

OBJECTS, ANIMALS, AND TRAUMA: A NEW MATERIALIST STUDY OF “THE READER”

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Abstract

*In having become a seminal “event without a witness”, the Holocaust has given rise to a body of varied literary narratives that gives us innovative modes of representing trauma. Through this paper, I argue for a new materialist reading of trauma by studying everyday objects like cassette tapes found in *The Reader* and how this may solve a central problem facing literary trauma theorists today – “the collapse of address” (Caruth 2020) – that allows us to rethink the temporality of trauma itself. I argue that in *The Reader* by Bernhard Schlink, the traumatic “collapse of address” allows represented objects – through their “intra-action” (Barad 2007) with the fictive world and character’s trauma– to become a potent, vital, and vibrant site for narrativizing traumatic experience. These objects take the role of a “proxy-witness” or “proxy-addressee” that creates a generative field of possibilities for the traumatized subject’s guilt and shame. I also look into the question how decentering the privileged human “subject” at the centre of anthropocentric, Western conceptions of trauma can lead to a broader understanding of the traumatized subject as an interaction between bodies, things, and space.*

Keywords: Holocaust literature, new materialism, subject, trauma

New Materialism: A Brief Introduction

One might make a bold claim today that objects are no longer dead in academia today. W.J.T Mitchell rightly observes that in diverse fields like sociology, anthropology, and literary cultural studies, there is a “current interest in questions of material culture, objecthood, and

thingness.” (Mitchell, 169). This interest has been sparked in no small means by the wide gamut of theories and heterogenous streams that have come to be classified under “New Materialisms” or “Neo-Materialism”.

New Materialism is a field that simultaneously has diverse definitions and yet cannot be circumscribed to a single definition. Dolphijn and Van de Tuin describe New Materialism in their insightful book as “a new metaphysics” (Dolphijn and Ven der Tuin, 13). They further state that

A new metaphysics is not restricted to a here and now, nor does it merely project an image of the future for us. It announces what we may call a “new tradition,” which simultaneously gives us a past, a present, and a future. (Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 13)

They argue that it is in friction between reading and re-reading of old and new texts that “new traditions” are formed. New Materialism is a term coined in the 1990s to signify the “cultural and theoretical turn away from the persistent dualisms in modernist and humanist traditions.” (Ibrisim, 234). One of the most concise yet precise definitions I found states,

New materialism is an interdisciplinary, theoretical, and politically committed field of inquiry, emerging roughly at the millennium as part of what may be termed the post-constructionist, ontological, or material turn. (Sencindiver, 1)

It would be impossible to do justice to the wide-ranging and complex questions that arise regarding New Materialism within the scope of this paper. It encompasses wide fields like Object Oriented Ontologyⁱ and Vital Materialismⁱ, which are topics for a larger discussion. My analysis also diverges from a cultural object-oriented study like that of Appadurai’s.

Perpetrator Trauma: The Problem of Guilt and Shame in *The Reader*

The Reader by Bernhard Schlink, since its release in 1995 (the English translation in 1997), has become a controversial best seller and a staple of Holocaust literature. And yet, this book often raises as many questions and controversies now, as it did when it was released. Some critics have appreciated the narrative of second-generation Germans grappling with guilt and the accompanying shame related to their parents’ generation and their involvement in the Holocaust. However, what I find problematic is the attempt to conflate the victim and the

perpetrator through Hannah's character, who is illiterate gets her falsely accused of a crime, while she was an SS guard in Auschwitz. Several prominent voices like Cynthia Ozick, Omer Bartov and Eva Hoffman have also raised concerns about the use of Hannah's illiteracy as an alibi for her criminal actions as an SS guard. These particular lines from the book struck me as extremely problematic, when Michael is talking about his curiosity and experience of attending the trial

It was like being a prisoner in the death camps who survives month after month and becomes accustomed to the life, while he registers with an objective eye the horror of the new arrivals: registers it with the same numbness that he brings to the murders and deaths themselves. All survivor literature talks about this numbness, in which life's functions are reduced to a minimum, behavior becomes completely selfish and indifferent to others, and gassing and burning are everyday occurrences. In the rare accounts by perpetrators, too, the gas chambers and ovens become ordinary scenery, the perpetrators reduced to their few functions and exhibiting a mental paralysis and indifference, a dullness that makes them seem drugged or drunk. (Schlink, 42)

Here, I would argue that the conflation of the victim and the perpetrator is complete. To compare being in a trial to the actual experience of a concentration camp is unethical in my opinion. However, to merely limit ourselves due to this ethical concern can make us miss out on some of the nuances he represents of perpetrator trauma, including the omnipresent emotions of shame and guilt. Schlink himself has emphasized on several occasions that he has written more about the vicissitudes of intergenerational love and the shame and guilt that accompanies it, rather than the Holocaust itself. It is possible to talk about perpetrator trauma without absolving them of accountability for their crimes or encouraging those with revisionist agendas. In fact, as Erin McGlothlin points out in her insightful essay, the very addition of PTSD as a diagnostic criteria in the DSM relied on studies of trauma of the combat soldiers who were (either willingly or unwillingly compelled by the military hierarchy) involved with the murder of other humans. Yet, we do not usually think of them as perpetrators in the normal sense of the word and often conflate them with victims.

(McGlothlin, 102) In fact, even Freud's conception of trauma included the perspective of the perpetrator as well.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, there is the tale of Tancred who unwittingly kills his lover Corinda. Tancred is not the victim but rather the perpetrator. However, Freud himself did not see perpetrator trauma as discrete phenomenon, and did not enumerate how perpetrator trauma may differ from the trauma of the victims. Cathy Caruth in her seminal *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, wrote about Tancred that "Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it?" (Caruth, 7). She notably calls Tancred a survivor. Especially in cases like the Holocaust, such a conflation is indeed unethical I believe. Ruth Leys reacts strongly to this conflation

On Caruth's interpretation, what the parable of Tasso's story tells us is that not only can Tancred be considered the victim of a trauma but that even the Nazis are not exempt from the same dispensation" (Leys, 297).

Another well-known incident from the Holocaust is of SS Reich leader Heinrich Himmler and his experience of distress while watching mass shootings, while at the same time remaining committed to the Nazi ideology. Thus, "we should be very cautious when we attribute a moral character to abhorrence responses" (Munch-Jurišić, 275).

MacNair in her paper titled "Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress in Combat Veterans" argues that contrary to political ideologies, the human mind is not well-suited to killing. In this paper, she coins the term Perpetrator-Induced Traumatic Stress or PITS. MacNair gives us a definition of PITS as "any portions of symptomatology of PTSD, at clinical or subclinical levels, which result from situations that would be traumatic if someone were a victim, but situations for which the person in question was a causal participant" (MacNair, 7). Erin McGlothlin gives us a symptomatology of perpetrator trauma, which can often be similar to symptoms of PTSD.

One key symptom of perpetrator is trauma is "recurring intrusion" in the form of flashbacks, nightmares and unwanted thoughts. These are especially strong in cases of perpetrator trauma. The second common symptom is "avoidance strategies" which manifest themselves

as coping mechanisms such as “denial of responsibility, denial of injury and the denial of the victim”. Apart from denial, “rationalization” is also an avoidance strategy that serves to “relate to the perpetrator’s attempts to preserve and project a sense of self uncorrupted by a personal history of the commission of violence.” (McGlothlin, 107) Two other symptoms include dissociation and depersonalization. This dissociation, in some cases, may manifest as a “doubling” in which the perpetrator’s self is divided “into two functioning wholes, so that a part-self acts as an entire self” (McGlothlin, 108). This allows the perpetrator to still see themselves as loving father, mother or lover despite having committed atrocities.

However, this is an issue replete with moral ambiguities and we must be careful – even as we understand denial and dissociation as a response to trauma caused by perpetrating a violent act – that it does not exculpate perpetrators from accountability for their actions, be it legally or morally.

I argue that Hannah enacts these symptoms of PITS, and that everyday objects like books and cassette tapes play an important role in shaping her subjective world view. I will also look into the character of Michael Berg, who also exhibits symptoms of trauma and how everyday objects have generated a space for his subjectivity to emerge and transform as his life goes on. But first, I would like to look into the notion of the “collapse of address” and how this can be seen in *The Reader*.

Who Listens?: The Collapse of Address in *The Reader*

What do we mean when we say “collapse of address”? Felman and Laub in their book, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* speak about the notion of the “collapse of witness” and what it means for an event to be constituted by this collapse. This becomes especially relevant while reading literature of the Holocaust or Shoah as it is often famously described as an “event without a witness”. Felman and Laub draw from Freud’s late notion of historical trauma to talk about an event which is not assimilated but is constantly deferred. Caruth remarks in her paper “The Body’s Testimony: The Collapse of Witness”,

By rethinking this historical trauma, however, as a “collapse of witnessing,” the authors shift the focus, I would suggest, from a purely cognitive or epistemological

question—a problem of knowing and not-knowing—to a question of communicating *to others*: a problem of address. (Caruth, 1)

Felman and Laub quite aptly describe this as a situation of having “no one to whom one could

say Thou” (Felman and Laub, 82). The famous dream of the father who has lost his child to a fire, where the father is awakened from his dream of his child dying to see that his child is actually dead has been analysed by both Freud and Lacan. For Lacan, unlike Freud, the voice of the child in the dream – “*Father, don’t you see I’m burning?*” – serves as an awakening for the father. The question is not, as in Freud, why does the father not see the fire but why does he “wake up in spite of the plea of the child *to be seen* within it?” (Lacan 1996). For Lacan, the dream is constituted by the father’s awakening from it. Lacan helps us recognize that there is a certain call and response emerging from the dream, in this case, a dying child’s plea to his father to be seen. Caruth adds to this analysis,

No conscious being – no “subject”, indeed, in his or her power to listen, to respond, or to save – can properly hear the words of a dying child. Not to see in time means, in the dream, not to be able to hear this address as an address, not to be, properly, the addressee of these words. (Caruth 81)

Thus, we can clearly see a “collapse of address” between the father and the son. I posit that we can identify subtle instances of this “collapse of address” between Michael Berg and Hanna.

Right from the first instance of their meeting, we get a foreshadowing of the things to come. In their first meeting, Michael vomits due to contracting hepatitis and Hannah comes to help him clean up. He remarks about the incident, “When rescue came, it was almost an assault.” (Schlink, 2). This sets the tone their relationship. Even when she was helping, Hannah was still a commanding presence in the boy’s life. Once they begin their relationship, it takes Michael over seven meetings to finally get the courage to ask Hannah her name.

What's your name?" I asked her on the sixth or seventh day. She had fallen asleep on me and was just waking up. Until then I avoided saying anything to her that required me to choose either the formal or the familiar form of address. (Schlink, 14)

Here, we begin to see the burgeoning of a "collapse of address". His avoidance and confusion regarding a formal or informal address shows us his own internal ambivalence regarding the relationship. He has already started feeling guilty about the affair by this time. It is indeed problematic because this is the statutory rape of a minor boy by a much older, sexually experienced and sophisticated woman. Here, Michael also becomes an inadvertent victim of Hanna's impulses and criminal conduct, to a certain degree.

There is also a collapse of address between Michael and father, which we get to see at the very beginning itself, which serves to demonstrate the post-war generation's inability to address the generation that came before them. Later in the book, we see that Michael's father— an academic — was not a member of the Nazi party, and was fired from his post for organizing a lecture on Spinoza. And yet, we never see an instance where this is directly addressed by the father to his children, nor does it strike the children to ask him. The children, just like his students, can only meet him by taking an appointment with him at his office. Michael remarks about his father,

Sometimes I had the feeling that all of us in his family were like pets to him. The dog you take for a walk, the cat you play with and that curls up in your lap, purring, to be stroked— you can be fond of them, you can even need them to a certain extent, and nonetheless the whole thing—buying pet food, cleaning up the cat box, and trips to the vet—is really too much. (Schlink, 12)

Here, the comparison to nonhuman beings is significant and it signifies the collapse of address between the father and the son, and this in turn falls as an address to the readers of the book, by extension of the reader's role as a proxy-witness. In a similar vein, Hanna's pet names for Michael — apart from kid — are also diminutive "such as Frog or Toad, Puppy, Toy, and Rose". Here he is explicitly compared to either nonhuman beings or an object (Schlink, 28) Gary Baker, in his paper titled, "Emotional Detachment in Bernhard Schlink's *Der*

Vorleser: A Problem for Democracy” places this emotional detachment exhibited by the older generation into a political context as well. These silences matter as much as the collapse of address between the two generations, fraught as they are with guilt and shame.

We might first interpret this as a classic symptom of Perpetration-Induced Trauma, and the silence is indeed an avoidance strategy. Yet, it is this very silence of the older generation within the purview of their personal lives that makes them complicit with the Nazis and makes their avoidance strategies replete with moral ambiguities. Baker argues that the coldness between Hanna and Michael, and between Michael and his father represents the emotional coldness of the entire German nation at the time. Thus, we can see parallels between Hanna’s illiteracy and the emotional illiteracy of his father, who for all his knowledge of Kant and philosophers, cannot connect emotionally to his own children, thereby almost rendering them to nonhuman status in his eyes.

Intra-action: The Traumatized Subject as a Movement between Bodies and Things

This constant rendering to a nonhuman status has much wider implications. Aime Cesaire in his work *Discourse on Colonialism* argues that Nazism in Europe can be seen to have a “boomerang effect”. He states that before becoming victims of Nazism, they were accomplices because until then it had only applied to non-Europeans. He makes a striking point, which I believe may underly Hanna’s behaviour.

“[T]he colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as *an animal*, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform *himself* into an animal.” (Cesaire, 36)

In her book, *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway develops a concept that she calls “naturecultures” or alternatively “material-semiotic” epistemology to deal with the complex entanglement of nature and culture. One of the themes she engages with is how to meet the nonhuman species, and she makes a very relevant point when she writes

To claim not to be able to communicate with and to know one another and other critters, however imperfectly, is a denial of mortal entanglement (the open) for which we are responsible and in which we respond...Response is comprehending that

subject-making connection is real. Response is face-to-face in the contact zone of an entangled relationship. Response is in the open. Companion species know that. (Haraway, 226)

Here, she borrows the concept of “the open” from Giorgio Agamben’s wide-ranging work titled *The Open: Man and Animal*. In *The Open*, Giorgio Agamben diagnoses the history of both science and philosophy as part of what he calls the “anthropological machine” through which the human is created with and against the animal. In Nazi Germany Jewish people were also reduced to the status of an animal with no rights. However, Haraway here does not mean that we attempt to attribute emotions, thoughts to animals and have an anthromorphism that is human, all too human. Rather, she means that humans and nonhuman species *meet* – they listen, move, negotiate and feel together, without assigning human attributes to nonhumans and vice versa. She further argues, “There is no formula for response; for precisely, to respond is not merely react with a fixed calculus proper to machines, logic and – most western philosophy has insisted – animals.” (Haraway, 77).

This lack of response on the part of Michael’s father as well as Hanna to effectively respond to Michael’s emotional needs is symptomatic of the collapse of address between them. Contrary to this, as a teenager, Michael actively conflates his identity, his “I” to Hanna’s “I”. His poem for Hanna highlights this very clearly.

When we open ourselves you yourself to me and I myself to you, when we submerge
you into me and I into you when we vanish into me you and into you I Then am I me
and you are you (Schlink, 23)

A much more evident case of the collapse of address is when Michael cannot speak about his relationship with Hanna to anybody in his life.

At first I told myself that I wasn’t yet close enough to my friends to tell them about Hanna. Then I didn’t find the right opportunity, the right moment, the right words. And finally it was too late to tell them about Hanna, to present her along with all my other youthful secrets. I told myself that talking about her so belatedly would

misrepresent things, make it seem as if I had kept silent about Hanna for so long because our relationship wasn't right and I felt guilty about it. But no matter what I pretended to myself, I knew that I was betraying Hanna when I acted as if I was letting my friends in on everything important in my life but said nothing about Hanna (Schlink, 30)

Post his failed marriage, he does try to talk about Hanna to some of his girlfriends, but he is met with a lack of interest and understanding. There remains, even in his adult life, no "Thou" to be his addressee. In the absence of this Thou, I argue that books and cassettes take on the role of a "proxy-witness" or a "proxy-addressee" in their intra-action with Hannah and Michael's shared subjectivity that he is unable to undo even after he becomes an adult. Intra-action is a Baradian term, which views agency not as an inherent property of an individual or a human being to exercise, but rather as a "dynamism of forces" in which all designated "things" are exchanging, influencing and working inseparably.

At the heart of Caruth's notion of "collapse of address" is also a clearly temporal element – the return of the unassimilated wound that is ever and always too-late. In Michael's belated attempts to listen to his unassimilated wound, he records and starts sending cassettes for Hanna, who has been imprisoned for her role at Auschwitz and the failure to rescue the women from the burning church. This is a re-enactment of his teenage relationship with Hanna. Michael says,

There were many nights when I couldn't sleep for more than a few hours... So I read aloud, and my eyes didn't close. And because in all my confused half-waking thoughts that swirled in tormenting circles of memories and dreams around my marriage and my daughter and my life, it was always Hanna who predominated, I read to Hanna. I read to Hanna on tape. (Schlink, 81)

However, tellingly, he chooses to never address Hanna directly in any of the tapes or give any personal information regarding himself. In having become an adult, Michael too becomes somebody who is unable to give a "response" in Haraway's sense of the word. The sole witness of their relationship (a proxy-witness) is now the cassette tapes that he sends to Hanna. Hanna on the other hand, finally learns to read and writes him letters, to which he

never responds. Here, he chooses not to engage with the generative field of possibilities that develop from Hanna's attempt to address Michael.

Once Hanna passes away, the possibility of address also collapses. Caruth writes, "Death arrives, that is, in this breaking of the conditions of address, in this utterance that destroys both addressee and addressor and thus can never properly be heard." (Caruth, 82) Both guilt and shame remain unassimilated by both Hanna and Michael at the end of the book. Michael says, "I am guilty of having loved a criminal" (Schlink, 138). Hanna proudly states that only the dead can hold her to account, as an avoidance strategy to preserve her sense of self. However, it is interesting to note that the only person Michael can convey the reality of his relationship with Hanna is the Jewish survivor. And the survivor unequivocally condemns Hanna for her abuse of the boy. Through this ending, we see the unforgivable nature of these crimes against humanity, and that there is no easy assimilation of guilt and shame in the traumatized subjectivity of the characters.

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Endnotes

ⁱObject Oriented Ontology (OOO), a term coined by Graham Harman, is an endeavor to study what we mean by the “real” which is beyond the human experience of matter. For Harman, “being” is something that is essentially withdrawn from all objects and surroundings. In a similar vein, the ontology of objects is always self-contained and cannot be interpreted by us. For more on Object Oriented Ontology, see Harman, Graham. *Object Oriented Ontology: A Theory of Everything*. Pelican Press, 2018. See also, Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology at the End of the World*. University of Minnesota Press, 2013; Garcia, Tristan. *Form and Objects: A Treatise on Things*. University of Edinburgh Press, 2014.

ⁱⁱVital Materialism is a field of enquiry under New Materialisms that insist on a “material vibrancy” that is inherent within all matter. If traditional materialisms viewed matter as passive and bereft of any agency, vital new materialism foregrounds an ever-present vital force inhering in all matter. For key texts on vital materialism, see Bennet, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press, 2010; Frost, Samantha and Coole, Diana. *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, Politics*. Duke University Press, 2010.