WORLD WAR II FICTION AND THE ETHICS OF TRAUMA

GERD BAYER

This essay looks at three novels dealing with various traumatic events of World War II: Stephen Fry’s *Making History*, John Boyne’s *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, and A.L. Kennedy’s *Day*.¹ All three authors were born after the end of that war. Nevertheless, they can all be said to work from within the confines of what Marianne Hirsch has called “postmemory”,² that is, of a second-generation memory that has been passed down from those directly affected by traumatic events. In representing trauma through the aesthetised means of narrative fiction, the authors also comment on possible ethical directions that memory work can take.

As all three texts can be read as attempts to deal more or less directly with post-traumatic stress, it seems promising to focus critical attention on the literary and formal means of representing what probably is one of the most persistent features of Europe’s collective memory: the events of World War II. Discussing World War I, Anne Whitehead describes its effect as “collective or cultural haunting”.³ The impact of World War II, one could add, is hardly any less difficult to bear. Yet only one of the novels discussed here, Boyne’s *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, can be called a Holocaust novel. The other two authors have chosen other paths to deal with the past: Stephen Fry combines a somewhat science-fiction-inspired plot with questions about the state of historical research and at the same time the

limitations of historiography; A.L. Kennedy’s novel concentrates on the borderline between victim and perpetrator, in effect raising difficult ethical questions about the military conflict between the Allied Forces and Nazi Germany.

All three authors work within a postmodern aesthetic paradigm, that is to say, they all show a critical awareness of the historicity of facts and the semantically elusive factuality of history. Far from denying the reality of any of the World War II atrocities, these second-generation authors focus on how the memory of these events is treated around the turn of the millennium, thereby following a metahistorical tendency also seen in other contemporary World War II writing.4 By engaging themselves in the discussions concerning the ethical attitude appropriate for such a difficult historical moment, they point out the moral potential of art. In Postmodern Ethics, Zygmunt Bauman argues that postmodernism opens up new opportunities to engage in ethical questions, provided that postmodern philosophy is appreciated as a rigorous intellectual endeavour. Making further assumptions such as the fundamental irrationality of moral judgments,5 Bauman states that “Morality is incurably aporetic”6 and specifically notes morality’s irreconcilability with rationality:

No logically coherent ethical code can “fit” the essentially ambivalent condition of morality. Neither can rationality ‘override’ moral impulse; at the utmost, it can silence it and paralyse.7

Postmodernism, in contrast with the logocentrism of modernity, allows for a questioning of the crucial tenets of morality: Bauman’s Postmodern Ethics, therefore, grows from the hope that “the sources of moral power which in modern ethical philosophy and political practice were hidden from sight, may be made visible, while the reasons for their past invisibility can be better understood”.8 Bauman’s critique of the traditional concept of humanist morality believes that postmodern fiction can offer insightful illustrations of ethical

6 Ibid., 11 (emphasis in the original).
7 Ibid., 10.
8 Ibid., 3.