MODERN LITERATURE

Paper 1: “Poets, too, can sin so gravely”: Holocaust Consciousness and the Persuasive Power of Fiction in the Oeuvre of Hannah Arendt and Toni Morrison

by Frank Mehring, Free University of Berlin

This paper will confront and contextualize Hannah Arendt’s writings on the Holocaust with Toni Morrison’s literary explorations of the African experience of slavery in the United States. For Arendt, political experience can only be mastered if it is remembered and communicated, because only in this way can meaning emerge. Unveiling the mechanisms of xenophobia and anti-Semitism became the keystone for her biography on Rahel Varnhagen, which according to Arendt was “written with an awareness of the doom of German Judaism”; understanding terror and tyranny characterized the “sequels” The Origins of Totalitarianism and Eichmann in Jerusalem. Arendt’s writings on literature in Men in Dark Times and her essays on writers like Bertolt Brecht, Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, or Marcel Proust recently published in Reflections on Literature and Culture (2007) reveal her keen understanding of fiction as a means of persuasion and manipulation. Arendt emerges not only as a philosophical analyst, but also as a critical reader and interpreter of what she called the “most efficient fiction”: Nazi propaganda. Morrison dedicated her 1987 novel Beloved to “Sixty Million and More” thereby creating a numerical bridge to the six million Jews killed during the Hitler Regime. Her literary oeuvre is motivated by similar passions like Arendt’s. In her essay “The Site of Memory”, Toni Morrison argues that the majority of 18th and 19th century narratives of enslaved people created false memories of American culture. She charges authors like Olaudah Equiano, Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, or William Wells Brown with questionable strategies to shape the experience of enslavement: to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it and to make white readers comfortable. By taking refuge in literary conventions of the day, false American cultural memories were created. From this assessment, Morrison gets direction and inspiration for her own literary work: to rip away the veil drawn over “proceedings too terrible to relate”. Imagination becomes a tool to access and reveal the unwritten interior life of the oppressed. By confronting Hannah Arendt’s philosophical and biographical writings on the Jewish experience with Toni Morrison’s oeuvre on the African-American experience, this paper will address questions of moral responsibility and literary strategies to cope with terror, enslavement, and mass murder.