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‘[...] ein Holocaust, aber eben nicht meiner’: The Armenian Genocide in the works of Edgar Hilsenrath

I

Over five decades, Edgar Hilsenrath (1926-2019) produced a substantial oeuvre which focuses with differing degrees of autobiographical reflexivity on his personal experience of National Socialism, on questions of memory, and the life-long traumatic impact of the Shoah on the individual and collective psyche of survivors. With, for example, the works of Jurek Becker, Jean Améry, Ruth Klüger, and the lesser known Jakov Lind and H. G. Adler, his novels constitute a relatively small body of literary depictions (as opposed to testimonial accounts) of the personal experiences of flight, the ghetto, or the concentration camp by writers in their native German language. Given that the study of literary representations of the Shoah is such a prominent area of research, all the more so when one considers the emergence in the last two decades of cultural memory studies and comparative genocide studies as interdisciplinary fields of inquiry, there is comparatively little substantial scholarship on Hilsenrath for reasons which have been well documented.¹ Certainly it is symptomatic that in a country known for its superabundance of literary accolades, Hilsenrath only received the first of a small number of awards at the age of sixty-four, the Alfred Döblin Prize in 1990, for *Das Märchen vom letzten Gedanken* (1989).² His later works,

¹ Patrizia Vahsen, *Lesarten: Die Rezeption des Werks von Edgar Hilsenrath* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2008).

² Edgar Hilsenrath, *Gesammelte Werke in 11 Bände* (Berlin: Dittrich Verlag, 200?-2007) VI: *Das Märchen vom letzten Gedanken: Eine Geschichte aus dem Kaukasus*, ed. by ??? (2007), pp. x-xxx. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text. Are you sure this is vol 6? It looks like 7 to me (online). Perhaps just check, also the number of years in total that the GW covers. If this is the only work in this particular volume, no need to give page range, but if it isn't, then you should also give the page range here where indicated above.

in particular a trio of overtly autobiographical novels, generated little interest,³ although *Jossel Wassermanns Heimkehr* (1992) fared somewhat better in academic scholarship.⁴ Moreover, age, infirmity, and a life-long lack of a stable relationship with a publisher restricted his ability to actively promote his activities in a German *Literturbetrieb* fixated in the early post-*Wende* years on young writers and a dismissal of *Nachkriegsliteratur* as overdetermined by the crimes of National Socialism. Since the mid-1990s, a small number of scholarly publications timed to coincide with Hilsenrath's round-number birthdays, a prominent exhibition, and efforts to republish his complete works have failed to substantially rekindle significant interest, likewise and somewhat surprisingly so, the public availability of a rich source of new material in his extensive archive acquired in 2004 by the Academy of Arts, in Berlin.⁵ In qualitative and quantitative terms the key preoccupations in the secondary literature are echoed in many of the obituaries published in early 2019, namely that Hilsenrath's reputation and likely legacy would appear to rest largely on two 'unvarnished Holocaust novels'⁶; his debut, *Nacht* (1964), a grimly realistic depiction of ghetto life that elides the perpetrators, and, in particular, his second and most renowned novel, *Der Nazi und der Friseur* (1977). This grotesque parable combines obscene, scatological, and pornographic elements in a bold transgression of the discourse of the *Shoah* as a unique, ineffable

³ Hilsenrath, *Gesammelte Werke* IV: *Fuck Amerika*, ed. by? (2005), pp xx-xx; *Bronskys Geständnis*, ed. by? (2005), pp. xx-xx; *Gesammelte Werke* VIII: *Die Abenteuer des Ruben Jablonski* ed. by? (2007) and *Gesammelte Werke* X: *Berlin ... Endstation*, ed. by? (2007).. Further references to these edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁴ See Anne Fuchs, 'Edgar Hilsenrath's Poetics of Insignificance and the Traditions of Humour in German-Jewish Ghetto Writing', in *Ghetto Writing: Traditional and Eastern Jewry in German-Jewish Literature from Heine to Hilsenrath*, ed. by Anne Fuchs and Florian Krobb (Rochester NY: Camden House, 1999) pp. 180-94.

⁵ *Edgar Hilsenrath: Das Unerzählbare erzählen*, ed. by Thomas Kraft (Munich: Piper, 2006). *Verliebt in die deutsche Sprache: Die Odyssee des Edgar Hilsenrath*, ed. by Helmut Braun (Dittrich Verlag, Berlin, Akademie der Künste, 2005).

⁶Sam Roberts, 'Edgar Hilsenrath, 92, Writer of Unvarnished Holocaust novels dies', *New York Times* 31 month? 2019.

event beyond all understanding which can not be apprehended by established techniques of representation.⁷

The focus here is on Hilsenrath's preoccupation throughout his career with the Armenian Genocide; 'a Holocaust, just not my Holocaust', as he put it in the interview from which I take the title for the present article.⁸ Drawing for the first time on papers from his literary estate held in the Berlin archives and with particular reference to a close reading of the major novel, *Das Märchen vom letzten Gedanken* (1989), I ask three main questions: what historical interpretation does Hilsenrath offer; how is it translated into aesthetic form, and what conclusions can be drawn about his literary treatment of the Armenian Genocide when viewed through the wider lens of more recent research into transnational memory? The answers I provide will allow me to contend that Hilsenrath, to a degree hitherto overlooked and considerably *avant la lettre*, promotes the case for comparative genocide studies and 'multidirectional memory' at a time when Jewish writers and scholars were focused on the uniqueness of the Shoah and in an era when Germans were reluctant to draw historical comparisons.⁹

II

During the Centenary commemorations of the Great War of the past five years, relatively little public consideration has been given to the war on the Eastern Front, and still less to the conflict in

⁷ See Erin McGlothlin, 'Narrative Transgression in Edgar Hilsenrath's *Der Nazi Und Der Friseur* and the Rhetoric of the Sacred in Holocaust Discourse', *The German Quarterly* 80 (2007), 220–39 (p. 235).

⁸ Edgar Hilsenrath, 'Schuldig, weil ich überlebte', *Der Spiegel* 15/2005, 11 April 2005, pp. 110-73, (p. 173). Are these page numbers? I have presumed so, but perhaps wrongly.

⁹ I am very grateful to my colleagues Stuart Taberner and Helen Finch for many helpful discussions during the writing of this article, and to the staff at the archives of the Akademie der Künste in Berlin.

the Near and Middle East. This was particularly true of arguably the most atrocious crime of the Great War, the attempts by the Ottomans to eradicate the Armenian people, one of the constituent communities of their crumbling empire. In little over a year from the spring of 1915 it is estimated that between one and 1.5 million Armenians were killed, approximately half of the pre-war population, a destruction proportionally far greater than that of any other people in World War I.¹⁰ It is known that a further 500,000 perished in the period from the Armistice to 1923 and the establishment of a new Turkish state. The events were widely discussed and protested at the time, with international outrage and knowledge fuelled by eye-witness reports of Western missionaries, travellers, journalists, and foreign diplomats, not least those of the US which enjoyed good access as a still neutral power when the killings were at their height.¹¹ As allies, German and Austrian diplomatic cables were enciphered and are particularly candid and graphic. In Britain, the Archbishop of Canterbury referred to '[...] a crime which in scale and horror has probably no parallel in history',¹² and Winston Churchill to an 'administrative Holocaust' in recognition of a state-commissioned crime 'planned and executed for political reasons'.¹³ However, notwithstanding the ensuing threats of Great Power retribution which were enshrined in the Treaty of Sevres, the shifting geo-political landscape after the War soon meant that the rights of the Armenians were no longer on the political agenda after 1922. By the end of the 1930s the genocide had slipped into obscurity. It was a Pole, the jurist Raphael Lemkin, who worked tirelessly to have the events recognized as an international crime. He coined the term 'genocide', and his understanding of the phenomenon was shaped by extensive studies of the Armenian experience

¹⁰ Ronald Grigor Suny, *'They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else': A History of the Armenian Genocide* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2015).

¹¹ One of the best known personal accounts of the Armenian Genocide is Henry Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story* (Doubleday: New York, 1919). Available online via Project Gutenberg.

¹² 'Armenians And Serbians', *The Times* (London, England), 15 December 1915, p. 7..

¹³ Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis: The Aftermath* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1929), p. 405.

and then applied to the Holocaust in the run-up to the Nuremberg Trials. He became the first person to use the term ‘Armenian Genocide’ in a 1949 CBS television programme on the recently ratified UN Genocide Convention.¹⁴

For nearly a century the atrocities have either been ignored or not fully recognised for what they were. Today, the mass killings of the Armenians are commonly accepted as being’s the first genocide of the twentieth century, although some historians now regard the systematic murder by German colonial troops of the Herero and Nama tribes to have a prior claim by a decade.¹⁵ Certainly the overwhelming weight of historical scholarship published in the past ten-to-fifteen years leaves no doubt that the Turkish actions meet all the definitional criteria developed in relation to the Shoah. In echoes of some of the so-called ‘functionalist’ debates in Holocaust historiography, serious historians now only differ in their assessment of whether it was pre-planned (and for how long) or the result of a ‘cumulative radicalisation’.¹⁶ Most recently there has been an interest in establishing the extent to which Islamic belief influenced the unfolding events, if at all.¹⁷

Yet in the face of all the historical evidence, Turkey denies categorically that a genocide took place and sometimes goes to grotesque and absurd lengths to do so, acting against the better interests of its own international diplomacy in the process. The official line taken is that the Ottoman

¹⁴ See the special issue on Lemkin in the *Journal of Genocide Research* (2005), 7 (4).

¹⁵ See Jürgen Zimmerer, *Vom Windhuk nach Auschwitz? Beiträge zum Verhältnis von Kolonialismus und Holocaust* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2011) and his ‘The Birth of the “Ostland” out of the Spirit of Colonialism: A Postcolonial Perspective on the Nazi Policy of Conquest and Extermination’, *Patterns of Prejudice* 39 (2005), 197-219. For a particularly rich discussion see Roberta Pergher, Mark Roseman, Jürgen Zimmerer, Shelley Baranowski, Doris L. Bergen, and Zygmunt Bauman, ‘The Holocaust: A Colonial Genocide? A Scholars’ Forum’, *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust* 27 (2013), 40-73.

¹⁶ Donald Bloxham, ‘The Armenian Genocide of 1915-1916: Cumulative Radicalization and the Development of a Destruction Policy’, *Past & Present* 181 (2003), 141-191

¹⁷ From the wealth of newer material see Donald Bloxham, *The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Taner Akçam, *The Young Turks’ Crime against Humanity: The Armenian Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

government was confronted with a rebellious and seditious minority population at a crisis point for national security whose separatist passions had been encouraged by forces outside the Empire, particularly by Tsarist Russia with whom they were in league, and against whom they took legitimate action. There was no strategic, systematic intent to annihilate the Armenians, so the story goes; the deaths of over a million, including on death marches into the deserts of Syria and Mesopotamia and concentration camps, was merely a ‘re-location’ and a regrettable consequence of the ‘military necessity’ of a war, from which a glorious new state under Kemal Pascha emerged in 1923. Indeed, this mantra, which pervades modern school and university curricula, is adhered to with vehemence, effectively acting as the foundational myth of the new Turkey, and the ideological basis for the unbending refusal to yield to Armenian claims of financial and territorial restitution.¹⁸ Writers and intellectuals such as Nobel Laureate Orhan Pamuk, who have challenged the government orthodoxy have suffered harassment, intimidation, and prosecution. In 2006, Elif Shafak was tried under Statute 301 of the country’s penal code for ‘insulting Turkishness’ because a character in her novel, *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2006), referred to the massacre of Armenians as genocide. Statute 301 was invoked when Hilsenrath’s *Das Märchen vom letzten Gedanken* first appeared in Turkish translation to imprison its local publisher for eight months. Most recently a dramatization of the novel in the provincial German city of Konstanz, in 2014, led to angry protests outside the theatre by Turkish nationalists who objected to the use of the word ‘Völkermord’ on posters and the theatre’s website. The Turkish Consul General intervened to refute the assertion of

¹⁸ Recent research has shown that there is a clash between official state memory and popular social memory of the genocide in Turkey. See Uğur Ümit Üngör, ‘Lost in Commemoration: The Armenian Genocide in Memory and Identity’, *Patterns of Prejudice* 48 (2014), 147-66.

genocide and to request that a letter from him to that effect be circulated to the audience and published on the internet.¹⁹

Realpolitik has dictated that Turkey's outrageous denial of the Armenian Genocide is tolerated, albeit often through morally gritted teeth, because of its continuing strategic importance as a relatively moderate and pro-Western Muslim country in a key geo-political location; the gateway to the war-torn Middle East, a host to its NATO allies' military bases, and sitting atop a new gas line running from the Caspian Sea to the EU. Most NATO states, including the US and with the exception of France, for example, where denial of the genocide is a crime, avoid explicit mention of the term for fear of offending sensibilities and losing Turkish goodwill. So too Israel, while the British government has repeatedly asserted that there is insufficient evidence that what it terms a 'tragedy' amounted to genocide, unlike Germany.

Hilsenrath is not the first German-language writer to depict the Armenian genocide in fiction. Franz Werfel's *Die Vierzig Tage des Musa Dagh* of 1933 is a conventionally narrated historical novel of the most dramatic and widely reported instance of Armenian resistance when 4500 Armenians withdrew in 1915 to the city Van at the foot of the eponymous coastal mountain (the mountain of Moses) and successfully repelled vast numbers of soldiers, gendarmes, and would-be looters until they were evacuated by French warships. Werfel uses the fate of the Armenians to warn his fellow Austrians and Germans of Jewish heritage of the impending dangers of Nazism, and he was duly proscribed and excluded from the Prussian Academy of Arts. A condensed version appeared in English translation and did much to draw attention to the Armenian cause in the USA,

¹⁹ Anon. 'Die türkische Fahne soll nicht über Leichen wehen', *Die Welt*, 22 March 2014.

where there remains the largest and most vocal diasporic community.²⁰ Hilsenrath himself was intimately acquainted with and inspired by Werfel's book, and refers to the historical events on which it is based in his novel (pp. 474-77). The genocidal acts are, of course, evoked in contemporary German literature, for example in Zafer Şenocak's *Gefährliche Verwandtschaft* (2005),²¹ and most recently, the Turkish-German film-maker, Fatih Akin, made the genocide the starting-point for his first English-language movie, *The Cut* (2014).

It is telling that Hilsenrath took an interest even as an adolescent in the racially motivated persecution of minorities and did not shy away from drawing comparisons between their respective experiences. By his own account his first literary attempts²² were inspired by the popular Austrian writer and journalist Hugo Bettauer, most famous for *Die Stadt ohne Juden: Ein Roman von übermorgen* (1922), who was murdered by Nazis. Hilsenrath's reading of Bettauer's *Das blaue Mal: Der Roman eines Ausgestoßenen* (1923) with its focus on the prejudicial treatment of African-Americans in the United States helped him understand the racist bullying to which he was subjected in his home town.²³ Looking to such persecution as a framework to understand his own suggests an already intuitive awareness of commonalities and structural analogies with historical systems that is significant for the later development of his comparative approach to genocide. His autobiographical novel *Fuck America: Bronskys Geständnis* (1980) also draws parallels between

²⁰ See Wolf Gruner, "'Armenian Atrocities': German Jews and Their Knowledge of the Genocide during the Third Reich', in *Expanding Perspectives on the Holocaust in a Changing World*, ed. by Hilary Earl and Karl A. Schleunes, *Lessons and Legacies*, 9 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014), pp. 180-208. I looked this up and found a different name to Weiss...

²¹ See Tom Cheesman, *Novels of Turkish German Settlement: Cosmopolite Fictions* (Rochester: Camden House 2007), pp. 104-07.

²² Hilsenrath refers in an interview to '[...] ein Roman über einen weißen Neger, inspiriert von Hugo Bettauer, dem österreichischen jüdischen Bestsellerautor, und hatte irgendwo mit dem Judenproblem zu tun'. *Gesammelte Werke IX: Sie trommelten mit den Fäusten den Takt* (2007), ed. by? (2007), p. 9.

²³ See Nancy P. Nenko, 'Elective Paternities: White Germans and Black Americans in Hugo Bettauer's *Das blaue Mal* (1922)', *German Studies Review* 39 (2016), 259-77.

prejudicial attitudes to Jews and Afro-Americans and the endemic violence from which both communities suffered, while he was critical in interviews of the Israeli government for its settler policy in the Occupied Territories.

Above all, Hilsenrath had a life-long preoccupation with the fate of the Armenians, and there is repeated reference to Armenia in his trilogy of autobiographical fiction. In *Die Abenteuer des Ruben Jablonski* (1997) for example, the eponymous narrator *en route* with a female companion on the *Baghdad Railway* to Palestine in 1945, makes reference to ‘[d]er erste staatlich organisierte Völkermord des 20. Jahrhunderts in Europa und Kleinasien.’ (p. ?) He goes on to provide a potted and historically accurate account of the effacement of Armenia and its people, including statistics on death toll. Of all of his literary creations, *Jablonski* is arguably the closest to his creator; like Hilsenrath, his historical studies during adolescence lead him to draw parallels between the Armenian and Jewish experience of persecution and conclude that the one was the precursor to the other (pp. 125-28). The last and more loosely autobiographical of the trilogy, which was published to coincide with his eightieth birthday in 2006, *Berlin, Endstation*, not only sketches the genesis of a novel very like *Das Märchen vom letzten Gedanken*, it underscores Hilsenrath’s close affinity with the country by embodying it in a passionate and intellectually stimulating love affair with a young Armenian woman, Anahid, who shares her name with the mythical Armenian goddess of fertility, as well as with the mother of the main protagonist of his *Märchen*. Here it is the uniqueness of the Shoah which is questioned: ‘Der Holocaust und die Vernichtung der europäischen Juden galt als einmalig in der Geschichte. Aber war es wirklich? War die Ermordung der Armenier nicht auch ein Holocaust?’ (p. 96). Similar statements are numerous in essays and interviews.

III

Das Märchen vom letzten Gedanken is a substantial and complex novel of some six hundred and fifty pages and is in my opinion Edgar Hilsenrath's most significant literary achievement. While the focus on the *Shoah* in his first two novels reflected and drew on his traumatic personal experience in the notorious ghetto of Mogdhilov-Podolsk in the Ukrainian lands between the Bug and Dneestr rivers, the Armenian genocide, with its clear categorical similarities, offered him rich and broadly cognate material to explore similar themes and draw comparisons without covering the same ground; 'ein ähnliches Ereignis, das genauso viel Stoff liefert.'²⁴ It is perhaps difficult at the distance of over thirty years to recognize just how controversial drawing a comparison between the Shoah and a pre-Shoah genocide was in the late 1980s. Certainly this was alluded to in some of the early reviews of the novel, and remains contentious.²⁵ The reason why, of course, is that the publication of *Das Märchen vom letzten Gedanken* coincided with the notorious *Historikerstreit* of the late 1980s. This acrimonious 'Historians Quarrel', which spread across the media and academic and political circles, convulsed German public opinion before being overtaken by the historical rupture of German Unification. Historian Ernst Nolte had lamented the Nazi past as 'Die Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will', and argued that it was not only a reaction to the acts of annihilation which took place under Stalin but was actually caused by it and copied its methods. A number of left-liberal historians and intellectuals, notably Jürgen Habermas, were concerned that the crimes of National Socialism were being historicized and normalized, and accused Nolte – and his fellow travellers Michael Stürmer and Andreas Hillgruber – of a collective attempt to deny the uniqueness of the Holocaust and of watering down Germany's responsibility for it. Since this debate, other scholars, often very far apart in their approaches and outlook, such as Yehuda

²⁴ *Das Unerzählbare erzählen*, ed. by Thomas Kraft, p. 222.

²⁵ See Jan Süsselbeck's December 2006 review of *Berlin, Endstation*, 'Wechselbad der Gefühle' <<https://literaturkritik.de/id/10248>> [last accessed 9 July 2019].

Bauer, Steven Katz, and Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, have shared the uniqueness position.²⁶ As understandable as Habermas's intervention was at the time, he was effectively erecting a *cordon sanitaire* around the Holocaust which ruled all forms of historical comparison off limits, and this was nowhere more strictly adhered to than in Germany. Yet the notion that comparing genocides necessarily diminishes the Holocaust holds only if there is an assumption of exact historical and moral equivalence; Hilsenrath, for his part, is concerned to explore with his reader certain structural or intellectual similarities and links and, in so doing, point up significant differences.

How does Hilsenrath establish connections between these two historical mass murders? Here consulting his literary papers in the holdings of Berlin's *Akademie der Künste* can be instructive. Hilsenrath's archive suggests that the novel had an extremely long genesis. I have traced the first efforts to 1970, when he was still living in the US; an English-language typescript bears the title 'Armenia, my Love'. This is an 'outline' for a 'dramatic love story based on [...] historical facts, which takes place in the period from the start of the massacres to the Armenian uprising against the Soviets in February 1921.'²⁷ A second, shorter copy has the word 'outline' crossed out and is labelled in red upper case ink in the author's own hand '(Outline/Novel) Screen Treatment by Edgar Hilsenrath', which suggests that it was composed to attract the interest of an American publisher and/or a filmmaker and, more speculatively, that Hilsenrath was perhaps uncertain as to the best form, or was simply keeping his options open. There also exists a thirty-page first chapter of the novel, translated into English, which is written in the same, stark realism of *Nacht*. What is clear, however, is that Hilsenrath struggled with his material and only started to write in earnest

²⁶ See Matthew P. Fitzpatrick, 'The Pre-History of the Holocaust? The Sonderweg and Historikerstreit Debates and the Abject Colonial Past', *Central European History* 41 (2008), 477-503, (p. 482).

²⁷ Berlin, Akademie der Künste (AK), Edgar-Hilsenrath-Archiv, classification no. Hilsenrath 908, 21 pages. Not sure why you cite the number of pages in this file – delete '21 pages'?

some fifteen years later, playing with variants of his initial title along the way, as different drafts show.²⁸

As is already evident in the early ‘treatment’, Hilsenrath was determined to write a novel altogether more ambitious in its historical sweep and scope than Franz Werfel’s, focusing his lens on the genocide with substantially greater depth of field. The work has a geometric structure; it is divided into three ‘Books’ of similar length in rising, equal multiples of six chapters, respectively. A twenty-one page ‘Prologue’ and two-page ‘Epilogue’ act as a frame and are set in the historical present, while a ‘Glossary’ explains the extensive use of Armenian and Turkish vocabulary. Most of the novel’s essential elements in terms of form and content are already prefigured in its title (*Märchen*) and original subtitle (*Ein historischer Roman aus dem Kaukasus*)²⁹, two genres which would conventionally appear to be at odds with one another but which, as I will show, serve the author well. In the Prologue, the novel’s self-consciously fictional status is established immediately; the titular ‘last thought’ is that of the dying 73 year-old Thovma Khatasian. He is as old as the genocide and one of only two members of his family to survive it. The novel bears many of the hallmarks of a classical oriental fairy tale; it unfolds as dialogues in the protagonist’s head with an imagined story teller or *Meddah*, imbued with genie-like powers, and the latter’s shadow. He is the ‘magical helper’ in possession of all the information and resources required to embark on a fantastical quest for knowledge and truth. Further dialogues-within-dialogues allow us to take a magic-carpet ride through time and space, to eavesdrop on conversations of historical personages and inhabit the past as it happened. The formulation of ‘A thousand and one’ is a leitmotif of the book as a whole and an obvious allusion to the *Arabian Nights*, as is the repetition of the Turkish

²⁸ See, for example, AK classification nos. Hilsenrath 918-922.

²⁹ Subtitle of the first edition published by Piper (Munich: 1989).

‘Once upon a time...’ refrain, *bir varmisch, bir yokmusch, bir varmisch* with which the Prologue concludes. Repeated in German, ‘Es war einmal einer, es war einmal keiner, es war einmal’, it underscores that the reader is entering a world of fictional representation, emphasizing ‘[...] die Doppelheit von wahrer und fiktiver Geschichte.’³⁰ Thus the text conveys that the stories we are about to hear of the peasant Khatasian family in the remote mountainous heartlands of Eastern Anatolia are entirely imaginary; a composite of Armenian experience over several generations, a document of persecution, and an exploration and retrieval of vanished customs, practices, and folk culture. The Story Teller signals this explicitly throughout the text, no more so in his story of Thovma’s miraculous birth, which may or may not have occurred. The latter has, like his creator, undertaken all manner of research and now requires an act of narration to make his people’s history – and his family’s place in it –, ‘real’. He seeks to bear witness but also be an eye-witness to the destruction in the face of modern Turkey’s actions to keep the ‘Armenian File’ containing the truth of the genocide, as it is called in Thovma’s imagined conversations with the Turkish Prime Minister, from the international community (p. 22). Thovma seeks not to punish or demand retribution, rather to uphold the monitory potential of the Armenian genocide in order to prevent similar atrocities in future. To this end Hilsenrath chronicles some of the horrendous acts and their systematic coordination from the epi-centre of the Turkish government throughout the novel, thereby revealing that his novel shares the didactic moral purpose of all good fairy stories: while the family story is a fiction, the reader is shown that the genocide did indeed take place, that it meets the UN’s legal definition of the term and, as such, that Armenian claims for restitution are justified.

³⁰ Edgar Hilsenrath, *Erinnerungsgespräch*, p. 323. I think this is the first mention of this work? Can you provide the full ref?

Hilsenrath's ambition to make a serious intervention in one of the most fiercely contested historical episodes in twentieth-century history is evident in his diligent attention to meticulous and extensive historical research. In order to fill the 'gaps' in the historiographical record and 'break the [Turkish] silence' (p. 14), he turned to German, Austrian, and other European archives, many of which reach back into previous centuries. He also made a study visit to the ancient Armenian heartlands of Eastern Anatolia which, however, yielded virtually nothing by way of information and insights, as if to reinforce the totality of the genocidal destruction.³¹ Not only has modern Turkey destroyed documentary records of the killings, it has also successfully erased virtually all traces of Armenian life within its territories, including villages, place-names, and over 2000 churches. Such wholesale cultural destruction points up that genocide is not only the elimination of a population, it is also the eradication of its intellectual and cultural identity and 'signifying practices', marking a caesura in its continuous history.³² Moreover, modern Turkey remains complicit in the crimes by continuing to deny them. This experience had implications for Hilsenrath's literary practice, as we shall see later.

The Hilsenrath holdings in Berlin contain a plethora of material from Ottoman Turkey's Central Power allies. A particularly rich source which the writer consulted is the two-volume collection of documents from the Austrian State Archives.³³ These are reports from the Ambassador, consular officials in Aleppo and other Ottoman cities to the Foreign Secretary, Count Stephan Baron Burian. There are also Hilsenrath's own hand-written notes of German diplomatic cables recording the detail of numerous atrocities, such as the butchery of 2500 Armenians in the Kemal Gorge by the

³¹ *Das Unerzählbare erzählen*, ed. by Kraft, p. 222.

³² See Peter Balakian, 'Raphael Lemkin, Cultural Destruction and the Armenian Genocide', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 27 (2013), 47-89.

³³ *Dokumente über Armenien im österreichischen Staatsarchiv*, ed. by Artem Ohandjanian, 2 vols (Vienna: publisher? Austrian State Archives?, 1988). AK, classification no. Hilsenrath 1570 contains vol I 1912-1914; AK, classification no. Hilsenrath 1571 contains vol II 1915-1917.

8th Cavalry Brigade of the Turkish army which caused the Euphrates river to run red with blood, a crime detailed in the novel (p. 556), or the burning alive by the local ruler of the town of Bitliss of one thousand children. A few surviving Ottoman government documents were clearly crucially important to him; the verbatim note of a Decree of 27 May 1915 on mass deportation of Armenians, for example, bears Hilsenrath's parenthetical, handwritten gloss that this was tantamount to 'a death sentence' and was done intentionally. Similarly, the coded cable of Interior Minister Talaat Bey, the genocide's main progenitor and later Prime Minister, to the police directorate of Aleppo, dated 15 September 1915:

Es wurde bereits mitgeteilt, daß auf Beschluß des Komitees die Regierung *die völlige Vernichtung der in der Türkei lebenden Armenier* beschlossen hat [...] Ganz gleich, ob Frauen, Kinder oder Invaliden und so grausamer die Methoden der Vernichtung auch sein mögen -- Ihrer Existenz ist ein Ende zu setzen, ohne Gefühlszeugung oder Mitleid. (my italics).

Not only does this refute the arguments of Turkish denialists that there is no documentary evidence of genocidal intent in the form of an extermination order,³⁴ its murderous linguistic proximity to the notorious pronouncements of Hitler or Himmler demonstrates that far from applying a National Socialist template to the Armenian Genocide the comparison he makes takes its impetus from the empirical evidence he consulted and is thus reinforced by his primary historical research. His sources, including material on the disastrous prosecution of military action against the Russians at

³⁴ See Geoffrey Robertson, *An Inconvenient Genocide: Who Now Remembers the Armenians?* (London: Biteback, 2014), p. 5.

the outbreak of war, are augmented by accounts from German and international and travellers and writers, such as the protestant missionary Johannes Lepsius, the humanist Armin T. Wegner,³⁵ and two Scandinavians, Age Meyer Benedicstsen and the 1922 Nobel Peace laureate, explorer and diplomat Fridtjof Nansen, who worked on behalf of the League of Nations to re-settle Armenian refugees in the 1920s. Hilsenrath's distillation of his extensive reading into notes also shows that he consulted contemporary German newspapers, as well as English-language material such as the writings of the US diplomat, Henry Morgenthau. For example he records the source of a crucial piece of evidence; a report of 11 November 1914 in the *Vossische Zeitung* which closer inspection of the microfilm available in the internet reveals to be a disavowal of official Turkish reports of an Armenian rising against them in Van, thereby debunking the Turkish line of Armenian provocation. He also delved deeply into the special archive of the Mekhitarist Congregation in Vienna, one of the most important of its kind in the world, where Werfel also undertook research.³⁶ It houses 2600 precious Armenian manuscripts, with the oldest one stemming from the ninth century, approximately 120,000 books in the Armenian language, and 15,000 foreign-language works on Armenian topics, especially on the history, language, and development of the Armenian people. It is significant from the point of view of *Das Märchen vom letzten Gedanken* as an historical novel that Hilsenrath was drawing on substantial German-language source material which is still largely underused in reconstructions of the events in Armenian, Turkish, and Anglo-American or indeed general genocide scholarship.

³⁵ Wegner produced four collections of photographic books on the genocide and campaigned tirelessly for Armenian rights throughout the Weimar Republic, before being banned and incarcerated by the Nazis.

³⁶ “‘Frisch von der Leber weg’ – Edgar Hilsenrath wird 85: Ein Erinnerungsgespräch’, *German Life and Letters* 64 (2011), 317-25 (p. 323).

What does Hilsenrath convey to his readers about Armenian history, in particular of the genocide? We are told that the killings during WWI were but the culmination of a pattern of persecution through the ages like that of the Jews, which the Armenians had suffered as the very oldest of a number of Christian minorities of Asia Minor. However, as the Ottoman Empire became the first of the dynastic empires to collapse under the weight of external demands from the Great Powers and for self-determination by its constituent peoples, the violence radicalized. This is the force of the novel's reference (p. 95) to the brutal repression orchestrated in Anatolia by Sultan Abdul Hamid II in 1895 when an estimated 300,000 perished in a series of massacres which continued sporadically, with a further 20,000 murders some fifteen years later. Hilsenrath draws the clear inference that what is regarded as the 1915-1916 genocide was but the culmination of these two previous killing sprees; a 'continuity view' one finds only in much more recent historical studies, which is also underscored by a number of the novel's personnel who are murderously active over a number of decades, including in the Bulgarian atrocities of 1876, not coincidentally the year of Wartan's birth (p. 82).

The novel's first Book takes place in the immediate run-up to the 1915 massacres and focuses on Thovma's father, Wartan. In precise detail, Hilsenrath charts the path of the most intensive wave of genocidal killings, beginning with the demobilization of Armenian soldiers into labour units prior to their summary annihilation, including young boys aged twelve and over. There follows the round-up in Constantinople and execution on trumped-up charges of communal leaders and the intellectual elite on 24/25 April 1915, the 'official' date on which the genocide is now commemorated. Book Two traces Wartan's family life in rural Anatolia before the genocide, while the third depicts the mass deportations and exterminations during and after WWI. Here all manner of heinous acts are referred to: mutilation, sadistic torture, crucifixion, murder by any object which

came to hand to conserve ammunition, burnings, mass rape, pillage, the horseshoeing of human feet, foetuses ripped out with bayonets of the bodies of pregnant women, kidnapping, slavery, and forced conversion to Islam, a fate which befell Thovma.

In Book One Wartan, recently returned as an American citizen after years in the USA, is arrested on absurdly false charges of spying and high treason ahead of a show trial designed to justify the planned killing. He is subjected to horrific torture, including oral rape, and on pain of the most grotesque death and with his pregnant wife as hostage, confesses to being the actual assassin of Archduke Ferdinand at Sarajevo and thus the trigger of WWI. Satirical dialogues replete with black humour, many taking place in the communal latrines, articulate the Ottoman case against him and reveal it to be a ridiculous Turkish fairy tale, a fabrication just like modern Turkey's claims that there never was a genocide. It is a product of the same mendacity and absurd national paranoia that makes of the trivial possession of Russian schnapps or a letter from a grandmother in Russia, or an alleged prayer on behalf of the Russians – the respective 'crimes' of three men hanged on the city gate of Bakir, including Thovma's uncle Dikran – a capital offence (p. 45).

In the stereotypical figures of the *Müdir*, the Chief of the local gendarmerie, two high-ranking district and regional commissioners within the Vilayet or province of Bakir, its Governor, the Wali, as well as an effete German major, Hilsenrath not only points up some of the complex tiers of government involved in the prosecution of the genocide and the complicity of Turkey's allies, he draws explicit links between the fate of the Armenians and the Shoah in two significant ways. First, the same anti-Semitic stereotypes which were applied by Germans to Jews are shown to be common currency in the Ottoman Empire with regard to the Armenians, notwithstanding the existence of a Jewish minority in Turkey. In actuality there were, of course, some sociological and political parallels between the two groups; exclusion from professions and discrimination relegated

them to minority status, requiring the development of expertise in activities from which they were not barred. A very small minority, mostly assimilated city dwellers outwardly indistinguishable from the Turks (pp. 39-40), enjoyed success in business and commerce which the Ottomans played into negative stereotypes of wily merchants bent on exploiting Muslims; sly, ruthless, and depraved. Significantly it is the German Major, fresh from a posting to the Galician front where he found a preponderance of Jews, who claims that the two peoples are 'fast zum Verwechselln' (p. 48). The provincial Governor of Bakir *inter alia* envies and reviles the Armenians for their presumed wealth and alleged control of the professions. He even claims that Armenians and Jews share the same look in their eye: 'geil, tückisch, gierig, hinterlistig, verschlagen genauso wie bei den Juden [...]', although the Story Teller makes it clear to the reader that such anti-Armenianism and anti-Semitism is simply confirming and reinforcing fragile Ottoman self-perception and is a projection of their self hatred. (p. 92).

Second, in order to support his belief that there is a line of continuity from the Armenian genocide to the Holocaust, Hilsenrath points up that the Ottoman and Nazi exterminatory nationalist ideologies share a fundamentally similar racist-biological belief. Moreover, actions against the respective ethno-religious groups are cloaked in strikingly similar euphemistic and bureaucratic language, as the following examples from Book Three of the novel reveal. Armenians are referred to on several occasions as a parasitical disease on the body politic of the Ottoman 'Wirtsvolk'. The persecution emerges as primarily racially motivated, with considerations of 'die nationale Gesinnung, die Rasse und das Blut' more important than religion (p. 498). Tellingly the *Müdir's* earlier, vivid association in a nightmare of Armenians with a cellar teeming with millions of rats (pp. 49-50) recalls a scene from the Nazi propaganda film *Der ewige Jude* (1940). The implication is that the vermin Armenians are an inherent threat to national security, in league with the Russians

as fifth columnists who, in an echo of the *Dolchstoß* myth, administered a ‘stab in the back’ (p. 48) of the brave Turks and caused their crushing military defeats in the first year of the War (p. 461). The Wali even evokes the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (1903) to argue that the Armenians are ‘an allem schuld’; part of a ‘Weltverschwörung’ whose defeat would deliver ‘die endgültige Lösung des Armenierproblems’ and constitute a ‘Triumph des Willens’ (p. 477). Hilsenrath’s deployment of the *Lingua tertii imperi* in the last three quotations even extends to adapting a section of Hitler’s notorious ‘Prophecy Speech’ to the Reichstag of 30 January 1939 and placing it into the mouth of a Turkish official: ‘Sollte es dem internationalen Armeniertum gelingen, eines Tages die ganze Welt gegen uns aufzuhetzen, dann wird das die Vernichtung dieser Rasse bedeuten.’ (p. 499) It is also significant that Hilsenrath identifies Imperial Germany as an accessory to the war crimes: training the Ottoman military, supplying weapons, battle ships, and employing slave labour taken from the Armenian and other Christian minorities on the building of the Baghdad Railway, which was financed by the *Deutsche Bank*.

When the Armenian revolt in the city of Van presents the Young Turk leadership with a more plausible excuse for the slaughter, it is prosecuted ‘mit fast preußischer Gründlichkeit und Präzision’ (p. 483). In these sections of the text a full-blown euphemistic genocidal language emerges. The mass slaughter is justified as a ‘Verteidigungsmaßnahme’ (p. 483) which leads to further ‘Armeniermaßnahmen’ (p. 489); the arrest, torture, and execution of the so-called ‘Notables’ and the fabrication of evidence against them; the seizure of property (p. 510), shootings of the menfolk; ‘kriegsbedingte Deportationen’; the ‘Umsiedlung’ (p. 508) via death marches (‘Todeskolonnen’ p. 478) into the desert, the rape and murder, including by burning, of innocent women and children by killing squads (‘Einsatzkommandos’) coordinated by a ‘Sonderorganisation’ (p. 484), the *Teschkilat-Mahuse*, which in its history and mission resembles

the SS. The violence escalates in the summer months in the run-up to Ramadan resulting in Bakir finally being declared 'Aremenierrein' (p. 522). Any Turk or Kurd harbouring Armenians faces execution (p. 546), and as with the Shoah, the genocide takes absolute priority over all other political considerations, such as maintaining US neutrality, and military necessities on the front. (p. 556). When the tide turns and the Russian advance is imminent, all remaining Armenians are to be liquidated (p. 582). Moreover, Hilsenrath points up other commonalities and structural similarities to the Shoah which qualify the actions as a genocide; the existence of a coordinated plan, albeit one which only acquired detail as the killings progressed systematically (p. 479), as well as extermination orders from the ruling Triumvirate which were then concealed, and the elimination of witnesses to the horrors. Yet, as it emerges in a discussion between Wartan and the American Consul who is reminiscent of the US historical eye-witness Henry Morgenthau, while Berlin was kept extremely well informed about the massacres it chose to turn a blind eye, refusing to exercise its power over its junior ally to prevent the genocide. In addition to his empirical evidence, Hilsenrath captures the complicity of the land of writers and philosophers in a powerful literary image:

Die Deutschen sind ein merkwürdiges Kulturvolk [...] Manchmal hat es den Anschein, als hätte sich das Gewissen ihrer Dichter and Denker hinter der Monokole der Generäle geflüchtet, um irgendwann in den Stiefelschäften der Soldaten zu verschwinden. Dort wird es dann unbekümmert zertreten (p. 555).

Finally, the historical continuity and parallels with the Holocaust are suggested in the ultimate fate of Wartan following his unlikely escape to Switzerland at the end of WWII. Adopting the identity of a Turk, he embarks on a mission to help Jews in Poland, loses his passport, is mistaken for a Jew, and deported to Auschwitz alongside a Turkish travelling companion. In a cattle truck at the doors of the death camp Wartan successfully and temporarily consoles the terrified Jews with Wilhelm Busch's story of Max and Moritz being baked in an oven as punishment for their pranks and misdemeanours. Wartan's fate is not the Turkish fairy tale which denies genocide, but a very real German perpetration that makes porous the boundary between history and fiction. In one of his final interviews Hilsenrath contends that this scene was a conscious way of connecting 'den Holocaust an den Juden mit jenem an den Armeniern'. Both had the intention to exterminate 'ganze Generationen', while the Germans had learned a great deal about mass extermination from the Turks, and the only difference was that their gas chambers enabled a mechanized form of killing.³⁷

Recent historical research gives legitimacy to Hilsenrath's suggestive comparisons, although one must take issue with him for claiming only one major differentiating feature. The Nazis' aims were namely notably distinctive in seeking to exterminate an entire race wherever its people resided.³⁸ That notwithstanding, a recent major study has shown that anti-Armenianism and an Armenia-related paranoia were propagated in the right-wing media in Germany of the 1920s and 1930s in terms very similar to the anti-Semitism of the day, and with a view to whitewashing German involvement in the genocide. Sitting alongside anti-Armenian clichés permeated in popular fiction,

³⁷ 'Das Buch endet in Auschwitz'. Interview with Edgar Hilsenrath in the *Wiener Zeitung*, 18 April 2015.

³⁸ See Robert Melsom, 'Paradigms of Genocide: The Holocaust, the Armenian Genocide, and Contemporary Mass Destructions', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, The Holocaust: Remembering for the Future*, 548 (1996), 156-68. Is this a special issue? If not, it would be easiest to delete the subtitle

for example by Karl May and Hans Barth, a discourse of ‘Armenian-Jewish conflation’ positioned the ‘Armenoid’ race as similar to, or even worse than, the ‘Jewish Race’. This provides ‘cumulative evidence’ that the Nazis, who fostered a personality cult around Mustapha Kemal (Atatürk), were directly influenced by the Armenian genocide.³⁹ Given Hilsenrath’s life-long interest it is very likely that he was aware of this discourse of ‘conflation’ in his youth and that he draws on it in the novel. Certainly he knew from his own reading that some German consular officials with first-hand experience of the genocide went on to become prominent National Socialists, a complex of people epistemically connecting the Armenian and Jewish genocides. Thus Konstantin von Neurath, Foreign Minister from 1932-1938, later *Reichsprotektor* in Bohemia and Moravia during Reinhard Heydrich's terror and indicted war criminal, was a diplomat in the German Embassy in Constantinople at the time, while Hilter’s first Chief of Staff, Max-Erwin von Scheubner-Richter, who died at his side during the Beer Hall Putsch of 8/9 November 1923, served in the German mission of Erzerum. In several interviews Hilsenrath mentions Hitler’s notorious *Armenierrede* of 22 August 1939, delivered on the Obersalzberg on the eve of the invasion of Poland. Designed to stiffen the resolve of his party paladins and military commanders to ‘kill without mercy men, women and children of the Polish race of language’ with impunity and under the fog of war, Hitler reputedly noted how early outrage had given way to the general, international indifference to the fate of the Armenians.⁴⁰

³⁹ For the most comprehensive analysis of the evolution of German representations of the Armenians and responses to the Armenian genocide see Stefan Ihrig, *Justifying Genocide: Germany and the Armenians from Bismarck to Hitler* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2016), pp. 333-38 (p. 352).

⁴⁰ When viewed in the light of Hilsenrath’s comparison, the similarities with the Nazi campaign in Poland, including actions against the non-Jewish population, reveal striking similarities to the Ottoman’s treatment of the Armenians, from the initial elimination of political, intellectual, and cultural leaders to the subsequent massacres. See Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Stalin and Hitler* (London: Bodley Head, 2010). On Hitler’s speech see Robertson, *An Inconvenient Genocide*, pp. 257-58.

The special etiology of genocide, as I have already intimated, prompted Hilsenrath to go well beyond simply writing a novel about historical massacres. Genocide's goal to eliminate a whole cultural, ethno-religious group is often accompanied by the simultaneous destruction of that group's civilization or culture. Hilsenrath not only wanted to break the Turkish silence surrounding the carnage visited on the Armenians he also wanted to commemorate their culture that was simultaneously destroyed, i.e. in Raymond Williams's sense of 'a whole way of life'. This is achieved via his depiction of the Wartisan family's everyday rural life in the prototypical Armenian village of Yedi Suh which makes up Book Two, the novel's longest. Hilsenrath's archive shows that his quest for historical accuracy extended to ethnographic research in the rich holdings of the San Francisco Public Library during a four-month long study visit. This attests to a form of total immersion not only in the history of Armenia but also in its culture, myths, rituals, language, and folklore, which he found described in the diaries, memories, and family documents of Armenian villagers and emigrés to the USA.⁴¹ There are four very substantial folders of copious notes devoted *inter alia* to proverbs, sayings, forms of address, names, and nicknames; rituals, customs, and superstitions; courtship and religious practices, geography and general history. An entire folder is devoted to Armenian food and cuisine.⁴² His exposure not least to the rich Armenian store of fairy tales clearly influenced him to abandon the realism of his initial draft first chapter in favour of his *Märchen*, and results in what might be termed an act of 'empathic memory', representing and feeling the Armenian situation as if it were Hilsenrath's own.

While the fidelity to detail is remarkable and includes such historical minutiae of the Turkish state in the years 1850-1915, it is much more significant that Hilsenrath uses it to highlight similarities

⁴¹ Edgar Hilsenrath, *Erinnerungsgespräch* op.cit., p. 323. Same query as in a previous note. Is this a ref to the GLL article?

⁴² AK, classification nos. Hilsenrath 912-915.

between Armenian and Turkish (and indeed Jewish) daily practice and how much the people share in common. This emerges particularly in the descriptions which are replete with biblical allusion, Armenian legends, folklore, wedding rituals, food and drink, superstitions, sexual mores, and minute details of household and agricultural accoutrements. Moreover even the fundamental religious differences are illuminated in a more nuanced light by repeated mention of the similarity and affinity of certain stories in Christian and Muslim holy books.

Whereas the perpetrators are described in a satirical mode, particularly in the novel's first Book, here a 'humorous' portrayal of the life of the future victims dominates. Yet this is not to say that an 'idyllic world' of oriental 'Kitsch' is created, as some reviewers contended,⁴³ for the humour is of the variety which always calls attention to the divergence between the real and the ideal, combining affect and critical awareness. Thus in addition to what they have in common with the Ottomans and the Kurds, the reader is invited to recognize that there are many shared negative traits, in particular a susceptibility to the same prejudicial treatment of other religious and ethnic groups which results in occasional violent flashpoints. Moreover, as Sievers has discussed at length in an article which *inter alia* takes Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) as its interpretive framework,⁴⁴ the Armenians are no less patriarchal than the Ottomans in their values. The obvious risk of over-identification with victims is mitigated if one revisits the depictions of what one prominent literary critic dismissed as the author's typical preoccupation with ribaldry and prurience.⁴⁵ Thus the numerous examples of misogyny, the general subjugation of women, and

⁴³ See Wiebke Sievers, 'Orientalist Kitsch? Edgar Hilsenrath's Novel "Das Märchen vom letzten Gedanken"', *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies* 41 (2005), 289-304.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Martin Hielscher, 'Das Flüstern des Todes: Edgar Hilsenraths *Märchen vom letzten Gedanken* – Ein Roman über den Völkermord an den Armeniern', *Die Zeit*, 6 October 1989, available at <<http://www.zeit.de/1989/41/das-fluestern-des-todes/komplettansicht>> [last accessed 3 July 2019].

grotesque sexually transgressive behaviour, such as the rape by a libidinous elderly man of a minor can be regarded in this light as deliberate attempts to alienate the reader from an over-empathetic view of the victim group, as is the case in some of his depictions of Jewish figures in other of his works. This thwarts uncritical involvement with the characters by introducing reflexive distance into the text (in addition, here, to those afforded by its metafictional elements), and thus also challenges the stereotype of the ‘idealized’ victim in a way that anticipates the criticism of philosemitic tropes by younger writers, such as Rafael Seligmann and Maxim Biller.⁴⁶

A novel which, to cite the title and subtitle, is both a *Märchen* and *ein historischer Roman* might appear to be something of a paradox, as I have noted in the foregoing. Yet Hilsenrath’s deployment of the fairy-tale genre serves his historical purpose well on two levels. First he manages to convey the acts of the perpetrators and magnitude of the suffering of the victims in a way that blends meticulously researched history with fantasy, opening up new ways of engaging with the material. In this manner the invented story of the Khatasian family can be more truthful than the Turkish historical narrative of denial. He also largely eschews brutal realism thereby avoiding some of the ethical dilemmas and questions which the fictional representation of atrocity can generate:

Der Völkermord an den Armeniern war so schrecklich, dass man ihn kaum mehr realistisch darstellen kann. Das hätte auch wenig Sinn gehabt, zu beschreiben, wie Hunderttausende einfach abgeschlachtet wurden. Nach langen Überlegungen wurde mir klar, dass ich das am besten in der Rahmenhandlung eines Märchens machen konnte. Allerdings ist es kein Märchen, sondern eine wahre Geschichte, es ist nur wie ein Märchen erzählt.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ See, for example, Rafael Seligmann, *Rubinsteins Versteigerung* (Munich: DTV, 1989); Maxim Biller, xxxx?

⁴⁷ Edgar Hilsenrath, ‘Das Buch endet in Auschwitz’. Interview with the *Wiener Zeitung* 18 April 2014.

The second level is that in looking back beyond the Holocaust to represent the Armenian genocide, Hilsenrath afforded himself the opportunity to revisit the themes of the earlier works which were rooted in his own direct personal experience but with a far greater degree of distance; the fairy tale genre takes him and his reader back to a time before the Shoah, and offers an approach which avoids much of the brutally direct representation of reality of *Nacht* and the grotesqueness of *Der Nazi und der Friseur*. It affords him a greater literary and aesthetic freedom to produce what is in my view his finest work.

IV Concluding Remarks

I have noted that the historical material which Hilsenrath adduces makes his novel highly informative, which is all the more impressive because academic understanding in Germany was scant at the time. It was several years after publication of the novel, for example, before Wolfgang Gust, a former foreign correspondent of the news magazine *Der Spiegel*, drew wider German public attention to the events themselves and the wealth of documents evidencing them in the German Foreign Office archives, which he then published later as a book with a critical commentary.⁴⁸ As to international scholarship, the major advances in historical research on the Armenian Genocide in the English-speaking world still lay many years in the future, with respectively the ninetieth and centenary anniversaries in 2005 and 2015 acting as significant milestones. Thus conventional historiography has arguably only caught up since the turn of the

⁴⁸ *Der Völkermord an den Armeniern 1915/16: Dokumente aus dem Politischen Archiv des deutschen Auswärtigen Amtes*, ed. by Wolfgang Gust (Berlin: Springer, 2005). Available online at <<http://www.armenocide.de/>> [last accessed 8 July 2019].

millennium with some of the documentary accuracy of Hilsenrath's account which the interrogation of rich primary source material afforded him. His adducing of evidence from German and, in particular, Austrian archives lends it additional value, as these are still largely absent in Armenian, Turkish, Anglo-American, and general genocide historiography. Finally it is notable that, as in only recent historical studies and well in advance of them, Hilsenrath locates the genocidal events of 1915-1916 in a much longer history of persecution and its radicalization, particularly at the end of the nineteenth century.

If Hilsenrath was *avant le lettre* in terms of his integration of primary historical sources, more significant is that these provide him with legitimating basis for his comparison of the fate of the Armenians with that of the Jews, and his bold and controversial assertion that the former was the precedent for the latter. Here he breaks at least two major taboos. Until the most recent phase of Cultural Memory Studies of the last fifteen years or so, often referred to as the 'transnational turn', the dominant view of the Holocaust was that it was a unique event, and to connect it with other traumas was to trivialize, rationalize, and deny that uniqueness. Indeed there is a strong critical tradition which wholly disallows any comparison of the Holocaust with other acts of genocide. A common critical response to the privileging of the Holocaust has been to provide a counterclaim for the uniqueness or primacy of other histories of suffering. As the example of the Shoah survivor Hilsenrath shows, his post-Holocaust representation of a pre-Holocaust genocide identifies some structural and ideological similarities but this is not to deny the horrors, nor the scale of the Holocaust. Indeed as Michael Rothberg has pointed up in his seminal monograph⁴⁹ the zero sum logic that claims that the opportunity cost of remembering one thing is the forgetting of another is

⁴⁹ Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

both historically problematic and politically and ethically unproductive. Emergence of Holocaust memory was inflected from the start by other histories, as Rothberg and others have shown, and the Shoah has served as a vehicle through which other histories of suffering have been articulated. Thus the bringing together of disparate histories on a non-competitive basis can increase the attentiveness to other, seemingly remote events, as well as providing resources for other groups to articulate their own claims for recognition and restitution – all causes close to Hilsenrath’s heart in the case of the Armenians.

If one reflects on the surge in global interest in the Shoah triggered in the 1990s by the Rwandan Genocide and the ‘ethnic cleansing’ of the Balkan Wars, then Hilsenrath’s literary preoccupation with Armenia has much contemporary relevance. All the more so when we remind ourselves of the current massacres of the Christians and Yazidis in Iraq and Syria, the Rohingya in Myanmar, and the Dafuris in Sudan, amongst others. As we have seen, Hilsenrath made comparisons between racially motivated crimes against humanity from his earliest days, well before such comparisons would become fraught in the post-war period, and a full half century before the peak of Holocaust awareness in the 1990s. Moreover, his contribution is important in the context of ‘postcolonial’ attempts of the past twenty years to link the Shoah to Europe’s long imperialist and colonial history, which was first mooted in 1955 by Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. An awareness of Hilsenrath’s representation of the Armenian genocide might suggest that the richer historical context for the understanding of Nazism is less the experience of European settler colonialists in Africa, as important as that is, and more the collapse of the multi-ethnic Ottoman empire and the rise of a hyper-nationalist, Turkish annihilatory racist state. Rather than Hilsenrath’s recent death serving to draw a line under his literary achievement, his highly

imaginative and inventive contribution to our understanding of lesser-known human-rights abuses is a reason for his continued importance today.

Finally, and as an impetus to further research, Hilsenrath's novel of Armenia achieves an impressive panoramic breadth that is unusual for a German-language work in its representation of a whole way of life on the eve of its shockingly violent, barbarically murderous destruction. In this regard *Das Märchen vom letzten Gedanken* reads like a precursor to the later novel, *Jossel Wassermanns Heimkehr*; in place of the Armenians we have the rich diversity of Hilsenrath's own Jewish community in the Rumanian territories of the Hapsburg Empire, full of human and cultural treasure that is staring in the face of its annihilation at the hands of the Germans and their Romanian vassals. Hilsenrath's field trip to research this novel proved just as frustrating and futile as his earlier visit to Armenia, as he found equally few traces of Jewish life. A future study which set out to examine similarities and differences in these two novels is likely to yield rich insights. For example attention might be focused on the respective narrative framing devices; both novels' dialogic form; the integration of folklore, fairy tale elements, and vernacular language, as well as some striking repetitions in milieu description and in the cast of characters. It would, not least, point up the productive and complementary relationship between Hilsenrath's depiction of the Armenian and Jewish experience and its abiding interest to contemporary readers and scholars.

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