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ESSAYS

THE HOLOCAUST AND THE GROTESQUE: THE CASE OF ARTUR SANDAUER'S FICTION

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The grotesque art is in general characterised by a group of features: a predilection for forms which are unusual and bizarre; absurdity of the rules governing the presented universe; juxtaposing the frightening with the banal or even comical; striking contrasts of thought, subject and style; lampooning of conventional means and ways of thinking and expression; the deliberate mockery of the sublime; and a challenging attitude towards a world vision based on respect for tradition or common-sense (see Kayser 1981; Bakhtin 1984; Jennings 1963; Harpham 2006). This aesthetics is definitely at odds with conventional ideas of how tragic events should be written about, especially one as total and devastating as the Holocaust.

Michał Głowiński, the eminent literary critic and a Holocaust survivor himself, wrote: “No grotesque work was written about the extermination of the Jews, or about the concentration camps. It is even difficult to conceive of such a work” (Głowiński 1980: 184). But such works do exist, although there are not many which make the grotesque their main artistic device. What is more, for some theorists, like Lawrence Langer, they are the core of Holocaust literature, which so often is “... not the transfiguration of empirical reality, but its disfiguration, the conscious and deliberate alienation of the reader’s sensibilities from the world of the usual and the familiar, with

an accompanying infiltration into the world of the grotesque, the senseless, and the unimaginable ...” (Langer 1975: 2–3).

Elements of the grotesque already occur quite extensively in texts written during the Holocaust: in literary works, such as the ghetto poetry by Władysław Szlengel, or in documentary prose like the diary of Rachela Auerbach or the so called *Diary Written With a Toenail*. The grotesque was also sometimes employed in the post-war literature on concentration camps – consider for example the titles of the 1940s’ short stories by Tadeusz Borowski, where linguistic and social convention is confronted with the macabre: “This way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen” and “Here in Our Auschwitz”/ “Auschwitz Our Home”, (original Polish titles: “Proszę państwa do gazu” and “U nas w Auschwitzu”) or some fragments and aspects of the *House of Dolls* (1955) by Ka-Tsetnik 135633 (Yehiel De-Nur). The grotesque mixture of the morbid and the poetic pervades *Le Sang du ciel* (*Blood from the Sky*) by Piotr Rawicz (1961) or Jerzy Kosiński’s *The Painted Bird* (1965), even more steeped in exaggerated, nightmarish horror. In more recent years the grotesque was, and still is, abundantly used in graphic novels or comic books, like Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1980–1991) or *Achtung Zelig!* by Krzysztof Gawronkiewicz and Krystian Rosenberg (1993–2004). However, few authors of Holocaust literature have received a thorough critical analysis of their grotesque poetics (Albert Drach being a notable exception; see Cosgrove 2004).

One of the early and more striking examples of employing the grotesque in Holocaust literature is the collection of short stories *Śmierć liberała* (*Death of a Liberal*, first published 1947) by Artur Sandauer (1913–1989). The author, better known as a literary critic than a fiction writer, survived the Holocaust in Sambor (now in the Ukraine), and the stories, as well as his later autobiographical book *Zapiski z martwego miasta* (*Notes from a Dead Town*, 1963), are based on his war time experiences (basic bio-bibliographic information on Sandauer can be found in Levine 2003; for the English translation of the title story from *Śmierć liberała* – see Sandauer 2001). Both books contain an account of the lives and then the extermination of the inhabitants of a small-town ghetto. In *Death of a Liberal*, Sandauer’s characters are almost exclusively Jewish: pre-war doctors of law who under Nazi German occupation become officials of the puppet “Jewish Council” (*Judenrat*), former students, now junior clerks of the *Judenrat*, and simple, uneducated men and women who just try to save their own lives and those of their families.

Sandauer describes situations and creates portraits of the Holocaust victims (some of them being perpetrators at the same time) in a merciless way in which horror is associated with comical distortion, and is even seemingly masked by it. Paradoxically, this allows the author to expose the dehumanising mechanisms of the Final Solution more clearly than realistic prose is sometimes

able to achieve. It also seems that, as was the case with many other Holocaust survivors, irony and grotesque made it possible for Sandauer to distance himself from his war time experiences, without which he would have been unable to speak about them. Katarzyna Chmielewska, questioning the thesis of Berel Lang, who stated that figurative representations of the Holocaust are by definition inappropriate (Lang 2003), writes that in the diaries written by the Holocaust victims the irony and “[i]ndirect description of facts, the figurative sphere, which supposedly divides the narration from the reality ... in fact provides the distance, which makes the narration possible in the first place” (2005: 29). Sandauer’s semi-autobiographic fiction provides a similar example (see: Wolk 2010).

Interestingly, reviewers writing in the 1940s about *Death of a Liberal* treated the stories as generally realistic, at most satirically distorting certain aspects of life in the ghettos (see e.g. Wyka 1948). Indeed, the typically grotesque devices often occur in Sandauer’s stories in the role of “the equivalent of the unusual reality, marked by inconceivable and unpredictable contrasts” (Głowiński 1980: 184), and not as factors disassembling this reality in order to structure it in a new way. Such use of the grotesque certainly de-familiarises the presented world, possibly it also de-automatises the reader’s perception of or thinking about the real world (e.g. some historical events or human experiences) but does not necessarily alienate him/her from this world. However, the boundary line between this “modest”, reader-friendly grotesque and the “grand”, total one is thin.

Consider, for example, the story “Spółka z ograniczoną odpowiedzialnością” (Limited Liability Company; in my analysis, I will concentrate on this text and some other related stories). Its protagonist, Dr Henryk Jassym, works in the ghetto administration and his main responsibility is keeping records of food rationing, forced labour directives, and, above all, registration of deaths and “resettlement” (that is to say, deportations to concentration or extermination camps). In his work –

There happen ... disturbing, although at the same time somewhat hilarious occurrences: for example one of the formally deceased who continued to collect his bread rations and go to mandatory work for two full weeks after his death had been registered. How this could have happened nobody knew, for although the bread could have been collected by his family, who would have wanted to go to work in his place? (Sandauer 1974: 16)

An equally bizarre situation occurs when a certain Józef Grad, although twice (!) registered as dead, appears one day in person in Dr Jassym's office and requests him to certify in writing that he is alive, which greatly disturbs the protagonist:

... here I've got proof, Doctor Henryk ran to the deaths cabinet and pulled out the files, his hands trembling with agitation. "You died for the first time on the fourteenth of December last year, of typhoid fever, and for the second time yesterday, on the sixteenth of February this year, the cause not quoted. As far as I am concerned, you do not exist, do you understand?" (Sandauer 1974: 19)

To which Józef Grad answers and explains:

When they registered people for bread, I registered twice, once with my father, once with the kids, so that I could get more bread for them. And then the Arbeitsamt [employment office] started calling everyone to work three times a week, and for me it was six times, because they thought there were two of us. So I had to die for the first time, because where was I to get the strength to work for the Germans all week long? [Here Grad tells the story of how he was beaten up – M.W.] ... so I think to myself: I'd rather starve than have to bear things like that. So I died for the second time (Sandauer 1974: 19-20).

The conversation develops further in this tragicomic style, until it reveals why Grad is determined to return to the living again – in order to save himself from being deported (and "deportation" is the euphemism for death) as a result of being unemployed.

It could be argued that in this passage the absurdity does not cross the boundary of the grotesque in its total form, that it's just a reflection of the "cruel, strange, illogical and chaotic world of the Holocaust" (Kowalska 2005: 50), like in the title of Sara Nomberg-Przytyk's autobiographical book: *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land* (1985). But in the quoted fragments we must also note the word-play exposing the relativity of the notions of "life", "death" and "work", and the unsolved contradictions such as the clash of the rigid formalism of the clerk for whom papers are more significant and trustworthy than a living human being, with the artlessness of the client, for whom regulations are made to be broken. These instruments are those typically belonging to the repertoire of grotesque literature, particularly its "office", (anti)bureaucratic variant represented for example by Nikolai Gogol or Anton Chekhov on the one hand and Franz Kafka on the other.

Indeed, Sandauer's story concentrates on the bureaucratic aspect of the Holocaust – which makes him a predecessor of such authors as Raul Hilberg and Zygmunt Bauman. In "Spółka

z ograniczoną odpowiedzialnością” seemingly ordinary registry work, growing to enormous dimensions (Dr Jassym eventually moves into his office, so that he does not waste time on anything apart from work) obscures from the person engaged in it the horrendous simplicity of the Nazi “calculation”, which is designed to bring about just one result. And here we encounter another typically grotesque trick: a literal representation of a metaphor. In this case it concerns metaphors suggested by the German word *Lösung* (as in *Endlösung*, the Final Solution) – “solution”, in both its meanings: the mathematical and the chemical. In the ghetto, Dr Jassym who used to be an impeccably honest bank accountant before the war, is reduced to recording the figures of the Final Calculation. One morning in his office he fantasises about the ultimate “result” of the operations he records:

He looked into the statistics book, where he kept a daily record of the population. Yesterday it was ten thousand and five, and today – how strange! – a round ten thousand. It’s not often that one finds a figure so round, so pleasant to the touch: four zeros and a solitary one. Zero is much nicer in writing than other figures ... But for the initial figure of one, one could have written five neat zeros. What a nice thought. Well, enough of this daydreaming! To work, to work! (Sandauer 1974: 15–16)

The grotesque simplification of the situations and characters, depriving them of almost any psychological dimension, limiting them to a few basic gestures and behaviours makes it possible for the author to expose the mechanism of implicating the victims – especially the officials of the *Judenräte* – in genocide. In this vision the circumstances of war, which corrupt all values, turn the old, “universal”, virtues of diligence, honesty and work for the community into factors leading to cooperation with murder. Pre-war clerks and lawyers, unable to quit their former social roles, become tools in the hands of the Nazis – like Dr Kirsche, ex-barrister, a character reminiscent in some ways of Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, the *Judenälteste* (head of the Council of Elders) of Łódź ghetto. The narrator summarises Kirsche’s career in typical, for Sandauer and for the grotesque, contradictory style: “When the Germans came, Doctor Kirsche was the first to volunteer for forced labour. Thanks to this, after a day of rinsing pots he advanced to the position of the head of the hastily formed Council” (Sandauer 2001: 136). Several months later, when the SS officer (bearing the Biblical name of Gabriel) tells him to make a list of half the ghetto inhabitants who would then be deported, Kirsche, acting on an impulse of his old self, a defence lawyer, says he may only make a list of those who would *not* be deported.

In the beginning, it is Dr Kirsche’s intention to enter on the list persons of high “moral value or social usefulness” (Sandauer 1974: 24) but Dr Jassym, who is helping him with his

registers and also with drawing up the list, has to admit: "... I don't have a note of this in my files" (Sandauer 1974: 24). So they proceed with a more practical criterion: "... let's choose those with whom we are more or less acquainted" (Sandauer 1974: 24). And then, because there is little time to compile the "survivors list", it turns out to be shorter than it might have been, shorter than the unwritten list of those who will be deported and most probably killed. In the end, lack of time forces them to leave out all people with longer names or longer addresses, so when Dr Kirsche proposes to enrol for example Maurycy Katzenellenbogen of All Saints street, number seventeen, Dr Jassym's answer is: "That sounds long-winded ... You must choose shorter names, Sir, like Schmidt or Bąk. We won't manage to reach the quota anyway and such a long one takes up the space, that is time, of two shorter ones" (Sandauer 1974: 25).

But there is no hope even for the "shorter ones", such as Józef Grad's children... The bureaucratic reduction of human beings to their surnames (long or short, Jewish or "Aryan") and to basic statistical attributes is just an element of the process of reducing them to nothingness. In the story "Noc praworządności" (The night of law and order), recounting the "action" executed as a result of "Kirsche's list", a misunderstanding concerning the identity of one of the listed persons arises. At the address stated on the list, instead of the expected Rosenblums lives a family named Rosenblau. On this basis, the protagonist of the story, a young *Judenrat* clerk (possibly an autobiographical figure), tries to save them from deportation. But the Gestapo agent present at the scene dispels any doubt (about the true meaning of the "deportation", too) in an instant: "Ah, it makes no difference at all: Rosenholz or Rosenklotz... We'll take it into consideration at the destination" (Sandauer 1974: 34).

The grotesque story of "Kirsche's list" illustrates several groups of problems at the same time. Firstly, the victims' inability to shed their pre-war habits, together with their desperate need to rationalise their situation, and the inevitable fiasco of their attempts to make sense of the *Endlösung* politics. Secondly, the unintentional entanglement of sections of the Jewish community during World War II, especially the assimilated intelligentsia, in the very process they wish to stop or try to avoid (their involuntarily admitted partial liability for this process, is ironically expressed in the phrase 'Limited liability company'). Thirdly, the stories reveal the all-encompassing character of the Holocaust, as epitomised in Dr Kirsche's dying as "the last one from the town" (Sandauer 2001: 142), his fate contradicting and at the same time confirming Józef Grad's bitter observation: "But you knew how to save your own lives" (Sandauer 1974: 27).

The world of bureaucracy with its tendency to produce documents, lists, files and to reducing human individuals to data and statistics has always been a favourite subject matter for grotesque writers. In the Holocaust grotesque by Sandauer it provides the means for symbolical

representation of the very process of mass extermination. Let us return to Dr Jassym's office. The repeatable element of his job is to "transfer [the file of the deceased] from the wasting cabinet of the living to the bulging cabinet of the dead". "... soon there won't be room for any more", reflects the "corpse accountant", "a new cabinet must be ordered at the carpenter's" (Sandauer 1974: 16). After the night during which all inhabitants who had not had the luck to be included on the list prepared by Kirscheand, Jassym left the town for ever, distressed Dr Jassym raves in fever:

That – that must have been a mistake, misconstrued directions from Berlin, a blunder in some office on the way. And they, those people, will come back one day from the Ukraine, from faraway Ukraine, where they had been sent; they will come back sunburnt from working in the fields and will cry: "Get us registered!"

"Registered? Right this instant! ... The files are waiting for you untouched, stacked in the cabinet marked with Ü (*übersiedelt* [deported]). I did not burn them. I've kept them in good order, so that you could all register a new one on your return. You'll see how smoothly it goes in my office. I take it from here, put it back there – done! – and you're back among the living. You're welcome! Let's begin! Please don't jostle, ladies and gentlemen! (Sandauer 1974: 25)

The grotesque vision of files more durable than people, files which are not burnt in stoves or crematoria, becomes here a symbol of the mass character of the Holocaust, of the objectification of its victims, of their plight (shown not directly, but through its negative), and eventually, of the irreversibility of the Shoah.

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I have concentrated here only on chosen aspects of the grotesque accounts of the Holocaust in Artur Sandauer's fiction. The grotesque in the works of this and other Holocaust writers is a much wider issue, worthy of thorough study. The authors variously employ images of dehumanisation, ironically reproduce Nazi propaganda, mock highbrow culture (e.g. the Bible), expose the contradictions intrinsic in 19th and 20th century humanitarian discourse or in language itself. Sometimes they show the extermination of people as a horrifying carnival, blur the boundary between the human and the animal or provoke the reader in other ways. That is how the grotesque makes readers uncomfortable, questions readymade interpretations and judgements, demands independence in taking a stance on things which are beyond

understanding. And that is why it becomes an efficient device of artistic expression concerning this subject which does not easily lend itself to more traditional and conventional approaches.

At the beginning of this paper I quoted Michał Głowiński's early opinion on the impossibility of the use of the grotesque in Holocaust literature. In 2005, in the introduction to the volume of essays entitled *Stosowność či forma: jak opowiadać o Zagładzie?* (Propriety and form: how to tell the story of the Holocaust) Głowiński corrected his view on the relationship between the Shoah theme and the aesthetics of the grotesque: "... undoubtedly, such devices as irony or grotesque do not bring dissonance or discord; moreover, they constitute a rightful and, one might say, efficient way of expression [concerning the Holocaust]... There is no language, no style, no diction which might be in advance considered suitable and proper", or unsuitable and improper, we may add, "in literary works describing the Shoah – both in literature and other arts" (2005: 14). Sandauer's fiction is one of the examples of the truthfulness of this statement. In it, the grotesque poetics serves not only as means of exposing chosen aspects of the Holocaust but it also helps to create metaphors concerning the basic mechanisms and fundamental processes of the catastrophe.

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ABSTRACT

The Holocaust and the Grotesque: the Case of Artur Sandauer's Fiction

The paper brings an analysis of the forms and functions of the grotesque in Artur Sandauer's literary works as well as more general reflections on non-conventional means of artistic

expression applied to the Shoah experience. In Sandauer's fiction, the grotesque poetics serves not only to expose chosen aspects of the Holocaust but it also helps to create metaphors concerning the basic mechanisms and fundamental processes of the catastrophe. The grotesque in the works of this and other Holocaust writers is a much wider issue, worthy of thorough study. The authors variously employ images of dehumanisation, ironically reproduce Nazi propaganda, mock highbrow culture, expose the contradictions intrinsic in 19th and 20th century humanitarian discourse or in language itself. The grotesque makes readers uncomfortable, questions readymade interpretations and judgements, demands independence in taking a stance on things which are beyond understanding. That is why it becomes an efficient device of artistic expression concerning subjects which do not easily lend themselves to more traditional and conventional approaches.

KEYWORDS

The Holocaust, the grotesque, Artur Sandauer, modern Polish literature

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