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Coming to Terms with the Past and Ethical Dilemmas. Two Case Studies (The Reader by Bernar Schlink and Revised Edition by Peter Esterhazy)

I

Psychologists claim that we tend to rely for our everyday behavior on the Cartesian tradition—the one which stands for dualism of body and soul. We usually react to stimuli coming from the left hemisphere of our brains. It is this hemisphere which allows us to rationalize the surrounding reality, organize all sorts of information, and arrange it in logical event sequences. The right hemisphere, however, which is responsible for the irrational and the emotional, sinks to a level of secondary importance. This is so, one may presume, since our brain is equipped with a variety of filters entrusted with the task of neutralizing the emotional sphere. The exercise of this function results in an imbalance between rational thinking on one hand and emotional thinking on the other.

In applying the remarks just made to how we usually deal with our past, the first thing that needs to be remarked is that over the centuries we have developed two basic ways of coming to terms with both evil and good history, in each of which we are still immersed. The first is offered by historiography, the second by literature[1]. The former is in the business of revealing rational motives of our actions, trying to establish cause-effect relations and

[1] For more on the problem of the relationship—although approached from a different angle—between literature and historiography see: L. Burska, *Kłopotliwe dziedzictwo. Szkice o literaturze I historii* (Uneasy Heritage. The Sketches on History and Literature); See also: G. Mann, *Dziejopisarstwo jako literatura* (Historiography as Literature), *Idem*, Ludzie myśli, ludzie władzy, historia (Men of Thought, Men of Power, History), transl. by. E. Paczkowska-Łagowska, Cracov 1997, pp. 3-9; *Dzieło literackie jako źródło historyczne* (Literary Works as Primary Sources), ed. by Z. Stefanowska, J. Sławiński, Warsaw 1978.

putting interactions between the individual and his/her community in its foreground. The latter is less reductionist. Its approach to the man entangled in history is more thorough and comprehensive. It is as much interested in examining rational motives of our actions as it is in probing into the realm of our dreams and fears.

Today, we are increasingly aware of the limitations inherent in the historical method which dates back to the 19th century and which is still so heavily drawn on among the community of scholars. In recent years, historians have come in for much criticism over shortcomings of the academic historiography. The article by Joanna Tokarska-Bakir "*History as Fetish*"[2] can serve here as one example of this trend. Dissociating herself from the "historians' club" (the authoress' phrase—R.S.), in the text which was her say in the Polish discussion of Jedwabne, she took Polish historians to task for the way in which they pursue their craft. In her opinion, historians aim at "objectifying the subject-matter of their analysis as they are anxious to place it at so great a distance as possible." They remove the voice of victims from their historical accounts and restrict themselves to relying only on self-evident testimonies of perpetrators. They get paralyzed by a *discretion principle* which makes it out of the question for them to admit that they have found themselves deeply affected by the events they are writing about. They refuse to acknowledge that they have been so moved, or so petrified, or so haunted by those events as to be willing to drop the subject or—God forbid!—employ a new methodology.[3] This is how academic historiography becomes guilty of relegating the emotional to a secondary place, leaving the reader unable to cope with ethical dilemmas that once confronted historical agents.

Living in a globalizing era and willing to give at least some credit to postmodern thought—which in its extreme form wants us to treat literature and historiography as holding the same cognitive value—we have changed our attitude towards the past. By adopting interdisciplinary viewpoints from which to survey the problem of the meaning of historical knowledge in the world of today, scholars offer new insights into the knowledge, trying to answer the question of what part it can aspire to play in building an intellectual equipment of contemporary man. Studies of collective memory and its relations with historiography—so popular in recent years in many countries, including Poland—the reliance on literature for knowing the past,

[2] "Gazeta Wyborcza", 2003, 15-16 February. In much the same vein the authoress comments on another work by J.T.Gross, Fear. Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz. An Essay in Historical Interpretation v: J. Tokarska-Bakir, *Strach w Polsce* (Fear in Poland), "Gazeta Wyborcza", 2008, 12-13 January.

[3] Ibid.

or the search for audiovisual ways of conveying historical knowledge can be held up here as proof of this scholarly effort.

What all these discussions seem to have at their core is the question of how we can come to terms with the past—both as individuals and as members of society, state, or nation. It is the question which, as is probably easy to see, leaves us confronted with some moral and ethical dilemmas. We have been coming to understand the fact that two ways of dealing with the past offered by European tradition—*remember and punish* or *forget and forgive*—affect our lives in a way which goes far beyond their formal—legal or political applications. They permeate our everyday behavior, requiring us to adopt certain attitudes or pass moral judgments, making historical knowledge derived from either academic handbooks or our own experience insufficient. We are intuitively led to look around for other points of reference—for example, religious ones. For many years German scholars were in the habit of using the concept "overcoming the past" (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) under which one was supposed to understand "all institutionalized patterns of behavior, habits, and knowledge which provided present-day democratic systems with a platform from which to judge and cope with the past of their undemocratic predecessors."[4] Today, such an approach seems to be no longer sufficient. Firstly, it is not good enough in view of its limited, diminishing applicability to various national experiences, including the German one. Secondly, it is unsatisfactory as "it makes us feel too confident, quite capable of knowing well in advance—says Winfried Schultze—that all our exchanges with the past are certain to be crowned with success"—thus resolving, at least semantically, all problems and controversies that might appear in this connection.[5]

Both literary and historical discourse rest on the convention of storytelling. The historian and the writer as well start from the premise which states that coming to terms with the past consists in telling about what happened. This is one of the basic viewpoints they share. This common assumption, however, leads to creating narratives that differ from each other to a great extent. Here is the way in which Javier Cercas—the author of a bestselling book on the Spanish Civil War, published in 2001 and entitled *Soldiers of Salamis*—argues for the advantage the former enjoys over the latter: "History is concerned with factual truths, while literature goes a step

[4] H. Koenig, *Die Zukunft der Vergangenheit. Der Nationalsozialismus im politischen Bewusstsein der Bundesrepublik*, Frankfurt am Main, 2003; Quot. from: W Schultze, *O stosunku do niemieckiej historii po 1945* (On the Attitude towards the German History after 194), [in:] Pamięć polska, pamięć niemiecka od XIX do XXI wieku (The Polish Memory, the German Memory from the 19th to the 21th century), ed. by K. Mikulski, Z. Noga, Toruń 2006, p. 43.

[5] Ibid., pp. 43-44.

further, trying to reveal truths which are moral and universal."[6] Professional historiography seems to ignore emotional or existential dimension of the past. Literature, by contrast, has it as its main focus. The question which arises here is whether literature—offering a type of storytelling so different from that which typifies historiography—can be of some use in our struggles with history and memory.

II

I will try to find the answer to the question by analyzing two novels that appeared in Poland some time ago[7]. I am talking here about the book by German writer, Bernhard Schlink, entitled *The Reader* and published in 1995 (Polish edition 2001, translated by Maria Podlasek-Ziegler) and about the work of Hungarian writer, Peter Esterhazy, *Revised Edition* which was written as a sort of post-script to one of his previous books *Celestial Harmonies* (Polish edition 2008, translated by Teresa Worowska).

On the face of it, both books do not seem to have much in common. B. Schlink—law professor working at the Humboldt University in Berlin and the author of several novels tells us a story about a fifteen year old boy who falls in love with a woman 20 years his senior. The story takes place in the post-war West Germany. Much older and more experienced, Hanna dominates the teenager. Young Michael reminisces:

> We did not have a world that we shared; she gave me the space in her life that she wanted me to have. I had to be content with that. Wanting more, even wanting to know more, was presumption on my part.[8]

From the very beginning their love was shrouded in a kind of mystery. At the same time it produced its own rituals that went hand in hand with their rendezvous, reading being one of them. She kept asking the boy to read her novels. We learn later that it is her illiteracy that made her want to listen to him read books. At one point the woman disappeared. Kept in the dark

[6] *It is poets who win wars*. Z J. Cerzasem rozmawia M. Stasiński (M Stasiński in conversation with J. Cerzas), "Gazeta Wyborcza", 2005, 3-4 December.

[7] From a different perspective, R. Zytyniec analyzed works by G. Grass in a paper *Literacki dyskurs pamięci a polityka historyczna. Przypadek Guntera Grassa („Idąc rakiem" i „Przy obieraniu cebuli")*, (Literary Discourse of Memory and Historical Policy. The Case of Gunter Grass <„Crabwalk" and „Peeling the Onion">), [in:] Narodowe i europejskie aspekty polityki historycznej (National and European Aspects of the Politics of History), ed. by B. Korzeniewski, Poznań 2008, pp. 133-158.

[8] B. Schlink, *The Reader*, London 2008, p 76.

about what had happened to her, the boy did not try to find her. Having grown up, he went to University to study law. At the University he enrolled in the seminar dealing with concentration camps, run by an older professor who had once emigrated from the Nazi Germany.

> Exploration! Exploring the past! We students in the camps seminar considered ourselves radical explorers. We tore open the windows and let in the air, the wind that finally whirled away the dust that society had permitted to settle over the horrors of the past. We made sure people could breathe and see. And we placed no reliance on legal scholarship. It was evident to us that there had to be convictions. It was just as evident that conviction of this or that camp guard or enforcer was only the prelude. 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.[9]

Soon to become lawyers, students attending the seminar were required to observe a trial which was just being held of women who had worked as guards in concentration camps. And it is in a courtroom that the narrator gets back to Hanna again. She is one of the defendants. It turns out that she served as a camp guard—first in Auschwitz and later in one of the smaller camps. Michael gets confronted with the Nazis past in a way which to so great an extent departs from the experience of any other participant of the seminar. While their encounter with the horrible past is anonymous and collective, his is personal and individual.

This courtroom experience inspired him with fear and helplessness with which, as we know, he would have to struggle in his later life. His unswerving confidence in justice, to be administered to war criminals, instilled in him during the seminar meetings had been much shaken. During the trial he found himself wondering over Hanna's behavior which seemed a mixture of passivity, calm, perseverance, and helplessness. Her testimony only brought more trouble on her as well as on her co-defendants. Sentenced to life imprisonment, Hanna was sent off to jail. Lovers were out of touch again. After a longer break, however, he resumed performing his former role. Reading books aloud, he put them on tape and then sent them off to her. And it is in prison that Hanna learned to read. If "illiteracy is dependence," then "by finding the courage to learn to read and write, Hanna had advanced from dependence to independence."[10] Independence is understood by Schlink as a condition whose meeting is necessary to become aware of one's own guilt.

[9] Ibid., pp. 89-90.

[10] Ibid., p. 186.

While in prison the woman began to read literature on concentration camps. The burden of guilt, however, proved too heavy to lift—Hanna committed suicide. In a scene which concludes Schlink's novel, Michael undertakes to carry out the last mission he was entrusted with by Hanna. He is supposed to convey her savings to two women—mother and daughter—who had been rescued from the fire of the Church in which other women prisoners had burned alive while Hanna was watching and did nothing to save them (this was one of the counts of the indictment). Here are the fragments of a dialogue between Michael and the saved woman's daughter:

> —And how am I supposed to deal with this?
> —However you think fit.
> —And grant Frau Schmitz her absolution?
> At first I wanted to protest, but Hanna was indeed asking a great deal. Her years of imprisonment were not merely to be the required atonement: Hanna wanted to give them her own meaning, and she wanted this giving of meaning to be recognized. I said as much. She shook her head. I did not know if this meant she was refusing to accept her interpretation or refusing to grant Hanna the recognition …
> Let's do it this way. You find out what kind of relevant Jewish organizations there are, here or in Germany (the conversation is taking place in New York—R. Stobiecki) and you pay the money to the account of the organization that seems most plausible to you. She laughed. If the recognition is so important, you can do it in the name of Hanna Schmitz. She picked up the caddy again. "I will keep the caddy."[11]

The caddy becomes here a special vehicle for memory, a metaphorical symbol of guilt.

The novel by the Hungarian author tells a different story. This time the reader does not confront a literary fiction, but actual events. Descended from a well-respected aristocratic family and celebrated for his novels, Esterhazy received one day an information that some Historical Archive had come into possession of a documentation, once had by the Communist secret police, including files on his father. The fact which is particularly important here is that a few years earlier Esterhazy released a book which—well-received by both critics and readers—was unstinting in its praise of his father and his family for displaying much heroism, integrity, and civil courage during the Communist era. Going through four files of an informer registered under the name of Csanadi, he recognized the handwriting of his own father. Suddenly, he found himself in a position of someone whose whole world had just fallen apart. As Teresa Worowska remarked in the afterword to the Polish edition of the book:

[11] Ibid., p. 213.

> With his wits collected a little, he understood that he had no other way of pulling himself out from under the rubble but by turning for help to what was the essence of his life: he simply had to write about it.[12]

Literature exercises here a therapeutic function. It enables one to cool off and rationalize what has happened, restoring a sense of belonging, craved for after reading such files. It is not much different—one might add—from what one finds in Schlink. In one of the concluding fragments the hero of Schlink's story utters the following words:

> Soon after her death, I decided to write the story of me and Hanna. Since then I have done it many times in my head, each time a little differently, each time with new images, and new strands of action and thought. Thus there are many different stories in addition to the one I have written. The guarantee that the written one is the right one lies in the fact that I wrote it and not the other versions. The written versions wanted to be written, the many others did not.[13]

So, memory remains a deliberate choice, an ethical precept born out of a personal experience. Unlike the book of the German writer, which is a classic example of realistic novel, that of Esterhazy rests on a more sophisticated model. A formal framework of the whole story consists here in a chronological record of the impressions Esterhazy gets alongside the reading of all the files of an informer working for the Communist secret police. We are dealing here with a kind of diary written by father and son. As a matter of fact, however, there are four planes to be found in the novel. Its complex structure is already clearly seen in the use of different types (commentaries in parentheses) and different colors in which the text is set. The excerpts from the father's reports, I have just mentioned, make up the first plane. The remaining ones consist of the son's comments—made first in the course of reading the files and later in the course of editing the text. These comments express Esterhazy's emotions which range from excusing his father's conduct to roundly condemning it. In spite of the fact that Esterhazy's account is not all of a piece with that found in Schlink's novel, it—just like Schlink's—places love at the center of its interest—in this case, a love between son and his late father. Both are stuck with each other. There are lots of fragments in the novel which abound in easily discernible ambivalence. For example:

> It is, no doubt, a defense mechanism, but I find myself decreasingly able to treat him as my own father. I do not want to be misunderstood: I am not trying to disown him. I simply feel that my daddy and the informer

[12] T. Worowska, *Życie jak powieść* (Life like a Novel), [in:] P. Esterhazy, Wydanie poprawione (Revised Edition), translated into Polish by T. Worowska, Warsaw 2008, p. 318.

[13] B. Schlink, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

> start drawing further and further apart in my head. My hand is sending me signals, making me more and more reluctant to write daddy. Instead, I prefer to write the informer … Now again he is coalescing into one whole. My contempt for him is something I know rather than feel. Regret, pity, gratitude, child's love are the only feelings I feel. Poor daddy … Contempt, too, is what I feel, but I am running out of my feelings. His personality seems to be slipping out of my mind's grip. But let's leave this…Let's bring the endless to an end.[14]

Just like the German writer, Esterhazy does not confine himself to vivisecting his attitude towards his father. He also aspires to become a voice of his generation which, it needs to be said, was also having a tough time under the Cadar version of the Communism. It is the voice, however, which does not want to remain detached and coldly objective—like that in *The Reader*. In commenting on the way in which the Hungarian society behaved during the Communism, Esterhazy remarked:

> When we, so casual about the use of our language, paying little attention to its precision, say that the country (I, you, he, she, we, you, they) allowed the bloodshed of 1956 to become an experience which dissolved into thin air, we mean that we allowed some people, our fellowmen, to turn other fellowmen into informers, into "snitches". It can serve as an excuse for neither of them, but that's how it is. I cannot keep myself out of it, uninvolved and unaffected. It is not something to be left up to "others", some kind of game going on between the Communist bastards and "snitches". It is as much our business as it is theirs, even though some of us have never been either Communists or informers.[15]

The two novels also differ in goals they set themselves. Schlink uses the story of Hanna and Michael as a prism through which to look at the long-debated problem of the German guilt, placing it in a specific context (I will turn to it in a moment). Esterhazy goes further. His novel offers three interconnected interpretations of his father's life—aesthetic, ethical and religious.[16] The first one consists in the examination of semantic aspect of denunciations. The author engages in commenting on a beautiful handwriting of his father, mocking language errors made by the Communist police agents under whose supervision his father pursued his activity of informer. The

[14] P. Esterhazy, *op. cit*., p. 177. Commentaries made in 2001, after transcribing the whole text, have been put in quarter parentheses, while remarks written after the final edition of the text have been placed in oblique ones. The writer's emotions and his line of reasoning can be seen in a long list of adjectives which stretches over 7 pages, characterizing his father's attitude and personality (Ibid., pp. 214-221).

[15] Ibid., pp. 138-139.

[16] T. Worowska, *op. cit*., p. 321. Henceforward I follow this line of reasoning.

second one is concerned with moral questions—like, for example, that of responsibility. The third one, in turn, has an eschatological dimension to it. The life of Esterhazy's father is dealt with here in a wider, biblical context. The author invokes the figure of Judas, pondering the nature of sin.

Setting aside, for a moment, all differences between the two novels and keeping in mind a different status sometimes accorded the Nazi past on one hand and that of Communist states on the other, one is justified in interpreting both works as dealing with the same problem. Is there a way of coming to terms with an evil, tragic, and obsessively recurring past? How should we comport ourselves in the face of this past? What strategy are we supposed to employ—both as individuals and as members of society—in dealing with it?

What answers to the questions—whose shape lead us into the realm of moral values, and into the problem of truth—are offered by the novels under discussion? In having to grapple with Hanna's guilt, with the love he feels for her, and with the loyalty he thinks he owes her, the hero of Schlink's novel moves on those two planes—on the plane of moral values and on that of truth. In aksjological terms Hanna eludes unambiguous judgment. In his novel Schlink writes:

> I wanted simultaneously to understand Hanna's crime and to condemn it. But it was too terrible for that. When I tried to understand it, I had the feeling I was failing to condemn it as it must be condemned. When I condemned it as it must be condemned, there was no room for understanding. But even as I wanted to understand Hanna, failing to understand her meant betraying her all over again. I could not resolve this. I wanted to pose myself both tasks—understanding and condemnation. But it was impossible to do both.[17]

It is possible to treat the remarks, I have just quoted, as involving more than a dilemma of choosing between understanding and condemnation. What one is facing here is also a choice involving a desire to understand on one hand, and a willingness to explain away on the other. And choosing means here passing a moral judgment, thus becoming a matter of conscience to everyone.

In these circumstances fidelity to truth is the only thing one is left with. The question remains, however, whose truth it is—Hanna's or Michael's? Is it the truth of the individual or his/her community? The truth of the past or that reached in a courtroom? It is easy to see that these dilemmas cannot be conveniently brushed aside as purely literary invention. It is only in the concluding part of the book that we encounter a makeshift answer. This is how Michael summarizes his experiences:

[17] B. Schlink, *op. cit*., p. 156.

> At first I wanted to write our story in order to be free of it. But the memories would not come back for that. Then I realized our story was slipping away from me and I wanted to recapture it by writing, but that did not coax up the memories either. For the last few years I have left our story alone. I've made peace with it. And it came back, detail by detail and in such a fully rounded fashion, with its own direction and its own sense of completion, that it no longer makes me sad. What a sad story, I thought for so long. Not that I now think it was happy. But I think it is true, and thus the question of whether it is sad or happy has no meaning.[18]

Remarks along similar lines are also to be found in the novel by Esterhazy. In dealing with the problem of his father's past as an informer, Esterhazy seems to be playing three parts—that of the son, of the historian, and of the novelist. As a son he is deeply affected by what he learns about his father. The opinions he expresses in this regard are deeply personal, intimate, and riddled with anguish. It hurts him to read the files. Betrayal and forgiveness are key terms characterizing the book at the son/father level. Esterhazy is aware of the fact that his father betrayed him, his family, his country, and himself.[19] He is trying to penetrate the nature of denunciations. At one point he cites what the Hungarian columnist, Gyorgy Csepely, has to say on the subject. The latter says:

> Informing on others needs to be looked at as an act which has punishment as its inherent part. No external judge is needed (And that's very good. At least I wouldn't like to serve as one). Whether the informer's deeds will be brought to light or not is of little import. The very role he/she is supposed to play is filled with contradictions to so great an extent that once it has been accepted, it will never be possible for him/her to throw off the yoke of a growing psychological burden. Never![20]

At the same time he feels the need to show forgiveness well up inside him. What is the essence of this need/gesture? He repudiates the kind of forgiveness which is prepared well in advance—the one in which the pure is alleged to forgive the impure. He also comes out against absolution which is offered out of kindness—the one in which he who forgives is trying to fashion himself into someone impure. Forgiveness can only be born out of the feeling of brotherhood and the awareness of a shared fate[21]—in accordance with the cruel principle that "everyone can become a snitch."[22]

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[18] Ibid., p. 215.

[19] P. Esterhazy, *op. cit*., p. 26.

[20] Ibid., p. 129.

[21] Ibid., p. 155.

[22] Ibid., p. 285.

The second role, that of historian, is supposed to supplement or complete the first. History serves here as a background against which to present his father's biography. Peter Esterhazy makes his father an important part of the Hungarian history. But it is the history that runs counter to common beliefs. Here is a characteristic excerpt:

> There exists a Hungarian (and Central European) vision of history—an everlasting tune of wallowing in self-pity which has at its core the conviction that our fall began during the reign of the king Maciej Korwin and that since that time our history has been making a constant descent into misery. And we, Hungarians, (one might add Poles, the Czechs, or Slovakians—R.S.) consider ourselves to be the victims of this history. My so-called base father is important here. He serves as proof that we have not been just victims. We are perfectly capable of producing our own traitors.[23]

And the third incarnation of the author—the role of a novelist. The diary narrative is a formal binder that keeps the whole story together, making it possible to merge the son's love and the son's hurt with the world of history. It allows the indescribable to become accessible to both the author and the reader as well. It is in this way that the father who seems beyond our capacity to describe is recreated and recaptured.

Esterhazy seems to be following the path similar to that taken by Schlink. Telling the story is of therapeutic value for him. It sets him free from the evil past. In one of the concluding remarks he says:

> At first I was afraid that all I was going to be left with was the feeling of disdain and abomination towards my father. I did not want to lose him. Now I can see that my love for him has survived. I might even add, crying and laughing at the same time, that it has become more nuanced.[24]

III

I am returning now to the question I put at the beginning. To what does the literature owe its advantage over historiography in dealing with the past? One may, as it seems, try to give the following answer (answers).

The literary discourse allows one to grasp the universality of history—its individual and collective dimension.[25] In both novels history is used as a

[23] Ibid., p. 209.

[24] Ibid., p. 303.

[25] The problem has more thoroughly been examined in a book by A. Żiębińska-WItek who analyzed images of the Holocaust to be found in literature, historiography, and film, *Holocaust. Problemy przedstawiania* (The Holocaust. The Problems of Representations), Lublin 2005.

pretext for showing the man immersed in the past, struggling with it, and confronted with its hardships. Both writers have proved that the past and the choices we make on its account are never "innocent." They are always bound up with responsibility. From this viewpoint the message sent by both works is ably summed up in the last sentence of Esterhazy's novel. "My father's life is a direct (and repulsive) proof of the man's free nature."[26]

It is also in the metaphorical character of the literary discourse that one needs to look for the sources of its advantage over its historiographical counterpart. As has often been stressed, the historian, required to live up to the standards of his craft and enslaved in a sense by what is usually referred to as primary sources, is often unable to liberate himself from the convention of a literal and realistic account. Posing questions is one of the main tasks literature is called upon to pursue. Historiography aims to do the same. The difference lies in the fact that questions put by literature remain open, leaving the reader with doubts as to the choices the story's hero has made and as to the way in which they are likely to affect his later life. The historian finds it difficult to consent to such a convention. Even if he doesn't always try to give full answers, then he at least tries to offer some hypotheses. By doing so, he reduces the reader's doubts, providing him/her with a full-length interpretation whose validity seems to be flowing directly from the source material of which he has made use. The issue at stake here concerns the relation between literary truth on one hand and historiographical truth on the other. The truth which is conceived of as lying outside the realm of our knowledge, language, and culture, and the truth which is regarded as being always mediated by these categories. The historian, as a rule, is usually reluctant to acknowledge multidimensional and culturally mediated character of historical knowledge. The statement, I quote in the below, made by one of the historians of the Holocaust is a clear indication of this reluctance:

> A metaphor known from the famous movie by Akiro Kurosava *Roshomon* which asserts the notion that the truth differs depending on who tells it is not to be accepted by the historian. It deflates the rationalism on which his craft rests, leading him away from the knowledge of the past into the realm of fiction. Of course, the truth happens to be retold in a variety of ways. However, it is up to the historian to draw from this tangle of truths what actually happened. This is one of the basic principles to be adhered to by every history writer.[27]

[26] P. Esterhay, *op. cit*., p. 316.

[27] F. Tych, *Czy istnieją odrębne pamięci o Shoah: polska i żydowska*? (Are there distinct memories of Shoah: the Polish one and the Jewish one?, "Znak," 2000, No 6, p. 55 (quot. from A. Ziębińska-Witek, *op. cit*., p. 62).

Following this line of reasoning, it becomes clear that—unlike the novelist—the historian does not want to present truths of his heroes, trying instead to fuse them into a kind of artificial synthesis. The novelist, by contrast, aims at highlighting particular truths, showing their conflicting nature. In this context both novels can be regarded as reflecting emotions stirred in the pursuit of truth in its various dimensions.

There is one more problem to be encountered in the discussion of the relationship between literature and historiography. It is bound up with the concept of historical experience. If one is willing to agree that experience is in the first place of language nature and that there is an insurmountable barrier separating us from it, then one is left to admit that literary discourse is better equipped to "grasp" the uniqueness of the experience.[28] It makes us feel involved in events, allows us to identify with story heroes, and, in a sense, it helps us touch the past in an aesthetic rather than a realistic way.[29]

And the last issue to be raised here is of a somewhat different nature. In spite of the fact that there are lots of works designed to testify to the existence of close relations between literature and historiography—with Metahistory by Hyden White coming to mind in the first place—historians remain highly reluctant to utilize literary conventions, adopting objectivistic attitudes. The latter foster a hardly productive tendency to weigh up the pros and cons of choices once made and the consequences they entailed, with lots of accusations heaped up against historical agents. It is this way of practicing history that was once ridiculed by Marc Bloch in *The Historian's Craft*.[30] This attachment to objectivism is to blame for making it difficult for historians to

[28] F. Ankersmith, *Język a doświadczenie historyczne* (Language and Historical Experience), [in:] *Idem*, Narracja, reprezentacja, doświadczenie. Studia z teorii historiografii. (Narrative, Representation, Experience. Studies in Theories of Historiograhy), ed. by E. Domańska, 2004, pp. 223-247.

[29] From this standpoint, says F. Ankersmith who analyzes works of Huizinga and H. White: "The history of history writing is—in the last resort—a chapter in a book on the history of aesthetics" (Ibid., p. 246.).

[30] I am talking here about the following opinion: "are we so sure of ourselves and of our age as to divide the company of our forefathers into the just and the damned? How absurd it is, by elevating the entirely relative criteria of one individual, one party, or one generation to the absolute, to inflict standards upon the way in which Sulla governed Rome, or Richelieu the States of the Most Christian King! Moreover, since nothing is more variable than such judgments, subject to all the fluctuations of collective opinion or personal caprice, history, by all too frequently preferring the compilation of honor rolls to that of notebooks, has gratuitously given itself the appearance of the most uncertain of disciplines. Hollow indictments are followed by vain rehabilitations. Robespierrists! Anti-Robespierrists! For pity's sake, simply tell us what Robespierre was" (M. Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, translated from the French by Peter Putnam, the University Press 1954, p. 140).

frame their histories in the mode of tragedy. And it is the mode of tragedy that allows us to extricate ourselves from the trap of conflicting visions of the past. As Krzysztof Pomian remarked:

> To accept a tragic character of a conflict is to dismiss its Manichean interpretation—the one which makes us view it in terms of a struggle between good and evil—and to jettison the belief that there were only victims on our side and nobody but perpetrators on the side of the opponent. Such a change in the way we understand the conflict affects deeply the way we feel about it. Hatred and lust for revenge become, when seen through the prism of tragedy, the very factors that brought the conflict about. By permitting ourselves to succumb to the last feelings, we are likely—if only in our imagination—to end up bringing ourselves down to the level of the most repulsive participants of the conflict. By understanding it in terms of tragedy, we open ourselves up to a cathartic purification, making our feelings lend themselves to education capable of replacing our pity for our own kind and hatred for strangers with sympathy for both—excluding those who stepped outside the boundaries of humanity.[31]

That appears to be the message sent by the novels dealt with here. Lastly, one is tempted to say: Historians! Read novels! It is really worth it!

[31] K. Pomian, *Miejsca pamięci, konflikty pamięci* (Places of Memory, Conflicts of Memory), "Gazeta Wyborcza", 2008, 12–13 April.