

Crossing Generational and Genre Boundaries in Commemorating the Holocaust

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Der Beitrag handelt von der Schwierigkeit, zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts in angemessener Weise den Holocaust in der Literatur und Kunst zu behandeln. Wir befinden uns an der von Jan Assmann festgestellten zeitlichen Grenze, wo mit dem Ableben der letzten Zeitzeugen, die Erinnerung an den Holocaust aus dem kommunikativen Gedächtnis in das kulturelle Gedächtnis überwechselt. Stieß schon die Darstellung des Holocausts für die Generation der Zeitzeugen bereits an die Grenze des Sagbaren, so ist die glaubwürdige Darstellung des Geschehens für die Nachgeborenen noch schwieriger. Ein mögliches Verfahren liegt darin, durch Zitat und Anspielung die Zeitzeugen selbst zu Wort kommen zu lassen, wodurch die Grenze zwischen den Gedächtnisarten durchlässiger wird. Am Beispiel von W. G. Sebalds Austerlitz, das Erfahrungen des Auschwitz-Überlebenden Jean Améry verarbeitet, und an der von Gedichten Paul Celans inspirierten Malerei von Anselm Kiefer werden zwei gelungene Anwendungen dieses Verfahrens vorgestellt.

Keywords: Holocaust, intertextuality, memory

1 Speaking of the Unspeakable

The Holocaust has become part of the foundational narrative of post-war Europe. As such it is more than just a fact to be listed in the chronicles of history. It is an existential wound in our conception of humanity. The crimes perpetrated by the Nazis during the Holocaust are literally unspeakable. They should also be unforgettable. The problem involved in upholding the memory of the Holocaust and respecting its victims is that of how to speak of the unspeakable. Artists who try to grasp what it meant for the victims, whether they be visual artists, writers or composers are inevitably confronted by the limitations of their media.

This paper deals with works commemorating the Holocaust at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries, that is, some fifty years after the event. They represent a historical transition in that they stand at the border, defined by Jan Assmann, where the Holocaust ceases to be present in individual memories of survivors and becomes part of the stock of cultural memory (Assmann 1992: 50–52). The artists dealt with here, the writer W. G. Sebald (1944–2001) and the painter Anselm Kiefer (*1945), both address the issue of remembrance at this time of transition with singular urgency. The central theme of Sebald's *oeuvre* is what he called “the natural history of destruction” (Sebald 1999: 41) which is epitomised by the Holocaust. Kiefer returns in his monumental works again and again to the themes of war and the genocide practiced by

the Nazis. Both draw on the on testimony of victims to legitimise their work. Sebald integrates the experience of Jean Améry, and Kiefer draws on the poetry of Paul Celan.

The impossibility of any adequate response to the Holocaust experience in any medium was a very prominent theme in immediate post-war theological, philosophical and literary discourse. Already in 1946 the Jewish theologian Margarete Susman, who had the good fortune of having escaped the concentration camps in Swiss exile, drew a parallel between the fate of the Jewish people in 20th Century Europe and the Book of Job in her book *Das Buch Hiob und das Schicksal des jüdischen Volkes*. In the first chapter she deplores the inadequacy of language:

Wohl ist diesem Geschehen gegenüber jedes Wort ein Zuwenig und ein Zuviel; seine Wahrheit ist allein der Schrei aus den wortlosen Tiefen der menschlichen Existenz.¹ (Susman 1968: 31)

From the awareness of the powerlessness of language in the face of brazen inhumanity it is only a short step to the conclusion that the refinement of language for the purpose of giving aesthetic pleasure was in some way insolent, an ethical abomination. This conclusion was famously formulated in 1949 when the exiled sociologist, philosopher and composer, Theodor W. Adorno, pronounced his famous dictum according to which writing poetry after Auschwitz was barbaric (Adorno 1998: 30).

Adorno's dictum immediately became famous and is often quoted out of context. It became understood as a moral challenge to post-war writing in Germany. This dictum has been particularly often evoked in connection with the reception of the early work of the German speaking Rumanian Jewish poet Paul Celan, whose parents died at the hands of the Nazis and who himself spent years of hard labour in the war but narrowly escaped deportation to the death camps. Paul Celan is today internationally the best known poet of the German language since World War II. His international fame, largely posthumous, is directly connected with his treatment of the Holocaust. Celan's most famous poem "Todesfuge" (Death Fugue) (Celan 1992: 41–42), which directly deals with the horrors of the concentration camps, was originally interpreted as a refutation of Adorno's dictum, an interpretation which the poet himself vehemently rejected. In fact Celan's relations with his critics and with the post-war West German literary establishment were strained at all times. The publication of his first volume of poetry *Mohn und Gedächtnis*² in 1952 was greeted with acclaim. With its expressiveness and strong imagery in a surrealist vein, the volume contributed to re-establishing the link between German writing and modernism that had been abruptly disrupted in 1933. In the reviews the fact that this achievement could be attributed to a complete outsider, to a Jew from

¹ For these events each word is too little and too much. Its truth can only be a scream from the wordless depths of human existence. (All English translations in footnotes by CP.)

² An earlier volume of poetry, *Der Sand aus den Urnen*, published in 1948, was withdrawn at the behest of the poet because of its many printing errors (Emmerich 1999: 81).

the Eastern periphery of Europe, was emphasised. Well-minded critics expressly saw in Celan's poetry an act of reconciliation between Jews and Germans (Mayer 1967: 367). But as the poet repeatedly emphasised, nothing could have been further from his intentions than reconciliation. Some years later when the poem "Todesfuge" had found its way into school readers, he dismissingly spoke of its having been "threshed through" for the schoolbooks (Felstiner 1995: 232)³.

The central motif dominating both the form and the content of the poem, the shocking juxtaposition of music and murder, proved a little too easily accessible to the readers and thus prone to a superficial reception. Celan made it a point of principle in his later poetry that his poems should become less transparent and more demanding. This resulted in poems with a unique combination of hermetic surface with a very strong underlying message. And when Celan once more took up the motif of fugue in connection with the concentration camps in the volume *Sprachgitter*, first published in 1959, the result was the much more frugal poem "Engführung" (Celan 1992: 195–204). Even the poem's title is more demanding, being a technical term belonging to a more specialised musical vocabulary and referring to the climax in the fugue when the thematic material reaches its densest concentration. We shall return to this poem later in connection with Anselm Kiefer's productive reception of it in his painting *Oh ihr Halme*. But despite Celan's later withdrawal from his early style, it is his "Todesfuge" that has remained his best known poem and indeed become emblematic in Holocaust discourse. In particular the much quoted refrain "Der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland" has entered the German language as much used tag.

Paul Celan himself was not to witness the enormous success of his poetry in the later decades of the 20th century. He was seldom satisfied with his reviewers and suspected anti-Semitic undertones at every turn – by no means always without justification. Celan's strained relations with German critics and the literary scene were quite characteristic for the initial difficulties of post-war German cultural life. Germans found it hard to come to terms with the past and overcome their internalised anti-Semitism or even accept any form of collective responsibility. Public awareness of the full extent of the Holocaust existed in Germany since the immediate post-war period, when information was distributed by the victorious allies as part of their re-education initiative. But with the challenge of economic reconstruction and in the shadow of the Cold War, such public awareness of the horrors perpetrated in the concentration camps that had existed immediately after the war receded and gave way to a general amnesia interrupted only by solitary voices such as Celan's. This only gradually gave way to a revived historical awareness in the more relaxed climate of the late 1970s and early 1980s (Diner 2007: 7). In the oppressive atmosphere of the 1950s and 1960s, the remaining

³ Celan is quoted by Hubert Huppert (1973: 32) as having used the term "lesebuchreif gedroschen".

European Jews tended to be met with polite awkwardness, while the younger generation of Germans often confronted a wall of repressed silence when they asked their parents and teachers about the past.

For the Jews who had experienced the Holocaust and the public silence surrounding its memory in these early decades, Jewish identity became an existential question, quite irrespective of belief. Jewishness demanded a special form of allegiance. As Margarete Susman put it:

Denn jeder Einzelne des Volkes wird zwar als Jude geboren; aber er *wird* Jude erst durch die Entscheidung für dieses Sein.⁴ (Susman 1968: 33)

This was seldom so true as in the aftermath of the Holocaust when the choice of existence as a Jew became inevitable, even and especially for non-religious Jews. It may not have been a free choice, but it certainly was a conscious one; a question of accepting the consequence of stigmatisation and producing a work of resistance and rebellion. This consciousness pervades the whole of Celan's work, which, as the poet explained in his major aesthetic statement, the speech he gave on receiving the respected Georg Büchner Prize for his work in 1960, he understood as an act of resistance – to political authorities, to fate and to the constraints of language itself.

Susman's point was put even more drastically by Jean Améry, an Auschwitz survivor who in the 1960s published a series of autobiographical essays in which he tried to come to terms with his experience:

Für [...] mich heißt Jude sein die Tragödie von gestern in sich lasten spüren. Ich trage auf meinem linken Unterarm die Auschwitz-Nummer; die liest sich kürzer als der Pentateuch oder der Talmud und gibt doch gründlicher Auskunft.⁵ (Améry 2002: 167)

Jean Améry (1912–1978) who originally had the very ordinary German name Hans Mayer was born and raised in Austria, spending many years of his childhood in the small Alpine town of Bad Ischl, and received a Catholic education despite being of Jewish descent. In his essays he records how his Jewish identity, of which he claimed as a child to have been hardly consciously aware, was forced on him in the political atmosphere of the 1930s. In 1938 he migrated to France and Belgium, just before the Anschluss made life for Jews intolerable – later impossible. Ironically, like many other German and Austrian Jews, after the outbreak of war he was interned as an enemy alien in the prison camp at Gurs. He was still in Gurs when France capitulated to the Ger-

⁴ Each member of this [Jewish] people is born Jewish. But he becomes a Jew only by conscious choice of this existence.

⁵ For me, being a Jew means to feel the yoke of the past tragedy weighing on oneself. The Auschwitz number I carry on my left arm is a shorter read than the Pentateuch or the Talmud but it is more informative.

mans, however he managed to escape before the new Vichy regime started deporting Jews. Returning to Belgium he joined the underground resistance and was arrested in 1943 by the Gestapo who tortured him in their concentration camp in Fort Breendonk near Antwerp before deporting him to Auschwitz. Hans Mayer was one of the lucky few who were liberated in January 1945. After returning to Belgium he started working as a journalist and writer and, like Paul Celan whose name was originally Paul Antschel, frenchified his name into the anagram Améry.

Améry was the author of two novels, of which only the second was published in his lifetime, and several volumes of essays including the autobiographical trilogy starting with *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne*. This first volume contributed together with the media coverage of the Frankfurt Auschwitz-trials in the 1960s to the slow reawakening of interest in Germany in the Holocaust and ultimately to the creation of an atmosphere more conducive to the admission and acceptance of collective responsibility for the events of Third Reich and World War II. Like Paul Celan, Améry rejected any idea of reconciliation between Jews and Germans and explained his stance in the essay “Ressentiment” in the volume *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne*. In this essay, as in the chapter “Wie viel Heimat braucht der Mensch?”, Améry deals with the pitfalls of unquestioned assumptions of identity and challenges the ideal of cosy homeliness ingrained in the German self image, which, though still widespread in the 1950s and early 1960s, could after the Holocaust only be seen as a fraudulent delusion.

2 Remembrance Across Generational Borders

How should later generations approach the topic of the Holocaust? One approach, which I believe is fairly common, is the indirect one of letting the victims speak for themselves, in one way or another, and alluding to the Holocaust by way of citations and marked allusions to their work. I shall illustrate this strategy in the way the writer W. G. Sebald incorporates the experience of Jean Améry in his writing and the painter Anselm Kiefer the poetry of Paul Celan in his art. Both were born within a year of each other at the end of World War II in small provincial towns in South Germany.

Sebald’s literary writing, like that of many immediate descendants of the active war generation, is to a great extent motivated by a traumatised childhood. This is the generation whose parents had been active in the war effort and were themselves frequently traumatized by war crimes they had witnessed or even perpetrated. Sebald’s father had fought in the war and later became an officer in the new Bundeswehr. Sebald’s childhood home did not provide an atmosphere conducive to free and open discussion.

The repressed silence in the homes of the 1950s paralleled the relative absence of public discourse about the war and the Holocaust. The later change in attitude, which finally

became more widespread and even mainstream from the late 1970s on was in no small part due to the fact that the first post-war generation, the generation of Kiefer and Sebald, had come of age and was beginning to exercise more influence on German culture and society.

Sebald left Germany after finishing School in 1963 to study first in Fribourg, Switzerland, and then, from 1966, in Manchester. After a short interlude in Germany and Switzerland, Sebald returned to England to take up a university teaching post at the University of East Anglia in 1970. His decision to pursue a career outside his native Germany was quite evidently a conscious choice motivated by profound unease about the unaddressed contradictions submerged beneath the clean modern surface of the reconstructed country. He acutely sensed the contradiction between the self-satisfaction accorded by economic success and the moral disaster which had preceded and indeed precipitated the necessity for reconstruction. It is therefore no coincidence that many of his scholarly essays dealt with migrant authors and authors from the European periphery whose work, even before the Holocaust, challenged simplistic conceptions of national identity.

One foundational experience for Sebald was reading the autobiographical essays of the Auschwitz survivor Jean Améry to whom he was later to devote several scholarly essays. He also integrated some of Améry's experiences in his own semi-fictional writing, especially in his best known final work *Austerlitz*.

It was not until the 1990s that Sebald made a name for himself as an important literary author. His transition from writing scholarly articles to writing independent literary prose may well have been motivated by the need to free himself from the formal conventions and restrictions of academic literary criticism. His literary writings are rhapsodic and melancholic excursions into culture and history where the prominent factual content tends to outweigh the scantily fictionalized framework. His first major international success was with *Die Ausgewanderten (The Emigrants)*, a volume of four fictionalized biographies of displaced persons.

Sebald took up the theme of the emigrant again in his final and best known work *Austerlitz*. As in previous works, Sebald goes into tremendous detail about all kinds of topics moving with ease from fortress design and railway station architecture to dam building in North Wales, the burial of plague victims in London, colonial exploitation and memory of the Holocaust. The main protagonist of the novel is Jacques Austerlitz, a specialist in architectural history who suffers from traumatic amnesia and remembers nothing of his origins and early childhood when he was evacuated from Central Europe. His story is related by a friend, the first person narrator who can easily be identified as an alter ego of the author. The first meeting between the two takes place in the 1960s in

Antwerp where the two discuss topics of common interest but do not get to know each other very well. Over the next few years they meet from time to time before losing touch with each other. It is only some twenty years later, after a chance meeting in London's Liverpool Street station, that Austerlitz confides in the narrator and tells him of his youth with foster parents in Wales and of the quest he has now taken up, to discover his origins, a quest which takes him to Prague and to the former concentration camp of Theresienstadt. On the level of the fictional plot, much of the novel is about the research conducted by Austerlitz into his own background and which he relates to the narrator. On a deeper level this is only a pretext for Sebald's own reflections on Europe's traumatic history in the twentieth century. And in this process the fate of Jean Améry plays no small part. Améry is only once mentioned by name at the beginning of the book, but the structure of the novel is such that his significance as source of inspiration is hard to overlook.

The obvious connection with Améry is that the narrator visits Fort Breendonk near the beginning of the book and describes his impressions in detail. The importance of Breendonk is further underlined by the fact that at the end of the novel, after parting from his friend at the Austerlitz station in Paris the narrator once more returns to Breendonk, though apparently not entering the fort again. Breendonk thus forms a bracket around the whole relationship between the protagonist and the narrator. When the two finally part, Austerlitz is about to take a train to Gurs, in the hope of discovering something about the fate of his father. Gurs was the site of the camp where Améry was initially detained and Austerlitz is the name of the Paris station, from which the internees and later the Jewish deportees to the concentration camps left the capital.

The very brief and dense passage in which Améry is mentioned by name contains a short section which repeats word for word Améry's own depiction of the torture he was submitted to in *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne*.

No one can explain exactly what happens within us when the doors behind which our childhood terrors lurk are flung open. But I do remember that there in the casemate at Breendonk a nauseating smell of soft soap rose to my nostrils, and that this smell, in some strange place in my head, was linked to the bizarre German word for scrubbing-brush, *Wurzelbürste*, which was a favourite of my father's and which I had always disliked. Black striations began to quiver before my eyes, and I had to raise my forehead against the wall, which was gritty, covered with bluish spots, and seemed to me to be perspiring with cold beads of sweat. It was not that as the nausea rose in me I guessed at the kind of third-degree interrogation which were being conducted here around the time I was born, since it was only a few years later that I read Jean Améry's description of the dreadful physical closeness between torturers and their victims, and of the torture he himself suffered in Breendonk when he was hoisted aloft by his hands, tied behind his back, so that with a crack and a splintering sound which, as he says, he had not yet forgotten when he came to write his account, his arms dislocated from the sockets in his shoulder joints, and he was left dangling as they were

wrenched up behind him and twisted above his head⁶, *la pendaison par les mains liées dans le dos jusqu'à l'évanouissement* as it is described in the book *Le Jardin des Plantes* in which Claude Simon descends once more into the storehouse of his memories [...] (Sebald 2002: 33–34)

The extreme density of the passage is unusual even for Sebald. Incorporating verbatim the words of Améry, in the same sentence as the information that he (the narrator) had at the time not yet read Améry, and ending the sentence with a reference to a completely different book, is not only quite an achievement on the part of the author, but also very demanding for the reader. The childhood memories at the beginning of the passage seem authentic enough to justify an autobiographical reading, and if we look at the role of the narrator within the text as a whole, this suggests a reading of the novel as representing Sebald's own process of coming to terms with legacy of Nazism and World War II. The fictional figure of Austerlitz in this reading simply acts as a catalyst, whereas the real biography of Améry serves as the major impulse for writing.

With the Art of Anselm Kiefer we return to Paul Celan and reach a threshold where intertextuality merges with media transfer. Anselm Kiefer (*1945) started to work in the 1960s and is today regarded as one of Europe's most prominent contemporary artists. His sombre works characteristically deal with war, atavistic German mythology and particularly the Holocaust. The latter, of course, eludes figural representation. Kiefer tends to intensify his work with the use of mixed materials, pasting straw on his canvass and even using slabs of lead. In addition to mixing materials he also mixes media, often using short quotations from poetry in his paintings.

A number of his paintings evoke the Holocaust by quoting the poetry of Paul Celan. A whole cycle of work is entitled *Dein goldenes Haar Margarete* and one impressive pair of paintings on display at the Royal Academy contrasts this recurring line from Celan's "Todesfuge" with the following *Dein Aschenes Haar Sulamith*⁷. The lines from the poem are both verbally quoted in the paintings, and serve as their titles. The contrast between the golden hair of the Aryan German and the ash coloured hair of the Holocaust victim is repeated by Kiefer in the motif and the chromatic composition of the two paintings, with the former representing a golden field of corn and using real straw in addition to paint on canvass, and the latter held in very dark tones showing shadowy vaults with a flaming furnace in the distance.

⁶ This section of the passage follows word for word Améry's own account in *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne*: "Und nun gab es ein von meinem Körper bis zu dieser Stunde nicht vergessenes Krachen und Splittern in den Schultern. Die Kugeln sprangen aus den Pfannen. Das eigene Körpergewicht bewirkte Luxation, ich fiel ins Leere und hing nun an den ausgerenkten, von hinten hochgerissenen und über den Kopf nunmehr verdreht geschlossenen Armen." (Améry 2002: 77)

⁷ These two phrases recur several times in the poem, forming one of the themes of the fugue. Their final occurrence, which ends the fugue, Felstiner leaves untranslated (Celan 2001: 33).

The poem most frequently quoted is, not unexpectedly, the famous “Todesfuge”, because the paintings rely for their communicative effect on the familiarity of the text referred to. But “Todesfuge” is not the only poem cited in Kiefer’s art. In one painting an impressive barren snowy landscape is punctuated by a book shaped slab of lead in the middle, and refers in its title to the poem “Schwarze Flocken” (Black Flakes) (Celan 1989: 129) where Celan mentions receiving the news of the death of his mother in a Labour camp in the Ukraine.

The last painting which I shall describe in more detail is entitled *Oh Halme, ihr Halme, oh Halme der Nacht* (2012), a quotation from the poem “Aus Herzen und Hirnen” from Celan’s early volume *Mohn und Gedächtnis*.⁸ The painting is emphatically monochrome, the upper half being largely black with some fifteen lines of white handwriting crossing the full width of the canvass. The lower half reverses the colours and the geometry with rows of stubble retreating into the background against a yellowish white background. This large but minimalist painting appears to represent a snowy field and a night sky thereby citing imagery familiar from many of Celan’s poems. The lines of poetry are taken from four different poems, “Engführung” from *Von Schwelle zu Schwelle* (Celan 1992: 195–204), “Schlaf und Speise“ (Celan 1992: 65), “Aus Herzen und Hirnen“ (Celan 1992: 70) and “Der Tauben weißeste“ (Celan 1992: 61) all from *Mohn und Gedächtnis*. Following the example of Celan’s “Todesfuge” the final lines repeat the opening, and become less and less legible until finally dissolving into the rows of stubble which make up the lower part of the painting. Whereas the lines of poetry, white on a black background, cross the painting from left to right, the stubble, black on a snow-like yellowish white, recede into the distance. The lines of poetry inscribed in the night sky reflect the barrenness of the earth below. Visually, the painting suggests the dialogue between heaven and earth which Davey (2014: 58) names as a characteristic of Kiefer’s art. At the same time the painting takes up a frequent metaphor from Celan’s own work: that of the similarity between the written word on the page and blades of grass. The painting actually realises the mimetic potential of the printed text that Celan himself points out in his poem “Engführung”, where the letters represent blades of grass or stalks. This is the poem from which the first quotation in Kiefer’s painting is drawn. Celan’s poem, which Peter Szondi (1972: 50) called a “text landscape” begins with the lines:

⁸ The quotation could be rendered as “Oh blades [of grass], you blades, oh blades of the night”.

Verbracht ins Gelände Mit der untrüglichen Spur:	Taken off into the terrain with the unmistakable trace:
Gras, auseinandergeschrieben. Die Steine, weiß, mit dem Schatten der Halme: Lies nicht mehr – schau! Schau nicht mehr – lies! (Celan 1992: 197)	Grass, written asunder. The stones, white with the grassblades' shadows: Read no more—look! Look no more—go! (Translation John Felstiner, Celan 2001: 119)

Kiefer's painting follows the imperative of this poem, adding a further level of intertextuality.

In spite of the difference of medium, both Sebald and Kiefer make a similar use of intertextuality. Where Sebald incorporates the testimony of Améry in the body of his text, Kiefer conducts a highly elaborate dialogue with the poetry of Paul Celan. By invoking the authority of witnesses both Sebald and Kiefer draw attention to the Holocaust in a manner which is as emphatic as it is indirect.

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