

TRAUMATIC MIRRORINGS: HOLOCAUST AND COLONIAL TRAUMA IN MICHAEL CHABON'S *THE FINAL SOLUTION*

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Michael Chabon's novella *The Final Solution* (2004), which first appeared in the *Paris Review* in 2003 with the subtitle *A Story of Detection*, lends itself to being interpreted as an allegory of man's futile quest for understanding of the Holocaust.¹ In this reading, the detective story that the novella recounts against the background of the Nazi extermination of the Jews illustrates the inaccessibility of the unspeakable horror of the Holocaust to rational inquiry. *The Final Solution* can thus be seen to abide by the demands of what Gillian Rose has called *Holocaust piety*; that is, devotion to the idea that the Nazi genocide is a radically unique event outside of human history, ineffable, beyond comprehension, and impervious to analysis.² Our reading of *The Final Solution*, however, supplements and complicates the standard interpretation of the novella as an exercise in Holocaust piety by focusing on an "impious" subtext that appears to contradict some of the text's more overt assumptions.³ We argue that the novella challenges the dominant conception of the Holocaust as an incomprehensible, ineffable, sacred event by returning the Nazi genocide to the realm of history—more specifically, the history of a colonizing Western modernity. *The Final Solution* breaks with Holocaust piety, we contend, through the proliferation of mirroring effects that suggest continuities and parallels between the Third Reich and the European colonial empires and between the plights of their respective victims.

The Holocaust and the Limits of Holmesian Reason

The title of the novella, which was awarded the 2005 National Jewish Book Award and the 2003 Aga Khan Prize for Fiction from the *Paris Review*, most explicitly references Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes story "The Final Problem" (1894).⁴ In this story, Holmes wrestles

with his greatest enemy, Professor Moriarty, at the Reichenbach Falls in the Swiss Alps, where both eventually plunge to their deaths. Although Conan Doyle intended “The Final Problem” to be his last Holmes story, he later revived his hero at the behest of his publisher and fans, and one such later story, “His Last Bow” (1917), is particularly germane to the novella.⁵ Chabon’s title also recalls Nicholas Meyer’s Sherlock Holmes homage *The Seven Percent Solution* (1974).⁶ Beyond these references to a generic tradition of detective stories, *The Final Solution* obviously alludes to the Holocaust, the systematic liquidation of the Jewish people that, in Nazi parlance, was known as the “Final Solution” of the “Jewish Question.” The novella is indeed concerned, albeit obliquely, with the Holocaust, as it focuses on the predicament of a Jewish orphan refugee from Nazi Germany who has been brought to England during the Second World War by a Jewish aid agency.

The Final Solution features an eighty-nine-year-old sleuth whose name is never mentioned—he is referred to only as “the old man”—but who is given enough detail to enable any reader to suspect that this might well be Sherlock Holmes. Chabon’s detective has retired to a sleepy Sussex village, where, by 1944, he is mainly known as an eccentric beekeeper who takes no interest in the local community. These facts are entirely in line with the data provided in the Sherlock Holmes canon. Many of the relevant facts on which Chabon draws can be found in one particular story, “His Last Bow.” As the title of this story suggests, in terms of his chronological age, it recounts the detective’s final case. Like “The Final Problem” before it, “His Last Bow” was meant to be the last story Conan Doyle would ever write about Sherlock Holmes, but again he changed his mind: he followed it with yet another collection (*The Case Book of Sherlock Holmes*), published four years later but covering events that happened earlier in the detective’s career. “His Last Bow” appeared at the height of the First World War and is set in 1914, just before its outbreak. Holmes has been acting as (performing the role of) a spy on behalf of the Germans and is on the point of delivering to his main contact, Von Bork, a crucial bit of information—or so this man thinks: Holmes uses this as a ruse to capture the German master spy. “His Last Bow” places Holmes’s year of birth around 1854 and also mentions the retirement to the Sussex Downs and the beekeeping.

In Conan Doyle’s story, Holmes is brought out of retirement to help the British government fight the German threat at the approach of the First World War. In *The Final Solution*, set during the Second World War, Conan Doyle’s most famous literary creation unretires once again to solve a mystery involving the murder of a British intelligence officer and

the kidnapping of a talking parrot. The parrot, named Bruno, is the constant companion of the young German Jewish refugee Linus Steinman, who appears to have been so traumatized as to have been rendered mute. The detective story takes its impetus from the special character of the parrot. It is an African grey, a species known for its strong imitative linguistic abilities. However, there is more than a touch of magical realism to the picture of the parrot, who regularly recites from Goethe's "Erlkönig," in a delivery that, "though toneless and a bit rushed, had a childish poignancy not inappropriate to the subject of the poem" (19).⁷ It is the parrot's habit of producing strings of German numbers, though, that catches the fancy of several observers and causes the bird to be purloined by one of them, who kills a competitor in the process.

In the novella, different theories are put forward as to what it is that the parrot is reproducing. The British intelligence service believes that it may be the cipher of the German navy, as Linus's father was the pet psychiatrist of a high-ranking Nazi, who shielded him and his family from persecution for a long time. The intertextual link to "His Last Bow" also points in this direction: what Holmes is purporting to deliver to the German spy in Conan Doyle's story is, precisely, the "naval signals":⁸ "semaphore, lamp code, Marconi." Another theory has it that, Linus's father being a rich Jew, the numbers are those of Swiss bank accounts. This is what Herman Kalb believes, the man from the Jewish Aid Committee who is working with his brother, a Swiss bank employee, in hopes of getting his hands on the money. However, it turns out that the numbers recited by the parrot are the numbers on the boxcars in which Linus's parents were carried off to their deaths as part of Hitler's "Final Solution."

This knowledge remains unavailable to any of the other human characters in the novel, including the Holmes figure, but the reader is privy to it thanks to a few carefully dropped hints, starting with the book's title. In the penultimate chapter, told from Bruno's perspective, it is revealed that the numbers are related to trains—indeed, the parrot thinks of them as "the train song, the song of the long rolling cars" (111)—and to the boy's traumatic separation from his parents (113). On the final page of the novella, moreover, Linus recites the numbers as he watches a military freight train pass through the station where his parrot has just been restored to him, a scene that presumably reminds him of the loss of his parents: "He watched the cars, his eyes flicking from left to right as if reading them go by. 'Sieben zwei eins vier drei,' the boy whispered, with the slightest hint of a lisp. 'Sieben acht vier vier fünf'" (127). However, neither the old man nor any of the other human characters is shown to comment on the boy's recitation or even to register it. Although Chabon's detective

manages to solve the murder case and to find the parrot, he is unable to fathom the greater riddle of what the numbers mean. Unlike the reader, who is given some unmistakable clues, he cannot deduce what the numbers gruesomely signify. Just before the boy recovers his voice without any of the other human characters apparently noticing, the old man admits, “I doubt very much . . . if we shall ever learn what significance, if any, those numbers may hold” (125).

The fact that the Holmes character solves the mystery of the murder and of the missing parrot but does not even come close to unraveling the unspeakable secret shared by the parrot and the boy indicates the impotence of reason in the face of the genocidal mystery of the Holocaust, whose truth eludes even the greatest of detectives. Ultimately, it would seem, *The Final Solution*, featuring an ageing, decrepit Sherlock Holmes, is less a detective story than an elegy for the detective story, a mournful reflection on the loss of the rational and moral order of the world, which is a necessary precondition of the genre. That the world in which detective skills were relevant has passed on is already suggested by the advanced age and the fading powers of the Holmes character—the last embodiment of the old order—to which the reader’s attention is repeatedly drawn. Chabon’s detective occasionally falls victim to a kind of seizure that makes him lose his grasp on reality. In the following passage, for example, he enters upon a scene that appears to have some meaning, only to be overcome by the sickening realization that he cannot lay hold of its significance because his rational powers are failing him:

When he came into the garden he saw a number of familiar objects and entities set about on an expanse of green as if arranged to a desired effect or inferable purpose, like counters or chessmen in some kingly recreation. Regarding them the old man experienced a moment of vertiginous horror during which he could neither reckon their number nor recall their names or purposes. He felt—with all his body, as one felt the force of gravity or inertia—the inevitability of his failure. The conquest of his mind by age was not a mere blunting or slowing down but an erasure, as of a desert capital by a drifting millennium of sand. Time had bleached away the ornate pattern of his intellect, leaving a blank white scrap. (37)

Another such moment of existential dread is brought on by his failure to retrieve Linus’s notepad, which the boy presumably dropped while

helping the old man to harvest honey from his beehives: “Meaning drained from the world like light fleeing the operation of an eclipse. The vast body of experience and lore, of corollaries and observed results, of which he felt himself the master, was at a stroke rendered useless. The world around him was a page of alien text” (85). These “eclipses,” which, we learn, are coming more and more frequently (85), are premonitions of the detective’s ultimate failure to fully solve the mysteries facing him. At the end of the narrative, having made his final catch, the old man nevertheless senses that something escapes him; he even comes to suspect that “meaning dwelled solely in the mind of the analyst” (125). Continuing this line of thought, he speculates “[t]hat it was the insoluble problems . . . that reflected the true nature of things. That all the apparent significance and pattern had no more intrinsic sense than the chatter of an African grey parrot. One might so conclude; really, he thought, one might” (125). Neither the boy nor the detective, it seems, can cope with the insoluble mystery of the Nazi genocide hinted at by the parrot’s ostensibly senseless number sequences. The unthinkable evil of the Holocaust, which has made Linus mute, exceeds the old man’s legendary powers of deductive reasoning. By declaring the Holocaust out of bounds of rational analysis, *The Final Solution* seems to effectively sacralize the Nazi genocide.¹⁰

Mirroring Empires

In the remainder of this essay, however, we will identify and discuss a number of signs of textual resistance to this tendency toward sacralization that make for a less pious reading of the novella. We will focus on the use of mirroring motifs at different levels of the text, especially with reference to the boy and the parrot and to the warring parties—the British Empire and the Third Reich—the conflict between which forms the background for the novella’s action. Central to our reading of *The Final Solution* is the idea, pervasive in the text, that empires rely on processes of mirroring in giving shape to their imperial identities—in fact, the novella belongs to the genre of the postcolonial trauma narrative just as much, we argue, as it is a novelistic reflection on the Holocaust. This postcolonial idea is communicated less obviously at the plot level, but it is conveyed rather strikingly at the rhetorical level, particularly through the use of similes and metaphors—a form of reference that has tended to be overlooked in readings of the novella.

The British Empire is mentioned as early as the opening scene, when the old man offers Linus sweets from a box, “stamped with the portrait of

a British general whose great victory had long since lost any relevance to the present situation of the Empire" (13). Throughout the novella, we get references to the far-flung outposts of that empire, often buried in similes such as the description of the detective's beehives that "loomed white and solemn . . . as a street of temples in Lucknow or Hong Kong" (84). A further element in the novella's evocation of the continuities of empire is the Indian provenance of Mr. Panicker, the local vicar and proprietor of the boardinghouse where Linus stays. "[A] Malayalee from Kerala, black as a boot-heel" (16), Mr. Panicker, whose full name is Khumbhampoika Thomas Panicker (94), was educated at the seminary in Kottayam (92). Assisting the old man in his recovery of the parrot, he serves as a substitute for Dr. Watson, Holmes's traditional sidekick, who is absent from the story—presumably long dead. The car in which Mr. Panicker drives the detective around, and which, we learn, is "difficult to govern," is identified as an Imperia (87) and repeatedly referred to as such, implicating their quest in the imperialist project.¹¹ This postcolonial subtext is reinforced by the frequency with which Bruno the parrot is referred to as "the African grey," a designation suggesting that the bird is to be regarded as a colonized subject.

Colonial overtones are also in evidence at the level of the plot. One threat to Linus's parrot comes from Mr. Shane, the British intelligence officer who will be killed while trying to steal the parrot. He is in competition with Mr. Parkins, a British colleague who works at Gabriel Park, a code-breaking establishment whose name carries an echo of Bletchley Park, the famous headquarters of the United Kingdom's decryption facility during the Second World War. Both of them work their separate ploys, and both, independently of each other, pretend to be involved in the milking industry. The code-breaking establishment poses as a dairy research institute, and Mr. Shane—who appears to Mr. Parkins to have "something indefinitely colonial [in his speech], a nasal echo of cantonment or goldfields"—as a salesman of "milking equipment" (15). The implied metaphor is clear: the British Empire, which has secured its wealth over the past century by "milking" the colonies for all they were worth, is now intent on laying its hands on this African grey.

That it is doing so in an effort to combat the Nazis does not get much credit in *The Final Solution*. The real villain in the unfolding plot is not a Nazi—we do not meet anyone belonging to that category—but a London-based Jewish character: Herman Kalb, who is revealed to have murdered Mr. Shane and made off with the parrot. Evil, it seems, is not confined to the Third Reich. Moreover, the detective in Chabon's novella is reluctant to aid the British war effort, in marked contrast to the Holmes figure

on whom he is modeled. In Conan Doyle's stories, Holmes is frequently portrayed as unequivocally supportive of British interests. In "The Naval Treaty" (1894),¹² "The Adventure of the Second Stain" (1905),¹³ and "The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans" (1917),¹⁴ he is presented as a patriot acting on behalf of the government in matters of national security, and in "His Last Bow," set on the eve of the First World War, he does counterintelligence work at the personal request of the British prime minister, culminating in his successful foiling of a top-level German secret agent. In the concluding lines of that story, Holmes evokes the impending war in the following, celebratory terms: "There's an east wind coming . . . , such a wind as never blew on England yet. It will be cold and bitter, Watson, and a good many of us may wither before its blast. But it's God's own wind none the less, and a cleaner, better, stronger land will lie in the sunshine when the storm has cleared."¹⁵ Holmes's espousal of war as a cleansing force in this story, written while the First World War was in its third year, is indicative of Conan Doyle's fervent patriotism, as are the humiliating treatment meted out to an arrogant German spy and the premise of the story that Germany is responsible for causing the war. Indeed, the disclosure by Von Bork that he had his safe made in 1910 and chose "August 1914," the month in which the war started, as its combination suggests that the war resulted from a long-premeditated act of German aggression.¹⁶

"His Last Bow" was hardly Conan Doyle's only attempt at war propaganda. In the previous decade, he had mounted a vigorous defense of the British Empire in several propagandistic publications about the Boer War, in which he had served as a volunteer army doctor. Most notably, he justified Britain's handling of the conflict, which was being condemned around the world, in his pamphlet *The War in South Africa: Its Cause and Conduct* (1902).¹⁷ Given Conan Doyle's allegiance to the British Empire, which earned him a knighthood in 1902, it should come as no surprise that the Sherlock Holmes stories reflect an imperialist mentality.¹⁸ Acting for the established authorities and the respectable classes, Holmes is a lover of order and the rule of law who roams the world as an unofficial ambassador of the British Empire, working to preserve the status quo.¹⁹

The Holmes character's past association with the British Empire is acknowledged in *The Final Solution*, but his allegiance appears to have drastically shifted. The reader learns that "[y]ears and years ago his name—itself redolent now of the fustian and rectitude of that vanished era—had adorned the newspapers and police gazettes of the Empire" (47). Mrs. Panicker, the vicar's wife, reflects that "[o]ver his bearing, his speech, the tweed suit and tatterdemalion Inverness there hung, like the

odour of Turkish shag, all the vanished vigour and rectitude of the Empire” (53). Colonel Threadneedle, an intelligence officer who is sent to ask the detective for assistance, calls him an “old friend[]” of “[t]his country” (70), to which the old man replies, “I hope that I was of some little service, here and there, over the years” (71). However, in the same conversation, the detective also makes it very clear that he is concerned only to restore the parrot to the boy. As he had earlier told the police officers who requested his help with the murder case, he is willing to assist them “[t]o find the boy’s parrot. . . . If we should encounter the actual murderer along the way, well, then it will be so much the better for you” (31). As in “His Last Bow,” vital national security interests are potentially at stake, and the detective is urged by the authorities to assist them in a mission actually or supposedly involving military intelligence and a German secret agent: the British secret service is now looking for, in the old man’s words, “a murderous Nazi spy with orders to abduct a parrot” (73). This time, though, the Holmes figure, a pillar of the British establishment in his heyday, is wholly dismissive of any claims on his patriotism. Chabon presents us with a changed man, who has different priorities in this phase of his life. Not least among these is seeing to the needs of his bees: indeed, the reason the old man gives for his initial refusal to assist the police is that he “could not possibly abandon [his hives] for an unremarkable crime” (27). He is prepared to help a German Jewish refugee boy retrieve his lost pet but has very little desire left to help the authorities solve a murder or, for that matter, save the British Empire—though the make of the car in which he is driven around suggests that he does in fact end up doing imperial business.

Unlike “His Last Bow,” *The Final Solution* does not hold up the British Empire as obviously superior to its German enemy and, therefore, deserving of reverence or protection. Rather than emphasizing the differences between the two powers, Chabon’s novella portrays a retracting British Empire simply trying to do whatever it can to halt the rise of a rival empire, the Third Reich. The old man takes a dim view of intelligence work, which, he observes, takes the form of copying the modus operandi of the Nazis: “He had known the flower of British intelligence, from the days of the Great Game through the first echoes of the guns of Mons. In the end their trade boiled down to purest mirror work: inversions and reflections, echoes. And there was always something dispiriting about the things one saw in a looking glass” (73). As Colonel Threadneedle tells the detective, “If *they* had a parrot stuffed to the wingtips with *our* naval cipher, we would certainly make every effort get [*sic*] it back” (73). The motif of the mirror reappears several times, and seeing the boy’s “[m]irror writing”

(107)—a name spelled backwards—reflected in a car window is what, in a fine example of “purest mirror work” or detection as “a matter of *reflection*” (107), enables the old man to finally solve the murder case and the mystery of the parrot’s disappearance. A less obvious but, for our purposes, more significant example of mirroring concerns the names of the outposts of the British Empire mentioned in the text, which do not seem to have been chosen haphazardly and which provide frequent reminders of the ruthlessness of colonial exploitation. Several of them are associated with the slave trade; for instance, Khartoum, which is mentioned in one breath with Bloemfontein (91). The silent common factor here is Lord Kitchener, under whose direction the British instituted the first concentration camps in the Boer War of 1899–1902, to house Boer women and children, about a quarter of whom died there according to current estimates.²⁰ In the historico-chronological terms that are only ever suggested by these unspoken parallels, the Nazi Empire is no longer just an original being copied by British intelligence, but is itself a copy of the original of the British, continuing and intensifying dehumanizing and genocidal policies first implemented by that earlier empire.

Animal and Human Suffering

The connection between the Holocaust, slavery, and colonialism is reinforced in chapter 10, the penultimate chapter of the novella, which highlights the tragedy of animal suffering hinted at, as we will see, throughout the text. The fact that animals feature so prominently in the story can be accounted for, at least in part, by the implicit metaphorical link with the victims of the Holocaust—including Linus’s parents—who were herded like cattle into boxcars and dispatched to the human slaughterhouses of the extermination camps. However, as will become clear, animals accrue various other metaphorical meanings in Chabon’s novella. That the parrot is not “just” an animal is suggested by its anthropomorphization, which is particularly blatant in chapter 10. This chapter is often regarded—wrongly, we believe—as something of a distraction or an aberration for being focalized through the parrot rather than a human being. *The Final Solution*, it should be noted, is told in the third person—another characteristic it shares with “His Last Bow,” which, together with “The Adventure of the Mazarin Stone” (1927),²¹ is the only one of Conan Doyle’s Holmes stories to be narrated in this manner.²² Chabon gives the reader a sense of the inner lives of various characters—especially the old man, but also Mr. Parkins, Inspector

Bellows, Mrs. Panicker, and Mr. Panicker—by shifting the perspective from chapter to chapter. In chapter 10, he passes the point of view to Bruno, arguably the story's chief protagonist. It offers a deft sketch of the parrot's history of enslavement and abuse from the moment of its capture on an island off the west coast of Africa. It is a remarkable attempt to imagine what it must be like to be a wholly different creature—not a bat, as in Thomas Nagel's famous essay,²³ but a bird—that suffers a potentially traumatizing fate such as that of having one's bodily freedom taken away, being imprisoned in a wire cage, and regularly being struck, throttled, shaken, and kicked. The parrot is also shocked to discover that humans eat birds, though its fear gradually abates as it realizes that they only eat chickens. It has a deep urge to produce imitations of sounds and speech because doing so “soothe[s]” the “rawness” inside it (113)—in fact, singing the train song, a favorite in Bruno's repertoire because of its association with sadness at the boy's loss but also at the parrot's own tragic history, turns out to be particularly effective in this regard.

Chapter 10 not only functions as an empathetic account of “the long years of suffering and captivity” (115) of an encaged African grey parrot—which can live to be over fifty years of age—but also works allegorically in relation to the history of slavery and European colonialism, with which some details of Bruno's biography clearly resonate. The bird appears to have been captured by a Dutchman on the island of Ferdinand Po, also known as Fernando Po or Bioko, which was a hub of the African slave trade under Dutch and Portuguese control in the seventeenth century.²⁴ Its owner went mad, partly, it is implied, from the sound of cicadas, and drank himself to death after killing the girl who shared his bed. The parrot was then owned by *le Colonel*, probably an officer in the French colonial army in Algeria,²⁵ before coming into the possession of a presumably Polish tailor called Wierzbicka, who sold it to the boy's family in a transfer that Bruno experienced as “the sense and fulfilment of his long life's pointless wanderings” (112). In the course of the narrative, it falls into the cruel hands of Herman Kalb, from which, however, it is eventually rescued to be returned to the boy. The bird's African origins, its presence at key sites of slavery and colonial history, its often inhumane treatment, and its passing from one European master to another invite a reading that sees it as representative of the fate of the enslaved and colonized people of the continent from which it stems. Such a reading, moreover, will be familiar to readers of postcolonial literature, in which, as Graham Huggan points out, parrots often serve as metaphors for the process of colonial mimicry.²⁶

Although, as far as the reader can tell, the parrot has never had a British master (except, perhaps, for Herman Kalb, whose nationality is not

mentioned), it is doubtful that it would have been treated any better had that been the case. After all, the rank of the British intelligence officer Colonel Threadneedle clearly links this character to one of the parrot's previous owners, *le Colonel* from the French colonial army in Algeria. Colonel Threadneedle's last words to the old man, "What's the taste of parrot meat, I wonder?" (74), suggest that Bruno might not even have survived British ownership. In fact, the novella records several instances of exploitation of animals by British characters carrying overtones of slavery or colonial oppression. One of these is the trade in exotic birds, dogs, and cats at Club Row animal market in London's East End, which is reminiscent of the slave trade. Walking down Club Row with the old man, Mr. Panicker remembers a visit he made to the animal market one Sunday morning years before. He "recalled how the street seemed inanely alive with the horrid cheer that haunted zoos and menageries, how the cries of bird sellers, of puppy wallahs and cat peddlers intermingled and created an eerie and disturbing echolalia, at once mocking of and mocked by the chatter of their caged and staring stock in trade" (101). Club Row struck him as "a street of the condemned," and he had the feeling that "all of this sad caged animal flesh was intended only for the slaughter" (101).²⁷

Another example of cruelty to animals that resonates with several histories of human suffering is the exploitation of bees for their honey, which is described in violent terms ("ravish" [75], "ravaged" [83]). In fact, the reason why vegans tend to avoid honey is that, in their view, beekeepers enslave bees and steal the fruit of their labor.²⁸ The old man's bees form "colonies" (75), and their six hives remind him of "a street of temples in Lucknow or Hong Kong" (84), two Asian cities that had been incorporated into the British Empire. The novella links the honey-harvesting process not only to colonial exploitation but also to the atrocities of the Second World War by evoking it in terms of a Nazi onslaught: "The hive gave off an air of doomed contentment, like a city sleeping it off on the day after carnival, contemplated from a hilltop by an army of Huns" (76). *Huns* is a derogatory term used by the British during both world wars in reference to the Germans, associating them with the Hunnic Empire of Attila the Hun, the most successful of the "barbarian" invaders of the Roman Empire. In the novella, however, it is a British character, the old man, who engages in Nazi-like behavior with respect to the bees, gassing them with foul-smelling tobacco smoke in an apparent reference to the Holocaust: "He put his lips to the entrance hole and blew in a rank rich exhalation of mundungus" (78). The detective's statement that "[Hive] Number 4 must be re-queened" (28) is further evidence that bees are used instrumentally, living and dying for the benefit of the beekeeper.

Requeening euphemistically refers to the practice of killing a colony's mother queen and replacing it with a younger one, typically when the reigning queen is two years old, and is considered to be an important component of successful bee management: "This is done for numerous reasons that all boil down to exerting control over the hive. For example, it is done to prevent swarming, aggression, mite infestation, and to keep honey production at a maximum."²⁹

Beyond Sacralization

The various forms of abusive and exploitative treatment of animals described in *The Final Solution* with echoes of slavery, colonialism, and the Holocaust suggest that Chabon's novella, which, as we have seen, illustrates the failure of the rational mind to get any kind of grasp on the Nazi genocide, at the same time challenges attempts to place the Holocaust beyond history and rational understanding. Instead of presenting the Holocaust as the very antithesis or denial of the rational and moral order embodied by the Holmes figure, these mirroring effects implicate that order in genocidal practices. In our reading, *The Final Solution* undermines popular, reassuring interpretations of the Holocaust as an irrational hate crime, a reversion to barbarism that can be safely consigned to the German context. It suggests that, rather than being a bizarre or aberrant episode in modern history, the Holocaust is an integral part of that history, as genocide lies at the heart of Western modernity.

This bleak vision finds support in the work of scholars such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Zygmunt Bauman, who regard the Holocaust not just as a German–Jewish tragedy but as a tragedy of reason and of modernity itself. Adorno and Horkheimer lay the blame for the Nazi extermination of the European Jews at the feet of the Enlightenment and the instrumentalization of reason.³⁰ Bauman similarly analyzes the Holocaust as a characteristically modern phenomenon, arguing that "it was the spirit of instrumental rationality, and its modern, bureaucratic form of institutionalization, which had made the Holocaust-style solutions not only possible, but eminently 'reasonable'—and increased the probability of their choice."³¹ Whereas, according to Bauman, the Holocaust revealed "the hidden possibilities of modern society,"³² postcolonial scholars such as Paul Gilroy and Enrique Dussel point out that the oppressive potential within modernity was already in plain view in European colonies. Lamenting "the absence of a concern with 'race' or ethnicity from most contemporary writings about modernity,"³³ Gilroy claims, in *The Black*

Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness, that racism and slavery were constitutive of modernity—indeed, the book is dedicated to uncovering the complicity of racial terror and occidental rationality.³⁴ Dussel also draws attention to the non-European anchoring of modernity—he proposes 1492, the discovery and ensuing conquest of the Americas, as the birth date of modernity—and calls for “a new definition, a new global vision of modernity, which shows not only its emancipatory but also its destructive and genocidal side.”³⁵ This new vision, encompassing Europe as well as non-Europe, would combine the emancipatory ideals of modernity with a critique of the “violent, coercive, genocidal reason”³⁶ used to justify the elimination of all alleged obstacles to modernization.³⁷

The critical narrative of modernity that can be inferred from the host of mirroring effects between the Holocaust and non-European histories of victimization set up in Chabon’s novella suggests a measure of continuity rather than absolute discontinuity between the Holocaust and other modern atrocities. This suggestion is congruent with current research in the fledgling field of comparative genocide studies, which builds on pioneering work by postwar theorists of racialized violence, such as Hannah Arendt and Aimé Césaire. In the early 1950s, Arendt identified an inextricable interrelationship between the phenomena of anti-Semitism, imperialism, and totalitarianism, which, in the preface to *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she named “[t]he subterranean stream of Western history.”³⁸ Around the same time, Aimé Césaire argued, in *Discourse on Colonialism*, that Nazism should be viewed as the continuation of Europe’s treatment of various non-European peoples in the previous centuries.³⁹ Hitler, he suggested, “applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the coolies of India, and the blacks of Africa.”⁴⁰ This understanding of Nazism as colonialism revisited on Europe also informs more recent research by Mark Mazower, A. Dirk Moses, David Moshman, Dan Stone, and Jürgen Zimmerer,⁴¹ who have sought to remove the “conceptual blockages”⁴² in comparing the Holocaust with other genocidal histories. Rejecting the rhetoric of Holocaust uniqueness, these scholars consider the Holocaust in relation to what they identify as its colonial antecedents. Rather than placing the Holocaust in a category all of its own, they argue that it must be seen as part of a broader history, “the sorry tale of European world domination.”⁴³ In the same vein, in the final chapter of *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy emphasizes the necessity of making connections across black and Jewish diasporic histories to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the dark underside of modernity.⁴⁴ Extending this argument in his book *Between Camps: Nations, Cultures and the Allure of Race*, Gilroy asks,

“Why does it remain so difficult for so many people to accept the knotted intersection of histories produced by this fusion of horizons?”⁴⁵ The same question can be addressed to critics of Chabon’s novella, who have so far largely ignored this intersection.

The postcolonial subtext that our reading has laid bare points to a deeper connection between the boy and the parrot than is apparent at first glance. The parrot, which echoes the boy in repeating the numbers on the boxcars in which the boy’s parents were deported, emerges as not just a secondary witness to the Nazi persecution of the Jews but as a victim of empire in its own right. In fact, the parrot’s own history of suffering seems to give it a special affinity with the boy, enabling it to effectively bear witness to the catastrophe evoked by the numbers the boy recited before going mute. Indeed, it is the parrot’s testimony that keeps the memory of the Holocaust alive throughout the narrative, albeit for an uncomprehending audience: the train song is misinterpreted by all the adult characters and eventually dismissed by the old man as senseless chatter. In a sense, the parrot also serves as a therapist who helps the boy to (re)articulate his trauma. After all, it is upon being reunited with his parrot that Linus finally regains his speech. Bruno’s testimony turns out to have a healing effect on the therapist as well. By singing the train song, the parrot manages to ease the pain somewhat of its own tragic history:

If he sang the train song, which had lingered far longer and more vividly in his mind than any of the thousand other songs he could sing, for reasons unclear even to him but having to do with sadness, with the sadness of his captivity, of his wanderings, of his finding the boy, of the rolling trains, of the boy’s Mama and Papa and the mad silence that had come over the boy when he was banished from them, then the rawness would be soothed. It was bliss to sing the train song. (113)

Bruno’s testimony thus ends up playing a beneficial role in relation to both the boy’s history and the parrot’s own history, which, as we have seen, resonates powerfully with the histories of slavery and colonialism.

These overtones do not register with the human characters in *The Final Solution*, though: just as the Holocaust remains an insoluble mystery hovering behind the story, so the horrors of slavery and colonial oppression do not enter anyone’s consciousness, except in the form of casual similes and metaphors whose full import no one seems to realize. Indeed, as Mrs. Panicker’s association of the old man with “all the vanished vigour

and rectitude of the Empire” (53) indicates, the characters cling to a nostalgic view of empire as a glorious and noble enterprise that occludes the unsavory reality of imperial domination. The oblique and suggestive connections between slavery, colonialism, and the Holocaust that traverse the text but which it is left up to the reader to detect may draw the Holocaust back into the realm of history, but the novella refrains from resolving horror into ready comprehensibility and from suggesting easy comparability between discrete instances of extreme suffering. Evoking a traumatic modern history that embraces both the Holocaust and empire, *The Final Solution* neither collapses these distinct strands of history into one another, suggesting equivalence, nor maintains their irreducible particularity. By bringing to light connections between dark histories lying just beneath the surface of the narrative, we have shown how Chabon’s novella makes visible what Gilroy calls the “knotted intersection”⁴⁶ of different histories of violence perpetrated in the name of racist ideologies and imperialist political projects. In our reading, then, *The Final Solution* is not so much a parable about the loss of a rational and moral world brought about by the Holocaust as a complex, multilayered text that contextualizes the Holocaust within a broader history of European imperialism and colonialism, suggesting that the old order embodied by the Holmes figure—a modern icon and the epitome of rational thought—was itself inherently violent and generative of untold suffering.

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NOTES

1. Michael Chabon, *The Final Solution* (2003; repr., New York: Fourth Estate, 2004); hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.
2. Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
3. For the standard interpretation, which we will attempt to go beyond, see Matthew Capdevielle, “‘The less we saw, the more he wrote’: Absent Memory and Invention in Stories of Detection” (paper presented at the conference *Response, Remembrance, Representation: A Dialogue between Postwar Jewish Literatures*, Universities of Antwerp and Ghent,

- Belgium, 6–7 November 2006); Anna Richardson, “In Search of the Final Solution: Crime Narrative as a Paradigm for Exploring Responses to the Holocaust,” *European Journal of English Studies* 14, no. 2 (2010): 159–71; and many reviews of the novella that were published in newspapers and magazines.
4. Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Final Problem” (1893), in *The Annotated Sherlock Holmes: The Four Novels and the Fifty-six Short Stories Complete*, ed. William S. Baring-Gould, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1968), 2:301–18.
 5. Arthur Conan Doyle, “His Last Bow” (1917), in *Annotated Sherlock Holmes* (see note 4), 2:792–803.
 6. Nicholas Meyer, *The Seven-Percent Solution: Being a Reprint from the Reminiscences of John H. Watson, MD*, Nicholas Meyer Holmes Pastiches series (New York: Dutton, 1974).
 7. In Goethe’s poem, a child is killed by the elf king; hence the appropriateness. The bird’s repertoire also embraces Gilbert and Sullivan: “Chiefly bits of Iolanthe” (21).
 8. Conan Doyle, “His Last Bow,” 795.
 9. *Ibid.*, 797.
 10. This is, of course, an allegorical reading of the novella, in which the Holmes character’s inability to solve this specific case stands for the impotence of reason in the face of the Holocaust in general. However, a more literal-minded reading would note that there does not actually seem to be anything wrong with the old man’s method—in fact, it is not unlikely that Chabon’s detective would have been able to deduce the meaning of the numbers if, like the reader, he had been given some extra clues. Moreover, the emphasis placed on the old man’s declining cognitive powers can be seen to suggest that his difficulty apprehending the Holocaust has nothing to do with the event as such.
 11. Impéria was the second-best-known Belgian car make, after Minerva. The company existed from 1906 until 1948 and was located in Liège. In addition to its production in Belgium, Impéria also made a number of cars in Great Britain, which were assembled at a factory in Maidenhead [*Wikipedia*, s.v. “Imperia (car),” accessed 22 October 2010, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperia_\(car\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperia_(car))].
 12. Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Naval Treaty” (1893), in *Annotated Sherlock Holmes* (see note 4), 2:167–92.
 13. Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Adventure of the Second Stain” (1904), in *Annotated Sherlock Holmes* (see note 4), 1:301–21.
 14. Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans” (1912), in *Annotated Sherlock Holmes* (see note 4), 2:432–52.
 15. Conan Doyle, “His Last Bow,” 803.
 16. *Ibid.*, 797.
 17. Arthur Conan Doyle, *The War in South Africa: Its Cause and Conduct* (London: Smith, Elder, 1902).
 18. Pinaki Roy, *The Manichean Investigators: A Postcolonial and Cultural Rereading of the Sherlock Holmes and Byomkesh Bakshi Stories* (New Delhi: Sarup, 2008). Catherine Wynne concedes the imperialist orientation of the Sherlock Holmes stories but qualifies it by pointing to a tension between imperialist enthusiasm and a tendency to champion social justice in Conan Doyle’s life and work, which she links to the Irish heritage of the creator of literature’s “definitively English sleuth” (*The Colonial Conan Doyle: British Imperialism, Irish Nationalism, and the Gothic*, Contributions to the Study of World Literature series [Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002], 7).

19. Nick Rennison, *Sherlock Holmes: The Unauthorized Biography* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006), 250–51.
20. In *The War in South Africa*, Conan Doyle defended the use of concentration camps, declaring that they were really refugee camps that the British government had set up to shelter and nourish Boer women and children displaced during the war. He admitted the high mortality rate but attributed it to disease rather than ill-treatment.
21. Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Adventure of the Mazarin Stone” (1927), in *Annotated Sherlock Holmes* (see note 4), 2:735–47.
22. Except for two stories in which Holmes himself acts as narrator (“The Adventure of the Lion’s Mane” [1927] and “The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier” [1927], in *Annotated Sherlock Holmes* (see note 4), 2:776–90 and 707–21), all of the stories are narrated by Dr. Watson, as are the author’s four Holmes novels.
23. Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” *Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (1974): 435–50.
24. “In 1642, the Dutch East India Company established trade bases on the island without Portuguese consent, temporarily centralizing from there its slave trade in the Gulf of Guinea. The Portuguese appeared again on the island in 1648, replacing the Dutch Company with one of their own, also dedicated to slave trading . . .” (*Wikipedia*, s.v. “Bioko,” accessed 24 October 2010, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bioko>).
25. *Le Colonel* has a house in the city of Biskra, Algeria, which was “a military post” and “the scene of severe fighting in the rebellions of 1849 and 1871” (*Wikipedia*, s.v. “Biskra,” accessed 24 October 2010, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biskra>).
26. Graham Huggan, “A Tale of Two Parrots: Walcott, Rhys, and the Uses of Colonial Mimicry,” *Contemporary Literature* 35, no. 4 (1994): 643–60. Huggan demonstrates this through an analysis of two “mimic texts” by Caribbean writers featuring parrots: Derek Walcott’s *Pantomime* (in *Remembrance and Pantomime: Two Plays* [1978; repr., New York: Farrar, 1980]) and Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (London: Penguin, 1966). One might also think of Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), which features an African grey parrot, Methuselah, that serves as a symbol for the Congolese people.
27. The Tower Hamlets borough council, under pressure from animal welfare groups, banned street sales of animals in 1982, forcing the closure of the Club Row animal market.
28. Noah Lewis, “Why Honey Is Not Vegan,” *Vegetus.org*, accessed 25 October 2010, www.vegetus.org/honey/honey.htm.
29. *Ibid.*
30. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (1944; repr., New York: Continuum, 1995).
31. Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989; repr., Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 18.
32. *Ibid.*, 12.
33. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), ix.
34. *Ibid.*, 213.
35. Enrique Dussel, “Eurocentrism and Modernity,” *Boundary 2* 20, no. 3 (1993): 65–76, quotation on 75.

36. Ibid.
37. For a wide-ranging survey and insightful discussion of ideas on the relationship between genocide and modernity, see A. Dirk Moses, "Genocide and Modernity," in *The Historiography of Genocide*, ed. Dan Stone (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 156–93.
38. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951; repr., New York: Schocken, 2004), xxvii.
39. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (1972; repr., New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000) (originally published 1950 in French).
40. Ibid., 14.
41. Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire: Nazi Rule in Occupied Europe* (London: Allen Lane, 2008); A. Dirk Moses, "Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas in the 'Racial Century': Genocides of Indigenous Peoples and the Holocaust," *Patterns of Prejudice* 36, no. 4 (2002): 7–36; David Moshman, "Conceptual Constraints on Thinking about Genocide," *Journal of Genocide Research* 3, no. 3 (2001): 431–50; Dan Stone, "The Historiography of Genocide: Beyond 'Uniqueness' and Ethnic Competition," *Rethinking History* 8, no. 1 (2004): 127–42; and Jürgen Zimmerer, "The Birth of the *Ostland* out of the Spirit of Colonialism: A Postcolonial Perspective on the Nazi Policy of Conquest and Extermination," *Patterns of Prejudice* 39, no. 2 (2005): 197–219.
42. Moses, "Conceptual Blockages."
43. Ibid., 36.
44. Paul Gilroy, "'Not a Story to Pass On': Living Memory and the Slave Sublime," in *Black Atlantic* (see note 33), 187–223.
45. Paul Gilroy, *Between Camps: Nations, Cultures and the Allure of Race* (2000; repr., London: Routledge, 2004), 78.
46. Ibid.