

Current research : MOMIK FRAGMENT

the Need for Intergenerational Illusions

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Nowhere have the complicated relations between Western civilisation and the Holocaust been more clearly demonstrated than in George Steiner's book In Bluebeards Castle; Some Notes towards the Redefinition of Culture, written in 1971. In this book, Steiner finds a connection between literary history and the history of the concept of the subconscious. To show it, he refers to the Inferno from Dante's Divina Commedia. Steiner makes a radical transition from the fourteenth to the twentieth century when he writes: 'The literature of the concentration camps is extensive. But nothing in it equals the fullness of Dante's observations.' He avails himself of an anachronistic style of argumentation, explaining that he can make only 'approximate sense of many of Dante's notations,' because he has no personal experience of Auschwitz and Treblinka. A very disquieting remark, which makes a remarkable connection between the mythological Inferno and the destruction camps. All who have not been in the camps can, according to Steiner, only partly understand Dante's text. 'But', he says, 'whoever can grasp the full meaning of Canto XXXIII of the Inferno, will, I believe, have grasped the ontological form of the camp world.' Steiner here refers to the line '*lo pianto stesso li pianger non lascia*': 'the very weeping there forbids to weep / And grief finding eyes blocked with tears / Turns inward to make agony greater.' What follows is the line of reasoning which has made Steiner such a prominent philosopher of culture:

'The concentration and death camps of the twentieth century, wherever they exist, under whatever regime, are *Hell made immanent*. They are the transference of Hell from below the earth to its surface. They are the deliberate enactment of a long, precise imagining.'

In a preceding passage, Steiner shows how the concentration camps minutely embody the images and chronicles of hell that have been manifest from the twelfth until the eighteenth centuries in European art and philosophy. He points out how the material realities of the inhuman have been detailed in Western iconography, from the mosaics at Torcello to the panels of Jeroen Bosch. 'They are prepared for from the fourteenth-century Harrowings of Hell to *Faust*. It is in the fantasies of the Infernal, as they literally haunt Western sensibility, that we find the technology of pain without meaning, of bestiality without end, of gratuitous terror. For six hundred years the imagination dwelt on the flaying, the racking, the mockery of the damned, in a place of whips and hellhounds, of ovens and stinking air.'

As I said, Steiner's reasoning is anachronistic: there is no report that reflects those horrors as precisely as the seven centuries old *Inferno*. Steiner shows a direct relationship between the Holocaust and Roman Catholic history: '*In the camps the millenary pornography of fear and vengeance cultivated in the Western mind by Christian doctrines of damnation was realised.*'

In other words: Dante's vision of hell contains images that have been present in the subconscious of Western culture for ages. They were sublimated in sadomasochist fantasies in the visual arts and in literature. In the twentieth century – '*finally*' is the only suitable term – these subconscious forces inevitably crossed the line to the conscious surface. They were made concrete and real with great precision, in a bureaucratic and efficiently organised structure, envisaged already in the *Inferno* with its circles and orbs. Since man appears unable to live without hell in a secularized world, he has learned to construct and maintain it on earth. And since an essential symmetry between fantasy and reality was broken due to this development, destroying the high-minded image of man that dominated our culture, to Steiner the Holocaust means the end of Western civilisation.

All who have been in this world of perpetual torment, as Dante calls it, all Holocaust survivors or second generation survivors, like David Grossman, who see themselves confronted with the so-called 'normal world', are faced with a linguistic problem. Their experiences cannot be expressed in words. Steiner speaks of this disturbing deterioration of language in his essay Language and Silence (1967). It is also the main theme of Grossman's See Under Love, wherever it is about the relationship between the author Momik, his parents and his grandfather. It becomes clear that an obstruction is in their way. What has happened to man in the Jenseits – the camp – cannot be expressed in daily speech. For this world of experiences that Momik is faced with as a young boy, Grossman invents the Hebrew term Eretz Sham, in English translated as 'over There', and in Dutch as 'daar'. Momik's last name is Neumann which, because of the prefix 'neu', implicitly refers to an earlier existence, and maybe to the New State too.

The child Momik lives in total isolation - "Momik, that is me", says Grossman in an interview. Momik is obsessed with signs from the other world that reach him through his traumatised environment. He has developed a special talent to detect these signs. He makes records of all that refers to this hallucinatory and hysterical place and hides these signs in his basements.

It is the child's life mission to decode Eretz Sham, the place called 'Over There' and. Only in this way can he be connected, or at least to have the illusion to be connected, to his social environment. The snatches, texts and reiterating cries of his insane grandfather Ansjel Wasserman are part of it. Just like the numbers tattooed on his arm, a code that Momik vainly tries to crack, as if his grandfather were a safe full of valuable and secret information. He internalises all codes he sees in his environment because he hopes he can tempt the 'Nazi Beast' – a term he has heard his neighbour use – to show itself so that he can gain control over it. Next to the internalised world full of the references he lays down in his notebook, the Nazi Beast is the externalisation of that same world.

The final scene of this first part of Grossman's book shows in a penetrating manner what the extreme identification of Momik with 'Over There', which is concealed from him, can eventually lead to. In that passage, Momik has locked up the crazy people around him and his insane grandfather Ansjel in his basement, where he also tortures animals and where he collects Holocaust documents. When these Jews finally give in to his frightening compulsion to talk, he decompensates. The child collapses. After the first part, the subject function in See Under Love has become multi-layered and multifunctional: the original subject is destructed. The child has lost its ego-boundaries.

Through the horrifying scream with which this nine-and-a-half year old collapses physically and mentally, he becomes inseparably One with the Nazi Beast he has internalised.

As described in the 2005 book The Cry of Mute Children, written by second generation specialist Ilany Kogan, the sound produced by Momik here is exemplary for the fate of second generation Holocaust victims.

Dutch psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Hans Keilson tried to communicate with children from Bergen Belsen directly after the liberation. They were first generation survivors, but saw themselves faced with similar linguistic problems. Keilson compared their world of experiences with an area 'Wohin die Sprache nicht reicht'. Those words in Dutch express exactly the ambivalence between *reiken* as in 'genoeg zijn', to be sufficient, 'where words do not suffice' and *reiken* as in a reaching of arms,

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