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# Trabajo Fin de Grado

# Memory, Trauma and the Perpetrator Figure: Transgenerational Responses to the Holocaust in Rachel Seiffert's *The Dark Room*


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The aim of this essay is to make a small contribution to the study of Holocaust narratives in the context of the "memory boom" and the development of Trauma Studies. I have chosen to analyze Rachel Seiffert's *The Dark Room* (2001) –a novel dealing with the perpetrators' side of the story– in an attempt to redress the balance between the great variety of victim-related works and the comparatively few that deal with the victimizers. Although the situation has started to change, traumatic episodes have usually been approached in connection to the people who suffered them, while less attention has been given to the experience of and the effects on the agency that caused them. Now that literature is getting to grips with these problematic issues, new trends are emerging through which the reader can open his/her eyes to fresh perspectives on past events. The Holocaust has proven crucial in this field, precisely because of its complex nature and the effects that it had (and still has) across different generations of both victims and perpetrators.

The essay begins with an introductory section that provides a framework for my analysis of the novel. It thus focuses on the main factors leading to the "memory boom" of the 1990s and its relation to the rise of Trauma Studies. The centrality of the Holocaust in this area is emphasized, as well as its problematic representation in the artistic field, especially when it comes to fictional narratives and the perpetrator figure. I highlight the way in which traumatic experiences disrupt language, but also the need to give them narrative form in order to cope with or work through trauma. This also applies to the descendants of those that lived through traumatic events, and so, I consider those theories that point to the possibility of trauma transmission across generational lines. In the last part of the introduction, I focus on a specific literary branch of perpetration narratives that brings the "ordinary German" to the fore in order

to approach Seiffert's first novel as illustrative of this trend. *The Dark Room* –made up of three novella-length stories entitled after each protagonist's name– encompasses the experiences of three young Germans from different generations and offers the reader a multi-sided picture of how direct and indirect involvement with Nazism can affect people through time.

Following the introduction, the analysis is divided into two different sections, one dealing with the novel's treatment of the past –in "Helmut" and "Lore"– and the other related to its recreation of the present –in "Micha". One of my main concerns has to do with showing the characters' evolution and their reactions to their troublesome circumstances, as well as the extent to which individual decisions and attitudes determine the degree of their traumas. Photography is a recurrent motif in the three stories. As many critics claim, photographs play a key role in this context because of their potential to revitalize, sustain or even create memories that link the present and the past. It is important, then, to consider the use that the novel makes of photography, which is also related to the writer's choice of aesthetic and stylistic devices, as will be explained in the conclusions at the end of the essay.

## INTRODUCTION

In considering the literary works published in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, it becomes clear that literature has also shared in what has been regarded as a "memory boom", which scholars and critics date back to the 1990s. They have also tried to account for this phenomenon, which affects not only literature, but also a wide variety of fields such as physiology, psychology, science, politics, sociology, history, and the arts, to name some (Marder 1). There is no denying that, as the 20th century neared its end, there was an increasing need to look back and interpret the recent past, marked by

turbulent episodes, especially the two world wars. This has brought about an almost obsessive remembering of traumatic events and a multi-perspective analysis of their influence on the formation of people's identities. The Holocaust figures prominently in this context, as it affected every single person by questioning human nature and showing that human beings are capable of the most inhuman acts. Moreover, the Holocaust called for a rethinking of categories in an attempt to delve into the experience of the victims but also into the various degrees of responsibility for this unprecedented massacre against humanity.

Interestingly, Jay Winter argues that the numerous commemorative events, monuments and tributes to the victims that suffered the horrors of the Holocaust inevitably bring to mind, shape, and can even distort the collective memory of a specific nation or group (365). Commemoration is just another way of bearing witness to what happened but, in Winter's words, commemorative practices also suggest that someone seems to "have the right and the need to tell us through commemoration how to remember the past" (368-69). Thus, the "memory boom" relates to a sustained attempt to provide answers to difficult questions, which are more often than not open to debate, as they especially deal with the highly problematic issue of "how best to remember the traumatic instances that had punctuated [twentieth-century] history" (Rossington and Whitehead 5).

Rossington and Whitehead (5-10) point to five main factors that account for the "memory boom" of 1990s, namely: 1) the appearance of Yosef Yerushalmi's *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (1982) and Pierre Nora's "Between Memory and History" (in *Les Lieux de Mémoire,* 1984; trans. 1989) as two remarkable studies for their pioneering contribution to the work on memory; 2) the 1990s controversy arising out of what was called False Memory Syndrome (FMS), concerning allegedly

untruthful accounts or false recollections of sexual harassment in childhood, which brought to the fore important questions about the powers of remembrance, forgetfulness, suggestion and repression; 3) developments in the field of postcolonial studies and criticism, led by figures like Gayatri C. Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha, who followed and expanded the postulates of Frantz Fanon several decades before in claiming anti-colonialist memories to be a powerful weapon to fight against the dictates of the empire and the dominant political discourse; 4) the force gained by poststructuralism, with the works of key theorists like Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, who were reluctant to endow memory and language with the quality of being reliable sources of information about reality; 5) and last, but not least, the quick development of Trauma Studies in the 1990s as a most important factor contributing and inextricably related to the "memory boom", with the Holocaust as its central area of research.

It was precisely in the context of this "memory boom" that trauma narratives began to flourish and contribute to the field of Trauma Studies by means of both autobiographical and fictional accounts. Since the publication of their seminal works on trauma and memory in the last decade of the 20$^{th}$ century, Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman have been considered by many to be the forerunners of trauma analysis as applied to the field of literature in relation to psychoanalysis. Drawing on Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Caruth pleads that literature serves two complementary purposes to the field of Trauma Studies, which Marder (3) summarizes as follows: on the one hand, it allows writers to testify to their own personal experiences or subjective truths, which add new knowledge and prospects to the mere historical account of events whose objective representation is in itself unattainable; and, on the other hand, it turns us readers into witnesses of previously silenced voices that now

have also something to say, even if they are, I would add, the disturbing voices of the perpetrators.

These and other critics were well aware of the thorny field of study they were facing when trying to define trauma and approach it in connection to textual representation, especially with regard to the representation of the Holocaust: language proved to some extent unable or not enough to convey the complexities and abstractions attending, above all others, Holocaust-related trauma. In fact, when it comes to the Holocaust, the first difficulty lies in choosing a term to name what some regard as unnamable. The Nazi atrocities are variously referred to as "Holocaust" (*i.e.* a burnt offering to the gods/God), "Shoah" (*i.e.* catastrophe), or "genocide" (that is, the extermination of a national, racial, political, or cultural group). However, none of these terms is unanimously regarded as suitable because of their implicit meanings, respectively hinting at religiousness, natural causes or lack of purpose, and anonymity or non-specific agency (Martínez-Alfaro, "Historia, trauma y literatura" 10-12). One must also bear in mind that, as Martínez-Alfaro points out, the Holocaust did not only involve the extermination of the Jewish community but also that of the Gypsies, homosexuals, free-thinkers, opponents to the Nazi regime, disabled people, and everyone tagged as "unworthy" according to Nazi standards (14). However, much emphasis has been given to the Jewish subject, probably because six out of eleven million victims were Jews. This problematic simplification regarding the identity of the victims is one among many other knotty issues, like the questions not only about the legitimacy of writing on such a touchy subject but also about who must or must not write about it. In addition to this, is it morally admissible to write fiction on the matter, thus taking the risk of trivializing evil and extreme human suffering? How can a

fictional text contribute to a general understanding and shaping of the Holocaust and what devices should be used to convey what happened? Are words enough?

Ann Parry refers to the Holocaust as a "caesura", defined as "a radical break that necessitates a re-thinking of the relation between past, present and future, as well as completely reconstituting ideas about evil and what it is to be human" (249). This caesura stands for a pause that separates the time before and after the Holocaust and can also be related to the period of silence following the event, illustrative in important respects of the linguistic loss that goes with trauma as well as of its belated nature. Survivors and post-war society in general wanted to forget the horrors of the Holocaust. However, this silence did not quell harrowing feelings ranging from shame, guilt, and confusion, to fear and pain, not to mention many survivors' conviction that their personal stories would not be listened to, understood or believed. In the artistic field, silence was also advocated as the most ethical response. And yet, after this initial (advocacy of) silence, the autobiographical accounts of survivors like Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, Jorge Semprún, and Jean Améry broke new ground and promoted the genre of testimony as a vehicle for keeping the memory of the Holocaust alive.

Second and third-generation writers, or what Marianne Hirsch calls "the generation after" ("The Generation of Postmemory" 105), also felt the need to tell their accounts so as to give voice to their experience and enrich present and future generations' collective memories. To an important extent, this is connected with the so-called "transgenerational transmission of trauma" (107). Though the notion is contested by some, the phrase refers to the possibility of trauma being transmitted across generational lines. As Hirsch explains (107), the descendants of survivors can be affected by their forebears' traumas and suffer from what is known as "survivors' syndrome", either as a result of too much exposure to or too much silence over the

traumatic subject. The disconnection that places descendants' non-experienced memories somewhere between history and memory is at the core of Hirsch's notion of "post-memory", which involves a connection to the past "not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (107). Thus, for the generation after, writing about the Holocaust can also be seen as a way to cope with their own traumas, even if they did not experience the traumatizing events themselves.

The most problematic area is, by far, that of Holocaust fiction, but the voices of writers with no personal connection with the Holocaust, whom Geoffrey H. Hartman calls "witnesses by adoption" (qtd. in Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory" 114), should not be downplayed, as some of them contribute to our knowledge of the subject and open our eyes to other perspectives by dealing, for instance, with the other side of the coin: Holocaust perpetrators and their descendants. Fiction focused on the victims' "others" should be thought of as a way of adding more layers to our collective memories, while also raising awareness of human evil and posing ethical questions. It may seem daring to give voice to the perpetrator's experience in fiction, and writers who do so run the risk of being accused of immoral practices and of disrespect to the victims and their suffering. The reader usually tends to empathize with the protagonist or narrator of the story, which opens the possibility of problematic identification and other dangers, such as confusing understanding with exculpation. Interestingly, what many of these works do, more often than not, is to turn away from the stereotypical image of the German agent as monstrous and to present perpetrators as ordinary people with human qualities, capable of loving and caring for their relatives even if they committed terrible acts. This shift in the conception of the perpetrator is related to what Hannah Arendt calls "the banality of evil" (287), as part of a theory that she developed after witnessing the Eichmann trial and realizing that he was not a monster, not

perverted or sadistic, but rather "terribly and terrifyingly normal" (257). This suggests that perpetrators could have felt the conflict between their work duties and their home life, a clash that can also be traumatizing. Moreover, if survivors' descendants can suffer from survivors' syndrome, it is feasible for perpetrators' descendants and even the Germans as a whole to have inherited a potentially traumatizing feeling of guilt that comes with the knowledge of their forebears' atrocities, even if the scholarly attention paid to this subject is not comparable to the research done in the field of victim trauma.

Fiction, I would argue, is a powerful tool to enquire into these gray areas, especially when it comes to the perpetration of evil and its relation to trauma. Froma I. Zeitlin approaches these issues by analyzing three novels dealing with Germans who are not perpetrators in the strict sense of the term (they do not commit crimes) but who are affected by Nazism by living in what she calls "the land of the perpetrators" (214). Among them, she discusses Rachel Seiffert's *The Dark Room* (2001) as a good example of "a new and more risky trend in Holocaust literature away from the victims to the victimizers" (213). Even if these novels deal with ordinary citizens in Nazi Germany, or living in the shadow of the Nazi past, they help the contemporary reader understand a perspective that had been generally neglected so far. These stories are noteworthy for their blending of history and fiction, the presentation of "fragments of quotidian realities" (218), the interconnection between family, history, and memory, and the preference for believable characters over stereotypes, all this in connection with the victims' "others". But what is particularly interesting about *The Dark Room*, and thus makes it unique, is its "more limited focus on a child of each generation across a time span of eighty years", covering the timeline from 1921 to the late 1990s (214).

My analysis of Rachel Seiffert's novel intends to contribute to the study of what this work epitomizes: the literary trend that brings an unconventional perpetrator −the

ordinary German− to the limelight, this being an aspect of the Holocaust not often explored in English literature.[1] To me, one of the most interesting aspects of *The Dark Room* is its triptych-like composition. Its being made up of three different and apparently disconnected novellas –"Helmut", "Lore", and "Micha"– allows the work to deal with the traumatic experience of Nazism from the perspectives of different generations of Germans, which in turn makes it easier for the reader to reflect on the scope of the tragedy and its consequences through time, also for those who were not victims or descendants of victims. I will divide my analysis into two sections: 1) the novel's treatment of the past, made up of the chronologically consecutive stories of Helmut and Lore (from 1921 to 1945); and 2) the contemporary quest of Micha, set in the 1990s (Seiffert's present when she wrote the book).

## WARTIME AND THE IMMEDIATE POST-WAR PERIOD: "HELMUT" AND "LORE"

The first story in *The Dark Room* takes place between 1921 (the main character's year of birth) and 1945, but is especially focused on wartime Berlin. The protagonist of "Helmut" stands for those in the first generation of Germans who staunchly defended and fought for the Nazi ideology until the very end of the war. Helmut's connection to perpetration lies in his loyal support of the Führer and the practices of the German military. His parents join the Nazi Party but, as Helmut was born with a birth defect in his arm, he cannot enroll in the army, which deeply disappoints him and embarrasses his father. This disability makes him "unfit", as he is well below the standards of Aryan perfection and close to some of the targets of Hitler's regime. His Hitlerian fanaticism, then, only enhances his blindness. It is this fanaticism that makes his non-severe

[1] It is German writers that have most notably contributed to this literary trend. Even if all the writers discussed by Zeitlin in her article have family roots or connections with Germany or the Holocaust, Rachel Seiffert (the daughter of an *Australian father* and a *German mother*) is the only one that is English, the others being Marcie Hershman (North-American) and Gila Lustiger (German-Jewish).

disability traumatizing: it renders him unable both to serve his homeland and please his parents, a fact he tries to cope with by taking photographs of wartime Berlin after he starts working for the photographer Gladigau. However, his failure to understand and judge what is taking place suggests that his obsession with photo quality and with becoming really successful at something is, firstly, a compensation mechanism to fit within German society and please other people (his neighbors, the school, his parents, Gladigau…), and, secondly, a screen that hides a trauma ultimately caused by an ideology that makes him feel "unworthy". In Zeitlin's words, "Helmut's patriotism is born not out of conviction, but as a desire to affirm an identity he cannot fully claim" (216).

The fact that Seiffert makes Helmut a photographer is relevant in many respects, since, the way I see it, pictures are a symbol for his mind: neither pictures nor Helmut are able to explain reality in a truthful manner. The photographs he takes resemble Helmut's incompetent interpretation of the worsening political situation in a nearly defeated Germany. Photographs in this story are shown to be unreliable sources of information about reality: the yearly family portraits that Gladigau takes always hide Helmut's crooked arm, and the documentary photographs that Helmut takes of the city are often out of focus or superficial, masking and trivializing the real horrors of the war. That pictures are misleading is precisely what Susan Sontag suggests when she claims that photographs stand for "an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal" (qtd. in Tollance 290), which turns paradoxical the view that photography constitutes "an art easily associated with realism" (289). Even if photographs contextualize personal narratives and link them with history, they are untruthful images, as illusory and defective as Helmut's attempt to cover his trauma. The fact that his efforts are self-deceptive throws light on his fragmented personality, which traps him in ruined Berlin.

In addition, Seiffert denies Helmut a voice, in contrast to the other two stories where main characters express themselves by means of dialogue or inner thought. The reader must rely on the external narrator in order to know Helmut, which distances him/her from a character who is never seen as rationally or ethically questioning his world. This "derealization" that evidences "the author's manipulations" in style (Suleiman 9) was probably a conscious choice on the writer's part. It points to the confusion and inability to cope with such a disturbing reality in those difficult times −especially when it comes to the experience of a youth who knows no other political system than the Nazi regime– while simultaneously leaving to the reader the task of interpreting and passing judgment not only on the character, but also on what he fails to see.

Eventually, Helmut achieves his goal at the age of 24, just before Berlin is invaded and the war is about to end: as no other men are available, he is finally admitted into military service together with other cripples and cast-offs. Even if "the vast Soviet army and the Mongol hordes" approach, Helmut is "confident of victory" and determined "to remember it all, the best time of his life" (Seiffert 60). Unsurprisingly, he immortalizes this moment by taking a group photo which captures an image of him "doing something which he never did in any of the other pictures lovingly printed by Gladigau" in the past: smile (63). And yet, this smile is but a measure of his ignorance. It is in the following story that ignorance starts changing into something else, as will be explained next.

"Lore" −the second story in the book− starts when "Helmut" ends, in early 1945, just after the war is over. Lore is a twelve-year-old girl who finds herself charged with the responsibility of taking her four younger siblings from her family home in Bavaria to her grandmother's in Hamburg. As children of Party members, they are left alone

after the disappearance of their Waffen SS father and the arrest and consequent imprisonment of their mother by the Allied forces. At one point during their hazardous journey, marked by hunger and misery, they are joined by Thomas, who claims to be a survivor of the Buchenwald camp. His real identity remains unclear, but his probable (though never confirmed) Jewishness accentuates Lore's confusion, as the children's well-being very much depends, from that moment, on someone she has been taught to regard as infrahuman and dangerous.

In contrast to Helmut, who shows no psychical evolution or guilt for Nazi crimes, Lore goes through different stages: from a blind faith in Nazism (like Helmut's) to an increasing awareness of the horrors of the war and a critical and emotional reaction to what she sees and learns. In fact, she realizes that all she was led to believe during the war years is nothing but a fallacy and thus hides in silence: she makes sure her siblings do not tell anyone about their parents and refuses to answer many of their questions in order to avoid existential inquiry. Lore is more prone to inner reflection than to verbalization –a protective wall she builds in order to (unsuccessfully) cope with a traumatic experience– and this silence is in the end replicated by her siblings. Thus, after going through the death of her brother Jochen and the disappearance of Thomas, "Lore doesn't speak about Jochen, or Thomas, and neither do Liesel or Jüri" (Seiffert 200).

Photography is still central in this novella, but now it plays a different role. "Helmut" is concerned with "the photographer's moral gaze" (Rau 301), questioned by the protagonist's detachment from the significance of the viewfinder's target. In "Lore", the concern is rather with "the photography's effect on the audience" (301), as the story's protagonist reacts to (and judges) incriminatory photographs. As Hirsch explains, the Nazis flattered themselves that they made visual recordings of their crimes

as a way to immortalize the moment and assert their superiority ("Surviving Images" 7). Hirsh establishes, in this context, a parallelism between the camera and "the weapon" (21) –after all, both of them shoot in comparable ways. Therefore Helmut, as a Nazi-minded photographer coldly capturing the horrors of the war, can be seen as guilty and responsible in this sense, since "the camera is in the exact same position as the gun and the photographer in the place of the executioner who remains unseen" (24). In the case of Lore, the act of looking at pictures of the atrocities committed by the perpetrators disturbs her, above all, because she is one of them, they are her people, even her family. What is relevant here is that "the viewer is positioned in the place identical with the weapon of destruction" (24), which accounts for Lore feeling like an accomplice, guilty by association.

Lore's encounter with incriminating images gradually makes her feel the burden of guilt that she will have to bear upon her shoulders: her mother had asked her to burn or bury every compromising picture in their family album; looking at newspaper photographs, she notices that men accused of criminal practices wear the same uniform as her father; and the Allies' poster campaigns, aimed at showing to all Germans the extermination carried out in concentration camps, definitely help her open her eyes because "the pictures are of skeletons, Lore can see that now" (Seiffert 103). Photographs like these –of corpses or emaciated camp inmates– were in fact taken by the Allies in real life and publicly exhibited in cities and villages as part of a campaign aimed at implanting collective guilt in Germany. In any case, the citizens' response to them in the story is either secrecy –as when Lore is told to stop looking at them and go away, for "there is nothing here for you to see" (104)− or denial –Lore hears a boy saying that "the people in those photos are actors" (175). Lore's initial confusion as to what these pictures mean makes her face an existential crisis, since she loses her sense

of identity. Her progress can be related to Pascale Tollance's argument about the contradictory role of photography: while photography "seeks closure and an escape from emotions", it also "exposes the viewer or reader to fragmentation, uncertainty, and lets emotions loose", which means that it can lead to "emotional paralysis" but also to a gradual departure from it (289), as is the case with Lore's evolution. In a world of destruction, suspicion, lies, and death, Lore's traumatic experience consists in opening her eyes to "both the history of her people and her own family history" (Pividori 84). Leaving behind her initial bewilderment and emotional numbness, Lore understands, and suffering comes with that understanding. She eventually finds her grandmother but, far from providing answers, she keeps silent about Lore's parents and German crimes. The story ends some time after that, with Lore crying alone, her eyes "streaming bitter tears" (Seiffert 217). The knowledge she has so painfully acquired is coupled with her wish to forget, to repress what she knows. In the last story, the protagonist will do the opposite: trying to find out the truth, determined to unbury a silenced past, even if it hurts.

**COMING TO TERMS WITH THE PAST: "MICHA"**

Set in the late 1990s, the third and last section of *The Dark Room* moves the action forward in time. This novella deals with the third generation of Germans (the one Seiffert belongs to) and the way in which they try to negotiate the past of their country and, sometimes, their family past –for some time buried in silence as "Lore" shows. In this sense, "Micha" provides a "portrait of the transgenerational haunting of a silenced past" (Martínez-Alfaro, "This is my Opa" 120) and throws light on the work of post-memory as affecting perpetrators' descendants.

Micha is a thirty-year-old teacher of English who is eager to break the silence advocated by his family and find out the truth about his grandfather, who died when he

was only a child and whom he suspects of taking part in Nazi crimes. During one of his visits to his grandmother, she tells him that his grandfather Askan did not return home until 1954 because he was Waffen SS and was imprisoned by the Russians after the war. Micha learns then about his Opa's being a member of the SS elite military force, but when he tries to find out more, he is discouraged by the silence and repression of his relatives. The two preceding generations of his family choose to remember Askan as a good husband and father, and reject to ponder on his involvement with Nazism. This opens a breach between them and Micha: he distances himself from his parents, stops visiting his grandmother, and frequently engages in strong arguments with his sister and with his pregnant girlfriend, Mina. "Micha" is the story of the protagonist's obsession with dismantling the "family myth, best represented in the story by the photo album that Micha's grandmother treasures" and where all pictures are happy (Martínez-Alfaro, "This is my Opa" 122).

Again, photography is a key motif, but now it works as a link not only between family and national histories, but also between the past and the present in a way that highlights the gaps in the middle, information gaps, gaps in the photo album, etc. Micha starts his quest by looking for his grandfather in visual archives on the Holocaust. However, these disturbing images do not help since, as happens with the photographs in the family album, they "conceal as much as [they] reveal" (Hirsch, "Surviving Images" 14): photographs acknowledge and evidence a real past while they simultaneously give us "only a partial, and thus perhaps a misleading, knowledge about [that] past" (15). For Micha, this could mean that, just as some pictures and videos conceal what Hitler was, his photos of his grandfather may conceal that he was a murderer. Micha fails in his attempt to spot his Opa in book illustrations and video recordings, but he manages to establish a connection between a film clip of Hitler and the photographs of his

grandfather. Surrounded by kids at his mountain home, the Führer appears as a loving uncle "who doesn't look at the camera, only at the child" (Seiffert 259). Askan's eyes similarly keep staring at his grandson, avoiding the camera in the photographs Micha keeps. This coincidence strikes and upsets Micha in a way that recalls Roland Barthes' notion of the photograph's *punctum* (Rau *passim*). In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes defines *punctum* as a specific detail in a picture that becomes the viewer's sudden focus of interest, and with it comes "a puncture", a click which abruptly "overwhelms the entirety of my reading", thus changing the viewer's interpretation and reaction to the image on the basis of the subjective meaning given to one particular item or element in it (49). Thus, what could be an insignificant detail –the filmed or photographed person's averting his gaze from the camera– becomes a *punctum* for Micha, who reads it as an index of guilt which changes the way he sees Askan. The loving memories of his grandfather are tainted by the fact that, on his mind, "*sometimes he's a Nazi now*" (Seiffert 245, original italics) and this makes him feel "guilt by association" (Berberich 242).

Micha's quest lasts a year and a half, approximately. He travels to a village in Belarus more than once, as this was the place where his grandfather spent the last part of the war. There, Micha seeks for someone who can recognize Askan in a photo and at last meets Jozef Kolesnik and his wife Elena. The first journey is of no avail because of the characters' omissions and negations: Micha hides his real reasons for being there and Jozef hides the fact that he was a Nazi collaborator. The second trip proves more successful as they tell the truth, but their conversations convey the difficulty to deal with guilt, shame, responsibility and the fear of being blamed or misunderstood. Jozef's narrative is significantly fragmented because of the nature of what he tells, and because he speaks in German with Micha, which is not his mother tongue. As Frie remarks, the

German language's "relation to the past cannot be underestimated: German is the language of traumatic memory" (215). Jozef does not soften the account of his collaborationism and does not regret what he did: as "I was hungry" and "orders were orders", "I chose to kill" (Seiffert 345). Unlike him, his wife Elena is an ambiguous character because she stands both for the victims –she had to hide from the Germans, the partisans, and the Russians in order to survive− and the victimizers −her brother and husband were collaborators and she has been ostracized for that all her life. She cannot speak German, so she is rendered unable to talk with Micha and remains silent all through the narrative. In line with Sara Horowitz's central tenet in *Voicing the Void: Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Fiction* (1997), Elena illustrates the way in which silence and muteness figure prominently in Holocaust narratives, as related to both traumatized survivors and perpetrators.

The more Micha finds out about his grandfather, the more he needs to distance himself from perpetration, which accounts for his refusal to pose with Jozef and Elena in the pictures he takes of them. Significantly, and as Micha notices, Jozef does not look at the camera when a picture is taken. This reinforces his theory that perpetrators avert their gazes, and thus he regards his grandfather's guilt as more and more likely. When Micha finally shows Jozef a picture of Askan, he remembers him, but not as one of the men who refused to shoot people. This was Micha's only hope, that his grandfather was among the very few who refused to kill.

In the end, Micha's attitude evolves from an obsessive wish to detach himself from perversion to resignation and acceptance of both his present and his family past. This evolution illustrates what Berberich calls "coming to terms with the past", which she defines as a process that does not imply "*closure*" but an acknowledgement of (and reconciliation with) "both sides of the coin": perpetrator and victim (237). It is in this

light that one can interpret Micha's final visit to Elena in Belarus after he learns about Jozef's death, and also his decision to resume his visits to his grandmother, interrupted on account of his discoveries. Eventually, Micha realizes that the past cannot be changed and that it cannot be fully known, either. Neither anger nor hate make life any easier for him, so he finds ways to cope with guilt (his grandfather's, his country's) and reconcile himself with a past that must be faced, and accepted.

## CONCLUSIONS

The growing engagement with trauma that the world of arts has shown since the late twentieth century is inextricably related to the "boom" of a concern with memory and the urge to remember a traumatic past. It seems that, after several decades of silence and painful repression, the time has come to face the wounds caused by tragedies such as the Holocaust. In contrast to science and other specialized fields of study dealing with trauma, history, etc., one of the arts' major achievements has been their ability to bring ordinary people closer to such disturbing events in order to raise both individual and collective awareness. The literary and film industries, in particular, have proved especially successful in accomplishing this task, although it is only recently that they started to show a sustained attempt to present different, more innovative, perspectives by bringing into focus not, or not only, the (often Jewish) victim, but also the perpetrator. This is the case with films such as Claude Lanzmann's documentary *Shoah* (1985), which critically presents both sides of the coin, Tim Blake Nelson's *The Grey Zone* (2001), Oliver Hischbiegel's *Der Untergang* (*Downfall*, 2004), Chanoch Ze'evi's *Hitler's Children* (2011), a documentary about how family members of high rank Nazi officers cope with that burden, and Cate Shortland's *Lore* (2013), based on the second story in *The Dark Room*. The same goes for novels such as Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow* (1991), Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser* (*The Reader*, 1995), Jonathan Safran

Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), and Jonathan Littell's *Les bienveillantes* (*The Kindly Ones*, 2007). In this context, a new literary trend focused on representing the lives and traumas of ordinary Germans and the workings of post-memory in them is gaining force today, together with other developments like the emphasis on children's and youths' perspectives —as can be seen in recent works like Rachel Seiffert's *The Dark Room* (2001) and Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2005).

Seiffert's novel explores the various degrees in which young people are able to negotiate things like responsibility ("Helmut"), culpability ("Lore"), and acceptance or forgiveness ("Micha"). To do so, she makes of photography a recurrent motif as part of her attempt to delve into the connection between trauma and memory and their effects through time. Pictures recurrently appear in the three stories but, interestingly, the novel's title already foreshadows the importance of photography: a "dark room" is the chamber where photographs are developed, as Helmut's physically existent cellar; it is the world itself, obscure and shadowy, where Lore desperately tries to survive; but it is also a metaphor for a place to be forgotten because of its disturbing and painful contents, as illustrated by the silenced history of Micha's family past. To this, Pascale Tollance adds that the dark room "is also the book itself, a closed space producing images in a sparse, descriptive style that could be termed 'photographic'" (289). Indeed, the text is made up of short paragraphs separated by blank spaces and this is a structure that reminds of a photo album, as if each paragraph showed the reader a mental picture or a frozen moment of the story that is being told. To the effects of this disrupted (and pseudo-modernist, it could be argued) style, one should add those created by the narrative's continuous present tense, "as if a hypothetical gaze was describing the scene just as one describes pictures by means of captions" (Martínez-Alfaro, "This is my Opa" 120). Seiffert's apparently simple style is made more complex, as Pividori

suggests, by the way in which heterodiegetic narration is interspersed with dialogue and characters' thoughts. The latter are often conveyed in free indirect style (always rendered in italics) to give the reader a more direct access to the characters' minds, thus adding dramatic emotion to their feelings, reflections and insights (82). Moreover, the incapability of using words to express one's feelings, the fragmentation of language that goes with traumatic experiences and traumatic memories, also find an echo in Seiffert's style −characterized by the frequent recourse to hyphens, periods, broken rhythms, ellipses, repetitions, and gaps.

It is precisely by using a style which prevents the narrative from flowing smoothly that Seiffert manages to reflect formally what is being told at the level of contents. What is more, these contents and the novel's structure can also be said to work in the same direction, since Seiffert arranges the three sections chronologically in order to highlight a temporal evolution conveyed by the way in which the main characters' attitudes change from one story to the next: Helmut's ideas remain unaltered, anchored in the past; Lore starts to see the truth as time goes by; and Micha eventually accepts his past and his present so as to make a better future possible. Besides, it is not only the novel's handling of the passage of time that illustrates this, but also its treatment of space: Helmut obstinately stays in Berlin, just as he is stuck in his beliefs; Lore makes a difficult journey from her native Bavaria to a new place to live, just as she painfully advances from ignorance to understanding; and Micha starts a back and forth quest, moving from the present to the past and back again, just as he travels between his hometown and Belarus until his contradictory feelings find some measure of reconciliation. The characters' evolution is also the evolution of the German nation, and perhaps of us all: from blindness, to a painful understanding that was initially silenced,

and, in the end, to a necessary attempt to give voice to and come to terms with a past that should not be forgotten.

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