

*Open Challenges, Hidden Stories.
The Power of Literary Histories*

The Two Realisms of Literary History

The best of recent literary histories offer a new paradigm for the writing of literary histories and new criteria for the selection of relevant texts and materials. Together with interpretations, description of periods and portraits of authors and critics they also bring to the fore new paths and contexts for the historical trajectory of literature through cultural history. But most importantly, they unearth larger or smaller groups of hidden texts and authors, hitherto forgotten either for ideological or for theoretical reasons, and thereby they re-address the problem of remembering and forgetting as it shapes how we proceed to unravel the vicissitudes of literary and cultural history. Literary histories from the cultural margins on the old continents like Europe or from postcolonial cultures constitute important examples, and the same do literary histories of specific social groups, often in a cross-cultural and transnational perspective.¹

How to write those histories through their partly neglected texts and authors and reshuffle the relation between remembrance and forgetting? The easy, and customary way, is to pretend that we can simply remove the veil and open a full view to what until now for various reasons has been overlooked, as if the neglect and ignorance was a mistake that can be done away with to finally reveal what was really there. We could call it the practice of the *realism of the hidden*.

But what we then tend to forget is that the hiding itself is also part of the real history of these texts and authors, and therefore it cannot be reduced without removing an important historical experience and thereby also impede our ability to recognize it as a historical fact and, subsequently, to uncover the meaning and importance of the

¹ E.g., *A History of Literature in the Caribbean* 1–3 (1997–2001); *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe* 1–4 (2004–2010); *Nordisk kvindelitteraturhistorie* 1–5 (1993–1998).

hiding process. Hiding has actually contributed to the shape of the texts and their afterlife. This problem is dealt with in many postcolonial literary histories, in the literary histories of traumatic experience as e.g. related to war, apartheid or genocide, in the reintegration in the histories of literature of oral literature as well as in the recognition of the foundational role of translations. Hiding is an important part of literary history with an impact on forms, themes, genres, literary cultures, canons and traditions. We could call it the practice of the *realism of the hiding*. Both realisms form an integral part of the formations of literary histories today.

The realism of the hidden is quite in line with the conception of realism of the primary literary material being concerned as it is, although often in complex and contradictory ways, with *textual reference*. Being concerned with the culturally suppressed the realism of hiding is more complex, not least in its relation to what has actually been hidden. This complexity forms a parallel to Sigmund Freud's attempts to generate stories of the unspoken and unspeakable, most radically in the so-called Dora case from 1900 where the verbalization and narrativization of the suppressed experiences and emotions of the patient Dora is reduplicated by the suppressed recognition, on the part of Freud, of the process of transfer between the patient and the analyst. The transfer blocks the process because the patient places the doctor in a role that forms her remembrance and the ensuing narrative. It constitutes an emotional undercurrent produced and repeated by the very way Freud defines the relation between the doctor and the patient. This relation is set up in order not to involve the doctor, but only to reveal the hidden facts of Dora's life, and therefore his own involvement that blends with the unveiling of Dora's past is inaccessible to himself. Consequently, the therapy had to be discontinued and the account of it, called a fragment, *Bruchstück* (Freud 1971). Thus, the realism of the hiding is a not problem of textual reference, but of *textual communication* where both subject and object is part of the communicative problem and also influences to what extent the hidden eventually is accessible. The former type of realism challenges our capacity to know, the latter our capacity to tell.

In spite of Freud's attempts to separate the two dimensions in order to end up exclusively with some knowledge independent of the process through which it has been acquired, they cannot be separated as it is shown in Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1900). Here young Jim is exercising a complicated process of remembrance in the courtroom where he stands trial in the case of the sunken ship *Patna* carrying 800 pilgrims. He did not stay onboard as he should, but jumped from the ship to save himself; he was later rescued and now appears in court as co-responsible for the accident. But having escaped, he has himself contributed to the complication of memory he is experiencing in front of the court: The hidden events and the process of hiding them cannot be separated from his own responsibility. He has no clue to the hidden series of events and is incapable of relating the truth to the judges. The court tries hard, like Freud, to separate the hidden from the hiding and unravel only what is necessary for a verdict. But one thing they cannot find out: How did the ship actually get damaged? Inside Jim, however, the two dimensions – the hidden reality and the reality of the hiding – are inextricably entangled as part of *his* story about what happened. Here, he is confronted with the questions of the prosecutor about the actual details of the shipwreck:

The questions were aiming at facts. [...] They wanted facts. Facts! They demanded facts from him, as if facts could explain everything! [...] He spoke slowly; he remembered swiftly and with extreme vividness; he could have reproduced like an echo the moaning of the engineer for the better information of these men who wanted facts. After his first feeling of the revolt he had come round to the view that only a meticulous precision of statement would bring out the true horror behind the appalling face of things. The facts those men were so eager to know had been visible, tangible, open to the senses, occupying their place in space and time, requiring for their existence a fourteen-hundred-ton steamer and twenty-seven minutes by the watch; they made a whole that had features, shades of expression, a complicated aspect that could be remembered by the eye, and something else besides, something invisible, a directing spirit of perdition that dwelt within, like a malevolent soul in a detestable

body. He was anxious to make this clear. [...] He wanted to go on talking for truth's sake, perhaps for his own sake also; and while his utterance was deliberate, his mind positively flew round and round the serried circle of facts that had surged up all about him to cut him off from the rest of his kind [...]. This awful activity of mind made him hesitate in his speech.... [...] There was no incertitude as to the facts – as to the one material fact [...]. How *Patna* came by her hurt it was impossible to find out; the court did not expect to find out; and in the whole audience there was not a man who cared. (Conrad 1993: 21–23, 42)

There are two intertwined storylines at work here. First, there is the storyline of the hidden, that is to say the attempts to discover the facts, not all of them, but the facts relevant in the perspective of the law. But it is not possible. Later in the novel we learn that the ship did sink – only nobody knows why – but also that the 800 pilgrims were saved by a French ship. Second, there is the storyline of the hiding: It embraces all the impressions that are too emotional or existential for Jim to tell, even if the court were interested. The interaction between the two storylines disturbs his mind and his speak.

The first storyline is not fundamentally changed by the second, and also not by the surprising and later disclosure of the lucky fate of the passengers, and the second is not deeply affected by the first: The burning images of sounds, peoples and his own weakness that swirl around in Jim's mind and determine the rest of his life. Nevertheless, their interaction prevents the creation of a regular narrative storyline. We also learn that the facts are no simple facts we can just observe. They are determined by the context and the aim of their disclosure and the way they are communicated, in this case to the court. Moreover, we witness how the hiding is related to Jim's capacity to remember and also to express himself, thereby shaping the necessary communication of the facts.

Although relatively independent of each other there is never a clear cut distinction between what is hidden and what is not, what can be revealed and what is subject to hiding. It is an interactive process with the perceiver and the storyteller actively involved. This process is crucial to literature, among other phenomenon, and that is what underpins its aesthetic devices, narrative procedures and

imaginary language. Therefore, it is fair to say that Jim's troubles mirror the practice of the art of literature, the novel Conrad is making us read. The same is the case in Freud's experience with the talking Dora on his couch. What Freud exemplifies in theory and scientific practice is mirrored in his abortive report on the case. *Lord Jim*, on the other hand, repeats the same experience in the mode of imaginative writing.

What I am going to do in the remaining part of my essay is to try to learn from literature the intricacies of hiding as an integral part of the art of literature and to draw the consequences for the writing of literary history, a relationship modeled after the relationship between realism of the hidden and the realism on hiding, exemplified by Freud and by Conrad who are connected by the similarities as a theoretical and an aesthetic practice that binds together the hidden and the hiding as a real textual and historical processes.

As the hidden does not appear all by itself and the process of hiding does not dissolve automatically and transform itself into a transparent storyline, there is a question of cultural *power* involved here. Literature's power is that it shows by hiding, and hiding by showing, and literary histories, on the other hand, investigate and present this process in its historical unfolding as an open cultural challenge. For literary history the task is to develop a paradigm for the historical investigation, just like the court did on the basis of the law and like Freud did when he tried to establish the psychoanalytical paradigm. A paradigm provides its practitioners with the power to decide what is hidden and what is not. Conrad's practice is the real creative practice of literature exposing itself in front of us in the mode of Jim's meticulous and reluctant looking for words: the fight for the power to tell.

On the one hand, we meet the power to impose a paradigm to discover and select what is relevant among the hidden facts and, on the other, the power to fashion the result in a convincing story. However, this is a process with now guarantee of success, as is amply shown by Freud and Conrad. There are boundaries to be confronted with – the limits of the paradigm as in Freud and in Conrad's courtroom, the hidden facts that remain undiscovered in Dora's life and in the shipwreck, and finally the limited capacity to

put the findings into adequate words. Therefore, literature does not only deliver the material of literary history, but also presents a way of working with the relationship between the hidden and the hiding which may also serve as a model for the creation of paradigms for literary histories.

Art is a particular type of remembering what is hidden, and maybe also forgotten. It is the process of unraveling that never stops and therefore feeds on those dimensions of the hidden that will remain so and therefore emerge in infinite protean variations. Art never simply discloses it, but shows it as hidden in such a way that the creativity of art is transferred to the process of reading or watching the traces of the hidden. Obviously, the writings on holocaust constitute a prime example of this constellation, but here I will avoid this well studied and still important field. With three examples I will instead point to the general complexity of hiding and disclosing in the texts, and leave the consequences for the writing the literary history until the conclusion: Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* (1992), Multatuli's *Max Havelaar* (1860) and Hans Christian Andersen's *The Shadow* (1847).

Anonymity Recognized

Ghosh's fabulous novel is set in Egypt around 1990, in the period leading up to the still ongoing Gulf war. But it also integrates various locations across the globe and across historical epochs since the Middle Ages. The young Indian anthropologist Amitab lives in a small village in Egypt while he is pursuing his studies of some old documents, located in Cairo and in the USA after they have been found in a hiding place in Cairo and dispersed partly by the Germans during WW2 but thoroughly studied by a German non-Jewish philologist in the 1930s during the Nazi regime.

The old papers contain a story about medieval commercial relations between Cairo, Aden and Mangalore, involving merchants of Jewish, Arab and Indian descent who interact harmoniously across the geographical and cultural boundaries. This story gradually emerges out of the documents and is discretely presented as a contrast to our contemporary world of persistent conflicts in the

same region. A both hidden and forgotten story formulated to teach the belligerent people of today a lesson.

But actually, the story of the merchants is not presented as an intricate intertwining of forgetting, hiding and remembrance. The hidden is just brought out into the open, like the meandering story of the documents themselves. There is however another story, too. It also turns out that the young and somewhat naïve Amitab only knows very little about the habits and beliefs of the people he is living with in Egypt, and they know even less about *his* cultural and religious background in India and in Hinduism. They are each others' hidden stories which produce an abundance of tragi-comical misunderstandings and heated arguments, as is the case with many cross-cultural encounters. They are hidden because of ideological and religious strategies, developed since the merchants travelled the region. The three hidden stories just mentioned: the medieval story of commerce, the routes of the documents and the mutually hidden cultural contexts, unfold in a structure of parallel and intertwined unfinished narratives. This narrative situation is known in other literary garments in literary history, as is the story about the migrating and permanently outplaced protagonist. And the narrative does not change when Amitab leaves to continue his research in the USA. He promises to go back later to wrap up the hidden dimensions left behind as only half-disclosed. But he only partly keeps his promise and does not succeed in getting behind the closed doors of knowledge and memories, but this is more for pragmatic reasons than because of the basic impossibility of this endeavor.

However, the profound driving force behind Amitab's research is another and more complex hidden story than the three just mentioned. He is struck by the recurring name of a slave in the documents, Bomma, always present, but on the margins of both events and narrative. Amitab speculates repeatedly about his role and his fate which is never revealed or verified. But on the other hand, the slave is always there and is obviously given responsible financial and communicative tasks in the networks of merchants, also when they at a certain point have a quarrel over money affairs and are afflicted by some mutual distrust. Bomma has been if not the invisible glue of the story, at least he has always been together with

the merchants, has known their story, has had access to confidential matters, and has acted as a go-between, maybe at times with a better overview over the situation than the merchants themselves.

Having no details of Bomma, Amitab in stead – as a sideline in his academic occupation with medieval trade routes – explores the name of the slave: Bomma. It turns out that it has Indian roots, from around Mangalore, Amitab's own homeplace. This is the only fragment of the slave's story he is able to reconstruct which is hardly an independent narrative, but still the driving force for him. At that point he sums up: "It was as if Bomma finally came of age and was ready at last to become a protagonist in his own story." (Ghosh 1992: 254)

This is, of course, the hidden story of Amitab himself – the peripheral stranger in Egypt, in India and in the research field he is engaged with. But still he is living where the core events of the medieval history actually took place, where the Gulf war that change the life of the small Egyptian village is launched, and where the rare documents are kept. And he continues to contact his friends, calling them from their village when he finally returns and when they are at war or live as migrant workers in Baghdad. But he never really shapes one story out of it all. The final words of the novel refer to his friend Nabeel from the village, now lost in Bagdad, but they are also valid for Bomma and Amitab himself: "Nabeel had vanished into the anonymity of History." (Ghosh 1992: 353)

The hidden story may surface when somebody focuses on it or, as with Bomma's story, on its relation to the process of hiding it, determined by his subordinate social position which is not turned into the general lesson of historical processes – anonymity. To be re-focused requires that somebody invests his own life and engagement in bringing the story forth. The story is then just as much about this engagement as about the more or less problematic visibility of the story itself. Ghosh's strategy using parallel stories in open networks is to produce a *writer's participation* in the process of telling through identification with the hidden. Without this participation the hidden story cannot be told, but the story therefore also cannot be told fully. The subjective filter, open to interpretations, will always remain a part of the hidden story.

A Cup of Coffee

With *Max Havelaar* we move back to the mid nineteenth century with a postcolonial view on Dutch colonial history in the province of Lebak, just west of Jakarta in Indonesia. Here the Dutch colonial coffee trade was practiced with a more than firm hand to the benefit of the Dutch merchants back in Amsterdam, who did not know – and were not interested in knowing – how the coffee they earned millions on was actually produced. In 1860 there was a public outcry when the book, written by the frustrated former colonial civil servant Edouard Dekker, was published under the penname of Multatuli – meaning in Latin ‘I have suffered much’. Before it went into printing it was edited by Jakob van Lennep without the author’s consent, and the story of the disappearance and reappearance of the manuscript in various hideouts until the mid-nineteenth century and the subsequent editions and revisions is a hidden story in itself, like the documents in Ghosh’s novel. Nevertheless, political measurements were taken after the book came out to make life easier in the colonies for the local population.

But again: this hidden story, as we know from numerous colonial and postcolonial accounts from most other colonies around the world, is not of prime interest 150 years later. The reason why the book is still an enticing read has to do with the fact that the hiding and forgetting never get out of their mutual entanglement.

One day the dry and hypercorrect coffee merchant Droogstoppel receives a huge box with mixed and unedited documents from the former colonial civil servant Max Havelaar, brought to him by an earlier acquaintance who Droogstoppel condescendingly calls Sjaalman, the man with the shawl, meaning a poor and unreliable person who cannot even afford a decent coat. The content of the box is a mess, but Droogstoppel starts making a list of the papers with a brief headline to each, the well organized merchant that he is. By reading some of them it dawns to him that the colonial reality from which he earns his honest money is a moral cesspool. This can, however, not be told straightforwardly if it is to be believed. He has to write a novel – another recurrent device in literature. Reluctantly, though: He hates and profoundly distrusts fiction and poetry. With

the help of a young German apprentice, Stern, his son Frits, and his daughter – and in part also Sjaalman because of documents in the local language where he is knowledgeable – the writing starts.

But here the reader begins to get worried, for the hidden story from the colonies on the life of the honest and therefore dismissed Havelaar cannot be separated from the writing process in all its fragmentary, subjective and arbitrary unreliability. The primary writing in Dutch is carried out by Stern, not even a Dutch citizen, as Droogstoppel hesitantly admits. We never know which papers from Sjaalman's box are taken into account and which are discarded, as we never know if Stern and Frits just invent everything because they like to indulge in imaginary writing, not least to impress various girls when they read aloud from their work. Droogstoppel tries to keep them on track, but the reader is never sure that he actually succeeds. And the young people couldn't care less. Droogstoppel even calls on a priest to sermon on decency, reliability and strict morals to suppress of the suspicious amorous motivations for the writing.

So the more we get to the core of hidden story, the unjust Dutch behavior in Indonesia, the more we doubt: Have the story been told from the right documents? Did the young blood invent half of it? Are the translations from local languages correct? Did Stern possess a sufficient mastery of Dutch? – Here not the writer, but the reader must make his or her own decisions concerning the hidden story, just like Droogstoppel with his nose in the box of papers must find some principles to guide a relevant selection.

At a certain point it is said about Havelaar's poetic power that it makes him trustworthy: "One cannot but acknowledge that Havelaar was a true poet. One cannot but feel that, when he spoke of the rice fields on the mountains, he raised his eyes to them through the open side of the 'hall' and really saw those fields. [...] He invented nothing: he *heard* the tree speak." (Multatuli 1987: 119). Said by Stern, probably. And then we are met with Droogstoppel's opposite view: "Mind you, I've no objection to verses in themselves. If you want words to form fours, it's all right with me! But don't say anything that isn't true. [...] And it is not only verses that tempt young people into untruthfulness. Just go to the theatre, and listen to all the lies that are served up there." (21). So Droogstoppel is more

and more worried about the reliability of his own projects and his helpers' capacity to reveal the hidden story truthfully – and so is the reader. These two positions are never reconciled.

The unsolvable balance between conscious hiding, accidental forgetting and disclosing is told in such a way that the very conditions for the reliability of the narrative process inevitably become an integral part of the story itself, and place the reader on the threshold of hiding and revealing, thus pointing to the reader's interpretative responsibility by identifying him- or herself with those who produce the unreliable but engaging story. It practices a strategy for the *reader's participation* by placing the responsibility on him or her.

Hidden in the Shadow

One of Hans Christian Andersen's most complex tales is "The Shadow." Shortly after the first volume with fairy tales came out in 1835, he realized that the genre offered more possibilities than pointing to a hidden and fantastic reality behind the realm of the senses and everyday experiences. They also became complex, but still short stories about the conditions of writing hidden stories. They became self-reflexive meta-stories about the creative process itself hidden behind the surface of the story and its events, characters and narrative flow. One such story is "The Shadow."²

A learned man from the cold north has settled in the warm south. From his balcony he can see both his shadow on the wall of the house opposite the balcony, and a young maiden inside the house. The shadow separates himself from the man – and age-old literary motif –, enters the maiden's apartment and disappears, while the man continues to write "books about what was true in the world, and about what was good and what was beautiful" – stories which nobody seems to care about. One day the shadow returns, now a fine man of world, rich, successful and powerful. "I just want to see you before you die", he condescendingly tells the old learned man.

² Quotations without page numbers refer to the webtext listed in the bibliography.

It now turns out that in the house opposite the learned man's apartment lived Poesy impersonated as the young girl. The man who had written poetry all his life didn't even recognize her when he saw her. But the shadow came to know everything, just from being in the antechamber in the other house, and he used his advantage to smart his way upwards in society. And the man, who thought he wrote about everything true, now became thinner and thinner, actually more and more shadowlike, and finally is turned into the shadow of his own shadow before he eventually dies. He tries to resist: "I am the man, and thou art a shadow – thou are only dressed up!" But in vain: "There is no one who will believe it!" the shadow returns. "Be reasonable, or I will call the guard." The man, now a shadow, fades away, "for they had deprived him of his life," while a princess gets infatuated with the shadow and marries him.

Poesy without life, as in the shadow, has a hidden power to manipulate the world or to kill its author. Here art and life stay external to each other. The hidden story tells that they are two sides of the same coin. Their mutual interdependence becomes the hidden story. The ontological problem of literature and other arts – where is the boundary between fiction and reality? – is forever hidden because when we tell the story the boundary is always set in motion. The questioning of the boundary always propels a process of repetition and produces *an ontological doubt*, precisely by addressing the issue. In art the ontological doubt is continuously reproduced thus pointing to this doubt as a fundamental part of our experience and knowledge and our capacity to tell about it.

Hiding and Disclosing in Literature

The three texts have focused on the hidden story of 1) the writer's participation, of 2) the reader's participation, and of 3) the ontological as a constitutive hidden aspect of art, framed in all three cases by literary motifs with a historically dissemination across cultures: the nomadic migrant, the contested reliability of fiction based on occasional documents, and the relation between the shadow and its human subject. In other words, they are embedded in the context of literary history and offer another perspective on how to

fashion it: Neither the sequential story of portraits, works or periods and their mutual influence on each other or the unidirectional influences from center to periphery, nor the randomly organized literary history centered around more or less arbitrarily chosen cultural events.³

Instead the focus point could be the historically changing conditions and manifestations of the transformations of the power of the writer to change the view on history, the power of the reader to redirect the conditions for interpretation, and finally the power of fiction to challenge the status of reality. The three texts have stated their case with different means: parallel narratives in Ghosh, fragmented narratives in Multatuli and meta-fiction in Andersen. Those could be nodal points for writing a literary history focusing on the changing conditions of how the hidden disappear and reappear in the cultural history and on the shifting discursive strategies that direct the process of hiding and disclosing. In the individual texts all three are but three dimensions of the same essential creative process: the use of the hidden dimension of stories as a way of creating a *reader responsibility* in the textual meaning production – to secure that we are always reminded of the hidden dimension of all meaning production that makes literature and literary histories an open cultural challenge.

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³ See Perkins 1992 and Valdès and Hutcheon 2002; the evenemential organization is most clear in Hollier 1989.

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