the Thomas Mann character, Felix Krull, in the arms of the mother rather than the daughter. (38).

⁶⁸ TR 16.

⁶⁹ TR 33.

⁷⁰ TR 34.

⁷¹ TR 45.



but hurt her anyway?”⁷² Ultimately, however, he does not follow through these issues; he defines the episode “a bad dream”⁷³ and leaves it behind him.

Just as with the people in Hanna’s building who are perhaps “deaf or dumb”, any chance of real communication is impossible. Self-awareness is “at the same time awareness of others, that is, of the expectations that they have of us and of the responsibilities and obligations that follow. Identity – and this must be stressed – is a *plurale tantum*, presupposing other identities. Without multiplicity there is no unity, without otherness there is no specificity.”⁷⁴ By not developing his knowledge of Hanna, who truly represents what is other than him, Michael can neither access the *reflexio* that would lead to self-awareness nor recognize what he himself projects: “Later I wondered [if]she had just wanted to win a power game.”⁷⁵ The result of this is the strengthening of pre-established associations, asymmetries and roles. Hanna’s complexity, her strengths and her weaknesses, go unacknowledged. When Michael does not understand her demands, he responds submissively in an almost childish way: “Whenever she turned cold and hard, I begged her to be good to me again [...] Sometimes I had the feeling that she hurt herself when she turned cold and rigid [...] Sometimes I thought she just bullied me.”⁷⁶

Another missed opportunity is the third argument which disrupts a period of intense happiness during their holiday together at Easter. Michael leaves the hotel room for a moment having written a note for Hanna, and on his return he has to answer to Hanna’s violent reaction; she hits him with a belt, cutting his lip, and then bursts into tears. These crises replicate the subtle state of restraint that is also a feature of Michael’s family environment, although when he compares the experience he sees them as different: “At home none of us

⁷² TR 46.

⁷³ TR 44.

⁷⁴ Jan Assmann, *La memoria culturale. Scrittura, ricordo e identità politica nelle grandi civiltà antiche*, Einaudi, Turin 1997, p. 104.

⁷⁵ TR 47.

⁷⁶ TR 48.



cried like that. We didn't hit, not even with our hands, let alone with a leather belt. We talked."⁷⁷ However, it is the family model itself that even subjects dialogue to ethical-cultural norms (packaged with that impersonal *we*) and prevents any admission of unacceptable impulses which could be processed only if they reach consciousness.

The times of happiness also come and go in stages. The first weeks of passion when Michael is "completely happy"⁷⁸ are also characterized by a copious amount of reading literature – Homer, Cicero, Hemingway, Lessing, Schiller – which precedes their showers and lovemaking. It is also significant that their happiness increases after the first argument, dimly seen as some kind of occasion: "We were never happier than in those weeks of April [...] everything that enlarged our ritual of reading, showering, making love, and lying beside each other did us good."⁷⁹ Yet again Michael is unknowingly knowing.

The happiness, which is both disrupted and reinforced by their differences, grows during the Easter holiday. Michael sells his stamp collection to finance their trip and also takes on all the other responsibilities: he works out the route and he even reads out the menus in restaurants to Hanna. He not only learns to take possession of her, but also writes a poem which can be seen as a sign of genuine communication with the potential to recognize each other's specific identity: "Then / am I me / and you are you".⁸⁰ On their return from holiday, he manages to let Hanna see his family home. For the occasion he gives her a nightgown, having stolen it from a shop; his little sister gives him the idea (indeed, he has to buy off his young accomplice). On seeing the Berg family residence, Hanna is not only able to gauge the differences in class and money that separate her from Michael, but also see the future that is mapped out for him. She feels like "an intruder".⁸¹ She looks around his father's library, runs her finger across the spines of the books, and asks if she can

⁷⁷ TR 53.

⁷⁸ TR 41.

⁷⁹ TR 49.

⁸⁰ TR 56.

⁸¹ TR 61.



see his father's publications: "Will you write books like that some day?"⁸² she asks. Hanna sits where his father usually sits at the table, but refuses to spend the night in Michael's room. Once back home, she puts on the silk nightgown and dances with happiness in front of the mirror. Michael will remember this moment, and we too shall return to it.

After this high point, the paths of Hanna and Michael begin to diverge. For Hanna's birthday on October 21st they go to the theatre in a different town: "I put my arm around her waist, and didn't care what people might think of us a couple. [...] At the same time I knew that in the theatre in our hometown I would care."⁸³ Hanna is increasingly perceived as a mixture of contrary impulses, an inflexible mix of strengths and weaknesses, and Michael's resentment of her grows. His response, which tends to remain detached rather than to integrate, is seen in his behaviour. *Ex positivo*, Michael expresses a need for simplicity, wanting to be able to have fun with his classmates, "swept up in the exuberance of our talk, our banter, our games, and our flirtations". *Ex negativo*, Michael begins "to betray her", to not "acknowledge her", to treat her almost as if she was an "illness",⁸⁴ convinced that "[w]e did not have a world that we shared".⁸⁵

Moreover, Michael begins to get interested in girls his own age, above all the dark-haired Sophie, presented as a model of the sweet Nausicaa from the pages of Homer. While Sophie's qualities are obviously reduced to the light-bearing aspects of her personality, Michael continues to feel humiliated by Hanna. He does not recognize the projections he makes regarding this other, or himself, despite the fact that he does realize how fragile the construction of his own identity is. Although he is convinced that he can take on the great challenges, he does not possess true resilience so that the simplest things can spark a crisis. Nevertheless, Michael denies his contradictions and aspires to an everyday life free from conflict, similar to the one he has in the family home.

⁸² TR 61.

⁸³ TR 70.

⁸⁴ TR 71-74.

⁸⁵ TR 76.



The end of his relationship with Hanna is inevitable. Only later does Michael learn that the transport company had offered to make Hanna a driver, but not knowing how to read, she had to turn the job down in order to maintain the secret that is a continued source of deep embarrassment to her. However, she only puts her plan for escape into action after she sees Michael for what will be the last time, while he is standing near the swimming pool where he spends his free time:

She was standing twenty or thirty meters away [...], looking at me. [...] I didn't jump to my feet to run to her. Questions raced through my head: Why was she at the pool, did she want to be seen with me, did I want to be seen with her [and] what should I do? Then I stood up. And in that briefest of moments in which I took my eyes off her she was gone.⁸⁶

Michael has been her reader and has also sensed her terror, her bewilderment and the way she gave herself to his embrace as if she wanted them “to drown together”. Despite this, he does not understand her: the look that Hanna gives him, as Michael remembers it, is “an expression I cannot read at all – that is another picture I have of her.”⁸⁷ It is only after this that Hanna runs away. Michael looks for her at her workplace and questions the owners of the apartments in her building only to realize that she has disappeared without a trace. As well as his gnawing longing for her, he also feels guilty, a guilt rooted in the “half heartedness of the past months, which had produced my denial of her, and my betrayal. Leaving was her punishment.”⁸⁸ Except that Hanna did not intend to punish him; she was suffering herself.

Two of Michael's dreams are described, near the beginning and at the end of all these events, and they summarize his complex affair with Hanna. The first is about Hanna's house which Michael sees

⁸⁶ TR 79.

⁸⁷ TR 79.

⁸⁸ TR 82.



everywhere, whether in the city or the countryside, in Rome, in Bern or in other foreign places. The dream is marked by his fear of arriving at the house too late, even though once he gets there he realizes that “it looks blind. [...] There’s nobody about, not a sound to be heard”.⁸⁹ When he goes up the steps and turns the doorknob, he does not enter, just as he cannot find a way into himself, or whoever is other to himself. In other words, being blind and deaf, Michael is incapable of perceiving the polarity between ego and non-ego, the light and the dark sides of personality. This is true whether it regards himself, in his own house or in Hanna’s; Michael only sees a series of ups and downs in a series of events. He lacks the realization that it is a more authentic mode of interpersonal communication that provides the basis for developing an identity; but here the steps lead nowhere, and the house is uninhabited, blind and deaf.

The second dream, to which we will return later, is described at the end of the story. Michael has gone to the United States to deliver Hanna’s savings and he falls asleep on the train, soothed by the rocking motion that Hanna also used to like. He dreams that he is living with her in a house in the hills, a place bathed in autumn colours, with the railway line running through it. In the dream Hanna is:

older than when I had met her and younger than when I had met her again, older than me, more attractive than in earlier years, more relaxed in her movements with age, more at home in her own body. I saw her getting out of the car and picking up shopping bags, saw her going through the garden into the house, saw her set down the bags and go upstairs ahead of me. My longing for Hanna became so strong that it hurt. I struggled against the longing, argued that it went against Hanna’s and my reality, the reality of our ages, the reality of our circumstances. How could Hanna, who spoke no English, live in America? And she couldn’t drive a car either.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ TR 7. Miriam Moschytz-Ledgley, *Trauma, Scham und Selbstmitleid*, cit., p. 28f., identifies in Michael’s first dream “the symbol of the family secret” of a repressed collective past, although as with all dreams, this also belongs to the person who has the dream.

⁹⁰ TR 209.



Here the two of them walk up the steps together, and the dream seems to reproduce the intensity of the earlier picture of Hanna dancing happily in front of the mirror. Even more than with the theatre visit in another town which allowed the couple to appear in public together, the alternative reality of the American dream – in a space associated with “vastness, openness, universality”⁹¹ – evens out the differences in their ages and circumstances according to the normative values of the family and of society in general. Such values establish a collective identity, but risk limiting any means of individual development. From an ethical point of view, only this process of integration, which *a priori* overcomes the barriers that separate the polar opposites of good/evil, beautiful/ugly etc., enables the construction of an individual morality and acknowledges an experience of self that is also open to further integration.

For Michael, as for Hanna, “life could never fulfil” its promises; indeed, “[b]eautiful memories shatter in hindsight”.⁹² In any case, when their affair ends, and above all with the trial, their lives take different paths. Hanna will eventually be able to recognize her own past from that dark page in German history, while Michael, conditioned by a repetition compulsion, will maintain a distance in all his personal relationships. His affair with Hanna could have mitigated this, but, like his father, Michael will focus on his public responsibilities.

Michael Berg: Part Two

After Hanna’s departure, the Berg family moves to another part of town. Like the once familiar places, the memory of Hanna “stayed behind” and then “[t]he feeling of guilt [...] gradually faded”.⁹³ Although Michael knows that he “had said goodbye to [his memory but] had not overcome it”, he turns his back on the past. In 1962 he takes his high school diploma and enrolls in the Faculty of

⁹¹ V 16. Cf. also p. 144, 218, 219.

⁹² TR 35.

⁹³ TR 85-86.



Law, deciding never to “let myself be humiliated or humiliate myself after Hanna, never to take guilt upon myself or feel guilty, never again to love anyone whom it would hurt to lose”.⁹⁴ Despite this continuing lack of awareness, sometimes even he is “suspicious” of the strange “juxtaposition of callousness and extreme sensitivity”⁹⁵ that he nurtures. He does not, however, change course: he privileges sentimentality over sentiment and intellectual knowledge over complex thought rooted in personal experience. It is no coincidence that the two most important experiences in this phase of his life are linked: taking part in the 1968 student movement and the trial against Hanna and the other defendants.

The experience of 1968

Those involved in the unrest of '68, Michael among them, felt as if they had been given the mission to subject events “to reassessment in order to shed light” in which they were the “radical explorers”. This involved a “political and moral fervor” in how the past was to be examined.⁹⁶ In fact, as Michael claims, “we tore open the windows and let in the air, the wind that finally whirled away the dust that society had permitted to settle over the horrors of the past.”⁹⁷

There is, however, a slight case of passing sentence before the facts emerge – “it was evident to us that there had to be convictions”⁹⁸ – as well as adopting the normative-generalist presupposition that a whole generation needs to be condemned to shame rather than just accusing various individuals of a crime. The unanimous, unvarying *we* of the students is thus pitted against the equally unvarying *you* of the guilty, with no exceptions permitted. Belonging to either of the two parties is predetermined by the objective fact of one’s date of birth, and no variations or subjective factors, such as an individual’s “propensities, life circumstances and

⁹⁴ TR 86.

⁹⁵ TR 87.

⁹⁶ TR 91.

⁹⁷ TR 89.

⁹⁸ TR 90.



motivations”,⁹⁹ are taken into consideration. Nevertheless, for the very reason that our relationships with others are simultaneously relationships with ourselves, it follows that in some way Michael’s father is also deemed guilty, despite the fact that he refused to have any links with the Nazi regime. Conversely, his son has “the good feeling [...] that I belonged, and that I was at peace with myself about what I was doing and the people with whom I was doing it.”¹⁰⁰

In a novel that specifically investigates the complexities of German guilt based on a single, atypical case, and of the concept of antithetical validity as opposed to the unequivocal, it is the students’ “strong group identity”¹⁰¹ which is problematic. Collective identity is not given by nature; in fact, it is “[t]he conscious creation of distance between oneself and the external world [that] can probably be designated as the founding act of human civilization” (A. Warburg, *Mnemosyne*). It is thus not the result of an adherence to norms, but a factor which pertains to consciousness.¹⁰² If historical circumstances vary and the individual adopts a conventional identity¹⁰³ in an unreflecting way, they might, like Hanna, become subservient to a regime of death or, like Michael Berg, conform while under the illusion that they are free from their own contradictions. Furthermore, any predetermined inclusions and exclusions or sweeping condemnations are evidence of enduring models of totalitarian thought which prevent any integration of past and present, not to mention intellect and emotion.¹⁰⁴ The result of this is a failure to integrate the past,¹⁰⁵ which, however – and also thanks to the up-

⁹⁹ V 181.

¹⁰⁰ TR 91.

¹⁰¹ TR 90-91.

¹⁰² Jan Assmann, *La memoria culturale*, cit., p. 99.

¹⁰³ Jürgen Habermas, *Können komplexe Gesellschaften eine vernünftige Identität ausbilden?*, in Jürgen Habermas, *Zur Rekonstruktion des Historischen Materialismus*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1976, p. 92-126.

¹⁰⁴ V 197.

¹⁰⁵ Ulrike Jureit and Christian Schneider, *Gefühlte Opfer*, cit., reproaches the 1968 generation for its emotive, moral and political strategies of externalization which go counter to the “interior process” (VS 140).



heavals of 1968 – eventually became a founding myth for Europe.¹⁰⁶

In *Der Vorleser*, the ‘collective *we*’ in which all individuals can find refuge, does not admit to facing up to any new kind of questioning regarding the extermination of the Jews, as Michael himself says:

We should not believe we can comprehend the incomprehensible, we may not compare the incomparable, we may not inquire because to inquire is to make the horrors an object of discussion, even if the horrors themselves are not questioned, instead of accepting them as something in the face of which we can only fall silent in revulsion, shame, and guilt. Should we only fall silent in revulsion, shame, and guilt? To what purpose?¹⁰⁷

Similar to the students, German society as a whole has not been allowed to discuss more complex issues. This might allow them to “realize what reality, the world and time are, and our place in it”.¹⁰⁸ Michael, however, is only aware of a “general numbness”¹⁰⁹ that “had taken hold not only of the perpetrators and victims, but all of us, judges and lay members of court, prosecutors and recorders”.¹¹⁰ Whoever dares put forward any new perspective – for example, to liken “perpetrators, victims, the dead, the living, survivors and their descendants to each other”,¹¹¹ even stating in advance that “the linkage was not meant to relativize the difference” and careful to stress that “this difference was of the greatest, most critical importance” – finds themselves faced with “shock and indignation” even before they can articulate any specific objections.¹¹² The “numbness” is ev-

¹⁰⁶ Cf. for example Alon Confino, *The Holocaust as a Symbolic Manual: The French Revolution, the Holocaust and Global Memories*, in *Marking Evil. The Dialectic of Globalizing the Holocaust*. Edited by Haim Hazan and Amos Goldberg, New York 2013, who sees the Shoah as replacing the French Revolution as a founding myth.

¹⁰⁷ TR 102.

¹⁰⁸ V 190.

¹⁰⁹ TR 101.

¹¹⁰ TR 101.

¹¹¹ TR 101.

¹¹² TR 101.



idence of psychological energy removed from the ego and from what is social,¹¹³ in relation to the negative polarity of past and present. The result, however, is that memory is dismissed, also from the collective sphere, rather than being processed and overcome;¹¹⁴ it thus continues to resurface like everything else that is repressed.¹¹⁵

When Michael looks back on the events of 1968, his opinions are even more clear-cut.¹¹⁶ The presence of one-time Nazis filling the high offices of state, or violent neo-Nazi incidents are undoubtedly the cause of deep shame for the post-war generation, also because it shows how the “web of guilt” survived, as well as some kind of solidarity with the guilty.¹¹⁷ “Pointing at the guilty parties did not free us from shame, but at least it overcame the suffering we went

¹¹³ On the freezing of the emotions, the derealization and the suppression of the event as reactions to the Nazi past, cf. Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern. Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens*, Piper, Munich 1967. The novel is interpreted in this key by Helmut Schmitz, *Malen nach Zahlen*, cit.; for a psychoanalytic reading, cf. Alison Lewis, *Das Phantasma des Masochisten und die Liebe zu Hanna. Schuldige Liebe und intergenerationelle Gewalt in Bernhard Schlinks “Der Vorleser”*, in «Weimarer Beiträge», 52 (2006), n. 4, pp. 234-252, as well as an interpretation from the traumatization perspective by Hannes Fricke, *Bernhard Schlink, “Der Vorleser”. Opfer und Täter*, in *Interpretationen. Romane des 20. Jahrhunderts*, vol. 3, Reclam, Stuttgart 2003, pp. 274-294; Dieter Kampmeyer, *Trauma-Konfigurationen*, cit. On the tabooization of the Third Reich, cf. Dan Bar-On, *Legacy of Silence – Encounters with Children of the Third Reich*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1989 and Dan Bar-On, *The Indescribable and the Indiscussable. Reconstructing Human Discourse After Trauma*, Central European University Press, Budapest 1999. Helmut Schmitz, *Malen nach Zahlen?*, cit., p. 308, talks of an “overdetermination” in Hanna, which is both representative and individual. Although it might seem paradoxical, Hanna is representative only because of her singularity or in her becoming individual. In the defence of the individual, in fact, the significant concerns regarding the fate of human beings, and all Schlink’s social and political apprehensions (as well as those of his *Vorleser*) coincide. On the other hand, Thomas Rothschild, *Unschuldig schuldig? Bernhard Schlinks Hanna Schmitz und Ödon von Horváths Sladek*, in *Täter als Opfer? Deutschsprachige Literatur zu Krieg und Vertreibung im 20. Jahrhundert*, edited by Stefan Hermes and Amir Muhić, Dr. Kovac, Hamburg 2007, pp. 115-128, (here p. 117), claims that as Hanna is the representative of a group, the group itself is rehabilitated.

¹¹⁴ TR 85-86.

¹¹⁵ Cf. Dieter Kampmeyer, *Trauma-Konfigurationen*, cit., who notes that the traumatized individual tries in vain to heal the cracks and the wounds in the psyche.

¹¹⁶ Cf. V 77-85.

¹¹⁷ Cf. VG 27.



through on account of it” is Michael’s bitter view.¹¹⁸ What is more, while he judges himself in relation to Hanna, the other students have to come to terms with their parents. They also hide behind “rhetoric: sounds and noise” and in so doing avoid facing their own contradictions¹¹⁹ and “drown out the fact that their love for their parents made them irrevocably complicit in their crimes”.¹²⁰ For this reason, the events of ’68, “the generational conflict that drove the student movement”,¹²¹ itself becomes a mark of the “German fate”.¹²²

The trial: Michael, Hanna and the representatives of the older generation

Michael attends the trial of various women in the Nazi party, including Hanna, in spring 1966. It is an event that highlights his failure to integrate personal and collective memory in his life. While his fellow students have to confront their own parents’ behaviour, Michael’s situation is more complex. While his father contested the Nazi regime, it is the son who is implicated in the vertical guilt of the *first* generation for having loved someone who collaborated, and for whom he still has feelings.

Michael follows the trial as part of a seminar organized by his professor, a man exiled during the regime, but now “one of the few of that time who were working on the Nazi past”.¹²³ At first Michael does not notice Hanna, only becoming aware of her when the judge calls out her name. He claims that he is not upset: “I recognized her, but I felt nothing. Nothing at all.”¹²⁴ Nevertheless, he misses none of the trial proceedings and thus hears all about Hanna’s past as a guard at Auschwitz and at a camp near Cracow. While she was guarding

¹¹⁸ TR 168.

¹¹⁹ Not by chance, Schlink returns to the guilt borne by the most revolutionary wing of the movement in *Das Wochenende* (2008).

¹²⁰ TR 169.

¹²¹ TR 167.

¹²² TR 169.

¹²³ TR 88.

¹²⁴ TR 93.



hundreds of women prisoners locked in a church, a fire broke out and almost all perished. The trial thus hinges on the question of the failure to rescue the women. Since the war, Hanna has lived in many places and was in Michael's town for eight years.

For Michael, the overwhelming sensation on seeing Hanna again is to realize the massive divide between two irreconcilable images that he has of her: on the one hand she is a guard, coldly inspecting the prisoners with whip in hand, screaming at them, her face contorted in rage; on the other, she is as she was in his father's studio or when dancing in front of the mirror; she listens to him, talks to him, smiles at him and loves him. In correspondence to this construction of the 'other-than-self'/alter ego that Hanna represents, Michael's own image of self disintegrates, almost as if he is subject to that "diachronic schizophrenia" that Claus Leggewie claims is characteristic of the relationship that Germans have with their Nazi past. In the present, Michael describes himself as going to classes and "functioning at the university, with my parents and brother and sisters and my friends", while "inwardly I felt no involvement".¹²⁵ In the past, it seems to him that "it was someone else who had loved and desired her, someone I knew well but who wasn't me."¹²⁶

Nevertheless, on seeing her during the trial, Hanna again becomes a source of alternative thoughts and feelings for him, of direct contact with the life of the psyche. Michael completely opens himself up to this at least once, when he is out walking in the woods. Although in recent years he has thought that he should be more daring, making the effort to travel to faraway places, "to Ceylon, Egypt and Brazil", he now goes back "to making familiar regions more familiar. I see more in them."¹²⁷ And one day it is here that "Hanna's secret became clear to me": "In thinking about Hanna, going round and round in the same tracks week after week, one thought had split off, taken another direction, and finally produced its own conclusion." As he says, this conclusion could only come about in a place

¹²⁵ TR 99.

¹²⁶ TR 99.

¹²⁷ TR 130.



where “the familiarity of the surroundings and the scenery allowed what was truly surprising, what didn’t come like a bolt from the blue, but had been growing inside myself”.¹²⁸ Michael embraces this awareness and it could not be more genuine: in breaking the power of external factors and of his own projections, Michael opens himself up to the experience of listening to the self and this connects him to his deepest feelings and allows them to rise to the surface.¹²⁹ The dynamics of this mutual recognition will now be discussed *ex positivo*: the memories that he has – of reading Hanna those literary classics, the restaurant menus and the names of streets – connect in a different way, prompting a new understanding that encourages him to change the way in which he interacts with the world. He realizes: “Hanna could neither read or write.”¹³⁰

Prone, as he is, to protect his non-authentic ‘equilibrium’, Michael does not follow up this experience. At the time, however, he recognizes that Hanna is ready to be accountable in that she was fighting “for her own truth, her own justice, Because she always had to dissimulate somewhat, and could never be completely candid, it was a pitiful truth and a pitiful justice, but it was hers, and the struggle for it was her struggle.”¹³¹ As a result, Michael is also aware that opposite polarities exist, wanting “simultaneously to understand Hanna’s crime and to condemn it”: “When I tried to understand it, I had the feeling I was failing to condemn it as it must be condemned. When I condemned it as it must be condemned, there was no room for understanding.”¹³²

The enlightenment he experiences in the woods – which, not by chance, occurs half way through the narrative – might have been a potential turning point. However, the process of structural integration is interrupted, and Michael returns to the bewildered state of

¹²⁸ TR 130-131.

¹²⁹ In this respect, in the three thrillers written by Schlink, published in 1987, 1994 and 2001, which focus on justice, deceit and murder respectively, it seems significant that the central character, is called *Selb[t]* (self).

¹³⁰ TR 131.

¹³¹ TR 133.

¹³² TR 156.



psychical functions of which he himself is aware. For example, he feels shame for Hanna when she suddenly turns to look at him when the court is told that she had had women read to her in the concentration camp. Just as he saw her that last time at the swimming pool, “[h]er face [...] simply presented itself.” While he realizes “how tense and exhausted she was”, Michael’s only reaction in the court is to go red, causing Hanna to turn away.¹³³ The effort to struggle with such a conflict and, at the same time, face up to the ‘wish to understand’ and the ‘need to condemn’ is seen as “too terrible” and, as such, is abandoned.¹³⁴ His beloved, meanwhile, is once more rejected:

I had assumed it was both natural and right that Hanna should be in custody. Not because of the charges, the gravity of the allegations, or the force of the evidence, of which I had no real knowledge yet, but because in a cell she was out of my world, out of my life. I wanted her far away from me, so unattainable that she could continue as the mere memory she had become and remained all these years.¹³⁵

At the same time, the images and the negative thoughts that cannot be assimilated – all the more real for them being denied – rise to the surface, and once more fill his nights: “The worst were the dreams in which a hard, imperious cruel Hanna aroused me sexually; I woke from them full of longing and shame and rage. And full of fear about who I really was.”¹³⁶ There is a blurring of the image of the other, parallel to the blurring of the image of oneself. When Hanna is sentenced to life imprisonment, Michael is ready “to return to and continue to live [...] everyday life.”¹³⁷

Not only does Michael fail, but his friends also disappoint him; however, he is mostly failed by the three men of the older generation when he turns to them in an attempt to face up to his predicament.

¹³³ TR 116.

¹³⁴ VS 182.

¹³⁵ TR 95.

¹³⁶ TR 146.

¹³⁷ TR 159.



His father fails him by engaging with his son as a philosopher, discussing freedom and human dignity with his mixture of “abstraction and concreteness”. Even though he suggests talking to the person in question, his father is not capable of putting him on the right track. Above all, however, it is the white-gloved driver of the Mercedes who fails Michael. Offering him a lift when he is on his way to visit Struthof concentration camp, the man talks about the past and tells his passenger that he had once seen a photograph – although it is possibly his own – depicting an officer who looks on impassively as a long row of Jews are shot en masse in Russia (perhaps a reference to the Kiev massacre at Babi Yar). The officer, the driver says, “[is] doing his work, he doesn’t hate the people he executes [...]. They’re a matter of such indifference to him that he can kill them as easy as not. [The officer] looked a little morose. Maybe things weren’t going fast enough for him. But there was also something satisfied, even cheerful about his expression, perhaps because the day’s work was getting done and it was almost time to go home.”¹³⁸ Two key words recur during the driver’s account: *Tagwerk* and *Feierabend*, terms which also connect with the third person that Michael encounters, the presiding judge at the trial. The two words have almost opposite meanings: there are certain analogies with *negotium* and *otium*, but in German tradition they are also invested with a certain sacrality. *Feierabend* – “the evening before a holy feast, the holy evening” according to the entry in the *Deutsches Wörterbuch* compiled by the Brothers Grimm – was also a term used by Nazi groups for workers’ recreation time. During the trial, the judge is not only affected by the general air *numbness*, but also hides behind his personal mannerisms and his over-generalized pronouncements. He eventually hands out an unjust, as well as wrong, verdict, demonstrating an indifference similar to that of the Mercedes driver; he too can condemn Hanna “as easy as not”. This, however, is not the only similarity between the views of the two men. Without his gown, the judge “seemed relaxed, a man who had finished his day’s work [*Tagwerk*] and was content.” Finally, with his “nice, intelligent, harmless

¹³⁸ TR 150-151.



civil servant's face", he also maintains that "[h]e had done everything the right way."¹³⁹ In other words, the novel creates a connection between the driver and the judge which also has parallels with the relationship between Hanna and Michael. Ignoring both the construction of identity and freedom of action – the prerequisites of any experience of the self – the driver is able to submit to a murderous regime and the judge can behave in a similarly conformist way. This prevents individual identity and any real sense of social responsibility from developing.¹⁴⁰

Michael and the outcome of his relationship with Hanna: Part Three

In the summer after the trial, Michael is ready to "return to" normality and "continue to live [his] everyday life."¹⁴¹ He shuts himself in the university library where "I studied so uninterruptedly, so obsessively, that the feelings and thoughts that had been deadened by the trial remained deadened."¹⁴² It is in this state of mind that he marries Gertrud, only for them to separate when their daughter is five years old. Compared to Hanna, Michael realizes that "something was wrong [... Gertrud] moved wrong and felt wrong, smelled wrong and tasted wrong."¹⁴³ Following his marriage, he wants all his girlfriends to provoke, at least in part, the sensations that he felt with Hanna. He also begins to talk about her. When he does so, Helen, an American literary critic, continues to stroke his back without saying anything, while Gesina, a psychoanalyst, notes that he "needed to work through [his] relationship with [his] mother", despite that fact that Michael feels that his mother "hardly appeared in my story at all."¹⁴⁴ There is also Hilke, a dentist, who asks him about his past and then immediately forgets everything, so Michael stops telling her

¹³⁹ TR 158.

¹⁴⁰ On the comparability of past and present guilt, cf. also the considerations made in in VS 94f. and 163f.

¹⁴¹ TR 159.

¹⁴² TR 165

¹⁴³ TR 171.

¹⁴⁴ TR 172.



about it. The three women are almost caricatures: the first plays things down, the second talks in the language of her profession (reminiscent of his father) and the third is forgetful. None of the three hold a mirror up to Michael, encouraging him to take a deep look at himself or observe himself from within (as he had managed in the woods). From this negation of You, we now pass *ex negativo* to the negation of the ego.

Michael keeps his emotional as well as his professional life at a distance: “the first escape was followed by a second, when I moved from the university to a research institution, seeking and finding a niche in which I could pursue my interest in legal history in which I needed no one and disturbed no one.”¹⁴⁵ Studying the Enlightenment, he feels for the first time that lawmakers and “guardians of this good order” strove for “greater beauty and truth, rationality and humanity”. He soon realizes, however, that “this belief was a chimera”: every route is characterized by “disruptions, confusions, and delusions” which means having to go back to the beginning and start the journey all over again.¹⁴⁶ And so Michael returns to the *Odyssey* that he once read with Hanna: “the story of motion both purposeful and purposeless, successful and futile. What else is the history of law?”¹⁴⁷

The *Odyssey* is also the first thing that he starts reading for Hanna later, recording it on tapes that he sends to her prison. Their relationship thus starts up again; once more he is her reader. Readings of Schnitzler, Chekhov, Keller, Fontane, Heine and Mörike follow, and also Kafka, Frisch, Johnson, Bachmann and Lenz; all in all, a wealth of modern literature, although he draws the line at “experimental literature”, intended for a public unlike Hanna¹⁴⁸ (and presumably unlike

¹⁴⁵ TR 178.

¹⁴⁶ TR 179.

¹⁴⁷ TR 180.

¹⁴⁸ In Hanna’s observations on the works of some of the authors that Michael reads aloud to her (Schnitzler, Zweig, Keller, Goethe, Lenz, VA 154-155), two of which are Jewish, Hans-Joachim Hahn, *Repräsentationen des Holocaust*, cit., p. 238, sees “the unaltered judgement of the SS guard”, also because there is no reaction on Michael’s part. On the contrary, I notice how Michael observes that Hanna reads every book as if it were written in the present, also because she lacks all knowledge of the “life circumstances” of the writers mentioned.



the reader that Schlink is writing for). After this, Michael himself starts to write and Hanna again becomes “the court before which once again I concentrated all my energies, all my creativity, all my critical imagination”.¹⁴⁹ Michael sends her his cassettes, but he never writes to her. He simply “close[s] the book, and presses the Stop button”,¹⁵⁰ aware of the fact that he is behaving in a way that is “comfortable and selfish”.¹⁵¹ Meanwhile Hanna has learnt to read by following his voice on the tape, and she starts to write to him from prison.

In 1983 he receives a letter from the prison warden asking if he can help Hanna reintegrate into society as she is about to be released. Even hearing that she is “lonely and helpless”,¹⁵² Michael refuses to go and see her: “I had the feeling she could only be what she was to me at an actual distance. I was afraid that the small, light, safe world of notes and cassettes was too artificial and too vulnerable to withstand actual closeness”;¹⁵³ he is also scared of “everything that had happened between us coming to the surface”.¹⁵⁴ He lets another year pass, but then receives a call from the warden saying that Hanna is being released. Michael can no longer put off seeing her even though – just like his father in the past – he takes refuge in his work, “under self-inflicted pressure to work and succeed.”¹⁵⁵ When he finally sees Hanna again after 22 years, he finds that she has aged terribly: her hair is grey, her face is lined, her body is thick and she smells like an old woman. Yet Hanna’s face lights up on seeing him, but only for a moment, having searched in vain for a sign of subjective recognition on his part.

Only later will Michael remember that Hanna’s voice still sounded the same as when she was young,¹⁵⁶ although when he is actually with

¹⁴⁹ TR 183.

¹⁵⁰ TR 184.

¹⁵¹ TR 189.

¹⁵² TR 190.

¹⁵³ TR 191.

¹⁵⁴ TR 191.

¹⁵⁵ TR 198.

¹⁵⁶ In the sphere of the aesthetics of the senses, the move from smell to the sound of a voice appertains to the Romantic tradition, although it has also been documented



her he cannot think of anything to say, even when she brings up the important question of her guilt. At this, Hanna resumes that air of solitude that has been with her for the whole of her life. *Ex negativo*, Michael is aware that he has “granted Hanna a small niche, certainly an important niche [...] but not a place in my life.”¹⁵⁷ *Ex positivo*, the aforementioned American dream cannot make up for his not being with her. There is only his writing where he records his memories: “Maybe I did write our story to be free of it, even if I never can be,”¹⁵⁸ he admits after Hanna’s death. He is a prisoner of his own dramatic stasis, of his inability to get to the heart of an inner conflict that can be both destructive and creative. The task of reconciling himself with Hanna and his past is transferred to the reader of his narrative, to which will return later.

Hanna

*Nil pluriformius amore*¹⁵⁹

Before discussing how Hanna’s character develops in Part Two and Part Three – that is, during the trial proceedings when we hear her speak, and in prison where it is the warden who speaks for her – it is useful to look at some of the issues raised in Part One of *Der Vorleser*.

Hanna does not talk at all about her past except for giving one or two general details, as if “it were not her life but somebody else’s, someone she didn’t know well and who wasn’t important to her”; it is as if her story came from having “rummaged around in a dusty chest”.¹⁶⁰ This observation seems to imply both her limited aware-

since antiquity. Regarding this, cf. Simonetta Sanna, *Die romantisch-satirische Komödie Leonce und Lena und die Übung des Möglichkeitssinn*, in *Georg Büchner und die Aufklärung*, edited by Gernot Wimmer, de Gruyter, Berlin 2014.

¹⁵⁷ TR 196.

¹⁵⁸ TR 216.

¹⁵⁹ G 40.

¹⁶⁰ Michael makes a similar reflection about his own past, but asserts that he has a good understanding of the person that he was. Hanna is nearer the truth.



ness of self and the impenetrability of her past, two themes which are closely linked to how her character develops. Let us first look at what Hanna tells us: originally from a German-speaking area of Transylvania on the fringes of the Reich, She arrives in Berlin at the age of seventeen and after working at the Siemens factory, she joins the army. After the war Hanna says that she has done a number of jobs before becoming a tram conductor; she likes the uniform, the feeling of movement, the changing scenery and the sense of the tram wheels turning below her feet.¹⁶¹ We notice some equivocal details in her story: in fact her uniform and her work on the trams are motifs which could very well call to mind the trains bound for the concentration camps. Unlike Michael's inner explorations within his region of birth, in Hanna's case we are dealing with external experience, independent of where she was born. It is this, considered in relation to Michael's dark introspection,¹⁶² that makes Hanna his *dunkle Schwester*.¹⁶² It is only later that Michael, and the reader, discover that Hanna is illiterate.

The way in which she is initially portrayed suggests that Hanna inhabits a *grey area* of rules and implied meanings, marked by a violence in which she has "more of a subservient, exploited role than an active one",¹⁶³ as will shall see later. Hanna is inarticulate, full of undeveloped impulses and instances, and her individuality has been subjugated to the values of the Nazi regime. She has certainly posed no objections or resistance.¹⁶⁴ The choices that she has made do not, however, appear to be based on inner reflexivity or on any personal goals that might be the result of having weighed up various options. In this respect she lacks "the capacity to behave according to justice, as this implies understanding, and the capacity to act according to this understanding."¹⁶⁵ Cold and rigid to the point of being obtuse, she ends up carrying out her work in an "obliviously conscientious" way.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶¹ TR 37.

¹⁶² Analogous to "dunkle Bruder" discussed in Toni Wolff, *Einführung in die Grundlagen der komplexen Psychologie*, cit.

¹⁶³ Described thus in VS 131, although not with regard to Hanna.

¹⁶⁴ VS 13.

¹⁶⁵ VS 13.

¹⁶⁶ TR 118.



Hanna's illiteracy is certainly partly responsible for her lack of freedom, her reserve and her diffidence; indirectly it is even a reason why she ends up a brutal guard. This argument is supported by the fact that on three different occasions her reaction is to run away in order to protect this secret: in the autumn of 1943, when she is offered the chance for promotion at Siemens, in the summer of 1959, at the tram company, and then during the trial when she prefers to shoulder most of the blame and is thus sentenced to life imprisonment. Moreover, maintaining this secret seems to be the one real choice she can make, one in which her strengths and her weaknesses coincide. Hanna's active role in those tragic events of sweeping historical significance consolidated the authority of the perpetrators and occurred where individual and the collective destinies intersect. The differences in the damaging and guilt-bearing consequences of the choices she makes in 1943 compared to 1959 are due to changes in social conditions that encourage individual choices not to run counter to the human values of freedom, a dignity to which Michael's father also refers. Indeed, those values are the *conditio sine qua non* for building a civil society, as there tends to be a "total weakness of individual morality wherever there is a lack of institutions".

Hanna's choice – carrying out the violent orders that she is also victim to – should not, however, be seen in a relativistic light. Nor is her crime lessened by her lack of education: Hanna herself becomes fully aware of her guilt when she is in prison, and she takes full blame upon herself. On the one hand she is a witness to an individual's capacity to redeem themselves, learning to renounce having to "tak[e] possession" of things.¹⁶⁷ On the other, she shows how the development of the individual self cannot disregard 'shadows' when accessing personal ethics. Initially constricted by social conditioning, Hanna eventually becomes an individual capable of self-determination. This then becomes self-sacrifice,¹⁶⁸ for the very reason that the sins that she committed are too great for her to be pardoned by her alone.

¹⁶⁷ TR 31.

¹⁶⁸ Cf. Niklas Luhmann, *Grundrechte als Institution. Ein Beitrag zur politischen Soziologie*, Duncker & Humblotz, Berlin 1999, p. 76, who holds that people can consider suicide as an alternative to doing something in which they do not recognize themselves.



Hanna: the meeting with Michael in Part One

In the first part of the book, Hanna does not talk about herself because not even she knows who she really is; she is only in touch with fear and with dark impulses and anxieties. For the reader therefore, this means interpreting how the character ‘speaks’ even when she is silent; we have to pay particular attention to the conflicts that the events, including violent events, are meant to resolve. Conditioned as she is by external factors, Hanna is detached from any personal goals which can only emerge when there is a range of potential acts from which to choose.

The reason why she chooses Michael are, for example, clearly signalled in the various phases of their relationship – in their moments of happiness as well as in their disagreements – but also in her final confession, which we will now examine. Here she expresses an intense need for *recognition*, for reciprocal understanding:¹⁶⁹ “I always had the feeling that no one understood me anyway, that no one knew who I was and what made me do this or that. And you know, when no one understands you, then no one can call you to account. [...] But the dead can. They understand.” Even at this point Michael does not know how to answer her: “She waited to see if I had anything to say, but I couldn’t think of anything.”¹⁷⁰ The same yearning for recognition explains her relationship with Michael; Michael is a sensitive, educated and well-mannered boy who potentially has all the qualities to recognize her and to accept her for what she is, but Hanna ends up understanding him much better than he understands her. On top of this there is the age difference, for which readers have criticized Schlink (as he himself has testified) saying that this “is not

¹⁶⁹ In a basic but equally powerful way, Hanna thus shares the same desire as Franz Kafka: to be recognized in her *Eigentümlichkeit*, in her “specific singularity”. This is genuine, is not generic in the least, and allows suffering to be elaborated in that process of “person-to-person healing” that Kafka wishes for in his fifth letter to Felice Bauer. Cf. Simonetta Sanna, *Franz Kafka*, Edizioni Studi Germanici, Rome 2013. On the subject of recognition, cf. also Judith Butler, *Hass spricht. Zur Politik des Performativen*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 2006, p. 16.

¹⁷⁰ TR 197.



a normal love story” in that “Hanna Schmitz is twice the age of Michael Berg”.¹⁷¹ The author, however, refutes such normative concepts regarding love in order to recognize a love that is entire and multifaceted, and which also allows for hate and violence to be taken into consideration, all the more so given that “many people think that it is better to believe in the existence of an absolute good and listen to the voices of those who represent a superior conscience and non-ambiguous thought”, whereas “one who can join the shadow to the light is the possessor of greater riches.”¹⁷²

Hanna’s behaviour is undoubtedly contradictory and convoluted: she expresses a yearning for completeness through destructive means, and despite intentions to bring about a further closeness between herself and Michael, she increases the distance between them, as when, for example, she hits him with a belt out of her fear of losing him. Nevertheless, communication is also frustrated and obstructed by Michael. While he decides to read to her on tape to maintain a certain distance between them, Hanna learns to write with the idea of keeping their communication alive. And up to the day before her suicide, Hanna places her hopes in their future meetings. Indeed, her love for Michael underpins the process of restructuring her feelings; as this regards the most deeply-rooted aspects of her being, it allows her to make contact with a wider range of positive and negative emotions. This stimulates her ‘reactive capacity’, opening her up to a commonality with human beings while she is on the road to accepting her own guilt.

It is also true that Michael behaves in a “comfortable and selfish” way.¹⁷³ Nonetheless, it is as if Hanna’s desire to share her pain with

¹⁷¹ G 38.

¹⁷² Carl Gustav Jung, *Mysterium coniunctionis*, in *Collected Works*, vol. 14, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ 1970, p. 105. Furthermore, I feel that Michael’s youth makes for an imbalance that will not be resolved even in the future. Despite the fact that he carries out his roles very well and has a certain degree of social success, Michael does not free himself from the socio-historical need for a “general ethics” (Kierkegaard, cf. *Aut Aut*, V, and *Fear and Trembling*) or collective morality. These override the greatest outcome of western culture, that is, the recognition of the irreducible singularity of the individual, which is the only means to encounter the other.

¹⁷³ TR 189.



a person capable of shouldering the burden also conveys the suggestion that such reciprocal recognition might be “the *via regia* towards the recognition of their own ‘shadow’”¹⁷⁴ for both of them. Hanna, however, will be left on her own, and it is also this lack of connection, this not having been seen or recognized, that brings out her vulnerability and her anguish. On two occasions her response to this conflict is to leave. She suddenly leaves town when she feels that Michael has started to perceive her as an “illness”, while years later she commits suicide when she realizes that she has no future with the one person whose recognition she needs.¹⁷⁵ (In contrast, Michael will continue to ask himself if Hanna loved him; he does not know how to read Hanna’s face just as he does not know how to read his own). Freed of all her ties with the living, Hanna takes up her responsibilities towards the dead.

Hanna and the trial in Part Two

The trial of Hanna and the other defendants takes place in 1966. With historical hindsight, the trial seems to recall three famous trials of the period: the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann in Israel; the 1963-65 trial in Frankfurt of various war criminals, including Robert Mulka, adjutant to the commander at Auschwitz, and the 1975-81 trial in Düsseldorf of 16 members of the SS who had worked in the Majdanek concentration camp. Among the latter was Hermine Braunsteiner, known as *the horse*, which is also the nickname Michael suggests for Hanna that shocks her so much. In *Der Vorleser*, the Nazi women guards are on two charges: firstly, they are accused of having chosen which prisoners were to be sent to the gas chambers in the satellite camp near Auschwitz. Hanna herself describes how every month the six guards selected 60 of the 1,200 women prisoners. They each had to pick ten women who were not capable of working in the munitions factory and thus had to be substituted by new arrivals. Secondly, the guards are accused of a serious act of

¹⁷⁴ Mario Trevi and Augusto Romano, *Studi sull’Ombra*, Marsilio, Venice 1990, p. 35.

¹⁷⁵ Cf. note 210.



omission involving loss of life.¹⁷⁶ This episode is related by two women, a mother and her daughter, who have survived by pure chance: after a long march westwards during which half the prisoners have died, the hundred or so remaining women are locked in a village church overnight. During a bombing raid the church catches fire. The prisoners scream for help and try to open the locked door, but to no avail; no one comes to help, neither the guards nor the villagers.

Michael's particular interest in the case allows him to note several differences between Hanna and the other defendants. Only Hanna is represented by a young public defense lawyer who gives an impression of being overly-keen; the other women are defended by older lawyers, ex-Nazis who will easily manage to make Hanna seem responsible for the whole episode. Moreover, Hanna has "no sense of context, of the rules of the game, of the formulas"¹⁷⁷ as the irritated judge notes; she also does not deny having read the book written by the daughter who survived, admits she knew that the women chosen each month were going to die and even says that she wrote the report that proves that help was not given during the fire (which, being illiterate, she could not possibly have done).

Furthermore, Michael sees other ways in which Hanna's behaviour differs from that of the other defendants both at the start and at the end of the trial. While the other defendants are "visibly older, more worn out, more cowardly and bitter",¹⁷⁸ Hanna's attitude immediately seems "arrogant"; she "[holds] her head very erect" and avoids speaking to the other women and the lawyer.¹⁷⁹ On the last day of the trial she even wears a austere black suit which makes her look as if she is wearing a uniform, giving the court the impression that "before us we were seeing the uniform, and the woman who had worked for the SS in it, and all the crimes that Hanna was accused of doing."¹⁸⁰ When the verdict is finally given, she looks

¹⁷⁶ Cf. VG 13f.

¹⁷⁷ TR 109.

¹⁷⁸ TR 135.

¹⁷⁹ TR 98.

¹⁸⁰ TR 161.



straight ahead with a “proud, wounded, lost, and infinitely tired look. A look that wished to see nothing and no one.”¹⁸¹

Hanna has had to give up, although during the trial she had fought her battle in her own way. Hanna’s own words from 1943 are reported at the trial in 1966. During the war, as the younger of the two women who survived remembers, Hanna chose her own “favourites”: she chose the younger, weaker, delicate girls and invited them to her room, making them read aloud to her before they were sent off to the gas chamber.

Hanna herself explains the reasons for not helping the prisoners during the fire:

Some of us were dead, and the others had left. [...] We didn’t know what to do. [...] How could we have guarded all those women? [...] Then the screaming began and got worse and worse. If we had opened the doors and they had all come rushing out ... [...] how could we have restored order? There would have been chaos, and we had no way to handle that. And if they’d tried to escape ... [...] We were responsible for them ... [...] That’s why we didn’t know what to do.¹⁸²

Here Hanna speaks as the woman she once was, and the woman that she has managed to hide until then. The words are those of someone who was once an insignificant officer of death, a stupid inflexible woman in a uniform with an inhuman desire for order.¹⁸³ Hanna speaks for the *Tätergedächtnis* and, unlike the other defendants, she uses the *wir* of a specific group which has conditioned both actions and memory. The difference between the self and the world is not recognized, and thus that “fundamental act of civilization” (Aby Warburg) that comes of reflexive distance is lacking.

Schlink, who refutes “the logic in valuing one life more than another because that is the logic of war”,¹⁸⁴ claims that “from within,

¹⁸¹ TR 162.

¹⁸² TR 125-127.

¹⁸³ VS 94.

¹⁸⁴ V 174.



wickedness is as diverse as the number of bad people that exist; only bad actions are similar.”¹⁸⁵ The guilty Hanna speaks woodenly, displaying her limited vocabulary and her poor syntax: she often resorts to the hedging modal *sollen* and her speech is marked by hesitation and doubt, and strewn with particles: grammatical items that are generally monosyllables and empty of meaning which can either be vaguely objective items intended to modify or clarify actions, or vaguely subjective ones meant to denote varying degrees of involvement. Furthermore, unlike Michael, his father, the presiding judge and even the driver of the Mercedes, Hanna insists on *nicht wissen, was tun*, only to admit later that she actually did know what happened. She is like those people who “have done what others did, who believed in orders because they were orders, and who were used to obeying orders”.¹⁸⁶ And for her an order is a more important concept than a human life;¹⁸⁷ indeed, as a total conformist¹⁸⁸ Hanna is marked by ‘anticipatory obedience’¹⁸⁹ behind which – interiorized as it is – the person disappears.

What is more, social dynamics cause her active collaboration to be transformed into that event of collective and historical significance that is the Shoah, the continuing symbol of German guilt. As is to be expected in an authoritarian regime where “parties, unions and associations, churches and communities, universities, schools and courts are assimilated”,¹⁹⁰ there can be no “social institution of the state which safeguards individual morality”.¹⁹¹ The violent actions

¹⁸⁵ G 18.

¹⁸⁶ G 19.

¹⁸⁷ See also Carl Schmitt, *Staat, Bewegung, Volk*, Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, Hamburg 1933, S. 45.: “Ein Artfremder mag sich noch so kritisch gebärden und noch so scharfsinnig bemühen, mag Bücher lesen und Bücher schreiben, er denkt und versteht anders, weil er anders geartet ist, und bleibt in jedem entscheidenden Gedankengang in den existentiellen Bedingungen seiner Art. Das ist die objektive Wirklichkeit der Objektivität”. Cf. also the views of Schlink’s teacher, Ernst Forstthoff, which he himself discusses in VS 149f.

¹⁸⁸ VS 94.

¹⁸⁹ VS 164.

¹⁹⁰ VS 116-117.

¹⁹¹ VS 117.



which besmirch Hanna were committed during the Nazi regime during which “the concept of justice in force was incorrect”.¹⁹² In this respect the Radbruch Formula can be applied, an issue that Schlink, the legal scholar, emphasizes: “Any contradiction between positive law and justice must be so inadmissible as to force the unjust legal norm to give way to justice.”¹⁹³

During the trial, however, a different Hanna emerges to the Hanna of the past. She does not remain silent or hide like the other defendants behind “a whole hierarchy of responsibilities”;¹⁹⁴ she confesses. Although Michael thinks that she appears to be “in visible and audible confusion and helplessness”,¹⁹⁵ Hanna refutes any unfounded charges and admits responsibility for those that are well-founded: “She contradicted vigorously and admitted willingly, as though her admissions gave her the right to contradictions or as though, along with her contradictions, she took on a responsibility to admit what she could not deny.”¹⁹⁶ Through this, Hanna not only demonstrates that she has a sense of justice (which, moreover, she does not exploit), but also shows that she is open to the reciprocity, interaction and communication which form the basis of any construction of identity.¹⁹⁷ Just as she needs to be understood by Michael in their relationship, Hanna also expresses a need to be understood by the court, with regard to the tragic events and the conflict “which brands us and with which we must live”.¹⁹⁸ However, as with Michael, her attempts are destined to fail. Her “more desperate and more vehement” arguments alienate the judges¹⁹⁹ and she is eventually forced to give up, retreating even more into herself, hiding behind a look “that wished to see nothing and no one.”²⁰⁰

¹⁹² VS 105.

¹⁹³ VS 40.

¹⁹⁴ TR 113.

¹⁹⁵ TR 108.

¹⁹⁶ TR 108-109.

¹⁹⁷ Jan Assmann, *La memoria culturale*, cit., p. 104.

¹⁹⁸ V 178.

¹⁹⁹ TR 135.

²⁰⁰ TR 162.



Nevertheless, it is Hanna at least who experiences the trial as a potential for rebirth, also because it is the first time that she has faced her past and her guilt as an “process of interiorization”.²⁰¹ This is an important moment in her story; like Michael’s experience of recognition in the woods (though this subsequently dissolves into a feeling of *numbness*), it occurs half way through the narrative and is a real turning point. In fact, for the first time she asks the presiding judge a question herself as she struggles towards a reflexivity completely from within herself: “I ... I mean ... so what would you have done?” Hanna meant it as a serious question. She did not know what she should or could have done differently, and therefore wanted to hear from the judge, who seemed to know everything, what he would have done”.²⁰² The judge equivocates and takes his time before replying, “There are matters one *simply* cannot get drawn into, that one must distance oneself from, if the price is not life and limb”.²⁰³ In Michael’s account, even those present realize how inadequate this vague answer is, based on some abstract notion of what “must” be done and what is *simply* the case; above all, Hanna realizes that this leaves her on her own with her questions and her anguish. In fact the judge goes on to criticize her, saying that she “had wanted to know what she should have done in her particular situation, not that there are things that are not done”. Immediately after this, Hanna turns the questioning on herself, and the acceptance of a guilty verdict is implicit in her querulous uncertainty: “So should I have ... should I have not ... should I have not signed up at Siemens?” [...] She was talking out loud to herself, hesitantly, because she had not yet asked herself that question and did not know whether it was the right one, or what the answer was”.²⁰⁴

The fact is that at the time of the crime, Hanna totally lacked “the ability to act according to the law, which assumes cognizance and the

²⁰¹ VS 140.

²⁰² TR 110.

²⁰³ TR 110-111.

²⁰⁴ TR 111.



ability to act according to one's own cognizance", as Schlink – in legal guise – has observed.²⁰⁵ Consequently, Hanna becomes aware of her own individual guilt at the very moment when, for the first time, she faces up to the problem of choice, that is, that there are various alternatives which derive from personal aims and thus from inner dialogue. At the time Hanna is only half aware of this; the moment when she assumes and interiorizes her individual partially responsibility is related in Part Three. The fact that she keeps her illiteracy hidden does not justify her actions, but it does show just how deeply the core of her identity is buried. Nevertheless, the verdict that is handed down by a judge who maintains he is doing his *Tagwerk* as best as he can, is actually wrong and also unjust. His decision goes counter to the notion of justice that Schlink regards as the basis for a fair trial: "A just verdict that does not consider the action and the doer of the action, of their propensities, their life circumstances and their motivations today seems unacceptable".²⁰⁶

Hanna in prison in Part Three

In her final confession, Hanna also recognizes the importance of what she experienced during the trial. Nobody can call her to account, because nobody has really understood her. "But the dead can. They understand. They don't even have to have been there, but if they were, they understand even better. Here in prison they were with me a lot. They came every night, whether I wanted them or not. Before the trial I could still chase them away when they wanted to come".²⁰⁷ Her acceptance of guilt has meant an end to repression, establishing a commonality with the victims and not, as her use of *wir* in 1943-45 indicated, with the perpetrators. We shall return to this point later.

Our knowledge of Hanna's life in prison is gleaned from her letters and above all in the warden's account after Hanna has commit-

²⁰⁵ VS 11.

²⁰⁶ VS 181.

²⁰⁷ TR 196-197.



ted suicide. The narrator respects the authority of the warden as well as what she says: “I had heard of her; her institute was considered extraordinary, and her opinion on questions of penal reform carried weight.”²⁰⁸ Above all, it is the warden who tells Michael about the inner journey that Hanna made and how she had interiorized her guilt; Hanna’s recognition of her past had undoubtedly set in motion an unstoppable process. In the early years in prison, Hanna “was greatly respected by the other women [...]. More than that, she had authority, she was asked for her advice when there were problems, and if she intervened in an argument, her decision was accepted.” In those days she “had always taken care of herself personally, she was slender despite her strong build, and meticulously clean.”²⁰⁹ Above all, Hanna learnt to read at that time by following Michael’s voice on the tape, and she subsequently learnt to write so that she could send him her first letters. But this, is not, as Michael claims, simply about moving from “dependence to independence, a step towards liberation”,²¹⁰ but much more.

In fact, the warden also tells him about how Hanna later stopped socializing with the other women. Her appearance changed: “now she began to eat a lot and seldom washed; she got fat and smelled.” And above all:

[I]t was as though the retreat to the convent was no longer enough, as though life in the convent was still too sociable and talkative, and she had to retreat even further, into a lonely cell safe from all eyes, where looks, clothing, and smell meant nothing. No, it would be wrong to say that she had given up. She redefined her place in a way that was right for her.²¹¹

Hanna therefore leaves all struggle and all duties behind her in order to follow a path of fragility and sacrifice to the very end. The reason for this change is to be found in her newfound literacy which

²⁰⁸ TR 191.

²⁰⁹ TR 206.

²¹⁰ TR 186.

²¹¹ TR 206.



has enabled her to get to the heart of her own personal guilt and that of her generation. The warden recalls the strike she held against cutbacks in library funds, and when Michael visits Hanna's cell after her death he sees a row of books on the shelf by the likes of "Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, Tadeusz Borowski, Jean Améry – the literature of the victims, next to the autobiography Rudolf Höss, Hannah Arendt's report on Eichmann in Jerusalem,²¹² and scholarly literature on the camps." He also learns that the warden "had to get her a general concentration-camp bibliography, and then one or two years ago she asked me to suggest some books on women in the camps, both prisoners and guards."²¹³

In other words, in prison Hanna journeys from her "obliviously conscientious"²¹⁴ ways of the past to a new individual consciousness that is also aware of others in that it embraces the responsibilities that this involves. Perhaps it is not surprising that her external "meticulous" cleanliness became an "inner process";²¹⁵ from the perspective of the alchemic *magnum opus* – seen in the ritual of bathing or showering – this is equivalent to passing from the *nigredo* to the *albedo* phase, i.e., to the white stage denoting the clarification and intensification of life and the consciousness (the third, red *rubedo*, phase, is the state in which the soul, having accepted its spiritual inheritance, is purified and replenished; in *Der Vorleser* the reference is extratextual). In Jungian terms, Hanna, once dominated by the Animus, is now in touch with the Anima. And indeed, Hanna has gone through a thorough process of expiation; at the beginning she is in a no man's land, whereas at the end she consciously renounces freedom by taking her own life. What is more, she leaves her savings of 7,000 marks to the Jewish woman who survived the fire with her

²¹² Dieter Kampmeyer, *Trauma-Konfigurationen*, cit., p. 66f., claims that reading *Eichmann in Jerusalem* would have been decisive for Hanna in that it would have confirmed her belief that she had only done her duty in the past and, for this reason, would not be accepted by present-day society; it is this that makes her decide to end her life. In our opinion, Kampmeyer's claim is not confirmed by the text.

²¹³ TR 203.

²¹⁴ TR 118.

²¹⁵ VS 140.



mother. The daughter, however, is unwilling to grant Hanna “absolution”,²¹⁶ although she does agree that the money can be donated to a Jewish association for adult literacy in the name of Hanna Schmitz. The woman does keep the tea tin that contains the cheque, however. The fact that it reminds her of the one in which she kept her mementoes that was stolen in the concentration camp perhaps establishes, in the end, a tenuous relationship with Hanna.

The poetics of the novel, of writing and of reading

si malum non est, unde Deus est

We can now return to the leitmotifs of reading and writing. These underpin the theme of the search for identity and they characterize the poetics of *Der Vorleser*. As regards reading, the two main characters represent two different types of reader. On her journey towards freedom, Hanna begins to ‘talk out loud to herself’ and ‘question herself’, and this behaviour intensifies when she learns to read. This is the moment that she becomes independent; her ability to read

now matched by her ability to interiorize things, including the fictional and non-fictional works about the Shoah, which foster the reflexivity of individual conscience and its consequent responsibilities. Michael, on the contrary, remains a *Vorleser*, someone who reads a text without making it a part of his own life. In this respect, it is interesting to note his response when he takes up the *Odyssey* again, a work that has been with him since adolescence, and was his model of a journey without a fixed destination. Rather than relating its message of having to start out all over again after “disruptions, confusions, and delusions”²¹⁷ to his own life, Michael relates the poem to the history of law (in which he holds a professorship). It is as if he needs a scapegoat to keep his inner conflicts at bay.

Michael also begins to write when he is in his thirties. From the perspective of writing, the final reflections he makes about the va-

²¹⁶ TR 210.

²¹⁷ TR 179.



rious versions of his autobiographical account (which some critics have found cloying)²¹⁸ are, in my opinion, of great importance:

Thus there are many different stories in addition to the one I have written. [...] At first I wanted to write our story in order to be free of it. [...] Then I realized our story was slipping away from me and I wanted to recapture it by writing, but that didn't coax the memories up either. [...] I've made peace with it. And it came back [...] I think it is true, and thus the question of whether it is sad or happy has no meaning whatever. [...] But if something hurts me, the hurts I suffered back then come back to me, and when I feel guilty, the feelings of guilt return; if I yearn for something today, or feel homesick, I feel the yearnings and homesickness from back then. [...] I understand this. Nevertheless, I sometimes find it hard to bear. Maybe I did write our story to be free of it, even if I never can be.²¹⁹

In fact, more than any reflections on Michael-as-reader, these considerations of Michael-as-writer are what are passed on to the actual reader of *Der Vorleser*. It is as if we are almost invited to create our own version of the story that has been narrated so far, opening up the text to various possibilities, and asking the picaresque character of Michael all those questions that have not been answered.

Even as internal narrator, Michael hedges and distances himself from Hanna; while integrating past and existential solitude “sadly” lead Hanna to put an end to her life, a “happier” conclusion to the story can be provided by readers who have the potential for a more dynamic and open-minded rapport with their inner lives. However, not even Michael Berg (the writer) manages to free himself of memories as ‘associative devices’, something that causes him to process present experiences on the basis of past events. What he perceives depends first and foremost on the original associations that were made in the past. For this reason, non-processed experience continues to determine both his present and future hopes. He remains with

²¹⁸ Micha Ostermann, *Aporien des Erinnerns*, cit., p. 117.

²¹⁹ TR 216.



the *monsters*, *intrigue*, and terrible *grins* originating in the “[d]esires, memories, fears, passions [that] form labyrinths in which we lose and find and then lose ourselves again”²²⁰ that filled his sickroom when he was a child.

The internal narrator consigns this theme of unresolved guilt to writing and this provides the main impulse for a more responsive psychodynamics.²²¹ By activating a process of recognition – similar to the one that Michael fleetingly experienced in the woods – they allow for memories to be reviewed, and thus encourage knowledge of oneself and of the other. This twofold understanding leads to reconciliation with oneself, with others, and with one’s own past. There is an ambiguity in the construction of the message and in the dynamics of the multilayered tension between opposing values: between good and evil, justice and injustice, love and violence, individual and collective memory, feelings and consciousness, and past and present; that is, between that sum of perceived, affective, ethical, social and political factors that Michael is unable to transform into knowledge of himself and what makes him what he is. This also strengthens the aesthetic-cognitive function of the novel and highlights the active role of the reader. Consequently, the questions that are raised by the divergent paths that Michael and Hanna take are pitched back to the reader in the role of *tertium non datur*. In this respect the tension between the ‘wish to understand’ and the ‘need to condemn’ no longer has such “terrible” connotations.²²²

There is no lack of counter-examples in *Der Vorleser*, however. One of these is the book written by the daughter who survives the fire, a testament of the first generation victims that “does not invite one to identify with it”, but “creates distance”. Although it has “the ability to observe and analyze”, it also “exudes the very *numbness*” of those who have been overwhelmed by such a devastating event.²²³ Neither is reconciliation with the past an undertaking that can be

²²⁰ TR 16.

²²¹ Amir Eshel, *Zukünftigkeit*, cit., also claims that working on the past provides the chance of “handelnd damit umzugehen”.

²²² VS 182.

²²³ TR 118.



delegated to the judicial system. On the one hand the character of the unjust judge is counter-balanced by the warden of the model prison, who perhaps understands Hanna more than Michael does. On the other, when Michael is choosing a profession – and having witnessed Hanna’s trial – he refuses to consider becoming a judge because the “[p]rosecution seemed to me as grotesque a simplification as defense, and judging was the most grotesque oversimplification of all”.²²⁴ Moreover, the whole of the second part of the novel covering the trial and its procedure is an illustration of the claim Schlink made (when taking an international view on the matter) of how “normative analyses disregard important data: how the existing political world is structured, the conditions that enable illegal acts, and the measure of economic and social change and demands that arise in the absence of structures.”²²⁵ What is more, “with the juridical classification of things moral, it is as if the morally-committed individual is dispensed with, given that his social responsibility can be delegated to the law”.²²⁶ In addition, “good laws reduce the conflict between the law and morality, but they cannot exclude it” for the very reason that “conflict and tragedy are found at the limits of the law. They are part of what we are as human beings and we have to live with them”,²²⁷ above all in the “current victim culture” with its strong emphasis on “*Verrechtlichung* und *Vergerechtigbung*”.²²⁸

There are, however, various other counter-examples in *Der Vorleser*. A few will be mentioned here in a purely unsystematic way: for

²²⁴ TR 177-178.

²²⁵ V 163.

²²⁶ V 157. On the scepticism regarding *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* from a legal standpoint, cf. Meike Herrmann, *Vergangenwart*, cit., p. 127f.

²²⁷ V 176, 178.

²²⁸ V 155: Cf. also *Universi della violenza*, edited by Adolfo Ceretti and Lorenzo Natali, Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli 2012, p. 55: “Un eccessivo ‘bisogno’ interiore di diritto (e particolarmente di diritto penale) e, dunque, di controllo, sembra un indicatore di segno opposto rispetto alla condizione di una collettività coesa e basata sulla fiducia” (An excessive internal ‘need’ for law (particularly criminal law), and thus for control, seems to be a sign of what is contrary to the conditions required for a cohesive society based on trust). The truth being that in a society where there is a strong need for protection, crime, in all its violent forms, becomes widespread.



instance, there are the friends that Michael asks for advice, to whom he poses his questions with a series of imperatives, each beginning “Imagine...” (repeated four times);²²⁹ there are the familiar images of the concentration camps “flash[ing] on the mind again and again, until they froze into clichés”, those “very powerful” images that “undermined my actual memories of Hanna”.²³⁰ There is also the attempt that Michael makes at Struthof to “imagine in concrete detail a camp filled with prisoners and guards and suffering”, though this leaves him with a “feeling of the most dreadful, shameful failure” because no real emotion emerges, but only “thinking about the way one is supposed to feel after visiting a concentration camp”.²³¹ There is also the driver of the Mercedes, who perhaps is saying what is true, but is wrong in how he says it; his mention of solidarity, human dignity and “reverence for life” rings hollow, but Michael has no response.²³² Another example is Michael’s attempt to understand and condemn Hanna’s crimes “simultaneously” and his feeling that he “could not resolve this”.²³³ Finally, there is his attempt to explain himself to his girlfriends so that they might “be able to make sense of whatever they might find disconcerting in [his] behavior and moods”,²³⁴ but which in no way reduces his feeling of alienation. Such behaviour does not change Michael’s opinions or actions given that “the truth of what one says lies in what one does”.²³⁵

In counterpoint to the themes of reading and writing, *Der Vorleser* presents a rich ambiguity of the aesthetic dynamics at play, under-

²²⁹ TR 139.

²³⁰ TR 146.

²³¹ TR 154. Cf. the similar experience of Andi and Sarah in *Liebesfluchten, Die Beschneidung*, Diogenes, Zurich 2000, p. 228, while observing schoolchildren visiting a concentration camp. Cf. also Theo Mechtenberg, *Bernhard Schlink “Der Vorleser” – ein gewagter Umgang mit der Holocaust-Thematik?, in Annäherungen. Polnische, deutsche und internationale Germanistik*, edited by Bernd Balzer and Irena Swiatowska, Oficyna Wydawnicza ATUT, Wrocław 2003, pp. 429-437; and also Bernhard Schlink, *Auf dem Eis. Von der Notwendigkeit und der Gefahr der Beschäftigung mit dem Dritten Reich und dem Holocaust. Ein Essay*, in «Der Spiegel», (2001), n. 19, pp. 82-85.

²³² TR 150.

²³³ TR 156.

²³⁴ TR 172.

²³⁵ TR 172.



mining binary oppositions or occasionally repositing them in different ways. This means that the novel can be part of a process of modifying perceptions and stimulating new understandings, and thus potentially new representations, of the world.²³⁶ From this perspective, the book is no different to a political novel which – “after a brief period of numbness, and a longer period of repression” – intends to encourage “the need and the possibility of a constructive discussion” about the German past through the medium of art.²³⁷ This need is felt above all in relation to the Shoah and presupposes both the ability “to accept the terrifying challenge of staring it in the face”, and to fight “the fear of that which does not conform with its time and with the world, and which creates scandal, even though it is part of our times and our world”.²³⁸ As a political novel, *Der Vorleser* adopts “that sense of distance, of objective, precise perception, wholly and without fear,” which Schlink claims is “the one true political stance of the writer, and of the intellectual in general”.²³⁹ Above all the novel relies on the heterodox dynamics that derive from the *aisthesis* it aims at bringing about. Unlike scientific procedures – as Schlink writes in a 2007 essay – literature has the potential to consider a specific individual case, observe it from within, empathetically and without distancing it, from a subjective perspective rather than the objective perspective of natural science. It thus transforms “the weakness in its method of understanding into its strength”.²⁴⁰

On the one hand there is Michael’s predicament, with him torn between absolution and guilt, and on the other there is Hanna herself, his *dunkle Schwester*, and a character who has the potential to process experience authentically and who is tragic for this very reason. These factors are also integral to the oppositions that the reader is called upon to unravel on reading and ‘rewriting’ the events. The

²³⁶ On this, cf. Simonetta Sanna, *L’esperienza estetica: presupposti psicologici e pratica interpretativa*, in «BAIG IV», January 2011, pp. 63-69.

²³⁷ V 209.

²³⁸ V 192.

²³⁹ V 192, 202.

²⁴⁰ VS 183.



author is intent on activating the appropriate aesthetic devices, presenting readers with stereotypes that on the one hand confirm their dissimilarities, seen in the clear division between victims and perpetrators – which consolidates a belief in what is rational, and thus in modern values – but that on the other encourages a recognition of their similarities and thus enables a back and forth movement along the line of correspondences in a constant process of reviewing beliefs. The strength of this mode of understanding is that it “offers the basis for reconciliation in that it aims at what unites us, countering all separation”, in that “if we understand, we create collectivity”.²⁴¹ Only reconciliation – our “ability to weep for those who are not us or ours” (Susan Sontag) – creates the conditions to “redeem the damage of the past, allowing it to be remembered and forgotten at the same time”.²⁴² That this does not become a blanket excuse for the Nazi past is something that has to be avoided, also because literature in general, and Schlink’s work in particular, only ever considers the specific, the disparate and individual case as the premise for a reflexive collective identity.²⁴³

The questions that the novel poses the reader call for open-ended rather than unequivocal answers. Indeed, “they indicate possibilities that have not been seen, that have not been taken up, that have not been carried through”.²⁴⁴ For literature in particular, however, such possibilities pertain to “interior processes”.²⁴⁵ It is for this reason that *Der Vorleser* also examines these women perpetrators in a way that is imbued with a superior sense of justice; the very justice that they themselves have damaged to the core. If these Nazi prison guards have helped to transform human beings into mere objects at the mercy of their own terrible brutality, then the idea of justice that the novel sustains in their respect echoes

²⁴¹ VS 185.

²⁴² VS 186.

²⁴³ This is therefore not a case of subscribing to the *Schlussstrich-Mentalität*, a charge made against Norman G. Finkelstein *Die Holocaust-Industrie. Wie das Leid der Juden ausgebeutet wird*, Piper, Munich 2001.

²⁴⁴ VS 140.

²⁴⁵ VS 140.



the view put forth by Emmanuel Lévinas. For Lévinas, justice implies, above all, a relationship with the Other, with its irreducible alterity: *Me voici*, here I am, is the most direct, ethical response whenever the Other is invoked.²⁴⁶ Therefore, in order to avoid repeating the catastrophe *ad infinitum*, peace cannot be considered as lack of war, or goodness as the absence of evil; first and foremost it must be rooted in *philautia*, the love we give ourselves, which Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* sees as a virtue closely linked to justice.²⁴⁷

Der Vorleser endorses the specificity of literary discourse, its potential to explore human interiority and the chance it offers of throwing light on the darker sides of existence. As Susan Sontag maintains:

Writers can do something to combat these clichés of our separateness, our difference – for writers are makers, not just transmitters, of myths. Literature offers not only myths but counter-myths, just as life offers counter-experiences – experiences that confound what you thought you thought, or felt, or believed. A writer, I think, is someone who pays attention to the world. That means trying to understand, take in, connect with, what wickedness human beings are capable of; and not be corrupted – made cynical, superficial – by this understanding. Literature can tell us what the world is like. Literature can give standards and pass on deep knowledge, incarnated in language, in narrative. Literature can train, and exercise, our ability to weep for those who are not us or ours. Who would we be if we could not sympathize with those who are not us or ours? Who would we be if we could not forget ourselves, at least some of the time? Who would we be if we could not learn? Forgive? Become something other than we are?²⁴⁸

²⁴⁶ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Altrimenti che essere o al di là dell'essenza*, Jaca Book, Milan 1983, p. 131.

²⁴⁷ On this, cf. *Universi della violenza*, edited by Adolfo Ceretti and Lorenzo Natali, cit., p. 87.

²⁴⁸ Susan Sontag, Acceptance Speech for the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade 2003, available at: <<http://www.friedenspreis-des-deutschen-buchhandels.de>>.



As Sontag added elsewhere, “To tell a story is to say: This is the important story”.²⁴⁹

The importance of the story told by Bernhard Schlink – a second generation author who, for this very reason, deals with the issue of German guilt in a way that is both more “individualistic and more universal”²⁵⁰ – is of particular importance to German people. With good reason, Schlink believes that the Shoah “at the same time conceals a general experience and defines the general scope of being human”.²⁵¹ The obvious audience for such a message may be German, but this is not only a “German question”. It is one which regards every human being involved in the process of recognizing the “ego and non-ego polarity, the conscious and the unconscious, positive and negative, the light side and the dark side of personality, and so on”, which “immediately occurs in any open dealings with the existence of the psyche”²⁵² and also with the complexities of modern life, since “if we understand, we create collectivity”.²⁵³ I also feel that it is significant that *Der Vorleser* became an international success while receiving more mixed reviews in Germany. However, the very fact that Schlink’s novel was such a literary event there shows that it is Germany – unable to escape the past due to the enormity of the guilt for a crime committed in the very heart of Europe – that is destined to process the past more than any other nation, almost as if it is also doing so on behalf of everyone else.

Translation from the Italian: Peter Douglas

²⁴⁹ Qtd. in Nadine Gordimer, “Susan Sontag”, *Telling Times*. Bloomsbury, London 2010, p. 667.

²⁵⁰ V 198.

²⁵¹ V 202.

²⁵² Mario Trevi, Augusto Romano, *Studi sull’Ombra*, cit., p. 26.

²⁵³ VS 185.