

Robert Eaglestone, *The Broken Voice. Reading the Post-Holocaust Literature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2017.

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'There is no explanation for Aushwitz', was a line heard from an anonymous character in the novel *Kaddish for an Unborn Child* by Hungarian novelist and Holocaust survivor Imre Kertész. That statement came to a harsh opposition by the narrator of the book, in which he claimed that for everything that is, that exists or existed, there always is an explication. The underlying premise of the book on post-Holocaust literature written by writer, academic and a professor at the Royal Holloway University of London, Robert Eaglestone is to examine how the concepts of meaning are inserted in literature about the Holocaust and genocide, but also to think about the meaning of the Holocaust in the contemporary world. The title of the book stems from the syntagm used by Imre Kertész in his Nobel prize acceptance speech where he said that one does not have to choose the Holocaust as one's subject to detect the broken voice that has dominated modern European art for decades.

669

Eaglestone begins with, otherwise extensively cited, Hannah Arendt's argument on meaning and truth. Intending to explain how literature, and generally non-historian disciplines, go further in understanding the issues attached to Holocaust, he employs Arendt's distinction between meaning and truth, where meaning arises from reason and from speech and is implicit in the urge to speak. If truth or evidence are used in order to connect certain fact to certain events from the past, understanding of the past is shaped by meaning to which that evidence is put. Accentuating the process of thinking in tandem with matters of fact, Eaglestone, quoting Arendt, claims that thought-objects such as fiction, testimony and memoir (forms of storytelling) enframe and shape meaning. Further on he writes that that 'the past is too important to be left solely to the historians'. Engagement with memory that derives from storytelling and culture has the great power 'not only to recall the past but to assign meaning to it.' Holocaust has been widely present in many narrative and visual forms since it officially ended, although there is, as David Cesarani pointed, a 'yawning gulf' between popular understanding of Holocaust and the 'current scholarship', meaning that people chiefly acquire their knowledge of Holocaust through literature, ill-informed lessons at schools and pop-culture sources. Not wanting to completely disagree, Eaglestone however offers a moderate resolution in which the memory of Holocaust could be preserved: new or renewed concepts of thinking, analyzing and studying the

Holocaust literature. That is the reason why his short but concise and very insightful book is divided in six chapters which are (excluding Introduction and Conclusion), being interwoven in different ways, offering five concepts of listening to 'the broken voice' of the Holocaust today: the public secret, evil, stasis, disorientation and post-Holocaust kitsch. Although the chapters are precisely titled and well organized in order to serve each hypothesis or problem, the author does not hesitate to make contextual cross-references between what he called five concepts.

670

The first chapter is concerned with one of the most debated and discussed and probably most interesting themes related to the Third Reich and its military operations and war crimes: the public secret. Naturally, the first question, when thinking about Holocaust, maybe even in terms of everyday conversation, is 'How much did the Germans know?' How much were the ordinary people informed on atrocities committed by their military forces in Final solution? Did they know about the concentration camps? The nature of the public secret is central to the nature of the consensus by which the Nazi regime ruled in great part. These two natures can bind people together in complicity. In this very first chapter, by examining a novel that is not primarily about the Holocaust, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, the author tries to show how only works of fiction are able to give fuller view of how public secret works to deform societies and make un-communities. It is beyond the power of historian knowledge to give exact evidence of how much the citizens of Nazi Germany knew about the Holocaust. There are records of people in Germany in the sort of 'spreading the word', but apart from being the individual cases, they cannot prove how much people actually knew. Of course, many knew, and knowledge was widespread, which involved the people in passive complicity. Eaglestone is defining the public secret as secret exposed (but not discussed publicly). It is there, in the open, but seldom part of the discourse. Following Michael Tuassig, the public secret can be best explained as that which is generally known but cannot be articulated. After presenting a very well informed discussion on the history and phenomenon of public secret in the Third Reich, Eaglestone transits to studying the famous science fiction novel by Ishiguro, intending to display how the public secret works in fiction: 'by analysing how the public secret circulates in the novel, it is possible to see how secrecy

affectively forms (or, rather, deforms) individuals and the wider social structure'.

The longest chapter of the book is dedicated to the problem of evil where the centrally imposed question is 'Why?'. This is where the author extensively uses Hannah Arendt's notions on banality of evil from her controversial book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Exploring and analysing perpetrators fiction and perpetrators testimonies, the author wants to present how and where the fiction or testimony writers swerved and failed to answer the essential question of evil. Giving it a scale of swerves, the author reviewed several different books. Where the writers chiefly erred was trying to demonize evil, to make it monstrous or sensational, while it was 'shallow, fungus-like and routine' all along. The perpetrators of war crimes were actually dull, boring, rootless men with which the language was destroyed by clichés and memory by intentional oblivion. Huge portion of the chapter is dedicated to applying the thesis of routinization of evil on the novel *The Kindly Ones* by Jonathan Littell. According to Eaglestone, that is the book that does not fall into the trap of making the perpetrators monsters (but rather ordinary, dull people) and avoids clichés.

The third chapter is withal the most complex and for that matter, needless to say, quite philosophical. By analysing novels by two major writers Imre Kertész (*Fateless* and *Kaddish for an Unborn Child*) and W. G. Sebald (*The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz*) author develops the term stasis-as-resistance, which includes scale of different reasons for refusing to 'work through the past'. It is the refusal which Eaglestone defines as a turn. In the name of memory, against the flexibility and fluidity of memory itself. Trying to stop the inevitable shifting and movement of memory, writers became engaged in a very complex and demanding endeavor at the level of form, plot and character. In the end of the conclusion part of the chapter, the author draws comparisons with another complex book, *Landscapes of the Metropolis of Death* by Otto Dov Kulka, where stasis is held in place by history (by him being a survivor and a historian).

Chapters four and five are both dealing with how the readings of Holocaust literature can shed light on post-colonial genocidal literature, or rather, as the author puts it, how to place together the Holocaust and the colonial and the postcolonial past. Starting from the premise that both the Holocaust world and the world of colonial and postcolonial

genocides are the worlds of disaster, Eaglestone explores in the Chapter four the complexities of the interaction of two colonial racist ideologies, paternalistic and genocidal, by re-reading Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The Chapter title 'Disorientalism' was meant to suggest that by bringing together Holocaust and postcolonial scholarship they can be putting together in a dialogue. In the chapter five which the author named 'Disorientalism today', he reads five different texts from the evasively named subgenre African trauma literature. The chapter served to show that there are illuminating congruencies between discourses about the Holocaust and about genocide, atrocity, and trauma in Africa, and also 'suggesting limitation to this by looking at correlation – or lack thereof – between the literature of the Holocaust, widely defined, and account of the Rwandan genocide and other atrocities in Africa'.

Finally, Chapter six leads the reader to a very disputable issue of Post-Holocaust Kitsch and again to models and mechanisms of representation of Holocaust memory. Giving themselves 'irresponsible freedom', the works of art go to the extremities in their artistic representations. Deriving from Kertész, kitsch is here understood as a form of separation between the worlds of Holocaust and our world in 'the very act of representing the Holocaust'. Kitsch is a 'transformation of the past into something meant to titillate or offer a

saccharine ease'. The author then gives a detailed examination of the Chapman brothers' sculpture *Hell* which is the grave example of Post-holocaust kitsch in visual arts. Intending to shock, it does not 'offer any history, but just devilish punishment', while the other is work of fiction, the best-selling novel (later made into film) *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* by John Boyne, also defined as simple, apolitical, childish work which combines both the sentimental and the mythical. These two do not offer any sense of development or engagement, but are rather childish accounts of the complex and demanding world of Holocaust.

Knowing that we live in the age of historical revisionism, falsely and ill-informed media representations of history and memory, which all produce the field for the uprise of the extremist right-wing, it is good to, as author does, propose a question 'What good is literature?' As Sebald thought, it only help us to remember, and teach us to understand that some strange connections cannot be explained by causal logic. Eaglestone concludes with Arendt and the notion of thinking as the constant process of understanding, which means brining past, present and future together in different and shifting ways. In the end, he writes: 'the danger of stories is avoided in the same manner: they are to be thought about, discussed, recast, and retold. This is how we best attend to the broken voice the Holocaust'.

