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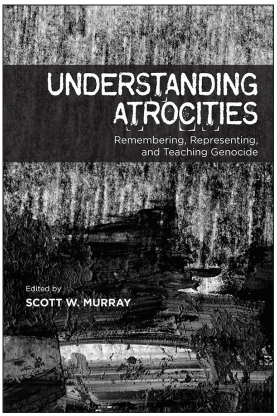

UNDERSTANDING ATROCITIES: REMEMBERING, REPRESENTING, AND TEACHING GENOCIDE

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Thinking About Nazi Atrocities Without Thinking About Nazi Atrocities: Limited Thinking as Legacy in Schlink's *The Reader*

Lorraine Markotic

> I love the old questions. Ah the old questions, the old answers, there's nothing like them![1]
>
> —Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*

> Only one who recognizes the new as the same will serve that which would be different.
> [Nur wer das Neueste als Gleiches erkennt, dient dem, was verschieden wäre.][2]
>
> —Theodor Adorno, *Reflexionen zur Klassentheorie*

Introduction

The extent to which Nazi genocidal murderers thought about and reflected upon what they did has been a question and a concern at least since Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* portrayed Eichmann as a fairly mindless, even if overzealous, bureaucrat.[3]

Bettina Stangneth's more recent response to Arendt, *Eichmann Before Jerusalem*, shows that Eichmann was actually an ardent and active believer in National Socialist ideas.[4] Eichmann's on-trial presentation of himself as someone who simply obeyed orders, as merely a "cog in the machine," was a calculated pose, Stangneth argues. In fact, Eichmann seems to have read and dismissed the philosophies of Kant and Nietzsche for being too internationally oriented—in other words, for having universal principles.[5] Christopher R. Browning also denies that Eichmann was a mere cog in the machine but shows that the Nazi murder apparatus did have many such cogs, many ordinary Germans, who were willing to kill Jews, believing that they should co-operatively "do their part," and who allowed this belief to override their moral and physical qualms.[6]

It is interesting, therefore, that Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*, a novel concerned with the Shoah, an influential book that was translated into almost forty languages, actively discourages thinking. As well as constitutively proscribing certain questions, it has a narrator who—though presented as thoughtful and reflective—does not think much or, if he does think, only thinks about certain things and only in a limited way. Of course, *The Reader* is a work of fiction; but this work of fiction is one of the most widely read Holocaust novels in the world. It is regarded as an important pedagogical tool: the book has been used to teach A-level and university students in Britain, to teach German courses in the United States, and to teach advanced high school (*Gymnasium*) students in Germany. To what extent the Nazi perpetrators—whether Eichmann or the "ordinary Germans" who pulled triggers—did or did not *think* is clearly an important issue. Hence, an internationally successful work about the Shoah that manifests limited thinking on the part of its first-person narrator and which itself intrinsically inhibits questioning—while at the same time representing the protagonist and the novel itself as reflective—clearly calls for further examination. Although *The Reader* does not directly aid us in understanding atrocities, it unwittingly teaches us to be suspicious and distrustful of our thinking precisely when we think about, represent, and remember genocide.

Context and Limited Thinking

The reception of *The Reader* was, in the astonished words of Ursula Mahlendorf, "nothing short of amazing."[7] The novel was welcomed enthusiastically, both in Germany and abroad, in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Die Zeit*, *Der Spiegel*, *Le Monde*, the *Observer*, and the *New York Times Book Review*, among others. Acclaim for the book emphasized its exploration of the imbrications of evil, especially the fact that it presents a perpetrator, Hanna Schmitz, who seems not simply evil, but someone with whom one might empathize—even while one condemns her actions. The main problem, the obvious problem, however, is that *The Reader* presents us with a Nazi perpetrator whose actions stem from her unusual situation: her illiteracy. In other words, not only does the novel seem to explain Hanna's behaviour; at some level, it seems to *excuse* it. Cogent critics of the book, among them Cynthia Ozcik, Ian Samsom, and William Donahue, were quick to point out that *The Reader* makes too easy the slide between empathizing with Hannah's motives and excusing Hannah's atrocities.[8] Here I am less interested in Hanna,[9] however, than I am in Michael Berg, *Der Vorleser* (the person who reads aloud), the narrator to whom the German-language title refers (something lost in the English-language translation, *The Reader*, which could eventually refer to Hanna as well). Michael does think, but only in a very limited way, and the book does seem to encourage reflection, but ultimately does not do so.

The Reader is a work of what Germans call *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, the process of coming to terms with, or mastering the past. The novel ostensibly explores the relationship between the generation that lived during the Nazi regime and the postwar generation, and the insistence of the latter upon *Aufarbeitung* (reappraisal; working-through) of the National Socialist past. In my view, however, *The Reader* fails to confront National Socialism in any genuine way because of the restricted manner in which the narrator thinks. Of course, one cannot think about everything. But since Michael, the narrator, claims to be concerned with confronting Nazi atrocities and with understanding those who lived and acted during the Nazi regime, there are certain things about which one would expect him to think, certain things that plainly should occur to him. For *The Reader* is filled with the narrator's reflections, ruminations, associations, thoughts chasing down other thoughts, musings on motives, ponderings about

decisions and actions, and the relationship between the two. Michael repeatedly questions, but there are certain questions he does not ask, certain things about which he does not think.

Precisely in his thoughtlessness, Michael resembles the way the Nazi generation behaved both during and after the National Socialist reign—despite Michael's preoccupation with the rift between the two generations. Again, one cannot prescribe how someone should think—certainly not a character in a novel—but one can measure such thinking against the way that thinking is presented, either by them, or in the case of fictional beings, by the literary work. Michael's thinking is limited in ways that undercut his alleged concerns. He can, of course, simply be regarded as an unreliable narrator. Certainly, Michael's view is skewed.[10] But here I focus on Michael not as an unreliable narrator, which he definitely is, but on Michael as an "unthinking" narrator, a narrator whose thinking is restricted, and whose thinking excludes as well as misinterprets. I address what Michael's reflections clearly omit. Michael is, in fact, exceedingly introspective, and draws us in with his ponderings and deliberations. But just because a character has thoughts running through his head, thoughts he pursues and returns to and revaluates, does not mean he is doing that much thinking. Just because a character notes that there are no easy answers, does not mean he is considering complexities. And even though a character poses question after question, this does not mean he is questioning; neither does it mean that there are not many more questions that he does not ask even though he may console us with his questioning, something I return to at the end of this chapter.[11]

As a young man, Michael and his generation actively protest and seek to break the taboo-like silence that, during the postwar years, cordoned off the period of National Socialism. Unsurprisingly, he and his generation regard themselves as distinct from their parents, the generation that refuses to talk about the Nazi period and which, for the most part, repudiates it.[12] But the older Michael, who narrates events, himself tends to repress, deny, and simply ignore critical questions and conspicuous concerns. The novel purports to be, and has been regarded as being, both an *Auseinandersetzung*, an attempt to come to terms with the past, and an exploration of the intergenerational conflict in Germany. Unfortunately, it is neither. *The Reader* does not explore the Nazi genocide in more than a shallow and self-centred manner, and it refuses to think about the ways in which the

postwar generation assimilated aspects of Nazi "thinking"—including its limited nature.

Continuity

The Reader presents us with an account written by Michael Berg as a middle-aged man who relates his earlier encounters with Hanna Schmitz. During the 1950s, as a young boy of fifteen, Michael has a relationship with Hanna, who is thirty-six. He seems to fall in love with her; he visits her frequently, sometimes reads aloud to her, and they have a lot of sex (an aspect highlighted in the movie). Then Hanna suddenly disappears, leaving Michael bereft and distraught. In the second part of the book, Michael graduates from high school and goes on to study law. As a law student in the 1960s, he and some classmates are sent to observe the trial of a number of former concentration camp guards. Michael suddenly sees Hanna again. He learns that before their relationship she had been a guard at Auschwitz. Hanna is on trial for having participated in the selections at the camp and for letting several hundred Jewish prisoners burn to death. The women were on a death march and were locked in a church for the night. A bomb hit the church, and the church caught fire, but the guards did not open the locked doors and all the women, except for one mother and daughter, burned to death. Hanna is accused of having written the report that provides evidence of the guards' guilt and of being their leader. At this point, well over halfway through the novel, something suddenly hits Michael, something of which there were hints all along: Hanna is illiterate and she is deeply ashamed of her illiteracy. She could not have written the report, but she is too ashamed to admit this. Michael wrestles with whether or not to reveal Hanna's illiteracy to the judge, but ultimately does not, and part 2 ends with Hanna sentenced to life imprisonment.

As Michael recalls his student days, he depicts the feelings of condemnation his generation felt towards the generation that experienced the Nazi period. Indeed, the novel as a whole explores this intergenerational conflict, which played a significant role in German society in the 1960s. Hanna clearly represents, and Michael regards her as representing, Germany's perpetrator generation; his having been seduced by Hanna represents the postwar generation's convoluted relationship with the previous one. The novel and Michael's narrative seek to bridge the gap between the two

generations. But seeking to bridge a gap is, indubitably, a way of asserting that two things are separate and distinct. Although Michael relates that his generation objected that after the war "so many old Nazis had made careers in the courts, the administration, and the universities,"[13] he does not consider that such a persistent Nazi presence might have had an influence on him. As a man in his fifties looking back critically on the tension between the two generations, one might expect it to occur to Michael that certain attitudes, orientations, or assumptions from the Nazi period *could have been passed on to him*. A dozen years of brutal, fascistic rule—during which various atrocities were acceptable—are not going to disappear without leaving a trace. Even when Germany began to lose the war, the Nazi regime was not overthrown by the Germans; it was defeated by the Allied forces. Michael himself—not just his parent's generation—manifests a certain amount of *continuity* between aspects of the Nazi period and the time that came afterwards. It is somewhat peculiar, therefore, that Michael, a middle-aged man reflecting back on his earlier self and on the postwar period, refuses to think about any continuity between the outlook and behaviour of the Nazi generation and that of his own.

Michael seems oddly unaware that his thinking sometimes remains within the parameters of the Nazi generation. In my view, his limited thinking illustrates his limited capacity, and perhaps the limited capacity of many of his generation, for *Aufarbeitung*, for a reappraisal or working-through of the past—although this is exactly their goal. Especially during the trial of Hanna and the other guards, aspects of Michael's reflections disconcertingly resemble the thinking of the Nazi generation. The way in which Michael thinks through and formulates what happens at the trial is telling. Salient for him is the predicament in which he finds himself. He agonizes over whether he has the right to reveal Hanna's illiteracy to the court, for Hanna is deeply, deeply ashamed of not being able to read and write, and she is determined to conceal her inability. Michael's reflections, however—his deliberations with himself, his discussions of his moral dilemma with his friends and eventually his father—are extremely narrow. Michael seeks advice, but he seems to want to conceal the fact that he is talking about Hanna's situation, so he provides examples of dilemmas he considers analogous.[14] In the manner of certain forms of analytic philosophy, Michael's reflections disregard the complexity of the situation, filter out its many dimensions, and reduce it to a moral quandary: whether

or not one has the right to go against a person's wishes and reveal something about this person in order to help her or him.

> Imagine someone is racing intentionally towards his own destruction and you can save him—do you go ahead and save him? Imagine there's an operation, and the patient is a drug user and the drugs are incompatible with the anesthetic, but the patient is ashamed of being an addict and does not want to tell the anesthesiologist—do you talk to the anesthesiologist? Imagine a trial and a defendant who will be convicted if he doesn't admit to being left-handed—do you tell the judge what's going on? Imagine he's gay, and could not have committed the crime because he's gay, but is ashamed of being gay. It isn't a question of whether the defendant should be ashamed of being left-handed or gay—just imagine that he is. (137)

Michael does not want his friends to latch onto the examples, but to grasp the quandary of whether one should reveal the truth about someone if it will benefit this person or whether one should respect the person's right to self-determination even when s/he is not acting in their own best interest. Michael does not seem to know what to do and is trying to figure it out. But his examples eliminate the victims—as if, like the Nazi generation after the war, he cannot face or refuses to think about them.[15] In Michael's first example, the addict's life is threatened because he is so ashamed that he does not want to tell an anesthesiologist of his drug consumption even though the drugs may be incompatible with the anesthetic; but while this addict may have broken the law through drug use, s/he has not harmed anyone else. Michael's second example involves a defendant who will be convicted because he does not want to admit being left-handed or gay, but who has *not* committed a crime. Of course, Hanna has not written the report; but she *has* committed a crime and she has certainly harmed others. There is therefore something inappropriate, if not a little obscene, about making an analogy between a drug user or an innocent left-handed or gay defendant, and someone who participated in the Nazi genocide.

In the end, Michael does go to speak with the judge, but then finds himself unable to disclose Hanna's illiteracy. Moreover, in his self-deliberations preceding this visit, he concludes that Hanna would not have wanted him

"to barter her self-image for a few years in prison" (137), as if he concurs that "exposure as an illiterate" (137) would damage someone's self-image more than designation as leader of a group of murderous concentration camp guards. It is rather disconcerting that Michael is not incensed either at Hanna, or at his society, that she feels less shame in falsely admitting to being the leader of guards responsible for hundreds of women burning alive—for most of the women did not suffocate but literally burned to death—than to admitting not to have learned to read and write.

Shame is a compelling, motivating force for Hanna; furthermore, Michael repeatedly recounts that his generation felt overcome with shame at what their parents' generation had done. It is striking , therefore, that in his narration Michael does not attend more to the experience of shame. In fact, *The Reader* opens with a description of Michael being ill when he was fifteen and his shame at this illness. Although the young Michael clearly belongs to the postwar generation, his particular feelings of shame suggest a continuity between the Nazi and postwar period. In the second paragraph of the novel, we read: "I was ashamed of being so weak. I was even more ashamed when I threw up" (2).[16] Without a doubt, the Nazis had little tolerance for weakness and would have thought it should make one feel ashamed. Michael is a teenager and it is easy to feel embarrassed at that age, but Michael does not say that he felt embarrassed—he says that he felt ashamed.[17] It seems odd to feel *shame* at being weak and vomiting. Even more odd is that the narrator, the older Michael recalling the event four decades later, does not reflect on the feeling he had then: on his shame at being "weak," a "weakness" that the opening sentence explains is hepatitis. Clearly, there is a certain continuity between the two generations insofar as the postwar generation understands and experiences events through inflections of the Nazi period.

Indifference

The court trial is a central aspect of *The Reader*. But Michael's thinking during the trial has further, disturbing elements. In his reduction of Hanna's illiteracy to a dilemma about self-determination, in his preoccupation with the question of whether he should or should not reveal Hanna's secret to the court, Michael loses sight of any broader concerns. Michael does not think much about justice in relation to the perpetrators, obligation

towards the victims, or social responsibility. First, the other guards who accuse Hanna of writing the report receive lighter sentences than she does because Hanna is considered their leader—even though one of them wrote the report. It never seems to disturb Michael, however, that if he keeps Hanna's illiteracy to himself, the other guards (including the one who actually wrote the report) will have succeeded in lying and laying the blame for what they did on someone else. Michael relates that during the 1960s, he and his generation felt ashamed that "former" Nazis simply continued to occupy their positions in the newly created German Federal Republic. The fact that "so many old Nazis had made careers in the courts, the administration, and the universities … all this filled us with shame, even when we could point at the guilty parties" (168). Michael and his generation saw the trial of the camp guards as an inculpation of the previous generation, the generation that desired to disregard the Nazi past: "The generation that had been served by the guards and enforcers, or had done nothing to stop them, or had not banished them from its midst as it could have done after 1945, was in the dock, and we explored it, subjected it to trial by daylight, and condemned it to shame" ["und wir verurteilten sie in einem Verfahren der Aufarbeitung und Aufklärung zu Scham"] (90/87). In relation to his father, Michael says that he had

> lost his job as lecturer in philosophy for scheduling a lecture on Spinoza, and had got himself and us through the war as an editor for a house that published hiking maps and books. How did I decide that he too was under sentence of shame? But I did. We all condemned our parents to shame, even if the only charge we could bring was that after 1945 they had tolerated the perpetrators in their midst. (90)

Looking back, Michael obviously thinks it unfair of him to have placed his father under a sentence of shame, and unfair of his generation to have condemned the previous generation merely for having "tolerated the perpetrators in their midst." But while Michael's father and his generation may have *tolerated* perpetrators in their midst, Michael himself makes it possible for Nazi perpetrators to *reside* in their midst. His decision to keep silent about Hanna's illiteracy allows the other Nazi guards, including the one who actually wrote the report, to return to civilian life more quickly.

Yet Michael himself never seems to feel any shame—either at the time or looking back—that his own action allows perpetrators to elude justice and return to society. The thought does not cross his mind.

Second, and more disconcerting perhaps, Michael does not feel any responsibility to the victims, either to the several hundred[18] women who died in the burning church or to the mother and daughter who survived. The daughter herself comes to the court to testify, but as William Donahue points out, Michael does not consider the right of the mother and daughter to the truth:

> In focusing on the dilemma between Hanna's happiness versus her alienable dignity and freedom as a human subject, [Michael] Berg, Schlink, and the critics (at least those who champion the novel's innovative morality) apparently lose sight of those who have at least as compelling a claim to the truth that might have been brought to light by Berg's timely intervention in the judicial process: the surviving victims. … Though his action could conceivably have advanced the cause of those with the most immediate and palpable interest in learning the truth, the mother and daughter whose lives are spared by pure chance, these people, it is worth noticing, do not once enter into Michael's ethical calculations.[19]

And "calculations" is the correct word here, although "ethical" probably is not.

During their affair, a few months before Hanna disappears, Michael begins to feel that he is betraying Hanna, and to feel guilt at his betrayal. Michael does not acknowledge Hanna to his friends or in front of them, as if he were ashamed of her. When Hanna suddenly leaves town, he assumes it is because of such an act of betrayal on his part. Later on, he realizes that she actually left because she was about to be promoted and would have had to take a written test. He recalls and reflects that

> I had been sure that I had driven her away because I had betrayed and denied her, when in fact she had simply been running away from being found out by the streetcar company. However, the fact that I had not driven her away did not change the fact that I had betrayed her. So I was still guilty. And if I was not guilty because

> one cannot be guilty of having betrayed a criminal, then I was guilty of having loved a criminal. (133)

Michael's reasoning about betrayal and guilt seems rather shaky, and he seems somewhat fixated (even looking back) on his betrayal of, and guilt in relation to, Hanna.[20] What is most noteworthy, however, is that he does not experience any guilt at all for betraying the mother and daughter survivors who leave the trial with an incorrect version of what happened to them.

At one point in the novel, Michael hitches a ride from a man who tells him that the murder of the Jews took place not because the perpetrators felt hate, or even because they were following orders, but rather because they were utterly indifferent to what happened to their victims. This man, who turns out to have been an officer who executed Jews in Russia, tells Michael that it was just a matter of getting the day's work done:

> An executioner is not under orders. He's doing his work, he doesn't hate the people he executes, he's not taking revenge on them, he's not killing them because they're in his way or threatening him or attacking him. They're a matter of such indifference to him that he can kill them as easily as not. (150)

The mother and daughter survivors may not be a matter of complete indifference to Michael, but he is not especially concerned with them. Even at the end of the novel, when Michael goes in person to visit the surviving daughter and tell her about Hanna, he does not feel any shame or remorse that she did not learn the truth at the trial—a truth he could have revealed.[21]

Third, just as Michael does not seem to feel any obligation towards the individual survivors and their right to know what happened, so he does not seem to feel any broader social responsibility for working through the Nazi past. Ironically, he and his generation claim to be preoccupied exactly with this: "Reappraisal! Reappraisal of the past. We students in the seminar saw ourselves as the avant-garde of the reappraisal" (89, translation modified).[22] Michael further recounts that he and his fellow students sought to tear "open the windows and let in the air, the wind that finally whirled away the dust that society had permitted to settle over the horror of the past" and to make "sure people could breathe and see" (89). The

students struggled to expose the atrocities of the Nazi period, which too many people wanted to deny or forget. Yet as Michael himself notes, if Hanna is clearly understood to have been someone who was in charge as the church burned, this tended to absolve the people in the village who also did not open the doors: "the existence of a leader exonerated the villagers; having failed to achieve rescue in the face of a fiercely led opposing force looked better than having failed to do anything when confronted by a group of confused women" (135). The daughter who testifies at the trial writes a book about her experiences in the camps, about the forced march, and about being locked in the burning church.[23] The daughter's book appears in German, which would result in the incident of the burning women becoming widely known in Germany. Had Michael felt any serious commitment to *Aufarbeitung*, he would at least have considered the broader social consequences of the circulation of an incorrect version of this notorious event. To the contrary, Michael refuses to think about how he is contributing to the myth of ordinary Germans' lack of responsibility for Nazi atrocities, how he is shutting the windows, keeping in the air, preventing the dust from whirling, permitting it to settle over the horrors of the past, rather than making sure people could breathe and see.

Let me be clear here: I am not suggesting that Michael should unhesitatingly have revealed Hanna's illiteracy to the presiding judge (German trials generally do not involve juries). Rather, I am pointing to the deleterious manner in which Michael thinks—or rather does not think—about the people and the events connected with the trial. To summarize: first, Michael does not think about the fact that his silence means that perpetrators get away with lies and receive reduced sentences. Second, he does not consider the surviving victims' right to know what happened to them. And, finally, he does not feel any concern that an atrocity in a German village is publically misrepresented. What is striking is not just that Michael's thinking is so limited during the trial, but that four decades later—looking back on his youthful self—Michael does not re-evaluate the thoughts he had at the time other than to express his feeling that it was unfair of his generation to have condemned their parents to shame: "How did I decide that he [Michael's father] too was under sentence of shame? But I did. We all condemned our parents to shame" (90).

The older Michael is critical of his generation's attitudes and activities, a self-critique that is not only limited, but also injudicious. Michael notes that his generation manifested a troubling eagerness:

> When I think about it now, I think that our eagerness to assimilate the horrors and our desire to make everyone else aware of them was in fact repulsive. The more horrible the events about which we read and heard, the more certain we became of our responsibility to enlighten and accuse. Even when the facts took our breath away, we held them up triumphantly. Look at this! (91)

Although the zealousness of Michael's generation may have been questionable, seeking to expose Nazi atrocities should hardly be regretted. In the early 1960s, many Germans remained unaware of the extent of the network of concentration and extermination camps that had existed in Europe under the Nazi regime; moreover, what had been perpetrated in the camps was rarely, if ever, discussed. The name Auschwitz was almost unknown.[24] So while the eagerness of Michael's generation may have been repulsive, exposing the atrocities was important. Even the feeling of triumph is understandable in the face of the systemic repression and denial that existed in postwar Germany for almost two decades. Furthermore, Nazi war criminals, both within and outside Germany, were not being pursued and had readily resumed or rebuilt their lives. The younger generation's eagerness definitely deserves to be questioned, but Michael's sense of "responsibility to enlighten and accuse" hardly deserves to be dismissed as "repulsive" (91).

Self-Absorption

As noted, during the trial Michael's thoughts are focused on his own perceived predicament regarding Hanna's right to self-determination. At an earlier point in the novel, however, the older Michael's train of thought regarding his time with Hanna is so self-centred it is almost implausible. In this instance of reflection, the older Michael wonders why it makes him so sad to think back to the time when he was with Hanna, although it was not a sad time for him, but one during which he was extremely happy. He poses the following questions:

> Why does it make me so sad when I think back to that time? Is it yearning for past happiness—for I was happy in the weeks that followed, in which I really did work like a lunatic and passed the class, and we made love as if nothing else in the world mattered. Is it the knowledge of what came later, and that what came out afterwards had been there all along?
>
> Why? Why does what was beautiful suddenly shatter in hindsight because it concealed dark truths? Why does the memory of years of happy marriage turn to gall when our partner is revealed to have had a lover all those years? Because such a situation makes it impossible to be happy? But we were happy! Sometimes the memory of happiness cannot stay true because it ended unhappily. Because happiness is only real if it lasts forever? Because things always end painfully if they contained pain, conscious or unconscious, all along? But what is unconscious, unrecognized pain? (35–36)

Now, the first time one reads the novel, when one does not yet know of Hanna's past, Michael's line of questioning might seem apposite.[25] But when one re-reads the novel (or if one already knows the story) Michael's questioning, and the analogies he constructs, are once again extremely disconcerting. For it makes complete sense that he would feel sad thinking back to his time with Hanna, even if he had felt happy at the time, because Hanna is now associated with horror and atrocity. In other words, one would assume that Michael's "beautiful" past is shattered because of the hideous images now linked to Hanna. (Had the movie included even a short scene of the women inside the church screaming and burning, and desperately banging on the door while the guards outside did not open them, I'm fairly sure it would have been a different movie.[26] In its downplaying of the atrocities, the movie is true to the book.)

And there is another related reason for Michael to feel sad thinking back: he must now realize that although *he* had been happy, Hanna could not have been that happy: she would have been living in an unabated state of anxiety because of her illiteracy. Indeed, later on in the novel, Michael reads about illiteracy and realizes that Hanna's inability to read and write must have rendered her constantly insecure and afraid. He states: "I knew about the helplessness in everyday activities, finding one's way or finding

an address or choosing a meal in a restaurant, about how illiterates anxiously stick to prescribed patterns and familiar routines, about how much energy it takes to conceal one's inability to read and write, energy lost to actual living" (186).

But Michael does not believe he feels sad when he thinks back to his time with Hanna either because he now realizes that he had been in love with a mass murderer or because he now realizes how exhaustingly anxious Hanna must have been. Rather, Michael makes a different set of associations. Thinking back, he recalls the teenager he was then: "My arms and legs were too long, not for the suits, which my mother had let down for me, but for my own movements. My glasses were a cheap over-the-counter pair and my hair a tangled mop, no matter what I did" (36). In other words, Michael was gawky, had non-prescription glasses, and experienced perpetual bad hair days. At that time, however, he felt youthful optimism and ebullience:

> But there was so much energy in me, such belief that one day I'd be handsome and clever and superior and admired, such anticipation when I met new people and new situations. Is that what makes me feel sad? The eagerness and belief that filled me then and exacted a pledge from life that life could never fulfil? (36)

This could, indeed, be why Michael feels sad. But other people in his situation might feel sad because they cannot rid themselves of an image of women screaming as they burned alive, or because they now realize that Hanna's days must have been depleted from concealing her illiteracy. For reasons of plot, of course, Michael's early reflections can reveal neither that Hanna is a mass murderer nor that she is illiterate. But this does not make it any less disconcerting that the older Michael concludes that he feels sad *not* because of the fact that when he recollects his time with his lover he is forced to think about the atrocities she committed but simply because, probably like many older people, he no longer experiences the youthful exuberance he did then.

Near the end of the novel, Michael makes his self-preoccupation explicit. He goes to see Hanna in prison very shortly before her release and finally speaks with her about what she did. What he wonders is whether she thought of the atrocities *when she was with him*. She responds that only

the dead can call her to account; she says they come to her, especially at night, and she is unable to chase them away as she was able to do before the trial. Michael's response, as he thinks about what Hanna has said, is to wonder where this leaves the living. But by "the living," he does not mean those who may have survived Hanna's selections at Auschwitz, or the mother and daughter who survived the burning church. The daughter was only an adolescent, and it is difficult to imagine (and Michael certainly does not try to do so) how she copes with memories of both the burning women and the fact that she had to spend the rest of the night and a full day hiding amongst several hundred charred corpses. These are not "the living" about whom Michael thinks:

> I accused her [Hanna], and found it both shabby and too easy, the way she had wriggled out of her guilt. Allowing no one but the dead to demand an accounting, reducing guilt and atonement to insomnia and bad feelings—where did that leave the living? But what I meant was not the living, it was me. Did I not have my own accounting to demand of her? What about me? (199–200)

Whereas Hanna does think about the surviving daughter, and leaves her her money,[27] thoughts of the actual survivors do not cross Michael's mind. Michael's focus on his own well-being to the exclusion of others is troublingly similar to the self-preoccupation of the perpetrator generation.

Michael is an upper-middle-class person who—until Hanna's situation finally hits him—has probably never thought about illiteracy (which is probably why it takes so long for it to occur to him that Hanna is illiterate). Hanna's wish to conceal her illiteracy is what led her to abandon her streetcar job, and Michael. Earlier, it had led her to leave her job at Siemens and join the SS; and subsequently it leads her to "admit"—falsely—to writing the report and being the leader of the SS guards. Hanna has a lifelong influence on Michael. After she disappears, he feels numb and never quite seems to recover. The fact that Michael's later marriage ends in divorce is attributed to his earlier relationship with Hanna. Yet never once, in all his ponderings, musings, and reflections, does Michael wonder *why* Hanna is illiterate. His lack of curiosity in this regard is stunning, especially given Hanna's unflagging influence on his life. Michael knows little about Hanna other than that she grew up in Siebenburgen (a German

community in Romania) and came to Berlin when she was sixteen. Were there no schools, or not enough, in Siebenburgen? Was her family too poor to allow her to go to school? Why does she so love being read to aloud and why does she insist that Michael concentrate on his studies? Is she simply in awe of the readerly and writerly world from which she is excluded? Or did she want to go to school and was not allowed to attend? Were only boys considered worth educating? The questions would seem to go on and on. But for Michael they never begin! Never, in all his reflections, does it occur to him to wonder why Hanna is illiterate. When Michael recounts the trial, his reflections on his dilemma regarding Hanna's right to self-determination seem to exclude a concern for other people, including the victims. But by the end of the novel, we realize that Michael is not even interested in Hanna—certainly not in the Hanna before she met him.

At the end of World War Two, Germany literally lay in ruins. Many non-Jewish families had lost at least one person, and the food shortage was dire. Most Germans focused on survival and concentrated on rebuilding and trying to leave the past behind. Michael's extreme self-centredness and his lack of interest in others, including even Hanna, resembles the perpetrators, but it also resembles the self-preoccupation and the refusal to think about the past that characterized the perpetrator generation after the war.

The Reader's Aporia and Structure

Michael is, at the very least, a flawed and morally confused character, and some readers might be tempted to conclude that Michael's self-centred focus on his own "victimization," and lack of concern for victims of the Shoah, illustrates the limits of the postwar generation and its inability to face up to the past. But there is more to the novel. *The Reader* itself discourages us from thinking, and it structurally constructs Michael as a victim. As Sansom notes, Hanna's illiteracy is the novel's central conceit.[28] But it is also the novel's aporia. The novel cannot reveal the reason for Hanna's illiteracy without unravelling (just as showing the burning, screaming women would unravel the film). On the one hand, if Hanna did not learn to read and write because she was mentally challenged, or because she was told she was, then the third part of the book, in which after a few years she teaches herself to read by means of books on tape, would be implausible, if

not impossible; for Hanna's accomplishment is nothing short of astounding, even if someone in prison might have a lot of time on their hands. On the other hand, if Hanna did not learn to read and write because she was not allowed to learn, then her deep shame is preposterous. For Hanna is not simply ashamed; she feels deep, overwhelming, unshakable shame—shame that overrides any shame at being regarded the leader of a group of Nazi guards responsible for a massacre. To reiterate: Hanna must believe herself at least somewhat intelligent in order to have set about learning to read *all by herself*; this means that she must have been, to some extent at least, prevented from learning. But if she was *prevented* from learning to read and write, then the fact that her shame at being illiterate overrides her shame about the atrocities she committed becomes odious—and the empathy we might otherwise have for her is undermined. In other words, the novel cannot work if we learn why Hanna is illiterate: had she been incapable of learning, the novel would be rendered implausible; had she been prevented from learning, this would undermine the novel's ability to present a somewhat sympathetic perpetrator.

Not only, then, is Michael's thinking severely limited (as well as narcissistic), but the novel itself constitutively proscribes the question of the reason for Hanna's illiteracy. Schlink has created a protagonist whose thinking is limited and whose questioning is circumscribed, but he has also written a novel that precludes any attempt to ask or even wonder about the very situation—Hanna's illiteracy—that impels the narrative. Throughout this chapter, I have focussed on analyzing Michael and not conflating this first-person narrator with the author. But here the fact that the novel intrinsically rules out the question of the origin of Hanna's illiteracy—and her extreme shame—needs to be pointed out. This aporia is constitutional, and I have not seen it discussed in the secondary literature. It is exceedingly significant that the novel itself inherently precludes thinking outside its frame, just as did the Nazis during the war and just as the perpetrator generation sought to do after the war.

In addition to structurally excluding certain questions, the novel (and not just Michael's self-understanding) positions Michael as a victim. As the war ended, Germans suffered under the massive Allied bombings, and after the war they suffered from hunger and cold in the bombed-out buildings. Many felt that they had been carried along by the National Socialists, that they had had little chance to oppose the course of destruction, and

little knowledge of the extent of the evil committed by the regime. They saw themselves as victims of the Nazi *Verbrecher* (criminals). Michael, too, is a victim. When he first meets Hanna, he is underage. Hanna seems to be the one who takes control of their relationship and who consistently has the upper hand. Michael is devastated when Hanna disappears without saying a word, and even after a few years have passed, he writes: "I know that even if I had said goodbye to my memory of Hanna, I had not overcome it" (86). After Michael becomes an adult and marries, he is still unable to shake Hanna's influence:

> I could never stop comparing the way it was with Gertrud [his wife] and the way it had been with Hanna; again and again, Gertrud and I would hold each other, and I would feel something was wrong, that she was wrong, that she moved wrong and felt wrong, smelled wrong and tasted wrong. I thought I would get over it. I hoped it would go away. I wanted to be free of Hanna. But I never got over the feeling that something was wrong. (171)

Michael gets divorced, and subsequently admits to himself that in order to have a relationship with a woman, she "had to move and feel a bit like Hanna, smell and taste a bit like her for things to be good between us" (172). The relationship Hanna had with Michael when he was fifteen is not something he seems able to shake.[29] The book makes clear that Michael was and will always be a victim of Hanna.[30] Insofar as *The Reader* positions Michael as victim, and insofar as Michael barely regards himself as an agent, this parallels the way in which many people amongst the Nazi generation positioned themselves after the war: as bamboozled victims of the National Socialist regime.[31]

Finally, not only does the structure of the novel position Michael as victim—the book's style reinforces this as well. A chance encounter brings Michael (as an adolescent) together with Hanna, and a strange coincidence leads him to re-encounter her at the trial.[32] As he narrates, Michael depicts himself as someone caught up in events, subject to the many things that happen to him. The first paragraph of the book's very short concluding chapter ends with the following sentence: "Whatever I had done or not done, whatever she had done or not to me—it was the path my life had

taken" (214). The novel presents Michael as swept up into his relationship with Hanna, forced to confront the fact that earlier she had committed atrocities, and unable ever to leave her influence behind. Noteworthy is that the *way* the story is told resembles the *way* the Nazi generation spoke about what had "happened" to them under the National Socialists, how they were inadvertently "carried along," subject to the events that "befell" them.

The Novel's Success and Style

Since its initial success and celebration, *The Reader* has been incisively and convincingly criticized in many ways. But the fact that it was so widely acclaimed is worth thinking about. It seems to me that much of the book's allure lies in its style. As Michael looks back and relates the events of his past, he reflects on how he felt, on his presumptuousness, his arrogance, his uncertainly, his episodes of guilt, his distance from those around him, and his helplessness. Michael does not just recount events, he reflects upon them (though in a specious way, I have argued), and these reflections seem genuine. Michael's presentation of incidents, experiences, and memories does not purport to be unambiguous. We are not told what to think; in fact, we do not have to think much, since Michael seems to be doing a lot of thinking for us. He seems to be pondering, to be wondering about things, to worry that he is retroactively reconstructing what occurred, and to put forth ideas and then retract them. Michael's contemplations and questions carry us along, and it is not unpleasant to be carried along. He explores possibility after possibility, his thoughts now taking this direction, now that—for the most part without presuming he is on the right track:

> I knew none of this then—if indeed I know any of it now and am not just making patterns in the air [mir nicht nur zusammenreime]. (14/18)

> Everything was easy; nothing weighed heavily. Perhaps that is why my bundle of memories is so small. Or do I keep it small? I wonder if my memory of happiness is even true. (86)

> I thought that if the right time gets missed, if one has refused or been refused something for too long, it's too late, even if it is finally tackled with energy and received with joy. Or is there no such thing as "too late"? Is there only "late," and is "late" always better than "never"? I don't know. (187)

Subtly, the novel encourages us to content ourselves with Michael's inconclusive and ongoing reflections.

Sansom attributes the success of *The Reader* to the fact that the critics "have been mesmerised and soothed by Michael's hypnotic quibbling and querying."[33] I would agree. While lauded for the moral complexity it allegedly exhibits, *The Reader* actually lulls and sedates. Michael ponders and muses, pursuing a train of thought here, another one there. He pokes his head into all kinds of nooks and crannies. But ultimately, he does not stir up too much dust.[34] His thinking never goes too far or too deep. Michael's tale may be unsettling, but the way he tells it is quite comforting.[35] He does not just recount his being swept along; his telling sweeps us—the readers—along as well. The novel is written in such a way that we, as readers, have to shake ourselves out of our stupor to notice not only the disturbingly self-involved nature of Michael's questions, but also the narrowly restricted way in which he frames problems and issues, and the exceedingly obvious questions he declines to ask—and how well this all seems to work.

I fear that part of the success of *The Reader* may lie in the fact that it is a conciliatory work. Michael wants to reconcile himself with the past, with the Nazi generation and with Hanna, the representative of this generation. The novel insists on the complexities of the Nazi period, and seeks to reconcile us to the past precisely by complicating it. As noted, many commentators have strongly criticized Schlink's anomalous Hanna character as representative of Nazi perpetrators. Hanna is not typical. First, she is illiterate. Second, at her trial, although Hanna seeks to conceal her illiteracy, she actually tries to tell the truth, to answer the judge's questions honestly, and to reflect upon what she has done. Most former concentration camp guards, including the other characters in the novel who are on trial with Hanna, downplay their responsibility and lie when they can get away with it. Moreover, as soon as Hanna becomes literate, she begins to read about the concentration camps. Hanna is a victim of her illiteracy, of

the other guards, and to some extent of the obtuse judge who sentences her. Michael is a victim of Hanna and of the events that befall him. All in all, *The Reader* is a novel about victims. Whereas many young postwar Germans found themselves in the uncomfortable position of wondering whether their parents or grandparents had committed atrocities during the era of National Socialism, this is not the case with Michael. Under the Nazis, his father planned to teach the work of Spinoza, a Jewish philosopher, and consequently lost his job. His father, too, was a victim. Perpetrators, other than Hanna, only appear in the novel as very minor, unnamed characters. *The Reader* seeks to reconcile us to the past and, concurrently, to present itself as an unorthodox work insofar as it challenges Manichean representations of this past and caricatured representations of Nazi perpetrators. The day before Hanna is about to be released from prison, she commits suicide, presumably out of a feeling of guilt. The novel concludes with Michael visiting her grave. The final sentence of *The Reader* is: "It was the first and only time I stood there [at Hanna's grave]." Ultimately, *The Reader* is not a novel that seeks to understand atrocities, but a work that wants to recount a genocidal past, bury it, and move on.

Conclusion

Decades after the war, Germans of the Nazi generation were often accused of not having wanted to know about what was happening in the camps. Michael belongs to the postwar generation, and he clearly does want to know about the camps; he even tries to learn more about them by twice going to see a camp (Struthof). But there is much Michael does not want to know, many things about which he does not seem to want to think. One of these is the influence of the previous generation on his own, even though *The Reader* is concerned precisely with intergenerational relations. And generations tend to hand things down: one generation passes things on to the next, either explicitly or implicitly. This is not rocket science, as the saying goes. Michael, then, seems particularly thoughtless to me insofar as he does not wonder what the prior generation might have passed on to him and his contemporaries. Michael feels he was deeply in love with Hanna, and he never gets over her. One would presume it would occur to him to wonder what he might have picked up, consciously or unconsciously, from her and from her generation. One would expect Michael to wonder what

ideas, attitudes, or orientations he might have assimilated. But Michael chooses not to think about this, as he chooses not to think about so many other things. It is difficult to avoid wondering if what Michael *did* pick up from the prior generation is precisely the inability or refusal to reflect.

Neither Michael nor Hanna are, in my view, especially empathetic characters. But perhaps *The Reader* can most charitably be interpreted as being about empathy and about how someone who has committed the most horrible atrocities might be someone with whom one might empathize in some way. One can conjecture that Schlink, and those who applaud the book, feel that lack of empathy was a defining characteristic of the Nazis, and that encouraging empathy and compassion is a good antidote. Specifically, the novel seems to want to address a dilemma experienced by many young Germans of the postwar generation: the fact that one might care deeply about someone whom one subsequently learns has been guilty of things one does not want to contemplate. But not wanting to contemplate is exactly the problem. If *The Reader*'s central message is that we should not judge, or should not judge too quickly or harshly, the novel also encourages us not to think, and not to think too deeply or arduously—certainly not about the past and our relation to it. And this does not at all bode well for the future.

The Reader teaches us little about the Shoah, I have argued, and even less about those who lived under, permitted, or participated in the atrocities of the Nazi regime. What the novel does teach us is the importance of thinking about how we think about atrocities. Few countries, if any, have a history that does not involve some form of genocide, be it a genocide of peoples or cultures. If we are trying to understand atrocities from our past, it is critical that we think about the fact that our ideas—or aspects of our ideas, even in partial or fractional form—may stem from this past and continue into our present. We may have assimilated certain attitudes, orientations, or assumptions from the time of the atrocities. It is absolutely crucial that we think about this. We need to consider how our thinking and our representations might—in whatever small ways—resemble the thinking of those who enacted or made possible the atrocities. We need to reflect upon the ways in which our thinking might be limited and restricted. We need to ask questions about what questions we might not be asking. It is not enough to reflect upon and analyze atrocities and instances of genocide. It is imperative that we think about the continuity between our own lack

or limited thought and the thinking of that time period. What *The Reader* (unthinkingly) teaches us is that remembering and representing genocide are hardly enough; we need to think about the ways in which we think about our genocidal past.

NOTES

1 Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (New York: Grove, 1958), 38.

2 Theodor W. Adorno, *Reflexionen zur Klassentheorie. GS 8*, *Soziologische Schriften I* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), 376.

3 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin, 1967).

4 See also Donna Mounsef's critique of Arendt's presentation of Eichmann's "thoughtlessness" at the beginning of her chapter in this volume. Mounsef draws on Zizek's appropriation of Lacan to argue that there is always an element of *jouissance* in inflicting suffering, including bureaucratically imposed suffering and humiliation.

5 Bettina Stangneth, *Eichmann Before Jerusalem*: *The Unexamined Life of a Mass Murderer*, trans. Ruth Martin (New York: Knopf, 2014), 283ff. Stangneth concludes the section as follows: "It is temptingly easy to dismiss his [Eichmann's] ramblings; like all dogma, his is ultimately just bad philosophy. But it is a disturbing fact: for Eichmann the logic of these terrible constructs provided stability and inner fortitude. To unbalance one of the most effective mass murderers in history, the ability to think in itself was not enough" (293).

6 Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

7 See Ursula R. Mahlendorf, "Trauma Narrated, Read and (Mis)understood: Bernhard Schlink's 'The Reader': '…irrevocably complicit in their crimes,' " *Monatshefte* 95, no. 3 (2003): 458–481; quote from 459. The appeal of the novel is something I return to at the end of this article.

8 See Cynthia Ozick, "The Rights of History and the Rights of Imagination," *Commentary*, 1 March 1999, 22–27; Ian Sansom, "Doubts about the Reader," *Salmagundi* 124/125 (1999): 3–16; William Collins Donahue, "Illusions of Subtlety: Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser* and The Moral Limits of Holocaust Fiction," *German Life and Letters* 54, no. 1 (2001): 60–81. Sansom recoils: "If the first part of the book was slightly queasy-making, the second part is hugely disturbing" (See "Doubts," 9). Katharina Hall points out, however, that no matter how critical academics are of the book, the demands of "readability" and conventions of the romance novel shape the general readership's interpretation of the work, just as conventions of hard-boiled detective novels shape interpretations of Schlink's earlier *Selbs Justiz* (written with Walter Popp), which also deals with the Nazi past. Hall draws on Iser's and especially Eco's reception theories. See Katharina Hall, "The Author, the Novel, the Reader and the Perils of 'Neue Lesbarkeit': A Comparative Analysis of Bernhard Schlink's *Selbs Justiz* and *Der Vorleser*," *German Life and Letters* 49, no. 3 (July 2006): 446–467.

9 An exceedingly problematic character, Hanna has been discussed and criticized by many commentators, especially Jane Allison, Bill Niven, and William Collins Donahue. See Allison, "The Third Victim in Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser*," *The Germanic*

Review: Literature, Culture, Theory 81, no. 2 (2006): 163–178; Niven, "Bernhard Schlink's 'Der Vorleser' and the Problem of Shame," *The Modern Language Review* 98, no. 2 (2003): 318–396; Donahue, *Holocaust as Fiction: Bernhard Schlink's "Nazi" Novels and Their Films* (New York: Palgrave, 2010). Donahue states in his introduction that the very fraught figure from *The Reader*, Hanna Schmitz, makes an appearance in almost every chapter of his study (18).

10 Mahlendorf ("Trauma Narrated") thoroughly and convincingly shows the many ways in which Michael's perspective is unreliable. Niven ("Shame"), Helmut Schmitz, and Daniel Reynolds also emphasize Michael as an unreliable narrator, especially regarding Hanna. See Schmitz "Malen Nach Zahlen? Bernhard Schlinks *Der Vorleser* und die Unfähigkeit zu Trauern," *German Life and Letters* 55, no. 3 (July 2002): 296–311 and *On Their Own Terms: The Legacy of National Socialism in Post-1990 German Fiction* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press, 2004); and Reynolds "Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser*," *Seminar* 39, no. 3 (2003): 238–256.

11 Schmitz argues that "the novel is structured by a chain of questions that for the most part remain unanswered, because Schlink's protagonist is not capable of directing them to the sole person who would be able to answer them" [Der Roman ist strukturiert von einer Kette von Fragen, die in ihrer Mehrzahl unbeantwortet bleiben, weil Schlinks Protagonist sie nicht an die Person zu richten vermag, die allein sie beantworten könnte] ("Malen Nach Zahlen?," 4). I agree, but I also think that Michael neglects to ask certain questions, questions that should be ineluctable to someone concerned with the relationship between his own and the Nazi generation.

12 Mahlendorf, Niven, and Schmitz all commend the novel for showing how the Nazi generation's behaviour harmed the postwar generation, especially in terms of the latter generation's limited ability to emphasize with suffering. Mahlendorf demonstrates that the way in which the postwar generation was subject to the power abuses and silence of the perpetrator generation led to a traumatization entailing emotional denial and an inability to empathize with the victims. She is rightly concerned with the resulting "blunting of sensitivity" (See "Trauma Narrated," 477). Niven regards the novel as demonstrating the postwar generation's "emotional dependency" on the previous generation (See "Shame," 389). Schmitz considers the novel to portray Michael's inability to emphasize with the victims of the Nazis. He sees Michael as an almost archetypal instance of what the psychoanalysts Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich depict as an "inability to mourn" in postwar German society. Michael may have difficulty empathizing and difficulty mourning, but he also has difficulty thinking. Schmitz refers to "Michael's troubled and reflective mind" (*On Their Own Terms*, 71), but although Michael's mind is indeed troubled, in my view it is not sufficiently reflective. Michael's lack of, or limited, reflection may of course be connected with his emotional state, but this limited thinking needs to be noted.

13 Bernhard Schlink, *The Reader*, trans. Carol Brown Janeway (New York: Vintage, 1997), 168 (hereafter cited in text) / *Der Vorleser* (Zurich: Diogenes, 1995).

14 It is unclear to me why Michael has to use any analogy with his father. He could simply tell his father that he has learned that the defendant is illiterate (without mentioning their earlier sexual relationship), and discuss the situation and whether he should reveal this information to the judge. The father, with whom the children have to make appointments, is completely unlikely to be inquisitive about Michael's personal life.

15 Although, in the early 1960s, someone might have been ashamed to be gay, and in Germany to be left-handed, the older Michael, looking back decades later, should

question such oppressive norms, especially since this lack of tolerance echoes that of the Nazi period.

16 As Martin Swales states: "the key junctures in the story-line have all to do with shame" and the narration begins with Michael's shame about his illness (11). See "Sex, Shame, and Guilt: Reflections on Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser* (*The Reader*) and J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*." *Journal of European Studies* 33, no. 1 (March 2003): 7–22.

17 Swales makes the important distinction between shame and guilt ("Shame," 10). I would also want to distinguish shame and embarrassment.

18 Michael never clarifies and does not seem interested in how many women died – whether it was two hundred, three hundred or five hundred. It is unlikely that any court would accuse defendants of being responsible for deaths, but leave the number vague. (The film, if I recall, refers to three hundred.) Michael becomes a lawyer (as was Schlink), so what can be the purpose of the imprecise and implausible "several hundred" (mehrere hundert) other than to suggest that it does not really matter to Michael or postwar Germans how many Jews died.

19 Donahue, "Illusions of Subtlety," 79.

20 The final chapter of the book makes clear that it is feelings of guilt in relation to Hanna that are most significant for him. The final chapter begins: "All this happened ten years ago. In the first few years after Hanna's death, I was tormented by the old questions of whether I had denied and betrayed her" (214).

21 Allison shows the quite numerous ways in which the novel positions Hanna in order to favourably and sympathetically contrast Hanna with her surviving Jewish victim. Sheridan focuses on how Hanna's poverty, in the novel and especially the film, is contrasted with the surviving daughter's wealth in a way that garners sympathy for Hanna and draws on certain anti-Semitic stereotypes.

22 Janeway's English translation is: "Exploration! Exploring the past! We students in the camps seminar considered ourselves radical explorers." The original German is: "Aufarbeitung! Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit! Wir Studenten des Seminars sahen uns als Avantgarde der Aufarbeitung" (87).

23 Here I would conjecture that Schlink was influenced by Ruth Klüger's autobiographical *Weiter Leben: Eine Jugend* (Munich: dtv, 1994). Klüger's book contains no account of a burning church but Michael's description of the tone of the book that was written by the daughter (who like Klüger was pubescent at Auschwitz) and Schlink having his mother and daughter characters survive because the mother did the "right thing for the wrong reasons" (122) seems to have been drawn from Klüger's *Weiter Leben*. Ruth Sheridan points out that the daughter's statement in the film ("Nothing good comes out of the camps") "appears to be lifted straight from the pages of Ruth Klüger's memoir." See Sheridan, "Sympathy with the Perpetrators: Examining the Appropriation of Schlink's '*Der Vorleser*' in the Film '*The Reader*'," *The Australian Journal of Jewish Studies* 27 (2013): 131.

24 This lack of awareness of Auschwitz, and the extent of the torture and exterminations that took place there, is presented in the film *Labyrinth of Lies* (German: *Im Labyrinth des Schweigens*—literally "In the Labyrinth of Silence") that fictionally portrays the difficulties and opposition state prosecutors experienced in their quest to bring Auschwitz workers to trial in the early 1960s. *Labyrinth of Lies*, directed by Giulio Ricciarelli (Universal 2014; Sony Home Video, 2016), DVD.

25 As Sansom notes: "Michael's orgies of questioning do become tiresome, and many of his questions are simply trite, or simply self-absorbed, or obvious, irrelevant, or uninteresting (Why does what was beautiful suddenly shatter …)" ("Doubts," 12–13).

26 The striking images from the movie are the steamy sex scenes at the beginning with an exceedingly attractive Hanna (Kate Winslet); as a result, the most shocking scene for the audience is when the middle-aged Michael re-encounters Hanna and sees an old woman.

27 As Ann Parry notes, Hanna's gesture reveals that "even at this late stage" (i.e., after Hanna has read accounts written by Holocaust survivors) Hanna somehow "thought that a gift could be a trade-off that would somehow mitigate that 'zero moment' that occurred when she and those with her refused to release the Jewish women from the burning church and save their lives." See Ann Parry, "The caesura of the Holocaust in Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow* and Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*," *Journal of European Studies* 29, no. 3 (Sept 1999): 261.

28 Sansom states: "The book's really big and important confusion is the central conceit of Hanna's illiteracy, which is presumably supposed to represent but which in fact exaggerates and caricatures her lack of moral intelligence. Because it is something that can be taught and easily remedied, it both diminishes the seriousness of Hanna's failings and holds out the promise of improvement and perfectibility" ("Doubts,"14).

29 Joseph Metz makes a thorough and convincing argument for the many ways in which fascism is coded as feminine throughout the novel and how that femininity is destructive: "the hapless male protagonist is duped and undone by Hanna and her sexuality, before which he is helpless and to which he systematically loses his moral subjecthood." See Metz, " 'Truth is a Woman': Post-Holocaust Narrative, Postmodernism, and the Gender of Fascism in Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser*," *German Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (Summer 2004): 305. Schmitz—less critically—also regards Michael as an injured party. He states that Michael says he has made peace with his and Hanna's story, but that "this peace does not consist of a closure in which the past is 'aufgehoben' (sublated) in the Hegelian sense, rather it consists of an acceptance of the failed life which is still determined by the injuries of youth." See Schmitz, *On Their Own Terms*, 77.

30 When Michael, as an older man, meets up with the surviving daughter in New York, the daughter refers to Hanna's "brutality" ("Was that woman ever brutal," 211—my translation [Was ist diese Frau brutal gewesen, 202]). In *Holocaust as Fiction*, Donahue points out:

> What she means, we soon discover, is not Hanna's treatment of the inmates trapped in the burning church, or her behaviour as camp guard, or even what she did (or failed to do) on the death march, as one might expect; rather, the survivor is referring to the sexual and emotional abuse that the young [Michael] Berg endured during the mismatched love affair. … This validation of Berg as victim, bestowed at this privileged moment in the novel by the sole Jewish survivor, may finally explain why Hanna's war crimes have never been clearly delineated: they would have distracted from her victimization of Berg." (129)

Donahue further points out that the surviving daughter asks Michael whether he thought Hanna realized what she had done to him: "In the novel as well as in the

film, this amounts to a conferral of victim status from an unimpeachable source." See Donahue, *Holocaust as Fiction*, 180.

31 Although he makes a quite different argument, John E. Mackinnon argues that *The Reader* involves a "studied effort to erode the distinctions between guilty and innocent, between perpetrators and victims" (16), ending his article—appropriately I feel—with the word "insidious." See Mackinnon, "Crime, Compassion, and the Reader," *Philosophy and Literature* 27 (2003): 1–20; quote from 16. See also Omar Bartov's "Germany as Victim," *New German Critique* 80, Special Issue on the Holocaust (Spring–Summer 2000): 29–40. Richard Crownshaw, to the contrary, argues that Schlink attempts to intervene critically in the binary thinking that marked German memory of perpetrators and victims in both the 1960s and 1990s. See Crownshaw, "Reading the Perpetrator: Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser (The Reader)* and *Die Heimkehr* (*Homecoming*)," in *The Afterlife of Holocaust Memory in Contemporary Literature and Culture* (London: Palgrave McMillan, 2010), 145–181.

32 As Carola Jensen recently reminded me, a novel that centres around former Nazis on trial in a German court distracts from the fact that the vast majority of Nazis were never even tried. Not only were many able to emigrate shortly after the war, but others simply remained in Germany without legal consequences. In 2014, the German justice system finally sought (for the most part, unsuccessfully) to prosecute still living former SS guards from Auschwitz, all of whom were eighty-eight or older and generally unfit to stand trial. In other words, almost seventy years after the end of war, there seemed to be a concerted attempt to "catch up," visibly to make up for all the trials that never took place. An article in *Der Spiegel* by Klaus Wiegrefe, "The Auschwitz Files: Why the Last SS Guards Will Go Unpunished," quotes the historian Andreas Eichmüller: "of the 6,500 members of the SS who served in Auschwitz and survived the war, only 29 were convicted in West Germany and reunified Germany, while about 20 were convicted in East Germany." See Wiegrefe, "The Auschwitz Files: Why the Last SS Guards Will Go Unpunished," *Der Spiegel*, 28 August 2014, 1.

Cynthia Ozick protests that "the plot of Schlink's narrative turns not on the literacy that was overwhelmingly typical of Germany, but rather on an anomalous case of illiteracy, which the novel itself recognizes as freakish" (See Ozick, "The Rights of History vs Imagination" 26–27). Ozick objects to this violation of the "right of history" by the alleged "right of the imagination." Although students who now learn about the Shoah through *The Reader* will likely realize that illiteracy was atypical, or presume it is a metaphor in the novel, they might not know just how extremely rare were trials (not to mention convictions) of former Nazis in postwar Germany. Hence, the "right of history" that is violated by the "right of imagination" in the novel might be less the "freakish" case of illiteracy that it portrays than the overall impression it leaves: that in the 1960s former Nazis were finally legally pursued in Germany. Such an impression could easily have been corrected by Michael, who is a lawyer and works as a legal researcher. During the trial, Michael does reflect on the question of what the second generation should do with the knowledge of the horrors of the extermination of the Jews, and he mentions the lack of convictions (102), but this fact is not emphasized, and the courtroom drama is centre stage in the novel (and movie). Moreover, the plot of Schlink's novel turns not on the denial of culpability that was overwhelmingly typical of perpetrators, but rather on an anomalous case of a Nazi perpetrator who, with the one exception, seeks to speak the truth during her trial.

In his book, *Ordinary Men*, Christopher Browning states that Reserve Police Battalion 101 "participated in the direct shooting deaths of at least 38,000 Jews" (142)

and that overall, for this "battalion of less than 500 men, the ultimate body count was at 83,000 Jews" (142). Browning concludes his chapter "Aftermath" with the following paragraph: "The interrogations of 210 men from Reserve Police Battalion 101 remain in the archives of the Office of the State Prosecutor in Hamburg. They constitute the prime source for this study. It is hoped that they will serve history better than they have served justice" (146). The last chapter of Wendy Lower's book, *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields*, is titled "What Happened to Them?" Here Lower recounts that very few of the women who contributed to, or directly participated in, the genocide in the east were prosecuted, and "even fewer were judged and convicted" (196). The final two sentences of the chapter are: "What happened to them? The short answer is that most got away with murder" (197). See Wendy Lower *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2013).

Of course, one of Schlink's points seems to be that courts and legal proceedings are not to be equated with justice. But in *The Reader* the court is presented as actively interested in pursuing justice for the victims, which is misleading if not dishonest. See Lower's *Hitler's Furies*, 167ff.

33 Sansom, "Doubts," 14.

34 Schmitz writes: "Schlink's book and its version of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* without closure, peace without appeasement, is a further indication of a gradual shift towards an ownership of the heritage of National Socialism that is aware of its inherent problems and ruptures" (See Schmitz, *On Their Own Terms*, 78). My argument has been that the novel *seems* to eschew closure and appeasement, but actually serves to appease by closing itself off from all too many considerations. It excludes ownership (assuming that there could be such a thing) of the heritage of National Socialism by not thinking about what might have been inherited. Hall notes that while both *The Reader* and *Selbs Justiz* (Schlink's earlier co-written mystery) "challenge their readers to consider genuinely difficult questions about guilt and moral accountability in relation to the Holocaust, they also close these questions down." See Hall, "The Author, the Novel, the Reader," 449.

35 In choosing which books to read aloud to Hanna, Michael states: "I do not ever remember asking myself whether I should go beyond Kafka, Frisch, Johnson, Bachmann, and Lenz, and read experimental literature, literature in which I do not recognize the story or like any of the characters" (183). One's first response might be: What Kafka did Michael read wherein he recognized the story and liked the characters? One's second response might be to realize that this is probably the kind of account Michael himself is seeking to write: one in which we recognize the story and like the characters. But a recognizable story with likeable characters does not seem especially appropriate to the Shoah, even if one's focus is the relationship of the postwar generation to the war generation.