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Fact, Fiction, Fascism: Testimony and Mimesis In Holocaust Narratives

CRITICS of contemporary literature tend to agree that the experience of the Holocaust has altered not only the nature of historical reality but also the possibility of embodying that reality in artistic representation. "No poetry after Auschwitz," Theodor Adorno declares in the classic statement on the subject.[1] "We come after, and that is the name of our condition," says George Steiner. "We cannot pretend that Belsen is irrelevant to the responsible life of the imagination. What man has inflicted on man in very recent time has affected the writer's primary material—the sum and potential of human behavior—and it presses on the brain with a new darkness" (p. 22). Alvin Rosenfeld comments, "The nature and magnitude of the Holocaust were such as to mark, almost certainly, the end of one era of consciousness and the beginning of another . . . The human imagination after Auschwitz is simply not the same as it was before."[2] Lawrence L. Langer concludes that "the existence of Dachau and Auschwitz as historical phenomena has altered not only our conception of reality, but its very nature."[3]

The briefest survey of literature in the period following World War II would seem to corroborate this sense that a watershed has occurred in the history of consciousness. During the two decades after 1945, the great majority of writers simply avoided the stage of history, opting either for the denuded landscape of the absurd or the private terrain of the inner self. As Mary McCarthy complained in 1960,

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[1] Quoted in George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays 1958-1966* (London, 1967), p. 72; hereafter cited in the text.

[2] "The Problematics of Holocaust Literature," in *Confronting the Holocaust: The Impact of Elie Wiesel*, ed. Alvin H. Rosenfeld and Irving Greenberg (Bloomington, Ind., and London, 1978), pp. 1-2.

[3] *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven, Conn., and London, 1975), p. xii; hereafter cited in the text.

> The existence of Highbury or the Province of O is rendered improbable, unveracious, by Buchenwald and Auschwitz . . . And here is the dilemma of the novelist, which is only a kind of professional sub-case of the dilemma of every one: if he writes about his province, he feels its inverisimilitude; if he tries, on the other hand, to write about the people who make lampshades of human skin, like the infamous Ilse Koch, he feels still more inverisimilitude of what he is asserting. His love of truth revolts.[4]

Since the mid-1960s writers have once again begun to grapple with the historical dimension of our being. But the treatment of factuality in much contemporary fiction reveals that a conception of history as nightmare has become an assumed—at times trite—underpinning of much recent writing. Although the manifestations of this consciousness are diverse, two principal strategies can be discerned. Some writers—such as E. L. Doctorow in *Ragtime* and Robert Coover in *The Public Burning*—willfully distort the data of the past in order to convey a chaotic sense of historical process and to suggest the necessarily subjective nature of any attempt to construct a coherent picture of bygone events. Others—such as Norman Mailer in *The Executioner's Song* or Joan Didion in *The White Album*—graft a range of novelistic techniques onto a factual account of some narrow segment of contemporary reality in order to evoke the bizarre atmosphere of our cluttered, alienated culture. Although the two approaches appear to be diametrically opposed, they share similar philosophical assumptions. Both posit that history is ultimately unknowable, that stable general meanings do not inhere in particular instances, and that the hypotheses by which we structure our historical understanding cannot aspire to objectivity. By rendering fiction as fact and fact as fiction, many contemporary writers move toward collapsing the distinction between consciousness and material reality and find themselves either assimilating world to mind or assimilating mind to world. Doctorow, one of the most theoretically self-conscious exponents of this prevalent historical outlook, declares, "There is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand the distinction: there is only narrative."[5]

In one sense, then, there seems to be an important philosophical link between the devastation of the death camps and the solipsistic or mechanistic theories of history espoused by a large number of contemporary writers. Indeed, to associate the aburdist outlook of much contemporary fiction with the nihilistic aftermath of Auschwitz is something of a cliché among recent critics. Logically, then, we might approach the prose narratives written out of the experience of the Holocaust itself with the expectation that they would herald the historical consciousness of postmodernism—that, in their attempt to grapple with the enormity of this historical trauma, these works would eradicate distinctions between fact and fiction and evoke a bizarre reality in which "what really happened" outstrips the author's wildest imaginings. Such a conclusion has, predictably enough, been reached. As Langer argues in *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination,*

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[4] "The Fact in Fiction," *PR*, 27 (1960), 455.

[5] "False Documents," *American Review*, 26 (1977), 231.

> The significance of the literature of atrocity is its ability to evoke the atmosphere of monstrous fantasy that strikes any student of the Holocaust, and simultaneously to suggest the exact details of the experience in a way that forces the reader to fuse and reassess the importance of both. The result is exempted from the claims of literal truth but creates an imaginative reality possessing an autonomous dignity and form that paradoxically immerse us in perceptions about that literal truth which the mind ordinarily ignores or would like to avoid. (p. 30)

I maintain, however, that a close examination of Holocaust narratives reveals just the opposite; Holocaust writers have been only too aware of the necessary difference between reality and imagination, and they have employed a variety of rhetorical devices to enforce the factuality or fictiveness of what I shall call the "contracts"—the patterns of literary expectation—that they establish with their readers. This is not to deny that the atmosphere of much Holocaust narrative, factual as well as fictive, is hallucinatory and irreal. As Sidra Dekoven Ezrahi has pointed out, Holocaust writers can assume no analogous relationship between the world described in the text and the world inhabited by the reader, and their assumptions about mimesis and historicity have accordingly been altered in order to compensate for this dislocation of the link between writer and reader.[6] But to acknowledge the difficulty of conveying a horrific experience—even to demonstrate the inadequacy of existing literary forms in rendering that experience—is not the same thing as to declare that reality itself has become "fictual."[7] One conclusion that emerges from a survey of Holocaust prose narratives is that the great majority of Holocaust writers have no interest in epistemological relativism; they ask to be approached in a genuinely historical manner, without the imposition of a *Weltanschauung* fashionable in a later time.

While Holocaust writers do not collapse distinctions between factuality and mimesis, however, their evident uneasiness with certain traditional generic conventions suggests that some literary forms provide better frameworks than others for conveying the subject matter of the Holocaust. In particular, I hope to show that those narrative forms—both factual and fictive—that rely upon an informing teleology generally prove inadequate to the task of encompassing the full significance of Holocaust experience. In the hands of the Holocaust writer, the autobiography frequently furnishes an inadvertent parody of the conventional journey toward self-definition and knowledge; the realistic novel proposes ethical humanist resolutions that are incommensurate with the totalitarian horror of the text's represented world; the fantasy creates a grotesque portraiture of metaphysical evil that evades the historical immediacy of the Holocaust as a twentieth-century phenomenon. By contrast, I suggest, such nonteleological forms as the diary and the pseudofactual novel more readily penetrate to the core of Holocaust experience, if only because they do not impose idealist philosophical schemes upon their material. The greater appropriateness of these nontotalizing narrative forms indicates not that the Holocaust is unknowable but that its full dimensions are inaccessible to the ideological frameworks that we have inherited from the liberal era. This examination of the relative efficacy of the various narrative forms employed by Holocaust writers thus points to a second conclusion, one relevant not merely to the problematics of Holocaust literature explored in this essay but also to the more general relationship between literary form and philosophical orientation. We may speculate that, while literary forms may not be inherently ideological, they have historically been associated with certain ideological perspectives; and that these perspectives, while admirably suited to the depiction of human affairs in some historical epochs, may be severely limited in their capacity to account for the configuration of reality in an altered historical situation. In the very urgency of their efforts to give their visions of horror "a local habitation and a name," Holocaust writers point us toward central considerations regarding the relations among ideology, history, and literary form.

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[6] *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature,* with a Foreword by Alfred Kazin (Chicago, Ill., and London, 1980), p. 51.

[7] This term has been coined by Mas'ud Zavarzadeh in *The Mythopoeic Reality: The Postwar American Nonfiction Novel* (Urbana, Ill., 1976).

In addition to literary-historical and theoretical interests, a third concern motivates my examination of Holocaust literature in this essay—namely, the conviction that the literature of the Holocaust has been banished from critical study for long enough and that the full aesthetic and social implications of this literature require closer scrutiny than they receive at present. Quite properly, of course, many scholars have hesitated to apply the instruments of formal analysis to works that cry out for a hearing on the basis of propositional content alone. Very recently there have appeared three serious studies—Langer's *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, Rosenfeld's *A Double Dying*, and

Ezrahi's *By Words Alone*—that promise to spark critical interest in this largely unexplored genre. But a hushed reverence accompanies most allusions to the Holocaust—a reverence that often masks an unwillingness to confront the full political and historical meaning of this event or that simply gives vent to a debilitating guilt which promotes cynicism and apathy rather than clarity and purposive action. So long as the possibility of another Holocaust remains with us—and the present world situation hardly renders such a speculation idle—we would do well to explore any avenue that can increase our understanding of the phenomenon of fascism. Indeed, if we critically evaluate the efforts at narrative interpretation undertaken by those who have grappled with the experience of Nazism, we may come to understand better the peculiar forms of historical blindness that continue to impede full recognition of the significance of the Holocaust in our own time. The examination of authorial strategy and audience response in Holocaust literature is thus integral to a comprehension of the meaning of the Holocaust itself; the historical moment and its artistic mediation are mutually illuminating in a variety of ways.

Elie Wiesel, speaking for the generation of Holocaust survivors, attaches profound importance to the personal documentaries that have emerged from the Holocaust. "If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony. We have all been witnesses and we all feel we have to bear testimony for the future."[8] Terrence Des Pres argues that the will to bear witness, oral and written, was the primary incentive to survival for many camp inmates, who have subsequently become the self-appointed historians of the Holocaust. They are torn between the impossibility of recounting—"You can never understand how it was," repeated so many witnesses at the Eichmann trial—and the necessity of describing the indescribable. In their effort to render an experience to which, they know, their readers' lives possess no congruent configuration, these testimonial narrators press against the conventions of the genres in which they write. The literature of testimony may indeed be a special inheritance of the Holocaust—but it is a discourse that poses challenges and difficulties for writers and readers alike.

As they have taken shape in Western culture, the diary and the memoir are distinct species of autobiographical discourse, each entailing characteristic structural patterns and eliciting predictable reader re-

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[8] "The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration," in *Dimensions of the Holocaust: Lectures at Northwestern University* (Evanston, Ill., 1977), p. 9.

sponses. Karl J. Weintraub analyzes the source of interest conventionally inherent in the diary as a literary form: "The diurnal entries of the diarist are governed by the very fact that a day has its end. Even if in the maturing diarist a sense of selection begins to be guided by the growing awareness of what this person values and does not value, the journal entry is the completed precipitate of each day. It has its very value in being the reflection of but a brief moment; it attributes prime significance to the segments of life."[9] The strength of the diary consists in its close attention to the texture of daily life and its revelation of gradual changes—in the observer and the observed—of which the author may not be fully aware; its limitation consists in its tendency to prohibit any sense of overarching design and to be unselective and repetitious. By contrast, Weintraub argues, the retrospective memoir is based upon a perspective of hindsight that impresses the "order of the present" on the past:

> The fact once in the making can now be seen together with the fact in its result. By this superimposition of the completed fact, the fact in the making acquires a meaning it did not possess before. The meaning of the past is intelligible and meaningful in terms of the present understanding; it is thus with all historical understanding . . . History and autobiography derive their value from rendering significant portions of the past as interpreted past; for both the incoherent realia of life have been sorted out and those selected have been assigned their fitting place in a fuller pattern of meaning. (pp. 826-27)

The advantage of the autobiography is that it highlights material that has emerged as essential and draws the particulars of experience under the rubric of an informing teleology; its potential liability is that the author's explanatory powers may not match the dimensions of his/her life in depth or sophistication. As a consequence of their different structures, we approach diary and memoir with different expectations. We expect a greater degree of immediacy and detail from the former and a greater comprehension of overall significance from the latter; a more static projection of consciousness in the former and a more dynamic sense of personal development in the latter.

But the typical diary or memoir of the Holocaust contradicts its conventional structure and undermines our expectations. The Holocaust diary, for example, proves to be a surprisingly effective means of conveying a coherent development of personality. Part of this effect no doubt derives from the extrinsic knowledge that we as readers bring to bear upon these diaries. The circumstances of the composition and preservation of the diary written in the ghetto or the camp necessarily influence our reception of these texts: Leon Wells's harrowing Janowska diary consisted, in its original version, of "a package of papers tied together with a piece of string and fastened to [his] belt"; Emmanuel Ringleblum's diary was stored in cans that were discovered in the rubble of the Warsaw ghetto.[10] What is more, our acquaintance with the full dimensions of the "final solution" leads us to provide each diarist with not merely a context, but a fate; Chaim A. Kaplan's ominous references to the transports to the East take an added significance from our knowledge of Treblinka and of Kaplan's own destiny in the gas chamber there.

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[9] "Autobiography and Historical Consciousness," *CritI*, 1 (1975), 827. For more on the generic characteristics of diary and autobiography, see Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (London, 1960); Wayne Shumaker, *English Autobiography: Its Emergence, Materials and Form* (Berkeley, Calif., 1954); and Barrett John Mandel, "The Autobiographer's Art," *JAAC*, 27 (1968), 216-26.

But much of the disruption of traditional expectations governing the reception of the diary as genre derives from the writer's own awareness of the ominous drift of events—not from extrinsic information provided by the reader but from intrinsic shaping achieved by the writer. In a diary such as that of Samuel Pepys, the writer merely acknowledges our presence as a shadow who may occasionally look over his shoulder; he fixes his attention upon the fruits of each day's activity and hints only slightly at the significance that they may bear for his life as a whole. Privacy and particularity are characteristic of the traditional diary. In the Holocaust diary, by contrast, personal experience cries out to be acknowledged as a register to the fate of a whole people, and the question of drift is explicitly or implicitly posed at the end of every day. Kaplan's daily entries often close with a prayer that his record will survive, as he knows he will not; his last words, followed by the ominous stillness of a blank page, are: "If my life ends—what will become of my diary?"[11] Because of the rapid transformation of reality—and of the consciousness observing that reality—that occurred in the ghettos and the camps, the diaries reflect distinct growth and definition of personality. The analytical Ringleblum (*Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*) ruthlessly confronts the significance of the panorama of suffering he sees and becomes increasingly committed to the concept of armed resistance. The meticulous, bureaucratic Czerniakow (*The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniakow*)—head of the traitorous Warsaw *Judenrat*—recounts his activities on the surface level, carefully avoiding their genocidal implications; but his anguished cries for his lost son, as well as his sporadic recognition of the Nazis' intentions in concentrating so many

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[10] Leon Weliczker Wells, *The Janowska Road* (New York, 1963), p. 249; Ringleblum, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*, trans. Jacob Sloan (New York, 1958).

[11] *Scroll of Agony: The Warsaw Diary of Chaim A. Kaplan*, trans. and ed. Abraham I. Katsh (New York, 1965), p. 340.

Jews in the Warsaw ghetto, show that he is only partially enmeshed in the web of his self-deception and signal his gradual movement toward suicide. The mystical Korczak (*Ghetto Diary*) recedes to an inner world and engages in increasingly fragmented fantasies, his only link with reality consisting of his devotion to the orphanage children he will voluntarily accompany to Treblinka in his final days. When the Holocaust diary enters the perimeters of the death camp, as in Leon Wells's "The Death Brigade" (*The Janowska Road*), each day becomes a tragic ritual in itself—beginning with Wells's agonized wondering whether he can last another day hauling and burning corpses, and ending with the routine suicide of at least one other inmate. In short, the extremity of the experience recorded in the Holocaust diary entails a profound readjustment of accustomed patterns of literary communication. Ordinarily serving to mediate between two aspects of the self—the one that performs, the other that records the performance in peace at the end of the day—the diary projects a self whose principal performance is the act of testimony and whose sense of identity hinges upon the recoverability of the text. The fragmentary character of the diary thus poses no barrier to the portrayal of personality and actually provides an accurate register into the psychological and political effects of fascist oppression. Indeed, the lack of teleology in the Holocaust diary enhances its value as a register of historical truth, since the tragic arc of history itself provides a totalizing context surpassing even the formidable interpretive powers of a Ringleblum or a Kaplan.

The Holocaust memoir effects a similar disruption of traditional generic expectations, though in quite different ways. For we ordinarily approach the narration of a past phase in a person's life with the expectation that the writer will explore the specificity of his/her fate, discover in it a pattern of growth that will be significant for the reader, and achieve some sense of felt resolution—temporary or ephemeral as that may be, depending on the phase of life at which the narration is completed. But while such a pattern may apply to the shaping of experience that we encounter in Rousseau, John Stuart Mill, or Henry Adams, it has little relevance to the experience of the great majority of Holocaust memoirists. To begin with, a sense of distinct individuality is signally lacking in most of these narratives. Wiesel asks, "Have you read, reread, attentively read, the survivors' testimonies? They seem to have been written by one man, always the same, repeating a thousand times what you, the reader, even if you are his contemporary, will never understand."[12] The uniformity in tone and content of the memoirs of the camps is, at first glance, startling. Although Elie Cohen (*The*

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[12] Elie Wiesel, "A Plea for the Survivors," in *A Jew Today*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York, 1978), p. 200.

Abyss) was a mature doctor and Gerda Klein (*My Tortured Years*) an adolescent girl, both experience nearly identical torpor and passivity upon their entry into the camp; although Primo Levi (*If This Is a Man*) was an apolitical chemist and David Rousset (*The Other Kingdom*) an anti-fascist political prisoner, both react to the cruel pressures of survival in much the same way. Traditional bourgeois autobiography aims at the elaboration of a unique individuality; the author's personality "stands for" all of humankind, even if the trajectory of the life represents a distinct and unrepeatable confrontation with familiar historical forces.[13] One goal of the Nazis' plan for the camp inmates, however, was precisely to obliterate such a sense of individuality; the goal of the Holocaust memoirist is, accordingly, not to convey a rich and unique particularity, but to delineate that process of dehumanization and anonymity that aimed at producing in the victim a negation of self.[14] Many memoirists' will to survive, their intense compassion for other inmates, their reports of resistance, rebellion, and sabotage—all these testify to the ultimate impossibility of the Nazis' program. But the writers' revulsion against the negation of their identities tends to be couched in highly universalistic terms: what appears to have survived the camps is humanity, rather than distinctly individualized human beings.

This obliteration of individuality in the Holocaust memoir is related to a second common characteristic—namely, the reversal of the traditional pattern of growth, and the absence of a felt resolution that can align the particulars of the narrative under a cohering explanatory scheme. For a Mill or a Rousseau, the steady conviction of significant individuality flowed from the emerging pattern of the personality's career, from ignorance to insight and from confusion to clarity. The firm sense of self was the product of a felt teleology in the individual's life experience. In the Holocaust memoir, by contrast, the characteristic movement is from life to death. Although the writer describes a kind of adaptation to existence (one cannot call it life) in the camps, the utter predictability of this process only underlines the irrelevance of the individual personality. A four-part development becomes familiar to the reader of Holocaust memoirs. First, the author describes life before deportation; then, the shock, disbelief, and despair of losing all one's relatives and being cast into the pit of the camp; then, the gradual process of adaptation and survival; finally, the departure from the camp and the return to a life that can only parody "normality." Innocence, initiation, endurance, escape—such is the pattern repeated in memoir after memoir, a kind of negative mirror of the traditional autobiographical journey toward self-fulfillment. And after the description of escape, a silence—more chilling, in a way, than the silence following the last page of a Holocaust diary. For where external circumstances terminate the testimonies of the diarist, internal reticence brings to a halt the accounts of the survivors. As Livia E. Bitton Jackson somberly remarks at the end of her gruesome account,

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[13] For more on the relationship between individuality and typicality, see Karl Joachim Weintraub, *The Value of the Individual: Self and Circumstance in Autobiography* (Chicago, Ill., and London, 1978).

[14] See Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (New York, 1976), passim, and Bruno Bettelheim, *The Informed Heart: Autonomy in a Mass Age* (Glencoe, Ill., 1960), Chs. iv and v. The value of Bettelheim's commentary is diminished, however, by his insistence upon the childlike passivity of the camp inmates. For an account of Jewish rebellion and resistance during the Holocaust, see Yuri Suhl, *They Fought Back: The Story of the Jewish Resistance in Nazi Europe* (New York, 1967).

> How can anyone understand the aching that is Auschwitz? The compulsion to fill the void that is Auschwitz? The search, the reaching out. The futility. The irrevocable statement that is Auschwitz. Who can understand the inconceivable futility that is Auschwitz. The loss of perspective. The loss. The total, irreconcilable loss.
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> I belong to this void. Nothing can change that. Nothing. My search for a home, for human relationships, for knowledge. This is one unalterable allegiance. This is where I belong. To Auschwitz.[15]

The great majority of Holocaust memoirists fall silent when they have completed their tales; at the moment when individuality could be resumed—or at least an account of the meaning of what they have endured might be offered—the voice recedes, or falters. Primo Levi's brief description of the liberation of Auschwitz by the Russians is incommensurate with the enormity of his foregoing experience, while the retrospective memoir that surrounds "The Death Brigade" pales beside the immediacy of Wells's camp diary. David Rousset's memoir is an exception, for at the end of *The Other Kingdom* the author attempts, however briefly, to draw his personal experience under the rubric of a broader historical analysis:

> The existence of the camps is a warning. German society, both because of the strength of its structure and the violence of the crisis that demolished it, underwent a decomposition that is exceptional even in the present state of world affairs. But it would be easy to show that the most characteristic traits of both the SS mentality and the social conditions which gave rise to the Third Reich are to be found in many other sections of world society—less pronounced, it is true, and not developed on any such scale as in the Reich. But it is only a question of circumstances. It would be blindness—and criminal blindness, at that—to believe that, by reason of any difference of national temperament, it would be impossible for any other country to try a similar experiment. Germany interpreted, with an originality in keeping with her history, the crisis that led her to the concentrationary universe. But the existence and the mechanism of that crisis were inherent in the

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[15] *Elli: Coming of Age in the Holocaust* (New York, 1980), p. 247.

> economic and social foundations of capitalism and imperialism. Under a new guise, similar effects may reappear tomorrow.[16]

Significantly, however, Rousset has to move beyond the sphere of his own life to that of politics at large in order to accomplish this goal; indeed, from its start *in medias res* at Buchenwald to its finish, *The Other Kingdom* proposes a generic contract that is as much public and historical as it is personal and autobiographical, since Rousset perceives that the arc of an individual fate is incapable of conveying the complex significance of the phenomenon of fascism. The characteristic memoir of the Holocaust, however, invites us to participate in the generic contract of autobiography and then retreats from our reach; the centrality of autobiographical individuality is parodied, inadvertently or not, and our expectations are disappointed.

Some Holocaust memoirists evince an awareness of this difficulty in communicating their experience and confront the issue by directly reflecting upon the nightmarish quality of the camp experience. Rousset—who has coined the phrase "l'univers concentrationnaire" to describe the world of the camps—remarks, "Even I, after more than a year there, cannot talk about it without feeling as if I were making it all up. Either that, or telling a dream that someone else had dreamed" (p. 41). Primo Levi also refers to the experience in the camp as a dream, which renders all his previous experience dreamlike as well: "Now everything has changed to chaos, I am alone in the center of a grey and turbid nothing, and now, I *know* what this thing means, and I also know that I have always known it; I am in the Lager [i.e., concentration camp] once more, and nothing is true outside the Lager. All the rest was a brief pause, a deception of the senses, a dream; my family, nature in flower, my home" (*The Reawakening*, quoted in Langer, p. 52). The discontinuity between the experience of the camp inmate and that of the reader is partially mitigated by this open admission of irreality; indeed, the very invocation of the notion of the "dream" serves to mediate, however incompletely, between the two realms, and to insist upon the existence of a stable reality—inhabited by the writer after the war—against which the nightmare of the camp stands in sharp relief. Other Holocaust memoirists adopt less direct techniques for establishing imaginative identification. Ernst Wiechert, for example, attributes his experiences to one "Johannes," whose internment in Buchenwald is narrated in the third person: by avoiding first-person autobiographical narration, Wiechert achieves distance from his represented world and aligns himself with—or at least grants legitimacy to—the historical stance of his readers. Anatoli Kuznetsov adopts a similar approach to the problem of individualizing the autobiographical self in *Babi-Yar*. Here the I-persona, while clearly equivalent to the author himself, is sufficiently removed by the passage of years and the process of maturation so that the author in effect projects himself as another self, one who can view his warped boyhood experiences from a position of ethical judgment not dissimilar to our own.

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[16] *The Other Kingdom*, trans. Ramon Guthrie (New York, 1947), pp. 172-73.

Perhaps it is Wiesel's *Night* that most effectively combines the immediacy of autobiographical statement with the patterning and ethical distance of fiction, for Wiesel grafts onto his narrative not one but a series of novelistic devices. Like Donat and Levi, Wiesel often evokes a hallucinatory atmosphere—"Gothic" would perhaps be too formalistic a description—in order to convey the full grotesqueness of life and death in Auschwitz. Like Kuznetsov and Jackson, he writes of his experience from the perspective of mature judgment and yet re-creates the immediacy of an adolescent consciousness. What is more, without relinquishing his foundation in factuality, Wiesel invests his memoir with some of the symbolic dimensions of a full-fledged fiction. Upon first seeing the camp, the young protagonist observes, "Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed, and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget the flames which consumed my faith forever."[17] Witnessing the hanging of a child who was arrested for sabotage and who is too light to be immediately throttled by the heavy rope around his neck, Wiesel reflects,

> For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes were not yet glazed.
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> Behind me, I heard [a] man asking:
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> "Where is God now?"
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> And I heard a voice within me answer him:
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> "Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows."
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> That night the soup tasted of corpses. (p. 71)

Finally, upon leaving the camp, the youth studies his gaunt reflection in a mirror: "From the depths of the mirror, a corpse gazed back at me. The look in his eyes, as they stared into mine, has never left me" (p. 116). Wiesel is not fictionalizing his experience at Auschwitz; he never permits his reader the luxury of believing that his represented world is an invented one, or that the corpse in the mirror is anyone other than the writer who addresses us in the text. The sustained analogy with hell that undergirds his description of Auschwitz is designed not to assimilate reality to the realm of metaphor but to uncover metaphor in the realm of reality.[18]

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[17] Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Stella Rodway (New York, 1960), pp. 43-44.

Holocaust memoirists know that their audiences possess no body of experience that is equivalent—or even analogous—to the worlds they evoke; the particularity of the events in their lives bears no connection to the particularity of the events in ours. An Adams or a Rousseau can plumb the depths of his individuality confident that the autobiographical self is seen to transcend the limitations of class and nation and to speak for the "human condition"; limited as may be the actual correspondences between his experience and that of most citizens of his age, the ideology guiding the composition and reception of the text is founded upon the consoling assumption that such a homologous relation does exist. Indeed, bourgeois autobiographers have also at their disposal the resources of a self-reflexive irony, since their contracts with their readers permit a totalizing perspective from which authors and readers alike can evaluate the subject's interaction with the historical moment. Having no such contract upon which they can rely, Holocaust memoirists turn to an alternative method of securing the credence of their audiences: they incorporate aspects of novelistic technique into the manner of representation, and thus endow the represented object with sufficient generality to ensure that grounds of communication are established between writer and reader. Whatever ironic distance emerges from *Night, Babi-Yar,* or *The Forest of the Dead,* however, takes as its object the historical existence of the camp itself, not the personality of the inmate; the autobiographical self can speak with assurance more as a survivor than as an interpreter.

What an examination of the diaries and memoirs of the Holocaust reveals, then, is that these texts compel us to revise some basic critical assumptions about the creation and reception of testimonial narratives. The diary, from which we ordinarily expect little more than fragmented glimpses of personality, yields a surprisingly compelling depiction of character in the process of metamorphosis. The memoir, from which we expect a coherent overview of the meaning of a life with which we can readily identify, thwarts this expectation and speaks to us from across a seemingly unbridgeable gulf. The challenge facing both writers and readers is the need for imaginative empathy—and at times the means used to establish such empathy entail the introduction of devices not ordinarily associated with testimonial writing. But the contract reached is anything but fictive—anything but a "willing suspension of disbelief." For the goal of the text is not to dissolve the particularity of the experience of the ghettos and of the camps into a general sense of typicality, but to reinforce the reader's perception that the horrific events portrayed "did," as Carlyle put it, "in very deed occur."[19] Two conclusions thus emerge from this brief survey. One is that these testimonial writers, despite their loss of bearings in an extreme situation, do not seek to overcome this sense of cosmic irrationality by negating the possibility of rational comprehension and assimilating the horror of their experience to a philosophical viewpoint grounded wholly in subjectivity. There is a world of difference between the *angst* of a Joan Didion and the anguish of a Livia Jackson, or between Primo Levi's memory of the sense that "nothing is true outside the Lager" and Norman Mailer's pronouncement that "once History inhabits a crazy house, egotism may be the last tool left to History."[20] Fascism begot a world that was, truly, a nightmare; but it did not, it seems, impel its victims to embrace that personalistic conception of historical process which we see exhibited in much contemporary documentary narrative. Yet our examination also implies that few Holocaust writers discerned a meaning in their destinies that could profitably utilize the interpretive structure of traditional autobiography. The diary poses fewer problems precisely because, as genre, it makes fewer claims to comprehensiveness. But with the exception of Rousset—who perceives a connection between the deepening economic and political crisis of the Weimar republic, the phenomenon of Nazism, and his personal suffering in "l'univers concentrationnaire"—most Holocaust memoirists clearly lack access to a structure of historical understanding that would locate the particularity of their experience in a coherent explanatory frame. They are unable to link their lives before the nightmare of the camp to the horror of the nightmare itself and to their shadowy existence in subsequent years. The majority of Holocaust memoirists may not proclaim that History is chaos, but their personal renderings of the historical moment are characterized by an anguished fragmentation and discontinuity. This loss of historical bearings accounts for much of what Rosenfeld calls "the revisionary and essentially antithetical nature" of many works of Holocaust literature, which, he argues, "not only mimics and parodies but finally refutes and rejects its direct literary antecedents" (*A Double Dying*, p. 29).

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[18] Several critics have commented upon the peculiar inapplicability of metaphor to the subject matter of the Holocaust. Des Pres remarks, "The concentration camps have given concrete form to the mind's most terrible enactments, such as before had been known mainly from literature, from religion and folktale, from dread and chthonic myth" (*The Survivor,* p. 170). Rosenfeld reflects, "In our own day, annihilation overleapt the bounds of metaphor and was enacted on earth" (*A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature,* Bloomington, Ind., 1980, p. 27; hereafter cited in the text).

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[19] Thomas Carlyle, "Biography," in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* (Boston, 1839), III, 108.

[20] *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, The Novel as History* (New York, 1968), p. 54.

Given the difficulties of establishing links between Holocaust memoirists and their readers in a later age, we might expect that novelists would encounter fewer problems with achieving successful literary communication. Since, as Aristotle proposed, mimesis entails generality where history entails particularity, we might suppose that writers intent upon conveying the horrific truth of the ghettos and camps would turn with relief to the resources of the novel. Yet we find that many commentators on the Holocaust have warned against the temptations of fictional representation. Wiesel, for example, believes that "a novel about Auschwitz is not a novel, or it is not about Auschwitz."[21] Although Wiesel's own practice would seem to contradict his opinion, such a view is hardly idiosyncratic. Michael Wyschogrod comments, "Art takes the sting out of suffering. . . . It is therefore forbidden to make fiction of the holocaust. . . . Any attempt to transform the holocaust into art demeans the holocaust and must result in poor art" (quoted in *A Double Dying*, p. 14). Adorno, amplifying his statement that there can be "no poetry after Auschwitz," states, "The so-called artistic representation of naked bodily pain, of victims felled by rifle butts, contains, however remote, the potentiality of wringing pleasure from it" (quoted in Langer, p. 1). Jean Améry puts the point most bluntly: "No bridge led from death in Auschwitz to 'Death in Venice' " (quoted in Langer, p. 71).

Despite the evident risks of a detached aestheticism, a number of writers have attempted to use the Holocaust as a subject for fiction. Some have utilized the format of the conventional realistic novel, with an added measure of documentation to guarantee verisimilitude. Some, rejecting the techniques and assumptions of literary realism, have opted for a consciously impressionistic style to capture the nightmarish atmosphere of the Holocaust. Others have employed a pseudodocumentary form in the attempt to attach veracity as well as verisimilitude to what is clearly an invented account; these pseudofactual novelists have, to my mind, discovered the novelistic mode that best encompasses the reality of the Holocaust. Still others—notably in recent years—have attempted a blend of fact and fiction that aspires to combine the resources of both types of discourse and proposes a dual generic premise. Indeed, the wide range of narrative strategies adopted by Holocaust novelists delineates a spectrum of approaches to the enterprise of fictional representation and illuminates the various truth-telling capacities of the novel. At the same time, the very urgency of relating the truth of the Holocaust throws into sharp relief that borderline region between imitation and fraudulence and leads us to scrutinize the difference between artistic license and historical distortion.

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[21] "A Plea," p. 198.

Those Holocaust novelists who have written realistic social novels have conveyed a sense of historicity principally through the representative quality—what Lukács would call the typicality—of the characters and events portrayed. The analogizing power of mimesis is central to the sense in which these works can be seen as historical, insofar as "history" here entails not particularity—the testimonial authenticity of the eyewitness account—but instead generality—the explanatory power of a wide-ranging replication of historical currents. Included in this grouping are such works as Leon Uris' *Mila 18*, Arnost Lustig's *A Prayer for Katerina Horovitzova,* Jean-François Steiner's *Treblinka,* and Yuri Suhl's *The Other Side of the Gate.* Introducing a cast of characters ranging from the craven Franz Koenig to the heroic Deborah Bronski and from the pacifist Alexander Brandel to the militant Andrei Androvsky, Uris depicts the effect of the ghettoization of Warsaw upon a socially representative fictional microcosm. Lustig portrays a diverse set of responses to Nazi double-talk among his wealthy kidnapped American Jews in order to point up the different strategies of evasion adopted by people unwilling to face their impending genocide. Steiner's *Treblinka* depicts a varied cast of characters in the death camp outside Warsaw and reveals the social and political metamorphosis that carried the inmates from despair to resistance. On a more modest scale, Suhl introduces an ideological spectrum of characters involved in resistance activities in order to examine the problems of anti-Semitism and anticommunism confronting the Polish partisan movement.

Each of these realistic Holocaust novels thus adopts an approach to history popular since Sir Walter Scott's pioneering achievement with the historical novel: in such works characters are chosen to reveal a cross-section of society, and, as Lukács argues, the "crises in the personal destinies of a number of human beings coincide and interweave within the determining context of an historical crisis."[22] At the same time, Holocaust writers working in this tradition rely upon direct historical underpinnings and attach to their narratives guarantees of documentary accuracy that point to a concern with historical particularity not ordinarily accompanying standard historical novels such as *War and Peace* and *Barnaby Rudge*. It would seem that Tolstoy's and Dickens' casual introduction of a fictionalized Kutuzov or George Gordon into the framework of the novel is inadequate to answer the needs of historical reconstruction in the realistic Holocaust novel, where the specific link with history carries the burden not merely of ensuring verisimilitude but also of guaranteeing credibility. As Alvin Rosenfeld has remarked,

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[22] Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel,* trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (1937; rpt. London, 1962), p. 41. I realize, of course, that the association of "realism" with such concepts as typicality and social conflict does not coincide with some popular definitions of the term. For a concise description of the multiple definitions of "realism" employed in literary scholarship, see Marshall Brown, "The Logic of Realism: A Hegelian Approach," *PMLA,* 96 (1981), 224-42.

> [The] need to place documentary or expository prose in apposition to works of fiction is quite common in Holocaust writings and would seem to indicate an awareness that imaginative literature on this subject does not carry a sufficient authority in its own right and needs support from without. This hesitation to let fiction speak for itself almost certainly grows out of a sense of double insecurity, on the one hand cognitive—"Did these things really happen?"—and on the other expressive—"Given the meager means of language, how can I convincingly relate them?" (*A Double Dying*, p. 79)

Thus Uris' novel employs a series of corroborative devices, from the interpolated diary of Alexander Brandel to a naturalistic montage of fictional and historical commentary, in order to guarantee the novel's historical immediacy. Lustig's novel is a fictional re-creation of the tale of an actual dancer who, on her way to the gas chamber, is said to have assaulted and killed Schillinger, an SS lieutenant at Auschwitz. Indeed, when we witness Katerina's murder of Schillinger at the end of the novel, the entire preceding account of the kidnapped Jewish businessmen is reshaped according to a historical Gestalt; Lustig's account of Katerina's revenge emerges not as a fictional exemplum of heroism but as an effort to reclaim from historical oblivion a legendary act of resistance. *Treblinka*, too, is firmly anchored in history—by the author's inclusion of excerpts from the diary of a former Treblinka inmate and by his prefatory and concluding remarks, which attest to the historical verifiability of each of the characters and to the accuracy of the novel's reconstruction of the rebellion.[23] Suhl's novel is followed by a postscript that testifies to the closeness between his tale and an actual episode from Holocaust history, when a Jewish infant was smuggled out of a ghetto in a barrel.

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[23] Steiner has been accused of distorting and even falsifying events at Treblinka. In his introduction to the recent reissue of *Treblinka*, Des Pres defends Steiner against these charges: "Steiner freely portrays characters, reconstitutes conversations, and fills in missing details in order to convey the essential spirit of the events on which the story depends . . . But these are not . . . serious objections so long as the structure of the story as a whole remains true to known facts . . . New information has come to light since *Treblinka* was published, but none of it discredits or seriously qualifies the story Steiner has given us" (Jean-François Steiner, *Treblinka*, trans. Helen Weaver, with an introduction by Terrence Des Pres, New York, 1979, p. xiv). Interestingly, Des Pres's principal complaint is that Steiner has attributed too much precision and ruthless efficiency to the "technicians," who were, Des Pres argues, actually more muddled and contradictory than Steiner allows.

Despite its grounding in a verifiable historical reality, however, the realistic Holocaust novel relies chiefly upon the strategy of depicting fictional characters who constitute a representative fictional microcosm. And it is questionable whether this time-honored mimetic approach can adequately convey the full extremity of Holocaust experience. For the classic realistic novel rests upon the premise that the totality of significant social relations can be conveyed and resolved through specific fictional interactions and conflicts—whether through the marital relationship of a Romola and a Tito or through the complex pattern of dependence and responsibility binding together a Jo and a Lady Dedlock. When such an inclusive strategy appears in the Holocaust novel, it fails to achieve such a sense of moral comprehensiveness. *Mila 18*, for example, is marred by the sentimentality of the intersecting love stories that make up the novel's fabric of interpersonal relations: love interest may be a vital means of getting at social conflict and accommodation in novels such as *Romola* and *Bleak House*, but it is an inadequate barometer of social relationships in the ghettos and the camps. What is more, the realistic novel's intricate moral network, which draws together heroes and villains in a unified ethical scheme, cannot adequately convey the depersonalization that marked the conception and execution of the "final solution." Thus Uris' insistent links between Koenig and the Bronskis serve to humanize a genocidal program that was in its essence inhuman. Lustig's juxtaposition of Katerina Horovitzova with Schillinger is more melodramatic than morally compelling. Even Steiner's pointed contrast between the solidarity of the inmates and the degradation of the SS—necessary as it is to his ethical scheme—precludes a sophisticated examination of the ideological process that could lead one human being to view another as raw material for processing in a death factory. Finally, the resolution characteristically reached at the end of the realistic novel strikes us as inappropriate to the magnitude and devastation of the Holocaust. Thus Suhl's novel, with its neat solution to the problem facing a particular family, seems inappropriately optimistic. Even *Treblinka*, for all its closeness to the gruesome details of the historical record, adopts conventions of suspense and romance that extract from the Treblinka rebellion a disturbing sense of catharsis. As George Steiner has complained, the episode "becomes more graphic, more terribly defined, but also has more acceptable, conventional lodging in the imagination . . . The aesthetic makes endurable" (pp. 90-91).

In short, social realism succeeds only partially in conveying the tenor of Holocaust experience. The realistic social novel proposes too many analogies between the world of its characters and the world of its readers; in the Dickensian mode, it assumes that the representative fictional microcosm can project its own critique of fascist social relations and—the point is crucial—provide its own corrective. Such a fictional strategy is valuable in that it characteristically reminds us of the resistance the Nazis encountered in their pursuit of the "final solution"; it is no accident that all the novels cited describe rebellious activity of some kind. The realistic novel also proposes that, as a social phenomenon, the Holocaust is comprehensible; it therefore provides a corrective to the ahistorical view that the death camps represent a mystical outcropping of evil. Yet the very source of its strength suggests its limitation: it substitutes catharsis for comprehension and, by celebrating the "human spirit," fails to confront the full dehumanization that defined the experience of fascism. The Holocaust may not be a nightmare beyond rational comprehension, but neither is it a historical experience readily accessible to the normative ethics inherited from nineteenth-century liberalism.

If the realistic social novel presumes too easy a congruence of the fictional and historical worlds, the irrealistic Holocaust novel—which for the most part draws upon the narrative strategies of modernism—proposes too remote a connection and runs the risk of "transcending" the Holocaust by assimilating it to a specious universality. This is not to deny, of course, that this second species of Holocaust fiction has its distinct usefulness in conveying certain aspects of Holocaust experience. To begin with, some fictions that evoke the hallucinatory atmosphere of the Holocaust succeed in conveying intense psychological pain where more realistic accounts fail. Thus Ilse Aichinger, in *Herod's Children,* treats the coming of fascism as it takes grotesque shape in the minds of a group of children. Jorge Semprun, in *The Long Voyage,* juxtaposes the perspectives of past and future time with an oppressive and seemingly eternal present in a train en route to Buchenwald; the discontinuous chronological scheme aptly conveys the Holocaust's traumatic scarring of an individual consciousness. The flexible uses of temporal sequence in the irrealistic novel also permit the exploration of the connections between the moment of the Holocaust and other phases of Jewish history. Thus Elie Wiesel, in *The Gates of the Forest* and *The Town Beyond the Wall,* explores experience on the geographical and chronological fringes of the Holocaust and places that experience in the context of a metahistorical inquiry into humanity's relation to God. André Schwarz-Bart, in *The Last of the Just,* takes as his theme the Jewish legend of the Lamed-Vov—the thirty-six just men for whose sake God has preserved the world—and delineates the culmination and conclusion of the legend in the martyrdom of Ernie Levy, who is, emphatically, the last of the just as he suffocates in the gas at

Auschwitz. Finally, the invocation of a fantastic atmosphere allows a depiction of brutality that matches in intensity the rawness of a testimonial account such as *The Janowska Road.* Thus Jerzy Kosinski, in *The Painted Bird,* evokes a grotesque and surreal atmosphere in his hero's journey through a landscape of unremitting brutality and moral decay, where eyeballs pop out and roll across the floor and men are eaten alive by rats. The hero's dark appearance—is he of Jewish, gypsy, or other non-Slavic origin?—is deliberately left ambiguous, while the novel's uncertain location in the Poland of World War II enhances the transhistorical nature of Kosinski's vision of earth as a living hell. *The Painted Bird* is, ultimately, a meditation upon the evil in humanity, rather than examination of the eruption of evil in the context of a specific historical situation.[24]

The irrealistic tendency in Holocaust fiction has attracted able practitioners and received the greatest critical acclaim of all the modes of Holocaust fiction. Semprun's *The Long Voyage* discovers ethical and historical resources in the irrealistic mode, since the author's insistence upon intersplicing the account of Gérard's train ride with descriptions of the horrors of the camp and with the record of his dislocated "liberation" centers the novel's psychological exploration around a compelling narrative focus. But for the most part the very power of the irrealistic mode in conveying the grotesque texture of Holocaust experience entails certain drawbacks. To begin with, we note that, with the exception of Semprun's novel, the irrealistic novel characteristically steers away from the ghettos and the camps. It may take us to the threshhold of the gas chamber—as in *The Last of the Just*—but rarely does it involve the reader in that sustained confrontation with the full institutional expression of Nazi atrocity which is commonly depicted in the testimonial narrative or in the realistic novel. Thus it is significant that Wiesel's unforgettable evocation of Auschwitz in *Night* is notably absent from the great bulk of his fiction, which tends to dissolve into metaphysical meditations that lack concrete relation to the experience of oppression upon which they presumably are based. Where the realistic novel too readily assimilates the world of the ghettos and camps to that of the reader, the irrealistic novel too often fails to treat this material at all. More seriously, the irrealistic mode too easily removes Holocaust experience from the crucible of the historical moment and draws it under the rubric of one form or another of philosophical idealism. Aichinger's surrealistic narrative captures the disoriented perceptions of her childish heroine and aptly renders the confusion of Ellen's mind, but it also dissolves the reader's awareness of anti-Semitic persecution into a vague sense of paranoia. In a similar manner, Schwarz-Bart detracts from the cataclysmic nature of Nazi persecution by placing his hero's destiny in the context of centuries of pogroms. Kosinski's inculpation of all of humanity has the effect of exculpating the Nazis, or at least of reducing their guilt: if we all are naturally evil, the historical incidence of National Socialism cannot be condemned, nor can we strive effectively to prevent the recurrence of fascism in the future.

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[24] In *Notes of the Author on* The Painted Bird (New York, 1967), Kosinski discusses the nihilistic moral perspective of the novel, as well as the novel's close relation to his own experience.

In short, the irrealistic novel either evades the horrific center of the Holocaust or else discovers in the Holocaust a parable of universal human amorality—and thereby fails to illuminate the concrete specificity of an event that is all too insistently located in our own century. With its disjunctiveness of chronological scheme and abstractness of historical landscape, the irrealistic mode brings to bear upon the subject matter of the Holocaust the formidable resources of modernism: linear narrative is disrupted and the represented world is denatured in order to convey the nightmarish quality of Holocaust reality. But, as Lukács argues in "The Ideology of Modernism," this strategy can end up by confirming the very dehumanization it sets out to confront:[25] Where realism proposes too facile a framework for grasping the problematics of the Holocaust, irrealism proposes too fragmented an explanatory mode. And yet the two approaches may not be as opposed as they first seem: conventional moralism and apocalyptic mysticism are both, after all, expressions of a philosophical idealism that would account for historical tragedy in essentially nonmaterialist terms.

A third type of Holocaust novel—which I shall call "pseudofactual"—adopts a qualitatively different approach to mimesis that enables its practitioners to avoid some of the pitfalls encountered in both the realistic and irrealistic modes. Writers of both realistic and irrealistic fiction implicitly base their creative process upon the assumption that mimesis involves what Aristotle called "the imitation of men involved in action"—the "men" being fictional people with analogues in the historical world. The difference between realism and irrealism simply consists in the specificity of this analogy. The former opts for highly representative social types occupying a recognizable world studded with actual historical persons and events, while the latter depicts less typical personalities in a landscape more remotely resembling our own; but both abide by a fictive contract that never proposes the represented scenario of characters and incidents as itself "real," but instead relies upon a strategy of configurational analogy. Insofar as documentation is employed in either of these mimetic modes, it enters into the manner of representation, not into the object of representation. In the pseudofactual novel, by contrast, the object of representation is not an imagined configuration of characters and events, but a putative historical document that records such a configuration. Practitioners of this third type of mimesis posit that the text can in fact be two steps removed from "reality"; it is an imitation of a mode of non-fictional discourse—memoir, diary, letter—that itself refers to the historical world.[26] This mimetic strategy need not mean that the author takes "language" rather than "life" as the object of imitation—although such an emphasis upon linguistic self-reflexivity is popular with such contemporary metafictionists as Barth and Nabokov, who use the device of the text within the text to tease the reader's settled assumptions about the reality of the real. In the hands of the Holocaust novelist, the pseudofactual mode achieves quite the opposite effect. For, while recognizing the artifice of the "factual" text, we are drawn into a Gestalt that invites us to examine Holocaust experience as simultaneously general and particular—general in that it consists of the lives of recognizable human types with whom we establish empathy; particular in that it is rendered by a quasi-historical voice that hesitates to generalize beyond its immediate sphere. In the pseudofactual novel, "reality" is restricted to the point of view of a single character/witness—not in order to suggest the inherently subjective nature of perception and interpretation, but to guarantee that we do not incorporate Holocaust experience into abstract generalizations or draw from it the ethical solace that routinely accompanies even the most concretely immediate "fictitious" fiction. The pseudofactual mode provides the unified image of a fictive realm but challenges the autonomy of this realm. While it projects an imagined world in its totality, in its local effects it substitutes historical probabilities for literary ones, and thus insistently reminds the reader of the text's relation to the historical world.

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[25] "The Ideology of Modernism," in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans. John and Necke Mander (London, 1963).

Thus in John Hersey's *The Wall*—a vastly underrated work—the object of imitation is the supposed diary of one Noach Levinson, which has apparently been discovered sealed in cans buried beneath the rubble of the Warsaw ghetto. In a sense, of course, we grant that the diary is a novelistic device, a means of narrating the intersecting fates of the various characters who constitute Hersey's imagined microcosm of ghetto society. Indeed, we remark that in places the artifice is perhaps overly visible, since Levinson occasionally has to introduce a rather cumbersome testimonial apparatus in order to report scenes at which he was not present. Yet the advantages of this device outweigh its disadvantages. To begin with, the closeness between Levinson and such ghetto archivists as Ringleblum and Kaplan substantially enhances our sense that the novel is grounded concretely in the historical moment. *The Wall* may not have been written by a Ringleblum or a Kaplan, but like Defoe's pseudofactual *Journal of the Plague Year*—which it resembles in many ways—it certainly could have been written by such an actual witness. (Indeed, Hersey feels obliged to preface his text with assurances that his novel is to be read as an invention: "This is a work of fiction," he begins. "Broadly it deals with history, but in detail it is invented. Its 'archive' is a hoax."[27]) What is more, Hersey's strict adherence to the restricted point of view of an engaged participant precludes the troublesome sense of totalization and catharsis that accompanies many straightforward realistic novels of the Holocaust. Thus the romance between Rachel Apt and Dolek Berson, while moving and poignant, never overwhelms the novel with sentimentalism—as do the various romances in *Mila 18*—because it is not permitted to take precedence over the historical context or to become independent of the quasi-historical observer who witnesses its progress. Nor does Hersey exhibit any compulsion to direct his narrative toward a gripping climax or to incorporate his imagined world into an ethical scheme suggestive of poetic justice. Hersey does not, we note, propose any startling analysis of fascism; but neither does he suggest humanistic moralism or false transcendence. The result is a compelling narrative that permits the reader imaginative identification with the Holocaust world and yet anchors this world in a direct and disturbing historical awareness.

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[26] For a full exploration of the notion that fictions characteristically imitate nonfictional discourse, see Barbara Herrnstein Smith's *On the Margins of Discourse*: *The Relation of Literature to Language* (Chicago, Ill., 1978). Smith maintains that all fictions take factual discourse as their *object* of representation; I argue that only the pseudofactual novel works in this manner, and that other fictions incorporate various aspects of nonfictional writing merely into their *manner* of representation.

In much the same way, Tadeusz Borowski's series of short stories, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen,* takes a camp inmate's journal as its putative object of imitation. Each story poses itself as a segment of the author's testimony about his internment in Auschwitz; the longest, "Auschwitz, My Home," even purports to be a letter written to Borowski's lover. The signals indicating that *This Way for the Gas* is actually a work of fiction are subtle; perhaps the most important is the author's assumption of an ironic and deprecating attitude toward his narrator, who is attributed a selfishness and moral obtuseness that could hardly escape the self-censorship involved in the writing of an actual journal. (According to persons who knew Borowski when he was himself interned at Auschwitz, the author's characterization of the narrator is at variance with his own unselfish and even heroic behavior in the camp.[28]) Borowski creates an imagined world of extreme moral degradation that he compels us to condemn by enforcing the conventions of fictional judgment; at the same time, his use of a hypothetical memoir as intertext challenges us to defy the historical existence of such a moral universe. The pseudofactual mode permits Borowski to explore ethical questions beyond the reach of the realistic mode, which hesitates to center upon the moral degeneration of the inmate in its interpretation of the meaning and effect of the ghettos and the camps. Yet the pseudofactual mode also enables Borowski to restrict his inquiry to a single individual, and thus to avoid the metaphysical pessimism of a Kosinski, who suggests, in the desensitization of his hero, a tendency inherent in the ethical constitution of all humankind.

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[27] *The Wall* (New York, 1950), p. vi.

Piotr Rawicz' *Blood from the Sky* illustrates still another variation on the pseudodocumentary mimetic mode. The bulk of the novel consists of the first-person narration of the Jewish Boris—alias the Slavic Yuri—who passes through a quasi-picaresque series of adventures in the ghettos and villages of the wartime Ukraine. Boris' account even achieves a kind of gallows humor: he is saved from execution by boldly convincing his Nazi captors that his penis was circumcised for sanitary rather than religious reasons, and his "tool"—the object of puns and riddles throughout the book—thus becomes a macabre symbol of the instrumentalist fascist mentality. Yet Boris' narrative—interspersed with poems and meditations—is framed by the magisterial presence of "the author," who claims to edit and select his hero's papers—not without a "faint repugnance," he adds, at their resemblance to "dirty linen." Underlying this grim humor is a recognition that no single account can adequately convey the essence of the Holocaust. As "the author" comments in despair about his editorial task,

> Do I have to admit it? It was "the tool and the art of comparison" . . . that I was trying to fish out of this mass of gibberish—though they were, in fact, far from preponderant . . . But cutting is easier than judging: in this great sea of words, what had and what hadn't a bearing on the precious story? Boris seemed sometimes to be sheltering from his human condition, too vast and too uncomfortable, by confining himself to his more personal condition: that of the man with the wound, that of protagonist in his own story. Had he not discerned the utter flimsiness of this fictitious and purely cerebral step: "from the general to the particular"?[29]

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[28] Alfred Alvarez notes, "Although in reality [Borowski] is said to have behaved with great courage in Auschwitz, in his stories he transforms and degrades himself" ("The Literature of the Holocaust," in *Beyond All This Fiddle*: *Essays 1955-1967*, London, 1968, p. 23). Mary Louise Pratt has used the term "flouting" to describe the strategy whereby the pseudofactual novelist signals fictional intentions by undercutting the reader's expectations of a factual generic contract. See her *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse* (Bloomington, Ind., 1977), esp. pp. 152-200.

[29] *Blood from the Sky*, trans. Peter Wiles (New York, 1964), p. 119.

Rawicz' pseudodocumentary strategy thus permits the articulation of a sharply individualized experience, suggests a symbolic and generalizing dimension to that experience, and yet poses an ironic critique of the assumption that his hero's tale can "speak for" the totality of Jewish experience in World War II.

The pseudofactual mode is especially suited to treating the subject matter of the Holocaust, then, because it prohibits participation in conventional moralism or spurious transcendence at the same time that it permits the reader to enter imaginatively the concretely historical world of the victims of fascism. The pseudofactual novel of the Holocaust rejects the epistemology of the realistic novel insofar as it questions the applicability of those typical analogies and congruent ethical schemes that furnish the structural underpinnings of literary realism. But pseudofactual Holocaust fiction eschews historical or epistemological skepticism: we never mistake the difficulty of proposing an adequate explanatory framework for the impossibility—or unimportance—of knowing what is real.

In several recent novels about the Holocaust, however, we discern a cavalier approach to the treatment of factuality and verisimilitude that raises new questions for the criticism of Holocaust fiction. In different ways, Gerald Green's *Holocaust*, Leslie Epstein's *King of the Jews*, and William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* bring to bear upon the interpretation of the Holocaust a distinctly postmodernist merging of subjective fantasy with objective reality. Interestingly enough, each novel works within one of the three major modes of Holocaust fiction; *Holocaust* utilizes the realistic mode, *King of the Jews* the irrealistic, *Sophie's Choice* the pseudofactual. Taken together, the three demonstrate how Doctorow's conviction that "there is no fiction or nonficition—only narrative" has motivated recent practitioners in various mimetic modes.

In *Holocaust*—the novel based upon the recent controversial television "docudrama"—Gerald Green attempts to encompass the totality of the Holocaust within the interlocked experiences of various members of the Weiss family and thus encounters in magnified form the difficulties that routinely accompany any effort to treat the Holocaust in the traditional format of the realistic social novel. Cataclysmic as the effects of the Holocaust could be, it is difficult to believe that a single family could have experienced *Kristellnacht* in Berlin, the "euthanasia" killings, the work camp at Buchenwald, the death camp at Auschwitz, the "model camp" at Theresienstadt, mass murder in the ravine at Babi-Yar, the uprising at Sobibor, the partisan bands in the forests, and the Warsaw ghetto uprising. Green's encyclopedic survey has the effect of circumscribing and totalizing an experience that surely defies such facile treatment. This problem is compounded by Green's use of the interpolated diary of SS member Erich Dorf, who brushes against the Weiss family at several points in the narrative. As in *Mila 18*, the attempt to anchor the misery of one family in the actions of some specified oppressor negates the impersonality of the Nazis' rationalized plan of genocide. Dorf's diary also involves some serious dislocations of historical fact, however, and points not simply to naïveté but to real distortion in Green's adjudication of historical guilt. For Green's attribution of the invention of Zyklon B to the fictitious Dorf—as well as his suggestion that the intricate verbal subterfuge regarding the "final solution" was the masterplan of this mythic Nazi—has the effect of lifting the full onus of responsibility from the shoulders of such real personages as Heydrich and Eichmann, both of whom appear in the pages of *Holocaust*. As Ezrahi wryly remarks, "Unlike either the historical figure in a straight documentary or the character who is conceived, lives, and dies in the house of fiction, the fictitious villain in a historical context is a kind of ghostly figure who commands little or no moral attention."[30] The process of fictionalizing historical data in *Holocaust* is thus qualitatively different from the documentary approach adopted in such realistic novels as *Treblinka* or *A Prayer for Katerina Horovitzova*. For while Steiner and Lustig rework certain episodes and flesh out certain characters in order to create tension, they never depart from the outlines of the historical record. By claiming for Dorf a status halfway between history and myth, however—and by grafting this hybrid creature onto a fictive tale that purports to encompass the enormity of the Holocaust in a single tale of victimization and villainy —Green at once reduces agony to the status of melodrama and distorts the locus of historical responsibility. *Holocaust* is not a fraudulent work simply because it aspires to make history accessible in a popular format, as some have suggested;[31] it is fraudulent because it both proposes a shallow resolution and catharsis and performs a frivolous reshuffling of historical facts.

If *Holocaust* represents a contemporary exploitation of realism in fiction about the Holocaust, *King of the Jews* represents an abuse of irrealism. Writing in the bizarre and impressionistic mood of a Kosinski or a Schwarz-Bart, Epstein depicts a surreal setting—the "Baluty suburb" ghetto of a nameless Polish city—and creates a grotesque aura of slapstick surrounding the antics of its leader, one "Isaiah C. Trumpelman." In this context, indeed, Trumpelman achieves a kind of heroic stature—not because he possesses any admirable qualities but simply because, in his willful insanity, he epitomizes the madness of a mad world. Even within the conventions of irrealism this portraiture would be problematic enough, since it shrouds historical assumptions in an ahistorical rhetoric: if fascism is an expression of mass psychopathology, then resistance was impossible, and *Judenrat* complicity with the Nazis was justifiable and possibly even correct. But when we remark that Trumpelman is not created by Epstein but modeled quite closely upon an actual figure of Holocaust history, the fantastic irrealism takes on added significance. For *King of the Jews* is a monstrous and tragic *roman à clef*: The Death Warriors are the Nazis, the anonymous city is Lodz, and Trumpelman is the notorious Mordecai Chaim Rumkowski, who, as head of the *Judenrat,* set himself up as "king" of the Lodz ghetto, rode around on a white horse, and guaranteed a steady supply of slave labor for the Nazis until late in the war (1944).[32] Although Rumkowski's behavior was indeed strange and horrendous, he was all too real and represents a nadir in *Judenrat* collaboration with the Nazis. By treating the historical account of Rumkowski in the irrealistic mode, Epstein is not, in the manner of Schwarz-Bart or Kosinski, simply proposing a universalization of the moral problems raised by the experience of fascism. He is instead implicitly endorsing highly problematic historical actions while precluding reasoned debate about those actions. In Epstein's hands, then, the belief that fact outstrips the strangeness of fiction leads to acceptance of a vision of historical absurdism; and historical absurdism, when applied directly to the fate of the city of Lodz, entails passive acceptance of the horrors that occurred there—and, indeed, a peculiar glorification of those grotesque figures who played leading roles in the city's nightmarish historical destiny.

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[30] Ezrahi, p. 33.

[31] See, for example, Lance Morrow's "The History-Devouring Machine: Television and the Docudrama," *Media and Methods*, 15 (October 1978), 18-21, 61-63.

Just as Green and Epstein impose a distinctly post-Holocaust consciousness on the modes of realism and irrealism, respectively, William Styron employs the form of the pseudofactual novel to lend credence to an essentially solipsistic interpretation of the Holocaust. *Sophie's Choice* makes a claim to truth that is more than "merely" mimetic, since the novel's narrator, Stingo, is clearly a projection of the author in his youth. Stingo makes extensive reference to his Southern heritage and to the publication of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* twenty years after his putative acquaintance with Sophie—references that anchor the novel not merely in a narrative consciousness typical of the decade (such as that of Nick Carroway in *The Great Gatsby*) but in Styron's own past. Styron also takes considerable pains to establish the concrete historicity of the year 1947, when the novel's principal action takes place: the Nuremberg trials are constantly mentioned in the newspapers, and the central characters discuss such contemporary events as the lynching of Bobby Weed and the entry of Saul Bellow onto the literary scene with the publication of *The Dangling Man*. In spite of its implied guarantee of veracity and its careful grounding in the historical moment of the postwar world, however, *Sophie's Choice* proposes a distorted—indeed, racist—perspective on the Holocaust. Styron's decision to cast the novel's heroine as a non-Jewish Pole could indeed be a legitimate venture—Jews were, after all, not the only victims of Nazi extermination—but Styron's exploration of Sophie's suffering is in effect anti-Semitic, because it promotes sympathy for a Gentile at the expense of a Jew. The principal Jewish character in the novel, Nathan Landau, is a psychotic sadist who continues in Brooklyn the tortures that began for Sophie in Auschwitz. Nathan's mental imbalance is in no way traceable to the oppression of world Jewry, but instead emerges as a purely private expression of madness that takes as its victim the blond, vulnerable, voluptuous Gentile. Nathan takes shape as a grotesque counterpart of the historical Rudolph Hess, administrator of Auschwitz, who appears as a character in the novel. Hess is if anything more of a gentleman, since he never abuses Sophie personally and treats her with a kind of melancholy respect. Such portraiture would be highly questionable even in a straightforward historical novel; Tolstoy, by contrast, was more careful with fidelity to the historical outline even as he breathed fictional life into his Napoleon and Kutuzov. But these "historical" elements are especially pernicious in a text that carries the ring of truth and claims to be narrated by the author himself, who, presumably, actually knew a Nathan and a Sophie in Brooklyn after the war, and actually heard Sophie's sad testimony from her own lips. It is no accident that, just as anti-racist critics roundly condemned Styron for his retelling of history in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, many commentators have taken similar exception to the treatment of the Holocaust in *Sophie's Choice*. In both works, Styron finally proposes that we blame the victim for the crime, and in both works his hybrid blend of fact and fiction serves to confuse the relationship between private myth and historical actuality.[33] Although Styron works in a different mode from Green and Epstein, he manipulates our historical expectations with equal aplomb. While such epistemological play may be diverting when the object of imitation is the rhetoric of Coover's Richard Nixon or the scholarship of Nabokov's Charles Kinbote, the utilization of such warping devices in the narrative reconstruction of genocide strikes us as tasteless, if not simply dishonest.

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[32] For a discussion of Rumkowski's activities, see Robert Skloot, "Directing the Holocaust Play," *Theatre Journal,* 31 (1979), 527-40. The role of the *Judenräte* in the ghettos of occupied Poland was and is the subject of heated debate. A defense of the *Judenräte* is given in Jacob Robinson's Preface to Isaiah Trunk's compendious *Judenrat: The Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe under Nazi Occupation* (New York, 1972), pp. xxv-xxxv. A searing critique is posed by Ben Hecht in *Perfidy* (New York, 1961). Emmanuel Ringleblum (see n. 10) detested both Rumkowski and Czerniakow.

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[33] I should note that it is by no means impossible for a contemporary writer to treat the Holocaust in a moving and significant manner. Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's *Anya* (New York, 1974) represents a fine example of sensitive exploration

What is ultimately most problematic about these recent Holocaust novelists, however, is not so much that they warp particular components of the historical record as that they call into question the very possibility—or desirability—of rendering an objective account—factual or fictive—of the Holocaust. For this approach carries a disturbing implication. One of the philosophical foundations of National Socialism was the belief that truth is relative, determined not by the application of reason but by the exercise of force. Nietzsche's concept of knowledge as power, Vaihinger's postulate that all our abstractions are fictions—such relativistic notions about the relation of mind and world, while not fascist in themselves, furnished important ideological underpinnings to a political regime that made its "truth" felt all too bluntly, however mystified its rationale. Inadvertent as the coincidence may be, writers such as Styron, Green, and Epstein encourage an epistemological relativism that is philosophically akin to the subjectivist attitude toward truth characteristic of the very fascist nightmare they describe. As George Orwell pointed out in his writings on the Spanish Civil War,

> I know it is the fashion to say that most of recorded history is lies anyway. I am willing to believe that history is for the most part inaccurate and biased, but what is peculiar to our own age is the abandonment of the idea that history *could* be truthfully written. In the past people deliberately lied, or they unconsciously coloured what they wrote, or they struggled after the truth, well knowing that they must make many mistakes; but in each case they believed that "the facts" existed and were more or less discoverable. And in practice there was always a considerable body of fact which would have been agreed to by almost everyone . . . It is just this common basis of agreement, with its implication that human beings are all one species of animal, that totalitarianism destroys. There is, for instance, no such thing as "science." There is only "German science," "Jewish science," etc.[34]

Surely the Holocaust testifies to the tragic consequences of historical submission to a lie. In our own troubled times, when even the historical evidence for the Holocaust is being called into question by certain neo-

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of the consciousness of a survivor. Interestingly, this novel is a pseudo-memoir, or very close to one: its careful adherence to the details of Anya's life, trivial as well as significant, calls to mind the historical probabilities informing a reality-referring narrative such as Livia Jackson's *Elli*.

[34] "Looking Back on the Spanish War," in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London, 1968), II, 258-59.

fascist "scholars,"[35] the challenge of discerning the historical and symbolic contours of a rapidly receding past is formidable enough. What we need to satisfy the current curiosity about the Holocaust is not an untrammeled and irresponsible virtuosity that plays fast and loose with the fragile structure of truth, but an imaginative empathy that recovers the sad history of our century and renders it in unforgettable outline for present and future generations.

The foregoing discussion suggests, I hope, that the study of Holocaust literature inevitably gravitates toward a discussion of "truth"—historical, testimonial, and fictional "truth." When we read about the Holocaust, we do not want to read lies or evasions. Yet we become critical of the ways in which writers approach the truths at the heart of their narratives. If they propose that the Holocaust can be accounted for with no qualitative break from inherited moral categories, then their truths strike us as shallow, and the content of their discourses seems to press against the limitations of their traditional forms. If, conversely, the writers imply that the Holocaust represents a total break with received conceptions of human behavior, then the truth at the center of the texts is shrouded in an ahistorical mysticism, and we are left dissatisfied and uneasy. If the writers suggest that it is impossible to align the truth of the text with the truth of history—since all truths, regardless of historical moment, are inherently subjective and unknowable—we are more uneasy still. Holocaust narrative thus furnishes a delicate instrument for investigating the cognitive powers available in various modes of discourse at various historical moments. It reveals that narrative forms tend to be conventionally bound by sets of ideological assumptions, and that the propositional adequacy of these forms can vary with changes in the historical world. In other words, our urgent need to discover the contours of the world prompts us to examine and evaluate the representational strategy of the works.

The investigation goes the other way as well: our experience with the problematics of these works impels us to reexamine the structure of the historical world. In this essay I have suggested that some of the dominant literary strategies inherited from bourgeois liberalism have proved insufficient to account for the full dimensions of the Holocaust. In conclusion, I propose that a fruitful topic for further historical investigation would entail an examination of the ideology of liberalism in its relation to fascism. Why did the liberalism of the 1920s and 1930s prove incapable of forestalling the coming of fascism? What veiled continuities might exist between the economics and politics of liberal capitalism and those of fascism? What elements of ideology might they have in common?[36] Writing in the early 1930s, Herbert Marcuse warned that the tendency of bourgeois liberalism to privatize human experience and to hypostatize "self" and "culture" as a realm apart from "history" was paving the way for fascist hegemony.[37] Having witnessed the full dimensions of the catastrophe he forecast, we might do well to reassess the validity of Marcuse' hypothesis—and also to investigate its applicability to the historical configuration of our own time, when once again liberalism seems unable to grapple with an increasingly totalitarian governmental policy. Indeed, Holocaust literature contains an urgent appeal that we do no less.

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[35] In *The Hoax of the Twentieth Century* (Richmond, England, 1975), for example, Arthur Butz proposes that Zyklon B was a pesticide, the gas chambers were showers, and six million Jews simply disappeared into the Soviet Union or Palestine during the war. Butz is now co-editing a neo-fascist journal, *The Journal of Historical Review*, which continues to garb these lies in academic dress.

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[36] As a starting point for this investigation of the extension of capitalism into fascism, I recommend R. Palme Dutt, *Fascism and Social Revolution: A Study of the Economics and Politics of the Extreme Stages of Capitalism in Decay* (New York, 1935), and Daniel Guerin, *Fascism and Big Business*, trans. Frances and Mason Merrill (New York, 1973). See also Benjamin B. Ferencz, *Less Than Slaves: Jewish Forced Labor and the Quest for Compensation* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1979), and George L. Mosse, *Masses and Man: Nationalist and Fascist Perceptions of Reality* (New York, 1980).

[37] See "The Affirmative Character of Culture," in his *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory* (Boston, 1968), pp. 88-133.

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