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VICKI LAWRENCE

Vergangenheitsbewältigung: Coming to Terms with the Nazi Past

A half a century after the Third Reich lay in ruins, German literature is still dealing with—maybe I should say is especially dealing with —the unfinished business of the Nazi past. In the last decade or so, a significant number of books have been published that examine the legacy of National Socialism from the perspective of a new generation. This is the generation that has enjoyed *die Gnade der spät-geborenen*— the grace of being born too late to be held responsible for the horror of the Nazi years. And yet they are not free of that time. It is always with them. Though not personally responsible, they are tied by love and respect to the people who were, and by upbringing, blood, and nationality to a history they cannot escape.

I would like to look at several novels here, two by German writers and one by an Austrian, each of which attempts to deal with these issues, and each of which has been written within roughly the last decade. Two of the books, *The Reader* (*Der Vorleser*) by Bernhard Schlink and *The Dog King* (*Morbus Kitahara*) by the Austrian Christoph Ransmayr, are now available in English. To the best of my knowledge, Peter Schneider's *Vati* is not. Nevertheless it is still of interest to us as one of the earliest examples of this genre and the book that triggered much of the discussion and debate in Germany on this topic. I think that by looking at these three, we can gain at least a beginner's understanding of this ongoing literary and societal phenomenon, which the Germans call *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.

Of course, it has not taken fifty years for German literature to begin to assess the legacy of the Nazi era. In 1947, a group of young German writers met to protest censorship by the occupying American forces. The loose organization that grew from that meeting came to be known as Group 47. It included Heinrich Böll, Gunter Grass, Siegfried Lenz, and many others not so well known on this side of the Atlantic. They all addressed issues of guilt and responsibility, though until the late 60's it sometimes seemed as though they were speaking to a country that did not want to hear. In the 60's and beyond, spurred on by the massive student uprisings of 1968, Germany began a major re-evaluation of its past, and for the first time these authors seemed to be spearheading a truly national examination of these questions. The major speakers for that movement were people—mainly men—who came of age during the Nazi years and experienced the war as adults.

It was in the 1980s that that older generation began to give way to new voices. The younger generation knew neither the war nor fascism first hand. For them, the more pressing issues were questions about who their parents were during those dark years, and whether the guilt of that generation indeed was something that they, as Germans, were obliged to inherit. And now, half a century after the war, these issues still haunt the German psyche. Who was innocent, who guilty? What is innocence? What is guilt? And how does one mutate imperceptibly into the other? What is justice, in either absolute or practical terms?

Probably the book most representative of this mindset, and the first of this genre to be widely read and talked about is *Vati*, by Peter Schneider. Published in 1987, the novella is an anguished examination of the conflicting demands placed on this generation to both love and hate, to accept and reject, to take on the burdens of guilt, and yet to go out and create their own lives.

The title, *Vati*, is German for "Daddy." After a sheltered childhood in early post-war Germany, the narrator is "enlightened" by an aunt, who tells him that his father is not really in a Russian prisoner-of-war camp, as he has been led to believe. His father is in South America, and he is one of the most notorious Nazi war criminals. (Though no names are used, the biography of the father parallels that of Josef Mengele.) The family, with the help of a shadowy group of "followers," supports him in Brazil and maintains a code of silence at home. Even from hiding half a world away, the father rules the young son's life, dictating what books he should read, disparaging the clothes he's wearing in a photograph (too American and uncultured), pressing him to become a doctor as he had.

The son's response is complex, contradictory, fragmented. From respect and even awe toward his father, through loathing and fear and shame, he is buffeted by emotions he cannot seem to master. Unlike the other members of the family he cannot simply accept his father's assurances that he is the innocent victim of international persecution; yet he cannot seem to decide what the father is guilty of. He sees his father too fully to be able to reduce him simply to the monster he is in public opinion, and yet he cannot find the living, feeling man behind the persona, someone to whom he might be able to reach out. Most difficult of all, he cannot separate himself from his father. He cannot even decide how much he wants to.

In furtherance of his themes, Schneider has the son enact most of the possible roles in the German psychodrama. As an adult in his thirties, the son goes to visit his father in Brazil. While there, his own actions turn him at various times, in various symbolic ways, into a predator, a Nazi, a victim, a self-righteous accuser, and a man who lies to the authorities to protect the guilty. The authorities, in this case the local Brazilian police, similarly permute from the forces of justice into a group of incompetents, after which they slide into violence and corruption.

Much of this works beautifully; some of it does not. The book is filled with simple, straightforward passages that deliver complex emotional reverberations. But occasionally the son's actions seem forced, more the result of Schneider's desire to flesh out his schema than of the inherent forces at work in the story.

Why, for example, does the son have no hesitation about calling the police when his money is stolen from his hotel room? Even after waiting an hour for the policeman to arrive, he has had no second thoughts. Instead he marches over to the police station to make sure the thing is done right. This is a man who has traveled from Germany to Brazil by a circuitous route under an assumed name in order to visit his outlawed father. Why would he draw this sort of attention to himself and to his falsified papers? But the idea that he might be endangering himself or his father never enters the picture, presumably because Schneider needs the episode to show the moral slide of those in power, and to delineate the son's shifting of position as his perceptions of those in authority shift.

If Schneider had worked a little less hard on pounding home every nail in his symbolic structure, if he had allowed the personal and individual responses of his characters a little more breathing room, I think his higher aims might have been even better served. Then his symbolic actions might have had the space to grow more naturally out of the characters' personalities and the context. As it is, the symbolism is so laid bare in this starkly trimmed tale that it nearly draws the life out of what is, at heart, a very individual, personal story. It's a shame, actually, because where the novella works best, I think, is at the personal level, as a powerful and painful study of a son coming to grips with the man he can neither repudiate nor embrace, the man he both wants to protect and to destroy.

But what we do see here, in a very straightforward way, are some of the main themes of this body of literature. The psychic pain and psychological immobility of the son are repeated again and again. The ambiguity and complexity of the situation for the younger generation, their inability to resolve these conflicting issues and construct meaningful lives for themselves, the numbness that is a psychological defense both against the horrors of the past and the younger generation's untenable position in the present, are the hallmarks of this genre.

By the end of *Vati*, the son has found no answers, though he has gone on with his life. Some measure of peace—or at least a settling of accounts—comes only in the last scene, when he travels back to Brazil to stand over his father's grave. There he realizes that, after all, perhaps some rough justice has been served. That may be all the answer he can hope to find. In fact, it is a better answer than that with which some of his compatriots must make do.

With Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader* (*Der Vorleser*), published in German in 1995 and in English in 1997, we have a more nuanced and less extreme exploration of many of the same issues. The story begins in the 1950s, when a fifteen-year-old boy has a rather sweet love affair with a woman in her thirties. Michael and Hanna spend their afternoons together, bathing, making love, and sharing literature—Hanna is illiterate and loves to have Michael read aloud to her. But Hanna abruptly leaves town one day, and Michael can find out nothing about where she has gone or why. Years later, when he is a law student, he unexpectedly finds her again. To his horror, he discovers that she is a former concentration camp guard and is now standing trial for war crimes. *The Reader* examines all the tangled emotions that such a situation could engender—shame, guilt, judgment, betrayal, love, forgiveness, and the failure to love or forgive.

Schlink's book is an intelligent, clear-eyed, yet compassionate examination of those issues, but he conducts that examination almost completely by staying in the particular. His ability to let character and situation open up the story to its larger connotations is superb. First, last, and always foremost are Hanna, with her prickly independence and no-nonsense manner, who reveals her vulnerabilities—and her blindnesses—

slowly, and Michael, whose youth makes him vulnerable from the beginning, but whose intelligence, education, and perception give him insights Hanna is not capable of and a future she is denied. The ways in which these quirky individuals symbolize forces larger than themselves grow naturally out of the richness of their personalities.

It is quintessentially Hanna, for instance, that during her trial, as she is badgered by the accusations of the prosecutors and the cynical manipulations of the other defendants, she turns suddenly to the cold-eyed judge and asks, in her blunt and unsophisticated way, "What would you have done?" It is a heart-stopping—and trial-stopping—moment, as this courtroom full of people all pointing the finger at each other falls into stricken silence, and all the ramifications present themselves.

Michael also exists both as an individual and as a metaphor for the post-war German. His responses to Hanna and to the challenges she offers his life are surprisingly individual, and yet they resonate with implications for a generation. He is never truly free of his love for her, and yet he cannot forgive her, or even allow himself to feel his love for her. Here is where Schlink parts company most radically with Schneider.

In *Vati*, the father, even when he is trying to reach out to the son, is never less than dogmatic, rigid, authoritarian, self-righteous, and self-absorbed. In fact, if you leave out the war crimes and the Nazi past, the father is an archetype of the stern, patriarchal Prussian who has been dissected and skewered in German literature for at least a century.

A cogent dissection in English of that strand in German literature can be found in Peter Gay's fascinating *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider.* Among other things, Gay argues quite persuasively that the Weimar years themselves can be read as a societal revolt against that father figure, and that the triumph of National Socialism was, on one level, a perverted and perverse backlash of the father against the son—of the traditional sources of power and authority in Germany willing to twist themselves into any shape to regain mastery. Schneider's father fits perfectly within this concept and could serve as a model for the frustrated forces of tradition gone Nazi radical. Because of that, the focus in *Vati* is the son's struggle to acknowledge his kinship and sense of duty toward the father while still separating from him. The pathology of this particular case is what makes that very ordinary rite of passage so extraordinarily difficult.

In *The Reader*, however, Schlink is on very different emotional ground. Michael loved Hanna and was hurt deeply by her abandonment of him. The only thing that hurts more—and it does indeed hurt very much more—is discovering her past. She is actually present in his life for only a very short time, but he is unable to deal with that episode, to come to terms with either his guilt or his love, his sense of having betrayed her or having betrayed himself. In *Vati*, the son must grapple with his sense of kinship with someone who is inherently unlovable, but in *The Reader*, Michael must come to grips with some questions that cut even closer: how could someone he loves have done something so awful? If so, how could he love her? If he does love her, why can't he bring himself to stand by her? And given all these things, how is he to forgive either her or himself?

During the decades that this book covers—Michael is in his fifties when it ends—he lives an oddly numbed and detached life. Somehow the questions he wrestles with, the moral imperatives he cannot resolve, seem to stunt and stultify everything he touches. That numbness is very interesting and has wide ramifications throughout this genre, but in *The Reader* we first see it enmeshed with illness.

The story opens with teenaged Michael falling ill from hepatitis. Still undiagnosed, he is walking home from school when he is overcome by nausea and begins to vomit. A woman bustles out of the building he is standing in front of and takes charge, cleaning up the mess and then walking him home. That woman is Hanna.

It seems a fairly unusual way to start a love affair, and yet it deftly links this meeting to a host of other ideas, not the least of which is the well-established place of illness, disease, and death in German literature (*The Magic Mountain* is only the most famous example). A case could probably be made that the scene also symbolizes the very real political and social ills of the Weimar Republic and the ways in which National Socialism was seen by many at the time as a solution to at least some of them. It also brings to mind the well-known (and almost untranslatable) quote from the Weimar artist Max Liebermann on the Nazi seizure of power: *Man kann nicht soviel fressen, wie man kotzen möchte.* (Roughly: "You can't cram in as much as you'd like to throw up.")

Illness is woven throughout the book. Michael falls ill after Hanna deserts him. Illness is also a factor at the beginning of the two other sexual relationships we see in Michael's life. More importantly, we see Michael courting both illness and injury as he tries to deal with his feelings after Hanna's trial. He goes on a skiing trip, where he skis recklessly in his shirt sleeves, absolutely unable to feel either the cold or any sense of danger. He tells us:

> When I started to feel feverish, I enjoyed it. I felt weak and light at the same time, and all my senses were pleasingly muffled, cottony, padded. I floated. Then I came down

> with a high fever and was taken to the hospital. By the time I left, the numbness was gone. All the questions and fears, accusations and self-accusations, all the horror and pain that had erupted during the trial were back, and back for good.

Here the illness is seen first as an intensification of the numbness he had been feeling, and then as an antidote to it.

Numbness is an even bigger presence in the book than illness. When Hanna first disappears from Michael's life, he is stricken with guilt as well as loss, for he is sure that his growing ambivalence about their relationship is a form of betrayal that has driven her away. His reaction is to develop an adolescent swagger, a kind of callousness and a disconnection from people that leaves him, in later years, with virtually no memories from that time. But that pales in comparison with the colossal, universal, all-conquering numbness that he finds at Hanna's trial:

> During the weeks of the trial, I felt nothing; my feelings were numbed.... After a time I thought I could detect a similar numbness in other people. . . . The effect was strongest on the judges and lay members of the court. During the first weeks of the trial they took in the horrors...with visible shock or obvious efforts at self-control. Later their faces returned to normal.... 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. . .exhibiting a mental paralysis and indifference, a dullness that makes them seem drugged or drunk.

This is the numbness that Michael breaks through by means of the fever he contracts on the ski slopes.

But in another sense, Michael doesn't free himself from it. His inability to resolve his feelings about Hanna, to resolve those questions of guilt and love and responsibility keep him from ever forming another deep attachment, from finding meaningful and challenging work, from engaging in life. During the long years of Hanna's imprisonment, he begins to send her tapes of him reading aloud, but he cannot bring himself to answer her letters, even though he can guess what it must have cost her to learn to write. When Hanna is about to be released, and the prison warden turns to him to help Hanna re-enter the outside world, he is thrown into turmoil again, but he cannot break through his own numbness, his layers of padding, to connect to Hanna.

During the trial, Michael thinks: "I wanted simultaneously to understand Hanna's crime and to condemn it.... But it was impossible to do both." The muffling of his feelings, this emotional paralysis, is a defense from attempting the impossible. Only the shock of Hanna's death finally breaks through his insulation, and he is then forced to face what his emotional distance meant to her. Pity, and some understanding, replace the wall he had erected between them. Significantly, he does not fall ill.

By the end of the book, as Michael looks back from a weary middle age, he has finally given up trying to find the right labels:

> For the last few years I've left our story alone. I've made peace with it.... 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 whatever.

At roughly the half-century mark, Michael, like the son in *Vati*, ends his tale by standing over a grave. We do not know what he does once he walks away, but for the first time we feel that perhaps he will go and build a life.

From the elegiac quiet and flowing compassion of Schlink's last chapters to the brutal world of Christoph Ransmayr is an abrupt lurch in sensibilities. In *The Dog King*, published in German in 1995 (as *Morbus Kitahara*) and in English in 1997, the Allied victory over Germany at the end of World War Two does not lead to the Marshall Plan and a rebuilt Europe. Instead, in Ransmayr's alternate universe, the Allies impose a Carthaginian peace: the people of the little German town of Moor watch in consternation as American soldiers rip up the railroad ties, tear down the electric pylons and telephone lines, and then sit back to watch Moor sink slowly back into the Dark Ages. Moor, however, is not simply left to its own devices. The quarry on the edge of town was the site of a concentration camp, and the American occupying forces, in a bizarre attempt at re-education and punishment, four times a year hold compulsory "parties" at which the town's inhabitants must re-enact the gruesome lives of the camp's prisoners.

That all sounds schematic, but this book is not. It is an engrossing tale about ordinary people in a world that has gone to hell. Mainly the story focuses on Bering, a boy who is born during the last days of the war and grows up under the occupation. As a young man he works as a blacksmith, the only person in the village who can repair the broken equipment of the lost mechanical age or jerry-rig something new by scrounging parts from the junked cars, jeeps, tanks, and other detritus of the conquering army. It is through that capacity that he meets Ambras, a former prisoner in the concentration camp who has come back to take over its administration under the American occupation. When the Americans pull their troops out of the town, it is Ambras—in his big American car, customized by Bering to look like a sleek, black crow—who is left as the sole authority in Moor. Hated and feared, Ambras lives in splendid isolation in an derelict villa that is overrun by wild dogs that only he can control. He offers Bering a job as his chauffeur and bodyguard, and Bering moves to the villa to serve the Dog King. It is there that Bering meets Lily, a young woman who survives by her wits and by smuggling contraband over the mountains from the town of Brand, where modern life is allowed to continue. She first came to Moor as a five-year-old refugee who was torn from her father's arms as he was attacked and killed by a mob of newly freed camp prisoners who believed—perhaps rightly, perhaps not—that he was a former guard. Bering becomes obsessed with Lily from their first meeting. It is a passion that, like all passion in Moor, is doomed to frustration.

The Dog King is deeply pessimistic. It runs well within those wide currents of German postwar literary and intellectual thought that are nihilistic and often apocalyptic. It describes a world where civilization has failed and where people, left to their own devices, do even worse. At one point Ransmayr speaks of "the seed of evil that always threatened to erupt wherever people were alone with themselves and their kind." This is a story that Rainer Fassbinder would have loved to make into a film.

It is part of that dark vision that Ransmayr delineates how, in the name of justice and retribution, those that fought the Nazis and those that were victimized by them both slide inexorably into committing nearly all their enemy's sins. There are no heroes, no good guys, in Moor. With self-righteous contempt, the conquering Americans attempt to punish and re-educate the local populace, with remarkably little effect. The people of Moor, none of whom identifies with the Nazi cause nor feels the least responsibility for what happened under them, quietly go on believing that they are now merely the victims of a new set of overlords. Over time the Americans, and later Ambras in their name, prove them right. The bizarre re-enactments at the concentration camp become real labor and then forced labor and then labor under conditions so horrendous that they can only be compared with those of the original camp. At the end of the story, Moor is scheduled to become a vast army firing range, and the entire population is about to undergo a forced deportation to distant barracks under American army control.

Most importantly, as part of his rewrite of history, Ransmayr has moved the date of the dropping of the atom bomb on Japan. In his version, though the war in Europe ends in 1945, the war elsewhere continues to rage another twenty-some years. It is brought to its nuclear finish just as Bering makes his first trip across the mountains with Lily into the city of Brand. There, dazzled by the lights and whizzing cars and pounding rock music, Bering walks the streets and stands transfixed before a window of television sets, each one showing, over and over, the rising mushroom cloud, while American soldiers all around him celebrate the great victory. The world lies prostrate at America's feet, and Adolf Hitler's dream has been realized.

This conflation of various sets of opposites—Americans and Nazis, victims and perpetrators, innocence and guilt, is of course also a theme in *Vati* and *The Reader*. In *Vati*, the father always considers himself a victim of the ruthless conquerors. The son undergoes several permutations of his feelings and actions that show his confusion over those categories. For example, in one pivotal scene while he is in Brazil, he is attracted to a pretty young woman he sees on the street. He follows her, at first simply because he's going her way, but soon the scene fills with overtones of violence and sex, and he pursues her ever more relentlessly through the streets of the nighttime city, like a hunter after his prey. When he finally catches her in a corner, he approaches, having no idea what he will do next. He watches himself in shock and horror as he raises his arm in the Nazi salute. Much later, after his money has been stolen, and he has reported the loss to the police, he realizes that she is probably the thief, and now he is her victim. It is only then that he begins to worry about what will happen to her in the hands of the Brazilian authorities, and then that he begins to try to protect her.

In *The Reader*, Schlink is much more cautious. When he discusses how everyone, victims, perpetrators, people in the courtroom years later, are all turned numb by the horror of the camps, he makes the interesting and very germane point that it is the perpetrators who cannot progress beyond that numbness, who are "trapped still, and forever, in this drugged state, in a sense petrified in it." But he has Michael point out: "When I likened perpetrators, victims, the dead, the living, survivors, and their descendants to each other, I didn't feel good about it and I still don't. Can one see them all as linked in this way?"

Ransmayr, of course, is also qualifying his conflation. The other side of his coin is the utter unwillingness of anyone in Moor to take responsibility or to acknowledge any guilt. They are, collectively, all like Lily's mother, who spent Lily's childhood dreamily painting and repainting a portrait of Lily's murdered father. The portrait captures exactly all the details of the one photograph of him that survived, except for the traditional loden suit and tyrolean hat that replace the photograph's SS uniform.

The people of Moor do not want to hear, and they do not want to see. Bering is a child of this place, and he too is afflicted with the strange, unfeeling numbness of Moor. Though he is stricken by the story Ambras tells him one day, of how he and his Jewish wife were torn from each other one morning at dawn as the storm troopers broke into their apartment, he asks no further questions, and it is clear to Ambras that he wants to hear no more.

Blindness is an even larger theme. Bering's father goes blind and later senile, returning in his mind to the North African battlefield where he was wounded, and where he is doomed to believe he is wandering for the rest of his life. Bering himself begins to see spots in front of his eyes, black holes that grow and wander over his field of vision. "Perforated vision" Ransmayr calls it, and it serves as a direct statement about those who would rather not see at all than focus on that which is staring them in the face day after day.

But perforated vision is not limited to the people of Moor. It is an disease called *Morbus Kitahara*, and it afflicts soldiers and sharpshooters, "all of them people who, whether out of fear or hate or iron vigilance, stared a hole in their own eyes." Interestingly, the shifting blobs of darkness form the shape of a mushroom cloud, the logical sequel to staring with hate. The condition is not permanent, however. In time, when the victims stop obsessing—shift their gaze, so to speak—vision returns. "The clouds dissolve, their vision grows brighter, and in the end no more than two or three delicate traces of fear are left on the retina."

In Bering's case, the direct cause seems to be his fixation on Lily. And in time, after Lily has rejected him and new horizons have opened in his life, his vision does improve. Those new horizons are opened by the deportations from Moor and Ambras's transfer to Brazil, for he arranges for Lily and Bering to accompany him. Brazil has always been

Lily's dream, and Bering is as eager as the others to exchange ugly and depressing Moor for a new world. But even before they get there, it is clear that Brazil is just Moor by a different name. Partly that is because Ransmayr does not think any place free of the evils he is describing, but more importantly it is because these three carry with them all the things they most hoped to leave behind. Like Schlink's perpetrators, they cannot be freed of what they have not acknowledged.

Of these three, that is most true of Bering, for this story traces his moral decline. Early in the story, he is a shy, rather earnest young man living unhappily on his parents' farm and working the forge. One day he is attacked by a roving gang of young thugs and ends up shooting one of them at point blank range. His complex mixture of shock, disgust, and horror is carefully delineated. For a very long time afterwards, that moment repeats itself in his brain. Possessing, let alone using, a gun is forbidden in Moor, and so some of his reaction is fear of discovery. But the sickening sense of something terrible and wrong that returns with each flashback speaks of a sensibility that is, at a minimum, not essentially evil.

But Bering changes. Working for the cold and brutal Ambras changes him. Being given a gun changes him. Being associated with power changes him. Eventually, his loyalty extends only to Ambras and Lily. All others are outsiders towards whom he feels no connection whatsoever. The villagers, who once were friendly to him, now call him an animal. He cannot bear to be without his gun.

While crossing the mountains, Bering and Lily come across several chicken thieves. Bering is incensed—he feels a great connection to birds—and he murders one of the thieves with Lily's rifle. This is a moment of truth for Lily, who has herself in the past used her rifle to pick off stray skinheads in the mountain, mainly for her own amusement. But now, watching murder unfold before her eyes, she stands shocked and transfixed, in what Ransmayr calls a "numbed state." The crack of the rifle snaps her out of it. But it takes five shots for Bering to kill his man, while the man runs grotesquely, his stolen chickens flapping on a rope around his neck, Lily screaming at an oblivious Bering. Afterwards, Lily throws her rifle into a crevasse. Her killing days are over. It is a moment of moral growth—the only moment of moral growth. Bering never does understand why she is angry nor why she has thrown away a valuable rifle.

And so, when they get to Brazil, Lily and Bering are barely speaking to each other. Bering rapidly transfers his affections to the first woman he meets, Muyra, the beautiful and kind Brazilian who is responsible for taking care of them till they reach their new jobs. She takes them on a day trip to a nearby island, called the Isle of Dogs. Only Lily leaves the island alive. Bering, while idly playing with a rifle, aims it at what he thinks is the distant figure of Lily, cleaning fish by a stream. All his hatred for Lily wells up, her condemnation of him, her contempt for him. As he looks through the sight, telling himself that he is not aiming it at her, he sees black spots where Lily ought to be. He does not consciously pull the trigger. But the trigger is pulled.

> And when the carbine suddenly recoils in his hands. . .it has nothing to do with him. He didn't pull the trigger. The rifle kicked at him and bruised his forehead. He doesn't even have to drop the weapon. It leaps from his hands. He didn't do anything.

The dissociation is complete. The inability to take responsibility is total. Even the voice in his head, telling him that he's killed Lily, seems not to belong to him. In a panic, he runs off in search of Murya, in search of the only possible source of kindness and warmth. Of course, it is Muyra who lies in her blood in the stream. His wild flight precipitates his and Ambras's deaths. In the end, their bodies are left to "a wilderness that entwines, seizes, rends, devours anything in its path, before it can itself be devoured by rot or a brush fire gone astray."

This dark world view is the text of Ransmayr's book, but one cannot draw firm conclusions without, at least for a moment, considering all the things not said—the white space around the words. As Ransmayr knows, and as every reader of the book knows, this version of world history is not world history. The occupying forces did not force German civilians into slave labor nor did they impose a Carthaginian peace. Many Germans, personally and collectively, have looked at hard truths and have taken and are still taking responsibility for them. Furthermore, whatever the debates about the dropping of the atom bomb, it is clear that Ransmayr rewrote that bit of history not only for the convenience of his plot but also to make a more forceful and unambiguous case for its unmitigated evil.

Without knowing anything about Ransmayr except what is in this book, it is difficult to know how to place his text against that background. Does he mean for us to ignore the discrepancy, to see his version as the metaphorical reality even if it is not the factual one? Or is his bleak message supposed to be undercut, however slightly, by the knowledge that the world is not quite as bad as it could be? That would be most atypical of German literature in this vein, and nothing in his tone suggests an author at an ironic remove from his story. Yet not to see some distinction between the world as portrayed and the world as it is shows a lack of discernment that I would find surprising in an author of this depth and fine precision.

And what about the photographic negative of this picture, the world that is never even glimpsed here but which must exist, at least as an intellectual concept in Ransmayr's mind? Can Ransmayr be so bitter about the world he has portrayed and presumably believes in, without some thought about, and feelings for, its opposite? Does he believe in a world of love and connection, where people take responsibility for their actions and look at each other with no spots before their eyes? Does he believe such a world is possible, or at least worth working toward? Such an admission might well damage his standing in some intellectual circles on both sides of the Atlantic, but if the idea is totally unfounded, why did he write such a book? It's an odd concept, but it might just be true. Somewhere, deep behind the scenes, this might be a positive, even an idealistic, book.

If we can for the moment accept that rather cockeyed interpretation of *The Dog King*, we can say that each of these books, however tentatively, has a positive note. The loss and the pain have been immense, even for those blessed by having been born too late. Fifty years have gone into the struggle just to understand, to sort out the questions and emotions, to arrive at a point where if forgiveness or compassion or even understanding are not completely possible, perhaps they are at least partially obtainable.

In *Vati* the resolution is partial, as is the healing. Yet the son has learned to separate himself from both his father's view of the world and the world's view of his father. His paralysis is over. The book ends with the son experiencing a moment of private irony. Standing over his father's grave, he is struck, and not displeased, by the realization that his father, the man who gave his life to all that was large, blond, and blue-eyed, is resting for all eternity next to a Japanese.

Even in *The Dog King*, the message is clear, though couched mainly in negative terms and as a cautionary tale. Lily's moment of moral growth and her subsequent escape from the death that awaits the others on the Isle of Dogs is the marker that points to all Ransmayr leaves unsaid. Without that growth, there is only the moral numbness of Moor, no matter where you are.

The Reader perhaps says it the best. Moral growth is not just taking responsibility, though that must be done. Without either condoning evil or damning the perpetrators of it, a way must be found to feel connection to both the victims and the guilty. From that will come compassion, and it is compassion that will set you free.

After half a century, I hope that is a message that Germany—and the rest of us—are ready to hear.

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