

moralistic railing against the messiness of reality. Still, the moral thorn in my side has never gone away.

Stories about the Past

In the first five essays I talked about perpetrators and victims, about the entanglement of following generations into the perpetrators' guilt and the victims' trauma and about forgiveness and reconciliation. I talked about how the past reaches into the present. In this last essay I would like to talk about present fiction reaching back to the past. Are there rules for fiction dealing with the past? Is it anything goes? There are people who were not heard or not seen and who want their truth acknowledged, traumatised people who want their trauma respected, people deprived of a dignified life who want

their dignity restored. Their expectations come to the fore whenever someone writes about the past they experienced. Can these wants be dismissed or must they be honoured?

I think the foremost question is whether fiction has to be true. What is truth in fiction? Is it that the facts that fiction presents happened or at least could have happened? But what if fiction does not claim to present facts? What if the story is clearly a fairytale, a satire, a comedy, which by definition does not limit itself to what happened or could have happened? Are authors allowed to craft fairytales, satires or comedies about anything at all? Even about the Holocaust? Adorno's famous statement from 1951 that to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbarian, (*nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben ist barbarisch*) certainly includes poems about Auschwitz and, to be sure, any Auschwitz comedy or satire. Are there events so serious and awful that they can only be documented, or at best fictionalised so that they present what happened or what could have happened?

I have heard and read affirmation of this position more than once, but I don't think it

is meant to be taken literally. After all, a fairytale, a satire or a comedy can open one's eyes to truth as effectively as a documentary can; and fiction presenting what happened and only what happened can create a veneer of truth that distorts by omitting what also happened. What lies behind the idea that some events may not be fictionalised or may only be fictionalised while remaining true to the facts is not about the genre, not about documentation versus fiction, not about this kind of fiction versus that kind of fiction. It is about authenticity in a fuller sense.

If I understand correctly, what lies behind the refusal to fictionalise an event such as the Holocaust, or to reject its representation in certain ways or forms, is the fear that the full truth might get lost. It is a fear that truth might disappear not only through the imaginings and fabrications of well- or ill-intentioned authors but also through true but singular and misleading aspects of what happened. Even if there might have been a funny moment in Auschwitz, even if there might have been a decent concentration camp guard, even

if there might have been a fairytale element in someone's rescue from persecution and horror – couldn't a novel, a play, a comedy about this make the reader or viewer forget that the full reality was profoundly different? It's understandable how this fear gives way to the demand that an event like the Holocaust should be documented but not fictionalised or only fictionalised in a way that makes the full truth visible. A good documentary can make us understand the full truth – just remember *Shoah* – and fiction is able to do the same; it can capture and represent single moments and episodes in a way that makes us aware of the large picture – just think of Primo Levi's or Imre Kertész's work. And it can fail. I, at least, could not find the whole picture in Benigni's comedic movie *Life is Beautiful* about a Jewish father and his son being deported into a concentration camp where the father manages to present everything to his son as a complicated game with complicated rules that the son has to master to win the prize: an American tank. And I understand the twofold criticism that has been levelled at the film: its myopic

perspective and its strange use of comedy were both misleading.

But to turn that fear into a demand for only certain types of representation reveals both too much and too little faith. The demand that artistic representations of the Holocaust be presented so that the whole picture becomes visible shows too little faith in viewers' and readers' ability to create the whole picture for themselves. Now that such a multitude of books and articles, plays and films have come out, whether individual works show only certain aspects of what happened matters much less. The whole picture is present anyway. The demand that the Holocaust not be presented in a comedic or otherwise reductive way, on the other hand, shows too much faith in the power of social norms – excluding any other type of norm for the moment. The norm would not succeed and would even be counterproductive. More than anything else it would trigger the wish to come up with something provoking and scandalising.

Germany and some other countries have a norm against reductive representation of the

Holocaust that is also codified as a legal norm in the penal code that makes Holocaust-denial a criminal offence. The law signifies that our society is united in its willingness to accept its past and deal with it – it is a tangible demonstration of that acceptance addressed at ourselves as well as others. It also somewhat protects Jews for whom the Holocaust has become an integral element of their individual and collective identity. But one unintended effect of the norm is that those who set out to deny the Holocaust don't do it bluntly any more. Rather they minimise what happened in a very skilled and subtle manner. The vice president of my university once gave me a print-out of one of the internet pages that minimise the Holocaust; it had been sent to him anonymously and he had given it to the police. But the police knew it already and couldn't do anything because the denial was too subtle. Instead of any blunt Holocaust denial, it presented and documented facts and asked questions like: the graves of all the great massacres of the last century have been found, from Katyn to Cambodia and Kosovo – why is it that the graves of Jews murdered by Germans

found in Eastern Europe don't by far add up to the four million murder victims that are the official number? The graves found at Babi Yar and elsewhere prove that German troops, or rather their local helpers, committed regrettable atrocities but nothing on the scale of the official numbers. I read the internet page with my students and, even though they had been taught extensively about the Holocaust, they found it far from easy to counter its arguments. So here the effect of the norm is not a will to provoke, since a provocation would be punishable, but something else similarly undesirable: a distortion of the truth that is not easy to detect and refute. There is always a social price for norms that limit what one is allowed to say – sometimes the price is worthwhile but, often enough, it's not.

A common version of the demand on fiction to show the whole truth demands that it be representative. So if a book about a Jewish student in the Third Reich contains a German teacher as one of its characters, that figure should exhibit the traits of a typical German teacher from that period, if a movie shows the sufferings of a

Jewish family it should not end with an unusually lenient fate for them. An SS officer in a story about persecution and annihilation should be the typical SS officer, and a movie or book about a German helping a Jew should make clear that such help was exceptional.

I agree that an atypical character, a non-representative situation, or an exceptional turn of events may be presented in a way that distorts the truth. And yet there may still be good reasons for liking those stories. Take von Donnersmarck's recent film *The Lives of Others*, which is set in the waning years of the GDR. In it a Stasi officer assigned to spy on a playwright comes to admire his life and to see the beauty of art and the value of freedom. In doing so he recognises that what he does is evil and helps the playwright whom he is supposed to control and denounce. The film definitely distorts the truth; the good Stasi officer is a fairytale figure. But the film was praised and well-liked in Germany as well as abroad; it was a fairytale that reconciled the still-divided East and West Germans, and it invited viewers abroad to set the legacy of the Cold War to rest. Its healing

message that there is always some good in the bad was irresistible.

Often enough it is not the presentation of an atypical character that distorts the truth but the creation of an overly typical one. Where the typical character simply doesn't exist, creating a stereotype is a distortion of the truth. It is what propaganda movies do. In Harlan's 1940 film *Jud Süß*, a Jew who finances and ruins a German state in the eighteenth century is presented as the quintessential Jew and the Germans, decent and patient until they are finally driven to stand up and fight, as the quintessential Germans. Also I remember 1950s Westerns where Native Americans all looked the same and acted the same – colourful, noisy, easily drunk, happily cruel, and, when push came to shove, not up to the white man's bravery and decency. Those Westerns supported stereotypes that distorted the truth for a generation of viewers.

The danger of creating stereotypes can be even greater than the danger of not paying tribute to what's typical. After all, the world is more diverse than uniform. Individuals, even if

they belong to the same race, the same nation, and the same religion are more diverse than uniform. Goodness is more diverse than uniform. Evil is more diverse than uniform. In his recent novel *The Kindly Ones*, which was both praised and criticised as provoking and scandalising, the French-American-Jewish author Jonathan Littell presents an SS officer's career and inner life because, as he explains in an interview that I read, he wanted to find out what evil is from the inside. But there are as many insides of evil as there are evil people and there isn't that much to find out about them. Once an SS officer or soldier has crossed the line from being a fighter to being a murderer every additional murder is just an additional number. And they crossed the line for all kinds of reasons: they got a kick out of crossing it or they thought they had to cross it, they wanted to act like their fellow soldiers, they were used to obeying orders, they didn't want or didn't dare to question them, they were convinced that it was the right thing to kill Jews, they were drunk, murdering was less dangerous than fighting, they just didn't care what they did, and so on. And

the psychological predispositions that enabled them to enjoy crossing the line or to want to obey orders or not to care were as manifold as the reasons for doing so. To create the typical evil-doer is as simplistic and misleading as creating any other stereotype.

As an author I was often criticised for depicting Hanna, the woman protagonist of my novel *The Reader*, a former concentration camp guard who committed monstrous crimes, with a human face. I understand the desire for a world where those who commit monstrous crimes are always monsters. We all have the deeply-rooted expectation that a person's acts and character, outer and inner appearance, behaviour in one context and behaviour in another context should conform. Whatever sociological role theory teaches us – deep down we still have the old notion of personal identity as consistency of character, appearance and behaviour. Our language reveals this when we talk about someone looking beautiful but being awful, looking warm but being cold, looking cultured but being amoral. We don't easily talk about people looking beautiful and being

awful, looking warm and being cold, looking cultured and being amoral.

But the world is full of this tension. Not seeing its multifaceted nature is simplistic and misleading. Maybe I insist on this point so strongly because my generation experienced again and again that someone whom we loved and respected turned out to have done something horrible during the Third Reich. I remember my English and gym teacher, a wonderful teacher to whom I owe my early love for the English language and also an early insight into the relativity of justice. When, at the end of the school year 1958 or 1959, my final grade in English was lower than the grades that I had gotten over the year, I asked him for an explanation. 'Schlink,' he said, 'as long as you don't try harder in sports, you won't get a better grade in English either.' I found this unfair, and of course it wasn't fair. But it showed an old pedagogue's insight into his student's psyche. I was an arrogant little intellectual and hadn't seen a reason why I should try harder in sports. Now I saw one and actually managed to swirl around the high pole that you have to jump up

to. During training we students saw the tattoo on his arm that all SS officers and soldiers had that indicated the person's blood group. But it was the fifties, and we still believed that the Waffen SS was just an elite troop and that only the Concentration Camp SS was bad. Even if we had known better, we wouldn't have suspected his involvement in crimes of the Gestapo, the secret police, that only came out after his retirement.

I remember the nights that I worked in a factory as a student in the 1960s. I had a twelve-hour shift, I worked a day from six am to six pm, had twenty-four hours off, and then worked a night from six pm to six am. My impressions of my fellow workers, who had all fought in the Second World War, were always as nice, decent and helpful people. But in the hours between two am and five am they sometimes talked about the war and where, when, how and in what capacity they had been involved. They didn't talk in detail, but it was very clear that some had been involved in evil things that they could neither forget nor repress. I am sure that even in those war years, when they were at home with their

families and friends, they put on the same nice faces that I saw at work.

And I remember the professor whose class I attended in my third year at law school and through whom I came to understand that studying law is more than studying articles and paragraphs; that it includes history and philosophy and is a rich intellectual universe. After my exam I started reading the legal literature from the Third Reich that, during my years of study, had been locked away in the so-called poison closet and had become available only as a concession to the rebellious students of 1968. And there they were, his writings on the totalitarian state and its necessary homogeneity and exclusion of the other, the Jew, the enemy.

No, sticking with what appears typical is no guarantee for truth: nor is avoiding it. My impression is that the demand for fiction to be representative by presenting typical characters and situations doesn't come out of a concern for the truth but rather for keeping up a precious image of events. It arises from the fear that writing about Germans as victims might

damage the image of Germans as perpetrators, that writing about collaboration in the German-occupied countries might relativise German responsibility, that writing about the *Judenräte*, the Jewish councils required by the SS to govern affairs within the ghettos, might damage the image of Jewish suffering, and so forth. Again I understand the impulse. It is the same impulse that makes us tell legends, myths and fairytales. Yet I don't believe in avoiding or suppressing the tension that reality holds for us. Germans were perpetrators and also victims, the people in the occupied countries were suppressed and also collaborated, Jews suffered and were also involved. Since the tension is already there, an image free of tension couldn't be upheld in the long run even if it served a noble cause. What can and should be upheld and strived for is not a reduced but a complete image where the involvement of the *Judenräte* is not suppressed but explained, where the fact that Germans were victims is not meant to insinuate any excuse, and where collaboration is shown as a companion to each and every occupation – as is, in one form or other, resistance. The truth is

not protected by presenting only what's typical. The atypical is also part of the truth – as long as it is presented and explained for what it is: atypical.

Once more: I understand the impulse to defend a precious image of events. It is similar to the impulse to tell and to preserve myths, legends, and fairytales. They can serve good purposes; *The Lives of Others* was, for my still-divided country, the right film at the right moment. Legends can inspire and encourage us, and founding myths can hold nations together. But they can do so without pretending to be the whole truth. We don't have to fear that they will lose their power in the bright light of truth.

At the beginning of this essay I mentioned not only people who want their truth about the Holocaust to be acknowledged but also those who want their trauma to be respected and to have their dignity restored. Can this give rise to the demand that fiction dealing with the Holocaust has to be not only true but also acknowledging, respectful and restorative? I don't think so. I think that truth is the only

acknowledgment, the only respect, the only restoration that fiction can provide. Yes, fiction can have mythical, legendary and fairytale qualities that can be useful for many purposes, but I don't think that myths, legends and fairytales can be demanded and constructed to serve the wants of those who have been traumatised and persecuted during the Holocaust.

What does it mean to find truth within a work of fiction? Fiction is true if it presents what happened or could have happened, and if it is a comedy or a satire, a legend, a myth or a fairytale that opens our eyes to something that happened or could have happened. What it presents doesn't have to be the full truth; it can be just a tiny element of the truth as long as it doesn't pretend to be more than it is. And of course, the presentation of what happened or could have happened is far from being all that fiction does. We don't want fiction just for the facts being presented to us. We want reality to be presented to us and explained to us and turned into something that, even though it is not our reality, we can imagine ourselves into. We read because we want to share the lives of

those we read about, we want to empathise with them, fall in love with them, train our hatred on them, and ultimately learn about ourselves from them.

Even though the composition of these fictitious realities with their fictitious plots and situations and characters is something other than a presentation of facts, I experience it as something that has to be true. I don't mean true by virtue of laying out what happened or could have happened any more – right now I mean a different truth. To be honest, I don't know exactly what I mean and how to define this truth. What I am talking about is the feeling I have when a story that I have thought about, played with, thought about some more, and played with some more is finally ready to be written. It is a feeling as strong as when, after having researched a fact extensively and carefully, I have finally found the truth. The feeling doesn't have to do with me putting something autobiographical or something else of which I am particularly certain into the story that I am going to tell. It doesn't concern having a message I want to convey that I am finally about to

convey successfully or with any other agenda. It is a feeling devoid of any agenda except: now I have it, now I can tell it. And it feels like I have found the truth.

In fact, an agenda other than telling the story would, at least for me, make the feeling of truth that I try to describe impossible. Once in my life, many years ago, I had a purpose other than telling a story when I tried to write a novel. I had been left by a woman I loved. I hoped to get her back, and to have God on my side, I promised to write something in His praise if He would help me – like Franz Werfel fleeing from Vichy France to the USA promised to write and later wrote *The Song of Bernadette* about the girl that had the revelation of Maria at Lourdes. I then started to think about what to write, and came up with all kinds of ideas about stories touching on religion but none praising God and none any good. The purpose killed all creative fantasy. I don't want to go so far as to say that I was happy that the woman didn't come back to me, but there was some relief in not having a promise I had to keep.

The pursuit of truth needs no other purpose than the truth. This is evident in the well-defined truth that I first talked about: truth in fiction that represents or opens our eyes to what happened or could have happened. It also holds for the truth that I find difficult to define, for which I can give no criteria other than my feeling and the absence of an agenda. To be true in both senses is the only obligation that I can see for fiction about the Holocaust or any other traumatic past. To be precise, it is the only obligation I can see having for myself. I don't mean to say that others shouldn't write myths, legends, and fairytales about the Holocaust. But I think that not everyone is entitled to the loose play with the truth that writing myths, legends and fairytales implies. Creating myths shouldn't happen at someone else's expense; the truth that is omitted or distorted shouldn't be the truth that someone else rightly cares about. That's why I understand that *The Lives of Others* was criticised by people who felt betrayed and belittled; they had been subjected to Stasi persecution and argued convincingly that the real world under Stasi

oppression would have looked different and better if characters like the good Stasi officer from *The Lives of Others* had actually existed. But I also understand the argument that can be made in the director's favour: the film's fairytale did so much good and the victims of Stasi persecution have so often been recognised that their hurt over the film can be tolerated. But this weighing and balancing of interests, concerns and hurts is a tricky topic. To tell a thrilling story can easily tempt one into tolerating someone else's hurt too easily.

As I mentioned in the introduction, the thoughts I have presented here were triggered by the questions I have been asked and the criticism I have received long after my actual writing. Even now I cannot say that those same thoughts will be with me in the future when I set out to write another book. Epistemologists distinguish between the context or logic of discovery and the context or logic of justification, and I think that most writers work in the context of discovery rather than in the context of justification. I think the delineation that I have tried to identify between more and less acceptable fictional

depictions of the past within this essay is more of an unconscious presence for us than a conscious one.

I think this is true for all the delineations between morally acceptable and morally unacceptable fictional depictions of other people and their lives. I mentioned the German penal code article on Holocaust-denial, let me mention another German attempt to make what's immoral illegal. Under German law a person must not be misrepresented in a way that violates his or her integrity and dignity. In 1971 Germany's Federal Constitutional Court ruled that Klaus Mann's novel *Mephisto* must not be published, because the diabolic protagonist's ruthless career in the Third Reich was modelled after the actor Gustav Gründgens's career and therefore posthumously violated the personality of Gründgens, who had died eight years ago. In 2007 the court ruled that Maxim Biller's novel *Esra* must not be published, because here the female protagonist and her mother were modelled after the author's former girlfriend and her mother, modelled with such malice and hatred that again the daughter's and

the mother's personalities were violated. Both decisions received much public attention and legal discussion; I myself have doubts whether the law should get involved in the arts like that. But I haven't found anyone who didn't agree on the moral aspect. Klaus Mann hadn't overstepped the line between what's morally acceptable and what's unacceptable; his sister had been involved with and traumatised by Gründgens, he and his sister had to leave Germany while Gründgens made a ruthless career, and he was strong enough to take care of his interests. Maxim Biller's protagonist couldn't fight back, she hadn't done anything bad that justified her malicious depiction. And while the normal reader would hardly remember Gründgens, who had died in 1963, while reading *Mephisto* in and after 1971, Biller himself had created a media hype that made everybody know that *Esra* was a book about his former girlfriend. He defended what he had written as a writer's artistic privilege, but in such a shrill tone that I found it obvious that he knew that he had crossed the line. The moral issue was clear without much weighing and balancing of

interests, concerns and hurts. In writing, as in other areas of life, what is moral is mostly self-evident.

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