

UNERHÖRT? PRISONER NARRATIVES AS UNLISTENED-TO STORIES (AND SOME
REFLECTIONS ON THE PICARESQUE)

Why is the pain of every day translated so constantly
into our dreams, in the ever-repeated scene of the
unlistened-to story?¹

It is well established that for those who have been marginalized or traumatized, speaking out can be psychologically hindered.² It can also be physically hindered: Larry Siems, who edited Mohamedou Ould Slahi's *Guantánamo Diary*, has observed that 'the strictest censorship in the world governs the speech of Guantánamo prisoners'.³ But even when it *is* possible, speaking out is not the same as being heard. I want to borrow Primo Levi's characteristically limpid articulation of a narrative problem – the 'unlistened-to story' – to explore the problem of stories that are told, but not heard.

Prison experience is not the same in all places, times, and political situations. Levi's profound understanding of the problems of speaking out illuminates the problem of telling the story of incarceration; but that is not to say that prisons are the same as concentration

¹ Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man* (1947), trans. by Stuart Woolf (London: Abacus, 1979), p.66.

² See e.g. Sophia Richmond, 'Finding One's Voice: Transforming Trauma into Autobiographical Narrative', *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 42 (2006), 639-50.

³ Larry Siems in a panel discussion at the Oxford TORCH conference *Writers, Rights, Institutions*, 17 June 2016. See also Mohamedou Ould Slahi, *Guantánamo Diary*, ed. and with an introduction by Larry Siems (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2015).

camps. This article focuses on prisoner writing from the ‘two Germanies’ in the post-war period, and nor can the conditions in those narratives be regarded as the same, neither across decades nor across political systems. My focus in this article is not so much on the *production* conditions of stories about what it is like to be incarcerated (even though that is an important topic) as on the *reception* of those marginal stories – on who hears them, when, and why.

In his Auschwitz memoir, *If This Is A Man*, Levi describes a painful scene that haunted his dreams in the camp: ‘the ever-repeated scene of the unlistened-to story’:

This is my sister here, with some unidentifiable friend and many other people. They are all listening to me [...]. I speak diffusely of our hunger and of the lice-control, and of the Kapo who hit me on the nose and then sent me to wash myself as I was bleeding. It is an intense pleasure, physical, inexpressible, to be at home, among friendly people and to have so many things to recount: but I cannot help noticing that my listeners do not follow me. In fact, they are completely indifferent: they speak confusedly of other things among themselves, as if I was not there. My sister looks at me, gets up and goes away without a word.

A desolating grief is now born in me.⁴

This story about the failure of story is reiterated and expanded in *The Drowned and the Saved*:

Almost all the survivors [...] remember a dream which frequently recurred during the nights of imprisonment, varied in its detail but uniform in its substance: they had returned home and with passion and relief were describing their past sufferings,

⁴ Levi, *If This Is A Man*, p. 66.

addressing themselves to a loved person, and were not believed, indeed were not even listened to. In the most typical (and most cruel) form, the interlocutor turned and left in silence.⁵

If This Is A Man was of course itself an unlistened-to story, at least in the first instance: Levi completed it in late 1946, and it was rejected by his later publisher Einaudi in early 1947 (and accepted by a smaller publishing house that managed to sell less than two-thirds of the original print run of 2,500 copies).

Even publication, then, is not the same as being heard. Using examples from published prisoner writing from Germany, I would like to explore what needs to be in place for a story to be worth listening to; and why (and when) some kinds of stories get heard, where others are inaudible. Because the stories told by the famous literary picaros (Moll Flanders, Simplicissimus, Huckleberry Finn, and their kin) overlap in content and structure with prisoner life stories, I conclude with some reflections on what the picaresque might tell us about the cultural conditions of audibility.

Invisibility, inaudibility, and the idea of literature

H. Bruce Franklin, who has worked since the 1970s to establish prisoner writing as a recognised element in US American literary studies,⁶ describes secrecy as ‘the essence of the prison’.⁷ As Foucault set out so influentially in *Discipline and Punish*, the modern prison

⁵ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. by Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 1989), p. 2.

⁶ See e.g. H. Bruce Franklin, *The Victim as Criminal and Artist: Literature from the American Prison* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); *Prison Writing in 20th-Century America*, ed. by H. Bruce Franklin (New York: Penguin, 1998).

⁷ Franklin, ‘The Inside Stories of the Global American Prison’, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 50 (2008), 235-42 (p. 235).

system replaced the public spectacle of punishment with the isolation of prisoners in a secret world behind walls.⁸ The result is not only invisibility but inaudibility: ‘the actual lives of people in prison remain invisible, their stories virtually ignored’;⁹ prisoner experience is ‘hidden or lost knowledge’.¹⁰ There have, then, been good reasons for scholars like Franklin, who wish to get prisoner stories heard, to designate those stories *literature* – the rhetorical implication is that they are worth listening to. In the German context Sigrid Weigel used the term *Gefängnisliteratur*;¹¹ more recent German-language scholarship, influenced by Helmut H. Koch, founder of the prisoner writing archive at Münster University, has preferred the spatially less confining *Gefangenenliteratur*.¹²

Weigel went so far as to formulate a genre definition: ‘Gefängnisliteratur konstituiert sich durch die Doppelrolle des Autors als Schreibsubjekt und als Objekt der Bestrafungsinstanz und -methoden’.¹³ As a rhetorical tactic that is understandable; it also

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Allan Lane, 1977).

⁹ Tiffany Ana Lopez, ‘Critical Witnessing in Latino/a and African American Prison Narratives’, in *Prose and Cons: Essays on Prison Literature in the United States*, ed. by D. Quentin Miller (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005) pp. 62-77 (p. 63).

¹⁰ Anne Schwan, *Convict Voices: Women, Class, and Writing about Prison in Nineteenth-Century England* (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 2014), p. 12.

¹¹ Sigrid Weigel, ‘Und selbst im Kerker frei ...!’ *Schreiben im Gefängnis: Eine Literaturgeschichte der Gefängnisliteratur* (Marburg: Guttandin & Hoppe, 1982).

¹² See e.g. Helmut H. Koch, ‘Anklage, Klage, Widerstand: Gefangenenliteratur nach 1945’, in *Gefangenenliteratur: Sprechen Schreiben Lesen in deutschen Gefängnissen*, ed. by Uta Klein and Helmut H. Koch (Hagen: Reiner Padligur, 1988), pp. 88-115; also the work of Koch’s PhD student Nicola Keßler, *Schreiben, um zu überleben: Studien zur Gefangenenliteratur* (Mönchengladbach: Forum Verlag Godesberg, 2001).

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

raises problems. Dylan Rodríguez, for example, objects to the limiting or legitimizing invocation of the penal system in the designation of prison writing as a genre, and has argued that forcing the designation *literature* on prisoner writing is ‘an exercise of domestication’ and ‘a discursive gesture toward order and coherence where, for the the writer, there is generally neither’.¹⁴ My related but somewhat different objections are that ‘literariness’ is in any case a vexed quality, and literature is not the only kind of textual production worthy of attention;¹⁵ but also that the ‘double role’ of the writer that Weigel makes constitutive of the genre *Gefängnisliteratur* is in fact ubiquitous. All narrators, not just prisoner narrators, are both storytelling subjects and the objects of sociopolitical and discursive circumstances that co-construct their stories. Writers in prison are not only in the grip of the criminal justice system but are enmeshed, like the rest of us, in prevailing constructions of gender, ‘race’, nation, order, and deviance. I do not regard prisoner writing as a genre any more than I regard women’s writing as a genre. I see it, as I see women’s writing, as a culturally and politically defined field that has been produced as a field by and in particular cultural and political circumstances. I will here use the term ‘prisoner writing’ to describe activity in that field, and ‘prison(er) narratives’ for the stories, with an awareness that those terms are imperfect.

The painful experience of telling an ‘unlistened-to story’ is a recurring element in prisoner narratives in different historical contexts. In a recent short memoir, a former East German prisoner describes how she survived the brutality of a GDR prison; but then how her world collapsed when she was released, and went home to her family, who as East German citizens in the late 1960s could not or would not hear her story: ‘Zu Hause brach für mich

¹⁴ Dylan Rodríguez, ‘Against the Discipline of “Prison Writing”’: Toward a Theoretical Conception of Contemporary Radical Prison Praxis’ in *Genre* 35 (2002), 407-28 (409-11).

¹⁵ Sarah Colvin, ‘Leaning In: Why and How I Still Study The German’, in *German Life and Letters*, 69 (2016), 123-41; and Sarah Colvin, ‘Why should criminology care about literary fiction? Literature, life narratives and telling untellable stories’, *Punishment & Society*, 17 (2015), 211-29.

eine Welt zusammen [...]. Mich hat auch keiner in der Familie jemals gefragt, wie es mir ergangen ist. Meine Mutter sagte nur: "Lass mich in Ruhe, ich habe genug gelitten".¹⁶ In a different context and at a different time, in an autobiographical text published in 2010, a woman prisoner in a Federal German prison describes how her story of childhood abuse (in the 'autobiographical third person' that sometimes attends trauma narratives) was rejected and went unheard: 'Kein Mensch wollte ihr glauben; niemand hat ihr geholfen! Niemand. [...] Sie fragte, warum wollte ihr niemand zuhören? Warum?'¹⁷ The collection of prisoner writing in which her narrative appears is subtitled 'unerhörte Geschichten', which translates, in a deliberate word-play, as something between shocking and unlistened-to stories. The German word *unerhört* contains simultaneous meanings English cannot combine in a single word: a prayer that goes unanswered is *unerhört*, but so is unrequited or rejected love; and *unerhört* is also regularly used in contexts where it means strange, outrageous, or incomprehensible. It always describes something that cannot be accommodated by its recipient, whether love, a prayer, or a story; something that does not merely go unheard, but is for some reason rejected as unhearable. What conditions need to be in place for a story to be accommodated?

Listening to prisoners in the post-war Federal Republic

¹⁶ 'Lucie Fischer', in *Der dunkle Ort: 25 Schicksale aus dem DDR-Frauengefängnis Hoheneck*, ed. by Dirk von Nayhauß and Maggie Riepl (Berlin: be.bra, 2012), 34-37 (p. 37).

¹⁷ Marta, 'Kannst Du dich noch erinnern ..?', in *Ich muss zurück ins Rattenloch: Unerhörte Geschichten aus dem Frauenknast*, ed. by Reimund Neufeld and Helmut H. Koch (Oberhausen: assoverlag, 2010), 14-22 (pp. 15-16).

After 1949, initial post-war fears that the social and legal order in Germany would disintegrate¹⁸ had been somewhat allayed by visible processes of stabilization, including the currency reform of 1948 (which introduced the *Deutsche Mark* into the Western zones, soon followed by the *Ostmark* in the Eastern zone) and the establishment of two separate, constitutionally anchored German states. Prison reform campaigners in the newly founded Federal Republic – which had built human dignity into Article 1 § 1 of its new constitution – began calling for more humane and dignified conditions for those in prison, and from the early 1960s prisoner writing began to be published. It was published with a clear agenda, as part of the duty of dealing with the recent past.

Birgitta Wolf (1913-2009), born Duchess von Rosen in Sweden, who had come to Germany in 1933 to live with her German husband, was the most active advocate of Federal Germany's prisoners in the Republic's early years. Wolf had a certain immunity in Nazi Germany as a relative of Hermann Göring (her maternal aunt was Göring's first wife), and used that connection to help individuals incarcerated under the Nazis.¹⁹ After the war she focused her energy both on campaigning for prison reform and on engaging personally with offenders: she regularly took released prisoners in need of financial and emotional support into her home. In the course of her life she received around 75,000 letters from prisoners and former prisoners, responded to most of them, and published some as part of a project to raise awareness of the prison experience and incite debate around prison reform. Making the prison experience public, Wolf suggested in her introduction to a volume of prisoner stories and

¹⁸ Thomas Würtenberger, 'Criminology and Penology in Western Germany', *British Journal of Delinquency*, 26 (1953-54), 26-38 (p. 26).

¹⁹ Christian Pfeiffer, 'Birgitta Wolf – Nachruf' <http://www.nothilfe-birgitta-wolf.de/nachruf_pfeiffer.htm> [accessed 29 August 2016].

poetry of 1963, is one way to make the new, democratic Federal Republic distinctively different from its Nazi predecessor:

Unsere Verantwortung als Mitmensch und Staatsbürger ist größer, als wir wahrhaben wollen. Wir haben uns schon einmal damit herausgeredet, daß wir ‘von nichts wußten’. Dieses Buch ist auch deshalb entstanden, damit wir uns nicht mehr herausreden können.²⁰

Knowing what is happening behind prison walls is a marker of responsible citizenship, she would argue again in her introduction to a volume of prisoner letters in 1968:

Wie verantwortet es eine Öffentlichkeit, sich so wenig um das, was hinter den Mauern vorgeht, zu kümmern – und das nach den Erfahrungen im Dritten Reich, wo wir zu wenig wußten, weil wir uns um die Behandlung von Gefangenen nicht kümmerten!²¹

That view was taken forward by Professor Helmut H. Koch (b. 1941), who began teaching seminars in *Germanistik* on German prisoner literature in the late 1970s,²² and quickly became the most influential editorial voice in the field. Koch founded the *Dokumentationsstelle Gefangenenliteratur* at Münster University; he also co-founded

²⁰ Birgitta Wolf, ‘Einführung’, in *Die vierte Kaste: Junge Menschen im Gefängnis. Literarische Dokumente*, ed. by Birgitta Wolf (Hamburg: Rütten & Loening, 1963), pp. 7-53 (p. 27).

²¹ Wolf, ‘Orientierung’, in *Aussagen: Briefe von Strafgefangenen*, ed. by Birgitta Wolf (Ebenhausen bei München: Langewiesche-Brandt, 1968), pp. 7-43 (pp. 23-24).

²² Helmut Koch, ‘Schreiben und Lesen in sozialen und psychischen Krisensituationen: Eine Annäherung’, in *Schreiben im Kontext von Schule, Universität, Beruf, und Lebensalltag*, ed. by Johannes Berning, Nicola Keßner, and Helmut H. Koch (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2006), pp. 127-59 (p. 129).

Germany's major prize for prisoner writing, the *Ingeborg-Drewitz-Literaturpreis für Gefangene*. He is now Chair of the *Arbeitskreis kritischer Strafvollzug*, and has developed the internet portal *Randgruppenliteratur* (randgruppenliteratur.de). In 1982 he co-edited (with Regina Lindke) a volume called *Ungehörte Worte*: 'Vielleicht kann diese Sammlung helfen, die ungehörte Sprache der Gefangenen ein wenig hörbarer zu machen', suggest Lindke and Koch in their introduction to the texts.²³ Audibility, again, is key – and listening a duty that Koch would remind his readers of in a collection winning texts from the *Ingeborg-Drewitz-Literaturpreis* as recently as 2008: 'Die schreibenden Gefangenen haben ihren Teil getan. Jetzt ist die Öffentlichkeit gefragt: die Texte der "Aussätzigen" wahrzunehmen, sie zu lesen, sich darauf [...] einzulassen'.²⁴

That notion of civic responsibility still echoes through the mission statement of the contemporary Berlin prison theatre company, Theater aufBruch:

aufBruch begreift sich und seine Arbeit als künstlerische Vermittlung zwischen der Welt innerhalb der Gefängnismauern und derjenigen außerhalb, sein Theater als Denkanstoß für individuelle Reflektion und als Ausgangspunkt für eine respektvolle Begegnung zwischen Straftätern und der übrigen Bevölkerung, welche beide Teil einer europäischen Gesellschaft sind.²⁵

²³ *Ungehörte Worte: Gefangene schreiben: Eine Dokumentation aus deutschen Gefangenenzeitungen*, ed. by Helmut H. Koch and Regine Lindtke (Münster: Tende, 1982), p. 7.

²⁴ Helmut H. Koch, 'Geräusche der Nacht: Anmerkungen zum Ingeborg-Drewitz-Literaturpreis 2008', in *Geräusche der Nacht: Literatur aus dem deutschen Strafvollzug 2008*, ed. by Ingeborg-Drewitz-Literaturpreis für Gefangene (Münster: agenda, 2008), pp. 113-23 (p. 122).

²⁵ <www.gefaengnistheater.de/aufbruch> [accessed 29 August 2016]

aufBruch's prison performances are open to local audiences who buy tickets and come to the theatre in the usual way, except that they are body-searched before they go in, because this is a prison. The meeting between prisoners and populace continues after each performance, when members of the audience are invited to stay on and chat with the performers. Arts projects in prison are generally subsumed under the heading of prisoner education; but aufBruch's mission is to educate the rest of us, so that we can learn to listen to prisoners.

'Literatur von Gefangenen [wird] beinahe uneingeschränkt als Widerstandsliteratur betrachtet' Weigel observed in 1980;²⁶ and Helmut Koch's expressed view is that prisoner writing must be read not only as literature, but as resistance ('Widerstand').²⁷ In writing, the argument runs, prisoners assert their subject status as authors and counter the objectifying impetus of the penal system. Many of the writers Koch has been instrumental in getting published – particularly in the 1970s and 1980s – agree: 'Du kannst das Schreiben schon als ein gutes Stück Widerstand ansehen' writes, for example, Karlheinz Barwasser in *Ungehörte Worte*.²⁸ In post-war Germany. 'Widerstand' of course also connotes resistance to Nazism – it is a heroic term,²⁹ and in the decades post 1968 it is one of the most frequently recurring words not only in political discourse but in the paratext (introductions, afterwords, and

²⁶ Weigel, 'Und selbst im Kerker frei ...!', p. 7.

²⁷ See e.g. Helmut H. Koch, 'Anklage, Klage, Widerstand: Gefangenenliteratur nach 1945', in *Gefangenenliteratur: Sprechen Schreiben Lesen in deutschen Gefängnissen*, ed. by Uta Klein and Helmut H. Koch (Hagen: Reiner Padligur, 1988), pp. 88-115; also the work of Koch's PhD student Nicola Keßler, *Schreiben, um zu überleben: Studien zur Gefangenenliteratur* (Mönchengladbach: Forum Verlag Godesberg, 2001).

²⁸ Anon. [Karlheinz Barwasser], 'Sich als starke Mauern begreifen – Schreiben im Knast', in *Ungehörte Worte*, ed. by Koch and Lindtke, pp. 107-11 (p. 108).

²⁹ 'ein Hochwertwort des politischen Sprachgebrauchs nach 1945, das die Gegenwehr gegen eine illegitime Herrschaft kennzeichnete'. Andreas Musolff, *Krieg gegen die Öffentlichkeit, Terrorismus und politischer Sprachgebrauch* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1996), p. 151.

‘blurbs’) and scholarly epitext surrounding prisoner writing. The status of prisoners in the Federal Republic is again being imagined as constitutive of its difference from the Nazi state: there, people failed to practise resistance; here, prisoners are resistance fighters.

Like the rhetoric of prisoner writing as literature, the rhetoric of prisoner writing as resistance says: surely that makes this worth listening to?³⁰

Beyond my ken: the limits of the collective ethos

Federal Germany’s most high-profile literary critic, Marcel Reich-Ranicki, tells an interesting story in his memoir *Mein Leben* – not of listening to, but of being listened to by someone who championed the idea of *Widerstand* in post-war Germany. In 1964, the young journalist Ulrike Marie Meinhof interviewed him about his wartime experience as a Jew in Warsaw.³¹ Wondering why he recalls that meeting so clearly, Reich-Ranicki reflects:

dass sie die erste Person in der Bundesrepublik war, die aufrichtig und ernsthaft wünschte, über meine Erlebnisse im Warschauer Ghetto informiert zu werden. Und wäre es denkbar, dass es zwischen ihrem brennenden Interesse für die deutsche Vergangenheit und dem Weg, der sie zum Terror und zum Verbrechen geführt hat, einen Zusammenhang gibt?³²

³⁰ That is not to say that prisoner writing is not sometimes literary writing or not, among other things, a form or means of resistance; but to highlight the ideas most often invoked to promote it.

³¹ For a full discussion of Meinhof’s use and popularization of the idea of resistance see Sarah Colvin, *Ulrike Meinhof and West German Terrorism: Language, Violence, and Identity* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2009).

³² Marcel Reich-Ranicki, *Mein Leben* (Stuttgart: DVA, 1999), p. 460.

I do not read this as an idle or merely spectacular question. Reich-Ranicki is recalling a national situation in which his story of the Warsaw ghetto was unlistened-to, or could not be accommodated. Why not?

In his well known essay of 1981, the historian Hayden White suggested that historical narratives are accommodated to the extent that they satisfy requirements he calls ‘moral’:

The demand for closure in the historical story is a demand, I suggest, for moral meaning, [...]. Has any historical narrative ever been written that was not informed not only by moral awareness but specifically by the moral authority of the narrator?³³

White leaves open the question this begs, namely, what is ‘moral authority’? He appears to believe that his readers will *just know* what he means. That in itself offers a kind of explanation: if the expectation is that readers will *just know*, then ‘moral’ has to refer to shared knowledge, or a set of norms, as White would acknowledge later, in *The Content of the Form*:

narrativity, certainly in factual storytelling and probably in fictional storytelling as well, is intimately related to, if not a function of, the impulse to moralize reality, that is, to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality that we can imagine.³⁴

³³ Hayden White, ‘The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality’, in *On Narrative*, ed. by W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: U Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 1-25 (p. 20).

³⁴ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 14.

More recently Judith Butler, in her reflections on *Giving an Account of Oneself*, is inclined to see narrators themselves constructed by sets of norms that precede their personal existence:

there is no ‘I’ that can fully stand apart from the social conditions of its emergence, no ‘I’ that is not implicated in a set of conditioning moral norms [...]. When the ‘I’ seeks to give an account of itself, it can start with itself, but [...] the ‘I’ has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation—or a set of relations—to a set of norms.³⁵

Like White implicitly, Butler explicitly conceives of the ‘moral’ as a ‘collective ethos’.³⁶ Unlike White, she simultaneously points to the violence of collective morality, drawing on Theodor Adorno’s notion that any collective ethos easily acquires ‘repressive and violent qualities’.³⁷ As Reich-Ranicki hints, it is thinkable that there was a link between Meinhof’s counter-cultural capacity to listen to his story and her turn to terrorism: it is thinkable that she – unlike most Federal Germans at the time – could accommodate his experience in the Warsaw ghetto because she was already rattling at her relationship with a West German post-war collective ethos that did not deny, but could certainly fail to hear stories of atrocities.³⁸

Reich-Ranicki’s story of Ulrike Meinhof demonstrates that it is possible for a listener consciously to deviate from the dominant moral code, and thereby to hear an otherwise inaudible story (although Meinhof later discovered what Levi warned of, namely that

³⁵ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 7-8.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁷ Cited in *ibid.*

³⁸ See e.g. Jeffrey Herf, ‘Post-Totalitarian Narratives in Germany: Reflections on Two Dictatorships after 1945 and 1989’, in *Perpetrators Accomplices & Victims: Reckoning with the Past*, ed. by Anatoly M. Khazanov and Stanley Payne, (= *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 9 (2008)), 2-27 (p. 6).

‘changing moral codes is always costly: all heretics, apostates, and dissidents know this’).³⁹

Birgitta Wolf similarly chose consciously to listen (to prisoners), and received hate mail and death threats from respectable German citizens.⁴⁰

Narrative theorists suggest that to be audible or accommodated, stories need to participate or at least be embedded in a discourse or plot that their recipients perceive as meaningful – they thereby ‘make sense’.⁴¹ Jerome Bruner differs from Butler in seeing narrators as agents in the business of making sense; he suggests that autobiographical storytellers avail themselves of a discursive ‘tool kit’ that provides building blocks from which they construct a culturally emplotted and therefore acceptable (audible) story:

the tool kit of any culture is replete not only with a stock of canonical life narratives (heroes, Marthas, tricksters, etc.), but with combinable formal constituents from which its members can construct their own life narratives: canonical stances and circumstances, as it were.⁴²

Despite their basic differences regarding the location of agency, both Bruner and Butler (with Adorno) can be read to be suggesting that effective narrators are, willy-nilly, collaborators. In another of his stories about storytelling, Levi reveals how narrative thuggery is thus enabled: in *The Drowned and the Saved* he tells the tale of an SS man who taunted his prisoners with

³⁹ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 86.

⁴⁰ Pfeiffer, ‘Birgitta Wolf’ <http://www.nothilfe-birgitta-wolf.de/nachruf_pfeiffer.htm>

⁴¹ For a helpful discussion of the notion of ‘plot’ see Seymour Chapman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978). On making sense, see e.g. Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); Jerome Bruner, *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2002).

⁴² Jerome Bruner, ‘Life as Narrative’, *Social Research*, 71 (2004), 691-710 (p. 694)

the spectre of a collective ethos that would always reject their stories: ‘even if someone were to survive’, the SS man tells them, ‘the world would not believe him. [...] people will say that the events you describe are too monstrous to be believed; they will say that they are the exaggerations of Allied propaganda’.⁴³ The primary perpetrator here – the Nazi – is anticipating secondary perpetrators, or narrative collaborators: that is, the great mass of people who will not hear survivors’ stories because they threaten to upset collective morality radically. Retrospectively it has been recognised that Auschwitz survivors did indeed meet a ‘conspiracy of silence among relatives and friends and the general public, which reinforced [their] inability to speak’.⁴⁴ The ‘unlistened-to story’ hits the wall of a normative ethos that does not want to accommodate it.

Narratively speaking, the business of making sense requires collaboration with a dominant story. Whether stories are told by subjects with toolkits or by the objects of powerful discursive norms, storytelling necessarily embeds experience in the common ken. If it does not, the story cannot make sense: *beyond my ken* is the incomprehensible ‘bar-bar’ or ‘bla-bla’ of the barbarian: the cultural outsider.⁴⁵ Levi’s narrator in the scene of the ‘unlistened-to story’, and the camp prisoners the SS man taunts, face the impossibility of being understood because they have been rendered barbarian – forcibly implicated in the norms of Auschwitz, which explode the bounds of the collective ken. Auschwitz cannot make sense – indeed, it is the purpose and intention of Auschwitz, as Levi portrays it, *not* to make sense; those entering the camp ‘expected to find a terrible but decipherable world’, but instead ‘the world into which one was precipitated was terrible, yes, but also indecipherable:

⁴³ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 2.

⁴⁴ Sophia Richman, ‘Finding One’s Voice’, *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 42 (2006), pp. 639-50 (p. 641).

⁴⁵ Maria Boletsi, ‘Barbaric Encounters: Rethinking Barbarism in C. P. Cavafy’s and J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*’, *Comparative Literature Studies*, 44 (2007), 67-96 (p. 68).

it did not conform to any model, the enemy was all around but also inside, the “we” lost its limits’.⁴⁶

Auschwitz unbuilds the personhood of its prisoners by denying them access to the key sensemaking question of humanity, the *why* – something Levi encapsulates in the story of a brief, striking moment shortly after his narrator’s arrival in the Lager:

Driven by thirst, I eyed a fine icicle outside the window, within hand’s reach. I opened the window and broke off the icicle but at once a large, heavy guard prowling outside brutally snatched it away from me. ‘*Warum?*’ I asked him in my poor German. ‘*Hier ist kein warum*’ (there is no why here), he replied.⁴⁷

The consequence of losing the *why* is, in Levi’s account, the inmates’ ‘moral collapse’,⁴⁸ which also means their loss of the capacity to narrativize.

‘things unbelievable and monstrous’: stories too close to home

Jack London, who was arrested and spent a month in prison in 1894, aged eighteen, later wrote that he saw ‘with my own eyes, there in that prison, things unbelievable and monstrous’.⁴⁹ Even as an experienced writer, he does not describe those things – they are apparently unspeakable.

Occasionally the stories she heard about prison conditions in post-war Federal Germany seemed unbelievable even to Birgitta Wolf, and challenged her capacity to

⁴⁶ *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 33.

⁴⁷ Levi, *If This Is A Man*, p. 35. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁸ *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 35.

⁴⁹ Jack London, “‘Pinched’: A Prison Experience”, in *Prison Writing in 20th-Century America*, ed. by Franklin, pp. 39-49 (p. 49).

accommodate them. One 35-year-old prisoner wrote to her from preventive detention (*Sicherungsverwahrung*, a form of imprisonment for those judged a danger to society). He tells the disturbing story of physical abuse in a prison psychiatric unit in the Federal Republic, from which I will cite an excerpt:

Haus 3 unter dem Decknamen ‘psychiatische [sic] Abteilung’, wurde oft dort in eine Zelle gebracht, genannt ‘Trockenzelle’ die fast leer ist. Drei Wochen lag ich oft ganz nackt nur mit 2 Decken, ohne Hofgang auf dem Fußboden, [...]. Große Mörder, die Lebenslang [sic] haben, sind dort als Hausarbeiter eingesetzt, die mitschlagen u. sich damit nach 15 Jahren ihre Freiheit ‘erkaufen’. [...] Dazu wird man noch geschlagen u. als ich mal zu den Beamten, der mich gerade ‘blutig’ geschlagen hatte sagte: ‘ich meine, hier würde keiner geschlagen?’ lachte er u. sagte: ‘Nein! Wenn Sie so Wahnsinnig [sic] sind u. selber gegen die Wand mit den [sic] Kopf rennen.’ [...] Fällt man aus der Reihe, [...] so kommt abends das Rollkommando! Sie ziehen einem ein Handtuch durch den Mund und drehen es hinterm Kopf zusammen. Ums Handgelenk machen sie eine Stahlklammer u. man wird 600 Meter überm Hof gezogen nach Haus 3 wie ein Tier, daß [sic] man zur Schlachtbank führt, ‘nicht unblutig, sondern blutig’. Dort gibt es Schläge [...].

Wo findet man Hilfe? Wo ist die Sonderkommission, die sich darum mal kümmert? Nichts! Alles wird vertuscht, den Gerichten falsche Zeugnisse über den Gefangenen geben, — der Gefangene lügt, ist ein Querulant, ein Schwerverbrecher.⁵⁰

Uncharacteristically, Wolf (who does not usually make any kind of editorial comment) appends an editorial note to this story:

⁵⁰ *Aussagen*, pp. 151-53.

Trotz Einschalten eines Anwaltes ist es mir nicht gelungen, festzustellen, ob diese Angaben auf Wahrheit beruhen oder nicht. Auffallend ist zwar, daß jahrelang aus diesem Zuchthaus immer wieder ähnliche Schilderungen kamen.⁵¹

In raising the question ‘can this be true?’, Wolf reveals her sense that this story is not only potentially beyond her ken but also, uncomfortably, *too close to home*.

I suspect that those are overlapping categories. In the story told by the young victim of sexual abuse I cited earlier, the people who failed to hear included her mother; it is likely her story of rape by a local priest was unlistened-to not only because of normative morality but also because there are comfort zones that protect the personal narratives individuals live by (which are likely to be heavily informed by normative morality, but also distinct from it). Issues looming too close to home were probably also in play for the East German family who refused to hear their daughter’s account of her imprisonment.

Stories that are too close to home threaten to disrupt my relationship with the narratives I live by, as I discovered when I read, among the many prisoner letters published by Wolf, one she received in the 1960s from a young male prisoner convicted of violent crime. It describes his feral childhood in Germany’s post-surrender chaos in the mid 1940s. The collection is out of print, so I am giving a longish excerpt from his remarkable story (the orthography follows the original):

Ich bin Zigeunerabstammung von beiden Teilen der Eltern und nach den zusammenbruch des Naziregim stand ich im Alter von zehn Jahren auf der Straße. Meine Angehörigen waren in allen Winder zerstreut, und wer kümmerte sich schon um einen hergelaufenen verwalosten Zigeunerkind, also war ich gezwungen nach

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 153.

Raubtierart mir durch Leben zu schlagen. Aber ich war nicht der Einzige der auf der Straße lebte, es gab Tausende von Kinder, die in den Wäldern in ausrangierten Scheinwerfer schliefen, die von Tür zu Tür um ein Stück Brot bettelten. Auch ich habe ein halbes Jahr mitgemacht, bis ich zu eine Truppe stieß etwa von fünfzehn Kindern, viele waren Russen, Polen, Deutsche, aber es waren Kinder im Alter von acht bis dreizehn Jahre. Damit began mein Leben als Huligan unter die Huligans. Sie werden fragen, warum haben sich den die Kinder zu Banden aufgeschlossen?? [...] Sehen Sie, ein einzelnes Kind würde ohne Gnade nacken ausgeplündert von andere Banden, manchmal wurde es sogar totgeschlagen, ein einzelnes Kind zählte nicht, aber in der Gemeinschaft war es ein volles Mitglied, und wurde von seinen Kameraden geschütz und vor jede Gefahr gewarnt. Darum zogen wir in Rudelweisen durch Dörfer und Klein Städten, wir plünderten russische Armeem Magazine (Verkaufshaus) wir überfielen junge Frauen und verkauften sie an betrunkenen sowjet Offiziere für Lebensmittel Zigaretten [...] und für Schuhe.

Ein ganze Jahr trieben wir uns umher, bis uns die russische Militärpolizei auf den Füßen hang. Viele Bänder Kinder entfesselten einen heftigen Widerstand, so das es Tote auf beiden Seiten gab. Sie meinen bestimmt, das ich übertreibe, leider nein [...]. Auch die Zieivilbevölkerung war nicht gut zu sprechen auf uns, den im Rudel kannten wir Kinder kein Mitleid eines Erwachsenen gegenüber. Ein Dorf wurde solange tyranisiert, bis der Bürgermeister [...] uns den sogenannten Triebut zahlte, und zwar in Form von Eßwaren und Kleidung, dann zogen wir ab, und das Dorf atmente auf. [...]

Ich möchte Ihnen eine Kleine aber sehr schmutzige Geschichte erzählen. In einer Klein Stadt wurde ich von der Polizei aufgegriffen, dabei steckte man mich in ein dunklen Keller unter einen Jugendamt, ein Polizeimeister mit Nahmen Müller

schlug mit einer dicken Holzlatte solange auf mich ein, bis ich besinnungslos zusammenbrach, am anderen Morgen zog man mich aus, bis ich nur auf einer Hose die Fetzen hing anbehalten durfte, dann führte man mich vor den Rathausplatz wo das ganze Volk versammelt war, und mußte barfuß aus der Stadt rennen, der Polizeiwachtmeister Müller mit einer Peitsche bewaffnet, fur mit seinen Fahrrad hinter mich her.⁵²

Interpolations such as ‘Sie werden fragen, warum’, and ‘Sie meinen bestimmt, das [sic] ich übertreibe’ betray the narrator’s own sense that the story he is telling in this letter is beyond the ken of its recipient. At a first reading, my own response was to question its historical accuracy (‘can this be true?’). Had the story been set in seventeenth-century Germany or a geopolitically more distant culture I would probably not have doubted its accuracy; as things stood, I found it *unerhört*: culturally and temporally too close to home. Rather like Wolf when she hired a lawyer to investigate whether the story of the brutal maltreatment of mentally ill prisoners was ‘true’, I looked for scholarly corroboration of the likely historical truth of this narrative. I found it in an article by a criminologist at Mainz University: writing in 1953, Thomas Würtenberger describes youth criminality, brutality, and gangs of children in the immediate post-war chaos, and notes the ‘general state of neglect’ among Germany’s youngsters after the collapse: ‘Many of them tramped around the country, living by their wits, stealing and embezzling’.⁵³ In the US *Federal Prisons Journal*, I also came across a curious story told by Myrl E. Alexander, Chief of Prisons in the American zone in 1945 and 1946, about his visit to a young offenders’ institution in Bavaria at that time. Alexander recalls:

⁵² Ibid, pp. 164-66.

⁵³ Thomas Würtenberger, ‘Criminology and Penology in Western Germany’, *British Journal of Delinquency*, 26 (1953-54), 26-38 (p. 27).

Maybe 100 kids, 14 or 15 years old up through 18 or 19, were being held in a dank basement of that institution, and the warden said it was on the orders of the military government. I went up to headquarters in Munich and talked with the commanding general, who said the prisoners were ‘werewolves’ – kids trained to carry out the Nazi traditions. I had talked to these kids through interpreters and found out that their mothers had been killed in bombings and that their dads had been on the Eastern Front or elsewhere in the military. They were going through the rubble of Munich, Nuremberg or other southern cities, stealing and scrounging for food, and they had gotten picked up and the label of ‘werewolves’ was pinned on them.⁵⁴

Rumours about a Nazi guerilla organization called ‘Werwolf’ did indeed circulate in post-war Germany. But Alexander is describing a phenomenon more often associated with East Prussia and the Russian zone (which seems to have been the location of Birgitta Wolf’s correspondent): the so-called ‘Wolfskinder’,⁵⁵ who had not so much ‘been trained to carry out the Nazi traditions’ as lost their families either in the war or in the subsequent chaos, and had so been left to fend for themselves in an almost entirely hostile environment.

My resistance to the original story almost certainly derived both from a will to protect my personal narrative (it unsettles my sense of modern Germany as a culture deeply familiar to me), and from a sense that it deviates grotesquely from normative morality: a world where

⁵⁴ Myrl E. Alexander and John W. Roberts, ‘Rebuilding a Prison System. Germany 1945-46’, *Federal Prisons Journal*, 2.2 (1991), 37-43 (p. 41).

⁵⁵ Since very recently the story of the ‘Wolfskinder’ is becoming better known in Germany; see e.g. Sonya Winterberger’s account *Wir sind die Wolfskinder: Verlassen in Ostpreußen* (Munich: Piper, 2012).

children capture and sell adult women to be raped, and adults neither nurture nor protect children, is an upside-down world.

Accommodating deviance: stories and their frames

As someone who has also studied early modern (seventeenth-century) Germany, I was struck as I read that story by how its upside-down world echoed the worlds evoked in other, very audible (canonical) German stories about the criminalising and brutalising effects of war: in Grimmelshausen's *Simplicissimus Teutsch*, for example, the story of a young vagrant during and after the Thirty Years War, and in its sequel *Courasche*, the basis for Brecht's *Mutter Courage*; but also later in Grass's *Blechtrommel*, that dwarf's-eye view of Germany and Poland during and after the Second World War. All three belong to a sub-genre of the novel called the picaresque novel – in German the *Schelmenroman*, or rascal's tale.

The relationship between power and audibility has been well explored: empowered narrators are likely to be listened to, where narrators with abject social status are liable to go unheard.⁵⁶ In the terms of that argument, picares – the protagonists of picaresque narratives – ought to be inaudible. As a character, a picaro has very little power or status in the world. They can be women – picaras – like Defoe's Moll Flanders or Grimmelshausen's Courasche; they can even be children, like Twain's Huckleberry Finn and Grass's Oskar in the early part of *Die Blechtrommel*. Most are delinquents or criminals. Often they *want* to collaborate in a normative collective ethos, but they never quite manage it: picares and picaras are

⁵⁶ See e.g. Deborah Tannen, 'The Power of Talk: Who Gets Heard and Why', *Harvard Business Review*, (September-October 1995) 137-48; Lesley Chenoweth, 'Violence and Women With Disabilities: Silence and Paradox', *Violence Against Women*, 2 (December 1996), 391-411; Gillian Proctor, 'Listening to Older Women with Dementia: Relationships, Voices and Power', *Disability & Society*, 16:3 (2001), 361-76; Ann Lewis, 'Silence in the Context of 'Child Voice'', *Children & Society*, 24:1 (2010), 14-23.

characteristically at odds with society and offend against social mores.⁵⁷ They live disjointed lives, and the worlds through which they move are chaotic, marked by war or social change. It is the picaresque's lot to suffer or observe violence, but also to perpetrate it: picaresques alternate between being victims and perpetrators. Their experience is episodic: picaresque lives are complex in a way that works against conventional plot. In similar vein, D. Quentin Miller has argued with reference to prisoner narratives that readers must expect to encounter 'peripatetic' narratives 'with unconventional structures, gaps, multiple voices, and a lack of closure'.⁵⁸ The overlaps in structure and content between picaresque stories and prisoner narratives might seem predictable: these are the stories of the fictional and actual underclass, and art imitates life. But it may help our inquiry into conditions of audibility to look again at the processes by which one set of stories becomes canonical, and the other struggles to be heard.

Picaresque life stories tend to be long: a reader must attend over four or five hundred pages to the life story of someone the same reader might not give five minutes to in real life. In telling their life stories, picaresques flamboyantly flout the convention of silence or inaudibility historically imposed on women ('a woman's glory'),⁵⁹ on children (who should be seen and not heard), and on the lower classes (who like women have historically been excluded from the audible arenas of scholarship, politics, and the law). Silence was a 'reformatory' feature

⁵⁷ See Ulrich Wicks, 'The Nature of Picaresque Narrative: A Modal Approach', *PMLA*, 89 (1974), 240-249 (p. 240); Julio Rodríguez-Luis, 'Pícaras: The Modal Approach to the Picaresque', *Comparative Literature*, 31 (1979), 32-46 (p. 33).

⁵⁸ Miller, "'On the Outside Looking In": White Readers of Nonwhite Prison Narratives' in Miller, *Prose and Cons*, pp. 15-32 (p. 16).

⁵⁹ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, ed. John Berseth (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2000 [1905]) 1, 13 (1260a), p. 52.

of early prisons, intended to encourage prisoners to reflect on their crimes.⁶⁰ Women, children, the lower classes, and prisoners have all, at different times in history, been denied that most audible of voices, the vote (in German, *Stimme*).

Prisoner life narratives tend to be short. That is partly because many prisoners struggle with literacy; it is probably also because many prisoners suffer an ‘inhibition in speaking’ associated with trauma and with shame.⁶¹ Literary picares might experience trauma but they largely escape shame, and they certainly suffer no inhibition in speaking: picares indulge shame’s garrulous cousin, guilt, and confess, copiously and extravagantly, on palm leaves if they are washed up on an island like Grimmelshausen’s *Simplicissimus*, on white paper if they are washed up in an asylum like Grass’s *Oskar*, who blackens what he calls ‘unschuldiges Papier’ with his guilty narrative.⁶²

Picares assume the power to speak; but why are their stories listened to, given that the deviance and violence of picaresque lives are played out *close to home* in contemporary, local settings, and touch on areas of life that are *beyond the ken* of most bourgeois readers? Suzanne Keen, in *Empathy and the Novel*, has suggested that we can listen to literary stories without turning away because we know them to be fictions and therefore to require no action from us.⁶³ That seems in line with the ‘can this be true?’ response to certain stories told as nonfiction (if it is not true, then I do not need to deal with it); but it does not yet provide a full account of the conditions of narrative audibility. Picaresque fictions often point rather urgently at truths about society that might well require action from contemporary readers. But they are also expertly contained, not only within a narrative structure but within what White

⁶⁰ Jason Haslam, *Fitting Sentences: Identity in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Prison Narratives* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), p. 5.

⁶¹ See Richman, ‘Finding One’s Voice’, p. 640.

⁶² Günter Grass, *Die Blechtrommel* (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1986 [1959]), p. 10.

⁶³ Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 106.

and Butler would call a ‘moral’ frame, and that frame is referenced at the same time as it is challenged by the story. Referencing the frame embeds the narrative in the collective ethos (even when that ethos is also being critiqued), so that it makes sense and can be listened to; it does not evoke the spectre of narrative chaos or even the complete collapse of story that threatens (terrifyingly)⁶⁴ when experience does not make sense. That is the spectre which, I suggest, induces the dream figures that haunted Levi to turn away, almost as if the survivor could infect them with his own barbarous narrative failure. A standard mode of reference or framing in the picaresque story is humour, notorious for its powerful evocation of norms as well as for its capacity to subvert.⁶⁵ In the voice of Simplicius Simplicissimus, Grimmelshausen writes an arch apology for the lewd and scatological scenes of farce that pepper his picaro’s story: ‘daß ich aber zuzeiten etwas possierlich aufziehe, geschiehet der Zärtlinge halber, die keine heilsamen Pillulen können verschlucken, sie seien denn zuvor überzuckert und vergüldt’.⁶⁶ Grimmelshausen critics have wondered how seriously we should take the claim that humour is being used with serious intent as a means of making the story possible to swallow (consumable, or in my terms, audible). To answer that question, it is first necessary to ask: what is the nature of the curative pill Grimmelshausen says I am being asked to ingest? I suggest that the ‘pill’ – the potentially indigestible element in the narrative – is its exposure of the violence inherent in the collective ethos of a society driven by money and war; which simultaneously exposes both the reader him- or herself and the narratives s/he lives by. The ‘sugar on the pill’ are the story elements that surround and contain or *frame* the

⁶⁴ Narrative collapse is associated with suicide. See Shadd Maruna, Louise Wilson, and Kathryn Curran, ‘Why God Is Often Found Behind Bars: Prison Conversions and the Crisis of Self-Narrative’, *Research in Human Development*, 3 (2006), 161-84.

⁶⁵ See Susan Purdie, *Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993).

⁶⁶ Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen, *Der abenteuerliche Simplicissimus Teusch* (1669) (Munich: dtv, 1975), p.485.

problem. In a case of literal framing, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's well known painting of the Turkish bath, *Le bain turc* (1863) was changed by the artist from its original rectangular form to the circular *tondo* form in which it now hangs in the Louvre – the image is thus framed to offer a view through a keyhole (or perhaps through a telescope lens, if more distance is needed) on to the spectacle of wet naked women. What is *unerhört* is rendered consumable when it is 'properly' framed.

'Die diskursive Wirksamkeit von Normen verdanken sie ihre Unsichtbarkeit', Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf has noted.⁶⁷ One of the remarkable capacities of art and literature is to expose not only deviant bodies but the invisible normative frame which, made visible, reveals that both the artist/narrator and the viewer/reader are implicated in a potentially violent collective ethos. When Huck Finn 'confesses' and resigns himself to eternal damnation for helping his friend Jim, a slave, to escape from his owner Miss Watson, he simultaneously exposes the grotesqueness of a society founded on a morality that puts white people's economic benefit ahead of black people's right to a dignified life. The great picaresque characters go on learning journeys in social mores as they tell their stories, and the guilt that blackens the white paper is also the guilt of narrative capacity – the ability to tell a listened-to story, which necessarily means complicity in the collective ethos. Picaresque deviance is therefore not merely autobiographical self-exposure (confession), but double exposure, because it exposes both the guilt of the deviant individual and the moral framework that determines it. Implicitly, picaros are always also saying: 'we share the same moral framework and so my guilt has to be read in the context of yours, because the social (and

⁶⁷ Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, 'Norm, Form, und Modell: Paradigma Autobiographie', in *Norms, Normality and Normalization*, ed. by Matthias Uecker and Dirk Goettsche (University of Nottingham e-prints, 2014), pp. 117-131 (p. 120) <http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/3611/1/Norms_Normality_and_Normalization.pdf> [accessed 29 August 2016]

narrative) norms you collaborate in are what made me'. Sometimes prisoner stories say the same:

Warnung

Wir sind die Abgebrühten,

die Ganoven,

die Schurken.

Nehmt euch in acht,

wir sind gefährlich.

Wir rauben

und stehlen

und betrügen,

um zu fressen,

zu saufen,

zu huren –

wie ihr.⁶⁸

Both prisoner and picaresque stories have the disturbing and important capacity to reveal a society's underbelly: the violence and inhumanity of which it is capable, and the 'moral' structures in place that make violence and inhumanity practicable.

But prisoner narratives are not the same as picaresque stories any more than prisoner narrators are the same as the fictional characters created by established authors. Real-life deviants are vulnerable in a way that separates them from fictional deviants. They often lack

⁶⁸ Ernst S. Steffen, 'Warnung', in *Mit der Flaschenpost gegen einen Ozean*, ed. by Helmut H. Koch (Münster: amRand, 1998), p. 21.

the sophisticated ‘tool-kit’ – the control of narrative and normative frameworks – that makes picaresque stories listenable-to. More importantly, perhaps, they lack the ‘moral authority’ in the context of a collective ethos that White and Butler posit as a prerequisite for audibility: insufficiently embedded in a normative framework, they leave the recipient, as Ina Linge has put it, ‘fassungslos’⁶⁹ – the German means both ‘uncomprehending’ and ‘without a frame’.

Conclusions: does listening to prisoner stories matter?

As an activity, prisoner writing is not always or necessarily audience-focused. Tarter and Bell argue for its historic importance even as a monologic activity, as one of ‘the range of strategies inmates developed to defend against external control of their bodies and souls.’⁷⁰

Chevigny agrees that writing in itself might ‘help[s] writers to find themselves, make themselves whole’; but at the same time she notes that it seeks to ‘forge significant contact with others’.⁷¹ That is clearly a communicative or dialogic function. In response to the question why he writes, the West German prisoner Jürgen Peter Buchta has written that he wants to permeate the prison wall: ‘Hier im Knast ist es so ziemlich die einzige kommunikative Möglichkeit, nach draußen zu dringen; zu spüren, daß es noch ein anderes Leben gibt als jenes, das wir in der Gefangenschaft führen’.⁷² It follows that such writing

⁶⁹ Ina Linge, ‘Bodily Relations, Bodily Creations: Representations of Embodiment in Early Twentieth-Century Life Writing of Gender and Sexual “Deviants”’ (unpublished paper presented at the conference *This is my Body*, University of Cambridge, School of Clinical Medicine/CRASSH, 18 November 2013).

⁷⁰ Michelle Lise Tarter and Richard Bell, ‘Introduction’ in *Buried Lives: Incarcerated in Early America*, ed. by Tarter and Bell (Athens: University of Georgia Press 2012), pp. 1-32 (p. 26).

⁷¹ Bell Gale Chevigny, and Perutz cited in Chevigny, “‘All I have, a lament and a boast’: Why Prisoners Write’, in *Prose and Cons*, ed. by Miller, pp. 246-71 (p. 247).

⁷² Jürgen-Peter Buchta, ‘Warum schreibe ich?’ in *Schrei Deine Worte nicht in den Wind: Verständigungstexte von Inhaftierten*, ed. by Karlheinz A. Barwasser (Tübingen: AS-Verlag, 1982), pp. 15-16 (p. 15)

requires listeners, as Kathrin Perutz, a former Chair of the US PEN prison programme, has said: ‘this is the way to reconstruct a life, to restore one’s sense of meaning, of responsibility to oneself and to others. But the others – at least some others – must be listening’.⁷³

Looking empirically at the publication and consumption of prisoner writing in post-war Germany, prisoner narratives appear to matter and get heard differently at different times. A trickle that built to a flood of contemporary prisoner writing was published in West Germany and West Berlin during the decades after the Second World War, when making prisoner experience audible could be construed as a building-block in the Federal Republic’s construction of itself as a *Rechtsstaat*: a just and justified state of law. In the Berlin Republic, the writings of regular prisoners are less frequently published than they were in the 1970s and 1980s; and in contemporary paratexts and epitexts, prisoners are rarely characterized as resistance fighters – that notion had largely disappeared from forewords and cover blurbs by the 1990s. But now the memoirs of prisoners of the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) are appearing fairly thick and fast, and in fact have acquired something like the moral status of witness testimony: they are paratextually characterized as (for example) ‘Geschichten gegen das Vergessen’ or ‘Zeugnisse von den Opfern eines Unrechtsregimes’.⁷⁴ These are clear indications that stories of East German prisons are listenable-to, even popular, in the post-wall Republic: a collection of the narratives of former prisoners in East Berlin’s notorious Hohenschönhausen prison (for example) has sold very respectably since its publication in 1997;⁷⁵ the sales figures suggest these are narratives the German book-buying public is well able to accommodate. Perhaps that is because they are embedded in a new

⁷³ Bell Gale Chevigny, and Perutz cited in Chevigny, “‘All I have, a lament and a boast’: Why Prisoners Write” in *Prose and Cons*, pp. 246-71 (p. 247).

⁷⁴ See the back covers of Hubertus Knabe, *Gefangen in Hohenschönhausen: Stasi-Häftlinge berichten* (Berlin: List, 2009) and *Der dunkle Ort*, ed. by Nayhaus and Riepl.

⁷⁵ At the time of writing, its Amazon rank is around 30,000.

(post-1989) moral or narrative framework by which the contemporary Federal Republic shores itself up in contradistinction to the totalitarian state that was once its competitor.

Ernst Steffen is not the only prison writer to have suggested that the popularly assumed polarity of prison and society is a powerful but unfounded narrative. ‘Die Verhältnisse im Knast sind nicht viel anders als draußen. Die Haft ist nur der Vergrößerungsspiegel’, writes (for example) the German prisoner and novelist Peter Feraru.⁷⁶ Prisoner writing offers an opportunity to look consciously into that mirror – in which we are they and they are we, in the terms of Steffen’s poem. The pleasurable fiction of the picaresque is that the stories reveal exactly what Franklin sees in prisoner writing, namely ‘what is supposed to be concealed and what is often unimaginable’.⁷⁷ The problem of voyeurism must, therefore, concern readers of both kinds of narratives. But both provide an unusual view of normal and normative violence, and both bring their readers face-to-face with our collaboration in a collective ethos founded on denial and exclusion.

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⁷⁶ Peter Feraru, *Das Messer der Hoffnung* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1985), p. 141.

⁷⁷ Franklin, ‘The Inside Stories of the Global American Prison’, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 50:3 (Fall 2008), 235-42 (p. 235); see also Franklin, ‘Introduction’, in *Prison Writing in 20th-Century America*, ed. by Franklin, pp. 1-20 (2).