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**Responding to the Effect of the
Holocaust in the Present**
A Comparison of Narrative Strategies in *Time's
Arrow*, *A Blessing on the Moon* and *The Reader*

The narrative technique chosen by the author to generate trust in his or her reader may be as important to the message of the story as plot or character. This is especially true when the essence of the story is well-known and derived from historical facts. In the domain of 'Holocaust Literature', special vigilance must be shown in 'honouring the line between fact and fiction.'¹ It has been noted that the 'Holocaust-as-theme is perhaps unique in our transgressive age in maintaining the integrity of its own boundaries and hence of the limitations it exercises on "artistic" representation.'² The first generation of victims and witnesses tended to write in the form of a memoir or autobiography, aiming to reveal truth and speaking with the authority of personal experience. The second and third generations of relatives of victims and perpetrators, as well as more distant observers, have found themselves to be less constrained by concerns of authenticity. It could be said that these later works do not represent the Holocaust directly but rather respond to its ongoing effect in the present.³ In other words, the 'implicit pact between text and reader' does not have its foundation in historical accuracy.⁴

1 H. Wirth-Nesher, 'The Ethics of Narration in D. M. Thomas's "The White Hotel"', *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, vol. 15, no. 1, (1985), 15-28, 15.

2 A. Leak and G. Paizis, 'Introduction' in A. Leak and G. Paizis (eds), *The Holocaust and the Text, Speaking the Unspeakable*, Macmillan Press Ltd, 2000, 10.

3 M. Grimwood, *Holocaust Literature of the Second Generation*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 3.

4 Leak and Paizis (n. 2 above), 8.

The success of the narrative strategies in fitting the teller to the tale will be assessed in three works of fiction that fall within the category of 'Holocaust literature': *Time's Arrow* by Martin Amis; *A Blessing on the Moon* by Joseph Skibell; and *The Reader* by Bernhard Schlink.⁵ All three books describe journeys, both physical and emotional, where the Holocaust is an important backdrop. The stories are told in the first person and therefore reflect only the viewpoints, biases and personal agendas of the narrators. The narrators grapple with issues of closure and re-opening of wounds, memory, forgiveness and moral choice. Beyond these common elements, the narrative strategies employed differ significantly.

Time's Arrow is recounted in reverse chronology by the soul or conscience of a Nazi doctor, Tod Friendly, who moves 'out of the blackest sleep' into life.⁶ The life he leads, as he grows younger and stronger and travels from the United States to Portugal to Germany and from the break-up of relationships towards their beginnings, hides a dark secret unknown to his soul but hinted at in dreams. The narrator discovers that Tod's 'cruelty, his secret, had to do with a central mistake about human bodies'.⁷ Doctors implant fetuses and heal with knives, ensuring patients leave in a worse condition than when they arrived. At Auschwitz Tod, by then Odilo Unverdorben, helps to create a race. The Jews join society, the ghettos are dismantled, and eventually babies disappear into their mothers' wombs. The backwards narration provides fertile ground for humour, especially as it concerns relationship misunderstandings, which is a key element of the narrative technique.

The narrator of *A Blessing on the Moon* is Chaim Skibelski, who crawls out of a mass grave in Poland during the war years only to discover that he is dead and trapped in a journey between two worlds. He haunts his old home, now occupied by an oblivious Polish family, and connects with one daughter, Ola, who is dying apparently of a moral illness. In the meantime, the moon falls from the sky and is lost. Following Ola's death, Chaim rescues his dead friends from the mass grave and under the guidance of the rabbi, now a crow, they wander until the dead are reunited at the eerie Hotel Amfortas and all but Chaim disappear into the bakers' ovens, symbolic of the gas chambers. Chaim helps two Hasidic Jews dig up the moon, buried deep 'beneath layers and layers of corpses' and restore it to the sky.⁸

5 M. Amis, *Time's Arrow or The Nature of the Offence* (1991), Vintage Books, London, 2003; J. Skibell, *A Blessing on the Moon*, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1997; B. Schlink, *The Reader*, (first published in German, 1995), Vintage International, 1997. *The Reader* appeared as *Der Vorleser* in its German original, which refers specifically to a person who reads aloud.

6 *Time's Arrow*, 11.

7 *Time's Arrow*, 48.

8 *A Blessing on the Moon*, 230.

The moon is no longer smooth but forever mottled.⁹ Chaim's mission accomplished, he is released into the world to come. 'My history falls away, like sacks of grain from a careless farmer's wagon. I begin to forget everything.'¹⁰ The narrative incorporates fables and Yiddish folk tales; animals speak. The oven in Hansel and Gretel is the oven at Auschwitz.¹¹ In contrast to *Time's Arrow*, the humour is subtle.¹² In addition, the deliberate and sometimes unusual use of punctuation stands out.¹³

The magical, almost fantastical quality of *A Blessing on the Moon* is distinct from Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*, a story told from the perspective of Michael who at the age of fifteen enters into an erotic relationship with the much older Hanna. The story has been said to present itself as a parable. Michael is ill with hepatitis which causes one to turn yellow, like the yellow star worn by the Jews. Moreover, post-war Germany is sick and needs to address its Nazi past in order to recover.¹⁴ The book is '[w]ritten in a style of icy clarity that simultaneously reveals and conceals'.¹⁵ Like Tod, Hanna holds a secret. The secret is contained in her request for Michael to read aloud to her. She once asked the same of frail inmates when working as a guard at a satellite camp for Auschwitz. The truth is revealed to Michael years after the relationship has ended when, as a law student, he follows her trial for wartime atrocities. 'Why does what was beautiful suddenly shatter in hindsight because it concealed dark truths?'¹⁶ As Michael discovers, the truth is multi-layered. Hanna's real secret is her illiteracy. The narrative includes flashbacks and extensive self-analysis by Michael as he grapples with his feelings and in a sense becomes a mouthpiece for the inherited wartime guilt of his entire generation. Michael decides not to reveal his knowledge of Hanna's illiteracy even though it could save her from a life sentence but years later he begins to send her tapes of books he has read aloud and as a consequence Hanna learns to read and write in prison.

9 *A Blessing on the Moon*, 244.

10 *A Blessing on the Moon*, 256.

11 Interviews with Joseph Skibell, *A Blessing on the Moon*, 261, and see allusion to the story of Hansel and Gretel at pp. 181-2.

12 Chaim smears his blood around his old home as a form of revenge. Ola can see the blood and screams that the blood is everywhere. Chaim retorts at p. 21: 'All the houses in the courtyard? I wasn't that ambitious. Clearly the poor girl is raving.'

13 For example at p. 72: 'A bright and clear morning, that was.' At p. 84: 'I'm reminded of a typing pool, so many teeth are chattering.'

14 R. Franklin, *A Thousand Darkneses, Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction*, Oxford University Press, 2011, 201-202.

15 *Ibid*, 201.

16 *The Reader*, 37.

Immediately following the Second World War it was speculated whether there could be any possible way of responding to the scale of the atrocities committed, the momentousness of genocide, through literature.¹⁷ Theodor Adorno famously stated in 1949: '*Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch*'.¹⁸ This statement appears as an ethical prohibition on profiting from horrific world events through imaginative fiction. In a deeper sense the difficulty is that fiction is often viewed as a tool to aid understanding of the world but some events are simply beyond comprehension. Early writing on the Holocaust sought to establish facts and evidence, proof of what had occurred, with little literary embellishments. Elie Wiesel's *Night* is a classic example.¹⁹ Wiesel was protective over his authority to transform his experience into knowledge.²⁰ Similarly, in *If This Is A Man*, Primo Levi wrote an account of his own experiences at Auschwitz where he 'became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man.'²¹ Levi's aim was nevertheless to promote understanding of the death camps as a 'sinister alarm-signal' and to 'furnish documentation for a quiet study of certain aspects of the human mind.'²²

The first generation factual accounts have become resources for the second and third generation imaginative accounts, aimed at understanding our modern day reaction to the Holocaust. Amis acknowledges his debt to Levi, from whom he borrows his alternative title, *The Nature of the Offence*.²³ The narrator in *A Blessing* is named after the author's grandfather and the book, apart from claiming a commemorative function, demonstrates 'that in the post-Holocaust era, as more descendants of survivors grow up, the silenced voice returns in a new form.'²⁴ By writing from the perspective of the dead, Skibell responds to Levi's observation that only the dead are true witnesses.²⁵ In *The Reader*, the narrator is himself the

17 See E. Alexander, *The Resonance of Dust, Essays on Holocaust Literature and Jewish Fate*, Ohio State University Press, 1979, xi-xiii, citing Lionel Trilling who wrote in 1948 'there is no possible way of responding to Belsen and Buchenwald. The activity of mind fails before the incommunicability of man's suffering.'

18 'To write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric.' Cited in Franklin (n. 14 above), 2.

19 *La Nuit*, 1958, published as *Night* in the United States, 1960.

20 See Franklin (n. 14 above), 5.

21 Primo Levi, *If This Is A Man*, Abacus Books, 1987, 32.

22 *If This Is A Man*, Author's Preface, 15. Levi observed that even when striving to be objective a writer 'always leaves his own mark and every character is distorted in some way as a result.' Franklin (n. 14 above), 16.

23 *Time's Arrow*, Afterword, 175.

24 Grimwood (n. 3 above), 119.

25 P. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, Summit Books, 1988, 83-84.

second generation, directly taking on the complex issue of a nation coming to terms with its past.²⁶ Michael comments: 'Whatever validity the concept of collective guilt may or may not have, morally and legally—for my generation of students it was a lived reality.'²⁷ Nonetheless, today's writers who take up the subject of the Holocaust are not 'unfettered in their creation' as 'concerns for truthfulness and authenticity' linger.²⁸ It has been argued that German literature about the Holocaust entails special limitations because 'the German novelist, playwright or poet—no matter how remote—is still identified with the perpetrators of atrocities', raising the question of the right to identify with the victims.²⁹ This may have constrained Schlink, although it is doubtful that Auschwitz means a German writer today 'cannot mourn over the ruins of Dresden'.³⁰

None of the three selected works appears to upset the delicate balance of preserving the inherently unknowable nature of the Holocaust while probing its modern-day presence and persistence as an inspiration for fiction. *Time's Arrow* has perhaps been the most controversial in this respect.³¹ Amis irrigates his account with what has been called 'sophomoric humor' as a type of setup for the book's 'emotional payoff' which consists of 'one huge philosophical point'.³² Early in the book, the narrator says: 'I keep expecting the world to make sense. It doesn't. It won't. Ever.'³³ Yet he knows 'the world is going to start making sense' when Odilo arrives at Auschwitz.³⁴ Finally, the narrator 'will know the nature of the offence'.³⁵ He learns that: Creation is easy. Also ugly. *Hier ist kein warum*. Here there is no

26 See other works by Bernhard Schlink addressing this theme such as the more recent novel *Homecoming*, Vintage International, 2009, and the collection of essays *Guilt about the Past*, University of Queensland Press, 2009.

27 *The Reader*, 169.

28 Leak and Paizis (n. 2 above), 9.

29 H. Bosmajian, 'German Literature about the Holocaust – A Literature of Limitations', *Modern Language Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1986, 51-61, 53.

30 *Ibid*, 57.

31 Joseph Skibell faced a review in the *Jewish Forward* that suggested *A Blessing on the Moon* 'violated some unspoken taboo about creating fiction out of the Holocaust'. See Interviews with Joseph Skibell, *A Blessing on the Moon*, 263.

32 M. Kakutani, 'Books of The Times; Time Runs Backward to Point Up a Moral', *The New York Times*, 22 October 1991, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/02/01/home/amis-arrow.html>.

33 *Time's Arrow*, 91.

34 *Ibid*, 124.

35 *Ibid*, 73.

why. Here there is no when, no how, no where. Our preternatural purpose? To dream a race.³⁶

Amis makes his point that only in an upside-down, backwards world could the actions of the Nazis ever be comprehensible.³⁷ In effect he reinforces the idea that these actions are unknowable.

A more sustainable criticism of *Time's Arrow* is that the narrative technique dominates over the tale. Amis was intent on telling the story of a man's life backwards and arguably exploits 'the comic possibilities of a structural gimmick'³⁸ at the expense of exploring the mindset of a former (or future) Nazi doctor. The core of the story comes too late and the momentum diminishes towards the end. Odilo's relationship with his wife is not explored with the same intensity and wit as the earlier relationship with Irene. When Irene tells Tod that he has no soul, the narrator takes it personally³⁹ and yet for all the more serious references to souls appearing in dreams and hanging in the dark,⁴⁰ and the voice of conscience speaking in a whisper so nobody can hear it,⁴¹ the reader never really learns how Tod's conscience affects his actions. 'I've come to the conclusion that Odilo Unverdorben, as a moral being, is absolutely unexceptional, liable to do what everybody else does, good or bad, with no limit, once under the cover of numbers.'⁴² The suggestion is that the soul is impotent (like Tod at various stages of his life) but the mind of the perpetrator is undoubtedly more complex than Amis suggests. 'Probably human cruelty is fixed and eternal. Only styles change.'⁴³ This may be true, but Amis leaves the reader wondering why the narrator fits so comfortably into Tod's flared trousers and whether it is the tendency of the human consciousness to evade responsibility.

A Blessing brings out the nostalgia of memory since what is lost is truly lost forever, even memory itself. Skibell's narrative technique provides a 'protective measure of distance and alternative possibility that makes the horror bearable without diminishing its concreteness.'⁴⁴ The tale is both beautiful and haunting

36 Ibid, 128.

37 Kakutani (n. 32 above).

38 Ibid.

39 *Time's Arrow*, 62.

40 Ibid, 83.

41 Ibid, 56.

42 Ibid, 164.

43 Ibid, 49.

44 G. Morahg, 'Breaking Silence: Israel's Fantastic Fiction of the Holocaust', in A. Mintz (ed), *The Boom in Contemporary Israeli Fiction*, University Press of New England, 1997, 143-183, 163.

and the telling is genuinely unpretentious. Like Amis, Skibell wishes to portray a world turned upside down where life is wasted on the living.

How they sigh and heave, these fatuous dreamers, flaunting the very air in their chests. Their exhalations fill my nostrils with a putrid stench. Oh, the living, how they stink! They stink! They do! They rot but do not decompose.⁴⁵

Chaim confronts his assassin who is literally disembodied but cannot offer forgiveness.⁴⁶ *A Blessing* succeeds through its method of narration in conveying the message that the silent victims of mass atrocity 'are invisible only to those who wish them to be.'⁴⁷

In *The Reader* Schlink is ambitious in his goals but evasive in his narrative technique, causing the novel to 'stagnate in moral confusion.'⁴⁸ Michael wonders why Hanna would 'opt for the horrible exposure as a criminal over the harmless exposure as an illiterate'.⁴⁹ He concludes that she must have accepted that she would be called to account and did not wish to endure further exposure.⁵⁰ During her trial, Hanna asks the judge the classic question 'so what would you have done?'⁵¹ Michael is dissatisfied with the judge's answer but does no better himself. He wants 'simultaneously to understand Hanna's crime and to condemn it' but finds it too terrible.⁵² Did he betray Hanna or did Hanna betray him? In helping Hanna to overcome her illiteracy Michael deliberately sends tapes of German classics. Goethe promised Faust: '*Wer immer strebend sich bemüht, Den können wir erlösen*'⁵³ Schlink is perhaps hinting that Hanna's repentance and Michael's forgiveness are complete when Hanna becomes literate. Michael's character is convincingly revealed but the first person narrative means that we can only judge Hanna and her actions through Michael's skewed vision. More problematic, however, is Schlink's attempt to uncover universal truths via the sudden and disruptive interposition of academic musings. 'What should our second generation have done, what should it do with the knowledge of the horrors of the extermination of the Jews?'⁵⁴ The way the novel is presented, it cannot hope to provide a satisfactory answer.

45 *A Blessing on the Moon*, 61.

46 *A Blessing on the Moon*, 112.

47 Grimwood (n. 3 above), 119.

48 Franklin (n. 14 above), 18-19.

49 *The Reader*, 133.

50 *The Reader*, 133.

51 *The Reader*, 111.

52 *The Reader*, 157.

53 'We will save him who always tries to strive'. Goethe's *Faust*, Part II, Act 5.

54 *The Reader*, 104.

Time's Arrow, *The Reader* and *A Blessing* demonstrate that it is not impossible to respond to the Holocaust in modern literature and that the key to a successful response in second and third generation imaginative constructions lies in the choice of narrative strategy. Each of the three novels has a degree of 'uncertainty, paralysis, and ambivalence' but this may be preferable to a narrative 'controlled by a tangible voice committed to the traditional transmutation of suffering into beauty and chaos into tragic significance.'⁵⁵ The three selected works are in a sense 'unaccommodating to the reader', yet have the potential to convey more successfully 'the disruption and unease that the subject demands than the more seamless, aesthetically pleasing work'.⁵⁶

When Michael observes the trial in *The Reader* he comments on the 'numbness' described in survivor literature 'in which life's functions are reduced to a minimum [...] and gassing and burning are everyday occurrences.'⁵⁷ He finds that this numbness grips everyone 'who had to deal with these events now'.⁵⁸ Literature offers an escape from the numbness, 'an imaginative access to past events'.⁵⁹ The Holocaust continues to capture writers' imagination as evident in more recent novels, such as *The Kindly Ones*⁶⁰ and *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*.⁶¹ The challenge today may be less one of achieving historical authenticity than in captivating readers when media images of conflict and atrocity are inescapable. Skibell's words ring true: 'Literature is a compass that points to humankind's true north.'⁶² Anyone who reads *A Blessing* will see the pock-marks on the moon in a new way.

55 Alexander (n. 17 above), Preface, xiii.

56 S. Vice, *Holocaust Fiction*, London, Routledge, 2000, 160. For an example of a more seamless work see Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, (1996), Bloomsbury, 2009.

57 *The Reader*, 103.

58 *The Reader*, 103.

59 Franklin (n. 14 above), 13.

60 Jonathan Littell, *The Kindly Ones*, (first published in French, 2006), Vintage Books, London, 2010.

61 J. Boyne, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, Definitions, 2006.

62 *A Blessing on the Moon*, Interviews with Joseph Skibell, 266.

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