Living with Radical Laughter: A Purim Reader

18forty.org/articles/living-with-radical-laughter-a-purim-reader

By: Yehuda Fogel

Is laughter radical? As the faint scent of Purim strengthens in the fragrant air of Adar, we are thinking about the radical religious value of laughter.

To start you off, we included a re-edited essay on the weighty questions of laughter's place in religious life from 18Forty's early exploration of comedy. To follow up this tasty introduction, we put together some of our favorite articles on the many faces of this radical laughter. First up we have "The Strange and Violent History of the Ordinary Grogger" by David Zvi Kalman, a fascinating journalistic read on our favorite noisemaker. Next up, we have a fascinating academic read, "Instituting the Holocaust: Comic Fiction and the Moral Career of the Survivor," by Adam Rovner, which explores the complex interaction between humor, tragedy, and the Holocaust. Last up we have Henry Abramson's fun and fascinating read on the history of Haman effigies, "The Romans tried to ban wild Purim parties in 408 CE – for a very good reason."

For extra credit, here are some Purim articles from our house writers at 18Forty, host David Bashevkin's love letter to the letters of *Megillah*, "Letter Perfect," and editor Yehuda Fogel's (AKA myself) "Purim and Paul: The Torah Veiled and Unveiled." We have mercy on your printers and our planet's precious trees, so we didn't add them to the PDF, but take a look and let us know what you think.

Wherever you are, and whatever you practice, we wish you a joyful, grogger-like Purim, full of spinning dances and gifts to loved ones. Freihlechen Purim!

Laughing Religiously / Religiously Laughing

Rabbi Elchanan Nir, an Israeli poet, novelist, and thinker, wrote *If Your Heart Runs* (p. 108), which discusses descent and ascent in religious life. At the end of a lengthy chapter about the Alter Rebbe, the Russian Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1813), Elchanan asks the following question: Did the Alter Rebbe have a sense of humor?

His explanation for why he finds that question important provides a powerful illumination into the idea of the comedic in religious life:

One year, I learned the sefer "Netzach Yisrael" with my students, written by the Maharal of Prague, Rabbi Yehuda Loewe (1520-1609). This book deals with exile and redemption, a subject relevant to the lives of many students, both on a personal-existential level and on a national level. However, the students never connected with the subject matter. They knew the material, they understood the content, but they felt distant from the material through it all.

At the end of the year, when I asked them whether they benefited from their encounter with this work, they acknowledged the importance of the *sefer*, but said that it felt distant to them still, foreign. "Only now do I understand why I felt this way", one student said: "The Maharal obviously didn't have a sense of humor." That student wasn't saying that the Maharal didn't have jokes – although this might also be true – but rather a sense of humor.

Humor is deep; The Zohar (2, 107a) refers to King David as "the King's jester," as he knows how to free the king from the gravity necessary to ruling. Humor engenders an ability to encounter life from within the heavy constraints of the gravity of the human condition and the gravity of religious life.

In a way, asking if the author of a work has a sense of humor is really asking a deeper question: Was there an author to this work? While someone put thought to paper, was that person struggling with the stuff of life? Was this work born from a real encounter with life, or just with philosophy?

Asking if the Maharal had a sense of humor is like asking if God has a sense of humor: We may feel like there is a Creator to this world, but it's easy to think of this Creator as a transcendent, Spinoza-esque Creator—above, distant, prone to ruling with gravitas. If we can feel like the Author—whether of *Netzach Yisrael* or this world—has a sense of humor, it becomes just a bit easier to relate to the Author as Real, and not just a foreign truth or *ani ma'amin*.

In *The Name of the Rose*, Italian author-philosopher Umberto Eco places a theological dispute between two monks about laughter at the heart of a book that would go on to become one of the best-selling books ever published. In this murder-mystery/literary journey, a theological dispute about whether Franciscans are heretical brings together the Francisan William of Baskerville and the elderly non-Franciscan Jorge of Borges.

At a pivotal point in the book, Jorge of Borges, a blind, elderly member of the monastery, shouts at the Franciscan William: "A monk should not laugh! Only a fool raises his voice in laughter!" Jorge notes, with no slight disapproval, that Franciscans like William look indulgently upon laughter.

> **William**: Yes, it's true. Saint Francis was much disposed to laughter.
>
> **Jorge**: Laughter is a devilish wind which deforms the lineaments of the face and makes men look like monkeys.
>
> **William**: Monkeys do not laugh. Laughter is particular to man.
>
> **Jorge**: As is sin. **Christ never laughed.**
>
> **William**: **Can we be so sure?**
>
> **Jorge**: There is nothing in the Scriptures to say that He did.
>
> **William**: And there's nothing there to say that He did not. Even the saints have been known to employ comedy to ridicule the enemies of the faith. For example, when the pagans plunged Saint Maurus into the boiling water, he complained that his bath was cold. The Sultan put his hand in and scalded himself.
>
> **Jorge**: A saint immersed in boiling water does not play childish tricks. He restrains his cries and suffers for the truth!
>
> **William**: And yet, Aristotle devoted his second book of poetics to comedy as an instrument of truth.

Spoiler alert: In a later scene, William discovers that Jorge had taken steps to poison any who read Aristotle's *Poetics*, which discusses comedy, and the dispute continues:

> **William:** Venerable brother, there are many books that speak of comedy. Why does this one fill you with such fear?
>
> **Jorge**: Because it's by Aristotle.
>
> **William**: But what is so alarming about laughter?
>
> **Jorge**: **Laughter kills fear and without fear there can't be any faith.** Because without fear of the devil there is no more need of God.
>
> **William**: But you will not eliminate laughter by eliminating that book.
>
> **Jorge**: No, to be sure. Laughter will remain the common man's recreation but what would happen if, **because of this book learned men work to pronounce it permissible to laugh at everything? Can we laugh at God? The world would relapse into chaos.**

In Jorge's eyes, laughter in religious life erodes the fear that keeps faith alive. But for William, laughter is a part of religious life, and keeps faith alive in its own way. "Can we laugh at God?" Indeed, can we? Should we? Does laughter kill fear, and thus faith? Does God have a sense of humor? Do we?

This question touches upon our deep concern for laughter, and the subsequent concerns born in our appreciation for laughter. And so Nir asks: Did the Alter Rebbe have a sense of humor? Feldman asks: Does God have a sense of humor? And across the theological ocean, Umberto Eco asks: Did Christ have a sense of humor? To each, the answer might just be: It depends. Do you, the reader, seek to find humor in these works? Do you put your personal interests in perspective, and learn to laugh like God, and with God?

Two hundred years after the Alter Rebbe, a different Russian Jew, the singer Regina Spektor, commented in song about the ironic challenge of laughter in religious life. It is easier to find God funny when one is in control. "God can be funny," she sings, "at a cocktail party when listening to a God-themed joke…or when presented like a genie who does magic like Houdini or grants wishes like Jiminy Cricket or Santa Clause." But when the act of living grows more complicated, more vulnerable, that laughter rings hollow:

> No one laughs at God in a hospital
>
> No one laughs at God in a war
>
> No one's laughing at God when they're starving or freezing or so very poor
>
> No one laughs at God when the doctor calls after some routine tests
>
> No one's laughing at God
>
> When it's gotten real late and their kid's not back from the party yet

But as her song winds down, Spektor softly sings:

> No one's laughing at God
>
> No one's laughing at God
>
> No one's laughing at God, **we're all laughing with God**

We're all laughing with God. There are dangers inherent to comedy, possibilities for the cynical edge that laughter sometimes has to creep into one's life. As Brother Jorges asks: Can we laugh at God? We might answer: We can laugh with God. We can laugh with hope, with faith, and with perspective. While hope and history may not yet rhyme, and while we may not yet have history's sense of perspective into the travails of our current moment, we can laugh at the shining absurdities that so often make our life worth living.

The Strange and Violent History of the Ordinary Grogger

forward.com/culture/335491/the-strange-and-violent-history-of-the-ordinary-grogger

David Zvi Kalman

Some objects look like they have stories to tell, but the *grogger* never seemed as though it was one of them. A single photograph convinced me I was wrong, though. You'll be forgiven if you think it is a photo of two men dressed up in hazmat suits for Purim —how were you supposed to know that those aren't groggers, but World War II gas alarms issued by the Royal Air Force, and that the hazmat suits and gas masks are all too real?

Image by Imperial War Museum
Rattle and Hum: Two airmen wield gas rattles during an exercise during World War II.

Now that you know, your eyes (like mine) might still play tricks on you. The photo has the feel of an optical illusion: You can know what it is, yet it looks like it *must* be something else.

Today you can go a lifetime without ever seeing a *grogger* outside of the Purim context, but this wasn't always the case. Three hundred years ago, you'd be more likely to associate *groggers* with the fire department than with Haman. Three hundred years before that, you'd

associate the *grogger* with church.

Over the past couple of months, I've been piecing together the story of the *grogger* in popular culture, trying to understand where it came from, how it was used and how Jews came to be its most prominent users.

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First, terminology. *Grogger* is just Yiddish for rattle. Its basic operation is simple: a wooden cog is attached to a handle, with a freely rotating wood slat fitted into the teeth. When the rattle is swung around, the slat is forced to move around the cog, vibrating every time it passes a tooth. Voilà: noise.

The rattle got its first big break as a stand-in for a more quotidian noisemaker: the bell. Bells and churches have gone together for so long that it's hard to imagine one without the other, but since at least the ninth century there's been a custom not to ring bells during the Triduum — the three days preceding Easter — out of solemn respect for the mournful times between Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Though the Triduum are sometimes called "the silent days," there was nothing silent about them — a medieval German archbishop explained that a simple wooden clacker stood in for the bells. Today this clacker is called a *crotalus*, after the Greek word for (wait for it) rattle.

The first *crotali* were almost certainly not *grogger* -like; one early design,still in use today, was made to swing back and forth, as one might swing a bell. Handheld designs like this could replace only the small altar bells, not their larger relatives in the bell towers; the cog mechanism was probably introduced to solve this problem. The bell tower rattle was several feet wide, stationary, and operated by a crank; some are still functional today.

Image by Metropolitan Museum of Ar...
It Might Get Loud: A French cog rattle.

With the rattle in use, miniaturization soon followed, and by the 14th century, churches were already commissioning *crotali* with intricate woodwork.It was inevitable, though, that users would find other purposes for this device. The church gave no special importance to the rattle's distinctive sound; its whole purpose was to be loud and not sound like a bell. It excelled at the latter, but the rattle is ill-suited for the acoustics of a church. Under a vaulted ceiling or in the open air of a tower, a bell's reverberation sustains, while a rattle simply percusses, atonal and staccato. Still, the inferior sound and the device from which it emanated were both unique, and over time, others began to take notice. Beginning in the early modern period, the rattle began to look for other jobs. It found two.

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Before cities had police departments, they had night watchmen. In 1658, Peter Stuyvesant, then the director-general of New Netherland, organized nine men to patrol what would become New York City between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m., "to pursue, attack, and capture…pirates and vagabonds" and to arrest "robbers or others who would wish to inflict injury and

damage." This was the city's first police force, and it's the direct ancestor of the New York Police Department. Stuyvesant called the group the Rattle Watch, after the devices they carried to sound the alarm. Twenty years earlier, Boston

had organized a similar force, also called a rattle watch. For the next 200 years, both cities supplied their officers with rattles. From the specimens that survive, we know that they were employing the same design as the *crotalus* and *grogger*.

As an officer's alarm, the rattle has three things going for it: It is cheap, it is portable and it is very loud. In Stuyvesant's day, this was a rare combination. To understand why, we need to consider the alternatives.

In an age of loudspeakers, megaphones, sirens and foghorns, our concern is usually noise reduction, not noise creation; these days, anybody can wake up half the neighborhood just by testing a smoke alarm in the middle of the street. But this personal, instantaneous access to ungodly amounts of noise is very new; almost all of the loudest handheld devices were invented in the last century, and most require electricity.

Of course, humans can make a ruckus with nothing but their vocal cords, but shouting at the top of your lungs is hard work: It takes energy to sustain, it strains the voice and it saps energy that might be needed for other things (like pursuing a New York City hooligan). The same rule holds for clapping, snapping, stomping, whistling and striking hard surfaces; sound is just vibrations, and making large vibrations with one's own body is either going to be tiring or painful.

Tools are the clear solution, since they can translate the body's movements into sound and reduce the effort needed to make noise. Until quite recently, though, noisemakers could get louder only by getting bigger or more cumbersome; most instruments small enough for a patrol weren't loud enough to be useful. (Explosives might have been an exception, but they weren't very practical since they were not only dangerous, but they also wouldn't have made continuous noise.)

The rattle was perfect, though. At less than a foot long, flat and L-shaped (in some police models the handle even folded down), it was easy to carry. Because the noise came with a flick of the wrist, it could be operated with one hand. It was cheap, too. Unlike their elaborate church counterparts, patrol rattles are simple affairs. It was the ideal tool for the job. For more than 200 years, rattles were used regularly in both American and Britain, by both police and fire departments.

The rattle's reign was finally ended by the pea whistle, whose trilling mechanism made it significantly louder than previous whistles. The changeover was swift: In 1884, only a year after its invention Scotland Yard adopted the pea whistle after a convincing demonstration of superiority. Other police departments soon followed suit. Within a decade, rattles had disappeared from civilian use.

The military, however, soon found rattles important for an entirely new reason: the rise of chemical warfare. When British and American forces realized that German forces were employing poison gas, they issued their soldiers masks, but these made blowing a whistle — crucial for alerting fellow soldiers to an impending attack — impossible. Rattles were the solution. During both World War I and World War II, British and American forces produced rattles marked "gas alarm only" to soldiers on the front line. There is actually video footage of these rattles in use during World War I.

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Police and military appropriation of the *crotalus* was probably the most important, but Stuyvesant didn't borrow the rattle directly from the church. That honor almost certainly goes to children, who know a good toy when they see one.

Children have been playing with rattles for a long time. Even after police started using the rattle, European adults could agree that it was primarily a plaything. Although the rattle does show up as a normal percussion instrument in a couple of musical compositions — you can hear a large one in the opening measures of Respighi's "Pines of Rome" and sporadically throughout Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition" — it usually appears in classical music *because* of its status of a toy; it was a way of communicating levity to the audience. This is its purpose in the finale of Walton's first "Facade Suites," and when Strauss uses the rattle in "Till Eulenspeigel," it's supposed to be slapstick — in fact, the original "slap stick" looks a lot like the early *crotalus*. The piece in which the rattle gets the most airtime is Leopold Mozart's lighthearted "Toy Symphony," which combines traditional instruments with musical toys.

Kids liked the rattle not just because it was loud, but also because it sounded vaguely violent. To many people, the rattle was a ringer for the din of gunfire. Beethoven apparently thought so; his "Wellington's Victory" orchestral piece uses the rattle as a substitute for a cannon. To others, it mimicked the sound of explosions: In early 20th-century America, colorful rattles were sold as toys under the name "safety crackers," with the word "safety" implying that they were safer than *actual firecrackers*.

But the place where children first encountered the rattle was the church itself, during those three days before Easter when the bells fell silent, as part of a ceremony called the Burning of Judas. This is the moment when our story takes an unsettling turn. It is also the key to understanding why Jews eventually adopted the *grogger* for use on Purim.

The Burning of Judas was never officially sanctioned by the Roman Catholic or Orthodox Church, but it was common practice in Europe until the 20th century and is still frequently performed in Latin America. While details vary by location, the basics are the same: An effigy of Judas is first hanged, then burned. It was in the context of this ceremony that the *crotalus* first morphed from church object to child object, as children responded to the flaming effigy by twirling their rattles in celebration. It still happens today; you can find images of a Czech anti-Judas rattle procession.

Early on, the rattle's distinctive sound became part of the ritual. As elsewhere, people understood it to be a violent sound; some compared it to the sound of nails being driven into Jesus' hands. More commonly, though, it was heard as a grinding noise — specifically, the grinding of Judas' bones. In some communities, from medieval Germany to 19th-century Malta, Grinding Judas' Bones represents a distinct ritual involving the mass twirling of rattles. (The grinding ritual didn't always use rattles; in some places, kids just smashed things on the ground.) It is likely through these semi-sanctioned ceremonies that the rattles came to be a general purpose toy.

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Out of this bawdy and frequently anti-Semitic rattle ritual, the *grogger* emerged.

In a brilliant piece of ritualistic judo, Jews appropriated all the violence and anti-Semitism contained in the rattle and flipped it around: Where the *crotalus* castigated Judas for eternity (and Jews by extension), the *grogger* vilified Haman, antagonist of the Purim story, incarnation of Jewish persecution and perpetual outlet for Jewish revenge fantasies.

And it was definitely revenge. Like so many rattles before it, the *grogger* expressed violence; some 19th-century *groggers* are constructed to allow users to hang Haman over and over again. Purim itself has long been a repository for such intense feeling. In his book "Reckless Rites," Elliott Horowitz argues that from the medieval period onward, Jews used Purim as a valve for vengeance — or at least vitriol in the form of anti-Christian polemic.

But the *grogger* wasn't the first time Jews turned the Judas ritual on its head — in fact, its appearance in the 18th century makes it late to the party. The uncanny similarity between the carnivalesque vilification of Judas and Haman is incredibly old. Haman is hanged (Esther 7:10) and Judas hangs himself (Matthew 27:5), and both deaths are reenacted. Christians have been burning Judas in effigy for a long time, but Jews have been burning Haman in effigy for longer — in fact, the Roman government was already trying to ban the practice in the fifth century, wary that Haman was just a stand-in for Christians and the Christianized Roman Empire (which it was).

And Jewish children in Christian Europe didn't need *groggers* to attack Haman with sound. For centuries, the noisemaker of choice was a pair of rocks. Each rock was inscribed with the name of Amalek, Haman's tribal ancestor and perpetual Israelite bogeyman. By repeatedly smashing the rocks together, children could solve two problems with two stones (so to speak): They could make a ruckus while fulfilling the Biblical injunction to "erase the memory of Amalek."

In general, Purim is celebrated between late February and late March; Easter is celebrated between late March and late April. In the small towns of Christian Europe, it's not so hard to imagine how the Judas and Haman rituals might have come into alignment. But alignment also masks the tangle of perceived and real antagonisms that fueled these rituals and spurred

each religion to mirror the other. Individuals can be passive-aggressive toward each other, but communities can't be passive-aggressive toward other communities. It's too easy for one community to see how another is really feeling and reacting — think of Christian anger over Hebrew anti-Jesus polemics, which in turn were inspired by Christian behaviors. Jews, who were powerless to shut down the Judas burnings, had a special incentive to appropriate: If the rattle was going to grind up Judas' bones, at least it could be neutralized by making it drown out Haman as well.

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Today, the rattle is an obsolete technology: It's a weak siren and a crummy toy. Obsolescence, though, doesn't necessarily entail instant death — technologies can take a long time to die, and some don't die at all. Witness the fax machine, alive and kicking in the 21st-century, or the bayonet, still in service at Marine boot camp despite the fact that it was already obsolete by the time World War I rolled around.

Religions have a particular habit of collecting yesterday's technologies and holding on to them long after they've faded from use and collective memory. There's a simple logic to this behavior: Obsolescence confers a post-facto distinctiveness on religious objects, which is just what the doctor ordered if you're trying to telegraph tradition, continuity or sanctity to practitioners. Shabbat candles used to be special because of how and when they were lit; in the electric age, they're also distinct because they're not lightbulbs.

Still, candles today aren't inherently religious; that won't happen until restaurants and romantics stop using them. When a technology *does* die out in all places but one, something very special happens: The technology moves into an afterlife. The obsolete label finally comes off, and the last user standing gets to associate the technology with itself. Take the humble parchment scroll, for example: 2,500 years ago, the scroll was everywhere; 1,700 years ago, the scroll was obsolete; now, the scroll is Jewish.

Christian rattle use is fast dwindling and not very visible; it's not too early to say that the rattle is effectively Jewish, too. But in becoming Jewish, the rattle/*grogger* has also been divorced from its aggressive history through a long, internal Jewish campaign to forget the vengeful feelings of Purim's past. What remains is just a portable wooden noisemaker. It is still full of sound and fury — but today, for better or for worse, it signifies very little.

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Instituting the Holocaust: Comic Fiction and the Moral Career of the Survivor

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Instituting the Holocaust: Comic Fiction and the Moral Career of the Survivor

ADAM ROVNER

The incongruity of imagining the Holocaust through the use of comic conventions is striking. The atrocities of the Holocaust do not immediately present themselves as likely backdrops for humour. Yet there are many such works and their number is growing. Critical and popular success have greeted both cinematic and literary examples of Holocaust humour. Nonetheless, even where humour may be wrung from destruction, some critics maintain that humour is an inappropriate means of representing the cruelties inflicted by the Nazis and the suffering experienced by their victims. Such objections amount to the charge that humour is unethical given the scope of the atrocities. This article investigates whether comic works of Holocaust literature really pose significant ethical problems.

To be or not to be, tell me
Prince Hamlet, who is nowadays
Jew or not a Jew, that is here
The So-called question of race
– from an anti-Nazi cabaret routine[1]

When dogs cry, the angel of death is to fear;
When dogs laugh, the messiah draws near
– adapted from the Talmud[2]

The Moral Career of the Survivor

Holocaust survivors like Elie Wiesel and Simon Wiesenthal have become prominent figures in the last several decades and are widely considered to be well-respected voices of moral wisdom. The many survivors who share their experiences on a local or communal level are also accorded an understandably high degree of deference. However, immediately after the Second World War, and especially in Israel until the Eichmann trial,

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survivors were often treated with impatience and contempt, as if their very survival was evidence of some sort of moral defect.[3] The public image of the survivor has been rehabilitated over time – from embarrassing postwar remnant to esteemed prophet of tolerance in the new millennium. Given this evolution, it is therefore surprising that much Holocaust fiction has continued to imagine survivors as psychologically tortured and verging on madness. Rather than portray the Holocaust survivor *as* institution, many literary works depict the survivor as requiring confinement *in* an institution.

Such representations point to an ambivalence regarding what sociologist Erving Goffman, in his classic study of total institutions, called the 'moral career' of the survivor.[4] Goffman's use of the phrase 'moral career' refers to a person's course through life and the changes in the person's self and framework for judging himself (pp.127–8). In other words, one's moral career is bound up with how selfhood is constituted by an institutional system, whether such a system is 'a social establishment such as a mental hospital or a complex of personal and professional relationships' (168). This article examines two novels that depict a survivor's moral career, American[5] Alan Isler's *The Prince of West End Avenue* (1995) and Israeli Yoram Kaniuk's *Adam Ben-Kelev*[6] [אדם בן כלב] (1969), translated as *Adam Resurrected* (1971). Both *The Prince of West End Avenue* and *Adam Resurrected* are darkly comic novels that imagine survivors of Holocaust atrocities as loveless, psychically troubled admirers of literature who require some form of institutionalisation. These texts serve to focus a broader examination of some of the institutionalised arrangements that render suspect the use of humour[7] in Holocaust representation.

The novels under discussion are not aberrant in their portrayal of survivors. Other significant examples of ambivalent and often grotesque representations of survivors in English literature include: Saul Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, Anita Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay*, Cynthia Ozick's *Rosa*, Francine Prose's *Guided Tours of Hell* and Art Spiegelman's *Maus* volumes. In Hebrew literature, Aharon Appelfeld's *The Immortal Bartfuss* [ברטפוס בן האלמוות], Haim Gouri's *The Chocolate Deal* [עיסקת השוקולד], Avigdor Dagan's *The Court Jesters* [ליצני החצר] and the recent novel by Amir Guttfreund, *Our Holocaust*, [שואה שלנו] serve as examples. I have chosen to mention only a few representative works in prose fiction, though there are many others. Significantly, the disturbed characters depicted in such works regularly provide occasions for irony, satire and even laughter. With varying degrees of sympathy, authors depict the survivor as an unreliable witness to historical atrocity – selfish, insensitive, self-aggrandising, deceptive, criminal, clownish, or insane.

Comic strategies such as irony, black or gallows humour, farce and slapstick are identifiable in a wide variety of imaginative works that consider the Holocaust. Such works cut across genres and derive from different linguistic communities and traditions.[8] The presence of comic elements in Holocaust fiction can be unsettling. It seems shocking that one of the worst horrors of the twentieth century, and perhaps the defining trauma for Jews, has been represented with regularity in a comic mode. No topic appears to be improper to humour. In fact, the nature of humour may be essentially transgressive, partaking of the carnivalesque in order to blur social boundaries and distinctions.[9] Humour we find offensive is often designated as being 'in bad taste'. Is humour the province of aesthetics only? Or can Holocaust humour fulfil an ethical role, despite the fact that critics have questioned the propriety of humour in Holocaust representation? The assumption is that humour is an illegitimate means of confronting the Holocaust because it distorts history and endangers memory's survival. I hope to suggest both why humour is commonly treated as an inappropriate mode for Holocaust literature, and how we might come to welcome such comic narratives rather than feel threatened by them.

Staging Survival

Otto Korner is the articulate, witty and wry narrator of *The Prince of West End Avenue*. His wife and young son were murdered in the Holocaust but he managed to survive by withdrawing into himself; he 'chose a day from the past and relived it' while incarcerated in the camps.[10] Now a resident of an old age home in Manhattan, Korner details the elderly residents' preparations for a very amateur production of *Hamlet*.[11] The title of the novel reflects a self-aware relationship with Shakespeare's great play and sets up a distinct parallel between Otto Korner and the Prince, in whom he says, 'I see much of myself...his hesitations, his vacillations, and above all his egregious eagerness to play the antic' (44). When an attractive physical therapist arrives at the home, Korner struggles to suppress memories of past actions which threaten to plunge his methodical life into madness. Otto is 'cornered' by intrusive thoughts of past lovers and by his own misdeeds, which combine to threaten his health. He is ultimately forced to reflect upon the roles he has played and his actions, 'however foolish and comical, upon the world-historical stage' (184).

Yoram Kaniuk's novel of black humour,[12] *Adam Resurrected* features protagonist Adam Stein as a priapic, though often gentlemanly, lunatic camp survivor. Adam had been forced to act like a dog for the camp

commandant's amusement. He claims that he owes his survival to the proposition that a sense of humour 'saves everything'.[13] Formerly Germany's most famous clown, Adam was required to entertain those on their way to the gas chambers. During his incarceration he learned that it is easier 'to weed out more sub-humans in a day through a combination of Zyklon-B and humour than with just Zyklon-B alone' (162/142).[14] His doomed audience included his wife and young daughter. Adam arrives in Israel many years after the war and is soon confined to a mental institution almost exclusively populated by survivors who daily perform a 'striptease of torture' (35/34). He lectures his fellow inmates on the theatrical genius of *Hamlet* (183/162) and the difference between tragedy and comedy (172/154) when he is not in the grip of psychotic fugues that find him acting like a dog. His lucid brand of madness allows him to all but control the institution while carrying on a love affair with the head nurse.[15] The appearance of a new patient, who also crawls on all fours and barks like a dog, catalyses Adam's reconciliation with his own past.

Otto Korner and Adam Stein both reside in what Goffman described as 'total institutions'. A total institution is characterised by a 'restriction of free movement', 'communal living' and is administered by a 'diffuse authority'.[16] Prisons, mental hospitals, convalescent homes, army barracks, monasteries and concentration camps serve as examples. These novels take place in total institutions: a retirement home and an insane asylum. The background setting is another total institution: the concentration camps where Otto and Adam had been imprisoned. Otto Korner fears being confined by the whims of the facility director whom he calls the 'Kommandant' (8). Adam Stein is at home only within the walls of an institution he explicitly equates with a concentration camp (56–57/51). Even years after the war, both protagonists feel, like Hamlet, that they remain captives in a world with 'many confines, wards, and dungeons'.[17]

These novels share different degrees of intertextual relationships with *Hamlet*. And, like Shakespeare's most famous play, these works combine elements of horror, humour and madness. Of course, the precedents for a literary admixture of comedy and catastrophe predate Shakespeare's or our own century. The term 'catastrophe' itself derives from an early Greek critical term denoting the turning point of a comedy.[18] We would do well to remember that the absurd was not a creation of existentialism. Nor are wry self-reflexivity and genre pastiche postmodern discoveries that predict the appearance of comic Holocaust fiction. Since classical times, tragedy and comedy have been linked. In Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates lectures the dramatist Agathon and the humourist Aristophanes on comedy and tragedy.[19] Socrates insists that the genius of comedy is the same as that of tragedy and that the artist in tragedy is also an artist in

comedy.[20] A brief reflection on the development of dramatic genres suggests that the catharsis sparked by tragedy is not necessarily diminished by paroxysms of laughter. Nor is humour spoiled by contemplation of the serious. Grave-digging clowns did not make Hamlet's existential questions seem any less grave.

By introducing some aspects of the history of the theatre, I am not trying to label the events of the Holocaust a tragedy, at least not in a classical or literary sense. And I am certainly not suggesting that they are a comedy. In casual conversation we may refer to many traumatic events as 'tragedies', such as car wrecks, untimely deaths, or terrorist attacks. Descriptive terms that are fine for everyday speech have higher stakes when applied to literary works which by their very nature are bound up with the history of genre. Tragedy and comedy are genres of dramatic representation. Lived experience is neither tragedy nor comedy. We can only choose to represent aspects of our lives as such. The tragic mode of representation is neither more nor less accurate or truthful a representation of lived experience than the comic. Tragedy and comedy are, as classicist Michael Silk reminds us, 'equally play-ful'.[21] Many critics of Holocaust literature appear to be undisturbed by works which draw on tragic modes of representation.[22] However, they express concern, disappointment and even outrage with works which utilise the rhetoric of humour to represent the Holocaust.[23]

One of the characteristics of comedy is that it presents images of survival, which, Silk distinguishes, 'is not quite the same as having "happy endings"'.[24] And survival without a happy ending is what much of Holocaust literature is all about. Of course, many critics have doubted whether the Holocaust can be figured in art at all. But the very real question of the scandal of aestheticisation notwithstanding, it is revealing that we seem to be relatively comfortable with Holocaust material when the tropes of tragedy are invoked. One reason why this may be so is that tragedy is often considered a 'high' art form and comedy a 'low' art form.[25] In the *Poetics* (V), Aristotle discusses tragic characters as noble and comic characters as base. Since comedy is traditionally thought to deal with distortion, it is therefore thought to deform reality.[26] Western philosophy has taken an equally dim view of humour and amusement in general. The accusation that the rhetoric of humour misrepresents the events of the Holocaust may be true, but so too do works in the tragic mode. Still, humorous emplotments of the Holocaust seem to require justification in a way that tragic ones do not. Why might this be the case?

The 'Philosophy of Clowning'

Isler's *The Prince of West End Avenue* and Kaniuk's *Adam Resurrected* both self-consciously dramatise the problems many feel are attendant to humorous representations of death and suffering. The elderly actors in Isler's novel debate whether or not to cancel their production of *Hamlet* after the death of their director. The residents ultimately accept that 'the show must go on' because *Hamlet* is a tragedy and therefore appropriate to a period of mourning, even though they introduce changes to the play that render it an unintentional farce. Korner himself repeatedly sees pathos as having a bathetic countenance. He links both the tragic and the comic to death, as in the description of a woman's brooch, which evokes the insignia of the concentration camp guards' Death's Head Units [*Totenkopfverbände*], 'a mask of comedy superimposed upon a mask of tragedy...looks like a grinning skull' (6).[27] One might take this image as symbolic of the novel's attitude towards death and life, viewing grief and sorrow as eternally linked in a meaningless *danse macabre* of human existence. Such a view is not all that different from the type of detached observations tinged with mockery found in Ecclesiastes.

After his liberation from the camp, Adam Stein maintains his maniacal laughter, claiming to be the victim 'of a God who has fallen asleep from laughing too much' (250/215). Adam considers himself to be a mad dog[28] barking at an Israel he calls 'the largest insane asylum on earth' (52/46). His only area of competence remains 'the philosophy of clowning' (167/149). To those who may disapprove of his clowning, Adam suggests that when Germany became *Judenrein*, it also became 'Humour-*rein*' (126/108; 157/136). This is an implicit insistence that Jewish survival is bound up with the existence of humour. Kaniuk further presses this point by describing a Purim *shpiel* in which the inmates dress up in traditional holiday costumes as well as masquerading as Hess, Himmler and Heydrich (227/196). Since the drunken festivities of Purim celebrate the foiling of a genocidal plot against the Jews in ancient Persia,[29] the comparison with Hitler's Final Solution is clear. Here Kaniuk incorporates traditional Jewish observance to legitimate what some might consider a heartless portrayal of Holocaust survivors.

Horace Walpole famously suggested that 'this world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel'.[30] What is the world like to those of us who believe that we both think *and* feel? If we accept Walpole's premise, the logical answer is that life is both a tragedy and a comedy. Perhaps, then, our experience of humour should be treated seriously as a necessary and valuable aspect of human existence. Yet, humour has often been attacked on philosophical, ethical and social grounds. Certain negative views of the comic mode of expression can be

traced from Plato and Aristotle, through Hobbes, Kant, Bergson, Freud,[31] and to American campus 'speech codes' outlawing so-called offensive jokes in our own day.

Broadly speaking, the two main Western theories of humour suggest that it derives from either: (I) a sense of *superiority* or (II) an observation of *incongruity*, defined as the presence of events which surprise or confound our conceptual framework. It is precisely these origins which are the sources of traditional philosophical arguments against humour. According to one of the foremost theorists of humour, philosopher John Morreal, there are three primary objections to humour in the rationalist tradition: (1) humour is born of a sense of *superiority* and is therefore essentially derisive, hostile and detrimental to human society; (2) humour is aligned with the *incongruous* and is therefore playful, non-serious and threatening to rationality; (3) humour is *irresponsible* because it encourages disengagement from dealing with the world.[32] These objections, consequentialist rather than deontological, must be addressed in order to suggest a preliminary ethics of humour in Holocaust representation.

It is unlikely that humour arises only from a sense of superiority and is essentially scornful. If this were so, readers would find it humorous that Jews were lulled into believing Nazi lies that they would be transported for 'resettlement for work in the East'. No one finds this amusing, nor should they. On the contrary, we are more likely to feel great sadness or become angry when recalling these facts. Our scorn is reserved for the deceivers, not for those innocents deceived. It is unlikely that anyone, even contemptible Holocaust deniers, reads Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* or Elie Wiesel's *Night* for comic relief. A sense of superiority is not a necessary condition for humour.

Although incongruity is certainly a component of humour, Morreal points out, it is unlikely that it is a sufficient cause of humour in all cases.[33] The incongruity of treating people as animals and shipping them to their death in cattle cars is not the source of lightheartedness. Art Spiegelman's depictions of humans as cats, mice and dogs in his *Maus* volumes do not make for particularly funny comic books. Nor is our enjoyment of incongruity necessarily irrational or non-serious. Problem solving as a rational thought process can be directed to non-serious, even playful goals, as can the enjoyment of aesthetic objects or experience, such as art or music. There is nothing inherent in humour that renders it any less serious or more irrational than many other responses. However, it is certainly intriguing that both the witty Otto Korner and the buffoonish Adam Stein struggle to maintain their sanity.

The third objection, that humour is irresponsible and encourages a disengagement from the problems of the world, is more trenchant. To

laugh at someone thrashing in the water while he is drowning would be irresponsible and unethical. While this is undeniable, Morreal maintains that such a case does 'not establish a general objection to humour, any more than the cases in which it is irresponsible to engage in...artistic activities provide a general objection to art'.[34] Although humour may encourage disengagement, this is not always detrimental. The efficacy of humour in medical and psychological treatment is well attested to.[35] Might there be a way then to view comic Holocaust literature as rational, responsible, pedagogically sound, or even explicitly ethical?

The Moral Career of Holocaust Humour

When Otto Korner forces 'the door open a crack' (52) on his guarded memories, he discovers that life, death and survival are determined by caprice. In the course of reviewing his deeds, Otto finds that 'memory is not to be trusted' (183) and that 'there is only the present' (241). His final verdict on his life is that it is laughable (240). Adam Stein too finds no meaning in his existence, determining that Hitler, 'that clown, that corporal, that painter', taught him that 'life is a comedy, a black and bitter comedy' (282).[36] Adam maintains that 'the future is fixed' while 'only the past changes' (145/122). Memory for these characters is subject to a fluctuation that leads them to conclude that suffering is random and that they are actors in a pointless farce. For both Otto Korner and Adam Stein, a darkly comic take on life is linked to forgetting. Critics of Holocaust literature evince a similar scepticism towards humorous representation – their concern is that humour distorts and ultimately imperils memory.

In 1986, Terrence Des Pres published a pioneering essay[37] that considered the implications of humorous representations of the Holocaust. Des Pres' essay begins by stating what he terms the 'three inclusive rulings' or 'fictions' governing Holocaust studies.[38] He uses the term 'fictions' to signal his awareness that 'academic disciplines constitute their respective "fields" by resorting to "fictions" – myths or principles accepted without question and endorsed by the community, but not susceptible to proof' (277). Des Pres draws on the work of Michel Foucault to remind us that: 'Knowledge cannot exist without order, and order depends upon informing fictions accepted as true' (278). In other words, Des Pres is not casting doubt on the reality of the Holocaust or subsequent scholarship on the subject, he is merely highlighting the consensual, institutionalised aspects of a field of inquiry. The three rules Des Pres identifies are:

1. The Holocaust shall be represented, in its totality, as a unique event.

> 2. Representations of the Holocaust shall be as accurate...as possible to the facts and circumstances of the event, without change or manipulation for any reason – artistic or literary.
> 3. The Holocaust shall be approached as a solemn, or even a sacred event (277–8).

His essay questions whether this 'set of rules, a decorum, a sort of Holocaust etiquette' places limitations on artistic representation (278).

Des Pres appears to approve of humorous representations of the Holocaust when he states that 'the comic spirit proceeds in an anti-mimetic mode that often mocks *what is*, that patiently deflates, demotes or even denies the authority of its subject matter' (279). Humour, Des Pres believes, 'is hostile to the world it depicts. It is free as tragedy and lamentation are not' (280). Not only does Des Pres defend humour on the basis of artistic freedom and its liberating virtues, he also finds humour to have particular efficacy: 'The paradox of the comic approach is that by setting things at a distance it permits us a tougher, more *active* response' (286). Des Pres believes that humour is in some ways a *more* responsible reaction to catastrophe: 'In the realm of art, a comic response is more resilient, more effectively in revolt against terror and the sources of terror than a response that is solemn or tragic' because 'tragic art accepts that which has come to pass' (280–81). In other words, laughter is a rebellion against the given.[39] Here Des Pres reverses the traditional assumption that humour requires a distance incompatible with a sympathetic response. The privileging of comedy over tragedy, of laughter over sobriety, overthrows the traditional hierarchy established in literature, philosophy and even religion. Defenders of this hierarchy – and their institutionalised interpretations – would, of course, label such a reversal as madness.

Another noted scholar, Sander Gilman, recently re-explored the topic of Holocaust humour in his essay, 'Is Life Beautiful? Can the Shoah Be Funny? Some Thoughts on Recent and Older Films'.[40] Gilman explains that comic cinema can be a 'possible' (that is, appropriate) means of representation when the Nazis are imagined as the enemy. He identifies the pleasures of Holocaust humour with that familiar from trickster literature: 'It is a means of assuring the viewer that the "victim" is smarter and more resilient than the aggressor' (286). At various points in the essay, Gilman mentions the 'ethical dimension' of Holocaust humour (281). He treats it as given that there are ethically acceptable modes of representing 'events of transcendental horror' (285). Gilman cites approvingly the belief that 'accident is the wellspring of comedy and laughter...because it is the instantiation of the random in life over which one can only laugh or weep' (304). Many survivors recall in their

memoirs that their survival was arbitrary; Primo Levi's account in *Survival in Auschwitz* is perhaps the most well known. Since comedic plots often hinge on accident, one would expect that humour might then be well suited to Holocaust representation. Gilman concludes that in some comic works, however, the traditional representation of 'action in spite of the vagaries of fate' has been replaced by an emphasis on 'heroic action'. Such an emphasis, he believes, is antithetical to the comic spirit and is indicative of a new 'rereading of the Shoah' (308). Gilman believes that this encourages a depiction of a universal rather than particularly Jewish dimension of the Holocaust (308). In other words, Gilman is concerned that what he regards as a distortion of the comic genre will facilitate a distortion of the memory of the Holocaust.

Both Des Pres' and Gilman's essays expose fundamental assumptions of academic Holocaust discourse and a concern with the ethics of representation. Normative literary criticism does not often explicitly consider questions of ethics.[41] When ethical criticism does appear, it is frequently couched in terms of ideology or social pathology. Academic criticism does not often object, for example, that a novel featuring an abusive, alcoholic patron of prostitutes is 'offensive', 'inappropriate' and 'unethical.'[42] Instead, the tendency is to label such a work as 'misogynistic' or 'voyeuristic'. In Holocaust scholarship, however, works are routinely subject to ethical scrutiny and a student is likely to encounter explicit considerations of the 'ethics of representation'. This disjunction is significant, if only because it points to a willingness by those who interpret Holocaust texts to use a discourse more familiar to moral philosophy or even religion than literary studies. If my inference is correct, this may partly explain the hostility towards comic modes of representation. Religion and moral philosophy, at least in the West, are viewed as supremely serious areas of inquiry generally inhospitable to humour. Since humour may be characterised as anti-authoritarian and rebellious, its autonomy is not conducive to institutionalised dogma. It is therefore no surprise that humorous representations of the Holocaust have become a flashpoint for condemnation. The debate over humour and the Holocaust must be seen in light of the overtly ethical tone of much Holocaust literary criticism. As I have suggested, the concern with ethics is really a concern over the way imaginative works of literature, film, or art may insure or threaten memory's survival.

Institutionalised Interpretation

Kaniuk's novel is a burlesque of what noted scholar of Hebrew literature Gershon Shaked refers to as the established interpretation of the

Holocaust – that the Shoah has some nationally redemptive or transcendent meaning.[43] He claims that, 'All agree (Jews and non-Jews) that the mythology of the Shoah is a mythology of martyrdom that connects to Job, Jesus, and the sanctification of God's name' (95). Shaked believes that literary works must break the consensus set forth by various cultural and socio-historic institutions, or in his terms, 'the interpretive establishment' (97) which he identifies with the 'ideological Zionist establishment' (96). He insists that, 'Literature's strength is not expressed in a return to extant myths and the normative historical text, rather, it is expressed in the renewal or at least the modification of them' (96–7).

Another esteemed Israeli critic, Yigal Schwartz, has discussed this establishment interpretation in terms of 'the Passion'.[44] Schwartz favourably recalls *Adam Resurrected* as an example of a work that resists what I would call the *institutionalised* meanings of the Shoah. *Adam Resurrected* violates the entrenched paradigms of Shoah literature in general and Hebrew literature of the Shoah in specific, emphasising that absurdity, epitomised by clowning in the camps, is all that life offers to Adam and to all men who are sons of Adam [בני אדם]. The novel suggests that we are all trapped on a stage, inmates of a prison-world, compulsively performing a routine devoid of meaning without the direction of a revealed God: 'We are acting in a play which both the playwright and the director have abandoned, and we're left to ourselves...There is just one outlet. Only one way to rescue yourself. To laugh' (184/163). Kaniuk's novel presents a satiric and satyric subversion of the literary paradigm of redemptive suffering that Shaked and Schwartz have noted as commonplace in Holocaust literature. Survivors find no transcendent purpose to their torments in *Adam Resurrected*; there is no theodicy, no 'Passion', only the profane 'passion play' of Adam the mocking saviour who leads a flock of psychiatric inmates into the desert. Instead of revelation, Adam only finds a heavenly father who is literally indistinguishable from a Nazi camp commandant.[45]

The Prince of West End Avenue also conforms to Shaked's and Schwartz's favourable estimation of a work which eludes established or institutionalised interpretations. The novel presents not a Passion play but merely play-acting. Isler's work undermines the idea of locating any transcendent meaning in the Holocaust by questioning belief in an ordered universe. Korner's extended meditations on *Hamlet* and the history of Dadaism are devoted to creating 'Purpose' out of absurdity and sense out of nonsense. His liberal, humanistic education impelled him to find meaning, just as the Dadaists of Zurich had been 'ideologically programmed to seek no meaning' (192). In meditating on his arbitrary survival, Korner explicitly denies any purpose to his life, calling his

search for meaning a 'vain defense against the terror of the void' (240). He is a grave-digger of meaning, ultimately mocking the very idea of purpose: 'No longer can I delude myself that *because* I cannot see order, ipso facto, it exists' (240). Now at the end of his moral career, Korner has become a kind of Dadaist, revelling in the absurdities and nonsense of the world. Like Adam Stein, he presents a relativised view of the past where meaning and order are the result of imposed interpretation coming 'not from without but from within' (241).

Both Otto Korner and Adam Stein mock the world of the living, either with eloquent ironies or fierce barking. Why? Because the world has mocked them with an unchanging natural order. The world provokes these survivors to madness by having remained silent to their suffering, and by the desire to get on with the drama of life while bodies still litter the historical stage. In response, Otto Korner and Adam Stein return such mockery with their own scorn of authority and those institutions that demand reverence. From their position as inmates in total institutions, they view all existence as a 'concentrationary universe'.[46] Their black humour implies a revolt against reality – against the terror the world allowed to take place. They refuse to move on with their lives and stubbornly remain traumatised, unable to cope with the present. After the war, Korner refuses to confront his past, perhaps because he is not certain he has really survived (49). Similarly, Adam Stein seeks to escape his existence by playing the role of the dog and by willing upon himself psychosomatic illnesses. Ultimately they both fear that, as Adam's friend suggests, 'the beginning of recovery [is] ... forgetting' (339/292). We should ask ourselves whether literature, including humorous literature, is a healthy means of confronting the Holocaust or merely a prelude to forgetting.

Laughter and Barbarism

Critical works often focus on the propriety of transforming suffering into art and entertainment.[47] One reason for such concern is an acknowledgment that works of the imagination necessarily recombine facts or indulge in an appropriation of experience in order to animate their fictions. The contested status of works of some authors[48] and the recent scandals occasioned by others[49] have contributed to the discomfort with literature that deals with Holocaust themes. Some critics fear that both the history and the memory of the Holocaust will be threatened by a combination of authorial obfuscations and literary fictions. As discussed previously, the two central objections that have repeatedly been stated by critics of Holocaust fiction are: (1) that writing cannot

adequately express atrocity[50] and therefore it misrepresents the past and (2) that the use of humour renders suffering as frivolous. Such criticisms are obviously related and expose an underlying anxiety over the status of the cultural memory of the Holocaust. Likewise, the suspicion of literary representations of atrocity may expose fundamental concerns about the influence of writing on a person's moral career – concerns that are expressed within the pages of Holocaust fiction as well.

It is significant that literature is represented in complicated ways in *The Prince of West End Avenue* and *Adam Resurrected*. Literature is depicted both as a means to encourage a withdrawal from reality and as a means to recover rationality. Otto Korner was a 'Wunderkind' poet in Germany who had even received a letter from Rilke praising his 'precocious talent' (14, 15). A lover of high culture, Korner recalls his encounters with James Joyce, Tristan Tzara and others during his studies in Zurich. Between the wars, Korner devoted himself to German culture, symbolised by Rilke and Goethe's poetry. He even calmly turned to read Goethe as the Nazis began to massacre his fellow Jews (230–31). Korner wrote articles urging his fellow Jews to remain in Germany and refused to listen to his wife's warnings of the coming catastrophe, merely because he had gained an audience of readers (232). His pride in his literary accomplishments remains intact in the camps. Even there he manages to save his precious letter from Rilke (16).

Although he is not a poet, Adam is a playwright who scripts the antic role he performs. 'Adam Stein the dramaturge' (167/150) insists of *Hamlet* that it is 'a tragedy of madness' (183/162). His own tragedy may be one of lucidity. Adam maintained his sanity in the camp by refusing to believe in a rational world awaiting redemption. He embraced the absurd and performed the role of clown prince in a kingdom of suffering ruled by Commandant Klein's dog, Rex. Rex becomes the name Adam applies to all representatives of German and European high culture, whom he damns for their complicity in the deaths of millions and for their refusal to see Jews as human.[51] He bitterly recalls Goethe, Heine and Schiller on several occasions. In particular, he growls about 'Rex the Jew, the father of elegant language, who called himself Heine' (141/119). Heine, of course, was the great German writer who was born a Jew and was later baptised, nominally transforming himself into a Christian. I suspect that one of Heine's poems, 'The Princess Sabbath', partly inspired Kaniuk's conception of a Jew transformed by suffering into a dog.[52] Heine's poem tells the allegorical tale of a Jew who is a dog during the work week, but changes into a prince with the coming of the Sabbath.[53] Adam Stein is such a dog, though he is driven mad at times by poetry itself.

In the world of the camps, Adam explains, 'it was ridiculous to believe in the sun, or a kind word' (34/33). Now in the world beyond the barbed wire, Adam cannot understand the language of men who maintain their belief that day follows day and that kind words can break through silence. To him, this faith in humanity, communication and celestial order is nothing less than insanity. He prefers the unintelligible howls of a dog and despairs of words. Adam ends the account of his moral career with what may be a mocking perversion of Psalm 19, implying that writing – even, or especially, holy writing – is valueless.[54] Perhaps Adam feels that in a world where men can be turned into beasts, or worse, literary expressions of transcendence should be reduced to doggerel. This suspicion of literature's moral or educative value finds a parallel in a general critical scepticism of creative endeavour after Auschwitz.

Theodor Adorno is perhaps the most well known critic of Holocaust representation, although he does not specifically single out humorous works for consideration. Nonetheless, his remarks are relevant because objections to comic depictions of the Holocaust are often stated in terms of the likelihood that such works will distort cultural memory and therefore undermine pedagogic injunctions to remember the past. In his essay, 'Cultural Criticism and Society', Theodor Adorno made his most famous pronouncement on the Holocaust : 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'.[55] There is probably not a single critical volume on Holocaust literature that does not mention Adorno's phrase or (mis)interpret its significance. Adorno's comment has become such a touchstone of academic discourse on the Holocaust that pointing out the fact that his dictum has become a cliché has itself become something of a cliché. Not all of Adorno's remarks on the Holocaust have received such scrutiny. There are few substantial references to Adorno's essay, 'Education after Auschwitz'. This essay has only been available in English since 1997, which may partly explain its relative absence from critical discourse. The beginning of his essay is worth quoting at length:

> The very first demand on education is that there not be another Auschwitz. ... Any debate about educational ideals is vapid and indifferent vis-à-vis this one ideal, that Auschwitz not be repeated. It was the barbarism against which all education aims. ... Barbarism continues to exist as long as the conditions that called forth that relapse essentially persist. ... When barbarism is located in the principle of civilization itself, there is something desperate about revolting against it.[56]

Here too, Adorno speaks of barbarism in relation to Auschwitz, which for him was the symbol of Holocaust atrocity. In the passage quoted

above, Adorno drew on Freud who believed that civilisation contains within itself the seeds of a discontent that sprouts barbarism. Education, often considered an effective civilising tool, is therefore implicated in barbarism. The struggle, as Adorno pointed out, is desperate.

Adorno's conclusions are rendered even more disturbing when he admits that he can't even begin to sketch out a type of education that would help prevent a future Auschwitz (13). The only consolation Adorno can offer is his belief that: 'The single veritable power against the principle of Auschwitz would be autonomy...power for reflection, for self-determination, for not going along' (13-14). Although probably not what Adorno had in mind, I think that humour may indeed be one way of developing this autonomy and freedom from social constraint. It may be that the emotional distance – Bergson's 'anesthesia of the heart' – often cited as an accusation against humour, actually furthers the 'power for reflection' that Adorno values.[57] Likewise, humour is associated with attitudes of rebelliousness, with criticism of the collective, with scepticism and thus 'for not going along'. Humour has much in common with the academic ideal.[58]

In another essay[59] relevant to a discussion of humour and Holocaust literature, 'Is Art Lighthearted?', Adorno defines art's lightheartedness as that quality of art that 'embodies something like freedom in the midst of unfreedom' and functions as 'a critique of brute seriousness that reality imposes on human beings'.[60] Adorno also revises his previous comment about poetry and barbarism, stipulating that: 'The statement that it is not possible to write poetry after Auschwitz does not hold absolutely, but it is certain that after Auschwitz...lighthearted art is no longer conceivable' (251). For Adorno, lightheartedness was a quality of all art, not just individual works. His comment that such art is no longer possible therefore expresses a sense that the nature of art itself must necessarily be different in the post-Holocaust world. He concluded that after Auschwitz 'art can no more be completely serious than it can still be lighthearted' (253). I believe that darkly humorous Holocaust fictions – tragi-comedies like *The Prince of West End Avenue* and *Adam Resurrected* – exemplify the sort of art that Adorno predicted. Humour is often acidic to sentimentality, fatal to hypocrisy and frequently erodes comfortable assessments of self. The comic spirit imperils structures of authority and profanes sacred instruction by introducing scepticism. Humour, then, may be 'something like freedom in the midst of unfreedom'.

The Memory of Survival, the Survival of Memory

Following Adorno's famous pronouncement on aestheticisation, several thoughtful critics have denounced any attempt to find meaning in the

Holocaust. Lawrence Langer, an eloquent commentator on Holocaust literature and testimonies, describes a battle for memory between 'literalists' like himself, who have no desire to 'reclaim meaning from Holocaust atrocity', and 'exemplarists', who 'gloss over the concrete offenses for the sake of a higher principle' and thereby ultimately transfigure the events of the Holocaust to suit their ideologies.[61] Langer is concerned that the imposition of meaning, which interpretation and imagination imply, will distort memory. He insists instead on a 'literalist discourse' that 'leads nowhere but back into the pit of destruction' and 'learn[s] nothing from the misery it finds there'.[62]

While sympathetic to the conviction that gives rise to this position, creating art, reading, studying and even entertainment are all projects directed in some way towards understanding and finding meaning. Any blanket announcement of the futility of the critical enterprise is self-defeating. At best it defines the field of Holocaust studies as both morbid and moribund. At worst it consigns the topic to an irrelevancy that typically precedes oblivion. Nothing endangers the survival of memory so much as catastrophe that defies and denies any and all meaning. The psychically tortured figures of Otto Korner and Adam Stein are both 'literalists' in a way that Langer does not seem to consider. The characters find the kind of anti-redemptive meaning that humour, especially black comedy and gallows humour, reveals. When they do finally confront 'the pit of destruction' they find that existence is precarious, that human cruelty is inexhaustible, and that life and death are devoid of purpose.

Another influential and thoughtful critic, philosopher Berel Lang, has questioned whether the Holocaust is 'too large for the selective mirror of fiction, too transparent for the conceits of literary figuration'.[63] Lang objects that 'artifice or literary figuration will appear as a conceit, an obtrusion' (116). He believes that there is an essential impropriety in the use of the Holocaust for creative expression; it is, he says, a 'falsification' (155). Lang draws a clear distinction between documentary and figurative writings and advances the thesis that there are certain limitations – literary and moral – inherent to representing the Holocaust.[64] He finds that those who create fictional works are 'impatient with history for not being "historical" enough; they thus intend by their "fiction" to fill out the historical record – but for the sake of history, not of fiction' (134). In other words, Lang feels that works of the imagination imperil the survival of historical fact. Like Langer, Berel Lang would prefer either a literalist discourse (diary, chronicle, etc.) or silence. Silence, he concludes, 'provides a minimal but decisive standard by which all writing about the Nazi genocide can and ought to be judged, a standard that poses itself in the form of a question: Would silence not have been preferable, more valuable than what was written?' (160).

The idea of remaining silent rather than representing the atrocities of genocide has exerted a great deal of influence in Holocaust criticism.[65] Yet the extreme of silence seems to hold out little promise except as a form of public memorialisation. What I find interesting about Lang's claim is the implicit belief that silence will in some way forestall 'falsification' and serve the interests of historical truth. This seems an odd position to hold given the historic silence of bystanders as atrocities occurred in their midst during the Holocaust, not to mention the silence of bystander nations that avoided intervention.[66] The attraction held out by silence as an option for confronting the Holocaust can be explained by the reluctance to trivialise suffering. While this is commendable, it seems unlikely that silence will contribute much to the type of understanding academic discourse has as its goal.[67] Laughter, particularly when directed at the perpetrators, may be an even better response than silence. A wise, wry humour may resist institutionalised interpretations of the Holocaust that are likely to dull rather than elicit sincere response. Of course, we would do well to remember that laughter is not always occasioned by humour. Often it is a sign of madness.

The Prince of West End Avenue and *Adam Resurrected* question whether or not we are insane for laughing as we follow the moral careers of their survivor protagonists. Do the characters in these novels blind us to the tragic reality of survivors' lives, carelessly encouraging amusement instead of sympathy towards victims? I think not, and would suggest instead that the characters' laughter is an understandable reaction to a world they perceive to be devoid of eschatological, philosophical and ethical certainties. These novels suggest that humour may in fact be a rational response to the 'eruption of the irrational' often said to have taken place during the Holocaust. Darkly comic novels such as these open our eyes to the absurdities of existence and warn against seeking reassuring homiletics in atrocity. Such works resist institutionalised interpretations of the Holocaust as a 'passion play' and subvert national, religious, sentimental, or triumphalist meanings. Rather than demonstrating inappropriate frivolity, these novels may in fact suggest an ethics that avoids instrumentalising or sacralising suffering. Many works of literature, drama and film indicate that Holocaust representation has demonstrated a tendency over time towards comic expression. Several such works have met with popular and even critical acclaim. This may signal a kind of cultural fatigue when it comes to confronting the horrors of the Holocaust. The moral career of Holocaust literature itself may be in flux, and it will be some time before we can fully determine whether comic Holocaust fiction like *The Prince of West End Avenue* and *Adam Resurrected* announce 'the beginning of recovery or of forgetting'.

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NOTES

1. From a routine by Kurt Egon Wolff's Ping Pong cabaret, quoted in Steve Lipman, *Laughter in Hell: The Use of Humour During the Holocaust* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1991), p.221. Lipman's book is an excellent source detailing how humour was used during the Holocaust.
2. Tractate Baba Kama [.בב"קם]. The original reads:
'כלבים בוכים מלאך המוות בא לעיר, כלבים משחקים אליהו בא לעיד.'
A more literal translation would read, 'Dogs cry when the angel of death comes to the city, dogs play when Elijah comes to the city'.
3. Historian Tom Segev quotes David Ben-Gurion as setting the tone for the Israeli attitude towards survivors in July, 1949: 'Among the survivors of the German concentration camps were those who, had they not been what they were – harsh, evil and egotistical people – would not have survived and all they endured rooted out every good part of their souls'; Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*, trans. Haim Watzman, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), pp.118–19. In an early comment on the reception met with by Jewish escapees from Nazi occupied Europe, Hannah Arendt ('We Refugees', January 1943) recalls with bitterness how Americans were reluctant to listen to the horrors and indignities suffered by Europe's Jews. She relates a 'fairy tale' of a 'forlorn émigré dachshund, [who] in his grief, begins to speak: "Once, when I was a St. Bernard..."'; Hannah Arendt, 'We Refugees', *The Jew as Pariah*, ed. by Ron Feldman (New York: Grove Press, 1978), pp.55–66 (p.60).
4. Goffman specifically mentions the moral career of the concentration camp inmate in a long note; see Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1961), p.144.
5. Isler was born in England in 1934 but emigrated to the US as a young man.
6. Literally translated, this title would mean 'Adam son of dog'.
7. Expositors of humour have spent hundreds of pages and hundreds of years commenting on the difficulty of adequately defining the object of their study. There is a significant lack of terminological rigour in critical writing on humour, and different commentators use the same terms in varying ways. My use of the broad term 'humour' is a convenient means of referring to what I regard as a complex phenomenon. The *OED* provides a list of those qualities present in many things we find humorous – oddity (strangeness, incongruity, absurdity), jocularity (lightheartedness, jokiness, whimsy), facetiousness (satire, mockery, irony), comicality (slapstick, ridicule, buffoonery) and fun (amusement, diversion, laughter). I point all this out to highlight that I am aware that 'humour' is a very broad and inclusive term. Despite its generalities, my usage is in line with the umbrella term that describes the phenomenon of study identified by the International Society for Humour Studies (ISHS) and its scholarly journal, *Humour*.

   Two related terms are 'comedy' and 'the comic'. Comedy is particularly troublesome as it more narrowly relates to that form of theatre traditionally opposed to tragedy. When I refer to comedy, I have endeavoured to use it in this sense. However, I use 'the comic' to describe those works which share attributes associated with the humorous. Another term I will use is 'laughter'. Strictly speaking, the physiological 'laughter' is independent of the emotional or aesthetic or perceptive category of humour. I am aware that not all forms of laughter signify humour, and not all humour results in laughter. Nonetheless, I

find the term 'laughter' to be a convenient shorthand for humour. Des Pres and Lipman established this precedent in their publications dealing with humour and the Holocaust, Terrence Des Pres, 'Holocaust Laughter', *Writing into the World: Essays 1973–1987* (New York: Viking, 1991), pp.277–86 and Lipman (see note 1).

8. There are numerous examples in many languages. Among the many examples of the broad range of humour related to the Holocaust that could be offered, some I find particularly interesting include: Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow*, Nathan Englander's 'The Tumblers', Leslie Epstein's *King of the Jews* (which contains a chapter detailing a production of *Macbeth*), Stephen Fry's *Making History*, Marcie Hershman's *Tales of the Master Race*, Michael Jacot's *The Last Butterfly* (about a clown in Theresienstadt), Philip Roth's *The Ghost Writer* and Lore Segal's *Her First American*. In Hebrew, Appelfeld's בדנהיים עיר נופש (*Badenheim 1939*), Kaniuk's היהודי האחרון (*The Last Jew*), Etgar Kerrett's stories "נעליים" ו"הצפירה" ['Shoes' and 'The Siren'], and parts of David Shahar's סוכן חוד סלבותו [*His Majesty's Agent*] as well as A.B. Yehoshua's מר מאני [*Mr. Mani*] all exhibit varieties of humour.

   Examples in German include Jurek Becker's *Jacob the Liar* and Edgar Hilsenrath's *The Nazi and the Barber*, the French novel *The Dance of Genghis Cohn* by Romain Gary, and short stories by the Polish writers Tadeusz Borowski (*This Way for the Gas Ladies and Gentlemen*) and Ida Fink (*The Garden that Floated Away*). Stories in collections by the Yiddish writers Rachmil Bryks (*Kiddush HaShem*) and Isaiah Spiegel (*Ghetto Kingdom*) should also be considered alongside such works by I.B. Singer as *Enemies: A Love Story*.

   In film, examples include the recent Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*, Peter Kassovitz's *Jakob the Liar* (a remake of Frank Beyer's *Jakob, der Lügner*) and Radu Mihaileanu's *Train of Life*. A special mention should also be made of Jerry Lewis's unreleased film *The Day the Clown Died*, which focused on a clown who entertained Jewish children on their way to the gas chambers, and Ernst Lubitsch's *To Be or Not to Be* (featuring a theatre company performing *Hamlet*, later remade by Mel Brooks).

   In theatre, director Yevgeny Arye's version of Kaniuk's *Adam Resurrected*, Peter Barnes' *Auschwitz*, Mel Brook's smash Broadway hit *The Producers* (based on his film) and Charlie Schulman's *Angel of Death* (featuring a song and dance Dr Mengele) should be noted.

9. See Bakhtin on the carnival and the 'suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions', Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, transl. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p.10.
10. Alan Isler, *The Prince of West End Avenue* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), p.226.
11. The device of the play within the novel is not just a literary conceit. Goffman describes how 'institutional theatricals' are common (see note 4, p.99). In *Adam Resurrected*, the characters enact a play on the holiday of Purim.
12. In *Sifrut Az, Kan, ve'Ahshav* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Zmora Bitan, 1993), p.47, Gershon Shaked calls it 'expressionist-grotesque'. I find that Kaniuk's novel can properly be considered to belong to the admittedly nebulous category of black humour as described in Alan Pratt, ed. *Black Humour: Critical Essays* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993).
13. [(1969 יורם קניוק, אדם בן כלב, (תל אביב: סיפרית פועלים"]; Yoram Kaniuk, *Adam Resurrected*, transl. Seymour Simckes (New York: Grove Press, 1971), pp.162/142.
14. Where two sets of page references are given, the English translation appears before the slash, the Hebrew original after the slash. References only in brackets signify passages that are unavailable in English translation.
15. It is possible that Kaniuk was familiar with the case history detailed by D.H. Ropschitz in 'Folie À Deux', *Journal of Mental Science*, 103 (1957): 589–96. Ropschitz described how a mentally ill doctor in England became a patient at an asylum, forged a relationship with a hospital nurse and proceeded to take over the treatment of patients, particularly dominating a young schizophrenic whom he claimed to heal. It is also worth mentioning in this regard the French film *King of Hearts* (1967), which featured asylum inmates run

amok in a village during the First World War, a brief portrayal of Hitler as a young soldier, and an ornithologist who reads Shakespeare to his carrier pigeons.

16. Goffman (see note 4), p.148
17. *Hamlet* II.2:245-6.
18. See Erich Segal, *The Death of Comedy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001) p.126.
19. Plato, *Symposium*, trans. W.R.M. Lamb (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp.243-4.
20. See Henry Alonzo Myers, *Tragedy: A View of Life* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, University Press, 1956) for a discussion of this scene from the *Symposium* and his thoughts on tragedy and comedy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
21. Michael Silk, 'The Autonomy of Comedy', *Comparative Criticism*, ed. by E.S. Shaffer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), x, 3-37 (p.18).
22. For example, see Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi's important *By Words Alone* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), which contains two chapters devoted to 'The Holocaust as Jewish Tragedy'.
23. See Des Pres (note 7), Sander Gilman, 'Is Life Beautiful? Can the Shoah Be Funny? Some Thoughts on Recent and Older Films', *Critical Inquiry* 26 (Winter 2000): 279-308, Kobi Niv, *Ha'Haim Yafim, Aval Lo L'Yehudim* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: N.B. Books, 2000) and Alvin Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) for different attitudes and responses to the use of humour in Holocaust fiction and film. It is interesting that even Hayden White, in his 'Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth', only seems to find it necessary to posit justifications for comic representations of the Holocaust, not those representations drawing on the attributes of tragedy (Hayden White, 'Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth', in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'Final Solution'*, ed. by Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp.37-53. Friedlander, Berel Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) and Lawrence Langer, *Preempting the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998) discuss acceptable and unacceptable representations of the Holocaust in many of their works.
24. Silk (see note 21), p.28.
25. Silk (note 21) discusses the privileging of 'high' over 'low' art forms and finds one possible origin for this in Aristotle. Silk is vehement that tragedy is not the opposite of comedy.
26. Such sentiments are found prominently in Aristotle, *Poetics*, V, in *Classical Literary Criticism*, trans. T.S. Dorsch (New York: Penguin Books, 1965), pp.31-75; Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I.6, in Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* ed. by C.B. Macpherson (New York: Penguin Books, 1985); Lord Shaftesbury, 'Sensus Communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour', in Anthony Ashley Cooper, Lord Shaftesbury, *An Old-Spelling Critical Edition of Shaftesbury's 'Letter Concerning Enthusiasm' and 'Sensus Communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour'*, ed. by Richard Wolf (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988), pp.129-36; the Earl of Chesterfield, 'Letter to his son, 9 March 1748', in Philip Dormer Stanhope Chesterfield, *Letters to His Son*, ed. by Oliver Leigh, I (New York: M. Walter Dunne, 1901); and Henri Bergson, 'Laughter', in *Comedy*, ed. by Wylie Sypher (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp.61-190. An ancient treatise on comedy, sometimes ascribed to Aristotle, called the 'Coislinian Tractate' exists. Its authorship has not been adequately determined so I will exclude it from my discussion. See *Theories of Comedy* ed. by Paul Lauter (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1964) for a translation of this document.
27. This memorable piece of jewellery is mentioned again (p.177).
28. Possibly this is also Kaniuk's nod to Agnon's own ironic tale of mad dogs and even madder pioneers of Israel, *Only Yesterday* [תמיל שלשום].
29. As recorded in the Book of Esther.

30. Horace Walpole, *The Letters of Horace Walpole*, ed. by Mrs Paget Toynbee (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904), IX, p.403.
31. In Plato's *Republic* the Guardians are warned to avoid laughter and poets are forbidden 'to describe men of worth being overcome' by laughter; Plato, *The Republic*, transl. Francis MacDonald Cornford (New York: Oxford UP, 1990), 388e. Hobbes, in the *Leviathan* identifies humour as being synonymous with scorn; Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. by C.B. Macpherson (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), Part I, ch.6. In Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, the humorous is aligned with the less lauded 'pleasant art', rather than the 'beautiful art'; Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, transl. J.H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Publishing Co., 1951), Part I, Div. 1, 54. Strangely enough, Kant ultimately approves of the results of humour, that is laughter, on utilitarian grounds. In different ways and despite certain criticisms, so too do Bergson (note 26) and Freud in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, transl. and ed. by James Strachey (New York: Penguin Books, 1976). See *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour* ed. by John Morreal (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987) for an excellent historical survey of philosophies of humour.
32. John Morreal, 'The Rejection of Humour in Western Thought', in *Philosophy East & West* 39.3 (July 1989): 243–65 offers a detailed discussion of these and other points. I am indebted to his essay for providing me with the spirit of my discussion which follows.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid, p.256.
35. Norman Cousins is perhaps the most famous example of healing through humour. See *Humour Scholarship* ed. by Don Nilsen (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), pp.15–20 for details and a bibliography of humour and medicine.
36. The paragraph in which these comments appear is not included in Simckes' published English translation.
37. Nahum Sokolov made what is perhaps the earliest critical pronouncement on humour and Nazi persecution. Writing his essay 'Irony' in 1934 before the worst had come to pass, Sokolov maintained that irony 'can build worlds or destroy them' (Nahum Sokolov, 'Irony', *Be'Mar'ot Ha'Keshet* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Ha'Sifriah Ha'Tsionit, 1961), pp.415–46 (p.416). Sokolov claimed that the ironist must have a strong moral education, sense of responsibility, psychological understanding and inner freedom (p.416). He believed at the time that irony, which he identified as a particularly Jewish skill, could weaken the machinations of the Third Reich, 'just one drop of Jewish irony, one sharp blow of sarcasm' would suffice to 'burst the soap bubble of Nazism' (p.429). The bitter irony of his failed prophecy is of course now known.
38. Des Pres (see note 7), p.277.
39. It is here that an interesting parallel between humour and deception is apparent. Lying, like laughter, can also be considered a 'rebellion against the given'. It is not surprising, therefore, that both Otto Korner and Adam Stein are well-practised in the deceit of self and others. In a similar fashion, Kierkegaard in 'The Concept of Irony' speaks of irony as a means of 'destroying' the actual; Søren Kierkegaard, 'The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates', in *The Essential Kierkegaard*, ed. by Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp.20–36 (p.29). Irony, as a form of humour, is also a kind of misrepresentation. It is a mode of misinforming meant to inform.
40. Gilman (see note 23).
41. A list of significant exceptions includes Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), *Commitment in Reflection: Essays in Literature and Moral Philosophy*, ed. by Leona Toker (New York: Garland, 1994).

42. The hesitancy to invoke questions of ethics may be attributed to the fact that most critics are sophisticated enough to understand that things which are 'offensive' or 'inappropriate' are not necessarily unethical.
43. Shaked (see note 12), pp.95–7.
44. See Yigal Schwartz's article 'The Person, The Path, and the Melody: A Brief History of Identity in Israeli Literature', *Prooftexts* 20.3 (2000) which surveys the historical development of this motif of sacrifice and redemption in modern Hebrew literature.
45. See chapter 12 of *Adam Resurrected*.
46. This often quoted phrase was first used by David Rousset, quoted in Ezrahi (see note 22), p.10. See Yigal Schwartz's consideration of the ways in which Aharon Appelfeld's characters view the world in general as a 'closed camp', or in my terms, an institution, in 'Degem Ha'Mahane Ha'Sagor: Dereh Motzah?' [Hebrew], *Siman Kriah* 12–13 (1981): 357–60.
47. See Lang (note 23), Langer (note 23), Cynthia Ozick, 'The Rights of History and the Rights of Imagination', *Commentary* (March 1999): 22–7 and Daniel Schwarz, *Imagining the Holocaust* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999). Lang has recently reiterated his concern with the ethics of representation in *Holocaust Representation: Art within the Limits of History and Ethics* (2002).
48. Examples include Martin Gray's *For Those I Loved*, Salomon Isacovici and Juan Manuel Rodriguez's *Man of Ashes*, Zvi Kolitz's *Yosl Rakover Talks to God*, Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird*, D.M. Thomas' *The White Hotel*.
49. Recent examples include Helen Demidenko's *The Hand that Signed the Paper* and Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments*.
50. This charge is not unique to Holocaust representation. The sense that some horrible things are beyond expression is similar to that described by T.S. Eliot in his criticisms of *Hamlet* in 'Hamlet and His Problems' (1920). In this essay, Eliot first described the idea of an 'objective correlative' claiming that in *Hamlet* there is a 'complete inadequacy' of the external facts to the emotions felt by Hamlet who displays 'the buffoonery of an emotion which can find no outlet in action'; T.S. Eliot, 'Hamlet and His Problems', in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, 1920, *Project Bartleby*, ed. by Steven van Leeuwen, 19 September 2002, accessed at www.bartleby.com/200/sw9.html.
51. Emmanuel Levinas' essay 'The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights' is relevant in this regard. In a commentary to a verse from Exodus (11:7), Levinas writes, 'At the supreme hour of his institution, with neither ethics nor *logos*, the dog will attest to the dignity of its person. This is what the friend of man means' (Emmanuel Levinas, 'The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights', *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, transl. Seán Hand (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), pp.151–3 (p.152). Later in the essay, Levinas describes how as a prisoner of war, a dog testified to his humanity while his captors refused to see him as anything but subhuman.
52. Adam Stein calls the dog-boy he nurses back to health in the novel 'David King of Israel'. In 1 Samuel 21:11–16, David, the consummate Jewish survivor, poet, womaniser, deceiver, and seed of the messiah, feigns madness and may be interpreted to act like a dog. The dog motif is also reminiscent of a scene in the chapter entitled 'The Dog' in Andre Schwarz-Bart's *The Last of the Just* wherein the central character dreams he is turned into 'a dog with Jewish eyes'; Andre Schwarz-Bart, *The Last of the Just*, transl. Stephen Becker (New York: Atheneum, 1961), p.300. In another scene in the novel, a Nazi guard orders his dog to attack a Jewish woman. He addresses the dog, commanding 'Man, destroy that dog' (p.368)! This in turn recalls Treblinka Kommandant Franz Stangl's remark that 'It is easier to kill a dog than a man' (Emil Fackenheim, *The Jewish Thought of Emil Fackenheim*, ed. by Michael Morgan (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), p.149.
53. 'Of a prince so used by fortune / Is the song I sing. / His name is Israel. A witch's magic / Has transformed him to a dog'. Heinrich Heine, 'The Princess Sabbath' in *Jewish Stories and*

Hebrew Melodies, ed. by Elizabeth Petuchowski (New York: Markus Wiener, 1987), p.98.

54. This Psalm, traditionally ascribed to King David, suggests that contemplation of the natural world leads to a better understanding of God. Verse 3 commences, 'Day to day utters speech', declaring the signs of God's kingship over the universe. Adam, son of dog, and father to the dog-boy David, closes his account of his moral career barking out the poetic accusation that, 'Dog to dog utters speech' (p.318). Simckes' translation of this line ('...יבלב לבלב יביע אומר') reads 'and may all dogs talk to one another' (p.370). In my estimation, this is inexact and does not reveal the possible intertextual connection to Psalm 19:3. Elsewhere in the novel, Kaniuk uses a variation of this line to allude to human speech (pp.264, 307). This proposed intertextuality is all the more important as Psalm 19:4 seems to complicate the previous verse, stating, 'There is no speech and there are no words; their sound is not heard'. Since human speech and the inability to comprehend the silence of bystanders are significant themes in Kaniuk's novel, this connection should be highlighted.
55. Theodor Adorno, 'Cultural Criticism and Society', in *Adorno Reader* ed. by Brian O'Connor (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), pp.195–210 (p.210).
56. Theodor Adorno, 'Education after Auschwitz', in *Never Again! The Holocaust's Challenge for Educators*, ed. by Helmut Schreier and Matthias Heyl (Hamburg: Krämer, 1997), pp.11-20 (p.11).
57. Bergson (see note 26), p.64.
58. Of course, Adorno also stated that: 'The incapacity for identification was unquestionably the most important psychological condition for the fact that something like Auschwitz could happen amidst fairly civilized and harmless people'; Adorno, 'Education after Auschwitz' (see note 58), p.18. This seems to cast a shadow over my positive estimation of humour. A sense of hostility, a derisiveness of the Other, has throughout Western history been considered a central feature of humour. Rather than foster identification, humour may in fact encourage withdrawal and emphasise difference. Perhaps the prospects for humour as a tool in fulfilling Adorno's 'first demand' are not so sanguine after all.
59. See also Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* (1992) for a further treatment of thought 'after Auschwitz'.
60. Theodor Adorno, 'Is Art Lighthearted?', in *Notes to Literature Volume 2*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, transl. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp.247–53 (p.248).
61. Langer (see note 23), p.10. In this, of course, he exposes his own ideology.
62. Ibid., p.22.
63. Lang (see note 23), p.106.
64. In particular, see Chapter 6.
65. George Steiner suggested that: 'The world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason'; George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (London: Faber & Faber, 1967), p.146). Elie Wiesel remarked: 'Before I say the words, Auschwitz or Treblinka, there must be a space, a breathing space, a kind of zone of silence', cited in Annette Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage, 1983), p.4. The idea of confronting the Holocaust with a sort of absence, muteness or stammering has been suggested by other critics as well, such as Sara Horowitz, *Voicing the Void: Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Fiction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997) and Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, transl. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).
66. Israeli literary scholar Adir Cohen reminds us in his encyclopaedic work on deception that 'there exists the lie of silence. ... In silence there is contradiction, avoidance, duplicity and ignorance, avoidance of responsibility, etc.'; Adir Cohen, *Olam Ha'Sheker* [Hebrew] (Haifa: Amatzia, 1999), p.43. From a sociological perspective, J.A. Barnes emphasises that:

'Silence is not necessarily a neutral state'; J.A. Barnes, *A Pack of Lies: Towards a Sociology of Lying* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp.16–17. And legal ethicist Charles Fried finds that 'silence can be a lie'; Charles Fried, *Right and Wrong* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), p.57.

67. Of course, silence is a singularly effective means of compelling memorialisation, which is different from but complementary to academic discourse.

The Romans tried to ban wild Purim parties in 408 CE – for a very good reason

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Henry Abramson March 12, 2019

(JTA) – Every year before Purim, my inbox and social media fill up with dire exhortations from rabbis and yeshivas warning against the dangers of celebratory excess – as if drunkenness on the holiday were something new.

In reality, the after-Purim regrets have been part of the discourse ever since Rabbah drunkenly attacked and inadvertently killed his dear friend Rabbi Zeira in the Talmud (don't worry – he was revived in the end). Rabbis and communal leaders across the religious spectrum have condemned drunken revelry on a holiday dedicated to excess and carousing, noting it often leads to harming life and limb. Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, leader of the Hasidic Chabad movement, outlawed more than four drinks at a time for anyone younger than 40.

But even before all of that, it turns out that the ancient Romans — who weren't exactly known for their sobriety — attempted to control wild Purim parties as early as the year 408.

An unusual bit of the Theodosian Code (16.8.18) is apparently the first non-Jewish source to document the phenomenon of Purim parties that get out of hand. Specifically, the law prohibited Jews from burning Haman in effigy. For Jews, the practice of symbolically

destroying the notorious villain of the book of Esther, the paradigm of anti-Semitism, was considered an aspect of the Purim commandment to "erase the name of Amalek," Haman's Jew-hating ancestor.

The Romans weren't especially discomfited by the idea of vicariously punishing enemies, or even maintaining fire safety. They were, however, concerned that drunken Jewish celebrants might use the opportunity to mock Christians by portraying Haman as a sacrilegious stand-in for Jesus. This is especially true because the favored method of representing Haman's death in the ancient world wasn't hanging by the neck – he was crucified on a wooden cross.

The biblical passage that literally describes Haman's "hanging on a tree" (Esther 7:10) was rendered as "crucified" in the ancient works of the Jewish historian Josephus, the early translations of the book of Esther into Greek (Septuagint) and Latin (Vulgate), and all through the Middle Ages in literary classics like Dante's "Purgatory." Artistic representations also depicted Haman on the cross, such as the 15th-century Azor Masters and even by Michelangelo, who painted a muscular Haman on a cross on the Sistine Chapel.

It's not hard to imagine how public Purim execrations of Haman, conducted by an inebriated crowd of Jews, could easily be misperceived by Christian observers, especially if the effigy of Haman is bound to a wooden cross. In fact, only a few years after the law in the Theodosian Code was promulgated, a Church historian named Socrates Scholasticus tendentiously described an event that sounded very much like a drunken Purim celebration gone horribly wrong: In Inmestar, Syria, a group allegedly seized a Christian child, bound him to a cross and scourged him until he died.

Socrates Scholasticus is not especially reliable as a source for Jewish history, but as the historian Elliot Horowitz has demonstrated in his masterful studies of Purim violence, it didn't take much to convince Christian audiences that Jews were in fact bent on committing acts of horrific violence. From Inmestar to Norwich to Nazi Germany and beyond, the noxious lie of the blood libel continues to plague innocent Jewish communities. It's too awful to think that it might in some way be connected to misunderstood, misapprehended, "harmless" Purim festivities.

The blood libels were just that. But because the Christian majority was so quick to feel threatened by Jewish revelry, violent or just intemperate, it was better for the Jews' own sake that they tone it down.

Some might be tempted to argue that drunken revelry is essential to the celebration and that non-Jewish viewers should develop a sense of humor about the holiday. Yet isn't that the same argument recently made by Bram De Baere, the designer of a carnival float in Aalst, Belgium, that depicted Jews in stereotypically ugly ways? De Baere told a Belgian newspaper that "Carnival is a time when everyone and everything can be laughed at. If you were to forbid that, you would be attacking the DNA of Aalst at its core."

Not everything is fair game for mockery, even on Purim. True, there's a big difference between a tiny, relatively powerless community poking fun at the dominant people on one day of the year on the one hand, and the majority population using their position of power to demean a hapless minority on the other.

But I have to give this one to the Romans: The law of 408 wasn't anti-Purim – it was anti-poor taste.

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