

IMAGINING AUSCHWITZ:  
POSTMODERN REPRESENTATIONS OF THE HOLOCAUST

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Kristina Busse

APPROVED: \_\_\_\_\_

Geoffrey Harpham, Ph.D.  
Director

\_\_\_\_\_  
Molly Rothenberg, Ph.D.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Joseph Valente, Ph.D.

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the Holocaust's relationship to modernity and postmodernity and the historic event's effects on a post-Holocaust world, culturally, socially as well as artistically. Showing the Holocaust's widespread influence on our postmodern unconscious, this study examines a variety of literary texts that demonstrate the haunting effects of the Holocaust on the present.

After a brief reading of Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader* that situates the concerns and parameters of this study, Chapter One looks at the theoretical relationship between the Holocaust and postmodernity. For the most part mutually exclusive, cautiously ignoring or, at best, dismissing one another, these fields ought not to be seen as antagonistic but can, instead, greatly contribute to our engagement with the past. Postmodern theory with its denial of universalism, its celebration of the imagination, and its emphasis on representation and representability is highly dangerous to Holocaust Studies. Likewise, postmodernism often shies away from addressing the Holocaust since the historic event comprises possibly its most serious challenge as this historic event questions the easy dismissal of absolute truths and values as well as the ludic treatment of history itself. Nevertheless, the two fields are intricately entwined and a postmodern approach to the Holocaust reveals new insight into both postmodernism and our study of the Holocaust.

Accordingly, Chapters Two through Four look at the cultural, linguistic, and psychological effects of the Holocaust on post-War life in close readings of E. L. Doctorow's and Walter Abish's postmodern historical novels, Raymond Federman's highly experimental texts and his readings of Samuel Beckett's work, and D. M. Thomas's controversial fictions. While these authors by no means present a comprehensive account of Holocaust literature, they offer a wide variety of reactions to the Holocaust, not only showing its exemplary role for postmodernism but also exhibiting a variety of ways in which postmodernism can offer new insights into our understanding of the Holocaust and its role in contemporary life. The dissertation concludes with an examination of identity politics within Holocaust, exemplified by the case of Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments* and the scandal surrounding its reception.

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## INTRODUCTION

### HOW TO BE A POSTMODERN READER OF THE HOLOCAUST

While one of postmodernism's impulses has always been to overcome the clear distinctions between highbrow elitist literature and popular culture, many—if not most—postmodern texts have failed to do just that. Self-involved, idiosyncratic, and self-referential to a fault, most postmodern authors remain within the confines of the academic ivory tower while bestseller lists are firmly held by writers such as John Grisham, Stephen King, Tom Clancy, or Anne Rice. It is surprising, then, when a novel succeeds in both arenas—even more so when it is both foreign and concerned with a topic as weighty as the Holocaust. Bernhard Schlink's 1995 *The Reader*, however, does just that: both critically acclaimed and highly popular, this 1999 Oprah's Book Club selection simultaneously sells at local grocery stores and makes reading lists of college courses, thus easily bridging the gap between academic writing and popular fiction. Moreover, one of only a few recent German novels to have become widely popular in the US, *The Reader* addresses some of the central problems of postmodern readership as it thematizes not only the Holocaust but also our reception of it. In fact, what distinguishes this novel from many other Holocaust texts—and might contribute to its popularity—is the way it self-consciously celebrates its mediatedness as it acknowledges its gruesome fascination with and horror of the concentrationary universe. Setting the novel apart from what some critics have derogatorily termed "holocaustology," is its constantly and often

painfully self-reflexiveness which, in turn, implicates the reader and his or her desire to read about the Holocaust.

### Ethics and Aesthetics in Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*

Schlink's *The Reader* serves as both incentive and introduction to my study of the relationship between postmodern theory and literature on the one hand and the field of Holocaust Studies on the other. As it stands, postmodernism and the Holocaust are, for the most part, mutually exclusive, cautiously ignoring—or, at best, dismissing—one another. After all, there is much to be afraid of in opening up these fields to something that has the power to undermine their very self-understanding. As far as Holocaust Studies is concerned, postmodern theory and practice is highly dangerous with its denial of universalism, its celebration of the imagination, and its emphasis on representation and representability. Postmodernism, on the other hand, faces its most serious challenge in the Holocaust as this historic event questions the easy dismissal of absolute truths and values as well as the ludic treatment of history itself; in fact, one could say that the Holocaust offers postmodernism an ethical test case. I want to show how postmodernism does not have to be seen as an antagonist to Holocaust Studies but can, instead, greatly contribute to our engagement with the past. In fact, *The Reader* indicates how a postmodern framework is vital in furthering our understanding of the Holocaust, a fact that is borne out in my discussion of the postmodern texts by E. L. Doctorow, Walter Abish, Raymond Federman, Samuel Beckett and D. M. Thomas.

Introducing ever more intricate reading layers into its seemingly simple story, Schlink's novel crystallizes a variety of moral and ethical issues for the postmodern

reader. In so doing, the novel raises some of the problems central to this dissertation: not only does its choice of plot, style, and character challenge a certain moral imperative of what may be appropriate to address in a novel about the Holocaust, its emphasis on reading and the reader moves the central concern from the event itself to issues of representation and representability. My analysis of Schlink's novel thus introduces several concerns central to this dissertation: For one, Schlink foregrounds the question of reading, thus emphasizing issues of mediatedness, reader reception, as well as our (in)ability to access the past. As a result, the novel raises aesthetic and ethical concerns of Holocaust representation, an anxiety that is clearly displayed in the text's academic reception. Finally, one of the main questions throughout *The Reader* is the moral responsibility of classical education with its traditional Enlightenment values, thus directly confronting the relationship between modernity—and, by extension postmodernity—and the Holocaust. After briefly discussing these issues as they relate to *The Reader*, I will give a general overview of aesthetic and ethical concerns of Holocaust literature in order to show how the following chapters challenge these notions by introducing postmodern theory and literature into the field of Holocaust Studies.

The narrator and protagonist of *The Reader*, Michael Berg, born like the author in the last years of the war, comes of age in postwar Germany as he is trying understand Germany's recent past. The book begins with the 15-year-old protagonist's secretive affair with the older Hanna, a relationship that comes to an abrupt end when Hanna leaves without telling the boy why or where she is going. One of the aspects of this hidden and somewhat sordid relationship is the intimacy the lovers derive from the process of Michael's reading books aloud to Hanna. Only years later as a young law

student does Michael encounter his first lover once more. Witnessing the judicial proceedings against concentration camp guards, Michael suddenly recognizes Hanna as one of the defendants. Refusing to defend herself or to take an exculpatory handwriting sample, Hanna is sentenced to life in prison. It is here that Michael realizes Hanna's secret of illiteracy, a secret that is to her even more shameful than her activities during the Holocaust, a secret that needs to be protected at all costs. With this knowledge, he begins a correspondence with Hanna during her long prison stay and sends her taped recordings of his reading classical novels and poetry to her. When Hanna has committed suicide on the day of her release from prison does he visits her cell and really learns about her life. It is here that he realizes that Hanna has taught herself to read with the help of his tapes, an ability she then uses to learn about the history of the Third Reich and the Holocaust. The novel ends with Michael fulfilling Hanna's last wish: he delivers a box with her savings to the last of Hanna's surviving victims, savings that are donated to a Jewish charity for illiteracy. It is in this conversation between Michael and the survivor that the latter thematically connects the two story lines as she regards Michael as yet another of Hanna's victims, a thought that deeply troubles Michael.

For many readers, there are a variety of problems with the novel. For one, the subject matter itself, with its odd intermingling of the seduction of a minor and mass murder is highly problematic. After all, the initial sections that introduce us to the sexual exploits of the underage Michael and the enigmatic Hanna are intricately connected with their later encounters. Only when reading it retroactively through Hanna's trial and her imprisonment can we make sense of the relationship's awkward beginnings with Michael's nausea, its odd intimacy of his reading to Hanna and the sexual violence of

Hanna's spanking of her younger lover. Through their age, gender, and involvement with Nazism, Hanna and Michael can easily be seen to represent two versions of Germany: the old, decrepit, guilty nation is contrasted with its young, emasculated, innocent yet voyeuristic counterpart that is desperately attempting to come to terms with its past.<sup>1</sup> As a result, the sexual relation takes on a metaphoric character for the central issues of Schlink's novel, namely the Holocaust and German guilt, thereby uneasily connecting sexuality and the Holocaust. Moreover, this simplistic imagery puts the text in danger of simplifying complex issues and granting the old Germany absolution as it ultimately does Hanna. Both the single-minded focus on Hanna as well as the often-exculpatory nature of Michael's inquiries and thoughts raise Hanna to the status of a victim herself, not on the same level as the women she guarded but a victim to circumstances nonetheless. With this comparison, *The Reader* asks its audience to sympathize with the perpetrator, an identification made even more problematic by the fact that the novel focuses primarily on Michael and Hanna, thus silencing the victims who are never even given the courtesy of proper names.

On a slightly more tenuous note, Holocaust novelist Cynthia Ozick, in an article in which she pits "The Rights of History and the Rights of the Imagination" against one another, criticizes *The Reader* for its unrepresentativeness, i.e., she condemns Hanna's illiteracy as historically not plausible. What makes Ozick's criticism so astounding, however, is her complete denial of any theories of representation, instead opting for a realist approach that completely eschews the medium of transmission—be it visual or textual. In so doing, she is representative of a certain type of Holocaust Studies that

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the novel's heavy-handed symbolism, see Ian Samson.

opposes contemporary theories for their seeming inability to provide simple truths and answers.<sup>2</sup> The article begins with an avid defense of the undeniability of visual representations of the Holocaust. While she admits that “photography can be kin to forgery,” she quickly assures her readers that “at that time the camera did not lie” (23). In fact, for Ozick, the absolute truth status of Holocaust representations carries over to the written word as well, as she argues, “And later, when the words disclosing those acts of oppression first began to arrive, we knew them to be as stable and as trustworthy as the camera’s images” (23). Ignoring all sophisticated recent theories of visual and textual mediation, Ozick uses the moral authority of the Holocaust to outweigh any theoretical concerns as to the reliability of eyewitness testimonies or photographs.<sup>3</sup> Ozick’s argument thus concurs with many Holocaust scholars who exempt Holocaust testimonies from both textual analysis and historical investigation by their sole characteristic of being composed by eyewitnesses in a celebration of immediacy that purposefully ignores all we have learned about textual mediation. In turn, non-eyewitnesses are subject to intense scrutiny as the Holocaust yet again is placed in a sacred space. Thus, Ozick argues that “What is permissible to the playfully ingenious author of *Robinson Crusoe* . . . is not permitted to those who touch on the destruction of six million souls, and on the

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<sup>2</sup> For some of the representative texts of this opinion, see Geoffrey Hartman, *The Longest Shadow*; Berel Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide*; Lawrence Langer *Admitting the Holocaust* and *Preempting the Holocaust*; and the central collection by Saul Friedländer, Ed. *Probing the Limits of Representation*, especially his Introduction. For a more critical account of Holocaust Studies, see Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust* and *History and Memory After Auschwitz*. For traditional discussions of Holocaust literature, see Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *By Words Alone*; Saul Friedländer, *Reflections of Nazism*; Berel Lang, Ed. *Writing and the Holocaust*; Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust and the Literary Imagination and Versions of Survival*; and Alvin Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying*. For more theoretical approaches that challenge some of the traditional assumptions, see James Young, *Writing and Rewriting*; Sara Horowitz, *Voicing the Void*; and Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism*. See also Geoffrey Hartman, Ed. *Holocaust Remembrance*.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the difficulties in evaluating the truth status of Holocaust photographs, see Barbie Zelizer.

extirpation of their millennial civilization in Europe” (25). In other words, while any other historical event is open to historiographic inquiries and literary rewrites, the Holocaust must be kept safe from such intrusions—its truth is undeniable and rests in the pictures and words of eyewitnesses alone.

As the title of Schlink’s novel indicates, the act of reading is at the center of the text, both on a literal and figurative level for we are free to fill in the subject and object of the reading process. Unlike the German title, *Der Vorleser*, which limits the options of reading to a male reader who is reading a text *to* someone, the English title frees us to contemplate the various positions of reading that are enacted in the text. Obviously, there is Michael who reads literature as he introduces Hanna to the Western classics, but the resonance of the word far from stops here. Michael and later Hanna are readers of the literature of German bourgeois culture but they also become readers of German history itself. In fact, the text clearly draws a parallel between Hanna’s illiteracy and her inability to grasp historical concepts. While the text does not simply collapse the two—or worse, excuse Hanna through her handicap—it does suggest that lack of literacy, and thereby lack of information and knowledge, is dangerous. The final level of reading occurs, as we, the audience, become readers of Michael and Hanna’s story and its historical situatedness and implications. In thus connecting literature and history inside and outside the text, Schlink simply follows one of the basic tenants of postmodern history: history must, on some level, be read as a text as our understanding of the past is intricately entwined with the way events are inscribed. In other words, within postmodernism, no event exists until it is inscribed in language; only when we read history can we ever begin to know it. Schlink delicately addresses this postmodern

assumption as the written text—and the ability to read it—becomes the text’s principal symbol of engaging with history.

This mediatedness of any historical event is particularly apparent in Schlink’s refusal to recall the events of the Holocaust directly. While the novel continually revolves around the Holocaust and its consequences, it makes no attempt to describe it directly. In fact, the only descriptions of the camps come several instances removed: Michael recounts his study of one of the survivor’s English autobiographies. Not only is the experience twice removed, we cross several language barriers as well. Rather than follow typical Holocaust fictional conventions of inserting the voice of the eyewitness to give his account credibility, Schlink emphasizes the various ways the original experiences are transmitted to us. Consequently, even though the trial stands at the center of the novel, Schlink does not offer direct testimony but instead emphasizes the obviously mediated quality of any such account. Of the two survivors, the mother is deposed in Israel—thereby most likely providing a *written* document to be submitted to the judges—while the daughter “had written a book about the camp and the march west and published it in America” (Schlink 106). Obviously, one could criticize the author’s refusal to lend voice to the victims, but his approach also reminds us that any such voice would already have been mediated—if only by all the previous recountings of the same tale.<sup>4</sup> This circling and circumscribing of the Holocaust while at the same time admitting its horrific fascination can be found in many postmodern Holocaust texts—but rarely is it presented as self-consciously as it is in Schlink.

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<sup>4</sup> In fact, Lawrence Langer describes in *Holocaust Testimonies* how survivors who have written down their experiences in book form often resort to these same words or chose to read from their books during interviews to avoid the danger of reliving the experience.

The first and probably most important figurative level of “reading” in Schlink’s text is the fact that Hanna’s literacy allows her to finally “read” history, to understand the historical event in which she participated but which she apparently did not comprehend at the time. This extended metaphor that connects literal and cultural literacy with a sense of conscience, of course, is in danger of excusing Hanna’s actions by linking it with her inability to read. The multiple levels on which reading is employed within the text, however, suggest that we, the readers, should refrain from taking the book itself too literally. After all, Hanna’s illiteracy seems to have more in common with a magical realistic imagery of Günther Grass’s dwarf Oskar Mazerath than with the actual likelihood of Hanna’s never having learned how to read in twenties’ Germany. By debating the likelihood of Hanna not having learned how to read, such critics access the text on a purely literal level as they measure its contents against reality, thus foreclosing the added layers. Accordingly, some of the objections leveled against the book in terms of its authenticity or worse, its representativeness, may completely miss the point that the novel is meant to work on a metaphorical rather than a literal level, that its focus is Michael’s—and our—reading of the past rather than an authentic account of the Holocaust itself.

The title serves yet another purpose, however, as it invokes one more metaphoric aspect of reading by connecting cultural and actual literacy. The novel thematizes the values of literacy within an enlightened, bourgeois mindset whose values are questioned throughout the novel. Not only does the protagonist emphasize his “great and fundamental confidence in bourgeois culture” (185), he also asks his father for advice since, as a philosophy professor “who had written about Kant and Hegel,” he “occupied

himself with moral issues” (139). This corrupt relationship between modern values and the Holocaust, which is addressed at various points throughout the text, raises one of the central debates surrounding the causes as well as repercussions of the Holocaust. For example, when asked why she did not release her prisoners from a burning church during the death marches, Hanna uses an almost Kantian defense (reminiscent of Eichmann’s self-justifications) that places a sense of duty above any empathetic or humane response. Emphasizing a perverted sense of responsibility, Hanna stresses, “We couldn’t just let them escape! We were responsible for them. . . . I mean, we had guarded them the whole time, in the camp and on the march, that was the point, that we had to guard them and not let them escape” (128). Hanna’s embarrassingly inadequate explanation must, of course, be connected to Michael’s constant musings about the moral and ethical responsibility of the bourgeois modern value system in which he was raised. Thus, whereas Hanna’s later literacy—mainly achieved through the Western canon—symbolizes her beginning consciousness, her almost Kantian defense reminds us that Enlightenment philosophy does not provide a sufficient bulwark against the horrors of fascism. This tension between Enlightenment ideals of order and the Third Reich is also noticed by Michael himself as he begins to doubt the commonplace truth that “the legal codes and drafts of the Enlightenment . . . were based on the belief that a good order is intrinsic to the world” (181). Consequently, Hanna’s justification for her desperately misguided sense of duty alludes to the complicated relationship between modernity and the Holocaust, between fascism’s corruption of modern rationality and postmodernity as a reaction to such a perversion.

On a final level, we must consider how Schlink thematizes the reading process as he foregrounds our own reading of the text. In other words, as the novel addresses the way we read literary and historical texts—including Schlink’s own book—we, the readers, must confront the text and negotiate its truth and metaphoric values as we learn about history. After all, Schlink’s explicit emphasis on the medium of the text and the process of reading recalls one of the commonplaces of a postmodern approach to history, an approach predicated on the fact that events cannot be comprehended outside of language and narrative.<sup>5</sup> While many postmodern texts are aware of this tenet, Schlink’s novel properly thematizes these issues—not least of all by its title. Not only does Schlink’s novel address the concept of reading in general, it confronts its readers and makes them face up to the titillating, horrible pleasures of Holocaust accounts. In a daring comparison, Michael relates his appalling fascination with the Holocaust to the actual experience of the victims as he foregrounds the slow, numbing process characteristic of both. Schlink provocatively describes how Michael watching Hanna’s trial makes him feel “like being a prisoner in the death camps who survives month after month and becomes accustomed to the life, while he registers with an objective eye the horror of the new arrivals: registers it with the same numbness that he brings to the murders and the deaths themselves” (102-3). While Michael himself is aware of its inappropriateness, the comparison is itself a testimony to the numbness he is attempting to describe. As camp images steadily bombard viewers, they slowly lose their ability to stir us as they become ordinary and familiar. Michael points out, that camp inmates as well as perpetrators have described this effect of desensitization, but what makes it so

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<sup>5</sup> See Hayden White, especially, “Historical Emplotment.” For rejoinders to this article, see Perry Anderson, Amos Funkenstein, and Martin Jay, “Of Plots.”

unsettling is the fact that the reader experiences the same. After all, it is a natural defense mechanism to shut out damaging and hurtful experiences so that any sufficient exposure will create a certain effect of familiarity that detracts from its terrible reality. Through Michael's reaction to the trial proceedings, Schlink thus comments on our own role as readers of Holocaust fiction—the voyeuristic fascination that dreads yet perversely demands the horrific is a carefully repressed secret of Holocaust fiction and possibly one of the hidden reasons for *The Reader's* popularity.

The fact that Schlink's novel has become successful enough to make him a household name, that he has entered mainstream culture, is an indication of the relevance of these issues as much as it is an indication that our interest has—at least in part—shifted from the immediacy of trying to represent the reality of the camps themselves to a more mediated, self-reflexive, and contemplative engagement. As such, Schlink addresses many of the problems facing Holocaust scholars right now. While the book itself advocates continued discussions of the Holocaust, its author is not unaware of the dangers involved in such literature; while the text valorizes the desire for knowledge and the crucial importance of our ability to read, it simultaneously problematizes this very desire and our voyeuristic fascination with the horrors of the camps. In this sense, all our endeavors to study and possibly understand the Holocaust must rely on various forms of reading. As time passes and we move away from the actual events, as eyewitnesses are dying and other atrocities take center stage, it is our ability to read properly that will keep us connected to the Holocaust. In other words, Holocaust Studies requires self-aware and self-conscious readers of historical documents and literary texts who not only constantly questions their motives and reactions but also finds themselves implicated on a variety of

levels. While Schlink's protagonists may be far from such ideal readers, the novel does succeed in shifting our focus from the events and primary texts themselves to the process required to access and comprehend these texts—the postmodern reading of the Holocaust.

My analysis of *The Reader* thus brings to the forefront a variety of subjects to be explored in more depth in the following chapters, namely issues of representation and representability, ethics and aesthetics of artistic confrontations with the Holocaust, and our general reception of the historical events within a culture shaped by the Holocaust. Ozick's criticism of *The Reader* illustrates a certain adherence to the particular moral imperative demanded of Holocaust literature; yet her single-minded need to separate fact from fiction when it comes to the Holocaust is naïve at best in its ignorance of both postmodern theory and some of the wealth of postmodern Holocaust fiction. Instead, Schlink's sometimes more experimental but always more self-conscious approach to the Holocaust is not only less evasive about issues of representation and representability but also aware of its highly mediated status—especially as few of the contemporary writers are eyewitnesses any more and even those are removed temporally. The text's emphasis on “reading” the past and on its reception as a practice fraught with ambiguity and complexity of interpretation is therefore basic to any study of literary Holocaust texts and an especially apt introduction to the theoretical issues and postmodern texts addressed in this dissertation. The criticism the novel has received from within the camp of Holocaust Studies, as well as my more generous reading of the text from a postmodern perspective, starkly illustrate the general unease that Holocaust Studies has with postmodernist theories as well as the limiting effect this has on a generally vibrant field.

My goal throughout then is to bring together these two fields in order to show what can be gained by using postmodern methods and theories of representation when confronting this recent historical period. As in my reading of Schlink's novel, this dissertation's principal concern is with the relationship between modernity and postmodernity to the Holocaust as well as the effects the Holocaust has had on a post-Holocaust world, both in terms of cultural and social as well as artistic reactions. In order to show the wide-spreading influence of the Holocaust on our postmodern unconscious, I have chosen a variety of literary texts that may not necessarily be classified as Holocaust literature but that demonstrate the haunting effects of the Holocaust on the present, ranging from Beckett's early plays through Federman's highly experimental texts to Thomas's controversial novels.

#### Imagining the Unimaginable: Representation and Representability in Holocaust Fiction

However, before we can look at the specific ways the Holocaust is—or is not—represented in postmodern fiction, we have to briefly recall the general debates waged within Holocaust Studies about our abilities to represent the Holocaust and the responsibilities such depictions carry. Seen as singular, unique, and exceptional, the Holocaust often is considered nonrepresentable and any representation thereof asked to obey a certain moral imperative. As we have seen in our discussion of Schlink's *The Reader*, any violation of these supposed rules of author, subject matter and style immediately draws extensive and vocal criticism. Even though more recent artists have attempted to broaden the extent of permissible and acceptable Holocaust representations and critics have begun to consider the problem of relying solely on realist depictions and

eyewitness testimonies as artistic expressions, the general stance still seems to favor a traditional, realist, nonexperimental approach, preferably without artistic embellishment and by an eyewitness.

As a result, many critics impose a variety of moral imperatives and ethical prohibitions on Holocaust fiction. The moral imperatives placed upon representations range from the desire to move the Holocaust into an incomprehensible, unintelligible, and thus unrepresentable space that requires us to approach the events with a reverential silence to the obsessive attempts to recall, represent, and catalog the events in detail, thus hoping to comprehend and reach a larger truth.<sup>6</sup> The main points of contention when dealing with Holocaust representation are *whether* to represent the Holocaust altogether, *how* to represent it, and *who* should undertake these representations. In other words, the ethical imperatives placed upon Holocaust representations include a complete call for silence and, in its lieu, an attempt to represent the events as truthfully as possible by restricting the depictions to realist account, preferably given by eyewitnesses.

This singling out of the Holocaust from any other historical event and from any concerns over textual mediation is fairly characteristic of large parts of Holocaust Studies, especially within the historical sciences. The destruction of the European Jews was—and still is—surrounded by an aura of incomprehensibility, a refusal or even inability of representation, and a complete rejection of theoretical tools otherwise easily employed when dealing with narrativized history. The Holocaust is thus often raised to an exemplar outside of space and time, an abject event that defies theorization and simply

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<sup>6</sup> One way of categorizing the current state of Holocaust studies is presented in Michael Rothberg's introduction to *Traumatic Realism*, where he juxtaposes the traumatic approach that relegates the Holocaust to an unknowable entity with a realist one that attempts to catalog all the details.

requires that it be witnessed. This mantra of incomprehensibility, disbelief, and inability to represent carries through much of the writings on the Holocaust. Especially eyewitnesses and survivors record their amazement at the facts they are trying to contain and comprehend and their incredulity when confronting their own memories. Ghetto archivist Chaim Kaplan, for example, describes in his diaries how “it is beyond [his] pen to describe the destruction” (qtd. in Rosenfeld, *Double Dying* 7) while Elie Wiesel depicts the survivors’ inability to recount their experiences when he writes, “[b]etween our memory and its reflection there stands a wall that cannot be pierced” (“Holocaust” 7). Similarly, filmmaker Claude Lanzmann repudiates any attempt or possibility of comprehension due to the “absolute obscenity in the very project of understanding” (204). Describing his filming of *Shoah*, he explains: “Not to understand was my iron law during all the eleven years of the production of *Shoah*. I clung to this refusal of understanding as the only possible ethical and at the same time the only possible operative attitude” (204).

Possibly the most outspoken representative of this approach is George Steiner, who has repeatedly voiced his conviction that only silence can be an appropriate response to the horrors of the Holocaust. In his early and probably most famous contribution to this discussion, the 1967 *Language and Silence*, Steiner describes how art after the Holocaust is confronted with the impossible task of representing an incomprehensible violence and consequently argues that the only apt response is silence, i.e., any artistic object coming out of the Holocaust is already sacrilegious. He moves the Holocaust into a sacred, nonlinguistic realm when he comments that “[t]he world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason” (123), because “the Auschwitz universe . . .

marks the realm of potential—now realized—human bestiality . . . which both precedes language, as it does in the animal, and comes after language as it does in death” (“Long Life” 154-65). From this collaboration of language and rationality in the thoroughly modern project of the so-called “Final Solution” he concludes that “silence is the only, though in this way suicidal, option; that to try to speak or write intelligibly, interpretatively, about Auschwitz is to misconceive totally the nature of this event and to misconstrue totally the necessary constraints of humanity within language” (“Long Life” 156).

While such a pure and unmitigated response to the Holocaust is theoretically valid, it is not practically viable. Moreover, its principal danger is the repetition and/or completion of the Nazi project of destroying not only the lives but also the knowledge and memory of a people. When acknowledging this need to tell the Holocaust, however, we immediately face the next dilemma, namely, how to represent the unrepresentable. At the center of this debate over suitable representations is the question as to whether *any* fictionalization does not fall danger to a negation of the facts, i.e., whether only the facts pure and simple can adequately tell the “real” story. James Young describes how some critics go as far as to limit Holocaust writing not even to survivors but to only attach authenticity to texts that were produced *during* the Holocaust itself (32).<sup>7</sup> More critics, however, agree with a strict separation of fact and fiction, with a clear distinction of memory and testimony against fictional and imaginary (re)creations. Lawrence Langer,

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<sup>7</sup> In his ensuing discussion, Young exposes the difficulties of such a differentiation. He points out that “nearly all the diarists and many of the survivors remind us [that] their insights, interpretations, and eyewitness descriptions may even be less reliable in a ‘factual sense’ because of their proximity to events” (33). Not only did many diarists have to rely on the false information provided by the Nazis, some purposely edited their diaries so as not to include incriminating evidence should the writings fall into the hands of the Germans (33-36).

for example, represents this partiality towards the survivor when he asserts that “anyone seriously concerned with the literature of atrocity must devote his primary attention to those writers who were more closely allied with the events of the Holocaust . . . , since they were the ones . . . who were *destined* to recreate in their art a unique portion of contemporary reality [my emphasis]” (*Literary Imagination* 20). In fact, Holocaust survivors often are represented as distinguished by their ability to gain unmediated access to their pasts.

This is especially obvious and troubling in depictions of oral testimonies.<sup>8</sup> In his study of *Holocaust Testimonies*, Lawrence Langer describes how the survivors can access a so-called “deep memory,” where they, in fact, relive their experiences unmediated and “recall the Auschwitz self as it was then” (6). He thus distinguishes between written and oral testimony insofar as the former shapes and molds the experience to “transform the real in a way that obscures even as it seeks to enlighten” (19) while the latter simply recounts the events as it describes the true reality. Psychoanalyst Dori Laub goes even further when he suggests that the oral testimony is the only way to allow the survivor access to his or her past as “the ‘knowing’ of the event is given birth to” (Felman and Laub 57). Again, there is an emphasis on “knowledge” as if these memories occur extra-verbal rather than being remembered and recounted decades after the original experiencing. Beyond the danger of raising the listener to the rank of participant and even—to some extent—originator of the knowledge, the problem is the uncritical approach to the verbal, mediated, retelling of past events. Dominick LaCapra articulates

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<sup>8</sup> Both the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, Yale University and the Spielberg Foundation strive to interview as many survivors as possible, to retain the memory of those eyewitnesses for future generations.

this problem when he criticizes Langer's endeavor for "focus[ing] on Holocaust testimonies with such an intensity and sense of their inherent truth that he [Langer] tends to bracket or avoid the problem of the relation between testimony and historical understanding and self-understanding" (*Representing* 194). This approach also implies that only eyewitnesses have the right to narrate the Holocaust, thus denying any consequent generation the opportunity to enter a dialog with the past, a perspective highly problematic for any number of reasons. More importantly, however, such an elevation of the eyewitness overlooks much of recent critical theory. Assuming a direct knowledge of the past that can be transmitted to others without manipulation and interpretation, eyewitness testimonies seem to circumvent all limitations imposed by language itself. Holocaust scholars, who would like to restrict Holocaust narratives to survivor memories and eyewitness testimonies as the only true and immediate link to the past, can do so only by ignoring the mediatedness of any such memory and account.

Nevertheless, as many theorists believe that the experiences of the Holocaust actually short-circuit any traditional modes of mediatedness, they contend that the eyewitness recounts the factual events rather than any narrativized accounts. Terrence Des Pres, for example, describes how "the experience they describe . . . resists the tendency to fictionalize which informs most remembering" (29). As a result, the legitimacy of fictionalizing the Holocaust is repeatedly debated and questioned. Elie Wiesel thus argues, "[o]ne cannot write about the Holocaust" ("Literary Inspiration" 9), that "[a] novel about Treblinka is either not a novel or not about Treblinka" ("Literary Inspiration" 7), because "by its very nature, the Holocaust defies literature" (qtd. in Rosenfeld *Double Dying* 22). In effect, this position demands an authentic realism that

precludes any fictional representation of the Holocaust. Furthermore, it establishes a clear-cut—though false—dichotomy between facts and fiction and collapses the power of the imagination into falsehood and lies.<sup>9</sup>

Postmodernism, on the other hand, suggests that fiction can often achieve a larger truth above and beyond the facts themselves—even as it may fail to recount all the particular details. This is especially pertinent when we consider that Holocaust narratives confront a system whose implicit goal was an Orwellian rewriting of history in which most of the surviving documents were produced by the perpetrators. As a result, artists often resort to fictionalization to imagine and resurrect the voice of the victims. While the fact that any knowledge of the past must be, by definition, narrativized and thus interpreted is, of course, a commonplace in postmodern historiographic fiction,<sup>10</sup> it is still a novel if not dangerous concept within the studies of the Holocaust where the stakes are particularly high. For one, fictionalization and conscious alterations contradict the Holocaust scholar's need to reach a certain "truth." More seriously, in the face of a small yet vocal extremist group of Holocaust deniers who claim that the Holocaust did, in fact, never occur, that six million people were not murdered on account of their supposed racial features alone, the postmodern ludic seemingly ahistorical approach may appear to lend credence to such propaganda.

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<sup>9</sup> In the context of the Holocaust *fiction* thus has often become synonymous with *lies* as in Dennis B. Klein's introduction to the special issue of *Dimensions* on Holocaust denial, entitled, "History Versus Fiction." For similar reasons, Art Spiegelman protests against the *New York Times Book Review*'s categorization of his comic book *Maus* as fiction in "A Problem of Taxonomy." See Sara Horowitz's discussion in *Voicing the Void* 2-6.

<sup>10</sup> This idea is probably best represented by Linda Hutcheon who repeatedly addresses the epistemological issues created by a postmodern historical fiction. Following Hayden White's theories on historiography, she argues that "[h]istory as a narrative account . . . is always already textualized, always already interpreted" (*Poetics* 143).

What critics of fictive and even postmodern approaches to the Holocaust tend to forget, however, is fiction's unique ability to bridge the gap between the personal and the rough data collected by historians. Moreover, in the absence of most of the victims, it is fiction that can often fill in the gaps purposefully created by the Nazis. In effect, then, the artist often must resort to fictionalization to imagine and resurrect the voice of the victims. Sara Horowitz accordingly argues that "[o]nly an imaginative leap reveals what might have been [the victims'] story, simultaneously reproducing and revoking the radical muteness genocide imposes" (13). One of the examples Horowitz uses is Ida Fink's "A Spring Morning" in which the reader is presented with two alternate versions of the roundup of the Jews in a small Polish town and the "procession" to their eventual murder. The rather prosaic description of an eyewitness is supplemented and corrected with Fink's imaginative retelling of one of the victim's thoughts as he tries to rescue his little girl and, when this fails, has to carry her dead body towards the mass grave and his own death. By fictionalizing this particular roundup and imagining the father's feelings, Fink succeeds in retrieving the victim's story that would be lost when restricting ourselves to purely factual accounts alone.

It is this question as to what fiction, especially the more provocative, less reverent, experimental forms of postmodern fiction, can contribute to Holocaust Studies in general, that is at the center of this dissertation. By analyzing a variety of postmodern texts, I show how they can deal with certain issues that both abject silence as well as realist eyewitness testimonies fails to properly address. Only in opening up the venues of Holocaust discourse can we get to a meaning, can we find a larger truth rather than hide it as an abject unknowable or get mired in factual details and all too realist portrayals.

Moreover, by framing this study of postmodern Holocaust fiction within a theoretical investigation of the relationship between the Holocaust and postmodernity as a philosophical construct, this dissertation explores the complex and complicated relationship between a historical event and the cultural, social, historical, and literary changes it is often purported to have brought about.

### Overview

The first chapter establishes the theoretical frame in which to examine the role of the Holocaust in recent historical, sociological, and philosophical discussions, especially in relation to issues of modernity and postmodernity. The contradictory premises of postmodern relativism and Auschwitz's traumatic reality have created a post-war philosophy preoccupied with the Holocaust in its attempt to understand the incomprehensible. This chapter explores the pivotal position Nazism holds in many current theoretical models and the various theories of totalitarianism that these analyses develop. Looking at figures as diverse as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, and Jean-François Lyotard, I trace the connections many thinkers have found between Enlightenment thought and the atrocities of the Holocaust. Accordingly, the basic debate in postmodernity is defined by the question of whether the Holocaust must be read as an aberrant, exceptional mistake of modernity or whether it can be explained in and by the very guidelines, rules, and ideas set forth in the Enlightenment project. With its close ties to modernity, the Holocaust is in an unusual position in regards to postmodernity—part of neither, it is intimately connected to both. One way to theorize the ambiguous position that the Holocaust holds

in relation to postmodernism then is the model of the constitutive exception which places the Holocaust both inside and outside of postmodern discourse. It is this model that informs the following chapters of literary analysis as it provides us with a way to read the function of the Holocaust in postmodern fiction and the role of such Holocaust literature in postmodern culture in general. Focusing on various postmodern texts, I examine how the Holocaust has affected postmodern culture, subjectivity, and language, thus showing the interaction between the Holocaust and postmodern literature.

The second chapter looks at two postmodern writers, E. L. Doctorow and Walter Abish, in order to show how the Holocaust has impacted post-War culture and society. While neither of the novels I analyze addresses the Holocaust directly, my reading suggests that its presence haunts these texts. I begin with the reading of Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* in order to trace the memory of the Holocaust within this text that is preoccupied with a past but refuses to address it directly. Instead of a direct confrontation, Doctorow's novel fulfills what I want to call the dialectics of repressed obsession/ obsessive repression, i.e., it circumscribes the traumatic site of the Holocaust at the same time as it refuses to address it directly. As such, Doctorow's novel must be understood within the context of postmodern reactions to the cultural trauma of the Holocaust. It exemplifies the crucial role the Holocaust holds within postmodern thought even, or especially, within contexts that do not directly deal with that particular aspect of history. This "missed encounter," which intimates the Holocaust without ever directly discussing it, exhibits how the Holocaust functions as an ever-present absence in postmodern fiction. As such, it indicates postmodernism's obsession with the Holocaust at the same time as it attests to its difficulty to represent it. *The Book of Daniel* therefore

functions in the shadow of the Holocaust, revealing how the traumatic impact of the Holocaust is repressed but still apparent in post-war America.

In a comparison to Doctorow's latest novel, *City of God*, which, in fact, addresses the Holocaust directly, we can see the advantages of the less direct approach of the earlier postmodern text. Unlike *The Book of Daniel*, *City of God* resorts to the realistic and chronological account of the eyewitness testimony when dealing with the Holocaust—a surprisingly simplistic form within this highly complex novel. As a result, however, the more recent novel fails to address the more interesting and more complicated issues about the Holocaust which *The Book of Daniel* succeeds in raising. Comparing these two novels by the same author, we not only see the lasting impact of the Holocaust on post-War culture but also the advantages to addressing these issues within a postmodern framework rather than the realistic representations preferred by many Holocaust scholars. The remainder of Chapter Two focuses on Walter Abish's experimental novel *How German Is It/Wie Deutsch Ist Es* which depicts the traumatic impact of the Third Reich on contemporary Germany. Literalizing the metaphor of the repressed and buried memory, Abish's characters actually encounter a mass grave under the foundations of their newly founded city. Abish's use of postmodern methods thus helps him to distance emotions, at the same time as his criticism of German complacency becomes all the more scathing. Abish's novel and its critical reception both thematize and enact a double move of repression and obsession within the German understanding of the Holocaust. In a text where the past haunts everyone, the personal and the political cannot be separated, and a country's confrontation with its past necessarily requires individuals to confront their own.

The third chapter foregrounds a topic implicitly present in all of postmodern fiction but more prominently so in the experimental texts of Raymond Federman: the linguistic turn in postmodernism. Recalling Lyotard's emphasis on language games, this chapter analyzes the impossibility and necessity of linguistic experiments in the context of Holocaust fiction. I begin by looking at the ways a Holocaust novelist like Raymond Federman has taken up this challenge to represent these traumatic experiences within a postmodern framework. While his work demonstrates how the text itself can function as a traumatic production as his characters repeatedly relive the traumatic events of Federman's own survival, he differs from other survivors in his use of a nonrepresentational style and his focus on postmodern linguistic experiments. Highly playful, his work constantly challenges traditional notions of authorship, memory, and even history itself, thus instantiating many of the theories developed within the framework of postmodern historiography. A reading of his texts immediately raises issues of authority, authenticity, and even ownership, all of which are problematic categories within Holocaust studies, thereby allowing us to examine how the traumatic memory of the Holocaust becomes an exemplary moment for postmodernity. On the one hand, his experimental style raises doubts as to the seriousness of his approach. At the same time, his use of experimental postmodern forms also prompts the question as to whether language itself is not overwhelmed and exhausted and thus not able to properly represent the Holocaust. Federman uses his texts to negotiate the universal and the particular as he contemplates the meaning of language and its changed status after the Holocaust while simultaneously confronting the very personal trauma of his own survival. Using Federman's fascination with Samuel Beckett's work and Beckett's own

particular explorations with language, I argue that ultimately Federman's linguistic and stylistic experiments form a different, and sometime more effective, way to deal with traumatic memory.

After discussing the impact of the Holocaust's exemplarity on postmodern philosophy, culture, and language, the fourth and final chapter turns towards issues of subjectivity within the novels themselves as it looks at D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel* and *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Employing the concept of exemplarity, I examine the role the characters play in relation to the protagonists of the more realist genre of eyewitness testimonies. My discussion of *The White Hotel* looks at the exemplary status of its protagonist, within the text and the exemplary status of the text itself within Holocaust representations. Through his main character, *The White Hotel* approaches the Holocaust by juxtaposing it with a personal, particularized account, thus presenting simultaneously the particularity of the individual victims and the universality of their experiences. This complexity stands in contrast to more canonical Holocaust texts. Thomas does not replicate the problems of the survivor texts and instead creates a text that moves beyond the specifics of the Holocaust while still ascertaining its particularity. As a result, he maintains a delicate balance, making the Holocaust relevant in a postmodern age with the use of postmodern methods. Whereas *The White Hotel* successfully negotiates the ethical demands of addressing the Holocaust with the aesthetic ones of a postmodern text, *Pictures* fails to do so as Thomas's more recent novel exemplifies many of the features Holocaust scholars tend to criticize in postmodern fiction. In fact, the novel's use of the Holocaust is highly exploitative, a fact most clearly seen when comparing the two novels.

Having read these postmodern Holocaust texts within a postmodern theoretical framework while nevertheless being aware of the criticism voiced from within Holocaust Studies, it becomes clear how postmodern literature and theory can, in fact, contribute to Holocaust Studies. Not only is the event of the Holocaust inextricably entwined with postmodern theory and culture, postmodern literature also offers new and innovative ways to approach this momentous historic event. While the first chapter establishes the intricate connection between postmodern philosophy and the Holocaust, my focus on the fields of culture, language, and subjectivity in the literary analyses reveals not only how the Holocaust has affected important parts of our cultural landscape but also how contemporary novelists have taken up this challenge posed by these effects. Taking these writers seriously as Holocaust novelists reveals a historical and political depth in postmodern literature often ignored and expands the often unnecessarily narrow vision of what many think ought to be the characteristics of a Holocaust text.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE HOLOCAUST BETWEEN MODERNITY AND POSTMODERNITY

Though it is by now a commonplace to mention that we live in an age of postmodernism (or postmodernity, as some prefer to call it), few are comfortable in defining what actually characterizes this period and, more importantly, how it differs from its predecessors. In general, postmodernity is defined by (1) the crisis of representation and the loss of a realist epistemology, culminating in Baudrillard's concept of the *simulacrum*, the simulation without origin; (2) the refusal of any privileged mode of explanation or privileged subject position; (3) the loss of any totalizing, universalizing systems of organizing knowledge so that meaning production becomes decentralized.<sup>11</sup> I want to suggest a somewhat different definition here that basically identifies what some recent thinkers have called "post-Holocaust" thought with the postmodern.<sup>12</sup> As the atmosphere after WWII has given rise to increasing doubts about the validity of the modern project, more critics have begun to question its legitimacy in the face of the horrors it had wrought. Many commentators on modernity have noticed a connection between modern goals, ideas, and principles and the rationale and implementation of the

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<sup>11</sup> For excellent overviews of the postmodern, see Andreas Huyssen, "Mapping the postmodern"; David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*; Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*; Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern*. For important essay collections, see Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays in Postmodernism*; E. Ann Kaplan, ed., *Postmodernism and Its Discontents: Theories, Practices*; Andrew Ross, ed., *Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism*; Ingeborg Hoesterey, ed., *Zeitgeist in Babel: The Postmodernist Controversy*.

<sup>12</sup> Especially religious studies, have adopted the term "post-Holocaust" thought. See, for example, Emil Fackenheim, *To Mend the World*.

“Final Solution.”<sup>13</sup> Looking at recent writings on modernity, I will tease out this connection more clearly in order to show not only how many postmodern theorists are preoccupied with the Holocaust, but also how they necessarily must be. After initially showing how the Holocaust has affected and influenced thinkers on both sides of the modern/postmodern divide, I will look at certain texts that address the relationship between modernity and the Holocaust in particular in order to finally address my main argument that the Holocaust is, in fact, at the center of postmodern philosophy.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The most extensive discussion of the relationship between modernity and the Holocaust is sociologist Zygmunt Bauman’s study that shows how modernity’s very principles of rationality are to be held accountable for much of Nazi ideology. In fact, thinkers in various disciplines have contemplated the connection between modernity and the Holocaust and argued that the Holocaust is consistent and compatible with rather than aberrant and contrary to the rational project of Enlightenment. Historian Raul Hilberg establishes the vital role of modern bureaucracy within the Nazi machinery, thus causally linking the German culture of order, obedience, and efficiency with the mass murder German society perpetrated. Political theorist Hannah Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism* explicates how modernity creates some of the conditions for a new and more severe form of anti-Semitism, employing modern scientific concepts like studies of race to champion its prejudices. In psychology, the 1960s Yale experiments conducted by Stanley Milgram show how the perpetrators could easily distance themselves morally and emotionally from their victims, thus showing that the circumstances rather than some particularly German aspect of anti-Semitism had to be held responsible for the unquestionable obedience of the Germans. In the field of science, Mario Biagioli establishes clear connections between modern scientific ideologies and practices in general and their particular Nazi instantiation.

<sup>14</sup> For convenience’s sake, I somewhat simplistically use “postmodernism” and “postmodernity” interchangeably. Though I agree with Norris’s argument that there is logic to keeping this distinction, in practical use this differentiation is hard to maintain. Also, within literary texts, their poststructural qualities are part of their postmodern characteristics. Moreover, I even subsume poststructuralist thinkers like Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida under this postmodern paradigm. This does not mean, however, that I am not aware of the crucial differences among these writers and between them and more ludic postmodernists like Baudrillard. Nevertheless, their vehement criticism of modernity to the point of dismissing it altogether without the potential of inner regeneration suggests that they have indeed moved beyond, i.e., “post,” modernity.

Modernity Revisited:  
The Role of Auschwitz in Habermas and Lyotard

In his influential book, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Lyotard coins the term of postmodernity as “an incredulity towards metanarratives.”<sup>15</sup> This definition of our current condition renders useless all legitimating practices but thrives instead on difference and incommensurability. Lyotard’s project relies on his belief that the hopes and goals of modernity have been liquidated so that any attempt at a normalizing or regularizing consensus becomes illusory. Against the mandate of coherence and order, authority and structure, Lyotard celebrates a version of localized and contingent legitimation. His interpretation of recent philosophical, political, and social history thus runs counter to that of Jürgen Habermas, who must be seen as his principal interlocutor in this debate on modernity versus postmodernity.<sup>16</sup> While neither one of these main protagonists has explicitly addressed the other directly or at length, their interventions on the subject, driven by deeply felt philosophical disagreements, have created a most interesting and fruitful discussion.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, the debate between the principal proponent of French postmodernism and the heir of the Frankfurt School, or the battle between the “Frankfurters and French fries” (59) as Rainer Nägele irreverently describes it, calls to

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<sup>15</sup> This concept is developed in Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* and further expanded in his *The Postmodern Explained*.

<sup>16</sup> Habermas’s most important contributions are his essay “Modernity versus Postmodernity” and his collection of lectures *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*.

<sup>17</sup> Though Lyotard frames his *Postmodern Condition* with references to Habermas, most of the German philosopher’s thoughts are not engaged directly. Habermas even more explicit refuses to deal with Lyotard who is mentioned but once in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Still, Lyotard must be

the fore some of the crucial issues of postmodern philosophical theory as they disagree about the basic tenants of modernity. While both agree on metanarratives' prominent role in the project of modernity as the fundamentals for the construction of modern knowledge and the self-legitimation of modernity, Lyotard describes their demise and consequent replacement by small narratives, the *small récits*. This move from universalizing, totalizing metanarratives to localized, small, self-legitimizing stories may be one of Lyotard's principal contributions to the debate of postmodernity. By replacing the grand stories that underlie and justify Enlightenment philosophy with immediate, contingent stories that are only designed and required to function locally, he circumvents one of the major problems of modern thought: from where to derive legitimacy in a system like modernity that is grounded within itself. Neither falling into a premodern mode of attaching legitimacy to larger metaphysical forces (like God), nor following the modern contradiction of positing values and norms that are only grounded in the thinker's own reason, Lyotard evades these problems by avoiding all universal categories. If any story only needs to be legitimated locally, it can be tested against its surroundings and the demands made upon it without resorting to larger truth claims. Moreover, in his concept of paralogy, Lyotard acknowledges that many of these small récits may contradict one another—an issue that does not invalidate his philosophy.

Habermas, on the other hand, maintains that the values of modernity must not be dismissed so easily, a demand he considers appropriate, since modernity stages its own criticism. For him, the main characteristics of Enlightenment include the subject's self-willed and self-critical emancipation, reason as the legitimating principle, and a

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seen as the implicit though hidden addressee of this text, just as he is one of the prime—if unmentioned—targets of Habermas's lecture "Modernity versus Postmodernity."

previously unknown *Selbstvergewisserung* (self-reassurance) of modernity, i.e., a normativity that cannot rely on any external norms, but therefore cannot be dismissed by external criticism either. Most certainly, his strong adherence to the project of modernity does not imply that Habermas—who is, after all, Adorno’s student—is not aware of the problems Enlightenment philosophy has encountered, both from inside and out. Nevertheless, Habermas maintains that a modernity that stages its own criticism must remain preferable to a postmodernity that has given up all recourse to universal value judgments. His solution to the problems both Lyotard and he aptly (and similarly) identify is a revision of the project at a stage where, in his view, modernity has gone awry. According to Habermas’s analysis, the differentiated realms of reason have been subsumed since Hegel under the one of instrumental reason, so that the other two are impoverished as is the life-world itself. The proper solution to this problem, then, is a return to viewing the spheres of modernity as defined by their inner logic and to both strengthen the ethical and aesthetic faculties as well as maintain a stable balance between the three—both among themselves and in relation to the life-world.

Though not a principal component of either philosopher’s work, there is one particular thread which haunts both projects and in which I am particularly interested. Both Habermas and Lyotard apparently react and respond to the threat of fascism which they both see looming behind the seemingly peaceful façade of modern liberal capitalist democracy, a threat which Lyotard metonymically calls “Auschwitz.” Traumatized by the memory of World War II, fascism, and the Holocaust, both thinkers are driven by the fear of a return of totalitarianism, and their theories reflect these very fears and apprehensions. As both Lyotard and Habermas react to the same threat of totalitarianism,

they arrive at completely different explanations as to the relationship between modernity and fascism. Whereas Lyotard views “Auschwitz” as the paradigm for the failure of modernity whose recurrence must be forestalled by fighting Enlightenment norms and values, Habermas regards the Holocaust as a horrible aberration whose repetition must be prevented by restoring the incomplete project of modernity through a critique of counter-enlightenment impulses. Thus, the Holocaust occupies a central position in a debate in which either side uses it to further their arguments. On the one hand, through the claim for uniqueness and exceptionality it serves to justify the continuation of the project of modernity; on the other hand, it can explain the attack on enlightened rationality through the very figure of incommensurability and incomparability.

Lyotard reads Auschwitz as a “paradigmatic name for the tragic ‘incompletion’ of modernity” (*Postmodern Explained* 18) and defines it as “the crime opening postmodernity” (19). Thus, his battle cry in “What Is Postmodernism?” where he calls to arms to “wage a war on totality” (*Postmodern Condition* 82) must be read as a direct refutation of any totalizing system attempting to organize the world as modernity had done. While Habermas hopes to return to Hegel in order to restore modernity to its rightful course, Lyotard perceives the very values and virtues of modernity as dangerous. For him universalism, order, and unity directly lead to a totalizing and ultimately terrorizing system that can only be prevented by refusing all normative and organizing principles. In fact, it is Hegel who according to Lyotard must be held accountable for the “transcendental illusion” of totalizing the Kantian faculties “into a real unity. But Kant knew that the price to pay for such an illusion is terror” (*Postmodern Condition* 81). Accordingly, Lyotard holds the project of modernity itself accountable for the terror in

the political, social, and historical sphere of the nineteenth and twentieth century. Rather than attempting to rescue its fragmented remainders, Lyotard argues that modernity has destroyed itself, that the terror it produced has foreclosed any possible resurrection or redemption of modernity and its values: "Modernity is not 'incomplete', rather it has been liquidated. After Auschwitz and Stalinism it is certain that no-one can maintain that the hopes, which were bound up with modernity have been fulfilled. To be sure, they have not been forgotten, but rather destroyed" (qtd. in Dews 27).

Although Habermas agrees with Lyotard's goal of preventing fascism and totalitarianism wholeheartedly, he strongly disapproves of Lyotard's methods. In fact, he even supports Lyotard's claim that we need to look towards Hegel as the site at which modernity "went wrong." Yet he is not willing to substitute the ethical and moral imperatives provided within the modern framework for postmodern relativism and uncertainty. Rather than dismissing modernity wholesale, he instead believes that enlightenment history contains other, unrealized possibilities whose potential we should not negate. Thus, he argues that attempts such as Lyotard's to liquidate the Enlightenment project and deny all potential modernity may have is the most certain way to destroy our liberal democratic societies. Habermas reads Adorno, Foucault, Derrida, and, by inference, Lyotard as part of a counter-Enlightenment to be opposed with a more rational, more enlightened discourse of and on modernity. In his re-evaluation of *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, he thus takes on not only the principal representatives of postmodernism, but also their alleged predecessors and argues that there exists a strain of counter-Enlightenment which can be traced back as far as Hegel. What thus connects postmodern and poststructural critics of modernity like Derrida and

Foucault with such anti-modernists as Nietzsche is their joint desire to destroy the modernist project, a desire that Habermas deeply resents and attacks throughout his lectures.

Even though Habermas does not address the Holocaust directly with in observations on the discourse of modernity, his political commitment is relentless and his constant engagement with Germany's past provides one of the consistent strains in his work. In particular, his interventions on Bitburg<sup>18</sup> and his seminal position during the historians' debate<sup>19</sup> reveal how most of Habermas's writings, ultimately, contain a political incentive.<sup>20</sup> These journalistic discussions of Germany's role vis a vis its recent past betray Habermas's philosophical investment in this debate. Throughout, he emphasizes the uniqueness of the German actions and behavior and the consequent special relation today's Germans must have in regards to history. Thus, what is at stake in his political interventions is an opposition to the normalization (or even revisionism) of the Holocaust, the attempts to render it unexceptional or to minimize it by comparison to other suffering.<sup>21</sup> Habermas's commitment to a "political morality of a polity which . . . was founded in the spirit of the occidental understanding of freedom, responsibility, and

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<sup>18</sup> For journalistic commentaries as well as theoretical discussions about the events at Bitburg, see Geoffrey Hartman, ed., *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective* .

<sup>19</sup> Most of the text comprising this debate are collected in Rudolf Augstein, ed. and Andreas Hillgruber. For further discussions on the historians' debate, see Dan Diner, ed. and "Special Issue on the *Historikerstreit*." See also Dominick LaCapra's excellent articles, "Reflections on the Historians' Debate" and "Revisiting the Historians' Debate: Mourning and Genocide" in *Representing the Holocaust and History and Memory* respectively.

<sup>20</sup> See Jürgen Habermas, "Defusing the Past" and his *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate*, esp. "A Kind of Settling Damages" (207-48).

<sup>21</sup> While comparison between historical events is necessary, the current competition of suffering and victimage seems in bad taste. One particularly inappropriate comparison is Hillgruber's juxtaposition of the Holocaust with the German defeat on the Eastern front. For an interesting reading of Hillgruber's book, see Perry Anderson.

self-determination” (*New Conservatism* 240) is obvious and can only be achieved by adhering to a political program which maintains the Holocaust at the center of its thought by considering it exceptional. In fact, political practice and philosophical theories are inseparable for Habermas as he ceaselessly returns to the (personal and national) traumatic site of the Holocaust in his theoretical discussions of modernity and the Enlightenment.

Considering the philosophical, historical, and political stakes, Habermas *must* regard the Holocaust as an aberration to the modern project itself. Though he does not ignore the modern character of the Holocaust, he maintains that, at heart, the mystical, anti-modern features of Nazism are responsible. Andreas Huyssen thus aptly paraphrases Habermas when he claims that “Auschwitz, after all, did *not* result from too much enlightened reason . . . but from a violent anti-enlightenment and anti-modernity affect” (255). Moreover, according to Habermas only a strict maintenance of the project of modernity can provide us with the potential to prevent similar horrors. As a result, Habermas’s political as well as his philosophical interventions are meant to uphold a democratic society based on his concept of communicative reason and free speech communities.<sup>22</sup> His vehement battle against all criticism of modernity (be it in the form of anti-, pre- or postmodern philosophy) thus must be understood within his deeply held belief that any departure from the ethico-political program of modernity necessarily endangers the liberal spirit of Western democratic societies and radical projects of social freedom as such.

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<sup>22</sup> For Habermas’s theories, see his *Theory of Communicative Action*.

Accordingly, a philosophical text like “Modernity versus Postmodernity” (later entitled with the more correct translation, “Modernity—An Incomplete Project”) can and must be read within the political context of a Germany which has not yet overcome the memory of the Third Reich and yet is already threatened by new right-wing groups and the relativization of history in such contexts as Bitburg or the *Historikerstreit*. It is a contribution to the debate of how to counter ultraconservative and anti-democratic forces within the Federal Republic. His revision of the (incomplete) project of modernity is driven by his need to stand up to neoconservatism and his goal for stabilizing the German federal democratic system. The essay, initially presented upon receiving the Adorno Prize in 1980, presents the clearest articulation of Habermas’s project to retain universal values and ideals by continuing the incomplete, unfinished project of modernity. His goal is to employ modernity’s potential for self-criticism: criticizing modernity’s mistakes from within allows us to rethink the philosophical implications of Enlightenment without having to surrender all normative values. It is for these reasons that Habermas opposes Lyotard’s utter rejection of modernity. According to him, such a faulty conflation of anti-modern phenomena with the project of modernity itself can only serve to hide unacknowledged pre- or anti-modern sentiments:

Those who lump together the very project of modernity with the state of consciousness and the spectacular action of the individual terrorist are no less short-sighted than those who claim that the incomparably more persistent and extensive bureaucratic terror practiced in the dark, in the cellars of the military and secret police, and in camps and institutions, is the *raison d’être* of the modern state, only because this kind of administrative terror makes use of the coercive means of modern bureaucracies. (12)

Rather than dismissing modernity wholesale on account of its faults and problems, Habermas advocates the use of the inherent criticism which modernity offers to remedy the problems while maintaining a universal instance from which to judge ethically.

Habermas and Lyotard's mutual fascination with the Holocaust and its relationship to modernity raises the question as to how close the two thinkers—and with it modernity and postmodernity—actually are. After all, both share the mutual goal of opposing fascism and the totalitarian dangers of instrumental rationality as they acknowledge the inherent problems of modern discourse—and even agree on Hegel as the primary culprit. In fact, it is difficult to separate the two, to establish a clear line between these supposedly oppositional discourses, since it is not evident whether the postmodern theorists appropriate modernity or are subsumed by it. Looking at the debate between Habermas and Lyotard, we can see how their positions exist on a continuum—even though the consequences they chose to draw are diametrically opposed.<sup>23</sup> After all, could the entire debate not be a product of the “narcissism of small differences,” an internal quibble that never threatens the fundamental structures in which it occurs?<sup>24</sup> In other words, what is really the difference between Habermas and the philosophers he opposes as anti- or post-modern? While Habermas, by his own definition, remains within

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<sup>23</sup> There are some critics, who have in fact read the debate in terms of the similarity of positions, rather than their wide discrepancy of opinions. Emilia Steuerman, for example, wants to draw Lyotard's position closer to Habermas's when she claims that “the postmodern condition, as characterized by Lyotard, is indeed a *radicalization* that in no way challenges the modernity project as such. Rather it takes it further in away that . . . answers Habermas's plea for the development of modernity as a yet unfinished (*unvollendetes*) project” (100). Accordingly, she reads modernity as the normative challenge of postmodernity and postmodernity as the taking up of this challenge, so that she finally can define postmodernity as “the continuous critique demanded by modernity” through “a *radicalization* that in no way challenges the modernity project as such” (113).

<sup>24</sup> Richard Rorty conflates the two positions in an wholly different manner, when he discounts the entire debate as “an artificial problem of taking Kant too serious” (89) and argues: “What links Habermas to the French thinkers he criticizes is the conviction that the story of modern philosophy (as successive reactions to Kant's diremptions) is an important part of the story of the democratic societies' attempt at self-assurance” (90). While there may be some merit in his criticism of self-involvement and restrictive philosophical outlook, his only viable alternative to the Habermas/Lyotard debate provides a rather untheoretical acceptance of a world that happens to follow democratic principles. Thus, Rorty's dismissal of both theorists by simply questioning the relevancy of Enlightenment philosophy in general seems to miss the philosophical points of both sides by substituting them with a pragmatic (and untheorized) account of the world *as is*.

a discourse of the modern, Lyotard—as well as the other thinkers he openly criticizes—cannot be as easily categorized. While Habermas’s study explicitly depends upon the project of modernity, most of the counter- and anti-Enlightenment philosophers—Adorno, Horkheimer, Lyotard, Foucault, Arendt, Lacan—are not only obviously indebted to Enlightenment thought, but continue to investigate and interrogate its premises. We thus can view them as heirs to a certain Enlightenment spirit—though not necessarily in a Habermasian vein—that represent the latest installment in the constantly revising and self-criticizing project of modernity.

Yet to simply subsume these insightful critics of modernity under its banner does injustice both to their—often radical—investigations into modernity and to the Enlightenment project itself. After all, there *are* fundamental philosophical issues at stake and while both sides may share a common theoretical heritage as well as a common goal, their methods of achieving these are completely contradictory. Whereas Habermas finds Enlightenment thought with its firm ethical structure and universal beliefs redeemable and necessary both philosophically and politically, Lyotard regards this same philosophical background as dangerous baggage that must be dismissed and overcome if we are to establish a free philosophical and political discourse. In other words, the principal difference between Habermas and Lyotard remains their opposing views on the values of the modern project of Reason and rationality, played out within the relationship—or rather, the responsibility—of modernity to the Holocaust. As each of the two considers his interlocutor’s position as enabling totalitarianism and, ultimately, fascism, we find the Holocaust at the very heart of the ongoing debate between proponents of modernity and their critics.

Thus, the Holocaust has been made to stand in for a variety of issues; in its extremity and shock value, the Nazi's "Final Solution" has become the exemplary topic that haunts the debate of modernity versus postmodernity. Not only does it provide a playing field on which various theories can be tested and taken to their respective limits, it also offers a shorthand as it serves as the ultimate metaphor of both the opposition to enlightened Reason and its perverse fulfillment. The question that pervades this entire chapter then is whether the Holocaust is a result of or an aberration of modernity. Both sides claim their position a priori without offering sufficient support above and beyond their particular view of modernity. If, as Lyotard claims, the terror of fascism with the Holocaust as its paradigmatic culmination has its roots deep in the heart of modern thought, that the crucial factor of modernity is its adherence to and dependence on totalizing metanarratives, fascism may well be an outgrowth of this philosophical universalism. Nevertheless, Habermas does not dispute the relationship between modernity and the Holocaust. What he disputes is an intrinsic dependency that would force us to dismiss the entire project on account of one aberrant result. He refuses to believe that a wholesale dismissal of the universal values and norms will help us prevent other atrocities in the future. In short, he refuses to intrinsically link Enlightenment values with the dark seed of counter-Enlightenment that he sees responsible not only for Nazism and its devastating consequences, but also for the anti- and postmodern forces of thinkers like Lyotard. In order to see whether we can, in fact, legitimately claim the Holocaust as postmodernity's center, as its cause and origin, we will have to look at the way specific modern and postmodern thinkers have looked towards the Holocaust and its relationship to modernity as well as evaluate their theories of postmodernity.

More specifically, we need to return to the roots of Enlightenment thought as it is in the fundamentally different approach towards Kant that we can find the clear theoretical separation between the postmodern thinkers (and their direct precursors) on the one hand and Habermas on the other. Throughout his career, Habermas is adamant about his project of continuing the goals and ideas of the Enlightenment, about safeguarding the original incentives of establishing philosophy on rational, logical grounds while maintaining a critical degree of self-reassurance (*Selbstvergewisserung*) and self-criticism. Habermas's strong investment in the original (and originary) move of modernity can be gathered not only from his avoidance of Kant in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* where he begins his discussion with Hegel and the problems he has introduced into the modern discourse, but also in the section on Horkheimer and Adorno. Strangely enough, while *Negative Dialectics* is a more deeply critical and pessimistic book than *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the latter is the one taken to task by Habermas. One way to read this choice is the different point of criticism: though both employ—and subvert—the modern investigative mode of dialectic /-reasoning, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* engages directly with the origins of modernity itself. Thus, whereas *Negative Dialectics* can be read as simply another installment in the ever-changing self-criticism of modernity, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* questions the foundations of modernity as such. Horkheimer and Adorno's tracing of myth to the very center of Enlightenment thought throws into doubt the modern project and prevents their being subsumed under that very project. Similarly, Foucault's and Lacan's (mis)readings of Kant hark back to the initial formulation of the enlightenment project. Rather than accepting the premises of modernity and attempting to rethink its implementation, both

question the very validity of the project itself as they suggest how Kant's very rationalism may be to blame for the anti-enlightened thoughts Habermas attempts to battle in his return to Kant.

### Eichmann's Categorical Imperative

The question as to whether the Holocaust is a result of too much or too little modernity, whether it is a byproduct of instrumental rationality or a result of an anti-rational counter-Enlightenment, has been raised by many post-Holocaust thinkers. For most, what is at stake is not simply an explanation of the horrors of Auschwitz, but also a deep inquiry into the very basis of our modern value system, our social life and, by extension, our entire modern existence. If, as Lyotard claims, modernity has died at Auschwitz, the consequence for philosophy is the overthrow of all rational thought and logical reasoning. If, however, the Holocaust is the result of a deeply irrational streak within the very center of modernity, then the question remains as to whether modernity can persevere by separating itself from its Other. In the following section I trace different arguments that posit irrationality and myth at the very center of Enlightenment. The central dispute in all these texts is the problem of whether modern evil, such as the Holocaust, derives from a mythical irrationality from which Enlightenment cannot divorce itself or whether it is, in fact, rationality itself gone awry. These in-depth discussions of the place of the irrational in modernity will hopefully shed some light on a proper definition of postmodernity and its relationship to the Holocaust. Returning to the father of Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant, all the thinkers I discuss probe into the relationship of the Kantian structural framework of the faculties to irrational and/or

unethical behavior and question the political, social, and moral realizability of the Kantian formalism. After examining Foucault's rereading of Kant in order to show how one of postmodernity's foremost thinkers ultimately returns to the cradle of Enlightenment, I look at Lacan and Horkheimer and Adorno who use certain similarities between Kant and de Sade to posit an intricate relationship between Enlightenment discourse and its other. By situating the origins of anti-Enlightenment in close proximity to Enlightenment itself—whether as an unseparable mythical Other or as simply another version of it—all these critics suggests that the violence and horrors of the Holocaust are, in fact, directly linked to Enlightenment ideas and thereby must herald the end of modernity as we know it.

One of the principal questions in this modern/postmodern debate is the ultimate status of modern methodology and other remainders of the Enlightenment within postmodernity. After all, post-modernity defines itself through, against, and after modernity and thus is prone to retain much of the modern approach, if only negatively. Moreover, as we have already seen in our discussion of Habermas and Lyotard, the question still remains as to whether certain counter-Enlightenment impulses are already at the center of Enlightenment itself. While Horkheimer and Adorno clearly write from within modern philosophy, poststructuralist Michel Foucault surely regards himself as having moved beyond these questions. Nevertheless, shortly before his death, he returns to the Kantian text which may be his first inquiry into what constitutes Enlightenment in order to resituate himself in respect to the issues of modernity.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Surprisingly enough, Foucault never addressed the Holocaust directly in his writing, which provoked David H. Hirsch to remark that "it is curious that Foucault should have dedicated himself to so meticulous an analysis of the 'panopticon', his paradigm (derived from Bentham) of the way in which liberal democracies keep watch over their subjects and thus keep them repressed, while he had nothing to

This seems especially strange when realizing how Kant had functioned as Foucault's opponent in the earlier texts. Especially in *The Order of Things*, Kant is among the thinkers whom Foucault holds responsible for the inauguration of a new relation between Man and the world. Recognizing the limits of Classical representation, Kant attempted to initiate a new discourse which not only brought Man at the center as *object* of philosophical inquiries, but also required him to become the center as transcendental *subject* of these very inquiries. Consequently, by questioning the previous metaphysical understanding of the world, Kant established a new metaphysical epistemology whose truth-claims are founded and maintained by its own discourse. Habermas describes Foucault's earlier criticism of Kant as follows: "the modern form of knowledge [is] marked from the very start by the aporia that the knowing subject raises itself out of the ruins of metaphysics in order, in the consciousness of his finite powers, to solve a task requiring infinite powers" (*Philosophical Discourse* 260-61). In short, Kant is but one of the many participants in the discourse of modernity whose universalizing and normalizing forces Foucault has repeatedly analyzed and criticized.

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say about the way the Germans kept him and his neighbors in subjection from 1940 to 1944" (122). James W. Bernauer, on the other hand, reads the very absence of commentary on the Holocaust as a sign of Foucault's deep engagement with and investment in the heritage of Auschwitz (260). In their insightful discussion on "Michel Foucault, Auschwitz and modernity," Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg trace a specific (though not expressed) interest in the Holocaust through Foucault's work. Filling in the connections, they argue that "[i]t is Foucault's own genealogy of the carceral society in *Discipline and Punish*, his penetrating outline of the mingling of a symbolics of blood and of bio-power in *The History of Sexuality* and his description of state racism in his lecture course 'Il faut défendre la société', that have enabled us to weave together these strands of a genealogy of Nazism which Foucault did not live to write, but which we believe cannot be written without him. Moreover, such a genealogy firmly situates Nazism within the historical trajectory of modernity" (110). In effect, they claim that it is not only Foucault's critique of enlightenment and his historical genealogical inquiries into Reason's Other through the disciplinary practices employed by the state that must be read as a study of the preliminary techniques employed within the concentration camps, but also his study of the relationship between sexuality and power that can help us understand Nazi ideology and policies.

Thus, when Foucault returns to a question that already seems to have been answered for most of his career, we must pay special attention to this particular move. His quest into answering “What Is Enlightenment” can be seen less as a recantation of his previously developed theories, but rather as the beginning of a new understanding and appreciation of modernity itself. What before had been a monolithic edifice of Reason, Truth, and Power, suddenly, in this new rereading of Foucault’s, reverts into its very opposite. As a result, Foucault seems, in fact, to succeed in having appropriated one of Enlightenment’s founding texts and turned it into its very opposite. Or has he, after all, been appropriated by modernity, as Norris and Habermas claim?<sup>26</sup>

With his essay “What Is Enlightenment?” Foucault continues a debate spawned by Kant who attempted to answer this very question in the *Berliner Monatsschrift* in November 1784. Kant’s text, which can be seen as the “point of departure” (38) for modernity, is unusual insofar as he emphasizes both his own historical situatedness yet views Enlightenment as an ongoing process. Still, Foucault’s main objection to Kant is that he does not acknowledge the historical specificity of his own text. Even though Kant emphasizes (for Foucault, for the first time) the historical contingency of his thoughts, he fails to admit to the conclusion that therefore his thought cannot possibly transcend these conditions. Moving Kant’s ethico-rational inquiry towards a more aesthetically oriented discussion, Foucault draws from Kant one important lesson. For Foucault the historically self-conscious, self-renewing Enlightenment offers a particular form of analysis that

implies a series of historical inquiries that are as precise as possible; and these inquiries will not be oriented retroactively toward the ‘essential kernel of rationality’ that can be found in the Enlightenment and that would have to be preserved in any

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<sup>26</sup> See Christopher Norris “‘What is Enlightenment?’: Kant according to Foucault” and Jürgen Habermas, “Taking Aim at the Heart of the Present.”

event; they will be oriented toward the ‘contemporary limit of the necessary,’ that is, toward what is not or is no longer indispensable for the constitution of ourselves as autonomous subjects. (43)

Thus, Foucault shifts the Kantian concerns of self-constraint and reason towards his project of the study of limit cases and their possible transgressions. The Kant we thus encounter is one who not only must be seen as the founder of Enlightenment, but also as the originator of counter-Enlightenment discourse. As a result, Foucault can easily trace a direct trajectory from Kant to himself, not as a devout follower of “a theory, a doctrine, [or] a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating,” but instead as “an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life” (50). According to this, Foucault has simply read Kant against himself in a perverse twist and thus appropriated him for his counter-Enlightenment goals. At the same time, however, Foucault’s entering into the modern philosophical debate requires the acceptance of certain universal terms and ideas, so that his intervention endangers him of being reappropriated by the very ideas he himself attempts to undermine.

This is the way both Jürgen Habermas and Christopher Norris read Foucault as they consider this re-opening of the Kantian question on Enlightenment as indicative of a shift in Foucault’s later thinking. Countering Rorty’s evaluation of Foucault as essentially a Rortian pragmatist who has not yet followed through with his own arguments, Norris attempts to present a Foucault who not only undermines his own earlier insights but who, ultimately, has returned to the modern project itself. While Norris acknowledges that Foucault’s reduced version of the Enlightenment project “can offer no hold for the truth-telling claims of old-style ‘universal’ reason” (“‘What is Enlightenment?’ 170), he still maintains that Foucault does, in fact, continue the Kantian project. He suggests that Foucault simply turns Kant against himself by separating the ethical project from the rational one within Kantian philosophy: “In this sense it might be

argued that Foucault . . . is merely following out the logic of Kant's own position when he seeks to drive a wedge between the truth-claims of enlightenment reason and the project of ethical self-fashioning that survives the eclipse or demise of those claims" (171).

Though Habermas still considers Foucault as a principal part of the anti-enlightened discourse he attacks in the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, he also recognizes Foucault's return to the discourse of modernity with his later inquiries into ethics and, more specifically, his engagement with Kant. Habermas reads Foucault as returning to a modern view of philosophy when he describes him as being "dr[awn] . . . back into a sphere of influence he had tried to blast open, that of the philosophical discourse of modernity" ("Taking Aim" 179). After all, by asking the question that Kant asked, by following him in acknowledging modernity as a historically contingent circumstance rather than a universal and ahistorical truth, Foucault views himself as returning to the beginnings of modernity. In fact, Habermas argues that a reader as astute as Foucault had to eventually acknowledge the contradictions his own discourse produces and, according to Habermas, the return to Kant occasions (or is occasioned by?) Foucault's self-recognition and consequent self-critique.<sup>27</sup> For Norris and Habermas, the late Foucault, with his new appreciation of modernity in his revisionist reading of Kantian ethics, has clearly returned towards the spirit of modernity's self-criticism and thus can no longer be sided with such postmodernists as Baudrillard or Lyotard.

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<sup>27</sup> Though we could argue that the occasion for Habermas's speech—a memorial address for Foucault—moderated his usually severe criticism, it is still astounding that this ordinarily harsh accuser of any postmodern theory appears to condone Foucault's reading of Kant.

Considering how Foucault is deeply steeped—in fact, has helped to create—the counter-enlightenment tradition, there are only two options to read this move. Either, as Habermas suggests and Norris argues, Foucault has been co-opted by the modern discourse and thus returned to Enlightenment ideals. Or, he maintains his position against modernity to the very end and thus uses his reading of Kant to subvert the entire project by positing its opposite at the very center of Enlightenment. It is this reading that Geoffrey Galt Harpham pursues when he argues that Foucault is exposing and exploiting an implicit paradox of Enlightenment itself: “the Enlightenment as a whole can be seen as devoted at once to particularity and distinction *and* to an overarching reason, which dispels contradictions or paradoxes by discovering, ‘in the widest sense,’ a principle of compatibility between apparently opposed terms” (531). Harpham thus understands Foucault’s article as the latter’s quest to not only read Kant against himself but, in so doing, to appropriate the Kantian discourse for Foucault’s critique of Enlightenment itself. Harpham suggests that “[t]he counter-Enlightenment seems as incapable of scraping the primordial mud of Enlightenment off its boots as the Enlightenment had been of suppressing its own perverted other” (533). While this interpretation is startling in its claim of positing an anti-Enlightenment discourse at the center of modernity, it still maintains a clear distinction between the two. Yet it stands to argue that it is the very qualities of enlightened Reason that also produces its dark other, epitomized as it is in the Holocaust, as the following reading of Arendt, Lacan, and Horkheimer and Adorno suggests.

One of the most unsettling and spectacular moments in the generally sensational 1963 trial against infamous Nazi criminal Adolf Eichmann comes when the principal

administrator of the “Final Solution” proclaims that he is not to be held responsible for the horrendous slaughter he had helped execute but instead had always followed what he considered a categorical imperative. Hannah Arendt who witnessed the trial describes the scene in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* as follows: “[D]uring the police examination [Eichmann] suddenly declared with great emphasis that he had lived his whole life according to Kant’s moral precepts, and especially to a Kantian definition of duty” (135-6). Arendt’s immediate reaction, of course, is to reject this connection as “outrageous” and “incomprehensible.” After all, Kant’s second critique must not only be seen as one of the principal interventions in the history of ethics, it specifically emphasizes how blind obedience as well as the instrumentalization of other men must be banned. Yet she cannot as easily as she would like to dismiss Eichmann’s perverse claim to obey a categorical imperative. She realizes instead that Eichmann has simply distorted the Kantian formula and filled it with his own obscene contents. The Kantian Categorical Imperative, “Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (38), is maintained in Eichmann’s formulation to read “Act as if the principle of your actions were the same as that of the legislator or the law of the land” (Arendt 136). Eichmann thus has created a simplified, perverted version of Kant as he himself explains, “I meant by my remark about Kant that the principle of my will must always be such that it can become the principle of general laws” (136).

Arendt, of course, tries to distinguish between Kant’s moral law and Eichmann’s perverse appropriation of it and concludes, “In this household use, all that is left of Kant’s spirit is the demand that a man do more than obey the law, that he go beyond the mere call of obedience and identify his own will with the principle of the law” (136-7).

Yet her hesitancy suggests that she is aware of the potential truth of Eichmann's claims. She realizes that Eichmann's comments may lead to a revelation about Kantian ethics that has deeper implication on the Enlightenment project in general. Thus, what Eichmann's exclamation (and Arendt's uncomfortable account of it) suggests is an insight into the complicated and intricate relationship between modernity and Western Enlightenment on the one hand and the Holocaust on the other.

When Arendt points towards the mere formalism of the Kantian imperative, the universal but empty formula that Eichmann fills with his obscene contents, she acknowledges one of the principal characteristics of Kantian ethics. In fact, one can argue that the emphasis on formalism is at the center of the Kantian project and that, consequently, the complete emptying out of any content in the Kantian imperative invites such a perverted reading as Eichmann's.<sup>28</sup> In an article published the same year as *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Jacques Lacan follows this line of inquiry by juxtaposing Kant with another unlikely bedfellow, the Marquis de Sade.<sup>29</sup> Entitled "Kant Avec Sade" this essay attempts to reconcile the Sadean will-to-jouissance with the ethical formal system of Sade's contemporary Kant. By formalizing ethics and leaving behind an ethics of the "good," Lacan argues, Kant offers a radically new version of ethics, one that is disinterested and rigorously formalistic. In fact, he regards de Sade as Kant's proper counterpart with *Philosophy in the Bedroom* instantiating the Kantian maxim: "Let us say that the diatribe is given in the maxim which proposes a rule for *jouissance*, bizarre in

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<sup>28</sup> For a philosophical approach to Kant's influence on Eichmann and the relationship between Kantian philosophy and Nazi ideology, see John Silber.

<sup>29</sup> For a reading that juxtaposes the two texts, see Juliet Flower MacCannell.

that it makes itself a right in the Kantian fashion, that of opting itself as a universal rule” (58).

Thus, it is Kant’s appeal to a universal formalism void of moral content that offers for Lacan the possibility of reading de Sade within a Kantian framework. Lacan does two things in this reading of Kantian ethics: while he emphasizes Kant’s formalism, when stating that “form is substance,” he simultaneously stresses Kant’s disinterest in regards to morality, the “good,” or pragmatic results. Whereas before Kant, Law tended to be seen as a repression of desire, his *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* changed the Law so as not to rely on repression. Instead, he substitutes a rigorous formalism in which the Law ultimately justifies itself via its universal law-status. Kant’s imperative law demands that it be based on pure reason alone, not on any contingent circumstances. He even accedes in his examples that obeying the Law may have severe effects on its participants; nevertheless, the Law must always have priority over any contingent situations to which it may be applied.

In Kant’s Categorical Imperative (in its first form) we are confronted with a Law which takes its sole justification from its law-status as the sole requirement for the ethical imperative becomes its ability to function universally. In fact, Kant clearly distinguishes between the *result* of an ethical action and the *grounds* on which it must be considered ethical: “An action done from duty does not have its moral worth in the purpose which is to be achieved through it but in the maxim by which it is determined” (16). As a result, the subject’s enjoyment cannot simply derive from a transgression of the Law any more, but, following Kant, we must also trace enjoyment to obedience to the Law itself.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> To move it onto another field, if we look at Foucault’s repression hypothesis, we can say that the enjoyments the repressed and repressing subject experiences, derive *not* from creating sexual laws and

Obviously Kant does not anticipate such a perverse twist when he makes obedience to the Law the essence of his version of ethics. Nevertheless, by removing the negative impulses from moral law, he has opened himself up to an interpretation such as the one by Lacan in which obedience to the Law is transformed into yet another obscene pleasure.

By focusing on Kant's rigorous formalism, Lacan is able to empty the Kantian imperative of all its contents and include de Sade into this formal gesture. Lacan juxtaposes de Sade with Kant and thus forces us to not only confront his own version of ethics, but also Kant's. Instead of repeating the classical reproach against Kantian ethics, within the Lacanian framework, Kant becomes praiseworthy for his very formalism. By leaving behind an ethics of "good," by formalizing the ethical system, Lacan believes that Kant offers a radically new version of ethics, one that is disinterested and rigorously formalistic as he points out what are for him the two most important points in Kant's ethics:

It is obviously necessary to recognize in it [Kant's ethics] this character [of unconditional practice of reason] for the simple reason that his very proclamation ...has the virtue of instituting at once—both this radical rejection of the pathological, of any concern for a good, for a passion, even for a compassion, that is the rejection by which Kant liberates the field of the moral law—and the form of this law which is also its only substance, inasmuch as the will is only obligated to dismiss from its practice any reason which is not that of its maxim itself. (59)

It is this ability of the Kantian ethics to exist outside of a moral good or any utilitarian concern that interests Lacan, and it is this very quality that allows Lacan to situate de Sade's maxim expressed in *Philosophy in the Bedroom* within the framework of Kantian ethics. After all, Kant is much less concerned with the actual contents of the law; his

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breaking them, but from the very obedience to these laws as the fulfillment of the demand of an obscene Other.

emphasis is on its universality *as* a law. What is important to realize here, though, is that Lacan is not advocating that Kant has left open the possibility of appropriation by an irrational enemy to the Enlightenment. Rather, the Sadean approach to sexuality is completely formulized and as such fulfills the Kantian requirements. Or, to say it differently, Lacan is not arguing that Kant is sadistic; rather, he is pointing out that de Sade is deeply Kantian.<sup>31</sup> In effect, Kant's ultimate mistake (or his genuine discovery according to Lacan) is that once we give up the demand for an ethics of "good," we have opened the door for a Sadean appropriation of the Kantian formal structure.

Accordingly, by using de Sade's version of a maxim, Lacan forces us to acknowledge the possibility of an anti-moral interpretation of the Kantian ethics and to confront the obscene enjoyment that is irrevocably linked with Kant's enlightened ethics.<sup>32</sup> For our reading of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* this means that there actually may be a legitimate reading of Kant that invites the response we found so repulsive in Eichmann. What is most unsettling about this interpretation is the fact that we cannot claim a counter- or anti-Enlightenment impulse at the center of modernity to account for the horrors of the Third Reich, but that, instead, the pure formalism of the Kantian formulas allows for the Sadean or Eichmannian version. In other words, to quote Juliet Flower MacCannell, "The scandal here is less that Kant's principles did not hold out

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<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of these two approaches to Lacan's reading of Kant and de Sade, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, 167-73.

<sup>32</sup> There are, in fact, two ways in which to counter this correlation between Kantian ethics and Nazi practices. The traditional one attacks the claims against Kant's formalism by arguing that Kant indeed is concerned with moral behavior and the Good. The second, more unusual rebuttal is Slavoj Žižek's who argues that Nazism was not really formalistic; instead, "it violated the basic Kantian precept of the primacy of Duty over any notion of Good, since it relied on a precise notion of Good (the establishment of a true community of German people) with regards to which all 'formal' ethical injunctions were instrumentalized and relativized" (*Plagues* 231).

against a will to transgress them, but that something in Kant's very principle seemed to an Eichmann ... to lend itself to that particular distortion" (74).

In fact, even the persistent universality of Kant can be found in Eichmann as the latter prides himself in never breaking the Law, never claiming an exception. Arendt describes how Eichmann is still embarrassed in 1963 for having intervened on behalf of two Jews, apologizing to the Israeli court for failing the Law in these instances. Arendt writes: "No exceptions—this was the proof that he had always acted against his 'inclinations,' whether they were sentimental or inspired by interest, that he had always done his 'duty'" (137). There is, of course, something deeply Kantian in this evacuation of all personal investments and enjoyment from one's actions. Eichmann, thus, obeys at the very least one of Kant's principal rules of the imperative by showing utter disinterestedness in his respect for the law.

Moreover, Eichmann himself repeatedly emphasizes the importance of the Law as he distinguishes between simply following a superior's orders and the Law itself. Arendt describes, "He did his *duty*, as he told the police and the courts over and over again; he not only obeyed *orders*, he also obeyed the *law*" (135). It is this emphasis on the law that ultimately marks Eichmann's closeness to Kant. By rigorously separating enjoyment from the law, Kant has foreclosed the possibility of the subject's taking into account its own *jouissance*. In fact, Eichmann offers an example that allows us to see clearly the dangers of trying to separate the Law and enjoyment; the dissection of his categorical imperative exposes how even such obscure ethics as the Lacanian demands to "not give way as to your desires" must finally conform with more commonsensical ethics. This does not mean to say, of course, that the categorical imperative as will-to-enjoy itself is unethical,

i.e., that either obeying the law or even enjoying such an obedience is unethical. What is important to recognize and acknowledge, however, is the simultaneous success and failure of any such attempt, and thus, the fact that enjoyment and the Law are inextricably interwoven. This, of course, is the principal lesson de Sade's writing has to teach us as he undermines our traditional separation of pleasure and morals by showing how the two are always already unconsciously connected.

### How Juliette Explains Hitler

What both Lacan's and Arendt's discussions suggest (but do not explicitly state) is the possibility that it is the rational, universal formalism at the center of Enlightenment thought that can be held responsible for modernity's aberrant path rather than the anti-Enlightened, irrational strain that Habermas holds responsible and tries to hold at bay with his revised project. Yet even when we refuse the utterly disheartening Lacanian reading that rationalism and democracy themselves are the principal causes for totalitarianism, we still may not be able to rescue the Enlightenment project as Habermas would like. Habermas's claim that only Enlightenment's rationality can produce a bulwark against the horrors of fascism is all the more stunning if we consider that he represents the second generation of Critical Theory.<sup>33</sup> After all, the Frankfurt School made its startling debut in this country with its wholesale indictment of Enlightenment when Habermas's teachers Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno collaborated on what later became the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* during their exile from Nazism in the

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<sup>33</sup> For a most comprehensive overview of the first generation of the Frankfurt School, see Martin Jay.

United States.<sup>34</sup> This unusual text registers a heightened concern about the relationship between Enlightenment rationality and its totalitarian abuse. While acknowledging their debt to modernity and attempting to rescue parts of the Enlightenment legacy, Horkheimer and Adorno question a potential separation of rationality from its Other.

In fact, they also look towards the Marquis de Sade as an exemplary instantiation of the dangers of Enlightenment rationality, intellectual formalism, and the evacuation of contents within a moral framework. Thus, twenty years before Lacan stages his confrontation of Kant and de Sade, Horkheimer and Adorno contemplate a similar correlation with their excursus “*Juliette* or Enlightenment and Morality,” as they continue their inquiries into the dialectics of myth and enlightenment. Meant as an application and illustration of the more abstract and conceptual discussions of the first chapter, Horkheimer and Adorno juxtapose Kant’s principles of reason and ethics with de Sade’s perversion of it.

From the very outset, Horkheimer and Adorno frame their studies of the dialectic of Enlightenment as an inquiry into what has gone awry with the project of modernity that “instead of entering into a truly human condition, [mankind] is sinking into a new kind of barbarism” (xi). Even though their allusions to fascism are infrequent throughout the text, the circumstances of its writing as well as the last chapter, “Elements of Anti-Semitism,” suggest that Nazism is at the center of this inquiry. The principal argument of the text proposes that enlightenment rationality has failed because it neglected to acknowledge the mythical component of its rational enterprise. In fact, they argue that rationality itself in its desire to replace all mythic thinking instead has become

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<sup>34</sup> For a more sociological study on Nazism of the Institute for Social Research, see Theodor Adorno et. al., *The Authoritarian Personality*.

Enlightenment's mythic center. They claim that the main problem is that human reason, the cornerstone of Enlightenment thought, has been reduced to instrumental rationality. Proceeding from its increasing control over nature and objects in general, instrumental rationality thus has taken over the differentiated spheres and taken mankind itself hostage.

Enlightenment's initial project, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, is the "disenchantment of the world," in order to "liberat[e] men from fear and establish[] their sovereignty" (3). Its principal tool in so doing is the emphasis of reason at the center of the rational subject to rationalize, disenchant, and, ultimately, control the nature surrounding him. There are several problems with this principle which Horkheimer and Adorno detail in their "Introduction." For one, the historical circumstances of Enlightenment point towards its indebtedness to bourgeois culture. Enlightenment's debt to and investment in bourgeois exchange principles thus leads to a subsuming of human interests to economic principles so that thought itself has become a commodity. Moreover, this inextricable link between capitalist principles and the concepts of Enlightenment also anticipate the commercialization of culture that Horkheimer and Adorno describe and criticize as "the culture industry."<sup>35</sup> Within cultural modernity, then, reason has been co-opted by power. Furthermore, as "[t]he formalization of reason is only the intellectual expression of mechanized production" (Horkheimer and Adorno 104) reason itself takes on the form of a commodity and the basis and center of

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<sup>35</sup> Their accordingly entitled fourth chapter performs an explicit criticism of mass culture through the example of Hollywood films. It is from this stance that the surprisingly different reactions stem which we encounter in postmodern and poststructural readings of Adorno. Whereas his insights into the workings of modernity anticipate poststructural critiques of modernity such as Derrida's, Foucault's, and Lyotard's (see Rainer Nägele), the postmodern valorization of popular culture and its merging of high brow and low brow are completely adverse to Adorno's aesthetic theories. For a critical reading of Adorno from a postmodern perspective, see, for example, Jim Collins.

Enlightenment thought is tainted from the very beginning by the historical circumstances of its creation and articulation.<sup>36</sup>

Another problem deriving from this central role of bourgeois principles within Enlightenment philosophy is the emphasis on technological methods. By turning reason into an instrument of control over nature and other objects, man has opened the door to utilize instrumental rationality over other subjects as well. As a result, Enlightenment's goal to gain further control over one's own destiny by disenchanting one's intimidating environment has turned into an abuse of this very principle as it uses the concept of instrumental rationality to subordinate and use other fellow human beings. In arguing this, Horkheimer and Adorno draw from Max Weber's analysis of modernity which emphasizes the separation of the different spheres of science, morality, and art, of—as Habermas calls it—cognitive-instrumental, moral-practical, and aesthetic-expressive rationality. As Weber had already described, however, not only did these autonomous spheres become ever more specialized and consequently alienated from an increasingly impoverished life-world, the sphere of science also overpowered the other two so that instrumental rationality became the central (if not only) way to view and describe the world. Interestingly enough, Jürgen Habermas does not disagree with this characterization; in fact, it lies at the basis of his attempt to recuperate the Enlightenment project. Where he differs from his teachers, however, is in the inevitability of such a “colonization” of the life-world by instrumental rationality. In contrast to Habermas's endeavor to maintain the democratic potentials of Enlightenment ideology by switching

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<sup>36</sup> As we have seen, this historical situatedness of the Enlightenment and its own awareness of it, is not only one of the dominant themes in Horkheimer and Adorno, but is also discussed in Michel Foucault's “What Is Enlightenment?”

its emphasis from instrumental to communicative reasoning, Horkheimer and Adorno, however, see the dominance of scientific progress and instrumental rationality with its ensuing totalitarian ideology as inevitable.

The final problem with Enlightenment's rational approach towards irrational and chaotic mythic principles is the fact that the process is constructed to erase its own development and therefore disallows self-critical analysis. As a result, it has failed to recognize how its own principles have turned against themselves by raising rationality itself to a new mythic character. Accordingly, Horkheimer and Adorno describe how "the very notion of spirit, of truth, and, indeed, of enlightenment itself, have become animistic magic" (11). Rather than positing its own self-critique, Enlightenment has thus given way to its totalizing, universalizing tendencies, creating a system more totalitarian and all-encompassing than the one it was meant to replace. As Horkheimer and Adorno point towards Enlightenment's inability to stage its own criticism, they argue that the very center of Enlightenment thought is lost. Self-reflexive reasoning, which was meant to replace mythic thinking, has evacuated itself of all meaning in modernity's attempt to properly formalize its functioning. Horkheimer and Adorno thus argue, "[w]ith the formalization of reason, to the extent that its preferred function is that of a symbol for neutral procedures, theory itself becomes an incomprehensible concept, and thought appears meaningful only when meaning has been discarded" (93).

In short, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, the problem with the historical development of Enlightenment is the stopping of the dialectical processes at its center. This, in turn, liquidates modernity's potential by focusing on a "conversation of the past" instead of a "redemption of the hopes of the past" (xv). It is in comments like these that

Horkheimer and Adorno seem closest to Habermas, that we can see their desire to maintain a dialectic of reason and continue the project of modernity. At the same time, though, they resist this desire, and most discussions in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* reveal their comprehension that such recuperation may not be possible. Instead, Horkheimer and Adorno maintain that the Enlightenment project may have been doomed from its start. By turning enlightenment's rational insights against itself, they posit an interwoven, inextricably linked synthesis of myth and enlightenment at the center: "Just as myth already realizes enlightenment, so enlightenment with every step becomes more deeply engulfed in mythology" (11-12). Mythic and rational thinking are one and the same, inseparable at heart, so that the discussion as to whether it is the rational or irrational aspect of modernity that lead to the Holocaust has become more difficult to answer. Their most important insight in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is that fascist ideologies are not a retreat or counterrational impulse *against* Enlightenment values, but rather the inversion of Enlightenment itself, an Enlightenment which according to Horkheimer and Adorno "already contains the seed of the reversal" (viii). Consequently, while they acknowledge that Nazism draws from anti-modern and irrational elements in its fascist ideology, these facets are, at heart, not only reactions to Enlightenment ideas and values but may well be their result as well.

Yet this entwinement of myth and Enlightenment can still be accounted for if we posit counter-Enlightenment impulses as arising simultaneously with Enlightenment itself, all the while maintaining their oppositional quality. In order to further investigate Horkheimer and Adorno's position we must look at their reading of de Sade in their second excursus, "Juliette or Enlightenment and Morality." Throughout their text it is

never completely clear whether Horkheimer and Adorno actually hold Enlightenment responsible for de Sade's perverted theories or whether they see Juliette's philosophy as a reaction to it. In traditional dialectical fashion, they regard de Sade both as result of and reaction to modern rational principles, both as outgrowth of and exception to bourgeois modern ideology. As de Sade exposes the repressed elements in Kant's rigorous formalism, he can be seen as perverting and corrupting Kant's ethical system at the same time as we can simply regard him as filling the void Kant's empty formalism has left behind.

On the one hand, Horkheimer and Adorno regard fascism as a reaction to modernity's rigorous attempts to control nature completely. This is at least the view that we must arrive at when reading the theoretical chapter alone. The entwinement of myth and Enlightenment, though inseparable it may have been in its historical instantiation, still posits a fairly distinct theoretical separation between the rational and irrational, between good and evil. In their excursus on Marquis de Sade's *Justine*,<sup>37</sup> however, their juxtaposition of Kant and Sade suggests that the relationship between the "black" writers and Enlightenment may be more complicated yet. In fact, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that there may be no natural connection between rationality and morality, thus rejecting the implicit claim on which much of modernity's self-understanding is based. They write,

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<sup>37</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno chose this Sadein heroine not only because de Sade's philosophical attitudes exemplify a Kantian counterposition. They argue that women are usually seen as a species rather than as individuals and have come to be considered closer to nature. Thus, women's domination aptly illustrates their argument that instrumental rationality has learned from the domination of nature how to dominate fellow human beings. Moreover, by positing both Jews and women as similarly powerless, Horkheimer and Adorno implicitly draw a direct connection to the Holocaust itself as consistent with their theories on Enlightenment.

Unlike its apologists, the black writers of the bourgeoisie have not tried to ward off the consequences of the Enlightenment by harmonizing theories. They have not postulated that formalist reasoning is more closely allied to morality than to immorality. Whereas the optimistic writers merely disavowed and denied in order to protect the indissoluble union of reason and crime, civil society and domination, the dark chroniclers mercilessly declared the shocking truth. (117-18)

One of the central motifs of criticism that runs through *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is the problem that instrumental rationality demands the subjugation of nature at the same time as it is supposed to forbid the subjugation of other men. As we have seen, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that one easily (if not inevitably) leads to the other: if we are to use nature, what is to keep us from using other men in the same way? After all, “[b]eing is apprehended under the aspect of manufacture and administration” (84). Thus, fascism’s abuse of human rights and its disrespect for human dignity is but the culmination of a process started unwillingly by Kant himself when he declares reason the central controlling instance: “[i]n contradistinction to the categorical imperative and all the more in accordance with pure reason, [fascism] treats men as things” (86).

As we have already seen in our discussion of “Kant Avec Sade,” what makes reason so dangerous is its complete disregard of ends, especially when we consider Kant’s repeated emphasis—even in his ethical writings—on ignoring ends as irrelevant to the principles themselves. Thus, Horkheimer and Adorno can write, “The architectonic structure of the Kantian system, like the gymnastic pyramids of Sade’s orgies . . . reveal an organization of life as whole which is deprived of any substantial goal” (88). Thus, they expose how one may logically deduct de Sade’s perversions from Kant’s rigorous formalism and the consequent subjugation of nature. In effect, if Enlightenment posits the individual freed from tutelage and external controlling forces, it invites such distortions as de Sade’s. This paradox is exactly what de Sade’s philosophy explodes

when it describes “the bourgeois individual freed from tutelage” (86) and shows how this free subject suddenly has the ability and potential to act immorally instead of obeying some inner virtuous and ethical rules. As Enlightenment places its emphasis on the subject with his pure rationality and free will, this free will is not bound by external moral forces as it previously was and has the potential to act immorally without the ethical restrictions by which it was previously bound.

Looking at Juliette, then, we must see her as much (if not more so) as a direct *product* of Enlightenment philosophy than as a *reaction* to its code, norms, and values. In fact, Juliette simply adopts the Cartesian separation of mind and body as she sharply separates her feelings and emotions from the bodily functions of sexuality. Horkheimer and Adorno thus comment: “[t]he unavoidable consequence, already implicit in the Cartesian separation of man into cognitive and extensive substances, is quite explicitly expressed as the destruction of romantic love, which is actually a disguise, a rationalization of physical impulse...” (108). Juliette, the “proficient manipulator of the organ of rational thought” (95) stands out even in Sade’s text as the one who is not bound by her own superstitions. Thus, she refuses to be fanatical; her sacrilegious work is always based on rational not emotional grounds; conscience has to be abolished for formalistic reasons. In no way can she be read as returning to a pre-enlightened myth like Catholicism (with which Horkheimer and Adorno contrast her) but instead must be seen as epitomizing the rationalized and rationalizing subject par excellence. Just like Kant demands, Juliette is exemplary in her apathy and indifference, her lack of emotions and enthusiasm, in short, her “[c]almness and decisiveness constitute the strength of virtue” (96).

Far from presenting a perverse misreading of Enlightenment, de Sade thus becomes the (admittedly undesirable) fulfillment of Enlightenment's potential. Accordingly, Sade functions as a corrective to the Kant's idealistic understanding of his own critiques as Sade's work "constitutes the intransigent critique of practical reason, in contradistinction to which Kant's critique itself seems a revocation of his own thought" (94). As we have seen before, one of the central problems of Enlightenment, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, is the erasure of its own roots. This, of course, inhibits any attempt to ward off any appropriations (or misappropriations). In fact, "the Enlightenment possesses no argument against even such a perversion of its proper nature, for the plain truth had no advantage over distortion, and rationalization none over the *ratio*, if they could prove no practical benefits for themselves" (93).

It is comments like this one that contradict interpretations that want to safely place Horkheimer and Adorno in a position where irrationality is at the root of all of modernity's problems. In fact, it is important to point out that Horkheimer and Adorno *do not* claim that irrationality is to blame for modernity's problems as they seem to suggest to a superficial reader. Instead, they are very careful to demonstrate how rationality itself has created its own Other. In fact, the problem is not the desiring subject itself, but the mechanisms that try to maintain control over it, the laws of repression that are enacted upon it. Thus, Horkheimer and Adorno do not see myth as a force repressed by Enlightenment that has come back to haunt the project but rather as the inevitable, inseparable other side of rationality itself. It is the very principles of reason that allow for the domination of nature not their potential negations.

Similarly, we need to be careful to avoid a reading like the one Habermas performs in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. In it, he accuses *Dialectic of Enlightenment* of flattening out the complexities of modernity by foregrounding instrumental and purposive rationality alone. Thus, “*Dialectic of Enlightenment* does not do justice to the rational content of cultural modernity” (113) insofar as it ignores “differentiation of value spheres in accord with their own logics” (112). According to Habermas, Horkheimer and Adorno consequently privilege the technical and instrumental aspects of the sciences at the expense of “the universalist foundations of law and morality that have *also* been incorporated . . . into the institutions of constitutional government, into the forms of democratic will formation, and into individualist patterns of identity formation” (113). It is hard to ignore Habermas’s personal investment of trying to consolidate the dismal outlook of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* with respect for his mentors. Overall, his criticism of Horkheimer and Adorno is less severe than most of the other lectures. His disappointment shows in remarks like the following, “how can these two men of Enlightenment (which they both remain) be so unappreciative of the rational content of cultural modernity that all they perceive everywhere is a binding of reason and domination, of power and validity?”(121). As he laments their “lack of concern in dealing with the . . . achievements of occidental rationalism” (121), he offers a critique based less on the actual problems within the text itself but rather with his incomprehension at Horkheimer and Adorno’s actual philosophical point of view. He even grudgingly respects Adorno’s almost ascetic refusal to collapse the dialectic moment into a comfortable synthesis, his refusal to “wanting to overcome the performative contradiction inherent in an ideology critique that outstrips itself” (127).

Habermas's ultimate criticism holds, when he claims that Horkheimer and Adorno's ideology critique "remained caught up in the purist notion that the devil needing exorcism was hiding in the internal relationship between genesis and validity, so that theory, purified of all empirical connotations, could operate in its own element" (129-30). Obviously, any critical approach that remains *within* the concepts of Enlightenment has to face these charges. The question remains, however, whether Adorno's acknowledging of the problem, his continuing attempts to refuse totalization, to resist comfort of synthesis and perform the contradictions, may not be moving outside of this framework which still contains the ideology critique as performed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Moreover, it is doubtful whether Habermas's alternative, his attempt to reassimilate the different spheres and bring them into communication in order to maintain the project that his teachers already found doomed, will be successful.

After our discussion, we can see, however, that a close investigation into the heart of enlightened reason exposes the very "violent anti-enlightenment and anti-modernity affect" from which Huyssen and Habermas try to purge Kantian Reason. By returning to Kant himself, Horkheimer and Adorno, Foucault, and Lacan realize that the seed for Auschwitz cannot be safely ascribed to anti-modern thought but must be found at the very center of rationality and reason. Eichmann may not have been far from the truth when he appealed to Kant himself as his guiding principle. Though a perverse version of the Kantian imperative, he may still be grounded in the very project Habermas so vehemently defends. Therefore, the only option philosophy has upon recognizing this dilemma is the constant questioning and undermining of the philosophical trajectory Eichmann so easily could abuse. Thus, the postmodern project can be defined through its

attempts to understand the relationship between Nazism and the Holocaust, and one of their principal goals is the prevention of another Holocaust. Consequently, we can see how these philosophers' understanding of the Holocaust is indicative of their understanding of modernity in general. In fact, if we understand the term postmodern as critical of the very foundations of the project of modernity while holding this project responsible for most recent philosophical, social, and political developments, the terms post-Holocaust and postmodern can be used synonymously.

### The Holocaust as Postmodernity's Constitutive Exception

As we have seen, the Holocaust holds a prominent place both for advocates as well as critics of postmodernity. However, retroactively claiming a central status to the Holocaust within the philosophical debate on postmodernity does not necessarily imply that the event itself ought to be singled out and regarded as unique. More specifically, it does not imply that the Holocaust was worse than other genocides, that it was more gruesome than other mass murders, more evil than other torturous regimes. Even if a comparison of evil were possible, it would lead to little new insights, and it seems futile to enter this debate. What it does suggest, however, is that a number of philosophers have chosen to react to this specific event in twentieth century Western history and made it emblematic of the course of history in general.<sup>38</sup> We can thus say that the Holocaust holds a crucial place in postmodern thought and that it has been repeatedly claimed as the crucial event to bring postmodernity into being.

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<sup>38</sup> Of course, the specific status that many critics have assigned the Holocaust may simply have particular cultural explanations (for example, it may be no surprise that this debate draws contributors mainly from Germany and France with the Anglo-American contingency somewhat disinterested) or even

Looking at this thoroughly modern event that marks postmodernity, we still lack an appropriate model to describe the relationship between the Holocaust, modernity, and postmodernity. After all, when trying to relate the Holocaust to modernity and postmodernity, one is immediately confronted with the question as to whether it is appropriate to incorporate an event as extreme as the Holocaust into any regular history or history of philosophy. The claim that the Holocaust is congruent with and a perverse end result of modern instrumental rationality seems more radical a position than the one that removes the event from philosophical history altogether by declaring it unique and exceptional. After all, if we maintain the Holocaust as a unique event, it must be regarded as an aberration to modern discourse, and modernity itself can therefore attempt to protect us from similar incidents. This position's need to historicize the Holocaust immediately puts it in danger of relativizing the event as the Holocaust simply becomes another modern occurrence. If, instead, the Holocaust is not an aberration, however, the wholesale postmodern critique of reason is warranted insofar as modernity itself must be held accountable. In either case, it is important to look closely at the role the Holocaust plays in any self-definition and self-understanding of postmodernity.

Although a somewhat simplified account of the problem facing philosophy after the Holocaust, this description nevertheless reveals the crucial position that the question of uniqueness holds within Holocaust Studies in general and post-Holocaust philosophy in particular. In the following, I explore question of uniqueness and its impact on the philosophical impact of the Holocaust on postmodern thought. Drawing from the subtly different approaches of Theodor Adorno in *Negative Dialectics* and Jean-François

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personal reasons (several of the theorists discussed here survived the Holocaust in exile; others lived through the war).

Lyotard in *The Differend*, I will suggest a theory that allows us to see the Holocaust as both unique and representative as it draws from both modern and postmodern aspects of the debate. Looking at various models of the relationship between the particular and the universal, I finally suggest the model of the constitutive exception as a framework which may allow us to circumvent the debate by accounting for the Holocaust as both unique *and* representative, both particular *and* universal at the same time. Using a particular reading of Hegel that maintains the dialectical model while avoiding its universalizing and totalizing aspects, I suggest that this approach not only helps us understand the relationship between the Holocaust, modernity, and postmodernity, but also bridges the seemingly clear-cut boundaries between the modern and the postmodern.

One of the principal debates within Holocaust Studies which continues to divide the public as well as the academic community is the question of uniqueness. While many consider the Holocaust's uniqueness beyond discussion and the general public's use of the Holocaust as the exemplar of human atrocity underlines such a position, scholars have difficulty qualifying or quantifying this uniqueness. George Steiner, for example, argues in "The Long Life of a Metaphor" the uniqueness of the Shoah, yet finds himself troubled when trying to defend it quantitatively or qualitatively. Quantitatively, he argues, the Stalinist regime has killed more (he puts the number at 10 or 12 million) and the massacres under Pol Pot killed more people in a shorter period of time. Qualitatively, he refutes the argument that either the specific ethnic-racial eradication nor the particular bureaucratized and industrialized killings made the Holocaust unique. Instead, he argues that any uniqueness must be understood in a "symbolic and metaphysical-theological realm" (159) in the way the Holocaust has come to figure to Jewish identity as a whole:

“The Shoah, the remembrance of Auschwitz, the haunting apprehension that, somewhere, somehow, the massacres could begin anew, is today the cement of Jewish identity” (159).

The argument then is less one of objectively proving the Holocaust’s uniqueness, but rather that the Holocaust has come to stand in for a larger shift in consciousness, that it easily shorthands a multitude of changing conditions, understandings, and theories. This, of course, avoids our having to prove its extraordinary cruelty and unsurpassed slaughter. In its stead, we can simply point towards the crucial role it has held (and continues to hold) in contemporary philosophical, social, and historical discourse.

When regarding Adorno’s and Lyotard’s reading of the role of the Holocaust within modernity and the question of uniqueness, there are obvious principal differences between the two. Whereas Lyotard views the event as allowing us to realize that modern theories were never an option, Adorno seems to describe the Holocaust as an actual break that, in its enormity, must cause a philosophical shift. With these interpretations, however, the Holocaust has become yet again a theoretical stumbling block for both philosophers as their positions on the uniqueness of the event contradict their overall theoretical impulses. After all, Lyotard, who emphasizes the continuity of incommensurability and therefore regards the Holocaust simply as an indicator rather than an actual agent or even catalyst, simultaneously accentuates the uniqueness of the Holocaust. In so doing, he moves the event outside of a seemingly continuous timeline in which postmodernity is not a *new* concept but simply one belatedly recognized. In a similar vein, Adorno’s need to regard the Holocaust as an extension of modernity and therefore not unique, subtly undermines his overall approach which demarcates a clear boundary between the modern and the postmodern with the Holocaust at its border.

Thus, for Adorno, the Holocaust must be both outside of philosophical time while at the same time being thoroughly mired in modern discourse. The disrupting role of the Holocaust for both Lyotard and Adorno signals not only its central role in both philosophers' theories but also in the overall relationship between modernity and postmodernity. As a result, this close examination of their interpretation of the function of the Holocaust allows us to ultimately develop a model that may be consistent with both thinkers and their contradictory impulses when it comes to addressing the Holocaust.

Lyotard clearly reads the Holocaust as an event that brought to the surface issues that were immanent within modern discourse as such. Notwithstanding Lyotard's postmodern position which would suggest his adhering to a radical break between modernity and postmodernity, he tends to emphasize the continuity of philosophical thought. In fact, much of his writing indicates that postmodernity has simply acknowledged the problems that modernity experienced but attempted to disregard and cover up.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the Holocaust serves as a principal example (or rather as a model) for what Lyotard terms the differend insofar as it exposes the incompatibility of phrase regimes in one of its most extreme forms. While the fact that he heavily draws from Adorno and his rhetoric may lead us to read Lyotard as arguing that philosophy changed with and after Auschwitz, we can see by contextualizing these passages that he does not advocate such a severe break within philosophical tradition. Instead, Auschwitz serves as an indicator that allows us to retroactively register and understand a problem that is at the

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<sup>39</sup> This attitude is consistent with his reading of the aesthetic, where the modern and the postmodern mutually beget one another: "A work can thus become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant" (*Postmodern Condition* 79)

heart of modern discourse but had previously been overlooked and neglected. One indication, of course, is Lyotard's situating the discussion on Auschwitz within a larger philosophical contemplation on phrase regimes and their incompatibility. Thus, Auschwitz becomes a model for a shift in understanding and interpretation of philosophy rather than for an actual shift in philosophy itself. In fact, most of the debate over Auschwitz is situated in a "Hegel Notice" in *The Differend*, thus suggesting that Auschwitz simply elucidates the problem of the failure of speculative knowledge rather than creating it. For Lyotard, Auschwitz comes to stand in as a placeholder for the recognition/discovery that phrase regimes are not always compatible, i.e., that there does not exist a consistent universe. As such, the metaphysical grounding which could relate things and ideas to one another, the dialectic movement which ultimately sublated experiences into concepts has disappeared (or proven insufficient to account for the experience of Auschwitz).

Yet his rhetoric shifts when discussing Auschwitz; in fact, surprisingly enough, Lyotard seems to establish the Holocaust as an actual break in philosophical history. He uses terminology of clear breaks and gaps, thus establishing the Holocaust as a singular, exceptional event. He designates "the 'Auschwitz' model" as "an 'experience' of language that brings speculative discourse to a halt" (88) so that Auschwitz produces a "cleaving [which] cracks speculative logic itself and not merely its effects" (90). Of course, while he states that "with Auschwitz something new has happened in history," he immediately modifies this claim by asserting that this "can only be a sign and not a fact" (57). Nevertheless, he is much more explicit in situating Auschwitz at the crossroads, at which philosophy became "obsolete" than Adorno himself. Moreover, when discussing

humanity, he asserts, “[w]ere this *we* called humanity . . . , then ‘Auschwitz’ is indeed the name for the extinction of that name” (101). What distinguishes Auschwitz, then, and the reason why he uses it in such an exemplary function is the fact that it not only exposes the problems of phrase regimes, differend, and litigation, but, at times, seems to explode even these concepts: “Between the SS and the Jews there is not even a differend” (106).

This ambiguity is also present in Adorno, though in an opposite direction.

Adorno’s philosophy in general is predicated on a break, a failure to fulfill the promises of enlightenment. Though he is well aware of the fact that many of modernity’s problems are inseparable from its very program itself (as our discussion on *Dialectic of Enlightenment* has shown), he still maintains a belief in the dialectical project which at the time of *Negative Dialectics* has failed to be fulfilled or even to be possible. In this context, we would expect his discussion of “After Auschwitz” to situate the faultline with the Holocaust, to make the Holocaust the cause of the loss of philosophical options. Accordingly, his comment of “no poetry after Auschwitz” has mostly been read as such.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, if we read *Negative Dialectics* closely, we begin to realize that Adorno uses Auschwitz as a model, i.e., as Jameson argues, his choice may be motivated by contextual contingencies such as his personal relationship to the Holocaust (112-13). Moreover, by maintaining the model of dialectics—even in its negative version—Adorno continues the project of modernity and thus cannot really be read as viewing Auschwitz as the ultimate end and death of the Enlightenment project.

Faced with two thinkers for whom Auschwitz both is and is not the break between modernity and something else, we can see how the role of Auschwitz—less a place here

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<sup>40</sup> For an in-depth analysis of this phrase and its shifting meaning throughout Adorno’s career, see Michael Rothberg, “After Adorno.”

than a symbol, both retroactively constructed and given meaning—in relation to postmodernity must be carefully analyzed. We need to find a model that allows Auschwitz to function as both singular and universal, as the absolute break from modernity and a representative thereof. After all, as an event which repeatedly has been singled out for its uniqueness, the Holocaust must be seen as particular—in the extreme. However, in our attempt to connect it historically and philosophically with the shift from modernity to postmodernity and the questions raised, the Holocaust must adhere to larger universal concepts. Just like the Holocaust is both universal *and* particular, it is also on the brink between modernity and postmodernity, so that we need a theory that will encompass both. By translating Ernesto Laclau's approach towards relating the universal and the particular to our specific situation, we can develop a model with which to view the Holocaust as a historically specific and particular phenomenon without losing sight of the larger implications we must derive from it. In fact, this model turns out to be very close to Adorno's use of the Holocaust in *Negative Dialectics* insofar as it emphasizes the borderline position of the Holocaust yet refuses to connect the Holocaust to modernity and postmodernity in any affirmative way.

The relationship between the particular and the universal has always been at the center of philosophical discourse. In his brief overview of the relationship between universality and particularity Laclau differentiates two modern approaches. Both of these oppose the classical and Christian views of the particular and the universal insofar as they attempt to theorize the boundary between the two and, by trying to bridge the clear division between the universal and the particular, to *think* the difference. Within a modern framework, then, we are faced with two models as to how the particular and the

universal constitute themselves and each other. Laclau shows how universalism, as it is derived from a generalized principle of particulars, must either acknowledge its particularity (and thus give up its universal status) or resort to a claim of secular eschatology, thus denying particular differences in its authoritarian universalism. In other words, “the universal is no more than a particular that at some moment has become dominant” (99). In the context of modernity, this is the position to which most philosophers ultimately ascribe. In Habermas, for example, the concept of the ideal speech community, though initially historically contingent upon the linguistic turn and its contextually specific results has become such a universalism.

The obvious solution to this problem, of course, would be a revaluation of the particular as practiced in a postmodernism of contingent, aleatory, situated partisan politics. Theoretically, the grand narratives of universalism are thus replaced by what Lyotard calls small récits. Nevertheless, the relationship between the universal and the particular remains problematic. In particularism, Laclau argues, we still are faced with universalizing claims to justify each particular group’s self-definition; moreover, a pure particularism reinforces the already existing power relations between groups and thus confirms the status quo. Laclau summarizes, “as the ensemble of nonantagonistic particularities purely and simply reconstructs the notion of social totality, the classical notion of the universal is not put into question in the least” (101).

Consequently, while the first option basically eradicated all differences and particularity as such, the second one establishes a rule of particularity while never addressing the issue of universals at all, thus remaining within a larger universal frame. Or, to say it differently, one school emphasizes the existence of particulars so that the

universal becomes little more than the generalized principle of the particular. The universal thus is more of an imagined, abstracted quality. The opposite view regards the universal as pre-given so that every particular case is only a specific implementation of a grander truth. Here the problem arises as to how the abstract universal is actually related to the “real” particulars. What unites both approaches is the clear differentiation between universality and particularity, a dichotomy that needs to be overcome when describing the complicated role of the Holocaust in relationship to modernity and postmodernity.

In its stead, we require a concept that allows us to think the particularity and universality of the Holocaust simultaneously. This requires a structural revision of the relationship between particular and universal, between the whole and its parts that avoids both the fallacies presented above. It is once again Adorno’s work, specifically his discussion of nonidentity in *Negative Dialectics*, that suggests a theoretical model which can accommodate both the particular *and* the universal.<sup>41</sup> At the center of Adorno’s text is the concept of negative dialectics, i.e., the refusal to submit to any teleological synthesis or unity.<sup>42</sup> This large-scale project, which launches a critique of traditional philosophical identitarian thinking from Plato to Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger, advocates negative dialectics as an “anti-system” that has become necessary if philosophy is to survive.

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<sup>41</sup> Of course it may seem somewhat ironic to return to Adorno whose work is not only temporally but also genealogically previous as he influenced both Habermas and Lyotard, but his simultaneous adherence to certain universal principles and the dialectic model at the same time as he explicitly criticizes modernity and refuses postmodern relativism can be read as a compromise formation.

<sup>42</sup> Adorno’s work, especially *Negative Dialectics*, has recently been read as a predecessor to poststructuralism. While I admit the obvious similarities in the joint efforts to question modernity, I instead want to emphasize the fundamental differences in approaching modern philosophy, in particular Hegelian dialectics. See A. T. Nuyen.

One of the principal components of negative dialectics is the emphasis on the nonidentical which “is not to be obtained directly, as something positive on its part, nor is it obtainable by a negation of the negative” (*Negative Dialectics* 158). Using this definition of the nonidentical, Adorno problematizes the relationship between a thought or concept and the object it is supposed to discuss or represent, ultimately rejecting identitarian thinking which conflates concepts and objects to a point where the singularity of the latter is erased. In other words, identity thinking can be understood within the traditional approaches to the relation between the universal and the particular and therefore is prey to the problems we have already discussed. The only solution, according to Adorno, is to resist the reification of both as he attempts to “cross the particular with the general and hold them together in their contradictory tension” (qtd. in Jameson 38). This maintaining of the paralogy is reminiscent of the postmodern program, but it occurs here within the confines of the dialectic model, i.e., Adorno refuses to move outside of the discourse of modernity in order to criticize it, choosing instead to think the traditional concepts and ideas against themselves.

In particular, he is interested in the way concepts and objects resist the conflation that philosophy requires of them as the concept exceeds the object and vice versa. Rather than focusing on the elements of the particular that cohere with the concepts of the universal, Adorno therefore suggests to emphasize the exceptional qualities which the particular possesses: “The individual is both more and less than his general definition. But because the particular, the definite would come to itself only by voiding that contradiction—in other words, by achieving an identity of the particular with its concept—the individual’s concern is ... to hold on to that of which the general concept

robs him” (151). Mobilizing the differences between concept and object and refusing to sublimate this tension, Adorno establishes a relationship between particular and universal in which neither can fully account for its other but both are maintained simultaneously. In what Jameson calls, “Adorno’s stereoscopic conception of the coexistence of the universal and the particular” (46), we find an attempt to escape the dead-ends of both Universalism and Particularism.

Adorno is aware that his dialectics runs counter to its Hegelian predecessor as “its motion does not tend to identify in the difference between each object and its concept; instead, it is suspicious of all identity” (145). Moreover, he attempts to emulate the negative dialectics he advocates by maintaining a tortured and torturous style throughout.<sup>43</sup> Possibly the clearest articulation is Jameson’s description in which “the particular is read, not in the light of the universal, but rather in the light of the very contradiction between particular and universal in the first place” (32). Unlike Adorno who employs the concept of negative dialectics but refrains from explicating it, Laclau explicitly theorizes such an alternative to traditional models of the particular and the universal when he defines the relationship between universal and particular via a constitutive lack, i.e. the universal and the particular are implicated in one another not through positive membership or subset, but guided by a negative logic. He thus explains how “[t]he universal emerges out of the particular not as some principle underlying and explaining the particular, but as an incomplete horizon suturing a dislocated particular identity” (101). In other words, the universal is neither the completion nor the transcendence of a set of particulars, but instead completes them through its very

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<sup>43</sup> On the character and meaning of Adorno’s style, especially his use of fragments (models, notes, prisms), see Gillian Rose.

incompletion. Moreover, the particular also stands in a negative relation to the universal, participating in its universal qualification only insofar as it is not part of it. Laclau describes this paradoxical pattern as follows: “the universal is the symbol of a missing fullness and the particular exists only in the contradictory movement of asserting at the same time a differential identity and cancelling it through its subsumption in a nondifferential medium” (101). What is important to point out here is the fact that this way of relating the universal and the particular does not depend on any positive qualities or established traits; instead, the two are related through their very absence and negative characteristics. Consequently, neither principle can be perceived as logically prior to the other; in fact, though negating one another to a certain extent, neither one can exist without the other. Specifically, Laclau defines the relationship between particular and universal via the concept of the constitutive lack: “the universal is part of my identity as far as I am penetrated by a constitutive lack, that is, as far as my differential identity has failed in its process of constitution” (101). In our case, the Holocaust fulfills this exact role vis a vis postmodernity. While obviously not part of the postmodernity as such, it must be held responsible—if only as a retroactively constructed origin—for the sudden displacement of a modern by a postmodern discourse.

The logic Laclau employs here is rather familiar to any student of contemporary theory as we can find its structure at the basis of most poststructural philosophy. Whether we consider Jacques Lacan’s construction of subjectivity around a constitutive lack whose impact is always felt but can never be overcome or Derrida’s notion of the center which brings a discourse into being of which it cannot be part, such theories follow a particular pattern that we can call the logic of constitutive exception. The similarities

between these approaches and Adorno's become especially clear when looking at Slavoj Žižek's theories, in particular his reading of Hegel which, influenced by and read through Lacan, describes a version of dialectics uncannily similar to Adorno's negative dialectics. Throughout, Žižek privileges the opening of the dialectic movement rather than the unifying *Aufhebung* as the crucial element of Hegelian dialectics as he emphasizes its negative, disjointed character over the traditional universal readings. Rejecting interpretations in which Hegelian philosophy is driven by a totalizing teleology, he contradicts traditional readings of Hegel by claiming that "[t]he 'One' of Hegel's 'monism' is thus not the One of an Identity encompassing all differences, but rather a paradoxical 'One' of radical negativity which forever blocks the fulfillment of any positive identity" (*For They Know Not* 69). Accordingly, he reads the entire *Phenomenology of Spirit* as "the representation of a series of aborted attempts by the subject to define the Absolute" so that "its final outcome ('absolute knowledge') does not bring about a finally found harmony but rather entails a kind of reflective inversion: it confronts the subject with the fact that *the true Absolute is nothing but the logical disposition of its previous failed attempts to conceive the Absolute*" (99-100).

What connects Adorno and Žižek in their particular reading of Hegel is the structural logic of the constitutive exception, the structural incompleteness which gives rise to the system itself which therefore can never be whole or complete, the center of a given system which is both inside and out and, by its very negativity or lack founds the system as a whole. Through its definition of negativity, the universal in such a constellation can never be complete or overwhelm the particular which, in turn, remains an integral part of the system. Considering the complicated role the Holocaust plays for

the thinkers who have taken up the task to approach its meanings, the logic of the constitutive exception seems exceptionally well suited as it allows for both the claim for uniqueness as well as the demand that the event be representative to some extent even if only to use it as a comparison. If we are to learn anything from the Holocaust, we must focus on its universal characteristics, while its extremity necessitates a sense of particularity.

Thus, it is not surprising that Auschwitz becomes the central model for Adorno in *Negative Dialectics*, both for its position on the cusp of modernity and postmodernity as well as its ambiguous status of particular and universal at the same time. In fact, in order to avoid the traditional terminology with its metaphysical trappings of the universal/particular dichotomy, Adorno refuses the term “example” for the Holocaust. In its stead, he appropriates the term “model” to describe the status he ascribes to Auschwitz in the postmodern consciousness:

[Models] are not examples; they do not elucidate general reflections. . . . The models are to make plain what negative dialectics is and to bring it into the realm of reality, in line with its own concept. At the same time—not unlike the so-called ‘exemplary methods’—they serve the purpose of discussing key concepts of philosophical disciplines and centrally intervening into those disciplines. (111)

What stands out in Adorno’s description of the model is its involvement in the philosophical concepts it is meant to elucidate and explain. Just like he eschews a clear separation between subject and object, the example and what it exemplifies cannot be divorced from one another. In trying to solve this problem, he uses the term “models,” though Jameson points out that even the model still retains some of the inherent difficulties of the example, “whose optionality immediately disqualifies the authority of the concept it was supposed to illustrate” (60). As such, the model is in danger of becoming a methodology, of becoming static in its separation of concept and

representation. Contextualizing the model within Schönberg's music theory, however, allows Jameson to ultimately argue for Adorno's model as fundamentally different from traditional philosophical expositions: "the text will become one infinite variation in which everything is recapitulated at every moment; closure, finally, will be achieved only when all the possible variations have been exhausted" (62). This emphasis on the surplus of the particular also translates into Adorno's understanding of Auschwitz. Even though he views the section "After Auschwitz" as a model and thus emphasizes the universal aspect of the Holocaust, its singularity stands out in ways that it did not in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Throughout the section, Adorno foregrounds the extremity and unprecedentedness of the event as he singles out the Holocaust—using its metonymic designator "Auschwitz"—in order to foreground its special status—both within his text and within post-War philosophical consciousness.

While there are a variety of ways to regard the Holocaust in relation to modernity and postmodernity and a widespread debate over the uniqueness of the Holocaust, I want to follow Adorno and his negative dialectics to describe this crucial event of the twentieth century. Using this model of the Holocaust as constitutive exception will thus allow us to think the particular *and* the universal aspects of the Holocaust simultaneously. It will assure us that we are neither overtaken by the universalizing claims that negate the particularity of the event nor by the claim for the Holocaust's uniqueness which endangers the possibility of any philosophical approach whatsoever. Moreover, this model also allows us to contain the complex position the Holocaust maintains in regards to modern and postmodern thought—neither one nor the other, it is central to both philosophical approaches. Any study of the Holocaust must be aware of this borderline

position, a fact particularly important when looking at postmodern Holocaust literature. If the Holocaust offers a specific case in which the universal and the particular cannot be clearly separated, literature itself is, by definition, attempting to connect the two: after all, one of literature's uncanny gift is to reveal general truths about human nature while depicting specific individual characters. Consequently, postmodern Holocaust literature poses a particular challenge as well as opportunity to investigate the relationship between the Holocaust and postmodernism, between the particular and the universal, between the demands of authenticity and the possibilities of fiction.

**CHAPTER TWO**  
**THE HOLOCAUST AS POSTMODERN CULTURAL SUBTEXT**  
**IN E. L. DOCTOROW AND WALTER ABISH**

While philosophers in the wake of World War II suggested that the Holocaust had caused a central shift in modern culture and history, society at large tended to ignore the Holocaust altogether. Whereas Adorno and Horkheimer regarded the Holocaust as an emblem for the ends of modernity and conjectured the shift towards what we now call postmodernity as early as 1944, culture at large did not engage with the phenomenon of the Holocaust or its implications until decades later. One way to understand this paradox, of course, is to assume that the philosophers described culture correctly and culture simply did not acknowledge that shift yet. In fact, if our recent obsession with the Holocaust is any indication, this is exactly the case. The fascination with the Holocaust during the eighties and nineties must be understood then as the return of the repressed—a very belated coming to terms with the past and the crucial cultural changes to which it contributed.

Even though the Holocaust is rarely center stage and mostly completely absent in postmodern texts, it is nevertheless a strong force in the cultural unconscious of the post-War years. In fact, the model of the constitutive exception developed in the last chapter is particularly apt when dealing with literary texts, since postmodernism and the Holocaust often seem to be mutually exclusive: while postmodernism hesitates to thematize the Holocaust, Holocaust literature eschews postmodern techniques. Using the concept of the constitutive exception thus provides us with a way to read the function of

the Holocaust in postmodern fiction and the role of Holocaust literature in postmodern culture in general. Some of the reasons for this incompatibility are the ethical problems connected to using a supposedly ahistoric and playful approach to a topic as somber and demanding of hard evidence as the Holocaust. At the same time, postmodern literature also seems to be mirroring a general post-War trend of repressing the memories of the Holocaust altogether. In this chapter I will look at two popular postmodern novels, E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* and Walter Abish's *How German Is It* in order to trace the memory of the Holocaust within two texts that are haunted by the past yet refuse to address it directly. Instead, they fulfill what I want to call the dialectics of repressed obsession/obsessive repression, i.e., they circumscribe the traumatic site of the Holocaust at the same time as they refuse to confront it.

As such, they exemplify the crucial role the Holocaust holds within postmodern thought even—or especially—within contexts that do not directly deal with that particular aspect of history. The ambiguity that pervades all of Holocaust Studies is exemplified in the obsessive repression that pervades much of the initial decades after the Holocaust. No period in history has received so much attention at the same time as it has been repressed in its specificity. Attempting to ignore or forget the personal and collective traumatic past automatically creates a situation where the past becomes repressed and demands to be heard in other ways. In fact, as I will argue in this chapter, the Holocaust's impact lies mostly in its repression and the results thereof. Whereas Abish thematizes the repressed obsession when confronting the Holocaust, Doctorow treats the Holocaust more metaphorically and exemplifies an obsessive repression characteristic for much of the fifties and sixties which are the central period in the novel.

In *How German Is It* the repression is shown quite literally as it constitutes one of the central elements of the text. Depicting a German small town in the seventies, Abish emphasizes the continuity between Germany's hideous—and willingly forgotten—past and its present affluence and complacency. The novel's reception, however, reveals a different sort of repression as a majority of the German critics emphasize the text's postmodern characteristics and its textuality over its serious contents and historical situatedness. As such, the novel's reception performs its contents as both not only neglect Germany's history but also use it to further their own goals—be it financial gains for the new German bourgeoisie within the novel or academic rewards for its scholarly critics.<sup>44</sup>

Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* performs this repression as it portrays the Rosenberg trial as a decisive moment in post-war history, politically central for the American Left, personally crucial to the life of the protagonist Daniel. Yet whereas the novel is haunted by the specter of the Holocaust, it goes to great pains to refuse to deal with it. In so doing, the text not only mirrors the cultural repression of the Holocaust in fifties America but also the author's own obsessed repression with this historical moment. Comparing it to Doctorow's most recent novel *City of God*, we can see how *The Book of Daniel* despite its refusal to address the Holocaust nevertheless forges deeper into the psyche of the post-Holocaust world than he does in a text that confronts the issue straightforwardly.

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<sup>44</sup> Ironically enough, I must include myself in this scenario since I 'use' the Holocaust and its novelistic treatments in a similar vein. However, I hope to not only foreground the historical aspects of these postmodern novels but also to remain self-critical in my investigation.

## Obsessive Repression As Primary Reaction to the Traumatic Events of the Holocaust

The first general knowledge of the Holocaust came with the liberation of the camps which flooded the news media with horrifying images that to this day still are inextricably linked with our impressions of the Holocaust. The world recovered quickly from the shock, however, and moved on to different issues—be it as a defense mechanism for not wanting to deal with the atrocities wrought by the Germans or simply because other political and social issues such as changing social structures and the beginning of the Cold War took precedence. As a result, the Holocaust was mostly ignored within the larger cultural context.<sup>45</sup> Reasons for this were, of course, manifold: politically, the threat of the atomic bomb and the ever increasing influence of the Soviet Union took center stage for American foreign policy. Meanwhile, Germany had become the United States' new ally and therefore neither side wanted to dwell on the past too much. Looking towards the future and the threat of communism was more important than dealing with the past, and the normativizing, universalizing ideology of the fifties, which valued the uniformity of white middle class America, was in desperate need of an external other to hate and despise. Moreover, the Holocaust must have created a number of complicated psychological reactions, all of which were easier to ignore than to

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<sup>45</sup> For the most part, the Holocaust was not dealt with directly until the sixties; in fact, most survivor testimonies were not published or even written until then. The big turning point in the States was the publication of Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1961) and the 1961 Eichmann trial delineated in Hannah Arendt's controversial account *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963). In Germany one of the first wide exposures was Rolf Hochhuth's *The Deputy* (1963), followed soon after by the Auschwitz trials dramatized in Peter Weiss's *The Investigation* (1965). Moreover, a new generation was coming of age in both Germany and the USA, a generation that questioned its parents and their actions. The student revolution forced Germans to finally begin to address their past and Americans to move away from the simplistic ideological viewpoints constructed by the Cold War. While historical scholarship quickly picked up pace and started investigating the Holocaust in detail, the general populace was not emotionally confronted with the Holocaust until the overly melodramatic 1977 TV series, *Holocaust*, which captured huge audiences and drew widespread attention both in the USA and Germany. The eighties and nineties have seen an obsessive fascination with the Holocaust, both in terms of literary and filmic representations, academic discussions, cultural monuments, and the preservation of eyewitness testimonies.

confront. Besides the pity and compassion that the sudden knowledge of the Holocaust produced, it also created resentment (for the victims' supposed lack of resistance), anxiety (for the realization that the victims had not been all that different from them), as well as guilt (both for real and imagined lack of help).<sup>46</sup> Focusing on the threat of communism helped overcome all of these emotions for Germans and Americans, Jews and Gentiles alike; in fact, everyone could externalize their fears by projecting them onto a clear outside enemy.

Interestingly enough, even—and especially—Holocaust survivors were encouraged to simply forget their experiences in order to fully live their new lives and many did so eagerly.<sup>47</sup> The explanation for individual as well as cultural repression is, of course, the same: traumatized, both the survivor and society as a whole refused to confront the past and its repercussions and instead repressed the events. As a result, testimonies of the Holocaust were rare in the first two decades following the war—both because the survivors themselves often avoided looking back and because the society surrounding them refused to hear their stories. In effect, culture at large experienced a delayed reaction to the trauma of the Holocaust similar to the one undergone by

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<sup>46</sup> The anger especially can be seen in reactions in Israel and even in Arendt's discussion of the Judenräte. The guilt, of course, has extensively been addressed in discussions of so-called survivor guilt. See Edith Kurzweil on a possible explanation of the all-pervasiveness of the concept of survivor guilt in psychoanalysis (esp. 347).

<sup>47</sup> The complete disregard of Holocaust survivors in the forties and fifties seems remarkable from our contemporary cultural position but must be understood within a context of a strongly universalizing and normativizing ideology. Unlike today where victimhood seems to be a desirable category to garner sympathy and political power, the category of the victim was connoted negatively. Furthermore, the depiction of the Holocaust was always framed in terms of the Nazis' assault on universal values and rarely ever in its more particularized version of an exclusively Jewish event. As such, a study like Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* could discuss Stalin's Gulags and Hitler's concentration camps side by side as two instances of the same totalitarian impulse. Ruth Klüger's testimony is representative when she describes how she had to keep her experiences in the camps to herself, not only immediately following the war but even much later in life (234-47).

individual victims of trauma. Just like any personal repression causes symptoms to arise, its cultural equivalent did the same. Not only are we able to trace an almost obsessive disavowal of the Holocaust through these years, the repressed—as is always the case—refused to go gently and returned obsessively. Our look at Abish and Doctorow will show how postmodernism has engaged the subject of the Holocaust even when it seems to not have done so.

E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*:  
How the Holocaust Rears Its Ugly Head in the Rosenberg Case

On first sight, E. L. Doctorow's fictional autobiographical musings of one of the Rosenberg children does not discuss the Holocaust at all. Instead, *The Book of Daniel* presents a displaced Holocaust narrative that thematizes and enacts the initial repression of the Holocaust in the post-War years. Using structural, stylistic, and thematic modes of displacement, the novel portrays a post-Holocaust world that is strongly affected by the Holocaust yet attempts to repress these effects. *The Book of Daniel*, a text that appears to focus on the history of the American Left in the fifties and sixties, at the same time confronts a very different topic as it investigates the relationship between religion and politics, between the personal and the historical. In so doing, Doctorow's novel is an exemplary account of the central yet hidden role of the Holocaust within the post-war years. As he focuses on the Rosenberg case, Doctorow thematizes one of the central transferences of anti-Jewish prejudice that displaces religious onto political sentiments; as he himself represses the Holocaust, Doctorow enacts this inability to confront the Holocaust in the novel itself. As such Doctorow's novel must be seen both as a description of underlying dynamics of the time as well as a particular interpretation that

employs the historical events of the Rosenberg case and alters them to foreground how the Holocaust simultaneously dominates society yet largely has been ignored by it.

While there is little direct evidence of the Holocaust in *The Book of Daniel*, it is Doctorow's extreme avoidance of the Holocaust throughout the novel that ultimately draws attention to this perplexing omission. After all, the fact that the Holocaust is barely mentioned is strange considering that it takes place during the forties and fifties in a Jewish household and deals with the political persecution and eventual murder of Paul and Rochelle Isaacson, thinly disguised versions of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. Aside from acknowledging in passing the fact that Lise Lewin, the protagonist's adopted mother, is a Holocaust survivor, the persecution and destruction of the European Jews is ignored and avoided. In fact, E. L. Doctorow not only depicts a historical moment characterized by its Holocaust repression, he himself does little to counter this repression. More than simply refusing to foreground the issues, he purposefully disregards this most recent event in favor of other historical occurrences. Thus, he not only describes the original repression of the fifties but also adds on another layer all his own as he simultaneously suggests a connection yet withdraws from it. What he does instead, however, is to perform a displacement of his own, thus drawing attention to the original one and to the repressed role of the Holocaust in the American unconscious of the fifties and sixties. In my reading, I use this displacement to tease out the repressed memory of the Holocaust, repressed both within the original historical circumstances and—once again—in Doctorow's appropriation of it.

E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* is the story of Daniel Lewin, son of Paul and Rochelle Isaacson, who is trying to write his doctoral dissertation about the trial and

execution of his parents for espionage in the fifties. Doctorow uses the context of the late sixties with its student revolt, anti-war movement, civil rights movement and general political and social unrest to frame the America of the early fifties with its normalizing stereotypical white middle class suburbia, its fear of everything different and foreign, culminating in McCarthyism and the Red Scare. Using Daniel as narrator and protagonist, Doctorow shifts easily between different historical moments, various styles, points of view, voices, and genres. Moreover, the text often is interrupted by seemingly unconnected meditations or information, both historical and religious. This intertextuality complicates an already complex novel and invites the reader to read beyond the seeming surface of a young man coming to terms with the history of his country, a son coming to terms with the legacy of his parents.

While he attempts to analyze and thereby comprehend his parents' trial and its relationship to the American Left from an academic and theoretical distance, Daniel's memories continuously assault him so that his personal experiences take over the story. Thus, the personal and historical meet as protagonist Daniel tries to come to terms with his parents' death. Not only did their trial and consequent execution traumatize him and his younger sister greatly, the injustice of their case has since stood as a symbol of the problems of American post-war politics. Thus, writing his history dissertation in the midst of student protests, Daniel attempts not only to disclose the political circumstances that lead to the death of his parents but also to unearth the psychic scars these events have left on him and his younger sister. When Daniel researches and remembers his parents' life before the arrest, the long period of trial and appeal up to the point of their execution, he does so not only to understand the historical circumstances, the political and social

backdrop against which this occurred. More importantly, he tries to understand his parents' motivations, their relationship to one another and to him and Susan. History and psychoanalysis often consider themselves completely separate fields, even though they perform similar functions as they both try to discover and interpret clues to understand the past. Here, however, they come together as Daniel traces events that have impacted both American history and his personal life.

The novel traces the personal repercussions that bearing the burden of being the Isaacsons' child entails. Through the relationships with those around him, his abused wife and child, his caring yet uncomprehending adopted parents and, most importantly, his radical and suicidal sister, the novel explores Daniel's intellectual as well as his emotional attempts to come to terms with his life and his past. In fact, in the figure of Daniel, the detached and objective public sphere of history and the emotional and subjective personal sphere of memory meet. As Daniel remembers fifties America, the reader is confronted both with the fear, anxiety, and paranoia of McCarthyism, the Red Scare and the Cold War and the anger, sadness, and mourning of a young boy losing his parents. In merging the two discourses, Doctorow forces the reader to not separate the two, to constantly remind us that political and historical events are not abstract facts and data but impact real lives. In that, Doctorow follows the tradition of the historical novel that often narrativizes a historical figure or period in order to create a story within and around history.

What is different in Doctorow, however, is his constant awareness of the complex relationship between history and fiction. It is for that reason that Linda Hutcheon uses Doctorow as one of the exemplary figures of what she has called "historiographic

metafiction.”<sup>48</sup> Firmly embedded in postmodern and poststructural theories, this writing nevertheless returns to storytelling and maintains an ethical imperative seemingly having been given up by more experimental postmodern writers. While the return to a certain plot structure, to the contents of historical events, and the creation of—at least partially developed—characters is quite unlike the metafictional prose often associated with postmodern fiction, writers like Doctorow do not forget the lessons learned from postmodern theory. Doctorow is well aware of the tenuous position of historical facts and the importance of writing in the creation of history as his protagonist embarks on a journey to write history—both his own and the political, cultural, and historical past. Anticipating later historical methods that foreground the details of everyday life,<sup>49</sup> Daniel draws from his own memory to understand the events surrounding his parents’ arrest, trial, and execution. At the same time, the book mimics the workings of the psyche as Daniel is unwilling or unable to process his story chronologically and instead only offers the reader glimpses of his past—sometimes triggered by events in the present. In so doing, the text performs various functions of psychoanalytic discourse, i.e., it fails to offer a coherent narrative and instead offers the reader insight into the narrator’s psyche. Not only are we privy to Daniel’s (and sometimes Rochelle’s or Paul’s) thoughts and feelings, we also follow Daniel on his journey that keeps on circling the central trauma of his life. Only towards the conclusion of the novel does Daniel actually face his parents’

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<sup>48</sup> See Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* and *The Politics of Postmodernism*. See also Hayden White, from whom Hutcheon draws heavily.

<sup>49</sup> Within Holocaust Studies, the main focus during the sixties and early seventies was still on the principal perpetrators in an attempt to write an “official” history. Not until the eighties, did historians begin to focus on the everyday, on the bystanders and regular citizens carrying out orders. An example of this trend is the controversial move towards *Alltagsgeschichte* within German historiography; see Alf Lüdtke, ed, *History of Everyday Life*.

execution which allows him to come to terms with his loss and focus on the present and future instead of remaining trapped in the past.

Daniel's avoidance of facing this personal trauma is mirrored throughout the novel by the pervasive omissions of confronting the Holocaust and its impact on post-War America. While it is perfectly legitimate to ignore the Holocaust in a novel obviously taking place at another time in a different country and dealing with different issues, the Holocaust forms an important historical backdrop to the Rosenberg prosecution and the Red Scare of the fifties. Its seeming absence during the actual historical events of the trial is therefore surprising, a fact foregrounded by the novel's similar oversight. In fact, by purposefully avoiding the Holocaust while at the same time creating various intertexts of persecution, torture, and murder, Doctorow draws attention to his—and history's—apparent omission. By relating Daniel's story to that of his Biblical namesake, Doctorow frames the Rosenberg case within a larger set of Jewish persecutions; by comparing the Rosenbergs' trial and execution to other historical judiciary and penal systems, he connects their case within a larger historical framework. Yet in neither case does he discuss the Holocaust, this very recent exhibit of state injustice, perversion of the legal system, and racial, political, and religious persecution. Instead, he asks the readers to draw these connections on their own. Just like we need not be told that the Isaacsons are a slightly different version of the Rosenbergs, we can understand this large absence that pervades the novel. In fact, the Holocaust thus functions similarly in the novel as it did in real history—a haunting absence that nevertheless influenced historical and political actions and decisions.

The absence of the Holocaust is most apparent in the passages throughout the novel that recall a variety of historical persecutions for religious or political convictions. In fact, historical descriptions, summaries, and vignettes intrude upon the story line, comparing Daniel's situation with other historical events such as the Stalinist purges, Medieval witch trials and a variety of different ways to torture and execute religious and political adversaries throughout history. Examples of this include Drawing and Quartering in Medieval Europe, Smoking in Sixteenth Century Japan, Knouting in Czarist Russia, and Burning at the Stake in Europe and the Americas (91, 132, 157, 158). Yet even though Daniel recalls practices of death and torture through the centuries and compares his parents' fate with that of other prisoners, he never once mentions the concentration camps. Considering the fact that the events he describes occur less than a decade after the Nazi attempt to annihilate the European Jews, it would seem one of the more obvious comparisons, one of the first connections that might come to his mind. After all, the Nazi concentration camps included victims for racial, religious, and political reasons with their rationalizations for the complete extermination of all European Jews containing aspects of all three. Moreover, both historically and within the novel, the defendants' Jewish background is emphasized in a manner not incidental at a time of lingering anti-Semitism.

Even though it is generally seen as the epitome of racial cleansing and religious persecution, the Holocaust never serves as an example in *The Book of Daniel*. We know that Daniel's adopted mother is a Holocaust survivor and that Daniel thus must have grown up with intimate knowledge of the Nazi persecution. Nevertheless, the text carefully avoids mentioning of the Holocaust when collecting its lists of historical

injustices. There are a few small allusions to the Holocaust but none of them figure central to the story itself. When Paul and Rochelle get questioned by the FBI after Mindish' arrest, Rochelle comments, "*Polizei* don't need to be smart" (129) purposefully using the German term, and shortly thereafter, waiting for Paul or Rochelle to be arrested, Daniel compares his anticipation of something ominous yet unknown to "the prison searchlight in the Nazi concentration camp" (132). Both times it is the police apparatus with its complete control over all of its citizens rather than the death camps with its gas chambers and ovens that is invoked. As such, the comparison to Nazi persecution evokes the political oppressiveness of Nazi Germany rather than its politics of racial cleansing.

The most curious mention of the Holocaust—and the only one aside from Lise and the brief allusions during Paul's arrest—occurs in one of the final scenes and, oddly enough, it is coupled with the most American of all places, Disneyland. Disneyland has long been seen as the epitome of American postmodern culture as both Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard have pointed out.<sup>50</sup> For Daniel to place Disneyland "between Buchenwald and Belsen" (346), suggests that there is a connection between the hyperreality that Eco and Baudrillard ascribe to this quintessential American amusement park and the camps whose names have metonymically come to stand in for the Holocaust. Linda Hutcheon sees Disneyland as contrary to the book's project since it "denies the historicity of the past" (*Poetics* 138), but this ahistoricity corresponds to a way Buchenwald and Belsen have lost their historic specificity and become symbols of

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<sup>50</sup> Baudrillard, for example, claims that "Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is all, even in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation" (25), while Eco describes how "Disneyland is more hyperrealistic than the wax museum, precisely because the latter still tries to make us believe that what we are seeing reproduces reality absolutely, whereas Disneyland makes it clear that within its magic enclosure it is fantasy that is absolutely reproduced" (43).

something else. Used as a symbol rather than a historical event, the camps have adopted an air as unreal as Disneyland itself. In fact, Doctorow only enacts a logical conclusion when allying Disneyland, the epitome of postmodernism, with an event that has become symbolic of the ends of modernity. Invoking Buchenwald and Belsen as a shorthand for the failings of modern life and thus as the event that has brought about a culture and society which can be represented by the superficiality, irreality, and seeming perfection of Disneyland, the camps have lost their real horror in the overuse and complacency of recent years.<sup>51</sup> This loss of reality—and with it loss of emotional impact—is one of most difficult things to face when trying to represent the Holocaust. Instead of reusing the worn images and used metaphors, Doctorow instead succeeds in creating a novel that addresses many issues of the Holocaust and its aftermath without having to rely on the emotionally diminished and diminishing images available to him.

Doctorow approaches the displaced Holocaust throughout the post-war years with a variety of displacements of his own. Most apparent, of course, are the conscious changes to the historical facts and the renaming of all the characters: Ethel and Julius Rosenberg become Paul and Rochelle Isaacson; Michael and Robert Rosenberg, later Meerpol, become Daniel and Susan Isaacson, later Lewin; the middle-class background of the Rosenbergs is transformed into a working-class environment. These changes serve a variety of functions: for one, as a postmodern novel, *The Book of Daniel* is not actually concerned with particular details or historical facts. In fact, the novel basically sidesteps the issue of the Rosenbergs' guilt. Instead, Doctorow uses the historical events as a metonymic lens through which he gives a broad portrayal of America in the fifties and

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<sup>51</sup> In fact, Doctorow anticipates more recent events such as Holocaust tourism, where European tours are offered that visit various sites of concentration and extermination camps.

sixties. At the same time, his focus is on psychological issues which, by definition, are highly subjective and concern themselves little with elements of facts. Thus within a postmodern context, Doctorow's change of names, places, and details is perfectly understandable: it allows him to draw away attention from the actual historical circumstances while his alterations often clarify certain issues. For example, Doctorow's choice of making the Isaacsons working class allows him to polarize issues of class in America; his choice of making one of the children female offers more varied responses to the parents' death and provides the basis for a very different dynamic between the siblings. Beyond its postmodern justifications, Doctorow's changes also establish a pattern of displacement consistent all through the text. Throughout the novel, we are faced with various levels of authenticity and a variety of story lines, thus forcing us to not only think reality and fiction simultaneously but also to allow for a variety of other shifts and alterations.

Another central displacement is the shift of focus from the Rosenbergs themselves to Daniel, their oldest child. In fact, *The Book of Daniel* is Daniel's story in more ways than one: not only is he both author and protagonist of his book, his story is told both on a personal and political level. As a whole, Daniel's book presents itself as an attempt to tell a story, all the while refusing to reveal anything. Within the novel, Daniel is attempting to write a dissertation as well as the story of his life yet fails to do either. Thus, it becomes very clear that the book of Daniel is both a book by and about Daniel. The author's insistence of moving between these different levels and story lines, interwoven with utterly disparate information, further displaces the reader. Daniel's actual inability to finish his dissertation is mirrored in the book's hesitating story line and

the reader's difficulties to discern any actual information. Beyond the classical postmodern strategies of writing a book about writing a book, which induces a certain level of self-awareness and discomfort, the results of Doctorow's *mise en scène* are a creation of uncertainty and indecisiveness.

Throughout the novel, there are hints that connect the tragedy of the Rosenbergs and—by extension—of the American Left to another far greater one that the world was still attempting to comprehend at the time of the Rosenberg trial and just beginning to confront at the time of Daniel's writing. Both temporally and organizationally, the story can be extrapolated to the Holocaust: written in the turmoil of the sixties about the confrontations in the fifties, the forties are barely addressed directly yet overshadow both consequent periods. Moreover, born the year the Final Solution is put into place, Daniel bears the mark of Jewish persecution not only in his name but in the circumstance of his very birth itself. In this way, Daniel's story about state power, police force, and persecution does not simply connect the Leftist revolution and counterculture of the sixties with the violence and injustice perpetrated by the state against his parents, both of these events resonate the Biblical persecution of Jews and, by extension, the destruction of the European Jews comprehensively begun the year of Daniel's birth. Metaphorically, these various political and religious persecutions are connected in the fire imagery that pervades the novel. Several critics have pointed out the all-pervasive imagery of electrocution and related it to the most famous of events in the Biblical Book of Daniel: the escape from the fiery furnace.<sup>52</sup> While this imagery of fire and electricity obviously symbolizes the

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<sup>52</sup> Not only does Daniel offer a detailed and very colorful description of his parents' electrocution and Susan's shock therapy is a central issue early on in the novel, electricity pervades the novel both literally and as a metaphor for connectedness and narrative coherence in the face of epistemological uncertainty as Geoffrey Harpham has shown in "E.L. Doctorow and the Technology of Narrative."

traumatic moment of Daniel's parents' death, it also resonates the central metonymic image for the Holocaust. Even though the majority of Jews were murdered in other ways, the gas chambers and fire ovens have become the emblems of the Holocaust, signifying both the anonymity and inhumanity of the Jewish mass murder. As a result, Doctorow's detailed description of the Isaacsons' execution against the highly charged religious backdrop suggests a pattern of Jewish persecution from Biblical times through the diaspora to the Holocaust and the trial against the Rosenbergs.

Throughout, E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* connects the religious and the political, thereby not only evoking the Biblical intertext but also the most recent religious persecution of the Jews. The Rosenberg case is usually seen—both within the novel and historically—as a metonymic enactment of McCarthyism and the Red Scare. The book, however, goes to great pains to establish the fact that not only anti-Communism but also anti-Semitism must be seen as an underlying motivation for the extreme fear and blatant hostility with which much of the public confronted the Rosenbergs. This correlation of anti-Communism and anti-Semitism, this displacement of guilt and aggression towards the survivors of the Holocaust and their co-religionists, is quite apparent in the novel but bears out historically as well.<sup>53</sup> Accordingly, one of the central modes of displacement throughout the novel is the almost interchangeability of Communism and Judaism. Notwithstanding Marx's scathing verdict about religion, there always existed an

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<sup>53</sup> In his *The Holocaust in American*, Peter Novick describes how Communist rhetoric against cold war mobilization often invoked the Holocaust (93) and that “nowhere was there more talk than among the partisans of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg” (94). While it may hold true that the Communist party established common victimship, the general public obviously refrained from consciously connecting their anti-Communism with anti-Semitism lest that would put them in the position of the totalitarian regime. In fact, part of the underlying hesitance to embrace the image of victim and to foreground the Holocaust may have been the Jewish mainstream desire to fit into the normed, universalizing world of the fifties, i.e., to be just like every other American. Daniel describes this impulse to succumb to a life with “an absence of ideology and relentless moral sentiment” (77).

unusually high concentration of Jewish intellectuals among Marxists and socialists, especially during the Cold War.<sup>54</sup>

Nevertheless, the novel moves beyond simple historical facts by ascribing something more meaningful to Paul and Rochelle's religious heritage. Daniel compares his mother's political conviction with her traditional upbringing when he describes: "Her politics was like Grandma's religion—some purchase on the future against the terrible life of the present" (51). Connecting the political and religious fervor as well as the aspects of salvation present in both, the text clearly suggests that Rochelle's Communist ideals are but a displacement of her rejected religion. Similarly, their lawyer Ascher, interestingly not a political but a religious man, is described as understanding their deeply held yet apparently severed ties to religion: "Ascher understood how someone could forswear his Jewish heritage and take for his own the perfectionist dream of heaven on earth, and in spite of that, or perhaps because of it, still consider himself a Jew" (146). This thread of mixing religion and politics or of displacing the former for the latter continues throughout the novel and is at its most pervasive in the equating of the two by their enemies. Daniel describes, for example, how McCarthy associates the two: "Had not McCarthy made a speech describing the great battle between international atheistic communism and Christianity? There was no question in anyone's mind where the Jews belonged according to Joe McCarthy" (147).

A scene that shows the constant slippage between anti-Jewish and anti-Communist sentiment is the attack on the bus after a Paul Robeson concert, which the

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<sup>54</sup> Peter Novick points towards the "popular association of Jews with Communism" (91) and cites an FBI estimate of 50 to 60 percent Jewish membership in the Communist Party of the late forties (93). For the role of Jews in the Communist Party, see Nathan Glazer.

Isaacsons attend with their friends. The crowd attacking the bus insults the occupants indiscriminately as “kike, commie bastard, jew commie, red” (61), thus suggesting that religion and politics are inextricably linked in the minds of many American citizens. Particularly interesting is that Daniel describes how everyone on the bus sings the “Peat Bog Soldiers” song (58). What Daniel does not acknowledge—or does not know—is that this song was originally written by the inmates of the concentration camp Börgermoor.<sup>55</sup> By singling out this specific song, the novel alludes to the persecution of both Communists and Jews by the Nazis, thus once again drawing a connection between the two. Considering then that the climate in which Daniel’s parents are put on trial and sentenced is similarly anti-Communist as it is anti-Semitic, Paul and Rochelle become martyrs not only for their cause but also for a religious affiliation to which they no longer adhere.

Accordingly, John Clayton argues that the political and religious aspects of *The Book of Daniel* are not contradictory but rather supplement one another since he believes that “radical, secular Jews are, in fact, central to the Jewish tradition” (108). From this he concludes that Doctorow is, in fact, a Jewish writer who follows “the heritage of Jewish writers [who] deal with suffering, especially suffering as a result of some essential injustice in the human or divine world” (109). This, of course, is a bold claim considering that Paul and Rochelle are purposefully anti-religious as is Daniel, but Clayton argues that both the general sentiment of the book as well as the specific intertexts are indicative of a larger Jewish radical heritage.<sup>56</sup> In fact, Clayton regards the

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<sup>55</sup> For the history of the song, see Hanns Eisler.

<sup>56</sup> A similar Jewish radicalism that is connected to religion while not being contained by it can also be found in several other Doctorow novels. *Ragtime*, for example, includes not only Mama and Tateh as

entire novel as a specific Jewish ritual when he describes how “Daniel speaks to us as if we were part of his congregation or family, sitting *shiva* over the agonies of this century” (112). While he does not mention the Holocaust specifically, it is, of course, one of the central Jewish events of this century to be mourned, a fact that is neither verbalized by Daniel, Doctorow nor Clayton, but suggested by all three.

Only when taking into account this intimate relationship between Communism and Judaism in the Isaacsons’ life can we fully understand the relevance of the religious intertext Doctorow has chosen for the entire novel.<sup>57</sup> By renaming the protagonist Daniel and thereby invoking his Biblical name bearer, Doctorow places the entire story—both the Isaacsons’ trial as well as Daniel and Susan’s consequent tribulations—within the context of Jewish persecution. Not only are Daniel and his friends exiled to Babylonia and constantly in danger of their lives, one of the first acts they are subjected to when arriving there is their renaming, similar to Daniel and Susan (Dan. 1.7). Unlike the ancient Daniel and his friends, however, whose steadfast belief in their own God saves them repeatedly, the siblings temporarily capitulate to the seductive American way of life, thereby turning their back on their parents: “Susan and Daniel Lewin slipped into the indolent rituals of the teenage middle class. In order for them to do this, there had to be a dialectic of breaking free: you asked yourself why live in faith or memorial to the people who had betrayed you” (77). Throughout the novel, then, Daniel attempts to emulate the strength and faith exhibited by his name bearer; yet while he is struggling to stay true to his parents and their beliefs he cannot do so naively. *His* book of Daniel thereby becomes his personal

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stereotypical Jewish immigrants but also Emma Goldman as a radical revolutionary who is conscious of yet not limited by her Jewish roots.

encounter with the past and the ghosts of his parents and the beliefs they stood and died for.

By naming Daniel's sister Susan, Doctorow invokes more than the traditional Hebrew version of the Book of Daniel, however. One of the apocryphal additions to the Book of Daniel recounts a younger/different Daniel's intervention into the trial against Susana who has been falsely accused of cheating on her husband (Dan. 13.1-64). He rescues Susana from the death penalty and enforces that the real perpetrators admit to the truth and be punished. Considering this background, we realize both Daniel's desire to rescue his parents (and his sister Susan) but also his ultimate failure to do either. Thus, unlike his Biblical counterpart, Daniel cannot properly defend his parents or rescue his sister. Where he does succeed in following his namesake is to challenge the perpetrators to tell the "real" story. In the very writing of his book, Daniel demands answers to his doubts, questions, and accusations. While the system that murdered the Isaacsons is not convicted like Susana's slanderous accusers are, Daniel's book does succeed in raising doubt and opening up questions. Even though he places less emphasis on the guilt or innocence of the Rosenbergs and is more concerned with the symbolic relevance and ideological purpose of the trial, Doctorow nevertheless indicts the system for arresting, convicting, and executing the Isaacsons for the wrong reasons. In an almost Kantian gesture, he demands a purity of motive and process that is divorced from questions of truth, since the latter—he realizes—is always open to interpretation and determined by its cultural context.

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<sup>57</sup> For Doctorow's specific use of the Bible, see Brian Dillon and Kurt Müller. For a more general discussion of the role of Jewish religion and culture in Doctorow's work, see John Clayton.

Moreover, by alluding to a non-canonical Biblical text, Doctorow already emphasizes a stylistic element of the Bible that he will later foreground in *City of God*, namely the sheer wealth of different voices, styles, narrators, and stories, often supplementing, at times even contradicting one another. Recalling this heterogeneous text, Doctorow comments on his (or rather, Daniel's) creation that also is constituted of a multitude of stories, contemplations, and texts yet through its very form serves a specific purpose. In fact, Doctorow himself has commented on the novel's need to be written in such a style: he describes how his attempts of approaching the subject in a traditional manner fails and, after having thrown out in despair 150 pages "in the third person, more or less standard past tense, third person novel, very chronologically scrupulous," he finally becomes "reckless enough to find the voice of the book which was Daniel's" (qtd. in Levine 62). Daniel's story is too complex, too complicated and self-contradictory to be contained within a simple third-person omniscient narrator chronological version. In fact, it is the form itself, Daniel's slow circling around the central event of his life, his constant attempt and failure to tell the story, to find the right words, that is one of the messages of the text. So traumatized is Daniel by his parents' death that he is unable to tell a straightforward tale. Just like in a dream or free association, Daniel's thoughts circle back to the past yet shy away from it at the same time. Far from impeding the reader's understanding, Doctorow's style is, in fact, necessary if we are to fully comprehend the depth of Daniel's trauma and his inability to confront it.

Accordingly, the constant switch between first and third person, the switch between past and present tense, as well as the switch in mode, style, and tone are all indicative of Daniel's internal struggles and his slow attempt to work through the

traumatic events of his childhood. While these events are more than fifteen years past, to Daniel they still seem present; he still relives the feelings of fear, loss, and despair, and he only seems to heal emotionally when he finally, in the last section succeeds in confronting his parents' execution. As much as this book is about Daniel's personal inability to write and finish his story, it is even more so about history's inability to ever completely know the facts, to ever comprehensively understand the data. On a structural level the story of the parents' trial is mirrored in Daniel's quest for absolution rather than truth. Although the novel seems to be an attempt to objectively determine his parents' guilt or innocence, it is, in fact, rather a son's endeavor to properly mourn his parents, thereby allowing himself to move on. As such, the Isaacsons' question of culpability resonates Daniel's attempts to come to terms with his own feelings of guilt.

Daniel's attempt to understand his parents and their actions and motives, in turn allows him to finally begin to understand himself and his role in the world. Unlike his sister Susan who single-mindedly takes on their parents' struggles, Daniel refuses to do so, instead moving between genuine political interest and apathy. Unlike Susan, then, he is able to grow, both emotionally and intellectually, and ultimately does not fall victim to his past. This becomes clear in the last few sections of the novel. When Daniel finally confronts Mindish, the person he holds most personally responsible for his parents' betrayal, he does not accuse the man or display any of the emotions he has expressed throughout the text. Instead, he realizes the futility of challenging someone who fails to remember anything including his own guilt. Daniel's descriptions of the senile old man with sunken eyes and facial palsy in the middle of Futureland is a mixture of pity and revulsion but avoids anger and hatred. In fact, Daniel letting Mindish kiss his head

suggests that while he may not ever forgive Mindish, he has let go of his obsession with the old man (354-56). In another moment of emotional growth, Daniel decides to become politically active, not in a frantic attempt to emulate his sister, but because he has begun to genuinely care. Instead of simply acquiescing his sister and her political goals or remaining locked in the past, Daniel participates in an anti-war protest even though he cannot join the others in their enthusiastic naiveté. Unlike them, being imprisoned for his political beliefs affects him strongly, yet he perseveres and endures the physical assault as well as the night in prison (312-15).

Likewise, the novel's three endings provide various ways that indicate some sort of resolution for Daniel to many of the problems that have been preoccupying him: returning to the site of his childhood home, he realizes that he does not belong there any more; burying his sister, he not only lets go of some of his grief but also finds renewed strength in religion and turns towards his wife for comfort; leaving the library where he has been writing his dissertation and hiding from the student protesters, he intellectually brings his endeavor to an end and faces the outside world. In all three versions, he succeeds in leaving the past behind, remembering, grieving, and accepting it, at the same time as he moves forward personally, religiously, and politically. In fact, he is finally able to embrace his family, both by becoming less erratic and aggressive towards his wife and child and by saying kaddish at Susan's funeral. He is a very different character from the Daniel the reader encounters at the beginning of the text, less narcissistic and violent, able to reach out and ask for help, as well as willing to help others. Not paralyzed by his past anymore, Daniel has achieved his goal and must now move beyond words; realizing that, the text closes by returning yet again to the Biblical intertext and suggests: "O

Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book” (368), thus closing both Daniel’s inquiry into the past and Doctorow’s novel.

The changes in Daniel are especially interesting when compared to his sister and Linda Mindish. Looking at the varied responses Susan and Daniel have to life, we can find various symptoms of what might be called survivor syndrome. Michelle Tokarczyk accordingly argues that they bear the “psychological traits of survivors” (3) and that “by depicting the spy trial’s children as people suffering from survivor syndromes, Doctorow suggests that injustice has lasting effects” (5). Susan’s desire to use her trust fund to finance an organization bearing her parents’ names is driven by her need to tell their story and to help political causes. Similarly, her constant hyperactivity and political activism, interrupted by periods of extreme suicidal depression must be traced back to her inability to overcome her parents’ death. Daniel, on the other hand, tries to ignore the pain of his past, yet acts out in other ways. His unexplainable anger and sadistic streak as well as his inability to live up to his stepparents’ expectations are all interconnected with his own sense of not having helped his parents survive. Yet his journey into the past that we witness throughout *The Book of Daniel* finally allows him to overcome some of the anger and desperation. Therefore, unlike his sister, who cannot handle her emotions and commits suicide, or Linda Mindish, who as Tokarczyk points out, “becomes a calculating person who goes to all lengths to divorce herself from her past” (9), Daniel finally works through his traumatic past and can move towards the future. His assessment that “perhaps we [Linda, Susan, and Daniel] all live with the desire for destruction” (346), is immediately overturned as Daniel succeeds in escaping the prison of the past that holds the two women.

Ironically, even though Tokarczyk uses psychological studies of Holocaust survivors and makes the clear connection between the psychological problems found in Susan and Daniel and the behavior found in Holocaust survivors and their families, she refrains from reading the novel as commenting on the Holocaust. Instead, she focuses on the fifties and reads the book as showing how “the McCarthy Era not only destroyed innocent people, but also left the victims’ children with permanent psychological scars” (13). Yet the novel itself establishes this connection by effectively making Susan and Daniel children of a Holocaust survivor through their stepmother. The two have thus become both: children of McCarthyism as well as children of the Holocaust. Just like the clear displacements of religious onto political persecution we have already discussed, this double victimhood yet again suggests how religion and politics merge or, at least, can stand in for one another. Moreover, by inviting us to see both children as confronting and—with varying success—working through their traumatic pasts and the repercussions those memories have on their everyday lives, Doctorow succeeds in moving beyond simple depictions of the horrors of totalitarianism and fascist injustices to deal with the aftereffects. He presents the traumatic consequences in an almost parabolic fashion by showing us survivors’ reactions to a trauma that may rank far less severe on a grand scale, yet nevertheless is devastating for the children we observe. Displacing the actual event of the Holocaust onto something more accessible, allows Doctorow to address a variety of issues—such as survivor guilt—that often get overwhelmed by the sheer enormity of the event of the Holocaust.

It is for this reason that *The Book of Daniel* works so successfully as a Holocaust novel. Omitting and evading the Holocaust directly, Doctorow nevertheless succeeds in

drawing our attention to the very thing he so carefully avoids. After all, much of the book works on the level of avoidance and displacement and the Holocaust is both chronologically as well as contextually the logical extension of Daniel's inquiry which moves from the sixties to the fifties and on, from the political struggles of his peers to the political and possibly religious persecution of his parents onward, from his own inner psychological turmoil to the real-life antagonism his parents were facing on to a much larger event. As Doctorow explores with Daniel the relationship between the personal and the political, he offers a very particular look at the surviving children of traitors executed by the American government. At the same time, his novel metaphorically addresses the relationship between personal and political trauma as we follow Daniel's attempts to understand his own story as well as history in general. The Holocaust is therefore present in the book both on the level of the text insofar as it—or rather its purposeful evasion— influenced America in the fifties as well as on a structural level insofar as it performs this very repression, thus drawing our attention to it in both the text itself and the history it describes.

E. L. Doctorow's *City of God*:  
How To Avoid the Holocaust By Talking About It

Doctorow's success of tackling the greatly difficult subject of the Holocaust in *The Book of Daniel* becomes especially apparent when comparing the 1971 text to his 2000 novel *City of God*. In his latest novel, Doctorow ambitiously tries to reflect on human existence in general, but especially within the twentieth century. Its fragmented style of offering the reader disparate parts that need to be read together and interpreted, mimics not only the Bible, one of the central intertexts of the book, but life itself with all

its seeming senselessness to which we must and will give meaning. Beginning with the Big Bang, contemplating Einstein and Wittgenstein's lives and theories, and interjecting songs by the Midrash Jazz Quartett, the novel uses these juxtapositions to challenge the mundane yet bizarre lives of the protagonists, all of whom are trying to make sense of the world but especially religion after the horrors of the last century. Religious interaction and doubts are symbolically represented by the central plot—a cross shows up on the roof of a radical synagogue—and the central romantic relationship—Episcopal priest Thomas Pemberton falls in love with Rabbi Sarah Blumenthal and they get married after Sarah's husband dies in Poland trying to retrieve Holocaust documents for Sarah's father. Yet these central plot lines are curiously unimportant, not only sketchy but also frequently interrupted and while Pemberton and Sarah do get married, the central mystery actually is never resolved. Instead, the text is more concerned with the characters'—and the author's—metafictional musings about the universe, religion, and life in all its forms.

Throughout, Doctorow addresses the Holocaust directly, or rather, he uses the Holocaust as an exemplar during his meditations on the existence of God. Creating a fictional survivor account, he lets the facts speak for themselves, completely unmediated and barely commented upon. This first person narrative entitled “Sarah Blumenthal's Conversation With Her Father” simulates authenticity by offering a genealogy of testimony. Similar to *The Book of Daniel*, the actual protagonist is the child, attempting to understand a past that must be reconstructed. Unlike Daniel's very conscious effort of imagining his parents' past, however, Sarah Blumenthal's father tells his story in an unmediated, almost generic first-person narrative, thus imitating a wide variety of eyewitness accounts. In fact, the Holocaust testimony is the most coherent one of the

various narrative strains and parts that make up Doctorow's novel. Its chronological realist account ends on the way to the camps, but our knowledge of Sarah's father's life give it a continuity and, ultimately, a closure that the remainder of the book lacks.

Not only is Doctorow using the mode of the eyewitness testimony which—even though it is taking place within the frame of a fictional story—relies on its similarity to true ones, he also downplays the much more postmodern *mis en scène* where the eyewitness testimony is invented—even within the story. It is only late in the book that the reader realizes the completely constructed nature of the testimony, a fact that is addressed merely in passing. We, in fact, find out that the testimony is a fictional account written by Everett, a writer around whom most of the various narrative strains revolve. About two-third's through the text, Everett meets with Sarah and they discuss his latest writing project—the very testimony we have been reading as if it were the true story of Sarah Blumenthal's father. They discuss the variety of Everett's influences, such as the specific diaries from which the writer has drawn inspiration, and Sarah points out certain erroneous facts and oversights: “you must be careful not to oversimplify the way things were” and “you say nothing about the soap” (146). It is here in that very short dialog that Doctorow moves beyond the confines of the adherence to authority of eyewitness testimonies when Sarah concludes: “But I was very moved. ... It may be inaccurate, but it is quite true” (146). Giving us this character's judgment of the previous Holocaust passages, we are offered the only self-critical, self-conscious moment in the text in regards to the Holocaust parts. Yet beyond this brief exchange, we are left with a text that approaches all topics—religion, philosophy, movie making, sex—with a certain

irreverence and presents them in a disjointed, fragmented, and episodic fashion, yet reserves the realist, narrative, very coherent mode for the Holocaust testimony.

Even though the Holocaust sections are mentioned, often even singled out, in the initial reviews of Doctorow's novel, they are not very interesting in and of themselves; instead, we are offered a clichéd amalgam of life in the ghettos that can be found in hundreds and thousands of interviews and written testimonies. As a result, the Holocaust simply becomes a ploy to make an argument about religion and twentieth century philosophy. The specificity of the Holocaust is ultimately lost in the way Doctorow embeds the story within the larger context. The text fails to really address the Holocaust or its impact on post-Holocaust thought and philosophy; its discussions of the cultural unconscious at the end of the twentieth century, of a post-Holocaust psyche are fairly generalized and generic. Consequently, *City of God* seems to lack the forceful, in-depth inquiry that has characterized Doctorow's treatments of specific historical periods in his other novels. Unlike texts such as *Book of Daniel* or *Ragtime*, for example, that radically reinvent the periods on which they focus and thereby elucidate the past as well as our present understanding of it, *City of God* remains firmly established in a now that meditates upon the past yet never really succeeds in accessing it.

It is for that reason that *The Book of Daniel* is actually a much more successful representation of the influence of the Holocaust on postmodern consciousness. Constantly aware of its existence yet consciously attempting to repress it, the novel's non-engagement with the Holocaust mirrors that of American society in general during the first three decades after the war. Nevertheless, this lack of straightforward confrontation succeeds far more than Doctorow's later attempt to represent the Holocaust

directly. Using the ambiguities of postmodern historiography and the self-consciousness of metafiction, *The Book of Daniel* becomes a thoroughly postmodern engagement with the Holocaust. By dealing with a handable version of anti-Semitism and injustice, Doctorow is able to discuss the repercussions of the Holocaust without being overwhelmed by it—as he later seems to be when confronting the issues directly in *City of God*. He not only shows us the emotional landscape of the fifties and sixties with its repression of the Holocaust but also—in the metaphoric role of Susan and Daniel—addresses some of the issues of survivors and how one can come to terms with historic and emotional trauma. In fact, the issues he addresses are central to those of Holocaust Studies: how to live in the shadow of something larger than yourself; how to deal with a past that has created a personal and public trauma; how to deal with personal memories, with the guilt of having survived, with the feeling of never fitting in. These are the problems Daniel and Susan face and cope with in a variety of different ways—some more successful than others. In effect, Doctorow offers his readers an “easier,” a more handable topic that nevertheless confronts many of the psychological and even some of the historical questions that are obviously raised by the Holocaust. This strategy, in turn allows us to read *The Book of Daniel* on one level as an extended metaphor, a much more successful meditation on the Holocaust than the one he produces almost thirty years later in *City of God*.

Walter Abish's *How German Is It:*  
Forgetting the Trauma/Re-covering the Past

Even though dealing with different countries and different decades, both Doctorow's 1971 *The Book of Daniel* and Walter Abish's 1980 *How German Is It*

thematize post-War consciousness in the aftermath of the Holocaust. In fact, both novels foreground how obsession and repression work as the two principal reactions to the events surrounding World War II and show how these two responses are negotiated. Whereas *The Book of Daniel* evades discussing the Holocaust directly and thereby forces its readers to unearth the repressed memory of the Holocaust that haunts the text, *How German Is It* is deceptively open about its focus on the Holocaust—or rather, its focus on the repression of the Holocaust. The text presents an artifact that seemingly is nothing but surface—the traditional complaint against postmodernism—yet skewing it slightly, making it somewhat unfamiliar, the text succeeds in revealing the deeper layers that appear hidden at first sight. By employing such postmodern strategies as pastiche, an emphasis on the surface, and defamiliarization, Abish moves beyond issues of textual representation to concerns about historical responsibility and the relationship between the two. Rather than regarding history and postmodernism as antithetical, Abish's text acknowledges history even as it employs postmodern theories and ideas, engages both as he plays with our hesitancy to accept their simultaneity. Abish's is a text that revels in its superficial character and textuality, that presents its historical aspects nonchalantly and a tad too obviously, thereby daring its readers to actually look beyond the surface.

In so doing, the novel does address central issues of contemporary German identity and its relationship to the past as it explores the relationship between history, historical accountability and accuracy, as well as postmodern and poststructural linguistic experiments. Even though the novel thematizes and enacts such a repressed obsession with the Holocaust, its postmodern aspects are often used to detract from reading the novel as a historical commentary. In fact, many critics have chosen to dismiss the clear political

and historical implications of the text in favor of focusing on the postmodern and experimental aspects. Abish's text not only shows us the difficulty of addressing the Holocaust within a postmodern novel, but through its reception yet again enacts our tendency to repress the Holocaust. The novel, which thematizes and enacts a double move of remembering and forgetting, of repression and obsession, addresses deeply ethical problems as it demonstrates how personal and collective responsibility are always interdependent as are the past and the present. In this text, where the past haunts everyone, the personal and the political cannot be separated, and a country's confrontation with its past necessarily requires individuals to confront their own. Not only does the novel *discuss* Germany's simultaneous repression and obsession with its Nazi past, its German critical reception *performs* an interesting obsessive repression of its own as the critics ignore the historical dimension of the book in favor of concentrating solely on its postmodern and poststructural characteristics. In so doing, they uncannily mimic the novel's content as the German past is yet again repressed.

Walter Abish, who is known mostly as a postmodern, anti-realist writer with a central focus on language and linguistic experiments does not seem a likely candidate for authoring a Holocaust novel. In fact, his first novel *Alphabetical Africa* (1974) and his short story collections *Minds Meet* (1975) and *In the Future Perfect* (1977) are almost programmatic in their stylistic and linguistic rigor, their emphasis on language and structure of the text in favor of plot or character development.<sup>58</sup> This self-conscious, almost mechanical, discipline forces readers to consistently remain aware of the stories' textuality, never allowing them to lose themselves in plot or characters. Traditionally

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<sup>58</sup> For an analysis of *Alphabetical Africa*, see Schirato, "Comic Politics"; for a discussion of "Minds Meet," see Arias-Misson.

identified as a postmodern experimental writer in the tradition of Barth, Barthelme, Hawkes, Coover, Gass, Sukenick and Federman, his texts are a collection of language experiments with a freeplay of linguistic signifiers. In *Alphabetical Africa*, for example, he restricts the author's ability to tell a story—and to describe Africa—by limiting the initial letters of all words: in the first chapter all words must begin with A, in the second with A or B etc. As a result, the text is not only limited in *how* it can tell its story but also in *what* it can tell as we are constantly reminded of the fact that language and form create but also restrict story and plot. Refusing to reflect the actual reality of Africa, it instead presents an empty space—not unlike Marlow's in *Heart of Darkness*—onto which author and reader conjointly can project their fantasies and stereotypes of Africa. Thus, the text ends up saying more about an American collective consciousness and the distribution of signifiers within our culture than it does about the reality of African life.

Similarly, Abish's next books, both collections of short stories, expose the status of the sign in contemporary life. Drawing his material mainly from an American context, Abish succeeds in destabilizing traditional notions of the familiar, in unsettling everyday sights and experiences. He does so by carefully restricting his narrative flow. Like the alphabetical experiment in *Alphabetical Africa*, he structures many of his short stories around external rules, which one of his critics describes as both puzzles and language-machines, characterized by arbitrariness as well as superdetermination (Arias-Misson 115). In fact, just like the linguistic constraints in *Alphabetical Africa* simultaneously construct and destruct a version of Africa, the stylistic restrictions in his short-stories give an account of American life that is at once uncannily familiar yet utterly foreign.

Read in this context, *How German Is It* is simply another attempt to create a world out of language—not as representation of reality but rather as imagining the world through words.<sup>59</sup> Considering Abish's background, however, it becomes more apparent why Abish might choose to address the Holocaust, or rather, why the author might move away from his ludic experimentalism when confronting Germany and its Nazi past. Born 1931 into a Jewish Viennese family, Abish flees the country with his parents to Shanghai and, after some time in Israel, comes to the United States in 1960, where he later becomes a naturalized citizen. While he and his family thus safely survive the Nazi genocide, Abish must also—in a more extended sense—be called a survivor and certainly is neither uninvolved nor indifferent to the subject of the Holocaust. It is with that biographical background in mind that we must look at Abish's 1980 novel *How German Is It*.

*How German Is It* actually establishes a fairly simple plot—especially for a postmodern metafictional text. Abish's satirical allegory of a new and wealthy Germany, which attempts to cover up its fascist past, centers on the writer Ulrich Hargenau whose personal life is inseparable from history. Not only was his father executed for an assassination attempt on Hitler, his wife was involved with a terrorist organization. With both events, Abish obviously draws on historically established circumstances: the attempted military coup under von Stauffenberg on July 20, 1944 and the terrorist activities of the Red Army Faction in the early 1970s. Furthermore, born in 1945, his birth year marks both the destruction of the Third Reich and the tentative beginnings of the new order that is to become the Federal Republic of Germany. At the beginning of

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<sup>59</sup> For postmodern readings of *How German Is It*, see Christopher Butler, Douglas Messerli, Marten Van Delden, Jerry Varsava, and Paul Wotipka.

the novel, Ulrich returns to his hometown of Württemberg, an old Southern German university town, after a six-months absence from Germany following the trial against the terrorist Einzieh Gruppe in which he was the leading prosecuting witness. The group's terrorism and the anti-fascist activities of Ulrich's father are repeatedly connected, thus creating a continuum between fascist Nazi Germany and the supposedly new and democratic one, both of which need to be resisted. Ulrich, for example, does not measure up when *Der Spiegel* compares "his cowardly actions to the *selfless* conduct of his father in 1944" (34).

Following a brief stay in Switzerland, Ulrich joins his brother Helmuth, a famous architect who specializes in public buildings. Both live in Brumholdstein, an imaginary German community founded after the war on the site of a former concentration camp and named after the famous philosopher Brumhold, a thinly disguised version of Heidegger. While not much happens in terms of plot or character development, the novel is replete with acts of violence, from the blowing up of some of Helmuth's buildings (among them the police station in Württemberg) through several assassination attempts on Ulrich and Helmuth to the final unexplainable terrorist act of a drawbridge attendant who then kills himself and two police men. Violence, Abish suggests, is barely hidden underneath a surface of civility and apt to break out at any time and for no apparent reason.

Though the Third Reich is not its principal theme, the novel obsessively alludes to Germany's *jüngste Vergangenheit*, thereby evoking its haunting legacy without actually addressing it directly. With its shifting points of view, we are privy to both an outsider's perspective of Germany as well as the defensive self-understanding and self-definition of the Germans. Some references are only hinted at, such as the choice of cities, "Munich,

Nuremberg, Berlin” (2) or the “black leather coat and black leather gloves” (3), some are more explicit, like Ulrich’s wondering about the *Hausmeister* ever having “been a member of an execution squad” (35) or the Hargenau’s former servant Franz building a concentration camp model out of match sticks.<sup>60</sup> Throughout the book, “the memory of a dream to end all dreams” (252) is barely under the surface, willing to come through at any moment. Or rather, it is not even *under* the surface a lot of times: instead, the text often literalizes metaphors as it exhibits the remainders and reminders of the “scars [that are] quite common in Germany” (73). In fact, the central literalized metaphor is the very creation of Brumholdstein. This completely constructed city without any historic roots, represents the New Germany that Phoenix-like has created its new democratic version upon the ruins of the past—in this case the remains of the concentration camp Durst. Yet in its constant play upon repression and obsession, the novel literalizes the return of the repressed when during the repairs of a ruptured sewage pipe a mass grave is exhumed (136-39). As Helmuth describes to his friends, “For all we anyone knows, all of Brumholdstein is sitting on one mass grave” (139). The past quite literally refuses to be buried in the form of the dead concentration camp victims that disrupt the bourgeois, complacent *Kleinstadt* mentality by reminding everyone of a past that they so adamantly try to erase.

However, the text’s most insidious reminders are the ones pronounced ironically in a vox populi. The intrusions into the text are without a clear narrative voice and completely void of irony and understanding of the gravity of their comments. One such

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<sup>60</sup> Ironically, Franz’s match stick model comes oddly close to a recent controversial art work by Polish artist Zbigniew Libera, who creates Lego model kits of concentration camps. For a discussion of his work, see Stephen C. Feinstein.

comment is the outrage at the bombing of the post office, “why pick on postal employees and mutilate and destroy innocent letters that may have been carrying checks to war widows and other people in dire need” (40-41). Another one describes the relationship to Durst: “Not that anyone tried to hide or conceal the fact—a futile task really—that it had been a forced labor camp for God knows how many thousand of foreigners, aliens, prisoners of war, political detainees, and other undesirables, including, of course, Jews, who presented a clear threat to the continued survival of Germany” (81). Not only is this voice not completely honest, since we later find out that no text exists on Durst, but the acceptance of pronouncing Jews “undesirables” without any distancing is astounding.

Possibly the most interesting example of how the shadows of the Third Reich loom just below the surface is a perfectly common coloring book that the protagonist receives as a gift from a friend. Aptly entitled *Unser Deutschland*, it initially seems to depict contemporary German life through innocuous pictures, an airport, a highway, a classroom; yet some of the other pictures are more problematic such as a group of German officers, a car accident, young women with automatic rifles (176-79). These more unsettling pictures, in turn, question the more ordinary ones, and we remain uncertain as to how innocent the pictures actually are, whether they may not suggest more sinister implications. One of the pictures, for example, shows railroad freight cars, perfectly harmless objects that at the same time have become one of the symbols of the industrialized mass murder that the Nazis engineered; another depicts a construction site, in which a work crew repairs a ruptured sewage pipe. Within the context of the book, this scene immediately recalls one of the novel’s most haunting moments where such a ruptured sewage pipe reveals a mass grave of concentration camp inmates.

In a way, this coloring book that Ulrich receives anticipates an artistic installation not created until fifteen years later: Israeli artist Ram Katzir designed a coloring book constituted of seemingly innocent pictures, a man feeding a doe, a father reading to his children, smiling faces, a park bench, only to reveal at the very end of the book the original photograph from which these drawings were done: the man feeding the doe is Hitler, the family idyll is Goebbel's, the park bench is "only for Aryans," and the laughing crowds are cheering for Hitler.<sup>61</sup> What these books achieve, of course, is the shocking realization of having mistaken various propaganda shots for innocent drawings. Not only do they force us to realize how propaganda often functions in the most seemingly innocent places but it also suggests how visual images can be manipulated, how *we* can be manipulated.<sup>62</sup>

While the picture book in Abish's case may not go that far, it similarly deceives its viewer into a false sense of innocence through its childhood connotations. In fact, Robert Siegle points out how the coloring book must be seen as an instrument of socialization and argues that "the coloring book accurately depicts almost everything that could be said to exist in the mind of a child" (1). Within the context of the novel, the picture book functions metonymically for the novel as a whole. Its surface relays an

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<sup>61</sup> The picture books were the central part of a traveling exposition shown in various different cities throughout Europe and Israel (1996-98) under different names and under often slightly varying circumstances. All exhibits presented a number of these coloring books—laid out on school benches, for example—and asked the audience to color them in. See Ram Katzir.

<sup>62</sup> This is an especially severe supposition considering the particular subject matter that Katzir has chosen: while questions of representation and representability are central to all postmodern inquiries, their stakes are particularly high within representations of the Holocaust. Not only did the Third Reich excel in presenting an image so very different from the horrendous truths hidden underneath, Hitler and his henchmen expertly used propaganda to indoctrinate the very young. Moreover, due to its incomprehensible magnitude and the logical and pragmatic inability to "prove" many of the events, the role of the eyewitness has become central to Holocaust Studies. This reliance on pictures and eyewitnesses, of course, is problematic. Accordingly, by revealing only partial information, Katzir exposes our inability to accurately read most images and our blind trust in the visual.

innocence tainted with the underlying guilt that corresponds to the way the novel appears to emphasize the surface while actually containing several deeper levels. Both picture book and novel, of course, stand in for a more general cultural reaction in Germany when trying to confront the past. Moreover, the sender of the book has written on every page, “*Wo bist du denn?*” (177). This simple question of where Ulrich—and by extension the reader—is situated in this scenario of reinventing Germany, repressing and resurrecting the past, carries throughout the entire novel. In fact, most of Ulrich’s thoughts are occupied with how he fits into the new German society, how much of the past ought to be remembered and how much should be forgotten.

Abish repeatedly uses the juxtaposition of the familiar and the horrific throughout the book, maintaining an ironic distance by refusing to give either side any level of depth. In a gesture similar to the coloring book, the photographer Rita mixes together all the pictures she has taken in Brumholdstein in a “deliberately careless combining of skeletons lying at the bottom of a long open trench that had been dug in the pavement, or being loaded onto the truck, and photographs of Helmuth in the garden watching Gisela play with Erika” (201). Abish’s use of the typical postmodern method of dehierarchization is misread both inside and outside of the text as Helmuth is infuriated by this mixing and Anthony Schirato compares Rita to the architects of the local concentration camp in her “lack of differentiation” (“Politics” 80). What Helmuth may sense and Schirato fails to see in his criticism is how the mixing of the photos signals that everyday life, including one’s very home, is implicated. In fact, the juxtaposition of the murdered camp inmates with Helmuth’s happy family stands in for the novel as a whole

as the entire text strives to show the implicit connections between the familiar of everyday life and the horrors of the past.

Throughout, Abish uses alienating and disrupting elements to constantly defamiliarize the familiar, to present a scene that we recognize but not completely, thus forcing the reader to look at it anew. In fact, he reminds us throughout of the dangers of the familiar and of assuming too much, because, as the text explains, “when something becomes terribly familiar we stop seeing it” (120). Resisting this process, Abish turns it around as he defamiliarizes the familiar just enough to make us notice it again.<sup>63</sup> The title itself challenges us to wonder how German this depiction really is, how much we should take this novel at face value. As German critics have pointed out, there are obvious mistakes in the book; for example, the region in which the novel takes place is erroneously spelled *Schwartzwald* and a soccer game can yield a result of 21:17 (“Nun Liebchen”). These mistakes, however, do not seem accidental but rather purposefully estranging. One could see these mistakes as markers to fend off any literal reading, to view “Germany” as a fictional entity. At the same time, the historical reality of the text, its clear situatedness within a specific historical context contradicts such a reading. In fact, it is moments like these that create the unfamiliarity and estrangement that characterize the entire novel, forcing the reader to confront history in a novel way. The constant alienation and defamiliarization functions as a way to reintroduce the readers to questions of history and how it is represented. In contrast to the overly familiar tropes and images that we connect with the Third Reich, Abish’s strange and estranging

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<sup>63</sup> Martin Richard has rightly pointed out, however, that the familiarity of Nazi Germany is mostly mediated; i.e., it is familiar “not through direct experience, but through art and entertainment” (241). Therefore, while Abish uses his text to address real historical issues, he simultaneously remains aware of the fact that we can only access this past through various modes of representation.

depiction forces us to reinvestigate our understanding of and relationship to the past. As a result, as Saalman points out, the text's focus on the surface and its defamiliarization of the subject matter succeed in avoiding one of the problems of traditional Holocaust literature, namely, "the pitfalls of being emotionally overwrought and subjectively engrossed in the event" (117). Instead, the reader must contemplate his or her own implication, as the world presented is both threateningly familiar and utterly foreign.

In an interview, Abish describes the process as "establish[ing] or reestablish[ing] the familiar in what is foreign, allowing the familiar to determine the subsequent defamiliarization. The result is a tension, a sense of *unbehagen*, a discomfort" (Lotringer 161). What is important, however, is the fact that familiarity for Abish does not imply comfort or safety. In fact, he argues that "the presentation of the 'familiar world' is not an innocent one" (Lotringer 162), a fact that becomes abundantly clear when considering Abish's subject matter in *How German Is It*. After all, the most familiar moments within the text tend to center around the memory of the Third Reich, thereby demonstrating the uncanny element of the familiar, showing how the home, the familiar, can be the most *(un)heimlich*, the most uncanny, of places. While it is not completely clear whether the general discomfort in Abish—upon which most of the critics tend to agree—is with postmodern life in general and its encompassing loss of signification or with the Holocaust more specifically, *How German Is It* seems to argue that the two are inextricably entwined. At least within the context of contemporary German life, it is the attempt to ignore, deny, and overcome the Holocaust that has created a society void of any history and therefore of any depth. Brumholdstein, the clean, affluent, orderly city without a past of its own, thus

becomes the quintessential New Germany, relishing the shiny new surface that money and an ignorance of the past can create.

The novel's protagonist Ulrich, of course struggles with this failure to remember the past as he tries to understand and accept his own historical position and responsibility. In fact, his complicated relationship with Germany's Nazi past culminates towards the end with a drastic—one critic has even called it melodramatic—scene in which Ulrich finds himself “with his right hand raised in a stiff salute” (252) after undergoing hypnosis. While the novel consistently reminds its readers of the constant impact of Germany's past on its present, this scene emphasizes just how deeply the past has traumatized everyone. Ulrich's repressed emotions testify to a traumatic memory that he may have dealt with intellectually but one by which he is obviously still haunted emotionally. Representing the modern enlightened German who has confronted Germany's past and performed the necessary *Trauerarbeit*, Ulrich nevertheless is not and never can be innocent. As the novel's protagonist, he thus stands in for Germany as a whole; both are left a victim of the past as they remain stagnant and refuse emotional or even intellectual growth.

In fact, the novel answers its central question of the role of the Holocaust in contemporary Germany when it concludes with the rhetorical question, “Is it possible for anyone in Germany, nowadays, to raise his right hand, for whatever the reason, and not be flooded by the memory of a dream to end all dreams?” (252). Using the image of the raising of one's arm, Ulrich acknowledges the strong emotional memory—even for someone of the post-war generation or for a foreigner—while simultaneously drawing attention to the absurdly innocent quality of the act itself. As such, this gesture becomes

emblematic of the novel as a whole since the text shows how all aspects of life in a modern Germany are tainted by connotations developed during its Nazi past. Neither the raising of one's arm nor the pictures in a children's coloring book can ever become innocent again after the Holocaust, as much as most of the characters in *How German Is It* try to pretend.

Even though these examples indicate that Abish's novel is suffused with history, the lack of an overarching narrative voice with a clearly defined moral center may be the reason that the criticism tends to ignore and overlook the text's historical aspects. Placing Abish squarely in the poststructural camp, most readers foreground form and structure in favor of content. The principal question that confronts a reader of Abish's text is the odd juncture of postmodern methods and poststructural ideas on the one hand and the political and historical situatedness of the novel on the other. Or, to ask the question differently: if *How German Is It* is a poststructural treatise, why the obsessive preoccupation with Nazism, and if it is a historical text, why the postmodern approach. Considering the often exemplary status of the Holocaust and the debates surrounding its representability, we need to decide whether a postmodern treatment of the Holocaust ultimately helps or hinders our understanding of this—or any—historical event. Instead of trying to decide whether it is one or the other, it makes more sense to reconcile the two seemingly mutually exclusive ideas. Rather than obeying a poststructural/ historical dichotomy, Abish succeeds in using the two to explore and exemplify each other, i.e., the self-conscious, self-referential quality of the text supports the historical issues and ethical debates addressed in the novel at the same time as the historical dimension of the novel challenges and extends its postmodern characteristics.

On first sight, *How German Is It* seems to resemble Abish's previous texts: it lacks of a clear narrator and stable ethical center, repeatedly intrudes upon the narrative voice with unrelated comments or arbitrary questions, and fails to provide a clearly plotted narrative, instead substituting plot with a series of vignettes. All these characteristics throw into doubt the literal reading of a text that simultaneously presents itself as objective and clear as a travel guide and as opaque and complicated as a theoretical discussion of poststructuralism. Yet while Abish does maintain many of his more experimental stylistics in *How German Is It*, he also powerfully merges the postmodern meditation on form and structure with a historical awareness and social urgency often absent in metafictional texts. By setting this novel within the context of post-war Germany, by explicitly and repeatedly raising the issue of Germany's Nazi past, he engages much more complexly with historical and political issues.

Similarly, we must understand Abish's prominent use of Heidegger not as a simple endorsement of the poststructural theories, which are strongly indebted to Heidegger, but as a warning to avoid a completely ahistorical linguistic free play. Heidegger is one of the central metaphors of the text: the principal locale is named after him, Ulrich is a student of his, and his thoughts—such as the signature question of “What is a thing?” (19) and his meditations on *Dasein* (169)—intrude repeatedly into the text. By using Heidegger in such an emblematic way throughout his novel, Abish invites us to read the issues the text raises through the philosopher's ideas and theories. As a result, the great German thinker serves several functions in the novel: obviously, Heidegger's tainted Nazi past and the philosopher's subsequent refusal to acknowledge his guilt repeats yet again the central motif of obsessive repression and the eventual return of the

repressed, one of the central metaphors of the text. In fact, the text makes explicit reference to this: from the philosopher's "too many reckless speeches in the '30s and '40s" (19) to his posthumously published "disappointing" interview in which Brumhold gave "no new revelations, no confession, no regrets" (166).

Not only does Abish use Brumhold/Heidegger as yet another representative for the motif of minimizing, denying, and repressing the German past, Heidegger's philosophy itself is in question and with it poststructural and postmodern linguistic theories and their seeming inability for historical engagement. While some critics simply see Abish's use of Heidegger as a further endorsement for a poststructural reading of the novel, Abish's ironic treatment of the philosopher suggest that it rather constitutes a warning sign against a pure formal, acontextual reading of the text.<sup>64</sup> In fact, the glimpses we get of Brumhold's philosophy are clearly drawn from Heideggerian thought, such as the extended contemplation on the forest with its reading of nature as a means to "reestablish our roots and return to a simplicity of life," thus "coming closer to our past, our history, our German spirit" (167). In fact, it is this very celebration of organicity that recalls Nazi *Blut und Boden* ideology and which has attracted some of the most severe political criticism against Heidegger—not for his unwise career moves in the thirties or his political speeches but for the entanglement of his very thought with the organic metaphors of Nazi ideology.

Moreover, reading Heidegger's focus on language against Abish's use of linguistic theories, we are faced with the problem of the politics of poststructuralism. After all, it was within the context of Heidegger and his Nazi past that poststructural and

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<sup>64</sup> Critics who regard Abish's use of Heidegger as supporting a poststructural reading of the text, include Jerry Varsava, Dieter Saalman, and Klaus Milich.

postmodern linguistic theories were accused of their supposed lack of any ethical or moral value system. Even though *How German Is It* precedes the criticism of deconstruction and poststructuralism during the eighties for their emphasis on textuality at the expense of historical and social context, its singular use of Heidegger against the backdrop of Germany's repression of its Nazi past anticipates these debates.<sup>65</sup> Just like less than half a decade later, in the Heidegger affair, the accusations against Heidegger's political allegiances and, by inference, his philosophical principles could throw into doubt all of deconstruction, Abish's careful insertion of Heidegger at the center of the novel must be understood as an engagement with the historicity of poststructuralism itself. Given the historical dimension of the text together with the mostly ironic treatment of Brumhold, the novel certainly does not embrace Heidegger's philosophy—nor does it support wholeheartedly the deconstructivist ideas built upon his theories. Instead, it reminds us that even in the midst of linguistic play and postmodern stylistics, a historical component remains that has impact both within and without the text.

If the novel does not simply revel in its poststructural textuality but instead constitutes a historical commentary, then the question remains as to why Abish chooses this form and what message we can derive from it. Or, to ask the question differently, what can an experimental postmodern approach do for this representation of seventies Germany and its relationship to the past that a more realist mode cannot? Of what

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<sup>65</sup> For the central text on the corruptness of Heidegger's thought due to his political background are Victor Farias's 1987 book *Heidegger and Nazism* and Hugo Ott's 1988 study *Martin Heidegger: A Political Life*. For critical readings of Heidegger from the position of Holocaust scholars, see Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg, Eds., *Martin Heidegger and the Holocaust* and Berel Lang, *Heidegger's Silence*. For more ambiguous approaches to his work and life, see Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and "the Jews"*; Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art and the Political*; and Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit*. See also the various contributions by Gadamer, Blanchot, Levinas, Habermas, and others to Arnold Davidson, Ed., "Symposium on Heidegger and Nazism." For historical documents, including the infamous *Rektorrede* as well as critical views, see Richard Wolin, Ed., *The Heidegger Controversy*.

Abish's text reminds us is that we already live in a world of mediated images and corrupted information. Abish's presentation of Germany seems like a surreal mixture of *Hogan's Heroes* and a cheesy vacation catalog, thus reminding us that our images of the Holocaust are already mediated by certain filmic, visual, and textual presentations that have circulated within our culture. While they may not be wrong, pictures cannot always tell the truth, as our discussion of the coloring books has shown. Moreover, with the repeated exposure to certain images they take on cliché-character and lose their forcefulness. Aware of these dangers, Abish uses the distance of the postmodern to generate a subtle yet much more severe accusation that is both personal and general in scope. With Ulrich, Abish has created a protagonist who is beginning to confront this past by acknowledging its ever-haunting presence and, possibly, even trying to take personal responsibility. By not allowing the reader to separate past and present or the individual from the collective, Abish indicts his readers on a much larger scale by mandating personal responsibility for historical events instead of the easier collective guilt. More specifically, of course, he demands of the German people, in particular the younger generation like Ulrich, not so much a collective guilt as a personal responsibility not to forget.

This clear indictment of the Germans with its demand for remembrance may account for the strange reception Abish has received in Germany. Unlike some of its American critics, German readers have unanimously chosen to focus on the text's form and structure instead of reading Abish's acerbic account of German life as a bitter satire on Germany's inability to work through its historical burden.<sup>66</sup> Thus, there appears to be

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<sup>66</sup> See the critical articles by Richard Martin, "Walter Abish's Fictions"; Joseph Schöpp, "Bilderbuch-Deutschland"; Kurt Gamerschlag; and Klaus Milich.

a consensus that the text is not actually about Germany but rather about textual and visual images of Germany that have been circulating and are easily recognizable in America especially. The critics read Abish's Germany as not mimetic (Milich, Schöpp) and "functioning primarily as a sign" (Schöpp), "an association, a pretext" (Martin 238); they thereby feel justified in mostly ignoring any historical contexts and focusing on the language, form, and textuality of the text. Their academic form of repression turns towards a multitude of sophisticated postmodern and poststructural theories which allow them to analyze the book without engaging in its particular historical dimension. The refusal to acknowledge the historical argument of the text thus repeats one of the central motifs in a book which playfully defamiliarizes a personal confrontation with the Holocaust and yet may still hit all too close to home.

What the German critics and even some of their American colleagues fail to realize is that history and postmodernism are not mutually exclusive propositions. In fact, as our readings of both Abish and Doctorow indicate, while postmodern texts resist the linear, seeming transparency of realism, their emphasis on textuality simply provides a different approach to history and its representations. Even with all their differences, *The Book of Daniel* and *How German Is It* must be seen as representative of postmodernism's reaction to the Holocaust, especially in its early stages. Following American culture at large, which only slowly began to consider the Holocaust a topic that deserved attention, postmodern literary texts also tended to avoid the subject. Focused mostly on concerns of textuality and caught in the present, postmodern texts shied away, for the most part, from historical issues, especially ones as loaded as the Holocaust. At the same time, the Holocaust did affect the postmodern psyche and, as such, had to be

addressed—if only negatively by thematizing its very absence and repression. As a result, we find texts like Doctorow's and Abish's who may not discuss the Holocaust directly but nevertheless give us insight into the effects the Holocaust has had on postmodern culture as a whole. Both novels illustrate how the collective traumatic memory of the Holocaust remains repressed and, as such, continues to wield significant influence contemporary society.

**CHAPTER THREE**  
**LANGUAGE AFTER THE HOLOCAUST**  
**IN RAYMOND FEDERMAN AND SAMUEL BECKETT**

As we have seen, when postmodern author Walter Abish confronts the Holocaust, he chooses to diverge from the more extreme experimental techniques such as the ones he used in *Alphabetical Africa* and foregrounds the historical aspects of his text. One of his fellow experimentalists, Raymond Federman, on the other hand, attacks the problem of how to adequately represent the Holocaust from a very different theoretical position. Not only are his texts highly playful yet dealing with the Holocaust, he, in fact, reserves some of his most experimental novels for his coming to terms with the Shoah.<sup>67</sup> Thus, Raymond Federman must be considered one of the few Holocaust novelists who have taken up the challenge to represent their traumatic experiences within a postmodern framework. In so doing, Federman exposes a paradox in Holocaust Studies where the Holocaust is seen to instantiate a discourse (i.e., postmodernism) from which it itself seems to be immune (as its primary mode of representation moves towards the immediate and mimetic).

Federman's texts differ fundamentally from what we have learned to identify as survivor testimonies. While Federman concurs with the majority of Holocaust writers that the Holocaust has constituted a climactic shift in history, culture, and even language,

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<sup>67</sup> See Raymond Federman, *Among the Beasts/Parmi Les Monstres: Poèmes* (1967), *Double or Nothing: A Real Fictitious Discourse* (1971), *Take It or Leave It: An Exaggerated Second-Hand Tale to be Read Aloud Either Standing or Sitting* (1976), *The Voice in the Closet/La Voix Dans Le Cabinet de Débaras* (1979), *The Twofold Vibration* (1982), *Smiles on Washington Square* (1985), *To Whom It May Concern* (1990).

he comes from a different theoretical background and consequently draws very different conclusions from this rupture. Agreeing with many of his colleagues that the Holocaust has affected the abilities and functions of literature and language, Federman disagrees completely as to what constitutes the results of this change. His postmodern and poststructural framework allows him to arrive at the conclusion that an experimental, non-mimetic textual engagement with the Holocaust is the only possible one.

Highly experimental and playful, his work constantly challenges traditional notions of authorship, memory, and even history itself, thus instantiating many of the theories developed within the framework of postmodern historiography. For one, his experimental style raises doubts as to the seriousness of his approach, since it appears difficult to confer a serious content within a ludic form. At the same time, his use of experimental postmodern forms also prompts the question as to whether language itself is not overwhelmed and exhausted and thus not able to properly represent the Holocaust. Nevertheless, as he suggests himself, in the face of the Holocaust maybe only imagination can ultimately address the issues appropriately. Consequently, Federman's linguistic and stylistic experiments form a powerful way to appropriately deal with traumatic memory. In fact, his work demonstrates how the text itself can function as a traumatic production as his characters repeatedly relive the traumatic events of Federman's own survival. As such, his obsessive return to the site of his trauma exemplifies the repetition compulsion found in many other Holocaust novelists as well.

Following Samuel Beckett, Federman confronts the impoverished linguistic landscape of the post-Holocaust universe by advocating an experimental, non-mimetic, even ludic approach. He foregrounds the issues of language and representation that so

preoccupy postmodernism in general and the relationship of postmodernism and the Holocaust in particular which allows him to explore both the advantages of using nonrepresentational, anti-mimetic methods as well as their implicit dangers. Accordingly, Federman's texts address and problematize the relationship between postmodern linguistic experiments and the mandate of authenticity generally adhered to in Holocaust literature. In fact, through his self-conscious style and programmatic essays, the author thematizes the issue of representability, historical accuracy, and the role of experimentation. As his theoretical texts confirm, it is the process of imagination itself that allows Federman to confront his past—a past that he re-members, re-writes, and re-creates, but nevertheless refuses to let pass into the realm of falsehood and fantasy.

#### Federman, the Postmodern Writer

Raymond Federman stands out from other Holocaust novelists in that he not only engages postmodern techniques but also wholeheartedly embraces postmodern experimentation. Among the most experimental of postmodern writers, Federman exemplifies many postmodern truisms in his literary and theoretical texts. Writing from a position of author and critic, he is well aware of the mainstays of postmodern theory and incorporates many of them into his writing. Jerome Klinkowitz, who offers the first longer study of Federman's work in his 1975 *Literary Disruptions*, emphasizes how Federman (along with Ronald Sukenick) “ha[s] published the most straight academic writing and so offer[s] the highest profile of theory behind such works” (119). Within the context of his study, Klinkowitz is most interested in the disruptive aspects of Federman's work which, he argues, go beyond theme or form to “question[] the entire

premise of traditional fiction” (119). Accordingly, most early studies of Federman emphasize his texts’ experimental and performative qualities and regard him as one of the theoretical—if not artistic—spokespeople of the early postmodern movement.<sup>68</sup>

“Surfiction,” the term Federman coins to describe his new mode of writing, is defined as “expos[ing] the fictionality of reality,” and he explains it as follows: “Just as the Surrealists called that level of man’s experience in the subconscious SURREALITY, I call that level of man’s activity that reveals life as fiction SURFICTION” (Federman, “Surfiction” 37).

The characterization of Federman as a postmodern writer is not unanimous, however, since some critics have termed Federman’s work along with other antirepresentational texts “examples of late modernist extremism” (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 52). Linda Hutcheon, for example, labels as postmodern only that art which “is historical and political in a way that much metafiction is not” (*Poetics* 52). This categorization is restrictive, not only because Hutcheon thereby limits postmodern literature to one particular type of novel (namely, historiographic metafiction), but also because she ignores the historical relevance of Federman’s work. After all, much of Federman’s work engages history insofar as at the center of Federman’s texts lies the constant circumscription of the Holocaust, the event that has overshadowed his entire life. In fact, much of the experimental style and language that Hutcheon criticizes for its lack of political engagement is intricately related to Federman’s aesthetics of a post-Holocaust art. Hutcheon critique points towards a problem in Federman’s reception, however, as many critics make only passing references to Federman’s preoccupation with the

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<sup>68</sup>For discussions of Federman’s use of experimentation, non-representation, anti-referentiality and textual autonomy, see Jerzy Kutnik and Jerome Klinkowitz.

Holocaust and neglect to foreground its importance and relevance to his writing.<sup>69</sup>

Instead, they regard Federman as a postmodern experimental writer par excellence and focus on his visual and stylistic experiments, his surfictional moments.

One of the most fascinating yet most frustrating aspects of Federman's work is his constant awareness of and engagement with his critics. Not only are his works strongly indebted to postmodern and poststructural theories while his theoretical texts enter into these debates, he also merges the boundary between reality and fiction, art and criticism by including criticism *of* his work *into* his work.<sup>70</sup> While this is obviously an example of his use of "pla(y)gialism," it also exemplifies the inability to separate fact and fiction, lies and reality. Defining "pla(y)gialism," Federman says, "I do not know any more where my own thoughts originated, and where these thoughts began to merge with others within the dialog all of us entertain within ourselves, and with others" ("Critifiction" 52), thus foreclosing both the idea of originality and authenticity as intrinsically impossible in language.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, he follows Beckett's *The Unnamable* who wonders "How can I tell the teller from the told" (qtd in Federman, "Critifiction" 55) thereby exposing any writers inability to clearly separate between writer, narrator, protagonist, and critic.

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<sup>69</sup> While Federman's own theoretical writings and interviews address the moment of his survival, most academic studies are more focused on the writer's experimental techniques and linguistic endeavors. Franz Link and Richard Martin are notable exceptions who repeatedly return to Federman's writing as mainly indebted to the Holocaust and his personal experiences.

<sup>70</sup> For example, Charles Caramello's insightful description of Federman's relationship to the Holocaust, "The central event in Federman's fiction is not the extermination of his family but the erasure of that extermination as a central event" (132), thus reoccurs repeatedly in Federman's work thereafter. Not only does Federman use it in his essays "Displaced Person: The Jew/ The Wanderer / The Writer" and "The Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jewish Writer," he also incorporates it into his novel *The Twofold Vibration* (13).

<sup>71</sup> This, of course, is an idea commonly argued within poststructural theory. See, for example, Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context."

In turn, Raymond Federman's postmodern theory and practice tend to exclude him from serious consideration among Holocaust scholars so that he is usually overlooked in discussions of Holocaust literature.<sup>72</sup> Foregrounding such standard postmodern concepts as our inability to approach facts or memory through anything except language, Federman violates most mandates employed in Holocaust literature. In fact, he argues that "everything is fiction because everything always begins with language, everything is language" ("Federman on Federman" 89) and that "language [is] ultimately ... all we *are*, ... what keeps us together" (in LeClair and McCaffery 138). He refutes mimetic representation or any attempts to describe the experiences of suffering and persecution in a realist fashion. Moreover, he theoretically repudiates the very idea of immediacy and the powers of the eyewitness as he states that "[a]n experience, whether tragic, comic, or banal, only gains meaning when it has passed through language, when it has been recounted, recorded, told, spoken, or written" (89). Repeatedly emphasizing that all our experiences only become intelligible in language, Federman rejects the mandate of authenticity, thereby inviting critics to question his experiences altogether. Writing between the apparently incompatible discourses of the Holocaust and postmodernism, Federman is a prime example of the difficulties and challenges that any postmodern approach to the Holocaust encounters. At the same time, he elucidates the opportunities postmodern theories provide for any attempts to confront the Holocaust.

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<sup>72</sup> James Young lists him in the bibliography of *Writing* but does not discuss him in his text. Geoffrey Hartman discusses *To Whom It May Concern* briefly in *Longest Shadow* (108-9).

Even though most studies of Raymond Federman make passing reference to his Holocaust allusions and some even discuss the texts' autobiographical aspects in detail,<sup>73</sup> few relate Federman to the general discourse of Holocaust literature and its problematic. That is all the more surprising, since a closer look at Federman's writing and his critical essays reveals his strong investment in the subject matter. Rather than following the traditional dichotomy that tries to clearly separate textual experimentation from meaningful historical commentary, Federman uses his highly idiosyncratic, often difficult and always challenging prose to comment on our post-Holocaust world. Using postmodern methods like linguistic, stylistic, and thematic experimentation, he succeeds in overcoming one of the most repeatedly claimed shortcomings of postmodernism, namely its inability to participate in a political and social dialog. Thus, while Federman's work can tell us something about the role of the writer, its more important function is what it can tell us something about the position of the post-Holocaust subject—both personally and as part of a cultural collective unconscious. It is this particular and personal dimension that distinguishes Federman from his fellow postmodernists as his word-games and linguistic experiments serve a purpose above and beyond its apparent naval gazing. As Federman addresses the Holocaust not through contents but through form, not through mimetic and authentic representation but through purposeful fictionalization, he embodies the crisis of language after Auschwitz and directly confronts the Holocaust within a postmodern framework.

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<sup>73</sup> Critics who emphasize Federman's personal experiences with the Holocaust include Charles Caramello and Alfred Hornung, both of whom do not move far beyond the actual facts. Richard Martin and Franz Link are the only ones to extensively address Federman's relationship to Holocaust.

federman, namredef, and moisnous:  
Federman's Life as Text

Federman's central trauma—his moment of survival—around which most of his texts circulate, is well documented.<sup>74</sup> On July 16, 1942 his parents and two sisters were arrested by the Nazis and deported to Auschwitz while he survived hidden in a closet. He has called this day “my real birthdate, for that day I was given an excess of life” and has stated that “my life began in a closet” (“Federman on Federman” 95, 97). It is this very closet to which he obsessively returns in all of his texts, from his first collection of poems, *Among the Beasts*, through the tellingly entitled *The Voice in the Closet* to *The Twofold Vibration*. In fact, all of Federman's literary texts address his moment of survival directly or indirectly. Probably the briefest explicit articulation occurs early on in the 1958 poem “Escape,” which opens Federman's collection of poetry. Federman repeatedly quotes this poem in later texts and reinscribes the events in a variety of forms. As several critics have noted, the treatment of his traumatic past becomes more explicit and direct throughout his novels.

*Double or Nothing*, Federman's 1971 novel, is a study in experimental fiction, focusing on a young French-Jewish immigrant's attempt to write a novel while imprisoning himself for 365 days in an apartment, living on noodles and tomato sauce.<sup>75</sup> No two pages are set alike and the entire text is interspersed with various textual images, different styles of prose, and varying story lines. Including French texts, paragraphs read backwards or words forming boats and noodle water, the entirety of the text obsesses

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<sup>74</sup> See Raymond Federman, “Raymond Federman: A Version of My Life—The Early Years.” For a chronological account of Federman's life, see “Chronology.”

<sup>75</sup> For a critical reading of *Double or Nothing*, see Opperman and Opperman.

about the process of writing—both as the contents focuses on the writing of the book and as the text itself constantly reminds us of its textual quality. Federman’s first novel is easily his most outrageously experimental, but it also constitutes the one least able to address issues of the Holocaust. The first mentioning of the narrator’s past occurs on the first page in a passage that seems to serve as a summary overview and offers the reader a fairly continuous narrative. Here, we learn that the protagonist’s

parents both his father and mother and his two sisters one older and the other younger than he had been deported they were Jewish to a German concentration camp Auschwitz probably and never returned, no doubt having been exterminated deliberately X\*X\*X\*X.. (0)

This passage provides the basic factual information about the author/narrator/protagonist’s background, a background the reader would expect to inform most of the novel. Instead, throughout the majority of the text, the young protagonist never openly confronts his past but obsesses about boxes of noodles, toothpaste, and soap. As the narrator draws up his various lists and contemplates how to plan the 365 days in his room, he can cover up his past, letting it surface in a few places only.

What is important in this brief passage beyond the very fact that Federman allows the reader this glimpse into his past, is the way he chooses to represent his family’s absence. The symbolized X\*X\*X\*X not only suggests a marker for the death of the four members of his family but also the placeholder for their absence. Federman repeatedly uses this expression to shorthand his family’s death, an expression that is characterized mostly by its lack. In *Federman: From A to X-X-X-X* the two entries framing his *recyclopedia* are “Absence” and “X-X-X-X,” both referring to one another as sole explanations. This, of course, yet again emphasizes the fact that words are incapable of explaining the “central primal loss,” as Federman describes it in *Take It or Leave It*.



to find his place in the United States, to understand the present rather than the past. As such, Federman's first novel perfectly fits the first stage of interaction with the Holocaust as we have seen in the last chapter, not too surprising, considering that both *Double or Nothing* as well as *Take It Or Leave It* recollect Federman's experiences in the US during the fifties and sixties. Mostly repressing the event, he gets uncomfortable and evasive when being confronted with his personal trauma:

I remember he said to me once my first few months it was always embarrassing to talk about it...I used to blush like a kid every time they asked me about my parents I record exactly what he told me...when they asked is your family in France?...I never knew what to answer...even years later...no and after much hesitation...they were deported...you know during the war...by the Germans...both of them...your father and mother?...yes...it's really embarrassing...sometimes...I would also mention my two sisters 2...they too were deported I would say...exterminated...butthatsoundedlikeIwasexaggerating likeIwasmakingitallup...togetmoresympathy...somostofthetimeIleftout mytwosisters...didn'tevenmentionthemthat'squiteastatement...because... itmeansnothingtothem...onepersonmoreoronepersonlessthat'sexactlyhow hesaidit...doesn'tmatter...ifyouinsisttoomuchthey start suffering for you good observation...and you feel even more embarrassed...even more lonely (103)

Even more so than the first quote this excerpt from *Double or Nothing* shows the narrator's focus on the present and his need to communicate with and be accepted by people who cannot relate to his experiences. Fearing their pity or their suspicion that he is exaggerating, the narrator gets embarrassed when having to divulge his past. The term "embarrassed" occurs three times in this brief passage, thus indicating both his personal inability of openly confronting his past as well as his interlocutors' lack of understanding. His response then is a conscious repression of his family's suffering: even if he acknowledges his parents' deaths, he tends to hold back his sisters' murders. The pain that the memory causes can only be revealed in the textual tension of this passage: the sentences and later the words lose any coherent structure as they merge into one another,

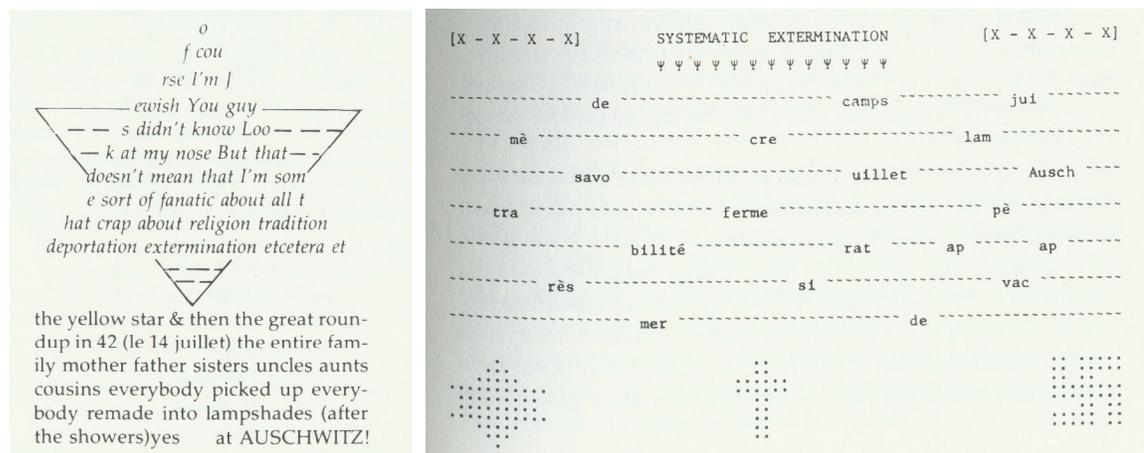
thus suggesting the narrator's inability to detach himself as he would need to do in order to narrativize his emotions. The endless continuation of words, syllables, and letters only interrupted by ellipses gives the passage a frantic character that aptly mimics the narrator's supposed state of mind. Yet like in the first passage, the emphasis seems to be less on the remembering than on his attempt to forget or at least ignore the memory in order to fit into this new society of which he so desperately want to be a part.

Federman's concern with the Holocaust shifts slightly in his second novel. While still largely in the background, it is the event itself that is now at the center of the textual play, not his attempt to deal with it. The 1976 *Take It or Leave It* tells the story of Frenchy's adventures and experiences while trying to get to the West Coast to go fight in Korea. Ironically, the Jewish Frenchman, who is a recruit in the US Army, never really makes the journey. The tale is told by a second-hand narrator, an acquaintance of Frenchy, in 23 unpaginated sections that, according to the index are "interchangeable" and can be read in any order. The most striking feature about the text—as most of Federman's work—is less the contents than the typographical play that pervades the book.<sup>76</sup> Divided into unrelated shorter and longer sections, switching font style and size, interspersing the prose with concrete poetry and other textual experiments, the text is exemplary for its particular stage of postmodern literature, the type of self-involved textual experimentation that Federman calls surfiction. Yet the obvious autobiographical components of the text—from Frenchy's persecution in his native country to his tour in

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<sup>76</sup> For a critical reading of *Double or Nothing* and *Take It Or Leave It* that emphasizes the disruption and fragmentation on both the textual as well as the narrative level, see Joseph Schöpp, "Multiple 'Pretexts.'" While Schöpp acknowledges the relationship between these textual and narrative breakup and Federman's own life, he ultimately reads them as "allegoriz[ing] their own making" (41). For a poststructural reading of *Take It Or Leave It* which foregrounds the particular American aspects of the text, see David Dowling.

Korea—suggest that much more is at stake for Federman than textual experiments and poststructural theories. Surprisingly, it is in the most experimental forms that we find hints of the author's, as well as the protagonist's, traumatic past:



In both these examples, Federman uses nonverbal signifiers to symbolize his own personal loss, his family's death, as well as the horrors of the Holocaust in general. He does so, however, by assuming and incorporating his audience's knowledge of the events. Not only does he expect his readers to pick up on certain dates, places, and symbols, he even asks them to supplement or correct the information that is lacking: thus the fragmented "Ausch" is the truncated reminder of the place that both epitomizes the Holocaust and signifies the actual location of his family's murder. His historical inaccuracies like the false date of the roundup (which incidentally occurred July 16, 1942) or the allusion to lampshades out of skin (a perversity apparently not committed at Auschwitz) only contribute to the fact that the events he is attempting to describe are predicated on uncertainty and lack.<sup>77</sup> Federman has escaped the final suffering and death that his other family members share, so that any knowledge of the most extreme parts of

<sup>77</sup> The protagonist's obsession with human lampshades may be explained, however, by the fact that the production of lampshades and soap out of human bodies has become symbolic of the horrors of the Holocaust. In fact, the protagonist actually works in a lampshade factory upon his arrival in New York.

it must be mediated. At the same time, his own experiences are certainly traumatic enough to warrant defensive mechanisms that prevent him from confronting the past directly, leaving the indirect approach of concrete poetry as a less painful alternative. Yet another way in which he challenges his readers and deflects his own emotions is his seemingly placating gesture, “But that doesn’t mean I’m some sort of fanatic about all that crap about religion.” These self-effacing comments are all the more jarring when read against the Star of David whom they construct and considering the paragraph that follows outlines just how much the narrator actually has been affected by his Jewishness.

Whereas these two early novels invoke the Holocaust visually in concrete poetry or through the enigmatic X-X-X-X that has become Federman’s sign for his family’s extermination at Auschwitz, his later texts confront these events more directly. Thus, it is in his 1979 *The Voice in the Closet* that Federman faces his past completely in an extended fashion. In fact, the entire text can be seen as a way to confront and work through the past, albeit within a tightly controlled textual space. The 1979 *The Voice in the Closet* doubles the memory of his day and night in the closet hiding from the SS with the character’s imprisonment within the text. In fact, the text encloses both the boy and its adult counterpart, Federman,<sup>78</sup> in what is simultaneously a womb and a tomb, the death of Federman’s innocence and the birth of his survivor self as well as the birth of literary creativity at the cost of all other potential characters or story lines.

Even though *The Voice in the Closet* does not engage in typographical experiments except for a strictly enforced boxlike enclosure of the words on the pages,

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<sup>78</sup> Federman chooses a variety of names for his narrator/protagonist alter egos, from his own name, Federman to its inversion namredf to the odd moisnous that signifies the collective quality of the character. His given name is curiously fitting, of course, since it translates from German as “man of the pen,” a fact with which the author repeatedly toys.

this dense text is more experimental than the previous ones in linguistic terms.<sup>79</sup>

Between stream-of-consciousness and Beckett-like babble, the narrator's thoughts are a constantly disrupted flow whose syntax keeps on breaking. Here the Holocaust is ever-present, not only in the actual memory of the closet, but also in the sparse, oppressive form. Avoiding ludic typography, the text ascetically restricts itself to a certain number of lines per page and characters per line. Thus, these 20 pages with 18 lines of 68 characters each offer a tightly controlled space that brace the author in his literary and personal quest to both represent and possibly confront his trauma. Federman himself describes the experience of writing the book as an attempt "to invent for myself a space . . . which allow[s] confrontation with the subject without explicitly sentimentalizing the story" (qtd. in Caramello 235). Thus, by restricting his text spatially and stylistically, Federman is free to explore his past thematically. Moreover, as the text fictionally re-enacts the closet, it exposes language's constraints, its inability to fully comprehend experience.

At the same time, however, the text also acknowledges that any memory can only be understood once it is cast in language. After all, any writer can only use terms according to generally conferred meaning, a fact made very clear both by Federman's made-up words and the English and French versions of his text that comprise the book. Less a direct translation, Federman uses two languages with their own semantic fields and personal as well as general associations to approximate the meaning for which he is searching. Of course neither language is able to fully reach, translate, or embody the event that haunts Federman. It is the gap between words and traumatic memory then that

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<sup>79</sup> For discussions of *The Voice in the Closet*, see Marcel Cornis-Pop, Evamaria Erdpohl, and Anne-Kathrin Wielgosz.

the nonverbal aspects of Federman's work attempt to touch; as a result, rather than detracting from the truth and reality of the horrors of the Holocaust, it is the experimental and, at times, ludic quality of Federman's work that actually touches upon the unspeakable and unrepresentable so often invoked by traditional Holocaust scholars.

The linguistic playfulness therefore supports Federman's historical engagement rather than obstructs or dismisses it, as Richard Martin, for example, suggests. In his sustained study of Holocaust imagery in Federman's first three novels, he concludes that for Federman, "[t]he distance between past and present has become irrelevant; the story, the events of the past serves nearly as leitmotif. The narration is all that matters" and that "Federman has no ambition for his story to be understood as history" ("A Yellow Star" 19). What Martin fails to realize, however, is the postmodern lesson that Federman obsessively relates, namely that there is no clear distinction between the linguistic and the historical. As Federman uses each field to illuminate the other, he offers yet another way to confront historical events at the same time as he challenges language by showing up its limits.

#### Premembering the Future in Raymond Federman's *The Twofold Vibration*

After *The Voice in the Closet*, the references to Federman's closet experience become more explicit but also more indirect, i.e., more metafictional and plagiaristic. Somehow having freed himself from the need to use linguistic signs to signify his loss, Federman confronts his past more openly yet still not in any traditional sense. His experimentation has simply shifted from linguistic to epistemic experiments insofar as his postmodern characteristics shift from toying with his readers on the level of language to

engaging them on the level of meaning. In fact, Federman's 1982 *The Twofold Vibration*, returns once more to the moment of loss and survival, but doubles it with a futuristic twist. His fourth novel stands out in Federman's oeuvre not through its experimental quality but through its use of science fiction, a genre most unusual for Holocaust representation.<sup>80</sup> Though on first sight contradictory to the moral obligations of Holocaust literature, the alienated and estranged modes of science fiction with its fantastic elements actually allow the author to revisit the topic in new and different ways.<sup>81</sup> Therefore, even though science fiction with its escapist tendencies is based on a rejection of reality and thus seems ill-suited to narrate the horrors of the camps, it offers certain characteristics that make it enticing as a genre to address the Holocaust. Whereas "normal" Holocaust literature is constrained by the ethical demands of authenticity and respectability, Federman can escape these constraints through his use of science fiction. Though coming from a very different background—namely the experimental strategies of postmodernism or surfiction, as he calls it—Federman arrives at similar imaginative

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<sup>80</sup> Even though its appropriateness has been questioned recently and replaced by "speculative fiction" or simply "sf," I have maintained the term "science fiction" since Federman himself uses it at the beginning of *The Twofold Vibration*.

<sup>81</sup> There are a variety of novels that could qualify as Holocaust science fiction or fantasy. First of all, there are alternate histories like those in which Germany actually has won the war, such as Philip K. Dick's classic science fiction novel *The Man in the High Castle* or Robert Harris's *Fatherland*, which revolves around smuggling a long-hidden secret out of Germany, a secret which turns out to be the knowledge of the Nazi genocide. Then, there are time travel narratives like Jane Yolen's *The Devil's Arithmetic*, where a young Jewish-American girl gets transported back in time, is imprisoned in a concentration camp, and dies in the gas chambers or J. R. Dunn's *Days of Cain* in which time travelers confront the difficult ethical question of whether they should interfere with the Holocaust. Finally, there are Holocaust fairy tales, like Jane Yolen's *Briar Rose*, in which a survivor alters the popular fairy tale to convey the story of her survival otherwise suppressed from conscious memory, or Lisa Goldstein's *The Red Magician*, a magical realist account of one young girl's experiences during the Holocaust. For a critical discussion, see Gary Wolfe's special edition on Holocaust fiction in *The Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*.

engagement with the Holocaust that has much in common with contemporary science fiction.<sup>82</sup>

Turning towards science fiction for its ability to portray the unimaginable, Federman attempts to write and understand the past by imagining the future. Though Federman vehemently protests against his novel being categorized as science fiction, his text employs various elements of the genre to allegorize the Holocaust in a fictionally safe environment, thereby allowing his readers to confront, imagine, and contemplate issues of the Holocaust. As such, not only does his text offer an example of a powerful Holocaust novel that confronts this historical event and its aftermath both thematically and stylistically, *The Twofold Vibration* also provides an example of how science fiction sometimes remains the only venue to address topics and problems not representable or even imaginable within traditional literary genres.<sup>83</sup> After all, it is not until his use of science fiction motifs that he finally seems to lay his traumatic memory to rest—at least his need to revisit it in literary form.<sup>84</sup>

In *The Twofold Vibration*, Federman weaves a futuristic plot which mirrors the Holocaust, thus allowing the protagonist to experience his own, personal moment of survival again, though very differently. The novel recounts the story of an Old Man—never given a name—who is in the process of being deported into the space colonies on New Year's Eve 1999. As most of Federman's protagonists, the Old Man is an alter ego

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<sup>82</sup> For a discussion of the similarities between Federman and contemporary science fiction writers, see Brian McHale.

<sup>83</sup> Surprisingly enough, few critics address Federman's use of science fiction elements in his engagement with the Holocaust. Notable exceptions are Franz Link and Paula Bryant.

<sup>84</sup> Gerhard Effertz points out how Federman seems to free himself from his past after finishing *The Twofold Vibration*, thereby ending his obsessive preoccupation with rewriting his moment of survival.

of the author, as are the narrator and their two mutual friends, Moinous and Namredef (Federman backwards) who appear in several of his other novels. Thus, the author is dispersed into four separate parts which are not clearly distinct, however and, at times, tend to merge. Apparently, the earth is overpopulated and after deporting into space criminals and other undesirables—including, we learn, experimental writers—the government now has decided to deport older people to make room for the young. Against this scene of waiting to be deported, the narrator recounts the Old Man's life and, with it, crucial incidents in twentieth century history.

Federman, however, does not simply retell his story but doubles the event of the Holocaust with the Old Man's experience of being left on earth, i.e., while all the others are being deported, he alone remains in the spaceport and cries desperately "BUT WHAT ABOUT ME, WHAT ABOUT ME" (173). Just like the little boy who remains behind by himself when everyone is shipped to Auschwitz, the Old Man is not deported with the others; once again, he remains behind to survive. Yet, with Marx, we might say that while history repeats itself, it happens the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce, since the Old Man's desertion takes on an absurdist quality.

Of course, from the very beginning, Federman goes to great length to reject science fiction as a label for his text. He writes: "what do you mean science-fiction, not at all, it's not because one wanders in the future that / call it exploratory or better yet extemporaneous fiction, that's right, a question of more space, room to expand forward and backward, . . . room to turn imagination loose on the spot and shift perspectives unexpectedly, sounds interesting, damn right, but no futuristic crap" (1). Accordingly, Federman justifies the apparent unbelievability of his actions (i.e., space colonies within

little more than a decade of the writing of the book) through necessity. He needs a protagonist who has survived the Holocaust and experienced most of the cultural, intellectual, and political developments of the twentieth century. For such a character to still be alive to be deported, the author is forced to suspend the reader's disbelief. He thus comments that "the colonies . . . were set up around 1994 . . . no I don't think it too obvious, or too soon, there's nothing symbolic, nothing premature in that date, don't start making all sorts of literary connections, it's simply that I have to work within a logical time span from the present so that the Old Guy can be born in 1918" (10). Rejecting any claims of probability, Federman then attacks the reader: "what do you mean it's not plausible, historically and scientifically speaking not possible, on the contrary, what do you think this is a pseudorealist story that pretends to record facts, how narrow-minded and backwards you people are, how enslaved to your realism" (10). In so doing, however, he simply draws attention to one of the principal characteristics of science fiction in general. What, after all, is science fiction, if not the violent transgression of our ontological universe.

However, Raymond Federman uses the genre's potential *not* to construct an alternate world, but rather to envision a reality incomprehensible in and of itself. It may be useful to think of science fiction in the way Robert Scholes has defined it, namely as "offer[ing] a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know, yet return[ing] to confront that known world in some cognitive way" (qtd. in McHale 59). Repeating the move of imagining an ontological alternative in order to comprehend our own world, Federman moves into the science fiction genre in order to be able to write about the Holocaust. Yet in Federman's case—as in most of the better science fiction—

the world he imagines is, in part, really our world. The unimaginable, unrepresentable event around which his novel revolves, which its futuristic elements repeat as farce, is the world we, as readers, actually inhabit. Thus, Federman's need to move the Holocaust into a universe estranged through science fiction suggests that he employs the genre, because it is capable of addressing issues that traditional literary forms cannot contain. As "normal" literature becomes "exhausted," science fiction becomes an alternative and a powerful way to actually confront the history of the twentieth century. Only in the safe environment of science fiction can the incomprehensible event of the Holocaust be played out metaphorically. Only here can events be imagined that withstand the scrutiny of comparison.

Similar to the linguistic techniques of his earlier books that place the traumatic events of his past under erasure by raising them without actually addressing them properly, Federman's narrative technique in *The Twofold Vibration* deals with the Holocaust without minimizing or sentimentalizing it. Aware that he can never represent the actual trauma, Federman instead chooses to sidestep the issue, thus forcing the reader to focus on it through the very non-mimetic approximations. Whether as simple absence as in X\*X\*X\*X, as concrete poetry or linguistic experiments, or through the displacement of fantastic elements, Federman unsettles his readers and thus forces them to confront the topic anew.

#### Language and Representation in Federman's Work

As Federman slowly comes to term with the Holocaust in his books, there also is a shift detectable in Federman's willingness to discuss his past directly in prose essays and interviews. Here, he proves himself very conscious—sometimes more so than many

of his critics—of the dangers and problems of Holocaust representation. Federman is very aware of the difficulties that any writer has to face when trying to represent the Holocaust. Beyond the belief that all art may have lost its meaning and power after the Holocaust, there is an all-pervasive sense that literature has changed, has had to change as the very components of imagery, metaphors, and language itself have been altered and tainted. Thus, as a writer of the Holocaust, Raymond Federman is faced with the dilemma that it is both *impossible* and *necessary* to write the event that he has to find the words and images when both have been changed utterly.

Entering the longstanding debates on representation and representability within Holocaust Studies, Federman occupies a most unpopular position in his rejection of both the traumatic and the realist approaches. Following postmodern theories, Federman speculates that sometimes a fiction is able to translate a larger truth—even though it may fail to recount all the particular details; in fact, he goes even further when he argues that *only* fiction (or, what he calls, “lies”) can access the past in any comprehensible manner. Discussing the new experimental mode of writing of which he is one of the prime representatives, he describes how the self-reflexive novel “places into the open, in order to challenge it, the question of representation in fiction, especially now that the line between the real and the imaginary has been erased. When the historical discourse is falsified as language, referential coherence collapses and becomes irrelevant” (“Self-Reflexive” 25). Thus, Federman confuses and even erases the line between truth and lies, autobiography and fiction when he describes how “in much of contemporary fiction (even autobiographical fiction) imagination supercedes memory” (“Federman on Federman” 102). Neglecting the dangers of Holocaust denial, Federman includes his

personal Holocaust experience among the autobiographical issues re-imagined in such a postmodern venue. In fact, he argues that especially the trauma of the Holocaust requires the new and experimental approach that his fiction offers when he contends that “at the same time as the world becomes more unintelligible, artists, poets, novelists realize that the real world is perhaps somewhere else . . . it is a world no longer to be known, no longer to be expressed or represented, but to be imagined, to be invented anew” (“Fiction Today” 12-3). After all, if the Holocaust is so traumatic that it cannot be approached with traditional venues, only imaginative rewritings can do it justice. He thus argues, “But then isn’t it imagination (or lies—same thing) that fills the holes of absences?” (“Federman on Federman” 99).

Federman thus opposes the usual approach to Holocaust literature, represented by such writers as Elie Wiesel or George Steiner, who lay out a variety of rules and regulations to be followed by anyone attempting to fictionalize the Holocaust. In fact, he not only refuses the mandate of silence but instead advocates a non-realist, non-documentary, experimental style. For him, giving in to the desire for sacred silence as a reaction to the Holocaust would only undergird the ultimate goal of the so-called “Final Solution,” not the murder of the Jewish people but the obliteration of their existence altogether. Thus, whereas both Caramello and Link connect Federman’s aesthetics to Steiner’s in their joint refusal to speak of the Holocaust directly, to refuse any mimetic representation (Caramello 132; Link 126), Federman and Steiner are actually diametrically opposed, both in their reasoning and the solutions they find. Steiner clearly demarcates the moment when language has failed its mimetic function as the “failure of the word in the face of the inhuman” (51) when he argues, “Has our civilization, by virtue

of the inhumanity it has carried out and condoned . . . forfeited its claim to the indispensable luxury we call literature? Not for ever, not everywhere, but simply in this time and place” (53).<sup>85</sup> Unlike Steiner, Federman rejects the ability to represent *any* event as a characteristic intrinsic to language itself.

In fact, the Old Man, the protagonist of Federman’s novel *The Twofold Vibration* comments: “the central concern is not the extermination of the deportees . . . but the erasure of that extermination as a central event” (13). Accordingly, in an essay on “The Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jewish Writer,” Federman argues:

To say that it is impossible to say what cannot be said is indeed a dead end in today's literature. . . In other words, **it is no longer through the functions of memory that one will confront the issue, but with the powers of imagination.** It is no longer remembered events, however sad they may be, that will give us the solution (if a solution is needed), but the mystery of invented events, and the process that allows such inventions.

It is this concept that I want to bring to the fore here. Rather than attempting to remember the past in all its details—an endeavor destined to fail for both pragmatic and intrinsic reasons—Federman realizes that the only way to confront—again and again as his repeated return to the subject testifies—is through imaginative forms, through experimentation and the complete rejection of realism. He thus looks into the future and not the past; he imagines rather than recounts as he realizes the need for writers to discover different and novel ways to describe historical events if they are to continue to move us. One way Federman achieves a regeneration of language is through stylistic experiments, both on the conceptual as well as on the functional level.

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<sup>85</sup> It is thus somewhat unfair to accuse Steiner of demanding silence as the only appropriate response to the Holocaust. In another essay, he does, in fact, suggest that the German language—tainted as it is by Nazism—can only be rescued through writing: “When [a language] has become injected with falsehood, only the most drastic truth can cleanse it” (108).

Federman's unusual approach to the Holocaust, with its emphasis on linguistic elements, also foregrounds the issue of language and the Holocaust, a question often ignored in discussions about representations of the Holocaust. After all, postmodern theory continually reminds us that any representation, any narrative, any knowledge of the past is always already in language. Yet many Holocaust scholars avoid the implications of postmodern and poststructural theories, instead advancing the worn-out reproaches of promoting relativism and ahistoricity at best, normalization and negationism at worst. With very few oppositional voices, the critical tenor of Holocaust critics towards postmodernism, poststructuralism, and especially deconstruction is highly suspicious to outright hostile. As a result, few scholars of Holocaust writing address shifts in language after the Holocaust, even though especially within the context of a postmodern (i.e., post-Holocaust) philosophy, new emphasis should be put on linguistic issues. If language has been corrupted, as Steiner and many others claim, only a transformed and altered language can do justice to Auschwitz.<sup>86</sup> Alvin Rosenfeld, for example, argues how Nazi language "clos[ed] the space . . . between violent words and violent deeds" thus enacting a "destructive transubstantiation . . . which returned figurative language to its unholy origins" (135).<sup>87</sup> Holocaust literature that takes this mutation into account cannot simply employ rhetorical devices as the realist novel of the nineteenth century would have.

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<sup>86</sup> One of the earliest sustained studies of the altered state of the German language is Viktor Klemperer's *LTI*. In this study, Klemperer, a Jewish linguist whose now famous diaries *I Will Bear Witness* record life during the Third Reich, tries to analyze the various ways Nazism contaminated even the most basic language, thus forcing even the victims to participate in their own subjugation. Aspects such as the excessive use of abbreviations, certain types of euphemisms, and the organic quality of many metaphors thereby created a language that forced its users to write and think in specific ways.

<sup>87</sup> Using Karl Kraus's discussion of the German language under Nazi rule, Rosenfeld offers the example of "pouring salt into open wounds" as an instance in which a metaphor that had long lost its actual meaning collapsed with its real denotat in the concentrationary universe (134-5). After all, how can this expression continue to function as a metaphor, when the actions described actually have been enacted.

Rosenfeld moreover suggests that Holocaust literature resists symbolism or allegory by foreclosing anything but the most literal level when the metamorphosis of a Kafkaesque world turns into one where “living children are transformed into smoke” and consequently asks, “How, after all, can we accept a realism more extreme than any surrealism ever invented?” (24). It is here that we can see how Federman’s two seemingly diverse approaches of language games and fantastic tropes come together as the literalization of metaphors moves us into the vicinity of fantasy and science fiction.<sup>88</sup> Federman’s awareness of the altered state of language thus appears in all his works—albeit in different ways—and informs all his attempts of Holocaust representation.

#### Federman Qua Beckett

The understanding of how language has changed after the Holocaust that connects Federman’s linguistic experiments with his foray into science fiction, also explains his passionate interest in Samuel Beckett’s work. Federman’s literary career is strongly indebted to Samuel Beckett who not only is the topic of Federman’s 1963 dissertation, resulting in his 1965 work *Journey into Chaos*, but also of several books and frequent articles since. Federman’s engagement with Beckett far exceeds the purely academic,

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<sup>88</sup> There actually is a subgenre of fantastic Holocaust texts that employ the concept of the literalized metaphor to relate the horrors of the event. One example for such a metaphor become reality is the use of animals that literally stand in for humans as in André Schwarz-Bart’s protagonist in *The Last of the Just*, who, after rejecting his Jewish heritage, dehumanizes and turns into a dog—quite literally—or Art Spiegelman’s comic strip *Maus* in which Jews are represented as mice, Germans as cats, Poles as pigs, French as frogs, etc. Another example of literalizing metaphors is the use of the living dead—a metaphor consistently used among camp survivors—that takes on a literal meaning in both the more mainstream *The White Hotel* by D. M. Thomas and in Joseph Skibell’s *A Blessing on the Moon*. In the former, the main character’s death leads her to a strange afterlife, in the latter, the murdered protagonist wanders through a macabre landscape that is both real and imaginary.

however. Beyond frequent allusions and homage to Beckett throughout his work,<sup>89</sup> Federman also follows Beckett's stylistic and conceptual philosophy as he writes against the backdrop of the utter refusal of representational art, or even the attempt to construct coherent narratives. Federman thus takes off at a point where any semblance of mimesis is already dismissed and logic, order, and chronology are dispensed with, so that, as Klinkowitz explains, Federman "striv[es] beyond the final banalities Beckett has destroyed" (120). Accordingly, his texts, not unlike Beckett's, contain little plot, are linguistically and topically playful, and abound with typographical experimentation. More than the formalistic experiments, however, it is the underlying philosophical context, the post-modern, post-Holocaustal sentiment that connects the two writers.

Few literary writers have come to represent postmodernism and postmodernity more than Samuel Beckett, who often is considered the inaugurator of postmodernism.<sup>90</sup> In Beckett's texts we encounter the utter disenchantment with modern rationality as he ceaselessly performs the destruction of meaning on both the semantic and the linguistic level. Not only do his texts precede and anticipate many of the postmodern gestures of the sixties and beyond, he also approaches the deterioration of meaning and language with an unparalleled consistency. For these reasons, Beckett's work must be seen as emblematic if not exemplary of postmodernism.

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<sup>89</sup> Whereas *Amer Eldorado*, the French version of *Take It or Leave It* is dedicated to Beckett and "sam" appears in the second line of *The Voice in the Closet*, *The Twofold Vibration* abounds with Beckett allusions. Not only is the novel's title taken from Beckett's *The Lost Ones*, and Beckett a character in the text as a personal friend of the protagonist, the entire text repeatedly refers to and quotes Beckett. For a detailed list of Beckett references in *The Twofold Vibration*, see Gerhard Effertz, especially 110-132.

<sup>90</sup> See, for example, Brian Finney 842. Some critics have preferred to regard Beckett as a late modernist, either for simple chronological purposes or because his nihilist minimalism does not fit into their theoretical framework of postmodernism. For the latter, see Linda Hutcheon.

In fact, the “unnamable” that titles Beckett’s last part of the trilogy has become an important trope to describe postmodern and poststructural discourse as Richard Begam points out in his extensive study on the relationship between Beckett’s early novels and postmodernity (26-27). Outlining the parallels between Beckett’s questioning of stable linguistic or conceptual categories and the postmodern celebration of dissolving identities, its rejection of totality and telos, Begam argues that Beckett must be seen as “a crucial figure in the development of postmodernity” (14). This emphasis on the “unthinkable” and “unspeakable,” the failure of language to contain the world or even remain consistent as a signifying system, is, of course, a recurring motif within post-Holocaust discourse. Not surprisingly, then, Begam illustrates the concept of the “unrepresentable” via a quote from Lyotard’s *Heidegger and “the jews”* (26-27). Beyond the similarities of unrepresentability and unspeakability, however, there is a general predilection in Beckett’s work that strongly resonates with Holocaust testimonies, which seems reminiscent of Holocaust imagery.

Not surprisingly, then, we can find any number of images in Beckett that lend themselves to a connection and/or comparison with descriptions of the camps. This approach is open to two types of criticism, however. For one, Beckett consistently attempts to erase all traces of biographical or historical associations in his texts. In fact, studying his manuscripts reveals how a variety of his works begin with biographical references only to be revised into the nebulous, vacant universality of the published versions (Lamont 37). More problematic, however, is the danger of circularity, i.e., are we simply seeing the Holocaust in Beckett because we have been looking for it? After all, Beckett’s texts are characterized by their generalizability and abstractness so that

critics tend to read Beckett's work less literally than metaphorically and avoid explicitly connecting his imagery with real events.<sup>91</sup> Thus, they invite interpretations that draw less on the text at hand than on the theoretical framework of the critic. Nevertheless, a case for reading Beckett as a (if not *the*) post-Holocaust writer can and must be made.

Notwithstanding Beckett's desire to erase all specificity in his texts, some critics have argued against a decontextualized reading. Not only did he move to France in the forties and fought in the Resistance movement, Beckett also had personal knowledge of the Holocaust, as Rosette Lamont has shown. Lamont describes Beckett's reaction when she confronts him with her experience of visiting Auschwitz and the resemblance to his work: "nothing reminded me more vividly of some of the images he had created upon the stage than these glass cases full of artificial limbs, valises, eye glasses, and empty frames" (37). Neither agreeing nor refuting, Beckett shares his own loss of a close friend: "Beckett did not answer me directly, but he began to talk with deep sorrow about his close friend Alfred Péron who died as a result of having been sent to concentration camp" (37). Furthermore, he reveals his personal involvement when he describes the danger in which he and his future wife found themselves: "The moment we received [the telegram of warning], Suzanne . . . and I walked out of our apartment. We took nothing with us. For a day or two we were hidden by friends in Paris while papers were being forged for us. With these we made our way into the 'free zone'" (Beckett, qtd. in Lamont 37). Thus, while Beckett does not acknowledge any direct connection between his writings and the camps, neither does his response preclude such a reading.

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<sup>91</sup> For a discussion of the autobiographical in Beckett's later work, see Alfred Hornung, "Fantasies."

While I certainly do not want to argue that Beckett was consciously trying to describe the camps as his characters slouch through mud to meet their victimizers,<sup>92</sup> Beckett could not help but be part of a post-war culture traumatized by the images and stories of the Holocaust.<sup>93</sup> As such, “all these corpses” and “skeletons” (*Godot* 42) may bear no direct relation to the camps; many readers, however, cannot help but connect the general hopelessness and despair experienced by Beckett’s characters to the disillusionment felt by the post-war generation. While Beckett may not be directly reacting to the specific event of the Holocaust, he certainly *is* representing a zeitgeist that has been traumatized collectively by WWII. As such, he is employing imagery that often is associated with the Holocaust in our collective unconscious. In fact, it is the very anonymity of Beckett’s protagonists, their utter severance from any familial, social, or historical ties that most strongly resonates the camp inmates.<sup>94</sup>

This loss of personal relations usually coincides with a lack of mobility; in fact, many of Beckett’s protagonists are physically imprisoned—whether to an omnipotent anonymous force or simply to their own bodies. When we consider the movement through Beckett’s *Trilogy*, it becomes clear how the loss of personal connections and

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<sup>92</sup> Personally, I saw the mud-crawling protagonists of *How It Is* recalling a variety of Auschwitz survivor testimonies. One of the outstanding features that pervaded all accounts was the dirt, feces, and mud covering every inch of the camp. See for example Primo Levi’s or Charlotte Delbo’s description of Auschwitz.

<sup>93</sup> While we usually think of the twin symbols of the Holocaust and the atomic bomb as representative of the destruction of innocence and Western culture, it is important to remember that Beckett lived in France and thus was closer literally and figuratively to Auschwitz than to Hiroshima.

<sup>94</sup> With few exceptions, like the Red Cross showcase of Theresienstadt, concentration camps did not support family structures but instead consciously separated family members. Prisoners were housed arbitrarily, often with complete strangers from different countries and different social, political, and religious backgrounds. Auschwitz, for example, imprisoned inmates from all over Europe, German criminals, French resistance fighters and Polish Jews living side by side. This forceful separation from anything familiar proved a powerful tactic to break the prisoners as many survivors attest to their survival,

relationships is paralleled symbolically via the characters' mobility. Whereas Molloy begins fairly mobile—though with a stiff leg—on his bicycle, he quickly loses it and his ability to continue his quest. Towards the end—or, rather, at the outset of the novel—he is unable to leave his mother's room and has no memory of how he got there. Through Malone, who is even more confined as he cannot leave his bed, the *Trilogy* culminates with Mahood, who is confined to a jar and has lost all ability to move of his own accord. As these characters lose mobility and finish as immobile talking heads, they renounce and forget any previous existence they may have had or known.

In the later *How It Is*, the narrator recollects vague memories of a past before. He quickly ignores them, however, since they have no purpose or sense in the present of the text: “. . .question of my memory obviously that too all-important too most important this voice is truly changeable of which so little left of me bits and scraps barely audible. . .” (15). Similarly, the question as to how he arrived in this situation is quickly dispensed with since it can serve no purpose in his present state: “how I got here if it's me no question too weak no interest. . .” (21-22). The situation in *The Lost Ones* is even more extreme as the thinking entities barely communicate with one another, imprisoned by abstract forces that they neither see nor know.

What pervades all of Beckett's texts is an utter hopelessness and despair, a complete inability to think beyond the here and now, to remember the past or dream the future. This, of course, is a theme that runs through most accounts of the concentration camps. The oft-quoted “Hier ist kein warum” which Primo Levi reports as the standard answer of the SS-guards to any inquiry illustrates the complete void of sense, meaning, or

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in part through their having been lucky enough to obtain a support structure, whether it be political (Charlotte Delbo), professional (Primo Levi), or religious (Elie Wiesel).

purpose in the camps. Similarly, the experience of forgetting any life prior to the camps, of *having* to forget any other life in order to survive every single day, resonates throughout Beckett's fiction. Unlike Beckett's characters, the camp inmates know only too well who is responsible for their suffering; however, the sense of irreality and incredulity pervades many survivor testimonies. The sense of the life in the camps as outside of regular human experience, of a "Planet Auschwitz" is reported repeatedly, so that Beckett's texts—occurring outside of place and time as they do—approach the experience unlike most other fiction.

Another remarkable current in Beckett's fiction which links it to a post-Holocaust motif is its violence—usually arbitrary and purposeless. Beckett's characters are exposed to a hostile and alien world without help or allies and with no one to hold accountable. This violence may most explicitly be expressed in *How It Is*, where the protagonists divide themselves between victim and victimizer. What is striking—as in all of Beckett's work—is the complete lack of purpose and identity. Though the narrator knows his victim and tormentor, he is not certain of their actual names, Pim, Pem, or Pam; Bim, Bem, or Bom. Though he has a vague concept of what is expected of him, the text provides neither external nor internal reasons for the circuitous task of suffering and inflicting pain. Both the useless violence and the superfluous tasks are a constant motif in survivor accounts. Attempts to explain the sadistic and often murderous actions of guards and Kapos within a psychological framework (i.e., through psychopathology) usually fail, so that we are faced with no explanation for their torturous behavior.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> For an attempt to explain the psychology of the perpetrator, see Stanley Milgram. For an in-depth study of the motivations of Nazi doctors, see Robert Jay Lifton. See also Christopher Browning and Daniel Jonah Goldhagen on opposing interpretations of the same group of perpetrators.

Similarly, the tasks given to inmates are often futile, given for the explicit purpose of exhausting the starving men and women beyond their physical strength. In general, the entire concept of the concentration camp above and beyond the purpose of slave labor is completely incomprehensible as is the Nazi attempt to continue their operations even when it takes away resources from the war effort.<sup>96</sup> It is this absurdist situation with its utter refusal of logic and normal human behavior that connects both the nightmarish world of Beckett's fiction and the concentrationary universe. Insofar as Beckett's anonymous heroes suffer outside of any known place or time, fulfilling repetitive and useless tasks in a world devoid of common sense and logic, they can be read as a rendition of the Nazi victims.

Most important, however, in any attempt to connect Beckett's writing with the Holocaust is the very fabric of Beckett's fiction—his particular style of writing as he painfully attempts to voice the silences, to order the chaos, to write the indescribable. His texts abound with repetition so as to symbolize the weariness and tiredness of language itself. Language has ceased to be an instrument of communication, a point Beckett in particular manages to demonstrate in his plays. The characters in *Waiting For Godot* and *Endgame*, for example, rarely speak with one another as they do not have to impart any emotions or information. When they do speak, they do so in short clipped sentences, often not responding directly to their interlocutor but instead muttering to themselves. Thus, the dialog mimics on a linguistic level the hopeless, useless endeavors that comprise the protagonists' actions in the plays. Language reflects contents as both repeatedly drive home the apathy and despair pervading Beckett's worlds.

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<sup>96</sup> For a historian who convincingly makes this argument, see Gerhard Weinberg.

Thus, the connection between Beckett and a post-Holocaust philosophy must most of all be understood in his overall refusal to depict, express, and represent. His texts are the first instances of voicing the emptiness and silence, and, by many accounts, they remain unsurpassed in alacrity, insight, and precision. Not surprisingly then, Beckett has had enormous success—critically and popularly—among Germans, the instigators and executioners of the “Final Solution.”<sup>97</sup> As P.J. Murphy et. al. point out, “the impact of Beckett was and still is particularly strong in Germany, probably because of the combined catastrophes of the Nazi era and the Second World War, which made people especially susceptible to the black humor and ‘absurdist’ and pessimistic strain in Beckett’s vision” (3). As German post-war literature tries to confront its Nazi past, it tends to do so without facing the “Final Solution” itself. Obsessed with guilt as well as their own loss and suffering, Germans focus on the Third Reich and their own roles in Hitler’s Nazi Germany rather than the victims and their loss and suffering. The generality and abstractness of Beckett’s texts, then, allows Germans to confront both their own situation as well as the reality of their victims. Working on a non-realist and thereby not completely conscious level, Beckett’s works offers an indirect confrontation, thus enabling a chance to mourn without the danger of melancholia.

Unsurprisingly, Theodor W. Adorno comprises one of the German critics who repeatedly links Beckett’s writing to a post-Holocaust aesthetics. Throughout his work, which we already have defined as a direct response to the Holocaust, he continually

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<sup>97</sup> German Beckett criticism is both original and extensive, even in comparison with Beckett’s two languages, English and French. In fact, the first full book-length study of Beckett’s work was published in 1957 in German (P.J. Murphy et. al 97).

returns to Beckett whom he uses as a constant yardstick throughout his writings.<sup>98</sup> Not only figures Beckett's *Endgame* central in his discussion "After Auschwitz" of *Negative Dialectics*, he also addresses the Holocaust obliquely in his seminal essay on the play. Connecting the text to the destruction wrought by World War II, he argues, "After the Second War, everything is destroyed, even resurrected culture, without knowing it; humanity vegetates along, crawling, after events which even the survivors cannot really survive, on a pile of ruins which even renders futile self-reflection of one's own battered state" ("Trying" 54). Moreover, he relates the violence and destruction of the play with the Holocaust through the trope of the unspeakable: "The violence of the unspeakable is mimicked by the timidity to mention it. Beckett keeps it nebulous. One can only speak euphemistically about what is incommensurate with all experience, just as one speaks in Germany of the murder of the Jews" (55). In this appraisal of Beckett's refusal of realism in favor of a more abstract approach, Adorno establishes the *Bilderverbot* demanded by many Holocaust scholars since. What separates Adorno from such thinkers as Steiner or Lanzman, however, is his acknowledgment that literary responses are needed and that Beckett's unspeakable, nebulous scenarios are an apt representation of the post-Holocaustal universe since they have grown out directly of this world.

Adorno thus views Beckett's art as the only appropriate response to a post-Holocaust world insofar as it addresses its own impossibilities. Even though Adorno repudiates a historicized, politicized reading of Beckett, he nevertheless advocates a reading *in* history, conscious of political context. This celebration of structure over

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<sup>98</sup> Beckett figures prominently in much of Adorno's work. In *Aesthetic Theory*, for example, he is the most referenced literary artist, and the introduction notes that the text was initially to be dedicated to Beckett.

contents must be understood within the framework of Adorno's aesthetic theory in which, as Jameson has shown, "great art" distinguishes itself by transcending its social productions (185-88). Defining the central problem of art as the antinomy between reality and the truth inherent in its representations, Adorno regards Beckett's work as rising to the challenge:

The dignity of art today is not measured by asking whether it slips out of this antinomy by luck or cleverness, but whether art confronts and develops it. In that regard, *Endgame* is exemplary. It yields both to the impossibility of dealing with materials and of representations according to nineteenth-century practice, as well as to the insight that subjective modes of reaction, which mediate the laws of form rather than reflecting reality, are themselves no absolute first principle but rather a last principle, objectively positioned. ("Trying" 59)

In rejecting both the simplistic copout of realism which fails to understand the essence in its feeble attempts of mimicry as well as the more existential approaches of expressionism that try to maintain the category of the individual, Beckett performs a feat of negative dialectics. In its stead, he thematizes the problem itself, thus making him not only the foremost representative of a post-Holocaust but, with it, of a postmodern philosophy.

It is these same aspects of Beckett's work that are at the center of Federman's interpretations. Considering Federman's strong interest in Beckett and the latter's particular rendition of a post-Holocaust universe, it is easy to detect Beckett's influence on Federman and the similarities between their literary responses. In his discussion of Beckett, Federman describes Beckett's protagonists as "stand[ing] as witness for the failure of logic, reason, or whatever mental process man utilizes for the discovery and understanding of the external world" (*Journey* 47). Even though not verbalized, it is here that we can see Federman's understanding of Beckett's work as representing a

meaningful response to the very event that has irrevocably patterned Federman's own life.

Similarly, Federman emphasizes the purposelessness of Beckett's characters, the futility of their journeys:

Beckett's people begin and end their fictional journey at the same place, in the same condition, and without having learned, discovered, or acquired the least knowledge about themselves and the world in which they exist. Theirs is a journey without beginning or end, without purpose or meaning. Though these creatures succeed in creating an illusion of progress, both for themselves and for the reader, they merely occupy time and space—the time it takes for the book to be read, and the space it requires for the story to be told. Ultimately their actions, motions, and verbal contortions are negated by the act of having been performed or spoken. (*Journey* 80)

What is interesting here is Federman's emphasis on the negation of actions through the very acts themselves. Rejecting both the choice to speak meaningfully or to be silent, Beckett performs a moment of "negative dialectics" by speaking the silence yet not transmitting any meaning, or rather, the only meaning is the complete absence of meaning. Federman thus recognizes negation as the crucial aspect of Beckett's fiction, though he does not connect this to either Adorno's theoretical framework nor a post-Holocaust aesthetics. Beckett's influence on him, however, combined with his constant attempt to write his own past, leads to Federman's particular type of Holocaust literature, a literature as much indebted to Beckett's writing as to any more traditional Holocaust Studies or survivor testimonies.

Whereas many critics praise Federman for his experimental and daring texts for their own sake, they fail to address Federman's biographical investment altogether. Federman himself, however, repeatedly connects his theoretical and literary attempts to *not* represent the world with his personal experiences, in particular his moment of survival. Thus, while many postmodern critics regard Federman's interludes that make

reference to the Holocaust, his family's murder at the hands of the Nazis, and his own accidental survival in a closet as simply more of the raw personal material that Federman incorporates into his fiction, his obsessional return to this closet as well as his theoretical discussion of post-Holocaust art demand closer investigation. His choice of Beckett is far from accidental if we consider that Adorno recants his proclamation that "after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems" (*Negative Dialectics* 362) when considering Beckett's work. Moreover, while there are tendencies in Beckett (and Federman) to contemplate the universal absurdity of life and to see our inability to create mimetic and orderly literature as intrinsic to art itself, the sudden turn towards absurdist and postmodern experimental forms after WWII suggests that it may be a condition of the post-Holocaust universe. Nevertheless, unlike Beckett's absurd, often nameless and bodiless narrators, Federman's voice, emanating from both a fictional and historical closet, is grounded in Federman's historical and biographical reality. Whether remembering and reliving an actual occurrence or repeating a *Deckerinnerung*, a fictional yet truthful memory serving to cover the traumatic reality, Federman's traumatized voice recalls the little boy who is behind left all alone, who must confront the loss of his entire family and the threat on his life. This "double vibration" of historical reality—however distorted it may be—adds a level to Federman's fiction difficult to detect in Beckett. Accordingly, any critic reading the story on its own terms alone, must conclude a protagonist similar to Beckett's; only surrounded by Federman's actual biographical data can his texts be fully comprehended. Thus, it is obvious why he ceaselessly writes and rewrites his life, why he adds theoretical discussions to his literary texts.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE HOLOCAUST AS POSTMODERN TRAUMA IN D. M. THOMAS

The tension between fiction and reality, especially as it concerns postmodern texts is present in all the novels I have discussed so far. As we have seen, even an exemplary postmodernist like Federman ultimately has to resort to reality and the facts of his life when faced with doubts about his experiences. This question of authenticity is even more problematic when dealing with someone else's testimony, when using someone else's experiences as a basis for one's own fictional exploits. Mostly, such Holocaust novels that rewrite or reimagine an actual testimony are sanctioned by the respect with which they address the subject matter. James Young defines this type of novel as "documentary fiction" and describes it as follows: "Because these things really happened, [the author] would claim not to re-create them imaginatively, thereby keeping 'facts' separate from 'fiction' and absolving himself of responsibility for imagining—and thereby re-perpetrating somehow—the most violent scenes in his novel" (*Writing* 58). Moreover, Young points out how the author can exploit the documentary aspects "to draw ... authority from the documents he cites" (58), thus invoking a certain moral authority for the entire text based on the weight of historical reality.

Employing someone else's experiences within a postmodern text, however, is more problematic and the 1982 Plagiarism Controversy over D. M. Thomas's first commercial success, *The White Hotel* shows the repercussions of such an attempt. Trying to unravel the curious emotional responses to Thomas's use of an eyewitness

account as one of the bases for his novel, I argue that the debate, in fact, crystallizes several of the issues we have addressed throughout. Rather than criticizing the text for its blatant mixing of psychoanalysis, pornography, and the Holocaust, I want to look at the way its female protagonist becomes an exemplary postmodern subject who simultaneously occupies a position of singularity and universality. While the fallback on realist modes intimates an avoidance of discussing the Holocaust *itself* in postmodern terms, it is only in the juxtaposition of the Holocaust with the second major motif, Freudian psychoanalysis, that we can characterize Thomas's novel as postmodern. By combining psychoanalysis and the Holocaust, two opposing yet intimately connected fields, Thomas succeeds in troubling the simplistic accounts that the realist testimony offers. By thematically and stylistically connecting the heroine's personal trauma as it is revealed through the Freudian case studies with the collective and historical trauma of the Holocaust, the novel questions the truth value of both disciplines as well as any interpretive attempts that privilege one in favor of the other. In other words, it is Thomas's postmodern approach of connecting his protagonist's personal turmoil with global events, of relating her psychic anguish to the genocide of the European Jews that is the final postmodern success of the novel, thus creating intense discomfort in many of Thomas's readers.

As the novel intersperses its treatment of psychoanalysis and the Holocaust, it connects two fields that stand on the cusp between modernity and postmodernity, two fields that question and undermine the former as they are opening up a space for the latter. Whereas psychoanalysis does so in a purely personal realm by throwing into relief modernity's attempt to understand science and nature to the point of scientifically

charting and explaining the human psyche, the Holocaust must be seen as emblematic of the failure of modernity on a political, social, and historical level. By intricately interweaving these two thoroughly modern—yet ultimately proto-postmodern—discourses, Thomas invites the reader to partake in a debate that addresses the limits and limitations of modernity—both within the personal as well as the historical sphere. In so doing, Thomas succeeds in creating a postmodern Holocaust novel that challenges certain characteristics of the traditional Holocaust testimonies while adhering to many of its standards.

This becomes especially apparent when comparing *The White Hotel* to his later *Pictures at an Exhibition*, a text that contains all the dangers of the earlier novel without any of its redeeming features. In both *The White Hotel* and *Pictures at an Exhibition*, Thomas balances the particular and the universal by implementing his psychologically rich characters in extraordinary historical situations. Accordingly, his protagonists remember/anticipate in their dreams etc. the traumatic experiences of the Holocaust. *The White Hotel*'s protagonist Lisa is a complex character who is ultimately confronted by a disaster that she has traumatically anticipated. In *Pictures at an Exhibition* the Holocaust takes on the characteristic of a universal traumatic childhood event for all the characters—and ironically it does so more for the perpetrators than the victims. Whereas in *The White Hotel* the text suggests that everyone can become a victim, *Pictures at an Exhibition* argues how everyone has been a victim. By switching the temporal direction, he changes an ethical argument into an obscene unethical one. As a result, these two novels show us both the risks as well as the opportunities of the postmodern Holocaust text.

### The Plagiarism Debate

After initial positive reviews and high sales in the United States, D. A. Kendrick's "Letter to the Editor" in the March 26, 1982 edition of the *Times Literary Supplement* accused the author of plagiarism. Kendrick argued that the fifth chapter of Thomas's novel was "in fact a superficially reworked version of the historical accounts in [Anatoli Kuznetsov's] *Babi Yar*." Kuznetsov's 1970 documentary novel, a fictionalized account of the 1941 destruction of the Kiev ghetto and the murder of approximately 34,000 Jews at the ravine of Babi Yar, recounts in particular the experiences of Dina Pronicheva, one of only two known survivors. Kendrick's letter, in which he labels *The White Hotel* a "literary deception," spawned a controversy carried out within the pages of *TLS* over right of authorship, breach of copyrights, and the limit of artistic creativity in postmodern literature.<sup>99</sup> Looking back at the debate, however, the accusations and the vehemence of the argument seem exaggerated and overwrought. Compared to the ludic pla(y)giarism of other postmodern writers, Thomas's use of actual persona and his fictionalization of history is moderate and certainly should not be perceived as offensive.<sup>100</sup> Not only does he acknowledge his indebtedness to Kuznetsov in the copyright section, he also treats the "stolen" material with the utmost respect for authenticity—to the point of quoting the

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<sup>99</sup> For an overview of the plagiarism controversy, see Lynn Felder; for the particular contributions, see letters by James Fenton, David Frost, Jeffrey Grigson, Sylvia Kantaris, D. A. Kendrick, Emma Tennant, and D. M. Thomas in *Times Literary Supplement*. Though Thomas's case is mentioned only in passim in *TLS*'s April 9, 1982 roundtable "Plagiarism—A Symposium" featuring Harold Bloom and Ian McEwan among others, the connection to the Thomas debate, which was taking place concurrently, is apparent.

<sup>100</sup> Other controversies involving postmodern literary use of actual historical figures and events include Robert Coover's insulting portrayal of Richard Nixon in *The Public Burning* or Salman Rushdie's fictional use of the Ghandis in *Midnight's Children*. Yet all these debates only prefigured the more serious and consequential scandal over Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, a text whose reception enacted the postmodern claims to destroy the boundaries between fiction and reality. For a discussion of this utterly postmodern spectacle of the *fatwa*, see Lisa Appignanesi and Sara Maitland's *The Rushdie Affair*.

original verbatim. Nevertheless, many readers were greatly upset, and even his defenders acknowledged the danger of his approach.

Although the debate has long abated, the issues have not. Articles discussing *The White Hotel* show how most critics are still puzzled by the dispute and often feel the need to take a stand with or against Thomas on the issue of plagiarism. What is most peculiar about these discussions is the emotional intensity with which they are carried out as well as the fact that the reality of Thomas's literary and intellectual debt stands in no relation to the oftentimes hostile reactions it has received.<sup>101</sup> For example, Lady Fall Brown, one of Thomas's most steadfast accusers, claims: "Had D. M. Thomas never read *Babi Yar*, he could have never written *The White Hotel*" (78), thus not only faulting Thomas for moral deficiency but also for artistic failure. Accordingly, she traces a variety of concepts in Thomas's text back to Kuznetsov's novel, including several that are completely unrelated to *Babi Yar*. Similarly, Martin Amis regards the *Babi Yar* chapter not only as ethically but also as aesthetically superior when he describes it as "the best bit—and Thomas didn't write it" (124). Yet when looking at the principal contributions to the debate, it becomes apparent that the purely formal complaints are ultimately subsumed by the critics' moral outrage. The criticism of Thomas's use of Holocaust material moves into an ethical register as readers argue that "no writer has the moral right to take the experience of a real human being and attach it ... to a made-up character" (Tennant) or conclude that "the 'borrowings' are symptomatic of a wider irresponsibility" (Frost), and wonder whether "the author of a fiction [should] choose as his proper subject

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<sup>101</sup> For diverse readings of the authenticity, authority, and impact of the *Babi Yar* chapter, see David Cowart, Richard Cross, John Foster, Linda Hutcheon, *Poetics*, Robert Lougy, John MacInnes, Robert Newman, Rowland Wymer and James Young, *Writing*.

events which are not only outside his own experience but also, evidently, beyond his own resources of imaginative re-creation?" (Kendrick).

The ethical imperative evoked again and again in the critical responses suggests that it is, in fact, the notion that Thomas plagiarizes a Holocaust survivor, rather than one of Freud's neurotic, bourgeois patients, which is most reprehensible. Considered to be beyond representability, the Holocaust occupies a consecrated state of sublimity; as a result, any writing on the Holocaust is subjected to intense scrutiny, especially when written by non-survivors or when venturing outside of purely factual accounts. Consequently, the accusations against Thomas revolve around Kuznetsov's novel only, a text that is, in fact, acknowledged and thanked in the copyright section, whereas Thomas's free use of Freudian concepts and styles and his substantial debt to the case studies is barely mentioned, even though it constitutes a similar type of intellectual appropriation. Ironically, the criticism offered is one that could, in fact, be leveled against any number of postmodern writers as well as against authors of documentary fiction—like Kuznetsov and other writers of Holocaust novels. In fact, as several defenders of Thomas's novel have pointed out, Kuznetsov's text itself is already mediated, since he transcribes Dina's eyewitness account. As a result, critics' discomfort with *The White Hotel* is not simply explained on the essentialist grounds that the author is a male, Gentile non-survivor or that his novel fictionalizes the Holocaust. While such criticism could arise from more purist quarters of Holocaust Studies, Thomas's book has actually received surprisingly little attention from Holocaust scholars.<sup>102</sup> Instead, most scholarly criticism firmly situates

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<sup>102</sup> Exceptions to this are Young's in-depth discussion (*Writing*), Zsuzsanna Ozsvath and Martha Satz's brief analysis, Alvin Rosenfeld's critical review ("Perspectives"), and Lawrence Langer, *Admitting* in passim.

Thomas as a postmodern historiographer and, as such, the narrator's varying subject positions and the playful and plagiarist attitude towards historical facts are most often thought to be simply part of its postmodern characteristics. After all, only within the discourse of the postmodern can we understand that Thomas's use of Dina Pronicheva's testimony cannot be charged with the ethical reproach of plagiarism but instead must be understood as a vital aspect of postmodern historiographic metafiction.

The postmodern theoretical framework of most critical responses to *The White Hotel* makes the ultimately negative ethical response all the more puzzling. In order to understand the generally felt uneasiness when confronting the novel, we have to look not only at Thomas's depiction of the Holocaust but also at the other central topic of the novel, psychoanalysis. Not only is Thomas facing the dual demands placed upon any writer of Holocaust fiction in terms of authenticity to the Holocaust and creative originality, he is also connecting the two disciplinary approaches of psychoanalysis and history that often appear to be contradictory and incompatible. In so doing, Thomas's novel bridges the old antagonism between historical and psychoanalytic criticism by invoking both disciplines and therefore demanding both disciplinary approaches.<sup>103</sup> Consequently, Thomas's novel must be categorized as postmodern not so much for his mixing of styles, voices, and genres as for its understanding of the relationship between the two seemingly contradictory discourses of history and psychoanalysis. It is the violent juxtaposition of these two topics that makes this text so unsettling and causes the

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<sup>103</sup> New Historicism relegates Freud to an intellectual past and regards his theories as obsolete; see, for example, Michel Foucault in his discussion of psychoanalysis in *The Order of Things*, especially 373-89. Psychoanalytic critics dismiss historical approaches as too simplistic because they overlook the ultimate power and influence of the unconscious; see, for example, Joan Copjec's *Read My Desire*, tellingly subtitled *Lacan against the Historicists*, in which she presents a historically sensitive account of psychoanalytic criticism, thereby refuting the common complaint of psychoanalysis as ahistorical.

readers' often quite mixed reactions. Only at the intersection of the emotionally charged discourse of psychoanalysis, the historical reality of the Holocaust and the ludic structural devices of postmodern fiction can we fully explicate the debates surrounding Thomas's *The White Hotel*.

By thematically and stylistically connecting the heroine's personal trauma as it is revealed through the Freudian case studies with the collective and historical trauma of the Holocaust, the novel questions the truth-value of both disciplines as well as any interpretive attempts that privilege one in favor of the other. Lisa becomes an exemplary subject; both within the psychic and the historic realm, her function is to stand in for others. In the Freudian case study, Lisa serves as a model hysteric for psychoanalytic theory; in the Babi Yar chapter, she turns into a representative Holocaust victim. Through her dual exemplary role, Lisa points towards the difficulty of separating the psychoanalytic and historical as well as the particular and universal. In other words, Thomas connects his protagonist's personal turmoil with global events as he relates her psychic anguish to the genocide of the European Jews. It is this juxtaposition of the psychoanalytical and the historical, that must be held responsible for the intense discomfort in many of Thomas's readers which manifests itself in their obsessive focus on the supposed plagiarism of Dina Pronicheva's testimony.

To fully understand the readers' discomfort with Thomas's novel, however, we have to move beyond the initial ethical offense of appropriating a Holocaust survivor or even the juxtaposition of the personal and the historical. By using a Dina Pronicheva's account, Thomas has entered the field of Holocaust Studies, a discourse upon which he implicitly comments when he presents history and psychoanalysis as different disciplinary

modes of trying to understand and theorize the experience of the Holocaust. As Thomas presents side by side these two very different approaches to the Holocaust, he implicitly comments on the conventions of survivor testimonies, one of the most prolific fields in the literature of the Holocaust. He does not contradict the conventions as much as foreground the dichotomy present in many—if not most—of these eyewitness accounts: only when we read *The White Hotel* against the background of other Holocaust testimonies can we see how Thomas exposes a certain repressed tension in the relationship between particular and universal experiences that most eyewitness testimonies try to ignore. Exposing this underlying tension of the survivor to report one's own experiences truthfully while at the same time representing the victims as a whole in order to speak for those who cannot, Thomas reveals an ambiguity between the particular and the universal often repressed in Holocaust Studies. Consequently, the emotional reactions to the meeting of psychoanalysis and history, of personal and collective trauma in *The White Hotel* indicates the currency of these issues within this quickly developing discipline.<sup>104</sup> As such, reactions to *The White Hotel* must be seen *not* as a result of its plagiaristic use of previous material nor for its attempt to discuss the Holocaust in postmodern terms, but for short-circuiting—and thus laying bare—the complex relationship between the different discourses of history and psychoanalysis that attempt to understand and explain the supposedly incomprehensible and unrepresentable event of the Holocaust.

At first sight, it appears that we must understand most objections to Thomas's novel within the context of its postmodern historiographic structure and the utterly ambiguous ending. While the concerns most readers voice are more complicated and

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<sup>104</sup> The fact that *The White Hotel* is still largely ignored within Holocaust Studies only supports my point insofar as it disrupts the clearly laid out boundaries that circumscribe and define the field.

complex, it is useful to discuss the objections named most frequently, namely Thomas's appropriation of a Holocaust survivor to create his literary heroine. After all, what frustrates many readers about Thomas's fictional depiction of the events at Babi Yar is the novel's postmodern approach to the Holocaust, the event whose brutal reality threatens to overwhelm and erase any attempt of fictionalization. As fiction meets fact, both are questioned and destabilized, but this ludic decentering is much more threatening to the historical account and the social and political beliefs it sustains. When fictionalizing witnesses of the Holocaust, however, we face the problem of immediacy of personal experiences, a central issue in postmodern theory but particularly relevant for Holocaust Studies. After all, as we move further away from the actual historical events, any attempt to access the truths of the past is mediated by knowledge and understanding already cast in language. It is this awareness of postmodern theory that any experience can only be fully accessed in language that must be brought to bear on Thomas's novel. In this case, the actual events at Babi Yar are recounted several steps removed as the novel emphasizes the literary process of our imagination and our need for literary models to comprehend the world. Even though Thomas's detractors criticize him for not treating the Holocaust reverently enough, his very use of Pronicheva's story suggests that the exact opposite is true. In fact, *The White Hotel* follows the self-imposed *Bilderverbot* so often found in Holocaust narratives that eschew representations of the Holocaust unless they rely on the authenticity of the eyewitness. Considering his strange reliance on the actual eyewitness account of Dina Pronicheva, the criticism of Thomas's use of a survivor account is startling. He even admits in one of his letters that "the only appropriate voice becomes . . . the voice of one who was there" (Apr 2, 1982). Thus, it

is equally plausible to regard Thomas's use of eyewitness accounts as the most reverential way to approach the Holocaust.

While his resorting to an actual survivor lends the novel a certain authority, it also purports a more naïve understanding of reality and fiction not found in the rest of the text. Whereas Thomas was willing and able to imagine a fictionally altered Freud, reality has become too strong in the case of his presentation of Babi Yar; he thus explains his failure to imagine Dina's words like he had imaged Freud's because "imagination . . . is exhausted in the effort to take in the unimaginable which happened" (Apr 2, 1982). Accordingly, Thomas subscribes to a model of authenticity in which not only the testimony of the Holocaust survivor herself is given a certain undeniable truth status but any account that can be traced back to her is granted a similar privilege. The direct genealogy from Thomas through Kuznetsov to Dina Pronicheva moves "The Sleeping Carriage" within the realm of the horrific sublime of Babi Yar which—though inadequately mediated through words—seems to allow us a glimpse of the reality of the Holocaust. Consequently, the postmodern fictional treatment of the Holocaust in *The White Hotel* is ultimately neither completely postmodern nor completely fictional as Thomas obeys the imperative of silence in which the Holocaust is surrounded by what Claude Lanzman calls, "a circle of fire." While Thomas's decision to use Pronicheva's account testifies more to an ethics of authenticity than to a postmodern pla(y)giarism, the particular manner in which Thomas presents Dina's experiences raises various problems for traditional Holocaust narratives.

Representing the Real in D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*

D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel* confronts the reader with an unconventional setup and structure but thematically splits into three parts: the initial sections focus on Lisa's psyche and the Freudian case study (complete with the patient's original texts and her corrective letters); followed by a briefer, historical account of Lisa's subsequent life through the turmoil of Stalinist Russia up to her brutal murder by the German soldiers; finally, a postmodern dream sequence that moves Lisa beyond death to an imaginary—though not idyllic—camp of healing and recuperation. Whereas the first part already problematizes the question of universal representation and representability, the second part shifts the mode of representation, completely undermining any attempt at universality, only to be overthrown yet again with the final section. Lisa thereby gains a depth of character that any single mode of explanation could not have provided. As the character evades any simplistic unified mode of interpretation—be it psychoanalytic or historical—so does the novel as a whole. In particular with the final chapter, any privileging of the psychoanalytic or historical as the “final word” must be thrown into doubt as the dream-like sequences simultaneously affirm and question both.

The novel commences with an epistolary prologue containing a variety of letters, most of them from or to Sigmund Freud. Beyond the—historically accurate—visit to the United States, the letters discuss a specific case and its patient's writings. These obviously fictional letters describing actual historical characters and circumstances set the stage not only for the central role of psychoanalysis and its emphasis of eros and thanatos, but they also introduce the constant merging of historical and fictional text. Moreover, they appear to create a fictional frame to verify the accuracy of the initial three

chapters containing the patient's erotic poem and prose narrative as well as Freud's case study, "Frau Anna G." Yet this apparent narrative frame breaks when the fourth and fifth chapters reveal the patient's actual name as Lisa Erdman, supplement and clarify much of Freud's assumptions, and expose a variety of errors in his interpretations. It is here in the next to last chapter that the second motif finally emerges with Lisa's brutal murder at Babi Yar, one of the Nazis' infamous sites of Jewish mass execution. The sudden advent of the Holocaust in *The White Hotel* catches the unsuspecting reader by surprise—some even feel "angered" and "tricked" for being "thrust in the most horrifying way into the midst of Babi Yar" (George 57). In effect, this brief fifth chapter, which depicts Lisa's death, overshadows the entire book and any interpretation of it.

Even critics who do not accuse the novel of plagiarism often privilege the relatively brief passage of Lisa's killing at Babi Yar as they use it to undermine and correct the psychoanalytic sections, thus implicitly privileging the outer, historical struggles over the inner ones. Any reading that relies exclusively on this realist chapter and retroactively reinterprets the earlier psychoanalytic ones through a historical lens, however, has to ignore not only the multitude of vantage points offered throughout the novel but, more specifically, the final chapter. This last chapter offers yet another point of view as it undermines both the psychoanalytic and the historical approach through its fantastic mode. As Ellen Siegelman summarizes, possible interpretations of the epilogue include "yet another prophetic fantasy of Lisa," "Lisa's experience of dying," or "a believer's account of an afterlife" (75). Merging the truths of reality and the fantastic, of a life and dream world, the novel concludes on an utterly ambiguous note that questions

all that has come before and, most certainly, refuses any unified and coherent interpretation.<sup>105</sup>

While both psychoanalysis and the Holocaust are clearly important themes in *The White Hotel*, critics disagree on their respective relevance in regards to the overall interpretation of the text. Psychoanalysis obviously occupies the larger portion of the text; in fact, it is the central motif throughout the first four sections. Though retroactively we can see its anticipation in Lisa's symptoms and dreams, it is not until chapter five that the Holocaust consciously enters the text. Yet at that point it completely overshadows the story and any of its previous themes. As a result of this dual split, many readers have chosen to take sides, selecting one of the two frameworks as sufficient and subsuming the other theme within it. While a more historical reading such as Robertson's claims that the Babi Yar chapter "portrays a reality which drives out the [psychoanalytic] theory" (460), a psychoanalytic critic like Cowart argues that "psychoanalysis is an ideal structural device for a fiction concerning appearance and reality" (216). Providing a reading in which the horrors of reality demonstrate the limitations and, ultimately, the uselessness of Freudian analysis or in which psychoanalysis ultimately is a theory that can account for all of the historical occurrences, these interpretations tend to pit the two parts against one another. However, not only does such a reading run contrary to the postmodern impetus of the novel, it belies the text's very form and contents. Therefore,

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<sup>105</sup> Readings of the final chapter vary but even positive readings of the novel tend to criticize Thomas's shift into fantasy. Many readers criticize the retroactive relativization of the historical chapter, such as Mary Robertson, who asks, "in view of the final chapter we must now ask whether Thomas means us to have read the realistic chapter as 'just one more possible discourse,' no more compelling than the others" (463). Similarly, Lars Sauerberg criticizes the "very nature of the shift" from "the mass grave at Babi Yar to the 'promised land'" (8), a criticism elaborated by Laura Tanner who reproaches, "Having uncovered the violence lurking beneath Freud's forms, Thomas, in this final section, retreats from the horror that he has unveiled" (148).

the central question when trying to read *The White Hotel* from a psychoanalytic and historical perspective is how to stay faithful to the theoretical framework of psychoanalysis and the historical realities of the Holocaust without privileging either one, thus maintaining a balance similar to the one the text itself performs. It is only when we consider the various incommensurable interpretations simultaneously that we can reach the meaning of the novel, a truth more complex than any singular vision could offer. While we must take into account the limitations and failures of the Freudian approach, the text does not support a reading in which the historical section supplants or eradicates the psychoanalytical insights; rather, the two parts must be seen as interdependent and supplementary so that we can understand the text fully only when bringing into dialogue the two seemingly disparate story lines.

Strangely enough, both the psychoanalytic and the historical readings agree insofar as they use the realities of the Holocaust to question, undermine, and supplement the theories of the psyche.<sup>106</sup> Yet, whereas one approach regards the Holocaust as psychoanalysis' death knell, the other views these historical events as simply another challenge that psychoanalysis has taken on to become a more comprehensive and better theory. Historically, psychoanalysis has often been accused of not offering a comprehensive framework to fully understand and theorize the Holocaust's effects on the survivors, since the universal trauma of the victim's experience in the, as David Rousset has called it, "concentrationary universe" is seen to outweigh any previous particular

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<sup>106</sup> The two most famous attempts to understand the Holocaust within a psychological framework have long since been discredited. Both Bruno Bettelheim, a prisoner at Dachau, and Viktor Frankl, a survivor of Auschwitz, failed to successfully explain the psychology of the camp inmate. Moreover, their judgmental approaches that tried to link survival to certain behaviors and mental stability offended large parts of the Holocaust community. For a very critical discussion of both writers, see Langer, *Versions of Survival* 1-65. See also, Young, "Versions of the Holocaust." *Modern Judaism* 3.3 (October 1983): 339-46.

experiences.<sup>107</sup> In an attempt to explain the overwhelming force of the Nazi machinery and the utter arbitrariness of survival, many accounts and interpretations of the concentration camps thus fail to emphasize the relative importance of previous experiences, of personal qualities that might have helped their survival as it allowed them to confront their traumatic environment.<sup>108</sup>

In other words, the survivor's trauma is always seen as a political event and not based on familial circumstances. Of course, such a reading is justified to a certain extent, since the Holocaust has often been regarded as the greatest of equalizers: the utter arbitrariness and gratuity of its violence disavows the advantages of personal achievements and moral strengths while its all-encompassing murderous intent equalized all its victims, regardless of any particularizing or individuating attributes. Nevertheless, it trivializes the category of the individual as it subsumes any and all personal idiosyncrasies to the universal trauma of the Holocaust and assumes that the Holocaust reduced everyone to the same state in the same way. Not only does the Holocaust negate the individualizing characteristics of the victims as they are thrown into its nightmarish

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<sup>107</sup> Even though most survivor accounts describe their lives before the Holocaust, it only serves to contrast the realities of the concentrationary universe. An almost constant feature throughout most Holocaust testimonies is the victims' inability to comprehend the outside world as real, and many describe how their memories ultimately cannot provide a mental and emotional escape from the camps. A scene repeated in many accounts is the first day in the camps with its immediate need to "forget" the family members and friends who were murdered; only a complete foreclosure of emotions seems to assure the mental capacity to confront the camps, thus offering a chance of survival. Elie Wiesel, for example, describes his state of mind upon arriving at Auschwitz: "Those absent no longer touched the surface of our memories. We still spoke of them . . . but we had little concern for their fate" (45).

<sup>108</sup> Among the survivor testimonies there is disagreement over whether there were any abilities or personality traits that could foster or even guarantee survival. Certainly, the absolute arbitrariness of the decision over life and death ensured that neither a certain knowledge, craft or profession nor faith, political solidarity or strength of character was sufficient. In fact, most survivors emphasize the loss of individuality and identity as well as the fact that their survival was based more on chance and odd luck than anything else. For opposing readings of the prisoners' states of mind in the camps, see Terrence Des Pres's *The Survivor* and Lawrence Langer's *Holocaust Testimonies*. See also, Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limit*; Todorov *Facing The Extreme*; and Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*.

world, the type and extent of their suffering retroactively seems to erase all that they were before while it equalizes their experiences to the one central trauma of the Holocaust. While it may be true that the victims lost their individuality in the camps and at the moment of death at the hands of the Nazi machinery, it is certainly more problematic to look at survivors as if the trauma of the camps had erased any individual experiences before or after.<sup>109</sup>

It is this tendency to erase the identity of the individuals in favor of a universalizing victim-status that we find challenged in *The White Hotel*. By simultaneously approaching the Holocaust from a historical and a psychoanalytic perspective, Thomas not only forces a confrontation between those two approaches, but also shows how they necessarily must be part of one another. After all, history is shaped and carried out by individuals with particular likes, dislikes, and idiosyncrasies. Accordingly, no individual can be regarded as separate from the historical circumstances that have shaped his or her attitude, fear, and desires; neither can we regard historical events as divorced from individuals or see these individuals as nothing but a set of historically contingent circumstances. In order to make his case clearly, Thomas chooses extremes for both sides: Lisa's analysis is with none other than Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, while her eventual demise is part of one of the largest and most haunting historical events of this century.

Thus, when Thomas creates a heroine who is both a patient of Freud *and* a victim of the Holocaust, he pits exemplary events of both psychoanalysis and history against one

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<sup>109</sup> In her highly self-conscious and self-reflexive autobiography *weiter leben*, Ruth Klüger, for example, criticizes this attitude that regards Auschwitz as a sort of birth place for all who survived it: "Und doch wird dieser Ort jedem, der ihn überlebt hat, als eine Art Ursprungsort angerechnet. . . . Aber so

another, each of which appear to deny the other's importance and impact. What *The White Hotel* succeeds in doing, then, is to complicate these clear boundaries, thereby showing the reader that both the more ahistorical reading of Freudian psychoanalysis as well as the anti-psychological, anti-individualistic approach to the Holocaust are problematic if not simply wrong. Lisa simultaneously comes to represent the model Freudian patient in her case study while the information the following chapters reveal about her actual life move her outside of the psychoanalytic framework. Similarly, she becomes both the representative Holocaust victim—standing in for the tens of thousands that died at Babi Yar—while she already cannot be typical any more to the reader since we have already heard her story, been asked to identify with her. This constant move between the particular and the universal becomes the theme throughout Thomas's novel and corresponds to Thomas's merging of history and psychoanalysis. After all, one of the central differences of their fundamentally distinct philosophical backgrounds is the dissimilar emphasis they place on the universal and particular. While psychoanalysis focuses on the individual psyche, history is characterized by its attempt to describe and understand the actions of large groups, factions, and nations. As psychoanalytic analysis foregrounds the particulars that make each patient different, it must look at each patient's symptoms and solution on its own terms. Historical analysis, on the other hand, is less concerned with the motivations—or even actions—of individuals as it addresses larger schemes of social changes, political upheavals, and wars.

Throughout the novel, Thomas connects the two story lines in several ways. Not only do both parts chronicle the life of protagonist Lisa Erdman and early twentieth

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einfach ist das nicht, denn was immer ihr denken mögt, ich komm nicht von Auschwitz her, ich stamm aus Wien" (139).

century history, any number of motifs, themes, and symbols appear throughout the case study only to recur in the historical sections. First of all, there is the apparent connection of Freud's Jewishness, and while the novel does not address Freud's life during the Holocaust, the psychoanalyst's flight from the Nazis and the loss of his four sisters in the camps looms in the background of the text. A subtler but more important connection lies in Lisa's symptoms which, in fact, are intimately related to a history that has yet to come. Freud misreads these symptoms as hysterical, but the reader ultimately learns that they are prophetic: Lisa experiences pains in the very same places that will later be injured prior to her death, her pelvis that is cracked by the boot of one of the SS men and the internal injuries she suffers when one of the soldiers rapes her with his bayonet. Moreover, one of the images she repeatedly imagines in her dreams and that open the "The Gastein Journal" is her flight through the woods. Not until after Lisa's death can we understand that she not only foresees her own murder but also the experiences of the only two survivors of Babi Yar. Thus, the reader learns that Dina's survival had been anticipated by Lisa, "for she had clairvoyant gifts" (250). In fact, we learn little about Dina's actual escape in the Babi Yar chapter, but we have already experienced her flight from the ravine in detail through Lisa's imagination.

On a structural level the historical and psychoanalytic aspects are connected in the figure of Lisa and the model role she plays in both story lines, as an exemplary patient of Freud's case study and as a representative victim at Babi Yar. Melding the surrealist portrayal of the protagonist's dreams and fantasies with the realist discussion of political, historical, and social issues of the twentieth century, *The White Hotel* links the personal psychic scars of its protagonist to the general traumatic impact of the Holocaust. In

casting Lisa in both roles, Thomas foregrounds the connections between the protagonist's personal trauma to be revealed and reconstructed by Freud and the collective trauma of mass murder as experienced by the victims at Babi Yar. It is this exploration of the relationship between personal and collective trauma that marks Thomas's novel as an important example of recent trends in trauma studies. Lisa's trauma, after all, is not only the psychic reaction to the tragic loss of her mother but, more importantly, her anticipation of the collective tragedy to come. By removing the actual traumatic event from Lisa's past to posit it in the future, Thomas offers a new understanding of trauma, one in which the traumatic reactions can occur without the actual personal experience.

Not coincidentally, it is the premonition of the Holocaust that brings about Lisa's traumatic sufferings. It is within the context of Holocaust Studies that we can detect this new, extended understanding of trauma as collective, a trauma which consequently can affect people not immediately involved. As opposed to the traditional definition of trauma as the victim's reaction to a psychic scar, as a reaction formation to repress a painful psychic event, this collective trauma moves beyond the personal experience to encompass larger historical events such as the Holocaust, Hiroshima, or the Vietnam War. Even though the experience and suffering of the *individual* victim may be similar to victims of other traumatic incidents, the historical impact of the collective traumatic event separates the two and creates a traumatic collective that incorporates people not immediately affected. Especially in Holocaust Studies, trauma theory has become a privileged mode of discourse as it allows for the explanation of events not easily theorized within a traditional psychoanalytical framework. In fact, looking over the

recent non-clinical literature on trauma, we could safely say that the Holocaust has become the exemplar for trauma theory.<sup>110</sup>

Within the Freudian section, Lisa clearly performs an exemplary function as Freud tries to generalize her experiences. After all, most of his findings were derived from particular case studies. Thus, while the Freudian case study by definition emphasizes the particularity of the patient, it does so with the understanding that the individual may generate general truths about human nature. It allows the analyst to formulate and develop his theories by addressing a universal problem within the particularities of his patient's specific life. Lisa's case study, "Frau Anna G," however, also shows the apparent limitations of this approach as Freud refuses to foreground Lisa's individuality in his endeavor to find an all-encompassing theory. In fact, the text questions Freud's diagnosis of his patient as a repressed homosexual via Lisa's letters which provide additional information about her life. A reader versed in Freudian psychoanalysis may further recognize the fictional Freud's discovery of Lisa's homosexual tendencies as reminiscent of the historical Freud's also faulty diagnosis in the case study, *Dora*.

Though Lisa's case study has mostly been read as modeled on Freud's early *Studies in Hysteria*, Freud's diagnosis as well as its style (including the corrective footnotes) suggest that the chapter must also be read as a commentary on Freud's *Dora* case. As many readers of the actual case study of *Dora* have pointed out, Freud's countertransference prohibited him from fully understanding his patient's problems, from

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<sup>110</sup> Among the most recent books on trauma, LaCapra deals exclusively with the Holocaust, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub as well as Kali Tal discuss the Holocaust extensively, and even for Cathy Caruth's more theoretical discussion, the Holocaust is always in the background.

fully analyzing her symptoms.<sup>111</sup> By allowing Lisa to speak on her own behalf, Thomas, in fact, creates the counterdiscourse Dora was never permitted and thereby questions Freud's abilities at the same time as he shows the limitations under which Freud was constructing his case study. This intertextuality with *Dora*, the case study which has become a symbol of psychoanalysis' (and the real Freud's) limitations, suggests Freud's desire to impose his general theories on individual subjects regardless of their particular histories and symptoms. As a result, the position of exemplarity that Lisa occupies employs the details of her specific individuality only insofar as it provides her with the ability to embody a universal principle.

Accordingly, many critics privilege the historical sections and regard them not only as supplementing but rather as supplanting the psychoanalytic ones. *The White Hotel* itself suggests psychoanalysis' inability to succeed in its task when it twice quotes Heraclid's "The soul of man is a far country, which cannot be approached or explored" (196-7, 250). Freud cites the ancient philosopher in a letter to Lisa—though he immediately questions its accuracy and judges it as "not altogether true" (196). Later, this quote precedes the description of the massacre at Babi Yar. While this repetition emphasizes the connection between the two parts, it is followed by another passage seriously undermining psychoanalysis' authority:

Most of the dead were poor and illiterate. But every single one of them had dreamed dreams, seen visions and had amazing experiences, even the babes in arms (perhaps especially the babes in arms). Though most of them had never lived outside the Podul slum, their lives and histories were as rich and complex as Lisa Erdman-Berenstein's. If a Sigmund Freud had been listening and taking notes from the time of Adam, he would still not fully have explored even a single group, even a single person. (250)

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<sup>111</sup> For a variety of critical feminist readings on Freud's "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria," see Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane.

Many critics use this passage to contend that psychoanalysis is completely discredited in the face of reality and history—some even go as far as to claim that it indicates Freud’s “failure to put himself in dialogue with real history” and thus “evasive of historical responsibility” (Robertson 463). This complete privileging of realism and historical reality is questioned, however, by the final chapter which, consequently, has been criticized by many readers as an evasion on Thomas’s part to confront the harsh reality of twentieth century history. As our analysis of the juxtaposition of psychoanalysis and history has shown, however, this final chapter simply underscores a point made repeatedly throughout the novel, namely that both modes of explication must be taken into account, that none of them should be privileged. By refusing to conclude the novel with the historical account, Thomas questions the temporal teleology employed when regarding the later chapter as “truer” and more valid. Likewise, the move into an utterly non-realist scenario (whether it depicts Lisa’s dying dream, her ultimate prophesy, or an actual afterlife), problematizes the clear valorization of the reality of the Babi Yar chapter. As he thus maintains a balance between the psychoanalytic and the historical approach, Thomas emphasizes the importance of both a particular and a universal reading of the Holocaust.

In fact, *The White Hotel* foregrounds the importance of looking at the victims as individuals and realizing their particular identity. While the very methods of historiography resist such an approach and the Babi Yar chapter seems to follow the impersonal, objective style preferred by most historians, the reader remains quite aware of the victims’ individual personalities. Not only do we know Lisa intimately and therefore cannot remain detached and uninvolved in the scenes at Babi Yar, the particular

passage quoted above does more than simply question Freudian analysis. By reminding us that every single one of the victims had an inner psyche as rich and complex as Lisa's, the text refuses to allow us to single her out for identification. While most texts make us care about and identify with the protagonist at the expense of all the other victims, *The White Hotel* resists such an approach both stylistically and thematically. In contrast to the early sections that concentrate on Lisa's inner life, in the Babi Yar section, Lisa appears at first to be less individualized as she loses her proper name and becomes "the old woman." Moreover, when reminding us that "every single one of them had dreamed dreams, seen visions and had amazing experiences," the text makes it clear that Lisa is not to be singled out for sympathy or identification; rather, she simply has become a representative for the suffering.

Both narrative strains address issues of representability and exemplarity as they confront the question of whether a particular person can stand for an entire group, whether she can adequately represent a collective idea. The Freudian psychoanalytic truths and insights are universal only insofar as they can be represented through a particular individual—at the same time as this exemplary representative belies Freud's theories as the historical part shows. In the Holocaust section, Lisa can function as an exemplary representative only insofar as she has already become an individual through the psychoanalytic sections. Thus, the two sections are complexly interdependent and cannot be read apart from one another. Although the text initially seems to follow Freud's enlightened rationalism in privileging an all-encompassing universal mode, the concluding chapters supplement such universals by suggesting a logic of exemplary

particularity in which the representative only functions as such via her specific and distinct identity.

When comparing the scene at Babi Yar to the earlier passage in which Freud regards Lisa as a prime example of his theories developed in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, we can see a shift in Lisa's representative status from universalized particular to particularized universal. In his case study, Freud comments that he "began to see Frau Anna G., not as a woman separated from the rest of us by her illness, but as someone in whom a hysteria exaggerated and highlighted a *universal* struggle between the life instinct and the death instinct" (128-9). In the scene after Lisa's brutal murder, the narrator informs us that "Dina survived to be the only witness, the sole authority for what Lisa saw and felt. Yet it had happened thirty thousand times; always in the same way and always differently" (251). The moments when Lisa explicitly is defined as a representative bear out this distinction between a universalized particular in the case study and a particularized universal in the Babi Yar section. Whereas Freud still sees her as an example of a universal rule, the phrase "always in the same way and always differently" suggests a more complex understanding of Lisa's exemplary function. It emphasizes both universal characteristics (always same) as well as her particularity (always different). Rather than resorting to a least common denominator (which is often negligible when confronted with the differences), *The White Hotel* suggests that paradoxically it is only when we fully understand a person in all her complexity that we can reduce/raise her to the status of the example. Only as a complex human being with her conscious and unconscious ideas, dreams, and desires can Lisa become exemplary

and stand in for the thousands slaughtered at Babi Yar, for the millions murdered by the Nazis.

As the novel explores the intricate differences between a universal particular in the first section and a particular universal in the second, its content raises similar issues. Lisa's relationship to her symbolic environment changes over the course of the novel in ways comparable to her status of representability. In the first part of the novel, Lisa, the model hysteric, excludes herself from the world to bring it into being: renouncing sexual relations, marriage, and children, her sacrifice constitutes an imaginary limit, allowing her to exert control over her symbolic surroundings. In the face of anti-Semitism, she rejects her father's Jewishness which she conceives as *unvermögend* by refusing to have children of her own, thus foreclosing any possibility to confront (or be confronted with) her own Jewishness. Already by the fourth chapter, things change: in a letter to Freud, Lisa admits to her own anti-Semitic shame. By accepting Victor Berenstein's marriage proposal, she embraces not only her Jewish heritage but also motherhood (albeit substitute). This connection is made explicitly clear in Lisa's decision to accompany Kolya; she affirms her own Jewishness over an external identity symbolized by her Ukrainian identity card. Though again sacrificing herself, Lisa now partakes in her world rather than rejecting it. Her death is the result of an acceptance of her Jewishness rather than her exclusion from an anti-Semitic symbolic whose universalizing tendencies eradicate difference. The logic here is one of universal particularity, both in Lisa's acceptance of her Jewishness and her refusal to accommodate her environment as well as in her representation as Holocaust victim.

In other words, only through our insight into her psyche, only once Lisa has confronted her innermost anxieties and faced herself, can she become a representative Holocaust victim. Consequently, rather than contradicting or impeding her universal aspects within the Holocaust narrative, the psychoanalytic aspects of the novel are the very reason Lisa can become generally representative. This is important both for the larger interpretation of the novel and for the often seemingly opposing discourses of history and psychoanalysis. Instead of limiting the general historical focus, psychoanalysis allows us to understand the Holocaust victim in all her particularity. When we finally stand with Lisa at the ravine of Babi Yar, we know her deepest and darkest fears, hopes, and dreams. It is this identification that makes Thomas's Holocaust chapter both so painful and powerful, an identification that owes more to the psychoanalytic and postmodern aspects of the text than to the purely historical facts. *The White Hotel* thus performs exemplarily what literature in general strives to achieve—by allowing the reader insight into the characters' minds, by creating distinct individuals, literature offers possibly the only way to connect with historical events and characters affectively. The fact that Thomas does not focus on an actual victim but instead creates a fictional character allows him to synthesize a variety of aspects into the composite of Lisa. In so doing, *The White Hotel* presents the Holocaust in a way that exposes its horrors without alienating the readers by allowing them to posit Lisa as Other.

Within the novel itself, Thomas comments on this need of a collective rather than an individual testimony when he suggests that Lisa's story continues through Dina's survival, because "naturally a part of her went on living with these survivors" (250). He thus emphasizes the superiority of a larger communal truth over the individual details of

particular events, a position that begins to be more popular in Holocaust Studies as scholars are faced with an event from which we now are distanced more than half a century. Moreover, since the majority of the witnesses have been silenced, the survivors must testify not only to their own experiences but also to those of the dead who are not able to speak for themselves.<sup>112</sup> As mentioned before, however, this imperative to speak for the dead is highly problematic, since it requires the narrator to “imagine” events, occurrences, and feelings of which he or she has no direct knowledge. It is this dichotomy that finally stands at the center of the plagiarism debate; it is this double bind that must be held accountable for many of the negative reactions to Thomas’s use of Dina Pronicheva’s testimony.

All survivor accounts make general statements about the experiences of the camps at the same time as they retain their individual knowledge to authenticate their narrative. Thomas, however, not only uses this method but also foregrounds it by juxtaposing Dina’s public and personal story by offering side by side the psychological and historical account. In so doing, Thomas’s fictional eyewitness testimony strongly resembles the actual survivor accounts in his attempt to maintain the balance between the particular and the universal. As a result, his depiction of the victims may be too close for comfort, foregrounding a fact that most testimonies share but few acknowledge. In fact, many Holocaust testimonies employ the collective voice at the same time as they foreground their individual experience, because they are torn between two opposing imperatives: they feel the need to speak for the dead while simultaneously knowing that that cannot be

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<sup>112</sup> This standard postmodern approach to historiographic novels is, of course, not restricted to Holocaust narratives. Examples from other areas include Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior*, Rudi Wiebe’s *The Temptations of Big Bear* or Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. Each of these texts rewrites actual

done. As a result, many focus on factual details, not only to certify that they were actually there, that the events actually happened, but also in an effort to overcome their awareness that by their very survival they can never fully testify.

One of the constantly repeated principles that pervades the writing of almost all Holocaust survivors is the all-encompassing impulse to tell their story—not only for their own sake but, even more so, for those who did not survive. This almost obsessive need to report the details of the concentrationary universe perseveres even as the survivors acknowledge and consciously contemplate their inability to understand it or to effectively relate it to their audiences. By speaking for the dead and telling their stories, the survivors take on aspects of a collective memory, transmitting a story larger than their own. As they tell the readers of their encounters with other prisoners, they give the nameless, faceless crowd of six million names, faces, and identities. Primo Levi, for example, repeats an often-stated sentiment when he describes how he felt the need to survive in order to bear witness. Nevertheless, he immediately amends this statement by saying, “we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses” (*Drowned* 83), thus not only emphasizing the impulse to testify on behalf of all of those who did not survive but also acknowledging the fact that by his very survival his account is not representative.

While survivor narratives tend to foreground their emphasis on particular details, their testimony must be valued for the collective information they reveal above and beyond the experiences of the individual author. Thus, when Charlotte Delbo prefaces her autobiographic text *Auschwitz and After* with the epigraph, “Aujourd’hui, je ne suis pas sûre que ce que j’ai écrit soit vrai. Je suis sûre que c’est véridique,” she wants to

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historical events and persona so as to give voice to those whom traditional history has disempowered and silenced.

distinguish between a general truth (*vrai*) and the truthfulness and factuality of her accounts (*véridique*). In so doing, she differentiates between a reality of the camps that even to her seems unfathomable now and her knowledge and assurance that all the facts and details she recalls are correct. On another level, however, we can turn her statement around and make it even more accurate: in her trilogy Delbo relates the stories of numerous victims, especially in the third book where various chapters are written in the voices of other former prisoners as they recount their inability to overcome the trauma that was Auschwitz. The text leaves it uncertain as to whether Delbo simply transcribes these statements or whether she shapes them in various ways. In either case, her survivor testimony has become that of many; her attempt to write and speak for the dead has transformed her descriptions from a simple factual account to a moving work of art in which collective voices speak their fear, pain, and anger. As a result, Delbo may claim an emphasis on the particular details—her text, however, performs the opposite as it creates a collective memory of both the living and the dead.

It is this tension between the particular and the universal, between an emphasis on facts and details and a need for an overarching truth that Thomas's novel exposes when he creates an imaginary victim who follows the rules of the survivor testimony but also foregrounds the facets of her life outside of the concentrationary universe that are so easily forgotten. By allowing the reader access to Lisa's personal and inner life, he reminds us that we are not faced with a generic victim but are, in fact, dealing with a genuine person. By creating a fictional character yet using Dina Prinocheva's testimony, he foregrounds the fact that all Holocaust testimony must, in part, serve the function of a collective testimony. With the help of his heroine Lisa Erdman, Thomas illuminates the

difficult relationship between the individual and the collective, psychoanalysis and history, and the particular and universal as he undermines the clear distinctions between them by having her transgress every supposed boundary. Lisa is both exemplary Freudian patient *and* representative Holocaust victim; yet by being both and more—as the final section suggests—she complicates the demarcating boundaries that disciplines like to establish as well as the clear frameworks that critics tend to employ. It is this dilution of clearly established and safe fields of thinking and writing that must be considered the most radical aspect of *The White Hotel*. As many Holocaust scholars have pointed out, an event such as the Holocaust has defeated any traditional disciplinary attempts to contain it and thus requires a new methodology. Creating a hybrid discourse that acknowledges the particular and the universal within both the personal and the political arena, Thomas outlines an approach to Holocaust Studies that dilutes disciplinary boundaries as it advances a new understanding of historical writing that is neither subjectively personal nor objectively historical but an amalgam of both. In so doing, this fictional text not only challenges the traditional disciplinary inquiries employed within Holocaust Studies but also provides us with an alternative outlined in the postmodern, multi-layered, multidisciplinary method of *The White Hotel*.

Ethics and Aesthetics Revisited:  
Reader Response in D. M. Thomas's *Pictures at an Exhibition*

If *The White Hotel* is a sensitive and caring treatment of the Holocaust and its victims, the same cannot be said about *Pictures at an Exhibition*, Thomas's more problematic second novel on the topic. By continuously rejecting ethical demands under the license of postmodern aesthetic practice, *Pictures* raises the question as to whether

there can be a purely aesthetic response to Holocaust literature without taking into account ethical issues or whether the Holocaust paralyzes traditional literary criticism by prioritizing authenticity and ethics over aesthetics. Thomas's 1993 follow-up to *The White Hotel* with its stereotypical portrayal of characters, its gratuitous sexual violence, and its central conceit of leaving the reader in the dark about the characters' real identity, is a very problematic text that continually breaches the boundaries of decorum generally accepted within Holocaust literature. *Pictures* suggests that Thomas's focus is less on representing an accurate past than on commenting on the function of the Holocaust in postmodern culture. In fact, Thomas contemplates the fact that the Holocaust has become the principal signifier, a kind of shorthand for pure evil. By undermining our expectations and repeatedly disappointing them, he complicates stable categories of historical truth and personal identity.

Following characters with vastly different experiences in relationship to the Holocaust, the novel explores the impact the Holocaust has had on both their public and private lives. In so doing, the novel illustrates how the Holocaust affects every facet of our contemporary life and allows no one to evade its overpowering shadow. By not only problematizing but also reversing the good Jew/evil Nazi dichotomy, he exposes our reliance on clear-cut demarcations within Holocaust literature. Likewise, the confusion of identity he describes in our contemporary society reinforces the destabilization of identity already begun during the Holocaust. Moreover, when concentrating on the reader's experience, we are suddenly faced with a book that implicates its audience in quite unexpected ways, thereby investing meaning into the problematic and seemingly unethical elements of the text. Nevertheless, in a final analysis, the novel cannot deliver

its promise of a self-reflective postmodern Holocaust novel as it refuses to acknowledge the particularity of the Holocaust in its desire to emphasize its universality. Thomas's approach of using postmodern techniques to offer a considerate engagement with the Holocaust ultimately fails, instead falling into the ever-widening field of Holocaust exploits with their voyeuristic and pornographic characteristics.<sup>113</sup>

*Pictures at an Exhibition* is an intricately plotted book in which the characters repeatedly change names and identities and apparently unrelated protagonists and events are ultimately connected. The story unfolds through limited first person narrative in personal accounts, psychoanalytic sessions and letters, interrupted by seemingly unrelated documents. Three of the nine chapters take place during the war in Germany with the other six occurring in and around London in the 1980s. Chapter One describes the analysis of Auschwitz doctor Lorenz by one of the Jewish doctors in the camp, Chaim Galewski. These psychoanalytic sessions which are intended to relieve Lorenz's nightmares offer a distorted lens through which Galewski describes his experiences in the camp. Galewski's child has miraculously survived the ovens and is being raised by an SS family as one of their own. The principal scene in this chapter which gives it its name, "Death and the Maiden" is the sadistic Christmas execution of a Jewish and Polish family by some of the SS guards in which a young Jewish girl, Judith, is forced to have sex with her father in a desperate—and futile—attempt to save everyone's life.

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<sup>113</sup> While Friedländer includes such artistic texts as Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's *Hitler* or Michel Tournier's *the Ogre* into his list of Holocaust kitsch, I would like to primarily use the term for texts that use the horrors of the Holocaust for exploitative purposes, shorthanding it to achieve cheap thrills and/or describing its horrors with pornographic pleasures. In this category fall the overly melodramatic TV miniseries *Holocaust* as well as the adaptations of William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* and Stephen King's *Apt Pupil*.

Chapter Two, seemingly unrelated, introduces the reader to a group of people who are all revealed to be interconnected both analytically and sexually as they are either in analysis with one another and/or have sexual relations. In fact, ultimately, their ties are revealed to be even more complex when their hidden identities suggests that many of them are related. At the center of this cabal is Oscar Jacobson, an aging psychoanalyst who claims to have lived through the Holocaust, and his wife Myra, an Auschwitz survivor. Oscar is presented as a mostly sympathetic old man, at least when seen through his friends and analysts; the reader, of course, is more aware of his manipulative gesture yet his age and frailty warrant sympathy both within and outside the text. While the Holocaust is a constant subtext in these present-day chapters (one of the patients, for example, is haunted by the murder of hundreds of children and babies who were kept in a house that used to belong to relatives of hers), it is initially unclear as to how the two parts of the novel relate. Only later in the novel do we learn that many of the protagonists of the first story line recur in the second one—albeit under altered names and identities. Consequently, we as readers become part analyst, part detective as we try to establish the intricate web of false identities as well as the relations between all the characters in the past and present. In this way, the reader of *Pictures* must mimic the psychoanalytic enterprise of deciphering the smallest clues, decoding and interpreting allusions, metaphors and small hints, of unraveling the plot.

*Pictures at an Exhibition* relentlessly challenges our conception of a Holocaust text as it explores the relationship between the Holocaust and contemporary culture. Thomas tests the boundaries of decent and tasteful imagery in relation to the Holocaust in any number of ways. While Judith and Galewski's sexual relationship in the middle of the

horrors of the camps seems indelicate, it is nothing compared to the offensive descriptions of the various sexual experiments, the sadistic torture of the Christmas massacre and the perverse nature of Lorenz's analysis. After all, it is completely obvious to the reader why Lorenz should suffer from nightmares, yet the Nazi doctor seems oddly surprised by preoccupation, asking desperately, "Why do I always dream of death?" (36). The odd juxtaposition between the seemingly normal environment of the Lorenz household with its domestic normality and the terrible reality of life in the camps is short-circuited by the contents of Lorenz's analysis. Though the concern about Lorenz's familial relations seems absurd in the face of the continuous murders he and his fellow officers commit, the emotional trauma they cause, the text does not clearly dismiss psychoanalysis in favor of history. Like *The White Hotel*, *Pictures* suggests that there are implicit connections between the inner psychic and external historical trauma that go beyond the simplistic connections of Lorenz dreaming of death in the middle of a death camp.

Possibly the most offensive aspect of *Pictures* is its blatant anti-Semitism. Obviously, the rather clichéd dichotomy of bad Nazi/good Jew has always been questioned in more sophisticated literature of the genre. Primo Levi, for example, coins the term "gray zone" (*Drowned* 36-69) to describe the multiple intermediary stages of forced collaboration and partial guilt among the camp inmates, thus acknowledging the brutal reality of the concentrationary universe in which one's survival often depended directly (or indirectly) upon someone else's death.<sup>114</sup> More recently, postmodern writers like Cynthia Ozick in *Shawl* and Art Spiegelman in *Maus* have portrayed the Holocaust

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<sup>114</sup> See, for example, Tadeusz Borowski's brutal descriptions of the inner economy of Auschwitz in *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, where the continuous stream of railroad cars full of victims and their possessions assures the continued survival and occasional luxury for the permanent prisoners.

survivor not as noble and dignified heroes but as broken and haunted, rather unsympathetic characters. Similarly, Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's List* shows how the perpetrators are not a uniform, homogeneous group either by exposing the interdependency between Schindler's collaborative actions and his ability to save Jewish lives.

Thomas's choice to completely invert sympathies, however, is quite stunning and dangerous. As his representation of both Germans and Jews is close to the antisemitic stereotyping in Nazi propaganda, he is walking a very thin line between exposing prejudices and imitating them. For example, Chaim, the Jewish protagonist, is a bitter, disgusted man whose remarks about the other prisoners are full of hatred and racism, reminiscent of Nazi rhetoric:

the Jews were no better than the criminals. I could understand only too easily, how a decent, civilised couple like Dr and Frau Lorenz could find most of my race unspeakable. Oh, there were the occasional Jewish saints, the rabbis who would step into the shoes of a condemned man, the mothers who wouldn't desert their children, but that was sheer animal instinct, and the saintly rabbis were thinking of their souls. They were haggling with God. It was like a bazaar to them: a bit of useless worn-out material, their bodies, for the shekels of eternal life" (27-8)

Of course, we must acknowledge that we have a limited and obviously quite unreliable narrator here. Chaim could simply distance himself from his fellow inmates as a mechanism of self-preservation. Or, more sinister yet, his inability to identify with his fellow sufferers may expose the desperate self-hatred the Nazi machinery was able to inspire.

Not only is Galewski's attitude towards his fellow prisoners objectionable, so is his actual behavior even though his survival instinct is mostly reasonable and at times even impressive. Thus, it is remarkable how he denies his paternity in order to save his daughter from the ovens and assure her a place in one of the Nazi families (54); similarly,

in order to help her survive he advises Judith to disown her own father, accuse him of sexual abuse and imprisonment, and then fellate him (42-44). His will to stay alive is more questionable, however, when he accuses another prisoner of being sick—thereby assuring his death—in order to save himself (55). While these incidents and Galewski's behavior are understandable and serve to reinforce the horrors of his situation, coupled with his derision of his fellow victims, they present a ruthless and selfish person who clearly exists in Levi's gray zone.

In the absence of alternative voices, this self-hating Jew who admires and respects the German Nazi doctor remains our only authority. His counterpart, the Aryan Dr. Lorenz, later to become Oscar Jacobson, is a quite charming and pleasant, much beloved person as we can detect from his patients and friends. Moreover, in a perverse plot twist, one of the victims of the first chapter, Judith, now Myra, is married to Lorenz/Jacobson, thus apparently having chosen the Nazi doctor over Galewski, her former lover and rescuer from the Christmas massacre. In Thomas's topsy-turvy world Nazi Germany may, on the whole, be evil, but the perpetrators in this story are often more sympathetic and likeable than the victims. Unlike Martin Amis who constructs a perverted world in *Time's Arrow* in which a Nazi doctor lives his life backwards and considers himself a hero for bringing to life hundreds of thousands of human beings, Thomas attempts to depict a realistic universe in which the Holocaust is an atrocious historic event exhibiting the most revolting side of humanity. Yet the narrative undermines this worldview both directly by having one of the Jewish victims express disgust at his fellow inmates as well as indirectly by tricking the reader into a certain amount of sympathy if not identification with a protagonist who will turn out to be an Auschwitz doctor.

Throughout Thomas's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, its audience faces a complex and complicated ethical situation. Thomas entices the reader to sympathize and even identify with one of the principal characters, only to reveal to us later that this protagonist is one of the Auschwitz doctors of the introductory chapter. Consequently, we as readers become part analyst, part detective as we try to establish the intricate web of relations and false identities to the relationships between all the characters in the past and present. In this way, the reader of *Pictures* must mimic the psychoanalytic enterprise of deciphering the smallest clues, decoding and interpreting allusions, metaphors and small hints, of unraveling the plot. At times, the text seems to suggest that Oscar Jacobson might be Chaim Galewski, the narrator of the first section, yet towards the end of the novel we are finally faced with the reality—only alluded to and repeatedly denied throughout the book—that Oscar Jacobson is, in fact, Dr. Lorenz. The first indication that Oscar might be Lorenz occur early on when he writes Lilian about a dream of finding his mother devoured by rats, a dream that he has had once before, almost 50 years earlier, he tells us (99). Repeatedly, there is reference to a piece of woodwork, a carved head that one of the SS doctors' wives made of Lorenz (99, 106), and Oscar refers to his home as "Padernice" (101), a place previously mentioned in one of Lorenz's dreams (58).<sup>115</sup> While these various incidents offer clues as to Jacobson's identity, the text never clearly denies Jacobson's fictitious past, i.e., with the exception of very few moments that suggest otherwise, the novel supports Jacobson's claim to be an English Jewish doctor with the possibility that he might be a Holocaust survivor.

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<sup>115</sup> Incidentally, Padernice is the name of a fictitious town given as the destination for transports of sick, old, and mentally ill, all of which were murdered instead.

The mutability of characters is reinforced in the various shifting identities of most of the other protagonists. Sometimes consciously, often without their knowledge, most of the characters in *Pictures* have reinvented themselves or have had different personas and backgrounds imposed upon them. Accordingly, Jacobson's wife Myra turns out to be Judith, the young girl who had survived the Christmas massacre with Galewski's help and it seems that Galewski himself resurfaces as the German Dr. Becker. Moreover, in a final twist of irony, Lorenz/Jacobson who hides behind a Jewish identity to cover his wartime crimes may indeed be part-Jewish after all in this text in which no one is who they appear to be. This game of mistaken and erased identities carries on into the next generation as Galewski's daughter Elli grows up assuming her parents to be the Nazi couple that had adopted her while Lilian believes her mother to be a resistance fighter, even though the text suggests that she is, in fact, Renata Tillich, one of the children of the camp doctors.

By deceiving the reader about the characters' identities, Thomas connects the postmodern and the Holocaust, illustrating how the postmodern tenet that every identity is constructed reproduces the realities of the Holocaust where the construction of identities is a life-saving necessity.<sup>116</sup> At the same time, these various identities with their contradictory alliances suggest that the post-war generations are affected by the Holocaust regardless of their relationship to the Holocaust or their respective involvement with it. Since the second generation often cannot even recall its connection to the Holocaust—or draws conclusion from wrong or insufficient material—their

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<sup>116</sup> See, for example, Louis Begley's *Wartime Lies*, in which the child protagonist completely internalizes his fake identity, thereby losing any sense of truth or lie and undermining traditional concepts of a real or true identity. See also the brief discussion on "lost children" in my conclusion.

reaction to the Holocaust must be understood as a collective rather than a personal response. Like in *The White Hotel*, Thomas bridges the gap between the personal of psychoanalysis and the collective of history to show how the trauma of the Holocaust cannot be limited by either but instead combines the two so that the personal has impacted the collective which, in turn, affects everyone on a personal level

Thomas clearly suggests that the memory of the camps is somehow part of our collective unconscious as every single character is haunted by it on one level or another. Thomas's text itself offers us a way to read it as the text inserts the review of a novel written by one of the characters, which suggests that "the camps are a common home to everyone who lives under their evil and enormous shadow" (264), an interpretation that might easily be applied to Thomas's novel itself. Accordingly, many of the more offensive aspects of the novel such as its pornographic preoccupation with sex and death can be explained once we understand that Thomas is less concerned with an accurate portrayal of the Holocaust than he is with the impact the Holocaust still has on contemporary society, the way its evil still filters through and affects all our lives. Since the majority of the novel focuses on second generation in present-day England, it obviously is more concerned with our contemporary understanding and reception of the Holocaust than with any attempt to realistically or properly represent the historical events. This focus on the Holocaust's role in society also justifies Thomas's more voyeuristic tendencies, since his participation in such exploitation of the Holocaust can be seen as exposing these tendencies rather than simply participating in them. In other words, if we understand Thomas's intention to be an exposure of what one could consider the industry of the Holocaust, our reaction of disgust is very purposefully created. It is

difficult, however, to clearly distinguish between simple pornographic use of the Holocaust's ready-made imagery and a conscientious and concerned critique of such abuse.

All the characters in *Pictures* are fixated on the Holocaust; after all, one of the explicit messages of the novel is how we are all implicated in and by the Holocaust, how we all live under its shadow. Yet it is central character Jacobson who is most peculiarly obsessed with the historic event and strangely identifies with the victims as he daydreams of taking revenge on the Germans. In one of these fantasy scenarios, he imagines how German tourists will be arrested in various European countries during their summer vacations, locked up in cattle-trucks and transported to "an exact replica of Auschwitz" where "SS doctors [are] standing, lordly, while a camp orchestra plays a merry tune. At last it begins to sink in. It really happened! It felt like this!" (204-5). Ironically, Jacobson's supposed revenge fantasies also reveal that underneath he has not changed at all, since he still contemplates mass murder and genocide, albeit justifying it this time around as righteous vengeance.

Of course, as he identifies with the victims Jacobson simply assumes the subject position all of us take when confronted with the Holocaust. By its very definition, Holocaust literature tends to position the reader as victims, usually identifying with the protagonist who often also constitutes the narrator. Even in documentary accounts where the victims are anonymous, making identification almost impossible, the audience refuses to identify with the perpetrators. In his text, however, Thomas insidiously tricks us into doing just that as his perpetrator protagonist ironically positions himself in the same subject position as all of us do when discussing/thinking about/reading about the

Holocaust. Thus, Thomas thematizes the problematic situation of the reader of Holocaust fiction within and outside of the text. On the one hand, with Jacobson, he offers us a likeable and identifiable character, thus duping the reader into *not* realizing and later *not* wanting to believe his Nazi past. On the other hand, Thomas creates within the text a Holocaust reader who, regardless of his subject position, identifies with the victims. Upon revelation of Jacobson's "true" identity, readers who have previously identified with Jacobson identifying with the victims, realize their own precarious reader position. Not only do we as readers identify with the victims, we are also implicated as bystanders and, via Jacobson, as perpetrators.

As it relies on Thomas's intention of exposing and criticizing reader expectations of Holocaust narratives, this reading of the novel is problematic, however. In all texts that rely on external interpretation and recognition of irony there is always the danger of the reader's failure to understand the intended criticism. Thus, it puts undue burden on the reader to decipher the author's intentions as the text refuses to provide clues that may support this recuperative reading of the text. Consequently, most writers establish such criticism from within the text itself (through a judging omniscient narrator or obvious deficiencies in the problematic character) or through ironic narrative distance.<sup>117</sup>

*Pictures*, however fails to do that. As we lay down the book in disgust, we may

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<sup>117</sup> Examples of such limited consciousness that make it difficult for the reader to distinguish between the narrator's and the text's ultimate meaning include novels as varied as *Huckleberry Finn*, *Lolita*, or *American Psycho*. In Nabokov's *Lolita*, for example, we are invited to identify with Humbert Humbert, there are obvious clues in the text that allow us to read the novel "against the grain," i.e., when we actually wade through the aesthetically inviting and obtrusive language, we see Humbert clearly abusing and molesting Lolita. Even though the novel is controversial, it stands up as an artistic text (as opposed to child pornography) through its very resistance to be conflated into one single meaning and it offers its own criticism from within the text. Moreover, it problematizes the issue of pornography and literature by seducing readers through its aesthetic style and language, thereby making them a participant in Humbert's lascivious and sick memories.

emotionally reproduce the feelings Thomas intended us to have, but the book fails to direct this disgust towards the Holocaust itself or our present fascination with it. Instead, it asks us to read the Holocaust as a universally evil event which victimized and still victimizes all of us. In so doing, it neglects the insights of Thomas's earlier Holocaust novel. In both *The White Hotel* and *Pictures*, Thomas attempts to balance the particular and the universal by implementing his psychologically rich characters in extraordinary historical situations. Yet whereas these methods succeed in *The White Hotel*, thereby intensifying its impact, they fail in *Pictures*.

In fact, Thomas undermines his insights on the Holocaust's role in contemporary society by simultaneously leveling out the Holocaust's impact (i.e., survivors, perpetrators, and bystanders are all equally implicated and affected) and by ultimately literalizing the relationship, since all main characters turn out to have been literally affected by the Nazi death camps. The text spells out its own interpretation when contemplating the idea that anyone could become a perpetrator, that most people "given the wrong circumstances" could have been Nazis but were not "put to the test" (127). With this argument, however, Thomas erases the difference between victim and perpetrator not only in terms of potential guilt but eventually, throughout the novel in terms of actual responsibility. Moreover, the novel's strong statement about the role of the Holocaust in post-war society is narrowed to include active participants only. Rather than showing how the Holocaust has taken on a certain mythic quality, thereby allowing people who are not connected to the events in any way to draw from its imagery, Thomas creates a scenario in which ultimately all traumatic memory can be explained by actual personal experience. Thus, Lilian's dream, for example, in which she presses her nose

against a glass only to encounter “horrifying faces,” “distorted, and like squashed against the glass, their eyes bulging, staring at me” (76), can easily be explained once we realize that Lilian is Renata Tillich, one of the children of the Nazi doctors. Furthermore, Thomas’s novel dangerously collapses the psychic traumata of the victims and perpetrators, in fact, perversely inverting them.

*The White Hotel* contemplates the arbitrariness of the Holocaust and human fate in general in its focus on Lisa, its protagonist. Throughout the text, Thomas foregrounds the connections between the protagonist’s personal trauma to be revealed and reconstructed by Freud and the collective traumatic impact of the Holocaust. *Pictures*, on the other hand, reverses the psychoanalytic and historical traumata. Lorenz suffers from nightmares which are suffused with images of death and dying, yet, ironically, he cannot comprehend and Galewski dares not tell him, the clearly external origin of the nightmares. Lorenz’s exclamation “Why do I always dream of death?” (36) is thus blatantly ironic against the backdrop of the extermination camps. Unlike Lisa’s case, Lorenz’s psychological problems are the *result* not the anticipation of the Holocaust. This is a subtle difference, but a difference nonetheless. The very individuality that makes *The White Hotel* so successful is completely flattened out in *Pictures* as everyone is equally victimized, as history rather than individuals becomes the perpetrator. *Pictures* conflates victims and perpetrators as universally human thus suggesting that we are all implicated. Yet he forgets the fundamental lesson of *The White Hotel*: we are all implicated, but we are all implicated differently.

Whereas in *The White Hotel* the text suggests that everyone *could* have been a victim, *Pictures at an Exhibition* argues how everyone *has* been a victim. By

switching the temporal direction, Thomas changes an ethical argument into an obscenely unethical one. By suggesting that we are all victims and portraying the perpetrator's trauma as equal to or greater than the victims', Thomas fails to acknowledge the particularity of the individuals involved. While it is certainly true that no one is exempt from the influence of the Holocaust, it is crucial to remember that everyone is implicated differently. Thus, unlike *The White Hotel*, which balances the universal and the particular in the figure of Lisa, *Pictures* fails to provide such a character that allows readers to realize both the enormity of the Holocaust at the same time as they are able to identify with the individual. Instead, we are faced with a scenario that emotionally detaches readers from the horrors of the camps and its victims while asking us to identify with the perpetrators. It is certainly true—and has often been argued—that the Holocaust destroyed individuality and particularity both in its very intent and program as well as in its aftermath. However, Thomas subscribes to this theory only insofar as it relates to the victims. His novel, which succeeds in evoking identification and sympathy for the perpetrators while mimicking anti-Semitic disgust with the victims may have been intended to expose the current industries of Holocaust literature. Even though its use of ready-made mythology allows us to comment on the Holocaust's impact on post-war culture, its overarching belief system that erases clear distinctions between perpetrator and victim in favor of an overall sensibility of post-Holocaust existence is ultimately offensive and not convincing. Accordingly, *Pictures* does little more than exploit the Holocaust, thereby providing an inferior specimen of the type of fiction he seems to want to scrutinize.

## CONCLUSION

### ETHICS AND IDENTITY POLITICS IN HOLOCAUST LITERATURE

Throughout this dissertation, I insist on the vast potential that postmodern fiction can offer to the field of Holocaust Studies and at the same time acknowledge the challenges postmodernism faces when confronting the Holocaust. Yet the discussion of D. M. Thomas's *Pictures at an Exhibition* demonstrates some of the limits of postmodern Holocaust representation as it extends or possibly even crosses the boundaries of what might be considered an appropriate and responsible representation of the Holocaust. Interestingly enough, the level of acceptance of Holocaust fiction is intimately tied up with its author, i.e., readers judge a Holocaust text not only on the appropriateness of the text itself but also on the character of the author. In this very emotional case of identity politics, the fictionalization of the Holocaust is first and foremost judged by the author's authority, thus often evading aesthetic evaluations completely at the expense of ethical judgments.

This particular phenomenon can be seen throughout Holocaust Studies but finds its test case in the events surrounding Benjamin Wilkomirski's 1995 text *Fragments*. Wilkomirski's novel proclaims itself a survivor account depicting the author's fragmented and recovered memories of his early childhood in the camps. Initially hailing *Fragments* as one of the great Holocaust accounts, critics compared Wilkomirski to Elie Wiesel, Anne Frank, and Paul Celan and awarded the novel a variety of literary prizes, including the National Jewish Book Award for autobiography and memoirs and the Prix

Mémoire de la Shoah.<sup>118</sup> Only three years later, however, journalist Daniel Ganzfried exposed Wilkomirski as a fraud: after having unsuccessfully attempted to document and verify the particular details of the story, he claimed that Wilkomirski was, in fact, Bruno Grosjean, an illegitimate child raised in foster care before being adopted and renamed Bruno Dössekker. While Wilkomirski had always admitted to being Dössekker, he had also maintained that upon adoption Grosjean's identity had been retroactively forced upon him, thereby effectively erasing his own past and his Holocaust experiences. He thus describes in the Afterword to his text that "for decades I was silent but my memory could not be wiped clean. . . . It is so easy to make a child mistrust his own reflection, to take away his voice" (495). Only many years later, when attempting to come to terms with his anxieties, fears, and nightmares, Wilkomirski supposedly recovered and reclaimed his true identity so forcefully denied to him: "I wanted my own certainty back, and I wanted my voice back, so I began to write" (495). In so doing, Wilkomirski collapses his writing with the process of remembering his true past, thereby forcing his readers to admit the truth status of his story even as many of the facts and details question this truth. In fact, by framing his story as a recovered memory, its fantastic and fragmentary nature confirms its factuality rather than undermining it.

At the same time, one of the central difficulties in confirming either Wilkomirski's or Ganzfried's claims is the fact that many children of the Holocaust lost their identity, just as Wilkomirski describes.<sup>119</sup> Nevertheless, the strong doubts suddenly

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<sup>118</sup> For a detailed overview of the early reception, see Mächler, esp. 111-128.

<sup>119</sup> These "lost children" were often too young to remember their actual personal history or were purposefully placed within a non-Jewish home, thereby assuring both their survival and their loss of family and culture. Possibly the most prominent case of such a child is former Secretary of State Madeline Albright. For an account of such experiences, see Barbara Kessel, *Suddenly Jewish*.

cast upon Wilkomirski's story were enough for many to turn away from him and consequent inquiries only continued to confirm Ganzfried's story. While many supporters initially defended Wilkomirski on the account that Holocaust survivors often could not prove or confirm their stories, further inquiries weakened Wilkomirski's staunch defense of his account.<sup>120</sup> Critics changed their judgment of his novel from praising it for its simplistically brutal honesty to criticizing its lack of technique. Accordingly, the novel moved from being a "small masterpiece" (Goldhagen qtd. in Mächler 116), a "wonderful witness" (Young qtd. in Mächler 117), and a "powerful novel" (Langer qtd. in Mächler 117) to being stuttering and no great work (De Winter), stale with blunt prose and a cloying pathos (Ganzfried). Finally, in 1999, all copies of the novel were removed from bookstores and now the text is available only in conjunction with Stefan Mächler's study commissioned by Wilkomirski's publishing house, a study which concludes that Benjamin Wilkomirski's story is a fraud.

What is most interesting in the entire debate is the overwhelming literary criticism of the novel that had been repressed or ignored when the text was thought to be autobiographical. Suddenly, critics discover the writing, which they previously had described as immediate, poetic, innocent, and magical, to be dilettantish and simplistic with overwrought imagery. This raises the question as to whether the novel would have been published as fiction or whether its appeal was simply based on the subject matter and its author's supposed authenticity. In his review of the entire affair, Leon De Winter, for example, convincingly contends that *Fragments*—a literarily inferior book which the

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<sup>120</sup> Similar to the central dilemma Lyotard describes in *The Differend*, the very system that victimized survivors of the Holocaust also made certain that their truth could never be confirmed. In Wilkomirski's case, however, the opposite came to pass: since the system had prevented any affirmative proof, the lack of documentation somehow became a confirmation in its own right (see Mächler 142 ff.).

author compares to Stephen King—was published only because as a Holocaust memoir demands and criteria are different. In Wilkomirski's case, then, the ethical mandate of Holocaust representation has taken precedence over any aesthetic interests—an oversight now painfully apparent as the text has lost its historical standing and is accused of containing no literary qualities to sustain its existence.

In fact, the reception of *Fragments* exemplifies the central problem of Holocaust fiction and its aesthetic and ethical criticism in general. Holocaust survivor and author Ruth Klüger, for example, claims that the literary value of the book deteriorates from shocking to kitsch simply because the extra-literary context is altered: “with the falling away of the authentic autobiographical aspect and without the guarantee of a living first-person narrator identical with the author, it merely becomes a dramatization that offers no illumination” (qtd. in Mächler 281). What Klüger suggests—and the altered reception of the novel supports—is that within Holocaust literature the aesthetic is linked with the ethical, i.e., a literary text's aesthetic worth is dependent upon its historical truth.

Moreover, the Wilkomirski affair also testifies to the overwhelming collective meaning placed upon the Holocaust. Whether purposefully or unconsciously, Bruno Dössekker chose this historical event to symbolize the very personal pain of his childhood. Using not only the imagery but also the collective suffering of the Holocaust as symbolic of his own psychic pain, he fashions himself a Holocaust survivor, this seemingly being the only way to sufficiently render his emotional pain.<sup>121</sup> Unlike Sylvia Plath, however, who also uses Holocaust imagery to express her psychic pain yet clearly

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<sup>121</sup> Of course, a slightly less charitable reading would see him simply as a fraud who gained publicity and monetary gains by posing as a Holocaust survivor. Mächler's very compassionate study, however, suggests that Dössekker seriously believes his own story, thus raising the much more important question as to how and why someone would chose the Holocaust as one's personal fictional history.

differentiated between herself and her narrative voice, Wilkomirski *becomes* his own fiction.<sup>122</sup> In his willingness to believe his survivor status, his actions are similar to that of other victims of false recovered memories; both are driven by a need to account for psychological problems with evident external causes and by the emotional rewards of compassion and sympathy to be received.

In fact, this affair not only reveals much about the psyche of the text's author but also about its readers. Many critics now have commented on the overall willingness to accept and praise this seemingly inferior literary work, a willingness that can only be accounted for with our overall "cult of testimony," as Raul Hilberg calls it. More dangerous than the actual lack of artistic sense and sensibility when confronted with writings of the Holocaust are some of the potentially underlying reasons for such a lack. As Jörg Lau convincingly argues, the wholehearted emotional acceptance of a survivor testimony allows the audience to self-righteously side with the victim at the same time as readers can subtly detach themselves and can forego any intellectual engagement. *Fragments's* style, of course, lends itself to such a reading, since the author claims the voice of a three-year-old, thereby positioning himself as ultimate victim and innocent of any reflection or deception.

The Wilkomirski affair thus reveals two important facets of current Holocaust Studies. First, it shows how the Holocaust has attained almost mythical proportions in our collective unconscious. This is obviously the case on a general historical level insofar as the Holocaust has become the exemplar of atrocity against which other historic

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<sup>122</sup> For a reading of Plath's metaphorical usage of the Holocaust as an "imaginative misappropriation of atrocity," see Rosenfeld 175-82. For an excellent defense of Sylvia Plath's use of the Holocaust as archetypal imagery, see Young 117-32.

events are measured. On a more personal level, however, Holocaust survivors seem to represent the epitome of victimhood; so much so that Bruno Dössekker appropriates this status in order to account for his psychic pain. In fact, even if Dössekker deliberately perpetrated this falsehood, it would still testify to the emotional reward he gains by passing as a survivor. At the same time, Wilkomirski's story reveals the crucial role of the author and identity politics in the reception of Holocaust fiction. The same text is judged completely differently—ethically and aesthetically—depending on whether it is fact or fiction. While it certainly is important from an ethical and factual perspective whether the author tells the truth, it should not diminish the aesthetic value nor the emotional impact of the text—yet, according to most of its critics, it does both. Rather than cherishing the text as a powerful testimony of the role of the Holocaust in our contemporary thought and the imaginary power Holocaust imagery holds in our collective unconscious, most critics refuse to engage any longer with the text.<sup>123</sup>

Of course, within a postmodern context, the truth status of the tale and the biographical background of the author should be of little import. After all, postmodernism has long proclaimed the author to be dead and has destroyed the clear lines separating fact and fiction. Furthermore, one of postmodernism's central tenets, the shifting and uncertain identity of all characters, is particularly appropriate in the context of the Holocaust where false identities could often save lives. Nevertheless, within the field of Holocaust Studies, the author returns with a vengeance and, as we have seen in

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<sup>123</sup> A similar controversy that addresses the potential value of false testimony is the debate surrounding Rigoberta Menchú's 1982 *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, a powerful narrative delineating the horrific experiences of Guatemala's rural peasants during a brutal and devastating civil war. Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992, Menchú was discovered to have falsified many of the details of her life in her supposed autobiography. David Stoll's revealing 1999 study provoked a debate about postmodern appropriations of history in an intellectual context where the positive impact of Menchú's testimony on human rights causes must be pitted against the need for historical accuracy.

the Wilkomirski scandal, the author's persona, background, and credibility become the ultimate measuring stick for any critical approach. Thus, when looking at the role of the author in Holocaust fiction, we can easily define one of the limits of postmodern Holocaust fiction which is upheld by many authors who otherwise must be considered postmodernists. After all, even though Thomas employs any number of postmodern techniques, he resorts to testimonies and documentation of real events when dealing with the Holocaust.<sup>124</sup> Similarly, Art Spiegelman, whose comic books *Maus* and *Maus II* must be considered one of the most important contributions to Holocaust literature of the past two decades, emphasizes that his texts may be considered literature but should never fall under the rubric of fiction. In the CD Rom version of *Maus*, Spiegelman also includes several of the taped interviews with his father, thus reiterating the fact that none of the material in his books is made-up, that he has done his research and tells us the truth.<sup>125</sup>

Raymond Federman provides a particularly interesting case since he is one of the few survivors who have chosen to recount their experiences in a highly experimental form that questions its own truth status. Repeatedly, he evades questions as to the veracity of his experiences, usually pointing towards his literary texts as answers. Yet for all his merging of truth and fiction, his emphasis on past experiences as only accessible via textual constructs, he himself is not protected from the reality-demands of the Holocaust. In fact, Federman ultimately falls back on a certain ethical imperative of the Holocaust as he maintains the verity and reality of his experiences. In most of his texts—

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<sup>124</sup> This, of course, is more pronounced in *The White Hotel* where the entire Holocaust chapter is indebted to a survivor testimony, but even in *Pictures*, he incorporates historically documented events.

<sup>125</sup> Moreover, Spiegelman also asserts his right to speak authoritatively about the Holocaust as he presents himself as a second generation survivor, thus insinuating a certain inheritance of experience and truth.

both fictional and theoretical—he toys with the question of truth, the supposed fictionality of his experiences. When describing his non-fictional autobiographical essay, “Raymond Federman: A Version of My Life—The Early Years,” for example, he shockingly realizes that he is plagiarizing his own novels (in Hornung and Ruhe 377). Throughout, then, he undermines the clear boundary between truth and lies, reality and fiction, as he emphasizes,

I have a story to tell, which is basically the story of my life. . . . What *is* interesting is not the story itself, but *how I tell you that story*. It’s the only reason you want to listen to me, or read my books. Not because of the story per se but because of the way I’m going to tell you what happened to me. In a way you are more interested in the lies, the exaggerations, the disguises I’m going to use to tell you my story and which are going to make you believe in the truth of my lie. (in LeClair and McCaffery 134)

Clearly, Federman’s relentless focus on the merging of fact and fiction challenges the ethical imperative of Holocaust fiction that attempts to establish the truth of what happened in the camps in order to counter Holocaust deniers and write a history of the persecuted. Federman’s identity as a survivor thus jars with his nonchalant attitude about truth and lies. As Timothy Dow Adams has argued, however, Federman’s lying might be the direct result of his trying to come to terms with the Holocaust and his own status as survivor. He describes how “the possibility that the fictional Federman is lying about the whole extermination is his way out of dilemma” of the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of writing his family’s extermination (355). In so doing, the character’s lies become the ultimate defense against the author’s past.

Yet, in a 1990 essay “Federman on Federman: Lie or Die,” Federman demonstrates the limits of this particular defense mechanism as he foregoes the ludic ambiguities of fiction and insists on the veracity of his traumatic life experiences. He describes an encounter with a hostile critic who challenges the truth of “the closet

experience” and instead suggests that Federman invented the entire episode, that “[he] had never been hidden in a closet during World War II, that [his] parents and sisters were never taken away to a concentration camp to be exterminated, that in fact they were well and still living somewhere in the world” (“Federman on Federman” 96). Fittingly, Federman does not refute the critic’s claim but instead inserts three different versions of his autobiography into the text, thus using his fiction to support his facts. While he admits, “I have been circling around that closet experience, digging into that obsession, telling the same old story, and yet there is no way to know if it truly happened to me” (“Federman on Federman” 97), he asserts “I had no proofs to convince him of the *truth*. I only had my fiction—my lies” (“Federman on Federman” 99 [my italics]). Juxtaposing the critics’ attack with his *truth*—albeit supported by his *lies* via his fiction—Federman ultimately leaves the grounds of pla(y)giarism and lies in order to assert his autobiographical trauma. He does so, however, while emphasizing the readers’ inability to confirm those truths as “there is no way to know” (“Federman on Federman” 99) and the ultimate superiority of the imagination.

Furthermore, on being questioned quite aggressively after giving this paper at a conference, he responded with uncharacteristic emotion. After Eugene Goodheart compares him to Holocaust denier Faurisson and asks, “Doesn’t it worry you that you are possibly trivializing [the Holocaust],” Federman reacts angrily: “Do you know how the Holocaust is trivialized everyday? Have you ever watched some of those programs on television? Have you read those novels, those terrible novels? Have you read *The Voice in the Closet*? No, you have not read *The Voice in the Closet*. I do not trivialize that thing. But I had to carry that burden for the past forty-five years and it is the only way I

can live with it. . . . It is the only way I can deal with it” (Hornung and Ruhe 379). In this rare emotional outburst we can see Federman reinscribing a boundary between fact and fiction as it relates to his own Holocaust experience that most of his literary and theoretical work tends to deny.

Yet it is in his follow-up to this comment that Federman clarifies the importance of respecting historical eyewitness experiences while at the same time emphasizing their limited role in finding historic truths. When pushed by Goodheart on whether “we are not to take the disclaimer seriously,” Federman reiterates and qualifies his general theoretical stance: “I think that the disclaimer is not that it never happened, but that this closet experience that I had—yes, I had it, but I don’t want you to think that because of that ‘closet’ you must feel sorry for me. I want you to understand that beyond the closet there is something else” (Alfred Hornung and Ernstpeter Ruhe 379). Even in his understandably emotional rejoinder to the accusation of trivializing the Holocaust, Federman foregrounds the insufficiency of reality. When claiming that “beyond the closet there is something else,” he emphasizes the fact that his experiences and his ability to share them with his audience are more dependant on representation than on the pure facts themselves. While his constant return to the closet experience testifies to the significance of the moment of his survival, the site of his (re)birth, the various ways in which he approaches this experience are as important as the actual events themselves. In fact, the different styles and modes Federman uses to convey his past are his way to describe and comprehend something that he himself is unable to understand or even fully and objectively recollect. While woefully insufficient and sometimes dangerously

irreverent, Federman's style is at the same time sadly appropriate insofar as it represents what is left of language after the Holocaust.

As such, Federman exemplifies the ultimate postmodern Holocaust writer: emphasizing his survivor past and using it as an emotional backdrop to provide an ethical truth claim, Federman nevertheless moves beyond his own experience. In fact, he uses historical and personal truths to create abstract and general ones, so that his personal experiences simply provide a starting point for his insights about the postmodern subject, language, and culture. In so doing, he illustrates how our postmodern life is intimately tied up with the Holocaust as our collective unconscious searches for an event to which it can point as the moment of change, an event that the Holocaust easily provides.

While the Holocaust may be a thoroughly modern event in its philosophical and pragmatic existence, it must be understood as laying the foundations for postmodernism and postmodernity, both only comprehensible in a post-Holocaust world. Whether our focus is cultural, linguistic, or psychological, the Holocaust has left its indelible mark on post-War life. It is this central connection between postmodernism and the Holocaust that makes postmodern literature genuinely suited to represent our current understanding of the Holocaust and to investigate its influence on contemporary life. Literature, by its very nature focused on issues of representation, allows us to foreground concerns of mediation often overlooked in more traditional historical inquiries; postmodern literature, in particular, offers insight into the Holocaust's effects on postmodern life in general. In fact, while the authors I chose to investigate by no means present a comprehensive account of Holocaust literature, they do offer a wide variety of reactions to the Holocaust, not only showing its exemplary role for postmodernism but also exhibiting a variety of

ways in which postmodernism can offer new insights into our understanding of the Holocaust and its role in contemporary life. Thus, while Holocaust Studies mostly addresses the actual actions of the Nazi perpetrators and the experiences of its victims, the Holocaust's effects on post-war life and consecutive generations still require much further inquiry. In view of that, this dissertation is but a beginning in establishing and investigating the impact of the Holocaust, using postmodern literature as a particularly apt medium to contemplate the difficulties facing all inquiries into this exceptionally dark part of recent history.

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### **BIOGRAPHY**

Kristina Busse was born November 29, 1967 in Mainz, Germany. She received her *Vordiplom* in mathematics in 1989 and her *Zwischenprüfung* in American Studies in 1990 from the Johannes-Gutenberg-Universität in Mainz. She attended the Free University in Berlin and received her M.A. in English in 1993 from Tulane University. She has published on Virginia Woolf, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and the Holocaust. Since 1995 she has been married to Jeffrey Ryan Simm of Pascagoula, Mississippi, and they live in Mobile, Alabama with their two children where she teaches at the Alabama School of Math and Science.