There is a presumption in all the representations of the Holocaust and in all the discussions of the proprieties and limits of its representation that there is an Entity, an Event or a Place, to which the historical, artistic, cinematic or literary reflections do or do not correspond – an epicenter which is often imagined as a black hole, (re-)entered only at peril to the communicability of the act and the sanity of the actor. "Was geschah?" asks the poet most identified with the impenetrability of the concentrationary universe; "Der Stein trat aus dem Berge." The mountain is unsayable; the echoes of the boulder that is the fragment of the place, the survivor's burden, resonate in language, toward the "unsubsided" ("Sprache.../ Wohin gings? Ges Unverklungen").

I want to submit that the positioning of both the writer and the audience in relation to this mountain or this defiled center functions much as does the positioning of the pilgrim vis-à-vis the holy mountain or the sacred center; in what closely approximates a theological quest at the postmodern end of our millennium, a new aesthetics and ethics of representation are being forged with Auschwitz as the ultimate point of reference. Pronouncements on the poetics of (or after) Auschwitz tend to establish a symbolic geography in which the camp represents both center and periphery: it constitutes the very center of evil but is located in a realm just beyond the borders of civilized speech and behavior. That unspeakable place of extermination (dis)articulated by Jean-François Lyotard resembles the extraterritorial place designated earlier by T. W. Adorno as "barbaric" – a place outside the community of selves. It both establishes the limits of what is human and threatens its annihilation. In what has become a locus classicus for the discussion of the license to speak, Lyotard invokes the murder not only of the subject and of language itself, but also of the means of assessing the loss; the analogy he draws is to an
Negotiating Distance: Tenses and Tropes

We can begin to see this polarity most saliently in the writings of Tadeusz Borowski and Primo Levi, both of whom have entered the "canon" of Holocaust literature as it is taught and discussed in the academy. "All of us walk around naked." So begins Borowski's story, "This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen," written in a DP camp in Munich a short time after the writer was liberated from Auschwitz. Liberation is celebrated not as entry into a postwar future, but as an occasion to record Auschwitz in a relentless present tense. Like Paul Celan's "black milk," another familiar trope conceived just at war's end but cast in an unremitting present so that we who "drink it at evening/ we [who] drink it at midday and morning we [who] drink it at night..." can never finish drinking, these are lines enacted *sub specie aeternitatis.*

"The delousing is finally over," continues Borowski's narrator, "and our striped suits are back from the tanks of Cyclone B solution, an efficient killer of lice in clothing and of men in gas chambers." The apposition of lice in clothing and men in gas chambers without any linking word of comparison preempts the metaphoric construction and obliterates the imagination as agent of meaning. The objectification of humanity which is also the reification of metaphor, makes the language of comparison - or, for that matter, art itself - obsolete or downright obscene. The world in which people were treated *in the manner of lice* is a parody of the world in which people are *represented* as treating each other like vermin; in the economy of human imagination, it marks the appalling distance from metaphor to metamorphosis. The reinstatement of metaphor is apprehended by more than one writer as a sacrilege, but Borowski may have been the first to express it; in a letter preserved as a story called "Auschwitz Our Home," he wrote to his fiancée in Birkenau:

It is we who built the pyramids, hewed the marble for the temples and the rocks for the imperial roads, we who pulled the oars in the galleys and dragged wooden ploughs, while they wrote dialogues and dramas.... We
Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi

earthquake that destroys not only buildings and people but the very instruments for measuring the destruction. Nevertheless, "the silence that surrounds the phrase ‘Auschwitz was the extermination camp’ is ... a sign that something remains to be phrased which is not, something which is not determined."2

The choice of metaphors is quite suggestive, particularly in the ongoing French dialogue with the philosophes of the late eighteenth century whose formative experience was the Lisbon earthquake of 1755. But it is a metaphor to beat all metaphors, since it insists that even the instruments of evaluation and comparison have been destroyed; commensurability, which is the premise of the metaphoric act and of all acts that establish a continuum in history, may then be what is most at stake in this discussion. It is a high stake, as metaphor is the first expression of consolation that the human mind can produce.3

My argument is that the discourse that has evolved in the pages of this and other journals and the cultural and intellectual enterprises of the last decades have generated two major clusters of attitudes with far-reaching implications. In the literature of testimony as well as of the imagination, in the theories of historiographical and of poetic representation, one can begin to discern a fundamental distinction between a static and a dynamic appropriation of history and its moral and social legacies. The static or absolutist approach locates a non-negotiable self in an unyielding place whose sign is Auschwitz; the dynamic or relativist position approaches the representation of the memory of that place as a construction of strategies for an ongoing renegotiation of that historical reality. For the latter, the immobility of the past is mitigated, at times undermined, by the very conventions mobilized to represent it; for the former, an invented language grounded in a sense of sustained "duration" or unmastered trauma prevents convention and commensurability from relativizing the absolute reality of the place. In each case, the work of history or art is being performed in the aftermath, at a "safe" distance – but again it is distance itself which is at stake. My purpose in referring here to a wide range of literature, film, critical and theoretical discussions is to try to demonstrate the diffusion of these two sensibilities in postwar culture at large, with allowances for the particular semantics of each interpretive community.
were filthy and died real deaths. They were "aesthetic" and carried on subtle debates."

In that very place and at that very moment, as it were, Primo Levi is trudging to the kitchens with young Pikolo, the messenger-clerk of the Chemical Kommando, to bring the soup ration to their group. Without comprehending what he is doing, Levi begins—or so he recounts in his memoir of Auschwitz—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 deeds, then, will have been the civilizing act of transmission of a poetic vision of an ordered universe:

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.

The premise of order lies not only in the appeal to Dante as source of the religious and poetic imagination; as it develops in Levi's postwar essays, it is also in the definition of the writer's mission as that of witness and communicator. In his argument with Paul Celan, whom he defines (not without reverence) as a writer whose "message... gets lost in the background noise," who shirks his responsibility to communicate in such a way that "every word reaches its target," Levi retains a continuous vision of the human order and of the relationship between history and art.

The chasm between these two models—between the communicable, continuous and hence commensurable, and the incommunicable, discontinuous and incommensurable—goes far beyond the age-old debate about the status of poetry in time of war. It places the center of gravity differentially in what Edith Wyschogrod calls the "life-world" or the "death-world."
constitutes a double paradigm that, if carried to its furthest extreme, invites us to reinscribe Borowski’s postwar suicide back into his “apprenticeship” in Auschwitz but to refrain from reinscribing Levi’s back into his. That is, only the hermetic vision of Auschwitz entails—or necessitates—such forms of closure. By this logic, Levi is allowed to have taken his life because of his wife’s nagging or his mother’s illness or a love affair or experimental anti-depressants or even a slip on the stairs. On the other hand, Borowski—like Celan, nearly twenty years later—must fulfill the script by remaining forever trapped within the electrified barbed wire, his stories a form of “repetition compulsion” and his head in the oven a final enactment of his incompletely fate in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. Those who view even Levi’s suicide under the sign of Auschwitz have returned to his writings to show that a kind of self-deception prevailed in the strategies of distancing that characterize much of his creative work. In taking issue with such an interpretation I do not mean, of course, to submit the reductionist claim that suicide was a stranger to Levi. I am, rather, insisting on the ambiguities of his treatment of it in his writings as well as warning against reading his last moments back into a lifetime of writing such that it would abolish the distances he built, a bridge as well as a barrier of words, between the survivors and the death-world.

Lawrence Langer gives the approach which isolates the inexorable sense of entrapment a strong endorsement in his study of oral testimony of survivors. “For the former victims,” he writes, “the Holocaust is a communal wound that cannot heal. This is the ailing subtext of their testimonies, wailing beneath the convalescent murmur of their surface lives.” He goes on to insist that Holocaust events cannot be truly represented but only “represented,” and that any chronological sequence “violates the uniquely imprisoned persistence of the Holocaust event in the memory of its witnesses”:

As Charlotte Delbo implied in the title for the trilogy of her Auschwitz memoirs, *Auschwitz et après*, there was an Auschwitz, and there was an afterward, and unless you understand that the two terms do not represent a chronology, you cannot begin to enter the abyss of the
place we call Auschwitz. Such testimony serves nothing; it can only preserve.\textsuperscript{\textcolor{red}{11}}

Langer's claim that oral testimony is a form of unmediated truth, consisting of words that "fall directly from the lips of the witness," unlike the written word that is structured and edited by narrative conventions, has been widely disputed.\textsuperscript{\textcolor{red}{12}} I am citing it here as one of the most radical expressions in the critical literature of the attempt we identified in the fictions of Borowski: to locate a place and a language that represents The Thing itself, that re-presents, that pre-serves, the place and time that cannot ever be left, relativized or temporized.

**Geography: Auschwitz as Black Hole**

The search for Auschwitz as a place on the symbolic map has been accompanied, in recent years, by a parallel search for a geographical center, manifested in the pilgrimages to Poland and the reconstruction of the camp itself as a tourist site. It serves the attempts to ground memory and to establish a point of origin for the reconstitution of the self that is identified with what was lost there. A number of monographs, informed by Pierre Nora's monumental study of *les lieux de mémoire* and by the growing literature on collective memory and its landmarks, have explored the different stages and constituencies of memory that have transformed Auschwitz. Déborah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt describe the process by which the ruins of Auschwitz were reshaped to conform to prevailing referential conventions; though it appears unchanged, Auschwitz I, the main camp, is, they demonstrate, actually quite different from the camp the Soviets liberated in 1945. Perhaps the most salient example of the subtle changes that constitute a particular semantics of memory is the gate with the inscription "Arbeit Macht Frei" as the site of initiation:

For the post-Auschwitz generation, the ... steel gate bearing the infamous inscription "Arbeit Macht Frei" ... symbolizes the threshold that separates the oikomene (the human community) from the planet Auschwitz. In fact,
however, the inscribed arch did not have a central position in the history of Auschwitz. First, it played no role in the Judaeocide. Indeed, very few of the Jews deported to Auschwitz ever saw that gate.... Yet our memory clings to the inscription above the gate as the modern version of Dante’s Lasciate ogni Speranza ... at the entrance of his Inferno.13

The gate, then, allows us to separate ourselves from Auschwitz and to locate it as a “wound” in a specific spot on the human body.

The essay by Dwork and van Pelt explores the process by which Auschwitz I was transformed into a postwar museum by concentrating “the history of the whole complex in one of its component parts.” The ruins of the crematories where the mass extermination had taken place were in fact located in Birkenau, a few kilometers away. But the architects of the reconstruction felt that it was necessary to represent a crematory at the end of the “memorial journey,” and decided to “recreate” a chimney. Dwork and van Pelt emphasize that the guides who direct tourists through Auschwitz I do not indicate that the building that they understand to be “the place where it happened” is in fact a facsimile.14 The authors go on to locate the “center” of the Jewish agon elsewhere; their own language, by now familiar in this discourse on the concentric circles of memory, designates not Auschwitz per se but the adjacent camp Birkenau as “a black hole,” a site with no interpretive signs, a vast unreconstructed camp that can be visited but not grasped.15 Their endorsement of a memorial to (through) Birkenau demonstrates the approach that spurns the formulas of memory and of the redemptive cultures built on its foundations. Based on the award-winning proposal of a group of Polish sculptors and architects, this (as yet unbuilt) memorial consists of a granite ramp that would cut diagonally through Birkenau; the ramp would allow visitors to come close to but not enter or touch or pay homage to any of the material of the camp – which would be allowed to crumble and eventually to be reclaimed by “nature”; such a memorial would, the authors argue, ensure that “the suffering of the victims and the life that had been within the camp [would remain] a history not to be excavated: that history could never be memory.”16
The endorsement of a memorial that cuts through the dark heart of Birkenau but does not allow for any acts of appropriation on the part of visitors is consistent with Langer’s location of the “real” in the oral testimonies of the survivors that can be witnessed and absorbed by the viewer but in no way incorporated into any regenerative narrative. This apocalyptic view of the ruins, unlike Walter Benjamin’s “angel of history” who, while facing the ruins, continues to move inexorably forward, is represented cinematically in Claude Lanzmann’s relentless, centripetal voyage into the “heart of darkness.” In his nine-hour film Šòah, the selection of most of the witnesses from among the survivors of the Sonderkommando, those prisoner units forced to operate the actual machinery of death in the gas chambers and crematoria, is a fore closure of narratives of meaningful survival. If the extermination camp (in this case Treblinka) is the center of this universe, then the gas chamber is the center of the center; the place of silence, the unrepresentable echo-chamber of Lyotard’s “phraseless universe.” The barber Abraham Bomba brings us closer to That Place than any other witness as he recites the cutting of women’s hair in the dressing room adjacent to the gas chamber... Through the dramatic staging of such testimonies, which provide what Lanzmann argues is not “knowledge” but “incarnation,” these witnesses become the high priests of the flame, performative conduits to the inner sanctum of the concentrationary universe. Studies of Lanzmann’s film point to the virtual absence of both women and survivors other than those who belonged to what Primo Levi called the moral “gray zone” – the “special squad” who were chosen to share the SS “burden of guilt... bound together by the foul link of imposed complicity.” In the non-chromatic scheme which terminates in “black milk” and “black holes,” that “gray zone” is as close as one can come to the complete annihilation of color. Like Borowski in fiction, Lanzmann speaks a cinematic language that reinvents a locus of absolute evil as the ultimate reference for our time. It is a language that precludes all other languages, as Lanzmann’s own dismissive response to other “Holocaust” films demonstrates.

Strangely enough, in societies that have largely accommodated the inevitability of “mechanical reproduction” and the ubiquity of “simulacra,” the search for the (physical and verbal) source of
absolute evil and absolute innocence begins to take on the urgency of a theological quest. Apocalyptic and mystifying, it creates a new calendar beginning in 1945, the “Stunde Null” that permitted Germans to “start over,” and is informed by widespread theories and practices of “endism” or “posthistoire” that accelerate as we near the end of our millennium. It is a sensibility that provides a new point of reference not in a benevolent but in an ultimately malevolent universe, a place that, like an earthquake or still-active volcano, swallows all physical manifestations of previous existence and even the instruments of its measurement. This position has been articulated in philosophical categories that identify the Holocaust as the locus of radical evil and insist on forms of representation that come as close to “reality” as possible. Arguing against poetry out of a Platonic epistemology – “poetic reference to specific historical settings becomes increasingly attenuated as the text is more fully realized poetically” – Berei Lang finds the most compelling moral and literary representations of the Holocaust in “documentary and other forms of historical writing.” Investing not only the documents themselves but documentary style in art with the same immanence that inheres in Auschwitz as physical presence, Lang tends to discount such crucial contextual factors as the ongoing exchanges between writers and their primary (informed) readers that determine the very nature and valence of any text.

The idea that some aura of authenticity attaches itself even to documentary-style writing relates to the particular issue of authority in this literature; the survivor carries the authority in his or her person, the documents in their manifestation of palpable traces of the past.

Alternative Sites

Whereas Auschwitz or Treblinka is the actual as well as the symbolic vortex of the extermination process, other places have been designated as centers of consciousness for different interpretive enterprises; functioning, mutatis mutandis, like local shrines vis-à-vis the Sacred Center, they also provide a magnet for the process that becomes less an historical reconstruction than a moral revisitation. The Warsaw Ghetto has become one of those
“alternative sites” of moral encounter. The “Umschlagplatz,” that area of the ghetto where the Jews were gathered for deportation to the concentration and death camps, is placed at the center of Jaroslaw M. Rymkiewicz’s narrative, *The Final Station* – because “it happened right here, in the midst of our lives” (my emphasis). Although the language resembles that used by those who, like Lanzmann or Dwork and van Pelt, insist on the crematory as the place where IT happened; who, like Borowski or Langer, insist on the relentless present tense as the suspended moment of traumatic time; who, like Lang, insist on documentary rhetoric as the only legitimate language of representation, the moral imperative and the aesthetic principles invoked by Rymkiewicz serve fundamentally different purposes. By weaving fiction and documentary into a search for the exact location, dimensions and shape of the Umschlagplatz in the Warsaw Ghetto, this Polish writer interrogates and juxtaposes the lives of those who lived through that awful time as well as those who live after – and might have lived differently:

It is on Umschlagplatz that the history of Polish Jews came to an end, was arrested and seemingly terminated. There are few such places on this planet. In fact, it may well be the only place of its kind. We who live in its immediate vicinity, in the very heart of Warsaw, ought to reflect on what it means for us, not in terms of the past, but in terms of our own reaction to what once happened there.... I am chiefly interested in the future. What does Umschlagplatz signify in Polish life and Polish spirituality, and what does it portend for posterity? We live within the orbit of their death. That is why I needed a plan of Umschlagplatz.28

Such attempts to establish the actual site of the crime can be traced throughout a proliferating literature that reflects something more than a search for memory sites and points of origin and reference; something other than the locus of absolute, unspeakable, evil. It serves the effort to create points of departure for the construction of alternative histories. Eric Santner’s study of mourning and memory in postwar Germany concludes with an endorsement of a powerful and postmodern form of
Vergangenheitsbewältigung that can be found in the identification of
moments where moral decisions might have been made and were
not. Such an exercise invites postwar Germans and other
Europeans to envision and identify with a different course of action,
a “history-that-might-have-been,” and redeem if not the history
then the moral discourse that was destroyed in the parental and
grandparental generation. One’s own proximity to or distance
from that place can then be incorporated into the language and
structure of representation.

Situated, as he understands it, in the place where IT happened,
Rymkiewicz invokes two photographs: of himself as a young Polish
boy in wartime Poland and of his compatriot, the Jewish boy in the
Warsaw Ghetto who has become an icon of the Holocaust. With
his arms raised, a cap on his head and a short coat reaching just
above his knee-length socks, the Jewish boy is surrounded by fellow
Jews with their arms also raised – and by four Germans, one of
whom holds an automatic pistol aiming at his back. The first act
of grace that Rymkiewicz performs restoresthe other boy’s
identity, reclaiming his privacy from the anonymity to which
“history” relegated him. The next is an act of magical thinking:

We have the boy’s personal data: Artur Siemiatek, son of
Leon and Sara née Dab, born in Lowicz. Artur is my
contemporary: we were both born in 1935. We stand side
by side; he in this photo taken in the Warsaw ghetto, I in
the photo taken on the high platform in Otwock. We may
assume that both photographs were taken in the same
month, mine a week or so earlier. We even seem to be
wearing the same caps. Mine is of a lighter shade and also
looks too big for my head. The boy is wearing knee-high
socks, I’m wearing white ankle socks. On the platform in
Otwock I am smiling nicely. The boy’s face – the photo
was taken by an SS sergeant – betrays nothing.

“You’re tired,” I say to Artur. “It must be very
uncomfortable standing like that with your arms in the air.
I know what we’ll do. I’ll lift my arms up now, and you
put yours down. They may not notice. But wait, I’ve got a
better idea. We’ll both stand with our arms up.”
As soon as we move the center of gravity from Auschwitz to any other spot on earth, we open up the narrative to a multitude of voices – if only because every place in which Jews lived or were incarcerated except the camps themselves was still penetrated and witnessed by the outside world. The former Jewish Quarter of Amsterdam furnishes a catalyst similar to the Umschlagplatz in the Warsaw Ghetto for the reexamination of postwar conscience in a new reading of Albert Camus’ 1956 novel, *La Chute* (The Fall). The entire narrative, it will be recalled, is a dramatic monologue delivered to an inaudible interlocutor whom the speaker, Jean-Baptiste Clemence, has met in a bar in Amsterdam; the explicit moral locus of the narrative is the Pont Royal in Paris where, years ago, Clemence was sole witness to the suicide of a young woman. In his monologue-confession, he returns to the site gingerly at first and then obsessively. But there is another, implicit, center of gravity, a geographical location that both attracts and repels revisitation. Towards the end of the first conversation, Clemence offers to accompany his new acquaintance back to his hotel:

*Your way back?... Well... But if you don’t have any objection, the easiest thing would be for me to accompany you as far as the harbor. Thence, by going around the Jewish quarter you’ll find those fine avenues with their parade of streetcars full of flowers and thundering sounds. Your hotel is on one of them.*

*I live in the Jewish quarter or what was so called until our Hitlerian brethren made room. What a cleanup! Seventy-five thousand Jews deported or assassinated; that’s real vacuum-cleaning.... I am living on the site of one of the greatest crimes in history.*

By mentioning the Jewish Quarter at the outset, casually, as it were, Camus is establishing the circumvented area which remains the implicit heart of the novel and constitutes its moral challenge. Even if it does not identify that “vacuumed” area as the “black hole” which sucks the life out of Europe, a rereading of the novel by Shoshana Felman is consistent with the new hermeneutics that posits an implacable, unrepresentable and untouchable place as the absent sign of the crime. Felman proposes that “the historical
implications of the movement of bypassing – of turning away from, and of going round – something that is nonetheless the center” form the historical and geographical analogue for the event of the woman’s unremarked suicide which is the anecdotal focus of the novel. Although the Soviet penal camps are the historical reference for the debate between Sartre and Camus in the years in which La Chute was written, it is the Nazi concentration camps and the Judaeocide that, Felman argues, are the innermost circle of this narrative: “a center that remains, as such, unspeakable ... [The Jewish Quarter] is itself a name that is no longer valid, a displaced, anachronistic designation that names – improperly – only an absence and a silence.” Felman argues, along with Lyotard and Maurice Blanchot, on behalf of a response to the unphraseable, the exterminated. Read in this light, La Chute poses the ongoing question of what it means to “inhabit the (exterminated) Jewish quarter of Amsterdam (of Europe)? What does it mean to inhabit history as crime, as the space of the annihilation of the Other?”

As if in response to such questions that will be posed nearly forty years later, the possibility of an alternative history is both entertained and dismissed at the conclusion of Camus’ narrative:

*Mon cher compatriote!* Search your memory and perhaps you will find some similar story that you’ll tell me later on.... Then please tell me what happened to you one night on the quays of the Seine and how you managed never to risk your life. You yourself utter the words that for years have never ceased echoing through my nights, and that I shall at last say through your mouth: “O young woman, throw yourself into the water again so that I may a second time have the chance of saving both of us!” A second time, eh, what a risky suggestion! Just suppose, *cher maître*, that we should be taken literally? We’d have to go through with it. Brr...! The water’s so cold! But let’s not worry! It’s too late now. It will always be too late. Fortunately!*

The suggestion is dismissed in the empirical realm of unrepeatable events (“it’s too late now”) but entertained as the narrative compensation for history (“through your mouth”), the moral reparation of history revisited.
Alternative Histories

Whether located in the Jewish quarter in Amsterdam, the Umschlagplatz in Warsaw, Auschwitz I or Birkenau – or the oral testimony of survivors – the search for a geographical, verbal or symbolic locus of the crime signals a need to locate the epicenter of the earthquake. The farther away from Auschwitz it is, the more likely that center is to furnish the opportunity for an alternative legacy. Although, as we have seen, Primo Levi succeeds – just – in providing some distance between himself and Auschwitz, it requires an enormous effort not to be swallowed up by the black hole when one is so close. Levi himself acknowledges the danger of such proximity in his poem “Pliny,” based on the story of Pliny the Elder who met his death in the year 79 on the slopes of Vesuvius: “Don’t hold me back, friends, let me set out. / I won’t go far; just to the other shore./ I want to observe at close hand that dark cloud./ Shaped like a pine tree, rising above Vesuvius, / And find the source of this strange light...” Resistance, then, is based on some measure of distancing, repression or even effacement, extending to the physical evidence itself. In a short statement on “Revisiting the Camps,” which accompanied an exhibition of photographs of the camps held in Milan in 1986, Levi acknowledged that the “old trauma, the scar of remembrance” still prevails, “hence the need for distance. If, at the time of liberation, we had been asked: ‘what would you like to do with these infected barracks, these wire fences, these rows of toilets, these ovens, these gallows?’ I think that most of us would have answered: ‘get rid of everything, raze it to the ground, along with Nazism and everything German.’” He went on to say that such a statement would have been wrong, because, as he realizes forty years later, these “are not mistakes to efface” but take on significance as “a Warning Monument.”

A Question of Limits

What we have begun to identify are clusters of attitudes that can be reduced to a fairly simple but far-reaching dichotomy between absolutist and relativist positions; between disruption and continuity in reconstructing the traumatic past; and between
incommensurability and commensurability as aesthetic principles. History is appropriated either as a set of documents frozen in time and providing the locus that articulates the Event Itself or as yielding to ongoing interpretive and narrative enterprises. Ethics resides in the absolutizing or relativizing of categories of good and evil. Artistic representation is an ongoing search for languages bordering on the danger zones of “transgression” and the “barbaric.” Both the mythifying and the relativizing positions can lead, in their extreme manifestations, to a suspension of the idea of historical verifiability or reality – the one because of its focus on the metaphysical or demonic nature of death under the sign of the Swastika and the place called Auschwitz, and the other because of the profound skepticism that characterizes the most radical versions of poststructuralism.

In the ongoing discussion among philosophers and historians, Robert Braun argues that it is only by relativizing the Holocaust discourse that moral judgment becomes possible; he credits Hannah Arendt with having first applied the categories of relative guilt and innocence to the Nazis and their victims. Braun subscribes to categories he defines as the “politically possible,” the “socially plausible” and the “morally imaginary” – claiming that in our encounter with the past through its material evidence, there is no significant difference between them. This statement leads him to extreme conclusions that exemplify the dangers of an uncritically consistent application of such an approach. “Historiography which looks at past reality as a substance to be epistemologically revealed has to be given up,” he argues; “in the final analysis, traditional criteria of truth and falsity do not apply to historical representations of the past.”

It is a moral position far more consistent with conventions of fiction than of historiography, but as it does not respect such boundaries, it demands a certain kind of vigilance that is implied in the pervasive but never quite explicit notion of “limits.”

Arguments against setting “limits” to representation arise from the principle of desire and change as a counterforce to the rituals and myths that freeze memory. As we have seen, it is the static encounters with Auschwitz, or centripetal movement drawn toward the stasis of an unspeakable place, that preclude the dynamic of a fore- and after-life; such encounters are encapsulated in certain
rituals of space and time. To the extent that rituals are mythic representations of the past experienced in a suspended present, and that myths represent the unchanging and fictions the changing patterns of memory, “limits” can be perceived as the collective enforcement of propriety over the past. Hans Kellner defines the “desire to represent the Holocaust” not as

the desire to repeat it as an event, nor necessarily the desire to repeat the form-giving pleasure of representation itself; rather, it is a desire to repeat the Holocaust in a suitably altered form to meet complex, often contradictory, sets of present needs.

Desire as a counter-force to frozen time, fiction as the dynamic answer to myth, alternative history as the future’s answer to the past, carry the obvious dangers that inhere in any act of revisionism. It is only within the critical and ongoing self-examination of specific interpretive communities that such acts are both disciplined and incorporated selectively into the open-ended argument of “life” with history.

Sideshadowing

The narratological possibilities that derive from what I have called the relativist position have been most effectively articulated by Michael André Bernstein in his book, Foregone Conclusions. Bernstein develops a critique of apocalyptic approaches that read cataclysmic history as a predetermined narrative, a teleology of inexorable and interconnecting events – a practice identified as “backshadowing.” Those narratives that stress the inevitability of the events to the exclusion of the principle of contingency have their counterpart in the fictional strategy of “sideshadowing”; it is here that categories of “plausibility” and of what-might-have-been could receive full play:

To concentrate on the sideshadowed ideas and events, on what did not happen, does not cast doubt on the historicity of what occurred but views it as one among a range of possibilities, a number of which might, with equal
plausibility, have taken place instead. The one that actually was realized, though, exists from then on with all the weight afforded by the singularity of what we might call its event-ness. Only the brightness of an actual event can cast sufficient shadow for side-shadowing to matter, and only the felt force of a life can give impetus to the counterlives that seize the imagination.... Counterlives count because they are a constituent element of the lives we have, just as it is often by the shadows the sun casts, not by its direct light, that we can best calibrate where we stand.”

Bernstein’s poetics — or, more accurately, his “prosaics,” which builds on the work of Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson on Bakhtin’s theories of fiction and the novel — stresses the texture of the quotidian, a kind of democratic sensibility that is the very opposite of an apocalyptic approach to history. His most serious critique, of Aharon Appelfeld’s fiction, adds an important dimension to our consideration of the implications of relativizing and absolutizing positions.

Bernstein argues that Appelfeld’s double vision — the reconstruction of events from the heights of historical hindsight, or backshadowing — in such narratives as Badenheim, 1939, is flawed both aesthetically and ethically: Appelfeld treats “his characters as marionettes whose futile gestures on an absurd stage we watch, half in horror, half in anxiously bemused melancholy at their foolishness. We know they are doomed; they stubbornly refuse to know it, and in the interaction between our knowledge and their ignorance a fable of willed self-delusion unfolds....”

The representation of Jews marching obliviously toward their fate, with the traces of cream in their mouths and Mozart’s sonatinas in their ears, which recurs in all of Appelfeld’s prewar fictions, can be seen as exemplifying the “apocalyptic” tale constructed backwards, from the point of ultimate knowledge which is the authorial weapon of last resort; it is a narrative framing that brands the Jew as doomed in every boulevard and alleyway of prewar Europe and makes any recapitulation of an innocent “before time” virtually impossible. The passivity and limited maneuverability of the Jew in Appelfeld’s fictional universe,
his utter dependence on external forces, is apparent to any careful reader.\textsuperscript{42} The indictment of the Jews of Europe for failure to anticipate their fate manifests itself in the absence of a living space in the present tense and in the underprivileging of the everyday.

Of course the critique of deterministic forms of historicism, of history told from the perspective of the "winners," has already been articulated by historians and philosophers as diverse as Hegel, Nietzsche, Benjamin, Raymond Aron and Paul Ricoeur. Arguments for the "presentness of the past" are a plea for open horizons in the narrative reconstruction of history.\textsuperscript{43} But they can also take their place in the broader debate on the aesthetic and ethical implications of forms of representation – both fictional and historiographical. The implied presence not only of a manipulative narrator but of a knowledgeable reader or an interpretive community is, once again, essential for the completion of such narratives. It is not possible to "know" anything else when one is inside an Appelfeld story, but without certain forms of knowledge, one cannot enter the story at all.

\textbf{Ages of Innocence}

What underlies determinism as a principle of representation is the rigid adherence to a mythical structure of memory which does not really admit any life beyond. Not only is there no redemptive value in Appelfeld's post-Holocaust Jerusalem (even when it appears in his stories, Jerusalem is a city without shadows, Hebrew a language without echoes), but there is no innocent point of origin even in the world of the author's childhood. One of the universal principles in fictions and memoirs of survival is the posing of an untainted area of reference, generally in the childhood of the narrator or the central protagonist. It is a protected area, a kind of nature preserve – in fact nature itself is inevitably a part of the childhood idyll. By admitting time and the chronological structure of memory as a pre-traumatic reference, such writers presume a protected past, a lost paradise that can furnish a base from which they can rebuild the future.\textsuperscript{44}

A set of concentric circles, with the self in the center, safe even for a moment in the bosom of family and nature, are the counterpart to the concentric circles with Auschwitz at the center,
the “black hole” as the nucleus of the concentrationary universe. If the reconstruction of a viable identity in the postwar period depends largely on the presence or effacement of such a reference, Appelfeld, like Borowski, has no such point d’appui. It is hardly surprising, then, that his reconstruction of childhood is thus overlaid by the inexorable consciousness of what is to come.

In Vittorio de Sica’s cinematic version of Giorgio Bassani’s Garden of the Finzi-Continis (1970), the soft focus suffuses the colors of the garden-that-is-the-past with the light of nostalgia, a safe zone for future reference. Generally speaking, as we have seen, the (non)color of Auschwitz is black, just as the color of documents and of documentary film is black and white. The introduction of color in Alain Renais’ black-and-white documentary film Nuit et Brouillard (1955) and, a generation later, in Steven Spielberg’s Schindler’s List, functions as acknowledgment of the intrusion of nature – and art – into the reconstructed past, as self-reflexive sign of a world outside the camps.\(^5\)

The reference to an innocent aforetime as blueprint for a postwar future is the structural principle in one of the last examples we will consider, Jurek Becker’s 1969 German novel, Jakob der Lügner (Jacob the Liar). The characters are incarcerated in their own hometown that has been metamorphosed into a ghetto; being in situ, when they dream of an afterlife, it consists of the same barber shop with a few more chairs and the same pancake house with a few extra tables. In fact, I would go so far as to-argue that the entire narrative is based on the epistemological as well as the aesthetic premise that National Socialism is not referenceable. This novel, one of the first in a series of counter-narratives of the Shoah, is a fictional chronicle of a closed society modeled after the Lodz Ghetto, where Becker himself spent his early childhood years. The outside world is filtered through the invented radio of Jacob Heym, who counters the growing despair among his fellow inmates in the ghetto by inventing good news. Based on an “actual” news broadcast about the positioning of a division of Russian troops that he overheard while in the Commandant’s office, Jacob begins to weave a fantasy of military progress that brings the Allied forces to within a few kilometers of the ghetto. At the moment in the story when such developments should have brought about the liberation of the ghetto, the order
appears in "real time" for the liquidation of the ghetto and the deportation of all its Jews...

In narrating Jacob’s story after his death and after the war, his friend (the first-person narrator) evinces, at one and the same time, the chronicler’s compulsive concern for factual accuracy and the acknowledgment of invention as compensatory principle. Here holes become, quite simply, invitations to memory and imagination. The ghetto police station, to which Jacob is told to report for being on the street after curfew, is located in the former municipal revenue office. The floor is pockmarked with the absent signs of its original status and it is these that invite a flood of relativizing memories: "At the spot where the table formerly stood there is no longer any table; but there where its legs used to be, four indentsations can still be seen on the floor." "Indentations" as catalysts for memory actually become a kind of ars poetica. The narrator, one of the few survivors of the deportations, confesses that although he learned certain details from Jacob and other inmates of the ghetto,

... there is a big gap for which simply no witnesses are available. I say to myself it must have been approximately thus and so. Or I say to myself, it would be best if it had been thus and so, and then I tell it and act as if it fits. And it really does fit. It’s not my fault that the witnesses who would be able to verify it are no longer available.

Plausibility is not the decisive factor for me. It is implausible that I, of all people, am still alive. It’s much more important that I think it should have happened thus and so. And that has nothing at all to do with plausibility – for that, too, I can vouch.  

Inventing a reality more acceptable, if not more plausible, than the "given" reality, turning the gaps to the advantage of a regenerative community, is a narrative task that served as compensation for disempowerment in Yiddish literature for a century before the Shoah. Jurek Becker’s reconstruction of the ghetto is at some deeper level of cultural memory really a reinvention of the shtetl and a conjuring of Sholem Aleichem, ultimate author of the Jewish word as alternative to Jewish fate.
This is not only an intertextual process but a postwar enactment of the continuity of storytelling as resistance to the black hole that would swallow the cultural forms along with the people who practiced them.

If the primary experience of the Jews under Nazi occupation was the total loss of control over the shape of their lives and fate, the retrospective projection of the power to define and create reality, by arrogating in the present the sole authority to authenticate the past, becomes a morally and psychologically urgent impulse to defy former powerlessness by means of present potencies. When we deny these Jews the restorative authority to say what was, it is as if we who live after or beyond the concentrationary universe continue to disempower them; their imagination becomes, then, “our” (those of us who “know better”) disempowerment or self-limitation. Additionally, it provides a platform for illuminating the gaps in both triumphalist and defeatist or martyrological versions of history. Becker makes this explicit when his narrator offers the reader two endings—one real and the other far more in keeping with the exigencies of his “heroic” narrative:

A thousand times Jacob can find again, report, invent battles, and circulate rumors. One thing he can not prevent. The story is approaching its vile ending authentically. That is, it has two endings. Really only one, of course: the one experienced by Jacob and all of us. But for me it has yet another. In all modesty, I know an ending at which you would grow pale from envy, not a particularly happy one, a bit at Jacob’s expense, however incomparably better than the real ending. I have fabricated it over the course of years. I said to myself, it’s really a crying shame that such a beautiful story should come so wretchedly to nothing. Invent an ending for it that can be halfway satisfying, one that is logical. A proper ending will atone for some of its shortcomings. Besides, all of them have earned a better end, not just Jacob....

Even if the storyteller is in the end defeated by history as a more “victorious” venture than his own and must hand his fictional
characters back to their “real” deaths, he, like Scheherazade, has succeeded for a time at least in keeping death at bay.

Centrifugal Narratives

Both Scheherazade and Sholem Aleichem appear as “co-authors” in a kind of Israeli sequel to Jacob the Liar: David Grossman’s 1986 Hebrew novel, Ayen erekh “ahava” (See Under: Love). “Eretz sham” (Over There) is the unwritten place and the unwritten story of Eastern Europe and its demise; the nine-year-old boy Momik, through whose consciousness the first part of the novel is filtered, is desperately constructing a narrative out of the myth of Israeli heroism that he encounters in school in the 1950s and the absent stories of his refugee parents, so that he can somehow inscribe them into an alternative history:

Over There must have been a lovely land with forests everywhere and shiny railroad tracks, and bright, pretty trains, and military parades, and the brave Emperor and the royal hunter, and the Klauiz and the animal fair, and transparent jewel-like animals that shine in the mountains like raisins on a cake. The only trouble is, there’s a curse on Over There.... There’s this spell that was put on all the children and grownups and animals, and it made them freeze. The Nazi Beast did it. It roamed the country, freezing everything with its icy breath like the Snow Queen in the story Momik read.... There’s only one person in the whole world who can save them and that’s Momik. Momik is almost like Dr. Herzl, only different. He made a blue and white flag for Over There, and between the two blue stripes he drew an enormous drumstick tied to the back of a Super Mystère, and below it he wrote the words If you will it, it is not a dream....

In the morning, before breakfast (Mama and Papa always leave first), he quickly jots down another guess: .... The Emperor galloped ahead on his faithful steed, bursting with splendor, also shooting his rifle in every direction. Sondar of the Commandos covered him from behind. The
mighty Emperor shouted to me, his bold roar resounding through the frozen kingdom.\textsuperscript{49}

The first section is followed by three consecutive and radically different experiments in writing and rewriting the Shoah, each more bold than the other. By introducing a series of anti-mimetic, counter-historical events and phenomena – from “grandfather” Wasserman, who suffers from immortality and a surplus of stories, to Kazik, who lives an entire life in twenty-four hours; by indulging in the most outrageous flights of poetic license – “Sondar” as a heroic Commando fighter, martyred Polish-Jewish writer Bruno Schulz as a salmon; by challenging the protocols of narrative itself – the Holocaust as Encyclopedia – Grossman is assaulting not only a number of sacred cows but the project of mimesis itself, in its most impregnable fortress. A comparison of Grossman’s irreverent invocation of the Sonderkommando with Lanzmann’s “incarnation” of those who worked at the inimitable limits of an event circumscribed “en un cercle de flamme,” demonstrates the distance between these two aesthetic and ethical structures.

By recuperating Sholem Aleichem’s character Mottel the Cantor’s Son and making him a contemporary of Momik, by creating a palimpsest of Jewish Geography that conflates Kasrilevke and Haifa, Boiberik and Tel Aviv, Grossman recasts the Israeli narrative of “Holocaust and Rebirth” as a synchronic rather than a diachronic process.\textsuperscript{50} Like Jacob the Liar, written in German by a writer then living in East Germany, See Under: Love is a text predicated on the historical knowledge of its primary readers, who participate in this act of repair not only of the “failures” of history but of failures of perception in the respective postwar interpretive communities. (Implicit in this process is an assault on the assumption that even if the Holocaust was a defeat for the Jews as a people, in the internal Jewish struggle the losers or the oppressed are the Jews of Europe and the victors the Jews of Israel.)

Such “centrifugal” narratives do not necessarily inhabit a safe or soteriological place. With Auschwitz or other killing centers as points of departure, they tend to establish additional, mobile, sites of memory. Images of the Holocaust or of interrupted lives released from gravitational forces and floating beyond all attempts to ground them in local redemptive cultures are inherently
Subversive. Diffuse particles of a partially remembered past provisionally captured in the *bricolage* poetry of writers like Paul Celan or Dan Pagis, for example, constitute the most extreme expression of a process that destabilizes all languages of representation.

**Terminus or Point of Departure?**

The centripetal thrust toward a *terminus* is, then, contemporaneous with a centrifugal thrust that establishes the physical and symbolic center as *point of departure*. As clusters of radically divergent sensibilities, the “mythifiers” and the “relativizers” generate alternative languages of history, art and ethics, exemplifying not only the problematics inherent in any attempt to enforce limits, decorum or standards of propriety in cultural activity but the consensus that one cannot ignore Auschwitz without destroying the moral foundations of culture. In this sense the Holocaust, like revelation, becomes the event whose interpretation controls the meaning of the present and the future. However, unlike the original chaos that preceded all Creation, Auschwitz-as-Dis-order must take account of the order that preceded it; as the chasm that terminates one world and constitutes the point of departure for another, it establishes the relative status of each. Auschwitz becomes, then, the ultimate link between the new post-Enlightenment languages of truth and morality. The affirmation that Auschwitz was a fact, a real place or a real event becomes the constitutive base of late twentieth-century ethical discourse; claiming to fully or exhaustively represent Auschwitz is a form of arrogation of authority as arbiter of moral conflict. The more “The Event” is deemed critical to everything that follows, the more the exclusive claim to know, define or represent it is mobilized to privilege one’s own interpretation or evaluation of the world.

What I have presented as two divergent orientations are actually part of the same dialectic which posits the wholly transcendent as wholly unrepresentable. For the mythifiers, it is inherently unsayable, elusive, inscrutable and immutable, the sole determinant and ultimate extinguisher of meaning. For the relativizers, it is precisely in its ineffability that it is infinitely and
diversely representable; the urgency of representation, then, unfolds in continual tension between desire and its limits. When it gives license to pluralistic interpretations and shifting sites of memory, Auschwitz "authorizes" the open horizons of a post-Holocaust world.
Notes

* An earlier draft of this essay was delivered at a conference on “Les camps de concentration: un phénomène du XXe siècle,” held at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes, Sorbonne, Paris, in June 1995. I am grateful to the students in my graduate course at the Hebrew University on “The Shoah and the Poetics of Memory” (Spring 1995) for the discussions that sharpened the ideas presented in this paper. I also benefited enormously from the comments of Froma Zeitlin, Natalie Davis, Saul-Friedlander, Idit Zertal, Don Handleman, Vera Solomon and Yaron Ezrahi.


2 Jean-François Lyotard, The Differend: Phrases in Dispute (Minneapolis, 1988), 57, 56.

3 “To what shall I compare thee ... that I may comfort thee?” asks the elegist in the book of Lamentations (2:13), the original canonic text of consolation.


5 Borowski, “Auschwitz, Our Home,” in This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen, 131–32.


8 “The world of concentration and slave-labor camps as concrete actualities emerges from a systematic effort to deconstruct the lifeworld ... to dismantle it and not merely to compress its range. Here a space is created in which is changed ... the scaffolding of experience itself.” Edith Wyschogrod, Spirit in Ashes: Hegel, Heidegger, and Man-Made Mass Death (New Haven, 1985), 16.

9 Even the more embittered expressions of disappointment in the
world’s response that punctuate the essays in Levi’s last book, *The Drowned and the Saved*, do not vitiate the impact of the epigraph from Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*: “And till my ghastly tale is told, this heart within me burns.” For a more detailed discussion of the vast and complex issue of the suicide of survivor writers, see my “The Grave in the Air: Unbound Metaphors in Post-Holocaust Poetry,” in Saul Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the ‘Final Solution’* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), 263ff. For the purposes of this discussion, I am delineating a position at variance with such widespread views as the one articulated by Lawrence Langer that identifies “Levi’s acute but paradoxical sense that shame and self-accusation, however unwarranted, nonetheless remained a burden for him and many of his fellow former prisoners throughout their lives – *in the end, a burden that consumed and probably destroyed him.*” Lawrence Langer, “The Literature of Auschwitz,” in *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays* (New York, 1995), 95 (my emphasis). See also Alvin H. Rosenfeld, “Primo Levi: The Survivor as Victim,” in James S. Pacy and Alan P. Wertheimer, eds., *Perspectives on the Holocaust: Essays in Honor of Raul Hilberg* (Boulder, CO, 1995), 123–44. For a fascinating discussion of “meaningful death” in an era of mass murder, see Wyschogrod, *Spirit in Ashes.*


13 Deborah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt, “Reclaiming Auschwitz,” in Geoffrey Hartman, ed., *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory* (Cambridge, MA, 1994), 236–37. “A misconstruction of history begins right in the parking lot: visitors think they have arrived at the periphery of Auschwitz I; in fact they are already in the middle of the camp as it existed in 1945.” The authors stress the misrepresentation of the buildings, now used as a reception center and restaurant for visitors, where the victims underwent the process of undressing and divestment that constituted their “metamorphosis from *Mensch* to *Untermensch.*” Ibid., 234, 238. Primo Levi, who may have been the first to associate Auschwitz with the Inferno, referred to the “Arbeit Macht Frei” inscription as recently as 1986 in “Revisiting the Camps,”

Arguments among Poles, Catholics, Diaspora and Israeli Jews over propriety in the reconstruction of the memorial space of Auschwitz reveal mutually exclusive narratives of the past. The Polish government commemorated the six million Poles who were subjugated and murdered – thereby, as it were, granting the Jews posthumous status as members of the “Polish family”; the Catholic Church engaged in a “triumphalist appropriation of Jewish suffering,” insinuating that the Jews had died there in a sacrificial re-enactment of Golgotha. Pilgrimages to Auschwitz of youth from Europe, the United States and Israel have reclaimed the site for different versions of Jewish memory. See Dwork and van Pelt, “Reclaiming Auschwitz,” 244–45; Jochen Spielmann, “Auschwitz is Debated in Oswiecim: The Topography of Remembrance,” in Young, ed., The Art of Memory, 169–73; Jack Kugelmass, “Why we Go to Poland: Holocaust Tourism as Secular Ritual.” in ibid., 175–83; Jackie Feldman, “It is my Brothers whom I am Seeking: Israeli Youth Pilgrimages to Holocaust Poland,” Jewish Ethnology and Folklore Review (Winter 1995); Jean-Charles Szurek, “Pologne: Le camp-musée d’Auschwitz.” in Alain Brossat et al., eds., A l’Est, la mémoire retrouvée (Paris, 1990), 535–65; James E. Young, The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning (New Haven, 1993), 119–54. For a comparison of Auschwitz and other camps with landscapes “that contain the memory of sacred events,” see Claudia Koonz, “Between Memory and Oblivion: Concentration Camps in German Memory,” in John R. Gillis, ed., Commemorations: The Politics of Identity (Princeton, 1993), 258.

14 Technically the site of the reconstruction is not entirely a facsimile, as “Crematory I” did function at Auschwitz as crematory and gas chamber until 1942, when it was abandoned and the mass killings and cremations transferred to buildings specially designed at Birkenau. Dwork and van Pelt, “Reclaiming Auschwitz,” 239. See also “Nazi Designers of Death,” NOVA television special aired on 7 Feb. 1995, written and directed by Mike Rossiter and produced by the BBC and WGBH, in which van Pelt traces, through architectural plans that have recently come to light, the construction of the gas chambers and crematoria at Birkenau.

15 Dwork and van Pelt, “Reclaiming Auschwitz,” 246. Auschwitz, alluded to by the Nazis themselves as “anus mundi,” is referred to as a “black hole” by contemporary writers that include, in addition to those mentioned here, Omer Bartov, “Intellectuals on Auschwitz: Memory, History and Truth,” History & Memory 5, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 1993):
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16 Dwork and van Pelt, “Reclaiming Auschwitz,” 249. The group of Polish architects and sculptors was led by Oskar and Zofia Hansen.


18 As Shoshana Felman calls it in Testimony, 240.

19 As heirs to that place, we are, in Langer’s words, “left with the burdensome legacy of the inaudible silences, echoing from the inner walls of the gas chambers, whose texts we will never hear.” Admitting the Holocaust, 18. Langer adapts Lyotard’s “anesthesies” in place of an aesthetics for Auschwitz. To the best of my knowledge, there is only one writer who dared to imagine that scene – André Schwarz-Bart in The Last of the Just.

20 Quoted in Shoshana Felman, “Film as Witness: Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah,” in Hartman, ed., Holocaust Remembrance, 97.


22 Lanzmann reserves most of his venom for Steven Spielberg’s Schindler’s List, as can be seen in the purgatorial references that punctuate his language: “You either understand or you don’t. It’s a bit like the Cartesian cogito in the end you come up against the final stumbling block and you can’t go any further. The Holocaust is unique first of all in that it erects around itself, in a circle of fire, the limit that must not be crossed because a certain absolute horror is intransmissible: to claim to [transmit it] is to make oneself guilty of the most grievous transgression. Fiction is a transgression, I deeply believe that there is a ban on representation.... I believe that I made a new form [in Shoah]. Spielberg has chosen to reconstruct (reconstruire).... The last image of Shoah is of a train moving, endlessly. In order to say that the Holocaust has no end.” Claude Lanzmann, “La Représentation impossible,” Sens: Juifs et Chrétiens dans le monde aujourd’hui 46, no. 4 (1994): 159–62 (my emphasis).

23 Jean Baudrillard provides an interpretation of the late twentieth-century search for points of origin within his general theory of simulacra and hyperreality: “When the real is no longer what it used to be [sic!], nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation
of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity. There is an escalation of the true, of the lived experience.... And there is a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential.... This is how simulation appears in the phase that concerns us: a strategy of the real, neo-real and hyperreal...."


24 For a discussion of "endism" or "posthistoire" sensibility, see Anton Kaes, "Holocaust and the End of History: Postmodern Historiography in Cinema," in Friedlander, ed., Probing the Limits of Representation. He admits that the "longing for the apocalypse and the end of history may be provoked by the utopian hope to begin once more, to create a pure moment of origin that is not contaminated by history" (222).

25 Berel Lang, Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide (Chicago, 1990), 139, 124.

26 Lang does not ignore the relationship of readers and texts, but he considers it more in terms of a "moral community" than in terms of the dynamic of knowing readers in an interpretive community whose primary knowledge is axiomatic in the give-and-take between the culture and its consumers. The "gaps" in a literary text such as Jurek Becker's Jacob the Liar are a function of such a dynamic in Germany just as the gaps in a text like David Grossman's See Under: Love are in Israel. See below. (Of course this is a complex subject, particularly in the German context and given the fine line between the understated or the implicit and the repressed.)

27 It is this basis on which writers of fiction and drama as wide-ranging as Jean-François Steiner, Peter Weiss, Rolf Hochhuth and D. M. Thomas have established their credentials.


29 At the end of his remarkable study, Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany (Ithaca, 1990), Eric L. Santner asks what strategies are available to "members of the second generation of Germans trying to constitute a viable legacy out of poisoned totemic resources? What is there to blast out, as it were, from the
homogeneous course of this history so full of horror? It cannot be simply a matter of transforming the parents into helpless victims, of seeing them as the oppressed who were caught up in the ruthless conspiracies of events and who must now be redeemed. Nor can it be a matter of turning everyone who, say, refused to read the Völkischer Beobachter into a crypto-resistance fighter.... But short of such wish-fulfilling transformations, it might yet be possible to discover in the lives, in the words, in the faces and bodies of the parents traces of another history, another past, that might have been but was not... the traces of knowledge denied, of deeds left undone, of eyes averted from pain, of shades drawn, of moments when it might have been possible to ask a question or to resist, but one didn’t ask and one didn’t resist. These were moments when a chance for solidarity with (or later, mourning for) the victims was offered but was left untouched. For the postwar generations, it is, I am suggesting, a matter of seizing those chances now, of constructing an alternative legacy out of the archive of symptoms and parapraxes that bear witness to what could have been but was not. By searching out these signs of a history-that-might-have-been in the documents of their own lineage, the postwar generations can begin to mourn these lost opportunities without disavowing their ancestry. These generations may yet be able to unearth new resources of identification out of the unconscious layers of the history into which they were born" (152–53). Of course this approach in its various late twentieth-century manifestations traces its history to Hegel’s Philosophy of History.

30 Rywkiewicz, The Final Station, 325.
32 Felman, Testimony, 188.
33 Camus, The Fall, 65, 147.
34 It is this last summons, however muted, that Felman (Testimony, 203) calls the “possibility, the chance, of our response-ability.”
35 See Alvin Rosenfeld’s discussion of this poem in “Primo Levi,” 133–34.
36 Levi, “Revisiting the Camps,” 185 (my emphasis). For a very recent example of the process of repetition for the purpose of “working through” by means of identifying sites for revisiting the past, see the various installations that localize memory through interactive forms of commemoration in Germany. Such “warning monuments,” which force the spectator into a reflexive relationship that challenges a moral response, making the past present in its physical, local manifestations, a reenactment of history-in-progress through the “everyday,” are qualitatively different from either the reconstructed sites of death or
the monuments to the Six Million that exist in a separate sphere marked off for that purpose (the “wound” or “black hole” of Western culture).


39 Kellner, “‘Never Again’ is Now,” 128. The reference of course is to the volume in which the question of limits is embedded in the very title and to which members of different intellectual disciplines, including history, philosophy, literature and film, contributed: Probing the Limits of Representation. See especially Saul Friedlander’s introduction. See also Jean Améry (Hans Meyer), who was one of the first to contemplate the “limits” of the intellectual inquiry into the Holocaust: At the Mind’s Limits, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington, 1980).

40 Michael André Bernstein, Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History (Berkeley, 1994), 7–8. In countering the claim that such an approach undermines the authority of lived history, Bernstein adds: “Indeed, every survivor’s narrative I have read emphasizes the multiple contingencies, the intersection of fortuitous events too wildly improbable for any fiction, that made survival possible” (12). The fallacy in this reasoning, of course, is that even though survival depended on a series of contingencies, death did not; since every Jew in Nazi-occupied Europe was condemned to death, every representation of Jewish fate under the sign of the Swastika is overdetermined from the outset.

41 Ibid., 58. See, for example, Book One of the two-part novel The Age of Wonders, trans. Dalya Bilu (New York, 1981); and my “Aharon Appelfeld: The Search for a Language,” in Jonathan Frankel, ed., Studies in Contemporary Jewry, vol. 1 (Bloomington, 1984), 366–80. In his analysis of the early stories of Appelfeld, many of which remain unavailable in English translation, Alan Mintz, Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature (New York, 1984), 215, notes that “Appelfeld intentionally and systematically commits the fallacy of projecting onto the past a knowledge of later events,” relating it to his mythic imagination in which “the ancestral order, as a world suffused with despair, entropy, and disintegration, was always already under the star of the Holocaust.”

42 For a discussion of this see, for example, Nili Ratok, Home over the
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Chasm: the Narrative Art of Aharon Appelfeld (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv, 1989), 86–91.


44 In their study of Jewish exiles living in Paris, who hail from former Jewish communities in both North Africa and Europe, Lucette Valensi and Nathan Wachtel observe the ubiquity of childhood as a protected sphere; an environment “composed of concentric circles [nature, family, community] formed a totality in which individuals, as they remember it, were harmoniously integrated... It is this early refuge of peace and affection that appears in memory as the ideal of all joy. The rest of life will preserve a longing for it.” Jewish Memories, trans. Barbara Harshav (Berkeley, 1991), 89–92. See also Richard N. Coe’s discussion of Childhood’s paradise lost as a closed or protected world, an “alternative dimension” that becomes particularly compelling when something in the present intensifies the normal sense of loss and nostalgia. When the Grass was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood (New Haven, 1984).

45 History in film and history as film is the subject of Anton Kaes’s fascinating study From “Hitler” to “Heimat”: The Return of History as Film (Cambridge, MA, 1989). One of his examples could highlight the invocation of color to bathe history in nostalgia. As late as 17 April 1945, after a private screening of a film commissioned by the SS, Goebbels said to his staff, “Gentlemen... in a hundred years’ time they will be showing a fine color film of the terrible days we are living through. Wouldn’t you like to play a part in that film? Hold out now, so that a hundred years hence the audience will not hoot and whistle when you appear on the screen.” KAES comments that until the regime collapsed completely, it depended entirely on “appearances, histrionics, and simulation” (4). See also his discussion of the use of color in Edgar Reitz’s black-and-white film Heimat (177). For an example of the ways in which even today's black-and-white photographs of Auschwitz begin to reflect the passage of time, see Erich Hartmann’s photographs, taken in the winter of 1993, which comprise a soft landscape that is the distant echo of a horror in ruins. In the Camps (New York, 1995), 46.

46 Jurek Becker, Jacob the Liar, trans. Melvin Kornfeld (New York, 1975),
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37–38 (my emphasis).

47 A number of readers have drawn connections between Becker’s ghetto and Sholem Aleichem’s Kastilevke. See Kornfeld, introduction, in ibid., i; David Roskies, Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture (Cambridge, MA, 1984), 191. On the compensations of the word for the disappointments of the world in Yiddish literature, see Ruth Wisse, The Schlemiel as Modern Hero (Chicago, 1971) and David Roskies, A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling (Cambridge, MA, 1995).

48 Becker, Jacob the Liar, 242.


50 “When I was eight years old,” writes David Grossman, “my father gave me the stories of Mottel, the Son of Peyze the Cantor to read.... That was my Sholem Aleichem year. Incessantly I dug my tunnel to the Diaspora.... The strange thing about it was that all that time (about a year and a half) I believed that the other world existed parallel to mine... carrying on somewhere according to its laws and its mystery and its various institutions and its special language. When I was about nine and a half, in the middle of the Holocaust Day ceremony... suddenly, it pierced me: the six million, the slain martyrs... they were my people. They were my secret world. The six million were Mottel and Teyye and... Chava... and Stempenyu.... On the blazing asphalt of the Beit Hakerem schoolyard, I felt as if I was literally disappearing, shrivelling and dissolving.... Where had their army been? Why didn’t their air force or their paratroopers fight? Above all, I was panic-stricken because I imagined that I might now be the only child... whose responsibility it was to remember all those people.... The first part of See Under: Love is about a child called Momik... who tries to understand the Diaspora in Israeli terms.” “My Sholem Aleichem,” Modern Hebrew Literature (Spring/Summer, 1995): 4–5.
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