

Writing and the Holocaust

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OUR SUBJECT RESISTS the usual capacities of mind. We may read the Holocaust as the central event of this century; we may register the pain of its unhealed wounds; but finally we must acknowledge that it leaves us intellectually disarmed, staring helplessly at the reality, or, if you prefer, the mystery, of mass extermination. There is little likelihood of finding a rational structure of explanation for the Holocaust: it forms a sequence of events without historical or moral precedent. To think about ways in which the literary imagination might “use” the Holocaust is to entangle ourselves with a multitude of problems for which no aesthetic can prepare us.

The Holocaust is continuous with, indeed forms a sequence of events within, Western history, and at the same time it is a unique historical enterprise. To study its genesis within Western history may help us discover its roots in traditional anti-Semitism, fed in turn by Christian myth, German romanticism, and the breakdown of capitalism in twentieth-century Europe between the wars. But it is a grave error to “elevate” the Holocaust into an occurrence outside of history, a sort of diabolic visitation, for then we tacitly absolve its human agents of responsibility. To do this is a grave error even if, so far and perhaps forever, we lack adequate categories for comprehending how such a sequence of events could

occur. The Holocaust was long prepared for in the history of Western civilization, though not all those who engaged in the preparation knew what they were doing or would have welcomed the outcome.

In the concentration camps set up by the Nazis, such as those at Dachau and Buchenwald, there was an endless quantity of sadism, some of it the spontaneous doings of psychopaths and thugs given total command by the Nazi government, and some of it the result of a calculated policy taking into cynical account the consequences of allowing psychopaths and thugs total command. Piles of corpses accumulated in these camps. Yet a thin continuity can be detected between earlier locales of brutality and the “concentrationary universe.” In some pitiable sense, the prisoners in these camps still lived—they were starved, broken, tormented, but they still lived. A faint margin of space could sometimes be carved out for the human need to maintain community and personality, even while both were being destroyed. Horrible these camps surely were; but even as they pointed toward, they did not yet constitute the “Final Solution.”

The Nazis had an idea. To dehumanize systematically both guards and prisoners, torturers and tortured, meant to create a realm of subjugation no longer responsive to the common norms of human society; and from this process of dehumanization they had themselves set in motion, the Nazis could then “conclude” that, indeed, Jews were not human. This Nazi idea would lead to and draw upon sadism, but at least among the leaders and theoreticians, it was to be distinguished from mere sadism: it was an abstract rage, the most terrible of all rages. This Nazi idea formed a low parody of the messianism that declared that once mankind offered a warrant of faith and conduct, deliverance would come to earth in the shape of a savior bringing the good days—a notion corrupted by false messiahs into a “forcing of days” and by totalitarian movements into the physical elimination of “contaminating” races and classes. There was also in Nazi ideology a low parody of that mania for “completely” remaking societies and cultures that has marked modern political life.

When the Nazis established their realm of subjection in the concentration camps, they brought the impulse to nihilism, so strong in modern culture, to a point of completion no earlier advocate had supposed possible. The Italian-Jewish writer Primo Levi, soon after arriving at Auschwitz, was told by a Nazi guard: *Hier ist kein warum*, here there is no why, here nothing need be explained. This passing observation by a shrewd thug provides as good an insight into the world of the camps as anything found in the entire scholarly literature. What we may still find difficult to grasp is the peculiar blend of ideology and nihilism—the way these

two elements of thought, seemingly in friction, were able to join harmoniously, thereby releasing the satanic energies of Nazism.

By now we have an enormous body of memoirs and studies describing the experience of the concentration camps. Inevitably, there are clashes of remembrance and opinion. For the psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim, held captive in Dachau and Buchenwald in 1939, it was apparently still possible to cope with life in the camps, if only through inner moral resistance, a struggle to “understand” that might “safeguard [one’s ego] in such a way that, if by any good luck he should regain liberty, [the prisoner] would be approximately the same person he was” before being deprived of liberty. Precisely this seemed impossible to Jean Améry, a gifted Austrian-Jewish writer who had been imprisoned in Auschwitz. No survivor, no one who had ever been tortured by the SS, he later wrote, could be “approximately the same person” as before.

Even to hope for survival meant, in Améry’s view, to “capitulate unconditionally in the face of reality,” and that reality was neither more nor less than the unlimited readiness of the SS to kill. The victim lived under “an absolute sovereign” whose mission—a mission of pleasure—was torture, “in an orgy of unchecked self-expansion.” Thereby “the transformation of the person into flesh became complete.” As for “the word”—which for Améry signified something akin to what “safeguarding the ego” meant for Bettelheim—it “always dies when the claim of some reality is total.” For then no space remains between thought and everything external to thought.

It would be impudent to choose between the testimonies of Bettelheim and Améry. A partial explanation for their differences of memory and understanding may be that Bettelheim was a prisoner in 1939 and Améry in 1943–45. Bettelheim’s ordeal predated slightly the “Final Solution,” while Améry was held captive in the Auschwitz that Hannah Arendt quite soberly called a “corpse factory.” It is also possible that these writers, in reflecting upon more or less similar experiences, were revealing “natural” differences in human response. We cannot be certain.

By the time the Nazis launched their “Final Solution” such differences of testimony had become relatively insignificant. The Holocaust reached its point of culmination as the systematic and impersonal extermination of millions of human beings, denied life, and even death as mankind had traditionally conceived it, simply because they fell under the abstract category of “Jew.” It became clear that the sadism before and during the “Final Solution” on the trains that brought the Jews to the camps and in the camps themselves was not just incidental or

gratuitous; it was a carefully worked-out preparation for the gas chambers. But for the Nazi leaders, originating theoreticians of death, what mattered most was the program of extermination. No personal qualities or accomplishments of the victims, no features of character or appearance, mattered. The abstract perversity of categorization declaring Jews to be *Untermenschen* as determined by allegedly biological traits was unconditional.

No absolute division of kind existed between concentration and death camps, and some, like the grouping of camps at Auschwitz, contained quarters for both slave laborers and gas chambers, with recurrent “selections” from the former feeding the latter. Still, the distinction between the two varieties of camps has some descriptive and analytic value: it enables us to distinguish between what was and was not historically unique about the Holocaust.

Whatever was unique took place in the death camps, forming a sequence of events radically different from all previous butcheries in the history of mankind. Revenge, enslavement, dispersion, large-scale slaughter of enemies, all are a commonplace of the past; but the physical elimination of a categorized segment of mankind was, both as idea and fact, new. “The destruction of Europe’s Jews,” Claude Lanzmann has written, “cannot be logically deduced from any . . . system of presuppositions. . . . Between the conditions that permitted extermination and the extermination itself—the fact of the extermination—there is a break in continuity, a hiatus, an abyss.” That abyss forms the essence of the Holocaust.

2

I cannot think of another area of literary discourse in which a single writer has exerted so strong, if diffused, an influence as Theodore Adorno has on discussions of literature and the Holocaust. What Adorno offered in the early 1950s was not a complete text or even a fully developed argument. Yet his few scattered remarks had an immediate impact, evidently because they brought out feelings held by many people.

“After Auschwitz,” wrote Adorno, “to write a poem is barbaric.” It means to “squeeze aesthetic pleasure out of artistic representation of the naked bodily pain of those who have been knocked down by rifle butts. . . . Through aesthetic principles or stylization . . . the unimaginable ordeal still appears as if it had some ulterior purpose. It is transfigured and stripped of some of its horror, and with this, injustice is already done to the victims.”

Adorno was by no means alone in expressing such sentiments, nor in recognizing that his sentiments, no matter how solemnly approved, were not likely

to keep anyone from trying to represent through fictions or evoke through poetic symbols the concentration and death camps. A Yiddish poet, Aaron Tsaytlin, wrote in a similar vein after the Holocaust: "Were Jeremiah to sit by the ashes of Israel today, he would not cry out a lamentation. . . . The Almighty Himself would be powerless to open his well of tears. He would maintain a deep silence. For even an outcry is now a lie, even tears are mere literature, even prayers are false."

Tsaytlin's concluding sentence anticipated the frequently asserted but as frequently ignored claim that all responses to the Holocaust are inadequate, including, and perhaps especially, those made with the most exalted sentiments and language. Here, for instance, is Piotr Rawicz, a Jewish writer born in the Ukraine who after his release from the camps wrote in French. In his novel *Blood from the Sky*, Rawicz put down certain precepts that the very existence of his book seems to violate: "The 'literary manner' is an obscenity. . . . Literature [is] the art, occasionally remunerative, of rummaging in vomit. And yet, it would appear, one has to write. So as to trick loneliness, so as to trick other people."

Looking back at such remarks, we may wonder what these writers were struggling to express, what half-formed or hidden feelings prompted their outcries. I will offer a few speculations, confining myself to Adorno.

Adorno was not so naive as to prescribe for writers a line of conduct that would threaten their very future as writers. Through a dramatic outburst he probably meant to focus upon the sheer difficulty—the literary risk, the moral peril—of dealing with the Holocaust in literature. It was as if he were saying: Given the absence of usable norms through which to grasp the meaning (if there is one) of the scientific extermination of millions, given the intolerable gap between the aesthetic conventions and the loathsome realities of the Holocaust, and given the improbability of coming up with images and symbols that might serve as "objective correlatives" for events that the imagination can hardly take in, writers in the post-Holocaust era might be wise to be silent. Silent, at least, about the Holocaust.

This warning, if such it was, had a certain prophetic force. It anticipated, first, the common but mistaken notion that literature somehow has an obligation to encompass all areas of human experience, no matter how extreme or impenetrable they might be; and, second, the corruptions of the mass media that would suppose itself equipped to master upon demand any theme or subject.

Adorno might have been rehearsing a traditional aesthetic idea: that the representation of a horrible event, especially if in drawing upon literary skills it achieves a certain graphic power, could serve to domesticate it, rendering it familiar and in some sense even tolerable, and thereby shearing away part of the

horror. The comeliness of even the loosest literary forms is likely to soften the impact of what is being rendered, and in most renderings of imaginary situations we tacitly expect and welcome this. But with a historical event such as the Holocaust—an event regarding which the phrase “such as” cannot really be employed—the chastening aspects of literary mimesis can be felt to be misleading, a questionable way of reconciling us with the irreconcilable or of projecting a symbolic “transcendence” that in actuality is no more than a reflex of our baffled will.

Adorno might have had in mind the possibility of an insidious relation between the represented (or even the merely evoked) Holocaust and the spectator enthralled precisely as, or perhaps even because, he is appalled—a relation carrying a share of voyeuristic sadomasochism. Can we really say that in reading a memoir or novel about the Holocaust, or in seeing a film such as *Shoah*, we gain the pleasure, or catharsis, that is customarily associated with the aesthetic transaction? More disquieting, can we be sure that we do not gain a sort of illicit pleasure from our pained submission to such works? I do not know how to answer these questions, which threaten many of our usual assumptions about what constitutes an aesthetic experience; but I think that even the most disciplined scholar of the Holocaust ought every once in a while to reexamine the nature of his or her responses.

More speculative still is the thought that Adorno, perhaps with only a partial awareness, was turning back to a “primitive” religious feeling—the feeling that there are some things in our experience, or some aspects of the universe, that are too terrible to be looked at directly.

In ancient mythologies and religions there are things and beings that are not to be named. They may be the supremely good or supremely bad, but for mortals they are the unutterable, since there is felt to be a limit to what man may see or dare, certainly to what he may meet. Perseus would turn to stone if he were to look directly at the serpent-headed Medusa, though he would be safe if he looked at her only through a reflection in a mirror or a shield (this latter being, as I shall argue, the very strategy that the canny writers have adopted in dealing with the Holocaust).

Perhaps dimly, Adorno wished to suggest that the Holocaust might be regarded as a secular equivalent—if there can be such a thing—of that which in the ancient myths could not be gazed at or named directly; that before which men had to avert their eyes; that which in the properly responsive witness would arouse the “holy dread” Freud saw as the essence of taboos. And in such taboos

the prohibition was imposed not in order to enforce ignorance but to regulate, or guard against the consequences of, knowledge.

How this taboo might operate without the sanctions and structure of an organized religion and its linked mythology I cannot grasp: it would require a quantity of shared or communal discipline beyond anything we can suppose. Adorno must have known this as well as anyone else. He must have known that in our culture the concept of limit serves mostly as a barrier or hurdle to be overcome, not as a perimeter of respect. Perhaps his remarks are to be taken as a hopeless admonition, a plea for the improvisation of limit that he knew would not and indeed could not be heeded, but which it was necessary to make.

3

Holocaust writings make their primary claim, I would say, through facts recorded or remembered. About this most extreme of human experiences there cannot be too much documentation, and what matters most in such materials is exactitude: the sober number, the somber date. Beyond that, Holocaust writings often reveal the helplessness of the mind before an evil that cannot quite be imagined, or the helplessness of the imagination before an evil that cannot quite be understood. This shared helplessness is the major reason for placing so high a value on the memoir, a kind of writing in which the author has no obligation to do anything but, in accurate and sober terms, tell what he experienced and witnessed.

Can we so readily justify our feelings about the primary worth of reliable testimony? Prudential arguments seem increasingly dubious here, since it should by now be clear that remembering does not necessarily forestall repetition. The instinctive respect we accord honest testimony, regardless of whether it is “well written,” may in part be due to a persuasion that the aesthetic is not the primary standard for judgments of human experience, and that there can be, indeed often enough have been, situations in which aesthetic and moral standards come into conflict. Our respect for testimony may also be due in part to an unspoken persuasion that we owe something to the survivors who expose themselves to the trauma of recollection: we feel that we should listen to them apart from whether it “does any good.” As for the millions who did not survive, it would be mere indulgence to suppose that any ceremonies of recollection could “make up for” or “transcend” their destruction—all such chatter, too frequent in writings about the Holocaust, is at best a futility of eloquence. Still, there are pieties that

civilized people want to confirm even if, sometimes because, these are no more than gestures.

Another piety is to be invoked here. We may feel that heeding the survivors' testimony contributes to the fund of shared consciousness, which also means to our own precarious sense of being, whether individual or collective, and that, somehow, this is good. Henry James speaks somewhere of an ideal observer upon whom nothing is lost, who witnesses the entirety of the human lot, and though James in his concerns is about as far from something like the Holocaust as any writer could be, I think it just to borrow his vision of consciousness for our very different ends. The past summoned by Holocaust memoirs not only tells us something unbearable, and therefore unforgettable, about the life of mankind; it is a crucial part of our own time, if not of our direct experience. To keep the testimony of Holocaust witnesses in the forefront of our consciousness may not make us "better" people, but it may at least bring a touch of accord with our sense of the time we have lived in and where we have come from.

There is still another use of this testimony, and that is to keep the Holocaust firmly within the bounds of history, so that it will not end up as a preface to apocalypse or eschatology, or, worse still, decline into being the legend of a small people. "Nobody," said the historian Ignacy Schipper in Majdanek, "will *want* to believe us, because our disaster is the disaster of the entire civilized world." Schipper's phrasing merits close attention. He does not say that the disaster was experienced by the entire civilized world, which might entail a sentimental "universalizing" of the Holocaust; he says that the disaster of the Jews was (or should have been) shared by the entire civilized world, so that what happened to "us" might form a weight upon the consciousness of that world, even as we may recognize that sooner or later the world will seek to transfer it to some realm "beyond" history, a realm at once more exalted and less accusatory. Yet history is exactly where the Holocaust must remain, and for that, there can never be enough testimony.

Chaim Kaplan's Warsaw diary, covering a bit less than a year from its opening date of September 1, 1938, is a document still recognizably within the main tradition of Western writing: a man observes crucial events and strives to grasp their significance. Kaplan's diary shows the discipline of a trained observer; his prose is lucid and restrained; he records the effort of Warsaw Jewry to keep a fragment of its culture alive even as it stumbles into death; and he reveals a torn soul wondering what premises of faith, or delusion, sustain his "need to record." Barely, precariously, we are still in the world of the human as we have understood it, for nothing can be more human than to keep operating with familiar categories of thought while discovering they will no longer suffice.

Elie Wiesel's first book, *Night*, written simply and without rhetorical indulgence, is a slightly fictionalized record of his sufferings as a boy in Auschwitz and during a forced march together with his father and other prisoners through the frozen countryside to Buchenwald. The father dies of dysentery in Buchenwald, and the boy—or the writer remembering himself as a boy—reveals his guilty relief at feeling that the death of his father has left him “free at last,” not as any son might feel but in the sense that now he may be able to save himself without the burden of an ailing father. No sensitive reader will feel an impulse to judgment here. Indeed, that is one of the major effects of honest testimony about the Holocaust—it dissolves any impulse to judge what the victims did or did not do, since there are situations so extreme that it seems immoral to make judgments about those who must endure them. We are transported here into a subworld where freedom and moral sensibility may survive in memory but cannot be exercised in practice. Enforced degradation forms the penultimate step toward the ovens.

The ovens dominate the camps that the Nazis, not inaccurately, called *anus mundi*. Filip Mueller's *Eyewitness Auschwitz* is the artless account of being transported from his native Slovakia in April 1942 to Auschwitz, where he worked for two and a half years as a *Sonderkommando*, or assistant at the gas chambers. Somehow Mueller survived. His narrative is free of verbal embellishment or thematic reflection; he indulges neither in self-apology nor self-attack; he writes neither art nor history. His book is simply the story of a simple man who processed many corpses. Even in this book, terrible beyond any that I have ever read, there are still a few touches recalling what we take to be humanity: efforts at theodicy by men who cannot justify their faith, a recital of the kaddish by doomed prisoners who know that no one else will say it for them. In the world Mueller served, “the transformation of the person into flesh” and of flesh into dust “became complete.” It was a world for which, finally, we have no words.

But isn't there, a skeptical voice may interject, a touch of empiricist naiveté in such high claims for Holocaust memoirs? Memory can be treacherous among people who have suffered terribly and must feel a measure of guilt at being alive at all. Nor can we be sure of the truth supplied by damaged and overwrought witnesses, for whatever knowledge we may claim about these matters is likely to come mainly from the very memoirs we find ourselves submitting, however uneasily, to critical judgment.

The skeptical voice is cogent, and I would only say in reply that we are not helpless before the accumulated mass of recollection. Our awe before the suffering and our respect for the sufferers does not disable us from making discriminations of value, tone, authority. There remain the usual historical tests, through

both external check and internal comparison; and there is still the reader's ear, bending toward credence or doubt.

The test of the ear is a delicate one, entailing a shift from testimony to witness—a shift that, except perhaps with regard to the scrappiest of chronicles, seems unavoidable. Reading Holocaust memoirs we respond not just to their accounts of what happened; we respond also to qualities of being, tremors of sensibility, as these emerge even from the bloodiest pages. We respond to the modesty or boastfulness, the candor or evasiveness, the self-effacement or self-promotion of the writers. We respond, most of all, to a quality that might be called moral poise, by which I mean a readiness to engage in a complete reckoning with the past, insofar as there can be one—a strength of remembrance that leads the writer into despair and then perhaps a little beyond it, so that he does not flinch from anything, neither shame nor degradation, yet refuses to indulge in those outbursts of self-pity, sometimes sliding into self-aggrandizement, that mar a fair number of Holocaust memoirs.

But is there not something shameful in subjecting the work of survivors to this kind of scrutiny? Perhaps so; yet in choosing to become writers, they have no choice but to accept this burden.

The Holocaust was structured to destroy the very idea of private being. It was a sequence of events entirely “out there,” in the objective world, the world of force and power. Yet as we read Holocaust memoirs and reaffirm their value as evidence, we find ourselves veering—less by choice than necessity—from the brute external to the fragile subjective, from matter to voice, from story to storyteller. And this leaves us profoundly uneasy, signifying that our earlier stress upon the value of testimony has now been complicated, perhaps even compromised, by the introduction of aesthetic considerations. We may wish with all our hearts to yield entirely to the demands of memory and evidence, but simply by virtue of reading, we cannot forget that the diarist was a person formed before and the memoirist a person formed after the Holocaust. We are ensnared in the cruelty of remembering, a compounded cruelty, in which our need for truthful testimony lures us into tests of authenticity.

That, in any case, is how we read. I bring as a “negative” witness a memoirist not to be named: he puts his ordeal at the service of a familiar faith or ideology, and it comes to seem sad, for that faith or ideology cannot bear the explanatory and expiatory burdens he would place upon it. Another memoirist, also not to be named: he suborns his grief to public self-aggrandizement, and the grief he declares, surely sincere, is alloyed by streaks of publicity.

But Chaim Kaplan cares for nothing except the impossible effort to comprehend the incomprehensible; Filip Mueller for nothing except to recall happenings even he finds hard to credit; Primo Levi for nothing but to render his days in the camps through a language unadorned and chaste.

We are trapped. Our need for testimony that will forever place the Holocaust squarely within history requires that we respond to voice, nuance, personality. Our desire to see the Holocaust in weightier terms than the merely aesthetic lures us into a shy recognition of the moral reverberations of the aesthetic. This does not make us happy, but the only alternative is the silence we all remember, now and then, to praise.

4

“We became aware,” writes Primo Levi, “that our language lacks words to express this offense, the demolition of man.” Every serious writer approaching the Holocaust sooner or later says much the same. If there is a way of coping with this difficulty, it lies in a muted tactfulness recognizing that there are some things that can be said and some that cannot.

Let me cite a few sentences from T. S. Eliot: “Great simplicity is only won by an intense moment or by years of intelligent effort, or by both. It represents one of the most arduous conquests of the human spirit: the triumph of feeling and thought over the natural sin of language.”

Exactly what Eliot meant by that astonishing phrase, “the natural sin of language,” I cannot say with assurance, but that it applies to a fair portion of Holocaust writing, both memoir and fiction, seems to me indisputable. A “natural sin” might here signify the inclination to grow wanton over our deepest griefs, thereby making them the substance of public exploitation. Or a mistaken effort, sincere or grandiose, to whip language into doing more than it can possibly do, more than thought and imagination and prayer can do. Language as it seduces us into the comforting grandiose.

When, by now as a virtual cliché, we say that language cannot deal with the Holocaust, we really have in mind, or perhaps are covering up for, our inadequacies of thought and feeling. We succumb to that “natural sin of language” because anyone who tries seriously to engage with the implications of the Holocaust must come up against a wall of incomprehension: *How could it be?* Not the behavior, admirable or deplorable, of the victims, and not the ideologies the Nazis drew upon form the crux of our bewilderment, but—how could human beings, raised

in the center of European civilization, do this? If we then fall back on intellectual shorthand, invoking the problem of radical evil, what are we really doing but expressing our helplessness in another vocabulary? Not only is this an impassable barrier for the thought of moralists and the recall of memoirists; it is, I think, the greatest thematic and psychological difficulty confronting writers of fiction who try to represent or evoke the Holocaust.

For the central question to be asked about these writings, a few of them distinguished and most decent failures, is this: What can the literary imagination, traditionally so proud of its self-generating capacities, add to—how can it go beyond—the intolerable matter cast up by memory? What could be the organizing categories, the implicit premises of perception and comprehension, through which the literary imagination might be able to render intelligible the gassing of twelve thousand people a day at Auschwitz? If, as Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi remarks, literature has traditionally called upon “the timeless archetypes of human experience” to structure and infer significance from its materials, how can this now be done with a sequence of events that radically breaks from those “timeless archetypes”? A novelist can rehearse what we have learned from the documentation of David Rousset and Filip Mueller, from Primo Levi and Eugen Kogon, but apart from some minor smoothing and shaping, what can the novelist do with all this? And if, through sheer lack of any other recourse, he does fall back upon the ideological or theological categories of Western thought, he faces the risk of producing a fiction with a severe fissure between rendered event and imposed category—so that even a sympathetic reader may be inclined to judge the work as resembling a failed allegory in which narrative and moral are, at best, chained together by decision.

Let us see all this concretely, as it might affect a novelist’s job of work. Yes, the facts are there, fearful and oppressive, piled up endlessly in memoirs and histories. He has studied them, tried to “make sense” of them in his mind, submitted himself to the barrage of horror. But what he needs—and does not have—is something that for most ordinary fictions written about most ordinary themes would come to him spontaneously, without his even being aware that it figures crucially in the act of composition: namely, a structuring set of ethical premises, to which are subordinately linked aesthetic biases, through which he can integrate his materials. These ethical premises and aesthetic biases are likely to obtrude in consciousness only as a felt lack, only when a writer brooding over the endlessness of murder and torment asks how it can be turned or shaped into significant narrative. Nor, if he tries to escape from a confining realism and venture

into symbolic or grotesque modes, can he find sufficiently used—you might say, sufficiently “broken in”—myths and metaphors that might serve as workable, publicly recognizable analogues for the Holocaust experience. Before this reality, the imagination comes to seem intimidated, helpless. It can rehearse, but neither enlarge nor escape; it can describe happenings, but not endow them with the autonomy and freedom of a complex fiction; it remains—and perhaps this may even figure as a moral obligation—the captive of its raw material.

The Holocaust memoirist, as writer, is in a far less difficult position. True, he needs to order his materials in the rudimentary sense of minimal chronology and reportorial selectivity (though anything he honestly remembers could prove to be significant, even if not part of his own story). Insofar as he remains a memoirist, he is not obliged to interpret what he remembers. But the novelist, even if he supposes he is merely “telling a story,” must—precisely in order to tell a story—“make sense” of his materials, either through explicit theory or, what is better, absorbed assumptions. Otherwise, no matter how vivid his style or sincere his feelings, he will finally be at a loss. All he will then be able to do is to present a kind of “fictionalized memoir”—which means not to move very far beyond what the memoirist has already done.

To avoid this difficulty, some novelists have concentrated on those camps that were not just “corpse factories” and that allowed some faint simulacrum of human life; or, like Jorge Semprun in *The Long Voyage*, they have employed flashbacks of life before imprisonment, so as to allow for some of that interplay of character and extension of narrative that is essential to works of imaginative fiction. Once our focus is narrowed, however, to the death camps, the locale of what must be considered the essential Holocaust, the novelist’s difficulties come to seem awesome. For then, apart from the lack of cognitive structures, he has to face a number of problems that are specifically, narrowly literary.

The Holocaust is not, essentially, a dramatic subject. Much before, much after, and much surrounding the mass exterminations may be open to dramatic rendering. But the exterminations, in which thousands of dazed and broken people were sent up each day in smoke, hardly knowing and often barely able to respond to their fate, have little of drama in them. Terribleness yes; drama no.

Of those conflicts between wills, those inner clashes of belief and wrenchings of desire, those enactments of passion, all of which make up our sense of the dramatic, there can be little in the course of a fiction focused mainly on the mass exterminations. A heroic figure here, a memorable outcry there—that is possible. But those soon to be dead are already half or almost dead; the gas chambers

merely finish the job begun in the ghettos and continued on the trains. The basic minimum of freedom to choose and act that is a central postulate of drama had been taken from the victims.

The extermination process was so “brilliantly” organized that the life, and thereby the moral energy upon which drama ultimately depends, had largely been snuffed out of the victims before they entered the gas chambers. Here, in the death camps, the pitiful margin of space that had been allowed the human enterprise in the concentration camps was negated. Nor was it exactly death that reigned; it was annihilation. What then can the novelist make of this—what great clash or subtle inference—that a Filip Mueller has not already shown?

If the death camps and mass exterminations allow little opening for the dramatic, they also give little space for the tragic in any traditional sense of that term. In classical tragedy man is defeated; in the Holocaust man is destroyed. In tragedy man struggles against forces that overwhelm him, struggles against both the gods and his own nature; and the downfall that follows may have an aspect of grandeur. This struggle allows for the possibility of an enlargement of character through the purgation of suffering, which in turn may bring a measure of understanding and a kind of peace. But except for some religious Jews who were persuaded that the Holocaust was a reenactment of the great tradition of Jewish martyrdom, or for some secular Jews who lived out their ethic by choosing to die in solidarity with their fellows, or for those inmates who undertook doomed rebellions, the Jews destroyed in the camps were not martyrs continuing along the ways of their forefathers. They died, probably most of them, not because they chose at all costs to remain Jews, but because the Nazis chose to believe that being Jewish was an unchangeable, irredeemable condition. They were victims of a destruction that for many of them had little or only a fragmentary meaning—few of the victims, it seems, could even grasp the idea of total annihilation, let alone regard it as an act of high martyrdom. All of this does not make their death less terrible; it makes their death more terrible.

So much so that it becomes an almost irresistible temptation for Holocaust writers, whether discursive or fictional, to search for some redemptive token, some cry of retribution, some balancing of judgment against history’s evil, some sign of ultimate spiritual triumph. It is as if, through the retrospect of language, they would lend a tragic aura. . . .

Many of the customary resources and conventions of the novel are unavailable to the writer dealing with the Holocaust. Small shifts in tone due to the surprises of freedom or caprice; the slow, rich development of character through testing and overcoming; the exertion of heroic energies by characters granted unexpect-

edly large opportunities; the slow emergence of moral flaws through an accumulation of seemingly trivial incidents; the withdrawal of characters into the recesses of their selves; the yielding of characters to large social impulses, movements, energies—these may not be entirely impossible in Holocaust fiction, but all must prove to be painfully limited. Even so apparently simple a matter as how a work of fiction is ended takes on a new and problematic aspect, for while a memoirist can just stop, the novelist must think in terms of resolutions and completions. But what, after having surrendered his characters to their fate, can he suppose those resolutions and completions to be? Finally, all such literary problems come down to the single inclusive problem of freedom. In the past even those writers most inclined to determinism or naturalism have grasped that to animate their narratives they must give at least a touch of freedom to their characters. And that, as his characters inexorably approach the ovens, is precisely what the Holocaust writer cannot do.

5

The Israeli critic Hannah Ya'oz, reports Sidra Ezrahi, has “divided Holocaust fiction into historical and transhistorical modes—the first representing a mimetic approach which incorporates the events into the continuum of history and human experience, and the second transfiguring the events into a mythic reality where madness reigns and all historical loci are relinquished.” At least with regard to the Holocaust, the notion that there can be a “mythic reality” without “historical loci” seems to me dubious—for where then could the imagination find the materials for its act of “transfiguring”? Still, the division of Holocaust fiction proposed by the Israeli critic has some uses, if only to persuade us that finally both the writers who submit to and those who rebel against the historical mode must face pretty much the same problems.

The “mimetic approach” incorporating “events into the continuum of history” has been most strongly employed by the Polish writer Tadeusz Borowski in his collection of stories *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*. Himself an Auschwitz survivor, Borowski writes in a cold, harsh, even coarse style, heavy with flaunted cynicism, and offering no reliefs of the heroic. Kapo Tadeusz, the narrator, works not only with but also on behalf of the death system. “Write,” he says, “that a portion of the sad fame of Auschwitz belongs to you as well.” The wretched truth is that here survival means the complete yielding of self.

Like Filip Mueller in his memoir, Borowski’s narrator admits that he lives because there is a steady flow of new “material” from the ghettos to the gas

chambers. "It is true, others may be dying, but one is somehow still alive, one has enough food, enough strength to work. . . ." Let the transports stop and Kapo Tadeusz, together with the other members of "Canada" (the labor gang that unloads the transports), will be liquidated.

Kapo Tadeusz lives in a world where mass murder is normal: it is *there*, it works, and it manages very well without moral justifications. The tone of detachment, which in a naturalistic novel would signal moral revulsion from represented ugliness, has here become a condition of survival. To lapse into what we might regard as human feeling—and sometimes Kapo Tadeusz and his fellow-prisoners do that—is to risk not only the ordeal of memory but the loss of life: a pointless loss, without record or rebellion.

Borowski's style conveys the rhythm of a hammering factuality, and in a way almost too complex to describe, one appreciates his absolute refusal to strike any note of redemptive nobility. Truthful and powerful as they are, Borowski's stories seem very close to those relentless Holocaust memoirs that show that there need be no limit to dehumanization. And that is just the point; for truthful and powerful as they are, Borowski's stories "work" mainly as testimony. Their authenticity makes us, I would say, all but indifferent to their status as art. We do not, perhaps cannot, read these stories as mediated fictions, imaginative versions of a human milieu in which men and women enter the usual range of relations. In Kapo Tadeusz's barrack there is simply no space for that complex interplay of action, emotion, dream, ambivalence, generosity, envy, and love that forms the basis of Western literature. The usual norms of human conduct—except for flashes of memory threatening survival—do not operate here. "We are not evoking evil irresponsibly," writes Borowski, "for we have now become part of it." Nor does it really matter whether Borowski was drawing upon personal memories or "making up" some of his stories. Composed in the fumes of destruction, even the stories he might have "made up" are not actually "made up": they are the substance of collective memory. *Hier ist kein warum.*

Inevitably, some Holocaust writers would try to escape from the vise of historical realism, and one of the most talented of these was the Ukrainian Jew Piotr Rawicz. Resting on a very thin narrative base, Rawicz's novel *Blood from the Sky* is a sustained, almost heroic rebellion against the demands of narrative—though in the end those demands reassert themselves, even providing the strongest parts of this wantonly brilliant book. What starts out as a traditional story soon turns into expressionist phantasmagoria seeking to project imagistic tokens for the Holocaust, or at least for the hallucinations it induces in the minds of witnesses. The story, often pressed far into the background, centers on a rich, highly educated,

aristocratic Jew named Boris who saves himself from the Nazis through his expert command of German and Ukrainian—also through a disinclination to indulge in noble gestures. Upon this fragile strand of narrative Rawicz hangs a series of vignettes, excoriations, prose and verse poems, and mordant reflections of varying quality. The most effective are the ones visibly tied to some historical event, as in a brief sketch of a Nazi commander who orders the transport from Boris's town of all women named Goldberg because a woman of that name has infected him with a venereal disease. Symbolically freighted passages achieve their greatest force when they are also renderings of social reality, as in this description of a work party of prisoners sent by the Nazis to tear apart a Jewish cemetery:

The party was demolishing some old tombstones. The blind, deafening hammer blows were scattering the sacred characters from inscriptions half a millennium old, and composed in praise of some holy man. . . . An *aleph* would go flying off to the left, while a *he* carved on another piece of stone dropped to the right. A *gimel* would bite the dust and a *nun* follow in its wake. . . . Several examples of *shin*, a letter symbolizing the miraculous intervention of God, had just been smashed and trampled on by the hammers and feet of these moribund workmen.

And then, several sentences later: "Death—that of their fellow men, of the stones, of their own—had become unimportant to them; but hunger hadn't."

The strength of this passage rests upon a fusion of event described and symbol evoked, but that fusion is successfully achieved because the realistic description is immediately persuasive in its own right. Mimesis remains the foundation. When Rawicz, however, abandons story and character in his straining after constructs of language that will in some sense "parallel" the Holocaust theme, the prose cracks under an intolerable pressure. We become aware of an excess of tension between the narrative (pushed into the background but through its sheer horror still dominant) and the virtuosity of language (too often willed and literary). Rawicz's outcroppings of expressionist rage and grief, no matter how graphic in their own right, can only seem puny when set against the events looming across the book.

Still, there are passages in which Rawicz succeeds in endowing his language with a kind of hallucinatory fury, and then it lures us into an autonomous realm of the horrifying and the absurd. But when that happens, virtuosity takes command, coming to seem self-sufficient, without fixed points of reference, as if floating off on its own. Losing the causal tie with the Holocaust that the writer evidently hopes to maintain, the language overflows as if a discharge of sheer nausea.

At least with regard to Holocaust fiction, I would say that efforts to employ “transhistorical modes” or “mythic reality” are likely to collapse into the very “continuum of history” they seek to escape—or else to come loose from the grounds of their creation.

6

M 'ken nisht, literally, Yiddish for “one cannot”—so the Israeli writer Aharon Appelfeld once explained why in his fictions about the Holocaust he did not try to represent it directly, always ending before or starting after the exterminations. He spoke with the intuitive shrewdness of the writer who knows when to stop—a precious gift. But his remark also conveyed a certain ambiguity, as if m 'ken nisht had a way of becoming m 'tur nisht, “one must not,” so that an acknowledgment of limit might serve as a warning of the forbidden.

In approaching the Holocaust, the canniest writers keep a distance. They know or sense that their subject cannot be met full-face. It must be taken on a tangent, with extreme wariness, through strategies of indirection and circuitous narratives that leave untouched the central horror—leave it untouched but always invoke or evoke it as hovering shadow. And this brings us to another of the ironies that recur in discussing this subject. We may begin with a suspicion that it is morally unseemly to submit Holocaust writings to fine critical discriminations, yet once we speak, as we must, about ways of approaching or apprehending this subject, we find ourselves going back to a fundamental concern of literary criticism, namely, how a writer validates his material.

Before. Aharon Appelfeld's *Badenheim 1939* is a novella that at first glance contains little more than a series of banal incidents in a Jewish resort near Vienna at the start of World War II. Each trivial event brings with it a drift of anxiety. A character feels “haunted by a hidden fear, not her own.” Posters go up in the town: “The Air Is Fresher in Poland.” Guests in the hotel fear that “some alien spirit [has] descended.” A musician explains deportations of Jews as if he were the very spirit of the century: it is “Historical Necessity.” Appelfeld keeps accumulating nervous detail; the writing flows seamlessly, enticingly, until one notices that the logic of this quiet narrative is a logic of hallucination and its quietness mounts into a thick cloud of foreboding. At the end, the guests are being packed into “four filthy freight cars”—but here Appelfeld abruptly stops, as if recognizing a limit to the sovereignty of words. Nothing is said or shown of what is to follow; the narrative is as furtive as the history it evokes; the unspeakable is not to be named.

During. Pierre Gascar, a Frenchman, not Jewish, who was a POW during World War II, has written in his long story "The Seasons of the Dead" one of the very few masterpieces of Holocaust fiction. Again, no accounts of torture or portrayal of concentration camps or imaginings of the gas chambers. All is evoked obliquely, through a haze of fearfulness and disbelief. The narrator makes no effort to hide his Parisian sophistication, but what he sees as a prisoner sent to a remote camp in Poland breaks down his categories of thought and leaves him almost beyond speech.

Gascar's narrator is assigned to a detail that takes care of a little cemetery molded with pick and shovel for French soldiers who have died: "We were a team of ghosts returning every morning to a green peaceful place, we were workers in death's garden." In a small way "death's garden" is also life's, for with solemn attentiveness the men who work there preserve the civilizing rituals of burial through which mankind has traditionally tried to give some dignity to death. Gradually signs of another kind of death assault these men, death cut off from either natural process or social ritual. The French prisoners working in their little graveyard cannot help seeing imprisoned Jews of a nearby village go about their wretched tasks. One morning they find "a man lying dead by the roadside on the way to the graveyard" who has "no distinguishing mark, save the armband with the star of David"; and as they dig new graves for their French comrades, they discover "the arm of [a] corpse . . . pink . . . like certain roots." Their cemetery, with its carefully "idealized dead," is actually in "the middle of a charnel, a heap of corpses lying side by side. . . ." And then the trains come, with their stifled cries, "the human voice, hovering over the infinite expanse of suffering like a bird over the infinite sea." As in Claude Lanzmann's great film *Shoah*, the trains go back and forth, endlessly, in one direction filled with broken human creatures, and in the other empty. Death without coffins, without reasons, without rituals, without witnesses: the realization floods into the consciousness of the narrator and a few other prisoners. "Death can never appease this pain; this stream of black grief will flow forever"—so the narrator tells himself. No explanation follows, no consolation. There is only the enlarging grief of discovery, with the concluding sentence: "I went back to my dead"—both kinds, surely. And nothing else.

After. In a long story, "A Plaque on Via Mazzini," the Italian-Jewish writer Giorgio Bassani adopts as his narrative voice the amiable coarseness of a commonplace citizen of Ferrara, the north Italian town that before the war had four hundred Jews, one hundred eighty-three of whom were deported. One of them comes back, in August 1945: Geo Josz, bloated with the fat of endema starvation, with hands "callused beyond all belief, but with white backs where a registration

number, tattooed a bit over the right wrist . . . could be read distinctly, all five numbers, preceded by the letter J.” Not unsympathetic but intent upon going about their business, the citizens of Ferrara speak through the narrator: “What did he want, now?” Ferrara does not know what to make of this survivor, unnerving in his initial quiet, with his “obsessive, ill-omened face” and his bursts of sarcasm. In his attic room Josz papers all four walls with pictures of his family, destroyed in Buchenwald. When he meets an uncle who had fawned upon the fascists, he lets out “a shrill cry, ridiculously, hysterically passionate, almost savage.” Encountering a broken-down old count who had spied for the fascist police, he slaps him twice—it’s not so much his presence that Josz finds unbearable as his whistling “Lili Marlene.”

As if intent upon making everyone uncomfortable, Josz resumes “wearing the same clothes he had been wearing when he came back from Germany . . . fur hat and leather jerkin included.” Even the warmhearted conclude: “It was impossible . . . to converse with a man in costume! And on the other hand, if they let him do the talking, he immediately started telling about . . . the end of all his relatives; and he went on like that for whole hours, until you didn’t know how to get away from him.”

A few years later Josz disappears, forever, “leaving not the slightest trace after him.” The Ferrarese, remembering him for a little while, “would shake their heads good-naturedly,” saying, “If he had only been a bit more patient.” What Geo Josz thinks or feels, what he remembers or wants, what boils up within him after returning to his town, Bassani never tells. There is no need to. Bassani sees this bit of human wreckage from a cool distance, charting the gap between Josz and those who encounter him on the street or at a café, no doubt wishing him well, but naturally, in their self-preoccupation, unable to enter his memories or obsessions. His very presence is a reproach, and what, if anything, they can do to reply or assuage they do not know. For they are ordinary people and he . . . The rest seeps up between the words.

Aftermath. On the face of it, “My Quarrel with Hersh Rasseynner,” by the Yiddish writer Chaim Grade, is an ideological dialogue between a badly shaken skeptic, evidently the writer himself, and a zealous believer, Hersh Rasseynner, who belongs to the Mussarist sect, “a movement that gives special importance to ethical and ascetic elements in Judaism.” But the voices of the two speakers—as they meet across a span of years from 1937 to 1948—are so charged with passion and sincerity that we come to feel close to both of them.

Like Grade himself, the narrator had been a Mussarist in his youth, only to abandon the Yeshiva for a career as a secular writer. Yet something of the Yeshiva’s

training in dialectic has stuck to the narrator, though Grade is shrewd enough to give the stronger voice to Hersh Rasseynner, his orthodox antagonist. What they are arguing about, presumably, are eternal questions of faith and skepticism—the possibility of divine benevolence amid the evil of His creation, the value of clinging to faith after a Holocaust that His hand did not stop. In another setting all this might seem an intellectual exercise, but here, as these two men confront one another, their dispute signifies nothing less than the terms upon which they might justify their lives. For Hersh Rasseynner the gas chambers are the inevitable outcome of a trivialized worldliness and an enfeebled morality that lacks the foundation of faith. For the narrator, the gas chambers provoke unanswerable questions about a God who has remained silent. Back and forth the argument rocks, with Hersh Rasseynner usually on the attack, for he is untroubled by doubt, while the narrator can only say: “You have a ready answer, while we have not silenced our doubts, and perhaps we will never be able to silence them.” With “a cry of impotent anger against heaven”—a heaven in which he does not believe but to which he continues to speak—the narrator finally offers his hand to Hersh Rasseynner in a gesture of forlorn comradeship: “We are the remnant. . . .”

In its oppressive intensity and refusal to rest with any fixed “position,” Grade’s story makes us realize that even the most dreadful event in history has brought little change in the thought of mankind. History may spring endless surprises, but our responses are very limited. In the years after the Holocaust there was a certain amount of speculation that human consciousness could no longer be what it had previously been. Exactly what it might mean to say that after the Holocaust consciousness has been transformed is very hard to determine. Neither of Grade’s figures—nor, to be honest, the rest of us—shows any significant sign of such a transformation. For good and bad, we remain the commonplace human stock, and whatever it is that we may do about the Holocaust we shall have to do with the worn historical consciousness received from mankind’s past. In Grade’s story, as in other serious fictions touching upon the Holocaust, there is neither throb of consolation nor peal of redemption, nothing but an anxious turning toward and away from what our century has left us.

7

The mind rebels against such conclusions. It yearns for compensations it knows cannot be found; it yearns for tokens of transcendence in the midst of torment. To suppose that some redemptive salvage can be eked out of the Holocaust is, as we like to say, only human. And that is one source of the falsity that seeps

through a good many accounts of the Holocaust, whether fiction or memoir—as it seeps through the language of many high-minded commentators. “To talk of despair,” writes Albert Camus, “is to conquer it.” Is it now? “The destiny of the Jewish people, whom no earthly power has ever been able to defeat”—so speaks a character in Jean-François Steiner’s novel about a revolt in Treblinka. Perhaps appropriate for someone urging fellow-prisoners into a doomed action, such sentiments, if allowed to determine the moral scheme of Holocaust writing, lead to self-delusion. The plain and bitter truth is that while Hitler did not manage to complete the “Final Solution,” he did manage to destroy an entire Jewish world.

“It is foolish,” writes Primo Levi, “to think that human justice can eradicate” the crimes of Auschwitz. Or that the human imagination can encompass and transfigure them. Some losses cannot be made up, neither in time nor in eternity. They can only be mourned. In a poem entitled “Written in Pencil in the Sealed Freight Car,” the Israeli poet Don Pagis writes:

Here in this transport
I Eve
and Abel my son
if you should see my older son
Cain son of man
tell him that I

Cry to heaven or cry to earth: that sentence will never be completed.