Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah – Séminaire des Boursiers

"That's so long ago": an Inquiry Into the Use of Irony in Post-Shoah Jewish American Literature

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This study addresses an apparently simple question: within Jewish American literature, can the Shoah be treated as a subject of humor, a "laughing matter" ? While the short answer should, of course, be negative, the issue demands careful qualification. The title of this research project adopts a deliberately ironic stance inspired by Bernard Malamud's phrase "That's so long ago," drawn from his 1958 short story "The Last Mohican."

This ostensibly reassuring remark, spoken by an assimilated American Jewish character to a concentration camp survivor, is deeply revealing: at a historical moment when the Shoah remained painfully recent and survivor testimonies were only beginning to surface, it exposes the silence that had come to characterize much of New World literature on the subject. Even in Malamud's own work, one observes a tendency toward indirectness, an apparent inability to evoke the Shoah except through mediation. This inquiry thus turns to representations of acculturated American Jewish characters, often portrayed ironically, who display little inclination to preserve the memory of the catastrophe. Figures such as the Hollywood producer Bellarosa in Saul Bellow's "The Bellarosa Connection" or the translator Hannah in Cynthia Ozick's "Envy; or, Yiddish in America" serve as critical points of reference for examining a broader cultural phenomenon: an American Jewry that remained largely silent in the face of the Shoah and bore witness to the decline, and at times the active erasure, of Yiddish culture. Hannah's refusal to translate Edelshtein's poems, thereby condemning them to oblivion, stands as a particularly striking instance of this abandonment of memory. Underlying these various forms of denial is an implicit moral critique, one that irony renders both socially palatable and incisively sincere. The first stage of analysis will therefore focus on these refusals of mourning, on the choices, whether deliberate or constrained, of indifference, and on the rejection of an ethical obligation to the dead. It will seek to illuminate the motivations behind this withdrawal from memorial responsibility, as well as the historical realities that inform such literary representations. Ultimately, the central problem becomes that of transmission: how memory

can be conveyed, and whether humor can coexist with remembrance without undermining it. This question, in turn, raises broader issues concerning the nature of memorial responsibility, whether individual or collective, and the inscription of these narratives within the larger framework of twentieth-century Jewish history, where the Shoah remains an inescapable horizon, even, and especially, when literary texts appear to evade or displace it.

Calculated Indifference: the Context of the Quote

In Bernard Malamud's short story *"The Last Mohican,"* Fidelman, a dilettante artist, an assimilated American Jew who considers himself liberated from any constraining Jewish memory, finds himself confronted, against his will, with the victims of the Shoah. Having gone to Italy to study art in order to nourish an aesthetic quest he wishes to be pure and unburdened by historical weight, he encounters the unsettling Susskind, a wandering Jew in Italian lands, a camp survivor, a spectral and disturbing figure of a past that Fidelman is precisely striving to keep at bay.

The dialogue that unfolds between the two men condenses, in a few seemingly innocuous exchanges, a tension of extreme memorial and ethical density. When Fidelman, with a veneer of lightness, refers to Susskind as "a Jewish refugee from Israel, no less," the latter's response ("I'm always running") immediately introduces a radical asymmetry between the two characters. Where Fidelman allows himself humor, even nonchalance, Susskind responds with speech marked by exhaustion and gravity, devoid of any true lightness. The continuation of the exchange is even more revealing:

> "Where else from, if I may ask?"
> "Where else but Germany, Hungary, Poland? Where not?"
> "Ah, that's so long ago."

This phrase—"Ah, that's so long ago"—which Fidelman utters almost as a casual remark, functions as a revelator. It constitutes both an attempt to close the conversation and a gesture of psychic self-defense. Fidelman seems to be reassuring himself as much as his interlocutor, as though temporal distance alone could neutralize the ethical and memorial charge of the event being evoked.

The irony of this remark is multiple. It was, in fact, the starting point of my research. It lies first in its glaring inadequacy to historical reality: the story was published in 1958, at a time when the Shoah was anything but distant, and when survivors were still physically present, sometimes wandering, often silenced. It also lies in its moral dissonance: what is "so long ago" for Fidelman is obviously not so for Susskind, whose very existence has been shaped by this experience.

The humor of this formula is a defensive, almost involuntary humor, grounded in an absurd minimization. By declaring that it belongs to a bygone past, Fidelman adopts a posture of polite, socially acceptable denial that poorly conceals his desire to evade all responsibility. The implicit smile of the phrase (reinforced by the "good-humoredly" tone attributed to Fidelman) stands in violent contrast to Susskind's complete lack of levity. The comic effect is thus profoundly ironic: it arises from the gap between the gravity of the history evoked and the almost bureaucratic banality of the reaction it provokes. Far from lightening the scene, this humor intensifies its moral cruelty.

This same Fidelman (whose name, through the onomastic irony so frequent in Malamud, paradoxically suggests infidelity – to tradition, to ethics, to Jewish memory) immediately seeks to cut the encounter short. He does everything he can to evade it, attempting to dismiss the refugee by giving him some money, as though a material gesture could suffice to settle a moral debt. In order to continue his Roman stay under conditions he deems optimal, Fidelman seems to have made an implicit decision: not to mourn, not to question what has been lost, and to carefully avoid this recent past that threatens to intrude upon his present. He prefers a more distant and more glorious past, that of Italian art, perceived as an aesthetic and cultural refuge. Recent history, saturated with horrors, thus appears unworthy of an aesthetic quest he wants to be disembodied.

Whether this refusal is fully conscious or partially endured matters little in the end: it results in a rejection of the duty of memory that one might, perhaps paradoxically, liken to *Yizkor*. In Malamud's story, the duty of remembrance is not borne by Fidelman but by other Jewish figures: the Italian Jews encountered in the synagogue, who embody a persistent communal memory, and objects of remembrance such as gravestones, which silently testify to the horrors of the Shoah.

Even after a provisional epilogue in which Fidelman sets out in pursuit of Susskind in the futile hope of returning his coat (a belated and fragile gesture of responsibility finally glimpsed) the protagonist continues, throughout *Pictures of Fidelman*, to collide with the temptation of an aesthetic stripped of all ethical commitment. He succumbs to it repeatedly, until he is haunted by the quasi-hallucinatory reappearances of Susskind, an evanescent figure who embodies, by his mere presence, the imperatives from which Fidelman seeks to escape.

In this context, the phrase *"That's so long ago"* appears as the most ironic and most revealing utterance in the entire narrative. It encapsulates the attitude of a segment of assimilated American Jewry toward the Shoah: a mixture of discomfort, denial, moral fatigue, and a will to integrate at all costs. This reaction echoes the prolonged silence into which American literature long retreated with regard to the Shoah. In Malamud's own work, this silence is never total, but it is mediated, fragmented, deflected; the Shoah is evoked only indirectly, through intermediary figures, as though it resisted any frontal articulation.

Malamud's short stories, generally centered on a conflictual dynamic between two irreconcilable characters, rarely address collective mourning. The Shoah is only marginally present. Fidelman, confronted with the graves of genocide victims in *"The Last Mohican,"* constitutes an exception. Yet even here, he reads only a single inscription—one that evokes an individual loss: that of a father. This choice is not insignificant. Mourning, because it signifies the irreversible collapse of an inner universe, can only truly be apprehended through the singularity of lost lives. Even when there is a multitude of victims, it is a voice, a name, a relationship that renders loss intelligible.

The cemetery scene thus functions as a fundamental reminder: the Jews of Europe, no more than the Native Americans ironically evoked by the story's title, did not die out of their own accord. They were exterminated. By naming the perpetrators ("Nazis") the epitaph removes all ambiguity. Fidelman, who had sought to reduce the Shoah to a distant and harmless past, is forced to recognize the error of his perspective. The history he wished to keep at a distance imposes itself upon him not as an aesthetic object, but as an irreducible ethical demand.

Humor is constantly shattered by tragedy, and yet, again and again, it resurfaces in the most unexpected contexts.

These themes are inextricably linked to the question of memory and transmission. In *Envy; or, Yiddish in America*, Ozick describes Yiddish as a language of specters, evoked through black humor: *"to speak of Yiddish was to preside over a funeral."* The famous quip *"Hey Mottel, print one less!"* illustrates the way in which humor becomes a paradoxical memorial weapon, reviving through language a vanished culture and the very speakers it seeks to honor, while continuing to proclaim its disappearance.

Far from trivializing trauma, humor emerges as a revelator of mechanisms of denial, moral fatigue, or distancing adopted by certain assimilated characters confronted with a history from which they would like to feel absolved. In Bernard Malamud's aforementioned quote, a kind of defensive, almost involuntary humor is grounded in an absurd and morally untenable minimization. Comedy here arises from the gap between the lightness of tone and the proximity of the genocide, producing an effect of cruel irony that lays bare the protagonist's ethical failure.

More broadly, this dark humor, often in direct tension with the tragedy that it attempts to contain, functions as a paradoxical memorial weapon: it exposes the impossibility of frontal speech about the Shoah while simultaneously preventing its erasure. Whether it takes the form of misplaced nonchalance, biting irony, or black humor inherited from the Yiddish tradition, as in Cynthia Ozick's evocation of Yiddish as a "language of specters", laughter never neutralizes memory, but rather underscores its imperative force. It thus becomes one of the privileged vectors of an anxious, conflictual, yet obstinate transmission of the past, inscribing the Shoah at the very heart of the tensions between aesthetics, ethics, and memorial responsibility.

Tova Reich's *My Holocaust*: a Textbook Satire of "Competitive Victimhood"

The 1990s and 2000s, in the wake of the individual appropriations already evoked by Saul Bellow in "the Bellarosa Connection", witnessed the emergence of what may be termed a "memory industry," characterized by the proliferation of foundations, educational programs, and cinematic productions, as well as by the institutionalization of the status of victim or survivor. While Bellow denounced forms of individual appropriation (while simultaneously revealing, in a more subdued manner, the latent guilt of American Jewish writers who regretted having long marginalized the Shoah in their work, whether out of restraint or indifference)

Reich stages a competitive economy of suffering grounded in the conflicting claims of victimhood, wherein each group asserts its own "Holocaust."

Tova Reich's 2007 novel is a sharp, extremely provocative satirical novel that interrogates the commodification and politicization of the memory of the Shoah in contemporary culture. The narrative follows Maurice Messer, an opportunistic academic who seeks to elevate his own status by aligning himself with mainstream "Holocaust" discourse (the term "Holocaust" is very debatable but common in an American context. See the annex), despite having no direct familial connection to it. Through exaggerated scenarios and biting humor, Reich exposes the struggle through which various minority groups vie for moral authority, visibility and recognition by appropriating the language and symbolism of suffering, using the Shoah as a kind of currency against which they compare their own discrete ordeals. The novel critiques not only the instrumentalization of the Shoah in public and institutional contexts, but also the broader American tendency to universalize and dilute its historical specificity. By deploying satire, Reich raises uncomfortable questions about authenticity, memory, and the ethical limits of foundations and museums that revolve around commemorations, ultimately challenging readers to reconsider how "Holocaust" remembrance is constructed and consumed.

The title of *My Holocaust* is thus programmatic and demands close scrutiny. The use of the possessive pronoun signals a logic of appropriation, most often unwarranted, whereby speaking of "one's" Holocaust simultaneously entails a betrayal of actual victims and the assertion of a form of symbolic ownership. In this sense, the title itself mimics the very dynamic it seeks to critique: the subjectivization of catastrophe. The ultimate danger inherent in such memorial competition lies in the erosion of the historical singularity of the genocide of the Jews, as individual or collective claims to victimhood risk diluting the specificity of the Shoah.

The novel has been analyzed through the prism of trauma studies, "Holocaust studies" and memory theory. Scholars tend to situate Reich's work within a second and third generation post-traumatic context, where humor and grotesque exaggeration reflect the saturation of public discourse with Holocaust imagery. Phenomena such as Holocaust tourism and museum representation, dating back from the 1970s, are read through the lens of commodification, aligning the novel with critiques of the so-called "Holocaust industry," without negating the singularity of Jewish suffering. Despite its polarizing nature, *My Holocaust* is widely regarded as an ethically serious intervention, critiquing the cultural overexploitation of memorials in the post-Shoah era in America.

In this context, victimhood is presented throughout the narrative as a scarce moral resource that confers legitimacy and symbolic power within contemporary cultural and institutional frameworks in America. The novel portrays a world in which survivors, descendants, scholars, museum professionals, and activists compete for proximity to "authentic" suffering, as though moral authority was finite and unequally distributed. This reflects, not the cold indifference of Bellow's Bellarosa who built memorials here and there while feeling unconcerned, but rather an obsessive policing of boundaries: who may be recognized as a "real" victim, and who runs the risk of being excluded. Through this lens, Reich exposes how cultures of remembrance, despite their ethical intentions, may inadvertently foster competitive dynamics that instrumentalize memory.

A second dimension of the novel lies in its exploration of hierarchies of suffering and the moral function of satire. Critical scholarship frequently emphasizes that the apparent harshness of Reich's satire is inseparable from its ethical purpose: satire operates here as a form of moral pedagogy, defending both the historical specificity of the Shoah and the integrity of survivor memory against the distortions of competitive victimhood. Reich's work thus functions as a test case for the limits of humor in representing atrocity – however, perhaps following Adorno's directive, the author deliberately shies from direct representation of the camps and only discusses its aftermath in an American setting. The ordeals of the survivors are, of course, never ridiculed.

I would conclude that, in contemporary American Jewish literature, humor ultimately functions less as a transgressive strategy than as a critical and pedagogical device. It never downplays the Shoah; rather, it preserves its ethical imperative by exposing the various forms of denial, instrumentalization, appropriation, and discursive saturation that surround it. Between Malamud's subtle innuendoes, Bellow's controlled irony and Reich's biting satire, a continuum of literary strategies emerges, all bearing witness to a shared concern: how to preserve the historical singularity of the genocide of European Jewry while ensuring its transmission within a cultural space that is both saturated and marked by competing identities and claims of suffering?

Annex:

The term "Holocaust" (from the Greek, "to burn entirely"), which is still very common in the Anglo-Saxon world, and more specifically in Jewish Studies in American, appears to draw on a biblical hypotext inasmuch as it translates the Hebrew *'olah*, denoting an offering wholly consumed upon the altar. However, it ultimately suggests a reading of history that casts the Jews as sacrificial victims of humanity: "the unfortunate term 'Holocaust' […] arises from this unconscious demand to justify a death that is *sine causa*—to give meaning back to what seemed incomprehensible" as Agamben suggests. While the word "holocaust" is indeed rooted in a conceptual universe shared by Jews and Christians (this wholly consumed offering is mentioned 289 times in the Pentateuch), the Jewish sacrificial ritual detailed in Leviticus involves animals alone. To make human beings the object of a holocaust is to distort, indeed, with a certain misplaced irony, the context in which this concept emerged and developed within the sacrificial system of the Torah; it is also to posit a form of sanctity in killing. With no less irony, Ozick in turn invokes the Holocaust in her collection of essays *Art and Ardor*: "the burnt offering of the Jewish people in the furnace of the German Moloch" (237). There is, then, indeed a sacrifice, though not to the God of Israel, but to some pagan idol in which Ozick discerns the criminal impulses of the West, a new incarnation of idolatry that she persistently rejects.

Not only is the semantic history of the term "Holocaust" intrinsically linked to Christianity, which came to designate all sacrifices under the hyperonym "holocaust," particularly in the writings of the Church Fathers, but, in authors such as Hilary and Augustine, the sacrifice of Jesus himself is described as a holocaust. The term thus becomes synonymous with "supreme sacrifice", as Agamben reminds us, or even simply with necessary killing, as in the case of the London pogrom of 1189, on the day of Richard I's coronation, which was likewise described as a holocaust.

These considerations, in my view, justify refraining from the use of a term that, although widespread not only in the English language and common discourse but also in Anglophone academic production, remains problematic.