

CULTURAL THEORY AND HOLOCAUST
REMEMBRANCE IN ROMAIN GARY'S *POUR
SGANARELLE* AND *LA DANSE DE GENGIS COHN*



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Between 1965 and 1968, Romain Gary published a cycle of three texts, called *Frère Océan*, the first of which, *Pour Sganarelle*, is a “preface” exposing the author’s view on literature. The other two texts are novels, entitled *La danse de Gengis Cohn* and *La tête coupable*.¹ This article will focus on the first-mentioned novel, which deals with the place of the Holocaust in art and in cultural memory in a most provocative way. Our aim consists, on one hand, in analyzing the causes and effects of Gary’s subversive stance towards certain types of culture and remembrance and, on the other hand, examining the links between *La danse de Gengis Cohn* and the theory of the novel elaborated in the cycle’s preface *Pour Sganarelle*.

CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY

The novel revolves around a Jewish comic named Moïché Cohn, alias Gengis Cohn. Cohn was actually shot by the Nazis, but his soul has lived on as a dybbuk and has taken hold of the subconscious of the Nazi officer who was in charge of his execution, Otto Schatz. The resulting “closeness” between Cohn and Schatz allows Gary to provide a combined view of both Jewish and German memorial stances on the Nazi genocide. Moreover, the narrator ultimately points out that the interactions of the characters take place in the subconscious of the author himself, hence offering an illustration of the latter’s own struggles in coming to terms with the past.

The conflict between different memorial stances in Gary’s subconscious gains particular significance in light of the novel’s plot. In fact, Schatz has become a police officer after the war and he has currently been entrusted with the investigation of a series of crimes occurring in the nearby Forest of Geist. Schatz’s astonished comments on these

¹ Gary R. *Pour Sganarelle. Recherche d'un personnage et d'un roman*. Paris, Gallimard, 1965; Gary R. *La danse de Gengis Cohn*. Paris, Gallimard, 1967; Gary R. *La tête coupable*. Paris, Gallimard, 1968.

“unprecedented” crimes are ridiculed by Cohn’s ironic insistence on the amount of suffering inflicted by the Nazis: indeed, in light of the huge number of victims involved in the Nazi genocide, the fuss made over the recent murders might seem quite out of proportion. However, this apparent emphasis on the unique historical status of the Nazi Holocaust is gainsaid by the fact that the new crimes described in the novel are eventually endowed with a mythological interpretation, thus becoming less insignificant. As a matter of fact, the victims in the Forest of Geist have all succumbed while seeking to satisfy a woman called Lily, who impersonates “humanity.” Actually Lily has been waiting for satisfaction for at least two thousand years, but no man could offer her pleasure, each attempt being too feeble or too short.² Yet, every man who fancied himself capable of “realizing” this challenge has paid for his failure with his life, killed by Lily’s eternal companion Florian, who is, in turn, a personification of death. This mythological dimension operates not only on an individual scale but also on a collective level where it engenders an explanation of historical massacres. Indeed, in Gary’s interpretation, the latter originates from the fact that men invariably try to become “*Übermen*,” casting their eyes and desires upon “humanity” itself, thereby setting “absolute” goals for their virility which they cannot make “real” but for the sake of which they sacrifice numerous victims.³ These historical “holocausts” include the Jews exterminated as part of the Nazi program along with, amongst others, the victims of religious wars or the Vietnam wars. Over and above this, Florian spots new resources, which are readily at hand in China or could be created by nuclear bombs. In fact these categories of would-be-victims might outnumber the Jews by far, thus beating the latter’s “*historical world record*.”⁴ At this point, the mythological interpretation of Lily’s crimes reverses the initial balance between the number of victims involved in the Holocaust and the series of “delicts” investigated by Schatz. Such a reversal actually calls into question any claim of uniqueness with regard to “crimes against *humanity*,” situating the latter on a universal level.⁵

This approach to human suffering in fact continues some reflections offered in *Pour Sganarelle*. In the latter text, Gary denounces the delusions of “puissance” which lead to mass massacres and genocide, notably in totalitarian regimes. His critique of

² In contrast to the eternal hardness of the stones longingly caressed by Lily (Gary R. *La danse de Gengis Cohn*, p. 151).

³ The link between virility and violence brought about by the association of Lily and Florian is reinforced by the intertwining of sexual isotopies with those related to war. For example, Lily sets her hopes on phallic instruments such as police weapons (as well as musical instruments).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 162; my own translation and emphasis.

⁵ Additionally, Gengis Cohn’s own execution and Lily’s crimes take place in the same Forest of Geist which reinforces the connection between both events. Furthermore, as Julien Roumette has added: “On a [...] pu lire *La danse de Gengis Cohn* comme un retour à une identité juive. Mais ce retour aux sources est relativisé par l’humour. Et Gary prend soin de généraliser aussitôt. À la fin du récit, après que le narrateur s’est évanoui devant le monument aux morts du ghetto de Varsovie, un passant demande si celui-ci a perdu quelqu’un dans le ghetto. À quoi le narrateur répond, en s’éveillant : ‘*Oui, tout le monde*’” (Roumette J. Avant-propos. Devoir d’imagination. *Littératures*, n°. 56, 1997, p. 9).

totalitarian “puissance” not only applies to society but to literature and art as well. In the discussion that follows we will analyze Gary’s views of this “totalitarian art” and the alternative type of novel that he introduces in *Pour Sganarelle*, named “roman total” or “roman picaresque.” We will then discuss how that theoretical model is put into practice in *La danse de Gengis Cohn* and how it influences Gary’s stance with regard to the remembrance of the Holocaust.

CHALLENGING THE “TOTALITARIAN NOVEL”

According to Romain Gary, totalitarian regimes engage in the pursuit of the absolute, trying to make reality conform to a “system.” Their firm belief in their own “puissance” induces them to confound reality and imagination.⁶ Likewise, totalitarian art claims that individual works can exert a clearly defined impact upon reality and upon the reader. Again, however, lived reality shows the extent to which this claim is groundless. That is to say, then, that excessive affirmations of “puissance” automatically shift into symptoms of “impuissance”. On the one hand, these conceptions explain why the attempts to satisfy Lily in *La danse de Gengis Cohn* are invariably vain and sanctioned by death. On the other hand, they bring out the reasons why Gary’s “roman total” adopts more modest ambitions with regard to the impact of its own imagination upon reality: though the “roman total” tends to challenge reality, it does so in order to distance it rather than to replace it. Given these reduced ambitions, the impact of artworks is considered indirect and undetermined and is not deemed to ensue from an individual œuvre. Indeed, in Gary’s view, artworks merge into an indistinct Ocean of culture through a “*noyade heureuse*.”⁷ In *La danse de Gengis Cohn*, the opposition between the totalitarian pretensions derided by Gary and the cultural imagination that he tends to promote reemerges through the contrast between the men approaching Lily with “virile” designs and those heeding Cohn’s advice to avoid looking straight at “humanity” in order to imagine its beauty with one’s eyes closed, that is to say, cut off from “reality.”

CHALLENGING “LE CULTE DE LA DOULEUR”

Considering that Gary’s aesthetic imagination involves a deviation from reality, it engenders, as the author points out in *Pour Sganarelle*, a “*joie de la création*.”⁸ This raises the question about how art might deal with tragic topics like human suffering. Gary

⁶ When attempts to “realize” their dream fail, men are trapped in their own struggle to attain the inaccessible, eventually resorting to new systems.

⁷ Which reminds us of the title of the cycle, *Frère Océan*.

⁸ Gary R. *Pour Sganarelle*, p. 261, p. 424.

addresses this issue on a theoretical level in *Pour Sganarelle* and elaborates it further through his own presentation of genocides and historical massacres in *La danse de Gengis Cohn*. *Pour Sganarelle* states that all reality, including human suffering, is liable to serve as primary material for artworks.⁹ Consequently, Gary does not adhere to metaphysical prohibitions of representation with regard to topics such as the Holocaust. Rather, he refutes any constraint on representation, openly declaring himself against what he calls the widespread “*culte de la douleur*.”¹⁰

[...] le respect du Malheur est devenu une véritable culture – au sens agricole du mot [...] Écoutez bien, dit le personnage, l'écho derrière vos oreilles: la souffrance de l'homme, c'est de la merde. Ne vous sentez-vous pas profanés dans votre nature même par cette affirmation? Voilà, mes *agneaux*, votre conception de votre « nature »; voilà ce que des siècles de *Pietà* ont fait de vous. Lorsque je dis que toute souffrance, votre souffrance, notre grande peine, c'est de la merde, ne vous sentez-vous pas personnellement atteints, scandalisés, outrés, insultés, diminués, *privés de quelque chose*, volés? Cette simple constatation d'une évidence aveuglante vous semble un blasphème. [...] Pourquoi vous sentez-vous profanés par une si élémentaire constatation? Parce que, dès qu'on profane la souffrance, vous trouvez qu'on profane celle du *Christ*, et que la souffrance est donc un « sacré », fille de Dieu? Eh bien, dites-le : il serait intéressant d'entendre enfin exprimée à haute voix cette abjecte perversion de la souffrance du *Christ*, celle qui *ferait adorer aux Juifs leur étoile jaune*, et mènerait en pèlerinage à Auschwitz les foules juives pour baiser dans l'adoration les pierres du four crématoire. [...] [La souffrance] confère à toute vérité un caractère exemplaire. Elle mène tout droit à une *complicité entre la victime et le bourreau*. Merde que tout cela [...].¹¹

The highlighted passages in the above quote offer important clues for understanding the relationships between art and suffering in *La danse de Gengis Cohn*. In this novel, Gary deals not only with artworks which glorify Lily's beauty but also with those devoted to the suffering of her victims. As Florian points out, echoing Gary's remarks in *Pour Sganarelle*, the agony of Lily's most famous victim, Jesus Christ, who “sacrificed” himself for the sake of “humanity,” has indeed inspired countless artworks and crucifixions over the past two thousand years. In Gary's novel, this excessive attention to suffering is turned into derision in various ways. First, Gary denounces the superficial empathy of the artist and the public towards the victims, arguing that their compassion is merely a preliminary step to exorcism. Indeed, “*le culte de la douleur*” excels in, what Gary, calls “*l'art de se dérober*”:

Je sens [que Lily] commence vraiment à se décourager, à se lasser, et je la comprends. On a beau jeter cent cinquante christes admirables et trois cents madones à ses pieds, lui jouer du Debussy, elle sait que tout ce très grand art, ce n'est finalement que celui de se dérober.¹²

⁹ Cf. Engel V. Romain Gary, l'empêcheur d'écrire en rond. *Les lettres romanes*, t. 59, n°. 3-4, 2005, p. 298-299.

¹⁰ Gary R. *Pour Sganarelle*, p. 279.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 278-280; my own emphasis except for “privés de quelque chose”.

¹² Gary R. *La danse de Gengis Cohn*, p. 150.

In fact, this statement is even applied to Gary's own writing suggesting that the author himself is not entirely above indulging in such stratagems in order to ease his own conscience or "subconscious":

- C'est un écrivain. Il essaie de t'oublier, ma chérie. [...] Tout ce que ça donnera, c'est encore de la littérature. [...] Il en fera sûrement un livre, c'est leur façon de se débarrasser de ce qui les gêne. [...] Ils s'en tirent toujours avec un livre.¹³

In a different vein, Gary also ridicules the aesthetic exaltation of suffering pushing this modality to the point where suffering is actually staged merely for the sake of art. Cohn reveals, for instance, that Jesus Christ remained on the Holy Cross for two days to enable an artistic immortalization of his experience. Along the same vein, certain victims described in *La danse de Gengis Cohn* are expected to "pose" for artworks, in particular mothers with children:

[...] je vois passer à vau-l'eau vingt cadavres vietnamiens absolument furieux, les mères tiennent encore leurs enfants dans leurs bras, ils en ont marre de garder la pose, qu'est qu'elle fout, la Culture, on ne va tout de même pas rester à pourrir sur place en attendant un Goya ?¹⁴

The example of the mothers holding their children is all but random, since these victims offer a configuration close to that of the *Pietàs*, which Gary reproaches in *Pour Sganarelle* for exalting suffering.¹⁵ On the other hand, Gary also mocks the victims' own deferential and protective attitude towards the suffering they endured and, notably, their trepidation about the artistic appropriations of the latter. In an ironic comment, Gengis Cohn associates these "possessive" concerns with the stereotype of Jewish avarice:

Je crains qu'à force de nous griser de culture, nos plus grands crimes s'estompent complètement. Tout sera enveloppé d'une beauté que les massacres et les famines ne seront plus que des reflets littéraires ou picturaux heureux sous la plume d'un Tolstoï ou le pinceau d'un Picasso. [...] Au fond, il s'agit là encore de notre avarice proverbiale, de notre esprit de lucre: j'ai peur que quelqu'un d'autre, un écrivain, un peintre, fasse une affaire sur mon dos, tire des bénéfices de mon malheur. Nous autres, nous voulons toujours garder tout pour nous-mêmes, c'est connu.¹⁶

As Vincent Engel has pointed out, the ironic recuperation of this anti-Semitic stereotype hints at the overall meaninglessness of any apprehension regarding the rightful

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 264-265.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

¹⁵ This is a recurrent topos in *La danse de Gengis Cohn*: « Nous étions une quarantaine, dans le trou que nous avions creusé, et il y avait naturellement des mères avec leurs enfants » (*Ibid.*, p. 14).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

representation of the Holocaust.¹⁷ At the same time, this passage recalls the critiques voiced by Gary in *Pour Sganarelle* with regard to the victims' attachment to their own suffering which eventually renders them complicit with the perpetrators. In an echo of the victimary attitude denounced in our quote from *Pour Sganarelle*, Cohn shows, for instance, an intense preoccupation with his Star of David. Moreover, he is forced to acknowledge, though reluctantly, that, in the author's mind or subconscious, victims and perpetrators appear to be inextricably linked:

- Il cherche à nous vomir, murmure Schatz. [...]
- Je comprendrais qu'il cherche à vomir un nazi de votre espèce, dis-je. Mais moi ?
- Nous sommes associés dans son esprit, dit Schatz. C'est normal.

La monstruosité est telle que je suis pris d'un fou rire. L'idée qu'au mot "Juif" puisse répondre à tout jamais par un processus d'association *normal* le mot "Allemand" est une véritable apothéose de l'humain.¹⁸

The inextricable link between victim and perpetrator has, however, a second cause, since Gary also insists that these two roles are not necessarily as separate as is often suggested by cultural or artistic representations. Indeed, Gary repeatedly alerts his reader to the fact that the stereotypical identities prevalent in the "*culte de la douleur*" oversimplify "reality." He endeavors, for instance, to invalidate the conventional representation of Jesus Christ as a consenting victim even though there has been such a portrayal throughout art history:

[...] ils continuent à geindre, tout ce qu'ils demandent, c'est une heure de pose, le reste, ils s'en foutent, une heure de pose, c'est pour la culture, Il n'a pas le droit de refuser. Mais ils se sont trompés de personnage. Ils L'ont peint tant de fois faiblard, transparent, mignon, efféminé, plein d'acceptation, qu'ils ont fini par s'imaginer qu'Il était réellement comme ça, doux comme un mouton. Le doigt dans l'œil. C'est un homme, un vrai. Il a un visage tellement fort, tellement sévère et viril et des yeux d'une telle dureté qu'il faut Le voir pour comprendre à quel point tout l'art sacré s'était voué à Le domestiquer.¹⁹

What is more, in Gary's novel, the stereotypical and "unfounded" image of Christ's acceptance of his own fate is mirrored by cliché images of unresisting Jews as well as by those of the victims succumbing to Lily and Florian, who, in one more symbolic reminder of Nazi genocide, undress willingly and fold their clothes neatly before meeting their deaths. In fact, according to Gary, the simplified stereotypes represented in the "*culte de la douleur*" fail to account for the complexity and reversibility of the roles or places of victims and perpetrators. The examples of this reversibility are

¹⁷ Engel V. Romain Gary, *l'empêcheur d'écrire en rond*, p. 302.

¹⁸ Gary R. *La danse de Gengis Cohn*, p. 148.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

countless, both on the individual and on the collective level. An illustrative example is the fact that Florian, who is responsible for the death of Lily's would-be sexual partners, is himself a eunuch due to a hunting accident. Similarly Schatz is the "victim" of a dybbuk and, more specifically, of the ghost of one of his own victims.²⁰ As a general result, stereotypes are shown to be another totalitarian form of representation since they fail to do justice to "reality" and serve ideological purposes:

Avouez que cela commençait à vous ennuyer d'être obligé de vous habituer à penser à l'Allemagne *autrement*. Hein ? Ce n'est tout de même pas désagréable de pouvoir recaser l'Allemagne dans la petite case « irrécupérable, éternellement à elle-même pareille » dans laquelle vous l'avez rangée une fois pour toutes, comme vous aimez bien que les Juifs se conforment à l'image que vous leur avez assignée à travers les siècles, et qu'Israël, ou une Allemagne démocratique, ça vous gêne un peu dans vos petites habitudes ?²¹

Je remarque une très belle bague, un rubis, un bijou de famille, ça vaut quinze mille dollars, au bas mot. Je dis ça en passant, par conformisme, par respect des opinions d'autrui. Je ne veux surtout pas vous déranger dans vos habitudes.²²

CHALLENGING CULTURAL ELITISM

Another side of the artistic totalitarianism which Gary criticizes in both *Pour Sganarelle* and *La danse de Gengis Cohn* is its cultural elitism. In *Pour Sganarelle*, Gary argues at length against the widespread disdain for the so-called "*culture de masse*." According to him, this position is related to a totalitarian and aristocratic ideology which aspires to dictate its own rules and create a "pure" culture. For instance, "la honteuse polémique sur le livre de poche pue le débat aristocratique entre petits marquis sur la meilleure façon de traiter le peuple."²³ Gary, for one, explicitly counters the social distinction between "high" and "low" by stating that a "humble ruisseau récusé et condamné à l'égoût éternel par nos aristos [...] se jette lui aussi dans l'Océan."²⁴ As a matter of fact, this anti-elitist point of view reveals a second aspect of Gary's earlier claim that all artworks fuse into one and the same "Ocean of culture."

In *La danse de Gengis Cohn*, an elitist tendency is represented through the (Nazi) ideals of purity and cleanness as well as by the characters of « le Baron » and « le Comte »: they advocate a "purely" platonic relationship with Lily presuming that she wishes for

²⁰ It is also worth noting that Gary resorts to a vocabulary of intimacy when describing the relationship between Schatz and his victim and dybbuk Gengis Cohn: for instance, the latter calls the former "Schatzchen" in imitation of the German "Schätzchen" (*Ibid.*, p. 133).

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 42.

²³ Gary R. *Pour Sganarelle*, p. 219.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

nothing more than cultural satisfaction. As a reaction against this tendency, Gary constantly mixes the pure and the impure, treasures and dirt, ideological ideals and vulgarity. Schatz, for instance, is obsessed with cleanness but he cannot wash off the past. Moreover, given the general reversibility of roles, the “high” and “low” positions in our culture turn out to be less than stable. This becomes particularly clear when Gary subverts the hierarchical relationships between consciousness and the subconscious, once more recurring to the sewer metaphor. In the novel, the latter refers to the suppressed subconscious of both the Germans – with their Jewish dybbuks – and the author, who discovers the hidden weight of the past during his visit to the Jewish ghetto in Warsaw when a hand appears to him out of a sewer line. However, due to the complex imbrication of characters in each other’s subconscious, their personalities become confused; this once more emphasizes the interchangeability of roles between victim and perpetrator:

[...] ma situation est si délicate, si confuse aussi, qu’en disant “je” il m’est impossible de vous assurer que c’est bien moi [Cohn] qui parle. C’est ça l’ennui avec la conscience morale, le subconscient et certains états historiques intéressants. Ça peut être moi, ça peut être Schatzchen, ou même vous et par vous, j’entends Votre Grandeur Illustrissime de l’Occident des Lumières, la caractéristique la plus curieuse du *dibbuk*, cette véritable lie de nos égouts, étant qu’il a une tendance quasi endémique à se fourrer dans tous nos hauts-lieux.²⁵

For another example, Cohn takes pleasure in pointing out vulgar traits in Florian’s appearance, precisely because “death” is a subject which has inspired countless works of “high” art, hence fulfilling a key role in elitist culture. In addition, Florian’s readings include not only the literary canon but also popular works featuring humanity and death such as the “*séries noires*” and *Playboy*. These systematic carnivalizations of “high” and “low” values emphasize that the “purity” aimed at in a totalitarian culture does not converge with “reality” and is, therefore, hypocritical. In the following quote, for instance, Florian disguises “vulgar” sexuality with humanistic ideals in order to placate Lily’s sensibilities:

- Qu’est-ce qu’il est en train de crier ?
- C’est du yiddish, ma chérie. *In the baba* !
- Qu’est-ce que ça veut dire ?
- En yiddish, ça veut dire « fraternité », ma chérie.²⁶

Moreover, Gary explains in *Pour Sganarelle* that pornography is a term which is wrongly – and hypocritically – reserved for sexual prostitution, while intellectual prostitution ought, in his view, to be evaluated in the same terms. That is the reason

²⁵ Gary R. *La danse de Gengis Cohn*, p. 132-133.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

why this “preface” stipulates the author’s intention to deal with the topic of nuclear bombs in terms of pornography. As we have seen, the mythological personifications of death and humanity in *La danse de Gengis Cohn* indeed enable him to develop the theme of crimes against humanity through a sexual allegory.

HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE: A CHALLENGE

By staging his own subconscious and by introducing other characters into this personal “ghetto,” Gary gives a voice to different cultural and memorial stances and stereotypes. The internal conflicts between those discourses emphasize the fact that none are no more “real” than the others. At the same time, however, they enable us to analyze the actions that occur at the level of the author’s imagined subconscious, hence revealing the hidden dynamics of memory such as oblivion, repression, and the return of the repressed.²⁷ Indeed, as we have seen, artworks “exorcize” the past, whereas the author’s memory returns during his visit to the Warsaw ghetto. Furthermore Lily does not remember her own victims, and police inspector Schatz is often tempted to expel his dybbuk through therapy; he seeks to redeem his past by resisting this impulse as the latter too closely resembles a renewal of the extermination act itself. Gengis Cohn, for his part, performs a frenetic dance, mentioned in the novel’s title, to ward off such an expulsion.²⁸ In the end, then, these complex dynamics of memory not only involve the author and his characters, but the reader as well. As a matter of fact, the latter is, at times, complicit with Cohn’s irony and, at times, accused of defending certain stereotypes himself. His position cannot be one of “purity” either given that cultural stereotypes, the roles of victim and perpetrator and the dynamics of memory are both eternally floating and invariably threatened by totalitarian projects.

²⁷ Cf. Poier-Bernhard A. Gengis Cohn en Allemagne, Gengis Cohn en Gary. *Littératures*, n°. 56, 1997, p. 186-187.

²⁸ Cohn’s dance is a traditional “hora” or “circle dance”. As a consequence of the Nazi genocide, the character has to perform this supposedly collective dance alone.

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KULTŪROS TEORIJA IR HOLOKAUSTO ATMINIMAS ROMAINO GARY TEKSTUOSE
SGANARELIUI IR ČINGIO KONO ŠOKIS

Santrauka

Remiantis Romaino Gary „totalaus romano“, arba „šelmiško romano“ (*roman picaresque*), teorija, straipsnyje nagrinėjamas jo romanas *Čingio Kono šokis* (*La danse de Gengis Cohn*). Gary savo teoriją išplėtojo veikale *Sganareliui: personažo ir romano beiškant* (*Pour Sganarelle, Recherche d'un personnage et d'un roman*). Jo modelis yra visiškai priešingas „totalitariniam romanui“, kuriam būdingos nerealios elitistinės pretenzijos. Dėl to *Čingio Kono šokyje* taip aštriai ironizuojamas aukštasis menas. Ypač Romainas Gary smerkia žmogiškosios kančios išaukštinimą, todėl šiame romane sąmoningai profanuoja holokausto atmintį.

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