



Holocaust Literature and the Taboo

Dr Matthew Boswell

**School of English
University of Leeds**

**April 16, 2014 (Wed)
4:30-6:00pm**

**CRT-4.36, Run Run Shaw Tower,
Centennial Campus, HKU**

This paper considers taboos that have developed in and around Holocaust literature, focussing on controversial, fictional responses to the Holocaust, with a particular emphasis on the representation of perpetrators. The writers discussed draw on the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud and this paper takes Freud's reading of social taboos as a model for interpreting transgressive forms of historical representation and cultural practice, arguing that the proscription of certain forms of Holocaust representation constitutes an attempt to foreclose responses to the genocide that are particularly difficult to articulate or deal with, including the 'fascination of Fascism' (Susan Sontag) and the ordinariness of perpetrator identities. It makes a case for the value of novels and poems which engage with truths about our relationship with history that are never straightforwardly empirical, arguing that they are fundamental to what the Germans term 'working through' or 'dealing with' (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) the knowledge and cultural legacy of the Holocaust.

Dr Matthew Boswell is a Research Fellow in the School of English at the University of Leeds. Since completing his PhD on Holocaust poetry at the University of Sheffield, his research has focussed on Holocaust fiction, taboo forms of Holocaust representation and 'hybrid testimony'. His monograph, *Holocaust Impiety in Literature, Popular Music and Film* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), considers irreverent and controversial representations of the Holocaust by non-victims. He is currently working with partners in South Africa and Australia on projects relating to transnational memories of the Holocaust.

