Holocaust Literature and the Taboo

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Abstract

This essay considers taboos that have developed in and around Holocaust literature, focusing on controversial, fictional responses to the Holocaust, with a particular emphasis on the representation of perpetrators. All of the writers discussed draw on the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud, and this essay takes Freud's reading of social taboos as a model for interpreting transgressive forms of historical representation and cultural practice, arguing that the proscription of certain forms of Holocaust representation constitutes an attempt to foreclose responses to the genocide that are particularly difficult to articulate or deal with, such as the 'fascination of Fascism', the ordinariness of perpetrator identities, and ambivalent attitudes towards the dead. It makes a case for the value of novels and poems which engage with truths about our relationship with history that are never straightforwardly empirical, arguing that they are fundamental to what the Germans term 'working through' or 'dealing with' (Vergangenheitsbewältigung) the knowledge and cultural legacy of the Holocaust.

Histories of what cannot be said

Described by the experimental psychologist Wilhelm Wundt as 'the oldest unwritten code of law of humanity', a taboo stipulates that certain persons or things are to be avoided: they are off limits, neither to be touched nor named (Freud, [1919] 1938, p. 42). The ways these unwritten laws are made manifest are varied and complex: taboos influence the social and cultural codes that govern individual behaviour, such as ethics; they provide emotive reference points for the media and political propaganda; and they affect individual and group psychology. However, they are never enshrined in formal legislation, which marks the point

at which a prohibition ceases to be taboo and instead becomes law. Sigmund Freud's pioneering work in Totem and Taboo ([1919] 1938), which draws on Wundt's earlier research, is of particular significance for the psychological understanding of the taboo, exploring the deeply-rooted origins of the fears that cause certain subjects and people to become stigmatised in this way. In this study, Freud examines the hold that taboos exerted on primitive societies and so-called 'savage' races, recognising in their psychic life 'a well-preserved, early stage of our own development' (ibid., p. 15). Paying particular attention to ancient tribal rites and customs, he identifies some of the key characteristics of the taboo, including a paradox at the heart of its symbolic logic:

> Taboo is a Polynesian word, the translation of which provides difficulties for us because we no longer possess the idea which it connotes […] For us the meaning of taboo branches off into two opposite directions. On the one hand it means to us sacred, consecrated: but on the other it means uncanny, dangerous, forbidden, and unclean. The opposite for taboo is designated in Polynesian by the word noa and signifies something ordinary and generally accessible. Thus something like the concept of reserve inheres in taboo; taboo expresses itself essentially in prohibitions and restrictions. Our combination of 'holy dread' would often express the meaning of taboo. (ibid., p. 41)

This essay considers taboos that have developed in and around Holocaust literature. While steering clear of Freudian readings of the unconscious motivations of authors, it recognises that many controversial literary responses to the Holocaust have stemmed from a considered engagement with Freud's work and with psychoanalysis more broadly. This essay also draws on Freud's understanding of the taboo as an internally-conflicted structure that discloses

polarised beliefs about the forbidden object, considering how taboos around Holocaust representation contain traces of this duality and its associated language. And so, for example, while non-victims have been repeatedly exhorted to remember and reflect on the Holocaust, they have also been subject to a forceful ban on representation that echoes the Old Testament commandment outlawing 'graven images', as in the charge made by the survivor and writer Elie Wiesel: 'A novel about Treblinka is either not a novel or not about Treblinka. A novel about Majdanek is about blasphemy. Is blasphemy' (Wiesel, 1990, p. 7). Wiesel's comments were made at a time, in the late 1970s, when blasphemy was proving exceptionally popular, with the Holocaust and Nazism becoming dominant historical subjects in mainstream literary culture. This essay will therefore also explore the psychological forces and social formations that tend towards this type of taboo-transgression because, as Freud observes, the unwritten rules associated with the taboo are not made to be broken in any old arbitrary sense: they exist because we already wish to break them:

> If taboo expresses itself mainly in prohibitions it may well be considered self-evident […] that it is based on a positive, desireful impulse. For what nobody desires to do does not need to be forbidden, and certainly what is expressly forbidden must be an object of desire. (Freud, [1919] 1938, p. 115)

Many of the works discussed in this essay acknowledge that their historical subject matter forms an 'object of desire', often drawing on psychoanalytic interpretations of human behaviour to explore the origins of their will to transgress.

Finally, just as Freud suggests that taboos repress the psychological material of the unconscious, which should be regarded as all the more fundamental for the fact that it is considered unspeakable, this essay argues that the taboo in Holocaust literature constitutes an

attempt to foreclose responses to the Holocaust that are difficult to articulate and deal with. These responses include things like the 'fascination of Fascism' (to paraphrase Susan Sontag (1975)), the ordinariness and even attractiveness of perpetrator identities, and ambivalent attitudes towards the dead. While Holocaust taboos are generally aimed at ensuring that factual historical truths are safeguarded against falsification – Wiesel's mistrust of the Holocaust novel being a case in point – this essay acknowledges a body of literature that treads a knowingly provocative path between the sacred and the profane in order to engage with another set of equally disturbing truths, yielding illicit meanings, anxieties and forms of knowledge that are never straightforwardly empirical. It makes a case for those 'blasphemous' novels and poems about places like Majdanek and Treblinka precisely because they are novels and poems, arguing that texts which might appear, on the surface, to be crude, offensive or factually misleading, are not always as gratuitous or misdirected as they might seem. Rather, they are fundamental to what the Germans term 'working through' or 'dealing with' (Vergangenheitsbewältigung) the knowledge and cultural legacy of the Holocaust, helping to construct meaningful relationships between history, individual subjectivities (those of perpetrators, victims and non-victims) and the wider national, political and cultural contexts in which they are written.

In a sense, the Holocaust has always been a taboo subject. During the war, civilians lived alongside a vast infrastructure of camps, ghettos, deportation centres and train lines, yet rarely spoke out. In the prologue to his collection of essays The Drowned and the Saved, the Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi writes that the exterminatory system of the univers concentrationnaire was 'not a closed universe' (Levi, [1986] 1996, p. 5). While recognising 'the enormity and therefore the non-credibility of what took place in the Lagers', he points to the regular contact between industrial companies and the camps they supplied with building

materials, uniforms, food, poison gas and crematoria ovens (ibid., pp. 2, 5). Mass murder became tantamount to a 'public secret', illustrating how the taboo can become an instrument of politics and how forcibly its edicts can be felt in a terroristic totalitarian system such as National Socialism, where unspoken laws are just as important as formal legislation.[1]

In the camps themselves, the basic humanity of the victims was also designated taboo, with the prisoners being treated as 'units', tattooed with a number and never referred to by name. Even after liberation, the extreme dehumanisation of the victims extended to the survivors' sense of themselves and their condition as victims. Levi identifies the 'feeling of shame or guilt' experienced by prisoners who had had to endure 'filth, promiscuity and destitution', stealing food to survive, living for months and years at an 'animal level', and who now had to live with 'the consciousness of having been diminished' (ibid., p. 56). Many survivors would not be able to confront their experiences or bear witness until many years later and even those who, like Levi, began writing about the camps almost straight away, initially found it difficult to find a readership. When Levi's classic account of his imprisonment in Auschwitz-Birkenau, If This Is A Man, was published in 1947 in a run of 2,500 copies, some six hundred unsold copies were stored in a warehouse in Florence, where they were destroyed by a flood in 1969 (ibid., p. 137). Levi himself is sanguine about this latency period, ascribing it to a 'desirable and normal' process whereby 'historical events acquire their chiaroscuro and perspective only some decades after their conclusion' (ibid., p. 8). Yet the relative paucity of Holocaust testimony in the immediate post-war period seems suggestive of traumatic as well as normative memory processes, with the taboo nature of these memories leaving individual survivors struggling to find the words with which to describe their experiences, and society reluctant to confront what had happened.

By the mid-1950s cultural recognition of Jewish victimhood had to some degree broadened following the publication of the English translation of Anne Frank: The Diary of a

Young Girl ([1952] 1997) and its socially-palatable adaptation for stage and film. Some years later, major testimonial works from the camps such as If This Is a Man ([1958] 1996) and Wiesel's Night ([1958] 1981) were translated into English, and at the landmark trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961 extensive first-hand victim testimony was heard in court and widely reported by the world's media for the first time. When an American television mini-series called Holocaust was broadcast in 1978, over three decades after the liberation of the camps, the ultimate taboo was finally lifted, in that the crime now at least had a name.

The increased public visibility of the Holocaust over these three decades did not, however, mean that the genocide became entirely free from a relationship with the taboo. With the experience of victimhood increasingly forming poignant subject matter for films and television programmes, novels, poems and plays, the taboo that surrounded Holocaust representation simply shifted polarities. The victims were no longer ostracised; rather, they spoke with authority from the 'inside' of a genocide that came to be regarded as a taboo subject for those on the 'outside' who were not there, enshrining the Holocaust in a kind of inverse metaphysic whereby hell on earth came to be figured as holy ground. Holocaust taboos in literature thereafter revolved around issues of transgression, aesthetics and representational ethics: if the memory of the Holocaust was authorised through the 'sacred texts' of the witnesses, many believed that the burgeoning 'Holocaust industry', driven by the imaginations of non-victims and corporate profit, constituted a violation that was variously construed as an offence against God or a newly emergent ethical code.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s Wiesel and other authoritative public figures pointed to the representational inadequacy – indeed, the representational travesty – of imaginative literary responses to the genocide. Drawing attention to its unprecedented extremity, they argued that the Holocaust was unique – 'the most radical form of genocide encountered in history', according to Saul Friedlander (1992, p. 3), 'the worst of all crimes to have been or

ever to be committed', according to the filmmaker Claude Lanzmann (2007a, p. 30) – and demanded that culture confront its own inadequacy. Employing the metaphysical terminology so often used to inscribe taboos, debate frequently centred on whether silence constituted a more fitting and articulate rendering of this limit event, carrying a weight of meaning that could not be conveyed by language. Even those who did not proscribe literary description of the Holocaust still tended to champion writing that adopted an ethos of anti-representation, where authors avoided vivid description of the most harrowing aspects of the extermination. Friedlander cites Ida Fink's short stories and Lanzmann's documentary Shoah, which eschews archival footage, as offering 'a feeling of relative "adequacy" in bringing the reader and viewer to insights about the Shoah':

> A common denominator appears: the exclusion of straight, documentary realism, but the use of some sort of allusive or distanced realism. Reality is there, in its starkness, but perceived through a filter: that of memory (distance in time), that of spatial displacement, that of some sort of narrative margin which leaves the unsayable unsaid. (Friedlander, 1992, p. 17)

This developing theory of anti-representation modified the earlier dialectic of 'inside' and 'outside', survivor and non-victim, by cutting across the category of authorial biography. Recognising that non-victims might represent the Holocaust, judgements about representational adequacy now came to rest on the perceived value of different aesthetic strategies, with variants of restrained and respectful anti-representation being set against more experimental or shocking forms of representation. The anti-representation tradition dominated theoretical writing on the Holocaust throughout the latter part of the twentieth century, canonising the likes of Paul Celan, Aharon Appelfeld and W. G. Sebald, yet this

essay will trace the emergence of a heterogeneous counter-tradition made up of writers who were prepared to represent the Holocaust in more controversial and explicit ways, wilfully exceeding the 'decent' limits of representation in a manner that suggests that creative responses to the Nazi genocide will never be as governable or reverent as we might like. Representational taboos have not prevented these writers from exploring subjects such as memory and identity in the context of the Holocaust; on the contrary, dealing with such taboos has become central to their representational logic, with their postmodern concern with notions of 'truth' meaning that they often find positive value in acts of taboo-transgression.

Death and the unconscious: 'Daddy' and The White Hotel

Sylvia Plath's 'Daddy', published in her posthumous collection Ariel (1965), is one of the most notorious works of Holocaust representation by a non-victim. It takes the form of a dramatic monologue spoken by, in Plath's words, 'a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God' (Plath, 1989b, p. 293). The speaker's father and husband share a Nazi identity and she links herself to the victims of the Holocaust through variations of the refrain, 'I think I may well be a Jew' (ibid., p. 223). Resonating with episodes in Plath's personal life, including a failed suicide attempt, the death of her German father when she was a child and her marriage to the poet Ted Hughes, 'Daddy' was repeatedly criticised throughout the 1970s and 1980s for indulging in what many took to be an indecent form of emotional plagiarism. Seamus Heaney, for example, wrote that the poem is 'so entangled in biographical circumstances and rampages so permissively in the history of other people's sorrows that it simply overdraws its right to our sympathy' (Heaney, 1988, p. 165). Seeming to lack any reasonable 'objective correlative' (to borrow T.S. Eliot's formulation) between the personal and historical frames of reference, Alvin Rosenfeld doubted that Plath could

‘expose the atrocity of the age through exposing self-inflicted wounds’ (Rosenfeld, 1988, p. 181).

Although ‘Daddy’ draws together historical atrocity and authorial biography through the suggestive life story of its speaker, later critics have recognised that the poem is self-evidently not a ‘realistic’ representation of either sphere. The biographical frameworks of ‘confessional poetry’ and critiques such as Rosenfeld’s assume a very literal set of metaphors, linking personal and historical victimhood with little regard for the impersonality of poetic form or indeed the place of ambiguity in Plath’s writing. As Christina Britzolakis notes, ‘the elements of caricature, parody, and hyperbole in “Daddy” are so blatant that only a very determined misreading could identify the speaker with the biographical Sylvia Plath’ Britzolakis, 1999, p. 123). Nonetheless, the poem – and Plath’s work more generally – does explore the relationship between subjectivity and history and, without presuming to understand exactly how events such as the Holocaust affected her personally, we might follow the lead of Jacqueline Rose in recognising that fantasy is ‘one of the key terms through which Plath’s writing […] can be thought’ (Rose, 1991, p. 5).

Knowingly risqué, the key ‘personal’ context for the speaker’s violent fantasies (‘Every woman adores a Fascist’) is the death of her father (‘I was ten when they buried you’), who is a ‘ghastly’ amalgam of taboo figures, being both a godhead and a Nazi (Plath, 1989a, pp. 223, 224, 222). Here Plath’s writing is steeped in Freud, drawing on works such as Mourning and Melancholia (1917) and Totem and Taboo ([1919] 1938). The poem seems to be particularly indebted to the latter, in which Freud recognises that ancient rituals and fears concerning the dead cannot be adequately explained by theories of mourning, as ‘mourning loves to preoccupy itself with the deceased, to elaborate his memory, and preserve it for the longest possible time’ (Freud, [1919] 1938, p. 98). What Freud terms ‘taboos of the dead’, on the other hand, are suggestive of a more ambivalent response to death, and specifically to the

repression of an unconscious wish for the death of the deceased, something that Freud felt existed 'in almost all cases of intensive emotional allegiance to a particular person' (ibid., pp. 102-3). The taboo of the dead assumes a 'punitive and remorseful character' because of the 'opposition between the conscious grief and the unconscious satisfaction at death' (ibid., p. 104) and 'Daddy' seems to tap into the unconscious of a speaker who both loved and hated her father in this way, enacting the symbolic consummation of a repressed death wish that has to be played out as a fantasy in order for her to achieve psychological liberation.

Psychoanalytic theory thus offers one theoretical inroad into the poem's exploration of the taboos that surround a particular psychological state, grief, linking them to the Oedipal (or, in this case, the Electra) complex, which Freud identifies as 'the nucleus of all the neuroses' (Bernstein, 2002, pp. 137-8). Yet such a reading says very little about historical taboos, or the dead Jews to whom the speaker compares herself, and immediately begs the questions: Does the speaker's ambivalence towards her father's death also inform an unconscious ambivalence towards those killed in the Nazi genocide? If fantasies stem from real experiences, what status do the realities of history have in this poem? And, by extension, if writers really break taboos about the Holocaust in order to confront truths that relate to that event, what truths does 'Daddy' address, beyond those of the individual unconscious?

In turning to such questions, we must firstly recognise that the issue of historical 'truth' in this poem is a vexed one, not least because it gets all its historical references wrong. Historical space is vague and de-historicised ('the name of the town is common' (Plath, 1989a, p. 222)) and the speaker keeps getting lost. Her 'Nazi' father is actually an amalgamation of every available Nazi stereotype: he has a 'neat mustache', evoking Hitler, while also being linked to the Luftwaffe and described as a 'Panzer-man' (a member of the tank unit) (ibid., pp. 222, 223). The poem offers no explanation as to how exactly a 'Taroc pack' (ibid., p. 223) would connect the speaker to the Jews and there is a sense that a victim

identity is being tried out or self-consciously performed as poem and speaker alike test the limits of what can and cannot be said. Comparisons to the Jews take place at arm's length, with 'I think I may well be a Jew' gradually tapering to 'I may be a bit of a Jew' (ibid., p. 223). With no confident hold on either history or its language, the speaker attests to her dumbness and inarticulacy ('the tongue stuck in my jaw', 'I could hardly speak') and feels imprisoned by words which form a 'barb wire snare', entrapping her in her own selfhood ('Ich, ich, ich, ich') (ibid., p. 223). Instead of expressing sovereign subjectivity, language acts upon her, positioning her as victim, as Jew, with the 'obscene' German language becoming 'an engine, an engine' that leads her 'to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen' (ibid., p. 223).

The speaker's identity is less a form of mastery than a process of subjugation and, set against the perverse pleasures of the unconscious, 'Daddy' identifies socio-linguistic forces that play out on a historical and cultural level. Going beyond the conflict-ridden instincts and drives identified by Freud, the poem challenges identity politics centred purely around personal experience ('ich') by exploring identity as a process or action ('I do, I do') that involves a complex interplay between autonomy and social construction within wider signifying systems (ibid., pp. 223, 224). And these systems, within which and against which the poem is written, seem to be themselves traumatised, informed by the experiences of victims, but in a confused and bewildering way, and engendering a pervasive sense of shock and compulsive repetitions that keep returning us to that past. This is registered at the level of the language and form, with the end rhymes of its 'Hieronymus Bosch nursery rhyme' scheme forming their own historical connections ('true' chiming with 'blue' and 'Jew' (ibid., p. 223)) and idiosyncratic digressions (Steiner, 1982, p. 330). The world of the poem – a kind of hell peopled by vampires, devils and perpetrators, a world where the speaker cannot even die – thus enables the coming-into-being of fictional, mythical, trans-historical and inter-

generational identities that testify to the continuing presence of past atrocities in oblique and unsettling ways.

With a contrastingly clear sense of its own representative inadequacy, especially in respect of the dead Jews of the Holocaust ('the voices just can't worm through' (Plath, 1989a, p. 224)), 'Daddy' does not seek to illuminate factual historical truths or to supplant testimony. But in challenging cultural taboos of the early 1960s, it anticipates the way that fantasy and psychoanalytic theory would shape works of historical representation by later generations who would become increasingly attentive to the complex links between the unconscious and history. A notable example is D. M. Thomas's The White Hotel (1981), which examines the relationship between the Holocaust, fantasy and the unconscious by way of Freud's notion of Das Unheimliche ('the uncanny') and the theory of the instincts outlined in Beyond the Pleasure Principle ([1920] 1974a), in which Freud posits the idea of a universal struggle between what he terms the 'life instinct' and the 'death instinct'. The White Hotel centres on the story of Lisa Erdman, a former opera singer and patient of Freud's in Vienna, who is murdered in Kiev during the massacre at Babi Yar. The novel alternates between erotic poetry, letters and a pastiche of a Freudian case history, while also including third person narration that draws on factual sources, notably Anatoly Kuznetsov's testimonial work Babi Yar: A Document in the Form of a Novel ([1967] 1969), in what was considered by some to be a controversial act of appropriation (Vice, 2000, pp. 38-66). While Freud initially looks to Lisa's childhood to explain her nervous and physical symptoms – and a traumatic sexual assault surfaces late in the novel, when she describes being attacked by sailors for being a 'dirty Jewess' and the daughter of a successful businessman – dreams, portents, fantasies and physical symptoms link Lisa's personal history with the later conflagrations of the Holocaust and the murders at Babi Yar (Thomas, 1982, p. 168). Lisa repeatedly experiences what Freud terms 'the uncanny' – the sense of something seeming both foreign

and strangely familiar – and as Sue Vice observes, '[h]er "hysterical" symptoms turn out to be real injuries' (Vice, 2000, p. 38). In Memories and Hallucinations (1988), Thomas describes how the early psychoanalytic movement might itself be interpreted as a Jewish response to the burgeoning anti-Semitism of the early twentieth century. He notes that what Freud and his colleagues diagnosed as 'hysteria' was linked, in mythology, to powers of premonition, and asks, 'Might not some of the hysterias treated by Freud have been caused by apprehensions of the future rather than suppressions of the past?' (Thomas, 1988, p. 40).

Thomas's novel also draws on Beyond the Pleasure Principle and, in writing Lisa's case history, the fictional Freud connects her troubles to his developing theory of the death instinct, noting 'an imperious demand, on the part of some force I did not comprehend, to poison the well of her pleasure at its source' (Thomas, 1982, p. 116). The fully-developed theory would postulate a conflict between the life instinct (Eros), which is directed towards pleasure and the unification of living substances, and the death instinct (Thanatos), which seeks a return to an inorganic state and tends towards self-destruction. For Freud, this conflict characterises the individual psyche and the evolution of human civilisation, governing 'the struggle for life of the human species' (Freud, [1930] 1974b, p. 122). In The White Hotel, this struggle culminates in the mass murder at Babi Yar, which is marked as a highly symbolic ravine where these instincts are distinctly gendered, with femininity being equated with the life instinct and extreme male violence marking the fullest expression of the death instinct. In one graphic scene, Lisa lies amongst the dead bodies in the bottom of the valley, having jumped off the ledge with her stepson in an attempt to save their lives. She watches an SS man steal a crucifix from an old woman nearby, with the ambiguous and shifting narrative point of view opening the possibility that this scene is now being focalised through a disembodied and deeply traumatised Lisa, and that she is the old woman who is being described. Sensing the old woman is still alive, the SS man sends 'his jackboot crashing into

her left breast' before another man named Demidenko rapes her and assaults her with a bayonet (Thomas, 1982, pp. 219-20). This horrific act represents the wider bodily harm inflicted during the Holocaust, which is described in terms of a universal (read male) propensity towards sexual violence. Thomas follows Freud in suggesting that genocide has its roots in the innate conflicts of the human psyche, which are posited as the founding (and final) truth of human history, regardless of the specific behavioural contexts created by politics, economics and history. As Richard J. Bernstein notes, even though Freud died shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War, he had 'witnessed the cruelty and barbarity of the Nazis' and 'certainly would not have been shocked by the subsequent genocide and massacres that occurred', as he regarded such 'unrestrained orgies of destructiveness' as emanating from man's instinctual nature (Bernstein, 2002, p. 149). In The White Hotel Thomas uses a range of techniques, from violent symbolism to erotic lyricism, to figure this conflict in terms of gender and to explode the taboo that would prevent his readers from acknowledging the provocative link between sex and death which, his novel suggests, accounts for the tragic victimhood of both individuals and entire ethnic populations.

The 'new discourse' and perpetrator taboos: The Ogre and The Kindly Ones

In the West during the post-war decades, as culture became increasingly liberalised and orientated towards social and self-transformation, the influence of Freud remained pervasive. Modernity 'accelerated' into post-modernity, as Chris Jenks puts it, and the period as a whole became characterised by 'the desire to transcend limits – limits that are physical, racial, aesthetic, sexual, national, legal and moral' (Jenks, 2003, p. 8). Robert Gordon draws attention to the way that 'a newly turbid, sexualised idiom for depicting Nazism' emerged in 'the taboo-breaking subcultures of the 1970s, intellectually informed by psychoanalysis and psychosexual analyses of history and ideology from Wilhelm Reich to Herbert Marcuse'

(Gordon, 2012, p. 26). This idiom spanned 'high' art and 'low' or trash culture, ranging from the sadomasochistic cinema of The Night Porter (Cavani, [1974] 2006) and Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom (1975), to swastika-wearing, leather-clad punk bands such as the Ramones and the Sex Pistols and low-budget exploitation films set in concentration camps with titles such as SS Experiment, Nazi Love Camp 27 and Deported Women of the SS Special Sections.

The trend for literature and film to draw on the powerfully suggestive iconography of Nazism in this way prompted Friedlander to express his concern over what he termed a 'new discourse' about the Third Reich. In Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death ([1982] 1993), he argues that this discourse gives free reign to 'phantasms, images and emotions', drawing on Michel Foucault's idea that 'power carries an erotic charge' to explain how Hitler and the other distinctly non-sexual males of the Nazi party – memorably described by Foucault as 'lamentable, shabby, puritan young men' and 'a species of Victorian spinsters' – came to be linked with a form of representation that repeatedly figures them in outlandish, sexualised terms (Friedlander, [1982] 1993, pp. 15, 74). One of the key novels cited by Friedlander is Michel Tournier's The Ogre ([1970] 1997), which he identifies as 'one of the first major manifestations of this new discourse' (ibid., p. 12). Incorporating elements of magic realism, The Ogre is a bildungsroman that recounts the life story of the strange, monstrous Abel Tiffauges. A shy and withdrawn schoolboy, Tiffauges lapses into obscurity in middle age as a car mechanic in rural France before undergoing a 'strange liberating process' when held in captivity as a prisoner of war (Tournier, [1970] 1997, p. 173). He eventually ends his days as 'the Ogre of Kaltenborn' who, during the final months of the war, kidnaps Aryan children from local villages and takes them to a Nazi training school in a gothic fortress in East Prussia. Friedlander highlights the novel's fascination with Nazi

symbolism and Teutonic mythology. Citing one of the final scenes in the novel, where three of Tiffauges's favourite charges are found dead on the castle terrace, he writes:

> Here is the essence of the frisson: an overload of symbols; a baroque setting; an evocation of a mysterious atmosphere, of the myth and of religiosity enveloping a vision of death announced as a revelation opening out into nothing – nothing but frightfulness and the night. Unless … Unless the revelation is that of a mysterious force leading man toward irresistible destruction. (Friedlander, [1982] 1993, pp. 44-5, ellipsis in original)

The Ogre holds tightly to the interpretative anchor of the 'new discourse', with the 'mysterious force' leading its protagonist to destruction being a libido that shapes, and is shaped by, a series of abusive and racially-charged power relations. Tiffauges's path to damnation begins with his victimisation during his institutionalised childhood in a Catholic boarding school, continues through his marriage to a Jewish wife called Rachel, whom he treats as a sexual object, 'raw flesh' reduced to 'the level of a steak', then culminates in the predatory sexual identity he develops at the training school at Kaltenborn, when he becomes perhaps the ultimate hate figure: a Nazi paedophile (Tournier, [1970] 1997, pp. 8, 9).

In its basic subject matter and mode of narration, which includes the first-person narrative of Tiffauges's 'sinister writings', The Ogre transgresses what Erin McGlothlin identifies as 'an unwritten but nevertheless powerful taboo' that 'places the imagination of the consciousness of the perpetrator outside acceptable discourse on the Holocaust' (McGlothlin, 2010, p. 213). Susan Suleiman notes that such writing requires some degree of empathy or imaginative identification on the part of both writer and reader, observing that 'empathy for a perpetrator of genocide – even if it coexists with revulsion and moral

condemnation –puts both author and reader on uncomfortable ethical ground, and on uncomfortable aesthetic ground as well' (Suleiman, 2009, p. 2). Much like the taboo on imaginative works of Holocaust representation, the taboo against imagining the consciousness of perpetrators becomes evident through the controversies that surround its transgression. Works such as The Ogre, Martin Amis's Time's Arrow (1991) and Bernard Schlink's The Reader (1997) are all 'scandalous' texts which, in line with Vice's definition, 'provoke controversy by inspiring repulsion and acclaim in equal measure' (Vice, 2000, p. 1). Suleiman states that, until recently, Robert Merle's novel Death Is My Trade (1952), a fictionalised version of the autobiography of Rudolf Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz, was 'the only full-length novel narrated in the voice of a Nazi perpetrator' (Suleiman, 2009, p. 1). Regardless of the exact veracity of this claim, the later examples clearly have varying degrees of narrative proximity to the viewpoint of their perpetrator-protagonists, with the distance created by, say, the magic realism of The Ogre or the chronological reversal of Time's Arrow meaning that there is not always an attempt at direct representation of a Nazi mindset.

More recently, however, a novel was published that explores the forbidden ground of perpetrator consciousness in a way that defiantly challenges this representational taboo, incorporating elements of the 'new discourse' and extensive historical scholarship. Written in French by the American-born author Jonathan Littell, The Kindly Ones (2006) resembles The Ogre in that it draws on mythological narrative structures – Littell's novel takes its title and key plotlines from the Oresteia, the trilogy of Greek tragedies by Aeschylus – and sexual deviance is again figured as a defining character trait of a Nazi. Despite being married with children, Aue has had homosexual affairs and an incestuous relationship with his sister. In one hallucinatory sequence late in the novel, as his increasingly disturbed state of mind spins

out of control, he fantasises about having sex with a dog and a tree branch, emphatically marking sexual deviance as either a symptom or cause of historical madness.

This is not to say, however, that Aue is wholly 'other' or a Nazi caricature, because unlike the mythical monster Tiffauges, who believes himself to be a magical being whose personal fate affects the entirety of human history, Aue stresses his ordinariness and basic similarity to his imagined readers, whom he terms his 'human brothers' in the novel's opening sentence (Littell, 2009, p. 3). In evidently self-exculpating but frequently persuasive fashion, he regards his being a perpetrator, rather than a victim or war hero, as a matter of historical chance (ibid., p. 592). He believes that his readers, like him, could have found themselves in any of these positions, had they been born in a different time and place, because 'everyone, or nearly everyone, in a given set of circumstances, does what he is told to do' (ibid., p. 20). As Jenni Adams observes, 'Aue insists upon the commonality of his own experience with the potential experience of the reader' and, in doing so, he asserts 'a continuity with his readers' that highlights our 'ethical implication in the narrative' (Adams, 2011, p. 33). The novel is structurally and thematically informed by a strand of scholarship that runs through landmark studies such as Hannah Arendt's Eichmann in Jerusalem ([1963] 1992) and Christopher Browning's Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland ([1992] 2001): a tradition that seeks to demythologise perpetrators, refuting what James Waller terms the 'mad Nazi theory' and explanations founded in sexual deviance, instead regarding the personalities of perpetrators as being more commonplace or, as Arendt famously put it, 'banal' (Waller, 2007, p. 61). Aue is thus a monumentally divided character, representing both extreme 'otherness' and extreme 'ordinariness'. Noting this duality, critics such as Suleiman and Robert Eaglestone make a helpful distinction between the 'family' strand of the narrative, where Aue is a psychopathic, sexually aberrant murderer, which conforms to an overarching literary and mythological framework, most notably that of

the Oresteia, and the 'genocidal' strand, which figures Aue as an 'ordinary Nazi' acting as a witness – and, as Suleiman argues, a 'reliable witness', even a 'moral witness' – to a series of meticulously-researched historical events (Suleiman, 2009, pp. 5-16; Eaglestone, 2011, p. 23).

Over the course of the novel, Aue's world becomes increasingly bizarre, with the violence and sexual content becoming ever more graphic and outlandish. Traumatised by his wartime experiences and suffering a head injury from the Battle of Stalingrad, he strangles his mother, murders his stepfather with an axe and bites Hitler on the nose, all while being pursued by two German police officers, Weser and Clemens, who represent the Eumenides: the Furies or 'Kindly Ones' from the Oresteia who seek to avenge the murder of Clytemnestra by her son, Orestes. For Eaglestone, this fantastical plot shows the 'family' strand winning out, representing a 'swerve' away from the 'genocidal' strand, 'as if the dark sun of the evil of the "ordinary Nazi" is actually too much to bear' (ibid., p. 23). In the final sections, The Kindly Ones retreats from the historical and psychological frameworks provided by the likes of Arendt and Browning and figures Aue within the mythic, melodramatic schemata of the 'new discourse', being compelled by mysterious psycho-sexual forces beyond his control to commit outrageous criminal acts. These episodes are frequently recounted as though they are committed by a sleepwalker or another person. If the taboos on perpetrator perspectives and fictional Holocaust representation are self-evidently challenged – and across some 900 pages Littell exposes the reader to some of the most disturbing episodes in the history of the genocide, from the viewpoint of a perpetrator – there is a sense, following Eaglestone, that another representational impossibility is drawn to the fore, and that the hope of understanding 'ordinary' evil, which The Kindly Ones has repeatedly framed as a readerly project of self-examination in light of the atrocities perpetrated by its perpetrator-narrator, is something that we simply cannot or dare not

confront. The novel does not substantiate Aue's claim that he is simply 'a man like other men' (Littell, 2009, p. 24), challenging the basis of his hope that through empathetic identification the reader might be drawn into some kind of revelation about his or her own capacity for evil. Instead, the genocidal strand remains a 'dark sun', which is to say a taboo made up of characteristically contradictory elements.

Transgression and truth

While The Kindly Ones offers an approach to representing perpetrators that seems original in every respect, this essay has suggested that all taboos against Holocaust representation revolve around competing notions of truth and the question of whether different dimensions of the Holocaust can ever be understood, known or revealed. Of course the concept of 'truth' is never stable and singular, and divided responses to taboo-transgression often come to rest on what are at least two very different versions of what is meant by 'truth'. Following Eaglestone, there is 'truth as explanation, corresponding to evidence and states of affairs, and truth as in some way revealing of ourselves, of "who and how we are"', with each existing in a complex relationship to the other (Eaglestone, 2004, p. 7). Few taboos exist around serious, evidence-based historical studies of the Holocaust, but the claims of this first, more objective kind of truth often form barriers to any exploration of the latter. We have seen that taboos around the literary representation of the Holocaust have been formulated by victims and others with a legitimate interest in preserving the integrity of the public memory of the genocide. But does transgressive literary practice give us access to more 'existential' forms of truth and self-understanding that justify the representational violence and inevitable historical distortion?

In seeking to provide some answers to this question, this essay has stressed that taboos against Holocaust representation make transgressive literary practice almost inevitable: the

very existence of a discourse about the taboo implies that the transgression has always already been made. We recall that one of Freud's central insights in Totem and Taboo was that taboos would not exist were it not for formations that sought to break them and Wiesel, Friedlander and the theorists of anti-representation recognised that atrocity had long provided a strong stimulus to the artistic imagination. Despite their efforts to safeguard the Holocaust by designating it absolutely 'other', differing in magnitude and nature to all that had come before, the Nazi genocide proved to be no exception, making their cultural 'hysteria' an uncanny portent of the voluminous literary production to come. The evil of the Holocaust has proved to be a source of continuing creative inspiration, with examples ranging from the poetic cycle to the graphic novel, encompassing comedy, satire, allegory, melodrama and tragedy. In the introductory 'Afterward' section of his Holocaust novel The Painted Bird, in which he describes the hostile public reaction to his book, the Polish-born author Jerzy Kosinski asks, rhetorically, 'Can the imagination […] be held prisoner?' (Kosinski, 1996, p. 28). The answer, of course, is emphatically no.

But even if the unconscious, the imagination, language and postmodern culture all tend towards taboo-transgression, this does not necessarily mean that such transgressions must be celebrated. While unconscious undercurrents and cultural forces influence creative practice, literary representation is also guided by other, more conscious factors, such as the claims of ethics and justice. Many novels explicitly acknowledge these imperatives. They are in fact central to the representational poetics of The Kindly Ones: all the more so, it seems, for the novel's failure to make sense of the atrocities it depicts and the motives of its perpetrator-narrator. Its title, mythological schemata and philosophical meditations all invoke Greek notions of justice and Aue understands that, according to these precepts, 'crime has to do with the deed, not the will'; in the final sentence the Kindly Ones are 'on to' him (Littell, 2009, pp. 592, 975). Yet the claims of justice equally inform taboos against representation.

James E. Young, for example, links the taboo against the representation of perpetrator consciousness to a concern that such literature might 'reperpetrate' these crimes (Young, 1988, p. 209), while others have worried that such writing might seem like a defence of the mindset, with representation being suggestive of commemoration and with it forgiveness. Indeed, many argue that any kind of understanding or explanation of the actions of perpetrators constitutes a gesture of assimilation which, by definition, renders criminal acts comprehensible, placing them somewhere on the known spectrum of human behaviour. It is perhaps for this reason that Lanzmann identifies 'an absolute obscenity in the project of understanding', citing Primo Levi's account of the Auschwitz guard who told him, 'here there is no why' (Lanzmann, 2007b, p. 51).

This notion of understanding being 'obscene' – indecent, improper, almost pornographic – leads us to the heart of the intellectual conflict that continues to be inspired by the literary obsession with evil, suffering and mass death. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the fascination with horror was immediately figured as 'obscene' and made the subject of social taboos. Sebald describes how, after the Allied firestorms, a second-hand bookshop in Hamburg kept photographs of corpses lying in the street under the counter, 'to be fingered and examined in a way usually reserved for pornography' (Sebald, 2004, p. 99). Linking sight to insight and with it a kind of criminal complicity, Lanzmann forcefully resists the 'pornography of representation', rejecting the idea that the Holocaust can ever be exposed or explained. However, this idea has been forcefully opposed, in turn, by historians, writers and survivors who have sought to analyse the genocide in sober, evidence-based terms, believing they must stare the gorgon directly in the eye if they are ever to understand it. In his introduction to Ordinary Men, Browning explicitly rejects 'the old clichés that to explain is to excuse, to understand is to forgive', arguing that only by trying to empathise with the perpetrators can any historical study get beyond 'one-dimensional caricature' (Browning,

2001, p. xviii). Waller makes much the same point in the introduction to Becoming Evil, noting that explanation should not be viewed as a moral category, but more straightforwardly as a way of understanding 'the conditions under which many of us could be transformed into killing machines' (Waller, 2007, p. xvii). In an interview with The Paris Review, Levi describes, pace Lanzmann, how his desire to explore the 'why' over and above emotional self-expression is a matter of 'natural hormones', stressing that this analytical impulse does not entail forgiveness, and that he was happy to see Eichmann arrested, tried and executed, even as his 'first reaction was to try to understand him' (Levi, 1995). These writers and historians suggest that rather than shielding us from obscenity, taboos around Holocaust representation can obscure our understanding of an event that is actually, as the philosopher Gillian Rose puts it in Mourning Becomes the Law, 'all too understandable, all too continuous with what we are – human, all too human' (Rose, 1997, p. 43).

Yet how does all this relate to the more experimental works of fiction discussed in this essay? We have seen that transparent forms of historical understanding elude the narrators of a novel such as The Kindly Ones and a poem such as 'Daddy'. Moreover, these texts do not offer documentary case studies exploring why real historical figures committed real evil acts. They are full of ambiguity, uncertainty and unreality. We have seen how the fictional protagonist of The Kindly Ones is located in a mythic as well as a historical framework, while Littell makes extensive use of literary devices such as symbolism (eyes, trees), psychoanalytic theory and intertextuality. Perhaps, then, any appreciation of the contribution that imaginative literature might make to the understanding of historical truth must rest on such traits, defining both the value of fiction and the types of truth with which it paradoxically engages. For example, it follows that if there is a 'swerve' away from the genocidal strand of The Kindly Ones, then there is equally a swerve towards the family strand and with it the questions that are explored in the Greek tragedies on which it is based, such as

the possibility of justice and the nature of evil. Rather than constituting an avoidance of truth or the 'why', such a 'swerve' might be regarded as a way of orientating a particular readerly (and literary) relationship to the 'why'.

In Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation (2002), Bernstein explores the historical development of different conceptual understandings of evil. He writes:

> I do not believe that there is, or can be, any end to this process; we must always be wary of thinking that we have reached a final resting place. There is […] something about evil that resists and defies any final comprehension. (Bernstein, 2002, p. 7)

The Kindly Ones proposes something similar, illustrating how literary texts enrich our understanding of concepts such as evil through their explorations of the psychologies and histories of fictional protagonists, drawing on the theoretical writing of the likes of Freud and Arendt, but they never fix it, not least because there is also something about the nature of literary representation and interpretation that resists mastery, final comprehension and definitive endings as well. Without necessarily providing all the answers, a fictional text such as The Kindly Ones constitutes a 'thought-adventure', to quote D. H. Lawrence (1997, p. 279), that is open, fluid and dialogic, ensuring that as it evolves, our contemporary understanding of abstract concepts such as evil relates to, and has to do with, the realities of the Holocaust.

But is this enough to mitigate representational violence, gratuitous shock and the risk of causing offence? With the defence of fiction often resting on its capacity to safeguard us against the repetition of historical disasters, perhaps the ultimate question to ask of literary works that have challenged Holocaust taboos is whether, in doing so, they have played, or

ever can play, a useful role in confronting the social and psychological formations that allow genocide to take place. If The Kindly Ones is the kind of watershed novel that many believe it to be, we might reasonably anticipate a continuation of the 'boom' in perpetrator fiction that has taken place over the last decade (Eaglestone, 2011, p. 15), with novels rising to fill the void that has been left by the observance of the taboo on engaging with perpetrator perspectives. This essay has demonstrated that the pace of literary engagement with the realities of mass killing is nonetheless slow. How, then, can literature keep up with the rapidly changing nature of global conflict and perpetrator identities? And do readerly processes of empathy and imaginative identification have any broader ethical significance beyond the production of a certain frisson and aesthetic gratification? The answers remain unclear, but if breaking taboos around Holocaust representation is part of a process of 'working through' cultural memories of the Holocaust – a process that requires us to consider who we are, what our place in the world is, and also how we are implicated in the violence that our society inflicts on others – then, following Bernstein, this process must always be wary of its own endpoint. By continuing to raise such questions and probing these more 'existential' types of truth in light of the Holocaust, transgressive works of fiction can at least help to ensure that we do not arrive at the kind of dangerous 'final resting place' where the objective truths of mass killing no longer matter.

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[1] See Robert Eaglestone, 'The Public Secret', at the Future of Testimony conference, University of Salford, 2011, forthcoming in J. Kilby and A. Rowland (eds), The Future of Testimony (London: Routledge, 2014).