

# On the Uses and Abuses of Memory

Marco Roth on the Holocaust and history in two recent novels

**WITH AN APT** economic metaphor, cultural critic Andreas Huyssen has referred to an unprecedented "memory boom" in the 1990s. This claim is provable with a panoramic glance at the long lines outside blockbuster museum retrospectives, ground-breaking ceremonies at new memorial sites, the flashing trailers for Spielbergesque pseudo-epics, and also with a browse through stacks of contemporary writing. Student memoirists have lately given way to a slew of novels, but all take their force from recovered memories, repressed memories or encounters with the past in the form of character or object, from Don DeLillo to Dani Shapiro.

Some of us may greet this boom with the optimism that accompanies the discovery of any emerging market. It seems that we need history. But this need for history -- as basic a nutrient for thought as food is for our bodies -- often can be cheaply satisfied. The risk is that our thoughts constrict like arteries on a cholesterol diet. "We need history, but not the way an idler in the garden of knowledge needs history," Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in one of his "untimely observations" whose time may have come, "On the Uses and Abuses of History for Life." Nietzsche's idler is comparable to today's memory consumer who approaches history with an insouciant hand on the remote -- as though history was already made and never still in the making.

These dynamics between active and passive ways of remembering, between caring conservation and conspicuous consumption of history play out in the way that the Shoah has figured in the current memory boom -- at least in the United States. From A.D.L. sponsored "memory-tours" to Poland, Prague and Israel, to a multiplying number of movies and books (some with such unfortunate titles as *Heroes of the Holocaust*), we -- especially in America -- are constantly confronted with choices about how we can accept the unacceptable murder of millions.

Two recent fictions, *The Reader* by German jurist and occasional mystery writer Bernhard Schlink, and Israeli writer and theater director Michal Govrin's *The Name*, prove instructive in regard to what could be provisionally called the uses and abuses of the Holocaust for life. The decision facing the protagonists of both novels is how best to remember, and the reception we have accorded these novels reveals, in-turn, how comfortable we are with the forms of remembrance they offer and why.

***The Reader*** is probably one of the few recent cultural artifacts that has elicited praise from both Oxford literary critic George Steiner and Miramax mogul Harvey Weinstein. Presented as the written confessions of Michael Berg, a German lawyer born at the end of the second world war, *The Reader* seduces its readers by trying to be a (mass)murder mystery and a love story. At the age of fifteen, Berg begins a love affair with Hanna, a woman twenty years his senior. Their lovemaking centers around almost ritualistic bathing and the boy reading aloud to his mistress from the classics of the German high-school canon. Hanna, in spite of her Hebraic-sounding name, turns out to have been a concentration camp guard and an illiterate: two secrets Berg only discovers four years later when Hanna is suddenly tried for war crimes. Too proud to admit her illiteracy before the court, Hanna allows herself to be scapegoated by other ex-Nazis looking to plea-bargain.

Haunted by both his guilt for having loved this woman and his inability to have saved her from excessive punishment because he knows her secret (a secret which any astute reader should divine fairly early in the book), Berg, standing for the first and last time at his lover's grave, informs us that he chose to write this story "to be rid of it even if I cannot be rid of it." Hanna rids herself of the story in another way. She commits suicide after thirty years in prison, making Berg her executor and willing her remaining money to the sole survivor of her barracks, a Jewish woman living comfortably in New York.

Hanna is not a sadist or an anti-Semite, she is only an ignorant illiterate -- so ignorant that she doesn't understand that when she sends the inmates of her work camp barracks to Auschwitz it means that they will be gassed. It's a hard thing to have sympathy for a character who was a guard in a forced labor camp. Schlink's strategy to gain the reader's sympathy runs through the old argument that no one does harm wittingly.

It's an argument with a distinguished philosophical pedigree -- from Plato to Kant -- but it's one that seems tangential -- at best -- to the Holocaust. On some level, Hanna's character -- like all other Germans who were directly involved with forced labor and extermination camps, whether in a decision-making capacity or carrying out orders -- was guilty of a primary ethical failing that the novel never addresses. Willing or not, few people would argue that these Germans were Hitler's unwitting executioners.

Although Schlink claimed in an interview with the *Times* of London that Hanna's ignorance does not make her less responsible, it is difficult to

understand why he would have gone through so much trouble to create this exceptional case scenario unless a larger historical allegory -- and message -- lurked behind it. Or as Berg, Schlink's extremely unreliable narrator, states it, in an overarching question: "But how can one feel shame and guilt, and at the same time judge with such superb assurance?"

The nice thing about unreliable narrators is that they get to have unreliable and controversial opinions and tell improbable stories. Berg's opinions are the fruit of a life damaged by his doubly taboo love for Hanna. He drifts through his life without passion or purpose, trying and failing to conform, marrying and divorcing, having the occasional desultory affair. What redeems him are the memories of his singular exceptional encounter. What frees him to write about it is Hanna's death.

The cause and effect relation -- death begets writing -- implied by Berg's admission that it is only after Hanna's death that he decides to write betrays a deeper problem with how *The Reader* structures memory. Schlink, known mainly for his prize-winning mystery novels, employs the first rule of that genre: where there's a dead body, there's a story. Taking this maxim one step further, Hanna has to die for the story to be written at all. In Schlink's narrative, stories are always latecomers, told after the fact as a form of either confession for past guilt or as a way of making reparation. Hanna's suicide is troubling because it is both gratuitous and convenient; it is as if she were sacrificed for the sake of narrative closure, so that Berg's remembrance will always be a remembrance of things past.

The problem with this kind of closure -- although it makes readers happy -- is that it also makes all events -- including the Holocaust -- appear as unavoidably necessary. Schlink makes the act of remembering into the ultimate overcoming. Once written down the past becomes the past, it has nothing to offer to the experience of a life except as a series of moral meditations like the one quoted above. It ends when it ends and everyone goes on with their lives as before, provided appropriate reparations payments have been made.

**IT IS THIS NEED** for a definitive ending that Michal Govrin resists so successfully in *The Name*. Yet, in order to do so, she anchors her novel in philosophical and theological writings that will seem strange to many American readers. Already her novel has been (mis)marketed as "a woman's descent into madness." In fact, in range and risk, it is closer to an Israeli *Ulysses*. There is carnal love, religious love, a whole cast of characters from a mystical Rabbi to an obsessed, lonely and dispossessed New York Jew called Leopold.

*The Name, HaShem*, is written as the diaries of Amalia -- a woman with almost as many names as God, going by Mala, Emily, Malinka. Even worse for her, she bears the name of her father's first wife who managed to perform the strangely defiant feat of killing herself in Auschwitz rather than being killed. Amalia, in body, is then a kind of living memorial, a fate she has spent her whole life trying to avoid. Attempting to annihilate a secular world where the name and uselessly heroic death of this woman is revered by everyone she knows, from her father to her German photographer lover, she turns to an Orthodox Judaism based on a remembrance of Jewish pre-history -- the period of the temple -- that strongly represses any discussion of the Holocaust except to refer to its victims as "martyrs."

Written during the 50 day period of the Omer counting, Amalia's diaries present a three-tiered story of her life during this 50-day period in between her writing, <sup>Amelia</sup> Mala observes Jewish custom and rule and works at weaving prayer shawls and a Torah curtain for a local synagogue. Govrin uses this weaving as the novel's controlling metaphor. The curtain -- like Amalia's memories -- mixes sacred and profane images: birds, people, the letters of God's holy name, even the colors of the yarn have meaning. Weaving and writing are linked constantly throughout the novel. The opening pages mention so many characters and possible plot lines as to be almost incoherent. Yet the readers recognize the outlines of Amalia's full story as slowly as they would recognize the curtain taking shape on the loom. The weaving also relates to the extensive use of a literary device called Melitsah throughout the novel.

Yet Govrin's comparison of writing to weaving a Torah curtain is more than just a metaphor for writing as a homespun craft. The curtain simultaneously conceals and points to the place where the Torah is sheltered. In the same way, by staging the novel as Amalia's diaries and not as a direct narrative of events, Govrin lets the reader know that the diaries tell her life story without being her life. Although there are similarities, these are not modernist interior monologues with their promises of immediate access to a character's thoughts. Behind the writing and the weaving is a deeper structure of experience that can only be represented -- simultaneously evoked and hidden.

If the diaries were to stand *for* instead of standing *before* Amalia's entire life, she would have to die and the curtain would become a shroud. Govrin hints at and backs away from this ending: Amalia's suicide, wrapped up in the Torah curtain. Amalia identifies herself with the "scape-goat" sacrificed on Yom Kippur bearing the sins of countless generations. She wants to be a victim. Yet Govrin does not allow this ending to creep into the novel. She prefers to leave the work unfinished,

a final tassel permanently dangling. This choice may reflect a Talmudic and mystical tradition that recalls that every work must have some flaw. The flaw left in the work, like an unpainted board in an otherwise completed house, is an act of mourning for the destruction of the Temple, that most perfect of worldly structures in Jewish mythology. These flaws, like the wounds caused by the Temple's destruction, can only be repaired when the Messiah comes. The longing for this final repair, the Tikkun Olam, even when it seems impossible and far off, can be a constructive yearning, as *The Name* proves.

The idea that yearnings can be constructive and transformative renders *The Name* a more optimistic novel than *The Reader*, but this is a difficult optimism, not nearly as simple as learning to heal our losses. Again, it comes down to a question of what form these authors choose in order to show how history is remembered. Both Schlink and Govrin choose to emphasize the importance of writing. The difference between them is that Schlink has his narrator use writing to honor an unnecessary sacrifice by memorializing it, as though the entire book was Hanna's epitaph, while Govrin sees writing as part of an ongoing mourning process with the ultimate and distant end of healing a wounded world. It is not to pay a debt to the dead that Amalia writes, but to create a space for living with her dead. *The Reader* tells the story of a death remembered. *The Name* is a chronicle of a life remembering.

*The Reader* was a commercial success, perhaps because it takes fewer risks. It is a remarkably classical novel and in that it confirms Walter Benjamin's remark about the genre, "What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with the death he reads about." Berg, as narrator, is also this kind of reader, drawing some warmth for an empty life by looking back into the past. We, as memory consumers, tend to identify with him -- to see our lives as bounded by an unchangeable history, to take solace in merely knowing history has dealt us a bad hand. We do what we can by supporting this or that cause, by buying this or that book. Reading becomes a guilt-driven exercise in compensation. *The Name* offers no such easy comforts. Few of us will identify with Amalia's struggles not to be overwhelmed by the past and not to forget it entirely. Govrin invites her readers to imagine a possible world where remembrance becomes a necessary, everyday activity, part of the structure of our life, just as prayer would be for the religious. The distance of this world from ours, where memory and history are increasingly contained within acceptable cultural forms -- the museum, the movie-theater, the bookstore and the classroom -- shows how much we need novels like *The Name* if only to leave us yearning for that far away place which we call by names of our own, and which Govrin calls

Jerusalem.

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## Notes

### **\*(1) elicited praise**

With circumspect academic caution Steiner pronounced *The Reader* "little short of a masterpiece." Weinstein, with an equal degree of entrepreneurial caution declared it, "one of the most compelling stories I've read in a while," before Miramax snapped up the rights. The book's ability to swim in the depths of literature and crawl in the mud of the marketplace makes it the perfect amphibious object for respectable profitability. Both Steiner and Weinstein's comments reflect another Holocaust product pre-requisite. For a book about the Holocaust to be deemed part of "The Western Canon" or suitable for mass-market film distribution, Jews must still remain in the background. As with *Schindler's List*, *The Reader* filters its perceptions of the Holocaust through an "Everyman" who is a Christian German caught in a moral dilemma familiar to Christians. These stories tend to be about conversion from the wrong way of seeing and acting to the right path, like St. Paul on the road to Damascus. This kind of story-line tends to transform the very human victims of persecution into a backdrop or moral proving ground for the individual. It is similar to the effects art critic John Berger noted in war photographs, where "the issue of the war which has caused that moment is effectively depoliticized. The picture becomes evidence of the general human condition. It accuses nobody and everybody."

### **\*(2) Amalia**

In the helpful glossary that accompanies the book, Govrin informs us that the name Amalia -- in Hebrew -- is a compound of Amal meaning evil and one of the names of God "ia." The world of *The Name* allows for the existence of this evil God, or evil will, and it becomes clear to the reader that this name -- Amalia -- Mala -- also the Latin word for evil (Malum) -- stands for the evils of the Holocaust which are inextricably bound-up with the culture and languages of the diaspora within the Jewish world. It is no wonder then, with this confusion and profusion of names, that Amalia's prayers are often simultaneously directed at both an evil manifestation of God and a good one.

### **\*(3) Omer counting**

The Omer counting is a period leading up to the holiday of Shavuot -- the commemoration of the Jews accepting the Torah Moses received from God on Mt. Sinai. The period of the Omer counting corresponds allegorically with the wandering in the desert after the exodus from Egypt. The Omer is also a period of mourning within the Jewish calendar during which no marriages are performed.

The present of the novel is written in the first person "I," during the same 50 days one year before, Amalia calls herself "you." The period before her return to Judaism and Jerusalem when she lived as a photographer in New York and Germany, Amalia marks with the estranging pronoun "she."

### **\*(4) throughout the novel**

Not only in the novel, weaving and writing are also etymologically linked activities through the word "text" deriving from the Latin "texere" to weave and textum both

textile, document and web. In modern Hebrew literature weaving and writing have also been linked in the person and work of S.Y. Agnon (1888-1970). Among the first writers of modern Hebrew literature, Agnon begins the story "Agunot" with such a metaphor: "a thread of grace is spun and drawn out of the deeds of Israel, and the Holy One, blessed be He, Himself, in His glory, sits and weaves -- strand on strand a tallit all grace and mercy for the congregation of Israel to deck herself in." (A Book that Was Lost and Other Stories, Hoffman, Mintz eds. translated by Baruch Hochman) This metaphor of the woven prayer shawl (tallit) to express God's relationship to Israel is played with throughout this story from which Agnon takes his pseudonym. An Agunah -- the singular of Agunot -- is the Jewish legal term for a woman whose husband has disappeared but cannot be proved dead. As a result of this vanishing, the woman cannot remarry and cannot obtain a divorce. Agnon relies on a reader's knowledge of the classic Hebrew analogy of Israel as bride and God as bridegroom to add a religious meaning to his story. Govrin, on the other hand, makes the allegorical literal: Amalia is a woman who prays aloud to God with prayers normally reserved for men. She feels that she literally occupies the position of the beloved bride of God whom he has abandoned without benefit of a divorce. In this respect, *The Name* is also an astonishing feminist novel from a position of orthodox Judaism.

#### \*(5) Melitsah

A writer using Melitsah makes a new story almost entirely out of biblical quotations and references. In its traditional use, the educated Hebrew reader would be reminded of the borrowed biblical phrase's original context and recognize an allegorical level to the story told through Melitsah. In this case, Melitsah is used not only to make an allegorical religious narrative, but as the only means to represent a less distant, historical past. Melitsah, as Y.H. Yerushalmi has suggested in his book *Freud's Moses* is the literary device that simultaneously requires memory and mimics the process of remembering. The arrangements of events and stories from the past help make up the stories we tell ourselves about our own lives. Govrin inverts the device's typical use, using the religious context to tell a secular story. Amalia draws upon religious language to weave together the text of her own life, and the ultimate reference point is just as often the name of this dead woman -- the first Mala -- who is continuing her after-death inside of Amalia. It is only through her return to Orthodox Judaism that Amalia is able to acquire the language she needs to tell her own story.

#### \*(6) Tikkun Olam

"Repair" or "healing of the universe." This notion is fundamental to a mystical Judaism based on the Kabbalistic school of Isaac Luria. In the Kabbalistic narrative, man's original sin is but one manifestation of an even earlier fall, the breaking of the vessels, which scattered sparks of divine essence and trapped them inside the evil shells -- kelipoth. As mentioned, this is mysticism. Yet, as Gershom Scholem argues in his book *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. (Schocken Books, NY) the popularity of this mystical narrative in the sixteenth century reflects the historical conditions of the Jewish expulsion from Spain, another exile within the exile from Israel.



Where this cosmology proves to be more interesting than historical allegory, however, is in the role that individual human beings are given within it. Human activities like prayer, charity, even forms of labor like Amalia's weaving can help liberate individual sparks from the evil imprisoning them. Any activity defined as helpful to this process is part of the Tikkun and brings closer the end of exile and ultimately the coming of the Messiah. As a result, individual humans play a part in shaping both their own and the cosmic destiny. Mystical in origin, the result of the mainstreaming of this process is a kind of pragmatic theory of human action. In fact, Scholem argues that without the absorption of these mystical concepts into everyday Jewish life, the State of Israel would never have come about. The presence of mysticism in *The Name* is no less of a response to the historical conditions of post-war Jewish life, even in ultra-modern, still mainly secular Israeli culture. At a recent reading at Yale University, Govrin said that her novel was, in part, about "how to pray after Auschwitz." If the labor of literature is a search for a form or vessel to express what, for reasons of history, was previously unsayable, then Govrin has done that work to its highest degree.