

# Narrating the void

Theodicy and beyond: secular Jewish authors writing about God, suffering, ethics, and Judaism in a post-Holocaust world

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## Preface

Writing my thesis was the most gratifying part of my Research Master. I would never have thought I would say so. But it is true. I have always been interested in questions related to different fields of study, studies in culture, history, religion. Uniting these interests was not always easy; never completely engaging with one specific discipline. However, in this thesis questions of history, culture, and theology have come together. Questions as how identities can be completely ruptured and must be recreated or reinvented. How history can change our ways of thinking fundamentally. How (fictional) literature takes up existential questions, questions about suffering and evil, questions that will not pass. The thesis touches upon literature's meaning after episodes in history that have ruptured life, as it was known, episodes that cannot be put to rest. How religious language is exercised when it is (seemingly) disconnected from former religious traditions. How religious language can be and is forced to be transformed. What these transformations indicate about a specific episode in history, in this instance, Western Europe after the Holocaust. These questions, obtained painful urgency in Holocaust literature. The very existence of the authors was at stake in their literary writings. That is what made studying their texts so interesting. I tried to do their literature right, not reducing them to mere objects of study or rational constructions. Hopefully I have succeeded in interpreted them for what they are, disturbing works of art.

To me the Humanities become interesting when they do not only hit the mind, but confront more than that. And to me the subject of this thesis did so. Therefore, I would like to thank Johan Goud, my supervisor, who pointed me to the direction of this subject. His confidence in me finding a relevant research question, his confidence in my writings, his reflective and analytic comments were incredibly stimulating. Even during his summer break I received feedback on my concept texts. Furthermore, I would like to thank Jeroen Koch, for being my tutor during my studies and for agreeing to be the second reader of my thesis. Whereas studying is often perceived as a highly individual activity, I have learned most intensely in dialogue with others, in dialogue with teachers and students, during class, after class, during coffee breaks, and long lunch hours. I would like to thank Erik Borgman, Geert Buelens, Elrud Ibsch, Derek Rubin, Joes Segal, and Judith Frishman for their stimulating responses to my requests, for discussing with me and giving me their opinions. Whereas most of the texts came about in the library, the library was not only a place of quiet, concentrated study hours, but most of all a place to meet others. Thank you Marieke, Reinier, Thijs,

Mariska, Esther, and Adriejan for studying and having coffees with me, not to forget my brother Maarten, the real historian of our family. As to conclude, thanks to my friends and family for their moral support. And I cannot but mention Neeldert van Laar, love of my life, thank you for being the person you are.

## Introduction

When the survivors have passed away, just as their children, and their children's children, will the Second World War belong to the past, to students' history textbooks, disconnected from the present, just as the European religious wars that took place in early modern times? And then, will the Holocaust belong to the past as well? Will Auschwitz ever pass? Though less and less Holocaust survivors are left to bear witness of their experiences in the camps and historians have pled for historicizing the Holocaust, some say – like Rüdiger Safranski – the catastrophe of the Holocaust was of such a scale and incomprehensible nature that it will not pass: 'Hitler hat eine Tür aufgestoßen und eine Schwelle überschritten. Etwas Unwiderrufliches ist geschehen, das Bild des Menschen hat sich seitdem verändert. Deshalb bleibt Auschwitz ein Vergangenes, die nicht vergehen kann – ein Menetekel der entfesselten Moderne.'<sup>1</sup> In the face of the Holocaust, questions about western civilization, about modernity, about history, about ethics, about evil, about man, and about God have been fundamentally disrupted. How to believe in progress, in justice, in the goodness of man, in righteousness, in a loving God, when people were systematically murdered not even for what they believed in, for what they did or practiced, but just because they existed? Whatever answers are given, every answer is bound to take into account the dark pages of European history. Yitzchak Greenberg argued uncompromisingly: 'No statement, theological or otherwise should be made that would not be credible in the presence of the burning of children.'<sup>2</sup>

After the Holocaust<sup>3</sup> Jewish theology was confronted with questions of the most troubling kind. Not only with the question how a good and almighty God could exist while innocent people were industrially slaughtered – general theodicy. But also with the question why the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, did not prevent his people for being dehumanized and, deprived from their individuality, were murdered in the gas chambers – particular theodicy. Jewish history is filled with suffering and persecution. However, in the face of the

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<sup>1</sup> Rüdiger Safranski, *Das Böse oder das Drama der Freiheit*, (München, Wien, 1997) 271.

<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Freiburg, "Moments that murdered my God and my soul": Der Theodizee-diskurs im Spiegel ausgewählter Holocaust-Literatur,' in: Gerd Bayer & Rudolf Freiburg, ed., *Literatur und Holocaust* (Würzburg, 2009) 116.

<sup>3</sup> The term *Shoah* is actually a better term in this instance, since it specifically refers to the persecution and murder of the Jews during the Second World War. *Holocaust* is a broader term and takes into account the imprisonment and murder of political enemies, disabled, homosexuals, and Gypsies' by the Nazis as well. However, due to Anglican dominance in literary studies on the Shoah, *Holocaust literature* is the term most commonly used for literature about the Shoah. Therefore, in the following chapters I will use the term Holocaust.

Holocaust classical answers to theodicy do not hold.<sup>4</sup> Though orthodox Jewish thinkers as Bernard Maza saw in the Holocaust the hand of God, pouring out his fury over His chosen people, punishing them for their godlessness and their abandonment of the holy Commandments, the Thora,<sup>5</sup> others radically called for the end of theodicy, the end of God. 'Every justification of God places blame of some kind on the Jews,' Alexander Donat wrote.<sup>6</sup> For many thinkers, Nietzsche's death of God became a quasi-empirical fact in Auschwitz. Richard Rubinstein said as follows: 'When I say we live in the time of the death of God, I mean that the thread uniting God and man, heaven and earth, has been broken. We stand in a cold, silent, unfeeling cosmos, unaided by any purposeful power beyond our own resources. After Auschwitz, what else can a Jew say about God?'<sup>7</sup>

Between the radical orthodox and atheist standpoint, many Jewish theologians and philosophers took more moderate positions, seeking answers for the existence of both the Holocaust and the covenant's God. However, as Clark Pinnock argues, theodicies' aim at giving all-encompassing explanations is problematic. Their justification of either God or man is abstract and theoretical.<sup>8</sup> In *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A report of the banality of evil* Hannah Arendt warns for the blinding effect of metaphysical interpretations of the Holocaust,<sup>9</sup> as if the Holocaust is a meta-historical catastrophe, not executed by actual human hands: administrator's hands, physician's hands, intellectual's hands, hands that merely followed instructions, hands like ours. Not only do theoretical justifications of God or man tend to invalidate the danger the Holocaust still poses upon us. Theoretical justifications also detach themselves from the individuals who suffered. Individuals with their particular histories, suffering in different places, at different times, under different circumstances, with different thoughts in their minds.

As opposed to theological theodicies, Rudolf Freiburg claims, literature is capable of doing just that: bringing the individual experience into abstract questions about God, man, and ethics: about questions of theodicy.<sup>10</sup> Whereas theodicies – as finding acceptable meaning to the relation that subsists between God, suffering, and evil – can be harmful by ignoring the social dimensions of evil, or by implicitly degrading the suffering of the victims and excusing

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<sup>4</sup> Hans Jonas, 'The concept of God after Auschwitz. A Jewish voice,' *The Journal of religion* 67 (1987).

<sup>5</sup> Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *Holocaust theology*, (London, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> Freiburg, 'Moments that murdered my God,' 123.

<sup>7</sup> Quote from Richard L. Rubinstein in: Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *A double dying. Reflections on Holocaust literature*, (London, 1980) 97.

<sup>8</sup> Sarah Katherine Pinnock, *Beyond theodicy. Jewish and Christian continental thinkers respond to the Holocaust*, (New York, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A report on the banality of evil*, (London, 1963).

<sup>10</sup> Freiburg, 'Moments that murdered my God,' 126.

the offenders,<sup>11</sup> literature cannot go astray into abstractions; it is bound to the concrete, to the social and individual. Literature does not build systems, it creates dynamic worlds wherein paradoxical argumentations or positions coexist. When implicitly addressing theodicy, literature will never drift away from the face of the individuals concerned.

After the Holocaust Jewish authors, seeking for ways to remain religiously involved within Jewish tradition, who were raised with the Thora, wrestled with questions about the God of their fathers in memoirs, essays and fiction. As a modern Job, Elie Wiesel charged God for the murder of millions, protesting against a God who had failed and abandoned the Jews.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, also 'secular' Jewish authors wrote about God and suffering in their literary works. Secular then, is not interpreted as irreligious, but as a disbelief in (a covenantal) God and disengagement from religious Judaism as it is traditionally defined, a position in which ambiguous positions are possible. Within Judaism questions of theodicy have always been related to a specific understanding of Judaism and Jewish identity. However, Jewish identity in particular had become extremely problematic after the Second World War.

Whereas religious authors, like Wiesel, were confronted with theological questions of the most troubling kind, some secular authors, raised within Jewish orthodoxy, had distanced themselves before or due to the war from the faith of their forefathers. They no longer defined themselves as religious or observing Jews. However, after the war the urge to redefine their Jewish identity had become extremely pressing. How do these secular writers deal with God, suffering, and Judaism in their literary works? Do they still relate to Jewish traditions transcending their individual experience as a Jew? And if so how do they do so? Beside these secular Jewish authors who were raised within Jewish orthodoxy, Western European Jewry consisted of a large group of highly acculturated Jews. Between 1933 and 1945 the identity of these Jews was fundamentally disrupted on another level. After the war they could never re-identify with a (Western) European civilization they had cherished before, but which had excluded them and without any resistance had let them deport into death. Authors like Jean Améry or Primo Lévi – before the war more German or Italian than Jew, but racially categorized by the Nuremberg Laws in 1935 – were deprived from their former identities. Jean Améry, not able to identify himself with Jewish tradition, calls himself a non-non Jew. He is a Jew without God, without history, without messianic-national hope: 'On my left forearm I bear the Auschwitz number; it reads more briefly than the Pentateuch or Talmud

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<sup>11</sup> Ibidem ; Pinnock, *Beyond theodicy*, 138.

<sup>12</sup> Elie Wiesel & Marion Wiesel, *The trial of God. A play in three acts*, (New York, 1979).



and yet provides more thorough information.’<sup>13</sup> Whereas Améry, and Levi, merely direct questions about God, other highly acculturated and secular Jewish authors do reflect on Judaism, God, ethics and evil. In the face of the Holocaust, they found themselves forced reconsidering Judaism and its God, seeking for highly individual ways to live as Jews after Auschwitz.

Some scholars have claimed theodicy is irrevocably connected to modernity; that since the 18<sup>th</sup> century the problem of evil was no longer a problem within Christianity or Judaism, but about Christianity or Judaism. The problem of evil had become a main argument for sceptics and atheists to reject a belief in God. The question then arises as to how secular Jewish authors, both from orthodox or highly acculturated contexts, deal with theodicy and themes related, like ethics, and Judaism, in their literary writings. How do they write about God? What position do God, man, evil, ethics, and Judaism have in their memoirs, fiction, and essays? Do they implicitly reject God as it is blasphemous speaking about a God in a century of industrial mass murder, or are alternative positions possible as well? Do they find individual ways to speak of God, or are former notions of justice, ethics, man, and God, concepts presupposed in theodic questions, completely ruptured in a world after Auschwitz, in *a cold, silent, unfeeling cosmos*? But why, then, would the authors still apply religious language?

As to conclude, writing and reading after the Holocaust have been extremely ethically burdened. Despite Adorno’s often rephrased objection to poetry, ‘writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’, people have written. Victims wrote in the camps – on the walls on little pieces of paper –, after the war, and even today memoirs are published of authors who survived the Holocaust as a child. They wanted and still want to be heard. Jacq Vogelaar actually argues that by writing authors reclaimed their individuality and by doing so they retrospectively rebel against the Nazis’ dehumanizing effort.<sup>14</sup> Interpreting these works – and in this case reading them on their religious subtext – is not without ethical implications. However, studies on Holocaust literature will also keep the debate, and hopefully the literature itself, ongoing and alive.

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<sup>13</sup> Jean Améry, 'On the necessity and impossibility of being a Jew,' *New German critique. An interdisciplinary journal of German studies* 20 (1980) 24.

<sup>14</sup> Jacq Vogelaar, *Over kampliteratuur*, (Amsterdam, 2006).

## 1. (Anti)theodicy, Holocaust literature, and interpretation

How did secular Jewish survivors of the Holocaust deal with theodicy in their literary reflections on the Holocaust, in their memoirs, fiction, short stories, and literary essays? The question is related to two different fields of study: Jewish intellectual history, more specifically the history of Jewish theology, and Holocaust literature.

The problem of the existence of a good and omnipotent God in a world of suffering and evil – theodicy – is deeply rooted in Jewish theology. Whereas the concept ‘theodicy’ itself is historically defined and the thinking about God and evil has changed constantly, the Holocaust was and is interpreted as a watershed in thinking about God and evil. Jewish theological questions were radically distorted after the Holocaust. Zachary Braiterman actually characterizes post-war Jewish religious thought as a discourse of anti-theodicy: pivotal Jewish intellectuals rejected justifications of God altogether, assuming radical solidarity with the suffering people.<sup>15</sup> They sought for new ways leaving behind rabbinic Judaism as well as 19<sup>th</sup> century modern Jewish thought. Obviously, the Holocaust did not only pose religious questions to Jewish theologians and philosophers. In fictional literature on the Holocaust Jewish authors also address questions about the connection between God, evil, and suffering. Consequently, within this study, Jewish theology is not to be regarded as a specific academic discipline, but consists of all writings on God, including fictional literature. Interestingly, authors of literary fiction are not bound to the rationale of (traditional) theological frameworks: as opposed to strict theological or philosophical texts, literary texts explicitly address a reader. The text’s literary form, its appeal to the reader, are as important for its content as the actual subject of the text.

As for literary studies and cultural history, Holocaust literature demanded rethinking of traditional literary concepts: e.g. concepts of representation, literary qualifications, the ethics of both writing and reading. Only in the 1970s and 1980s Holocaust literature came to be recognized as a distinct and serious genre.<sup>16</sup> By then, distinctions were made between first and second generation Jewish authors. This study will confine itself to fictional and non-fictional work of first generation Jewish authors, more specifically: literature from survivors of the Holocaust, for whom existential questions became most pressing and urgent. For many survivors writing itself became at the centre of their existence.

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<sup>15</sup> Zachary Braiterman, *(God) after Auschwitz. Tradition and change in post-Holocaust Jewish thought*, (New Jersey, 1998) 164-165.

<sup>16</sup> Efraim Sicher, *The Holocaust novel*, (New York, London, 2005) xv.

The studies on Jewish theodicy and Holocaust literature have their own backgrounds, difficulties, discussions and implications. While directing a theological concept as theodicy to Holocaust literature it is worthwhile addressing both discourses. What is the background of the concept of theodicy? What does the concept entail? How did Jewish philosophy and theology deal with theodicy after the Holocaust? While theodicy strictly means ‘justifying God’, this study will use the concept as starting point for analyzing and including any reflection about the relationship that subsists between God, man, evil, and suffering, even when it leads to atheism or what Braiterman calls anti theodicy. With regard to the other field, Holocaust literature, questions arise as to what were and have become main themes? How did the analyses of Holocaust literature evolve? And finally, how is the question regarding theodicy in secular Jewish literature related to current studies in Holocaust literature?

As mentioned before, theological implications of religious authors – like Elie Wiesel, Paul Celan, Nelly Sachs – have been studied in both Jewish theology and the field of Holocaust literature. This study will focus on secular Jewish authors. Secular authors, who still address questions about God and suffering. Since the concept ‘secular’ has been highly ideologically burdened, some considerations regarding the concept will be addressed at the end of the chapter. For the present analyses ‘secular’ will be understood as a disbelief of the (covenantal) God in which ambiguous positions are possible.

## **Theodicy**

### ***Epicurus, the historicity of theodicy, and Jewish theodicy***

*Unde malum?* – Whence evil – was a common refrain in classical writing. However, evils only become a problem when there are beliefs in the world with which they seem to conflict. Christianity and Judaism share their paradoxical experience with a world of suffering and evil while believing in an almighty and good God; an experience which gave rise to rational formulations of the problem of evil. This problem is usually treated as a *trilemma*: the apparent inconsistent set of propositions which asserts God’s goodness, God’s omnipotence, and the existence of evil. The sceptical character Philo - referring to Epicurus – briefly stated the problem in David Hume’s *Dialogues concerning natural religion*: ‘Epicurus’ old questions are yet unanswered. ‘Is he [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?’<sup>17</sup> The problem has been formulated millennia ago in different contexts

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<sup>17</sup> Mark Larrimore, ed., *The problem of evil. A reader* (Oxford, Molden, 2001) xix.

by different thinkers – e.g. Epicurus, the sceptics, Philo, Marcion, Boëtius, Augustine – and with dramatically different responses. Therefore, it would be tempting to approach theodicy unhistorically, as if it is a never changing fundamental problem for all times. However, recently, scholars have pointed to the historicity of theodicy.<sup>18</sup> Odo Marquard even claimed theodicy is specifically modern: ‘Where there is theodicy there is modernity, and where there is modernity, there is theodicy’.<sup>19</sup> The statement inevitably evokes questions of how theodicy is related to ‘post modernity’. In line with Marquard, Mark Larrimore highlights several developments which have increased the urgency of formulating theodicies: Renaissance’s focus on earthly happiness; Enlightenment’s eclipse of belief in original sin; and the emergence of modern medicine, which brought about dramatic changes in the quality of life. The problem of evil became acute only once suffering no longer seemed a necessary part of life, but exceptional, Larrimore argues.<sup>20</sup> Rudolf Freiburg adds a more philosophical argument and asserts that theodicy became unavoidable once empiricism was widespread.<sup>21</sup>

The term ‘theodicy’ – from the Greek θεος (God) and δικη (justice) - was coined by the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and has long been understood in Milton’s terms as ‘justifying the ways of God to man’ - though Leibniz seemed simply to have meant the ‘justice of God’: *theodicy* as an ethics.<sup>22</sup> The concept, thus, stems from Christian theology but is addressed in Jewish theology as well.<sup>23</sup> The developments mentioned by Freiburg and Larrimore – with the exception of the downfall of belief in original sin – increasing the urgency of theodicy, are as valid for Christian thinking as for Jewish thinking. In the ‘age of theodicy’ – the 18<sup>th</sup> century wherein not a single writer did not address theodicy<sup>24</sup> – Jewish thinkers such as Moses Mendelssohn made significant attempts to rationally explain the existence of evil in the world.<sup>25</sup>

Though it is difficult to compare religious traditions without making crude generalisations, the question of evil and suffering has had a prominent existential dimension within Jewish history. While Israel was supposed to be the chosen people of God through whom God’s work of redemption would take place in the world, daily practice often seemed

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<sup>18</sup> In his introduction to *The problem of evil* Mark Larrimore criticizes John Hick’s *Evil and the God of Love* (London 1977) for being unhistorical. For long *Evil and the God of Love* has been the dominant history of theodicy in the English speaking world.

<sup>19</sup> Larrimore, ed., *The problem of evil* xxvii.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem* xxix.

<sup>21</sup> Freiburg, ‘Moments that murdered my God,’ 111.

<sup>22</sup> Larrimore, ed., *The problem of evil* 191.

<sup>23</sup> Braiterman, *(God) after Auschwitz*, 4.

<sup>24</sup> Freiburg, ‘Moments that murdered my God,’ 112.

<sup>25</sup> Oliver Leaman, *Evil and suffering in Jewish philosophy*, (Cambridge, 1995) 147.

to demonstrate the opposite: there have not been many periods during which there has been no persecution of Jews at least somewhere.<sup>26</sup> This reality has deeply shaped Jewish theology and philosophy. Whereas Christian theodicy is profoundly influenced by Greek philosophy, illustrated by its tradition of a strict systematic approach to the problem, within Jewish tradition there has always been the possibility of rebellion against and dispute with God. Though the motif of rebellion until the twentieth century never had assumed normative status in rabbinic texts – the Deuteronomy’s theodic discourse of rebuke and retribution had been at the centre – it has always been a counter tradition. The book of Job and other Babylonian Talmud and midrash compilations gave way to some form of protest against God.<sup>27</sup> Within that tradition arguing and thinking about evil and suffering took place in relation to God. The most important text about suffering in the Jewish Bible, the book of Job, is not so much about the rationale for the suffering of the innocent, but is rather about man’s relationship with God<sup>28</sup>: Job did not talk about God, he rebelled against and disputed with God.

The technical meaning of theodicy is restricted to justifying God – as being good and almighty – in the face of evil. It is not coincidental that post-Holocaust Jewish thinkers made little to no such use of theodicy. Moreover, in the late 1960s and 1970s scholars in social science studied theodicy on its social implications. Peter Berger argued that theodicy is a type of social masochism that legitimates social institutions at the expense of suffering individuals.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, theodicy has also become a concept referring to all attempts to explain, justify, or find acceptable meaning to the relationship that subsists between God, man, evil, and suffering.<sup>30</sup> As indicated in the introduction, for the present study I will use the concept as a starting point as to include any reflection on the problem posed by theodicy: the problem of evil, even when it leads to atheism or anti theodicy:<sup>31</sup> A way of thinking which refuses to justify, explain or accept the relation between God, evil and suffering in any way. According to Braiterman antitheodicy has shifted from the margins in Jewish classical texts and traditions to the centre of post-Holocaust Jewish thought.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, 4.

<sup>27</sup> Braiterman, *(God) after Auschwitz*, 14-15.

<sup>28</sup> Leaman, 13.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Berger, *The sacred canopy. Elements of a sociological theory of religion*, (New York, 1969) 54.

<sup>30</sup> Braiterman, *(God) after Auschwitz*, 4.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem, 5.

### ***Responses to the Holocaust in Jewish thinking***

As mentioned before, reflection on suffering and catastrophe have always been a substantial part of Jewish theology, literature and poetry. However, the discussion received severe importance after the Holocaust. Comparing the modern pogrom poetry of an earlier generation with the poetry written in the ghettos during the war, David Roskies writes: ‘In all these former cases, the scene of destruction was never more than a catalyst, a small part of the whole. (...) No writer (...) would dwell exclusively on the meaning of Jewish catastrophe. After 1 September 1939, however, the subject of catastrophe eclipsed all others as millions of Jews suddenly found themselves standing ‘at the crossroads’ with nowhere to turn.’<sup>33</sup> Poets addressed religious questions during and after the war, that would dominate theological discourse decennia ahead.<sup>34</sup> Modern Jewish religious thinkers like Buber, Heschel, Soloveitchik, and Kaplan made only haphazard and oblique references to the Holocaust immediately after the war. Auschwitz represented a silent but as yet unnamed presence in their post-war writings. Only when a larger discourse took shape in the 1960s and 1970s, a post-Holocaust theology arose. The 1963 Eichmann trial, the testimony it generated, and Hannah Arendt’s formulation of the ‘banality of evil’, played a pivotal role in the formation of a Jewish philosophical and theological response to the Holocaust. Furthermore, the 1960s and 1970s saw the historical studies of Lucy Dawidowicz and Raul Hilberg, and the psychological reflections of Elie Cohen, Viktor Frankl, and Bruno Bettelheim. Alongside these studies, Braiterman underlines the importance of writers such as Elie Wiesel, providing Jewish theologians the images and language to reflect upon the Holocaust.<sup>35</sup>

Richard Rubinstein’s seminal *After Auschwitz*, published in 1966, offered the first theological reflection in which the Holocaust was driving preoccupation. The word *after* suggested that Jewish life and thought could never be the same. The Holocaust represented a unique and radical evil in human history, that had ruptured every traditional theological understanding.<sup>36</sup> Rubinstein confronted the problem of evil relentlessly and radically. His argument was simple: ‘Judeo-Christian’ tradition posited a just and omnipotent God covenanted to Israel, the ultimate author of history. If such a God exists, it could only mean that He justly willed the murder of six million Jewish people: God as Hitler’s accomplice. Rubinstein therefore proclaimed ‘the death of God’ and turned to what he called ‘the tragic

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<sup>33</sup> David G. Roskies, *Against the apocalypse. Responses to catastrophe in modern Jewish culture*, (Cambridge, London, 1984) 241.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, 241.

<sup>35</sup> Braiterman, *(God) after Auschwitz*, 9.

<sup>36</sup> Leaman, *Evil and suffering*, 185.

fatalities of the God of nature'.<sup>37</sup> Man was standing in a cold and meaningless universe. Nevertheless, Rubinstein did not abandon Jewish religion: even without a transcendent God, Jewish liturgy and rituals could be meaningful. In an absurd universe, the suffering person did not represent a figure of guilt and redemption – traditional Judaism – but a victim of tragic happenstance, who could be comforted by (pagan or Jewish) liturgy and rituals.<sup>38</sup>

Rubinstein actually draws on a view of God's role in history, which has been severely criticized, and interestingly corresponds with notions of God expressed by Orthodox scholars, such as Bernhard Maza. According to him, by 1939 Jews had forgotten the faith of their fathers and desired to be like other nations. As Maza writes '*Hashem* (God) knew the oppression of the Jewish people had to end or the sun of the Torah would set. Jewish people had to be redeemed and returned to the land of Israel.'<sup>39</sup> The beginning of this liberation was to be ushered in with the coming of the divine fury – the Holocaust. Like Rubinstein, Maza holds on to the view of God as the author of history. However, instead of proclaiming 'the death of God' he proclaimed the liberation of Israel. Holocaust was part of the salvation of Torah Judaism, Maza argued.<sup>40</sup> As opposed to singling out God's providence in the camps, Eliezer Berkovits, emphasised the importance of the traditional notion of *Kiddush ha-shem*, the maintenance of faith and its proclamation even in the most dire circumstances. Berkovits – trying to search for a religious response from Orthodox Jewry as well – draws on a notion of the hiddenness of God, *Hesder Panim*. As the Psalms attempt to resolve the dilemma of Jewish suffering,

*Awake, why sleepest Thou, O Lord,  
Arouse Thyself, cast not off for ever,  
Wherefore hidest Thou Thy face,*<sup>41</sup>

modern Jewry can also appeal to God's silence. A silence which is not filled with divine indifference, rather with God's intention to create space for human freedom. By contrast with many of his contemporaries, Berkovits denied that the Holocaust posed any unique theological challenge to traditional belief and Jewish texts: Jewish tradition had confronted the problem of evil throughout a long history of exile.<sup>42</sup>

With his own idiom of rupture and repair, Emil Fackenheim combined Rubinstein's rhetoric of radicalism with Berkovits' rhetoric of tradition. Like Rubinstein, Fackenheim

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<sup>37</sup> Braiterman, *(God) after Auschwitz*, 87.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, 8.

<sup>39</sup> Quote Bernhard Maza in: Cohn-Sherbok, *Holocaust theology*, 17.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, 22.

<sup>41</sup> Psalm 44 in: *Ibidem*, 59.

<sup>42</sup> Leaman, *Evil and suffering*, 191.

argued that a complete reevaluation of thought is required after the Holocaust. Like Berkovits, Fackenheim never abandoned traditional Jewish sources or a belief in a covenant's God: just as God's presence at Mount Sinai resulted in divine commandments, so did God reveal a further commandment in the death camps. Added to the 613 commandments contained in the Torah, the 614<sup>th</sup> commandment is directed to the post-Holocaust Jewish community, and formulated by Fackenheim as follows: 'Jews are forbidden to hand Hitler posthumous victories. They are commanded to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish people perish. They are commanded to remember the victims of Auschwitz lest their memory perish. They are forbidden to despair of man and his world, and to escape in either cynicism or otherworldliness. (...) Finally they are forbidden to despair of the God of Israel, lest Judaism perish...'<sup>43</sup> The 614<sup>th</sup> commandment demanded a stubborn steadfastness by which secular and religious Jews alike might infuse life with meaning and hope.<sup>44</sup> Declaring the world a meaningless, godforsaken and absurd place, as Rubinstein did, is for both Berkovits and Fackenheim unacceptable. Fackenheim advocated a Judaism of resistance and *tikkun* – mending of the world after the radical break inflicted by the Holocaust. The state Israel could never mend the Holocaust, but for Fackenheim she is reason for joy; for not granting Hitler posthumous victory. Martyrdom as a route of bearing witness to God and *Kiddush ha-shem*, sanctification of the name, belonged to the past of pre-war Judaism.<sup>45</sup>

Rubinstein's, Berkovits', and Fackenheim's books were to form the 'classic' corpus of Holocaust theology; the canon most commonly studied and critiqued.<sup>46</sup> Except for Maza, the three prominent thinkers in post-Holocaust theology – though continually struggling with the problem of evil – resisted dealing with traditional theodicy, which according to them had become 'obscene', 'blasphemy', and 'shipwrecked' after the Holocaust.<sup>47</sup> Braiterman even argues that the three theologians represent pivotal figures forming a new theological discourse of antitheodicy, assuming radical solidarity with the suffering people: not God, but Job is justified at the expense of God.<sup>48</sup> Emmanuel Levinas – due to his innovative and original way of thinking more difficult to relate to the discussion – partly fits Braiterman's reading of post-Holocaust thought as antitheodic. In 'Useless suffering' he proclaims the end of theodicy: 'The disproportion between suffering and every theodicy was shown at Auschwitz with a

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<sup>43</sup> Emil. L. Fackenheim, *God's presence in history. Jewish affirmations and philosophical reflections*, (New York, London, 1970) 84.

<sup>44</sup> Braiterman, *(God) after Auschwitz*, 135.

<sup>45</sup> Leaman, 188.

<sup>46</sup> Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *God and the Holocaust*, (Leominster, 1996) i.

<sup>47</sup> Braiterman, *(God) after Auschwitz*, 164.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, 164-165.



glaring, obvious clarity.<sup>49</sup> Western humanity has sought for the meaning of suffering by invoking the proper sense of a metaphysical order, Levinas argues. However, Auschwitz has shown the unjustifiable character of suffering in the Other person.<sup>50</sup> Levinas reveals an ethical objection to theodicy. His phenomenological philosophy of facing the Other objects to ontological ways of thinking. Moreover, God, as the Absent One is *ultimately* unsayable. God does not coincide with the (supreme) being, but is precisely otherwise than Being. Levinas reacts against every way of thinking that has pretension of being able to thematize God.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, theodicy is by definition impossible.

In 'The concept of God after Auschwitz. A Jewish voice', Hans Jonas does not let go of the concept of theodicy and takes an exceptional stance in the debate. Since Abel J. Herzberg – whose work is included in the corpus – reveals similar ideas about the position of God, Jonas' thoughts are worth being considered here. In his article, Jonas draws on Kabbahistic traditions from the Middle Ages: by creation, Jonas argues, the Eternal has 'temporalized' himself. 'To make room for the world, the *Ensof* (Infinite; literally, No-End) of the beginning had to contract himself so that, vacated by him, empty space could expand outside of him.'<sup>52</sup> Such an idea of divine becoming is at odds with the Greek, Platonic-Aristotelian tradition of philosophical theology. According to Jonas, God is being affected by what happens in the world, and affected means altered, made different. God made his fate dependent on his creation, and from the moment of creation the relation of God to the world involves suffering on the part of God. God was silent in 'Auschwitz', not because he chose not to, but because he *could* not intervene.<sup>53</sup> Jonas' abandonment of God's omnipotence implies full responsibility of man: 'God has no more to give, it is man's now to give to him.'<sup>54</sup> Perhaps the importance of ethics and the ethical appeal are common features for the majority of Jewish post-Holocaust thinkers. Jonas refers to the 'thirty-six righteous ones' whom, according to Jewish lore, the world shall never lack. Their hidden holiness could outweigh countless guilt and redress the balance of a generation. Interestingly, this particular myth is the main theme in the novel *Le dernier des justes* by André Schwarz-Bart – which will be addressed in the next chapter. The meaning of the myth is subverted and challenged by

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<sup>49</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, 'Useless suffering,' in: Mark Larrimore, ed., *The problem of evil. A reader* (Oxford, Malden, 2001) 377.

<sup>50</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, 'Useless suffering,' in: Robert Bernasconi & David Wood, ed., *The provocation of Levinas. Rethinking the Other* (New York, 1986) 378.

<sup>51</sup> Johan Goud, 'This extraordinary word. Emmanuel Levinas on God,' in: P. Jonkers & R. Welten, ed., *God in France. Eight contemporary French thinkers on God* (Leuven, 2005) 115-117.

<sup>52</sup> Jonas, 'The concept of God,' 12.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem* 10.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem* 12.

Schwarz-Bart: the protagonist Erny, one of the just, dies in the concentration camps, not for the sake of his faith, not as a martyr like his forefathers but simply because he was a Jew. He was the last of the just and his death consequently subverted the covenant between God and man.

More recently, another sound sprang from feminist theology. Melissa Raphael argues, subscribing to Braiterman's argument, that post-Holocaust theology was reigned by rejecting or questioning God's role in the Holocaust. Many post-Holocaust Jewish thinkers interpreted God's silence in the camps as divine deferral to humanities free choice. Melissa Raphael suggests an answer to God's role in the Holocaust in the image of God-as-Shekinah, the female face of God. Raphael too plunges into the wellspring of Kabbalah, but without subscribing Jonas' answer of the *becoming* God; she sees God's presence in womanly acts of caring, kindness, nurturing, sacrifice, and suffering. Interestingly, she draws from the testimonies of women who survived the death camps in forming a constructive theology. Revelation and redemption were continually retrieved and sustained by genuine nurturance and close human friendships, she argues. Raphael objects to 'God is dead theologies' and urges for a feminist presence, not absence, in Auschwitz. The covenantal love between God and Israel was sensed not in the hidden face of God *hesder panim*, but in God's presence as suffering Mother in the camps. Raphael's focus on small gestures of compassion brings into mind Dresden's apology for Jewish dignity: not searching for the great actions of resistance and righteousness, but signalling the moments when people retained their individuality, their humanity: while comforting a baby just before it is being executed, while telling stories, playing music, and writing poetry in the camps, even when it led to insanity.<sup>55</sup>

Melissa Raphael is exceptional in including Holocaust literature, particularly Holocaust memoirs, in her theology. Braiterman emphasises the importance of literature providing images and language for thinking about the Holocaust: images of the death marches, concentration camp life, Elie Wiesel's anti-aesthetic despair, Primo Levi's figure of the 'Musselmann', or Jean Amery's qualification of the Nazis' 'logic of destruction'.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless. However, Holocaust literature is scarcely included in the post Holocaust theological discourse, with the exception of the writings of Elie Wiesel. Interestingly, Elie Wiesel – who is largely responsible for the creation of the term 'Holocaust' as a conceptual category – played a pivotal role in creating awareness of theological questions in the face of

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<sup>55</sup> Sam Dresden, *Het vreemde vermaak dat lezen heet. Een keuze uit essays*, (Amsterdam, 1997).

<sup>56</sup> Braiterman, *(God) after Auschwitz*, 7.

the Holocaust for a wider public.<sup>57</sup> He is in the company of Camus and Sartre in asking fundamental questions about the human condition, about evil, and about God, but he does not subscribe their atheistic answers.<sup>58</sup> Despite the guilt of God, Wiesel - like Fackenheim - refuses to abandon Judaism. If God does not hold on to the covenant, man is obliged to do so, Wiesel urges. Therefore we must live as though God existed, and as though humanity could live in a civilized manner. At the same time in 'The trial of God' and in 'Ani ma'amin' Wiesel relates to the tradition of the *choetzpah*: a religious opening for disputing with and rebelling against God. Wiesel's images of God waver between God as cynical and distant tyrant and a concerned and compassionate God who is in need for forgiveness.<sup>59</sup>

Wiesel's work is extensively analysed on its theological and philosophical implications.<sup>60</sup> The same goes for Nelly Sachs and Paul Celan, who explicitly deal with a silent God in their poetry,<sup>61</sup> or Etty Hillesum who, while setting herself at the heart of the suffering Jewish people in its particular historical situation, seems to be more attracted to Christianity perceived as a religion of love and compassion.<sup>62</sup> Rudolf Freiburg has dealt explicitly with theodicy and Holocaust literature in his article 'Der Theodizee-Diskurs im Spiegel ausgewählter Holocaust-Literatur, in *Holocaust und Literatur*', but mainly addresses the work of Elie Wiesel.<sup>63</sup> Generally speaking, little attention has been paid to questions about God, evil, suffering, and Judaism in more secular and religiously less outspoken literature written by Holocaust survivors. Bettine Siertsema's work is exceptional in analysing all Dutch Jewish, Christian and secular memoirs written in the Nazi camps on their theological, literary and ethical implications.<sup>64</sup> But given the scope of her corpus and the broad question – including the ethical, literary, and theological dimension – she inevitably touches upon the theme of God and suffering briefly. Corrie Blei-Strijbos deals with a similar question. However, she addresses the works of four theologians and three writers – a corpus which

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<sup>57</sup> Bettine Siertsema, *Uit de diepten. Nederlandse egodocumenten over de nazi concentratiekampen*, (Vught, 2007) 35.

<sup>58</sup> Freiburg, 'Moments that murdered my God,' 126-129.

<sup>59</sup> Cohn-Sherbok, *Holocaust theology*,

<sup>60</sup> E.g.: Michael Berenbaum, *The vision of the void. Theological reflections on the works of Elie Wiesel*, (Middletown, 1979); Freiburg, 'Moments that murdered my God,'

<sup>61</sup> E.g.: Otto Pöggeler, *Spur des Worts. Zur Lyrik Paul Celans*, (Freiburg, 1986); Otto Pöggeler, *Lyrik als Sprache unsere Zeit? Paul Celans Gedichtbände*, (Opladen, 1998); Ulrich Klingmann, *Religion und Religiosität in der Lyrik von Nelly Sachs*, (Frankfurt am Main, 1980); Ursula Rudnick, *Post-Shoah religious metaphors. The image of God in poetry of Nelly Sachs*, (Frankfurt am Main, 1995).

<sup>62</sup> Melissa Raphael, *The female face of God in Auschwitz. A Jewish feminist theology of the Holocaust*, (London, 2003) Melissa Raphael, 20. For theological analyses of Etty Hillesum's work: Edward Alexander, *The resonance of dust. Essays on Holocaust literature and Jewish fate*, (Columbus, 1979); Ria van den Brandt & Smelik, "Etty Hillesum studies. Etty Hillesum in context," (Assen: 2008).

<sup>63</sup> Freiburg, 'Moments that murdered my God'.

<sup>64</sup> Siertsema, *Uit de diepten*.

seems to be a bit arbitrary – without making a principal distinction between philosophical and theological texts on the one hand and literature on the other. Hers is to find a proper theological attitude and approach to the Holocaust,<sup>65</sup> not interpreting the religious stance in Holocaust literature. Finally, individual literary works from secular authors have been read e.g. on the depiction of God.<sup>66</sup> However, there seems to be no attempt to bring together and interpret different responses to questions about God and suffering in secular Holocaust literature.

As mentioned before, in the field of Holocaust literature a similar pattern is visible: theological themes are dealt with insofar as the authors explicitly focus on questions of faith, God and Judaism, e.g. Eastern European poets like Uri Zvi Greenberg, Yehuda Amichai, Jacob Glatstein, or writers like Wiesel. However, before leaping into the state of the arts of Holocaust literature and relating the present study to current research, it is worthwhile considering the specific developments within the studies of Holocaust literature. From the 1960s onwards an analysis of Holocaust literature slowly developed. Since then the scope of the field has grown exponentially. Cynically, Holocaust studies today have become a real industry, especially in the United States. It is impossible and out of scope to give an overview over the whole field, however, the most important developments in the field will be touched upon briefly. What questions, concerns, and issues have become dominant in the field? What were and have become main themes? And how is the main question of this research related to current studies in the field?

## **Holocaust literature**

### ***The emergence of a field of study***

Right after World War II many testimonies and a few novels about the experiences in the concentration camps were published. However, in the 1950s a relative silence occurred. Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi did not at first find it easy to find an audience for their harrowing accounts of life in the camps. But gradually their first books were recognized. The poetry of Paul Celan, Nelly Sachs, and Dan Pagis, Rudolf Hochhuth's drama's and the art that emerged

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<sup>65</sup> Corry Blei-Strijbos, *Woorden voor het onzegbare. Joodse Auschwitzliteratuur gelezen met het oog op de vraag naar de betekenis van religie in existentiële crises*, (Kampen, 2001).

<sup>66</sup> E.g. Barbara Mahlmann-Bauer, 'Imre Kertész' Gottesbild in seinen Tagebuchaufzeichnungen *Galeerentagebuch* und *Ich - ein anderer*,' *Colloquium Helveticum: Cahiers Suisses de Littérature Comparée/Schweizer Hefte für Allgemeine und Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft/Quaderni Svizzeri di Letteratura Generale e Comparata* 34 (2003) 267-301.

from the camps helped to establish a Holocaust literature.<sup>67</sup> Similar to the emergence of a post-Holocaust theology, the Eichmann process played a pivotal role in literary writings about the Holocaust and the analyses of this literature. Whereas the Nuremberg trials told the story of the perpetrators on trial of war crimes, the voice of the victims was heard widely for the first time in 1961. In 1963 Hannah Arendt's account of the trial raised much controversy and discussion. The Eichmann trial was a watershed in consciousness of the Holocaust. However, according to Efraim Sicher, commercial success and popularity of literature about the Holocaust in the ensuing years must be explained also by changing attitudes to the theme of the Holocaust in the film industry, popular culture, and the literature itself.<sup>68</sup> In the 1960s Samuel Dresden and Alfred Alvarez were the first literary scholars in bringing together different literary genres, written in different languages to one corpus: Holocaust literature.<sup>69</sup> However, only in the late 1970s and 1980s Holocaust literature came to be recognized as a distinct and serious genre.<sup>70</sup>

Lawrence L. Langer's *The Holocaust and the literary imagination* published in 1975 has become the first authoritative work on Holocaust literature. In his book Langer focuses on how authors tried to represent an essentially different unbearable and for the reader ultimately inconceivable reality. He draws on possible conflicts between facts and the imagined reality and how fantasy and imagination are able to convey incomprehensible truths hidden behind the mere facts.<sup>71</sup> Though in due course 'documentary literature' – diaries, testimonies, and memoirs – would be considered the genre most appropriate to the subject,<sup>72</sup> Langer's work concentrates on fiction, including e.g. *La nuit* from Elie Wiesel, which he perceives as partly fictional due to its literary construction. Whereas many scholars and writers have renounced any adequate analogy between Holocaust literature and classical works, Langer relates Holocaust literature to *The brothers Karamazov*, *King Lear*, *Divine Comedy* and works of Kafka and Camus. Furthermore he passionately rejects any universalistic interpretation of the Holocaust; interpretations which assume that all of humanity could have participated in the Holocaust as either victim or executor. Philosophers and theologians tend to extract universal lessons from the Holocaust, Langer argues. Nothing universal is to be learned from the Holocaust: 'that discourse', Langer writes 'leads nowhere but back into the pit of destruction.'

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<sup>67</sup> Sicher, *The Holocaust novel*, xiv.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem*, xv.

<sup>69</sup> Dresden in 1959, Alvarez in 1964.

<sup>70</sup> Sicher, *The Holocaust novel*, xv.

<sup>71</sup> Lawrence Langer, *The Holocaust and the literary imagination*, (New Haven, London, 1975).

<sup>72</sup> Elie Wiesel stated for example: 'A novel about Treblinka is either not a novel, or not about Treblinka.'

At least it has the grace to acknowledge that we learn nothing from the misery it finds there.’<sup>73</sup>

In the 1980s two important studies were published somewhat at the same time: Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi’s *By words alone. The Holocaust in literature*, and *A double dying. Reflections on Holocaust literature*, by Alvin Rosenfeld. ‘A double dying’ refers to Elie Wiesel’s comment: ‘at Auschwitz, not only man died but also the idea of man’. Rosenfeld poses questions like: how is Holocaust literature related to history, what have become canonical authors, is it possible to distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ books, between its most authentic or spurious and exploitative strains of expression, can Holocaust literature be ‘literary’? Rosenfeld explicitly rejects literary works that, according to him, abuse and exploit the Holocaust into amusement.<sup>74</sup> Both Rosenfeld and Ezrahi address the impossibility of conveying the unimaginable experience by words and language. According to Rosenfeld Holocaust literature marked how Auschwitz had changed the way man thought about the human condition. That required a new literary form, in the words of Langer: ‘a literature of decomposition’, e.g the distorted bible quotations of Chaim Kaplan, or the ruptured ‘Bildungsroman’ of Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel. Interestingly Ezrahi as well as Rosenfeld – more than their scholarly successors – extensively focus on religious themes and questions: Rosenfeld in analysing the poetry of Paul Celan and Nelly Sachs,<sup>75</sup> and Ezrahi by focusing on the tradition of Lamentations and in relating Elie Wiesel’s and Isaac Bashevis Singer’s work to *midrashim* and *Hasidic tales*.<sup>76</sup> Ezrahi’s interest is less concerned with literary techniques. She focuses on how authors have interpreted the Holocaust; their perspective of what has happened, and how they related the Holocaust to their worldviews and beliefs.<sup>77</sup>

Already in an essay published in 1959, Samuel Dresden directed questions that would dominate the international debate on Holocaust literature in the following decennia. However, only in the 1990s he published his main work on Holocaust literature, *Persecution, Extermination, Literature*.<sup>78</sup> In this essayistic work Dresden explores and wanders through the field of Holocaust literature, touching on its problems, tensions, and urging ethical implications. Literature in general, specifically tragic literature, Dresden argues, tends to comfort the reader and strives for a feeling of peace: catharsis. However, when facing the

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<sup>73</sup> Quote Lawrence Langer in: Siertsema, *Uit de diepten*, 60.

<sup>74</sup> Rosenfeld, *A double dying*.

<sup>75</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>76</sup> Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *By words alone. The Holocaust in literature*, (Chicago, London, 1980) 118-148. In the same chapter Ezrahi addresses Paul Celan and Nelly Sachs.

<sup>77</sup> Siertsema, *Uit de diepten*, 63.

<sup>78</sup> S. Dresden, *Persecution, extermination, literature*, (Toronto, 1995).

Holocaust catharsis is unbearable, unethical and exactly the opposite of what should be urged for. Still, literature about the Holocaust is written; it is read, and testimonies have been given. Dresden opposes Adorno's objections to poetry after, and George Steiner's rejection of fiction about the Holocaust. An argumentation which has dominated the debate and favoured memoirs, testimonies, historical studies, and factual documentation over fiction and poetry, as if style, composition, and literary techniques would make the accounts of the Holocaust less troubling and disturbing. However, according to Dresden language by definition cannot exist without interpretation: memoirs, as well as testimonies, incorporate an element of fiction and form, he urges. Therefore, literary qualification of Holocaust literature should not be avoided. Dresden argues scholarly criticism should concentrate on literary form; form not as beautification or ornamentation, but in its capability of involving the reader in a reality which cannot be affected by mere facts. With its quality of fragmentation, literature is capable of exposing the gap between the reader and what is read. Fragmentation forces the reader to be ethically involved in what he reads. Against Adorno's quotation Dresden cites Günther Anders: 'Nur durch fictio kann das faktum, nur durch Einzelfälle das Unabzählbare deutlich und unvergessbar gemacht werden.'

### *Specific perspectives*

The scholars discussed above reflected on and took into account the whole corpus of Holocaust literature. However, from the 1990s onwards scholars have narrowed down their research by focusing e.g. on specific genres, countries or by choosing a specific perspective. For the present study, a few of these perspectives are worthwhile considering here. From gender-studies a certain revulsion occurred against the invisibility of women's experiences and visions during the Holocaust. The argument which has become dominant in gender studies is that the experiences of women in concentration camps differed profoundly from men's experiences: according to these scholars women's fear of sexual harassment made them physically more vulnerable. Moreover, female testimonies underline the importance of relationships within the camps. Scholars such as Ellen Fine, Myrna Goldenberg, and Dalia Ofer, argue that women were better capable of relating to and supporting other inmates; there was more solidarity among women in the concentration camps.<sup>79</sup> Lawrence Langer, sharply criticizes these argumentations and urges that in due course solidarity among women did not prevent them from being gassed or killed. According to him it is unethical using Holocaust

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<sup>79</sup> Siertsema, *Uit de diepten*, 66.

studies for feminist goals.<sup>80</sup> Sara Horowitz has a more balanced reaction and argues that gender differences play a role in stories and accounts of Holocaust survivors – as we will see in Ruth Klüger’s novel – but narrowing down the experiences of Jewish women to be solely gender specific would contribute to the marginalization of these women’s experience.<sup>81</sup>

For long, truth claims or at least claims of authenticity – the writer being evaluated on his true intentions – were dominant in the field of Holocaust literature. These claims seem contradictory to the literary trend of post modernism that consciously bewilders reality and fantasy and disrupts the idea of absolute truths. When speaking or writing about Auschwitz – regarded by many as the manifestation of sheer evil – post modern relativism seems out of place. However, on the other hand, Auschwitz is often related to the emergence of post modernism: the mere fact that grand scale genocide took place on European grounds undermined every meta story or grand narrative of western civilization. Sidra Ezrahi distinguishes two approaches to the Holocaust in which the tension between relativism and absolute truth is visible. The first absolutist approach to Auschwitz perceives the Holocaust as a unique and incomparable event, which is a never ending offence to humanity and even though it happened in the past, still continues. This approach prefers documentary literature written in present tense as best form of representing the Holocaust. The second dynamic and relativistic approach characterizes every attempt in remembering Auschwitz as a strategy to come to terms with the Holocaust over and over again.<sup>82</sup> A stance, which favours fiction and is often visible in second generation literature. Second generation literature has become a distinct genre and is often defined as literature from children of survivors or more broadly from all post war Jewish writers.<sup>83</sup> However, since the distinctive features of the genre and the limited scope of this research, second generation literature will not be included in the analyses.

In *Die Shoah erzählt. Zeugnis und Experiment in der Literatur* Elrud Ibsch outlines the wider temporal developments in Holocaust literature. Since the titles selected for the corpus and considered in the analyses stem from different decennia, it is worthwhile briefly mentioning the different stages: Elrud Ibsch starts off with the eyewitness’s testimonies of e.g. Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi and Jean Améry in the first decennia after the war. Authenticity in these testimonies is not so much connected to objectivity of the written facts, but much more

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<sup>80</sup> Ibidem, 67.

<sup>81</sup> Ibidem, 67; Sara R. Horowitz, *Voicing the the void. Muteness and memory in Holocaust fiction*, (New York, 1997) 364-377.

<sup>82</sup> Sicher, *The Holocaust novel*, 121-154.

<sup>83</sup> Siertsema, *Uit de diepten*, 72.



to the selection of and the perspective on the described facts. Then, she focuses on George Tabori and Imre Kertész – who will be discussed later on – as examples of autobiographical fiction. A fictionalized autobiography provides the authors with more freedom to combine historical elements and reflections. After discussing historical debates on representation and the (im)possibility of representing the Holocaust historically, Elrud Ibsch leads the reader into postmodernism as it is manifest in literature of mostly second generation writers. Interestingly, she also refers to Edgar Hilsenrath's work, a first generation writer whose literature will be included in the analyses. Furthermore, Ibsch argues that Holocaust literature has shifted from the margins to the centre of literary debates. For long Holocaust was an isolated subgenre with its own canon not reflected upon by literary critics. This ended when Holocaust literature was no longer bound up with the documentary genre. Literature about Auschwitz inevitably touches upon the boundaries of language and the (un)imaginable. Dominated by postmodern theories, these themes and thereby Holocaust literature are at the centre of literary discourse.<sup>84</sup>

Until recently, research on Holocaust literature focused on specific motifs and themes. In this line of research diaries written in the camps were interpreted as means of mental survival: through writing the authors, robbed from their humanity, made an attempt to interpret the chaos they had to live in day by day. In similar research the motivation of writing memoirs is regarded as informed by remembering and honouring the dead, seeking for revenge or informing and warning future generations. Only since the 1990s attention was drawn to Holocaust literature as a means of finding a way to live with an unintelligible trauma.<sup>85</sup> In writing for a public, in bearing witness, the victims were forced to regain the self.<sup>86</sup> Within this context Jacq Vogelaar distinguishes *immediate experience* from *reflected experience*. Only by overcoming the dehumanizing regime in the camps and afterwards, only by separating the self from the camps, the authors were capable of reflecting upon his or her experience.<sup>87</sup> The mere act of writing changed the individual and the individual's experience and observations. For the reader, remembrance exposes the gap between the past and the present and thereby opening the trauma and coming to terms with it over and over again. In a wider perspective, Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin speak of die 'modifizierende Kraft

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<sup>84</sup> Elrud Ibsch, *Die Shoah erzählt. Zeugnis und experiment in der Literatur*, (Tübingen, 2004).

<sup>85</sup> Important in exploring this theme was the project initiated by the Yale University: Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies. Dori Laub was the first scholar addressing the therapeutic aspect of bearing witness in *Testimony. Crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalyses and history* (New York, London 1992). Important scholars on Holocaust literature – Lawrence Langer, Shoshanna Feldman, Dominick LaCapra, and Ernst van Alphen – elaborated on the therapeutic aspect of Holocaust art.

<sup>86</sup> Siertsema, *Uit de diepten*, 98.

<sup>87</sup> Vogelaar, *Over kampliteratuur*.

des Eingedenkens', with the possibility of 'das Abgeschlossene (das Leid) zu einem Unabgeschlossenen zu machen'.<sup>88</sup> In this line of reasoning, remembrance opens ways which were initially closed off. Questions of theodicy then, can be arrived at in a non-theoretical way. Whereas rational frameworks of theodicy inevitably lead to an aporia, literature can be capable of opening questions that seem to be blocked; to find a *modus vivendi* for questions about God and suffering.

As indicated before, the debates about God, evil and suffering, and Judaism, changed dramatically after the Holocaust, which informed Braiterman to characterize the theological debate as antitheodic. Whereas before the War, there was a tradition of justifying God in the face of the world's suffering, after the War there was a strong resistance against addressing theodicy. While not searching for a justification of or a systematic approach to the question how the existence of God could be related to the Holocaust, many writers of memoirs, fiction, and essays have addressed the themes of Judaism, suffering, evil, and God. The camps not only undermined their feeling of individuality, but also ruptured and questioned how they looked at the world and thought about God. While writing, authors not only regained their individuality, but were forced to reflect on more existential questions; questions that could never be answered convincingly; questions that seemed to be closed off. However, in line with Lawrence Langer and LaCapra, one could say that by the act of addressing these questions openings may be found.

While finding a *modus vivendi* for questions about God and suffering was more urgent for religious Jews, several 'secular' Jewish authors – confronted with questions of identity and Judaism – addressed themes of God, evil, and suffering in their literary work: while some were confirmed in their secular position due to the war, others found themselves losing their faith in a covenantal God as a consequence of their experiences during the Holocaust. At the same time, the different positions are often characterized by ambiguity: while in disbelief some authors remain addressing questions to or about God. However, to get a better understanding of the 'secular' author's positions, it is important to look at the concept 'secular' and its implications more closely. What is defined as secular is related to definitions of religion, both concepts being under continuous criticism. Moreover, within Judaism culture, identity, and religion are very much intertwined, which makes a closer look at the position of the Jews before World War II necessary. Due to the emancipation of 19<sup>th</sup> century Jewry, Jewish self understanding had changed dramatically.

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<sup>88</sup> H. J. Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus. Aufsätze und Vorträge zur Religionsphilosophie*, (Kampen, 1995).

## Defining secular in relation to 'religion' and modern Judaism

In his study *Rethinking modern Judaism* M. Eisen argues that for modern Judaism the implications of emancipation – by which he means the assumption of new sorts of selfhood by Jews in radically altered social and economic order – cannot be overestimated.<sup>89</sup> The process of integration and acculturation of mainly Western and Central European Jews had a severe impact on forms of Jewish self-understanding.<sup>90</sup> Traditional Judaism and Jewry did not distinguish between religion and nation (or people) – the Hebrew had no word for the equivalent Latin *religio*. However, 19<sup>th</sup> century emancipation changed traditional understandings of Judaism dramatically. Dan Michman characterizes three different forms of Jewish self understanding. On the one hand there was a definition of Judaism as religion only, either Orthodox or Liberal – in the second chapter of the thesis authors will be discussed who would fit this category. On the other hand Zionist and Autonomist Jews defined Judaism as nation only. The third group, that became very important in the modern period of pre-war Europe, consisted of Jews who wanted to integrate themselves into the local nation-state and refused to be national Jews.<sup>91</sup> Though for long pre-war Jewish Western European culture has been identified as completely assimilated, it was only a small minority that actually did fully assimilate. The majority of Western European Jews wanted to keep some of the attributes of Jewishness, which were both related to religion and culture. What took place was a formation of a new kind of private, domestic Judaism in which Jewish women played a pivotal role as upholders of both Jewish tradition and *Bildung*.<sup>92</sup> The authors discussed in the third chapter belong to this group of (highly) acculturated Jews.

While Eisen underscores the importance of emancipation for Jewish self understanding, he argues that the role of Enlightenment has not been as predominant among Jews in their negotiation of modernity as is often suggested. For long, the meta-story of modern Judaism was centred around Enlightenment's challenges to Judaism: by adopting Enlightenment notions of a new and rational worldview Jews would have cast off traditional beliefs in God and revelation and quite naturally modified the performance of inherited

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<sup>89</sup> Arnold M. Eisen, *Rethinking modern Judaism*, (Chicago, London, 1997) 3.

<sup>90</sup> Dan Michman makes the distinction between integrated *Westjuden* and the shtetl *Ostjuden* Whereas this is a somewhat blunt distinction, which has been under criticism, Eastern European countries had many vivid autonomic Jewish communities, whereas Central and Western European Jews were more often integrated into the hegemonic society.

<sup>91</sup> Dan Michman, 'Jewish identity in interwar Europe. Between acculturation, democratization and rising antisemitism,' in: Stephanie McMahon-Kaye, ed., *The memory of the Holocaust in the 21st century. The challenge for education* (Jerusalem, 2001) 35-47.

<sup>92</sup> Pascale R. Bos, *German-Jewish literature in the wake of the Holocaust. Grete Weil Ruth Klüger, and the politics of address*, (New York, 2005) 8-11.

commandments. Eisen underlines the favouring of belief over practice in this view. He urges for a new understanding of ritual, which is not informed by theories based on what he calls protestant notions of ritual and the sacred. His criticism on intellectualist approaches of religion, which favours belief over practice, is comparable to other more general critiques on dominant ideas about secularization and religion. Secularization as a teleological development wherein religion stands in opposition to modernity and Enlightenment and in which religion would completely withdraw from the public sphere, has been severely criticized by scholars like Danièle Hervieu-Léger and Callum Brown. They have reshaped the idea of secularization as a ‘process’ to see individuals and societies engage in an evolving and changing relationship with religion.<sup>93</sup> Both authors focus on the actual practice of religion: how it shapes the way people think and act and how that has changed constantly, yet not teleological, during the past centuries.

The current study will not take religious practice into account: by analyzing the works of Jewish authors, the study actually focuses on intellectual history. Therefore, bearing in mind Eisen’s critical arguments, it is not intended to make claims on Jewish religious life in general. In addition, while using the term secular, connotations of secularization theory – in which there is an unavoidable opposition between rationality, modernity on the one hand and religion on the other – will be avoided. For the present analyses ‘secular’ will be understood as a disbelief of the (covenantal) God in which ambiguous positions are possible. If secular authors come to some form of religiosity it is disconnected from traditional religious notions. In this context a normative atheistic viewpoint would be defined as a secularist stance in which there is little room for ambiguity on this subject matter.

### **Corpus, literary forms, and interpretation**

Holocaust literature is by definition an international genre. Therefore, within this study authors born in different countries – France, Germany, Holland, Lithuania, Hungaria – will be addressed. The analysis mainly focuses on Central and Western European Jewish authors, since before and after the War secular Jews were overrepresented there. After the War some authors immigrated to countries outside Europe; these authors will be included as well. Given the scope of the research second generation literature – which is defined as Holocaust literature, but characterized as a distinct genre as well – will not be taken into account. The same goes for Jewish authors living outside of Europe during the Holocaust. The study will

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<sup>93</sup> Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *La religion pour mémoire*, (Paris, 1993); Callum Brown, *The death of Christian Britain*, (London, 2001).

exclusively explore literature from Holocaust survivors, for whom existential questions became most pressing and urgent.

On top of Holocaust literature's international character, it is also not connected to one particular genre, but consists of different literary forms: memoirs, fictional autobiographies, biographies, literary essays, fiction. In line with Dresden's argument that every literary testimony contains an element of fiction, this study will not favour non-fiction over fiction and takes into account fiction as well as memoirs and biographies. Essays written by the selected novelists will be addressed as far as they verify, clarify or confirm ideas depicted in the fictional literature. However, analysing different genres on their different theological implications is a slippery expedition. Precisely the thing that makes literary reflections on the Holocaust more interesting than for example a scholarly theological exposition, also makes it difficult to interpret: literature does not build systems but creates dynamic worlds sustained by literary forms wherein paradoxical argumentations or positions coexist. Defining the position of the implied author of the text goes back and forth between reader and text and is by definition never ending. Moreover, an awareness of different modes of literary representation of ideas cannot be avoided.<sup>94</sup> How does a line of argument come to the fore? Is it a particular character exploring certain ideas or is the position of the implied author to be recognized in the construction of the narrative? How is the form of the text connected to its supposed content. The literary elements of the texts will be addressed insofar as they are possibly connected to the point of view of the implied author.

As this study is concerned with reflections on the implication of the Holocaust on existential questions in literature, 'Holocaust literature' will not be reduced to literature depicting camp life.<sup>95</sup> It involves all literature written by Holocaust survivors wherein reflections on the implication of the Holocaust comes to the fore. Whereas discussions have risen whether it is possible to make literary qualifications of Holocaust literature, in the past decennia a corpus of 'literary' texts have emerged. Without engaging with the discussion on the possibility of literary qualifications, the titles incorporated in the analyses are considered 'literature' within the field of Holocaust literature.<sup>96</sup> It falls out of the scope of this research to address the history of reception of these literary works extensively. However, studies on the

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<sup>94</sup> For the interpretation of the texts I will use the methods and terms of structuralism as it is presented in: Erica van Boven & Gillis Dorleijn, *Literair mechaniek. Inleiding tot analyse van verhalen en gedichten*, (Bussum, 1999).

<sup>95</sup> As E.g. Vogelhaar, *Over kampliteratuur*.

<sup>96</sup> They are mentioned in the works of Langer, Rosenfeld, and Schwarz.

literary texts will be addressed insofar as they provide information on the interpretation of the texts.

Questions about the existence of God in the face of the Holocaust require some form of coherent argumentation. Though the silence of God is often addressed in poetry on the Holocaust – e.g. by Nelly Sachs and Paul Celan – this research will focus on prose, since in general prose is better capable of giving a more or less coherent argumentation, which makes an analysis of the connections between God and suffering more attainable. Presupposing there is a relation between the author's biography and his or her literature, the characterization of the different positions of the authors is both based on their biographical background and the ideas exposed in the literary texts. For the selection of literature written by secular authors addressing God, suffering and Judaism, the encyclopaedia on Holocaust Literature including an index of themes and subjects edited by S. Lillian Kremer was of great use.<sup>97</sup> Nevertheless claiming to give all encompassing answers on the characterization of relevant Holocaust literature written by secular authors would be pretentious and out of scale. However, while reading there is a distinction to make between the different positions.

In the following study I will propose reading the literature in two categories: secular authors with orthodox backgrounds still addressing the God of their ancestors in their work (Abel, J. Herzberg and André Schwarz-bart) and authors from highly acculturated backgrounds radically rejecting God or directing issues on God and suffering in highly individual ways disconnected from traditional notions of God (Imre Kertész, Ruth Klüger, Edgar Hilsenrath). For the sake of the analyses within each category two or three authors will be addressed extensively while it is possible to extend the category with more authors. Furthermore, to avoid superficial analysis the study will concentrate on one or two literary works of each author dealing with issues of God, evil, suffering, and Judaism most extensively. In addition to the main material other works can be addressed as to prevent blunt conclusions and simplifications.

Ideas about God, evil and suffering are inevitably connected to the implied view of man, view on ethics, and view of God. Therefore the analyses of the selected literary texts will focus on different subjects related to (anti)theodicy: the relation between God and evil/suffering, between God and man, between the self and the other, and between values and facts. Furthermore an intertextual reading is possible addressing religious or philosophical subtexts and analyzing how they are being transformed. These two methods are to be applied

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<sup>97</sup> S. Lillian Kremer, ed., *Holocaust literature. An encyclopedia of writers and their work* (New York, London, 2003).

as complementary. For example, while giving a systematic analyses of Herzberg's *Drie rode rozen* an intertextual reading would be required since the narrative is a retelling of the story of Job. Within each category the texts will be systematically and intertextually analyzed on their existential implications. What is the individual position of each author? What are similarities and difference between the viewpoints within each category? How do the standpoints of each separate category differ from each other? And finally, is there something imaginable binding all texts together? After coming to an interpretation of the authors viewpoints in each category these questions will be readdressed in the conclusion.

## 2. Secular Jewish authors questioning the faith of their forefathers

History comes to us in fragments. Pieces of paper, pictures, texts, objects; traces from the past which we try to interpret. Fictional literature could be seen as one of these traces. Nevertheless, an exceptional one: literature as art form does not only emerge within a specific historic context, created by one or more individuals, it has an afterlife. It may become part of a canon, it can be read in different contexts, by different people, with different interpretations. Moreover, fictional texts are by definition multiinterpretational – note in this context the heated debates and controversy that surrounded *Le dernier des justes* right after it was published. Due to the discrepancy between the implied author and the narrator, between narrator and characters, fictional literature is always multilayered. Its interpretation is never clear-cut. It becomes even more complicated when the reader is separated from the literary texts by time. Nevertheless, in the following analyses the selected literature will be approached as remains of the past, as different forms of post-Holocaust reflections. Though every text creates an independent autonomous world, it is also related to its context, to other texts, to specific themes. In this study the texts will be read on the implications of one specific subject, i.e. a religious subject: how do the authors write about the connection between God and suffering and themes connected, such as the nature of man, Judaism, and ethics.

When it comes to history of religion, current research has underlined former negligence of ritual and practice.<sup>98</sup> However, in a recent proposition paper Michael Hoberman argues that since monotheistic theologies are all scripturally-based interpretations of the Word, in the case of monotheism, religious history can be practiced, among others, as a form of literary criticism.<sup>99</sup> On the basis of a working assumption that *the culture*, and not merely *the author*, creates the work of art, he reasons that close reading of theological discourse, even as practiced by elites, can be a proper index of societal complexities, concerns, misgivings, and fears. Without making claims on the representativeness of the selected Jewish authors and texts for Jewish culture in general, the current study confines itself to underlining the mutual influence between author and cultural context. The selected texts can be interpreted as indications for broader cultural developments.

While being aware it is just one way of understanding the material, one way of interpreting particular traces from the past, I propose to distinguish two categories of authors:

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<sup>98</sup> Eisen, *Rethinking modern Judaism*.

<sup>99</sup> Lecture held by Michael Hoberman on 26th April 2010 at the Utrecht University.



secular Jewish authors with orthodox backgrounds and, as we will see, related to Eastern European Judaism, still questioning the God and faith of their ancestors in their post-Holocaust work and authors from highly acculturated backgrounds radically rejecting God or going beyond traditional notions of God and Judaism altogether. Each position will be engaged with in a separate chapter.

Though the analyses of the different intellectual arguments in the selected literature is an important part of the thesis, the literary texts cannot be read solely on their theological or philosophical ideas: while writing, something was at stake for these authors, their personal existence was at stake. As Vogelaar underlines in his study on camp literature, in or after the experiences in the camps which had as its sole purpose complete destruction and total annihilation of the human mind, the act of writing itself is part of the text's content. Writing forced the writer to dissociate himself to some extent from what he was writing about; by doing so, he or she was not completely absorbed by the camp's totalizing life. The writer reclaimed his or her individuality. Therefore, Vogelaar argues, every act of writing is a form of resistance against the totalitarian oppressor.<sup>100</sup> While writing the author had a reader in mind: his or her voice would be heard and would not be silenced. Bearing that in mind, attention is required for the form the author chose to write his or her reflections.

## **Eastern European Judaism**

This first chapter focuses on the works of two authors: Abel J. Herzberg and André Schwarz-Bart. At the end of the chapter Chaim Grade and a few other authors will be addressed very briefly – due to the scope of the research it is not possible to analyse their work at length. However, their work demonstrates the validity of the category; a category consisting of authors who before or after the war distanced themselves from the Jewish faith of their parents and grandparents. At the same time their works demonstrate an urge for finding new ways to relate to that tradition. Interestingly for Herzberg and Schwarz-Bart, as for Chaim Grade, their parent's religious beliefs are connected to Eastern European Jewry. The authors are either children of immigrated Eastern European Jews or have lived in Eastern Europe, each from different places and within different religious traditions: Abel Jacob Herzberg's father, characterized by his son as a 'devout', instead of an orthodox Jew,<sup>101</sup> immigrated from Latvia to Amsterdam at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His mother and her family fled from the pogroms in Lithuania to the capital of the Netherlands in 1882. They were followers of the

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<sup>100</sup> Vogelaar, *Over kampliteratuur*, , 639-642.

<sup>101</sup> Abel J. Herzberg, 'Brieven aan mijn kleinzoon. De geschiedenis van een joodse immigrantenfamilie,' *Verzameld werk 2* (first edition 1964; Amsterdam, 1993).

Chabad movement which was an offspring of Chassidism, a mystical revival movement from the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>102</sup> André Schwarz-Bart was born into a Yiddish speaking traditional Polish family. His parents immigrated to France in 1924, a few years before André Schwarz-Bart was born. As for Chaim Grade, he was born in Vilna, Poland, in 1910 and spent his youthful years in yeshiva study. His family belonged to the Mussarists, an ascetic Jewish sect.<sup>103</sup>

Whereas the distinction between Eastern European and Western European Jews has often been oversimplified – shtetl orthodox *Ostjuden* versus assimilated secular *Westjuden* – there are important differences in the degree of emancipation and in their religious life. While exchanges occurred between the Jewish and non-Jewish communities in Eastern Europe, and while not all Jews in Eastern Europe lived in autonomous Jewish communities, it was never possible to emancipate into Eastern European societies as it was in Western and Central Europe during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>104</sup> Indeed, anti-Semitism continued to exist in Western and Central Europe and social emancipation lagged behind the legal opportunities that evolved. Nevertheless, there was a great deal of political emancipation, and, thanks to the democratization process, Jews played an important role in the political sphere including parties and labour unions. While this process of integration and acculturation did not take place on a similar scale in Eastern Europe, the Eastern European Jewish communities were to a greater or lesser extent self sufficient, which had its consequences for Jewish religious life. In Eastern Europe, Jewish religion as diverse as it was – remarkably illustrated by the short summary above – had a more public and recognizable character as opposed to the private Jewish culture and religion in Western Europe. Religious life was thus much more visible and present for Eastern European Jews; it dominated communal life.<sup>105</sup>

Though Herzberg and Schwarz-Bart were born and raised in Western Europe, when speaking of the Jewish religion they mean Eastern European Judaism. In their fictional literature Schwarz-Bart and Herzberg thematize – probably in a romanticized way – the differences between Western and Eastern Judaism,<sup>106</sup> in which they often present Eastern European Judaism as Jewish religious life in general. For this study the authors' depiction of Eastern European Judaism is relevant insofar as it is related to questions about God and

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<sup>102</sup> Arie Kuiper, *Een wijze ging voorbij*, (Amsterdam, 1997) 26-27.

<sup>103</sup> Alexander, *The resonance of the dust*, 247.

<sup>104</sup> Michman, 'Jewish identity in interwar Europe,' 36-38.

<sup>105</sup> Eisen, *Rethinking modern Judaism*.

<sup>106</sup> Herzberg in *Brieven aan mijn kleinzoon. Een geschiedenis van een immigrantenfamilie* and Schwarz-Bart in *Le dernier des justes* (Chaim Grade in *my quarrel with Hersh Rasseynner*).

suffering in their works:<sup>107</sup> e.g. Schwarz-Bart's saga of the Levy family in *Le dernier des justes* serves as synecdoche for the spiritual richness of Eastern European Jewish life before the Holocaust. However, its extinction – visualized in the death of the last of the Just in Auschwitz – disrupts every fundament that had supported the relation between God and his suffering people.

In the case of Schwarz-Bart the Holocaust lead to what he called a 'counterconversion', an abundant hostility toward the Jewish God.<sup>108</sup> In *Le dernier des justes* Schwarz-Bart relates Jewish history – which is most of all Eastern European Jewish history – to questions about God and suffering. Not only Schwarz-Bart, who was only 17 when the Nazis' invaded France and who had lost his faith during the Holocaust, but also Herzberg (and Grade) who had dissociated themselves from Jewish faith before the war, address questions about God and suffering in their literary reflections on the Holocaust. However, the ways in which the individual authors address these questions and the way each author searches for answers differs profoundly. Studying the authors individually on how they write about themes related to theodicy may shed light on the differences, but also on possible similarities. How do they write about God in relation to man, ethics, Judaism, and suffering? In what context and what form does the theme of God and suffering occur? How do the authors differ in their questions and possible answers? Not all the works of Herzberg and Schwarz-Bart can be addressed here; the study will confine itself to the works in which the questions of theodicy come to the fore most prominently: Herzberg's *Tweestromenland* and *Drie rode rozen*, Schwarz-Bart's *Le dernier des justes*.

### **Abel Jacob Herzberg**

In 1964 Herzberg edited and published letters he had written to his grandson the years before. In the letters Herzberg enrolls the history of his immigrant family. When speaking of the journey he made to meet his Russian grandfather in 1911, when he was about 18 years old, Herzberg writes:

'Ik moest juist om zijn oude hart te verkwikken laten zien, hoe vertrouwd ik was met alle ingewikkelde regelen van het verkeersreglement tussen het oude volk en zijn Schepper. Ik kende het. Ik had het als kind in dagelijkse lessen jarenlang geleerd, maar ik was de fijne kneepjes natuurlijk al lang weer vergeten. Ik had daarom een beetje gerepeteerd voor ik naar het heiligdom van Prekulln optrok. (...) Ik heb mijn knieën gebogen waar dat moest, mijn ogen gesloten waar dat te pas kwam en ik heb met drie passen achterwaarts afscheid genomen van

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<sup>107</sup> This relation is more evident in the works of Schwarz-Bart and Chaim Grade than in the works Herzberg.

<sup>108</sup> Alexander, *The resonance of the dust*, 222.

de Heilige, geloofd zij Hij. Het was een afscheid voorgoed. Ik heb nadien nooit of nagenoeg nooit meer op dezelfde voet met Hem gestaan.’<sup>109</sup>

Abel Jacob Herzberg, born in 1893 and raised in a Jewish orthodox immigrant family, was, already in his early youth, attracted to the Zionist movement and slowly departed from his parents’ and grandparents’ Jewish orthodox faith.<sup>110</sup> In 1912 he joined the Dutch Zionist Student Organisation (NZSO) and in 1914 he became the president of the Amsterdam department. While Zionism in the Netherlands never really set foot on the ground Herzberg would never stop devoting himself to the ‘Zionist cause’ in his writings and political engagement.<sup>111</sup> As opposed to most of his Jewish Dutch contemporaries, Herzberg was alarmed and shocked when Hitler seized power in 1933. He had the Russian pogroms of his parents and grandparents fresh in mind and warned the Dutch Jews for underestimating anti-Semitism. According to Herzberg, the Jews would never be able to live in human dignity as long as they would not have their own state.<sup>112</sup> Unlike many Jewish Dutchman, Herzberg expressed his identity as primary Jewish: not a religious, but a political identity. Herzberg’s Jewish self understanding had shifted from what Eisen called ‘Judaism as religion only’ to ‘Judaism as nation only’.<sup>113</sup> As opposed to his parents Herzberg raised his children, not with Shabbat, but with Zionism.<sup>114</sup>

While being a ‘nonbeliever’<sup>115</sup>, in his literary reflections on the Holocaust, Herzberg relates to questions about God and Jewish suffering at length. The novella *Drie rode rozen*, which was published in 1975, deals exclusively with the question why misfortune and

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<sup>109</sup> Abel J. Herzberg, *Verzameld werk 2*, (Amsterdam, 1993) 266-267.

To console his old heart, I had to demonstrate my familiarity with the complicated traffic regulations between the old people and their Creator. I knew them. They were taught to me in daily lessons when I was a child, but I had forgotten the exact tricks of the trade long ago. Therefore, before I went to Prekulln’s sanctuary, I had rehearsed them for a bit. (...) I have bent my knees, where it was required, closed my eyes when necessary and with three steps backwards I have bid farewell to the Holy, praised be He. It was a parting for good. Since then, I have never been on an equal footing with Him. (translation Matthea Westerduin; there is no published English translation available.)

<sup>110</sup> Whereas Abel Herzberg’s father wanted to acculturate into Dutch society and send his son to a public school, he raised and taught his children as devout Jews. Abel’s mother and her father never stopped longing for Russia. As asserted in *Brieven aan mijn grootvader* Abel Herzberg spend much of his youth visiting his grandfather, who was dressed as a traditional Eastern European Jew. He was a follower of the Chabad movement; an offspring of Chassidism, a mystical revival movement from the 18th century. (Kuiper, 28-29)

<sup>111</sup> Ironically Herzberg warned against the temptations of Jewish assimilation, since it underestimated latent anti-Semitism existent in every western society. At the same time Herzberg’s participation in politics illustrates Michman’s argument on Jewish acculturation and participation in Western European societies.

<sup>112</sup> Kuiper, *Een wijze ging voorbij*, 58.

<sup>113</sup> Eisen, *Rethinking modern Judaism*, 47. However, as will be pointed out later on, Herzberg’s account of Nazism and anti-Semitism is based on a very specific reading of Judaism as the first monotheistic religion. The emergence of monotheism in Herzberg’s reading is interconnected with the offspring of ethics.

<sup>114</sup> Kuiper, *Een wijze ging voorbij*, 122.

<sup>115</sup> Herzberg, *Verzameld werk 2*, Herzberg, 471.

suffering happens to innocent people: the protagonist Salomon Zeitscheck who has lost eighty members of his family during the Holocaust, initiates a trial with God as its suspect. However, besides this novella Herzberg has produced an extensive oeuvre. To avoid blunt interpretations and to put the novella in a somewhat wider perspective *Tweestromenland. Een dagboek uit Bergen-Belsen* will be taken into account as well. In 1950 the diary was published anonymously in *De Groene Amsterdammer*. In that same year the text was printed in book form with Herzberg's name on the cover. Together with *Amor fati* – seven essays on Bergen Belsen, published in 1946 – it is Herzberg's most renowned work. Both texts are translated in German.<sup>116</sup> *Tweestromenland* was translated in English as well.<sup>117</sup> Since issues on God and suffering are not addressed as extensively in *Amor fati* as in *Tweestromenland*, the previous text will not be taken into account.

In the Dutch media *Tweestromenland* was reviewed extremely positive.<sup>118</sup> *Amor fati*, which was published a few years earlier, had raised aggressive reactions among Jewish readers: they criticized Herzberg's argument that national-socialism was a universal, instead of a distinctively German problem. They blamed Herzberg for creating too much sympathy for the Germans. One of the two most prominent Jewish Dutch periodicals ignored *Amor fati* altogether, the other wrote: 'Het is niet genoeg hem [de vijand] objectief te beelden als een wezen dat niet anders zijn kan, want zo is het niet. (...) Hij moet, met de edelsten onder de Nimrods, nagejaagd worden tot de doodsvijand van het leven in een dode vijand veranderd is.'<sup>119</sup> *Tweestromenland*, on the other hand, was praised for its intensity in both Jewish and non-Jewish Dutch press: 'kan de werkelijkheid dan nog schrijnender zijn geweest dan het relaas van Herzberg?'<sup>120</sup> Despite these positive reviews Herzberg's public performances were often controversial among both Jews and non-Jews, for example when he defended the leaders of the Jewish council.<sup>121</sup>

When *Drie rode rozen* was published at the end of the 1970s, Herzberg's publisher referred to the novella as the only story, the only real story Herzberg had ever written.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Abel J. Herzberg, *Amor Fati. Sieben Aufsätze über Bergen-Belsen*, (Wittingen, 1997); Abel J. Herzberg, *Zweistromenland. Tagebuch aus Bergen-Belsen*, (Wittingen, 1997).

<sup>117</sup> Abel J. Herzberg, *Between two streams. A diary from Bergen Belsen*, (London, 1997)

<sup>118</sup> Kuiper, *Een wijze ging voorbij*, 379.

<sup>119</sup> It is not enough to portray him [the enemy] objectively as if he could not be any different, because it is not so. [...] He must, together with the most noble men among the Nimrods, be hunted until the deathly enemy of life has become a dead enemy.

Quote from periodical *NIW* (New Israelite Weekly) 1948 in: *Ibidem*, 289.

<sup>120</sup> Could reality be more cruel as it is depicted in Herzberg's story?

Quote from *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant* 1951 in: *Ibidem*, 380.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibidem*, 313.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibidem*, 382.

Herzberg stated in an interview that he had struggled throughout his life with the question how religiosity is connected to the human psyche: religion is as old as humanity, but where does it come from? These questions were at the centre of the novella.<sup>123</sup> Whereas *Drie rode rozen* was reviewed positively, its criticism depended for a greater part on the reviewers' attitude towards religion. An attitude that was often negative or indifferent among journalists in the 1970s. Some critics praised Herzberg for his wisdom and existential reflections. He was called the city's only mystic. Others casted off the philosophical reflections, but admired the literary qualities of Herzberg's description of the protagonist's hiding experience.<sup>124</sup> Interestingly, Herzberg reacted aggressively towards that comment. For him there was more at stake than literary qualifications. Herzberg regarded himself as 'a guest in literature': he was not a 'regular' writer. He had written the novella as to reveal that humans cannot live without philosophical foundations.<sup>125</sup>

In the wider temporal developments of Holocaust literature, *Tweestromenland* would fit in what Elrud Ibsch characterizes as the eyewitness's testimonies of e.g. Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi and Jean Améry, published in the first decennia after the war. *Tweestromenland* is exceptional in that it is written during Herzberg's imprisonment in Bergen-Belsen. *Drie rode rozen*, published two decennia after *Tweestromenland*, is as fictional novella far removed from the documentary genre. Whereas it is not a fictional autobiography – which Ibsch characterizes as the dominant genre succeeding the documentary genre – it nevertheless illustrates the shift in Holocaust literature from eyewitness's testimonies to fictional novels. Since Herzberg's oeuvre is – for the greater part – not translated in English his work has not become part of the (anglican) canon of Holocaust literature, which makes it even more interesting to compare Herzberg's novels with internationally more renown works.

### ***Between two streams, polytheism versus monotheism***

In 1944 Abel Herzberg and his wife were deported from Westerbork to Bergen-Belsen. At first they hoped to enlist for an immigration to Palestine in an exchange between Jewish convicts and German prisoners in allied countries. In Bergen-Belsen they stayed in a *Sternlager*, which was meant for exchanges between the allied and the Germans and had certain privileges: family members were not completely separated. As opposed to the other camps its policy was not complete annihilation. However, eventually only 30 percent of the imprisoned would survive the war. In April 1944 Abel Herzberg and his wife were registered

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<sup>123</sup> Ibidem, 382.

<sup>124</sup> Ibidem, 589.

<sup>125</sup> Ibidem, 588.

for an immigration to Palestine, but due to unknown circumstances, the transport left without them. Herzberg, being committed to the Zionist movement ever since he was a student, was deeply disappointed. From that day onwards he started to write a diary, which was illegal in the camps.<sup>126</sup> The notes and observations were meant to be used for a more complete depiction of what had happened in Bergen-Belsen, which Herzberg wanted to write after the war – if he would ever survive the camp.<sup>127</sup> When writing, Herzberg thus did not make private notes; he had a reader, a public, in mind. In his foreword Herzberg urges he published the diary in remembrance to those who had not survived; so that their story would not be forgotten, would be told over and over again. When going into Herzberg's writing about God, Judaism, and suffering, it is important to bear in mind Vogelaar's argument, that the act of addressing a reader in the midst of barren circumstances is part of the book's content.

The diary covers the period from 11<sup>th</sup> August 1944 to 26<sup>th</sup> April 1945 and consists of two different kinds of text: the narrative parts, and the reflective parts. They differ profoundly in style. The colliding sentences of the narrative concerning camp life are short and elliptic. The form reinforces its content, describing the barren experiences in the camp: 'Vandaag is Hans L. gestorven. Keeltuberculose. Dat hadden we ook nooit gedacht. Vader in Polen, broer in Barneveld, nu in Theresienstadt of wie weet waar elders. Voor het eerst vriest het. Het is beter dan dat eeuwige vocht. Maar verwarming is er niet. De stemming is zeer slecht.'<sup>128</sup> As opposed to the narrative parts, the style of the reflective parts is fluent; the sentences are long and stylistic. In these introspective texts Herzberg addresses questions about the relation between God, Judaism, ethics and suffering. When God is referred to in the narrative parts, it is mostly in exclamations,<sup>129</sup> e.g. on 19<sup>th</sup> December Herzberg writes: 'Mijn God, mijn God hoelang nog? Menigeen heeft de hoop opgegeven. Elke dag doden. Elke dag crematies.'<sup>130</sup>

Herzberg, trained in law, focuses extensively on justice and ethics in his reflections, which seems to be informed by his particular reading of Judaism and anti-Semitism. In 'Tussen kruis en hakenkruis', which was published in 1934, some of these thoughts were already put to the fore. However, by writing down these thoughts in Bergen-Belsen they

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<sup>126</sup> Siertsema, *Uit de diepten*, 127-128 and Herzberg, *Verzameld werk 2*, 65.

<sup>127</sup> Herzberg, *Verzameld werk 2*, 65 (foreword to *Tweestromenland*).

<sup>128</sup> *Ibidem*, 196.

Today Hans L. died. Laryngeal tuberculosis. That, too, we had never expected. Father in Poland, brother in Barneveld, now in Theresienstadt or who knows where? The first frost has arrived. It is better than constant dampness. There is no heating, though. The mood is very bad. (translated by Jack Santcross, in: *Between two streams. A diary from Bergen-Belsen* (New York 1997).

<sup>129</sup> Given its form these texts are to be called exclamations, but due to their desperate and urgent undertone I will speak of exclamations.

<sup>130</sup> Herzberg, *Verzameld werk 2*, 211.

My God, my God, how much longer? Many have given up hope.

obtain painful urgency. *Tweestromenland* seems to refer to two possible ways which can be followed by each individual: ‘Elk mens heeft in zijn werk de keus tussen twee wegen. (...) Hij kan zichzelf zoeken, dat is één weg, hij kan ook de zaak zoeken die hij dienen wil.’<sup>131</sup> The forces of Nazism were those which sought for personal gain by destroying the other. Herzberg’s work is suffused with the urgency of ethics and man’s responsibility; binding one’s instincts and in seeking for what is right. Herzberg’s view of Judaism, as the first monotheistic religion, his view of God, and man, is completely intertwined with his ideas about ethics: ‘Monotheïsme is de grote geestelijke prestatie van het joodse volk,’ Herzberg urges on 5<sup>th</sup> September 1944<sup>132</sup> The Jews, Herzberg states, have singled out monotheism as the only truth. And when God is described as one and eternal, man is completely responsible for his deeds. Whereas polytheism chooses power over justice, monotheism enforces justice and ethics: ‘God is één, is daarom identiek met de eis ener ethiek’,<sup>133</sup> Herzberg concludes.

While being in the midst of death and hunger Herzberg continues thinking through the consequences of his arguments. He underlines the singular position of the Jews – who will never stop asking the painful question: ‘Kaïn, Kaïn waar is uw broeder Abel?’ –<sup>134</sup> but he also raises his arguments to a more philosophical level. Psychologically there are only two religious types, he argues: monotheistic and polytheistic. Each individual, the Nazi as much as the Jew, bears in his soul a polytheistic and monotheistic type – Herzberg thus, does not make an essentialist distinction between the oppressors and the oppressed. However, Judaism as the historical manifestation of monotheism has chosen to restrict and confine its polytheistic drifts. Whereas Europe and America have accepted monotheism in its Christian belief, the heathen drifts in each individual soul burn by their imprisonment. The chains of monotheism are hated and even more so the one who has imprisoned the drifts and selfish instincts. Herzberg concludes: the Jews are not hated because they have killed Christ, but because they brought about Christ. Christ, though less Jew than any other Jew, is banished and doomed 2000 years after he died, because he was Jew.<sup>135</sup> Anti-Semitism, Herzberg argues, is the hate people bear in their soul against their captors: the Jews.<sup>136</sup> This reflective, more abstract

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<sup>131</sup> Ibidem, 28.

Every individual can choose between two roads that stretch out before him. (...) He can chose his own ego over others, that is one way, he can also search for a concern he wishes to pursuit.

<sup>132</sup> Ibidem, 118.

Monotheism is the great spiritual achievement of the Jewish nation.

<sup>133</sup> Ibidem, 117.

God is One, is therefore identical with the requirements of an ethic.

<sup>134</sup> Ibidem, 118.

Cain, Cain, where is your brother Abel.

<sup>135</sup> Ibidem, 117,118.

<sup>136</sup> Later on we will see a similar argument in the text of André Schwarz-Bart.



passage obtains its importance even more while it is enclosed in Herzberg's descriptions of the daily camp life: the concrete consequences of Nazis' 'polytheistic triumph': 7<sup>th</sup> September 'Hij zond allen aan het werk. Mannen tot tachtig jaar, zieken met negenendertig en veertig graden koorts. (...) Het crematorium kreeg vandaag maar één geval. Een koopje.'<sup>137</sup>

As in Schwart-Bart's narrative, Herzberg connects the particular history of Judaism to suffering. He urges: at first the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was not unique in comparison to the gods of the surrounding people. He had to make war, which should have led to victories. Israel's God initiated wars, but generally he did not win them. Then, Herzberg argues somewhere else in his diary, something significant happened. Normally when a god had lost a war in the surrounding nations, it meant he was weaker than the other gods; his rituals were being abolished and the national culture would assimilate into the nation of victory. However, when Israel's God was defeated during the war, He was not blamed for being weak. Exactly the opposite did happen: His priests and prophets praised Him as wholly Good and Righteous. Not God, but the Israelites were made responsible. 'Aan U, o Heer, de rechtvaardigheid, aan ons de schaamte van het gelaat',<sup>138</sup> the Israelites declared. Their priests and prophets pleaded for justice instead of power, which they lacked. This claim of absolute righteousness, of responsibility in the face of the Eternal, is what caused their despair and persecutions. Since then the Jewish history is a history of suffering, Herzberg urges: their voice was hated because they would not stop exclaiming: 'Kaïn, Kaïn, waar is uw broeder Abel?'.<sup>139</sup>

In these reflective parts God is described as an abstract foundation for righteousness: the source of ethics. Based on this idea of Judaism's nature, the suffering of the Jews during the Holocaust cannot be blamed upon God. Herzberg has distanced himself from the faith in an intervening, almighty God, which would raise questions of theodicy. In Herzberg's argument on monotheism and polytheism, suffering and evil are, above all, prevailing consequences of man's negligence of the monotheistic urge for ethics. Interestingly, while being Zionist, Herzberg remains defining the Jewish identity as religious: 'de godsdienst, dat is de joodse eenheid'.<sup>140</sup> At the same time Herzberg writes: 'ik zeg het, hoewel ik de oude

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<sup>137</sup> Herzberg, *Verzameld werk 2*, 121.

He sent everyone to work. Men up to eighty years of age, sick people with thirty-nine and forty degrees of temperature. (...) The crematorium received only one victim today. A bargain.

<sup>138</sup> Ibidem, 120.

To You, oh Lord, righteousness, to us shame.

<sup>139</sup> Ibidem, 121.

Cain, Cain, where is your brother Abel?

<sup>140</sup> Ibidem, 115-116

Indeed, the religion, that is the Jewish unity.

godsdiens zelf niet belijdt en toch op mijn aandeel in de joodse eenheid aanspraak maakt.<sup>141</sup> The narrative parts call to mind a somewhat different view of God. Herzberg often invokes God's name, implicitly addressing a personal God. The meaning of these exclamations probably resembles Herzberg's explanation of similar pleas of his inmates 'En menigeen zucht 'God zij met ons'. En hij verzucht zulks nog niet eens, omdat hij er iets mee bedoelt, maar om zijn hart lucht te geven en om vrede te vinden met zijn volledige machteloosheid.'<sup>142</sup> However, when the circumstances worsen, Herzberg's exclamations to God intensify; this does not go for the reflective parts.<sup>143</sup> His texts remain ambivalent: Herzberg's outcries to God are often ironical: 'Zon, zon. God, geef ons ten minste een beetje zon. Het is het minste. Antwoord: regen, regen, regen.' Still, his longing for an intervening God seems to grow: 'Grote God, maak een eind aan onze verschrikkingen. Ik smeek je.'<sup>144</sup> Herzberg addresses God while at the same time arguing: 'Wat praten wij toch altijd over God, in Wie wij vertrouwen moeten hebben? God helpt alleen, als wij Hem helpen. Hij woont in ons en heeft ons van Zijn grote warmte gegeven.'<sup>145</sup> It seems as though Herzberg's longing for an intervening God increases: a personal God whom He at the same time rejects and invokes. It illustrates the ambiguous character of the text.

Whereas one could ask whether Herzberg's essentialist view on Judaism and anti-Semitism – monotheism versus polytheism – is historically justified, this notion is at the core of, and endorses his writings on ethics. It provides a perspective for hoping for a future for the Jews: 'En opnieuw is er een 'rest die terugkeert'. Opnieuw staat in ons midden op de stem der profeten en in ons hart de zang van de dichter.'<sup>146</sup> Herzberg's own account is itself an urge for ethics. He engages with his reader by rhetorical questions. Choosing this literary form implies that Herzberg urges to include the reader in the things he writes about, though separated by time and space: his experiences should still concern the reader living in a post-

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<sup>141</sup> Ibidem, 115.

I say it, even though I myself do not profess the ancient religion, yet still lay claim to my share of Jewish unity.

<sup>142</sup> Ibidem, 184.

And many a person sighs 'God be with us'. And he sighs it not so much because he means anything by it, but to vent his heart and to come to terms with his utter powerlessness.

<sup>143</sup> Siertsema, *Uit de diepten*, 138.

<sup>144</sup> Herzberg, *Verzameld werk 2*, 226.

Sun, sun, God, give us a little sun at least. It is the least. Reply: rain, rain, rain.

<sup>145</sup> Ibidem, 90.

Why do we always talk about God, in Whom we should place our trust? God helps only when we help Him. He lives inside us and has given His great warmth.

=> Note: A similar line of reasoning is to be found in the works of Etty Hillesum.

<sup>146</sup> Ibidem, 121.

And once again there is a 'remnant that returns'. Again there rises in our midst the voice of the prophets and in our heart the song of the poet.

Holocaust era. And whereas Herzberg's experiences had brought him into despair, they did not force him into a nihilist attitude.

'Ik heb een stukje spek gegeten en een beetje suiker. En de wereld heeft weer perspectief – geluk. Ik heb geen honger meer. Ik heb weer geloof. Is het beschamend? (...) Erst kommt das Fressen, Und dann kommt die Moral.' En toch is dat niet waar. Er is Moral overgebleven in het diepst van onze verwerping. We vervuilen als koeien en varkens; we doen onze behoefte waar we staan. (...) Er wordt gestolen, veel en vaak, en toch wordt het niet aanvaard, maar verworpen. Toch is de sociale houding *niet* kapot.<sup>147</sup>

Herzberg signals the rapid erosion of morality in the camps, but in his texts he always seeks for explanations for that behaviour.<sup>148</sup> Moreover, Herzberg seems to be able to uphold the idea of an absolute foundation for ethics, God(?) – which is for him at the core of Judaism – because even in the camps the moral conscience among his inmates was not completely destroyed. Because the possibility for righteousness was not annihilated by the camps dehumanizing and destructive politics, Judaism's call for righteousness was not destroyed. Whereas the Holocaust has ruptured traditional notions of man and ethics, testifying about the morality of Herzberg's inmates, implies that an urge for ethics is still to be heard in a post-Holocaust future.

Herzberg's descriptions of the camp life are as urgent as his reflective parts. Sometimes they problematize the reflective parts: e.g. right after Herzberg's contemplations on Yom Kippur wherein he celebrates the unity among the Jews, he writes 29<sup>th</sup> September 'Slecht is de stemming onder de joden in het kamp.'<sup>149</sup> The narrative parts illustrate what man, both oppressor and oppressed, is capable of. At the same time some individual stories show that there is still morality in the camps: 'hommage à toi, jij klein meisje (...) wat zou je graag een beetje melk hebben. Maar je kunt niet duwen. Je doet het niet. Niemand heeft het ooit gezegd. Maar als je morgen de melk gaat halen voor Siegie, je broertje? Wat doe je dan? Dan bijt je op je lippen en dringt en duwt. En je leert voorgoed: het is werkelijke mogelijk

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<sup>147</sup> Ibidem, 211.

I have eaten a piece of bacon and a little sugar. And the world has perspective – happiness. I no longer feel hungry. I have faith again. Is it humiliating? (...) 'Erst kommt das Fressen, Und dann kommt die Moral.' Nevertheless, it is not true. At the lowest point of our rejection 'Moral' did remain. We are becoming as filthy as cows and pigs: we relieve ourselves wherever we happen to be. (...) There is thieving, much and often, and still it is not condoned but condemned. Social conscience has still *not* been broken.

<sup>148</sup> Siertsema, *Uit de diepten*, 147.

<sup>149</sup> Herzberg, *Verzameld werk 2*, 158.

The mood among the Jews in Bergen-Belsen camp is bad.

mensen te onteren.’<sup>150</sup> The quote illustrates the tension between the girl’s morality, taught to her in her youth, and its frailty under life threatening circumstances.

‘Social conscience has still *not* been broken.’ However, one could ask what these demanding considerations are worth for Herzberg and other survivors. The concluding sentences of his diary are filled with emptiness: ‘We zijn ziek. Moe. Hoe is het in Holland? Buiten tjlpen de vogeltjes. In de nacht lig ik wakker en tel de slagen van de klok. Is dat vrijheid?’<sup>151</sup>

### ***Three red roses: tormented fragments and God as thou brother***

While writing extensively on suffering, Judaism, and God in his diary, strict theodic questions are only implicitly interwoven in the narrative parts: at times Herzberg calls upon an intervening God. While always ambiguous – Herzberg’s exclamations to the heavens are often ironical or ‘sighs of the heart’ – calling upon God implies he is somehow accountable for the barren life in the camps. The reflective parts, on the other hand, speak of God solely as a foundation for an absolute ethics. In the contexts of the camps then, man, instead of God, is responsible for the suffering and evil. Within this view the question how God could have let this happen to the Jews is irrelevant. However, given the subject of the novella *Drie rode rozen* Herzberg was still concerned with questions about God’s guilt and responsibility. In 1975 he takes up the theme of theodicy in the novella in which he relates to Jewish tradition in general and more specifically to the Jewish tradition of the chutzpah. Salomon Zeitscheck, the story’s protagonist, has lost his wife, all of his children, brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, cousins; eighty people who had not come back from the camps or their hiding places. He and his cousin were the only ones left.

Whereas before the war Simon Zeitscheck was a humble tailor, who in his spare time had read the world’s classics, occasionally having some deep thoughts about different aspects of life, after the war he was consumed with one single thought: why did he have to suffer, why did innocent, guiltless people had to suffer, was there no righteous principal in the universe, and if there was a God, why would he create a world filled with despair and agony? Instead of addressing man – as Herzberg had done in *Tweestromenland* – in *Drie rode rozen*

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<sup>150</sup> Ibidem, 128.

*Hommage à toi*, you little girl, who stands aside, (...) how you would love to have a little milk. But you cannot bring yourself to push. You will not do it. No one has ever told you, but you know how undignified all this is. But what about tomorrow, when you go to collect milk for Siegie, your sick little brother? What do you do then? Then you bite your lips and push and shove. You will learn for always: it really is possible to dishonour people.

<sup>151</sup> Ibidem, 240.

We are ill. Tired. How is it in Holland? Outside, the birds are chirping. I lie awake at night and count the strokes of the clock. Is this freedom?

God is called for his responsibility. If, as Jewish tradition confesses, God is almighty; who then was responsible for the burning of little children? Again the narrative engages with ethics and justice: when the book of Job somewhat coincidentally falls into Simon Zeitscheck's hands, he starts writing *Job de Dulder*, disputing with the enduring and faithful Job. Whereas Job is eventually silenced by the greatness of his God, Simon Zeitscheck urges his cousin in Israel to gather a Sanhedrin and put God for trial. However, before diving into the philosophical arguments, raised by Simon Zeitscheck and the other characters, it is important to underline the significance of the disputes, the dialogues, the discussions as literary forms. They come to define the novella's subject matter: the conflicts, the paradoxes, and schizophrenic attitudes that dominate *Drie rode rozen* are part of the novella's content.

Job and God are not the only ones Simon Zeitscheck is disputing with. When Simon Zeitscheck's wife committed suicide during the war, he started talking to himself. He became as to say two persons who lived at odds and continuously in conflict with each other. Simon Zeitscheck was torn apart by the war; it had ruptured every sense of reason.

'Het was of hij uiteenviel in een rechterdeel en een linkerdeel, in twee pollen, een positief en negatief, in een ja en een nee, in twijfel en hoop, in opstandigheid en berusting, in dwaling en doling in de wildernis en in de illusie van een beetje begrip. Een gespleten man. Het ene part noemde hij Salomon, het ander Zeitscheck. (...) En niet enkel een tweegesprek werd Salomon Zeitscheck, hij werd ook een slagveld van gedachten, een slagveld van doden en gewonden.'<sup>152</sup>

The narrative confines of a continuous dialogue between Simon and Zeitscheck; between them and Job; and between them and the inhabitants of the Israeli Kibbutz. While in the story the question about the connection between God and suffering seems to be resolved somehow, the theme of conflicting ideas and beliefs puts the outcome in a somewhat different perspective. One could not read the final letter Simon Zeitscheck writes to Job without bearing in mind what is written earlier in the narrative:

'Zeg trouwens nooit van iets dat het vanzelf spreekt. Laten wij liever tegen elkaar zeggen. 'Jongens, denk erom, het is niet zo,' zoals de geleerden wel doen in de spaarzame ogenblikken dat zij zich van hun onmacht bewust zijn. 'Het is niet zo', dat moest je eigenlijk schrijven op de titelpagina van ieder boek, je moest het beitelten aan

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<sup>152</sup> Abel J. Herzberg, *Drie rode rozen*, (first edition 1975; Amsterdam, 1994) 28.

It was as if he fell apart in two pieces, a right part and a left part, two poles, one negative one positive, falling apart in a yes and a no, in despair and hope, rebellion and resignation, roaming and wandering, and the illusion of some sort of understanding. A broken man. The one part he called Salomon, the other Zeitscheck (...) Not only had Salomon Zeitscheck become a dialogue, his mind was a battlefield of thoughts, a front line filled with the dead and the wounded. (As there is no English translation available, I translated this and the following quotes.)

de gevel van iedere school en vooral van elke academie, je moest het in vlamme letters aanbrenge boven de ingang van de kerk en nog eens aan ieder altaar. (...) 'Het is niet zo, het is niet zo,' dat is het beginsel van alle wijsheid.<sup>153</sup>

Still, eventually the protagonist seems to find peace after his persistent urge for justice. Simon Zeitscheck had asked his cousin whether she could form a Sanhedrin. Job himself should be the persecutor and the ones torn apart, the childless, the fathers and mothers who had lost their children, the ones doomed by the world, the oppressed and the isolated, they should be the witnesses.<sup>154</sup> But the people living in the Kibbutz had rejected his suggestion: his question was irrelevant in their context of permanent threat and hard work. Either God was dead and thus not responsible, the story of Job mere fiction an invention of some soul thousands of years ago, or the people were themselves responsible for their own fate and had to learn to fight for their own prosperity. Had they not understood Simon Zeitscheck's request? Their answers would not convince the elderly, the sick, and poor, the ones not able to fight back.

After this response Simon Zeitscheck, sick, his strengths fading away, writes his last letter to Job, accounting his urge for justice: his dead children had never stopped asking 'Father, father, we want to know why'. While Simon Zeitscheck argues he has no answer, the following passage entails a reversal of the question and a reversal of Jewish traditional notions of God. Beginning with the ancient words 'in the beginning' Simon Zeitscheck reasons, God could never have created the world out of nothing, since God is Eternal with neither beginning nor end. Therefore, He must have created heaven and earth out of Himself, condensing his Eternal being into matter: matter becoming God and God becoming matter.<sup>155</sup> As mentioned before, in 1987 Hans Jonas would expose a similar argument in his article 'The concept of God after Auschwitz. A Jewish voice'. Simon Zeitscheck wanders why we should build churches, cathedrals and synagogues if God is everywhere and in everything: he is as existent in the chair standing next to a table as in the eyes of a criminal as in the prayers of a devout Jew.

Interestingly, while exposing this pantheistic view it does not result in an urge for mystical longings: man, as fragment, seeking unification with its origin, with the Eternal. Simon Zeitscheck's letter to Job ends with the remark that instead of praying 'Our father, who

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<sup>153</sup> Ibidem, 12.

Do not ever say about anything that it is self-evident. Rather, let us say 'mind you, it is not so', like the scholars during the few moments wherein they are aware of their incapacity. 'It is not so', you should write it at the cover of each book, you should carve out the words on the front of every school every academy, you should set up the flaming words above the entrance of the church and every altar. 'It is not so', it is the principle of all wisdom.

<sup>154</sup> Ibidem, 59.

<sup>155</sup> Ibidem, 111.

art in heaven' we should exclaim 'Brother on earth'! Zeitscheck's account ends with an ethical appeal. The old question whence evil, whence suffering is justified, the protagonist urges, and will not fade. However, instead of addressing God we should address our 'brother on earth'. Instead of praying for help, we should help. Simon Zeitscheck's philosophical contemplations on the nature of God and matter are not merely abstract thoughts; detached from individual human lives. They are connected to particular lives, to individuals who can ease each others pain. That is also underlined by the narrative preceding the letter to Job, wherein Simon Zeitscheck recalls the encounters he once had with the ones he loved: one of them was a gypsy girl who had sold him three red roses: she had named them love, hope, and faith. While Simon Zeitscheck had forgotten these three old and shattered words, for the few minutes they met, the words regained their importance. The girl had said 'If God is with us, who could be against us?' Then, he had realised that was true: if God was as present in the girl as in the tailor, no one could be against them. They were each others keepers.

Ironically Simon Zeitscheck elaborates on God's answer to Job, which was not really an answer, but a description of nature's inconceivable greatness; an answer which Simon Zeitscheck had put aside so persistently. It demonstrates the ambiguous attitude towards Jewish tradition: Simon Zeitscheck reverses the ancient answer given by a transcendent God into an implied answer of an immanent God: 'Oh brother on earth'. Simon Zeitscheck relates to Jewish tradition, as he initiates a dialogue with the biblical figure Job. However, the protagonist's urge for justice in the face of God is only ambiguously related to the Jewish tradition of the chutzpah: disputing with God. Whereas Job cries to the heavens for justice, Simon Zeitscheck, contemplating on God's guilt and responsibility, never talks or writes directly to God. He does not dispute with God, he disputes with expressions and manifestations of Jewish tradition, with Job. Interestingly, Simon Zeitscheck concludes that these things are eventually the same: his quest for justice results in an understanding of God as the foundation of life, as life, as nature, as man itself. One could conclude that disputing with Job is disputing with God: 'Oh brother on earth', Zeitscheck says. While not abandoning the Jewish religion, Herzberg turns traditional notions of God upside down, which brings Simon Zeitscheck to an ethical understanding of God.

If it comes to the relation between God and man, while continuously confronted with the dehumanizing politics of the Nazis, *Tweestromenland* focuses on man: his motives and intentions, his passions and responsibilities. In his thinking about ethics, Herzberg engages anti-Semitism with a philosophical understanding of monotheism and polytheism.

Interestingly, instead of focusing on the responsibility of man, *Drie rode rozen* focuses on the responsibility of God. However, at the end of the novella, the question is turned around. By different means the protagonist comes to a similar reasoning as in *Tweestromenland*: an ethical reading of Judaism, not abandoning the Jewish faith and tradition, but reversing old notions of God; focusing on man's responsibility. In *Drie rode rozen* Herzberg's Zeitscheck does not dissociate himself from Jewish tradition, but when engaging with this tradition, I would say, he focuses on man, instead of God. Whereas Herzberg, as a writer, must be disconnected from his fictional character Simon Zeitscheck, perhaps he feels somewhat related to what another character says in *Drie rode rozen*: 'Onderschat deze verhaaltjes niet, hun schrijvers konden de mens wel eens heel diep in het hart hebben gekeken en daar meer hebben ontdekt dan jij of de meesters die je vereert. Denk je dat een verhaal duizenden jaren lang gemeengoed van de mensen kan worden, gelovig of ongelovig, als zij zichzelf daarin niet herkennen?'<sup>156</sup>

*Drie rode rozen* relates to the book of Job, to the character 'Job', but at the same time the novella seems to underline the particularity of Simon Zeitscheck's dialogue with Job. His dealing with traces of Jewish tradition is just one way of interpreting them. The novella's form – consisting of continuous dialogues between Simon and Zeitscheck, letters and conflicting opinions – seems to underline the importance of the dialogue, conflict, and disputes themselves. Therefore, when reading Simon Zeitscheck's solution to the question of suffering and evil, one should bare in mind: 'Het is niet zo', *dat moest je eigenlijk schrijven op de titelpagina van ieder boek.*<sup>157</sup>

### **André Schwarz-Bart**

In his *Imagining the Holocaust* Daniel R. Schwarz singles out the 'topos' of conversion in Holocaust fiction, which, as he describes it, is often a maturation to disillusionment and if not nihilism, cynicism: a counterconversion, away from faith and humanist values. André Schwarz-Bart – who was only eleven when the German's invaded France – spoke of a conversion from orthodox belief to loss of faith and agnosticism.<sup>158</sup> His was a completely different experience than Herzberg's. Herzberg had lost his faith decennia before his

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<sup>156</sup> Ibidem, 97.

Do not underestimate these stories, their writers may have looked man deep into his soul, revealing more than you or your lauded teachers could ever have done. Do you think a story can become common heritage for thousands of years, for believers as well as non-believers, if they would not recognize themselves in these stories?

<sup>157</sup> 'It is not so', you should write it at the cover of each book.'

<sup>158</sup> Daniel R. Schwarz, *Imagining the Holocaust*, (New York, 1999) 175.



imprisonment. When Herzberg was deported to Bergen-Belsen, he was a successful lawyer, politically engaged, and had written many texts on anti-Semitism and Zionism. André Schwarz-Bart was only a boy when the Germans invaded France.<sup>159</sup> Two decennia prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, his family had been immigrated from Poland to France. They had settled in a Jewish quarter in Metz where Eastern European immigrant Jews lived separated from the rest of the city.<sup>160</sup> At home the family spoke Yiddish.<sup>161</sup> Their daily life was dominated by Jewish Polish traditions and Jewish orthodoxy. However, when André Schwarz-Bart's parents, three of their six children, and an eighty-four year old great-aunt were arrested for deportation in 1942, and Schwarz-Bart had full responsibility for the rest of his family at the age of fourteen, he stopped believing in the covenantal God.<sup>162</sup> Schwarz-Bart would survive the war: he joined the French resistance, but he would lose almost all of his family to the Nazi genocide.<sup>163</sup>

'Je ne suis pas devenu écrivain par vocation littéraire. Comme pour bien d'autres hommes de ces temps, l'écriture m'est venue en réponse à l'avènement.'<sup>164</sup> Like other Holocaust survivors, like Primo Levi, Schwarz-Bart while not being a writer, found himself forced to write. Eventually, after many drafts, *Le dernier des justes* was published in 1959.<sup>165</sup> It was one of the first great novels of the Holocaust, and in its portrayal of Christian responsibility for Jewish suffering, one of the most controversial as well. The novel was published a year after Elie Wiesel's memoir *La nuit*, at a time when the term 'Holocaust' had not come into common usage. The French were still in denial about their wartime record: the stunningly quick military defeat, followed by widespread collaboration with the Germans and the Vichy government, and in particular the dubious distinction of being the only nation in occupied Western Europe to voluntarily transport Jewry countryman to death camps, even before requested to do so by the Nazis. Schwarz-Bart was condemned by both Jews and Christians: either because of his sacrificial reading of Judaism and of Jewish history – creating a Christianized Judaism by emphasizing the Jews' passive acceptance of suffering

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<sup>159</sup> S. Lillian Kremer, ed., *Holocaust literature. An encyclopedia of writers and their work* (New York, London, 2003) 1122.

<sup>160</sup> Schwarz-Bart's depiction of Stillenstadt, Ernie's birthplace in *Le dernier des justes*, would be based upon Schwarz-Bart's experiences in La Pontifoy, Kaufman 235.

<sup>161</sup> Ronnie Scharfman, 'Exiled from the Shoah. André Scharz-Bart and Simone Schwarz-Bart's 'Un plat de porc aux bananes vertes', in: Lawrence D. Kritzman, ed., *Auschwitz and after. Race, culture, and 'the Jewish question' in France* (New York, London, 1995) 251.

<sup>162</sup> Francine Kaufman, 'La genèse du roman *Le dernier de justes* d'André Schwarz-Bart,' *Revue des études juives* 142 (1983) 236.

<sup>163</sup> Kremer, ed., *Holocaust literature* 1122.

<sup>164</sup> Quote André Schwarz-Bart when receiving the Jerusalem Prize for his oeuvre, Kaufman, 'La genèse du roman,' 235.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibidem* 233-234.

and martyrdom – or because of his condemnation of the church’s historical anti-Semitism as the root cause of the Holocaust.<sup>166</sup> However, despite what Francine Kaufman had termed ‘L’affaire Schwarz-Bart’, the novel was awarded the 1959 Prix Goncourt.<sup>167</sup> *Le dernier des justes* was an exceptional book, both in form and content: while, as Elrud Ibsch had pointed out, Holocaust literature in the first decennia after the war was dominated by documentary literature – testimonies, memoirs, diaries – Schwarz-Bart had created fiction intermingling myth, history, and saga. It would be Schwarz-Bart’s only novel dealing explicitly with the Holocaust.

Like Herzberg in *Drie rode rozen*, Schwarz-Bart takes up a story from Jewish tradition: not the story of Job, but the legend of the Lamed-Vav. The legend originates in a Talmudic saying that in each generation there are at least thirty-six saints. Jewish traditions teach that the world itself is saved by the existence of these thirty-six just individuals, that a new saint is born before one of the thirty-six dies to ensure the continued salvation of the world, and that the identity of the thirty-six is secret. Because their identity is hidden, every single person should feel responsible for the salvation of the world. However, Schwarz-Bart’s use of the folklore is every bit as controversial as the novel’s use of Jewish history: he assigns the fictional Lévy family one Just man in each generation, ignoring the hidden identity of the Just in the Talmudic folklore. The identity of the Just man in the Lévy family is revealed explicitly. Moreover, the Lévy family history could be seen as iconic for all Jewish history: the members of the family are involved in almost every major catastrophe to befall the Jews of Europe in the last eight hundred years.<sup>168</sup> Starting in Western Europe in the Middle ages, the story soon shifts to Eastern Europe. More than Herzberg’s novella, Schwarz-Bart’s narrative is intertwined with Eastern European – more correctly, Polish – Judaism: most of Yom Tov Lévy’s descendants lived in Zemyoch, a Jewish sjetl in Poland. One of the themes throughout the book is the interaction between the non-assimilated pious Polish Jews, with the Gentile Christian world; while living in a Jewish village in Poland, or while living as immigrants in Germany or France – where Jews had so many opportunities, but nonetheless died in the concentration camps. Consequently, in his account on Jewish history, Schwartz-Bart leaves out the history of the acculturated Western European Jews.

On many different levels the book poses questions which it does not resolve: Is the Holocaust another tragic event within the history of an ever dying and therefore eternally

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<sup>166</sup> Raymond Bach, 'André Schwarz-Bart's *Le dernier des justes*. A dangerous text?,' *Symposium* 50 (1996) 164.

<sup>167</sup> Kremer, ed., *Holocaust literature* 1122.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibidem* 1123-1124.

Chosen People? Or should the Holocaust be seen as the end of Jewish history and a denial of the Jewish God? What would the Jews be without their God? What is left of the covenantal God without the Jews? Did the Holocaust result in a complete destruction; of Jewish life, of their God? How is Jewish life possible after the Holocaust? In *Le dernier des justes* suffering is inextricably connected to Judaism and the Jewish God. However, the narrative, which sets off in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, is continually overshadowed by its ending: the destruction of the last of the Just as one of the 16 million Jews; undermining every individual episode of each of the Just. This tension continues to the end of the novel, and beyond it. By doing so Schwarz-Bart starts off a dialogue with Jewish history, with tradition, questioning it, undermining it, undermining faith in the God of that tradition. But the implied position remains ambiguous: while Schwarz-Bart's book ends with complete annihilation, the narrator is still there, as someone to pronounce a deformed Kaddish over Ernie and the other 16 million Jews. Is that a cynical end, or is that, deformed as it is, some sort of continuation? All of these questions are intertwined with the question about the connection between God, Judaism, and suffering.

*Le dernier des justes: jamais plus...*

VIII

JAMAIS PLUS

(...) Le soleil se levant au-dessus

D'une bourgade Pologne, de Lithuanie,

Jamais plus rencontrera à la fenêtre un vieillard

Juis murmurant des Psaumes, un autre

Se rendant à la synagogue...<sup>169</sup>

Isaac Kacenelson

*Chant du peuple Juif assaniné*

Unlike many other novels, Schwarz-Bart places the Holocaust within a diachronic history of Christian anti-Semitism:

'Une biographie de mon ami Ernie tairait aisément dans la deuxième quart du xx<sup>e</sup> siècle; mais la véritable histoire d'Ernie Lévy commence très tôt, vers l'an mille de notre ère, dans la vieille cite anglicane de York. Plus précéément: le 11 mars 1185.'<sup>170</sup>

<sup>169</sup> The last chapter of Schwarz-Bart's novel begins with this poem, 321.

<sup>170</sup> André Schwarz-Bart, *Le dernier des Justes*, (Paris, 1959) 11.

The narrator recalls the massacre at the tower of York; an episode which was not alien to Jewish history as it was filled with massacres and persecutions. When the omniscient narrator proceeds telling about the promise God made to the son of the murdered rabbi Yom Tov, he speaks as if he were a rabbi: ‘l’Éternel dit: Écoute Salomon, prêt l’oreille à mes paroles. Le dix-septième jour du mois de Sivan 4945, ton père rabbi Yom Tov a été pitoyable à mon Coeur. Il sera donc fait à sa descendance, et dans la siècle des siècle, la grace d’un *Lamed-waf* par generation. Tu es le premier, tu es celui-là, tu es saint.’<sup>171</sup> From that day onwards one of the family Lévy would die as a martyr: not to change the course of history, but to feel and endure the pain of others:<sup>172</sup> ‘Les *Lamed-waf* son le Coeur multiplié du monde, en eux se déversent toutes nos douleurs comme en un receptacle.’<sup>173</sup> Almost every generation of Lévy suffers from persecution by the Gentiles; but a fervent loyalty to the Jewish faith somehow ensures their miraculous survival, until, that is, the Nazi genocide.

Whereas Lillian Kremer argues that in *Le dernier des justes* there can be no question as to whether God exists: for, she urges, almost thousand years, one Lévy served as incontrovertible proof that God not only exists, but intercedes, whether belatedly or ineffectively, where suffering is concerned, in human affairs.<sup>174</sup> However, from the beginning onwards, this covenant between God and his Lévy-Jews is being problematized. The questions raised to the heavens of this God increase. ‘Le Seigneur, saint est son nom, veut-il donc la mort des enfants?’ Mardochée, Ernie’s grandfather wanders.<sup>175</sup> Whereas in the first centuries of God’s promise, its irony is often recalled. For example when a father has to bless his son, ‘the Beast’, least suitable for being a Just man: ‘En riant à nouveau de Bonheur, le vieux Haïm s’étrangla, hoqueta, exhala en un fin soupir: ‘Savez vous? ... Dieu s’amuse’ et mourut.’<sup>176</sup> However, irony turns into cynicism when at the beginning of the twentieth century Mardochée as one of the Just witnesses and survives the extinction of his village, the death of his sons, neighbours, and their children. When the only surviving son decides to emigrate to Germany, away from the Polish village where God and his Just man had lived for so long,<sup>177</sup> Mardochée ‘se tantait trahi, mais il n’aurait su dire si c’était par les siens ou par Dieu. Ses fils étaient morts, et le *Lamed-waf* vivait.’<sup>178</sup> The reader does not know then, that Mardochée will die anonymously as an old man in the Nazi camps. Is that the promise God made with his

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<sup>171</sup> Ibidem, 13.

<sup>172</sup> Ibidem, 163.

<sup>173</sup> Ibidem, 12.

<sup>174</sup> Kremer, ed., *Holocaust literature* 1124.

<sup>175</sup> Schwarz-Bart, *Le dernier des Justes*, 61.

<sup>176</sup> Ibidem, 35.

<sup>177</sup> Ibidem, 38.

<sup>178</sup> Ibidem, 77.

Lévy men? Or is it the first sign this promise has come to an end; ruptured by complete destruction?

Having covered seven or eight hundred years of Lévy family history as legend in the first two chapters, the years from Ernie's birth to his death are described in a much slower, more horrifying pace through the rest of the novel. The language of realism replaces the parabolic language of legend.<sup>179</sup> In Germany, in Stillenstadt's every-day-life the history of the Lévy family seems meaningless.<sup>180</sup> Benjamin, Ernie's father, does not believe, does not want to believe in the promise of the *Lamed-waf*. Still, Ernie learns about the legend of the Just man by his grandfather Mardochée, who had immigrated from Poland to his son in Germany. When Ernie thinks he can save his family from anti-Semitic forces by physical self-mutilation and suicide, his grandfather teaches him what it means to be a Just man, who cannot change the course of history: 'Si un homme souffre tout seul, c'est clair, sa peine reste sur lui.', he says (...) Mais si un autre le regarde et lui dit: 'comme tu as mal, frère juif...', que se passe-t-il? (...) 'Il prend le mal de son ami dans les yeux.' The Just man is there to ease the pain of others, not by suffering, but by feeling, seeing the pain of others.

It will take a long time before Ernie will grasp his task: romanticizing his family legacy, he first becomes 'Le juste des mouches' both celebrating and massacring insects in great numbers; when betrayed by his only German friend he tries to commit suicide – dès l'année 1934, c'est par dizaines et dizaines que les petit écoliers juifs d'Allemagne se portèrent candidates au suicide; et par dizaines qu'ils y furent admis – and when his family is arrested for deportation Ernie distances himself from both his family and his traditions by joining a regiment for foreigners in the French army. Only at the end of his life Ernie seems to understand his task: in order to stay with Golda, the girl he loves, Ernie volunteers to leave in a convoy for Auschwitz, a convoy that will also transport hundreds of orphans to their death. In the dark freight car, filled with terrible suffering and fear, Ernie finds himself surrounded by the children who look to him for words of comfort. Ernie starts talking to these children, holds them into his arms until they die. 'Approchez-vous que je vous dise comment est fait notre royaume', he says. Then a child dies. 'Lui aussi, il se réveillera tout à l'heure, avec tous les autres, quand nous serons arrivés au royaume d'Israël. Là-bas, les enfants y retrouvent leurs parents, et tout le monde se réjouit.'<sup>181</sup> Ernie fulfils his task, consoling the children, easing their pain. It is for the first time he is referred to as 'le Juste Ernie Lévy'. The episode

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<sup>179</sup> Schwarz, *Imagining the Holocaust*, 242.

<sup>180</sup> The portrayal of Stillenstadt is based on Schwarz-Bart's experiences while living in the Jewish quarter in Metz.

<sup>181</sup> Schwarz-Bart, *Le dernier des Justes*, 335.

confirms God's promise to the Lévy family as upholders of the *Lamed-waf*, but at the same time the legend is completely negated: When a doctor, outraged by Ernie's words says 'Comment pouvez-vous leur dire que c'est un rêve?', Ernie starts weeping 'Madame, il n'y a pas de place ici pour la vérité.'

Ernie the Just man will stay with the children, with his Jews, until the end. However, the language of dreams is ruptured by the cruel reality of the trains, the dead bodies of Jewish men, Jewish women and Jewish children piling up, the Nazis' outcry, demanding his dog 'man, grab the dog'. Then, while weeping blood Ernie says 'O Seigneur, nous sommes sortis ainsi il y a des milliers d'années. Nous marchions à travers des deserts secs, à travers la Mer Rouge de sang, dans un deluge de larmes salées et amères. Nous sommes très vieux. Nous marchions. Oh! Nous voudrions bien arriver enfin!'<sup>182</sup> As for Ernie the covenant comes to its end, he is the last of the Just. One could wonder whether the narrator is being cynical while describing the Jew's praying their 'vieux poème d'amour' in the gas chambers.

'SCHEMA ISRAEL ADONAI ELOHENU ADONAI EH'OTH. (...) O seigneur, par ta grace tu nourris les vivants, et par ta grande miséricorde tu ressuscites les morts; et tu soutiens les faibles, guéris les malades, brises le fer des esclaves; et tu gardes fidèlement tes promesses à ceux qui dormant dans la poussière. (...) Le voix mouraient une à une le long du poème inachevé.'

Is the God, adorned in this ancient prayer, dying away together with the voices of these Jews in the gas chambers? Ernie comforts Golda by saying they will soon see each other again. But will there be any justice in the end? The reader can remind the words Ernie had said to the doctor: it is no place for the truth. The words of Zemyock's chairman in Paris seem to come true: 'un jour Tu nous chercheras...et nous ne serons plus'.<sup>183</sup>

The relation of Schwarz-Bart's novel to questions of theodicy is complicated. Right after *Le dernier des justes* was published, much of the controversy was caused by what was interpreted as Schwarz-Bart's sacrificial reading of Judaism.<sup>184</sup> Interestingly, the complexity of theodic questions can be related to that controversy: in the history of the Lévy family, God seems to be actively involved in their persecutions and martyrdom; 'songeant aux multiples fins de ses ancêtres, Haïm se disait que les ressources de Dieu sont inépuisables.'<sup>185</sup> Therefore, sometimes suffering is even regarded a privilege in the Lévy's rationale: 'Le

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<sup>182</sup> Ibidem, 344.

<sup>183</sup> Ibidem, 286.

<sup>184</sup> Bach, 'A dangerous text?,' 164.

<sup>185</sup> Schwarz-Bart, *Le dernier des Justes*, 31.

*Lamed waf*, le prend, notre souffrance, pouvait-il [Mardochée] avec enjouement. Et il monte au ciel, la dépose aux pieds du Seigneur – qui pardonne. Et voilà pourquoi le monde continue... avec tous nos péchés.<sup>186</sup> Within this account on suffering the question to why there is evil and suffering in the first place if God is almighty and good, loses its relevance; or all suffering must be the result of human sin. Of course the image of Jews who actually seek to play the victim encountered severe opposition: within that argumentation, the Jews would always be partly to blame.

However, in the construction of the narrative Schwarz-Bart continually problematizes the Lévy rationale on suffering: e.g. when Ernie asks his grandfather what use there is in feeling the pain of others when it does not change the course of history and Mardochée replies that it changes something for God, Ernie says: 'Si c'est pour Dieu seulement, alors je comprends plus rien. Ça serait donc lui qui demande aux Allemands de nous persécuter?'<sup>187</sup> Mardochée cannot answer that question. Bearing in mind the end of the novel, the question is rather cynical. Instead of explicitly questioning the God of the *Lamed-waf*, the narrative is completely overshadowed by the last pages. From that point, sincere expressions of faith, sound often desperate e.g. when Golda says to Ernie: 'Si Dieu n'était pas là (...) comment feraient donc les gens pour supporter? ... Tu es fou, Ernie, de croire... Car si Dieu n'était pas là, en ce moment, s'il ne nous aidait pas à tout instant, on ne deviendrait qu'une larme. (...) *Où bien on s'évanouirait dans l'air.*'<sup>188</sup> Golda's exclamation gets its stirring and almost cynical meaning when it finds an echo in the narrator's words: 'Il en fut ainsi de millions, qui passèrent de l'état de *Luftmensch* à celui de *Luft*.'<sup>189</sup>

After these words every theodicy seems out of place. Whereas Simon Zeitscheck had found some sort of answer before he died in a post-Holocaust world – God is not an almighty being apart from the world; he is the world – nothing is resolved at the end of *Le dernier des justes*. What remains is a deformed prayer. Ernie fulfils his task without the God he had sought for. If God does not intervene, there is only man seeing the pain of the other. Ernie finds his calling not in his suffering – which undermines the critique that the reader is led to believe the Jews wish to be sacrificial victims<sup>190</sup> – his suffering will not make any difference; has no meaning. Only by consoling others, by seeing the pain of others, Ernie is to be called the Just. For exactly this reason Raymond Bach argues in his article 'André Schwarz-Bart *Les*

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<sup>186</sup> Ibidem, 57.

<sup>187</sup> Ibidem, 155.

<sup>188</sup> Ibidem, 301.

<sup>189</sup> Ibidem, 345-346.

<sup>190</sup> Francine Kaufman, *Pour lire 'Le dernier des Justes'. Reflections sur la 'Shoah'*, (Paris, 1986) 126.

*dernier des justes*. A dangerous text?' Schwarz-Bart's novel calls forth an ethical response: 'In the way that the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas defines it, namely, as a response elicited by the radical vulnerability of the Other.'<sup>191</sup> Levinas had argued that after the Holocaust any attempt to explain the suffering by a theodicy is doomed to failure. But it is precisely the failure of theodicy, 'the most revolutionary fact of our twentieth century consciousness' that has revealed 'the scandal which would occur by my justifying my neighbour's suffering, the unjustifiable character of suffering in the other person.'<sup>192</sup> The ethical outcry resonates in both *Le dernier des justes*, *Tweestromenland* and *Drie rode rozen*.

### Some concluding remarks

In its character, form, and content Schwarz-Bart's novel differs profoundly from Herzberg's *Tweestromenland* and *Drie rode rozen*. It is true that within the narrative of *Le dernier des justes* God's existence is not questioned. However, as pointed out, the construction of the story ending with the annihilation of the devout praying Jews, the death of the last Just man and a deformed Kaddish breaks with central tenets of tradition in which the book is written. Whereas Herzberg questions Jewish traditions more straightforwardly, especially in *Drie rode rozen*, Schwarz-Bart's narrative consists of an implicit dialogue: by the construction of the story he continually questions the legitimacy of God's existence and his presumed interventions. Neither Ernie Lévy, nor the narrator of *Le dernier des justes* comes to the pantheistic answers which eventually consoles Simon Zeitscheck. How could there be any consolation in the gas chambers? However, at the end of the novel the narrator recalls the moments he cannot but think Ernie Lévy is still alive: 'Hier (...) une goutte de pitié tomba d'en haut sur mon visage; mais il n'y avait nul soufflé dans l'air, aucun nuage dans le ciel.... Il n'y avait qu'une présence.'<sup>193</sup> Is it a presence of the 16 million, a Just man, God? The Nazis did not succeed in completely annihilating the Jews. The narrator's voice reminds the reader of that.

The narrator has seen and has testified of the life of Ernie, 'morte six millions' and their traditions.<sup>194</sup> A tradition which in Schwarz-Bart's account consists of bearing the world's suffering in one's eyes, one's heart, one's mind: a way of living which had distinguished the Jews from the Gentiles for so long. In *Le dernier des justes* the gentleness and righteousness of the devout Jews is often contrasted with Gentile's, Christian's violence, their urge for

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<sup>191</sup> Bach, 'A dangerous text?,' 164.

<sup>192</sup> Levinas, 'The provocation of Levinas,' 163.

<sup>193</sup> Schwarz-Bart, *Le dernier des Justes*, 345.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibidem*, 346.



power and greed.<sup>195</sup> Herzberg's and Schwarz-Bart's novels somehow meet in their diachronic portrayal of Jewish history and anti-Semitism. Both authors put the Nazis anti-Semitism in a wide historical perspective. While Herzberg's account is more philosophical – the Jews, as founders of monotheism and ethics, are persecuted because polytheistic motives and drives, centred on power, hate their imprisonment – the implications of Schwarz-Bart's novel seem similar: the world of the Gentiles is ruled by power and violence (especially against the 'murderers of Christ'), the world of the Jews by pioussness and Law: 'Les Juifs – qui depuis deux mille ans ne portaient pas l'épée et n'éurent jamais ni royaumes de mission ni esclaves de couleur.' Distinction between the two authors is that Herzberg, eventually, focuses more on individual motives than on fundamental differences between groups: polytheism and monotheism are psychological types that are to be found in each individual.

In their portrayal of Christianity Herzberg and Schwarz-Bart are to be related as well. Whereas Herzberg characterizes Christianity as monotheistic, and therefore an ethical religion, he also argues that polytheistic forces have always been existent within Christianity: forces that hated the Jews for their invention of monotheism and ethics. Implicitly *Le dernier des justes* bears a similar argument: at the end of the novel, after describing hundreds of years of Christian persecution Ernie says to Golda 'C'est très mysterieux. (...) J'ai été dans leurs églises, j'ai lu leur évangiles; sais-tu qui était le Christ? Un simple Juif comme ton père, une sorte de Hasside. (...) un miséricordieux, un doux. Tu comprends *Goldelé*, c'était un petit Juif de chez nous un vrai petit Juste.'<sup>196</sup> Instead of Christianizing Judaism, Ernie underlines Christ's Jewishness, just as Herzberg had underlined the Jewish roots of Christ. However, Christians 'prennent la croix et ils la retournent, et ils la retournent, mont Dieu'. They have perverted Christ and 'made a sword out of him'.

While being 'secular' both Herzberg and Schwarz-Bart place the Jewish religion at the core of Judaism, leaving out, to some extent, the accounts of assimilated and acculturated Jews who would define their identity in non-religious terms. Though Schwarz-Bart and Herzberg are themselves not religious, their self understanding is for a greater part related to religious Judaism. Conversely, Jewish authors like Jean Améry and Primo Levi found themselves completely isolated after the war: they were deprived from their former identity as German or Italian and could not identify with traditional Judaism. Herzberg's and Schwarz-Bart's positions as secular Jews are not as isolated as Améry's and Levi's. Though always

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<sup>195</sup> E.g. 'Les Juifs – qui depuis deux mille ans ne portaient pas l'épée et n'éurent jamais ni royaumes de mission ni esclaves de couleur.' Ibidem, 345.

<sup>196</sup> Ibidem, 298.

ambiguous they relate their work to questions and themes of religious Judaism. For the more acculturated authors, who will be discussed in the third chapter, questions of identity will be more problematic. While addressing themes of the connection between God and suffering they will not be able to relate to Jewish traditions as Herzberg and Schwarz-Bart did.

Jewish religion and traditions, in the outset of Herzberg and Schwarz-Bart, are separated from the Gentile's by their urge for ethics. While *Drie rode rozen* gives some perspectives on Jewish life after the Holocaust, Schwarz-Bart's account is more pessimistic. His last chapter opens with the words 'Jamais plus': Jewish life as he has described it, is forever extinguished by the Holocaust. Schwarz-Bart's history of the Jews was actually a history of Eastern European Jewry, more specifically Polish Jewry: the lives extinguished are the lives of devout Polish Jews. In Schwarz-Bart's account the covenantal faith is at the core of Judaism, but the believers are destroyed. A void is what is left, filled with nothing but memories of Eastern European Judaism. Similar themes are to be found in the works of Chaim Grade and the Nobel prize laureate Isaac Beshevis Singer. As Singer lived in the United States during the Second World War, he fell outside the scope of this research. Chaim Grade lived in Lithuania and immigrated to the United States after the War. Both authors always have written in Yiddish. Whereas Chaim Grade has been admired by literary critics, he never reached the status Singer had in the United States.<sup>197</sup> In 1978 Singer received the Nobel Prize in literature. Chaim Grade, as well as Isaac Beshevis Singer, were raised in Eastern European Jewish orthodoxy.

Chaim Grade, trained as a Mussarist, became secular years before the war. However, like Herzberg and Schwarz-Bart, his texts demonstrate an urge for disputing with his orthodox roots. One of his texts is titled 'A quarrel with Hersch Rasseynner', and consists of a dispute – note the importance of the dispute as it is at the core of *Drie rode rozen* – between Chaim, a secular poet and Hersch Rasseynner a Mussarist. Both Jews were endorsed in their beliefs by the Holocaust. Rasseynner, who had survived the camps, urged the impossibility of living an ethical life without the Law: there were many great minds in Western Europe, but they were not able to do good, they could not prevent the Germans from destroying one third of the Jewish population. Chaim on the other hand blamed Rasseynner for not crying out to Heaven, asking God the old question. Jewish religion as fundament for ethics is not only a theme in this dispute, but also in the work of Isaac Beshevis Singer: e.g. in *Shadows on the Hudson* wherein a group of Jewish intellectuals living in New York of the 1950s struggles with existential

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<sup>197</sup> Alexander, *The resonance of the dust*.

questions which the Holocaust has confronted them with.<sup>198</sup> One of these questions is how to live as a Jew. Most of them cannot live religious lives anymore, but at the same time they find it impossible to live moral lives without the Law. An argument reminding of Herzberg's portrayal of monotheism is to be found in a letter at the very end of the novel: a Jewish man who had lived an hedonistic life decides to live as an orthodox Jew. In the epilogue he writes:

'For all its flowery language, this culture [American and European culture] acknowledges only one power: might. (...) The Torah is the only effective teaching we have about how to bridle the human beast. No one has better tamed that beast than the Jew – I mean the true Jew, the Jew of the Scriptures, of the Gemara, of the *Shulhan Arukh*, of the books of ethical instruction. The Christians have a handful of monks and nuns. We created an entire nation that served God. We were a holy nation. Thank God, a remnant of that nation has remained.'<sup>199</sup>

Whereas these are the words of an orthodox Jew, the argument is similar to Herzberg's in *Tweestromenland*: man's passions, man's urge for power, are to be bound only by law.<sup>200</sup>

Eastern European Jewry resonates in Schwarz-Bart's, Grade's, Singer's and to a lesser extent Herzberg's understanding of Judaism. They all continue the dialogue with the old faith of their forefathers, either by questioning Jewish religion, reversing old notions of God, or rupturing the religious questions altogether. In both Herzberg's and Schwarz-Bart's work traditional notions of theodicy are closed off: Herzberg puts aside the premise of God's omnipotence and transcendence, Schwarz-Bart's line of the Just Lévy's ends in the Nazi camps; he exposes the almost complete annihilation of God's devout Jews. What remains are the words of the narrator. The destruction was not complete. Perhaps his words, urging for 'the unjustifiable character of suffering in the other person', are some sort of continuation of Jewish tradition, as Herzberg writes: 'En opnieuw is er een 'rest die terugkeert'. Opnieuw staat in ons midden op de stem der profeten en in ons hart de zang van de dichter.'<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Isaac Beshevis Singer, *Shadows on the Hudson*, (London, 1999).

<sup>199</sup> Ibidem, 546-548.

<sup>200</sup> Ibidem, 545-549.

<sup>201</sup> Herzberg, *Verzameld werk 2*, 121.

And once again there is a 'remnant that returns'. Again the voice of the prophet rises in our midst and in our heart the song of the poet.

### 3. 'Non non-Jewish' authors<sup>202</sup>: God is dead or still to be addressed?

Imre Kertész: 'Ik heb er nooit aan gedacht dat ik een jood ben, behalve op momenten dat ik in gevaar was. Mijn joodse identiteit manifesteerde zich dan echter niet als iets 'innerlijks', maar als een beperking, als een uiterlijke determinant. (...) In plaats van mezelf jood te noemen zeg ik dus liever dat ik een negatie ben, de negatie van elke menselijke hoogmoed, de negatie van zekerheid, van rustige nachten, van vreedzaam leven, van conformisme, van vrije keuzemogelijkheden, van nationale roem.'<sup>203</sup> Ruth Klüger: 'Erst hatte es die Verachtung der arischen Kinder für die jüdischen in Wien, danach die Verachtung der tschechischen Kinder für die Deutschen in Theresienstadt gegeben, jetzt die der Männer für Frauen. Diese drei Arten der Verachtung sind inkommensurabel, werdet ihr sagen, ich aber erlebte sie an mir selber, in der angegebenen Reihenfolge. Ich war das *tertium comparationis*.'<sup>204</sup> Hilsenrath: 'I have frightened the philo-semites. I am an outsider for both the Germans and the Jews.'<sup>205</sup> All these quotations reveal some kind of solitude and alienation: alienation from the Jews, from the Hungarians, Austrians, or Germans, from men.

Imre Kertész, Ruth Klüger, and Edgar Hilsenrath became outsiders on different levels: not only as Jews, but also as 'non-Jews'. They were banned from the European countries they lived in, racially categorized by the 1935 Nuremberg Laws, deported for their 'Jewish identity', and alienated from their Hungarian, Austrian, and German context. Whereas Herzberg, Schwarz-Bart, and Grade were able to relate to Jewish (religious) traditions; subverting, rupturing, or questioning them, Kertész, Klüger, and Hilsenrath were not able to relate to that tradition, since they had never identified themselves as exclusively Jewish, neither as related to Jewish (religious) traditions. They grew up in highly acculturated Jewish families, sharing a domestic form of Judaism, which was restricted to the celebration of Sabbath and the Jewish feasts. They belonged to a group of Jews that wanted to integrate themselves into the local nation-state; a group that had become very important in Western-

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<sup>202</sup> Concept coined by Jean Améry in: Améry, 'On the necessity,' 15.

<sup>203</sup> Imre Kertész, *Dagboek van een galeislaaf*, Henry Kammer, Gályanapló, 1992 (Amsterdam, 2003) 45.

I was never aware of being Jewish, except for the moments I was in danger. Then, my Jewish identity manifested itself not as something 'internal', but as a form of restriction, as an external definition. (...) Instead of calling myself Jewish, I would rather say I am a negation, the negation of human hubris, the negation of certainties, of quiet nights, of living peacefully, of conformism, of free choice, of national pride.

(There were no English translations available of Imre Kertész's works discussed in this chapter. I have translated this and the following quotes from Dutch into English. The quotes in the text in English are to be found in the articles discussed and referred to.)

<sup>204</sup> Ruth Klüger, *Weiter leben. Eine Jugend*, (Göttingen, 1992) 207.

<sup>205</sup> Thomas Feibel, 'Ich habe die Philosemiten erschreckt, ich bin ein Aussenseiter. Ans einem Gespräch mit dem Schriftsteller Edgar Hilsenrath,' *Frankfurter Rundschau* 215 (1990).

European Jewry in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The self-perception of these acculturated Jews was not determined by their Jewish identity: they refused to be national Jews and they were not religious Jews either. They emancipated into the societies they lived in: socially as well as politically.<sup>206</sup> It is precisely this group of Jews that was excluded from Schwarz-Bart's account on the destruction of European Jewry in *Le dernier des Justes*.

In an article published in 2001 Dan Michman argues there is a general attitude, shared by many historians and non-historians, toward viewing the Holocaust from the Eastern European (Jewish) angle. Michman calls to the fore an extreme example: Dawidowicz's widely used, comprehensive study of the Holocaust *The war against the Jews*, which was published, republished and translated into several languages. Dawidowicz claims in her introduction: 'East European Jewry created a culture that venerated the *sefer*, the book of religious learning, but whose people laughed at themselves. It was a culture that put its people, familiar with poverty and hardship, on speaking terms with God.— note the resemblance with the depiction of Jewry in *Le dernier des Justes* — It was a culture unique in all Jewish history, and East European Ashkenazic Jewry, which fashioned that culture, was the wellspring of Jewish creativity for Jewish communities throughout the world.'<sup>207</sup> The book is somewhat outdated, but Michman still argues that the perceptions and conclusions about the most decisive issues on the Holocaust are usually arrived at through the Eastern European (Jewish) example.<sup>208</sup> In the writings on religious issues in the face of the Holocaust a similar tendency is visible: David Roskies' impressive works *The literature of destruction. Jewish responses to catastrophe* and *Against the Apocalypse. Responses to catastrophe in modern Jewish culture* wherein, among others, questions of theodicy are addressed, deal exclusively with Eastern European Jewish literature.<sup>209</sup> Earlier the extensive studies on the religious implications of the works of Elie Wiesel and for example Isaac Bashevis Singer were mentioned.

Indeed, the major Jewish community in Europe lived in Poland, and Eastern European Jewry contained the majority of the Jewish people. Nevertheless, there was a large group of acculturated Western European Jews who found themselves ripped off from their former identity during the Holocaust. They could never re-identify with a (Western) European civilization they had cherished before, but which had excluded them and without any

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<sup>206</sup> Michman, 'Jewish identity in interwar Europe,' 41.

<sup>207</sup> L. Dawidowicz, *The war against the Jews*, (New York, 1975) xxiv-xxv.

<sup>208</sup> Michman, 'Jewish identity in interwar Europe,' 38.

<sup>209</sup> David Roskies, *The literature of destruction. Jewish responses to catastrophe*, (Philadelphia, 1989); Roskies, *Against the apocalypse*.

resistance had let them deport into death. When it comes to questions connected to theodicy, authors like Klüger, Hilsenrath, and Kertész are interesting because of their problematic Jewish identity: traditionally, questions about the relation between God and suffering are inevitably intertwined with a particular understanding of Judaism and Jewish identity. As opposed to Herzberg and Schwarz-Bart, Hilsenrath's, Kertész's, and Klüger's, understanding of Jewish identity was never self-evident. They are involved in a quest for a sense of Jewishness that is not primarily religious.<sup>210</sup> However, when reflecting on themes connected to theodicy they are forced to relate somehow to Judaism.

Klüger, Hilsenrath, and Kertész do not write as extensively on themes connected to theodicy as Herzberg and Schwarz-Bart – they lack the vocabulary with which Herzberg and Schwarz-Bart are able to rupture religious Jewish traditions – but nevertheless address these themes in their literary works. How then, do they write on these issues? And how is their writing connected to their Jewish self-understanding? Are there characteristics the three authors have in common, or are the works to be read primarily as individual accounts? Moreover, how do the authors differ from Herzberg and Schwarz-Bart? Are there similarities as well? Are there things to be revealed while separating 'secular' Jewish authors with acculturated backgrounds from authors with orthodox backgrounds?

Hilsenrath and Kertész have written an extensive oeuvre. This study will confine itself to the analyses of two works of each author wherein themes of God, suffering and Judaism are somehow addressed: Hilsenrath's most renowned works,<sup>211</sup> *Nacht* and *Der Nazi und der Friseur* – that will be addressed more extensively, for the two books put the fore some confliction notions – and Kertész' *Kaddish for a child not born* and *Someone Other. The Chronicle of the Changing*. Ruth Klüger, who dedicated most of her life to German literary studies, started to write literary fiction during her 60s. Klüger's *Weiter Leben. Eine Jugend* was praised extensively by German scholars. In 2008 a new book *Unterwegs verloren. Einnerugen* was published. Because it mainly deals with the period after the war including experiences at several (American) universities, the analyses will focus exclusively on *Weiter Leben. Eine Jugend*.

As will be argued in this chapter the positions of these acculturated Jewish authors are highly individual. Unlike Herzberg and Schwarz-Bart who related somehow to Jewish religious traditions, and therefore can be related to each other as well, these authors place

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<sup>210</sup> Anne Fuchs, *A space of anxiety. Dislocation and abjection in modern German-Jewish literature*, (Amsterdam, 1999) 8.

<sup>211</sup> Peter Stenberg, 'Memories of the Holocaust. Edgar Hilsenrath and the fiction of genocide,' *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 56 (1982) 282.

themselves outside Jewish traditions and seek for individual notions of Jewish identity. To put to the fore the diversity of these authors, I chose to address three authors in this chapter, instead of two.

## Edgar Hilsenrath

Deine sprache ist Deutsch.

Deutsch.

Deutsch.

Die verdammte Sprache.

Die verdammte Sprache.

Die du liebst.

Die ich liebe.

Weil sie deine Sprache ist.

Weil sie meine Sprache ist.

Die du immer geliebt hast. Auch damals.

Auch damals.

Damals als die Synagogen brannten.

Damals als die Synagogen brannten.

Die du geliebt hast. Auch im Land der Massenerschießungen

Im Land der Massenerschießungen.

Als dein Blick in die Ferne schweifte, dorthin, wo die Öfen von Auschwitz rauchten.

Auch damals.

Auch damals.<sup>212</sup>

The dialogue reveals the painful paradox wherein German speaking Jewish authors lived after the Holocaust. Not only was Edgar Hilsenrath alienated from the country in which he was born, he shared his mother tongue with his perpetrators: the German language of Hilsenrath's prose, in which he spells out the alphabet of genocide in ever changing styles, is the same language the Nazis spoke in the camps.

Whereas after the war Hilsenrath lived in exile (Palestine, France, the United States) like many other German-Jews, German remained his medium of memory. However, it would take a long time before the German public would appreciate Hilsenrath's bitter and provocative work.<sup>213</sup> Though many Jewish writers continued to write in German after the war – among others, Paul Celan, Elias Canetti, Manes Sperber, Jakov Lind, Jurek Becker, Nelly

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<sup>212</sup> Quote from Edgar Hilsenrath in 1978 in: Edgar Hilsenrath, *Verliebt in die deutsche Sprache. Die Odyssee des Edgar Hilsenrath*, (Cologne, 2005) 75.

<sup>213</sup> Piet de Moor, "Het is allemaal echt gebeurd", *De groene Amsterdammer* 132 (2008) 30.

Sachs – Peter Stenberg argues they were considered not as German, but as Jewish writers only. For the mass audience in Germany it was not a major work of literature which first brought the German genocide on the Jews to the centre of their imagination, but an English-language melodrama: the U.S. television series *Holocaust*, broadcasted only in 1978.<sup>214</sup> When Hilsenrath wanted to publish his first novel *Nacht* in 1958 he was criticized for being anti-Semitic and blasphemous. For years his book was refused by many German publishers. In the 1950s and 1960s German literature was inhabited solely by positive and noble Jewish figures.<sup>215</sup> It was taboo portraying Jews in a negative way. Hilsenrath says about his first novel: 'Es ist das erste Buch, das mit der scheinheiligen philosemitischen Tradition bricht'. It would take six years before *Nacht* was published. His second novel *Der Nazi und der Friseur*, narrated from the perspective of an SS officer, was refused even more persistently. During the 1970s the book was rejected over sixty times in Germany, but translated and published in the United States, Italy, and France. Eventually, in 1977 the book found his German public.<sup>216</sup>

It took eleven years for Edgar Hilsenrath to finish his first great novel *Nacht*: an hyper naturalistic chronicle of death in Rumanian ghetto-life. Whereas the author explicitly declares the narrative is not autobiographical – he is not to be identified with the main character Ranek – the portrayal of ghetto-life's painful absurdity was based on Hilsenrath's own experiences.<sup>217</sup> He was fifteen when he was deported with his mother and brother to a ghetto in Moghilev-Padolsk, Transnistria. While Hilsenrath was born into an acculturated German-Jewish family – who had largely rejected Jewish traditions in favour of integrating into German culture; his father even joined the army during World War I –<sup>218</sup> anti-Semitic attacks prompted his father to send his family to in-laws in Sereth. A town in the supposedly safe haven of Bukovina, at that time part of Romania. The immigration illustrates how fluent and complex Jewish identities can be: Hilsenrath was both raised as integrated German-Jew and also became familiar with (Rumanian) Eastern European Jewry. When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, the family was trapped. Edgar Hilsenrath, his mother, and brother were deported to the ghetto in Moghilev-Padolsk, a bombed-out, isolated town. Instead of the organized executions of the German concentration camps, Hilsenrath and his family faced a survival test in the crumbling ruins of the former Rumanian city. The Rumanian extermination relied on a diabolic game, which allowed relative safety if a shelter could be

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<sup>214</sup> Stenberg, 'Memories of the Holocaust,' 277.

<sup>215</sup> Heidy M. Müller, *Die Judendarstellung in der deutschsprachigen Erzählprosa (1945-1981)*, (Königstein, 1986)

<sup>216</sup> Kremer, ed., *Holocaust literature* 554-557.

<sup>217</sup> Moor, "Het is allemaal," 31.

<sup>218</sup> Fuchs, *A space of anxiety*, 8.



found at night, and deportation and execution if it couldn't. In addition, there were no regular food deliveries and survival came only to those strong enough to live off the ruined land.<sup>219</sup>

According to Peter Stenberg both *Nacht* and *Der Nazi und der Friseur* represent the first examples in German literature translating the destruction of the European Jews in the Second World War in a language of satire, irony, and black humour. While Gunther Grass in *Die Blechtrommel*, Kosinski in *The painted bird*, or Knieza in *Jankel Tannenbaum trilogy* employed satiric, ironic or fantastic terms, when describing other almost equally destructive aspects of the war, fictional writings on the Holocaust were limited to detailed descriptions of the brutalities in naturalistic terms. In Germany Holocaust literature remained an isolated genre: communication between the victimized culture and the dominant German culture failed to take place.<sup>220</sup> For Ruth Klüger this gaping wound would be one of the reasons to write her memoirs in the first place; to address the German public explicitly while living in the United States, even in the 1990s. Also *Nacht*, had ruptured existing discourses on Holocaust writings: it did not fall over the relatively familiar war landscape of north-eastern Europe, but over the political and geographical no-man's-land of the Rumanian-occupied Ukraine. Stenberg argues that the almost arbitrary disorder of survival or extinction in the Rumanian ghetto lends itself to an absurd, black comic description of the horror of everyday survival. As opposed to the unique concentrated evil arising from the descriptions of German concentration camps, Hilsenrath focuses on the victims alone as players in the absurd black theatre of the world.<sup>221</sup>

With his black comic, bizarre depictions of ghetto-life, Hilsenrath ruptures dichotomies of good and evil, victim and perpetrator. In *Der Nazi und der Friseur* the distorted dichotomies startle the reader even more when an SS officer, the I narrator, takes over the identity of his Jewish murdered victim. Elrud Ibsch relates Hilsenrath's work to literary post modernity in his experimentation with identities: undermining traditions of fairy tales, the Bildungsroman, and confession literature.<sup>222</sup> Both Schwarz-Bart and Herzberg related Judaism, understood as a religious identity, to an ethics that contradicted with Christian, polytheistic, or secular culture. However, Hilsenrath undermines these notions of Jewish identities. Identities of victim and perpetrator, of Nazi and Jew, are intermingled: even the reader cannot escape freely from this ethically burdened enterprise: for the reader it is impossible to completely detach from the SS narrator's voice in *Der Nazi und der Friseur*.

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<sup>219</sup> Stenberg, 'Memories of the Holocaust,' 284.

<sup>220</sup> Ibidem 279.

<sup>221</sup> Ibidem 285.

<sup>222</sup> Ibsch, *Die Shoah erzählt*, 78-90.

As for Hilsenrath's writings on God: in the black theatre of death in the ghetto, or in a ruthless confession of a mass murderer, Jewish religious language and imagery seem to be directed to the world of absurdities. The question arises as to whether *Nacht* and *Der Nazi und der Friseur* ventilate a 'God is dead theology'. *Nacht*'s protagonist Ranek often reacts cynically to expressions of faith – 'Es gibt keinen Shabbath mehr... und kein Gesetz. Er ist doch damals gestorben.'<sup>223</sup> – but how is Ranek's position related to the overall narrative? Is the overall narrative as cynical and nihilistic as Ranek's survivalist approach to life in the ghetto – which seems to contrast with Herzberg's observation in Bergen-Belsen: 'Er is Moraal overgebleven in het diepst van onze [note the plural] verwerping.'<sup>224</sup> Moreover, to what extent is *Nacht* related to *Der Nazi und der Friseur*, wherein the perspective is reversed and told from the perpetrator's point of view instead of the victim's. In *Der Nazi und der Friseur* concepts of Jewish identity become even more complicated than they were in *Nacht*: the notion of Judaism as an essentially religious or historical entity is being undermined. (How) are questions about the relation between God and suffering related to this problematic relation to Judaism?

### *Nacht*

'Heute muß jeder zuerst an sich selbst denken, (...) es ist das Gesetz unsere Zeit,'<sup>225</sup> Ranek replies in one of *Nacht*'s first pages to a woman, right after he had stolen the shoes of a dying man, violating one of the ghetto's unwritten laws. Though the dead provided shoes, underwear, clothes, golden teeth, glasses, and watches for the living, there were still (unwritten) laws prohibiting the inhabitants of Hilsenrath's fictional Prokower ghetto stealing from dying men and women. In the ghetto life has become a game of survival. Every form of ethics is turned upside down in the ruined city where naked corpses lay across the streets, where little children comb the hair of dead bodies, where the ones without a shelter at night are deported to a certain death, deported not by the Nazis but by the Jewish police, where hunger has corrupted men, women, and children. The narrator describes ghetto life in ice-cold short sentences: no reflections, no considerations, just images, images, and images: hell becoming reality. Though children are mostly depicted positive, even they become dim:

'Muß auch Papa deshalb sterben?'

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<sup>223</sup> Edgar Hilsenrath, *Nacht*, (Cologne, 1978) 50.

<sup>224</sup> Herzberg, *Between two streams*, ; Herzberg, *Verzameld werk 2*, 211.

'At the lowest point of our rejection 'Moral' did remain.'

<sup>225</sup> Hilsenrath, *Nacht*, 20.

‘Wenn du fleißig betest’, sagte die Frau, ‘dann wird er vielleicht am Leben bleiben.’

‘Ich bin jetzt zu müde, um zu beten. Hat es morgen Zeit? Oder ist er morgen schon tot?’<sup>226</sup>

The Prokower ghetto is completely isolated and seemingly autonomous, closed off from the rest of the world; the ghetto echoes Camus’ Oran in his existentialist novel *Le peste*. Conversely, the absurd theatre of the Prokower ghetto was not the result of a random disease as it was in *Le Peste*, it is created by human hands. Though Hilsenrath is criticized for his choice not to focus on the perpetrators, as if the ghetto could function without them,<sup>227</sup> the reader cannot escape from the idea that one group of humans has forced another group of humans into living according rules of anarchy and survival. While absent in the narrative, the perpetrators are fearfully present in the lack of food supplies, the absence of housing, and each and everyone’s continuous fear for the night, when razzias lead the homeless into death. Though *Nacht* problematizes the dichotomy between good and evil – Jewish men and women fighting relentlessly for their lives – the barriers between perpetrator and victim are not dissolved. Indeed, the inhabitants of the ghetto follow the rules of survival, but they have been forced into living by them; into living in a ghetto with its inner logic of hunger and death, created and invented by others. It is a logic of absurdity, which is reflected in the narrator’s almost monotonous descriptions of ghetto life wherein death, sickness, and hunger determine the rhythm of daily life. The absurdity is forced upon the reader by short and barren sentences and dialogues. People do not have time to think about their lives: they are fully occupied with surviving each day.

In *Nacht*, with its literary style of detailed cold realism, questions of theodicy, or any other form of reflections, are out of place. In a world where death becomes the only possibility of escaping a life in hell, speaking of God becomes absurd, as if that language belongs to another time, and another place. For the protagonist Ranek words as Sabbath, God, and prayer have literally shifted to the world of his dreams. When he fantasises and dreams of the time before the ghetto, he thinks of his family while celebrating Sabbath:

‘Er träumte in dieser Nacht (...) Er bemerkte die Sabbatleuchter. Im geheimen wunderte er sich, denn heute war Sabbat, und an diesem Tag nahm Mutter die Leuchter ausnahmsweise vom Klavier herunter, um sie auf die Tisch zu stellen; sie zündete dann die Kerzen an und sprach das Gebet mit geschlossenen Augen.’<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> Ibidem, 341.

<sup>227</sup> Claudia Brecheisen, *Literatur des Holocaust. Identität und Judentum bei Jakov Lind, Edgar Hilsenrath und Jurek Becker*, (Augsburg, 1993) 68.

<sup>228</sup> Hilsenrath, *Nacht*, 49.

Only in the world of his dreams prayer does not seem incommensurable with daily life:

‘Er träumt von einer frühen Morgenstunde zu Hause. Er steht am Fenster und zieht die Gebetsriemen an. Es ist jeden Morgen dieselbe Routine...Tefilin legen...und dabei das Morgengebet herunterleiern, dann ein kleines Frühstück, das aus Buttersemmeln und Kaffee besteht und das er meistens mit Mutter und Debora einnimmt.’<sup>229</sup>

However, when Ranek is awake the world of his dreams is completely disrupted: ‘Es gibt keinen Sabbat mehr....und kein Gesetz. Er ist doch damals gestorben,’ ‘Wer?’ ‘God’.<sup>230</sup> ‘Gesetz’ echoes the sentence: ‘Heute muß jeder zuerst an sich selbst denken, (...) es ist das Gesetz unsere Zeit,’<sup>231</sup> The covenantal God with his laws and commandments seems to belong to the past. In a world of survival, God’s commandments have become absurd. Nevertheless, others still invoke God’s responsibility in their expressions: when Ranek steals food from two children their mother exclaims ‘Gott wird Sie dafür bestrafen’, but Ranek replies ‘Ich scheiß auf Gott’.<sup>232</sup>

Several commentaries have argued Hilsenrath focuses exclusively on the degeneration of man.<sup>233</sup> As if *Nacht* puts a universal principle to the fore: discarded from his little sense of civilization man is fundamentally barbaric, corrupt and animalistic. But Hilsenrath’s world is more complex than ‘man as animal’ platitude. Even Ranek experiences the barriers of his consciousness: though it would increase his chances on survival, he refuses to join the Jewish police ‘Ich hab schon ziemlich schiefe Sachen gedreht, schiefe oder ganz miese, wie du’s willst; ich hab’allerhand auf dem Kerbholz. Aber ich hab’ noch niemanden umgebracht.’<sup>234</sup> Ranek would not kill others to survive. Even in the barren rhythm of daily life small acts of compassion are hidden beneath the surface. They are rare and perhaps, as exceptions, confirm the bestiality of life, but they are there. One of the characters acting out compassion is Debora – a name spelled like the Old Testament’s judge –, her presence in the ghetto is like a stream of light. She is Ranek’s sister in law and represents everything Ranek has lost: faith in man and faith in God. She carries her half dead husband, Fred, from city to city to the ghetto, giving him her food while he is infected with typhus and given up by others. As she prays for him constantly, she is not surprised when he recovers.<sup>235</sup> Her selflessness continually

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<sup>229</sup> Ibidem, 167.

<sup>230</sup> Ibidem, 50.

<sup>231</sup> Ibidem, 20.

<sup>232</sup> Ibidem, 401.

<sup>233</sup> E.g. Johann Ernst, ‘Noch unter dem Rang von Insekten,’ *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 12 (1978)

<sup>234</sup> Ibidem 72.

<sup>235</sup> Hilsenrath, *Nacht*, 267.

contrasts with the ghetto's logic. Still, she survives – cynically, Fred does not and dies of hunger.

Debora's role in the narrative is ambiguous: on the one hand her acts of kindness undermine other images of man's bestiality, on the other hand, she is often referred to as insane by others in the ghetto. As if her way of living is incommensurable with the ghetto life.

'Sie haben gestern Suppe unter die Leute verteilt

Gestern war Sabbat, sagte Debora

Na Und?, sagte Moische.

Am Sabbat soll man sich freuen, lächelte Debora, und es gibt so wenig Freude auf der Welt! Deshalb hab' ich mir vorgenommen daß ich einmahl wöchentlich mehr Suppe koche, als ich essen kann, und sie dann unter diejenigen verteile, die sie am nötigsten haben

Moische nickte zustimmend, aber dabei blickte er sie an, so wie man jemanden, der den Verstand verloren hat.<sup>236</sup>

Debora has not given up on man or God. And only in dialogue with her, Ranek speaks of God: she reminds him of a faith he has lost: 'Gott wird immer für dich da sein', sagte er bitter, 'nur für einen wie mich ist er tot und begraben.' And a bit further he says: 'Menschen wie du geben nicht auf. Sie glauben selbst dann noch, wenn sie Dreck und Sägespäne fressen.'<sup>237</sup> Debora represents everything which seems to be opposed to the ghetto life: humane values, moral integrity, and piousness. Interestingly, in the narrative these three are often interconnected: compassion going hand in hand with piousness, just as godlessness is often related to ethical cynicism. Debora is described by others as 'Saint', as the only one whose appearance is not changed and distorted by hunger and war.<sup>238</sup> But even her appearance, her face, the face of a remote biblical figure, is ruptured by ghetto life:

Ihr Gesicht war in diesem Augenblick vollkommen verändert; es drückte nicht anderes aus als tierischen Hunger, und es war plötzlich nicht mehr Deboras Gesicht; es war eind fremdes Gesicht, das er nicht mehr erkannte; aber es paßte jetzt in diese Umgebung. 239

If someone, referred to as Saint, can be broken in the ghetto, what else is there to expect? Manfred Rieger's commentary – 'Hilsenraths Botschaft ist daß der Mensch, auch wenn er abgrundtief schlecht gemacht wird, doch immer wieder auf das Gute zurückfällt'<sup>240</sup> – is

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<sup>236</sup> Ibidem, 439.

<sup>237</sup> Ibidem, 193.

<sup>238</sup> Ibidem, 183.

<sup>239</sup> Ibidem, 416.

<sup>240</sup> Manfred Rieger, 'Edgar Hilsenrath. Nacht,' *Neue deutsche Hefte* 25 (1978)821.

perhaps too optimistic. Still, at the end of the novel something has changed for Ranek, the cynical protagonist. He will die just like the man from whom he had stolen his shoes in the beginning of the novel: at night, alone, in the darkness of a hidden corner. But as an old woman reflects on his life, she says to Debora:

Ranek hat Sie geliebt. Bloß hab' ich mir's nie erklären können, weil er doch einer war, dessen Glauben man zerstört hatte, den Glauben an Gott, Debora, und den Glauben an die Menschen, einer, dem dann nichts mehr heilig war....(...) Aber Hofer hat eben doch recht gehabt. (...) Nur die Toten können nicht mehr lieben.'

Again humane values, like love, are related to faith in God. But as Ranek was cynical and nihilistic, he was not inhumane. Debora had changed something in his existence. Ghetto life could not destroy everything: 'Nur die Toten können nicht mehr lieben'. For the overall narrative Ranek's love for Debora does not change anything: ghetto life still continues. The reader is not permitted to look into some kind of liberation.

Debora flees into the woods with a child, an orphan. Again she disregards the rules of survival. She is told: 'Was Sie da tun, das ist ja Wahnsinn. Das ist ja Wahnsinn.'<sup>241</sup> The reader does not know how it will end. She comforts the baby 'Du brauchst keine Angst zu haben, Mutter wird auf dich aufpassen.' Is she a fool talking to a child she cannot save? Will she and everything she represents, including faith in God, die in the woods? Is she insane, or is her act of compassion the only hope there is? Just like her, the reader touches in the darkness of the night; a night that had still not passed. It painfully brings into mind the book's motto:

'Ich habe dich einen kleinen Augenblick verlassen,  
aber mit großer Barmherzigkeit will ich dich sammeln' (Jesaja 54:7)

### ***Der Nazi und der Friseur***

Hilsenrath's *Nacht* broke baldly with 'philosemitic traditions' not depicting Jews only as positive and noble characters. *Der Nazi und der Friseur* even puts into question and undermines persistent conceptions of Jews altogether: the protagonist Max Schulz, an SS mass murderer and an illegitimate and abused son of an Aryan whore, is the spitting image of the Stürmer Jew,<sup>242</sup> while his Jewish friend Itzig corresponds to the picture of the ideal Aryan German, both becoming the mirrored reverse of their origins. Schulz takes over Itzig's identity at the end of the war as a means of escaping the Polish concentration camp, where he

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<sup>241</sup> Hilsenrath, *Nacht*, 499.

<sup>242</sup> The Jew as described in the anti-Semitic scandal sheet 'Der Stürmer.

has murdered not only Itzig, but the whole Finkelstein family.<sup>243</sup> With a bag of stolen golden teeth – note the resemblance with Ranek’s golden teeth collection – Schulz undertakes an epic journey through partisan controlled Poland to Berlin and finally on to the forest of the six million victims in Israel. There, the Yiddish speaking Zionist Max Schulz alias Itzig Finkelstein marries Mira, a Holocaust survivor, and finds a satisfying new life among the terrorist groups of Jerusalem. Even such a brief sketch indicates that Hilsenrath is entering taboo territory: Schulz’s distortion, his identity change, not only worked in post-war Germany, but also functioned from the Jewish point of view. Hilsenrath plays with stereotypes existent not only in anti-Semitic ideologies but also among Jews.

Essentialist ideas on Judaism, as ventilated in the work of Herzberg and Schwarz-Bart, are fundamentally undermined by Hilsenrath. In *Le dernier des justes* the narrator not only emphasizes the recognisability of the Jewish characters’ appearances,<sup>244</sup> he also defines Jewish identity and Judaism in essentialist terms: as Christian European’s suffering, pious, mild, and gentle *other*. While Herzberg’s *Tweestromenland* distinguishes between individual Jews and Judaism as monotheistic psychological type, he nevertheless reduces Judaism to an unchanged kernel: being the first ethical religion. Hilsenrath’s protagonist Max Schulz is also searching for Judaism’s defining character, but this quest is being ridiculed. The one character who searches for his ‘Jewish soul’ is a Nazi. Though he likes to identify himself as ‘Massenmörder Max Schulz’, he loses himself in his identification with his Jewish victims:

‘Seelengeruch...

Heute dachte ich den ganzen Nachmittag über dieses Wort nach. Was ist es, was wir Juden ausstrahlen? (...) Was ist diese geheimnisvolle Etwas? Und woraus setzt sich zusammen? Ist es unsere Vergangenheit? Unsere einmalige Geschichte? Das Erbe unsere Väter? Unser Bund mit Gott? Unser Leid? 2000 Jahr Verfolgung? Unsere Sehnsuch nach Jerusalem?’<sup>245</sup>

These reflections are of course absurd and painful, for the I-narrator has killed thousands of Jews, but they are also ridiculed in the following dialogue with Max Rosenfeld who had recognized Max Schulz as a Jew.

Beim gemeinsamen Abendessen verlangte ich von Max Rosenfeld eine Antwort. (...)

Und ich sagte: ‘Und wie haben Sie mich erkannt? An meinen Seelengeruch?’

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<sup>243</sup> Stenberg, ‘Memories of the Holocaust,’ 287.

<sup>244</sup> E.g. When Erny had joined the army as goy, he is recognized as a Jew by a black smith: Schwarz-Bart, *Le dernier des Justes*, 276.

<sup>245</sup> Edgar Hilsenrath, *Der Nazi und der Friseur*, (Cologne, 1977) 204.

Max Rosenfeld schüttelte den Kopf. 'Nicht am Seelengeruch, Herr Finkelstein. Bloß an Ihrer Fresse!'<sup>246</sup>

Max Schulz was not recognized by a shared history, a shared covenant with God, a shared suffering or longing for Jerusalem; he was recognized by his nose, his eyes, his hair. The narrative's grotesque construction ruptures essentialist, or religious ideas on Jewish identity as they are ventilated in the work of Schwarz-Bart and Herzberg, wherein Judaism consists of an unchanged (religious) kernel: either as monotheistic psychological type or as a tradition of suffering mirrored in the Lévy-tradition.

In the fifth part of the novel, the unreliable I-narrator Max Schulz is able not only to take over a Jewish identity, but also to invoke admiration by other Jewish Israeli when he speaks of 'their' Jewish history, 'their' suffering, and 'their' religion:

Ein Friseur soll Seine Kunden unterhalten. Ich rede fast den ganzen Tag. Über Geschichte, unsere Geschichte, jüdische Geschichte. (...) über die Zukunft. (...)

Je mehr ich redete, desto erregter wurde ich. (...) Ich machte noch einen ordentlichen Fassonschnitt, redete wild drauflos, hatte Visionen, sprach von Millionen Kleinkindern, sprach von Atombomben, sprach von Expansion, sprach vom winzigen China, sprach van der Beherrschung der Welt! Ich wußte nicht, ob Kunden den letzten Teil der gewaltigen Rede wirklich verstanden hatten, war aber sicher, daß der Ton meiner Stimme seine hypnotische Wirkung nicht verfehlt hatten. Denn als ich schwieg, war es sekundenlang still im Salon, so still wie damals auf dem Ölberg nach der gewaltigten Rede. Dann aber sprangen die Kunden von ihren Sesseln empor (...) schrien wie die Wahnsinnigen: ‚Amen! Amen! Amen!'<sup>247</sup>

Here, Max Schulz dangerously refers to Hitler's speech on the Ölberg. Schulz, the man who had adored Hitler, who had slaughtered 10.000 Jewish men and women, but at the same time had learned how to pray, had learned Yiddish and Hebrew from his victims, is being admired by his Jewish customers for his Jewish Zionist vision, for his knowledge of Jewish history and Jewish traditions. It is as if Judaism is like a coat one can or cannot wear. Hilsenrath never ridicules Holocaust's victims – the Finkelstein family or Schulz's wife Mira – their Jewish identity had led them into death, but in the post-Holocaust world these identities seem completely arbitrary: if an SS mass murderer is believed to be a Jew: what then does it mean to be Jewish? As opposed to Herzberg and Schwarz-Bart who, while questioning and rupturing Jewish religious traditions in their narratives, relate to and identify with these

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<sup>246</sup> Ibidem, 204.

<sup>247</sup> Ibidem, 334-335.



traditions, Hilsenrath places himself outside that discourse, questioning and mocking ideas on Jewish identity altogether.

Not only concepts of Judaism, but related to that, concepts of Judaism's God are being ridiculed. The heavens were silent when millions of men and women were slaughtered. Cynically, in Schulz's (unreliable) account, the heavens had obeyed him, mass murderer Max Schulz, for years, until the end of the war. God's only reaction to Max Schulz's crimes was that his watch stopped ticking.

Ich kletterte aus dem Bunker heraus. Es war noch stockdunkel. Ich bürstete meine Uniform mit dem Fingerspitzen ab, knallte die Hacken zusammen und brüllte den Himmel an.

Ich brüllte: 'Es werde Licht!'

Ich brüllte: 'Es werde Licht!'

Ich brüllte: 'Es werde Licht!'

Aber nichts geschah. Jahrelang hatte ich in aller Früh den Himmel angebrüllt. Und der Himmel hatte mich gehorcht. Und jetzt....auf einmal...ging das nicht mehr. Der Himmel gehorchte nicht

Ich zündete ein Streichholz an und schaute auf meine Uhr. Sie war stehengeblieben.

Erst etwas später begann es zu dämmern.<sup>248</sup>

Even exclamations to the heavens, calling upon God's responsibility for unjustifiable suffering, a recognizable literary form in Holocaust literature, is turned upside down and corrupted by Max Schulz's confession: not the Jews call the heavens to account for the millions, but an SS officer while lost in the woods of Poland: 'Was dann passiert ist? Gar nichts ist passiert. Bloß kalt war's. Auch in der Nacht. Sogar noch kälter. Und der Himmel hat gegrinst.'<sup>249</sup> Or later on, on the boat to Palestine, Max Schulz addresses Itzik and undermines every sense of justice when he speaks of God's failure and Jewish suffering as if it was his own.

'Ja, lieber Itzig. Gott ist ein großer Versager. Was hat er getan, als einer seiner Kinder in die tiefen Massengräber purzelten? (...) Nein Itzig. Die meisten von uns auf Exitus glauben nicht mehr an Gott. Wir wollen keine Schafe mehr sein. Nie wieder wird man uns einfach wegführen, zur Schlachtbank.'<sup>250</sup>

These questions of theodicy obtain bizarre connotations when articulated by a Nazi mass murderer. Sometimes, for the reader, it is even hard to distinguish Max Schulz from Itzig

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<sup>248</sup> Ibidem, 128.

<sup>249</sup> Ibidem, 225.

<sup>250</sup> Ibidem, 252.

Finkelstein. Schulz plays his role convincingly. The reader is drawn into the story, trapped in Max Schulz's confession, too personally engaged to allow any truly critical evaluation of his character, and, disturbingly, finds himself almost his accomplice.

In her article 'Subverting satire' Astrid Klocke underlines the similarities between Charlie Chaplin's traditional satiric *The great dictator* and Hilsenrath's black humorous *Der Nazi und der Friseur*: both acting on the Doppelgänger motif. But whereas *The great dictator* does clearly explicate good and evil – the Jewish barber's character traits are contrasted with the dictator's – Hilsenrath rather exposes the ways in which the notion of justice, dichotomies of perpetrator and victim, or guilt and redemption are destroyed.<sup>251</sup> At the end of *The great dictator* the barber sketches visions of hope, of a humanitarian world, of democracy and human dignity. In *Der Nazi und der Friseur* justice will never happen:

'Es geht ihnen gut, den Massenmördern! Die sind Friseure. Oder was andres. Viele haben eigene Geschäfte. Viele besitzen Fabriken. Sind Industrielle. Viele machen wieder Politik, sitzen in der Regierung. Haben Rang und Ansehen. Und Familie.

Ich grinste und sagte: 'Wahrlich, ich sage euch. Das ist die volle Wahrheit. Sie lieben auf freiem Fuß und machen sich über Gott und die Welt lustig. Ja. Und auch über das Wort 'Gerechtigkeit'!<sup>252</sup>

*Der Nazi und der Friseur* is not inhabited by a Debora reminding the reader of possible hope, human dignity, or a merciful God. God is as guilty as Max Schulz: the American edition's end shows a trial in Heaven during which Schulz is confronted with his deeds. Schulz is condemned. When Schulz confronts God with his inactivity and asks him what he did when he was not asleep. God says, 'I watched'. Whereupon Schulz replies: 'Than your guilt is greater than mine! If that is true...then you cannot be my judge!'<sup>253</sup> In a somewhat different way, Hilsenrath, like Herzberg, relates the existence of God to the possibility of eventual justice. But if God is guilty he cannot fulfil his task as judge. The implications of Schulz's dialogue with God are similar to a God is dead theology: if God is not dead, then he has failed completely and man would better live as if he was dead.

In the German edition Hilsenrath deleted the trial scene to ensure that Schulz could not be excused for his crimes by virtue of his accusations against God. Either way any form of justice has become impossible: at the end of the novel the main character stares into a hopeless abyss. As in *Nacht* Hilsenrath refuses to give explanations for the blind calculated

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<sup>251</sup> Astrid Klocke, 'Subverting satire. Edgar Hilsenrath's novel *Der Nazi und der Friseur* and Charlie Chaplin's film *The great dictator*,' *Holocaust and genocide studies* 22 (2008) 505.

<sup>252</sup> Hilsenrath, *Der Nazi*, 418.

<sup>253</sup> Quote from the American edition in: Klocke, 'Subverting satire,' 506.

murder, he refuses to search for meaning. Above all, Hilsenrath's black humorous novels spell out genocide's meaninglessness. They undermine Fackenheim's 614<sup>th</sup> Commandment, that forbids Jews to despair of man and his world, to escape in either cynicism, or to despair of the God of Israel.<sup>254</sup> With his disturbing literature Hilsenrath places himself not only outside the perpetrator's (German) culture, but also outside the victimized (Jewish) culture. Whereas Herzberg and Schwarz-Bart in their dialogue or dispute with Jewish religious traditions actually write within that tradition, Hilsenrath questions and undermines these traditions altogether. In his novels, especially *Der Nazi und der Friseur*, the question arises as to whether Judaism or Jewish identities are some kind of construction, sometimes even based on anti-Semitic stereotypes. Herzberg had explained the Nazis' hatred against the Jews as the polytheistic urge for blind power, annihilating its obstacle, monotheistic ethics. Anti-Semitism, then, is a never ending universal struggle of mankind. Conversely, in Max Schulz's account on the Holocaust the urge for annihilating the Jews seems completely arbitrary, related to the will for destruction, but impossible to explain. Hilsenrath turns everything upside down and thereby places himself outside every tradition. His position as a German Jewish author writing on the Holocaust is an isolated one.

Whereas *Nacht's* Debora could give some kind of perspective of hope in the midst of insanity or, insane hope in the middle of desperation, *Der Nazi und der Friseur* challenges the reader to face nihilism unscrupulously. The reader's expectations are not fulfilled, they are actually hurt – Max's account is not sincere, it is a disrupted confession, there is no suitable punishment, no justice takes place. In words of satire, irony, and black humour Hilsenrath engraves the reader's mind with Holocaust's countless unfinished ends, its incomprehensibility, not as an untouchable part of history, but in its complete meaninglessness. The absurd black humorous novel will haunt its readers and therefore makes it impossible to forget. And that is, perhaps, Hilsenrath's serious intention.

## Ruth Klüger

Ihr müßt euch nicht mit mir indentifizieren, es ist mir sogar lieber, wenn ihr es nicht tut; und wenn ich euch ´artfremd´ erscheine, so will ich auch das hinnehmen (aber ungern) und, falls ich euch durch den Gebrauch dieses bösen Wortes geärgert habe, mich dafür entschuldigen. Aber laßt euch doch mindestens reizen, verschanzt euch nicht sagt nicht von vornherein, das gehe euch nichts an (...) ihr hättet ja schon die Photographien mit den

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<sup>254</sup> 'Jews are forbidden to hand Hitler posthumus victories. They are commanded to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish people perish. They are commanded to remember the victims of Auschwitz lest their memory perish. They are forbidden to despair of man and his world, and to escape in either cynicism or otherworldliness. [...] Finally they are forbidden to despair of the God of Isreal, lest Judaism perish...'

Leichenhaufen ausgestanden und euer Pensum an Mitschuld und Mitleid absolviert. Werdet du streisüchtig, sucht die Auseinandersetzung.<sup>255</sup>

Ruth Klüger's autobiography *Weiter leben. Eine Jugend*, written in the late 1980s and published in 1992, represents a landmark between early and recent representations of the Holocaust written in Germany.<sup>256</sup> Like Hilsenrath's *Nacht* and *Der Nazi und der Friseur*, *Weiter leben* challenged commonly held notions and conventions of Holocaust literature. Ruth Klüger, a survivor of the Holocaust and citizen of the United States, wrote her *Weiter leben* – 'ein Deutsches buch' at a time when the Historikerstreit of 1986-1988 signalled an intellectual break in the German and international discourse on the Holocaust. More and more German intellectuals emphasised the singularity of the Holocaust. They approved of a 'normalization' of the Nazi legacy, evading German guilt.<sup>257</sup> Furthermore, the German reunification of 1990 seemed to indicate a symbolic break with World War II and its continued political significance for the German state. If the division of Germany had served as a symbol for the aftermath of the Nazis' unprecedented destructive war, reunification seemed to mean the opposite. It served as the acknowledgement by Germany and the rest of the world that the nation had finally left its *Sonderweg*, and that it had proven itself to be a democratic country like any other in Europe.<sup>258</sup>

Ruth Klüger – one of the last members of the generation of Holocaust survivors – resists closing off the past and engages with the German discourse vividly. She intervenes in a debate about the Holocaust, about survivors, about their experiences, about writing after the Holocaust, and about German-Jewish and Austrian-Jewish relations. Klüger's novel provides the opportunity to 'talk-back'.<sup>259</sup> On different levels Klüger's position is comparable to Hilsenrath's. Whereas most German speaking Jews who survived the war in concentration camps and who had left for America after the war, tended to distance themselves from their German background, Klüger, like Hilsenrath, relates to her Austrian-German background. She not only writes in German, she published her book in Germany, in Göttingen, as well. 'Talking back' is exactly what she does in *Weiter leben*; talking back in a convincing, disturbing, self-conscious, original and creative way, both in prose and poetry. Furthermore,

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<sup>255</sup> Klüger, *Weiter leben*, 141.

<sup>256</sup> Dagmar C.G. Lorenz, 'Memory and criticism. Ruth Klüger's 'weiter leben', *Women in German yearbook 9. Feminist studies in German literature and culture* (1993) 207.

<sup>257</sup> Catherine Smale, 'Ungelöste Gespenster? Ghosts in Ruth Klüger's autobiographical project,' *The modern language review. A quarterly journal devoted to the study of medieval and modern literature and philology* 104 (2009) 786.

<sup>258</sup> Bos, *German-Jewish literature*, 71.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibidem*, 73.

*Weiter leben* turns a critical eye towards itself as testimony by commenting on it. By calling into question how memories and narratives are constructed and function, Klüger's memoir fits the mould of a postmodern autobiography, which is highly unusual in survivor literature.<sup>260</sup> *Weiter leben* breaks radically with the genre of testimony.<sup>261</sup> The book is an illustration of Elrud Ibsch's argumentation that Holocaust literature has shifted from the margins to the centre of literary debates, discussing the construction of memories and narratives.

Klüger had a difficult time finding a publisher for her memoir, however, once it was published it became a remarkable bestseller.<sup>262</sup> Within a few weeks, Klüger's autobiography held the first place on the prestigious *Bestenliste* of the *Südwestdeutscher Rundfunk*. Soon thereafter it was discussed by the *Literarisches Quartett* on German Television, perhaps the most influential literary forum in Germany today, and within a few years, Klüger won many important literary prizes.<sup>263</sup> Whereas Klüger attempts at intervening in the reception of her work, Pascale R. Bos points out that her intervention failed completely. In her memoir, Klüger warns for a triumphant reading of *Weiter leben* as sending a positive, redeeming message.

‘Und das wird nun auch zum Problem meines Rückblicks. Wie kann ich euch, meine Leser, davon abhalten, euch mit mir zu freuen, wenn ich doch jetzt, wo mir die Gaskammern nicht mehr dorhen, auf das Happy-End einer Nachkriegswelt zusteure, die ich mit euch teilt?’<sup>264</sup>

*Weiter leben* recounts an uncomfortable story, without a happy ending. Nevertheless, Bos argues, most German critics proceeded to interpret the work as a triumph, as a success story. In many reviews, Klüger's achievement as a postwar academic is hailed as a sign that she managed to become highly successful professionally, and more importantly that she has ‘returned to Germany’, after all.<sup>265</sup> What is more, Klüger's insistence: ‘Ihr müßt euch nicht mit mir indentifizieren’ fails as well. Instead of engaging with the text as an invitation to debates about the (im)possibility of a German-Jewish dialogue; instead of confronting ones

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<sup>260</sup> Ibidem, 78.

<sup>261</sup> Lorenz, 'Memory and criticism,' 208.

<sup>262</sup> Bos, *German-Jewish literature*, 73.

<sup>263</sup> Lorenz, 'Memory and criticism,' 219

<sup>264</sup> Klüger, *Weiter leben*, 139.

<sup>265</sup> Bos, *German-Jewish literature*, Bos refers to the analysis of the reception by Stephan Braese and Holger Gehle in: Stephan Braese & Holger Gehle, 'Von 'Deutschen freunden'. Ruth Klüger's 'Weiter leben. Eine Jugend' in der Deutschen rezeption,' *Der Deutschunterricht* 47 (1995) 76-87.

personal responsibility to come to terms with the Nazi past, German critics emphasized and indentified with Klüger. In their reviews they imagined themselves in her position, her life.<sup>266</sup>

Klüger sought to engage her German readers, sought to unsettle them with her sharp criticism of a German consensus surrounding the Holocaust. Ironically, *Weiter leben* was often read as a work of a (Austro-) German author. An author who bears witness to her experiences during the Holocaust, who lost her place in German society because of the Nazis, and who is able to rediscover her Germanness after the war by becoming a successful professor of German language and literature. Bos argues that what is sought for in this kind of reading is solely a German identity: Klüger's *otherness*, her displacement, was taken for granted or pushed to the background.<sup>267</sup> Indeed, more strings are connected to this displacement. Not only Ruth Klüger's relation to her German-Austrian background is problematic, she also experienced many restrictions within Judaism and positions herself critically towards many forms of Jewish identity. Like Hilsenrath, Klüger takes a solitary position, both isolating herself from German as well as Jewish traditions.

Born into a highly acculturated Austrian family in Vienna – with a mixture of German *Bildung* and domestic Jewishness – Klüger's identity as a girl and as a Jew had never been self evident. A few months after the Anschluss the seven year old protagonist of *Weiter leben* became Jewish out of protest:

Ich war für Heimatgefühl sehr empfänglich gewesen: Donauwibchen und Balisickenhaus, Stock im Eisen und Spinnerin am Kreuz (...) Und nun, als mein ungefestigter Glaube an Österreich ins Schwanken geriet, wurde ich jüdisch in Abwehr.<sup>268</sup>

In this fragment, Jewish identity is connected to choice – a similar reasoning is presented in Imre Kertész's writings as will be discussed later on. However, Klüger finds out she can hardly take up a self-conscious Jewishness because of her difficult position within Judaism as a girl: she is not allowed to pose the central question during Pesach, she is not allowed to say Kaddish for her dead father.

Wär's anders und ich könnte sozugaen offiziell um meine Gespenster trauern, (...) für meinen Vater Kaddish sagen, dan könnte ich mit dieser Religion anfreunden, die die Gottesliebe ihre Töchter zur Hilfsfunktion der Männer erniedrigt.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> Bos, *German-Jewish literature*.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibidem*, 80.

<sup>268</sup> Klüger, *Weiter leben*, 39-40.

As opposed to Herzberg, Schwarz-Bart, and Hilsenrath, Klüger presents feminist objections to Judaism and the patriarch Jewish God. Her criticism seems to be more straightforward and less ambiguous. What are her argumentations when she writes about God, Judaism, ethics, and suffering and how is that connected to her understanding of Jewish identity? How does Klüger deal with questions of theodicy? How does she differ from e.g. Edgar Hilsenrath? As questions of theodicy seem less urgent in *Weiter leben* the themes of ghosts, and reciting Kaddish are important themes throughout the novel. Where do these themes refer to? How are they connected to Klüger's position toward Judaism as a religious tradition?

### ***Weiter leben: goodness, mourning the ghosts, and saying Kaddish***

In her writing on ethics Klüger's reasoning somehow reminds of Melissa Raphael's critique on the male dominated post-Holocaust theological and philosophical discourse: focusing exclusively on the absence of God in the camps, evolving from the incommensurability of God's omnipotence and God's justice. Whereas Klüger would reject Raphael's argument to observe God in female acts of kindness, she does emphasise female capability of constructing social bonds in the camps. Klüger passionately criticizes platitudes that the camps stripped off every form of ethical behaviour:

'Später in der Freiheit hat mich nichts so gekränkt, nichts habt ich so sehr als pauschales Fehl- und Vorurteil empfunden wie die Unterstellung, in allen Lagern sei nur die brutalste Selbstsucht gefördert worden, und wer von dort herkomme, sei vermutlich moralisch verdorben.'<sup>270</sup>

[note the resemblance with Herzberg's argument: 'Social conscience has still *not* been broken.']

If Klüger and Raphael are to be connected it is in their portrayal of acts of kindness and goodness. Similar to Hilsenrath, Klüger insists on the complete absurdity and arbitrariness of the camps, – 'das Bewußtsein der Absurdität des Ganzen, das Widersinnige daran, die völlige Sinnlosigkeit dieser Morde und Verschepungen'<sup>271</sup> – and the complete randomness of her survival. As to her survival, Klüger rejects any idea of providence. Nevertheless, she reflects extensively on the woman's deed that saved her life: during the selection in Auschwitz that separated the women from the children a female Jewish administrator had walked to the little girl and whispered to Ruth Klüger to lie about her age. When the SS officer asked questions about her length the woman defended the girl, and Ruth Klüger escaped a direct transport to

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<sup>269</sup> Ibidem, 23.

<sup>270</sup> Ibidem, 90-91.

<sup>271</sup> Ibidem, 147.

the gas chambers; she was sent to the working camps. When Klüger discusses this decisive incident, that she calls 'Zufall',<sup>272</sup> she also applies the word 'Gnadenakt' 'trotz und auch wegen der religiösen Besetzung des Wortes'.<sup>273</sup> Whereas 'Zufall' is blind and random, Klüger continues and explains the act in religious words: 'Zwar ging dieser Akt von einem Mensch aus, kam aber ebenso aus heiterem Himmel und war ebenso unverdient, als schwebte der Urheber über den Wolken.'<sup>274</sup>

Not evil, that is often grounded in banality, but goodness transcends natural logic, Klüger argues. Whereas the SS-officer's actions seemed to be free – he was not prevented from doing what he did – the female who saved Klüger's life, who lived in the same desperation as any other inmate, acted against common logic: by acting the way she did, she reduced the chances of her own survival. Her act had no other purpose than saving someone else's life. The moment the woman stepped to the fore and walked to the girl, the logic of the camp was undermined. The woman's deed was truly free; it ruptured the expected course of events completely. Therefore, the ultimate approximation of freedom, Klüger continues, could only take place in the midst of solitary imprisonment and close to death. There, where one would expect, psychologically as well as biologically, utter acts of self preservation, goodness as possibility became manifest. The distinction Klüger makes between the act of the SS-officer and the woman reminds of the distinction Isaiah Berlin makes between two concepts of liberty. The first one, negative liberty, is related to the SS-officer's arbitrary act of 'freedom': his 'free' act coincides with the logic of the system in which he functions. The woman's act of freedom, positive liberty, on the other hand, is inexplicable seen from the system, it reaches further and transcends the system's logic completely.<sup>275</sup> As for *Weiter leben* the incident was not only crucial for Klüger's survival, it is also decisive within the overall narrative. In the midst of Klüger's portrayal of her life in the camps, the camps that were strange as the moon, that were completely arbitrary, and banal, Klüger recounts this incident. For her, recounting the story is the only possible reaction. While Klüger rejects all sorts of explanations about 'altruism', or the opposite, she urges the reader just to listen to the story:

'Die Gelegenheit zu einer freien, spontanen Tat war nirgends und nie so gegeben wie dort und damals. Ich wiederhole es, weil mir nichts Eindringlicheres einfällt als die Wiederholung. Das habe ich erlebt, die reine Tat. Hört zu und bekrittelt sie bitte nicht, sondern nehmt es auf, wie es hier steht, und merkt es euch.'<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> Ibidem, 133.

<sup>273</sup> Ibidem, 131.

<sup>274</sup> Ibidem, 131.

<sup>275</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Two concepts of liberty*, (Oxford, 1958) 4.

<sup>276</sup> Klüger, *Weiter leben*, 134.



Klüger cannot fully explain this act of selflessness that saved her life: for she lives, because someone else wanted it so.

Interestingly, as will be discussed later on, a similar reasoning about goodness and freedom is present in Kèrtesz's *Kaddisj for a child unborn*. It also reminds of Hilsenrath's portrayal of Debora in *Nacht* who ruptured the ghetto's logic of survival. However, when in Hilsenrath's *Nacht* one spoke of goodness, it was almost always connected to piousness, belief in God, and belief in man. Debora's acts of kindness, whether they were insane or naïve, were related to her persistent belief in God. Whereas Klüger applies religious words to her 'Gnadenakt', she resists classical notions of God. As opposed to Hilsenrath, Schwarz-Bart and Herzberg, Klüger's objections to a faith in God, to Judaism as religious tradition, are not primarily connected to the question how the experiences in the camps could be reconciled with belief in God.

*Weiter leben* only briefly relates to theodic questions as is evident in the following quote where Klüger explains the fictional name of her friend and her resistance toward a Judaeo-Christian God:

'Ich hab ihr den Namen von Simone Weil gegeben, obwohl sie mid dem Herrgott so wenig anfangen kann wie ich. Ich hab erstens kein Talent zur Transzendenz. (...) Zweitens kommt der christlich-jüddische Gott aus einer Gesellschaftsstruktur, die mir wenig behagt, denn der Sprung über Adams Rippe hinweg zu diesem Patriarchen ist mir zu weit, und ich schaffe nicht. Weder zum Mann mit dem Bart noch zu seiner logozentrischen Abstraktion. Ich seh mich im Spiegel und bin nicht sein Ebenbild. Und drittens war ich zu früh in gottverlassenen Räumen.'<sup>277</sup>

Only succinctly Klüger mentions her early experiences in godforsaken places. As opposed to the authors discussed previously, the decisive reason for rejecting a Jewish notion of God is the isolation of and ignorance of women within Judaism. As mentioned before, Klüger as a girl, was withheld taking up a self-conscious Jewishness. Neither the Holocaust nor the experience of aging have eased her rebellion against the religious and social conventions in Jewish society that, according to Klüger, relegate women to an inferior position.<sup>278</sup> 'Ich will keine Tische decken und Sabbatzkerzen anzünden, Kaddisch möchte ich sagen. Sonst bleib ich bei meine Gedichten.'<sup>279</sup> The right to mourn her father by reciting Kaddish, the prayer of the dead, obtains a particular urgency throughout the novel.

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<sup>277</sup> Ibidem, 252.

<sup>278</sup> Lorenz, 'Memory and criticism,' 217.

<sup>279</sup> Klüger, *Weiter leben*, 23.

‘Wär’s anders und ich könnte sozusagen offiziell um meine Gespenster trauern, (...) für meinen Vater Kaddisch sagen, dan könnte ich mit dieser Religion anfreunden’: Klüger’s writings about the impossibility to recite Kaddish and her writings about ghosts are strongly connected. In an article published in 2009, Catherine Smale argues that the treatment of ghosts in *Weiter leben* has been largely neglected.<sup>280</sup> Remarkable, since ghosts are a recurrent theme throughout the text: Klüger refers to her writing as an act of both ‘Beschwörung’ and ‘Exorzismus’, ‘Verbannung’. She not only describes ghosts as ‘etwas Ungelöstes’, she also refers to herself as being haunted by her ghostly figures. Verbs such as ‘heimsuchen’, ‘plagen’, ‘fesseln’, and ‘spuken’ pervade the narrative. Whereas the images of ghosts stylistically endorse Klüger’s self-conscious reflection on the process of remembering and interpretation of the past, Klüger repeatedly emphasises her actual duty towards the ghostly figures. ‘Die Toten stellen uns Aufgaben oder? Wollen gefeiert und bewältigt sein.’ The act of commemorating the dead is closely bound up with the symbolic rite of burial; therefore, Smale argues, Klüger’s engagement with memories of her father and brother might be understood as an attempt to lay their ghosts to rest and cause the haunting to cease.<sup>281</sup> For this reason the prohibition of reciting Kaddish obtains a painful importance. Klüger was obliged to remain silent during the Jewish burial rite. It prevented her from laying the dead to rest and forced her to seek alternative forms of obsequy.

A ‘hausbackenen Kaddisch’ is Klüger’s answer to her exclusion. Instead of saying Kaddish, she wrote poetry to commemorate her dead father and brother who have become ghosts to her, that haunt her. The poems’ title ‘Jahrzeitlicht’ and ‘Jom Kippur’ reveal Klüger’s ambivalence toward Judaism’s religious traditions. Sandra Alfes actually argues that Klüger’s use of religious references, can be seen as an assertion of her poem’s spiritual validity outside of traditional Judaism and, simultaneously, as a critique of the perceived subordinate role of women in this religion.<sup>282</sup> However, instead of addressing God in both ‘Jahrzeit’ and ‘Jom Kippur’, Klüger addresses the dead. ‘Ich hadere mit ihnen (nicht mit Gott hadere ich, wie die fromme Juden es manchmal tun).<sup>283</sup> Whereas religious Jews – and to some extent even secular Jews like Herzberg or Schwarz-Bart – dispute with the Jewish God to find a *modus vivendi*, a way to live with inexplicable suffering, injustice, and pain, Klüger disputes with the ghosts that haunt her. Similar to both forms of disputes is its urge to unlock, to open

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<sup>280</sup> Smale, ‘Ungelöste Gespenster?’, 778.

<sup>281</sup> Ibidem 780.

<sup>282</sup> Sandra Alfes, ‘Voices from a haunting past. Ghosts, memory, and poetry in Klüger’s ‘Weiter leben. Eine Jugend’ (1992)’, *Monatshefte* 100 (2008) 527.

<sup>283</sup> Klüger, *Weiter leben*, 99.

something which seems to be closed off, either by death or by the impossibility of belief. For while Klüger urges her ghosts to lay to rest, it is not complete closure she enforces.

Catherine Smale argues Klüger longs to be free of the dead, yet simultaneously she clings to their presence; she realizes that she cannot speak on their behalf, yet continues to emphasize the ongoing need to consider what their experiences might have been.<sup>284</sup> This ambivalence is present throughout *Weiter leben*. For rather than laying the dead to rest, Klüger's writing seem to serve as a means of coping with their presence; it enables her to live with her ghosts rather than exorcize them completely. 'Wo kein Grab ist, hört die Trauerarbeit nie auf. (...) mit Grab meine ich nicht eine Stelle auf einem Friedhof, sondern das Wissen um das Sterben, den Tod eines Nahestehenden.'<sup>285</sup> It is, or should be impossible to lay the victims of the Holocaust to rest. For that matter Klüger's description of the ghost, who cannot and may not be silenced, is part of her criticism of the outcome of the Historikerstreit. 'Es liegt dieser Museumskultur ein tiefer Aberglaube zugrunde, nämlich daß die Genspenster gerade dort zu fassen seien, wo sie als Lebende aufhörten zu sein.' We seek to banish the ghosts to a particular physical location, or to a fixed page in history, in order to halt their intrusion into our everyday lives, Klüger argues. However, we risk defiling the dead through our desire to carry out acts of exorcism, since we fail to respect their need to remain in the presence among the living.<sup>286</sup>

By writing her autobiography, Klüger not only talks back to the German audience on her behalf, she addresses her ghost, and has given them back speech, however, fragmented and unsatisfying it may be to her. The religious language Klüger exercises enables her to seek for alternative ways to live with the dead. Her approach to relate to dead could be called a poetic performative one: in reciting her poems and in writing *Weiter leben* the ghosts are at the same time invoked and exorcised. In their article 'On the theory of ghosts' Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno point to the loss of historical perspective in contemporary life, because individuals are reduced to a 'mere consequence of instantaneous experiences which leave no trace.' They call for a theory of ghosts that would create 'the correct relationship with the dead,' a relationship that would resituate the dead in the world of the living, producing an experience of history, which is contemporaneous with rather than anterior to the present.<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>284</sup> Alfes, 'Voices from a haunting past'.

<sup>285</sup> Klüger, *Weiter leben*, 94.

<sup>286</sup> Ibidem, 70-76.

<sup>287</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "On the Theory of Ghosts," appended to: Max Horkheimer & Theodor Adorno, *The dialectic of Enlightenment*, (New York, 1987).

The exclusion of women within Judaism, and the exclusion of German-Jews from the German Holocaust debate forced Ruth Klüger to take a solitary position, to create a personal niche. Like other German artists, such as Lotte Paepcke, Ingeborg Hecht, and Peter Edel, Klüger was caught between two cultures. However, while their identity was shaped largely by the rejection and discrimination on the part of the hostile mainstream, Klüger transforms her gender and ethnicity into positive forces. She portrays them as source of her political views, her love of justice, her compassion with the oppressed, her rejection of violence, and her circumspection.<sup>288</sup> As for her 'Hausbacken Kaddish', Klüger was forced to create alternative forms of Jewish rites. And instead of God, she addresses the ghosts that haunt her. To Klüger God is not dead, because he had never really lived: 'Das Wenige, was mir an jüdischem Glaubensbekenntnis geboten wurde, abbröckelte, bevor es gefestigt war. Das wäre auch ohne Nazis geschehen. Unter den Nazis war es die Enttäuschung, bei einem Schiffbruch ein morsche Rettungsplanke umklammert zu haben.'<sup>289</sup> Like Raphael, Klüger evades notions of God as omnipotent, omniscient (patriarch) other – 'Ich seh mich im Spiegel und bin nicht sein Ebenbild.' – she focuses on her ghosts and on the small acts of kindness among her inmates, among her friends.<sup>290</sup> And while Klüger criticizes traditional Judaism, she uses religious references in her poetry and in her description of the ultimate free choice and deed of goodness that she experienced in the camps. By doing so, she seems to find individual ways to live as a Jew, to be 'still alive', and to live with the ghosts that haunt her, reinforcing their presence for the reader.

### **Imre Kertész**

'I once said that so-called Socialism for me was the petite madeleine cake that, dipped into Proust's tea, evoked in him the flavor of bygone years. For reasons having to do with the language I spoke, I decided, after the suppression of the 1956 revolt, to remain in Hungary. Thus I was able to observe, not as a child this time but as an adult, how a dictatorship functions. I saw how an entire nation could be made to deny its ideals, and watched the early, cautious moves toward accommodation. I understood that hope is an instrument of evil, and the Kantian categorical imperative - ethics in general - is but the pliable handmaiden of self-preservation.'<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> Lorenz, 'Memory and criticism,' 217.

<sup>289</sup> Klüger, *Weiter leben*, 44.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibidem*, 252.

<sup>291</sup> Imre Kertész, *Heureka* (2002) [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2002/kerteszh-lecture.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2002/kerteszh-lecture.html)

It is a quote from the Nobel Lecture delivered by Imre Kertész in Börssalen at the Swedish Academy in Stockholm, 7 December 2002. He was awarded the Nobel prize 'for writing that upholds the fragile experience of the individual against the barbaric arbitrariness of history'.<sup>292</sup>

It is hardly possible to characterize Imre Kertész as a writer in generalized terms. Though he is a Jewish Hungarian writer, he resists identifying with religious, ethnic, or historical notions of Jewish identity. In his work Kertész continually explores and struggles with the concept of Jewish identity as a personal experience. 'Ik kan het jood-zijn als een symbool, een levenssituatie, een ethische zaak zien, het als een mogelijkheid beschouwen om inzicht te verwerven en als een uitstekende leerschool voor de verworpenheid, maar de etnische, religieuze en historische aspecten van de joodse identiteit, wat moet ik daar in vredesnaam mee?'<sup>293</sup> On the other hand, Kertész resists shaping his identity by the rejection and discrimination on the part of the hostile mainstream. 'Mijn joodse identiteit is veel te interessant (of te belangrijk) om te worden gezien in de lichtbreking van de krankzinnige waan die antisemitisme heet.'<sup>294</sup> When he was awarded the Nobel prize, the 'in-between-ness' of Kertész created discomfort and controversy in Hungary. In Hungary the belief and insistence on nation defined as homogeneous culture is still persistent in social, intellectual, and cultural debates.<sup>295</sup> However, Kertész does not define himself either as Jewish, nor as Hungarian, nor as Jewish-Hungarian.<sup>296</sup> It is probably perceived as a provocation that Kertész does not describe his land of birth as his country of choice. 'The language – that is the only thing that ties me to it. This foreign language, my mother tongue, which helps me to understand my murderers...'<sup>297</sup> Whether it concerns 'Holocaust literature', 'Jewish or Hungarian identities', 'Holocaust survivors', the writings of Imre Kertész stand on their own; they seem to be drenched in alienation and dislocation.

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<sup>292</sup> [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2002/](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2002/)

<sup>293</sup> Kertész, *Dagboek van een galeislaaf*, 109.

I could perceive being-Jewish as a symbol, as an experiential aspect of life, as an ethical issue, as a possibility for gaining new understandings, and an excellent school of repudiation. However, what should I possibly begin with the ethnical, religious and historical aspects of Jewish identity?

<sup>294</sup> Imre Kertész, *Ik, de ander*, Henry Kammer, Valaki más 1997 (Amsterdam, 2001) 56.

My Jewish identity is too interesting (or too important) to be understood only in light of the maniacal delusion that is called anti-Semitism.

<sup>295</sup> Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek & Louise O. Vasvári, 'Introduction to 'Imre Kertész and Holocaust literature'', in: Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek & Louise O. Vasvári, ed., *Imre Kertész and Holocaust literature* (West Lafayette, 2005) 1.

<sup>296</sup> Magdalena Marsovszky, 'Imre Kertész and Hungary today,' in: Loise O. Vasvári & Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, ed., *Imre Kertész and Holocaust literature* (West Lafayette, 2005) 148.

<sup>297</sup> Quote from Imre Kertész in: *Ibidem* 152.

As opposed to the previous authors, after surviving Auschwitz Imre Kertész faced another totalitarianism in Hungary. Due to this experience freedom, catharsis, or reconciliation had never been realistic possibilities. Whereas Western European intellectuals debated about a viable ethics in a world after Auschwitz, hope for righteousness was completely alien to Kertész. He even describes his experiences as something that prevented him from committing suicide.

‘Ik begin te begrijpen dat ik voor zelfmoord (à la Borowski, Celan, Améry, Primo Levi etc.) behoed ben door de stalinistische ‘maatschappij’, die me na mijn concentratiekampervaringen leerde dat van vrijheid, bevrijding, echte catharsis etc. – van alles dus wat intellectuelen, denkers, en filosofen in gelukkiger contreien niet alleen bediscussiëren maar kennelijk ook mogelijk achten – geen sprake kan zijn.’<sup>298</sup>

Though right after the war Kertész joined the Communist Party, he was left disillusioned in 1949 after the takeover and the elimination of democracy in Hungary. He began working as a journalist in Budapest, but the consolidation of Communist rule and Stalinist dictatorship **let** to his dismissal in 1950. For a while he worked in a factory, but then turned to writing. He supported himself, like many other Hungarian authors who could not – or would not – publish during those years, as translator from German; he translated the works of Nietzsche, Canetti, Freud, and Wittgenstein into Hungarian,<sup>299</sup> – thinkers who are often recalled in Kertész’s fictional autobiographies. Isolated from public life, Kertész lived in a small apartment in Budapest with his wife where he wrote his novels and worked on translations. It took him ten years to finish his first novel *Sortsalansàg* (Fatelessness) in 1972. The novel was not published until 1975, in a censored version and in a small press run which seems to have been quietly withdrawn from the bookstores.<sup>300</sup>

The Holocaust as subject matter was seen as unpalatable in Socialist Hungary and Kertész’s depiction of it was perceived naïve and vulgar. *Sortsalansàg* broke with convention in that it even attempted to address the question of the Holocaust and Jewish identity in Socialist Hungary. Kertész was one of the first making public statements on Jewish themes

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<sup>298</sup> Kertész, *Dagboek van een galeislaaf*, 260.

I begin to understand that I was protected against suicide (à la Borowski, Celan, Améry, Primo Levi etc.) because of the Stalinist ‘society’, that, after my experiences in the concentration camps, taught me that freedom, liberation, and actual catharsis – in sum, everything intellectuals, thinkers, and philosophers in happier regions not only discussed about, but perceived as actual possibilities – are not feasible at all.

<sup>299</sup> Enikő Molnár Basa, ‘Imre Kertész and Hungarian literature,’ in: Louise O. Vasvári & Steven Tötösy Zepetnek, ed., *Imre Kertész and Holocaust literature* (West Lafayette, 2005) 12.

<sup>300</sup> Sarah D. Cohen, ‘Imre Kertész, Jewishness in Hungary, and the choice of identity,’ in: Louise O. Vasvári & Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, ed., *Imre Kertész and Holocaust literature* (West Lafayette, 2005) 25-26.

after the Communist takeover in Hungary. Only in the first half of the 1980s, after long decades of silence, a vivid debate broke out on the Holocaust in Hungary. At the time of the first publication of *Sortsalanság* the memory of the Holocaust belonged mainly to the realm of personal, private memory.<sup>301</sup> Despite the low profile of responses, some critics appreciated both the content and style ‘the seemingly ingenuous yet deeply ironic tone’ of Kertész’s contribution.<sup>302</sup> Kertész published steadily throughout the 1970s and 1980s, but it was not until the fall of Communism in 1989 that he achieved popularity and respect in Hungary, as well as in Germany.<sup>303</sup> The majority of his works were translated into German in the 1990s. Kertész was awarded many prizes. Strikingly, as Adrienne Kertzer argues in an English (!) edited book, Kertész’s work is rarely the subject of North American scholarship on the Holocaust. Although the Nobel prize laureate has been compared to Elie Wiesel, Kertzer proposes another way to understand Imre Kertész, that is, to think of his work as radically opposed to Wiesel’s.

Wiesel grew up in a Hasidic background in Sighet, a small village in Romania’s Transylvanian region. Kertész was born in Budapest, Hungary. In *Kaddish for a child not born* the narrator mentions that Budapest Jews were ‘not Jews at all, but of course not Christians either...’<sup>304</sup> Moreover, Kertész is an extremely self-conscious artist. His prose is both philosophical and poetical and carefully constructed. Whereas Wiesel stated: ‘A novel about Auschwitz is not a novel, or else it is not about Auschwitz’, Kertész argues that ‘the concentration camp is imaginable only and exclusively as literature, never as reality’.<sup>305</sup> He regards the Holocaust as a ‘trauma of European civilization’, a civilization that is in need for a new language, a post-Holocaust language. Klüger wrote in her *Weiter leben* that Auschwitz was strange as the moon to her and never to be comprehended.<sup>306</sup> In contrast, Kertész’s narrator writes:

‘Auschwitz heeft wél bestaan, ja *bestaat nog steeds*, zodat het ook verklaard kan worden; het zou juist onverklaarbaar zijn geweest als Auschwitz niet had bestaan. (...) Auschwitz hing immers al heel lang in de lucht,

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<sup>301</sup> Andràs Kovács, ‘The Historian’s debate about the Holocaust in Hungary,’ in: Louise O. Vasvári & Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, ed., *Imre Kertész and Holocaust literature* (West Lafayette, 2005) 138.

<sup>302</sup> Quote from György Spirò in: Cohen, ‘Jewishness in Hungary,’ 26.

<sup>303</sup> Ibidem 26.

<sup>304</sup> Quote from *Kaddish for a child not born* in: Adrienne Kertzer, ‘Reading Imre Kertész in English,’ in: Louise O. Vasvári & Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, ed., *Imre Kertész and Holocaust literature* (New Lafayette, 2005) 116.

<sup>305</sup> Quote from *Galley Boat-Log* in: Ibidem 121.

<sup>306</sup> Klüger, *Weiter leben*, 131-133.

als een donkere door de stralen van talloze wandaden gerijpte vrucht die wachtte op het moment dat hij op het hoofd van de mensen kon neerploffen.<sup>307</sup>

Auschwitz is the black hole of European civilization, Kertész argues; it has completely consumed and eradicated previously valid ethical and moral consensus. Therefore, it has become impossible to fall back on words, and images commonly used before the war.<sup>308</sup>

A world deprived of humanist values, is expected to be deprived of God as well. Kertész's narrators often recall the death of God in modern Europe. Moreover, his works are characterized by a lack of interest in religious Judaism. Yet, Kertész often writes about God.

'Waarom ik aan het slot van mijn *Dagboek van een galleislaaf* zo over God uitweid? In dit geval is niet het antwoord verkeerd maar de vraag, omdat je volgens mij niet over God kunt zeggen. God is een persoon noch zaak, dus ik vrees dat we in dit geval met een grammaticaal probleem te maken hebben. Wat ik in dat boek probeer duidelijk te maken is dat de mens in bepaalde omstandigheden God *moet* bedenken en over God *moet* nadenken – het gaat hier dus alleen om een getuigenis, om een *document humaine*, verder niets.'<sup>309</sup>

Kertész's writings about God are often conflicting and ambiguous. For example, *Dagboek van een galleislaaf* evokes a helpless God who is ashamed and disappointed by his own creation, but at the same time God is held responsible for Auschwitz.<sup>310</sup> In contrast with Hilsenrath and Klüger, Kertész seems to reflect upon God more philosophically, disconnected from religious Judaism: 'de mens *moet* in bepaalde omstandigheden God bedenken.'<sup>311</sup> What is meant by this phrase? Is the phrase to be related to the works discussed? The quote implies Kertész writes about God as if some things cannot be said without using the word God, a word that he defines as a metaphor: 'Als ik 'God' zeg is dat natuurlijk uitsluitend een metafoor, zoals trouwens alles wat ik zeg, nauwkeuriger gezegd: wat ik *kán* zeggen, wat met woorden is uit te

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<sup>307</sup> Imre Kertész, *Kaddisj voor een niet geboren kind*, Henry Kammer, Kaddis a meeg nem született gyermekért 1990 (Amsterdam, 1994) 38.

Auschwitz did exist, indeed, it is still existent, and therefore it can be explained; it would rather be inexplicable if Auschwitz would not have happened. (...) Yet, for a long time, Auschwitz hangs over our heads, like a dark fruit aged by the rays of countless atrocities, waiting for the moment to plump down on people's heads.

<sup>308</sup> Kremer, ed., *Holocaust literature* 632- 633.

<sup>309</sup> Kertész, *Ik, de ander*, 68.

Why I elaborate extensively on God in my *Diary of a galley slave*? In this instance, not the answer, but the question is wrong, for, according to me, nothing can be said about God. God is neither person, nor subject matter, therefore, I am afraid we are dealing with a problem of grammar. What I try to explain in that book, is that in certain circumstances, man *has to* invent God and *has to* think about God – therefore, it is not only a testimony, but a *document humaine*, nothing more.

<sup>310</sup> Mahlmann-Bauer, 'Imre Kertész Gottesbild,'

<sup>311</sup> in certain circumstances, man *should* invent God and *should* think about God



drukken, een metafoor is.<sup>312</sup> But while writing about God does Kertész relate to theodic questions? In addition, Kertész often reflects on man as a religious being. But what is meant by that? And how is this statement to be related to Kertész's writings about his problematic relation to religious Judaism and his Jewish identity? In his novels Kertész tries to find a new language, a language that endures a world after Auschwitz. How is this 'post-Holocaust' language connected to existential questions about ethics, man, suffering, and God, Kertész relates to in his autobiographical fiction *Kaddisj voor een niet geboren kind* and *Ik, de ander*?

### ***Kaddish for a child not born and Someone Other.***

In *Weiter leben* Klüger struggles with the Jewish rite of reciting Kaddish, which she is excluded from. By writing poems, a 'Hausbacken Kaddish', and transforming the ritual's content into a dialogue with the dead, Klüger alters the rite into an individual practice, which helps her to live with her ghosts. Kertész also takes up the theme of saying Kaddish. In 1990 Kertész published *Kaddis a meg nem született gyermekért* (Kaddish for a child not born). No!, the narrator's exclamation is the first sound of this novel. It is the answer to a simple question posed by a philosopher during an afternoon walk in a writer's retreat. He had asked the narrator, a Hungarian writer and survivor of the Holocaust like Kertész, whether he has children. The question evokes a monologue about the life the narrator has lived, the camps he was not able to leave, not able to escape from, his failed marriage, and above all his choice not to have children. Sara D. Cohen argues that if the Kaddish of the title is taken to mean the novel itself, it is a secular, personal prayer.<sup>313</sup> The question arises as to how this 'secular' prayer is to be read. In *Dagboek van een galeislaaf* Kertész writes: 'Het gebed van een werkelijk gelovig mens bestaat in zelfonderzoek, ook als dit hem van het geloof van God verwijderd.'<sup>314</sup> What is more, *Kaddish*'s narrator suggests it is man's 'religious obligation' to analyze the world. He goes back and forth between a nihilistic worldview and this obligation to observe and analyze the world. But how are these two to be related?

In 1997 Kertész published *Valaki Más* (Me, someone other) The novel answers the question as to what has changed after the fall of Communism. For the narrator forty years of

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<sup>312</sup> Kertész, *Dagboek van een galeislaaf*, 254.

When I talk about 'God' it is of course a metaphor only, like everything I say, more specifically: what I can say, what is to be expressed in words, is a metaphor.

<sup>313</sup> Cohen, 'Jewishness in Hungary,' 31.

<sup>314</sup> Kertész, *Dagboek van een galeislaaf*, 263.

The prayer of a truthfully devout person consists of critical introspection, even if it causes him to move away from faith in God.

isolation have come to an end. It enforces him to reconsider existential question about Auschwitz and culture, freedom and modernity, and eventually the meaning of human existence. Like *Kaddisj, Ik, de ander* is written in carefully constructed prose; philosophically and poetically charged. When it comes to reflections about God, suffering, ethics, and man *Ik, de ander* and *Kaddisj voor een niet geboren kind* do not expose explicitly conflicting ideas. Therefore, *Ik, de ander* will be addressed in so far as to put *Kaddisj voor een niet geboren kind* in a somewhat wider perspective.

Traditionally, the kaddish is a prayer of praise, which is to be recited by the orphaned sons in the synagogue three times a day for the first year of mourning.<sup>315</sup> In *Kaddisj* the ritual is completely counter-acted: the prayer is pronounced by the father accounting for his never born child. The narrator has never been able to really leave the camps and is thus incapable of creating new life. Instead of praising God, the narrator enrolls a monologue filled with nihilism and destruction. He often compares his writing to digging, digging in the ground, digging a grave, unravelling the emptiness of life. 'In die jaren begon ik te begrijpen wat de ware aard is van mijn werk, dat in wezen niets anders is dan graven, dan het uitdiepen en voltooiën van een graf dat anderen zijn begonnen te delven – in de wolken, in de wind, in het niets.'<sup>316</sup> The words in *Kaddisj* literally peel off any illusions. This counteracting of existing forms, images, and words, remind of the poem which is the novel's motto: a fragment of *Todesfuge* written by Paul Celan.

'...streicht dunkler die Geigen dann steigt ihr  
als Rauch in die Luft  
dann habt ihr ein Grab in den Wolken da liegt  
mann nicht eng.'

The poem originally starts with the following sentences:

'Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken sie abends  
wir trinken sie mittags und morgens wir trinken sie nachts  
wir trinken und trinken  
wir schaufeln ein Grab in den Lüften da liegt man nicht eng'

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<sup>315</sup> Samuel C. Heilman, *When a Jew dies. The ethnography of a bereaved son*, (Berkeley, 2001) 164.

<sup>316</sup> Kertész, *Kaddisj*, 114.

In those years I began to understand the true nature of make work, which is nothing but digging, deepening and completing the grave others had started to dig – in the clouds, in the wind, in a void.

Celan confronts the reader with the image of ‘Schwarze Milch’, milk, that is commonly associated with life, the life-giving breast milk of a mother. In *Todesfuge* the milk gets a fatal black color; it is not the life of a newborn, but to death, to the black smoke of the burning dead. The musical fugue is transformed into a song of death, just as the kaddish, the song of praise is transformed into the digging of a grave. Thus, Celan, as well as Kertész create a language that is only to be comprehended in a world after Auschwitz, wherein, according to Kertész, traditional value systems have been completely ruptured.

As mentioned, it is remarkable how often Kertész’s narrators speak of God in that post-Holocaust world. Their statements about God are mostly conflicting: ‘God is Auschwitz, maar hij is ook degene die me uit Auschwitz heeft gehaald. En die me gevraagd, ja, gedwongen heeft van Auschwitz verslag uit te brengen. God wil namelijk graag horen en weten wat hij op deze wereld heeft aangericht,’<sup>317</sup> or in *Kaddisj* ‘als het waar is dat God een verheven vader is, heeft God zich aan mij geopenbaard in het beeld van Auschwitz’<sup>318</sup> Kertész even puts to the fore a writer K. who says ‘Auschwitz is op geen enkele manier te benaderen behalve als we van God uitgaan.’<sup>319</sup> God is presented not as incommensurable with Auschwitz; his image is bluntly connected to Auschwitz. Kertész’s narrators go beyond theodic questions: they do not relate to the question how Auschwitz could have happened if God is almighty and good. These questions do not seem to be valid in a post-Holocaust world, wherein images of God are disrupted and God is as easily connected to good as to evil. Moreover, God was argued to be dead before the Nazis marched into the world. But why then, is God so often addressed? Perhaps it has something to do with the following quote from *Dagboek van een galeislaaf*:

‘Wat is het verschil tussen ons? Zij verzetten zich tegen het systeem (de systemen), ik tegen God. Wie zich tegen een systeem verzet, moet in een ander systeem geloven. Wie echter niet tevreden is met God, hoeft helemaal niets te geloven, hij hoeft alleen maar te leven – voor Zijn aangezicht. Als geloof is dat ruimschoots voldoende.’<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> Kertész, *Dagboek van een galeislaaf*, 225.

God is Auschwitz, but he is also the one who freed me from Auschwitz. The one who asked me, indeed, forced me to testify about Auschwitz. For God likes to be told and know how he has damaged the world.

<sup>318</sup> Kertész, *Kaddisj*, 107.

If God is truly a sublime father, God revealed himself to me in the image of Auschwitz.

<sup>319</sup> Kertész, *Ik, de ander*, .

Auschwitz is never to be understood except if we presume the existence of God.

<sup>320</sup> Kertész, *Dagboek van een galeislaaf*, 222.

What is the difference between us? They riot against the system (systems), I riot against God. The ones resisting the system must believe in another system. Who, on the other hand, is not satisfied with God, does not have to believe anything, he only has to live – in the face of God. In believing, that is more than sufficient.

Protesting against God prevents the narrator to be captured in predestined rational discussions about systems, that only evoke new systems. It allows him to think individually, to relate to themes transcending the modern world, a world that, according to Kertész in *Galeislaaf*, tends to destroy the individual, robbing him from his individual fate, a world where man becomes 'fatelessness'.

*Fatelessness* is the title of Kertész's first novel and describes the situation of the Jews in the camps, a situation that, according to Kertész, exposed the ultimate human condition of man in the modern world. Robbed from their fate, the Jews could no longer live their individual lives, they were transformed into functional masses with annihilation as its only purpose. The modern world had replaced the tragic man 'de zichzelf scheppende en ten onder gaande mens'<sup>321</sup> with the functional man.<sup>322</sup> Somehow Kertész's reasoning on 'fatelessness' reminds of Levinas' 'Il y a'. Philosophically, the anonymous 'Il y a', 'there is', is never ending and precedes every form of (human) being. 'Il y a' is at the same time alluring and frightfully sinister; it could be related to what other philosophers called 'nothingness' or 'the void'. However, according to Levinas, between 1933-1945 the Jews came to live in a condition of 'Il y a.'. Their 'I' was absorbed into 'there is', and like Kertész argues, they were completely deprived of their identity. Disturbingly, Levinas continues, there were no others who, instead of the Jews, said 'I', who would say 'I do not accept this', 'I will resist' – the ethical appeal that is also related to 'Il y a'. Moreover, just like Kertész had related God to Auschwitz and at the same time to his vocation to testify about Auschwitz, Levinas' relates the concept of God to 'Il' being at the same time alluring and sinister. In Kertész's writings God, is above all a literary projection, that enables him to escape from fatelessness. 'De mens moet in bepaalde omstandigheden God bedenken.'<sup>323</sup> Possibly, the narrator means speaking of and protesting against God allows him to think outside pre-existing structures, which helps him to regain, to create his individuality.

The protest against consensus, the individual's rebellion against the collective, against adaption, is a main theme throughout the works discussed here: 'Ik wil leven, mij verzetten, mijn lot ondergaan, maar dan *mijn* lot, dat ik met niemand gemeen heb en dat nergens mee is verwant. Ik wil de bruggen achter mij verbranden'<sup>324</sup> In Auschwitz the narrator was reduced

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<sup>321</sup> Ibidem, 7.

Man creating himself and being ruined.

<sup>322</sup> Ibidem, 7.

<sup>323</sup> In certain circumstances, man *has to* invent God

<sup>324</sup> Kertész, *Dagboek van een galeislaaf*, 74.

I want to live, want to oppose, I want to live my own fate, *my* fate, one I do not have in common with someone else's nor is related to anything else. I want to burn my own bridges.

to a number, to a member of a race, reduced to one of the masses that were to be destroyed. The narrator was robbed from an individual fate. *Kaddisj*, *Ik, de ander* and, *Galleislaaf* resonate the urge to regain an individual fate by writing. Possibly the characters' specific attitude towards Judaism and Jewishness is connected to this urge. As mentioned, Kertész's narrators reject the religious aspects of Jewish identity. In *Fatelessness* George, the main character, listens to his observant uncle incomprehendingly when he says: 'Now, you too are part of the common Jewish fate...' A fate that meant a 'millennium of continuing persecutions'. This image, this tradition of predestined martyrdom and self-sacrifice – which reminds of Schwarz-Bart's *Le dernier des justes* – is completely alien and mystifying to George. In *Kaddisj* religious Jewish identity is envisioned in the negative and alienating image of a *bold woman in a red dressing gown*, the protagonist's observant aunt, which is his first experience with 'real genuine Jews'. However, when it comes to Jewish identity, Sarah D. Cohen, argues that Kertész not only rejects religious criteria, but also legal, cultural, racial, reactive criteria. To Kertész's characters, the question of inherited Jewishness is a pressing one, one which they try to escape from:<sup>325</sup> the wife in *Kaddisj* is raised by survivors of the Holocaust and urged to see herself as a testimony of Jewish survival – an understanding of Jewishness that reminds of Fackenheim's 614<sup>th</sup> commandment. Forced to acknowledge her Jewishness made her feel as though 'she no longer existed, that she couldn't claim *to any individual feelings or thoughts*, and that she was merely entitled to have *Jewish feelings and Jewish thoughts*.<sup>326</sup> Inspired by the writer's work, she feels freed from being obliged to see herself as either a racial, legal, cultural, or reactive Jew. Her Jewishness has become a choice: that is what eventually liberates her.

Kertész's characters obviously withdraw from Jewish (religious) traditions, to which authors like Herzberg, Schwarz-Bart, Grade, or Singer, still relate. In Kertész's novels only a chosen Jewish identity can result in an affirmation of existence. The characters' resistance against inherited forms of Jewishness is to be understood against the background of Kertész's urge to create and regain an individual fate, a fate that is a tragic one, but nonetheless always to be chosen over fatelessness. The novel itself can be seen as an attempt to escape from fatelessness: a death in Auschwitz. However, the attempt is paradoxical. On the surface the narrator of *Kaddisj* seems to continue the Nazis' project: he is digging his grave. Digging his grave with words, stylistically peeling off illusions, illusions about the meaning of life, illusions about the self, illusions about humanist values: 'Het leven schrijven is zoveel als het

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<sup>325</sup> Cohen, 'Jewishness in Hungary,' 33-35.

<sup>326</sup> Quote from *Kaddisj for a child not born* in: Ibidem 34.

leven in twijfel trekken'.<sup>327</sup> Digging a grave implies the narrator will slowly kill himself and with him any other illusion, *schrijven is zoveel als een oordeel vellen over onszelf*, (...) ik veroordeel mezelf ter dood (dat doe ik in al mijn werken, ik sterf steeds opnieuw).<sup>328</sup> Seen that way, *Kaddisj* is a work of destruction, a destruction of Kertész narrating self. Paradoxically, by digging his grave, the narrator creates a space in which he can reside as an individual; he creates new space with words: the novel does not consist of nothingness, of air, it consists of words, created words, words to be told and to be read. *Kaddisj* is not a prayer of destruction, but a prayer of invention. The narrator is inventing a space in the air, in the ground, to live.

A similar paradox is put to the fore by Elenud Summers-Bremmer in her article about Kertész's *Kaddisj*. She recounts the story of 'the Professor' and the interpretation of his act of kindness in *Kaddisj* which is surprisingly similar to Klüger's account of her 'Gnadenakt': about to be transported as one of the sick to a new location, the narrator lies on a stretcher and his food ration, which must last for several days, is held by the Professor who is described as 'a skeleton'. However, the Professor seeks out the narrator unsteadily and gives him his due portion. 'He [the professor] was given two chances for survival and...he threw away this double chance.'<sup>329</sup> Like Klüger, the narrator emphasises that this enigmatic act of kindness is never to be fully understood: not evil, but goodness is inexplicable. And like Klüger the narrator describes the act as to be closest to real freedom.<sup>330</sup> Then he continues:

That's it for the story, even if it's true that I don't wish to view my life merely as an arbitrary chance of birth followed by a series of other arbitrary chances.... I want to view my life even less as a series of attempts to keep me alive... yet it is a fact that... the Professor did what he did in order to keep me alive... And this here is the question, this is what I'd like you to answer if you can; why did he do it?<sup>331</sup>

'Why did he do it?' The question resonates throughout the novel. Summers-Bremmer goes so far as to suggest that the enigmatic act of kindness is a stand-in for the prospect of the narrator's unborn child: in giving away his extra chance of living, the Professor gave

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<sup>327</sup> Kertész, *Kaddisj*, 80.

Writing life is to some extent doubting life.

<sup>328</sup> Ibidem, 81.

Writing is actually condemning oneself (...) I condemn myself to death (that is what I am doing in of all my works, I die over and over again).

<sup>329</sup> Quote from *Kaddish for a child not born* in: Elenud Summers-Bremner, 'Imre Kertész's 'Kaddish for a child not born', in: Louise O. Vasvári & Steven Tötösy de Zepetnik, ed., *Imre Kertész and Holocaust literature* (West Lafayette, 2005) 228.

<sup>330</sup> Kertész, *Kaddisj*, 42.

<sup>331</sup> Quot from *Kaddish for a child not born* in: Summers-Bremner, 'Kaddish,' 227.

something belonging to his humanity. He passed it on, just as the narrator is passing on the story onto the reader, and just as children pass on to future generations. While the narrator cannot contemplate giving birth to children, he is able to pass on the story: 'It is my duty to tell, albeit I don't know why.'<sup>332</sup>

Perhaps unintently, Summers-Bremmers argues, Kertész's novel serves something of the function of the kaddish in Jewish religious tradition. For, on the surface, the kaddish has nothing to do with mourning. As mentioned, it is a prayer of praise. The connection between the kaddish and the funeral, Summers-Bremmers argues, resides traditionally in the way the study of the Torah is cancelled for the sake of the funeral. The kaddish is to mark the disruption of the natural, the scriptural, order of things. Therefore, paradox is the essence of the mourner's kaddish. For it is a statement of praise, recited by a bereaved son in the synagogue. It marks desolation and community in one turn. In this respect, Summers-Bremmers continues, the mourner's kaddish is not so different from the Auschwitz-Professor inexplicable act of kindness. His act is a disruption of Auschwitz itself. It resonates as an unresolved question throughout *Kaddisj's* narrative.<sup>333</sup> *Kaddisj* laments a child unborn. However, its function as an outcry is at odds with its subject, issuing forth a community of readers: for if there can be no life after Auschwitz, why does the narrator of *Kaddisj* continue speaking to us, the readers? Why does he seek to share his burden?

'Het gebed van een werkelijk gelovig mens bestaat in zelfonderzoek, ook als dit hem van het geloof van God verwijdert.'<sup>334</sup> *Kaddisj* seems to fulfill this criterion. *Kaddisj's* narrator cuts into his own flesh brutally. By means of sharp reasoning he rips off commonly held certainties, certainties about himself, about the modern world, about the human condition, about Auschwitz, about Jewishness. Familiar images obtain opposite meanings: the kaddish, a prayer of praise, is turned into the digging of a grave. Kertész's narrators go beyond theodic questions, rupturing images of God as being good: God is scrupulously related to Auschwitz. After Auschwitz nothing can be self-evident.

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<sup>332</sup> Quot from *Kaddish for a child not born* in: Ibidem 229.

<sup>333</sup> Ibidem 229-230.

<sup>334</sup> Kertész, *Dagboek van een galeislaaf*, 263.

The prayer of a truthfully devout person consists of critical introspection, even if it causes him to move away from faith in God

'Old prophecies speak of the death of God. Since Auschwitz we are more alone, that much is certain. We must create our values ourselves, day by day, with that persistent though invisible ethical work that will give them life, and perhaps turn them into the foundation of a new European culture.'<sup>335</sup>

As much as Kertész's novels appear to be destructive, they are actually the opposite, creating words that endure a world after Auschwitz, words creating space for the individual. An individual that is familiar with and at the same time a stranger to its own time. The narrators, like Kertész, look at the world as outsiders. They are outsiders in Hungary, outsiders among Jews, and outsiders among Western European intellectuals. Kertész seems to hold on to this estranged position: it forces him to create new words over and over again. Only then, when words, when values, are created 'day by day' they can be pronounced out loud in a world after Auschwitz.

### **Some concluding remarks**

The Holocaust had ended the life of European Jews as it had existed for centuries. Jews were segregated, isolated, hunted down, and murdered in unprecedented fashion. In her study on German-Jewish literature, Pascale R. Bos argues, that for long the Holocaust was understood as having led exclusively to the *physical* destruction of the European Jewish community. However, what has been underexposed, according to Bos, is how these events also brought about a traumatic *shift in identity* for surviving Western European Jews. Their sense of belonging was completely destroyed.<sup>336</sup> Jean Améry, an assimilated Jewish Viennese intellectual who had been called Hans Maier before 1938, expresses this estrangement painfully:

Suddenly, the past was buried and one no longer knew who one was... My identity was bound to a plain German name and to a dialect of my immediate place of origin. But since the day when an official decree forbade me to wear the folk costume I had worn almost exclusively from my early childhood on, I no longer permitted myself the dialect. Then the name...no longer made sense either... And my friends too.... Were obliterated... Everything that had filled my consciousness – from the history of my country, which was no longer mine, to the landscape images....– had become intolerable to me.... *I was a person who could no longer say 'we' and who therefore said 'I' merely out of habit, but not with the feeling of full possession of my self.*<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>335</sup> Kertész, *Heureka*.

<sup>336</sup> Bos, *German-Jewish literature*, 89.

<sup>337</sup> Jean Améry, 'How much home does a person need,' *At the mind's limits. Contemplation by a survivor on Auschwitz and its realities* (New York, 1990) 43-44.



According to Bos, particularly acculturated middle class Jews of Western and Central Europe had to confront and redefine their identity, their sense of belonging to Europe after 1945, as Jews and as citizens of a certain nationality. Whereas Dan Michman argues that the most decisive issues on the Holocaust are usually arrived at through the Eastern European Jewish angle, the authors discussed in this chapter belong to the group mentioned by Bos. Before the war they were middle-class Jews in Germany, Austria, and Hungary.

‘I was a person who could no longer say ‘we’ and who therefore said ‘I’’. Herzberg, Schwarz-Bart, and Grade, had lost their Jewish faith, but in their work they still dispute with Jewish religious traditions and thereby relate to that tradition. Indeed, their understanding of Jewishness is for the greater part defined by Judaism as religion, especially as an ethical religion. In *Tweestromenland* Herzberg writes ‘de godsdienst, dat is de joodse eenheid. Ik zeg het, hoewel ik de oude godsdienst zelf niet belijd en toch op mijn aandeel in de joodse eenheid aanspraak maak.’<sup>338</sup> Herzberg is still able to speak in plural. Perhaps that is the main difference between the authors discussed in chapter two and three. Hilsenrath, Klüger, and Kertész can no longer say ‘we’. They are not Austrian, not German, not religiously Jewish, not American, not Hungarian. As for their Jewish identity, Hilsenrath ruptures commonly held notions of Jewishness altogether and Kertész ‘s and Klüger’s narrators seek for non reactive, non religious ways to inform their identity. Klüger portrays her gender and ethnicity as sources of her political views, her circumspection, her love of justice, and her compassion with the oppressed. Kertész holds on to his experience in Auschwitz, because it has shown him something of the human condition. His narrators define their Jewishness as an existential experience of alienation and estrangement, that results in a continuous ethical appeal. An ethical appeal that is not absolute or given, like Herzberg seems to imply, but to be reinvented day by day.

Three authors (instead of two) were discussed in this chapter as to single out the singularity of each author. They are related by their estrangement, but their works differ extremely. Possibly because the authors are not able to say ‘we’ anymore. They cannot relate to something transcending their own experience like religion, culture, or history: they were not familiar with religious Judaism, the culture their parents had lived in was destroyed, and the history of Western Europe had casted them out almost completely. Separated from others by their experiences, they are forced to seek for and create purely individualist understandings

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<sup>338</sup> Herzberg, *Verzameld werk* 2, 115.

Indeed, the religion, that is the Jewish unity.

I say it, even though I myself do not profess the ancient religion, yet still lay claim to my share of Jewish unity.

of their (Jewish) identity: Klüger positions herself in the German debate as a German-Jew – like Hilsenrath had done a decennium before her – but her motivation to ‘talk-back’ is given not only by her exclusion as a Jew, but also by her exclusion as a woman. Kertész on the other hand found himself transported from the one totalitarian regime into the other. He seeks a position as a survivor of Auschwitz in Socialist Hungary.

Whereas Klüger, Kertész, and Hilsenrath do write about God, suffering, and Judaism, the works discussed in this chapter have in common that they seem to have passed theodic questions altogether. Zachary Braiterman had called the post-Holocaust Jewish religious discourse antitheodic, as it was dominated by the resistance to explain or give meaning to the relation that subsists between God and suffering. However, antitheodicy still presupposes notions of God that are related to theodic thinking. In his God-is-dead theology, Rubinstein, assumes notions of God that are irrevocably connected to theodic questions – God being transcendent and almighty. Conversely, the works discussed in this chapter cannot be characterized as antitheodic. They not only go beyond theodicy, they go beyond antitheodicy as well.

Hilsenrath’s *Nacht* comes closest to implying the question how could there be a God in the Prokower ghetto, a theatre of cruel absurdity. The main character Ranek seems to ventilate a God-is-dead theology. However, *Der Nazi und der Friseur* ruptures questions about God and justice altogether. It implies justice is never to be attained in a world after Auschwitz. *Nacht*’s hyperrealism is transformed into black humour. After the war, the mass murderers have picked up their jobs, their small lives, and continue as if nothing had ever happened. And since God is as guilty as they are, he cannot be their judge. Notions of God, ethics, justice, that are presupposed in theodic questions have been completely ruptured. Klüger’s resistance against Judaism as religion is mainly informed by her exclusion as a woman. Not Judaism’s God, but its rituals are central in Klüger’s criticism. Like Raphael, she rejects the image of an almighty or abstract God, in which she cannot recognize herself. Her passionate resistance is motivated by her eagerness to participate in Judaism’s rituals. The religion of her father and mother forced her to be silent at times that she wanted to speak, at times that she wanted to mourn her father and her brother. The rituals could have opened ways for Klüger to live with the dead. As for Kertész’s narrators, they surpass theodic questions altogether, and speak of God in conflicting ways. God is bluntly engaged with Auschwitz, but also to be addressed as to escape thinking in systems.

At some point the works discussed in this chapter problematize Schwarz-Bart’s and Herzberg’s notions of either God and Jewishness. While Schwarz-Bart and Herzberg dispute

with the old faith, they do ventilate questions of theodicy presupposing traditional understandings of God. Herzberg's protagonist even comes to a positive notion of God related to pantheism. In the works of Kertész, Hilsenrath, and Klüger such notions have become meaningless. When they refer to God, Judaism, or ethics they seem to refer to different things, asking different questions. Hilsenrath points to the impossibility of justice, Klüger tries to find ways, not to live with God, but to live with the dead, and Kertész's writings function as means to escape from 'fatelessness'.

The works discussed ventilate the nonnecessity of Jewish religion as it is defined traditionally. However, they do explicitly apply religious language. As for Klüger, her 'Hausbacken Kaddish' and language of ghosts and exorcism enables her to seek for new ways to resituate the dead in the world of the living, giving them back speech. The language of ghosts intersecting with Jewish rituals is even more remarkable because exorcism was absolutely forbidden within traditional Judaism. As for Kertész, his narrator argues that sometimes God must be invented, he seems to imply sometimes one cannot do without 'God' as literary construction. As literary construction 'God' enables the narrator to avoid being trapped in rational systems and – without mystifying Auschwitz – to give words to the inexplicability of his life's all absorbing black hole, Auschwitz. In the works discussed, exercising religious language to find ways to live with the past is an highly individual endeavour. For Hilsenrath, Klüger, and Kertész, possibilities to relate to traditions transcending their own experience – like Herzberg and Schwarz-Bart had – have been cut off. In the end this lack of continuation is also highly problematic. The authors discussed have to reinvent traditions and a post-Holocaust language that are highly individual. Therefore a next generation of writers would only partly be able to relate to their writings, and consequently they too have to reinvent themselves all over again.

This chapter has shown possibilities to think about God and suffering beyond theodicy. In the works discussed both theodicy and antitheodicy are shipwrecked. To discover some sort of correspondence it would be possible to interpret 'theodicy' metaphorically as to refer to possibilities of sense-giving. In that manner some similarities are to be found: for example in the way Klüger and Kertész write about the good deed they experienced in the camps. Whereas Klüger and Kertész describe a universe devoid of meaning, this deed is narrated and reflected upon as an inexplicable light in the midst of desperation, like the character Debora was in *Nacht*. Going against the logic of the system, the acts of freedom do not correspond with the limited freedom occurring within the system. By reaching out of the Nazis' logic, they are able to transcend the universe of the camps. Without applying notions

of providence, Klüger and Kertész feel obliged to narrate the story of practical goodness over and over again. It could be characterized as a practical performative – obtaining its meaning only when narrated – ‘theodicy’. A ‘theodicy’ that is not only defined by its performative character, but also by its poetic character, could be applied to Klüger’s poems that, when written, pronounced, or read, enables her to live with her ghosts. The poems then, have taken over the significance of Judaism’s rituals of mourning. The same goes for Kertész’s counter-acted Kaddish, that in the end, creates words that endure a world after Auschwitz, words creating space for the individual, that enables the narrator to live.

For all three authors writing itself has shifted to the centre of creating new forms to remember, to find address, to create a community. To all three authors, the outcome of the Historikerstreit is invalid. The Holocaust will not pass, the dead cannot and must not be put to rest, the language to be used after the Holocaust has to be reinvented. The authors create a new language to tell their stories, stories of exorcism, stories of a counter-acted kaddish, stories of the world as a black theatre. And sometimes the world of the Holocaust, a world that is deprived of meaning, is disrupted by a figure like Debora, by a ‘Gnadenakt’, or by poetry. Without giving absolute significance to the acts of kindness, the stories are told. ‘It is my duty to tell, albeit I don’t know why.’<sup>339</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> Quot from *Kaddish for a child not born* in: Summers-Bremner, ‘Kaddish,’ 229.

## Conclusions

### *Theodicy and beyond*

*Unde malum* – whence evil? The ancient question has been formulated and reformulated throughout the ages, obtaining different meanings and connotations and probably referring to different problems as well. Nevertheless, the question becomes urgent, solely when there are beliefs in the world with which evils seem to conflict. As Christianity and Judaism share their paradoxical experience with a world of suffering and evil while believing in a good and almighty God, one could claim, it is or has been a specifically monotheistic problem. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz coined the term theodicy as to refer to the problem of evil. For long, theodicy has been approached as referring to a universal and never changing problem. However, recently, scholars have put to the fore the concept's historicity. Only after Renaissance's focus on earthly happiness, the Enlightenment's eclipse of original sin, and the emergence of modern medicine that brought dramatic changes in the quality of life, the question of evil obtained severe urgency.<sup>340</sup> The 18<sup>th</sup> century, 'the age of theodicy', did not face a single writer who did not address the problem. Leibniz's best of all worlds theory or Voltaire's *Candide* ridiculing it, are only tips of the iceberg. Whereas rabbinic Judaism – which is not included in this study – had its own extensive and significant traditions on the matter, from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards modern Jewish thinkers too, like Moses Mendelssohn, made significant attempts to rationally explain the existence of evil.<sup>341</sup>

What is more, Odo Marquard not only claimed the historicity of theodicy, he claimed it is irrevocably connected to modernity: 'where there is theodicy there is modernity, and where there is modernity, there is theodicy.'<sup>342</sup> Odo Marquard, followed by Kenneth Surin, and Terrence Tilley and many others argued that the introduction of the concept 'theodicy' marked a new way of thinking about God and evil: no longer was the problem of evil an interior question of Christianity or Judaism – triggering arguments to convince those who had a wrong faith – it became a question about Christianity and Judaism. Whereas before the 18<sup>th</sup> century questions of evil had brought about doubt in man, after the 18<sup>th</sup> century not man, but God was doubted. Indeed, the problem of evil became the main argument for sceptics and atheists to reject belief in God. While before the 18<sup>th</sup> century the question of evil also led to

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<sup>340</sup> Larrimore, ed., *The problem of evil*.

<sup>341</sup> Leaman, *Evil and suffering*.

<sup>342</sup> Larrimore, ed., *The problem of evil*, xxi.

practical elaborations, after the ‘age of theodicy’ theologians and philosophers found themselves forced to formulate theoretical answers as to oppose atheists and sceptics.<sup>343</sup> However if theodicy, indeed, is related to modernity, the question as to how theodicy is related to a post-Holocaust world, to late or post modernity is left unanswered.

After the Holocaust Jewish theology was confronted with questions of the most troubling kind. Judaism had a long history of persecution and exclusion, but never before were the Jews systematically murdered on a mass scale; the persecutors aiming at their complete annihilation. The Jews were murdered not for the sake of their belief or practice, but – racially categorized – were murdered for the single fact that they existed. Though some scholars maintained that the Holocaust was only one of many catastrophes in Jewish history, and as such did not generate or require any unique theological responses, most scholars have argued Auschwitz represents a theological point of no return. Zachary Braiterman characterizes the post Holocaust discourse, originated by Fackenheim, Berkovits, and Rubinstein, as ‘antitheodic’. Antitheodicy means the refutation to justify, explain, or accept the relationship that subsists between God, evil, and suffering in any way: a protest against God, resulting in complete solidarity with the suffering. While Fackenheim, Berkovits, and Rubinstein differed in many ways, they shared their rejection of theodicy. Braiterman does acknowledge that before 1939 many classical Jewish texts, novels, (pogrom) poetry already incorporated antitheodic motifs, calling God to account for the suffering. Nonetheless, he argues, modern poets and sceptics have always found it easy to ridicule and protest a God in whom they don’t believe. Theologians like Buber, Heschel, Soloveitchik, and Kaplan, on the other hand, have exercised great hesitation. Only after the Holocaust, antitheodicy gained a larger currency in specifically religious circles. The urge to refuse to explain the relation between God and evil, Braiterman concludes, shifted from the margins to the centre in Jewish religious thought.<sup>344</sup>

Whereas Braiterman underlines the importance of genre and rhetoric of the texts involved, he does not extend his analyses to literary genres. In the context of questions about God and suffering in Jewish thought after the Holocaust, little research has been done on fictional literature written by ‘secular’ Jewish authors, Holocaust survivors, who do address

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<sup>343</sup> Marcel Sarot, 'De theodicee. Een nieuwe benadering voor een oud probleem,' *Nederlands theologisch tijdschrift* 58 (2004) 180.

Marcel Sarot critically notes that some notions of the ‘modern’ approach to evil can be traced back to the Bible. In the Bible evil and suffering are also being used as possible arguments to reject a faith in the covenantal God. As opposed to the Middle Ages, in biblical times, the God of the covenant had to compete with other Gods as well.

<sup>344</sup> Braiterman, *(God) after Auschwitz*.

issues on God, suffering and Judaism.<sup>345</sup> The present thesis focused on texts written by this group. While addressing a selection of Jewish authors a distinction was made between secular Jewish authors having orthodox backgrounds (chapter two) and secular Jewish authors who were raised in highly acculturated families before the War (chapter three). Chapter two focused on the works of Abel. J. Herzberg and André Schwarz-Bart – Chaim Grade and Isaac Beshevis Singer were briefly mentioned. Before, or due to the war the authors distanced themselves from the Jewish (orthodox) faith of their parents and grandparents. Whereas Singer and Grade were born in Eastern Europe, Herzberg and Schwarz-Bart, born in the Netherlands and France, are to be related to Eastern European Jewry as well: they were born into immigrant families. Whereas the distinction between shtetl orthodox *Ostjuden* and assimilated secular *Westjuden* is an oversimplification, religious life was more visible and present in Eastern European Jewry as opposed to the private Jewish culture and religion in Western Europe. While Herzberg and Schwarz-Bart had distanced themselves from the orthodox Jewish faith, their works demonstrate an urge for finding new ways to relate to Jewish religious traditions. The authors discussed in chapter three on the other hand, have never been familiar with these traditions. Raised in acculturated Jewish families, Edgar Hilsenrath, Ruth Klüger, and Imre Kertész shared a domestic form of Judaism, which was restricted to the celebration of Shabbath and the Jewish feasts. Before the war they did not perceive themselves as exclusively Jewish (religiously or otherwise). Ripped off from their former identity as either German, Austrian or Hungarian Jews, after the war, they could never re-identify with a (Western) European civilization that had excluded them and without any resistance had deported into death. When it comes to questions connected to theodicy these authors are interesting because of their problematic Jewish identity: traditionally, questions about God and suffering are intertwined with a particular understanding of Judaism and Jewish identity. However, the authors' Jewish identity had never been self-evident and was to be re-created.

Braiterman had defined the post-Holocaust discourse starting in the 1960s and 1970s as antitheodic. Nevertheless, the authors discussed in the second chapter, Herzberg and Schwarz-Bart, do relate to theodic questions. *Drie rode rozen* published in 1975 and *Le dernier des justes* published in 1959, explicitly or implicitly concentrate on the question how the existence of God can be justified in a world of suffering, more importantly in a world after Auschwitz. Both authors take up a story from Jewish religious traditions: the story of Job and

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<sup>345</sup> 'Secular' in this instance is defined as a disbelief of the (covenantal) God in which ambiguous positions are possible.

the legend of the *Lamed-Vav*. Throughout their work, Herzberg and Schwarz-Bart are in continuous dialogue with these traditions. Herzberg's protagonist Simon Zeitscheck opposes to *Job de Dulder* and insists on a trial against God: why do innocent people have to suffer? Paradoxes, conflicting ideas and continuous dialogues are in form and content at the centre of the novella. However, eventually, by transforming old notions of God, the protagonist does find his rest. Whereas Simon Zeitscheck ascertains what Braiterman calls theodicy, that is, an 'acceptable meaning to the relationship that subsists between God, evil and suffering',<sup>346</sup> the questions raised in *Le dernier des justes* remain unresolved. The tension in Schwarz-Bart's novel between the impulse to see the Holocaust as another tragic event within the history of an ever dying and therefore eternally Chosen People and the contrary impulse to see it as the end of Jewish history and a denial of the Jewish God continues to the very end of the novel. In questioning the notion of Jewish history as a history of an ever dying people, Edward Alexander argues, Schwarz-Bart finds himself, like for example Glatstein and Molodowsky, partner to an ancient quarrel that actually confirms the very attachment it wishes to deny – each generation claiming the end of the Jewish people in the future.<sup>347</sup>

Though Herzberg and Schwarz-Bart had distanced themselves from the Jewish faith of their parents and grandparents, their works seem to explore new ways to live with these traditions. Herzberg and Schwarz-Bart dispute with old notions of God as almighty and good, notions of the Jewish people, the Jewish covenant. However, by rupturing these notions they are actually extending traditional vocabulary to include theirs and, possibly, are still to be understood within or related to these traditions. Herzberg's and Schwarz-Bart's relation to religious Judaism could be illustrated in their portrayal of Jewish identity. The protagonists of *Tweestromenland*, *Drie rode rozen*, and *Le dernier des justes* derive their Jewish identity from something transcending their individual lives and experiences in the camps. Their identity is related either to a sacrificial history of devout Jews and their God or to a tradition of poets and prophets of ethical monotheism. This line of reasoning is also connected to Schwarz-Bart's and Herzberg's comprehension of anti-Semitism and Nazism, that, in their works, is not to be understood as an arbitrary and incomprehensible force of violence and destruction – a way of thinking that is visible in the works of Hilsenrath, Kertész and Klüger – but as either Christian hate of the suffering *other*, the Jews, or a polytheistic urge for power trying to destroy monotheism's ethics, Judaism.

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<sup>346</sup> Braiterman, *(God) after Auschwitz*, 4.

<sup>347</sup> Alexander, *The resonance of the dust*, 218-222.



The interpretation ventilated by Schwarz-Bart and Herzberg of Judeo-Christian history – Christ was actually a devout Jew but his cross was made a sword and Christianity was never able to repel its polytheistic longings because it never fully understood the monotheistic (Jewish) roots – somehow reminds of Buber’s and Rosenzweig’s understanding of Judaism’s relation to Western culture: whereas Western culture is founded on the Bible, Buber and Rosenzweig argue, the Bible and its language had never been understood properly, since Jewish traditions were left out.<sup>348</sup> The religious traditions Herzberg and Schwarz-Bart relate to – critically questioning them – still inform their understanding of Jewish identity. ‘De godsdienst, dat is de joodse eenheid. Ik zeg het, hoewel ik de oude godsdienst zelf niet belijd en toch op mijn aandeel in de joodse eenheid aanspraak maak.’<sup>349</sup> Regarding Jewish identity Herzberg and Schwarz-Bart call upon and reformulate Jewish history and religion. Yet, their understanding of Jewishness is derived from that (ruptured) tradition.

‘Suddenly, the past was buried and one no longer knew who one was... (...) *I was a person who could no longer say ‘we’ and who therefore said ‘I’.*<sup>350</sup> Jean Améry expresses the estrangement painfully that seems to distinguish the authors discussed in chapter two from the authors discussed in chapter three. Cut off from their self understanding before the war – as ‘highly acculturated Jewish citizens of European nation states’<sup>351</sup> – after the war, the authors were forced to rethink or even reinvent their Jewish identity. Regarding their writings on God, suffering, and Judaism, the question arises as to whether their reflections are still to be compared to Herzberg’s and Schwarz-Bart’s writings. When they write about God and suffering, do they refer to similar objects or subjects? While Herzberg’s and Schwarz-Bart’s works are still to be understood in the framework of (anti) theodicy, Hilsenraht, Klüger, and Kertész seem to have surpassed theodic questions altogether. They do write about God, suffering, and Judaism, but they refer to fundamentally different things.

Hilsenraht’s *Nacht* comes closest to traditional questions as to how the covenantal God could have let the Jews transport into a never ending night of death and destruction. However, Hilsenraht’s second novel, *Der Nazi und der Friseur* ruptures notions of righteousness, justice, ethics, and God – preconditions of thinking about theodicy – altogether. In *Weiter leben* Klüger formulates her estrangement as a woman from the notion of a higher being as

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<sup>348</sup> This line of thought is presented in the introduction to Rosenzweig’s and Buber’s translation of the Tenach into German.

<sup>349</sup> Herzberg, *Verzameld werk 2*, 115-116.

Indeed, the religion, that is the Jewish unity. I say it, even though I myself do not profess the ancient religion, yet still lay claim to my share of Jewish unity.

<sup>350</sup> Améry, ‘How much home,’ 43-44.

<sup>351</sup> Bos, *German-Jewish literature*, 89.

either a covenantal (patriarch) God – ‘Ich seh mich im Spiegel und bin nicht sein Ebenbild’<sup>352</sup> – or logo centric abstraction: Hers are different questions to struggle with. *Weiter leben* employs religious language not to relate to the question how God could have let Auschwitz happen, but to find ways to relate to the dead – the millions who have never been put to rest, the millions without a grave, the millions that still haunt Western culture, Klüger’s father and brother still haunting her. As for Kertész, his writings on God are completely disengaged from notions of God presupposed in theodic questions. His urge to write about God goes beyond ‘God is dead philosophies’. Kertész’s statements about God are often contradictive, being as easily related to Auschwitz as to the narrator’s obligation to testify, to write about his experiences. As literary construction ‘God’ enables Kertész’s narrators – without mystifying Auschwitz – to give words to the inexplicability of their life’s all absorbing black hole, Auschwitz. Kertész writes in *Dagboek van een galleislaaf*: ‘De mens moet in bepaalde omstandigheden God bedenken.’<sup>353</sup> His literature reveals an urge to escape from believing and thinking in systems, or by opposing systems creating new ones – a way of thinking that has dominated 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe and had caused millions to die. Inventing God creates space in which Kertész’s narrators can reside and claim their individual fate. Repelling God as a literary invention or concept altogether would leave modern man in his functional state of mind:

Wie het transcendente aspect uit de roman wil bannen, begaat een even grote fout als degene die God uit de wereld wil bannen. Toch is het momenteel in de mode om deze twee vergissingen te begaan. Daardoor zijn de hedendaagse romans zo saai, zoals ook het moderne leven saai is.<sup>354</sup>

After the 18<sup>th</sup> century the problem of evil, the question about the relation between God and evil, theodicy, was no longer a problem within Christianity or Judaism, but about Christianity or Judaism. The problem of evil had become a main argument for sceptics and atheists to reject a belief in God. If that is true, and theodicy is irrevocably connected to modernity, what then, does it mean when secular Jewish authors do no longer address the question of evil as to reject a belief in God? What does it mean when traditional notions, presupposing theodicy, notions of God, justice, ethics, Judaism, evil, and suffering, are completely ruptured or even

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<sup>352</sup> Klüger, *Weiter leben*, 252.

<sup>353</sup> In certain circumstances, man *has to* invent God

<sup>354</sup> Kertész, *Dagboek van een galleislaaf*, 97.

The one who wants to repel the transcendent aspect from the novel, will make the same mistake as the one who wants to repel God from the world. Yet, nowadays both mistakes are in vogue. That is why present-day novels are so boring, just as modern life is boring.

overcome? In the writings of Hilsenrath, Klüger, and Kertész not only traditional theodicy, but also antitheodicy, as Braiterman had characterized the post-Holocaust discourse, is shipwrecked. Whereas antitheodicy – as a rejection to find acceptable meaning to the relation between God and suffering – cannot escape completely from the theodic framework, presupposing a transcendent or immanent God, justice, and ethics, Hilsenrath, Klüger, and Kertész, go beyond these notions, asking different questions. They do write about God, suffering, and ethics, but they cannot and do not depart from traditions transcending theirs. Therefore, the words they use have to be invented and reinvented over and over again:

‘Old prophecies speak of the death of God. Since Auschwitz we are more alone, that much is certain. *We must create our values ourselves, day by day*, with that persistent though invisible ethical work that will give them life, and perhaps turn them into the foundation of a new European culture.’<sup>355</sup>

To conclude, whereas the works of Schwarz-Bart (1959) and Herzberg (1975) are still to be understood within a framework of theodicy, Hilsenrath, Kertész and Klüger, writing in the following decennia, go beyond (anti)theodicy. Indeed, many secular Jewish authors have not addressed theodic themes – think of Primo Levi, Jean Améry, Tadeusz Borowski –. Nevertheless, the authors discussed in chapter three did write about God and suffering, but cannot be related to concepts presupposed in (anti)theodicy. The possibility to do so, to go beyond theodicy, not asking the question of evil as to reject faith in God, could be read as a confirmation of modernity’s projects coming to a final end. At least modernity’s project of theodicy – not only facing ineradicable moral objections, as Levinas had exposed, but also conceptual – seems to be passed.

Continuation in thinking about theodicy may be signalled if theodicy is to be understood metaphorically, extending its meaning to ways of finding meaning or significance, in exploring existential questions. Then, different forms of ‘theodicy’ are visible in the works of Klüger and Kertész, related to what Benjamin and Adorno called: die ‘modifizierende Kraft des Eingedenkens’, with the possibility of ‘das Abgeschlossene (das Leid) zu einem Unabgeschlossenen zu machen’.<sup>356</sup> *Weiter leben*, for example, seeks to lay its ghosts to rest, but at the same time it reinvokes the ghosts for the reader, giving them back speech and opening a history which seemed initially to be closed off. Klüger addresses her ghosts in the poems she writes – as alternatives to the Jewish rites – disputing with them, and thereby evoking them. Not by rationalizing, but in what could be called a poetic and performative

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<sup>355</sup> Kertész, *Heureka* ([cited])

<sup>356</sup> Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus*, 169.

way, Klüger establishes 'das Abgeschlossene zu einem Unabgeschlossenen zu machen'. But also Schwarz-Bart opens ways of thinking about the annihilation of the Jews as ever-dying-people, when in the last chapter, the narrator speaks directly to the reader. The reader then, cannot but think the destruction of the Jews was not complete: there is still someone who can tell the story of Erny, died 16 million times. It opens the question if Erny was the last of the Just. Another form of 'theodicy' could be described as a practical performative 'theodicy' – performative, because the moral act only gains its importance while narrated: without applying providential connotations, both Klüger and Kertész, evoke an unexplainable good deed of an inmate, the story of the person who, against the survivalist logic of the camps, saved their lives, and thereby acted freely. The question 'Why did he or she do it' remains unresolved. Within a universe devoid of meaning the only thing Klüger and Kertész are able to do is tell and retell the story again and again, testifying what cannot be explained.

These two forms of 'theodicy' are only shredded remains of what had been questions of traditional theodicy. The metaphorical interpretation of 'theodicy' has shifted far from its original meaning. Nevertheless, within this understanding, aspects of traditional theodicy, like the ways to find, give, or create meaning, could be maintained.

### ***Inventing a post-Holocaust language: narrating the void***

How to write about the inexplicable? How to put into words what cannot be said? How to give voice to the people that had been made speechless, had been robbed from their individuality, reduced to anonymous masses, and forced into what Kertész called 'fatelessness'. When the Jews, who escaped from their intended destruction, returned from the camps, they faced a culture of silence, a culture that was putting all of its efforts in heading to the future, rebuilding what was materially destroyed. They lacked address, they lacked a language and imagery to communicate about their experiences. While after the war many testimonies were written, there was no audience to read them. When Primo Levi published *Se questo è un uomo*, 'If this is a man?', in 1947 only 1500 copies were sold. It was not until 1958 the book was published in a revised form and had a major worldwide impact. Whereas after the Eichmann process in 1961 the voice of the victims was heard widely for the first time, European Jewish authors had to face the paradox of either reclaiming their position by writing in a culture that had excluded them, that had not prevented their deportations to the death camps, or turning their backs to Europe, migrate to Israel or the United States and adopt a new language, but by doing so they would affirm what was intended to be destroyed, European Jewry.

After the Holocaust a Jewish author's choice of language had become highly burdened. Some authors, like Isaac Beshevis Singer or Chaim Grade, chose to write in Yiddish, throughout their lives. Whereas their works have been translated into many languages, the implied reader-public, is a Jewish community. The same goes for an author like Aharon Appelfeld who was raised in a region that until the First World War belonged to the Habsburg Empire, had survived the Holocaust as a child and had learned Hebrew in Israel. His complete oeuvre is written in Hebrew, not in German, the language of his childhood. Interestingly, Appelfeld, raised in what he called an assimilated family, chose Hebrew as his literary vehicle for its succinctness and biblical imagery. Without returning to Jewish religious traditions, Appelfeld – inspired by Kafka – intentionally contributes to what he characterizes as a specific Jewish literary tradition including ahistorical parables and biblical imagery, a tradition, he argues, that had its own string within European history of literature.<sup>357</sup> Appelfeld's reasoning shows how he positively construed his Jewish identity as a writer after the war, applying a new language and claiming a specific Jewish literary tradition. The authors discussed in chapter two and three, on the other hand, chose to write in their mother tongue, a language absorbed with its history of guilt. A language they had been alienated from, but at the same mediates and expresses their experiences of alienation. After the war, the authors were forced to reposition themselves as Jewish Hungarian, French, American, or Dutch writers.

In its depiction of European Jewry's destruction, *Le dernier des justes* departs from a Talmudic folktale of the *Lamed-Vav*, and thus consciously relates to a specific Jewish literary tradition. Whereas Schwarz-Bart wrote in French, relating to a culture the book forcefully condemns, the choice of this Jewish folktale creates a particular distance to its French readers. *Drie rode rozen*, written in Dutch, is less critical to its Dutch culture, but the novella too relates to a specific Jewish tradition: the chutzpah and the book of Job, consisting of a dialogue between Simon and Zeitscheck and the narrative of Job. Though Job of course has become a familiar literary figure in European literature as well, he remains a specially Jewish figure. Again, Schwarz-Bart and Herzberg are able to relate to (literary) Jewish traditions transcending their own, that enables them to partly (!) disengage from the French and Dutch culture. The tension between the hegemonic culture and Jewish identity is more problematic and pressing in the works of the authors discussed in chapter three. Before the war, their self understanding was mainly informed by the country and its culture they were born into. In

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<sup>357</sup> Aharon Appelfeld, *Beyond despair. Three lectures and a conversation with Philip Roth*, Jeffrey M. Green, (New York, 1994) 66.

Kertész's and Klüger's literary works, it is precisely the experience of alienation that has shifted to the centre of their self understanding. Jewish identity is presented as an existential and purely individual experience of estrangement, as a choice, informing the narrators' sensitivity to illusions, injustices, and ethical thinking. Paradoxically, their understanding of Jewish identity could be perceived as a new form of exile; alienation as its core quality.

While Klüger became a citizen of the United States, it is Western Europe, particularly Germany, she relates to in her work. She wrote her book in German and had it published in Göttingen. Klüger addresses her readers directly, urging them not to identify with her. She explores the limits, the tensions, and (im)possibilities of a German-Jewish discussion. Fundamentally separated by opposite experiences, Klüger urges, Germany will never be able to do justice to its past if German Jews are not included in the debates. By 'talking back' Klüger claims her individual place as a Jewish German writer. However, she too, cannot escape from the impossible paradox of writing herself into the German culture and at the same time distancing herself from that culture. If you are not allowed to identify with the protagonist, how can you possibly relate to her? However, Klüger criticizes the genre she attributes, the 'testimony', on different levels, not only does she intervene in *Weiter leben's* reception by asking the reader not to identify with her, *Weiter leben* turns a critical eye towards itself as a Holocaust testimony by commenting on it: Klüger calls into question how memories and narratives are constructed and function and underlines the impossibility to write about the Holocaust in the 1990s as if she was to the first to do so. In his essays Kertész puts to the fore a more fundamental objection to traditional literary forms, declaring the invalidity of European literary tradition as it is based on moral and ethical conventions that had been destroyed by 20<sup>th</sup> century mass murders. Europe is in need for a post-Holocaust language, Kertész argues, a language which is constructed from the fragments of pre-Holocaust language: like the words of Kaddish, a prayer of praise recited by a son mourning his father, that are turned into the digging of a grave of a man who did not want to have children. Paradoxically a post-Holocaust language cannot exist on its own. The language has to be constructed over and over again, because, if an image like Kertész's *Kaddisj*, or for example Celan's 'black milk' become commonly used, they will lose their disturbing meaning.

The self-conscious ways in which the authors reveal how their narrative and memory is constructed, undermines the commonly held notion that only second and third generation Jews were able to look at their writings and their memories that way. Sara Horowitz claimed that because second generation authors were at the same time related and in some way

detached from the Holocaust, only they were able to question canonical writings, enabling critical engagement with the Holocaust discourse.<sup>358</sup> Conversely, the works of Hilsenrath, Kertész, and Klüger seem to indicate the opposite: they are aware of their narratives as constructions, either as black humorous fiction, fictional autobiography, or post modern testimony. They present themselves as self-conscious writers, rupturing commonly held notions about the Holocaust or Holocaust literature, struggling to find ways to remember in the post Holocaust world they live in. Their writing could indicate that the ways in which memories are constructed and reflected upon by survivors and later generations, the ways in which they try to remember, are not to be strictly separated.

Is it possible to write about the inexplicable? To write about things that cannot be put into words? Literature addressing the Holocaust cannot but reflect on what literature is (in)capable of. Each of the authors discussed in this thesis has tried to find ways to narrate what is left after the Holocaust: a void. Interestingly, already in the 1950s Schwarz-Bart reached out to fiction to account for European Jewry's destruction. By applying Jewish literary traditions, Herzberg and Schwarz-Bart have found a language that transcended their individual experiences. The questions arise as to whether the language and literary forms of Klüger, Kertész and Hilsenrath are still to be related to the works of Herzberg and Schwarz-Bart. Do they write about the similar things? Perhaps not. Hilsenrath's black humor, going beyond satire, ruptures notions of ethics that are still presupposed in *Le dernier des justes* and *Drie rode rozen*. Kertész too writes about a universe devoid of meaning, rejecting Fackenheim's command forbidding Jews to despair man and his world. But there is something paradoxical about nihilism in literature. Whereas Kertész's narrator is digging his grave with words, peeling off illusions, at the same time questions of inexplicable goodness remain unresolved, 'why did he (the Professor) do it?' sound throughout the novel, but more than that, while writing, Kertész is issuing forth a community, a community of readers. If there can be no life after Auschwitz, why then does the narrator continue speaking to us. Schwarz-Bart, Herzberg, Hilsenrath, Kertész, Klüger, their voices were not silenced by the Nazis. At that point all writers meet: against the Nazis' effort to make them speechless, to rob them from their individual lives, their individual fate, they speak. Whereas Kertész, Klüger, and Hilsenrath are not able to say 'we' they do seek for a community. A community of readers. Margalit goes as far as to claim that against all despair writing itself presumes faith in the possibility of a moral

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<sup>358</sup> Sara R. Horowitz, 'Auto/biography and fiction after Auschwitz. Probing the boundaries of second generation aesthetics,' in: Efraim Sicher, ed., *Breaking crystal. Writing and memory after Auschwitz* (Chicago, 1998)

community.<sup>359</sup> That is something literature, not rational reflections is capable of. It finds address. Each time a book is read, the individual fate of the authors is restated, both author and reader rebelling the Nazis' annihilating effort.

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<sup>359</sup> Avishai Margalit, *The ethics of memory*, (London, Cambridge, 2002).



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