

## The Representation of the Holocaust in *Flowers for Hitler*

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FOR MANY MEMBERS of the post-World War II generations who reached intellectual maturity after the war, awareness of the war and the Third Reich raised, beyond the theoretical difficulties of integrating into one's intellectual makeup a completely unprecedented event, a number of personal issues. A decisive factor in the German student revolt of the 1960s, for instance, was critical detachment from the parental generation. These young people had to come to terms with their parents' potentially dubious pasts as party members, or at least with their inexplicable inactivity in the face of pure inhumanity. The ubiquitous generation gap was in this case further exacerbated — rightly or wrongly — by young Germans who viewed their parents as potential murderers or spineless collaborators. Along the same lines, Leonard Cohen might have asked himself where his life would have taken him had he been born in another place — say, Germany. Cohen's generation, Jewish or not, was the first to have to cope with the knowledge and the consequences of the Holocaust, which was a recent event, even in 1964 when Cohen's collection of poems entitled *Flowers for Hitler* was published. This awareness is reflected in the literature of the period, which was written not only with fresh, undigested moral indignation but, as in Cohen's case, also from a perspective of potential personal involvement: Cohen himself belongs to the primary target group of the Nazis' exterminating crusades.

"Where is the poet who can make clear for us Belsen?" (xviii) Irving Layton asks in his preface to *Balls for a One-Armed Juggler* (1963). Layton calls upon intellectuals to speak up against the silence that brings about forgetfulness and to rise to the challenge of trying to make comprehensible the incomprehensible. Just a year later, as if in response to Layton, Cohen publishes *Flowers for Hitler*.

Both Layton (by demanding that the Holocaust be written about) and Cohen (by actually writing about it) have moved beyond a

crucial question that provoked substantial controversy in the immediate postwar period, particularly among writers: can and should the Holocaust be written about at all? Do such horrors as happened during the Third Reich defy representation in language altogether? Related to this, and even more important, is the question of whether writing about it is helpful (insofar as it keeps forgetfulness at bay and thus reduces the risk of a phenomenon like the Holocaust reoccurring<sup>1</sup>) or whether writing about it is an indecency toward the suffering of millions, or presumptuousness on the part of the poet? Most famously, Theodor Adorno polemically voiced his objections: “*Noch das äußerste Bewußtsein vom Verhängnis droht zum Geschwätz zu entarten. Kulturkritik findet sich der letzten Stufe der Dialektik von Kultur und Barbarei gegenüber: nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch, und das frißt auch die Erkenntnis an, die ausspricht, warum es unmöglich ward, heute Gedichte zu schreiben*” (Die 30).<sup>2</sup>

Adorno’s well-known criticism in his essay *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* relies on a twofold assumption, based on the process of aestheticization and repetition inherent in the production of a work of art: by becoming a subject in art, the Holocaust is deprived of its horrifying singularity. The work tries to instil in the reader the emotion evoked by the experience by aesthetically recreating it on a more or less mimetic level. It can therefore be maintained, as did Adorno, that any “re-creation” can, in view of the complete incomprehensibility of the event, only be a simulacrum of the original, a weak copy that can never do justice to the experience, that can only be “*Geschwätz*” (“blather”) and as such an offence to the sensibilities of people whose lives were destroyed by the Nazi death machine. Taken to its logical conclusion, the argument would be that such an act of re-creation can even be seen as legitimizing the Holocaust by repeating it in an aesthetic realm.

Implicit in this objection is, of course, a disapproval of the aestheticization of the Holocaust. Human beings derive aesthetic pleasure from experiencing art. Again, the question arises whether any kind of pleasure derived (however indirectly) from the disaster the Holocaust represents is an immorality and an offence to the victims. Lawrence Langer suggests, almost perversely, that the inclusion of an inordinate amount of graphic detail of the atrocities could function as a saving grace insofar as a pleasurable response to these details is out of the question. Such an observation merely defers the problem, though, as even though the poem’s content is

unlikely to instil feelings of pleasure, its success as a poem might. Similarly, the “infiltration into the work of the grotesque, the senseless, and the unimaginable, to such a degree that the possibility of aesthetic pleasure as Adorno conceives of it [?] is intrinsically eliminated” (3), is a doubtful technique. Such a view segregates responses to art into the legitimate and the illegitimate. No matter whether a feeling of pleasure is derived primarily from a poem’s subject matter, its careful construction, or a fusion of both, in the ideal case all of these sentiments find their origin in the same root. Paul Celan’s poem “Fugue of Death” is extremely moving and instils the feeling of exhilaration that accompanies all great art *because* it achieves such an inseparable unity between content and form — in other words, because it is a well-made poem about the Holocaust. Does Langer suggest a division of pleasure into a superficial and a metaphysical variety, depending on whether it is brought about by conventional aestheticism or its reversal, thus implying that Adorno’s criticism could only have been aimed at the former? This distinction seems exceedingly artificial.

Finally, then, the problem of writing after Auschwitz comes down not to questions of technique (superrealism or surrealism) in order to exclude unwanted responses but to fundamental attitudes toward art and a person’s faith or distrust in language. Is it possible to move other human beings so deeply through art that making the Holocaust a topic in art is not a condescension? And if so, what strategies are used in order to achieve this objective and do justice to the Holocaust’s uniqueness? Günther Grass says in *Dog Years*: “for even I — you can tell by my modest literary efforts — lack the vital grip, the quivering flesh of reality; the technique is there but not the substance. I’ve been unable to capture the this-is-how-it-was, the substantial reality that throws a shadow” (471).

By what strategy should artists attempt to capture the essence of what they would like to convey? Langer moves quickly from Grass’s famous quote to Peter Weiss’s play — or should one say theatrical experiment? — entitled *The Investigation*, which stages with minimum alteration the testimonies of witnesses at the Nuremberg trials. But if “the quivering flesh of reality” were captured in art by replaying the bare facts of reality in a fictional (artificial?) setting, *The Investigation* should have been a dramatic success, yet Langer finds it “singularly undramatic”: “oddly, and certainly unintentionally, the result is not a new aesthetic distance, but an aesthetic *indifference*” (31).

Certainly, one interesting question would be whether this verdict of aesthetic indifference is not entirely Langer's personal response. Does it really matter whether the words are spoken by an actual concentration camp survivor or by an impersonator thereof? In other words, do the same words have different effects depending on whether they make their appearance in "reality" or in "art"? The events and their representation in language remain the same. If the stage event is experienced as mediated, then maybe the experience in the courtroom just feeds on a basic voyeurism that the play no longer satisfies. Or is a completely different aesthetic needed in art in order to achieve the same effect — one that moves historical fact inevitably into the realm of fiction in order to do justice to art's own idiosyncratic mechanisms? This would then be a necessary move away from the unembellished "quivering flesh of reality" and potentially toward inadequate "*Geschwätz*." How do artists, and in this particular case Cohen, try to avoid the pitfalls of inadequacy, once they have decided to raise their voices in response to the Holocaust and thus defy the forces that brought it about?

In *The Investigation* the obvious motivation for Weiss to stage the unembellished historical fact is an acute awareness of the inadequacy of one's own imagination when confronted with the Holocaust as an experience. David Rousset writes, "Normal men do not know that everything is possible. Even if the evidence forces their intelligence to admit it, their muscles do not believe it. The concentrationees do know. . . . They are set apart from the rest of the world by an experience impossible to communicate" (168–69). Action and reaction depend upon context. In a given context — say, middle-class everyday life — only a limited range of situations based on an equally limited range of human behavioural patterns are thought likely. Therefore, for lack of experience, the ordinary imagination does not know how to cope with a phenomenon such as the Holocaust, since its frame of reference is missing.<sup>3</sup> Out of this evolves the belief that there is nothing the creative imagination could add to the event itself. Anything beyond the statement of pure fact would inevitably result in meaningless babble, because the unimaginable cannot be imagined.

Cohen's approach in his poem "All There Is to Know about Adolph Eichmann" is reminiscent of Weiss's, except that Cohen moves exclusively in an artistic realm: all of the words were specifically chosen to serve a purpose in an artistic construct. In passport style, the familiar enumeration of a person's identifying features is given, but

it turns out that the investigation yields no spectacular results: Eichmann's fact file of distinguishing characteristics fits the vast majority of the human population; he *has no* distinguishing characteristics. He is of ordinary physical appearance and average intelligence.

Cohen does not turn to flamboyantly poetic language, which would tentatively circle and zoom in on the phenomenon "Adolph Eichmann." Instead, he chooses the head-on assault of a mere statement of facts, as if to say that as a poet he can do nothing to make the ugly reality more bearable or digestible. All he can do is make the facts speak for themselves in a language exceedingly sparse so as not to distract from them — and the facts are all the more effective and incomprehensible for their unremarkable nature. Although Eichmann stands out in history for his atrocious deeds, there is nothing in his physical or intellectual makeup or background that singles him out for such a career. A monster, complete with "talons" and "oversize incisors," or a man stricken with "madness" (66) would have implied the comfort of the utterly extraordinary; a case of one in a million. "Madness" would have offered the certainty of an explanation, but the facts are unable to provide any such certainties. Eichmann was singled out only by the opportunity of circumstance: he happened to be in a particular place at a particular time.

An individual's idiosyncratic fate could have been dramatized or given more elaborate descriptions. True to the genre of biography, the poet could have investigated how the individual became what he or she ended up to be through nature and nurture, or causal relationships could have been established between personal tragedies and their disparate psychological effects. But none of this can be done for Eichmann, as he emerges not as an individual but as Everyman. The reader is left with the sheer incomprehensibility of how average human beings can commit crimes such as Eichmann's.

With this goes the awareness of potential reoccurrence: if neither the protagonists nor the circumstances were extraordinary, the implication is that a disaster similar to the Holocaust can repeat itself at any time in a society structured like Western industrialized society. In his book *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Zygmunt Bauman very convincingly reveals the Holocaust to be a phenomenon deeply rooted in modernity: "The truth is that every 'ingredient' of the Holocaust — all those things that rendered it possible — was normal . . . in the sense of being fully in keeping with everything we know about our civilization, its guiding spirit, its priorities, its immanent

vision of the world . . .” (8). Bauman reveals the Holocaust to be not a relapse into barbarism<sup>4</sup> as was commonly believed but an outgrowth of modern culture, if not its continuation (110). The Holocaust took neither madmen nor a degenerate society. In their own ways, both Cohen and Bauman arrive at the realization that in order to come to terms with the Holocaust, the conditions that brought it about have to be accepted as part of everyday life.

In Cohen’s poetry, this idea resurfaces in the surreal, disjointed ramblings of “A Migrating Dialogue.” Disparate figures of contemporary Western culture are listed as collaborators in the Nazi crimes: “Joe Palooka manufactured the whips. / Li’l Abner packed the whips in cases. / The Katzenjammer Kids thought up experiments” (72). No peculiarly German form of authoritarianism or mentality produced the Holocaust but rather Western culture as a whole, including exponents of ostensibly “innocent” popular culture such as children’s comics. No culture structured along its principles can claim immunity: “I said WIPE THAT SMIRK including the mouth-foam of superior disgust” (72).

In *Flowers for Hitler* this knowledge of the ubiquity of evil results in a reversal of conventional aesthetics. The poems in the book present a series of disparate, surreal glimpses of scenes that revel in the grotesque, the senseless, the tasteless. Rather than follow a logical progression, the individual pictures seem joined together to create an atmospheric effect designed to take the reader into Cohen’s world of aesthetic and moral inversions. Cohen becomes a chronicler of the dark side of life, which is at the creative root of the work: *Flowers for Hitler* draws its creative strength from a celebration of all those elements that in conventional aesthetics stand for decay. The back-cover blurb for the book quotes Cohen as saying, “This book moves me from the world of the golden-boy poet into the dung pile of the front-line writer,” and Sandra Djwa concludes that “this is a movement from a qualified acceptance of the romantic ideal as it is embodied in art . . . to the decadent romanticism of a *fin de siècle* aesthetic in which the ugly replaces the beautiful as the inspiration for art” (32). Almost as a parallelism to the literature of the Decadence, Cohen looks for new revelations in the experience of failure. Decadence literature follows the same principle: common Romantic motifs are radically reinterpreted, inverted so as to achieve freedom from the repressive limitations of Victorian, positivist notions of linear growth and progress.

According to Adorno the ideals of the Enlightenment — the further domination of nature in the name of progress in order to enable humans to make their history as autonomous beings, free from the constraints nature puts on them — inevitably turn against themselves (“*Der Fluch des unaufhaltsamen Fortschritts ist die unaufhaltsame Regression*”<sup>5</sup> [*Die* 53]). As soon as nature is reduced to subservience by human instrumentalism, the drive for domination is taken out on other humans who are then dominated in nature’s place. Thus, Adorno sees Enlightenment thinking as inevitably spiralling into fascism. As if to break free of the thought patterns that were seen by Adorno to be directly responsible for fascism and the Holocaust, Cohen turns to the same methods with which his Decadent precursors tried to free themselves from the constraints of positivist thought. Even the title of Cohen’s book, as has often been noted, evokes Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal*.

“A Migrating Dialogue,” one of the most effective poems in the collection, combines many of the book’s distinguishing characteristics. The poem opens with the image of a Nazi henchman in camouflage, travelling abroad with a companion after the war to flee prosecution by the allied forces. He is wearing “a black moustache” (72) (itself, of course, Hitler’s own primary characteristic, prominent in every caricature of the man) and cannot quite conceal his mindset: even in camouflage he and his companion are talking “about the gypsies,” presumably as being a “subhuman” “race.” Cohen establishes firmly what the reader has to expect: he is not going to count himself among the poets who wallow in their own (ostensible) sensitivity and write a poem about the hardships of the Holocaust refugees. Instead, he undermines the expectations of bourgeois morality by perverting the conventional setting: he is going to write about a Nazi on the run from the forces of righteousness.

In the following lines a clearer picture of the “refugee” emerges. His companion showers him with advice: “Don’t bite your nails, I told him. / . . . Be cute. / Don’t stay up all night watching parades on the Very Very Very Late Show. / Don’t ka-ka in your uniform” (72). The advice is centred on simple behavioural patterns that need to be maintained in “exile,” so as to remain inconspicuous. It could just as well be directed at an ill-behaved child. Reminiscences of Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove* shoot through the reader’s head: suddenly the “refugee” is transformed into a pathetic figure who lapses at times of uncontrollable psychological stress into old,

deeply ingrained habits, which society does not sanction any longer (parades now have to be watched in the small hours of the morning, “on the Very Very Very Late Show”), and the poem’s farcical character is established.

From here onward any logical, linear progression in the poem breaks down and it no longer communicates through a single or unified narrative voice. Some statements the reader can agree with, such as the one that implicates all of Western culture in the possibility of the Holocaust by denying idiosyncratically German traits as its origin. Others are clearly designed to offend the reader’s sensibilities: “Peekaboo Miss Human Soap” (73) combines the blunt statement of historical fact with a disrespectful way of presenting it.

As an overall poetic strategy, the overstatement of farce or parody is mixed with ideas that sound overly familiar to the reader. Most of the provocative voices reiterate historical statements from the far right of the political spectrum: “Don’t believe everything you see in museums. / . . . / Don’t tell me we dropped fire into cribs. / I think you are exaggerating” (73). Cohen drives his point home by topping these historical offences with his own, thus intensifying the points: “I think we should let sleeping ashes lie” (73), he says bluntly, as if to rub the reader’s nose in the ignorance and obtuseness one is up against.

Mixed in with these statements are allusions that the reader is guaranteed to pick up on and that strike sensitive notes: “Don’t tell me we dropped fire into cribs” refers to any air raid during the war, but more specifically to the firebombing of Dresden, and although the reader is unsure of where the narrative voice is coming from, since neither the Nazi protagonist nor his companion are likely to have been part of that, the image of burning Dresden is evoked for effect, not to make sense in any logical progression in the poem; “I believe in gold teeth” (73) evokes the mountains of gold teeth extracted from the victims before they were sent to the gas chambers; “There is sad confetti sprinkling / from the windows of departing trains” (73) is reminiscent of both the celebrations that happened around the trains that sent soldiers to the front in World War I and of the boxcars that took Jews to the Nazi death camps. World War I was the most popular war in history. In the reader’s mind this exuberance mixes with the awareness that the young men who were called upon to fight in it, and who proudly did, did so with a high probability of not returning from the front. This image of death is topped by the role of trains in the organized mass murder



of the Third Reich. A tight network of allusions is established, which makes its point far more forcefully than a graphic description of atrocities could, as more freedom is left to the reader's imagination and a more sweeping treatment of the entire phenomenon is possible.

The slap in the face of (established bourgeois) morality emerges as a way of coming to terms with the horrors the poem describes. In an almost cathartic fashion, Cohen piles one (implied) atrocity on top of the next, always with a lighthearted flippancy and without going into detail, but in the multiplicity of voices suddenly a single voice emerges that goes beyond the dominant flippancy and articulates concerns similar to Adorno's: "I don't like the way you go to work every morning. / How come the buses still run? / How come they're still making movies?" (73). In the face of the ultimate human tragedy that is the Holocaust, ordinary, everyday pursuits seem mundane, insignificant, and lacking in legitimacy. Apart from the fact that all of these pursuits shrink in significance, Cohen also expresses his incomprehension of the world's "quick" return to business as usual: the world must somehow function differently after it allowed the Holocaust to happen, and if it does not, it is fake, covering up an irrevocably altered conscience and consciousness, suppressing it instead of confronting it.

What the poem conveys very well, then, is the inability to reconcile normality with the knowledge of horror and at the same time the inability to imagine such horror in the presence of normality — which again is reminiscent of Rousset's statement quoted above. The poem is an attempt at overcoming this speechlessness in ramblings that still convey ineffability in their disorganization.

In its stance against conventional aesthetics, *Flowers for Hitler* also takes a stand against formally "good" poems: under no conventional criteria is "A Migrating Dialogue" a "good" poem, yet it makes its point precisely because of this lack of form. Cohen thematizes this programmatic stance of the book in the poem entitled "Style": "I will forget my style / I will have no style" (27), he announces — a statement that, as soon as it is elevated to a stance, becomes in itself a style, of course.

Conventional aesthetics, he suspects, has aided the world in lying, and by participating in it he has become a collaborator in the world's insincerity. "I do not know if the world has lied / I have lied" (13), he says in "What I Am Doing Here," the strategically placed poem that, as the title suggests, introduces the collection. In order to free himself from the tangle of these lies and to be true to

himself again and escape the *mauvaise foi* in which he has been implicated, he has to radically question every preconceived idea, emblematically epitomized in style (being a set of ideas society has labelled acceptable without questioning its validity). Having become the “front line writer” who (in Cohen’s view) functions as the disseminator of the ugly truths of life, he can then lie back, as it were, and “wait for each one of you to confess” (13).

Just like the members of the literary Decadence at the turn of the nineteenth century, then, Cohen presents a work that is a slap in the face of bourgeois sensibilities (cf. Koppen 66). Within the context of Canadian writing at the time, this is a rather unusual and unconventional development: “its awareness of the darker side of human consciousness is a helpful counterbalance to a literary tradition that professes an ignorance of the human animal as complete as any of the Pollyanna Glad books” (42), Djwa says polemically. But Cohen’s acute awareness of taking a stance with the book is part of the problem. Again in the blurb on the book’s back cover, he says: “I say that there has never been a book like this, prose or poetry, written in Canada: All I ask is that you put it in the hands of my generation and it will be recognized.” Cohen is, of course, among other things, referring to the generational conflict outlined at the very beginning of this paper, but he is also making a personal declaration of his function as a poet that is summarized in the golden-boy poet/front-line writer dichotomy. It is his self-conscious positioning of the artist as persona that detracts from the poems as effective works of art about the Holocaust. His conviction that a descent into the underworld of human consciousness and experience is necessary for artistic creation precedes the work and determines it: “Because it is Cohen’s thesis that the experience of failure is indispensable for the creation of art, the book becomes a case study of the *fleurs du mal* beauty of such losers,” Djwa says (38).

In a way, Cohen brings his own concept of artistic creation along and imposes it on his treatment of his topic. The book’s aesthetic is as such only partly determined by the subject matter. Rather, the subject matter lends itself to such a treatment as Cohen has chosen, but it is at least partly used as a vehicle for Cohen’s own self-presentation and his concept of artistic creation. Once again Cohen finds his literary forebears in the Decadents, who also set up their own lives as antitheses to bourgeois sensibilities.

By adopting the whole Decadent stance, Cohen avoids a mimetic approach to the Holocaust and thus the dangers outlined in the

first pages of this essay: rather than appeal to the readers' empathy, he deliberately alienates them from the work of art by disfiguring it (Langer 3) and thus removing it from the familiar world. What Langer is apparently driving at by his cryptic remark "aesthetic pleasure as Adorno conceives of it" (3) is pleasure derived from a poem that does not make the conventional reception process an issue: in *Flowers for Hitler* the flow of information in the conventional communication model with sender and receiver at opposite ends is obstructed by a "message" that is experienced as unpleasant or perverse (which is the origin of the initial defensive reaction to Decadent art). Thus, the reader is forced to see her- or himself as a radically separate entity rather than one compliant with and pleasurably immersed in the world of the poem. With the reception process becoming an issue, the work takes on vaguely metafictional characteristics: the readers reflect on their own function and that of the poem, and become active constituents in the process. This obstructive mechanism helps Cohen circumvent a re-presentation of the Holocaust.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Schnurre's comment: "*Lyrik ist sinnlich. Also meint sie das Leben. Also verteidigt sie es. Und da soll sie, nach einem derart globalen Todessieg, schweigen?*" (14; "Poetry is sensual. Therefore it is about life. Therefore it defends it. And now, after such a global victory of death, poetry is supposed to be silent?" [my translation]).

<sup>2</sup> "Even the most extreme awareness of the disaster is in danger of degenerating into blather. Cultural criticism is confronted with the final phase of the dialectic of culture and barbarism: to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric, and this also influences the realization that articulates why it became impossible to write poems today" (my translation).

<sup>3</sup> In fact, one of the problems the Holocaust poses is that the frame of reference was so familiar: inconceivable atrocities happened in a modern, Western, civilized country. What concentrationees learned was not to trust what were believed to be the certainties of everyday life.

<sup>4</sup> "The Holocaust was not an irrational outflow of the not-yet-fully-eradicated residues of pre-modern barbarity. It was a legitimate resident in the house of modernity; indeed, one who would not be at home in any other house" (17).

<sup>5</sup> "The curse of irresistible progress is irresistible regression" (*Dialectic* 36).

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