

## ARTICLES – GERMAN STUDIES

# Genocide, Landscape, Beauty, Taboo: Reading Anselm Kiefer's *Der Morgenthau-Plan* with Walther von der Vogelweide's *Lindenlied*

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Anselm Kiefer's 2012 exhibition, *Der Morgenthau-Plan*, courted controversy with its seeming willingness to equate Allied planning for post-Second World War Germany with the Nazi genocide. Taking as its cue German nationalist interpretations of the (unrealised) proposal in 1944 by the US Treasury Secretary, Henry Morgenthau Jr., to deindustrialise and pastoralise Germany, the exhibition intervenes in debates about German victimhood by creating a counterfactual historical narrative in which a German landscape devoid of human life is returned to an exuberant state of nature. The exhibition appears to be playing riskily with Holocaust revisionism and the aestheticisation of genocide, but to what end?

This paper proposes a way of looking at these images that bypasses critical approaches that concentrate on trauma, memory and debates about victimhood, which in this case seem to lead us to a dead end. Instead, it sets Kiefer's *Morgenthau* paintings in the context of some remarkably similar works inspired by the medieval lyric *under der linden an der heide* by Walther von der Vogelweide. I take a detour via a reading of Walther's complex and self-reflexive text as a meditation on how conventions of representation both bear witness to and efface their object, and on how play with taboos on representation can be a source of erotic pleasure for those in the know.

When read alongside Walther's text and Kiefer's response to it, I suggest, the *Morgenthau* paintings reflect in a troubled way on longings for beauty and release from guilt, and on the codes and conventions of Holocaust representation. Most provocatively, Kiefer shows how an understanding of and engagement with the taboos of Holocaust representation – a viewer's status as theoretically informed discourse insider – can itself be a source of a pleasure that potentially effaces historical reality while claiming to bear witness to it.

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## Introduction

Anselm Kiefer's exhibition *Der Morgenthau-Plan*, which ran from May to June 2013 at the Gagosian Gallery in New York, presents a typically monumental series of works, both painting and installation, consisting mostly of landscapes.<sup>1</sup> The title refers to the memorandum presented by US Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, Jr., to US President Roosevelt in September 1944, suggesting the postwar dismantling of German heavy industry, the country's division into demilitarised zones, the annexing of the industrial centres of the Ruhr, Saar area and Upper Silesia by neighbouring states, and the reduction of Germany to an agricultural and pastoral economy. Roosevelt initially accepted the plan and presented it to a reluctant Churchill in the same month. The leaking of the memorandum to the press forced the President to deny its existence, but presented Goebbels with the opportunity for an extensive propaganda campaign concerning the supposed Jewish desire for vengeance and genocide against the German people.

The historical consensus suggests that, despite the dismantling of manufacturing plant and temporary limitations on food relief, the Morgenthau memorandum had little concrete effect on Allied occupation policy. Proposals for pastoralisation met with criticism from within the US and British establishments. Thus, the most significant historical effect of the Plan was a gift for Goebbels, whose propagandistic interpretation still resonates amongst German nationalists (including left-wing revisionists), who continue to connect very real German memories of post-war starvation, expulsions and epidemics with the plan and its Jewish author. An emphasis on the supposedly genocidal nature of the plan allows the real genocide to be played down and overwritten with fantasies about victimhood and vengeance, as if the Nazi assault on the Jews is being justified by the back door, and forms of suffering are being weighed up against each other.<sup>2</sup>

Kiefer's *Morgenthau-Plan* show thus enters controversial territory, and participates in an ongoing public discussion about German wartime suffering and the consequences of the Allied bombing raids against German cities.<sup>3</sup> As I discuss below, the catalogue (Kiefer and Calvocoressi) also encourages us to interpret the works in this political context. The works themselves are more complex than this suggests, however: the show presents a counterfactual historical narrative imagining a landscape that has suffered the full force of the Morgenthau Plan. It takes the German nationalist interpretation of Morgenthau's intentions and imagines their most extreme consequences, namely genocide against the Germans and the destruction of the German landscape. The show asks us to consider the status of this counterfactual narrative as a fantasy about genocide, rather than an encounter with the realities of history.

As I suggest below, confronting head on the issue of post-Holocaust aesthetics and the representation of genocide in these works might lead us to view them as little more than political provocation. Instead, this article takes a more indirect route, exploring Kiefer's work, after some comments on the presence of poems by Paul Celan in the *Morgenthau* paintings, through a reading of a literary text by the medieval Minnesänger Walther von der Vogelweide (*Under der linden an der heide*), an author who appears to be of particular importance for Kiefer, and whose poetry provides the inspiration for a remarkably similar sequence of paintings produced at the same time as the *Morgenthau* works.

There has been some important recent work on Kiefer's use of literary references in his paintings, which has drawn attention to the depth and significance of his engagement with the literary tradition. The focus of much of this work has been on the poetry of Paul Celan,

<sup>1</sup> See the exhibition details, including images of some works, on <http://www.gagosian.com/exhibitions/anselm-kiefer-may-03-2013>.

<sup>2</sup> See Greiner; Benz 214.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Fuchs.

to which Kiefer has shown a particular commitment, although Dora Osborne has explored his creative affinity with the Austrian writer Christoph Ransmayr, whose counter-factual novel *Morbus Kitahara* (1995) explores similar territory to the *Morgenthau-Plan* paintings (see Buck, Lauterwein, Osborne). However, in considering Walther's text, I take a detour away from works that make reference to the aftermath of war and genocide in order to take a more distanced look at issues of landscape, trauma and memory that the paintings consider and to find a way of understanding Kiefer's provocation in a more nuanced way.

In discussing Walther's text as a sophisticated game with ideas of landscape, witnessing, art, taboo and presence/absence, I read the *Morgenthau* paintings as a sequence of works that develop Kiefer's concerns with landscape, trace and Holocaust witnessing, while taking the risk of making beautiful art from genocide. As Matthew Biro (186) has indicated, Kiefer's reception in the 1980s of the gestural language of American Abstract Expressionism was interpreted by some of his critics as a symptom of bad faith, romanticising or beautifying his work in order to make his themes palatable. So the question of aesthetic beauty in Kiefer's work has often been accompanied by suspicion about his motives and the ethical consequences of particular representational strategies: Lisa Saltzman discusses this issue in terms of Adorno's supposed *Bilderverbot*, which she interprets as a prohibition of 'any sort of sensual or libidinous relationship with the image' (21).

Given the presence of beautiful imagery in much of Kiefer's work beyond the history-laden paintings that have attracted most critical attention, it may be that suspicion of beauty and libidinal investment in imagery has troubled his critics more than the artist himself. However, taking up Saltzman's comment that Kiefer's art functions as 'a visual trace, or record, of psychological processes' (3), as well as of the traumas of history, I would suggest that the *Morgenthau* paintings take up this issue of 'bad faith' and confront it head on, exploring the psychological processes and interests behind a revisionist desire for uncomplicated beauty and innocence in representations of landscape in the aftermath of genocide.

## The Exhibition

The painted works, almost all of them photographs painted over with oils and acrylics, show landscapes scarred by fire gradually being recolonised by grasses and flowers. From two paintings, weapons of war jut out: an aeroplane wing, reminding us of the wartime bombing campaigns, and a small machine gun and artillery piece, perhaps representing resistance to the bombing, or alternatively the Soviet advance as a counterpart to the bombing. In either case, both of these works stress the 'scorched earth' consequences of modern militarised warfare. Texts by Paul Celan and others snake across some of the paintings, and the paintings' titles are written on the images themselves. There is a night sequence, in which grey and white flower heads gradually rise like spectral moths in to the black sky, and a day sequence, in which the flowers eventually burst into intense colour.

In all the landscape works, there are marks or indentations in the ground, seeming to indicate that something is either buried there or that something that once lay there has now vanished, leaving only bent stalks and crushed flowers. The movement of the painting – often from dark bottom right to lighter or more colourful top centre or left – always begins with this indentation. The installation pieces work with golden stalks of wheat (fabricated using gold leaf and other materials) either fully ripe or blackened by fire or rot. The central installation consists of a field of these wheat stalks, standing, cut or crushed, enclosed in a cage, along with various symbolic objects familiar from Kiefer's work, such as a snake and a lead book.

It might be rather easy to walk past these works without engaging with them in any complex way, acknowledging the political provocation in the reference to the Morgenthau Plan,

which seems to equate the Holocaust with the Jewish desire for vengeance, and chalking them up to a dubious revisionist politics, in which German suffering is equated with genocide: the essay by Richard Calvocoressi (25–41) in the catalogue supports this view, with its detailed account of the period of starvation and disease in Germany between the end of the war and the introduction of the Marshall Plan. There is a hint here that the starvation of Germany was deliberate Allied policy in this period, which echoes the views of German nationalists and historical revisionists. Calvocoressi's essay also provides references to works by Alfred Döblin and Otto Dix that record their appalled fascination at the new life growing out of the wreckage of German cities and the thousands of unburied corpses, encouraging us to make the connection with Kiefer's flower paintings.

Kiefer's political provocation is complicated or possibly undercut in these works by something stranger, and perhaps more disturbing, namely the striking beauty of the landscapes, which revel in colour, texture and rhythm in a way which one does not expect from the artist. The stalks of corn, manufactured using gold, a prestigious material indicating the end point of an alchemical transformation, and recalling Celan's golden-haired Margarethe as the privileged symbol of German culture, are not just potent symbols, but are also beautiful in their own right, as are the flower paintings. Sometimes the beauty is ambiguous in a rather mannered way, as in the painting *Nigredo – Morgenthau*, that presents the initial stage of alchemical transformation in terms of a burnt landscape with the hint of a railway track leading towards, or away from, what may be a sunrise or sunset, or a fire on the horizon. Is this the hopeful beginning of a transformation out of fire and destruction, or do the train tracks refer to the Holocaust, as they often do in Kiefer's earlier works?

Kiefer's gestures here are familiar from his work, and they exploit our tendency as viewers to make simple connections between the representation of a trace (in this case a burnt field, the remains of a train track, or an impression in the landscape) and the Holocaust. An artist like Kiefer can take this for granted after several decades of artistic representations and accompanying discourse: nobody has to work too hard to make these connections. One might therefore refer to images like this as Kiefer-Kitsch, the endlessly reproduced gesture of non-representation, pointing at a taboo without breaking it, and conspiring with us in our pleasure in our skill at identifying the taboo: we *decode* this kind of image, rather than *experiencing* it.

Can we get more out of this show than this? *Morgenthau-Plan* is provocative not only in its politics, but also in its insistence on beauty: an exploration of the possibilities of rendering the intensity of the experience of nature, in a way that seems to want to strip away some of the layers of self-conscious mediation in Kiefer's earlier depictions of nature, just for the sake of the shock of the experience of pleasure this generates. These gestures suggest a desire to restore innocence and anxiety-free representation, something that one can relax into as a viewer without having to constantly probe one's ideological assumptions.

Kiefer's claim, in a letter to Richard Calvocoressi printed in the catalogue to the 2013 showing, that the idea to associate the paintings with the Morgenthau Plan only came to him after he had been making these canvasses for a while – in other words, that the flower paintings were originally made naively, or from a purely aesthetic impulse – is intriguing in its insistence on the, at least partial, autonomy of artistic production and inspiration:

This past year I have painted a number of pictures of flowers. They were from Barjac where I had planted them. There were red ones, yellow ones, and blue ones. Flowers make people happy. They're beautiful. But beauty in art needs meaning. One can't have just beauty on its own. True art does not portray beauty alone. Beauty requires a counterpart.

If he paints flowers for six months and they become more and more beautiful, closer to perfection, he begins to believe he is losing himself, his identity as a painter, as a good painter. He can even develop an increasingly bad conscience because the subject is easy. They are simply flowers. They are so beautiful, and you just paint them. Direct mimesis. Beauty requires a counterpart. In thinking about this flaw another flaw occurred to me; the Morgenthau Plan. For it too ignored the complexity of things.

And so I had hit upon the Morgenthau Plan, which would now be associated with the flower paintings [...]

With the destruction of industrial sites more land would have been gained. The fields would have been opened up for plants of all kinds, for carpets of flowers everywhere. (Kiefer and Calvocoressi 120–1).

His statements about the Morgenthau show are designed to be provocative in drawing attention to violence proposed against Germans, where we might expect Holocaust references. He suggests that Morgenthau proposed a form of cultural, as well as physical genocide: 'Morgenthau also wanted to burn down the forests as the seat of the German soul' (Kiefer and Calvocoressi 120). However, his suggestion that he only came up with the Morgenthau idea after having made the flower paintings is intriguing: the false-note naivety of his account of painting the flowers suggests that we might not necessarily take this at face value, but we should see it instead as a playful juxtaposition of naivety with self-reflexivity, of aesthetics and politics, both of which are seen here as one-sided and requiring correction. But what are we to make of a show that is in a very immediate way a series of beautiful paintings about genocide, which work in quite a different way from the anxious reflection on representational codes in Kiefer's earlier work?

Politically, this seems dubious in the extreme. Kiefer here explores a historical phenomenon that German nationalists and revisionists of the Left and Right have employed as a way of weighing up relative levels of guilt against each other, suggesting that these works intervene in ongoing debate about ways of talking about the suffering of German civilians during and after the Second World War (Niven). In his catalogue essay, Calvocoressi has delivered the material for a political interpretation, but, characteristically, Kiefer concentrates on the ambivalent, disturbing symbolism of the plant life emerging from the destruction: the political level of interpretation only takes us so far in understanding the intensity of these works.

Kiefer does not engage directly with historical events but creates a *counterfactual* history based on what could have happened had the Plan been seen through. The provocation is needed in order to set a thought process in motion, to shake us up out of established habits of looking and interpreting, but the counterfactual aspect shows us that something else is going on, namely that these are works about longings and hidden desires, about what it means to want to go back and start again, to undo history: what if there really had been a *Stunde Null*?

### **Literary references in *Der Morgenthau-Plan*: Paul Celan**

I now will look at some of Kiefer's literary references and the broader context of the Morgenthau works. I will bracket for a moment the political questions, which are interesting, but not really sufficient to explain what is happening in these works: the aeroplane wing and weaponry that jut out of two of the paintings draw attention to the political level of interpretation, but this can only take us part of the way. Perhaps one can say, more positively, that the political provocation is designed to shake up our thinking and to make us look beyond the predictable tropes of post-Holocaust representation.

I will also skirt around the issue of Kiefer's cyclical philosophy of history, which strikes me as a rather predictable gesture in the context of Kiefer's work, relying on the intimacy of his relationship with his audience, who are used to being directed to read his works as if they were codes to be cracked once one is provided with the correct key: as Brett Kaplan puts it, 'because the alchemical tradition of speaking in code resonates with the hermeneutic processes Kiefer inspires throughout his oeuvre, one finds that reading codes is essential to understanding his work' (125). Reading the show in terms of the cyclical ideas of judgement, annihilation and rebirth that structure Kiefer's thinking and reception of Jewish mysticism and German myth would certainly give us a way of reading the works as a cycle of destruction, purification and growth, but if all that these paintings are doing is imposing a layer of mythical, timeless meaning onto genuine experiences of suffering, then we are in problematic ethical territory.

It is the treatment of the landscape and the counterfactual nature of the narrative that lead me to believe there is more to say here. In order to investigate the works' engagement with history and landscape further, I want also to go back and look at literary references in Kiefer's work that predate the Holocaust. After some comments on the presence of works by Paul Celan in these paintings, I will go on to read the work alongside a text by Walther von der Vogelweide, a writer who is not mentioned in the Morgenthau show, but who plays an important role in a range of works produced almost simultaneously, and whose work can give us a way in to Kiefer's risky aesthetic strategy in *Der Morgenthau-Plan*.

Theo Buck has written usefully on the relationship between image and text in Kiefer's work. He talks about a 'Rückkopplung' between text and image, in which the work takes a visual image from the text, removes it from its original context and expands its frame of reference and association by inserting it into the new context of the pictorial work. Thus, the stalks of straw in the Morgenthau paintings are not simply a reference to or inspiration by the 'Halme' in Celan's poem, but are a means of allowing an image to resonate backwards and forwards between two media: for Buck, this results in a 'produktive Zunahme des textlichen Spielraums' (11). It also demands active participation: 'Das [...] auf der Grundlage eines lyrischen Bildmotivs vermittelte Denk-Bild soll eine aktive Mitwirkung auslösen und befördern' (14). In front of one of these works, we are both viewer and reader, with both of these complex activities playing off against each other.

Kiefer does not destroy the text in this process: even where it is incorporated as part of the image (as in the 'Halme der Nacht' text here) the text retains its integrity and still refers clearly to the pre-existing text that has a life outside Kiefer's. This can be seen in the clear, legible writing that always stresses its separateness from the image: the writing suggests a school handwriting exercise, treating the texts as prestigious *Bildungsgut*. The beautiful, but rather pedantic German handwriting, characteristic of a particular generation, is part of the meaning of the image, too.

Most importantly, maintaining the integrity of the text means that the artist does not exercise power over it. Buck suggests that Kiefer '[lässt seine] Bildidee "über das Wort" (als Weg) und "über dem Wort" (im Sinne des Medienwechsels) entstehen' (11). But I would argue that Kiefer specifically excludes making meaning 'über dem Wort', refusing to allow the text to become subordinate to the image, or overlaid by it. This not a power exercise, but an encounter; text and image often oppose each other, and the text does not form an integral part of the image. It is never only an illustration, which would entail its subordination to the image. Given Kiefer's employment of the works of Paul Celan, not to mention those of Jewish mystics such as Isaac Luria, this is a vital distinction: the non-Jewish artist should not subordinate the work of the Jewish writer to a dominant aesthetic purpose.

Clearly, Celan is still important for this set of works, but in comparison with Kiefer's almost contemporaneous show *Die Ungeborenen* (2012), which included rich and ambiguous references to Jewish legends, such as the story of the golem, or to personifications from myth and mystical thought, like Lilith or the Shekhina, Kiefer seems in *Der Morgenthau-Plan* to have turned away from the complex references to Jewish mysticism that characterised a long period of his work. *Der Morgenthau-Plan* is pared down, with a seemingly clearer narrative structure and a less complex system of references. So anyone familiar with Kiefer's work may well ask whether he has left behind his engagement with the perspective of the Nazis' victims, in order to shift the emphasis to the suffering of the German population under the Allied bombing.

Andréa Lauterwein has shown that Kiefer's reception of Paul Celan allowed him to move beyond the obsessive reworking of German cultural motifs in his earliest work in favour of a more open engagement with the perspective of the Nazis' victims, as well as with broader cultural, religious, and mythic concerns (Lauterwein). Celan's work is still present here, as it so often is, with quotations from the poem 'Halme der Nacht' and others present in a handful of paintings. The painting with the aeroplane wing, entitled *O Halme, ihr Halme, o Halme der Nacht* (2012) actually presents a composite of quotations from a number of poems: 'Halme der Nacht', 'Landschaft mit Urnenwesen', 'Fadensonnen'. These references suggest that the Holocaust should not be forgotten when thinking about these works, but questions are raised about the relationship between the three elements of the composition, wing, landscape and writing.

The poetry appears in the dark sky (representing stars, heaven, judgement?). Kiefer carefully squashes the writing into the space of the sky, avoiding the landscape, as if writing and landscape may never touch. The landscape has some small, perhaps early flowers, though there is still an impression in the middle, as if there is something buried that will not yet allow growth. The landscape seems to refer to some of his earlier work in which burnt straw or wooden stakes form runes: so do we see here the Jewish tradition of writing as distant or opposed to the earth-bound, national relevance of Germanic traditions, with Jewish monotheism sitting in judgment (or vengeance) on the German *Scholle*?

This association of Celan's poetry with bombing and vengeance is extraordinary, and if taken at face value it seems like an abuse of Celan's work in a way that contrasts crassly with Kiefer's previously subtle, ambiguous but committed engagement with the poet. A more complex understanding of this work would require investigating the way the pictorial elements relate to each other: why is Celan's work presented in fragments here, and are the quotations associated with the aeroplane wing, or do they form a backdrop or interpretation to the whole image? One possible reading is that the dark landscape represents the destroyed, mourning landscape upon which the new growth appears – if we read the paintings as a narrative cycle in this way, then we can arrive at this conclusion – but this is rather crass. I would suggest instead that these paintings explore the tension between history and myth, engaging in a risky analysis of the longings that lead to nationalist revisionism.

Despite the references to Celan, these landscapes seem to represent a different approach in Kiefer's work: the project of making Jewish and German images resonate against each other has, for the moment, been relegated from the centre of Kiefer's concerns. There are also no more ashes, dust, shards of glass, or other 'anti-materials' that reference the Holocaust as remnants of destruction on the surface of the paintings (Osborne 225). Instead, we find a re-engagement with the possibilities of paint, which is a prestigious, rather than abject, artistic material with its own history and range of associations, and which does not operate by itself being a trace or remnant of destruction.

On one level, this can be seen as an engagement with different modernist traditions, looking back at Expressionism, with its exploration of how painted gestures can represent emotions and inner states, rather than collage art, with its metonymic and indexical approach to materials and meaning. Kiefer appears to be trying to take back some of the levels of anxious reflection on representation, mediation, and the ideological appropriation of aesthetics that characterised his earlier work, in order to provide the viewer with a more direct encounter with beauty and emotion, reflecting, perhaps, what Fatima Naqvi calls 'a longing for a less turbulent relationship between man and nature' (77).

Taking this further, though, we need to ask how this seeming desire to take back layers of aesthetic and ideological self-reflection goes together with a set of works in which the experience of the victims of the Holocaust has been subtracted or effaced in order to stage an encounter between the Germans and the Allied bombing campaign. Do the works reveal a longing for Germans to occupy the position of victim, imagined as a state of beauty and uncomplicated emotion? Does the offer Kiefer makes to us to relax into the contemplation of beauty actually reveal a desire to take back the Holocaust itself? We need to look beyond the references to Celan in order to answer these questions.

I intend here to look at Walther as a writer who clearly cannot be associated with Holocaust writing, but whom Kiefer lines up in his canon of 'Deutschlands Geisteshelden' in the 1973 painting of the same name. He is not part of the 'progressive' canon of antifascist writers inspired by Georg Lukács and validated by the critical preoccupations of the 1968 generation (to which Kiefer himself belongs), but neither is he a writer who can himself be considered an ideologically suspect precursor of National Socialism, despite his enlisting at various times into nationalist literary histories. He is a canonical writer, but Kiefer reads him in a way that frees his work from established modes of reception and makes it useful for new ways of seeing. So I will read Walther's work in the light of a confrontation with Kiefer, focusing on particular aspects that seem to me to be helpful in understanding how the works that make up *Der Morgenthau-Plan* attempt to shake up our understanding of how works of art refer to the Holocaust.

### **Landscape impressions: Walther von der Vogelweide, *Under der linden an der heide***

The issue that interests me, and which is most relevant to the reading of Walther that I propose here, is the fact that the paintings and installation all feature impressions left on the pristine landscape, as if someone has been lying there and has just stood up, or some feature under the soil has led to uneven growth on the surface. In most cases, it is the impression in the undergrowth – the trace of a now absent body or object – that appears to act as the origin for the painting's movement, usually from bottom right to top left or centre, and from dark to light or grey to bright floral colours.

Taking the initial, political interpretation offered by the show – in particular through Kiefer's citation of Max Colpet's German lyrics to the Pete Seeger/Joe Hickerson protest song 'Where have all the flowers gone?' – one at least of the impressions in the landscape can be seen as a mass grave.<sup>4</sup> The cited text on the painting *Sag mir, wo die Blumen sind* (2012) seems immediately relevant to the theme:

Sag mir, wo die Blumen sind  
Wo sind sie geblieben?

<sup>4</sup> The resonances of the German lyrics ('Sag mir, wo die Blumen sind'), are interesting in themselves: Max Colpet's well-known German translation was popularised by Marlene Dietrich, who also sang it on a tour of Israel.

Sag mir, wo die Soldaten sind  
Wo sind sie geblieben?

Was ist geschehen?  
Über Gräbern weht der Wind.

This reference to one of the key anti-war protest songs of the German 1960s offers us further support for a political level of interpretation, with a rather narrow view of the victims as soldiers, which clearly only takes us so far. And it still leaves us feeling that the Holocaust is absent here, although a reading of the German text in particular allows another view, namely that the soldiers have moved on after committing a crime.

But in order to make sense of these landscape traces, we need to look a little further than the Morgenthau paintings themselves. The recurrence of such impressions and traces seems to form a counterpoint to the implied cyclical narrative of burning and rebirth in overall structure of the Morgenthau show: perhaps something quieter and more subtle than the grand, mythic history of violence and rebirth.

The flower paintings that make up the majority of the Morgenthau cycle belong in the context of a far broader range of works – paintings and artist books – that Kiefer was making for a number of years inspired by the landscape around his estate at Barjac. A number of these paintings were exhibited shortly after the *Morgenthau* exhibition in a show entitled *Walther von der Vogelweide für Lia* (2013), which consists of a cycle referring to one of the central lyrics of German Minnesang, Walther's 'Under der linden an der heide'.<sup>5</sup>

The works were all made in Kiefer's complex in Barjac, and they represent a response to the southern French landscape. By contrast with Kiefer's earlier landscape paintings, which are amongst the works that made his name, these are not landscapes that bear the traces of violence, and the works do not show the signs of a struggle with the legacy of German traditions of representation and nationalism. It is as if this new landscape, lacking forests, ploughed fields, snow and scorched earth, has permitted him to simply look and paint, naively and for no other purpose than pleasure. Kiefer states that this landscape is, for him 'perspektivlos', indicating that it has allowed him to leave behind the preoccupation in his earlier works with the totalitarian central perspective of Nazi art and architecture and the way that it positions and manipulates the viewer (Kiefer 2010: 45). These are landscapes that, remarkably for Kiefer, do not resonate with the echoes of violence, but display an Expressionist passion for luxuriating in the experience of making marks on a canvas that represent the plenitude of a primal landscape.

This, at least, is the claim that Kiefer makes in the letter to Richard Calvocoressi cited above, that accompanies the catalogue to the Morgenthau show, in which he suggests that painting purely for pleasure gave him a bad aesthetic conscience and that he required a subject for them. However, these works (for example, the painting entitled *Under der linden an der heide*, 2012) exhibit a telling similarity with the *Morgenthau* works, namely the presence of impressions in the undergrowth, grass and flowers bent and broken under where, perhaps, a body or bodies have recently lain. This formal correspondence shows us that the connection between these works is more significant than Kiefer suggests in his letter to Calvocoressi, and also that the landscape impression is a key to interpreting these works.

Despite Kiefer's insistence on the purely aesthetic pleasure involved in making the flower paintings, his employment of Walther's lyric reveals a political, as well as aesthetic purpose

<sup>5</sup> See details of the exhibition, including images of some works, on <http://www.liarumma.it/exhibitions/walther-von-der-vogelweide-fur-lia/>.

behind these works. Kiefer distributed the text of Walther's poem as a press release for the exhibition, drawing attention to it as an equal partner with the images it accompanies. In its original context, Walther's poem participated in a radical renewal of courtly lyric in its treatment of sexuality and mutual consent, rather than raising the Lady to an unattainable object of longing. However, its reception history is rather different: as with so much of the great tradition of German medieval poetry, Walther's work was revived in the early nineteenth century in the creation of a German national canon; Kiefer may well have encountered it in literature classes at school.

One of the features of Kiefer's treatment of the poem is its *anti*-nationalism, not just non-nationalism or pure aestheticism. He strips away the layers of reception history, displacing Walther from the German literary canon in order to find something new. By associating Walther with this French landscape, he enlists the poet against the grain as a witness to a period of fruitful French–German cultural encounter *before* the invention of nations and the development of the repertoire of national symbols that entrenched division and difference: the German forest, with all its associations, is simply absent here.

These works convey a strong desire to return to a time where European culture contained other possibilities before nationalism, where a different route could have been taken: this is a counter-utopia to the German Romantic-nationalist reconstruction of the Middle Ages. If one reads the works this way, the connection with the Morgenthau pictures seems obvious. The Walther works represent the state of grace that can only be restored through a rain of fire, while the Morgenthau works represent through their counterfactual approach the immense, violent and self-destructive psychological and aesthetic effort required to wipe the slate clean and start again: a case study in the Freudian death drive.

Turning to the aesthetic questions raised by Kiefer's use of Walther's text, we find a contrast between the complex, self-reflexive aesthetic of the poem itself and the apparent naivety (at least in comparison with Kiefer's earlier works) of the painted representation of the landscape. The works seem to display a desire to return to a pre-modern, unproblematic representation of nature, to a unity of representational gesture and thing represented: stripping away some of the layers of distance and reflection seems to make an offer to the viewer of direct encounter and unproblematic, overtly emotional experience.

However, Walther's poem, far from being a simple, naïve love lyric, itself already problematises issues of representation: it is a sophisticated meditation on presence, absence and taboo, asking not only how to read signs, but also how signs refer to anything at all. In a sense, it carries within it a modern sensibility and sophistication that will later, under the impression of the catastrophes and crises of modernity, become sources of anxiety rather than pleasure. The poem is about many things, but for the purposes of this article, I will read it with Kiefer as a poem about witnessing.

Much of the extensive recent critical reception of this most well known of German medieval lyrics has focused on locating the social status of the female speaker of the poem, a difficulty that stems from the (from a modern perspective) unresolvable ambiguity of the words 'hêre frowe'. The detail need not detain us further, except to say that this difficulty in establishing the nature of the speaker adds an extra layer of instability to a poem that is about the reading of signs and the limitations of our interpretative systems.<sup>6</sup> A recent queer reading by Andreas Krass (63–75) has combined Foucauldian thinking about taboos with theories of the performance of gender to reveal the playful indeterminacy of the language of gender and sexuality in the text. My reading develops some of Krass's insights in order to help place the text within and against Kiefer's work, and to explore the pleasure gained from taboo and

<sup>6</sup> For a brief summary of this dispute, see Scholz 123–5.

transgression in Walther's text in order to reveal an analogous structure in Kiefer's work on Holocaust representation.

Under der linden an der heide,  
 dâ unser zweier bette was,  
 dâ mugent ir vinden schône beide  
 gebrochen bluomen unde gras.  
 Vor dem walde in einem tal,  
 tandaradei,  
 schône sanc diu nahtegal.

Ich kam gegangen zuo der ouwe,  
 dô was mîn friedel komen ê.  
 dâ wart ich enpfangen, hêre frowe,  
 daz ich bin sælic iemer mê.  
 Er kuste mich wol tûsentstunt:  
 tandaradei,  
 seht, wie rôt mir ist der munt.

Dô hât er gemachet alsô rîche  
 von bluomen eine bettestat.  
 des wirt noch gelachet inneclîche,  
 kumt iemen an daz selbe pfat.  
 Bî den rôsen er wol mac,  
 tandaradei,  
 merken, wâ mirz houbet lac.

Daz er bî mir læge, wessez iemen,  
 nun welle got, sô schamt ich mich.  
 wes er mit mir pflæge, niemer niemen  
 bevinde daz, wan er und ich,  
 Und ein kleinez vogellîn -  
 tandaradei,  
 daz mac wol getriuwe sîn. (Walther 126–7)

The poem is about reading signs in the landscape, traces of human activity, in this case a secret sexual encounter that has left the grass and flowers under the tree broken and bent. In a play of sign, interpretation and taboo it presents a complex poetics of witnessing, exploring how the traces we make bear witness to things that we have experienced or observed. It does not present a single poetics of witnessing, but places different, incompatible ones side by side: the voice of the woman, the song of the nightingale, the impression on the grass, the performance of the singer, and the complex, intertextually reflexive text itself. All of these witnesses both reveal and conceal simultaneously: the act of revelation is in itself an act of concealment.

The creators of the sign are absent, and all that is left is the trace of where they have been, the impression in the landscape. The passers-by can read the sign of the crushed grass where the lovers lay, but they cannot know who lay there: their laughter arises from their shared acknowledgment of the ease of reading a sign left behind by the lovers, making them complicit in the act while ignorant of the actors – they interpret generally, according to shared

conventions, but without access to the individuals who left the trace. They gain pleasure from their acknowledgment of the taboo, not from its breaking. They read the indexical relationship of the trace to the bodies according to a set of conventions, perhaps in the stereotypical association in Minnesang of broken flowers with loss of virginity, resulting in an easy, crude, shared pleasure (Walther 695). This trace on the landscape is paralleled in the line 'seht, wie rôr mir ist der munt': the lover's kisses have left a trace on the speaker's body, which we, the audience, are encouraged to read in the same way as the passers-by read the broken flowers.

The nightingale sings as the only witness to the event: it accompanied everything with its song, and possibly kept watch over the lovers, but it will remain discreet. Its witness cannot be deciphered, and it makes a song that is simply, naively, or naturally beautiful out of something that is more intense and individual.

The social status of the poem's 'ich' is unclear for us (though it may have been clearer for Walther's original audience), and the poem exploits to the full the possibilities of gender ambiguity offered by the genre of the *Frauenlied*. The grammatical gender tells us that the lover ('friedel') is male, but everything else is open; the genre of song in which a male writer/performer voices a woman's experience leaves plenty of potential for ambiguity. The text never states unambiguously that the speaker is a woman. Although this is perhaps the most likely reading, it is only the genre convention that makes us assume this, and there is space for play with ambiguity.

This means that there is a tension between the experiencing individual, the 'ich' that reports the experience, and the singer who performs the report, representing or citing it for a new audience that, unlike the nightingale, was not present. They may be the same person, but they may also not be. The speaker reconstructs the experience only in retrospect, interpreting the trace in the landscape for us and reflecting on its interpretation by passers-by. The word 'ich', as in any autobiographical act of witness, is the pin that connects the reporting self to the reported self: it pulls against the layers of mediation, laying claim to a certainty that the text refuses. On the other hand, the performance of the text pulls us towards the presence of the singer's voice and body: Krass (70) speculates that the singer may have indicated his own mouth at the words 'seht, wie rôr mir ist der munt', suggesting a playful slippage between the bodies of the speaker and the singer in conspiracy with a knowing audience.

Walther's poem does not present a single poetics of witnessing, but places multiple, incompatible ones side by side, presenting the tension between them as a source of pleasure. The text is a frame to try to hold these together, but it cannot: direct witnessing is impossible, but art – and beauty – are possible. The text constructs simultaneously the experience, the impossibility of accessing the experience, and the complex modes of signification that offer but also refuse access. It contrasts the knowingly naïve representation of the bird, which knows but does not tell and is beautiful but incomprehensible, the conventionalised interpretation of the traces on landscape and body, and the hyper-reflexive process of individual verbal witness: all seem to offer access to the experience, but also veil it in an erotics of presence and absence. The poem appears to offer a key to interpretation, but in doing so simply defers the problem of authentic witness to a different level of reflection.

Reading the poem with Kiefer's aesthetic response to it, we find that text and image interact in a complex exploration of *how* a landscape can mean something, how it can bear witness to the traces left in it by human activity, and how those traces, and the language we use to interpret them, conceal exactly as much as they reveal. Claiming to see traces of violence in a landscape – even talking about 'trauma' in landscape as if this were a meaningful statement – relies on a complex of agreed conventions and ways of speaking.

The similarity of the Walther works with the Morgenthau paintings is disturbing: all of this complexity and play is in the service of *Lustgewinn*, of stimulation and deferral.

The taboo is made visible but not broken, and the audience shares the text's knowledge about lack of knowledge and participates in the process of deciphering and veiling. The similarity between the paintings in the *Walther* and *Morgenthau* shows hints at a viewer's complicity in the same play of desire when identifying a conventionalised representation of a trace as a reference to the Holocaust. There is pleasure in playing with making visible the taboo on representation without breaking it, rather than taking the risk of representation itself.

### Conclusion

What, then, can we learn about Kiefer's *Morgenthau* show from this detour? The paintings create a counterfactual image of Germany after the implementation of the Morgenthau plan: an impression left in a meadow by a now absent body or bodies. Humans have vanished, but the flowers – and the artworks – record their loss. Is their beauty naïve like the nightingale's song, an unintelligible witness, or complex and reflexive, a consciousness reflecting on its absence? As with Walther's poem, the paintings allow all of these interpretations. Do passers-by laugh in sympathetic complicity at genocide, seeing the impressions where the bodies have lain? Is there mourning here, and if so, what for? A lost innocence or utopia, missed opportunities, a wish for the Holocaust not to have happened at all? Are the works naïve and self-indulgent or a reflexive and careful approach to German guilt? Does the emphasis on German suffering efface or overwrite the Holocaust and the feelings of guilt associated with it, or does the way in which Kiefer presents the narrative reveal something new?

We are not dealing here with a Freudian account of mourning as working through and bringing to light, or with the idea of a symptom as a point of access to a deeper problem, but with a counter-narrative that sheds new light on the historical narrative, and in particular on the difficult emotions connected with it. Imagining a present counterfactually, as imagined by Morgenthau, but with a trace left by an absent body or experience, allows Kiefer to discuss the longing for innocence and for non-presence of history and guilt. This is a landscape in which traces of the human presence will vanish soon, and the past will be eliminated. But reading these works with Walther ensures that we see this as a man-made nature – a product of choices – and forces us to contemplate the works at the level of self-reflexive aesthetics, rather than naïve pleasure. These paintings demonstrate more than any others by Kiefer the potency of this longing for naivety in looking at and experiencing nature.

Reading these images with Walther's poem allows us to see them as a careful staging of tension between different possibilities: does the beauty of these paintings of flowers flourishing over impressions in the landscape bear witness in a way that is aesthetically pleasing but that refuses to identify the specificity of the event – are they 'getriuwe', like the nightingale – or do they encourage us to reflect on the meaning of this beauty and the ways in which art can reveal and conceal simultaneously?

Kiefer's works do not immediately offer themselves as enlightened deconstructions of myth: the risk of falling back into older patterns is part of their meaning. These works require us to experience the longing to take back history and start again, as well as the desire to claim victimhood for ourselves. They deal explicitly with bombing and destruction and the idea of collective victimhood – but the aesthetics of the paintings hint at the desirability of this state. However, the paintings also show us that the return to a state of innocence, to start again from nothing, always requires violence: beyond the purely German context, Kiefer reminds us that the longing for an immediacy of experience of natural beauty, for emptiness and wilderness, for uncomplicated fullness, is always also a longing for genocide.

To sum up, it is not so much the risk of historical revisionism that is the scandal with the Morgenthau works, although that danger is always there. There would be a good, positive case to be made for the way that these works take a fresh look at the codes of Holocaust representation, through their connection with the *Walther von der Vogelweide* series. Walther's poem is about how to connect words, signs, marks and gestures with what they represent, and about the codes and conventions we need to make the connection. Kiefer's pictures are about this too, interrogating the way marks on canvas and other materials represent, and interrogating the desire for authenticity in representation. Works in the *Morgenthau* show, with their absences and impressions marked on the landscape, explore established codes of Holocaust non-representation in aesthetic practice, showing how making complex semiotic connections between forms of (non-)representation has become a kind of mannerism, a matter of habit and convention. Kiefer's works want to shake up these assumptions and block short cuts, in this case by introducing a counterfactual genocide into the equation, as well as an insistence on a beauty as unfathomable as the nightingale's song. So Kiefer complicates the relationship between signs again, exposing the conventions and assumptions behind them.

But the pleasure explored in these works is troubling: they are about the pleasure of the taboo, of revealing while not revealing. Kiefer shows how exploring the taboos on representation is a source of aesthetic and libidinal pleasure, involving complicity between the artist and the audience. Here, we are confronted with our own pleasure in deciphering the codes of trace, fragment, absence, mediation and self-reflexivity that have become hallmarks of Holocaust art: re-stating the taboo gives a pleasure that breaking it would dissipate, and we become like Walther's passers-by, taking pleasure in our own knowing complicity in the cover-up. This exploration of pleasurable complicity in *not* representing the Holocaust is perhaps the real scandal of the *Morgenthau-Plan* show.

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