

a review of

Anselm Kiefer / Paul Celan:  
Myth, Mourning and Memory

by Andréa Lauterwein

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# HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

a review of



***Anselm Kiefer / Paul Celan: Myth, Mourning and Memory***

**Andr ea Lauterwein**

**Thames and Hudson, 2007**

**by Kevin Hart  
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**“M**y thought is vertical,” says Anselm Kiefer, “and one of its planes was fascism. But I see all its layers. In my paintings I tell stories in order to show what lies behind history. I make a hole and I go through” (28). One could meditate on these four sentences for a very long time. The verticality that Kiefer evokes is not that of Roberto Juarroz, a stretching up into the heights of the imagination that is also, simultaneously, a reaching down into its depths. The contingencies of history are rigorously excluded in the beautiful, unsettling lyrics of Juarroz’s *Poesía Vertical*; yet those same contingencies brood over Kiefer’s paintings and sculptures. It is more telling to say that Kiefer’s best art is closer to what Husserl called genetic phenomenology: the study of how something gains sense through time. All cultural objects have many sediments of sense, and a genetic phenomenology seeks to show how this sense is given to us in relation to the different horizons against which an object is constituted, and by way of passive and active syntheses. In this lush volume, the object in general that most concerns Kiefer is “being human” as it appears after the Second World War in Germany, and the horizons that press on his work are National Socialism and, barely distinct from it, the Shoah.

Yet when Kiefer looks at one of his particular objects—an attic, a field, a winter landscape, railway tracks, a book—he sees “all its layers,” the mythical as well as the historical, the distant past as well as the years leading up to the reign of the Third Reich. So one must expect to find allusions in his paintings to the deep pasts of Germany, to Norse myths, the *Nibelungenleid* and all that Wagner evokes in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* and *Tannhäuser*, for example. His canvases tell stories, as he says, or—more precisely—stories about stories. You might say that they stage a conflict between two political narratives about Germany. There is the grand, monumental narrative, abstracted from any concrete history and put to dark use in the years of National Socialism and those leading up to them, of a heroic Germany whose great men, suitably made up for the part, include Luther and Frederick II, Bismarck and Wagner, Nietzsche and Hitler. And there is the shorter counter-narrative, a story of cultural criticism and political correction that was repeatedly related after the defeat of Germany in 1945, one that features Heine and Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno. Kiefer sees—and this is a glory of his art—the different, sometimes dislocated layers of how something is constituted as meaningful. What is “behind history” is not a supposedly ahistorical essence, a *Wesen* that would belong only to a logic or metaphysics that can be conducted without reference to history, but the diverse starting points—ideas, ideologies, impressions, acts, failures to act—that, in retrospect, we can see as having led to a particular reality, and that still hover

behind it when we bring it sharply into focus. Kiefer does not render history transparent so that we can reach back into it and touch its actors. Rather, he de-sediments the difficult period of history through which he has lived (he was born in 1945; his father was a German army officer), a time of survivor guilt and shame, denial and moral posturing, and quietly points to dangers that may well press upon the present or the future if we ignore the past.

It is also worth underlining that, for Kiefer, art is *thinking*, and that it too has uneven, dislocated layers. Not all his work takes place at the same level, no more than it works with the same media. In his sculptures, watercolors, installations, and great sprawling canvases, Kiefer thinks differently because each medium demands different things of him. The same is true of his subjects: each demands a thinking that is appropriate to it. The thought required by modern history, as in the work represented in this book, is not the thought that is proper to the cosmos, as is represented in much of his more recent work, let alone the more anguished religious themes of a contemporary installation such as *Palmsonntag*. In the paintings and sculptures considered by Andréa Lauterwein, Kiefer can be seen to enter history at a particular point, and indeed much of the art that he practices turns on choosing the right angle of entry and, once behind history, making his way along its dark side to find what best to expose. If history is a tapestry composed of many threads that historians and politicians ask us to view in different lights, Kiefer's mature works in this book are invitations to look behind the tapestry and see its hanging system, its loose threads, its evidence of having been constructed over time and under certain conditions. His art, we might say, involves turning the tapestry around and around.

Unsurprisingly, then, Kiefer's canvases, some of which are very large indeed, include photographs, straw, ash, clay, charcoal, string, and dirt; his sculptures use lead, glass, and dead plants. If we are tempted to call Kiefer's work "neo-symbolist," we must do so in the full awareness that it is a symbolism that rebels against the spirituality of nineteenth-century symbolists such as Caspar David Friedrich and Edvard Munch. In terms of its media, Kiefer's art is one with the detritus of the world about us, which means that it makes no attempt to transcend history, let alone to present the ineffable or to fascinate us by its formal perfection as an artwork. Its religiosity is as palpable as it is unorthodox, especially in the work that comes after the period that is surveyed by Lauterwein, but it is neither confessional nor filled with hope. One might say it is Vatican I Catholicism developed in negative: what was light appears dark. And yet the metaphor limps. For what was dark then has become darker now. In terms of tonality, the silence in Kiefer's canvases is not that of a world lifted momentarily out of time but of a time after the screams of the dying can no longer be heard. We are in an attic where Jews have been hiding, but they were found, cornered by the Gestapo, and have been murdered now. We are walking along railway tracks towards the horizon and a blank sky, but

the cattle trains crammed with Jews have long passed by. The silence of the works is the silence of mourning.

“Quotation within Kiefer’s work becomes a true working method” (15), observes Lauterwein, and with good reason: it is essential to his art. More accurate, though, would be the statement that it is a method that works in several ways and to various ends. One can use quotation for pedagogical purposes, to distance oneself from something said, to use something, to mention it, or to use it and mention it at the same time, and so on. Consider *Occupations*, the collection of photographs that first drew attention to the young artist, and that generated fierce, angry discussion of his intentions. In the Summer and Fall of 1969 the young Kiefer traveled to Italy, Switzerland, and France, and stood before or on well-known cultural sites and natural vistas in a military uniform with his arm raised in the *Hitlergruss* or Nazi salute. Photographs, taken from various angles and elevations, of him standing in this transgressive pose constitute the artwork. Clearly, Kiefer is quoting a gesture from the 1930s and 1940s, Goebbels’s *Sieg Heil*, which has been outlawed in Germany since 1945, although whether he is also “disquoting” the gesture (detaching it from another and using it himself) is not at all clear. Far from being plainly satirical, as in Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* (1940) or in Billy Wilder’s *Stalag 17* (1953), the Nazi salute in *Occupations* allows the viewer to regard it as an act of brute rebellion against the post-1945 political order.

When we see Kiefer standing before the Coliseum in Rome, his arm raised at a forty-five degree angle, are we meant to see a correlation between the *pax Romani* and twentieth-century Italian fascism? Are we to recall the cheap holidays in Italy taken by ordinary German families in the 1940s, vacations made possible by the Reich’s leisure organization, the *Kraft durch Freude*? Are we to see him, wearing his hair too long and too unkempt for a soldier, as a young man of his day, not himself, perhaps, but one who is nonetheless affirming solidarity with the fascists of an earlier age or at least acknowledging the fascination of Nazi party rallies? Or are we to take the photograph as a statement that Germans have not fundamentally changed, not even after the *68er-Bewegung*, and that the National Socialist ideology of the 1930s and early 1940s still presses on their consciousness? Yet again, are we meant to recall the sixty-eighters of Heidelberg in the student revolt shouting at their professors *Hier wird nicht zitiert!* (“No quoting here!”) in a naïve attempt to break totally with the past? Or are we to view the subject of the photographs as a pathetic figure, disheveled, tiny and alone, and to see this as a deflation of Nazism and neo-Nazism? It is this uncertainty, this under-determination of context with respect to image, that makes *Occupations* as disturbing now as it was when first viewed by his professors at the Fine Arts Academy in Karlsruhe on his return from his travels in central and southern Europe and as seen when it appeared in the art magazine *Interfunktionem* in 1975.

When we quote someone we present a state of affairs as grasped by that person. Modern art has long seen the value of quotation as a technique of self-alienation, in one or more senses of the word: T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) showcases his practice of "quotation without quotation marks," while quotation and self-quotation have long been common in music. (Brahms quotes Mozart's *Don Giovanni* in his *Liebe und Frühling*, for example, while Puccini quotes the "Mimi" theme from *La bohème* (1896) in *Il tabarro* (1918).) One consequence of Eliot's practice is to break down the integrity and authority of the lyric "I," to assemble fragments of culture in order to show that the unity and energy of western culture have been fatally compromised, and that we are spiritually exhausted. Yet Brahms pays homage to Mozart's genius, and Puccini transposes the "Mimi" theme in *Il tabarro* so that the song vendor offers a commentary on the fate of the lovers ("Poor Mimi, who died for love"). In postmodern works, quotation is, if anything, freer: we find quotations from popular culture as well as high culture, and with no suggestion of a hierarchic difference between them. Here there is less of a sense of claiming the authority of another than of regarding the past as a huge basement with all its many artifacts just thrown together from which bits and pieces may be selected at will to make new works. More specifically, we may talk of artists whose quotations use other works in order to make substantive claims, and others whose quotations mention other works without using them: they evoke a color, a form, a conceptual structure, perhaps with parody in mind, perhaps not. So when Algernon Swinburne quotes (by paraphrase) Boccaccio's *Decameron* X. 7 in his double sestina "The Complaint of Lisa" (1870) he is using the older work, but when John Ashbery quotes "The Complaint of Lisa" in *Flowchart* (1993) by retaining the terminal words of the double sestina while weaving his own poem around them he is mentioning Swinburne's poem but not using it.

The sort of quotation that Kiefer mostly favors does not place him among the ranks of postmodern visual artists—Joseph Kosuth, Sherrie Levine, and Mark Tansey, for example—who like to straddle the divide between use and mention, and sometimes to play endlessly with mentioning. The reanimation of symbol, not pastiche, is Kiefer's artistic concern; his muses are pain and loss, not theory and humor; his interest is in thick textures, not monochromatic flatness. Of course, like many visual artists, from time to time Kiefer alludes to other paintings. As Lauterwein notes, the photograph of Kiefer giving the Hitler salute to the sea quotes Casper David Friedrich's 1818 painting *Wanderer above a Sea of Mists* (35). (It also alludes, perhaps, to the legend of Canute the Great attempting to fight the oncoming waves of the sea with a sword.) Far more pressing, though, are Kiefer's quotations from literature, especially poetry: Ingeborg Bachmann and Velimir Chlebnikov, among others, and above all the early poetry of Paul Celan. In this volume the poetry of Celan frequently gives Kiefer the point he needs to "make a hole" and "go through" to the back of history. Here we are not dealing with pictorial quotation, as in Dirk Hager's

woodcut *Paul Celan*: we do not find images of the poet's face on the canvases, for example. Sometimes the quotations seem to be what philosophers call "propositional quotations": the painting in question states that Celan has said something important. And indeed many of Kiefer's canvases point us to what is made manifest in Celan's poems, especially those in *Mohn und Gedächtnis* (1952). Yet we must take care. A poem such as "Todesfuge" states very little while also evoking a great deal. Certainly "der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland" [death is a master from Germany] is a statement, yet far more important to Kiefer are other lines from the same poem: "dein goldenes Haar Margarete" [your golden hair Margarete] and "dein aschenes Haar Sulamith" [your ashen hair Shulamith], which at best only border on statements. Ungrammatical phrases like these have no use-function when quoted.

Nelson Goodman in his essay "On Some Questions Concerning Quotation" (*Monist* 58 (1974)) tells us that quotations not only refer to something but also contain it. So when Kiefer quotes "dein aschenes Haar Sulamith" in the title of one of his works from 1981, while also writing those words at the top of the canvas, he is referring to Celan's "Todesfuge" and containing the four words. Yet those words are not simply self-contained on the canvas, they are not just repeated in another context, nor are they merely mentioned, for they now participate in the life of the canvas: the dark letters are one with the lines of black paint, white paint and charcoal that thickly cross the canvas. Kiefer is showing how the reality of the Shoah manifests itself to him, and is using Celan's disclosure of the Shoah in "Todesfuge" as an exemplary manifestation of the same grim reality, one that has allowed him to make the Shoah manifest in his own way. As Robert Sokolowski says, in a very fine essay on quotation (and drawing here upon an insight of John Searle's), "It is not the case that presenting a representation is to present *only* the mind of another; the mind of another is itself the manifestation of something in the world" ("Quotation," in *Pictures, Quotations, and Distinctions* (1992), 30). Important artistically in a work such as *Dein aschenes Haar Sulamith* is not just *what* is presented but *how* it is presented. Were this not so, we would regard the canvas as merely parasitic on Celan's poem, as though it were art about art. Instead, we directly recognize it as art about the world in which we live.

In seeing that Kiefer passes from what to how in his paintings and sculptures we recognize a phenomenological impulse in that work. It would be profitable to see the various ways in which that passage occurs in different canvases and even in the same canvas. In the writing of "Margarete" or "Sulamith," for example, we would say that being appears drained of being; while in *The World-Ash* (1982), with its tension between the mythical Norse tree Yggdrasil which stands at the origin of the world and a post-Holocaust landscape, we would say that being—here the being of horror—is given to us in an excessive way: the artwork is saturated with intuitions that cannot be held together. Equally, it would be instructive to regard Kiefer's mature pieces, as given in

this book, as offering hospitality to literature, especially poetry, and to media that are usually taken to be alien to visual art. I am thinking in particular of “hospitality” as Jacques Derrida resets the word for new use:



Hospitality—this is a name or an example of deconstruction. Of the deconstruction of the concept, of the concept of concept, as well as of its construction, its home, its “at-home” [*son chez-moi*]. Hospitality is the deconstruction of the at-home; deconstruction is hospitality to the other, to the other than oneself, the other than “its other,” to an other who is beyond any “its other.” (“Hospitality,” *Acts of Religion* (2002), 364).

Derrida is speaking here of works, especially literary works, as offering hospitality to *la différance*. No poem, story, play, or indeed anything written, belongs fully and completely to its genre; it is always and already able to participate in other genres. It can always be lifted from one context and situated in another, and then it will take on new senses and functions.

Of course, this way of thinking about art as hospitality can justify the assemblages of a Robert Rauschenberg, making him a forebear of postmodernism in the visual arts. This is a very long way from where Kiefer wishes to stand. His heavily textured paintings, his forceful perspectives, his relentless symbols and insistent, somber quotations show us something utterly different. He wants to give us art as experience: an art that has barely escaped an exposure to peril, and that lets us glimpse that exposure and the narrowness of that escape. Time and again, Kiefer tells us that we cannot expect ever to be “at home” in the world, and that the desire to be “at home” in a land, a language, and a history, is itself a courting of danger. Another passage from Derrida, this time from his early *Edmund Husserl’s “Origin of Geometry”: An Introduction* (1962) indicates a better direction for understanding this formidable artist. “A phenomenology of the experience is possible thanks to a reduction and to an appropriate de-sedimentation” (50). Kiefer’s finest works as given in Anselm Kiefer / Paul Celan, and there are a great many of them, perform a reduction—a bracketing of our default understandings of history as linear, as determined by “great men,” as narrative, as progress—and offer us the very feel of the sediments of our past. They show us how the sense of our recent past is built up over time, in concrete moments of action and inaction, and how, with the Shoah, this sense rises to a sharp point in horror itself.

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