

she is to move into his house, symbolically consummating a common-law marriage, she decides marriage is impossible for her and leaves to propagandize population control in remote villages. His aunt, who devoted her life to gossip and preparing food, has been shocked by his projected marriage outside traditional custom; her Hinduism awakened, she leaves for the Ganges where she will spend the remainder of her life in religious observances. If Raman has been defeated by the age of reason, he has given his aunt's life a purpose which he had not foreseen.

*The Painter of Signs* should be enjoyed for its comedy and irony. While it is possible to discuss the novel in terms of the cultural confusion of modern India and the failures of the Indian character, such analysis would lose sight of the experience of the book. Narayan conveys a community's attitudes and assumptions through a few deft strokes. He is a master of benign amusement toward the self-deceptions of his characters. We feel the interplay of personalities as they ricochet off each other, defining themselves through posturing or disdain. Despite a degree of exaggeration, the world of *The Painter of Signs* is instantly recognizable. Life has always been like this, in villages, small towns, and even cities, for those who work, marry, plot, and plan, acting upon each other without intellectualizing their motives or goals. Daisy, the advocate of population control, does not explain herself except by recourse to a few absurd statistics. She is an unexpected experience to which Raman is attracted and because of which he destroys his settled routine. Caricature gives her and Raman a deserved importance and grandeur that they might not otherwise be seen to possess. If *The Painter of Signs* will not attract the critical attention of *The Conservationist* or *Guerrillas*, it is a good work of fiction—amusing, wry, tolerant, worthy of anyone's time.

These four writers have won so many literary prizes that their names and work should be familiar to most readers. Yet, with the exception of Naipaul, they have received little critical attention and are not regarded as part of our current literary and intellectual scene. This should warn us that in concentrating our attention on works of metropolitan American relevance we risk losing sight of the genuine literature being written from contemporary experience. While newspaper headlines are replaced by more recent news and today's issues are consigned to benign neglect, the literature of the recently independent countries increases in quantity and quality. Such writing has become at least as important as the contemporary literature of the United States and England.

## THE LITERATURE OF ATROCITY

THEODORE ZIOLKOWSKI

T. W. Adorno's widely publicized view that there should be "no poetry after Auschwitz" has caused a good deal of mischief. Adorno did not mean, of course, that no poetry *could* be written about the holocaust. His fear was precisely that the poets, by bestowing form and meaning upon the atrocity, would thereby seem to justify it. Probably not a single poem failed to get written as a result of Adorno's warning: the poets' need to bear witness was too compelling. But critics, who tend to take other critics more seriously than do the writers, have long been inhibited by Adorno's powerful injunction. Despite all evidence to the contrary they have refused to acknowledge the existence of a growing body of works that might be labeled collectively "holocaust literature." We have had to wait thirty years for the first systematic "aesthetics of atrocity," as Lawrence L. Langer defines the aim of his brilliant new book.

Langer is not the first critic to call attention to the individual works that he treats. His study begins with an interpretation of the most famous and probably most often analyzed poem in postwar German literature—Paul Celan's "Fugue of Death." And it ends with a discussion of the most popular novel by the Nobel prize-winner Heinrich Böll—*Billiards at Half-Past Nine*. In between he deals with such writers as Elie Wiesel, Jerzy Kosinski, and André Schwarz-Bart, whose works can scarcely be called unfamiliar and whose merits are hardly unappreciated. It is Langer's achievement to show that these works are not discrete and unrelated but that, taken together, they constitute a coherent genre that can be identified as the Literature of Atrocity.

In response to Adorno and his principal disciple, George Steiner, Langer points out that "the fundamental task of the critic is not to ask whether it [holocaust literature] should or can be done, since it already has been, but to evaluate *how* it has been done, judge its effectiveness, and analyze its implications for literature and for society."

Tadeusz Borowski, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, translated by Barbara Vedder. Penguin, 1976. 180 pages. \$2.95; Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps*. Oxford, 1976. xii + 218 pages. \$10; *Out of the Whirlwind: A Reader of Holocaust Literature*, edited by Albert H. Friedlander. Schocken, 1976. viii + 536 pages. \$7.50; Lawrence L. Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*. Yale, 1975. xiv + 300 pages. \$12.50; Ashley Montagu, *The Nature of Human Aggression*. Oxford, 1976. xii + 382 pages. \$9.95; Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower (With a Symposium)*. Schocken, 1976. 216 pages. \$7.50.

Using Celan's poem and a text from Nelly Sachs's *O the Chimneys* as examples, Langer demonstrates through careful analysis how the finest poetry, by involving the reader as an insider in the experience of the horror that is being depicted, precludes any simple aesthetic "pleasure" or any unambiguous "meaning" of the sort that Adorno viewed with apprehension.

The basic problem facing writers of the holocaust was the brutal fact that nothing in their experience, or in the cultural tradition, had prepared mankind for its sheer atrocity, which Langer distinguishes from violence in that atrocity has no apparent cause. Incomprehensible for those exposed to it, it was unbelievable for those who later heard about it through reports and the various postwar trials. Even Elie Wiesel, writing in 1967 (*Judaism* 16), exclaimed: "I do not believe it: The event seems unreal, as if it occurred on a different planet." Drawing on Charlotte Beradt's *The Third Reich of Dreams*, Langer suggests that the surreal quality of the holocaust was paralleled only in the untrammelled imagination of dreams and nightmares, which provided images of the fantastic for writers attempting to convey some sense of their experiences in the camps. A world in which even the consoling idea of a dignified death was destroyed is so remote from the normal realm of experience that it seems virtually inaccessible—hence the frequent images of insulation that set off the world of atrocity from the "normal" world. According to Langer it was the principal task of the writer to devise strategies for overcoming the barriers erected by atrocity between the holocaust and normalcy, between language and expression.

The first fact that man encountered in the incomprehensible new reality of Auschwitz was the constantly menacing presence of death. Elie Wiesel's imaginative autobiography *Night* inverts the conventional form of the bildungsroman to show a hero who is educated to the reality surrounding him—the reality of raw death rather than the naive humanism of Anne Frank, which still remains intact at the end of her diary. The hero of Ladislav Fuks's *Mr. Theodore Mundstock* attempts with pathetic inadequacy to prepare himself, by exercises of the imagination and of the body, for the death world of the camps to which he is doomed; yet no effort of the imagination can possibly anticipate the grotesque horror of reality itself. While the familiar reality of the adult consciousness is radically displaced by the immanence of death, the entire coherence of life is violated in the still unshaped minds of children. In Ilse Aichinger's novel *Herod's Children* we see how the young victims attempt through play-acting or rewriting familiar fairy tales to restructure their reality in such a manner as to accommodate the incomprehensible threats of such anonymous institutions as "secret police" or "camp."

Many writers were driven by the seeming incommunicability of literal reality to resort to the language of metaphor. As a result some of the works that Langer cites deal only peripherally or indirectly with the holocaust, translating its horrors into other terms. In Kosinski's *The Painted Bird* the transformation of men into beasts is emphasized, as Langer observes, by the fact that it is "literally a speechless novel, totally lacking in dialogue." If the vaguely eastern-European peasants of Kosinski's shocking fiction exemplify the total exhaustion of human values, Pierre Gascar's *Beasts and Men* exposes the dehumanization of the holocaust by contrasting people with animals whose behavior always retains a dignity in keeping with their nature. Another metaphorical strategy deliberately distorts reality in such a way as to reflect "a world gone so mad that insanity, now the only measure of experience, somehow seems sane." In Jakov Lind's *Landscape in Concrete* the atrocities are exaggerated to such a degree of absurdity that they preclude any conventional moral reaction: the holocaust has so totally undermined man's reason and his moral intelligence that we are capable of reacting only with the hollow laughter of madness.

Langer concludes that the atrocities were perceived as being so absolute and unique in man's experience that they shattered the traditional sense of time, isolating the holocaust as a period in history. This perception, he argues, has affected temporal organization in the literature of atrocity. In *The Last of the Just* André Schwarz-Bart employs a conventional chronological narrative, covering many generations of the Levy family, in order to show more emphatically how little consolation history offers for anyone on whom the doors of the ovens at Auschwitz slam shut. The discrete narrative voices that recount the story of Böll's *Billiards at Half-Past Nine* imply that reality has been so fragmented by the holocaust that its pieces can no longer be assembled into any meaningful whole. In Jorge Semprun's *The Long Voyage* normal temporal sequences are inverted as the narrator, imprisoned in a boxcar on the way to Buchenwald, shifts back and forth between the immediate present, his past prior to his arrest, and his future after the liberation. In all three cases the effect of this temporal disjunction is to shatter our accustomed notion of a history that proceeds according to recognizable patterns.

The significance of Langer's eloquent book cannot be overemphasized. It marks the first attempt to define systematically a literary genre that has an urgent claim on our moral attention. At the same time, while the genre is defined by its moral coherence, Langer is virtually the first critic to address these works primarily as literary texts rather than as historical documents. A critic as intelligent as Langer would presumably be quick to admit that his book, as the first one on a problematic subject, is necessarily highly tentative. For

one thing, in his attempt to locate these texts within the new genre of atrocity literature Langer disregards other contexts to which many of them legitimately belong. For instance the dislocation of time, the metaphysics of death, and the view from the madhouse are three themes that have preoccupied writers since at least the beginning of the twentieth century. Kafka, among others, used animal imagery to expose the dehumanization of modern man. Possibly Langer has exaggerated the holocaust as a dividing line for the purposes of his book. It is not to discredit his insights—only to qualify them—if we insist on the conventionality as well as the originality of the works discussed. Langer exploits this conventionality quite effectively in cases in which he speaks of the inversion of existing forms (e.g. of the bildungsroman in Wiesel's *Night*). Reference to existing contexts would have reinforced his argument in several other cases, obviating the necessity to define entire categories by reference to a single writer (e.g. children and madness).

In one important respect, however, Langer's disregard of literary history—he supplies few dates and little biographical background—has affected his entire strategy. I am referring to his failure to qualify Adorno's apothegm, with which the book begins. Adorno's fellow exile in the United States, Hermann Broch, also spoke of the "immorality of the work of art" in an age of gas chambers—and, paradoxically, wrote a novel, *The Death of Vergil*, to prove his point. "The screams from the camps" that Bertolt Brecht imagined he could hear from his refuge in Denmark produced the radical skepticism of his great poem "To Posterity," in which he laments an age when a conversation about trees amounts to a crime because it implies a silence concerning so much evil in the world. On closer scrutiny the motif of silence turns out to have been a sentiment produced by the experiences and anxieties of a specific generation: exiled writers who felt a sense of guilt because they escaped the holocaust. As Brecht put it in his poem: "Nothing that I do entitles me to eat my fill. Only by chance was I spared." The rhetoric of silence has been kept alive principally by critics like George Steiner, who (in his essay "A Kind of Survivor") justifies his obsession with "the black mystery of what happened in Europe" through his own rather melodramatic sense of guilt: "Precisely because I was not there, because an accident of good fortune struck my name from the roll."

In organizing his book as a response to what amounts to a literary topos, Langer implicitly accepts the narrow categories of a group with special problems. He notes, to be sure, that the writers with whom he has chosen to deal reached a conclusion contrary to Steiner's: after all they wrote their books. But the implications reach deeper. For, in adopting Adorno's injunction, Langer agrees to meet Adorno on his

own terms and to demonstrate that the literature of atrocity precludes Adorno's fear that "the reader may discern in the inconceivable fate of the victims 'some sense after all.'" But Langer never challenges this presupposition, which is not the apprehension of an objective critic; it is the peculiar obsession of a refugee who feels guilty because he escaped the holocaust. Langer is able to respond to Adorno's objection only by defining his genre in an unacceptably narrow sense, excluding from his consideration an entire corpus of works that might be suggested to many readers by his title: that is, works actually written in the camps and during the holocaust.

In the camps the situation was different. While the exiles were preoccupied with their aching consciences, the prisoners were writing poems by the hundreds—poems that appeared immediately after the war in dozens of volumes and in such moving anthologies as Gunter Groll's *De Profundis* (1946). Rather than condemning poetry, the prisoners turned to aesthetic expression as an escape from the horror of camps whose air was so foul that, according to general belief, no birds ever flew overhead. Adorno, in the security of his American exile, may have been contemptuous of the form that poetry imposes on chaos. But in the camps highly structured forms like the sonnet and terza rima were preferred by prisoners who sought some order that they could oppose to the chaos of their daily lives. Adorno may have been skeptical of the attempt to find meaning in the holocaust. But those who experienced it firsthand grasped almost desperately for cultural and literary analogies that might clarify their experiences. David Rousset, in one of the earliest accounts of the camps (*L'Univers concentrationnaire*, 1947), cites Céline, Kafka, Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, Dante, Faulkner, and Rodin's *Gate of Hell*, among others. In the sonnets from the camps we find recurrent biblical motifs (e.g. Job) or historical parallels (the plague). The aesthetic impulse is evident not only in the writing: many witnesses—Josef Bor in *The Terezin Requiem* and Leon W. Wells in *The Janowska Road*—mention the orchestras that the prisoners organized in an effort to preserve some sense of their human worth. Many accounts report that theatrical groups, art classes, and poetry readings constituted an important facet of life in the camps. I have seen no more poignant evidence of this consolation through form than the wooden cigarette-box that lies on my desk. On its front the name of the camp and the dates of internment: Neubrandenburg from 1939 to 1945; on the back, painstakingly inlaid with bits of colored wood, a forbidding watchtower seen through the barbed-wire fence; and inside, a view of the barracks interior with its tiers of beds, an "x" marking the pallet of the craftsman himself. Adorno, Broch, Brecht, and the other exiles may have felt that art was trivial in the face of atrocity; but the victims themselves could not have endured

the indignities without these reminders of a life with order and meaning. Langer's study is one-sided to the extent that it admits only evidence written afterward by survivors or by those who witnessed the holocaust from vantage points outside the camps: he does not include a single text written *during* the holocaust or by a victim who perished in the camps.

It would be a pointless exercise in one-upmanship to second-guess Langer's choice of examples. Limiting himself to works that are available in English translation, he has selected the most representative examples for each category. In one case, however, I feel that another entire group of texts has been ignored. I do not mean the "documentary dramas" of Peter Weiss (*The Investigation*) or Rolf Hochhuth (*The Deputy*), which Langer has omitted presumably on the grounds that they are closer to history than to literature. I am concerned about the category that could be included under the label *black humor*. In his preface Langer apologizes because his passing mention of Tadeusz Borowski's *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* "does not begin to do justice to its impact and stature." But Borowski's work is not merely a further illustration of a theme or category otherwise adumbrated in Langer's book, for the gallows humor of Borowski's grim tales represents a reaction to atrocity, both existential and literary, that is unique. Indeed, in his omission of Borowski and in his subordination of the black humor in the works of Lind to the theme of madness, Langer is again allowing his position to be defined by the agonizing seriousness of guilt-ridden exiles like Adorno. Let us listen to a survivor. Among the recompenses for his experience of the "concentrationary universe" Rousset specifically cites "the fascinating discovery of humor, not so much as a projection of the personality, but as an objective pattern of the universe. . . . The discovery of this humor enabled many of us to survive. It is clear that it will command new horizons in the reconstruction of the themes of life and in their interpretation."

The problem, then, is not that there could be or was no poetry during and after Auschwitz: it was produced in a richness and variety commensurate with the symbolic universality of the camps themselves—a fact often stressed by the survivors. Every aspect of this *univers concentrationnaire*, from the retreat into aestheticism to its grim humor, is reflected in its literature; and the entire corpus belongs, in a larger sense, to the literature of the holocaust. Although Langer, in responding to Adorno, has chosen to narrow his focus, we must be grateful to him for exposing and coming to grips for the first time with a genre that was ignored for three decades.

The publication of Langer's book is symptomatic of the astonishing interest in the holocaust that has become evident within the past year

or two. Langer acknowledges a debt of gratitude to the students in his seminar at Simmons College on the literature of atrocity. Terrence Des Pres reports (in the *New York Times* for April 26, 1976) that 141 students registered last spring for his course on literature of the holocaust at Colgate University. The Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, in conjunction with the New Jersey Education Association, has sponsored a pilot project at two New Jersey high schools for study of the holocaust. Publishers have responded by reprinting essential texts along with such excellent anthologies as Albert H. Friedlander's "reader of holocaust literature" entitled *Out of the Whirlwind* (which includes several of the works discussed by Langer as well as many written during the holocaust). Dorothy Rabinowitz has just published her interviews with survivors of the holocaust living in America (*New Lives*). Scholars have begun turning out articles and books on the subject. The Modern Language Association included at its 1976 meeting a special session on holocaust writing. Filmmakers have produced television specials, documentaries (Alain Resnais's "Night and Fog"), and features (Lina Wertmüller's "Seven Beauties") on the holocaust. Indeed more than a few commentators have expressed a concern that genocide is becoming chic.

Why should there now be this sudden obsession with the most shocking event of the twentieth century? Various catalysts have been proposed—ranging from the Yom Kippur war and the Munich olympics to the revival of Jewish themes in the work of such writers as Cynthia Ozick, Herbert Gold, and Irving Howe—but it is clear that any deep-reaching answer to the question must somehow come to grips with the problem of guilt. To put it most simply: the holocaust generated a huge quantity of *guilt*, and anyone who thinks about it must find some way of disposing of that guilt. The simplest solution, of course, is to ignore it altogether. Man is infinitely resourceful in his capacity for rationalization. It was argued (especially in postwar Germany) that the camps were not really so bad as reported and that therefore the literature of the holocaust was irrelevant. And anyway—what about the bombing of beautiful Dresden? It was argued (especially outside Germany) that the holocaust was an aberration in human history and therefore unrepresentative and not deserving of consideration in a world enjoying an unprecedented postwar prosperity. In one of the most valuable chapters of *The Survivor* Terrence Des Pres analyzes the tensions that exist between the survivors with their insistent "will to bear witness" and the "conspiracy of silence" mounted by a world unwilling to be distracted by questions of guilt. Perhaps the most sophisticated strategy employed against the surviving witnesses was the attempt to undermine their authority by pointing to their guilt: "If he is guilty, then perhaps it is true that the victims of atrocity col-

laborate in their own destruction; in which case blame can be imputed to the victims themselves. And if he is guilty, then the survivor's suffering, all the sorrow he describes, is deserved; in which case a balance between *that* pain and our own is restored."

If it was the principal strategy in the past to ignore the guilt or to project it onto the victims themselves, it has been the tendency recently to remove the holocaust altogether from moral considerations. Some fascinated students have revived the notion of original sin, which amounts to a religious justification of the inevitability of the holocaust, since man is foreordained to guilt and evil. Others have adduced depth psychology in an effort to detect in the holocaust a Jungian shadow-image of man's basest impulses. In both cases the effect has been to relieve the holocaust of its moral implications by claiming that man is inherently evil and hence not responsible for his behavior. In recent years the religious and psychological justifications have welcomed scientific support in the studies of Konrad Lorenz, Robert Ardrey, Niko Tinbergen, Desmond Morris, Raymond Dart, and Anthony Starr, all of whom have advanced the theory of innate aggressiveness, according to which man is inherently a killer and hence not to be held accountable for such fundamentally "human" episodes as the holocaust. In *The Nature of Human Aggression* Ashley Montagu takes on the "innate aggressionists" and exposes what he considers to be their misinterpretation of the scientific evidence, arguing that "aggressive and non-aggressive behavior are mainly learned." Although Montagu mentions the holocaust only in passing, it lurks constantly in the background of his considerations. Montagu is set on putting human evil, including the holocaust, back into the frame of moral responsibility, from which it has been removed by the social darwinists. The conviction that man is depraved or inherently cruel relieves man of the moral accountability for his deeds: Auschwitz becomes a regrettable but inevitable episode in the history of human aggressiveness. But if our aggressiveness is, as Montagu argues, a cultural trait rather than an innately human one, then we cannot simply shrug our shoulders at the holocaust: we must seek solutions to man's inhumanity to man.

Simon Wiesenthal, the noted Nazi-hunter, is keenly aware of the human tendency to avoid moral dilemmas by ignoring the past. "Today the world demands that we forgive and forget the heinous crimes committed against us. It urges that we draw a line, and close the account as if nothing had ever happened." In his remarkable novella *The Sunflower* Wiesenthal has produced a work that lies on the borderline between fiction and autobiography and whose cunning tactic involves the reader in its moral deliberations. A young Jew, on a work assignment outside his camp, is summoned to hear the confession of a dying German soldier. (The eerie circumstance that the soldier's

head is swathed in bandages deindividualizes him and generalizes him into a representative of all Germans.) The Jew listens as the young soldier tells of his participation in the massacre of two hundred Russian Jews. Then, when the German begs to be forgiven for his deeds, the Jew turns on his heel and walks out of the hospital room without a word, leaving him to die in the consciousness of his guilt. After many pages of debate concerning the moral propriety of his behavior, the narrator asks in conclusion what the reader would have done.

Wiesenthal's novella, clearly a reaction to the silence that has long greeted witnesses from the holocaust, turns the tables by describing a case in which it is the victim who refuses to respond or to provide moral support. This device forces the reader, whether he identifies himself with the victim or with the persecutor, to a moral decision: to forgive or not to forgive. For the American edition the publisher gathered responses from thirty-two prominent writers and thinkers. The majority of the consultants agreed that Wiesenthal's narrator had acted correctly: no individual has the right to forgive another individual for crimes committed against a third party; moreover the forgiving of crimes against humanity simply perpetuates them. The question, however, that Wiesenthal forces upon us is more important than our answer. Together with Montagu but contrary to the prevailing trend, Wiesenthal succeeds in restoring the moral dimension to our thinking about the holocaust. And this confirms Langer's sense of the value of holocaust literature, which "is exempted from the claims of literal truth but creates an imaginative reality possessing an autonomous dignity and form that paradoxically immerse us in perceptions about that literal truth which the mind ordinarily ignores or would like to avoid."

This capacity of literature as opposed to documentary works is evident if we compare Langer's "aesthetics" of atrocity with Terrence Des Pres's study, which is subtitled "an anatomy of life in the death camps." Des Pres mentions few literary examples. Moreover not one of the three works that he cites for "The Survivor in Fiction"—Camus's *The Plague*, Malamud's *The Fixer*, and the fiction of Solzhenitsyn—deals with the holocaust. Des Pres is obsessed with the spiritual and physical debasement of man as portrayed in many of the factual accounts of the holocaust. His view of the survivor, encrusted in the slime and filth of the camps, is excremental rather than sacramental. It is in Langer's literature of atrocity, not in Des Pres's factual records, that we comprehend why Langer calls the encounter between man and Auschwitz the most profound symbolic confrontation of the twentieth century. The boundary situation of the holocaust exposed man in *all* his extremes—not just in his brutality but also in his urge to find meaning, order, and dignity even in degradation.