

THE ZONE OF INTEREST: HONOURING THE HOLOCAUST VICTIMS

AÍDA DÍAZ BILD

Universidad de La Laguna

adbild@ull.es

ABSTRACT. *Amis has always found the question of the Holocaust's exceptionalism fascinating and returns to the subject in The Zone of Interest. After analysing how the enormity of the Holocaust conditions literary representation and Amis's own approach to it, this article focuses on one of the main voices of the novel, Szmul, the leader of the Sonderkommando, whose members were Jewish prisoners forced to clean the gas chambers and dispose of the bodies. Through him we confront directly the horrors of the Holocaust. One of Amis' greatest achievements is precisely that he humanizes and rehabilitates the figure of the Sonder by transforming Szmul into a comic hero who, in spite of the atrocities he witnesses, reaffirms the unconditional value of life and fights to give meaning to his terrible predicament. The novel is dedicated to the writer and Holocaust survivor Primo Levi, whose voice can be heard throughout the text.*

Keywords: Holocaust, Martin Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, Sonder, comic hero, Primo Levi.

**THE ZONE OF INTEREST:
HONRANDO A LAS VÍCTIMAS DEL HOLOCAUSTO**

RESUMEN. *Amis siempre ha encontrado la cuestión de la excepcionalidad del Holocausto fascinante y retoma el tema en The Zone of Interest. Tras analizar cómo la enormidad del Holocausto condiciona la representación literaria y el acercamiento de Amis a éste, el presente artículo se centra en una de las principales voces de la novela, Szmul, el jefe del Sonderkommando, formado por prisioneros judíos que eran forzados a limpiar las cámaras de gas y desprenderse de los cuerpos. A través de él confrontamos directamente los horrores del Holocausto. Uno de los grandes logros de Amis es precisamente que humaniza y rehabilita la figura del Sonder al transformar a Szmul en un héroe cómico que, a pesar de las atrocidades que presencia cada día, reafirma el valor incondicional de la vida y lucha por encontrarle sentido a su terrible situación. La novela está dedicada al escritor y superviviente del Holocausto Primo Levi, cuya voz se escucha a lo largo del texto.*

Palabras clave: Holocausto, Martin Amis, *The Zone of Interest*, Sonder, héroe cómico, Primo Levi.

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In “Symptoms of Discursivity” Ernst van Alphen argues that Holocaust survivors are incapable of narrating their past experiences because they lack an appropriate discourse to describe the horrors they have been through: “[T]he problem for Holocaust survivors is precisely that the lived events could not be experienced because language did not provide the terms and positions in which to experience them, thus they are defined as *traumatic*” (1999: 27). Van Alphen stresses that the problem of the unrepresentability of the Holocaust had already started during the Holocaust itself, since the victims’ experiences could not be narrated in the terms the symbolic order offered at that time (26-27). Berel Lang expresses a similar idea when reflecting on the appropriate way of imagining or recreating the Holocaust. Lang asserts that the uniqueness and enormity of the Holocaust clearly conditions the act of writing and the process of literary representation: “[I]f *any* literary or scholarly subject could challenge the role conventionally assumed by authors, it is the radical evil exemplified by, and then to be represented, in the events of the Holocaust” (1988: 3).¹ In

¹ In an interesting article on American “Holocaust” films produced between 1945 and 1959, Baron argues that Hollywood movies “Americanized” the Holocaust by introducing edifying messages that would be personally touching and politically relevant to their audiences, not because they wanted to trivialize the Holocaust or minimize its horror, but because they knew that America would only be

fact, since Theodor Adorno affirmed that “[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (1955: 34), there has been a great debate about whether the horror of the Holocaust is capable of representation.

Steiner clearly supports Adorno’s famous dictum when he claims that “[t]he world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason. To speak of the *unspeakable* is to risk the survivance of language as creator and bearer of humane, rational truth” (1985: 146). Howe, who has tried to “interpret” the influential remarks made by Adorno on literature and the Holocaust is sceptical about the possibility of the literary imagination recreating the Shoah. Howe reminds us that there is no rational explanation for the physical extermination of millions of Jews, a unique event in the history of mankind: “We may read the Holocaust as the central event of this century; we may register the pain of its unhealed wounds; but finally we must acknowledge that it leaves us intellectually disarmed, staring helplessly at the reality or, if you prefer, the mystery of mass extermination” (1988: 175). Howe argues that Adorno believed that by imposing aesthetic principles on the terrifying ordeal Jews went through, the writer would minimize its horror, thus doing a great injustice to the victims:

It was as if he were saying, Given the absence of usable norms through which to grasp the meaning (if there is one) of the scientific extermination of millions, given the intolerable gap between the aesthetic conventions and the loathsome realities of the Holocaust, and given the improbability of coming up with images and symbols that might serve as “objective correlatives” for events that the imagination can hardly take in, writers in the post-Holocaust era might be wise to be silent. Silent, at least, about the Holocaust. (180)

Following Adorno’s thesis, Howe affirms that the literary imagination is incapable of rendering intelligible the extermination of 6,000,000 Jews: “what can the literary imagination, traditionally so proud of its self-generating capacities, add to –how can it go beyond– the intolerable matter cast up by memory?” (187). The novelist tries to make sense of the Holocaust and turn it into a significant narrative, but he cannot because he lacks something that is vital in the act of composition: “namely, a structuring set of ethical premises, to which are subordinately linked aesthetic biases, through which he can form (that is, integrate) his materials” (188). He cannot even escape into a symbolic or grotesque world because there are no myths or metaphors that might serve to describe the ordeal: “Before *this* reality, the imagination comes to seem intimidated, overwhelmed, helpless. It can rehearse, but neither enlarge nor escape; it can describe happenings, but not endow them

able to face the Shoah if the story was told in a language they could understand: “...representation of a crime so heinous boggled the imagination of Americans and therefore had to be framed in idioms and terms familiar to them” (2010: 94-5).

with the autonomy and freedom of a complex fiction; it remains –and perhaps this may even figure as a moral obligation– the captive of its raw material” (188).

The creative writer has to face other more specifically literary problems, which Howe enumerates and which in the end come down to the single problem of freedom: “In the past, even those writers most strongly inclined to determinism or naturalism have grasped intuitively that to animate their narratives they must give at least a touch of freedom to their characters. And that, as his characters inexorably approach the ovens, is precisely what the Holocaust writer cannot do” (191).

Howe reaches a very gloomy conclusion. Fiction dealing with the crimes of Auschwitz cannot give us any consolation, redemption or transcendence: “Or that the human imagination can encompass and transfigure them. Some losses cannot be made up, neither in time nor eternity. They can only be mourned” (188).

There are other critics who not only believe that the enormity of the Holocaust is capable of literary representation, but argue that comedy can treat the Holocaust respectfully while at the same time offering a different perspective. In “Holocaust *Laughter?*” Des Pres affirms that it is possible for fiction to represent the Shoah and argues that the use of the comic mode to write about the Holocaust helps both reader and writer to transcend the horrors of the event. Des Pres believes in the coping function of humour, in its survival value and this is precisely why comedy has become vital when coming to terms with such a horrifying event as the Holocaust: “That something so slight should alleviate the burden of something so gigantic might, on the face of it, be a joke in itself. But then, humor counts most in precisely those situations where more decisive remedies fail” (1991: 218).² A comic response to calamity is more resilient and helpful than a response that is solemn or tragic. Tadeusz Borowski’s *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, Leslie Epstein’s *King of the Jews*, and Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* are works that refuse to take the Holocaust in its own crushing terms: “[...] pity and terror are held at a distance, and this is not, finally, a bad thing. To be mired still deeper in angst and lament is hardly what is needed. The value of the comic approach is that by setting things at a distance it permits a tougher, more active response” (232). None of these books belittle the enormity of the Holocaust, but celebrate and affirm life against death.

A similar idea is expressed by Cory: “As a literary device it [humour] has lent credibility to witness literature and functioned aesthetically to make the

² De Pres’s thesis has been challenged by Gilman, who believes that none of the comic representations of the Shoah are intended to evoke laughter: “It is clear, in spite of Des Pres’s title, that no one ever actually *laughed* while reading *Maus*” (2000: 282). Gilman adds that those who have used the comic mode to evoke the Holocaust have had to identify themselves as Jews to have their texts accepted into high culture.

unfathomable accessible to the minds and emotions of the reading public” (1995: 39). Cory makes a short but illuminating analysis of the different functions that humour has fulfilled in Holocaust literature: it has helped characters and readers to rise above pain and suffering; it has defined the boundaries of our moral response to the events of the Holocaust; it has functioned as resistance, as protest; it has served to create a sense of verisimilitude in a fictional world which defies comprehension. Cory believes that Spiegelman’s *Maus* is unique in Holocaust literature not only because it allows us to understand the paradoxical relationship between atrocity and humour, but because it shows that the second generation survivors have created a symbolic language for depicting the Holocaust which did not exist before: “Common to all such works is a complex syndrome of guilt at not measuring up to the strength, skill and courage of one’s survivor-parents, of a theological and existential quest for a meaningful relationship to the religion of those parents, and an aesthetic quest for the icons and images appropriate to the experience of second generation survivors” (38).³

Although there has been a great controversy over Adorno’s famous dictum, the fact is that it has been defied by a large number of novels, plays, movies, poems, graphic novels, etc. which have taken on the subject of the Holocaust. It must be acknowledged that most authors have emphasised the difficulty of their task. When Adam Appelfeld was asked on the obliqueness of his novels’ representations of the Holocaust, he answered: “one does not look directly at the sun” (Lang 1988: 8). Sebald also admitted that writing about the Shoah, especially for a German author, was dangerous and difficult, since tactless lapses, both moral and aesthetic, could be committed. He explained that his oblique and tentative approach to the Holocaust was due to the fact that “you could not write directly about the horror of persecution in its ultimate forms, because no one could bear to look at these things without losing their sanity. So you would have to approach it from an angle, and by intimating to the reader that these subjects are constant company; their presence shades every inflection of every sentence one writes. If one can make that credible, then one can begin to defend writing about these subjects at all” (Jaggi 2001).

Cynthia Ozick has confessed that although in theory she agrees with Adorno’s dictum, yet the Holocaust figures in many of her stories: “I write about it. I can’t not. But I don’t think I ought to. I have powerful feelings about it. In our generation, it seems to me, we ought to absorb the documents, the endless, endless data, the endless, endless what-happened [...] I *want* the documents to

³ Ballesteros González expresses a similar idea: “By listening and responding to Vladek’s account, by taking notes and recording his voice, Artie will live his own holocaust, that of the child of a survivor” (2008: 149).

be enough; I don't want to tamper or invent or imagine. And yet I have done it. I can't not do it. It comes, it invades" (Teicholz 1987: 184-185). She challenges those who try to bring a moral umbra to the Holocaust, because she cannot find any spots of goodness or redemptive meaning in the event: "Is there a 'redeeming meaning' in the murder of the six million? For me, the Holocaust means one thing and one thing only: the destruction of one-third of the world's Jewish population. I do not see a 'redeeming meaning' in a catastrophe of such unholy magnitude" (1988: 278).⁴ In fact, in an interesting essay, "Who Owns Anne Frank?", Ozick condemns the way the diary has been distorted in order to soften Anne's dread, terror and despair and thus give the text a redeeming meaning:

The litany of blurbs –“a lasting testament to the indestructible nobility of the human spirit,” “an everlasting source of courage and inspiration”- is no more substantial than any other display of self-delusion. The success -the triumph- of Bergen-Belsen was precisely that it blotted out the possibility of courage, that it proved to be a lasting testament to the human spirit's easy destructibility. “*Hier ist kein Warum,*” a guard at Auschwitz warned: here there is no “why”, neither question nor answer, only the dark of unreason. Anne Frank's story, truthfully told, is unredeemed and unredeemable. (1997: 78)

Ozick is firmly committed to remembering the Holocaust and, since she cannot see anything positive in it, her own act of memorial is expressed in the negative: she will not buy German goods, nor set foot in Germany or Austria. By doing so, she is remembering the victims of the genocide: “Not buying a German spoon is a memorial act for its own sake; it has no power to punish anyone, nor is it meant to. If I avoid buying something marked Made in Germany, I do it for myself: to keep alive the memory of Jews marked Murdered in Germany. It is the way I remember” (1988: 283).

Howard Jacobson agrees with Ozick that remembering the Holocaust is a “sacred duty” (Mullan 2010). In contrast to those Jews who insist on moving on or they will never stop seeing themselves as victims, Jacobson makes clear his refusal to forget.⁵ Jacobson's greatest achievement in *Kalooki Nights* is not only that he has fulfilled the sacred duty to remember the Holocaust, but that he has done

⁴ Friedländer agrees with Ozick that there is no redeeming meaning in the Holocaust: “It may be that, on the *individual* level, there is something redeeming here, moments of revelation of a world one had not known. But to speak in this way on a more global level –here I concur with Cynthia Ozick that to look for a message in such events is certainly not for me. This certainly is the most difficult task we face: precisely not to look for redemption in these events” (1988: 289).

⁵ Naomi Alderman has argued that surely the six million Jews who died during World War II would not have wanted their descendants to live a life dedicated entirely to memory and the past: “We have an impossible task: to hold onto something at the same time as letting it go. The fact that it's impossible doesn't mean it's not worth trying. Remember. And at the same time, remember that it's over” (2012: 30).

so in a comic way. Jacobson himself has explained that his aim in *Kalooki Nights* was not to recreate history but to find a different discourse, a different language to talk about the Holocaust:

Not because I think it's funny. Not because I feel we need to "lighten up" – if anything, I felt we needed to go on darkening down [...] But I do want to change the language in which we go on thinking about this. We can't all go on being Primo Levi. We've no business trying to be. Comedy is one way to change the discourse. I believe in taking up the challenge of Hamlet in that wonderful scene, holding the skull of Yorick and confronting him: "You were a jester". (Jacobs 2008)

Jacobson's reference to Primo Levi is highly relevant because on rereading *If This Is a Man*, the record of Primo Levi's incarceration in Auschwitz, Jacobson warns of the danger of forgetting or denying the Holocaust:

The danger, as times goes by, is that we will tire of hearing about the Holocaust, grow not only weary by disbelieving, and that out of fatigue and ignorance more than cynicism, we will belittle and, by stages, finally deny – actively or by default – the horror of the extermination camps and the witness, by then so many fading memories, of those who experienced them. The obligation to remember is inscribed on every Holocaust memorial, but even the words "Never Forget" become irksome eventually. (2013)

Actually, Levi himself explains in the "Afterword" to *If This Is a Man and The Truce* that perhaps his survival was due to the fact that he had the firm purpose to write about what he had witnessed and endured. Levi's attitude was shared by many survivors, who, as Appelfeld has explained, "remained alive only because of the power of that hope: after the war, they would tell [...] The struggle for physical survival was harsh and ugly, but that commandment, to remain alive at any price, was, in this case, far more than the commandment to live. It bore within it something of the spirit of a mission" (1988: 86). Unfortunately, immediately after the war many people were filled with silence because of the inability to express their experience and the feeling of guilt: "The feeling of vocation that throbbed within you in the camps and in the woods became, imperceptibly, an indictment of yourself" (86). In fact, Levi argues that the survivors of concentration camps fall into two categories: those who refuse to go back and would like to forget or have actually forgotten and dismissed everything, and those who believe that remembering is a duty. The latter do not want to forget, and what is more important, they do not want the world to forget:

In every part of the world, wherever you begin by denying the fundamental liberties of mankind, and equality among people, you move toward the concentration camp system, and it is a road on which it is difficult to halt. I know so many ex-prisoners

who understand very well what a terrible lesson their experience contains and who return every year to “their” Camp, guiding pilgrimages of young people. I would do it myself, gladly, if time permitted, and if I did not know that I reached the same goal by writing books and by agreeing to talk about them to my readers. (2004: 390-391)

But although Levi thinks that it is paramount to know and remember what happened, so that it can serve as support and warning, he admits very humbly that he cannot understand the violent anti-Semitism of Hitler and of Germany behind him:

Perhaps one cannot, what is more one must not, understand what happened, because to understand is almost to justify. Let me explain: “understanding” a proposal or human behaviour means to “contain” it, contain its author, put oneself in his place, identify with him. Now, no normal human being will ever be able to identify with Hitler, Himmler, Goebbels, Eichmann, and endless others. This dismays us, and at the same time gives us a sense of relief, because perhaps it is desirable that their words (and also, unfortunately, their deeds) cannot be comprehensible to us. They are non-human words and deeds, really counter-human, without historic precedents, with difficulty comparable to the cruelest events of the biological struggle for existence. The war can be related to this struggle, but Auschwitz has nothing to do with war; it is neither an episode in it nor an extreme form of it. War is always a terrible fact, to be deprecated, but it is in us, it has its rationality, we “understand” it.

But there is no rationality in the Nazi hatred: it is a hate that is not in us; it is outside man, it is a poison fruit that sprung from the deadly trunk of Fascism, but it is outside and beyond Fascism itself. We cannot understand it, but we can and must understand from where it springs, and we must be on our guard. If understanding is impossible, knowing is imperative, because what happened could happen again. Conscience can be seduced and obscured again – even our consciences. (2004: 395-396)

Levi’s reflection on the Nazis’ violent anti-Semitism is included in the “Acknowledgments and Epilogue” at the end of *The Zone of Interest* (2014), by Martin Amis, an Holocaust-centred novel set in Auschwitz in the months from August 1942 to April 1943. Amis has admitted that the problem of understanding Hitler and the Holocaust bedevilled him until he read Levi’s statement on the Nazis’ fanatical hatred of the Jews (Rosenbaum 2012). Amis has always found the question of the Holocaust exceptionally impressive: “I can’t imagine ever losing my horrifying fascination regarding this subject” (Seaman 2014). In fact, Amis has explained that his return to the subject after *Time’s Arrow* (1991) came from a feeling “that in the very palpable, foreseeable future the Holocaust is going to absent itself from living memory” (Rosenbaum 2012). In this sense, although

Cynthia Ozick has some reservations about *The Zone of Interest*, she has admitted that Amis “is not among those worldly sick-and-tired-of-hearing-about-it casuists for whom the Holocaust has gone stale to the point of insult” (2014). Amis believes that, although the survivors’ testimonies will always be available in print and on video, their death will mark a symbolic divide (Rosenbaum 2012).⁶ He has thus justified his attempt to represent the Holocaust:

There are very respectable and distinguished people who say you shouldn’t write about the Holocaust. George Steiner, Cynthia Ozick and others. But it is slightly self-righteous to say that and it also makes no philosophical sense and no literary critical sense [...] “*Arbeit Macht Frei*” says on the gates of Auschwitz and also underneath poets and novelists not welcome. The Holocaust and the Nazi Germany is the worst that has happened yet, it’s the terminal point of human evil and it demolished the image of man while it was taking place. If in the Middle East the Isis phenomenon suddenly exploded, genocide in every direction and the numbers were as great, at what moment, at what stage, does it exclude itself, becomes extraterritorial for writers? It makes no sense. (Seaman 2014)

Amis admits that the author addressing a topic as complex as the Holocaust has special responsibilities not qualitatively different from any other kind of writing, “because you are always battling with finding the right tone and words for the event you are describing. But the tension is unusually sharp when you are writing about something as atrocious as this” (Seaman 2014).

With *The Zone of Interest* Amis wanted to deal with the Holocaust in a more realistic way and this is why he chose social realism as the genre for the novel (Seaman 2014). In fact, in the “Acknowledgments and Epilogue” Amis includes the historical documentation he used to write the novel and emphasises that “I adhere to that which happened, in all its horror, its desolation, and its bloody-minded opacity” (2015: 310).⁷ Certainly, some critics have described the book as a traditional historical novel (Wood 2014; Preston 2014; Ozick 2014), which “slams home the horror of the Holocaust” and makes the reader aware of the “monstrousness of the Nazis’ crimes” (Kakutani 2014). As Wheldon has asserted, Amis is performing a fundamental task by doing his subject justice: “If it only helps to explain to those who at present so promiscuously throw around the word ‘genocide’ what that awful word in reality denotes it will have earned the attention it will certainly receive” (2014).

⁶ Rosenbaum is certainly right when he claims that there are two Martin Amises. On the one hand, we have the Martin Amis who writes outrageous comic satiric novels and, on the other, the Martin Amis who writes “books that go beyond *Bad Behavior* to contemplate Evil itself” (2012).

⁷ Lang has explained that Holocaust fiction tends to include statements attesting to the essential truthfulness in it, which suggests that “historical discourse is viewed even by writers of the *imaginative* literature of the Holocaust as a condition to which they aspire” (1988: 10).

Amis's emphasis on his use of realism to represent the Shoah is certainly significant, since Epstein, the author of the well-known Holocaust novel *King of the Jews* (1979), argues that Holocaust fiction should show "what life in the ghettos and camps was really like -that is, reproducing, re-creating, restoring to life, in such a way that the reader feels a sense of connectedness, not dispassion and distance, least of all horror and repugnance, to the events and the characters that, Lazarus-like are called back from the dead" (1988: 264-5). Fiction should increase our capacity to suffer and bear the unbearable and make us realize that both victims and perpetrators were men and that the Holocaust happened in our own world, not in a fantasyland: "[...] just as the Holocaust did not take place in a special universe, so did it not 'reflect a fundamental distortion in human nature' but, in fact, was both inflicted and borne by those who were all *too human*" (267). The failure of the creative artist to give us the reality of the Holocaust entails what Epstein calls a crucial failure of responsibility (269), since only by creating a bond between the reader and the world that is being depicted in the novel can the writer help bring about a political change that would make another Holocaust less certain.

Amis's realistic approach to the horrors of the concentration camps explains why in the novel humour is more restrained than in previous books: "But, in his new Holocaust novel, Amis is too humane, finally, to do more than attempt a few swipes at such humor [...] Yet, when such cruelties are repeated and repeated, even the satirist is apt to lose heart and concur with Thomsen: 'I used to be numb; now I'm row'" (Oates 2014). In *The Zone of Interest* the story is told from the point of view of three central characters: Angelus Thomsen, a womanizer, a nephew of Martin Bormann, Hitler's private secretary; Paul Doll, the camp commandment and the source of most of the comedy in the novel; and Szmul, the leader of the Sonderkommando, whose members were Jewish prisoners forced to do the Nazis' "dirty work":

At Auschwitz, the Sonderkommandos had better physical conditions than other inmates; they had decent food, slept on straw mattresses and could wear normal clothing. Sonderkommandos were divided into several groups, each with a specialized function. Some greeted the new arrivals, telling them that they were going to shower prior to being sent to work. They were obliged to lie, telling the soon-to-be-murdered prisoners that after the delousing process they would be assigned to labor teams and reunited with their families. These were the only Sonderkommandos to have contact with the victims while they were still alive. The SS carried out the gassings, and the Sonderkommandos would enter the chambers afterward, remove the bodies, process them and transport them to the crematorium. Other teams processed the corpses after the gas chambers, extracting gold teeth, and removing clothes and valuables before taking them to the crematoria for final disposal. (Shields)

Amis has explained that Szmul has much less space than the others because he felt that only in the character of Szmul was he confronting directly the horror of the Holocaust: “And I didn’t want any poetic summoning of the horror of it, but you could not in the end entirely avoid it” (Seaman 2014). Oates has argued that Szmul is not a convincing character because “it’s a nearly impossible task to give a convincing voice to such a person (and such a person very likely existed)” (2014). Franklin (2014) expresses a similar idea, while Reich has argued that Szmul is the least original of the three main characters because with him Amis is “uncharacteristically cautious and deferential, as if treading on sacred ground”. On the contrary, others believe that Szmul is “at once admirable and horrifying in his desperate drive to survive” (Preston 2014) or that “Amis’s crematorium raven flies out from the novel as its single invincibly convincing voice”, erasing all other voices: “He alone is immune to the reader’s skepticism, he alone is safe from even the possibility of diminishment through parody” (Ozick 2014). I absolutely agree with the latter, because I think that Szmul is one of Amis’s most brilliant creations. The very first time we hear his voice, Szmul tells us the story of a king who commissioned his favourite wizard to create a magic mirror that “showed you your soul-it showed you who you really were” (2015: 33). No one could look at it without turning away: “I find that the KZ is that mirror. The KZ is that mirror, but with one difference. You can’t turn away” (33). Interestingly enough, at the end of the novel Thomsen, one of the perpetrators, comes to the same conclusion: “We all discovered, or helplessly revealed, who we were. Who somebody really was. *That* was the zone of interest” (285). Even Doll, who seems to be very “proud” of his job, realizes that you cannot judge the Sonders or anyone who has gone through the experience of the concentration camp: “Ach, if they were real men -in their place I’d [...] But wait. You never are in anybody’s place. And it’s true what they say, here in the KL: No one knows themselves. Who are you? You don’t know. Then you come to the Zone of Interest, and it tells you who you are” (68). In fact, Amis has explained that the application of the story of the king to Auschwitz is that “survivors said again and again you only see about five per cent of another person and about five per cent of yourself in real life, in normal life. It’s only in dire extremis that you actually find out the extent of your courage, whether you’re prepared to make others suffer for your advantage. Even among victims. It’s a very frightening thing the idea of finding out who you really are” (Stadlen 2013).

Amis dedicates the novel, among others, to Levi, who in his essay “The Grey Zone” pays special attention to the role played by the Special Squads in the concentration camps. Levi believes that no one is authorized to judge them and asks the readers to imagine what they would have done if they had lived

for months or years in a ghetto tormented by hunger, promiscuity, humiliation, witnessing the death of their beloved ones, and had been sent afterwards to a concentration camp.⁸ His conclusion is enlightening:

But it is doubtless true that it deals with the death of the soul. Now, nobody can know for how long and under what trials his soul can resist before yielding or breaking. Every human being possesses a reserve of strength whose extent is unknown to him: it can be large, small, or non-existent, and only extreme adversity makes it possible to evaluate it. Even without having recourse to the extreme case of the Special Squads, it often happens to us who have returned that when we describe our vicissitudes, our interlocutor will say: "In your place I would not have lasted for a single day." This statement does not have a precise meaning: one is never in another's place. Each individual is so complex an object that there is no point in trying to foresee his behaviour, all the more so in extreme situations; and neither is it possible to foresee one's own behaviour. Therefore, I ask that we meditate on the story of "the crematorium ravens" with pity and rigour, but that a judgement of them be suspended. (2013: 60-61)

Levi reminds us that some of the Special Squads did rebel and were immediately punished by a horrible death. There were also many cases of suicide at the moment of recruitment or immediately after. Finally, it must not be forgotten that at Auschwitz in October 1944 a group of Sonderkommandos organized a rebellion against the SS. The revolt was a failure and no one of the insurgents survived (58-59).

Levi insists that although we have the testimonies of the Sonders, who buried their diaries near the crematories in Auschwitz to bear witness to the atrocities committed by the Nazis, it is almost impossible to imagine how these men lived day by day, saw themselves and accepted their role in the camp (49). Levi goes so far as to say that what they wrote cannot be taken literally, since probably most of them were trying to justify and rehabilitate themselves: "a liberating outburst instead of a Medusa-faced truth" (52).

I think that one of Amis' greatest achievements in *The Zone of Interest* is precisely that he humanizes and rehabilitates the figure of the Sonder by showing that people like Szmul were also the victims of the Nazi genocide. Cohen has accurately described the situation of those who were forced to collaborate with the Nazis:

Arendt's point is that no prosecution would have wanted, and no defence would have dared, to address the forced collaboration of Jews in their own extermination

⁸ Howe expresses the very same idea in his analysis of *Night*, by Elie Wiesel: "Indeed, that is one of the major effects of honest testimony about the Holocaust – it dissolves any impulse to judge what the victims did or did not do, since there are situations so extreme that it seems immoral to make judgments about those who must endure them" (1988: 184).

[...] But Arendt failed to state the obvious: that being forced to participate in another's death while waiting for your own was victimisation of its most perverse. What the Jerusalem judiciary didn't trust the world to comprehend was something that was already being taught in Israeli schools, and for survivors was a basic fact. (2016: 31)

Van Alphen also argues that the victims' situation was defined by the lack of choice and therefore it is difficult to draw the line between responsibility and victimhood: "One took part in a history that did not provide unambiguous roles of subject and object" (1999: 30). In fact, in the novel *Szmul*, whom Ozick describes as "the most pitiable of the doomed" (2014), defends his innocence: "When he was still with us, my philosophical friend Adam used to say, *We don't even have the comfort of innocence*. I didn't and I don't agree. I would still plead not guilty" (34).

Hofmann has stated that in the midst of so much horror, *Szmul* is striving for dignity and truth (2014: 3) and it is obvious that Amis tries to imagine and recreate how someone who is forced by circumstances to collaborate in the extermination of his brothers feels:

As well as being the saddest men who ever lived, we are also the most disgusting. And yet our situation is paradoxical.

It is difficult to see how we can be as disgusting as we unquestionably are when we do no harm.

The case could be made that on balance we do a little good. Still, we are infinitely disgusting, and also infinitely sad. (33)

When Hannah, Doll's wife, meets him she tells her husband that "He's got the saddest face I've ever seen" (184). Doll himself asserts that *Szmul* has Sonder eyes: "His eyes are gone, dead, defunct, extinct" (63). This emphasis on *Szmul*'s sadness is very interesting because in "The Grey Zone" Levi reproduces the testimony of a member of the Sonderkommando which echoes *Szmul*'s feeling: "You mustn't think that we are monsters; we are the same as you, only much more unhappy" (2013: 52). *Szmul* acknowledges that the "Sonders have suffered Seelenmord -death of the soul. But the Germans have suffered it too" (201), which is very revealing because again in "The Grey Zone" Levi explains that the existence of the Sonderkommando had precisely this message: "We, the master race, are your destroyers, but you are no better than we are; if we so wish and we do so wish, we can destroy not only your bodies but also your souls, just as we have destroyed ours" (2013: 52-53). By focusing on *Szmul*'s feelings and treating him as a human being who suffers and tries to share with us what life is like in a concentration camp, Amis is fulfilling what Appelfeld believes should be

the task of any author writing on the Holocaust. Appelfeld argues that literature about the Holocaust should forget the numbers and facts, since they were the murderers' own well-proven means, and bring the horrifying experience down to the human realm: "When I say 'to bring down,' I do not mean to simplify, to attenuate, or to sweeten the horror, but to attempt to make the events speak through the individual and in his language, to rescue the suffering from huge numbers, from dreadful anonymity, and to restore the person's given and family name, to give the tortured person back his human form, which was snatched away from him" (1988: 92) Appelfeld believes that "man as a number is one of the horrors of dehumanization" (92) and actually in *The Zone of Interest* the perpetrators are the ones who are obsessed with numbers.⁹

Szmul is certainly, as a critic has put it, the moral consciousness of the novel (Kakutani 2014). Through him we learn about some of the atrocities committed in the camps: how the Sonders were eventually murdered by the SS so that there would be no witnesses to the Nazis' killing methods; how in the course of their work the Sonders very often encountered someone they knew and had to pretend that everything was going to be great, which is what happens when Szmul sees his son's best friend, Witold, whose face "flares with gratitude and relief" (241) when he recognizes Szmul:

"Yes, Chaim's here. With his brother. They're working in the home farm. In the fields. With any luck you'll get the same job. They're big boys now. They've grown."

"What about my boot? I'll be needing my boot for the fields."

"All the luggage will be waiting at the guest house."

...

"You'll get cheese sandwiches straight away, and then there'll be a hot meal later on. I'll have Chaim come and find you."

"Oh, that'd be good."

And those are his last words. (241-2)

⁹ Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remember Center, has been fulfilling since 1955 its mandate to preserve the memory of Holocaust victims "by collecting their names, the ultimate representation of a person's identity". Their main aim is to comprehend who the "six million" murdered in the Holocaust were, "where they lived, information about their families, what their dreams were, how they died, or whether and how they were related to us". In fact, the International School for Holocaust Studies has as its goal to "present Jewish people as human beings with discernible identities which the Germans planned to destroy in the name of their murderous racist ideology. From the dust and loss, we are obliged to retrieve the humanity of the victims and uncover families and communities as well as their culture that was annihilated during the Holocaust".

The reader is also shocked when Szmul tells him about the fate of the teenage boys the SS selected to help the Sonders drag the bodies to the mass grave, especially when he learns that Szmul's sons were among the silent boys:

They were given no food or water, and they worked for twelve hours under the lash, naked in the snow and the petrified mud.

When the light was thinning Major Lange led the boys to light the pits and shot them one by one –and you could hear that. Towards the end he ran out of ammunition and used the butt of his pistol on their skulls. And you could hear that. But the boys, jockeying and jostling to be next in line, didn't make a sound. (203)

The reader is constantly aware of Szmul's pain and suffering: "It takes Witold less than a minute to die. About twenty seconds pass, and he is gone. There are fewer things to say goodbye to, there is less life, less love (perhaps), and less memory needing to be scattered" (242). In his effort to make the reader sympathize with Szmul, Amis emphasises that he never gets used to the task he performs in the camp: "'Either you go mad in the first ten minutes,' it is often said, 'or you get used to it.' You could argue that those who get used to it do in fact go mad. And there is another possible outcome: you don't go mad and you don't get used to it" (77).¹⁰

Amis also describes how Doll constantly humiliates, demeans and mocks Szmul, who cannot defend himself because he is absolutely powerless. Doll's comments are really cruel:

"Tell me, Sonder. Does it feel different? Knowing your uh- time of departure?"

"Yes, sir."

"Of course it does. April 30th. Where are we now? The 6th. No, the 7th. So. 23 days to Walpurgisnacht."

He took an indescribably filthy rag from his pocket and set about scouring his fingernails.

"I'm not expecting you to confide in me, Sonder. But is there anything...positive about it? About knowing?" (235)

Doll knows how much Szmul loves his wife and in order to make him suffer makes remarks that cause Szmul unbearable pain:

"Tell me. Were you happy with your Shulamith? Was it love whose month was ever May?"

¹⁰ Amis is probably referring here to one of the testimonies that Levi reproduces in "The Grey Zone": "Doing this work, one either goes crazy the first day or gets accustomed to it" (2013: 51).

I shrug.

“Mm, I suppose you’d have to explain why, in her absence, you’ve rather gone downhill. Let yourself go a bit. Ach, there’s nothing worse than the contempt of a woman. Your one, Shulamith, she’s a big girl, isn’t she. Did Shulamith like you fucking her, Sonder?” (204)

Szmul is deeply wounded by Doll’s words because although he adores his wife, he cannot bear the thought of seeing her again and having to tell her what his job is in the concentration camp:

The thought I find hardest to avoid is the thought of returning home to my wife. I can avoid the thought, more or less. But I can’t avoid the dream.

In the dream I enter the kitchen and she swivels in her chair and says, “You’re back. What happened?” And when I begin my story she listens for a while and then turns away, shaking her head [...]

That is all, but the dream is unendurable, and the dream knows this and humanely grants me the power to rouse myself from it. By now I am bolt upright the instant it starts. Then I climb from my bedding and pace the floor no matter how tired I am, because I’m afraid to go to sleep. (137)

But in spite of his tragic fate, Szmul never falls into false sentimentalism or victimization. His narrative is always spare, because his main aim is to bear witness and he thinks that the best way to make the reader believe him is by being calm. Interestingly enough, he seems to be following Levi’s example:

I prefer justice. Precisely for this reason, when describing the tragic world of Auschwitz, I have deliberately assumed the calm, sober language of the witness, neither the lamenting tones of the victim nor the irate voice of someone who seeks revenge. I thought that my account would be all the more credible and useful the more it appeared objective and the less it sounded overtly emotional; only in this way does a witness in matters of justice perform his task, which is that of preparing the ground for the judge. The judges are my readers. (Levi 2004: 382)

Szmul knows that he is writing about an event that has no precedent, no model in human history. He does not want to distort or embellish it, as other Sonders have done before him: “I am a serious man, and I am writing my testimony” (79). But he knows that it is very difficult to tell the truth: “Will I lie? Will I need to deceive? I understand that I am disgusting. But will I *write* disgustingly?” (79). Nevertheless, he will try to accomplish his task as best as he can and tell the world about the horrors of the concentration camp. He is aware of the fact that he will die in Auschwitz, but, like many survivors, believes that his mission is to recount the things he has witnessed: “*Martyrer, mucednik, martelaar, meczonnik, martyr:*

in every language I know, the word comes from the Greek, *martur*, meaning *witness*. We, the Sonders, or some of us, will bear witness” (77).

In the novel Doll argues that for him honour is very important, whereas for the Sonders “Honour gone; the animal or even mineral desire to persist. Being is a habit, a habit they can’t break” (68). But for Szmul being is not a habit, but something very special and valuable and it is precisely his acceptance and celebration of life in spite of the atrocities he witnesses, which makes him a comic hero. According to Hyers (1996) comic heroes reaffirm the unconditional value of life and refuse to let personal tragedies crush their spirit. Comic heroes exalt virtues such as flexibility, freedom, compromise, survivability, sympathy, empathy, generosity, affection, love, meekness. The comic hero has to fight with suffering and disappointment, with the inconsistencies and ambiguities of life and does it rather valiantly. Szmul has to face the absurd fact that “The Jews can only prolong their lives by helping the enemy to victory -a victory that for the Jews means what?” (238)¹¹ and cannot forget that his two sons contributed to this war against the Jews: “I am choking, I am drowning. This pencil and these scraps of paper aren’t enough. I need colours, sounds -oils and orchestras. I need something more than words” (238). Szmul also realizes that with the war the ambiguities, muddiness, limitations and contradictions of human nature come to the fore and that in the end man’s main commitment is to life and the basics of life. As Hyers points out, comic heroism is more concerned with saving skin than with saving face: “Moral codes are in the service of people and their circumstances. Hunger supercedes Mosaic Law” (1996: 66). When people are confronted with the harsh reality of ghettos and concentration camps moral values no longer apply, everything is relativized. The labels with which we define our lives become blurred. This becomes very clear in the novel when one of the prisoners who arrives in Auschwitz tells Szmul what he describes as “a story about the power of hunger” (136). The deportation of all adults over sixty-five and children under ten from the ghetto in Łódź generated a lot of pain, but when the same afternoon those left behind were told that a supply of potatoes was ready for distribution: “a wave of euphoria surges through the streets of the ghetto. Now the focus of talk and thought is not the disappearance of all adults over sixty-five and all children under ten, but the potatoes” (136).

But in spite of so much pain, Szmul has the courage to go on writing and adapt himself to the new circumstances in order to survive. As Hyers explains: “We are endowed with a brain that -along with the capacity for imagining all sorts of paradises and utopias for ourselves, and an equal number of holocausts and hells for our enemies -is capable of imagining an endless variety of alternative modes of

¹¹ Levi describes the fact the Jews were forced to contribute to their own extermination as a “paroxysm of perfidiousness and hatred” (2013: 50).

being, believing, and doing” (1996: 51-2). Like the comic hero, Szmul realizes the importance of being alive and fights to give meaning to his terrible predicament:

There persist three reasons, or excuses, for going on living: first, to bear witness, and, second, to exact moral vengeance. I am bearing witness; but the magic looking glass does not show me a killer. Or not yet.

Third, and most crucially, we save a live (or prolong a life) at the rate of one per transport. Sometimes none, sometimes two –an average of one. And 0.01 per cent is not 0.00. They are invariably male youths. (34)

Amis has explained that by the time Levi wrote “The Grey Zone” he did not know that occasionally the Sonders saved a life (Seaman 2014). They would tell the young boys to say that they were eighteen years old and had a trade so that they would get passed the selection. In fact, when in *The Zone of Interest* the Sonders have a debate on why they lie to the Jews when they arrive at Auschwitz, Szmul puts an end to the discussion by saying: “And I say, ‘*Ihr seit achzen jobr alt, und ihr bott a fach.* That’s all there is. There’s nothing else.” (138)

Instead of allowing dramatic circumstances to destroy us, the comic spirit renews our will and courage to live.¹² Szmul celebrates every day that he is still alive: “At every sunrise I tell myself, ‘Well. Not tonight.’ At every sunset I tell myself, ‘Well. Not today’” (200). He realizes that perhaps it is frivolous to persist in a “fool’s inferno” (200), but his commitment to life is greater than his commitment to death. He is even capable of transcending his own demise by making fun of it. Thus, when Doll tells him that April the thirtieth is the day he will have to stab Hannah, he writes: “It’s now March 10. I feel as though I have been granted eternal life” (202). When Szmul realizes that Doll is going to shoot him after he has killed his wife, he decides to sacrifice himself in order to save the life of the only person in the camp who has been nice to him, Hannah Doll:

She looks in my direction and she says something quite extraordinary to me. And I recoil from it as if I have smoke in my eyes. Five minutes later, standing bent behind the main guardroom, I am able to shed tears for the first time since Chelmo.

“Guten Tag,” she says. (140)

Szmul is aware of the fact that this time his not obeying the orders will make a difference and shows his commitment to life and the basics of life by forcing

¹² In fact, according to Hyers (1996), the book of Job can be considered to belong to the comic mode not because of its happy ending with Job getting back everything that was taken away from him, but because of his attitude when he loses his family and possessions: “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21 RSV).

his own death so that another person can survive. What Hannah remembers with crystal clarity is how Szmul, who never looked her in the eyes, did so as he told her that her husband wanted him to kill her. By making Szmul perform this act of generosity, Amis is showing the reader that under extreme circumstances people like the Sonders are capable of the worst but also of the best. As Hyers has explained, people and circumstances are not so neatly divisible into black and white, right and wrong: “We are suspended, as it were, between heaven and earth, eternity and time, the infinite and the finite, spirit and flesh, rationality and impulse, altruism and selfishness, pride and insecurity, life and death” (1996: 60-61). At the end of the novel by giving Szmul the strength to look into Hannah’s eyes, Amis is giving him his soul back and celebrating his humanity and compassion: “Then after a time you realize that all the Sonders do it: they try to hide their eyes. And who would have guessed how foundationally necessary it is, in human dealings, to see the eyes? Yes. But the eyes are the windows to the soul, and when the soul is gone the eyes too are untenanted” (81).

Hyers asserts that the comic hero reminds us of our intrinsic flexibility and adaptability, which have allowed us to survive under the most difficult circumstances: “We have lived in caves and palaces, deserts and fertile valleys, igloos and tropical huts, monasteries and harems. We have been patriarchal and matriarchal, monarchists and anarchists, capitalists and communists [...] And we have survived” (1996: 52). The comic hero knows that life is never simple, sensible or logical, but still insists on affirming and celebrating life. What defines a comedy is not a completely successful ending, but the way life is perceived and received. Comedy does not ignore suffering or death, but does not leave us with a sense of futility, alienation or despair: “Even in those comedies that end ambiguously or in defeat, one is left with a distinct sense of faith renewed and hope rekindled” (Hyers 1996: 171). When Doll asks Szmul why the Sonders do not rise up, he answers that “The men still hope, sir” and adds “It’s human to hope, sir” (82). Szmul believes that his testimony will bear witness to the atrocities committed by the Nazis and this is why the last words of his diary do not show despair or defeat, but celebrate life and renew hope and faith:¹³

On my way over I will inhumate everything I’ve written, in the Thermos flask beneath the gooseberry bush.

And, by reason of that, not all of me will die. (270)

¹³ Interestingly enough, one of the main aims of the International School for Holocaust Studies at Yad Vashem is to instill in the pupils a feeling of hope: “Studying the Holocaust can generate a feeling of helplessness, but we aim to create a dialogue with the past for a better future”.

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