

ARTICLE

Afterword

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Is there such a thing as a family novel? Considering the focus of the present study, the question seems an unlikely one in the closing pages of its analysis. Books popularly classified as *Familienromane* have enjoyed increasing exposure in recent years, especially in Germany, where several authors of family novels have been honoured with the prestigious *Deutscher Buchpreis*, awarded each year by the German Publishers and Booksellers Association. As already noted in the Foreword, the number of *Familienroman* German Book Prize winners since 2005 suggests that German-language writers have something to say about the way families are constructed and how they operate as units of meaning and memory, and also indicates that these examinations of family are considered to be particularly prizeworthy. However, several of the authors interviewed for this project voiced distinct opinions vis-à-vis family novels, either in terms of the genre as a whole, or the classification of their works within it. Tanja Dückers asks, 'ist das [writing about families] eine neue Entwicklung?' and reminds her interviewer of one of the foremost examples of the *Familienroman* in the German-language canon, Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* (a work also mentioned by Eva Menasse and Simone Costagli as a defining example of the *Familienroman* in twentieth-century German literature), positing, moreover, that the great classical dramas of Shakespeare, Goethe and Schiller were all rooted in issues of family and kinship, and could thus also be classified as family stories (Dücker pers. comm.). Further, Dücker asserts that 'Familienroman' is too general a category, suggesting that several works popularly recognized as 'family novels' could easily be classified within other genres (Dücker pers. comm.). In his survey of *Familienerinnerung* and *Familienromane*, however, Costagli perceives this flexibility of the genre as something useful, praising it for its 'universelle Erzählstruktur mit hohem Identifikationspotential' (1).

Despite her scepticism, Dücker still admits that novels categorized as *Familienromane* have shared a larger portion of recent intellectual discourse than they did even a few decades ago ('Gefährliche Sehnsucht'). This is perhaps due to several developments in the genre 'Familienroman' that have transformed it from the classic model of *Buddenbrooks* or *Die Blechtrommel* to something slightly different, characterised in contemporary scholarship as 'Generationenroman'. Costagli, Sandra Kohler and Julia Gruber consider this evolution, highlighting the emphasis on third generations in *Generationenromane*; indeed, Kohler asserts that these novels could even be classified as 'Enkelliteratur' (1), since they are primarily concerned with the transmission of memory from grandparent to grandchild(ren). Costagli, meanwhile, commends the *Generationenroman* for resuscitating a certain genre of storytelling which the *Familienromane* of old could not: 'dort wieder Zusammenhang zu stiften, wo mit dem Ende der großen Erzählungen und Epochendarstellungen, ein Verlust von Überblick, Einheit, und sinnvoller Abfolge verbunden war' (1). In her study *Gedächtnis und Geschichte*,

Friederike Eigler clarifies the new developments in recent *Familienromane*, which include an emphasis on “‘nachträglich rekonstruierte Genealogien’, [...] die ‘unterschiedliche historische Phasen ins Blickfeld’ rücken, welche ‘in Form eines Palimpsests übereinander gelagert sind und nicht unabhängig voneinander geziffert werden können’” (qtd. in de Winde and Gilleir 279). As Eigler describes it, the *Familienroman* of recent years emphasizes not just the family but also themes of memory, history, space and time. Indeed, the family stories analysed in this project share a similar preoccupation with these thematic intersections, and, as the discussion below will demonstrate, use them to foreground larger considerations of families and family memory in the first decades of the twenty-first century.

But still: is there such a thing as a family novel? Though she may resist the wholesale categorization of her writings as such, Dückers allows that the increased popularity of family novels can be attributed to ‘eine allgemeine gesellschaftliche Verunsicherung und Desorientierung nach dem Ende der bipolaren Kalten-Kriegs-Weltordnung und dem Aufkommen von Globalisierungsphänomenen und dem Internet’ (Dücker pers. comm.). The result of such sweeping societal transformations is a collective grasping for the ‘familiar’ in every sense of the word: as something intimately known, but also familial, in an increasingly disjointed world. Menasse indicates that literature, which is essentially about people and their relationships, centres around the family because it is ‘die erste Gruppe, die der Mensch erlebt’ (Menasse pers. comm.). Dücker, meanwhile, terms the family ‘die kleinste regionale Entität’; it provides a sense of place for its members to find meaning in an ever-expanding, globalized system (‘Gefährliche Entität’). For better or worse, families create cohesive group identity and correspondingly shape the identity of the individual within the group. Inherent to their meaning is something basic, innate: family is the first thing we know, and it is through family that the individual assimilates in the world, recognizing itself as part of a larger social frame, per Maurice Halbwachs’ theory of collective memory (51). Indeed, the family transforms ‘I’ into ‘we’, providing each of its members with experiences and legacies that are in turn transmitted to successive generations. Regardless of their classification as writers of *Familienromane* – or their objection to being defined as such – the authors considered in this study all write about family because it provides them the framework to tell stories about memory, trauma and identity. Indeed, and as Julia Gruber writes in her study of Eva Menasse’s novels, when we think of a ‘family story’, the story is what is central. It is not the family that determines the story but rather the other way around: ‘good stories produce good families’ (6). Gruber asserts that stories are often the last surviving remnants of the families that they describe: ‘with the passing of the grandparent generation and because family members have moved away and therefore no longer share a permanent physical presence, the family stories will die and without them, the family will become unglued’ (7).

When his old college friend Mimi asks him to help hide Lucas, her Lithuanian war criminal great uncle, in her grandmother’s basement on Long Island, Josef Haslinger’s protagonist Rupert Kramer replies, ‘Großvater in Dachau, Enkel hilft seinem Peiniger. Das ist eine zu steile Karriere. Mach ich nicht, sagte ich. Mit Nazis will ich nichts zu tun haben. Eine Erballergie’ (*Das Vaterspiel* 472). Similarly, the Jewish-Austrian author Doron Rabinovici explained in his interview for this project that he felt alienated during the Waldheim campaign in 1980s Austria, describing himself as ‘auf den Antisemitismus allergisch’ (Rabinovici pers. comm.). Both writers assign a biological cause to their aversion toward sociocultural phenomena. The relationship between inherited physiology and constructed environment seems incongruous: can one’s understanding of memory be grounded in science? Taken in context, however, Rupert and Rabinovici’s ‘allergic reactions’ do not emerge *sui generis*, but instead evidence a family inheritance of suffering in the Second World War which is transmitted to them via a kind of traumatic DNA. Gradually discovering her family’s Jewish history – which included

a set of great-grandparents who were murdered in Auschwitz – the novelist and poet Alison Pick describes her family memories as residing ‘deep in my cells below my rational mind’ (‘Auschwitz’). Her daily struggles with depression are familial, like the *Erballergie* that attacked Rupert in *Das Vaterspiel*: ‘my family had repressed the horror of the gas chambers. The unfelt grief had been passed from my grandmother to my father to me, like an heirloom’ (‘Auschwitz’). Despite recent studies affirming the genetic transmission of trauma from Holocaust survivors to their children,¹ the field of epigenetic inheritance – the notion that trauma can be passed from parent to child via genetic channels – is contested. Pick acknowledges the inherent difficulty in accepting scientific explanations for the transmission of intergenerational trauma, likening the phenomenon to a situation in which, ‘80 years ago, my grandmother tripped on an apple core and now my ankle is sprained as a result’ (‘Auschwitz’). Unlike Pick’s inherited grief, Dückers understands collective traumatic memory as something socially enacted, and then observed, absorbed and reanimated in subsequent generations. Her understanding of memory aligns with Jan and Aleida Assmann’s conception of it, in that families, a ‘soziale and kulturelle Konstruktion’, are the ‘main site of remembrance’ (Kohler 4). While Dückers’ theory of generational memory rejects the possibility of a biological basis, characters confronted with past unresolved traumas in her novels collide with emotional dead-ends in much the same way Alison Pick describes in her experience. Memories that are unresolved – either intentionally, through wilful forgetting, or because of some kind of trauma that renders the memory unspeakable – are resurrected in younger generations: ‘Gerade wenn Eltern oder Großeltern ein Projekt, eine Leidenschaft, unvollendet gelassen haben, wird oft eine starke indirekt unmittelbare Aufgabe an die jüngeren Generationen übertragen’ (Dücker pers. comm.). Or, more poetically illustrated by Stefan Wackwitz in Costagli’s consideration of the *kollektive Autobiografie*:

Jeder Mensch hat ein Recht auf eine geschichtslose Kindheit. Aber als ich, der Sohn und Neffe jener Kinder in Schnürstiefeln, Spitzenkleidern und kurzen Hosen, die ich auf alten Fotos betrachten kann, hinter dem ehemaligen Pfarrhaus von Holdunów auf dem Gelände des aufgelassenen Gartens stand, wusste ich, dass der Spuk im Pfarrhaus von Anhalt in meinem Leben weitergegangen ist. (Costagli 2)

Wackwitz’ ‘Spuk im Pfarrhaus’, Haslinger’s ‘skeleton in the basement’: the metaphors may be mixed, but the sentiment remains the same. As Rabinovici stated in his interview: ‘Jede Familie hat ein Geheimnis. Ich kann mich an dieses Gefühl als Kind erinnern. Dass es da irgendwo ein Geheimnis gibt’ (Rabinovici pers. comm.). Enduring memory is innate to families, and the novels analysed in this study consider the inseparability of it from the formation of both collective and individual identities. For these authors, families can be vehicles by which memory is passed from one generation to the next but also containers that preserve it within the confines of the family unit. The transmission of memory is thus not a pure, unchanging process. Indeed, it can backfire, rendering family less a communicative permeable system and more an inscrutable fortress, a place where memories become traumatic secrets preserved like a mutated genealogical DNA.

Several of the novelists considered in this study refer to the writings of Jan and Aleida Assmann, who together have contributed significantly to the field of memory studies. In her essay ‘Transformations between History and Memory’, Aleida Assmann stresses *contra* Sontag that collective memory is an enacted phenomenon: ‘the past cannot be “remembered;” it

¹ Thomson, Helen. ‘Study of Holocaust Survivors Finds Trauma Passed on to Children’s Genes.’ *The Guardian* [London] 21 Aug. 2015.

must be memorized' (Assmann 52). She illustrates the processual nature of collective memory with a quote from Margaret Atwood:

When I lived in the rural Ontario countryside north of Toronto, a local man said, 'There's the barn where we hid the women and children, that time the Fenians invaded.' An individual barn; individual women and children. The man who told me about the barn was born some sixty years after the Fenian attack, but he said *we* not *they*; he was remembering as a personal experience an event at which he had not been present in the flesh, and I believe we have all done that. It is at such points that memory, history, and story all intersect. (qtd. in Assmann 52)

Atwood's belief that memory, history and story intersect within the family (or within similarly constructed collective/regional units such as neighbourhoods or local cultures) echoes Hillary and Todd Herzog's statements about Rabinovici's text, which, they assert, 'explores the roles that history, memory, family, and space play in determining [...] identity' (5). Similarly, Maurice Halbwachs, who wrote the seminal text *On Collective Memory*, highlights the many sources from which family identity is derived:

When we say, 'In our family we have long life spans,' or, 'we are proud' or 'we do not strive to get rich,' we speak of a physical or moral quality which is supposed to be inherent to the group, and which passes from the group to its members. Sometimes it is the place or the region from which the family originated or it is the characteristic of this or that family member that becomes the more or less mysterious symbol for the common ground from which the family members acquire their distinctive traits. In any case, the various elements of this type that are retained from the past provide a framework for family memory, which it tries to preserve intact. (59)

Family does not exist within a vacuum but is rather acted upon by several phenomena, such as historical caesurae or the specificities of place. Memory and history are thus enmeshed in a complicated duality. The relationship of memory to history is debated and debatable; the French historian Pierre Nora, for example, argues that they are polar opposites (60), while Assmann places history and memory in an 'entangled relationship' which evolves over time (57), and is ultimately characterized in its postmodern stage as 'complementary, [with] each one adding something that the other cannot supply' (62).² In his exploration of the interplay between history and memory, Costagli indicates that 'new' family novels contend with these issues by employing a variety of narrative methods that touch on private family memory and public history alike: 'Einerseits wird diese Erzählung innerhalb der privaten Gedächtnissphäre der Familie erlebt und rekonstruiert; andererseits muss sie sich stets mit dem öffentlichen Geschichtswissen konfrontieren' (2). When we consider the scope and focus of the present study, it seems nearly inconceivable to consider memory apart from history. The collective familial memories presented by all these writers are directly pierced by the historical ruptures of the Holocaust and Second World War. Hillary and Todd Herzog point out that Rabinovici is both a fiction writer and an academic historian, and as such, exemplifies the complementary exchange between memory and history in his writing: '[Rabinovici the academic historian and Rabinovici the writer] work hand in hand to tell a gripping and touching story that is also a meditation on the interconnections of the past and the present and a reflection on the

² Assmann explains that the interplay between memory and history is studied in a new field called 'mnemohistory' (62).

ways in which families and histories intersect to form constantly shifting identities' (2). In the Herzogs' analysis, which, I would argue, could be used to examine any of the authors' novels considered in this collection, history intersects with family (and the memories it contains) in order to establish identity in the present. Family, then, is essential to the individual and its understanding of self in relation to the past. As Costagli put it, 'Die Familie ist die repräsentative Erzählform der Verschmelzung von öffentlicher und privater Geschichte' (3). In other words, the family is the medium by which *Geschichte* – in the sense of both public 'history' and private (family) 'story' – is revealed.

These authors also consider the conditions of being-in-place and placelessness, and how both states affect the transmission of memory. Characters in several of these novels are *displaced* in both time and space, and experience resulting disorientations that lead them to the family for a sense of existential rootedness. Haslinger's, Rabinovici's, Erpenbeck's and Menasse's texts in particular centre on questions of space and place and their relation to memory in both individuals and families.³ Rabinovici's text 'Nach Wilna' places us, even in its title, somewhere else. Rabinovici journeys to Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital where his mother grew up and survived the Holocaust, after coming to terms with his parents' mortality following serious health complications endured by them both. Rabinovici recognizes that the stories his family has to tell are more important than any research or novel he could write on his own: '[Die Angst, daß ich, der Historiker und Schriftsteller] würde meine Eltern verlieren, ohne mich mit ihrem Herkommen und mit ihrer Geschichte auseinandergesetzt zu haben, konnte durch keine Operation entfernt werden und saß mir in den Knochen' ('Wilna' 2–3). The journey 'nach Wilna' is not just to another place but also to another time, aptly considered by the Herzogs: 'the journey east is also a journey to the past' (4).

Edward Casey, the seminal theorist of place, poses the question, 'Does getting back into place mean getting back into mind?' (312), similarly underscoring the symbiosis of journeys and memory. Indeed, with his small family assembled to make the trip, Rabinovici describes his condition in both spatial and temporal terms: 'ich fühlte mich versetzt in jene Zeit' ('Wilna' 1). What he finds in Vilnius is a spatial palimpsest, the façades of which, when peeled away, expose structures and places that trigger memories in his mother while revealing the family's past to Rabinovici and his brother. Locating the site of her own mother's store 'Bon Ton' after asking a pair of young salesgirls to grant her access to the building's *Hinterhof*, Rabinovici's mother immediately recognizes it as the place where she 'spielte als Kind' ('Wilna' 8). As the Herzogs identify, Rabinovici's acknowledgement that, 'Modern ist nur die Fassade, aber weiter hinten lebt die Vergangenheit fort' ('Wilna' 8) assures us that the past histories of Vilnius 'continue to live on into the present ... through memories. Incomplete and often conflicting memories' (6–7). In their displacement to Vilnius – which corresponds to a movement from the present to the past – Rabinovici and his brother gain access to family memories *in situ*. When he exclaims, 'Unglaublich. Mit einem Mal habe ich eine Geschichte' ('Wilna' 9) after locating extensive information about his family tree in an archive, Rabinovici's brother reinforces Halbwachs' assertion that 'every collective memory unfolds within a spatial framework' (6): only through their placement in Vilnius do Rabinovici and his brother gain access to the totality of their family's story.

³ Costagli also discusses the concretized place of the home as a marker of time and endless cycles (circularity). Just as places in 'Nach Wilna' and *Das Vaterspiel* contain a temporal dimension, so too does the house in Jenny Erpenbeck's *Heimsuchung* – itself a character in the novel – witness its cyclical habitation by successive generations, until time collapses in upon itself and loses all meaning: 'Heute kann heute sein, aber auch gestern oder vor 20 Jahren, [...] die Zeit scheint ihr zur Verfügung zu stehen wie ein Haus' (qtd. in Costagli 8). Costagli characterizes the temporality of Erpenbeck's house as 'nicht von Fortschritt, sondern von der ewigen Wiederkehr von Entstehungs- und Verfallszyklen bestimmt' (Costagli 7).

Josef Haslinger's *Das Vaterspiel* utilizes a similar deployment of (divided) space to examine unresolved memory within families, which, in his conception of it, are both domestic units but also metaphors for Austria and its political system (Souchuk 8). Nearly all of Haslinger's major works of fiction are about families, from his novella *Der Tod des Kleinhäuslers Ignaz Hajek* from 1985, to his most recent novel *Jáchymov* (2011). Like Dückers, Rabinovici and Menasse, Haslinger also concerns himself with the transmission of memory to the *dritte Generation* in his texts (Souchuk 18). The turn to the family as a representative unit is seemingly irresistible for Haslinger, since he does not set out to write about families but inevitably ends up doing so: 'Vater-Sohn-Konstellationen haben bei [meinen] Werken immer eine besondere Rolle gespielt, bei *Jáchymov* kommt eine Vater-Tochter-Konstellatation dazu. Das ist kein Programm, das ich verfolge, das hat sich so ergeben' (Haslinger pers. comm.). In *Das Vaterspiel*, the family, its performance of self in public space, and the ways in which it correspondingly inhabits private space together metaphorize how memory is alternately (mis-)appropriated, confronted or ignored in Haslinger's Austria of 2000. Like the *Fassaden* in Rabinovici's Vilnius, space in Haslinger's text is also split between presentable surfaces and hidden back spaces of enduring memory, though it has less revelatory potential than the façades in 'Nach Wilna'. The emphasis in *Das Vaterspiel* is placed on the secret nature of place – either the 'place' of the lived body or the inhabited architectural structure – and the novel becomes, as Haslinger wrote, a *Versteckspiel*.

At the end of 'Nach Wilna', Rabinovici accentuates the capacity of literature (i.e. 'Poesie') to engage with history and memory, which in turn compels us to reflect upon the persistence of past transgressions in present time:

Poesie macht einen Kontinuum: Poesie weiß von den Verbrechen der Vergangenheit, vergißt aber nicht jene, die heute zu Opfern vom Krieg und Folter werden, die hier Zuflucht suchen und auf Argwohn stoßen. Sie macht uns verstehen, warum, was einmal geschah, immer wieder geschehen kann. Sie erlaubt mir den Blick auf das Andere, auf das Abseitige. Sie erinnert uns an das, was geschah, und daran, wie uns geschieht, indem sie uns immer wieder davon erzählt, wie es gewesen sein wird. (11)

Somewhat relatedly, in a discussion of her own writing, Menasse states her belief that, 'ich habe mich vor allem selbst therapiert durch das Schreiben' (Menasse pers. comm.), suggesting that writing encourages her to (self-)reflect, remember, and heal. Further, she clarifies that it is only fiction writing – in her case, the genre of the novel – that can accommodate the family stories that all her interviewing and questioning have produced: "ich werde keine Familienchronik schreiben ... aber der Stoff war da und dann wußte ich dann an irgendeinem Punkt, daraus machst du jetzt einen Roman" (Menasse pers. comm.). Both Rabinovici's and Menasse's statements reflect the restorative potential of writing and why it is an essential thing for them to do. As an exercise that encourages processes of introspection, contemplation and revelation, writing suggests the possibility of arriving at a resolution, of interrupting the seeming inevitability of Rabinovici's formulation: 'was einmal geschah, [kann] immer wieder geschehen'. The *Kontinuum* of Rabinovici's *Poesie* parallels, perhaps, the continuum of the family, with its memory spanning time and space. Writing and reading about the family might then compel us to reflect upon our relationship to the past and consider how the ruptures of the twentieth century, should they go unscrutinised, can continue into the twenty-first.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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