

Telling History/Histories: Autobiographical Writing and Testimonies of the Holocaust

The relation between history and literature, or historiography and works of fiction, has been at the centre of an ongoing debate within literary and historical studies for some decades. The New Critics' insistence on the autonomy of the literary text on the one hand, and most traditional historians' denial of the relevance of literary texts for their field of study on the other, were in a sense well suited to each other. Historians and literary critics occupied different territories with few points of contact.

These two positions have come under attack from several quarters, leading to a climate in which few find it easy to maintain a clear-cut distinction between fact and fiction. Indeed, the denying of such a distinction has become a kind of hallmark of the post-modern condition (cf. Assmann, 1989). Derrida's dictum "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte" is not acceptable to many scholars, but the very idea that our grasp of past and present events is mediated through and conditioned by language has gained widespread recognition. In his meta-historical reflections, Hayden White gives a central place to the role of language in producing both fictional and historical narratives:

"Readers of histories and novels can hardly fail to be struck by the similarities. There are many histories that could pass for novels, and many novels that could pass for histories, considered in purely formal (or I should say formalist) terms. Viewed simply as verbal artefacts, histories and novels are indistinguishable from one another."

(White, 1978: 121f.)

White concludes by collapsing the two concepts into one, namely that history is fiction with ethical consequences.

Understandably, this line of thought has shocked many historians. To give up the distinction between fact and fiction seems to imply that one no longer acknowledges the special and crucial authority of facts, a position that Reinhart Koselleck opposes, pointing out the "Vetorecht der Quellen" (the veto exercised by the sources). The literary scholar Dorrit Cohn, on the other hand, also insists on the distinction between reality and fiction, or between referential and non-referential discourse, not only to preserve the authority of the historical account, but also to protect and preserve the special role that fictional works play in human life.

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A rather different approach to the issue of the relationship between history and literature may be ascribed to the New Historicists, amongst whom Stephen Greenblatt is the key figure. New historicism insists on “the historicity of texts and the textuality of history” (Montrose, 1989: 20). Seeing a culture as a text, they acknowledge the crucial role that the study of discourse plays in any historical period while also insisting on the historicity of the text itself, fictional or non-fictional. Rather than denying the distinction between history and fiction, they define their field of study in such a way that both are necessary for the study of each of them. Of necessity, this field of research thus becomes interdisciplinary, and the uniqueness that a work of art may have is understood not by isolating the text from the context, but by placing it more deeply within it:

“The house of the imagination has many mansions, of which art [...] is only one. But the new historicist project is not about ‘demoting’ art or discrediting aesthetic pleasure; rather it is concerned with finding the creative power that shapes literary work *outside* the narrow boundaries in which it had hitherto been located, as well as *within* these boundaries.” (Gallagher/Greenblatt, 2000:12)

This is hardly the place to adjudicate between these various positions, but the point is that the debate itself is an important backdrop to recent developments in the field of autobiographical writing. The rapprochement of the fields of literature and history has allowed this special kind of fictional works, i.e. those based on documentary experiences, to contribute to contemporary history, and especially to the topic of the Holocaust, in a more specific way than before. Literary works have always been accepted as valuable meaning for understanding life and going beyond facts and political analysis, although on quite a different level from historiography with its ideals of objectivity and scientific rigour.

There have been specific changes within literature as well. Many contemporary authors are well read in history, sociology, anthropology, philosophy etc. They compose their works with an eye to supplementing academic historiography written by scholars who belong to another tradition and follow different criteria in their presentations. At the same time, we can observe an ongoing change in the genre of autobiography, as more and more highly ordinary individuals, e.g. politicians, football players and singers, are writing (or dictating!) their autobiographies. However, that is a very different phenomenon that is a consequence of ‘democratic’ leveling of all values. The kind of autobiographical writing I am interested in consists of stories written by *authors of literary fiction* and usually marked as novels, short narratives, or sometimes given no indication of genre in an effort to underline the documentary nature of the story. It started after the World War II and saw a real breakthrough in the 1970s after the student revolution in Europe, where the so-called second generation, born during and after the war, wanted to know more about their parents and their political activities – or their lack of political alignment, and their passivity towards the Nazi movement and later the Nazi regime. The other group of writers on autobiographical topics consists of the victims of and eye witnesses to the Nazi crimes, especially the Jewish authors, who play the

most important role for the cultural memory and our knowledge of 20th century history. The analysis of their narratives is therefore a central part of the work to be done within this project.

In *Der Vorleser* (1995, in English *The Reader*), a book that has been translated into many languages and also filmed, author Bernhard Schlink (*1944, professor of Law and Moral philosophy) mentions this generation's feeling of responsibility for what their parents did or were involved in as the main motivation for writing his book. He also shows the developments leading to reunification and the permanent necessity of facing up to the past. That obligation now also affects all those who believed in the state ideology of the DDR, a state that suddenly vanished and left its people with broken dreams and beliefs. As we know from the many books published in recent years, it took about 40 to 60 years from the time the most horrifying things happened until eye witnesses were able to tell or to write about them. But that raises the question: What kind of texts do we expect when reading narratives about the Holocaust or the problems of Jewishness told by second and third generation Holocaust survivors and victims who were not eye witnesses themselves and therefore cannot make claims of authenticity? How are we to react to the stories they tell about the Holocaust?

The field of narrative investigation is a wide one and it encompasses questions such as: How is remembrance (re)constructed? Who tells the story and how is it told? As readers, what do we expect from the text of an eye witness? What does authenticity mean and how is it to be recognised in the narrative? How does historical representation relate to narrative form?

These are questions that arise in connection with the case of the 88-year-old Austrian writer and survivor of several concentration camps, Fred Wander, who wrote a novel about his time in the concentration camps, *Der siebente Brunnen* (1971, in English *The Seventh Well*), who said that the only motivation that kept him alive was his determination to tell everybody about it when it was over! It took him 40 years until he was able to write the narrative. He also published his autobiography *Das gute Leben* (1996, in English *The Good Life*) and edited a new version earlier this year¹. Reviewers prefer the autobiographies, perceiving the novel as overly fictional, while Wander says that only fiction enabled him to be totally honest and open. A comparison of the three books could possibly show the specific differences between the fictional and the autobiographical approaches as means of attempting to tell about these nearly untellable events.

The fact that many authors work on their subject in different modes (fiction, autobiography, report, interview or with a theoretical approach) gives us information about their way of writing, i.e. the poetic process, such as the transformation of documentary material into fiction by means of narrative. I mention two authors whose books are translated into English and Norwegian: Hans-Ulrich Treichel's *Der Verlorene* (*Lost*), published in 1998, and Uwe Timm's *Am Beispiel meines Bruders* (*In My Brother's Shadow*), published in 2003. Neither author calls his work a novel or a short narrative. They do not consider them to be mere fiction because they both use documentary material *and* reflect on the necessity of using

1: New title: *Das gute Leben oder Von der Fröhlichkeit im Schrecken*, Göttingen 2006.

rhetorical techniques to tell their stories, especially when struggling with memory and the time gap between an event and the process of writing about it. In his lectures, Treichel gives an interesting presentation of what happened when his parents were expelled from Silesia and lost their baby while escaping to the West, and how his whole childhood was influenced by this accident and the parents' mourning their lost child. That allows us to see the difference between the factual event and the construction of an autobiographical narrative, not so much in the sense that we want to know whether or not the story is 'true', but in that we can follow the author's process of self-construction throughout the story. For example, he feels free to put in invented episodes where he wants to give a realistic portrayal of the cheerless immigrant-reality in the post-war West Germany of the 1950s. In this context, fiction creates an impression of reality and authenticity based on the author's own experience, but we never know where the line runs between fiction and reality in the narrative as a whole. Sometimes it is also difficult for us to determine if we are dealing with a post-modern attitude in the sense of 'anything goes', e.g. every combination is allowed and everything is non-committal and contingent. I think it depends on what we know about the author/narrator, as well as on what he is writing about.

Personally, I am convinced that many writers do not follow the trend of post-modern contingency when they recount events from their own lives, as these are often burdened with feelings of guilt, damage and deprivation. That is the case with most of the subjects related to World War II and the Holocaust. These issues were taboo for many years because they were associated with feelings of guilt and shame on the perpetrators' side, and suffering and sorrow on the part of the victims. When many contemporary authors use autobiographical techniques to tell their stories, it is because they want to emphasise the authenticity of their experiences and to contextualise them historically in the political and socio-cultural forces of the time. To show *how* they do so is one of the objectives of this project.

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