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Writing about the Inconceivable

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Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer, *Between Witness and Testimony: The Holocaust and the Limits of Representation*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001. 192 pp. $49.50; $16.95 paper.

Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. 208 pp. $39.95; $17.95 paper.

Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000. 272 pp. $49.95; $19.95 paper.

Decades ago, there was mainly silence about the Holocaust. But the issue of Bitburg and an American president willing to visit a cemetery where both Auschwitz victims and SS men are buried riveted attention on the mass murders and signaled a change in modern culture and American Jewish culture in particular. The silence was followed by an overwhelming proliferation of scholarship on the Holocaust, causing a leading Holocaust historian to worry over its "use and misuse."[1] His concern proved justified because the Shoah has now been particularized so completely that it has even become the standard of authenticity for Jewish people, the only sense many Jews have of their Jewish identity.[2] Robert Alter protested in 1981 that

1. Michael R. Marrus, "The Use and Misuse of the Holocaust," ed. Peter Hayes, *Lessons and Legacies: The Meaning of the Holocaust in a Changing World* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1991) 106–19.

2. Giorgio Agamben comments on the term "Holocaust," which he claims to be incorrect in connection with the destruction of the European Jews. He traces the semantic

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"to make the Holocaust the ultimate touchstone of Jewish values, whether political or religious, is bound to lead to distortions of emphasis and priority" and to falsifying "our lives as Jews by setting them so dramatically in the shadow of the crematoria."[3] Having borne almost complete reticence about that catastrophic event, having had it used as a measure of Jewish identity, even consigning Jews to victimhood, we are now confronted by a surfeit of scholarship that theorizes how to represent trauma and at the same time casts profound suspicion on language. The question that cries out for an answer is, What have current historiography and literary criticism added to the debates about the path paving the way to the Nazi genocide and the destruction of Europe's Jews?

Earlier debates arose from antipodal positions regarding historiography. One centers on how the course of historical events should be determined. The intentionalists respond by identifying the agents of history, namely Hitler, who they maintain are culpable. In *The War against the Jews*, for example, Lucy Dawidowicz alleges that Hitler and his relentlessly anti-Semitic policy set the stage for mass murder on September 1, 1939, when he attacked Poland.[4] As Michael Marrus observes, "This line of thought accents the role of Hitler. . . . this explanation of the Final Solution rests on quotations and depends, in the final analysis, on the notion of a Hitlerian 'blueprint' for future policies, set forth in *Mein Kampf* and other writings and speeches."[5] Those who doubt the existence of such a blueprint and who judge Hitler's capacities otherwise are referred to as functionalists.[6] They deem the Final Solution as improvised, not purposely planned; and they contend that Hitler's motives are difficult to unmask and his competence to plan

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history of the word and reveals that it is "essentially Christian," a term that was used in disputations against the Jews, and responsible for creating the euphemistic term "Shoah" (*Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen [New York: Zone, 1999] 28–31).

3. Robert Alter, "Deformations of the Holocaust," *Commentary* Feb. 1981: 51, 54.

4. Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The War against the Jews, 1933–45* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1975).

5. Michael R. Marrus, *The Holocaust in History: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (New York: Meridian, 1989) 35.

6. The term is Christopher Browning's, in *Fateful Months: Essays on the Emergence of the Final Solution* (New York: Holmes, 1985).

carefully questionable. An awareness of Hitler's constant raving against the Jews secures an understanding of the intentionalists' point of view. However, Marrus's conclusion about Hitler's famous speech of January 30, 1939, is telling: the speech is "an important measure of his [Hitler's] priorities," but it is not "clear . . . what the January speech tells us about Hitler's objectives at the time. A look at his words in context shows that Hitler spoke for several hours, but devoted only a few minutes to the Jews." If the path followed by the intentionalists is all too direct, the road the functionalists take is "twisted" (*Holocaust* 37, 40). Christopher Browning and others have challenged the functionalists' conclusions just as the functionalists challenged those of the intentionalists. At times it becomes difficult to distinguish one from the other.

Both sides agree, however, on documentary evidence as fundamental to analyzing historical problems. Yet for those historians who adhere to poststructuralist philosophy, that is not the case. Skeptical of whether documents can register a historical event objectively, Hayden White is interested in how to construct a narrative of history and how to determine an "emplotment" of historical language. White's ideas about narratives and histories of the Holocaust are resoundingly stated in "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth." He begins this way: "There is an inexpungeable relativity in every representation of historical phenomena." About the Nazi Final Solution, he asks: "Are there any limits on the *kind* of story that can responsibly be told about these phenomena? . . . In a word, do the natures of Nazism and the Final Solution set absolute limits on what can be truthfully said about them?"[7] Other historians, Berel Lang for one, insist that documenting the events of history is primary and the intentions and writing style of the historian secondary.[8] The two positions encompass the divergence between the subjectivists and the objectivists.

Theories of representation have become fundamental to contem-

7. Hayden White, "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth," *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution,"* ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992) 37–38.

8. Berel Lang, "The Representation of Limits," *Probing the Limits of Representation* 300–317.

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porary scholarship on the Holocaust, and the concern about representation itself has a context. The *Historikerstreit*, or the German Historians' Debate, arose in the aftermath of the visit to Bitburg during the summer of 1986. It was occasioned by Ernst Nolte's article arguing that the Holocaust was unexceptional and Jürgen Habermas's objection to the fallaciousness of attempting to rewrite the Nazi past. In addition to Nolte, revisionist German historians like Michel Stürmer and Andreas Hillgruber held that the historian should devise positive images of the past so as to renew national self-confidence. A strategy of avoidance, that stance stirred up a debate about whether German scholarship should "assume a more skeptical and critical attitude vis-à-vis the commonplaces of a national past for which Auschwitz has become the unavoidable metaphor, thereby assisting concretely in the process of 'coming to terms with the past.' "[9] Charles Maier, in *The Unmasterable Past*, addressed coming to those terms, as they were ascertained in 1988: "The central issue has been whether Nazi crimes were unique, a legacy of evil in a class by themselves, irreparably burdening any concept of German nationhood, or whether they are comparable to other national atrocities, especially Stalinist terror. . . . But if the Final Solution remains noncomparable—as the opposing historians have insisted—the past may never be 'worked through,' the future never normalized, and German nationhood may remain forever tainted, like some well forever poisoned."[10]

The issue of uniqueness as opposed to the comparable foregrounds the contemporary consideration of another historians' debate—the one over how the Holocaust is to be represented. Reflecting on the Historians' Debate, Dominick LaCapra elucidates issues relevant to the current argument about representation: "whether . . . it [the Holocaust] will be worked through to any conceivable extent," what problems confront the Holocaust historian, and the "demands placed upon the historical use of language

9. Richard Wolin, "Introduction," *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate*, ed. and trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1990) xvi. For Habermas's comments, see his article in the same collection, Jürgen Habermas, "A Kind of Settling of Damages" (207–28).

10. Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1988) 1.

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in attempting to account for phenomena such as Auschwitz."[11] No longer repressed by silence but "still struggling to find its proper locus," the Holocaust has become an event clamoring for serious reflection and a comprehensive approach to its representation.[12]

Such a reflection in itself fires doubts concerning the acceptability of abstract theoretical discourse about so horrendous an event and fosters skepticism about an appropriate depiction. Indeed, a conference, "Nazism and the Final Solution," was convened in 1990 to discuss the evolving image of the Nazi annihilation of Europe's Jews. In his important introduction to the collection of essays that the conference produced, *Probing the Limits of Representation*, Saul Friedlander describes the dilemma trenchantly: although the destruction of the Jews of Europe "is as accessible to both representation and interpretation as any other historical event," the event "tests our traditional conceptual and representational categories, an 'event at the limits.' "[13] Why is the Holocaust an "event at the limits"? Jürgen Habermas has responded to that question unequivocally:

> Something happened there [in Auschwitz] that no one could previously have thought even possible. It touched a deep layer of solidarity among all who have a human face. Until then—in spite of all the quasi-natural brutalities of world history—we had simply taken the integrity of this deep layer for granted. At that point a bond of naiveté was torn to shreds—a naiveté from which unquestioned traditions drew their authority, a naiveté that as such had nourished historical continuities. Auschwitz altered the conditions for the continuation of historical life contexts—and not only in Germany.
>
> (251–52)

A catastrophe of those dimensions merits caution: "It suggests, in other words, that there are limits to representation *which should not be but can easily be transgressed*. What the characteristics of such a transgression are, however, is far more intractable than our defi-

11. Dominick LaCapra, "Representing the Holocaust: Reflections on the Historians' Debate," *Probing the Limits of Representation* 109, 122.

12. Dan Diner, *Beyond the Conceivable: Studies on Germany, Nazism, and the Holocaust* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2000) 173.

13. Saul Friedlander, Introduction, *Probing the Limits of Representation* 2–3.

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nitions have so far been able to encompass" (Friedlander 3). The issue of historical knowledge, the problematics of language, and a need for "truth"—these have sparked the current debate. The contrast between Hayden White's extreme relativism and Carlo Ginzburg's impassioned plea for historical objectivity and truth is clear, even stark.[14] "Reality" and "truth," therefore, are contested terms in the fundamental relativism of postmodernism, and they inform any exchange about Nazism and the Holocaust.

That such interchanges—the one between the functionalists and the intentionalists and the one between subjectivists and objectivists—have led historians to select traumas or disasters as subjects for investigation is unsurprising. Writers of all stamps have taken a statement Theodor Adorno made in 1949 as an admonishment to find a way to express the unspeakable. The focus of most critics and writers who have explored what is at stake in writing literature about the Holocaust, or who have doubted the ethics of creating works of art on the destruction of Europe's Jews, Adorno's maxim—"to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric"—has been widely misunderstood. As Lawrence Langer points out, "Few readers know that Adorno's stricture appeared at the end of . . . 'Cultural Criticism and Society' " and that it "had little or nothing to do with Holocaust literature or the experience it sought to express."[15] Rather, Adorno's words aimed to puncture "self-satisfied contemplation" so that an acceptable way to depict "doom" might be found.[16] Perhaps that issue has nourished the trauma theory that now animates historiography as well as critical theory. Theories about trauma spring from the perceptions Freud enunciates in texts like *Moses and Monotheism* and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, texts that "both speak about and speak through the profound story of traumatic experience," in Cathy Caruth's assessment. In other

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14. Carlo Ginzburg, "Just One Witness," *Probing the Limits of Representation* 82–96.

15. Lawrence L. Langer, "Recent Studies on Memory and Representation," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 15.1 (2002) 77.

16. Lawrence L. Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995) 77. Trying to decipher the riddle of how long it has taken to arrive at an expression of doom, James Berger concludes, "Finally, most generally and perhaps most obviously, the late twentieth century is a time marked, indeed defined, by historical catastrophe" ("Trauma and Literary Theory," *Contemporary Literature* 38 [1997] 572).

words, the voices in the texts, however unknown to us, force us to bear witness to them. Caruth provides an indispensable lens through which to interpret meaningfully the belatedness that characterizes trauma, for belatedness itself is where trauma lies, which is to say that "history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas."[17] Caruth's perspective on trauma and its discourse affords an essential means to begin a discussion of Michael Rothberg's *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*, Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer's *Between Witness and Testimony: The Holocaust and the Limits of Representation*, and Dominick LaCapra's *Writing History, Writing Trauma*.

Rothberg's *Traumatic Realism* seeks to answer the question of "how to comprehend the Holocaust and its relationship to contemporary culture" (1). For Rothberg, the enormity of that event requires not only an appropriate means of representation but the instruction of poststructuralist theory. In his opinion, there are two approaches to the Holocaust, the "realist and antirealist," both of which rely on a familiar antithesis—that the Shoah is either unique and impenetrable or knowable and representable (3).[18] Nearly two-thirds of his book concentrates on Theodor Adorno and Maurice Blanchot, and those chapters constitute an extensive account of the impact the two critics had on modern culture. Rothberg believes that "[Adorno's] account of culture 'after Auschwitz' both constructs a complex philosophical chronotope and provides an original analysis of genocide on the space and time of representation" (27). Applying Bakhtin's thought to Adorno, Rothberg claims that Adorno has read modernity in light of Auschwitz, and that the term "traumatic realism" is one with which he would fully agree.

The lengthy examination of Adorno precedes the chapter on Maurice Blanchot, in which Rothberg studies the French critic and his entanglement with right-wing journals during the 1930's. With the exception of Jeffrey Mehlman's *Legacies of Anti-Semitism in*

17. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996) 4, 24.

18. On this issue, Yehuda Bauer remarks that the Holocaust is explicable, but this "does not imply any kind of closure" (*Rethinking the Holocaust* [New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2001] 38).

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France, few books deal so openly with the so-called missing texts of Blanchot.[19] Blanchot shares with Adorno, then, the experience of transforming his relationship to the Nazi genocide into a philosophical and ethical strategy necessary to apprehending the problems at the core of postmodernism. The two chapters are immensely valuable for their painstaking analyses, though Rothberg's frequent descent into the abstract portrays Adorno and Blanchot in terms as elusive as their own texts often are.[20] Keen to clarify his term "traumatic realism" and ultimately succeeding, Rothberg nonetheless inclines to abstractions in that process as well. Simply stated, traumatic realism involves "the traumatic event as an object of knowledge" and its importance lies in inducing readers to become implicated in the trauma of their postmodern culture. An agent to refashion our apprehension of the Holocaust, traumatic realism is not a messenger of unity; instead, its mission is revelatory. Training an audience in how to encounter an object, traumatic realism clarifies the "overlap, and [the] tensions" of "history, experience, and representation" and manifests their "epistemological and pedagogical, or, in other words, political" features (177, 140).

The concept of the concentrationary—David Rousset's concept for the constellation of the extreme and the everyday—is broadened by Rothberg's exegesis of Ruth Kluger's memoir *Weiter Leben: Eine Jugend (Living On: A Youth)* and Charlotte Delbo's trilogy *Auschwitz and After*. Rothberg attributes to her title Delbo's intention of looking at Auschwitz in two time frames that coexist in her chronicle and announce their separation. Together the literary practices of Kluger and Delbo not only build on Adorno's insights but use literature as a kind of archive to formulate an "intervention that is not only aesthetic but interdisciplinary" (177). Rothberg's are provocative analyses, and they fulfill his intention of forcing readers of these works to face historical responsibilities, whether inherited or experienced, rather than evade them.

However valuable Rothberg's readings are, there remains the is-

19. Jeffrey Mehlman, *Legacies of Anti-Semitism in France* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983).

20. In his *Adorno* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1984), Martin Jay discusses Adorno's ideas in less abstract terms than does Rothberg.

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sue of language. Designating the Holocaust an "extreme event" is apt, but overuse of that label can sanitize the atrocity. The term "traumatic realism" risks the same fate. Enjoining readers to "acknowledge their relationship to posttraumatic culture" seems worthy enough. Yet what are the implications of that experience? Rothberg's conviction that trauma produces "a socially shared universe of meaning" in which all can participate significantly calls forth Lawrence Langer's assertion: "dozens of witnesses have recorded in their testimonies the feeling of solitude that seized them during the most chaotic moments of atrocity in ghettos and camps" ("Recent Studies" 83). How to represent such a world? All of the writers and artists Rothberg considers are preoccupied with what can and what cannot be portrayed from the universe of destruction, as Geoffrey Hartman might call it.[21] Their preoccupation is consonant with the postmodern obsession with trauma and coexists, Rothberg thinks, with a "sense that trauma has lost its disruptive edge," that "what is missing from most discussion today [is] concern with the referential components of discourse and with the course of history" (186). What Dan Diner has observed about the historian is germane to Rothberg as well: "the more closely the historian focuses on the abstract" details of the trauma, "the further he moves from the horror of the deed."[22]

Unanimous assent never greets a worthwhile critical book, particularly on a contested issue, and Rothberg's book is no exception. His consideration of Philip Roth, Art Spiegelman, *Schindler's List* and *Shoah*, and the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., is likely to trigger the most dissent. A case in point is the chapter inelegantly called "Reading Jewish" on Philip Roth's *Operation Shylock*. No reader would gainsay that novel's concern with Jewish identity. But would all readers agree that "Philip's twoness, his antithetical biography, is the narrative equivalent of his spatial location at a determinate distance from the events that surround him in Israel and that echo the genocidal history of Holocaust"?

21. See Geoffrey Hartman, "The Book of the Destruction," *Probing the Limits of Representation* 318–37.

22. Diner makes this comment (164) in connection with historians of the Holocaust. It applies just as accurately to literary critics.

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And surely not *all* "Jewish Americans of all political stripes—Zionist, anti-Zionist, and critically Zionist—have recognized Israel and the Holocaust as the twin poles of their identity formation" (201).

It is directly against this notion of a simple "twoness" of identity that *Operation Shylock* struggles. Consider, for a moment, that novel as the third volume of Roth's autobiography, and observe the way Roth envisages the self and its multiple forms, conflicting impulses, and clashing encounters.[23] For Roth, Israel presents burdens equivalent to those of the Diaspora. To reduce the complexities of Roth's journey to a political statement about the Palestinians and Israelis, or to assert that *Operation Shylock* "suggests that in the postintifada, post–Cold War world, ethnic struggle and potential genocide create too much pressure to maintain the rhetoric of uniqueness [of the Holocaust]," is at the very least to render the complex simple, which, as Kenneth Burke once said, is exactly what the complex is not. The apodictic conclusion Rothberg reaches about Spiegelman's *Maus* presents similar problems: "The drift is that for post-1967 diasporic and Israeli Jewish communities any text that explicitly challenges sentimental renderings of the Holocaust also implicitly challenges that tragedy's dialectical double—the legitimacy of Israeli incursions into Arab land" (215). An interview Spiegelman gave on National Public Radio in which he commented on southern Lebanon paves the way for Rothberg's judgment. But the lack of a rigorous argument that contextualizes these issues and relies less on disputable assumptions attenuates Rothberg's conclusions considerably.

If *Traumatic Realism* concludes that the "deadly persistence of religious, racial, and ethnic hatred continues to haunt the present, as do the specters of genocide" whose "reality reappears on city streets everywhere," Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer's *Between Witness and Testimony: The Holocaust and the Limits of Representation* poses a question they admit is dangerous: "To what extent can a disaster, or an individual's attempt to respond to it, be considered redemptive?" (Rothberg 272, 273; Bernard-Donals and Glejzer vii). In their endeavor to understand what an event at the limit is, the writers reconsider the relation between witness and

23. For more on this point, see my article, "This Doubly Reflected Communication: Philip Roth's 'Autobiographies,'" *Contemporary Literature* 36 (1995) 443.

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testimony and the "nature of a redemption . . . that involves access to what lies beyond it" (xiii). To speak of divinity in a book about the Holocaust is as troubling as connecting it to redemption; nevertheless, the thesis of *Between Witness and Testimony* is that "the divine, like the God whose image is banned by the Second Commandment, is defined by excess, something quite outside the limits of the knowable that can only be indicated and only leaves a trace" (x). Thus for Bernard-Donals and Glejzer, it is the sublime that is the ultimate indicator both of the limits of knowledge and of what lies behind it, and they attempt to discover what witness and testimony, sublimity and redemption have in common, and to demonstrate how they are applicable to pedagogy.

The way in which the traumatic effect of certain representations of the Holocaust can be elucidated casts doubt on the canonical definition of the terms "sublimity" and "redemption." Redemption—"the differend between the conceivable and the presentable"—is linked by Bernard-Donals and Glejzer to one kind of Jewish mysticism. In turn, it is related to the sublime—the disturbing events of history that compel the reader to face her dread of the limit. Following Walter Benjamin, Bernard-Donals and Glejzer chronicle redemption and postulate a redemptive critique, which they claim is "a work of *remembrance* . . . a process of preserving the truth content or idea of a work [or an object] from the ever-threatening forces of social amnesia to which humanity has over the ages become inured" (Benjamin, qtd. in Bernard-Donals and Glejzer 9). Horrifying moments, therefore, can be redemptive, though not in conventional terms; what is redeemed "is what exceeds representation," but "not as positive or transcendent . . . not the lives lost or the experiences that traumatize a life" (11). Bernard-Donals and Glejzer grapple in a similar fashion with the association of sublimity and the Holocaust, employing Kant's *Critique of Judgment* as a *locus classicus*. While continually rehearsing the limitations of their explanation, Bernard-Donals and Glejzer decide that "because both redemption and sublimity are defined as the act that tries nonetheless to bring into relation extremity and concept, witness and testimony," they cannot "avoid understanding them together, both for their barbarity and also for their promise" (22). Accordingly, Abraham Lewin's "Diary of the Great Deportation"

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exemplifies their conviction, "because it forces open those worlds we might imagine, and through that opening comes a confrontation with what the human mind can and cannot do" (47). If Rothberg's language becomes quite abstract at times, Bernard-Donals and Glejzer's takes on mystical hues. Of Lewin's diary they write, "But it is redemptive in the sense that in what it cannot say—in what is de-scribed, unwritten, in the words and the images incanted by them—we see the disaster as it affects us individually, as it destroys the narratives and the memories we have created to contain both our 'selves' and the name of the Shoah, and as it fleetingly and irretrievably connects Lewin, and the event, and us, to the uncanniness of the divine"(47).

Lawrence Langer has urged us to understand that "when the vocabulary used to describe this event [the Holocaust] is neutralized by its cultural context . . . shorn of the specific forms of terror that the victims actually faced (gas, fire, frost, heat, starvation, thirst, beatings), we begin to recognize how easily language can be used to *betray* reality to reshape (or distort) it, indeed, to summon up any attitude we wish, *despite* the inhuman conditions that inspired the attempt" (*Admitting the Holocaust* 26). No matter how well-meaning a critic is, no matter how discerning, no matter how scrupulous, the words chosen to describe this historical atrocity must not veer away—or to purloin Dominick LaCapra's formulation—"trope away" from it, neither through dispassionate abstraction nor in impassioned spirituality. When Primo Levi registers the difficulty of perceiving someone else's experience from the distance of time and alterity, he simultaneously issues an unwritten warning about the language used to describe another's experience. Bernard-Donals and Glejzer's conclusion about the limits of epistemology and the Shoah is linked to Levi's: "The Holocaust requires an epistemology based on the instrusion of the real rather than its foreclosure, pointing towards an ethics that forces us beyond reducing the Holocaust to a simply symbolic system" (77).

Such a system diverges sharply from Aharon Appelfeld's "fire zone," the locale of the catastrophe itself, which he exhorts writers to avoid. It is otherwise for Tadeusz Borowski. To employ the "language of presence," as Borowski does, is to force readers to gaze directly at the fire zone, the very place Appelfeld seeks to escape

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by hewing to the "language of absence" (Bernard-Donals and Glejzer 81–89). Their unequivocal positions vis-à-vis language contrast with Cynthia Ozick's; where their texts rely on excess, Ozick's are informed by conflict, uncertainty, and ambiguity and seek to avoid another zone—the one inhabited by idols. In discussing Ozick's essays and fiction, Bernard-Donals and Glejzer underscore her conviction that the six million should be sanctified or separated, a separation they claim is "negative" (90). That the Shoah is not "the object of representation here [in *The Shawl*]" is correct, but they mistakenly attribute to her tale a "location beyond representation" that "forces the reader or viewer out of all connection with the logical and into contact with what surpasses it" (98).

Rather, the contact is with the illogic of psychic truths, for in her novella Ozick is a kind of Virgil of the Nazi Hell, a guide into the unconscious realm of a survivor—the place, Primo Levi tells us, "convenient truths" seek to circumvent. Juxtaposing Ozick's *The Shawl* with Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved* uncovers the dark facts about survival contained in "Levi's final testimony."[24] To accept Levi's famous detachment at face value is to misapprehend the invincible rage that propelled him to suicide. More than an injunction against idolatry, then, *The Shawl* might to be said to represent the fire zone Levi faced. And Rosa, who provides a window into his consciousness, survives the Nazi Hell that ultimately vanquished Primo Levi.

If the languages of absence, presence, and separation disclose a location beyond representation, the films *Night and Fog*, *Shoah*, *Schindler's List*, and *Life Is Beautiful* all avoid covering over the "trauma of the event" by "differentiating witness and testimony, the seen and the said" (105). For Bernard-Donals and Glejzer, the divine is somehow connected to the moments that rupture history, and the Historical Museum can only signal the "*beginning* [emphasis added] of history and the end of the six million as particulars," forcing the viewer "to identify with Israel's history instead of any particular victim" (141). For F. R. Ankersmit it is otherwise. Of his experience at Yad Vashem he writes compellingly:

24. The phrase belongs to Cynthia Ozick, who uses it in *Metaphor & Memory: Essays* (New York: Knopf, 1989) 41.

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> This is precisely what the Holocaust memorial must be for future generations. It must not aim at an overcoming of the past, nor at a reconciliation with the horrors of the past. The memory of the Holocaust must be an illness, a mental disorder from which we may never cease to suffer. Not only because of the crimes themselves that were committed against the Jews, but also because genocide will remain forever a possibility in future human history.[25]

And future human history is what concerns Bernard-Donals and Glejzer in their final reflections on teaching and writing about the Holocaust. Instructors, they conclude, "need to teach *that what we are supposed to know we do not know*, that the most crucial—hence most radically particular—learning is not to be found in the fabric of our lectures, tests, essays, understandings, or knowledge of the event" (174). In other words, the knowledge that instructors impart should induce their students to appreciate that knowledge cannot solve difference, that an encounter with trauma "must be particular" (173). That is incontestable. Their conclusion itself, however, requires the particulars of how to teach the Holocaust differently from other historical traumas or an argument divulging how they regard the issue of the Shoah's specificity, where they stand on its singularity or comparability, whether, in fact, for pedagogical purposes they think it valuable to stress one position or the other.

That trauma and its aftermath remains an abiding issue is unmistakable from Dominick LaCapra's point of view. His book *Writing History, Writing Trauma* elucidates the problems associated with trauma and charts the ways theory is related to practice. Adapting psychoanalytic concepts to historiography as well as to economic, social, and political dimensions, LaCapra yokes the variance Freud adduces between acting out and working through to the historian's task. The perspective of history—the argument of whether truth claim are necessary—is seen as necessary but insufficient. To truth claims LaCapra fastens "empathic, responsive understanding and performative, dialogical uses of language," as well as "the role of the middle voice in 'writing' trauma" (xii). Ideas LaCapra unfolds and articulates in earlier books, like *Representing the Holocaust* and *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, he accords a broader perspective in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, in which he expands upon

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certain of his original points and furnishes new directions for further research and reflection.

LaCapra's premise is that the binary opposition between the individual and society, and historical approaches to collective as well as individual reactions to events, need to be reconceived in light of fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis—denial, repression, transference, acting out, and working though. Two ways of remembering trauma are implicated in transference, the repetition of feelings between parent and child in other, inappropriate situations. Whereas Freud envisioned acting out as a compulsive repetition of a trauma from the past that sacrifices life lived in the present, he conceived of working through as a healthy form of transcending or, at the very least, coming to terms with trauma, so that the individual differentiates the past from the present and thereby owns a future. If Freud considered that process as the road to a cure, LaCapra takes psychoanalysis itself "in more ethical and political directions" (143). To come to terms with the past, and especially with the traumas of the past, is to relinquish acting the past out so that engaging with ethics and politics is possible.

LaCapra's treatment of the middle voice also takes on psychoanalytic overtones when he avers that if the middle voice "suspended judgment or approached it only in the most tentative terms," it might be apposite "to ambiguous figures in Primo Levi's gray zone, for example, certain . . . members of Jewish Councils . . . certain victims who were also perpetrators" (30). Is not that explanation congruent with the accepting silence and evenly hovering attention of the analyst listening to his patient? And when LaCapra cautions against the dangers of excessive objectivity and empathy, the influence of Freud's conception of countertransference is revealed. Like the psychoanalyst, the historian must recognize why a particular trauma provokes the affect it does or risk interpretative error. Two extreme reactions—full identification with victims or total denial of their experiences—distort a historian's perception of events and hinder the ability to comprehend them. LaCapra theorizes that the alternative to extreme reactions "is trying to work out some very delicate, at times tense, relationship between empathy and critical distance," or transforming one's understanding of problems rather than reenacting them repeatedly (147). In the face of these

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responses, "empathic unsettlement" is required, for it permits a more "cognitively and ethically responsible" approach to representation, writing, and dialogic exchange (41, 42). The dialogic exchange in psychoanalysis, contrary to what many believe, includes morals—the morals arising out of adult ethical behavior, not out of infantile guilt. Many who employ psychoanalytic concepts neglect that fact, but LaCapra stresses it as a *sine qua non* of historiography. Discounting the ethical domain, critics promote neither an acceptance of a sense of guilt nor a resolution of collective guilt.

Working through and acting out pertain to the problem of absence and loss whose differences LaCapra establishes. He situates absence in a transhistorical level and locates loss on a historical one. Since absence does not involve events, it is distinct from loss, which encompasses particular events. Why this dissimilarity needs elaboration becomes apparent in LaCapra's distinction between anxiety and melancholia, for the indefiniteness of anxiety, its lack of an object to fear, varies from the feelings generated by loss in which an object inheres. It is precisely the conflation of loss and absence, LaCapra believes, that yields "melancholic paralysis or manic agitation" that obfuscates or generalizes "the significance or force of particular historical losses (for example, those of apartheid or the Shoah)" (64). To work through the historical trauma is "to allow a less self-deceptive confrontation with transhistorical, structural trauma and in order to further historical, social and political specificity, including the elaboration of more desirable social and political institutions and practices" (85). In this association of psychoanalytic thought and historiography, there is a vitalization of theory, an exemplification of its actual practice, and, more importantly, a significant ethical direction for further investigation.

How theory meets praxis is displayed in LaCapra's analysis of Holocaust testimonies, both of perpetrators and of victims. An explication of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* appears in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, just as one does in *Traumatic Realism* and *Witness and Testimony*. The subjects of almost all critics who explore the Nazi mass extermination and the literature devoted to it, *Shoah* and the Goldhagen debate are in LaCapra's hands treated evenhandedly. Lanzmann's interviewing techniques are examined and assessed along with the historians' practices, and both are judged in

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light of the transferential realm. On the one hand, Daniel Goldhagen instances the "extreme identification with Jewish victims," and the evidence he deploys in his argument serves as an illustration of "extremely questionable hypotheses and assumptions" (100). On the other hand, the "excessive objectification" of Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews*, a study based largely on documents, and which LaCapra deems both "important and groundbreaking," illustrates his theoretical perception of the misapprehension latent in the strategy of objective distancing (100). An essential component of understanding, empathy itself is bound up with a transferential relation to the past and, therefore, constitutes a difficult component to master. But LaCapra reconceives empathy and adds to it the sense of "unsettlement" that limits both exorbitant objectification as well as inordinate identification. His revised version succeeds in allowing for a more effective historical understanding.

Other concerns command LaCapra's deliberation: what to name the extermination of the Jews in Europe and whether to judge the Holocaust unique. For him, that is not a "strategy of universalization" or a "'humanization' of the deed"; rather it has to do with "difficulty with the concept of uniqueness," which "*can* easily serve identity politics and a certain kind of self-interest, and . . . also become involved in what may be termed a grim competition for first place in victimhood" (Diner 228; LaCapra 159). Nevertheless, denying the particularity of the Jewish Holocaust and opting for a comparative approach to the Holocaust's Jewish victims not only transforms "the tale of the Holocaust into a narration beyond Jewish existence and Jewish historical experience," but "blurs in a universalizing intent . . . [and] lacks any differential auratic element—the only element that produces meaning" (Diner 228–29). The meaning LaCapra ascribes, however, to psychological insight for the practice of historiography merits application, for the historian's insistence on vigilance toward individual reactions and limitations outside the purely professional ones holds the promise for coming to terms with the traumatic past, as well as addressing "the need for linkages with sociopolitical analysis and practice bearing on contemporary problems and possibilities" (218). Of central importance for representing the abyss of mass extinction, LaCapra's book

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registers considerable theoretical and analytic effort. What is more, it intimates an acceptance of the "cancellation of basic principles of rationality" that is an absolute prerequisite for relating the inconceivable deeds enmeshed with Auschwitz (Diner 137).

But writing about that past theoretically can lead to abstraction, to a path away from the "human realm" and toward "dreadful anonymity."[25] Is rescuing the suffering from anonymity compatible with theoretical expositions? Does the postmodern robust belief in historical relativism make some historiography an untenable method of confronting the Holocaust? Those are questions that refuse to be silenced or dismissed, and they haunt all the books reviewed here. Still, with all of their problematic dimensions, the theories proposed by Rothberg, Bernard-Donals and Glejzer, and LaCapra offer a viable means to restore to the imagination an antidote to sweetening the horror. Freighted with our indomitable Pollyannaish cultural convictions, which proclaim optimism in the face of any disaster however hopeless, let alone a disaster of the Shoah's proportions, we quickly shrink from the complications involved in imagining such an extreme event. Although historians like Berel Lang proclaim facts, not graphic description, as imperative because they speak for themselves, such commentators often abrade the issue and render its contours indistinct. For these reasons, the literary critic as well as the historian is constrained to use all instruments available to his enterprise. If literature affords a way to "restore to the imagination the depth and scope of the catastrophe," it also necessitates what James Young in his recent book *At Memory's Edge* calls an "antiredemptory aesthetic."[26] And it is against redemption and toward acknowledgment that the historian and the literary critic must strive.

As we continue to reflect on this extreme event, and as we pursue various theoretical modes to represent it, we must remain alert to

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25. F. R. Ankersmit, *Historical Representation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2002) 193. I quote Aharon Appelfeld (*Beyond Despair: Three Lectures and a Conversation with Philip Roth*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green [New York: Fromm, 1994] 39), who also uses the phrase "sweeten the horror." He declares fiction an antidote to that unwelcome act, since fiction depicts deeds graphically.

26. James Edward Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2000).

the dangers of finding shelter in how to delineate the Holocaust rather than in availing ourselves of the means to brave it. That theory can separate us from what is theorized rather than bring us closer to it constitutes the Gordian knot in all the books reviewed. Their commitment to map the dynamics of trauma is coextensive with their ability to deny access to the experience of trauma. These are the challenges of engaging in theoretical reading and writing about the destruction of European Jewry. In this connection, it would be well to remember Primo Levi's adjuration: "But since we the living are not alone, we must not write as if we were alone. As long as we live we have a responsibility: we must answer for what we write, word by word, and make sure that every word reaches its target."[27]

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27. Primo Levi, *Other People's Trades*, 1985, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Summit, 1989) 174.

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