The Tension between Fact and Fiction in Holocaust Literature

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Abstract

For a long time, factual truth was a prerequisite for Holocaust literature. Thus, autobiographical texts were strongly preferred over fiction. From the 1980s onward, however, the boundaries between ‘fabricated’ and ‘true’ turn out to be blurred, though scandals still arise when something that was thought to be true turns out to be fabricated or non-autobiographical. For theologians who are looking for answers to the theodicy question in Holocaust literature, such as Elie Wiesel’s novella Night, the question of factuality is of less importance. What they must never lose sight of, however, is that ambiguity is an important property of literary texts, and that they do not do justice to such texts by ignoring that ambiguity. In general, theologians and philosophers searching for lessons for humanity should be wary of using the Holocaust and its literature for their own ends.

Keywords

Holocaust literature – fiction – authenticity – Elie Wiesel – theodicy

1 Introduction

The nineteenth-century English poet Coleridge once used a phrase to describe the enjoyment of literature that has since become a catchphrase for literary scholars, even though the concept itself is much older, from Aristotle: reading fiction and engaging with it entails “the willing suspension of disbelief.” When writing about supernatural characters or events, such as in his Rime of
the Ancient Mariner, Coleridge wanted to achieve “a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.”¹

It is an experience that every reader will recognize, if only from the fairy tales of our childhood, or Harry Potter from our teenage years. You knew there were no such creatures as dementors, but they still gave you the creeps. By extension, Coleridge’s goal basically applies to all fiction, not only narratives of the supernatural, and it is perfectly respectable and accepted for writers to endow their fictitious world with a certain verisimilitude and make readers suspend their disbelief. Clearly, in fiction that is recognizably autobiographical in nature, this lifelikeness may also pose a problem if relatives or acquaintances recognize themselves in the book’s characters and are displeased with their negative portrayal. Some such cases are taken to court, more often than not resulting in increased public attention for the book, the author, and the plaintiff’s allegedly unreliable portrayal, regardless of the eventual verdict. That verdict is hardly ever in favour of the plaintiff, due to the artistic freedom the author is at liberty to invoke.

2 Holocaust Literature as an Exception

There is one domain of literature, however, where that freedom and the idea of willing suspension of disbelief cause trouble, and that is Holocaust fiction. Readers would be all too willing to disbelieve the horrible world that Holocaust literature depicts, but no serious author would aim at “suspending” that intuitive disbelief. The horrors may be almost beyond one’s imagination, yet they were part of reality, and readers should always be aware of that.

No wonder that Holocaust fiction has long been a contested genre. We all know Adorno’s famous dictum that to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric, but for our topic a somewhat less well-known statement by Elie Wiesel is of greater relevance: “A novel about Treblinka is either not a novel or not about Treblinka. A novel about Majdanek is about blasphemy. Is blasphemy.”² He seems not only to question the legitimacy of fiction about the Holocaust, but to downright deny its very possibility. His quote is from the late 1980s. In more

¹ Coleridge, Biographia literaria or biographical sketches of my literary life and opinions, chapter xiv: “(…) my endeavours should be directed at persons and characters supernatural or at least romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.”

² Wiesel, The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration, p. 7.
recent work by literary theorists such as Sue Vice (Holocaust Fiction, 2000), Ruth Franklin (A Thousand Darknesses: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction, 2011) and Emily Miller Budick (The Subject of Holocaust Fiction, 2015), this view is refuted. Nowadays the taboo on fiction has become less rigid, if not completely resolved.

It is interesting to see how Wiesel himself dealt with the issue of fiction versus factuality, but in looking into that we should be aware of his general situation as a writer. In the United States a strict interpretation of the First Amendment of the constitution offers free license to all kinds of Holocaust deniers. Wiesel himself was targeted very aggressively by them. I was shocked to read on a revisionist website how an article by a completely respectable scholar, Naomi Seidman, was twisted into an argument that Wiesel was an impostor, suggesting that he had never been in a concentration camp. All that Naomi Seidman had done was to show the dissimilarities between the first version of Night, which appeared in 1956 in Yiddish, Un di Velt hot geshvign, and the French text from 1958 that has become so famous and which is about one quarter the length of the original version. The ‘Society for Free Historical Research’ twisted and misused her findings. Apparently not educated in literary theory these revisionists confused the use of literary devices with lying. Indeed, analysis showed that Wiesel used these devices much more amply than even I as a literary scholar was aware when first reading Night. I remember that working on my Ph.D. thesis I read an article on how literary techniques are used especially in scenes of crisis to get the reader emotionally involved. One such crisis in many texts on the Holocaust is one’s first arrival in Auschwitz and the bewildering experience of entering a completely unknown and alien world, where one is reduced to a number, to nothing more than vermin. I checked the theory by marking the various literary techniques mentioned, in different colors, such as metaphors (such as my use of the word “vermin” just now), broken grammar, divergent times in the verbs, stylistic devices like repetition and rhetorical questions, and breaches of the narrative perspective. And lo and behold, that third chapter of Night, which I until that time had deemed a direct, straightforward account of a terrible experience, showed a multitude of colored markings. Wiesel had indeed profusely used stylistic tools to relate this moment of crisis. Obviously (though not obvious to the revisionist Society for Free Historical Research) such an application of stylistic instruments does not make the text fictional. Literary quality is not identical to fiction.

In his literary work Wiesel himself struggled with the dilemma as to whether to use fiction or not for conveying his message. He relates how as a 15-year-old

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3 At present, the whole revisionist society seems to have vanished from the Internet.
boy he witnessed some pious rabbis in Auschwitz conducting a court case against God, finally reaching the conclusion that God was guilty of breaching the covenant with his people. Wiesel tried to make a literary text based on this event, but his efforts to write a novel, a theater play, even a cantata, all failed. He would end up writing a stage play set in a different period and at a different location, the 17th century in a Polish village during a pogrom by the Cossacks: *The Trial of God* (1979). Much, much later, in 2008, the BBC used the legendary event in Auschwitz for a television play by Frank Cottrell Boyce, titled *God on Trial*. This BBC-production deals with the problem of theodicy, the question how an all-good, all-powerful God can be consistent with the existence of evil and innocent suffering. The question is almost as old as monotheism itself, as the book of Job shows. Theodicy debates received a forceful impulse by the huge earthquake that devastated Lisbon in 1755. The evil that the Shoah represents, differs from such instances of ‘natural’ evil in the fact that it is totally man-made, but that doesn’t make the question less pressing. For Irving Greenberg the issue remains unresolved, but he is clear about the Holocaust’s impact on it. “The cruelty and the killing raise the question whether even those who believe after such an event dare talk about God who loves and cares without making a mockery of those who suffered […].” Referring to children who were burned alive in Auschwitz (a scene that Elie Wiesel describes too in his novella *Night*, which I will discuss later) the phrasing of his reservation is even more pungent: “No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be creditable in the presence of the burning children.”

Theologians who want to address the theodicy with regard to the Holocaust should take note of this BBC production. The various positions that we know from Jewish responses to the Holocaust, from ultra-orthodoxy to modernist atheism, are represented by various characters, while the audience’s sympathy and possible agreement shifts from one to the other. Nevertheless, when I once attended a screening of the film in the presence of some concentration camp survivors, I was struck by their negative view of the whole setting of the story. They considered it unimaginable that camp prisoners would have been able to perform such a court case, lasting the entire night. Here we clearly see a clash between factual reality and imaginative truth, in spite of Wiesel’s claim that such a lawsuit had really taken place.

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4 Cf. McAfee Brown, *Introduction*, p. VII.
3 Presser: A Historian as Novelist

Here is another example of this tension between fiction and historical truth, this time from Dutch literature. The renowned historian Jacques Presser, himself Jewish, survived the war in hiding. During those years he wrote a novel, *Homo submersus*, that shows so many similarities with his own experiences that it could just as well be called a diary. He was in hiding with a friend in a hamlet near Ede in the Veluwe, a region in the center of the country. Wim, the friend, is a very active member of the Resistance and has a lot of stories to tell about other people in hiding, aid-givers, and the many problems encountered by him and his co-workers. This novelistic device permits Presser to include the aid-giver's perspective in his story. Obviously, it would be problematic for historians to use this book as a historical source. Yet the similarities with a recently published real diary by an aid-giver, Arnold Douwes, are striking. Douwes worked in the northeastern province of Drenthe, and to the best of our knowledge there has never been any contact whatsoever between him and Presser, but the incidents that Douwes recounts, concerning troublesome and demanding people in hiding, who do not seem to understand the risks that their hosts take for them, the constant threat, the unwillingness of most non-Jewish Dutch to provide hiding places, which causes the few who are willing to be overburdened, and the bragging and carelessness that in the long run find their way into his attitude, all show a remarkable likeness to the observations in Presser's novel/diary. But for the names of the characters and the dates that are not in line with what is known of Presser's biography, it would be impossible to discern facts from fiction in this autobiographical novel.

Five years after the liberation, the government gave Presser the assignment to write the history of the persecution and extermination of the Jews in the Netherlands. Naturally he started with research, a lot of research. The government had thought it would take him two and a half years to write the book, but it took him some seven years before he was ready to even start writing. At that point, however, he was struck with writer's block and found himself unable to get anything done. He was only able to overcome this by writing a novella, *The Night of the Girondists*, also translated as *Breaking Point* and in German as *Die Nacht der Girondisten*. In it he included incidents and stories that he had come across in his historical research. The novella is about a Jewish history teacher, Jacques, who is imprisoned in the Westerbork transit camp. He joins the camp police, thus basically taking the side of his persecutors, out of an

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7 Primo Levi used this German translation as the basis for his own translation into Italian, see Vandewaetere, *Primo Levi en De nacht der girondijnen*.
urge for self-preservation. He really makes himself complicit. For instance, he carries his favorite student, a girl with whom he had secretly fallen in love, to the deportation train, and he leads the operation in which the Jewish lunatic asylum Het Apeldoornsche Bos is evacuated (one of the most infamous events of the Jewish persecution in the Netherlands; in the novella it has another name, but the event clearly is the same). For theologians the novella’s final act is of extra interest. In the transit camp Jacques meets the rebe Jeremiah Hirsch, who gradually manages to open his eyes to the value of Judaism and teaches him that human dignity outranks the law of the jungle, which reigned in the camp. Jacques even starts to read the Bible. Yet, one day he does not refuse to be the messenger who reads the transport list for Sobibor, containing the names of Hirsch and his family, and to supervise the loading of the train. When his name is called, Hirsch tellingly responds saying “hineni” (Hebrew for “Here I am,” which was also Abraham’s response to God, when called to sacrifice Isaac). On the platform Hirsch stumbles and drops his little Bible. Jacques’ superior, Cohen, the man who had coerced him into taking the perpetrator-like position, gets angry, punches Hirsch in the face, and kicks the Bible away. That is the final “breaking point” for Jacques. He rebels against Cohen’s game and ends up in the punishment barrack, from where he will inevitably be sent on the next train to Poland. There he changes his name from the French version Jacques to the original Jacob, as in fact the author Jacques Presser did. So, let us turn back from the novella to its author Jacques Presser. It was only after writing this fictional account of camp Westerbork that he was able to start writing his historiography, which in 1965 resulted in Ondergang, published in English as Ashes in the Wind: The Destruction of Dutch Jewry (1968).

Filmmaker Claude Lanzmann, who since his documentary Shoah has been considered one of the world’s leading Holocaust experts, was quite taken by the English translation of the novella and recommended a French translation, to be published in the journal Les Temps modernes (of which Claude Lanzmann would become chief editor in 2016). But the journal rejected the French text without explanation. It was subsequently published by a different publisher, but at its presentation one of Lanzmann’s assistants protested in public and accused Presser of being an impostor, because he had never been in Westerbork. Apparently, Lanzmann had thought the book was autobiographical. The misunderstanding is easily conceivable: the main character is a history teacher at the same school where Presser taught, the Vossius Gymnasium in Amsterdam; his first name is Jacques, which he later changes to

8 Baggerman/ Dekker, Egodocuments and the personal turn in historiography, pp. 90–110. They found the anecdote in Bregstein, Over Jacques Presser, pp. 17–19.
Jacob, just as Presser did; the woman who he tells his story in the punishment barrack has the same name as Presser’s wife, and so forth. Yet Presser never stated anywhere that the novella was about his own experiences. Lanzmann probably was so irritated because he held on to his firm conviction that the subject of the Holocaust should be forbidden territory for fiction.

That is the trouble with this topic: it seems to inspire absolute claims. Wiesel and Lanzmann are the most prominent representatives of what is called the “mystical” approach to the Holocaust as an event that can never be conveyed to somebody who wasn’t “there.” In the words of Elie Wiesel: “[...] just as no one could imagine Auschwitz before Auschwitz, no one can now retell Auschwitz after Auschwitz.” Clearly this is a problem for autobiographical literature, but in Wiesel’s eyes it makes fiction about the Holocaust completely impossible, as we have seen; he considers it to be an insult to the dead.9

Presser could rightfully defend himself against the accusation of being an impostor by pointing out that he never claimed the novella was autobiographical. That argument was less to the point, though not untrue, in the case of another well-known Dutch author accused of being an impostor. The author Carl Friedman (1952–2020) made her debut in 1991 with a collection of interrelated short stories, *Tralievader* (*Nightfather*), depicting how it was to grow up as a child of a concentration camp survivor. Her second book, *Twee koffers vol* (*The shovel and the loom*), made into a film titled *Left Luggage*, was about a girl working as an au pair with an orthodox Jewish family in Antwerp burdened by the father’s wartime trauma. It led the critics and the readers to believe that she was of Jewish descent herself and that her first book was entirely autobiographical. Actually, it was, and she does not state or even suggest anywhere that her father was imprisoned in the unnamed camp for being Jewish. However, when critics assumed that she autobiographically described the experiences of the Jewish second generation, she didn’t deny that either. She was, by the way, married to a Jewish man, whose name she kept after her divorce, and she had acquired in-depth knowledge of Judaism, considering it her own religion. When in 2005 it became known that she had grown up in a Roman Catholic family and that her father had been in a camp as a political prisoner, a scandal was born. She lost her position as a columnist and basically her literary career was cut short. With her death in 2020 came a kind of

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rehabilitation, as in articles in her memory, most authors stressed the impressive literary quality of her work.

Claude Lanzmann attacked not only Presser as a literary writer – it was never about his work as a historian – but also fellow filmmakers, most notably Steven Spielberg, who undoubtedly made the best-known Holocaust film ever with \textit{Schindler’s List} (1993). This feature film is based on a novel by Thomas Keneally, \textit{Schindler’s Ark}, who in turn used a survivor’s testimony for his novel. Yet the film aroused Lanzmann’s wrath. He explicitly held the view that his own representation of the Holocaust, in his nine-hour documentary \textit{Shoah} (1985), was the only proper, honorable way of approaching the subject in film. Spielberg’s film, by the way, won seven Oscars, and its takings were used for the worldwide project of recording survivors’ testimonies on videotape, resulting in 52,000 interviews in 37 languages and now expanding to the Armenian, Rwandan, Cambodian, and other genocides, as well as the Nanking Massacre, resulting in 3,000 additional interviews.

Lanzmann the filmmaker is, in my view, not completely on the same page with Lanzmann the critic. Presumably the best-known scene in his film is where the hairdresser Abraham Bomba relates how he had to cut the hair of women about to be gassed. He tells his memories in a hairdresser’s shop, busy- ing himself with cutting a male customer’s hair. This scene is totally staged – the colleagues and customers are random figurants, and you don’t even have to look closely to see that Bomba is not really cutting the customer’s hair, but that he is just making the moves and sounds with the scissors. So, Lanzmann too uses fiction to draw the audience – and presumably Bomba in the first place – into the memory of the scene in Treblinka that Bomba relates. In no way do I mean to say that Bomba’s experiences are fiction, but the setting of him telling them is fictionalized.

This staging of the scene at the hairdresser’s is obvious for anyone who resists letting him/herself be carried away by the harrowing story related by Bomba. Deeper research was needed to uncover Lanzmann’s editorial interventions in the representation of the interview he had with perpetrator Franz Suchomel. Literary scholar Erin McGlothlin carefully examined the outtakes from \textit{Shoah}. In 1996 Lanzmann donated all the raw footage of his film to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and it was the Steven Spielberg Film and Interview Archive – oh, the irony! – that took care of the digitization of the 230 hours of material, making it available for researchers and the general public alike via the museum’s website.\footnote{Cf. McGlothlin/Prager/Zisselsberger, \textit{The Construction of Testimony}.} McGlothlin has found out that by the way he edited the interview Lanzmann paints a darker portrait of Suchomel than the complete interviews warranted. The filmmaker repeatedly
omits fragments where Suchomel expresses shame and guilt and suggests that singing a “Treblinka anthem” was just an expression of his callousness rather than his response to Lanzmann’s hunt for “history”: “Sie wollen Geschichte haben und ich sag Ihnen Geschichte” (you want to have history and I’m telling you history). Thus Suchomel is not granted “the ambivalent humanity that Lanzmann wishes to deny him”, as McGlothlin phrases it. Ambiguity is erased in favor of a more unequivocal portrayal of a perpetrator who does not even seem aware of his guilt.

5 Proximity and Ownership

Another critic of the way the Shoah is treated in literature and film is Lawrence Langer. He demurred to the tendency to try and learn lessons from the Holocaust, something he observed particularly with theologians and philosophers. He calls this pursuit “exemplarist.” He detects “a persisting myth about the triumph of the spirit that colors the disaster with a rosy tinge and helps us to manage the unimaginable without having to look at its naked and ugly face.” Clearly, this goes not only for the interpreters of Holocaust texts, but also for the authors, whether survivors or not. So, Langer takes offense with Viktor Frankl, who was a survivor of Theresienstadt and Auschwitz and his conviction of the meaningfulness of suffering:

Many witnesses in the courtroom at Frankfurt [i.e., at the Auschwitz trial, BS] would have been bewildered by the scriptural finality of his proclamation that ‘if there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering.’ Frankl’s language invites, indeed requires us to dismiss the petitions of despair before we confront them.

And:

Frankl almost single-handedly invented the idea of spiritual resistance in *Man’s Search for Meaning*, a work that appeared in its original German edition right after the war and still provides millions of readers with a solace that blurs the true painful nature of the deathcamp ordeal.

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11 McGlothlin, *The Ethics of Perpetrator Representation* (minute 51 et seq.).
13 Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust*, p. 3.
Survivor authors like Jean Améry, Tadeusz Borowski, and Charlotte Delbo, on the other hand, were, in Langer’s view, able to convey the truth that concentration camp life meant a total rupture with the value systems that they – and their readers – had normally adhered to. Surprisingly, he discerns that same courageous (or ruthless) honesty in Cynthia Ozick’s work, “one of the few American writers to meet the challenge of imagining mass murder without flinching.” He juxtaposes Ozick’s fictional novellas *The Shawl* and *Rosa* with a survivor’s testimony about a comparable event and does not dismiss the fiction as inferior:

Real testimony may offer us the concrete grief and tension of the Holocaust experience as no story can possibly do, but Ozick’s narratives add a quivering intensity to that experience through vibrations that are unique to the world of fiction.


In at least one respect Langer is exceptional. Cynthia Ozick was born in New York in 1928 and thus has no direct relation to the Holocaust other than her Jewish descent. Many critics and theorists show a definite preference for autobiographical literature where the Holocaust is concerned. The effect of this fencing off the Holocaust as a literary topic only suitable for strictly testimonial literature is a kind of “ownership” of the Holocaust by survivors, which excludes even the second generation, let alone the third generation. Such “post-memory” authors, such as Jonathan Safran Foer, Arnon Grunberg, and Katja Petrowskaja, show a tendency to literary experiment. They make their distance to the event that marked their parents or grandparents into a trope in their literary work. Perhaps the best-known example is Art Spiegelman with his graphic novel *Maus*, in which Jews are represented as mice, Germans as cats, and Poles as pigs, in the way a fable depicts people with their vices and virtues. Though the form excludes it from pure factuality, the story and the various roles the animals play are totally realistic, without the exaggeration fables usually employ. In a letter to the editor, Spiegelman protested when the *New York Times* listed him in the bestseller list of fiction, arguing that *Maus* is not a work of fiction. His book must be among those the most commented on by literary scholars, who tend to be much more interested in this literature of

the second and third generation than in the generally non-experimental testimonial literature, which mainly sticks to realism and a chronological order. Yet, in general the relative proximity to the Holocaust of the second and third generation, which extends to Jewish authors in general, is an element that can count on the critics’ benevolence. So much so that it is hard to come up with a literary representation of the Holocaust written by someone who either has not been “there”, or is a descendant of someone who was “there”, or someone who is Jewish him/herself. That, however, goes only for literature from the perspective of the victims, and Carl Friedman’s case shows how complicated this criterion of proximity proves to be.

There is a growing body of fiction about Holocaust perpetrators, including Bernard Schlink’s Der Vorleser (The Reader, 1997), Jonathan Littell’s Les Bienveillantes (The Kindly Ones, 2009), Martin Amis’s Time’s Arrow (1991), and The Zone of Interest (2014), to mention only the best-known examples. Maybe this genre is less contested than Holocaust fiction from the traditional perspective of the victims because there are very few published autobiographical perpetrator texts.18 The perpetrator novels aim not so much at justification as at enlarging our understanding and our awareness that Holocaust perpetrators are not different from us. Consider the closing sentence in the introduction to The Kindly Ones, which sounds like a climax, or at least a summary of the preceding 20 pages: “I am a man like you. I tell you I am just like you!”19 There is one noteworthy exception: fiction about Hitler. Especially American authors tend to attribute supernatural qualities to him. He is represented more as satanic than as human. The perpetrator perspective is a legacy of which no one would claim exclusive ownership. In many cases the offspring of perpetrators would clearly prefer to denounce that legacy. Examples are Helga Schneider, daughter of a female camp guard, and Niklas Frank, son of the governor-general of Nazi-occupied Poland who was sentenced to death during the Nuremberg trial. The title of Frank’s memoir testifies to that: The Father: A Revenge: A Son’s Judgment on his Nazi War Criminal Father.20

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18 Most noteworthy are the autobiography of Rudolf Höss, Commandant of Auschwitz, the memoirs Eichmann wrote in prison, Götzen (in English: False gods: The Jerusalem memoirs) and the diary of Joseph Goebbels from 1923 to 1945, Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels.
19 Littell, The Kindly Ones, p. 29.
20 In German: Der Vater. Eine Abrechnung.
6 Breach of the Autobiographical Pact

The scandal caused by Binjamin Wilkomirski’s *Bruchstücke* (*Fragments*, 1995) needs to be mentioned too. This memoir by a Swiss author, who claimed to have survived the Holocaust as a Latvian child, was admired by readers and critics alike, until an investigative journalist, Daniel Ganzfried, discovered that the author had been a Swiss illegitimate child who had spent his early years in an orphanage. As far as I know, it remains unclear if his wartime memories were deliberately fabricated or if they are a case of “false memories”. The historian who researched the matter later observed that the work, which had been considered a masterpiece, turned into ‘kitsch’ when its historical basis proved to be false, but that instead it could have been hailed as great fiction.  

Crucial in this affair is that the “autobiographical pact”, as Philippe Lejeune terms it, has been violated. That pact is the silent agreement between writer and reader of diaries or memoirs that the narrator or main character of the story coincides with the author. Issues like memory lapses or exaggerations do not fundamentally harm the pact. What matters more is the intentions of both sender and receiver of the text.  

The case of Boudewijn Büch poses a similar matter. This Dutch author wrote a generally acclaimed novel about the death of his young son (and his own Jewish descent, to boot). Not only did he get his readers to believe him, he even convinced his closest friends, and perhaps even himself, in the end. Can we talk about a violation of the autobiographical pact if the authors genuinely believe their own “lies”? Literary critics did not denounce Büch’s novel, and for many years it has remained a hit on high school reading lists. Yet in contrast, Wilkomirski’s book has been banned from the literary realm. Presumably the difference is that Wilkomirski tells his life’s story in an allegedly historically truthful setting, while Büch’s is of an individual and more personal nature. Büch may have broken the autobiographical pact, but as a novel his book still stands, while the quality of Wilkomirski’s book is defined by its historical truth, as the shift in the judgment seems to suggest.

22 Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique*.
23 Büch, *De kleine blonde dood*.
The Tension between Fact and Fiction in Holocaust Literature

Historiography and Truth

Diametrically on the other side of the spectrum of fiction versus non-fiction is historiography. Historiography hinges on facts, or is supposed to. Historian Hayden White, however, showed how even historiography uses a certain amount of “fiction”. For instance, what is a historian’s starting point in representing a certain event? Does the Holocaust start with Hitler’s rise to power (and what exactly was the starting point of that?), with the Nuremberg laws, with 19th-century anti-Semitism, or even with medieval anti-Semitism and the Crusades? And when did it end, with the liberation of the camps, with the death of the last survivor, or is it passed on to the second and third generation? Is there still no end at all?24

In the same vein, literary scholar James E. Young points out that every reconstruction of the past entails an interpretation and contains elements of fictionality. Think, for example, of the selection of details and the assumption of chronological and/or causal connections. After all, the causes for certain events can often only be identified in hindsight and can be completely overlooked as such at the moment they occur. Although diaries, chronicles, and memoirs generally have the authority of the eyewitness, they are often less reliable as a source of information because of their lack of distance from events, and because they often have an incomplete view of them. As an example, Young gives the sometimes-flourishing cultural life in the camp or ghetto, which the chronicler or diarist considers a form of spiritual resistance to dehumanization, while we know from other sources that the Nazis sometimes encouraged such activities to distract the prisoners from the transports or to keep them quiet by allowing them their pleasures. Because of this aspect of “unreliability,” James Young reads such literary testimonies more as historical exegesis than as documentary evidence.25

Fiction has that evidential quality only to a small extent. It does not show how people at the time interpreted the events. It lacks a direct, factual link to the events, it is not genuine. Yet it does offer a form of exegesis, namely the interpretation of previous events at the time of writing. If it concerns realistic fiction, I leave obvious demands such as verisimilitude and the absence of sensationalism or sentimentalism aside for now (in the surrealism that is now often employed by second and third generation writers, matters are different and more complicated).

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24 Cf. White, Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth.
25 Cf. Young, Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust.
When we return to Elie Wiesel, in this light – literature (both fiction and autobiography) as a form of historical exegesis of past events – it would be legitimate for us to read a memoir such as Elie Wiesel’s *Night* as theodicy, as Christian theologians in particular have often done. Following the theory of the autobiographical pact one could indeed consider it a theodicy by the same person as the one whose experiences from some 12 years before it describes. There is, however, one element in many theological readings of *Night* that I as a literary scholar object to. In those interpretations one of the most crucial qualities of literature is ignored: its deliberate ambiguity.

The scene that seems to appeal most to Christian theologians is the one with the young boy who is hanged. He is emaciated and has insufficient weight to break his neck, unlike his two adult companions. So, the noose slowly strangles him, and his death struggle is drawn out. The first-person narrator hears a man behind him asking: “For God’s sake, where is God?” And from within me I heard a voice answer: ‘Where He is? This is where – hanging here from this gallows […]’. That night, the soup tasted of corpses.”

Many Christians, with Jürgen Moltmann as prime example, read this scene as a metaphor for Christ on the cross, or more broadly for the God who suffers the same pain and sorrow as his people. And the text allows this interpretation. But another reading is just as possible, and even more plausible: namely that the I-narrator witnesses the death of God. This would be in line with a previous chapter, about his arrival in Auschwitz, where he sees babies being burned alive in a pit and reflects: “Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever. […] Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul […].” But then the text continues, again inserting ambiguity: “Never shall I forget those things, even were I condemned to live as long as God Himself.”

Is the scene of the boy on the gallows a representation of the death of God or of the suffering God? It is the great power of this memoir, it is the great power of literature that both interpretations can be true at the same time. We could appeal to Wiesel’s 1994 autobiography (part 1), *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, to advocate the view that Wiesel kept his faith, damaged and changed as it may be. But we fail to pay *Night* its literary due when we narrow our reading down

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27  “Of them [the martyrs, BS] and of the dumb sacrifices it is true in a real, transferred sense, that God himself hung on the gallows, as E. Wiesel was able to say.” (Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, p. 296).
28  Wiesel, *Night*, p. 34.
29  “There is a passage in Night – recounting the hanging of a young Jewish boy – that has given rise to an interpretation bordering on blasphemy. Theorists of the idea that ‘God
to that one interpretation. Great literature resembles life itself: there are times when we can believe and fail to believe at the same time. It does not really matter if we read *Night* as a memoir or as fiction, but we should always read it as literature.

**Biography**

Bettine Siertsema is assistant professor of History at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. She specializes in Holocaust literature and testimony. In English she published articles on Etty Hillesum, literature on hiding, female Holocaust perpetrators, the “grey zone” in memoirs and fiction, and on video testimonies by Amsterdam’s diamond Jews. She co-edited *See under: Shoah. Imagining the Holocaust with David Grossman* (Brill, 2014).

In Dutch she published books on the religious views in diaries and memoirs on the concentration camps (*Uit de diepten, 2007*), on early testimonial literature of the Holocaust (*Eerste Nederlandse getuigenissen van de Holocaust 1945–1946, 2018*) and on the lives of a group of Jewish diamond workers and their families during the war (*Diamantkinderen, 2020*), which will appear in English with Palgrave Macmillan in 2022. Her essays on Holocaust literature are collected in *Verhalen van kwaad (2018)*.

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is dead’ have used my words unfairly as justification of their rejection of faith. But if Nietzsche could cry out to the old man in the forest that God is dead, the Jew in me cannot. I have never renounced my faith in God. I have risen against His justice, protested His silence and sometimes His absence, but my anger rises up within faith and not outside it.” — Wiesel, *All rivers run to the sea*, p. 91 et seq.


