

KOHOUT AND THE BANALISATION OF BRUTALITY

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Pavel Kohout's *Hodina tance a lásky. Německá romance* is a novel totally lacking spirituality. That is incongruous since it deals with one of the great themes of literature, guilt. In the Western tradition guilt cannot be divorced from responsibility, though modern Czech literature is rich in works where the emotional and legal concept (guilt) is divorced from the moral (responsibility). One thinks, for example, of Mácha's *Máj*, Machar's first autobiography, and many works of Socialist Realism, where the guilt is non-personal because inherited from parents, usually bourgeois parents, and where children are responsible for the real or notional guilt of their parents. The separation of guilt from responsibility may be ideologically justified in Mácha by his apparent fatalism and in Machar and the Socialist Realists by their determinism. Ideology must, however, not be confused with morality. In his novel Kohout separates guilt from responsibility or, rather, says he is not quite sure whether the two are connected. And the novel does not evince either ideology or morality, or perhaps it evinces a confused ideological morality, a morality of personal pragmatism. His words in an interview for *Literární týždenník* (12 January, 1990) are informative for anyone attempting to analyse what at first looks like common-or-garden Karel-Čapek-esque moral relativism: 'Anyone living and attempting actually to do something will necessarily cover his personality with scars. What is decisive is that he should be capable of recognising where

he has failed intellectually; only then can he prevent himself from failing morally' (p. 1).

The 'intellectual' failure of the main characters in *Hodina tance a láskey* is, thus, convinced Nazism and because they fail to recognise that, they fail morally. Perhaps. For it is not at all clear to the reader (or to the author?) whether the main character, the SS camp commandant, Kleinburger, and his daughter, Kristina, are depicted as having failed morally. Kleinburger is hanged as a war criminal and the author-narrator is not at all sure that is fair. Kristina first hides in Germany with her distraught mother (a podgy anti-Rapunzel who eventually hangs herself with her own luxuriant hair, but not out of remorse for being pro-Nazi), and then escapes to the United States by marriage. When, in 1966, she returns with her second American husband, a German Jew, to Bohemia and visits Theresienstadt and Leideneritz (Leitmeritz) or as it is now called Lítomořice (Litoměřice – feeble pun: *Leiden*, suffering, sorrow; *lito*, sorry; *mořit*, torment, consume). Kristina has attained pragmatic moral redemption through the virtual deletion of memory, though *Schadenfreude* that life in Leitmeritz is grubbier under the Communists than it had been under the Germans, through material riches, and through a happy and useful marriage based on a lie (her husband does not know the truth of her background, and is not particularly interested). Kohout is certainly not symbolising Jewish-German reconciliation based on Christian forgiveness in the marriage between the ex-Nazi and the Jew. Kristina is depicted as successfully self-seeking, but so, a little less obviously, is her Jewish husband.

The 1966 visit to Theresienstadt makes up the last chapter, where the author introduces himself as a youngish Communist observer. He muses on the ills Stalinism had inflicted on Czechoslovakia, implicitly comparing Czechoslovak Stalinists with Bohemian and German Nazis. On the other hand Kohout depicts himself as a man firmly believing that the Communists are working to prevent the despotism and arbitrary violence (*zvěř*) of the Nazis ever recurring. There he avoids the issue somewhat, since the German attempt to obliterate Jewry was based on a policy, of which the German electorate was well aware when they helped the Nazis into power. Furthermore he makes the trite relativist statement about the young Germans who had supported Nazism: 'The jolly young lads had as a mass become mass murderers. They, too, had mothers, girl-friends, wives, daughters and dogs; they, too, had loved and believed.' (p. 243) Kohout avoids the moral issue, avoids the knowledge of good and evil. The loving husband and father who works from nine to five as a torturer in a Chilean gaol is not less evil than the unmarried torturer who beats up prostitutes in his spare time. Certainly Kohout does ask whether he as a Communist had been any better than the Nazis, but excuses himself on account of his idealism (just as Kleinburger excuses himself). He may be right when he states, 'We are not born evil or good' (p. 244), that moral values are all learned, that there is no categorical imperative. On the other hand, if one claims that, one is more or less implying that we are born without the capacity to love and to loathe, which is not true, unless we are born psychopaths. Furthermore, Kohout avoids the issues of moral and physical cowardice when he asks, 'could not any of us, in certain circumstances, become an executioner's assistant, and do not those who do not become one owe that more to their lucky star than to their strong character?' (p. 244) Guilt is divorced from responsibility.

On top of all this Kohout's philosophising is essentially banal. The 1966 Kohout is as banal as all the other characters and the action of *Hodina tance a lásky*. Certainly he tells the reader nothing new about Nazism itself or about the possible psychologies of Nazis. Indeed, to apply the term 'psychology' to any of the characters in the novel constitutes an exaggeration. Ladislav Fuks's ironic account of the way a petty bourgeois becomes a Nazi, *Spalovač mrtvol* (The cremator), is far more convincing than any of the accounts offered in Kohout's novel. The messianic nature of Nazism and any other ideology of salvation by violence is put across with far greater mental vigour and rejected with far greater conviction in Fuks's *Oslovení z tmy* (Address from the dark) or Martin Harníček's *O Albínovi* (About Albín) than in *Hodina tance a lásky*.

The very choice of the commandant's name is banal; Kleinburger means 'petty bourgeois' and is intended to encapsulate the dangers latent in even the most honourable lower middle-class man (a Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist view?). Kleinburger is a model. His father had written nationalist poems and had been a great lover of Nietzsche, and inspires a love of him in Kleinburger, who in turn leads Kristina to love him; Kleinburger relays his interpretation of Nietzsche thus: 'moral strength is the greatest virtue; the greatest sin is moral weakness; what is victorious is good; what is subjected is bad; the most natural instinct of men and nations is the will to power.' (p. 71). The reader does not know whether Kohout is here satirising the Nazi conception of Nietzsche or simply accepting it, as a good Stalinist should. The 'ascetic' (p. 221) Karel (Karlí) Kleinburger, holder of party card No. 711, is first a convinced Nazi print-worker; then he becomes the first convinced Nazi in the German Army. He is a man of great honour, refuses to work as a provocateur among his socialist fellow print-workers, and is such a fine soldier that he is soon made an officer. In the officers' mess he is known as 'the decent Nazi' (p. 31). When the war comes he eventually gets to the Eastern Front, and there he loses half a leg and half an arm, but gains the Iron Cross First Class. He is an ardent observer of regulations (p. 65). On the Eastern Front he prevents as many executions of civilians as he can, because, like most of the killings in the concentration camp, they do not fulfil the honourable German designs of his adored Hitler. Furthermore, in the spirit of 1945, 'Thanks to him only a few dozen Czech bandits were executed, because their stipulated term to appeal had run out.' (p. 235). He calls himself an idealist, in contrast to the fanatics and opportunists he finds himself with in the camp. To complete this clichéd picture, Kohout has him capable of reeling off quotations from Schiller. Like a Communist speaking of residual bourgeois values, the Nazi Kleinburger believes that SS viciousness has nothing to do with either Nazism or the presence of psychopaths in human society: 'Primitive killers like Kolatschek and cynical opportunists like Grube [are] products of the past and will die out with the past.' (p. 186)

Kleinburger's honour and respect for regulations are sometimes shown for what they are, pharisaical casuistry, for example:

Executions were not among the fortress commandant's duties, and so he did not participate in them on principle. Though he was convinced of their legality, he did not see why blood, even if only the blood of common criminals, should besmirch the picture of the future world for which he was living. He simply superintended the running of the fortress and made sure that no one suffered any injustice. (p. 185)

Similarly when he sends a junior officer to solve the problem he has made for himself by getting a Jewish prima ballerina from Theresienstadt to give Kristina dancing lessons, he tells the sadist officer to dispose of the woman, and adds, 'I do not wish any injustice to befall her!' (p. 192). Just before his death Kleinburger at least half realises that he had been 'merely an amenable and, on top of that, cowardly cog in the killing machine of some criminals.' (p. 236)

Kleinburger's attitude to the Jews is that of a fanatical believer in the Führer, but here, too, one suspects the honourable notion of belief constitutes a flimsy veil over pharisaism; he justifies inhumanity on what he conceives of as humanitarian grounds. The Jews, he tells his daughter, had 'by virtue of their race always been an alien element in Europe; the Reich had with Theresienstadt given them the opportunity of being all together until the time comes for their resettlement.' (p. 69) The Jews, who had caused so much bloodletting among nations, had given something to the civilisation and it is because of this that he agrees to their being gathered together in camps before going to their new homeland, 'why not in Poland [...] where the Jews had always had large communities?' (pp. 37-38). He believes that the rumours of their being exterminated was just foreign propaganda. That is a cliché, but even Kohout is going too far in having a senior SS officer believe that. The manner in which Kleinburger avoids meddling in the affairs of the Theresienstadt 'ghetto' evinces sheer hypocrisy, together with a self-delusion which is implemented by would-be blind adherence to regulations.

The blond-beast junior officer, Weissmüller, whom Kleinburger uses to get rid of the uncomfortable prima ballerina, is even more banal a literary cliché than Kleinburger himself. His name may be telling: *weiß* as a near synonym of blond and *Müller* as a typical German surname. The orphaned son of an early Nazi 'hero', he had become the minion of the commandant of the SS officers' academy, and so knew only homosexuality; Kohout's cheap Freudianism has Weissmüller get his sexual kicks out of sadistic *coups de grâce* after executions. Kristina falls in love with him, but he first experiences sexual intercourse with the prima ballerina just before he sends her to her death. As one would expect from a mass-murderer in Kohout's novel, after the war he escapes to Paraguay. Weissmüller is a fanatical believer in the Führer, and for Kristina he exudes that true 'nobility of manhood' she worships in her father (p. 54).

Weissmüller is the opposite of Kohout's next type, Kleinburger's second-in-command, Grube, the weakling opportunist son of a Hamburg docker. He believes that 'weak-spinedness' is a vital and, therefore, permissible form of self-defence in a régime which is rotten through and through.' (p. 89) His first love had been the daughter of his Jewish employer, who had been horrified at the thought of their marrying and had persuaded him to join the NSDAP; the day before he is due to marry, the Gestapo visit him, and so he rushes back to Hamburg, soon joins the Party apparatus, and his last posting before Leideneritz had been supervising executions in France. In France, he had met his amoral wife, Monika. Their marriage consists in her being constantly unfaithful to him while he pretends to be a voracious visitor at the Theresienstadt brothel so that Monika does not feel remorse for her philandering. He is a coward who hates everything he does, but does not try to cease doing what is hateful to him. Perhaps,

then, guilt is not divorced from responsibility in Grube, though his sense of responsibility is but notional.

Kolatschek, who runs Theresienstadt, is not a coward like Grube. He is a standard criminal type, a feelingless lecher, a tyrant, thief and wheeler-dealer. His name is telling in as much as it is Bohemian German (in his case not as in some villains of World War II literature, it does not denote a Czech who has Germanised his name), and Bohemian Germans are frequently particularly unpleasant specimens of Nazidom in literature (one thinks of Bednár's *Hodiny a minúty* or Šikula's *Majstri* trilogy). The N.C.O. Himmler also has Bohemian connexions – and is also a type, but this time a timid, lazy type, a former luke-warm Communist, former Ruhrgebiet schoolmaster, who had moved to his sister in Karlsbad after the Reichstag fire. He joined Henlein's party, but eventually made it into the SS because of his name. So here we have a Nazi who collaborated in mass murder out of a combination of fecklessness, laziness and enough intelligence to perform the appropriate dodges.

Kohout's women are perhaps even less alive, more banal as literary figures and as types than his men. Only two of them are developed to any degree, Kristina and Monika Grubeová. The very name 'Monika' in contemporary Czech suggests either a whore or a petty bourgeois *demi-vierge*. Grubeová is a mediocre actress who had been made into something by a Jewish theatre producer, with whom she falls in love; as soon as Hitler takes over he emigrates. After the Nuremberg Laws she is compromised by this liaison. Still she manages some Nazi lovers, learns to enjoy copulation with sailors and students, joins a troupe which entertains the forces, and meets her husband while her troupe is in France. She is in the end not much more than a selfish, manipulating loose woman, and the fact that she, right to the end, bears love for the producer who had turned her into something more than a bit-actress, makes her come very close to the sentimental-whore type. When Kohout adds to that her thoroughly unrequited love for Weissmüller and her bitchiness to Kristina, he also makes her, for a few pages, into the jilted-middle-aged-woman type.

Where Grubeová is, Kohout suggests, a nymphomaniac as a result of lost love, Kristina is a pure virgin, partly because of her love for her father, and partly because she is an ideal Nazi child. Her name might sarcastically refer to Christ and the messianism of Nazism (cf. Harníček's *O Albinovi*, the white one). She is sentimental and has something of the sadist in her, as we see when Weissmüller takes her to see the execution posts. When, at her mother's birthday party, she is competing for Weissmüller's attention with Grubeová, she crassly characterises herself as a bitch, while the narrator crassly characterises her as a she-cat. The self-characterisation lacks verisimilitude: 'Mrcha mrše oči nevyklove, přede si spokojeně' (which, approximately translated means: 'there's honour among bitches, she purrs to herself contentedly', p. 61). Perhaps that *Trivialliteratur* style comports with the perfect German maiden part we see her in, whenever she is with her mother. At one point Kristina says to her 'I want to learn how to run a household at last. Most of all, how to cook'. (p. 73) Her blind faith in Nazism makes one imagine that if the last stages of the war had not prevented her marrying Weissmüller, they would have followed the SS tradition of copulating on a German hero's tombstone in order to conceive a son befitting the master-race – but Kohout shows no knowledge of SS traditions in this trivial novel. When Kristina re-

turns from America as Chrystle to visit Leitmeritz and Theresienstadt, because of her bedroom life with Isaac Feuerstein, 'she had rid herself of many of her prejudices about Jews and was willing to forget their complicity in her father's death.' (p. 239) Similarly, and surely this lacks all verisimilitude, she has become one of those who do not 'believe in Auschwitz and similar legends invented by the victors under the influence of the Jews.' (p. 236) She considers that justice has been done when 1966 Czechoslovakia reminds her of the misery of immediately postwar Germany. She is not moved by the fact that with her visiting Theresienstadt are the widows of Frenchmen whose death warrants her father had signed. To make Kristina an even remotely believable monstress would take a writer with considerable psychological insight.

Kohout's banal characterisation and feeble, often amoral, philosophising, cannot be supported by his claim that in this novel he was not essentially writing about the Germans, but was trying to discover how far the Czechoslovaks would have gone if Stalin had died twenty years later than he did. The author goes on to tell us that he had in *Hodina tance a lásky* transferred the 'types, motifs, dialogues, problems and feelings' he knew from one dictatorship into another (*Literární týždenník* interview, p. 11). I do not doubt he did the latter (at the birthday party of Kristina's mother, the cosy nattering about the wonders of the Führer, German victories and so forth, does remind one of small-talk about the wonders of the year's wheat harvest in the Writers' Union in Prague in the early-to-mid 1970's), but one cannot take just single elements of dialogues or characters and present them as true to life. The banality which results turns into a banalisation of the brutality of the Nazi régime, even to a banalisation of its attempt to exterminate the Jews. The sentimentalisation of the horror of the Jewish plight in the scene where Kristina rushes off to get a bottle of milk and a thick ersatz salami sandwich for the starving ballerina also serves as banalisation.

Incompetent writing aids banalisation. The episode where Kristina and her mother are talking about Kristina's experience, or lack of experience, with men, reads like something out of an inept marriage-counsellor's textbook. The novel abounds in redundant sexuality. The crass crudity of passages like 'her kisses, in which her Sankt Pauli schooling gleamed [...], the last of which relieved the huge man of his lading of male juices in a manner of which he had hitherto only dreamed' (p. 82), or: 'For relaxation the previous commandant had brought female prisoners here, especially French women' (p. 43), or: 'he knew where to take top brass to learn the secrets of French love safely' (p. 166), seems also to demonstrate a banally macho attitude to women in the narrator. The novel is replete in automatic imagery like: 'the tom-toms spread the news of mass executions of numerous [sic] SA leaders in Munich and Berlin' (p. 32); or: 'Monika starts trembling; tenderness falls from her like the fleece of a lamb, and now again she is a she-wolf' (p. 157); or: 'The bitterness of being insulted and defeated begins to give way to the conviction that she had lost a battle, but not the war' (p. 172).

The reader is sometimes not quite sure whether the author himself is not prejudiced. For example, when Kleinburger is studying the ballerina, the SS officer's prejudices appear to fuse with the author's: 'the aquiline nose underlined by a little moustache bore witness to her racial origins' (p. 90). The reader asks why only gipsies ever beg for mercy when they are about to be executed (p. 133); the Slovene Oberscharführer in the

camp uses gipsies to satisfy his homosexual desires, not only because they speak only Romany and so can never inform on him, but also because gipsies are 'artists of manly love' (p. 117). Statements of this kind do not help the author to persuade the reader he is truly concerned with writing about the vile horror of Nazism and its offspring.

I do not know what sort of audience Kohout intended to address in *Hodina tance a láskey*, nor do I know what he intended to say. One is tempted to think he wants to show concentration camp personnel are ordinary human beings, or behave as ordinary human beings would in a Nazi régime. A passage in the last, confessional chapter, however, suggests that he might believe that the Nazis and their subjects were no worse than anyone else, that most human beings have a bit of the fascist in them (which might be true), which can easily be drawn out and exploited by a certain type of régime or ideology (which I do not believe to be true). In this passage he fails to distinguish between those régimes which are set on the extermination of a section of society and have to find elements in that society to do their work for them and those régimes which are putting down a rebellion. If his only point here is that rulers can become barbarous rulers, that too, is banal.

To declare only the Germans and Russians the bloodthirsty of the modern age world would be as unjust as it would be dangerous. One would be forgetting the 'little' slaughterings and ragings of the British in India, the Turks in Armenia, the Italians in Abyssinia, the Japanese in China, the Chinese in Tibet, the French in Algeria, the Americans in Viet-Nam, the Cambodians in their own country, the Iranians and Iraqis in Kurdish areas and so many others elsewhere. (p. 244)

That justifies nothing, and explains nothing. It may simply contribute to some readers' thinking that what the Germans did in World War II was just normal. That is an amoral position. To take an amoral position, or to pretend to take one, needs a fine writer (Baudelaire, in Czech literature perhaps the minor Arthur Breiský or the major Ladislav Klíma). To write *Trivialliteratur* suggesting an amoral position is immoral.