BY WORDS ALONE
The Holocaust in Literature
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With a Foreword by
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ONE

Introduction

Had I but rhymes rugged and harsh and hoarse,
Fit for the hideous hole on which the weight
Of all those rocks grinds downward course by course,
I might press out my matter's juice complete;
As 'tis, I tremble lest the telling mar
The tale; for, truly, to describe the great
Fundament of the world is very far
From being a task for idle wits at play,
Or infant tongues that pipe mama, papa.

Dante Alighieri, Inferno

The great illumination that the Enlightenment cast on the image of man faded and flickered during the dark years of this century and projected long shadows into the future. The habitations of death which the Nazis devised for the Jews and some of Europe's other "undesirables" may have become a trauma for modern consciousness such as only the incarnation of fantasies of absolute evil could still produce in a secular world. Sartre describes the prewar consciousness in which "the notion of Evil...had been abandoned"; by 1945, however, we had "been taught to take it seriously...Châteaubriant, Oradour...Dachau and Aushwitz have all demonstrated to us that Evil is not an appearance." The implementation of the Final Solution—not an eruption of the chaotic forces of violence but a systematized, mechanized, and socially organized program—was a mockery of the very idea of culture that had survived into the twentieth century. No symbolic universe grounded in humanistic beliefs could confront the Holocaust without the risk of being shaken to its foundations.

Yet in a broad sense the subject has become as pervasive as it is elusive; the symbols of the events that began with Hitler's accession to power in 1933 and ended with the defeat of the "Thousand Year" Reich in 1945 have been inflated and diluted over the years by loosely
analogue application to any abject human condition and by the oblique responses of those who cannot face the subject directly. Simultaneously, a need for some sort of containment is manifested in the evolution of an abstract system of concepts and terminology which tends to distance and tranquilize. Even the rubric under which the horrors of those years are subsumed—the Holocaust—may be regarded as something of an evasion through verbal encapsulation. It is derived from the Greek word for whole-burnt and is meant, presumably, to suggest the extent and even the “manner” of the death of the Jews of Europe. Yet the word hōloκαυtoma, which refers in the Septuagint to the “burnt offering” in the Temple of Solomon, raises problems through the sacrificial connotation that it attaches to the death of the Jews of Europe and which is, unfortunately, consistent with a prevailing Christian reading of Jewish history. (The nomenclature that has been adopted in the Jewish world does not carry the same affirmative theological overtones but, rather, signifies the enormity of the rift in Jewish history and culture brought about by the destruction of the European Jewish community.)

Minimally, the diffuse imagery and the facile and associative vocabulary reflect a tendency in European and American culture to circumscribe the events, to allocate to them a place and a function in human history, and to confine the madness which threatens to impinge on a “reconstructed” world.

The writer who touches such events with his inheritance of words appears to be reaffirming if not the sanitizes then the forms of civilized existence. Still he may be disarmed by the resistance of the matter to any attempts at discipline and by the notion that the extremes of human experience can hardly be contained within the delicate frames of art. He may be accused of uncovering the monstrous, culturally illegitimate shapes embedded in recent reality—of polluting human discourse with the language of horror and of forcing the tongue which reverberates with the infant’s “mamma” and “papa” in the higher spheres of civilized society to echo the inhuman sounds produced in the “fundament” of the world—in what the Nazis themselves referred to as the “anus mundi.” There is a basic tension within the artistic enterprise between the instinctive revulsion against allowing the monstrous creatures to emerge and the base sounds to be heard—as if by exposing them to the light of day the artist were somehow affirming or legitimating the deformities of man’s nature—and the equally compelling instinct against repressing reality, against the amnesia that comes with concealment. The ambivalence which these opposites generate in any portrait of evil evolves here within a unique kind of cultural discourse.

The distorted image of the human form which the artist might present as but a mirror of nature transformed can hardly be contained within the traditional perimeters of mimetic art, because although Holocaust literature is less archetypal, renders until Harry Levi be viewed touch with write about foot on the generations writers of V were thoug challenges inner, bloodi warfare. T as well as chivalry, that appear World V Holocaust.

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literature is a reflection of recent history it cannot draw upon the timeless archetypes of human experience and human behavior which can render un-lived events familiar through the medium of the imagination. Harry Levin argues, in his study of realism in literature, that "art can be viewed and judged as imitation only when men are in confident touch with the realities that have been imitated." Stephen Crane could write about war with convincing verisimilitude before he had ever set foot on the battlefield, in part because war is, to the sorrow of the generations, a familiar paradigm of human experience. The soldier-writers of World War I still marched into battle under the cover of what were thought to be invincible literary conventions reflecting the fixed challenges and virtues of combat. They returned under a different banner, bloodied irreparably by a new kind of mechanized and brutal warfare. The violence committed on the meliorist visions of society, as well as on the fortress of the self and the surviving traditions of chivalry, which would begin to find an idiom of its own in the literature that appeared after the Great War and that culminated in the literature of World War II, is carried to an all but inarticulate extreme in the Holocaust.

It may be possible, simply by piling on image after bloodcurdling image, to convey the atmosphere of terror that prevailed under National Socialism. Yet whereas factual reportage can add to our knowledge of what actually happened, in fiction the realist's or the naturalist's respect for details which comprise the fabric of historical processes is defeated by facts which can hardly be integrated into any preexistent system of ethics or aesthetics—facts which, in the words of the London Times correspondent accompanying the British troops who liberated the concentration camp at Belsen, are "beyond the imagination of mankind." As I shall try to show, precisely where it is most confined to the unimaginable facts of violence and horror, the creative literature that has developed is the least consistent with traditional moral and artistic conventions. Even the most vivid presentation of concrete detail and specificity, the most palpable reconstruction of Holocaust reality, is blunted by the fact that there is no analogue in human experience. The imagination loses credibility and resources where reality exceeds even the darkest fantasies of the human mind; even realism flounders before such reality.

The disjunction between generic memory and conventional forms on the one hand, and "millennial" subject matter and the literary forms which have evolved to contain the new reality on the other, is a measure of the shifts in the boundaries of art beyond which the imagination becomes inarticulate and form disintegrates altogether. As representational art reflects not just nature but the images of nature that have accrued over the centuries, so the representation of the Holocaust
in art is, essentially, an oscillation and a struggle between continuity and discontinuity with the cultural as well as with the historical past.6

One manifestation of the writer's poverty of resource when dealing with a subject that, in exceeding the bounds of recorded experience, could not draw upon familiar models of human behavior and values, has been the heavy reliance of certain artists on psychologists or social historians to provide new touchstones. The social scientists have, it would seem, succeeded to some extent in fathoming and taming the horrors of that period by deducing theories of human response to extremity from the Holocaust experience. The very presentation of a systematic explanation, or the assignment of one form or another of social or psychological "meaning" to the camp experience constitutes a code by which writers, in particular those who did not share the experience, can reconstruct it. Yet for others, primarily those who were close to the events themselves, it may be precisely in its resistance to conceptual abstraction, to psychological reductionism, that art as a version of historical memory can provide form without fixing meaning, insight without explanation, for the recovered events. For the writer to whom art is a form of resistance to death, and the fictional restoration of character and private fate a defiance of the anonymity of life in the shadow of the Swastika, no less than for the writer whose writing is in itself an act of acquiescence to the ultimate power of the system over the imagination, the creation can hardly be mediated by the claims of the analytical mind to comprehend or to instruct.

With respect to the structural metamorphoses that have taken place in response to historical discontinuities, the visual arts appear to be more amenable than the literary medium to the representation of violent disruptions in human affairs and distortions of the human image. Picasso's innovations have provided the visual vocabulary for the representation of horrors even greater than those that took place at Guernica; Jean Cayrol, in his essay on Holocaust art, writes that "Picasso is the painter par excellence who could have installed his easel on the 'Appel-Platz' at Mauthausen or Buchenwald."* Cayrol, himself a survivor who has written a number of novels and poems reflecting the concentration camp experience, collaborated with Alain Resnais in producing the film Nuit et brouillard (1955), which employs techniques of juxtaposition that assault the senses with an immediacy and a brutality that can hardly be matched in any other medium.

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continuity of past, the notion that art would not be fixed and determined by social values, or social institutions share the name of a nother of the characters in the novel. For the purposes of this essay, the fictional anonymity of the narrator, whose name is not revealed, is maintained.

In place among the many violent events that shaped the lives of the characters, the novel is structured around the central event of the descent into the Penal Colony. This descent is not merely a physical journey, but a symbolic one, representing the descent into a world of violence and oppression.

Yet even if the arts do not develop congruently, given their structurally inherent differences, it can be argued that they do evolve along parallel lines in response to cultural or historical shifts. Thus we can trace both the initial resistance and the stages of accommodation of the novel and other literary forms to the experience of social disruption and brutality which had begun to be manifested long before their encounter with Auschwitz. Frederick Hoffman's study of nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction, The Mortal No, analyzes the gradual breakdown of the novel of manners as a vehicle for representing the proliferation of violence in society: "The result was to challenge the novelist in a curious way: he had in all conscience to produce a novel of manners of violence" that is, he had to account for violence in a literary form that was not prepared to accommodate it."11

The structural responses that the forces of violent reality had begun to exact from the literary imagination are exemplified in this century not only in the ironic mode in the literature of two wars but also in the dislocations and distortions of focus in the fiction of Joyce or Gertrude Stein, in the poetry of Eliot or Pound. The shift is from violence as a passionate crime of the self to automated, socially enforced, and diffuse violence as the general backdrop for human endeavor. Holocaust literature appears in this context as the culmination of a well-advanced literary process. And if the new literary forms come not only to reflect but in some sense to anticipate current events, Kafka is the writer whose fiction so fully expressed the logic of modern technology, mechanized sadism, and bureaucratic depersonalization that Auschwitz appears almost as the realization of the fantastic world blueprinted in The Penal Colony. Still, the next stage, even in the literary history of violence, seems to test or transgress the boundaries of the admissible in art. When Hoffman reaches this stage in his analysis, he poses the ultimate question of whether the "circumstance of violence"
in the world of concentration camps is not "so overwhelming that it is impossible for any literature to comprehend it adequately... It is true that literature has never been silenced by calamity; it has not been especially nourished by it either. Catastrophes in the past... either have been ignored or have only temporarily been introduced into the margins of literature." Nevertheless, contemporary writers persist in their attempts to extend the limits of the imagination, to devise a "strategy of the mind" which could encompass even the most violent extremes of human experience: "Wallace Stevens describes the mind as containing a 'violence from within that protects us from a violence without'; [presumably] he means that the imagination can and does meet the full force of reality, and that an act of mind must and should apply to any occasion of external violence, that it must be equal to the occasion."  

Yet again the basic tensions that are generated in an art grounded in monstrous reality emerge in the form of a challenge; literature which meets the "full force... of external violence" can be accused of engaging in a kind of complicity with the evil forms it bodies forth. Edmund Wilson, in his controversial article on Kafka in the New Yorker in 1947, called Kafka's representation of the forces of human cruelty and irrationality a "rather meaching compliance... in the presence of the things he would satirize," and argued against the tendency to compare him to Proust or a Dante: "You cannot have a first-rate saint or prophet without a faith of a very much higher potential than is ever to be felt in Kafka." The implication is that art should provide a refuge from reality, and that "prophetic" art should at least aim at a vision of moral fortitude in the face of human suffering. Wilson's position in regard to Kafka presupposes, in other words, that the artistic representation of social disintegration or anarchy denies itself as art if it does not transcend the abyss through the force of a moral vision; his attitude relates to the concept of culture as a striving toward perfection and refinement: "What are we writers for if it is not to cheat the world of its triumph? The denationalized, discouraged, disaffected, disabled Kafka, though for the moment he may frighten or amuse us, can in the end only let us down. He is quite true to his time and place, but it is surely a time and place in which few of us will want to linger."  

T. W. Adorno, with far less faith in the redemptive pretenses of art, also considers the danger that the very reconstruction of intolerable reality can somehow contaminate the writer, and alludes to the dissonance between aesthetic or formalistic conventions of order and beauty and the chaos and ugliness which were the essence of Auschwitz. His assertion that it is "barbaric" to write poetry after Auschwitz, made in the context of a discussion of "engaged" versus...
“autonomous” literature, raises the issue of whether the cultural and social degeneration that culminated in Auschwitz commands a literature that is commensurately degenerate. Yet throughout Adorno’s deliberations resounds the echo of Pascal’s warning, “‘on ne doit plus dormir,’” and the conclusion that such an “abundance of suffering permits no forgetting,” that even if art is constantly in danger of betraying the victim, there is almost no other place where suffering still “finds its own voice.” Adorno also considers the options that Kafka explored in his fiction and implicitly rejects the refuge that Wilson seeks; “He who was once run over by Kafka’s wheels has lost his peace with the world.”

For some scholars and writers the ambiguities and dangers inherent in the enterprise are submerged beneath what they conceive to be a clearly hortatory or didactic imperative. A. Alvarez has suggested that only art can restore the moral values which would make further totalitarian atrocities impossible.16 Sartre, in the impassioned postwar treatise, What Is Literature? that initiated the polemic to which Adorno was addressing himself, assumed the position of spokesman for his generation when he wrote: “We are now forced by circumstances to discover the pressure of history.... We have undertaken to create a literature of extreme situations.”17 Both Sartre and later Camus, like Stevens and other writers who have touched the “flowers of evil” from one side or another, suggest that the creative writer, by expanding the boundaries of his art to incorporate unprecedented violence and despair, may in fact conquer or at least discipline them: “Despairing literature is a contradiction in terms,” Camus was to write; “even if the novel describes only nostalgia, despair, frustration, it still creates a form of salvation. To talk of despair is to conquer it.”18

In the following chapters we will be focusing our attention on the various ways in which the writers who “talk of despair” reflect degrees of submission or of conquest. The writer’s very effort to “communicate,” even within a system of altered perceptions, to account for the violence that had been committed on the notions of personal and collective survival, on moral and ethical values, and on aesthetic traditions which serve a continuity of cultural perspectives, is one mark of his trust in certain linkages between the past and the future. As Frank Kermode has pointed out, “the forms of art—its language—are in their nature a continuous extension or modification of conventions entered into by maker and reader, and this is true even of very original artists so long as they communicate at all.”19 Again, the manipulation of reality within the unmapped regions of human experience becomes a measure of the writer’s invocation of a world beyond the barbed wire: the form of creative literature that is most “unconventional,” morally
as well as aesthetically, is that which stays so close to fact, which is so bound by the internal perspective of life in the lowest spheres, that all attempts to communicate with the uninitiated reader or to provide an escape route for reader, or victim, into the verities of the past or the possibilities of the future are precluded.

Intensifying with the reader’s familiarity with the Nazi system, and shifting with the degree of authorial intervention, a relationship evolves between maker and reader which is probably unprecedented in the history of Western literature. However his purpose is perceived—as testimonial, elegiac, confessional—the writer is, in some sense, held accountable to whatever form of historical memory his reader subscribes to. The very act of writing is often regarded, especially by survivors and even by the writers themselves, as presumptuous. There is an unarticulated but uneasy sense that a different logic pertains in regard to “reality” when one crosses over from history or autobiography into imaginative literature; the suspicion that fiction must be somehow subversive of truth is repeatedly manifested in the insistence on the part of those who write memoirs that what they are writing is not “a fiction.” It is this claim on which the documentary writers whom we will consider also base their authority. Beyond the “telling,” that is, speech is perceived by such writers as an intrusion into the memorial silence of a memorial. Robert Jay Lifton, in his book on Hiroshima, refers to a “creative guilt” among the writers of A-bomb literature which is equally applicable to Holocaust writers: “What happens with the A-bomb is that the event becomes rendered so historically sacred that recreating it in any form can be psychologically perceived as hubris by both artists and their audiences.”

Because of the unique interaction between the reader and the written text, dictated by both the new historical condition and the commemorative impulse, the ultimate impact of much of the literature of the Holocaust lies not in the explicit resolution of the reconstructed events, but in the privileged position of the post-Holocaust reader. This is especially true of those works in which the action extends only to the edge of darkness, the reader’s prescience serving to underscore the irretrievable innocence of victims who died in a distant world in which the absolute evil that came to be named Holocaust was not yet an integral part of human consciousness. In a novel like The Shop on Main Street, by the Czech-Jewish writer Ladislav Grossman, the real tragedy is felt not in what takes place before our eyes—the death of deaf old Mrs. Lautman in her buttons-and-lace store—but in the glimpse that the reader has of the roundup of the Jews outside her window. By comparison with what the reader knows to be their destination, the old woman’s deafness, and even her death, in full dignity and innocence, appear blessed:

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Mrs. Rosalie Lautman...had found such favor in the eyes of the Lord that she had been granted seventy-eight years of blameless life and the precious gift of deafness, thanks to which she preserved unspoiled to the very end the illusion that the world was full of kind, friendly people.21

The reader who knows what the inevitable fate of every Jew was to be in this deterministic world becomes, then, a "collaborative" witness to the events. This is especially evident in novels in which there is no morally detached narrator to act as cicerone. In A Prayer for Katerina Horowitzova, by another Czech-Jewish writer, Arnošt Lustig, the reader enters into a kind of collusion with SS Commandant Friedrich Brenske in understanding the literal underpinnings of his speech to twenty-one unsuspecting victims, which they choose to understand metaphorically: "Everything will turn out just as we said it would. The final solution is at hand... Your worries will all go up in smoke."22 Similarly, a short poem by the Polish poet Tadeusz Różewicz, "The Massacre of the Boys," evokes a kind of conditioned response through the austere language that contains only the bare, unexplained signals of a new reality:

The children cried: 'Mommie, I was a good boy, really... Oh, it's so dark—so dark.'

Look—they are going to the bottom See their little feet They have reached the bottom. Do you see these marks tiny footprints here and over there.

Their pockets were full of bits of twine and pebbles and little tin horses.

The vast plain is closed off like a geometric figure and a tree of black smoke rises vertically a dead tree with no star on top.23

The economy of language dispenses with all the physical details of violence; the informed reader knows that—and in what manner—little boys were massacred during the Nazi regime. The second stanza is intelligible only to one who can visualize the shooting of children at the edge of a mass grave. The blank margins of this poem are, as it were,
the unspoken forces of violence and oblivion that ultimately engulf and silence the civilized poetry of childhood's "twine and pebble and little tin horses."

As the Holocaust is by very definition all-consuming, a historical imperative which predetermines the fate of every individual, regardless of his merits, in a closed universe where there can be no appeal and no grace, the decisions of the victim can, at the very most, affect the quality of his "sentence"—they can never effect a reprieve. The post-Holocaust reader can, then, arrive at the fate of any given character by a process of deduction. If he does not die, his survival is, simply, an aberration. Even epic war novels such as War and Peace—or the less epic but more fatalistic novels of World War II—do not present war as the sole and totally predictable factor determining the lives (and deaths) of all of the protagonists. War in fiction, as in life, is a game of roulette, and survival is at least a logical possibility.

The Vocabulary of the Holocaust Universe

Perhaps the clearest evidence of the predictability and uniformity, as well as the perversity, of the genocidal system, and of the degree of its penetration into the very fabric of human intercourse, with far-reaching implications for literature, is the manipulation of language within its borders. The concentration camp, first described by David Rousset as "l'univers concentrationnaire," was a self-contained world which both generated its own vocabulary and invested common language with new, sinister meanings. The terms Sonderkommando, Kapo, and Appel—untranslatable because there is no precedent for them in human experience—signify not only the functions and the routine of the inmate, but also a new hierarchy of human relations, values, and expectations. The idiom of l'univers concentrationnaire encompasses all aspects of the Nazi operation which were a part of the master plan of annihilation and therefore common to most of the ghettos and camps. Certain terms which appear in the literature convey a specific status and a predictable fate: katzennik is an inmate of any of the concentration camps, while Häftling has the more general connotation of prisoner. The adjective concentrationary, used here as in the English version of Rousset's memoir as a rough translation of concentrationnaire, is not necessarily limited in its reference to the geographical confines of the camps but may allude to the general condition of the Jew in Europe during World War II, who, whether incarcerated in a ghetto or a concentration camp, posing as an Aryan, or hiding in a barn, an attic, or a forest, was marked for extermination.

The Jews were not, of course, the only victims of Nazism, and a number of works written by non-Jews reflect the different logic of
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Introduction

Lake and survival that distinguished the fate of the political from the Jewish Häftling in the concentrationary universe. The former were, in general, treated with less brutality and could find strength in the fact that they had in large measure chosen their own destiny; the Jews and the Gypsies were the only peoples singled out by racial criteria for extermination, and arrested, deported, interned, and gassed simply because of the biological fact of their ancestry. Yet the concentrationary idiom informs the literature written by all the prisoners and binds them in a common linguistic universe.

Of course, no single language was so transformed by the operation of the Nazi system as was the German language, whose syntax, style, and symbolic associations were profoundly and abidingly violated by what came to be known as "Nazi-Deutsch," the perverse rhetoric that signified the collective actions of the National Socialists. The ideological premise, with its totalitarian extension into every area of cultural expression, coupled with the incompatible goals of maintaining precise written records of Nazi deeds while camouflaging them in euphemism for the outside world, created a complex of verbal acrobatics which subsequent generations of linguists would strive painstakingly to sort out. Perhaps the most absurd yet intransigent paradox can be found in the links which the fascists claimed between contemporary politics and art, hailing the Fuehrer as the successor to the artist in his possession of a transrational vision and even arrogating to Hitler the function of the "poet." Some of the major postwar writing in Germany has been read as an attempt to purge, through subtle parodies and ironic reversals of traditional literary modes and forms of speech, the language and the literature of their implication in the crimes of Nazism.

Predictably, though ironically, the language most affected, next to German, by the abuses of National Socialism was Yiddish, which registered the barbaric terminology as an inseparable part of the national consciousness of the Jewish victims. Yiddish has been studied as a "record of Jewish history," accreting idiomatic expressions that have their origins in generations of persecution; by the same process the terms of the most recent barbarity have been absorbed into the collective memory. And even as the language records the specific historical coordinates of the twentieth-century slaughter, the experience of catastrophe is absorbed into a cyclical reading of history that links ancient and modern forms of hurbn ("destruction").

The literatures of the perpetrators and of the victims remain, then, discrete organisms indelibly branded with the emblems of genocide. Questions of continuity and discontinuity with pre-Holocaust structures and values can, therefore, be considered here with reference to specific cultural contexts. By a similar logic, English, in its very
remoteness from the events, retains a kind of autonomy and purity that only a language which was not spoken in the concentrationary universe, and was therefore never tainted by the Holocaust vocabulary, could claim. Jakov Lind, who recapitulates the dislocation of many a young Jew growing up in the Europe of the 1930s and 1940s (his native tongue was German but, by his own admission, "I had to speak Dutch at eleven, Hebrew when I was eighteen, English when I was twenty-seven and French when I was thirty-four"), relates the mystical appeal that English had for him as a teenage refugee in Holland:

Strange or not so strange, I began learning English with a fever I had never known for any other subject at school. I just wanted to know as soon as possible everything that had anything to do with my personal British and American allies. (The BBC wartime program "Here is London..." sounded, even to those who didn't understand a single word of it, like a message of hope for passengers of an aeroplane that had lost both wings.) English, after May, 1940, was simply the sound of defiance, the language of reason.39

The status of English as the language of the "outsider" and, eventually, of the "liberator" is reflected especially in the American literature which has evolved since the war; for the native American writer, as well as for the European victim, English represented not only the "sound of defiance" but also the very existence of another world and a different hierarchy of human values. Yet for one who had survived the Holocaust, even the adoption of the English language could not provide a shield against private memory. Holocaust novels written in English by survivors from Europe are differentiable from indigenous American literature by the salient marks of a translated idiom. They are examples of a literature of displaced persons who remained after the war without specific cultural citizenship, exchanging their native tongue, but not their vocabulary of experience, for the language of their adopted country. The literature that many of the survivors produced shares certain unique qualities of cultural dislocation and of crosscultural perspectives precisely because it is a literature of uprooted persons, most of them writing in acquired languages: Anna Langfus and Piotr Rawicz in French; Jakov Lind, Jerzy Kosinski, Ilona Karmel, Zdena Berger, and Elżbieta Ettinger in English; and so on. It may be, as Albert Memmi suggests, that language for the Jew is anyway a very provisional possession which the vagaries of history force him periodically to assume and then to abandon.39 If so, this may just be an accelerated instance of a process that has become "normal" for the Jew. Nevertheless, the interchangeability of language seems to be a specific characteristic of
the massive displacement of the Holocaust experience. Even when a displaced writer does not exchange what Arnold Mandel calls one’s "literary nationality" (Paul Celan and Nelly Sachs continuing to write in their native German while exiled in Paris or Sweden), he is at best cut off from the literary mainstream of his native land. In certain important ways the work of any of these writers can be located more firmly in the idiom of Holocaust fiction and poetry in other languages than in the literary traditions of either his native or his adopted country; and the interaction of themes, styles, and structures can be studied as part of what is primarily a transnational literature which derives from a common experience and vocabulary. The ashes that congeal as black milk in one poem and as hovering clouds in another are the hideous substance of the new order underlying variant images. The pervasiveness of the Holocaust as an experience that transcended national borders creates the possibility of a literature whose reference is, then, both personal—indeed, irrevocably traumatic—and international at the same time.

The distinction between a collective literature and a "displaced" literature is not merely linguistic but broadly cultural. The lamentation literature encompasses Hebrew, Yiddish, and European works which reflect the specific threat to Jewish civilization that accompanied the attack on Jewish existence; it draws upon a unique and continuous tradition of Hebraic response to catastrophe, invoking specific historical memories and an ongoing dialogue with Jewish destiny and theodicy. For the heirs to this tradition, which dates back to the Bible, the center of reference is the people and history of Israel; the ultimate assault of Nazism is on the survival and values of the community; and the Holocaust is perceived as a formative historical event. They locate the individual within the historical and valuational continuum of the community of which, in his extremity, he still remains a part, even if the whole no longer exists and even if his own life is fractured beyond repair. The use of historical values in the search for signification does not, as we shall see, ensure the continued reaffirmation of those principles, but it does, at the very least, inform the quest. By contrast, for the writer set adrift by the Nazis from the sources of his life's continuity, the reference is usually private experience rather than the more generalized historical questions of collective identity and destiny. The Holocaust represents for such a writer and his characters the experience of total anonymity and the defilement of the integrity and dignity, as well as the body, of the individual. What emerges from a comparative evaluation is that the existentialist perspective, which focuses on the individual in extremis, placing the exposed self at the center as the irreducible source of meaning, and viewing biography as the limit of
history, generates symbolic responses which are profoundly different from the historical vision which relates to a chapter in the martyrology of a people, anchoring the meaning of the life of the self in the fate and the cultural resources of the group.

The search for an orientation to the Holocaust from within either the collective or the existential purview encompasses a wide spectrum of stages in the relationship of art and human consciousness to cataclysmic history. Documentary literature can be seen as an intermediate stage between testimony and imaginative literature, which preserves a kind of sacred attitude toward broad historical processes that precludes, as it were, artistic "interference." The next level, at which history operates less as a specific record than as a creative resource but still reflects the artist's primary sense of loyalty to fact, is what I call "concentrationary realism," a form of fiction which places the exposed individual at its center and traces the degrees of submission to concentrationary reality, the erosive effects of brutal reality on the autonomy and integrity of the self. Another form of fictional realism, the "survival novel," constitutes the first breach in the tyranny of fact over imagination, employing memory, fantasy, and metaphor as a manner of escape from and denial of reality within the private soul of the victim. Similarly, Hebraic literature explores the possibility of a way out of as well as a way into the concentrationary universe that in turn generates a provisional attitude toward that reality—but, again, it is collective Jewish history rather than personal biography which constitutes the link between past and future by which the present is endured or tested. Finally, the most radical form of absorption of the historical events into the imagination is the myth created by the writer who is totally liberated from "facticity" but subject to the pervasive, transcendental reality of Holocaust.

Each of these stages constitutes one chapter of this book, with representative authors exemplifying the different patterns of literary response. It is still too soon to judge which of these works of art will endure—which are, in Northrop Frye's terms, "redeemable" and which "irredeemable." I have tried, nevertheless, given allowances for subjectivity in matters of taste, to establish critical distinctions between works of "high seriousness" and the more popular literary productions, incorporating some admittedly middle-brow writers who may prove to be worthy of consideration in the long run more as forerunners or apprentices than as masters of a literary genre.

The writers who will be considered in the following chapters are either survivors or men and women who never lived through the Holocaust; that is, they are all writing after the events, and the litera-

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Introduction

ture they have created differs significantly from that which evolved in
the ghettos and camps themselves. The most obvious distinction is the
hindsight that the "completed event" offers the post-Holocaust writer;
the full extent and the systematic quality of the genocide could be
appreciated only after the war. Literary activity in the ghettos or camps
was often a desperate attempt at self-immortalization, at leaving some
human record to defy the degradation and finality of the death that
surrounded and awaited the writer; on the other hand, much of the
literature that has been written since by survivors is both an account of
the price one had to pay for personal survival and an effort at com-
memoration, at resurrection of one's own dead—a process in which the
survivor serves as a kind of scribe. Most significant of course in terms
of the artistic process is the element of time; the literature that was
coeval with the experience did not benefit from the distancing neces-
sary for a relatively tranquil perfection of aesthetic forms or for even a
temporal distinction between the "man who suffers and the mind
which creates."

In order to highlight such distinctions, and to provide an internal
point of cultural reference for the literature that followed, I wish to
focus briefly on some aspects of the life of art in the concentrationary
universe itself which are particularly worthy of attention because they
represent not only active literary efforts, but also evidence of the spir-
tual transformation of elements of Western culture in a society sen-
tenced to collective extinction.

Literature in the Concentrationary Universe

Some of the cultural effects of Nazism in the Jewish world could be
identified even in the earliest stages of National Socialist rule. Before
the policy of extermination had been systematically implemented, the
impact of the Nuremberg Laws on German-Jewish culture was already
considerable. Even the assimilated Jews suddenly found themselves
exiled from German culture, and many began to turn back to a tradition
from which they had been estranged for years or, in some cases, genera-
tions. One of the more public manifestations of this new orientation
was the flourishing of a new kind of Jewish theater; plays with biblical
themes were written and produced and a Kulturbund formed with the
purpose of reconstructing Western drama from a Jewish point of view.

An alternate route of escape was exile, and many of those who still
could fled, whether in response to a threat to life itself or to the Nazi
pollution of German culture, of which the curtailment of Jewish par-
ticipation in "Aryan" civilization was just one manifestation. The Exil
Literatur created by German emigrés to America and other countries
provides a rich resource for reflection on the implications for German culture of the voluntary expatriation of so many of Germany's Jewish and non-Jewish artists.33

Among those who were unable or unwilling to leave, and who eventually found themselves incarcerated in ghettos and then in concentration camps, art provided an important medium of defiance and escape. Clandestine literary efforts produced numerous manuscripts which were distributed by underground methods and served as a primary spiritual resource for the prisoners in the ghettos and camps. Where paper was scarce, the inmates inscribed their messages on logs, which were often transferred from camp to camp. Underground organizations such as the Warsaw Ghetto's YIKOR (Yiddish Cultural Organization) sponsored literary projects and dramatic performances. Here again, as in the early stages of the German-Jewish response to Nazism, many of these dramas were adaptations of biblical themes with clearly contemporary connotations. This was as much for the purpose of camouflaging references to current events as for the resuscitation of indigenous Jewish culture. Literary creativity was so valued that in rare instances gifted writers, including children, were smuggled by the underground out of the ghettos and even out of concentration camps so they could continue their work.34

Of the literature that was rescued from the ghettos and camps, considerable attention has been paid to the poems written by children in Theresienstadt, which were published together with a sampling of their drawings. Theresienstadt was unique among the concentration camps in that it was constructed as a showplace for members of the Red Cross and of other humanitarian organizations who might inquire into the Nazi treatment of the Jews. Cultural activities were encouraged. The reprieve, however, was deceptive; of the 15,000 children under the age of fifteen who passed through Theresienstadt between 1942 and 1944 on their way to one or another of the extermination camps, only one hundred remained alive at the end of the war. The poems they left behind, which are valuable as a whole primarily for the rare human testimony they represent, are uneven in quality, but some of them show not only a maturity born of suffering but also a mastery of form. There are recurrent themes and stylistic patterns in this poetry that are surely unique in the history of children's writings: nostalgia for the world that is already lost to them (a theme reserved for aging poets in a normal world), the contraction and diminution of the images of nature and civilization that are available to them, the struggle between the unbridled imagination and the constriction and inexorability of present reality. Some of these poems illustrate the transformed images of comparison that will signify new parameters of metaphor in the more
accomplished post-Holocaust literature which we will consider. 25

The reading as well as the writing of literature took on social dimensions which can be studied as an example of the unique cultural functions that art may assume among people living under a death sentence. A number of testimonies have survived which attest to the fact that, contrary to what one might perhaps expect, the demand for literature intensified as conditions worsened. Finding correspondences and premonitions in the books at hand, Jean Cayrol admits that, reading in a lonely cell that Julien Sorel had been condemned to death, he did not believe that he would outlive him. 26 War novels, it seems, were especially in demand in the ghettos. In one of the entries in his Warsaw diary, Emmanuel Ringelblum wrote that, along with other classics, “Tolstoy’s War and Peace is enjoying great popularity among people who have already read it more than once . . . . In short, unable to avenge themselves upon the enemy in fact, people are trying to do so in their imagination, in literature.” Through Tolstoy many readers seem to have taken comfort in historical analogies; in the fall of Napoleon some saw the inevitable defeat of any dictator—although the comparison between Napoleon and Hitler was of course resolved in Napoleon’s favor. Whether it furnished historical parallels or simply a momentary escape from the imminence of death, literature helped to maintain the individual’s self-image: “they [the outside world] can say that we did not lose our human characteristics; our minds are as busy as they were before the War,” writes Ringelblum. 27

Library facilities and the leisure time and energy to read were of course more available in the ghettos than in the concentration camps. Yet even in the camps some prisoners managed to obtain books, often under the most unlikely circumstances. Ernst Wiechert, the German writer who was interned in Buchenwald for his outspoken criticism of Nazi policies, managed, after a time, to receive permission to have copies of the books he had written sent to him in the camp. The irony of this fact, which he relates in his autobiographical novel, Forest of the Dead, is that his arrest could be at least partly attributed to the “subversive” nature of these books; 28 as a society of total control, Nazi Germany systematically gathered all the “refuse”—human as well as cultural—in certain designated areas. Another inmate of Buchenwald who benefited in his incarceration from the cultural controls imposed by the Nazis was Eugen Kogon, who writes in his memoirs of retrieving literary masterpieces that had reached the camp as wastepaper:

For months on end I volunteered [for the nightwatch in the bread stores], taking the shift from three to six o’clock in the morning. It meant sitting alone in the day room . . . . What an experience it was to sit quietly by a shaded lamp, delving
into the pages of Plato's *Dialogues*, Galsworthy's *Swan Song*, or the works of Heine, Klabund, Mehring! Heine? Klabund? Mehring? Yes, they could be read illegally in camp. They were among books retrieved from the nationwide wastepaper collections. The Nazis impounded many libraries of "enemies of the state," and turned them over to these collections, part of which found its way into the camps as toilet paper. The prisoners carefully retrieved what was of value.39

While the Nazis were engaged in their systematic attempt to dismantle Western civilization, the inmates were deriving solace from the fragments of civilization shredded into toilet paper for the "anus mundi."

Another testimony of the capacity of the victim to transcend, through art, the agony of physical and spiritual degradation appears in Primo Levi's memoir on Auschwitz. Levi, an Italian Jew who was arrested while engaged in resistance activities, begins with an account of the initiation into camp life, and describes the slow process by which the Nazis achieved the "demolition of a man": "Nothing belongs to us anymore; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair... They will even take away our name."40 Then one day, as the narrator, now nameless as "*Häftling* 174517," is trudging to the kitchen with young Pikolo, the messenger-keeper of the Chemical Kommando, to bring the soup ration to their group, he suddenly begins to quote from *The Divine Comedy*—to teach his unlettered companion those verses from the "Canto of Ulysses" which his memory has retained. He acts out of the urgency of one who knows that he may not live until tomorrow; one of his final gestures, then, will have been the civilizing act of the transmission of the human vision which might still somehow redeem him and his friend from the brutality of their fate.

Perhaps, he thinks to himself,

Pikolo... has received the message... has felt that it has to do with him, that it has to do with all men who toil, and with us in particular; and that it has to do with us two who dare to reason of these things with the poles for the soup on our shoulders... I must explain to him... something gigantic that I myself have only just seen, in a flash of intuition, perhaps, the reason for our fate, for our being here today. [Pp. 103–5]

Levi's memoir focuses on this moment as the point at which *Häftling* 174517 begins to rediscover his humanity, to combat by the powers of imagination and analogy the absurdity of his condition. In the literature of survival, which we shall discuss, such a moment represents the transition from "Darwinian" to "human" survival.
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Introduction

The Czech novel by Josef Bor, *The Terezin Requiem*, is another story of the role of art as the medium of spiritual struggle in the camps. It is a semifictionalized account of the performance of Verdi’s Requiem—again in Theresienstadt, the showcase of Jewish culture in the Third Reich—in the presence of Eichmann and a number of his henchmen. The story is narrated from the point of view of Raphael Schächter, the conductor, who succeeds in molding the Requiem into a prism reflecting the individual miseries, and the one final triumph, of a group of camp musicians. Schächter conceives of the performance of the Requiem out of the realization that the Nazis had

assembled in one camp the greatest Jewish artists from a large part of Europe; and they had created conditions that forced men to ponder deeply the fundamental questions of life and death.... Here everyone hungered and thirsted after art, longed feverishly for every tremor of deep human feeling, all the more passionately as the world in which they had been forcibly imprisoned became more unthinkably repulsive and barbarous.51

The Requiem is, on the night of the performance, transformed by these artists into a cry of protest: Schächter takes the liberty of amending the libretto by answering the four pianissimo notes of the finale—the conciliatory “libera me”—with a defiant, fortissimo ‘libera nos,’” delivered by the entire orchestra and choir as four fighting blows (the three short and one long strokes of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony). “O Saint Verdi in heaven, forgive me my sin,” pleads Schächter. “If you had been in a concentration camp you, too, would have composed your finale differently” (p. 83). By the end of the performance, Schächter has dropped his baton and is conducting with his fist. The entire cast of performers is shipped out on the very next transport to the death camp—but that event is so inevitable as to be almost insignificant. The real victory is measured in the confused response of Eichmann, who finally admits that the performance was “very interesting” (p. 112); his obtuseness—and even more so that of his associate Moese, who “understood music” (p. 102), but obviously did not comprehend the power of music to subvert the concentrationary system—underscores this modest triumph of the spirit. A. Alvarez has called this short novel a “real-life allegory of art poising itself precariously against destruction.”42 Like Primo Levi’s recital of the Canto of Ulysses in Auschwitz, it illustrates the ways in which the significance of some of the classical elements of European culture were completely transformed in the context of the camps.

A thorough analysis of the life of art in the concentrationary universe, which is beyond the scope of this study, could also include a
discussion of the uses of and attitudes toward literature, music, and the plastic arts on the part of some of the culturally more sophisticated Nazis such as Eichmann’s assistant, Moese. George Steiner has for some years been engaged in a polemic over the implications of the failure of art to civilize in what perhaps the most civilized country in Europe (“why did humanistic traditions and models of conduct prove so fragile a barrier against political bestiality?”). His conclusion, that after Auschwitz we have “passed out of the major order and symmetries of Western civilization” and find ourselves in an era of “post culture,” is of a piece with the apocalyptic temper with which many contemporary writers confront the times.43 Another writer who, as a member of Europe’s political and intellectual elite and as a citizen of a country allied with Germany, was in a unique position to observe at close range the process by which the Nazis attempted to subvert Western culture, was the Italian journalist Curzio Malaparte. His rhetoric is far less inflated than Steiner’s, his conclusions more affirmative of the continuity of the human vision and spirit, and yet his pain is far more real. His four-year odyssey through the wasteland of Europe during the war is recorded in one of the most sensitive and thorough accounts of the devastation. He demonstrates repeatedly the coexistence of art or aesthetic sensibility and sadism in the Nazi mind, even highlighting a peculiar form of aesthetic repugnance which the German officers demonstrated toward acts of violence or the sight of blood; Kurt Franz (commandant of Treblinka), for example, confides to Malaparte that “vomit and blood are two things that disgust me the most.”44

Art remains, of course, intrinsically independent of the uses or abuses to which victim or victimizer subjects it, and there is more to be learned from the life of art under the Third Reich about the spirit’s endurance and its elevation or perversion of the resources of cultural memory than about the inherent value of “humanistic traditions” as a “barrier against political bestiality.”

After Liberation: The Testimonial Imperative
When the nightmare finally came to an end and the camps were liberated all over Europe, a surprisingly large number of manuscripts were found in the possession of the survivors. Of those who did not survive, many had managed to bury their writings or to smuggle them out of the ghettos and camps. For years after the war, friends were still digging among the rubble of the ghettos to unearth a tin can or a bottle with a manuscript. Events had turned Warsaw, Lvov, Cracow, Lublin, Vilna, and thousands of small towns into instant “tells” and the survivors into archaeologists of the immediate past. Often fragments turned up years later in the custody of peasants or nuns. The Yiddish writer Mentshe writes an article and says that the Yiddish writer Mentshe writes an article and says...

The need to record the lives of the survivors, to make a place for their experiences, to give a voice to those who have been silenced, to remember the lives that were lost, is as urgent now as it was in the immediate postwar period. The testimonies of the survivors are a testament to the power of the human spirit to survive and to leave a record of the horror of the Holocaust. The testimonies are a reminder of the importance of preserving and sharing the memory of the past, of the need to honor the lives of those who have suffered and to uphold the values of human dignity and justice.
writer Mendel Mann describes the concentrationary poetry and his reaction to it: "This was in most cases a desperate poetry, but passionate and sacred. At the time I read these creations...I admired not so much their literary form, but their faith, their confidence in the eternity of the Jewish word."45

The creative and testimonial literature from the ghettos and camps was supplemented in the postwar years primarily by the memoirs of survivors. For most of these writers, the compulsion to record their experiences could be attributed to several motives: the desire for some sort of revenge; the need to bear witness "so that the world will know what we suffered"; the desire to commemorate the dead; the impulse to absolve oneself or one's companions of aspersions of passivity or complicity; the sense of mission, to warn humanity of its capacity for genocide. But the real victory to which these documents attested was the very fact of personal survival; the written records provide the evidence of the occasional lapses in the Final Solution. As Mendel Mann has testified, "I write to prove that I am alive, that I exist, that I too am still on this planet. The world condemned me to die. I write because, through my books, I bear witness to my existence. I try to banish my solitude, to demonstrate to the world that I am here."46

The need to bear witness, then, seemed to many to be the primary reason for which they had been spared. The survivor, often the only one of his family or community to remain alive, almost invariably prefaced his account with a formulaic assertion of his vocation as a survivor: "And I only am escaped alone to tell thee." There is a fragment which has survived from the Hebrew lamentation literature of the fourteenth century, written by a man who returned to his hometown after a trip only to discover that a pogrom had wiped out every inhabitant and destroyed all the holy books, except one Bible. This one remaining man, who refers to himself as the "last ember," wrote a brief account of the destruction of his town on the pages of the one remaining Bible.47 That act is a prototype of the frenetic activity that was repeated after the war in communities all over Europe, which was now "Judenrein" of all but a handful of survivors. The sense of urgency was intensified by the tenuousness of their own survival and the knowledge that the passage of time would be marked by the diminishing presence of the historical witnesses. In the words of the Polish-Jewish writer Piotr Rawicz, when the survivor dies or his memory fails him, his hometown "dies for a second time."48

Yet this body of memoir literature produced only a small ripple in the public consciousness. Beyond serving the personal needs of the writers, such testimony was meant, primarily, to serve the cause of knowledge, which is usually regarded as somehow redemptive. But again, with no system of metaphysics, of social justice or human morality or
aesthetics to relate the information to, the uninitiated reader floundered in a morass of excruciating detail. Eventually such readers, numb by the onslaught of sordid accounts and by the guilt of their own record of passivity in the face of such crimes, began to lose interest in this literature. Finally this growing disregard of the writers themselves, and in most countries in Europe the first frenzied years of memoir writing were followed by a decade or more of silence. Even in America, where the Jewish community was neither inconsiderable nor traumatized by firsthand involvement, the initial shock of discovery was followed by a long period of introversion, which we will explore in some detail.

Ultimately, however, even though the memoirs and diaries did not enjoy a large immediate readership, they were to have a measurable impact on creative writers, especially on those who had been remote from the events themselves. And it may be significant, in recognizing the preeminent role of Holocaust art as testimony, to note that a number of survivors have written memoirs or histories as well as fiction, as if to establish the historicity of the subject before admitting it to the imagination. Elie Wiesel followed the contours of the memoir in his first book, *Night*, in which he presented many of the autobiographical events that were to resonate, in various guises, throughout his fiction. The evocative power of art beside the imperative of autobiography is dramatized in the apposition of Henryk Grynberg’s personal memoir, *Child of the Shadows*, with his brief fictional story “The Grave”; the short fictitious “epiphany” stays with the reader long after he has forgotten the chronology of events that structures the memoir. Jacob Presser, a Dutch historian, published in 1968 a monumental study of the history of the Dutch Jews during the German occupation. Ten years earlier he had written a short novel, *Breaking Point*, which may have been based on one of the personal testimonies that had reached him in the course of his research. The authority of his historical work derives from the accretion of comprehensive data and testimonial material; as a novelist he distills the conflicts and the agonies into one man’s battle with his conscience.

Leib Rokhman is another writer whose first book is a close, autobiographical account of the struggle for survival; his second work is a visionary Yiddish novel in which all the components of the former realism are fractured into a surreal narrative of the inner life of the victim—a version of history reorganized by the creative mind which has been freed from chronology and the fortuitousness of biography. A useful distinction has been drawn by Ruth Wisse between certain forms of Holocaust literature and French symbolism, which are at least technically similar, “except that the inner and outer landscapes have been inverted”:

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In the works of the symbolists, the imagination repudiates conventional reality, skimming into its own fantastic voyages of light and discovery. Here [in the Holocaust literature], the events are so “fantastic” as to strain the resources of fiction; the suspicion of madness is never in the poet, as it is in most modern fiction, but in the events to which he bears witness. These selections record the tension between history and art—history as the wanton destructive chaos, art, the creative synthesis of one interpretive imagination.52

In order to escape from the finality as well as the chaos of history, to commune with the dead through whatever transhistorical means the imagination can muster, it seems that many writers must first pay their debt to history; for the act of commemoration, however fanciful, to be compelling, and for the madness to be perceived as a property of the “outer landscape,” these writers would first establish their credentials as reporters or historians whose data can then become the pliable matter of their art.

In some cases, however, the testimonial imperative so controls the artistic impulse that the boundary between the memoir literature and the fiction (the histoire as history and as story) seems hardly distinguishable. This is most evident in the first person novel. Paul Fussell asserts, especially in relation to the novels of World War I, “the impossibility of ever satisfactorily distinguishing a memoir from a first-person novel,” since the former is also a “kind of fiction,” differing from the latter primarily in its “continuous implicit attestations of veracity or appeals to documented fact.”53 There is, however, an important distinction in the claim to credibility or legitimacy that different forms of historical literature make. Documentary art is a hybrid genre between fact and fiction. In the next chapter I will discuss various examples of documentary fiction, drama, and poetry which are characterized explicitly by a deferent attitude toward history that rejects any “violation” or mitigation of reality by the mediation of the creative imagination, but that often contains implicit premises about the transcendent significance to be extracted from historical processes.