

PART 2

Dying Over There



The Laugh of a God Who Doesn't Exist

Marc De Kesel

1 'Little Favors of Divine Will'

'Every time I laugh . . . my deity, who doesn't exist, of course, knows I cleave to Him, knows I have understood Him profoundly, if only for an instant.' (S 330)

A God who does not exist, but whom you believe in. A God you understand the best in moments of humor and laughing, including laughing at God Himself.

I quote this strange faith in God from the lips of one of the characters in *See Under: Love*. We are in the years 1920, in one of the Jewish *shtetls* in central Europe, and the man speaking is Shimon Zalmanson, editor of a children's magazine named *Little Lights*. Two decades later, in 1943, in one of the Nazi extermination-camp where the entire *shtetl* culture literally and 'biologically' was burned, Zalmanson's memorable words are cited by Anshel Wasserman, another character of the novel. Twenty years ago, Wasserman was widely praised as the author of the successful story cycle 'The Children of the Heart', but unfortunately, his literary inspiration ran dry. Now, he is sitting in the camp office, facing the leading SS-commander, Otto Neigel. Actually, instead of sitting there, he should already have been gassed and cremated. After a failed gassing, they shot him several times through the head, but inexplicably, he felt nothing but a strange noise passing through his brain. This is why the camp commander had decided to give him a 'camp-job' in his own office, as gardener. The commander's hidden reason, however, was that, as a child, he grew up with Wasserman's stories, and that, now, he takes the opportunity for enjoying some literary entertainment at the end of his 'working' day.

It is to him that Wasserman addresses the words of his editor Zalmanson, elevating laughter to the most eminent form of religious faith. But Wasserman does not only address *him*. Aside, invisible to Neigel, he also addresses Momik/Shleimeleh/Shloma, a writer in crisis, and the main character of the novel. Momik supposes Wasserman—erraneously—to be his grandfather. When, in the course of Part 3, Wasserman constantly addresses his words to him, it is because he wants Momik to write his story—the story of his 'grandpa' who has lost his capacity to properly speak after the war.

The larger context is as follows. The son and grandson of Jewish Holocaust survivors is an Israeli writer in the eighties and goes through a deep existential crisis after having been confronted with the traumatic past of his parents and his people. By writing a novel about (among others) his 'grandpa', he tries to overcome his crisis. 'Grandpa', so Momik tries to make clear in the novel he wants to write, is not simply the lamb that is brought to the slaughter. It is true that this perception dominates the larger part of the Jewish Holocaust memory, just as it dominates Momik's own memory of his 'grandpa', but the facts were different, so Momik wants to prove: his 'grandpa' was a writer and writing was *his* way to resist the Nazi-beast. This is why Momik/Shleimeleh/Shloma's resistance, too, will consist in writing—writing as resistance against his own depression and against the depressing world that has made and still makes things like the Shoah possible. And this is why Momik wants to do justice to the story of his 'grandpa' becoming speechless: to the stories he wrote, to the story of his life, both his life in the *shtetl* and his 'non-life' in the Shoah. Simultaneously, Momik wants to do justice to the life and force that his own story (and that literature as such) can give to the struggle against the lethal forces that Wasserman and other survivors barely escaped.

One of the topics in Anshel Wasserman's story (told by Momik) is the friendship that he once shared with his editor, Shimon Zalmanson, who professionally was a severe person but, apart from that, lived his life as a real 'bon vivant'. A thing that the anxious bourgeois Wasserman was secretly jealous of. And that, while he is sitting in front of his Nazi executioner, he is involuntarily thinking of. If only because his former editor would have simply laughed away the thorny position he is in. And 'thorny' is after all a euphemism if one tries to describe Wasserman's situation. It is not that he is eager to escape death. On the contrary, he hankers after death, but fate refuses to give him that and, instead, forces him, as a living dead, to fake his lost literary talent in order to please one of the main persons responsible for the extermination of his family and his people.

So, only now he understands the holy message of Zalmanson's reaction to such situations: laughing, feeling joyful, and laughing troubles away. For this is the way in which Zalmanson has entered the gas chamber. Together with Wasserman, be it that, there, the latter was confronted with his acute incapacity to die. This obliged him to listen to Zalmanson's inexcusable laughing till the very end—longer, in a way, than Zalmanson himself was able to tolerate. Elsewhere, in a passage in which Wasserman addresses himself *aside* to (the always invisibly present) Momik/Shleimele, that moment in the gas chamber is strikingly described:

Nu, they were writhing and groaning [...] and only I, Anshel Wassermann was left standing like a lulav, and Zalmanson started laughing then, would that I had never heard him, snorting and weeping, such a laugh, till suddenly he died. He was the first to die! And it is important you should know this, Shleimeleh: Shimon Zalmanson, the Jew, my only friend, editor of *Little Lights*, the children's magazine, died laughing in the gas chamber, a fitting death for a man like him, who believed that God reveals Himself through humor. (S 190)

Wasserman is not capable of following his murdered editor's example. He takes things too seriously for that. Including the literary job his executioner has charged him with. Although the latter is forced to do him a favor in return: after every successful literary evening, he has to shoot 'his Jew' through the head. One never knows it once may work. But laughing the way Zalmanson does is certainly no option for him.

Whether, however, Grossman's reader will be able to repress a fit of laughter is less certain. Despite its subject—how children and grandchildren of Shoah victims can deal with that trauma—the novel is in fact one long chain of hilarious situations, scenes, and characters. A boy (Momik as kid) wants to catch the 'Nazi-beast' about whom he 'heard' his parents and others in his neighborhood keep silence, picks up that it can come out of every beast, therefore breeds animals at home in the basement; and as the Nazi-beast still refuses to come out, he gathers all traumatized lunatics (Shoah survivors) of his neighborhood, including 'grandpa' Wasserman, hoping this will tempt the beast to show up. It goes without saying that the entire plan runs into a hilarious fiasco. So far Part 1. Part 2, which is an ode to the Jewish-Polish writer Bruno Schulz, might be a tougher part to read, the subject is not less hilarious. A Jew, anno 1943 at an art gallery in Dantzig/Gdansk, kisses Edward Munch's *Scream* (S 90) and escapes his pursuers choosing the open sea to become a salmon in a school of salmons. The conflict he has there with his rescuers, both the sea as such and the salmon school, brings about highly comic and funny scenes—certainly when the story is interlarded with another one about a writer in crisis supposing to have contact with 'Bruno' by speaking directly to the sea and, at times, by disappearing in it like once Bruno did. In Part 3, a Jew fails in the only test he is invited to in 'Auschwitz': dying. That this guarantees a set of unseen comic situations has already been illustrated above in the few things revealed from Wasserman's story. The fourth and last part is, if possible, even more comical. It tells the story of a baby, Kazik, who in 22 hours lives the 72 years of a normal man. The baby is the central preoccupation of a group of aged madmen in the

destroyed zoo of Warsaw in the same year 1943. The group is gathered by Otto Brig, a Christian Polish man who supposes his collective of 'artists' to be the true response to the dominating Nazi terror. One of them is a real 'elephantiasis man' who carefully counts the number of his 'non-ejaculations', convinced as he is that once his saved and accumulated sexual energy will catapult him out of the Nazi hell.

When looked at closely, the entire book is one big hilarious joke. It is probably only due to Grossman's unquestionable literary genius that the critics haven't razed the novel to the ground, accusing it to be sheer blasphemy. When George Didi-Huberman once began an essay on the Shoah and visual culture saying '*Il faut s'imaginer*' Auschwitz, he was reprimanded immediately.¹ Grossman's novel is one big ode addressed to that imperative, and constantly violates the ban on images that dominates a larger part of the Shoah memorial culture. The critics reproached Didi-Huberman of feeding the illusion that images can bring us into the heart of the Shoah, the gas chamber, and so help us overcome the non-representable nature of the Holocaust. With Grossman, we enter all the ventricles of the Shoah's heart, both the ones of the executioners and the ones of the victims. He carries us along to the gas chamber's very inside and lets us witness there how a Jew dies from laughing. A greater blasphemy is almost impossible.

This is all the more true if one considers that the Jew's laughter answers the blasphemous laughter of the Nazi. The passageway leading the naked Shimon Zalmanson and Anshel Wasserman to the gas chamber was decorated in a way that could not be misunderstood. A few lines above the quote that opened this chapter, Wasserman cites Zalmanson's words uttered just before they were collectively killed:

'No doubt you remember, Anshel, the sight that greeted us at the entrance of the Holy of Holies, the little gas chamber?' Wasserman remembered very well: the Germans had brought the ark curtain from a synagogue in Warsaw and hung it at the entrance to the gas chambers. Embroidered on the curtain were the words 'This is the gate of the Lord. The righteous shall enter' and here Zalmanson began to laugh, and died laughing with the realization that even someone like fusty old Wasserman has his funny points. Laughter itself was the spontaneous ritual of his religion. 'Every time I laugh' he explained, 'my deity, who doesn't exist, of course, knows I cleave to Him, knows I have understood Him profoundly, if only for an instant. Because, my little Wasserman, the good Lord created the world

1 Didi-Huberman 2003: 11. For a critical reply, see Wajcman 2001; Pagnoux 2001: 84–108.

out of nothingness, out of chaos, and He took His blueprint and building materials from that chaos . . . nu, what do you say to that? (S 330)

Zalmanson's laughter responds in the first place to the sarcastic joke of the Nazis' letting the Jews advance their certain death as if they were entering the space where, in a synagogue, the Torah scrolls are stored and which, since the second destruction of the Temple (70 AD) functions as the 'Holy of Holies'. Nazi sarcasm cannot be more thorough, more *grundlich*, more blasphemous. And what does Shimon Zalmanson do? Instead of protecting himself against the humiliation, and, out of vicarious shame, looking away from such tasteless cynicism, he fully approves of it. He simply does what each joke expects one to do: he laughs. What is more, he does what each *sarcastic* joke expects one to do: he laughs without laughing away the cruel thing almost every joke is about. For this is the Nazis' intention: the curtain hanging before what the Jews consider to be the Holy of Holies, hangs there for nothing, because it hangs hiding nothing. It hangs there hiding the *nothing* the Jews are as biological and cultural identity, hiding the nothing they are now and, thanks to the biopolitically 'correct' Nazi ideology, they will be in a few moments. It hangs there hiding their grave, telling that in that grave lies nothing and that their death doesn't count, that the one dying there, never was really living, never was real life and that, therefore, just like that embroidered curtain, he was mere fiction and fantasy. In case of the Jew: a bad, biologically and racially wrong fantasy.

Indeed, Shimon Zalmanson understood the joke of his killers perfectly. He didn't miss the point and *thus* laughs—dies laughing, literally. So the 'immortal' Wasserman was able to witness. But his lethal laughing not only fully acknowledges that which the Nazis laugh with, Zalmanson acknowledges at the same time his own religion. This is why he does not simply laugh because the Nazis are right in his eyes. He also laughs with the Nazi joke because even in that he recognizes a sign of God. Because it is God himself who, in the most terrible moment of their history, has given the Jews that joke. When Zalmanson laughs, it is in gratitude for this divine present. The lines above the just cited passage cannot be misunderstood:

Zalmanson (who was, incidentally, the errant son of a great rabbi) said humor was the sole means to understand God and His Creation in all its mystery, and to go on worshipping Him in gladness. Zalmanson's God went around showering mankind with little favors of divine will. 'No doubt you remember, Anshel, the sight that greeted us at the entrance of the Holy of Holies, the little gas chamber?' (S 330)

One of the 'little favors of divine will': thus Zalmanson qualifies the cynical, sadistic joke the Nazis play on the Jews just before killing them. Similarly, he has no fear to name the 'little gas chamber' 'the Holy of Holies'.

Against the use of the word 'holocaust' as the term to indicate the Nazi genocide of the European Jews, there is a widespread critical reserve. A cruelty and suffering of that proportion cannot be done justice with a religious, and more precisely sacrificial term. 'Holocaust' is the word for a sacrifice that 'burns all', i.e. a sacrifice that does not leave the participants anything to eat. One cannot appropriate the unimaginable cruelty of the Shoah, not even religiously. On Zalmanson, this kind of critical reserve is definitely wasted. According to him, even infernos such as Auschwitz are barrels full of 'little favors of divine will', and with full religious assent he takes them to heart—laughing, laughing to God, even in the most godforsaken instant of his dying. As a restlessly consumable sacrifice—i.e. as a 'holocaust'—he offers himself while laughing to his God. An apotheosis of gratitude for the humor offered to him by God even in the most infernal of his Creation's 'mysteries'.

2 "The Almighty"

Zalmanson's laugh seems to be Grossman's grotesque, literary blow-up of the kind of reactions that historically are ascribed to Hasidic Jewry. Hasidic Jews were largely represented among the Holocaust victims, if only because their kind of Judaism was dominant in the religious and cultural life of the East-European *shtetls*. It was thanks to the Hasidic reformation movement that, during the 18th century, Ashkenazi Judaism conquered a proper place both within the Jewish world and in European culture in general.² Referring to elements from the Cabbala (but without the sophisticated intellectualism in which it often was practiced), Hasidism believed in a far reaching interaction between the divine and the earthly reality, so that even the most 'earthly' and 'evil' things were considered to be signs referring to God. Among other prominent Hasidic rabbis, Grossman mentions a few times Nahman of Breslow (1772–1811),³ who learned that happiness and joy are the privileged signs of God's blessing. This made him compel his disciples to be always happy and joyful.⁴ It is a fact that in the Nazi concentration and extermination camps,

² Kriwaczek 2005.

³ Cohn-Sherlok 1997: 97–100.

⁴ Besançon 1986: 432–439.

many Hasidic Jews did what they could to obey that commandment.⁵ In his way, also Shimon Zalmanson does so in Grossman's novel.

In the beginning, before Creation, there was only God. The infinite space was filled with Divine Light. Thus the Jewish myth inspired by Isaac Luria's Cabbala-interpretation. In order to create heaven and earth, God decided to 'shrink', to 'contract' himself. In a gesture of 'contraction'—in the Hebrew of the Cabbala called *'tsimtsum'*⁶—the Light-God shrank. This way, an immense space was set free. Deprived of Divine Light and Goodness, that space was dark and empty, and allowed evil to come into being. Even when the dark immediately was traversed by God's Light again, evil and godforsakenness stuck to the Creation that was made in that space. But also sparks of the original Light remained present in every single corner of the created universe. Even in those corners dominated by evil. This is why evil, badness, calamity and disaster are to be conceived as possible bearers of redemption.⁷ The *raison d'être* of the Jewish people consists in gathering all over the universe, including its most evil corners, the sparks of light that could bring mankind back to the God of Light. Thus the Chosen People has to fulfil its task of bringing redemption to the entire creation.

This kind of Hasidism based on the Lurian Cabbala constitutes the background of all 'positive' characters in Grossman's novel. In what seems to be the worse, they are able to recognize the sparks of redemption, as the laughing Zalmanson recognized it in the corridor leading to the gas chamber as well as in the gas chamber itself. Just like all others acknowledge a messianic feature in the most abject of their inclinations and idiosyncrasies.

Yedidya Munin, for instance, the manic ejaculative superman, already mentioned above, interprets his own sexual aberration in no other way. Which is the reason why Otto Brig received him in his circle of 'artists' intending to engage into combat against the Nazi terror. In a conversation with another member of that circle, Fried, the physician/veterinarian of the zoo, who takes heed of Munin's obsession of constantly touching his genitals, the name of Nahman of Breslow is mentioned, together with a striking evocation of the Lurian-Cabbalistic doctrine of redemption:

'... And the sperm, your honor surely knows that sperm, a drop of semen is more than a drop of semen...' 'Is it?' 'Absolutely so! It, too, contains a

5 Schindler 1990; Gabner 2005.

6 Scholem 1995: 260–265.

7 For the hasidic idea that one can experience God *within* the mundane (*Avodah Begashmiut*), see Schindler 1990: 12–13.

divine spark! And the *organ*, the *smitchick*, all the more. And we find in the compilation of Rabbi Nahman that the whole world was created for the sake of Israel, and even for the lesser ones of Israel, such as I, for instance, and even for the least of *organs*, and all this so that Israel may be redeemed [...]. (S 372)

[Fried:] 'But God—is holy! Transcendent, and all that, while you—foo! It is too revolting!' Munin: 'Only seemingly, your honor! Seemingly indeed it is revolting, but God's glory is everywhere, as they say in the *Zohar*, Munin's commentary—there is no place where God is not, He pervades even that which is called sin, and sparks that fell from on high are tarnished now and sullied in every kind of corruption, in the drop of semen, too, and we, the children of Israel, are commanded to worship the Holy One, blessed be He, with devotion, in order to bring those sparks back to their rightful place, and even the most terrible sinners will be His support, [...]' (S 373–374)

What semen and ejaculation mean for Yedidya Munin, blasphemy and sanctification mean for Shimon Zalmanson. The sinful 'drop of semen' contains an unspoiled spark of Light, and Munin's obsession for ejaculation is his way to push the hidden sparks back to their origin. In the same way, the sardonic laughter of the Nazis hanging the synagogue curtain before the entree of the gas chamber is a spark of Light to be acknowledged. This makes Zalmanson's laughter in the gas chamber a supreme act of Hasidic religiosity.

The divine is what even the most abject and godless things can behold as seeds of redemption. Only in *that* sense, God is almighty. Not in the sense that he has realized all that is possible. Only *as mere possibility* He is almighty. He is inexhaustible, infinite potentiality—a capability incapable of realizing its capacity and of reaching its limits. Operating in the darkest corners of the universe, this God gives new possibilities to everything that, exhaustedly, seems to dash against its limits. Instead of a transcendent God whom human desire is longing for, He is radically immanent, again and again breaking open the potentialities of mortal humans. It is a God who delivers the human potentiality from its finitude, not by integrating it in a realized infinity, but by giving finitude as such again and again new possibilities. God as an infinitely creating God is the basic intuition of the cabbalisticly inspired Hasidism, which constitutes the background of a larger part of the Jewish characters in Grossman's novel.

The 'delusion of creation' into which another of Otto Brig's 'artists', Hannah Zeitrin, has fallen, illustrates this strikingly. Hannah is a Polish/Jewish woman

whose husband and children were killed by the Nazis in 1939, at the very beginning of the war. Now, 1943, she lives in the ghetto of Warsaw, together with her new husband (Yisrael Lev Barkov) and the child she got from him. One night, a Polish policeman capriciously shoots the child as well as her sister who was carrying the child to Hannah's house. Since all this occurs a few minutes before the hour of the curfew, the two dead bodies stay lying outside on the street in the sight of Hannah and her husband. A delirious dream keeps the desperate mother between sleep and wake: incessantly she has sex with her man, incessantly she bears children, and, once outside the house, one after another each child is shot through the head.

Hannah: 'Barkov and I were like hungry animals that night. We gave birth to my son Dolek, and my Rochka, and then Nechemia, and Ben-Zion, and Abigail. And our last child. And Barkov lay with me again and again. And we scratched and bit each other till we bled. And we sweated buckets and drank buckets to have more en more moisture. And my womb was a giant funnel, a cornucopia. Seas and mountains and forests and land. And children flowed out of Barkov and me and filled the streets, and the ghetto, and all of Warsaw. And our passion knew no bounds. And our children were murdered outside. And we made new children. And then we heard shots outside again. So we made more children. And towards dawn we knew we could never stop. And then we felt everything move with us, the bed and the room and the house and the street. Everything rose and fell and writhed and sweated and groaned. And when dawn broke, all the world was with us, all the world was dancing our dance. People and trees and cats and stones. A dance. Even the sleepers did it in their dreams. Dreams. God was giving in. His terrible secret had been found out. That He can create only one thing. That He has doomed us to passion. To love this life. Love this life at any cost. Love without reason. And faith in life. And longing. [...]' (S 411)

Notice the same kind of reaction as in the case of Zalmanson's lethal fit of laughter. Again, childless, again realizing that, in a Nazi-universe, raising children has no sense, Hannah Zeitrin does not stop bearing children, children *for that very world*. In the hell of the ghetto she deliberately is a funnel of voluptuousness and labour pains, incessantly, until she feels that the entire world—man, animal, and stone—enjoys limitlessly that kind of 'procreative' lechery.

Here, the enigma of the novel's title is revealed. In the realm of death, pogrom, mass murder, and crematoria, victims have only one motto, 'See

Under: Love', 'Love' to be found 'under: Sex'.⁸ The only remedy is love, love that is sex, sex that is creating life, giving birth. Exploiting life's inexhaustible potentialities. This is God's mystery, that He is life, an excessive source of life incapable of running dry. And Hannah's and Barkov's sexual orgy has forced God to abandon his usual reserve: 'God was giving in'.

At least in the delirium of Hannah's dream during the night she was forced to stare at the dead body of her child lying next to that of her sister on the street in the Warsaw ghetto. The same night, Barkov could no longer stand it and committed suicide.⁹ But Hannah doesn't give up. In other words, even awake, she sticks to her delirium. She begins to make herself up for her God and, in full make-up, wanders through the streets of the ghetto. And where others stick to the facts (a mad drifter who keeps on laughing even when by times she is raped both by Polish and by Jewish men), Otto Brig sees what Hannah really is doing: seducing God so that He keeps on revealing his secret. Otto admits her in his community at the zoo where now the 'most beautiful woman in the world' dances in order, once again, to seduce God. It is her way to shape her 'war with God', a war against a God who is at war with himself. Otto and Hanna hear 'him bang His hoary head against the wall and moan with pain' (S 412).

3 Crisis

Does David Grossman belong to the kind of 'artists' recruited by Otto Brig? Is he a modern exponent of the cabbalistic and Hasidic culture able to turn the harshest Nazi sadism into divine light sparks? Is Grossman a pious Hasidic Jew? If not wrong, the question is at least pointless. As if the understanding of a novel depends on what we know about an author's biography. Yet, within the boundaries of the novel, the question is not inappropriate. Does Momik/Shleimele/Shlomo belong to Otto Brig's 'artistic' collective? Is the way he deals with his existential crisis not imbued by Hasidic mythology and, even, Hasidic faith?

Let us have a second look at Momik's crisis. He is a thirty years old writer, married, father of a son, and 'would-be' grandchild of a Shoah-survivor. The crisis came on during the months he decided to have children with his wife. Initially, he didn't want children. This seemed inappropriate to him in a world enabling things like the Shoah, a world that has not come to terms yet with

⁸ 'SEX, See Under: Love' (S 376); 'LOVE, See under: SEX' (S 305).

⁹ 'And Yisrael Lev tore himself from me. He dragged himself to the window and threw himself out.' (S 500)

the possibility that one shoots one's colleague's 'house Jew' because the other has shot his. This happened, so Momik discovered, to Bruno Schulz, a famous 20th-century Polish writer, in the ghetto of his home town Drohobycz—as the 'house Jew' of the Nazi officer Felix Landau (S 119; 209). This made a deep impression on Momik. To him, it felt as an attack on language itself. A language allowing sentences like 'You killed my Jew, so I will kill yours', loses all acceptability. Such language should be destroyed, so that, from its ashes, a new one could rise up again in which sentences like this have become impossible. This is why Momik is fascinated by Schulz's literary work. Years before the Shoah occurred, this Polish writer already had that intention in mind. To destroy and to rebuild language is the basic motive behind Schulz's literary writing. In a passage in the second part of Grossman's novel, Momik (who is looking for Bruno) is told by the sea:

... that Bruno, sensitive as he was, had guessed everything years before it actually happened. And for that reason, perhaps, he had begun to write, to train himself in the new language and the new grammar. He understood humanity and knew; he heard the rumbling long before anyone else heard it. He had always been the weak link. Yes. He knew that a language that will admit a sentence like 'I killed your Jew... In that case, I will now kill...' etc., a language where such verbal constructs do not turn to poison in the speaker's mouth—is not the language of life, human and moral, but a language infiltrated many ages past by evil traitors, with one intention—to kill (S 167–168)

A new language, killing the one of death and giving birth to the one 'of life'. This is the impossible task of a writer, so Momik thinks. This task names both Momik's crisis and his way out of that crisis.

Bruno Schulz strikingly expresses Momik's crisis, for he lived in a world in which sentences like 'I have killed your Jew...' were commonly accepted and, yet, he kept on being an 'artist'. How could he do that? How could he obey Nazi officer Landau, who liked to shoot children in the mouth while they were hankering for lollies and who at the same time admired both Schulz's literary and graphic art? How could he obey this war criminal who has taken him as his 'house Jew' and charged him to paint frescos on the walls of his private house? How could he make art on Nazi command? This is the idea Momik cannot stand. How can one be an artist for the benefit of the Nazis?

For Momik, it is a real question, if only because he assumes that Bruno is basically right to do so, and that it is up to him, Momik, to understand it. By traversing his crisis, by writing like Bruno wrote, Momik begins to understand.

In the darkest night, one must recognize the spark of pure light. In the most lethal, one must let speak the living. That is what creation is about. That is the task of art and literature. And this is why Bruno could continue doing what he did in the time before Landau made him his *'Hausjude'*. He could do so even when it got clear to him that the Nazis' *New Order* was 'new' because it was an order without people of his 'race', an order built on the death of the Jew. With his art, Bruno tried to break open the Nazis' world and make them realize that the ones they considered to represent death (the evil virus among the world's races) were in fact life's creative force. Yet, Momik's understanding of Bruno's lesson is only possible by an intervention of his imagination that explicitly 'changes' the facts. Unlike in Schulz's biography, in Momik's writing Bruno does not die. He escapes. He disappears into the sea, into that fluid element where nothing is what it is, where each fish can choose to go or not to go his own single way in an ocean that allows each his own language. He is taken by an element in which even his decomposition is still a fertile gesture.

That fertility is similar to the one of that other Bruno, 'grandpa' Wasserman. Wasserman does in fact what Bruno does. Obedient to the Nazi commandment, he produces art, in his case literary art. In the story he tells for (and with) him, he gathers a collective of 'artists' centred on a kind of strange apotheosis of fertility: a baby who, in hardly one day, lives the entire life of an adult man. It is Momik's way to show that even in the centre of Warsaw 1943, a life not affected by the Nazi killing machinery is possible. It is Momik's escape from his existential crisis as well. Of course it is foolish to beget children in a world that cannot deal with the normality that sentences as 'I killed your Jew ...' once had. Or, what in the novel amounts to the same thing: in a world in which each Israeli is doomed to face his Palestinian neighbour/enemy in arms till the end of his day. A world in which his children will have to share their playground with tanks and armoured cars and where a pomegranate might always be simply a grenade. But life is to be lived, made and loved nonetheless.

Yet, even when Momik overcomes his fear of having children and becomes a father, the crisis is not fully over. Remember, for instance, the passage when he visits the neighbourhood play area with his young son.

I am always testing him. He's taller and sturdier than most children of his age, and that is good, but he is afraid of them. He is afraid of everything. I have to climb the slide because he refuses to move without me. I climb down again and leave him there crying that he's afraid he might fall. Some kindly soul walks over to inform me that he's afraid. I smile, coldly beatific, and tell her that out in the forest children his age were used as sentinels and made to sit guard for hours high in the treetops.

She recoils in horror. [...] He screams and carries on. I light a cigarette and watch him. [...] Come here, you little coward, I say out loud, feigning nonchalance stubbing my cigarette out on the heel of my shoe, and then I climb up to get him. But when his mouth sticks to my neck and trembles with a mournful sob, I feel the heavy pendulum of childish shame swing from his heart to mine with such force it almost knocks me off the ladder. Forgive me, my child, I say inwardly, forgive everything, be wiser and more patient than I am, because I don't have the strength, they didn't teach me how to love. Be strong enough to tolerate me, love me. And stop crying like a girl, I whisper out loud. (S 149)

Not a real son will release Momik from his crisis, but a fictitious one. Not the strong shoulder of a child which the father can cry on, but a weak baby burning life in less than a day in order to keep itself saved from ubiquitous evil. Not his Holocaust research keeping him day after day in Yad Vashem, not a harsh confrontation with the facts, but imagination and fiction show him the way out from the impasse both his life and his writing is in. That imagination makes him one with Bruno and enables him to understand the story his ununderstandably mumbling grandpa 'told' him when he was a child, a story that he now understands/imagines as the one of a Nazi beast that repents—read: commits suicide—by getting absorbed by a story about a baby who, in Warsaw 1943, is the messianic torch of an artists' collective.

4 'The White Room'

One of the basic elements in the narrative of *See Under: Love*—a young writer traumatized by the memory of the Shoah—is Momik's intention to write a 'Youth Holocaust Encyclopaedia'. For months, he locks himself up in Yad Vashem, the Jerusalem memory and documentation centre of the Nazi genocide on the European Jews. Room after room he unravels the archives. Only this way, he argues, one can get access to the facts. And facts—correct, hard facts—are a *conditio sine qua non* to understand the Shoah. Yet, this very confrontation with the facts cuts him off and brings him in a deep existential and artistic crisis. Wandering through the rooms of Yad Vashem, he more and more feels deadlocked.

If only you have the courage to look there for 'the White Room', Ayala replies. With Ayala, Momik had an affair in the period of his crisis. Already in their first meeting, she perfectly felt what his problem was about. One of the things she asked him was whether, at the end of 'one of the subterranean corridors of Yad

Vashem', he had visited the 'White Room'. At that time, Momik was so obsessively keen on facts, that he did not mention that this 'room'

isn't a room at all, in fact, but a kind of tribute,¹⁰ yes [...] a tribute from all the books, all the pictures and words, and films and facts and numbers about the Holocaust at Yad Vashem to that which must remain forever unresolved, forever beyond our comprehension. And that's the essence of it, Shlomik, isn't it?' (S 121)

The 'White Room' is a 'tribute', a 'gesture' made by all the 'words and films and facts and numbers' in Yad Vashem. A 'tribute' making clear that even their assembled force is not able to give full voice to the facts they report. A 'gesture' hiding the suffocated cry concealed in all these books and files. In a house where each room is filled up with archives on the Holocaust, the 'White Room' names a central but elusive *surplus*, a vacuum that imperceptibly sticks to the abundance of documentation. That empty 'room' hides the 'essence' where the account of the facts keeps failing. Yet, this is the 'essence' this account at the same time acknowledges and cherishes. The 'White Room' is the unmemorable, 'extimate' kernel of the Shoah memory.¹¹

You cannot deal with this kernel in the way you deal with the facts. Here, you have to rely on imagination. Operative in a house full to bursting with facts, imagination must run the risk of entering the 'White Room', the room emptied of all facts. Who refuses to enter that 'extimate' room will not be able to write about the Shoah in a proper, truthful way. This is what Momik learns from his mistress in the first night they meet, and it indicates one of the central theses in Grossman's novel.

She told me that first night that the White Room was the 'real testing ground for anyone who wants to write about the Holocaust. Like the riddling Sphinx. And you go there to present yourself willingly before the Sphinx, understand?' [...] 'and if you want to be honest with yourself', she said gravely, 'you'll have to try the White Room.' (S 123–124)

¹⁰ A 'gesture', so the Dutch translation writes.

¹¹ 'Extimate' is a term borrowed from the Lacanian theory indicating the position of the central object of human desire. Since that object is by definition inaccessible, so this theory says, desire can only turn *around* that object. In that sense, desire's most intimate object remains at the same time exterior to it—hence: 'extimate' (Lacan 1992: 131; De Kesel 2009a: 146–147, 180–181).

Of course, you have to face the facts mercilessly. But should you not allow that the facts face *you*? For this is what they do. The hideous horror they throw into your face affects your capacity of seeing, of assuming and comprehending. In spite of their macabre clarity, the facts you deal with are enigmas coming from a dark 'beyond', enigmas without answers but which, once you have taken notice of them, need an answer, or you will not survive them. To understand the Holocaust, you have to find the 'room' where it reveals itself as an explicit enigma and where only the wager of your own life may give an adequate answer. Only in this 'room', you truly write about the Shoah.

'And in this room you find the essence of those things', she said [...], 'but the wonderful thing is that there are no ready-made answers there. Nothing is explicit. It's all merely possible. Merely suggested. Merely liable to materialize. Or likely to. And you have to go through everything all over again, by yourself. Without a double or stunt man to play the dangerous parts. And if you don't answer the Sphinx correctly, you'll be eaten up. Or you will leave without having understood. And in my eyes that almost amounts to the same thing.' (S 124)

In the 'White Room', the facts turn back to what they were before occurring: merely virtual, non-actualized potentiality. Facts in a shape before they were 'explicit'—read: actualized, realized. Facts such as they were in the imagination they originate from: flights of fancy, unarticulated possibilities. If you want to penetrate into the 'essence' of the Shoah, you have to allow that the facts penetrate into what also for you lies *beyond*—or (what amounts to the same thing) *before*—the facts, into your own imagination, into your own capacity to live a mere, non-actualized possibility.

In the 'White Room', Momik's inquiry of the facts remains without 'ready-made answers'. Even without new questions enabling promising orientations. The room has only 'white' to offer, i.e. virgin, unlimited imagination. That is the basis the facts rely on. For facts as well have once been imagined. Once they have been dug up from the bottomless pit of virtual possibilities, before a ruthless logic turned them into concrete reality. If you want to make a stand against those facts and their ruthless logic (and this is Momik's intention), if you want to remember them without cutting off your way to the future, you will have to *imagine* them.

Yet, your imagination should not be of the kind which, in a totalizing vision, appropriates the facts, holds them in its grip and, thus, makes the unacceptable acceptable. Your imagination has to connect the facts' unacceptability with the equally unacceptable imagination they originate from. If you want

to enter into the heart of the Shoah memory, you have to reach that level: you have to jump into the imagination *before* or *beyond* the facts.

To acknowledge the Shoah facts is necessary but not sufficient, so this passage states. You have to '*go through*' them as well. In your imagination, of course. Though this too is not without taking its toll. For you have to imagine the facts as possibilities *you* have imagined. It is in that sense that the horrible, unimaginable facts have something to do with you, not because you have done them or should produce them, but because you can imagine them. In their quality of merely unarticulated possibilities, these facts are yours as well. If you do not take them like that, you will never 'understand'. Or, which 'almost amounts to the same thing', you will be 'beaten up'.

Certainly as a writer 'you will be beaten up'. Writing operates in the limitless domain of imagination, in the realm of non-actualized virtuality. There, the limitlessly cruel facts the writer fights against have their origin too. That is why he has to find the 'White Room'. There, his imagination finds its equal, which in this case is at the same time its enemy. There, he finds the imagination that grounds the facts. Neglecting this, the writer misses the comprehension literature can give, and risks losing his dignity as writer. Yet, when he does not neglect this and deals with the imagination the cruel facts originate from, another risk then is that he loses his dignity as author and even as human being. For how can he avoid being affected by the evil hidden in this kind of virtual imagination? Against that risk, he can only use his risky imagination with a yet greater force.

Entering the 'White Room' of imagination equals the courage to 'embody the *soul* of the other'—which is an expression Grossman uses in an essay on the literature and writing.¹² You have to imagine the other as having virtual possibilities that are yours as well, he explains. This is what Momik does with his 'grandpa' Wasserman: 'It was for Grandfather Anshel's sake I went into the White Room' (S 193), he realizes. He has put himself in the shoes of Wasserman. Writing becomes speaking through the confused murmuring of his 'grandpa' who, since his return from the Shoah, has lost the capacity of properly speaking. Writing in the White Room, Momik renders voice to the imagination hiding in that murmuring. That imagination has been broken down by the Nazis in the camp, and it made Wasserman irreparably 'mad'. In the White Room, Momik reactivates so to say his grandpa's suffocated imagination. He imagines himself an *other* Wasserman, a Wasserman who resists the killing machine of the Nazis and even subverts it.

12 See his essay 'The Desire to Be Gisella', in: Grossman 2008a: 38–42.

Momik succeeds in entering Wasserman's imagination, his 'soul', as well as the one of Bruno Schulz. But putting himself in the 'soul' of the Nazi perpetrator is a more difficult thing to do. It is not simply a matter of willing, but also of time. In a touching passage Wasserman resists Neigel's attempt to intervene in his artistic imagination. There, Momik, who is always imperceptibly present in that kind of scenes, shows clearly he is not yet ready to 'enter' Neigel:

'Don't get so insulted, *Scheissemeister*' [sic], says Neigel. 'I didn't mean to hurt your feelings [...] There is a name for that, isn't there? 'Poetic licence' you artists call it, right?' Wasserman studies him anxiously. I [Momik], too, I am anxious. 'Poetic licence' doesn't seem to either of us [to Wasserman and Momik] to belong on the intellectual menu of a Nazi officer. He may have been quoting someone. I'll probably know more about him when I get under his skin, as I did so easily with Wasserman. It's my duty, after all. As Ayala said, In the White Room everything comes out of your own self, out of your own guts, victim and murderer, compassion and cruelty... soon, then. Meanwhile, I will just have to make do with Neigel reflected in Wasserman's eyes. Very slowly. (S 209–210)

Momik has to let the perpetrator 'come out of his [Momik's] own self, out of his own guts'. The range of cruel possibilities hidden in the morbid fantasy of the anti-Semitic Nazi has to be dug up from Momik's own imagination. As if it were his—Momik's—possibilities. No wonder it takes time to enter that 'soul'. By appropriating the perpetrator's imagination, you are able to intervene in it, to give it a different direction and, so, to nip evil in the bud. But therefore, you dare to dig it 'out of yourself'. You must leave the mediation of the facts behind and *directly* take part in what made the Shoah possible: imagination. And against *that* imagination you have to place yours in position. You have to 'cut' the Shoah out of your imagination, because your imagination is the only thing you can put in position against the unimaginable Shoah. This is what Wasserman does when, in the midst of hell, he shares room with his perpetrator. He re-animates—so Momik wants—his perpetrator's dried up imagination and makes it break the iron wall of what the officer calls 'facts', for instance the 'fact' that a Jew is not a real human being. This way, so Wasserman/Momik hopes, the Nazi may face again a field of virtual possibilities out of which he can freely choose. And indeed, Neigel will reach that free state, be it in order to commit suicide.

5 A Room and a God 'Non-Existent'

Only from the 'White Room', which in fact does not exist, one might be able to truly write about the Holocaust. How, then, should we imagine that 'room'? Does it differ from the room Zalmanson goes in when, as he says, he enters the 'Holy of Holies'? That 'Holy of Holies' does not exist either. What exists is the opposite, the gas chamber, and Zalmanson perfectly knows that, just like he knows he is going to die there. Without denying this for one second, that room nonetheless *is* at the same time the 'Holy of Holies'. As befits a pious Hasid, he dances and laughs, and realizes that his

'deity, who doesn't exist, of course, knows I cleave to Him, knows I have understood Him profoundly, if only for an instant' (S 330).

No one can have faced the Shoah more directly, no one can ever have felt the macabre reality of that room more. Nonetheless, the room Zalmanson enters is another one, one that 'does not exist', a room where he laughs for a God who does not exist either, though this does not devalue Zalmanson's laughing and the validity of the truth worshiped by his uncanny prayer.

Religion is fantasy. Zalmanson fantasizes that the darkest corner in God's creation and history's most hopeless darkness contain sparks of light and that only man's positive affirmation can bring these sparks back to where they belong. Only such radical imagination may contribute to a possible salvation of the sinful universe. Even if these sparks of light do not exist, it is our task to acknowledge this non-existence in an affirmative sense. For in those sparks, whether they exist or not, lies hidden the exit from the negative force that drives the universe into death, into non-existence.

Literature is imagination. Momik brings it face to face to the Shoah horror and recalls the duty to keep its memory alive. This literary imagination, however, is to be situated in a room 'that does not exist'. It is literature's task to assume this non-existence and to affirm it as an infinity of virtual possibilities, capable of turning the darkest impasse into a starting point for a new actualization, a new reality.

Zalmanson's affirmative laughing can be compared with Momik's affirmative attitude once he has started writing in the White Room 'that does not exist'. And, similarly, Momik only joins in with what occurs in the gas chamber when he delivers himself to that empty, white and 'factless' imagination.

What does this say about Zalmanson's religion and about religion in general (1)? And what does this say about literary imagination (2)? Where does that

kind of striking parallel come from and what does it mean? Let me, by way of conclusion, develop this parallel.

(1) The Hasidic background of Zalmanson's religion is already made clear. Though never prominently present, a lot of Lurian-Cabbalistic elements play a decisive role in that kind of religiosity. One of them is the immanent character of the worshiped deity. Here, God is not the transcendent deity of rabbinic Judaism, emphasizing the Law as the way to get in line with creation's lost perfection. Here, the Creator has compromised himself from the very outset. The idea of '*tsimtsum*' says that creation is a process occurring *within* God, and that thus God is not situated transcendentally *outside* his creation. *Inside* Himself, God has withdrawn Himself *out of* Himself. He has deliberately chosen to be marked by lack and emptiness. Finitude, the hallmark of creation, is now part of the infinite God. Finitude is a characteristic of infinity.

This provocative idea¹³ has a typically *modern* dimension. Here, man is no longer delivered to a perfect Law which, as imperfect human being, he obeys in order to be in line with the perfect God. Without denying these qualities of God and Law, the idea of *tsimtsum* puts forward that it is first of all up to man to lend a helping hand to Law and Grace, since they too are marked by lack and void. The relation between God and man is not the one of a perfect God meeting the realm of the human, full of shortcomings. On the contrary, since God Himself is shortcoming, since He Himself withdraws and establishes a void within Himself which escapes His omnipotence, man should not simply worship God's perfection, but particularly remedy it, restore it.

Here we meet the typically modern God. Not the God of fate or grace, who determines our life path with iron perfection, whatever we might do or not do. The God we meet here admits to be wounded 'in the blossom of his sin' and has to ask his son/man to heal that wound in order to avenge the crime that is done to him. This is, as I have called it elsewhere,¹⁴ the *Hamletian* God, the God who is no longer the alternative for human lack and finitude, but assumes that lack and, thus, gives man the chance—and the duty—to remedy that lack.

Yet, the emphasis on lack is to be rectified. For that lack is in fact a surplus, a sign of abundance, which is still God's real hallmark. It is the positive product of God's infinite power. The lack involved here is the 'finitude *of* the infinite', the incapacity of the Almighty to enclose and exhaust Himself, i.e. His infinite capital of possibilities. This is what the immanent idea of the Hasidic God

13 Scholem 1995: 260: '[...] the doctrine of *Tsimtsum*, one of the most amazing and far-reaching conceptions ever put forward in the whole history of Kabbalism'.

14 De Kesel 2010: 139–142.

is about. It is a God allowing everything in himself, even what escapes him. Put in Leibnizian terms: the infinity of His virtual possibilities can never be actualized in the same infinite extent. God is the inexhaustible virtuality that grounds the totality of exhausted, actualized possibilities. He is the immanent and infinite virtuality on which actual reality rests.

(2) In other words, He is the ontological base of the imagination that brings reality into being and re-creates it again and again in different shapes. This is the answer to the second question I put forward, asking what Zalmanson's religion has to say about literary imagination, about the imagination that has produced *See Under: Love* and whose praise that novel sings. Just like Zalmanson's religion, here, imagination is an infinite field of possibilities forming the base of each actualized reality, also to the extent that these possibilities have *not* been actualized.

In that sense the novel recalls postmodern theories like the ones of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Building on Henri Bergson's vitalistic thought and going back to the pre-Kantian ontologies of Spinoza and Leibniz, Deleuze considers imagination, not as a subjective faculty able to produce representations and, thus, unreal fantasies, but as a dimension in our thought that closely joins reality itself, even reality's ontological foundation, i.e. the virtual field of possibilities of which the actual reality is only one of countless other ones. Reality is thoroughly productive and creative, but not as a result of a *creatio ex nihilo* performed by a transcendent God throning above being (and non-being). The productive creative reality is an immanent *creatio*, a dazzling field of possibilities that no actual reality can exhaust. Each reality rests in a ground that, in itself, has an infinity of other possibilities. In other words, current reality is only one 'expression' of the absolutely immanent, virtual possibilities constituting its ontological ground.¹⁵

This is the secret, non-existing 'White Room' Momik's imagination has to draw from if he wants to write about the Shoah in a true, authentic way. Even the lethal certainty of the gas chamber is resting in a virtual possibility which no certainty can exhaust, however absolute it might be. This is why human imagination—in this case the one of Momik/Grossman—is able to let Zalmanson die from laughing in the gas chamber and to let Wasserman survive there in order to bear witness of it.

For Giorgio Agamben, a 'rest' enables bearing witness of Auschwitz, as already the title of his book suggests: *Quel che resta di Auschwitz* ('What

15 Deleuze uses the term 'expression' first of all in his analyses and evocations of Spinoza (Deleuze 1968; De Beistegui 2005: 91–92).

remains from Auschwitz', 'Remnants of Auschwitz').¹⁶ What 'survives' is first of all life itself, vegetative life that keeps even the 'undead' *Muselmann* 'alive', though all human life has left him, incapable as he has become to even recognize the injustice done to him *as injustice*—incapable as he has become to distinguish between the pain the SS man inflicts on him and the pain of the freezing cold.¹⁷ This kind of 'surviving' is the ultimate base of the Shoah witness, so Agamben argues.

This, too, is the 'surviving' David Grossman arms Wasserman's 'Children of the Heart' with, when, in the zoo of destroyed Warsaw, they *organize* their battle against the Nazis. More generally, this 'surviving' is responsible for the vitalistic purport of Grossman's imagination, which during the novel's course, becomes more and more explicit. At the end it finds its most grotesque expression in Hannah Zeitrin's endless act of copulation and giving birth. Life, life as an non-exhaustible surplus of life, as a non-obstructable surviving: this is the remedy against the lethal violence of those who want to lock life up in fixed boundaries and controlled definitions.

Whether a vitalistic vision on imagination is defensible or not, whether an ontological view on imagination is the most adequate one or rather a metaphor among others, is a question which cannot be dealt with here.¹⁸ But even as metaphor, it shows how indispensable imagination is within our typically modern way to lean our relation to reality on empiricism and empirical facts. What is more, it shows our reliance on empiricism in a way that obliges us to acknowledge the primacy of imagination.

16 Agamben 1999a.

17 Agamben refers to a passage in Robert Antelme's *L'espèce humaine*, (Antelme: 1947); see Agamben 1998: 185.

18 I do deal with this in De Kesel 2009b.