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**LITERARY AND THEOLOGICAL RESPONSES TO THE HOLOCAUST**

**PHILIP J. LYONS**

**A thesis submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the requirements for the degree of Ph.D. in the Faculty of Arts, Department of Theology and Religious Studies.**

**September 1988**

## ABSTRACT

I am concerned in this thesis to assess the ways in which writers and theologians have responded to the systematic murder of Europe's Jews by the Nazis, an event now commonly referred to as the Holocaust. I take this event to be of central importance in any understanding of Western culture.

Beginning with the writings of survivors themselves, I have sought to address the question of what constitutes an appropriate response to the fact of mass destruction. In considering imaginative versions of the Holocaust, I have restricted myself to novels and short stories, offering a critique of selected texts in the light of the historical event itself. I have singled out three novels for special attention in a chapter on the pornographic tenor of some of this literature.

If writers are confronted by the problem of making the event seem real or credible, theologians are confronted by the problem of incorporating the negative reality of the event into an affirmative tradition. I offer a summary of Jewish theological responses in one chapter, and two chapters on relevant aspects of contemporary Christian theology; namely, a re-examination of suffering and the radical encounter with the Church's legacy of antisemitism.

I regard the respective enterprises of novelists and theologians as in some measure complementary, believing that culture should where possible be studied as a whole. The tenuous status of culture after Auschwitz makes it imperative to recognize the extent to which the world has been irrevocably changed by the epoch of genocide.

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My debt to John Kent, my supervisor, goes without saying. Moreover, financial assistance in the form of a Major State Studentship from the DES (more recently under the auspices of the British Academy) was instrumental in making it all possible. I hope that submission of the thesis will go some way towards repaying these benefactors.

Finally, let me say how grateful I am to Susan Reed for typing the whole thing so promptly and so well.

I dedicate this thesis to Hannah Simpson, my niece and god-daughter, born the week I embarked on it (though we both took a while to get our bearings), and to her two sisters, Jessica and Rebecca. "An intellectual hatred is the worst,/So let her think opinions are accused."

## MEMORANDUM

I certify that the work contained in this dissertation is my own. It has not been submitted previously for a degree at any other university.

P. J. Lyons

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## INTRODUCTION

All post-Auschwitz culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage.... Whoever pleads for the maintenance of this radically culpable and shabby culture becomes its accomplice, while the man who says no to culture is directly furthering the barbarism which our culture showed itself to be.

Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics

Some forty years after the systematic degradation and murder of Europe's Jews, I find myself asking what it means to accept that such a crime took place. The debate surrounding the uniqueness of the Holocaust<sup>1</sup> seems misplaced in the face of its enormity. Are we any less obliged to respond to what might be described as state-sponsored genocide simply because it is not without precedent? What kind of cynicism is it that says, in effect, we need not bother too much with this phenomenon, it has all happened before? We are indeed coming to the end of a century that has unleashed two immensely destructive world wars, countless regional ones, and the continuing success of despotism as a form of government. That something has gone very wrong with the advance of civilization is hardly a reason for complacency.

"The Final Solution of the Jewish Question", in the phrase the Nazis chose to conceal their plans for mass murder, provides a seemingly insurmountable obstacle to anyone who wishes to believe that humankind has something to hope for from the progress of history. Like Moses Herzog, the hero of a novel by Saul Bellow, we are perhaps troubled by what seems to represent the spirit of the age:

"You think history is the history of loving hearts? You fool! Look at these millions of dead. Can you pity them, feel for them? You can nothing! There were too many. We burned them to ashes, we buried them with bulldozers.

History is the history of cruelty, not love, as soft men think. We have experimented with every human capacity to see which is strong and admirable and have shown that none is. There is only practicality. If the old God exists he must be a murderer. But the one true god is Death. This is how it is - without cowardly illusions." Herzog heard this as if it were being spoken slowly inside his head.<sup>2</sup>

Where is the voice to counter these thoughts?

This thesis is an attempt to find such a voice in the responses of writers and theologians to the Holocaust.<sup>3</sup> The treatment of the Holocaust in literature has become so extensive that I propose to limit myself to an examination of its treatment in fiction, that is, essentially the novel, although I shall also be considering the role of eyewitness testimony in defining the scope of what can and cannot be said. Fiction produced by survivors would seem to occupy an ambiguous position that merits being assessed in its own right.

My main justification for choosing the novel is a personal one: it is the form of literature I most enjoy. But there is also a more general reason, suggested to me in the course of reading The Sense of an Ending by Frank Kermode. As he rather grandly puts it, "It happens that in our phase of civility, the novel is the central form of literary art. It lends itself to explanations borrowed from any intellectual system of the universe which seems at the time satisfactory."<sup>4</sup> Milan Kundera has argued something similar in an essay on "The Novel and Europe". "The novel's essence is complexity," he claims. "Every novel says to the reader: 'Things are not as simple as you think.'"<sup>5</sup> Kundera might have written "every good novel"; a distinguishing feature of bad novels (and there are more than a few on the subject of the Holocaust) is a tendency towards propaganda, simplification by distortion in much the same manner as the mass media. Kundera himself is anxious to oppose the spirit of the mass media with the novel's greater wisdom, what he calls "the wisdom of uncertainty".<sup>6</sup> Kermode finds this wisdom in the nature of fiction as something which is consciously false.<sup>7</sup> Fiction provides a way of making sense of the world without appealing to the timeless authority of God or destiny.



Theologians, of course, are committed to some notion of divine authority, but, whether Jewish or Christian, they now face the task of reconciling their respective faiths with the fact of Auschwitz. For Jews the challenge is more transparent: What does it mean to be a Jew after the destruction of so many merely for existing? Christians are confronted by a number of questions: Can the traditional belief that suffering makes holy still be affirmed in the light of the apparently senseless suffering endured in the camps? To what extent is the Church responsible for the antisemitism<sup>8</sup> that led to the Final Solution? What are the implications of this for relations between Christians and Jews today?

I do not wish to imply that novelists have an easier task than theologians in coming to terms with the Holocaust. After all, the novel is a product of Western humanism - "the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God", Georg Lukács calls it<sup>9</sup> - which proved no more effective in resisting the ideological lure of Nazism than did religion. But the novelist does have the advantage of not being committed a priori to a set of beliefs and is free, unlike the theologian, to let the imagination roam. How the imagination is able to cope with the world of the death camps remains to be seen. What is clear, however, is that only by a supreme effort of responsiveness (that is, using our capacity to respond) can we begin to acknowledge Auschwitz as our heritage.

Let me illustrate the nub of the problem by citing an example of the way in which news of mass murder was first received by the Allies. In The Terrible Secret, Walter Laqueur describes the reaction of a prominent American judge to what Jan Karski, a courier from Warsaw who had himself seen the death camp at Belzec, had to tell him soon after being smuggled out of Poland towards the end of 1942:

Karski told Justice Frankfurter everything he knew about the Jews, and when he finished the Justice said some complimentary things and then, "I can't believe you." Ciechanowski ... told Frankfurter that Karski had come under the authority of the Polish Government and that there was no possibility

in the world that he was not telling the unadorned truth. Frankfurter: "I did not say this young man is lying. I said I cannot believe him. There is a difference."<sup>10</sup>

Even after the camps were liberated this incredulity persisted. Even today the facts resist assimilation.

It is all the more urgent to find some way of responding to the death camps in the wake of recent attempts to deny that they ever existed. The so-called historical revisionists may be few in number, but the fact that neo-Nazi apologetics have any support at all from the academic community is cause for concern. Robert Faurisson, a French professor of history, provoked a scandal with the publication of his claim that the gas chambers were a figment of the imagination, yet he was nevertheless invited to air his views on American radio. In an article on "Lies about the Holocaust", the historian Lucy Dawidowicz relates how she was invited to debate with him:

While I was writing this article, a man associated with the Larry King radio show, a national network talk program, called to ask if I would debate with Faurisson. When I replied indignantly that Faurisson should not be provided with a platform for his monomania, the man mildly inquired why I was against discussing "controversial" matters on the radio. I in turn asked him if he thought the murder of the European Jews was a "controversial" matter. Had it not been established to his satisfaction as a historical fact? "I don't know," he answered. "I wasn't around at the time. I'm only thirty years old."<sup>11</sup>

Has relativism thus triumphed over our capacity to respond to the nightmare of history? Does the authority of the eyewitness count for nothing unless we are eyewitnesses too? Is documentary evidence to be treated like fiction? I would be over-reacting if I were to devote myself to the refutation of one man's stupidity, but he and I belong to the same generation, and I perceive in his response an unwillingness to accept the burden of the past. If we cut ourselves off from our history, we are more likely than ever to repeat the mistakes of earlier generations. Implicit in this man's statement is an indifference to the fate of strangers. "Why should I care what happens to people I've never heard

of?" he seems to be saying. Especially if they're Jews, one might add - as a lack of concern with the Holocaust can often be traced to a lingering antisemitism.

Not that Jews were the only victims. Martin Gilbert estimates that at least as many non-Jews perished as a consequence of Nazi atrocities.<sup>12</sup> Slavs and Gypsies were persecuted and killed because they were deemed to be racially inferior. Homosexuals and Jehovah's Witnesses met a similar fate for what was regarded as social deviance. Political opponents of the Nazis, needless to say, were ruthlessly punished. But the argument for defining the Holocaust as a Jewish catastrophe has always been based on the singularity with which the Nazis sought to destroy every living Jew.<sup>13</sup> This is what a Jewish theologian has called the unique intentionality of the Holocaust.<sup>14</sup> It was Hitler's belief, first expressed publicly in Mein Kampf, that by eliminating the Jews from history altogether he would be saving the human race:

If the Jew, with the help of his Marxist catechism, triumphs over the peoples of this world, his crown will be the dance of death for mankind, and as once before, millions of years ago, this planet will again sail empty of all human life through the ether.... I believe that I am today acting according to the purposes of the almighty Creator. In resisting the Jew, I am fighting the Lord's battle.<sup>15</sup>

If Hitler's project ultimately failed it was not because it lacked support in the occupied countries. Though some people did risk their lives to help Jews, most did not; and the Nazis were able to recruit willing accomplices to expedite their elaborate programme of annihilation. The record of the Allies is itself none too heartening when it comes to the rescue of Jewish lives. The failure to bomb the railway tracks leading to Auschwitz has become a symbol of the world's indifference to the fate of the Jews. The present-day equation of Auschwitz with Hiroshima or the My Lai massacre in the Vietnam War is, as Bruno Bettelheim suggests, an extension of this.<sup>16</sup> The Jews were victims of an unprovoked aggression quite separate from the atrocities, terrible though they are, of modern warfare.

Bettelheim, a distinguished Austrian-born child psychologist who was imprisoned for a year in the concentration camps at Dachau and Buchenwald, before being allowed to emigrate to the USA in 1939, accuses American intellectuals of siding, whether consciously or not, with the Nazis. "It is but the other side of the coin," he adds, "when the same intellectuals applaud books and films which use the death camps as background to titillate or excite, and in this way make them appear as just an ordinary part of life".<sup>17</sup> Any assessment of literary responses would be inadequate without some recognition of this trend for glamourizing the Holocaust. One must also recognize the extent to which the reality has been misrepresented by the very act of discussing it as an academic problem. George Steiner first warned against this some twenty years ago. "The best now, after so much has been set forth," he wrote in 1966, "is, perhaps, to be silent; not to add to the trivia of literary, sociological debate, to the unspeakable."<sup>18</sup>

Steiner has himself, in fact, continued to make occasional contributions to the debate, reflecting his belief that the next best is to try and understand.<sup>19</sup> He has even produced a fictional response in the form of a novella, The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H. (1979). But his warning still stands, for not everyone is as passionate or as honest in their commitment to free inquiry. It is all too easy to appropriate the Holocaust for your own ends. It is with a certain unease, therefore, that I embark on what might be seen as yet one more instance of morbid curiosity or impetuous axe-grinding. Robert Alter observed in 1981 that there were 93 courses on the Holocaust then on offer at American and Canadian colleges and universities.<sup>20</sup> That number has doubtless increased since. The emergence of Holocaust Studies as a discipline in its own right is surely a mixed blessing. While it clearly bears witness to an increased awareness of the need to investigate thoroughly the social and cultural factors that made possible murder on so vast a scale, it also reduces the Holocaust to part of the curriculum, something to get up on for exams.

To try and understand the Holocaust is a lifetime's work. It would be absurd to imagine that academic seminars and conferences are anything but a prelude to serious reflection. A discussion of genocide between breakfast and dinner is unlikely to shed much light on the experience of dehumanization. My analysis of the responses of others is thus guided by a sceptical respect for the limits of human discourse. When W.H. Auden wrote "We must love one another or die," he was not being over-literal (at any rate, he managed to survive for a good many years to witness love's failure as a medium of exchange in world affairs), but he was drawing attention to the gap between our needs and our means.<sup>21</sup> If a word like "love" is to have any meaning beyond its sentimental definition in pop songs and romantic fiction, we must first address Adorno's complaint that all post-Auschwitz culture is garbage.<sup>22</sup> As Steiner has put it, "We come after."<sup>23</sup> Our world has been radically compromised by the existence of the death camps. That the hardware of destruction is now sufficient to end the world completely should not blind us to the fact that extreme human destructiveness has already found its expression in the bureaucratic and technological implementation of the Final Solution.

#### A Note on "Holocaust Literature"

There have been a number of general surveys of literary responses to the Holocaust, in addition to those works which deal with individual authors or literature in a specific culture. Irving Halperin's Messengers from the Dead (1970) appears to have been the first, drawing on selected texts to illuminate the moral questions raised by the catastrophe.<sup>24</sup> Lawrence Langer's The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination (1975) reflects a similar confidence in the authority of literature as a form of instruction, but adopts a more critical approach:

The mind resists what it feels to be imaginatively valid but wants to disbelieve; and the task of the artist is to find a style and a form to present the atmosphere or landscape of atrocity, to make it compelling, to coax the reader into credulity - and ultimately, complicity. The fundamental task of the critic is not to ask whether it should or can be done, since it already has been, but to evaluate how it has been done, judge its effectiveness, and analyze its implications for literature and for society.<sup>25</sup>

If one balks at Langer's desire to classify these literary responses as a movement - to construct "an aesthetics of atrocity"<sup>26</sup> - it comes as something of a relief to find that his next work, Versions of Survival (1982), is restricted to an assessment of the writings of survivors. It was confusing to read his earlier contention 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 even when they were not literally survivors, since they were the ones, notwithstanding intermittent moments of despair, who were destined to recreate in their art a unique portion of contemporary reality".<sup>27</sup> But by exploring the question of how far survivors are reliable witnesses of their own ordeals, Langer is able to give a clearer sense of the uniqueness of their testimony.<sup>28</sup>

The term "Holocaust literature" is adopted by Edward Alexander in his collection of essays, The Resonance of Dust (1979), and it seems to have become the accepted shorthand for a new genre.<sup>29</sup> Alexander himself is less concerned with literature as such than with the status of Jews in the modern world.<sup>30</sup> Alvin Rosenfeld, however, who also employs the term in A Double Dying (1980), has aesthetic considerations very much to the fore, even if, like Alexander, he recognizes the inextricable moral dimension of using the imagination to reproduce the experiences of the victims. He writes of the need to place Holocaust literature in the context of the history that has given rise to it, "a history that reduces the expressive powers of language almost to silence, yet at the same time obligates writers to speech". He continues:

If one can talk about such a thing as a phenomenology of Holocaust literature, it would have to be in terms of this contradiction between the impossibility but also the necessity of writing about the death of the idea of man in order to sustain that idea.<sup>31</sup>

A Double Dying is probably the most comprehensive survey yet produced, covering diaries, journals, memoirs, novels, plays, and poetry. It has an excellent bibliography to match the broad sweep of its text. Sidra Ezrahi's By Words Alone (1980) also covers a lot of ground, but concentrates on imaginative responses, providing a more or less straightforward taxonomy of these.<sup>32</sup> As a taxonomy it does not engage with the larger questions raised by artistic representation of extremity. Rosenfeld, on the other hand, does much to address such questions in A Double Dying, pointing to a crisis of language after the Holocaust. But he is a little too hasty in his dismissal of the various literary theories, since they also acknowledge a crisis of language and, however inadequately, seek to resolve it.<sup>33</sup>

The whole humanist enterprise is foundering for want of a shared belief in meaning. Rosenfeld's own belief that there is such a thing as Holocaust literature, that it is a composite literature - "a literature of fragments, of partial and provisional forms, no one of which by itself can suffice to express the Holocaust, but the totality of which begins to accumulate and register a coherent and powerful effect"<sup>34</sup> - is appealing without being altogether persuasive. A good deal of second-rate material can be made to seem more important than it really is.

Thus, I find the term "Holocaust literature" unhelpful. It dignifies a body of texts that is united by a common theme but not by any consistent worth; it fails to distinguish between eyewitness testimony and fiction (though Rosenfeld makes the distinction in the course of developing his argument); and it is often used ambiguously, applying variously to the writings of survivors alone, to work by Jewish writers, or to the gamut of literary responses. Just as the growth of Holocaust Studies brings with it the danger of making the response to mass

murder an academic exercise, so the concept of Holocaust literature predisposes the student to bypass reflection in favour of passive consumption. Such detachment as I can muster in the following pages is entirely self-conscious.



## Notes

- (1) "Holocaust" is less than perfect to convey the senselessness of what historian Lucy Dawidowicz has usefully called the war against the Jews. Its connotation of religious sacrifice seems inappropriate. Nevertheless, it is, as Dawidowicz points out, the term that Jews themselves have chosen to commemorate being singled out for death. (See Lucy S. Dawidowicz, The War Against the Jews 1933-1945 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p.19.) Some Jews now prefer to use the Hebrew word Shoah (which means more straightforwardly "destruction"), especially in the wake of "holocaust" becoming a generic term for any large-scale catastrophe (and in popular usage for small-scale ones too). For the sake of clarity I have continued to address the destruction of the Jews as the Holocaust, but with these qualifications in mind.
- (2) Saul Bellow, Herzog (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p.297.
- (3) All the material I have dealt with is either written in English or in English translation.
- (4) Frank Kermode, The Sense of an Ending (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p.128.
- (5) Milan Kundera, "The Novel and Europe", New York Review of Books, 19 July 1984, p.18.
- (6) *Ibid.*, p.15.
- (7) Kermode, Sense of an Ending, p.64.
- (8) I have chosen this spelling in preference to the more orthodox "anti-Semitism" because it is less ambiguous as well as less cumbersome. The word means hostility to Jews rather than to mythical Semites.
- (9) Georg Lukács, The Theory of the Novel, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1978), p.88. Lukács also writes, "The novel tells the adventure of interiority; the content of the novel is the story of the soul that goes to find itself, that seeks adventures in order to be proved and tested by them, and by proving itself, to find its own essence." (p.89) The story of the Holocaust is the story of the soul's mortality.
- (10) Walter Laqueur, The Terrible Secret (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p.237.
- (11) Lucy S. Dawidowicz, "Lies about the Holocaust", Commentary 70 (December 1980), p.36.
- (12) Martin Gilbert, Atlas of the Holocaust (London: Michael Joseph, 1982), p.11.
- (13) Dawidowicz puts it thus:  
"The Final Solution transcended the bounds of modern historical experience. Never before in modern history had one people made the killing of another the fulfilment of an ideology, in whose pursuit means were identical with ends. History has, to be sure, recorded terrible massacres and destruction that one people perpetrated against another, but all - however cruel and unjustifiable - were intended to achieve instrumental ends, being means to ends, not ends in themselves." (War against the Jews, pp.18-19.)

- (14) Steven T. Katz, Post-Holocaust Dialogues (New York: New York University Press, 1983), pp.287-310.
- (15) Cited by Norman Cohn, Warrant for Genocide (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1967), p.187.
- (16) Bruno Bettelheim, "The Holocaust - One Generation Later", in Surviving the Holocaust (London: Fontana/Collins, 1986), p.203.
- (17) Ibid.
- (18) George Steiner, "Postscript", in Language and Silence (London: Faber & Faber, 1967), p.188.
- (19) Ibid.
- (20) Robert Alter, "Deformations of the Holocaust", Commentary 71 (February 1981), p.49.
- (21) W.H. Auden, "September 1, 1939". (Selected Poems, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber & Faber, 1979), p.88.)
- (22) Theodor W. Adorno, Negative Dialectics, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p.367.
- (23) Steiner, Language and Silence (Preface), p.15.
- (24) Irving Halperin, Messengers from the Dead: Literature of the Holocaust (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970).
- (25) Lawrence L. Langer, The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), p.22.
- (26) Ibid.
- (27) Ibid., p.20.
- (28) Lawrence L. Langer, Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982).
- (29) Edward Alexander, The Resonance of Dust: Essays on Holocaust Literature and Jewish Fate (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1979). The idea of a new genre is stated explicitly by Mary Gerhart in her contribution to The Holocaust as Interruption (Concilium 175, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and David Tracy, pp. 75-79), though she appears to confine her definition of Holocaust literature to Jewish writing on the subject, if not purely to work written by survivors.
- (30) Alexander writes in his Preface that "in the aftermath of the Holocaust the historical situation of the Jewish people is so desperate that an evaluation of Holocaust literature in merely literary terms is an unaffordable luxury". (Resonance of Dust, p.xv.)
- (31) Alvin H. Rosenfeld, A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), p.8. The allusion to "the idea of man" refers back to a quotation from Elie Wiesel: "At Auschwitz, not only man died but also the idea of man." (Cited by Rosenfeld, p.5.)

- (32) Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).
- (33) Rosenfeld, Double Dying, pp.11,19. To caricature all previous critical methods as arbitrary forms of symbol-hunting is to do them an injustice. One does not have to be a Marxist, a Freudian, a structuralist or post-structuralist, for example, to glean some insight from the arguments concerning the status of the text.
- (34) *Ibid.*, p.33.

**PART I**

**LITERARY RESPONSES**

**TO THE HOLOCAUST**

## CHAPTER 1

### THE SURVIVOR AS WITNESS

There are no parallels to life in the concentration camps. Its horror can never be fully embraced by the imagination for the very reason that it stands outside of life and death. It can never be fully reported for the very reason that the survivor returns to the world of the living, which makes it impossible for him to believe fully in his own past experiences. It is as though he had a story to tell of another planet, for the status of the inmates in the world of the living, where nobody is supposed to know if they are alive or dead, is such that it is as though they had never been born.

Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism

To read the testimony of survivors is to be challenged by a world beyond our understanding. These narratives form a record of what was endured by the inmates of the camps without, on the whole, making it seem more real. However desperately the witness cries "I was there! I saw it with my own eyes," we shake our heads and say "But we weren't. We can't imagine what it was like." We want to understand, yet knowing the details of this or that atrocity brings us no closer to comprehension. As much as we feel a duty to heed what survivors have to tell us, their accounts do not necessarily illuminate the terrible suffering that they chronicle: the work of Primo Levi is a notable exception, and the core of this chapter will be dedicated to an appreciation of that work. It is understandable, then, if survivors have sought to express the nightmare of their past through the medium of fiction. I also propose to examine some examples of such fiction, measuring them against the sense of unreality that afflicts the survivor of an event so extreme as the Holocaust.

First, let us be quite clear about who survived. Some two hundred thousand Jews were among the survivors of the camps and the death marches.<sup>1</sup> If we

compare that figure to the six million who were murdered, we begin to realize how near to completion the Final Solution was, in Europe at any rate. Even after the camps had been liberated former prisoners continued to die from the effects of hardship and disease. What could be more grimly ironic than the fatalities consequent on the generosity of American troops, whose donations of chocolate, jam and other rich food proved impossible to digest for many of the survivors? Moreover, there were few survivors of the six camps set up exclusively for the purpose of mass extermination - Auschwitz-Birkenau, Belzec, Chelmno, Majdanek, Sobibor, and Treblinka. Of the two survivors of Belzec, one was murdered in Poland nearly a year after the war had ended - because he was a Jew.<sup>2</sup>

There have been various attempts to portray the survivors as an elect of some kind, none more thoroughly researched than The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps (1976) by Terrence Des Pres. Apart from the misleading inaccuracy of the subtitle - Des Pres not only fails to make a distinction between death camps and concentration camps, he also mixes testimony from the survivors of Stalin's purges with that from survivors of the Holocaust - the very exercise seems like an insult to the dead, as if survival were evidence of superior character. One of Primo Levi's chief preoccupations, as we shall see, was to make understood that survival, for Jews at least, depended rather more on chance than on strategy: all Jews were destined for annihilation. The conclusion that Des Pres reaches - "A biological wisdom exists, prompting us to know that in life's own needs the spirit can find a home"<sup>3</sup> - is based on a naive reading of the material to hand.

The author's celebration of the will to live skates over his initial recognition of how utterly degraded prisoners were. They were subjected to what Des Pres calls "excremental assault", made to feel defiled by their own bodily needs, stripped of any vestige of their dignity. This humiliation, as Des Pres points out,

may well have been a greater trial even than hunger or the fear of death. He has no understanding, however, of its traumatic repercussions. Those who survived were unable to recover fully their self-respect. "Survivors return from the grave," Des Pres alleges, "they come through Hell, and some, after descent into darkness and the defiling filth of underground sewers, rise again into the common world of sun and simple life."<sup>4</sup> Resurrections are rarely so straightforward. Des Pres has allowed himself to neutralize the suffering of others by making it seem romantic.

The concentration camps were reservoirs of slave labour. Those too weak to work were beaten to death or sent to the gas chambers. Des Pres is so impressed by the degree of consistency among eyewitness reports that he loses sight of the fact that only a tiny minority survived to write them:

Books by survivors are invariably group portraits, in which the writer's personal experience is representative and used to provide a perspective on the common plight. Survival is a collective act, and so is bearing witness. Both are rooted in compassion and care, and both expose the illusion of separateness. It is not an exaggeration, nor merely a metaphor, to say that the survivor's identity includes the dead.<sup>5</sup>

Does this mean that the dead are not really dead? In the face of mass murder one might equally say that dying is a collective act. Theodor Adorno expressed it thus:

The administrative murder of millions made of death a thing one had never yet to fear in just this fashion. There is no chance any more for death to come into the individual's empirical life as somehow comfortable with the course of that life. The least, the poorest possession left to the individual is expropriated.<sup>6</sup>

Des Pres depersonalizes the struggle to survive and thereby avoids the difficult question of why some became accomplices to their Nazi overseers, while others opted for some form of solidarity, however minimal, with their fellow victims. "The purpose of action in extremity is to keep life going," Des Pres argues. Whose life? Any life, it would seem. He criticizes psychoanalysts for their moralizing approach to behaviour in the camps, singling out Bruno

Bettelheim for his old-fashioned notions of heroism.<sup>7</sup> But Bettelheim does speak with the authority of a survivor, albeit one who was released before the worst excesses began, and I am inclined to view his response to The Survivor as the more penetrating critique. In his essay on "Surviving", concerned primarily with Lina Wertmüller's film Seven Beauties, Bettelheim takes Des Pres to task for believing that survival is all.<sup>8</sup> As he remarks elsewhere, "Survival in the camps - this cannot be stressed enough - depended foremost on luck; to be able to survive, one had to escape being killed by the SS."<sup>9</sup>

Bettelheim began writing about his experiences in Dachau and Buchenwald following his release in 1939, and he has returned to the subject on a number of occasions since. Acknowledging that he felt something akin to the compulsion to bear witness, a desire to make people understand what was happening in the camps, Bettelheim is nevertheless reluctant to see "survivorship" as a vocation.<sup>10</sup> It is rather a trauma to be coped with. One suffers from irrational guilt about having been spared. "Being one of the very few who were saved when millions like oneself perished," he writes in "Trauma and Reintegration", "seems to entail a special obligation to justify one's luck and very existence, since it was permitted to continue when that of so many others exactly like oneself was not." The voice of reason is assailed by other, more insidious voices:

One voice, that of reason, tries to answer the question "Why was I saved?" with "It was pure luck, simple chance; there is no other answer to the question"; while the voice of conscience replies: "True, but the reason you had the chance to survive was that some other prisoner died in your stead." And behind this in a whisper might be heard an even more severe, critical accusation: "Some of them died because you pushed them out of an easier place of work; others because you did not give them some help, such as food, that you might possibly have been able to do without." And there is always the ultimate accusation to which there is no acceptable answer: "You rejoiced that it was some other who had died rather than you."<sup>11</sup>

So much for the world of sun and simple life. It is hardly surprising that Bettelheim should be concerned to relieve survivors of their sense of obligation. "I do not think it is particularly laudable to spend one's life bearing witness



to the inhumanity of man to man," he comments.<sup>12</sup> His most telling criticism of works like The Survivor is contained in the observation that a partial truth is often more damaging than an outright lie. "If presentation of what is involved in survival is to have any meaning," he argues, "it cannot restrict itself to stating simply that unless one remains alive one does not survive. It must tell what else is needed: what one must be, do, feel; what attitudes, what conditions are required for achieving survival under concentration camp conditions."<sup>13</sup> Bettelheim is here referring to survival of the human personality rather than physical survival as such. In The Informed Heart (1960) he maintains that he survived his own year of imprisonment (a stronger word is needed, but "torture" seems over-dramatic) largely by employing his psychoanalytical training to reflect on what was happening to himself and to his fellow prisoners. The conclusion he draws from this inevitably betrays a psychoanalytical bias:

Those prisoners who blocked out neither heart nor reason, neither feelings nor perception, but kept informed of their inner attitudes even when they could hardly ever afford to act on them, those prisoners survived and came to understand the conditions they lived under. They also came to realize what they had not perceived before; that they still retained the last, if not the greatest, of the human freedoms: to choose their own attitude in any given circumstance. Prisoners who understood this fully, came to know that this, and only this, formed the crucial difference between retaining one's humanity (and often life itself) and accepting death as a human being (or perhaps physical death): whether one retained the freedom to choose autonomously one's attitude to extreme conditions even when they seemed totally beyond one's ability to influence them.<sup>14</sup>

Here we approach the distressing nub of dehumanization. Conditions in the ghettos and on the train journeys to the various killing centres, meant that large numbers of people went to their deaths in a prolonged state of shock. "Millions of people submitted to extermination," Bettelheim writes, "because SS methods had forced them to see it not as a way out, but as the only way to put an end to conditions in which they could no longer live as human beings."<sup>15</sup> The concentration camps added to this toll of victims, but it is important to remember that at least two out of three Jewish deportees were sent straight to the gas chambers.<sup>16</sup>

To champion survival for its own sake, then, as Des Pres appears to do, is to miss the point. Bettelheim's insight into survival as a matter of preserving one's humanity rather than staying alive at all costs, is complemented by his belief that physical survival was not an adequate goal in itself. "To survive," he claims, "one had to want to survive for a purpose."<sup>17</sup> Whatever it was - the desire for revenge, the urge to bear witness, the hope of being reunited with one's family, the belief in a better world - there had to be a reason for staying alive. We read in one memoir of Auschwitz, for example, how four sisters felt compelled to survive for each other.<sup>18</sup> And the profusion of eyewitness testimony itself bears witness, perhaps, to the fact that many were sustained by a determination not to let what they had seen and suffered be consigned to oblivion. Primo Levi has suggested that "the entire history of the brief 'millennial Reich' can be reread as a war against memory, an Orwellian falsification of memory, falsification of reality, negation of reality".<sup>19</sup> No one was supposed to be left alive to tell the story of the camps.

### Primo Levi

Let us look more closely at the writings of this remarkable witness, whose suicide in April 1987 must give us pause when we are tempted to place too much faith in the healing power of reason. For there can be no doubt that Primo Levi was the most reasonable of human beings. Like Bettelheim he assumed the role of an observer, and in circumstances even more terrible. Born in Turin in 1919, Levi was deported to Auschwitz in February 1944, having been arrested as a partisan and identified as a Jew. His first account of his experiences, If This Is a Man, was initially published in 1947 in a limited edition of 2,500 copies, six hundred of which were to remain unsold,<sup>20</sup> but just over ten years later - in 1958 - it was brought out in an enlarged edition by Einaudi, the prestigious Italian publishing house, and has remained in print ever since. Levi explains

in his preface to the book that it was written, first and foremost, as "an interior liberation", to satisfy the need to tell his story.<sup>21</sup> But its enduring appeal shows that it goes considerably further than that.

The title of the book is an important clue to its central theme: how much humanity could be preserved in the face of a system dedicated to its eradication? "It is man who kills, man who creates or suffers injustice," Levi asserts near the end of his story; "it is no longer man who, having lost all restraint, shares his bed with a corpse. Whoever waits for his neighbour to die in order to take his piece of bread is, albeit guiltless, further from the model of thinking man than the most primitive pigmy or the most vicious sadist." For Jews who survived the initial "selection" on arrival at the camp - from Levi's convoy of 650 Italian Jews only ninety-six men and twenty-nine women were deemed fit enough to work; the rest were gassed immediately - there awaited the ordeal of initiation, so vividly described in If This Is a Man. Stripped naked, shorn of all hair, forced to put on rags and an ill-fitting pair of clogs, tattooed with a number on the wrist: one thus became a Häftling, a prisoner:

Imagine now a man who is deprived of everyone he loves, and at the same time of his house, his habits, his clothes, in short, of everything he possesses: he will be a hollow man, reduced to suffering and needs, forgetful of dignity and restraint, for he who loses all often easily loses himself. He will be a man whose life or death can be lightly decided with no sense of human affinity, in the most fortunate of cases, on the basis of a pure judgement of utility.<sup>22</sup>

Many were unable to adapt in time to the harshness of their new environment. They became what were known in camp jargon as Muselmänner ("Muslims"), recalled by Levi with haunting clarity:

To sink is the easiest of matters; it is enough to carry out all the orders one receives, to eat only the ration, to observe the discipline of the work and the camp. Experience showed that only exceptionally could one survive more than three months in this way. All the musselmans who finished in the gas chambers have the same story, or more exactly have no story; they followed the slope down to the bottom, like streams that run down to the sea. On their entry into the camp, through basic incapacity, or by misfortune, or through some banal incident, they are overcome before they can adapt themselves; they are beaten by time, they do not begin to learn German,

to disentangle the infernal knot of laws and prohibitions until their body is already in decay, and nothing can save them from selection or from death by exhaustion. Their life is short, but their number is endless; they, the Muselmänner, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand.<sup>23</sup>

Levi's final collection of essays is in fact called The Drowned and the Saved (1986), and from it we learn that prisoners who did not understand German nearly all died during the first ten to fifteen days after their arrival.<sup>24</sup> It was vital - literally - to know the complex rules governing camp existence.

"At a distance of years one can today definitely affirm," Levi writes in the Preface to The Drowned and the Saved, "that the history of the Lagers has been written almost exclusively by those who, like myself, never fathomed them to the bottom. Those who did so did not return, or their capacity for observation was paralysed by suffering and incomprehension." He returns to this argument when contemplating a friend's insistence that he, Levi, must have been chosen to survive, perhaps in order to write about what he had seen.

Levi's response is characteristically to the point:

The 'saved' of the Lager were not the best, those predestined to do good; the bearers of a message. What I had seen and lived through proved the exact contrary. Preferably the worst survived, the selfish, the violent, the insensitive, the collaborators of the "grey zones", the spies. It was not a certain rule (there were none, nor are there certain rules in human matters), but it was, nevertheless, a rule. I felt innocent, yes, but enrolled among the saved and therefore in permanent search of justification in my own eyes and those of others. The worst survived - that is, the fittest; the best all died.

He goes on to say that he has borne witness as best he could, but "the thought that this testifying of mine could by itself gain me the privilege of surviving and living for many years without serious problems, troubles me, because I cannot see any proportion between the privilege and its outcome".<sup>25</sup>

That the survivors are not the true witnesses<sup>26</sup> is a radical suggestion and must be placed in the context of Levi's probing analysis of his own experience.

If those who suffered most did not survive, their personalities destroyed in advance of their bodies, we should also remember that many of those who did survive have continued to suffer from nervous disorders, sometimes leading to complete breakdown.<sup>27</sup> At the end of The Truce (1963), the story of his eight-month journey home after the Russians had liberated Auschwitz in January 1945, Levi describes a nightmare that recurred throughout his life:

It is a dream within a dream, varied in detail, one in substance. I am sitting at a table with my family, or with friends, or at work, or in the green countryside; in short, in a peaceful relaxed environment, apparently without tension or affliction; yet I feel a deep and subtle anguish, the definite sensation of an impending threat. And in fact, as the dream proceeds, slowly or brutally, each time in a different way, everything collapses and disintegrates around me, the scenery, the walls, the people, while the anguish becomes more intense and more precise. Now everything has changed to chaos; I am alone in the centre of a grey and turbid nothing, and now, I know what this thing means, and I also know that I have always known it; I am in the Lager once more, and nothing is true outside the Lager. All the rest was a brief pause, a deception of the senses, a dream; my family, nature in flower, my home. Now this inner dream, this dream of peace, is over, and in the outer dream, which continues, gelid, a well-known voice resounds: a single word, not imperious, but brief and subdued. It is the dawn command of Auschwitz, a foreign word, feared and expected: get up, "Wstawàch".<sup>28</sup>

Beyond the sense that one is forever a slave to the memory of the Lager (the camp) is the shame inspired by having been a witness to so much cruelty. We have already noted the irrational guilt a survivor may feel for having been spared. In The Drowned and the Saved Levi stresses how overwhelming this can be. Deprived of "the screen of willed ignorance" that enabled the majority of Germans to tolerate the existence of the camps, the inmates were confronted daily by the nightmare of reality:

The ocean of pain, past and present, surrounded us, and its level rose from year to year until it almost submerged us. It was useless to close one's eyes or turn one's back to it, because it was all around, in every direction, all the way to the horizon. It was not possible for us, nor did we want, to become islands; the just among us, neither more nor less numerous than in any other human group, felt remorse, shame and pain for the misdeeds that others and not they had committed, and in which they felt involved, because they sensed that what had happened around them in their presence, and in them, was irrevocable. It would never again be able to be cleansed; it would prove that man, the human species - we, in short - were potentially able to construct an infinite enormity of pain; and that pain is the only force that is created from nothing, without cost and without effort. It is enough not to see, not to listen, not to act.<sup>29</sup>

The just survivors took upon themselves the burden of guilt that was shunned by the perpetrators and their accomplices. The German industrialist Friedrich Flick, who was sentenced to seven years of imprisonment at Nuremberg for giving financial support to the SS and for using slave labour, had said in his defence, "Nothing will convince us that we are war criminals."<sup>30</sup> When he died in 1972 he was reputedly the richest man in Germany, but he had persistently refused to pay any compensation to the former inmates of concentration camps.<sup>31</sup> How can we face these things and not despair? Cruelty and indifference are hardly modern inventions; at the same time, as Primo Levi points out in his Conclusion to The Drowned and the Saved, the corrosive influence of the Nazi era is a disquieting legacy:

After the Nazi Gott mit uns, everything changed. Goering's terrorist bombings were answered by the "carpet" bombings of the Allies. The destruction of a people and a civilisation was proved to be possible, and desirable both in itself and as an instrument of rule. The massive exploitation of slave labour was learned by Hitler in the school of Stalin, but in the Soviet Union it was brought back again, multiplied at the end of the war. The exodus of brains from Germany and Italy, together with the fear of being surpassed by Nazi scientists, gave birth to the nuclear bombs. Desperate, the Jewish survivors, in flight from Europe after the great shipwreck, have created in the bosom of the Arab world an island of Western civilisation, a portentous palingenesis of Judaism, and the pretext for renewed hatred. After the defeat, the silent Nazi diaspora has taught the art of persecution and torture to the military and the political men of a dozen countries, on the shores of the Mediterranean, the Atlantic and Pacific. Many new tyrants have kept in their drawer Adolf Hitler's Mein Kampf: with a few changes, perhaps, and the substitution of a few names, it can still come in handy.<sup>32</sup>

To stave off despair, one asks "Why?" - without expectation of a reassuring answer. Soon after his arrival at the Buna camp in Auschwitz (officially known as Auschwitz III or Monowitz), Levi is driven by thirst to break off an icicle outside the window of his hut. A guard snatches it away from him:

"Warum?" I asked him in my poor German. "Hier ist kein warum" (there is no why here), he replied, pushing me inside with a shove.<sup>33</sup>

In The Drowned and the Saved Levi remarks that it was futile to try and understand in the Lager itself.<sup>34</sup> Trying to understand came later, in the act of recollection, though Levi, along with other survivors, was afflicted by a sense of

unreality. "Today, at this very moment as I sit writing at a table," he confesses at one point in If This Is a Man, "I myself am not convinced that these things really happened."<sup>35</sup> Elsewhere, however, he cherishes the accuracy of his memory. "Of my two years outside the law I have not forgotten a single thing," he tells us in the Preface to Moments of Reprieve (1985), a book that concentrates on the survival of human personality. "Without any deliberate effort, memory continues to restore to me events, faces, words, sensations, as if at that time my mind had gone through a period of exalted receptivity, during which not a detail was lost."<sup>36</sup>

"Redemption lies in remembering" is the inscription at the entrance to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, and in Levi's case this was peculiarly apposite. If he showed more caution about memory as a reliable tool in his final work,<sup>37</sup> it would still seem fair to assert that If This Is a Man, The Truce and Moments of Reprieve, as well as The Periodic Table (1975), which contains episodes from his life based loosely around his vocation as a chemist - all highlight a gift for remembering, even when the memory itself is a traumatic one. Levi's wry humour, affectionate regard for other human beings and luminous intelligence are qualities that inform the narration of events else too harrowing to contemplate. He was fond of quoting the Yiddish proverb "Troubles overcome are good to tell" (and used it as the epigraph to The Periodic Table), but we, his readers, should be aware that telling the story of past troubles for someone of Levi's integrity was also a protest against the erosion of memory by external forces, like the passage of time or political expedience.

In The Periodic Table Levi compares the way he felt on his return to Italy with the Ancient Mariner's compulsion to tell the story of his misfortune.<sup>38</sup> The epigraph to The Drowned and the Saved, fittingly enough, is taken from Coleridge's poem. Prisoners in the camps were oppressed by the thought that

no one would want to know what they had been through, suffering from nightmares to that effect. "Why is the pain of every day translated so constantly into our dreams, in the ever-repeated scene of the unlistened-to story?" Levi asks in If This Is a Man.<sup>39</sup> And is it not true that we would prefer on the whole to ignore the survivor's "ghastly tale"? "For us to speak with the young becomes ever more difficult," Levi wrote shortly before his death. "We see it as a duty, and at the same time as a risk: the risk of appearing anachronistic, of not being listened to." There is nothing new in Levi's message, but it is none the less urgent for that:

We must be listened to: above and beyond our personal experiences, we have collectively been the witness of a fundamental, unexpected event, fundamental precisely because unexpected, not foreseen by anyone. It took place in the teeth of all forecasts; it happened in Europe. Incredibly, it happened that an entire civilised people, just issued from the fervid cultural flowering of Weimar, followed a buffoon whose figure today inspires laughter, and yet Adolf Hitler was obeyed and his praises were sung right up to the catastrophe. It happened, therefore it can happen again: this is the core of what we have to say.<sup>40</sup>

Hitler was no buffoon, of course. A complex bureaucracy had to be won over to the goal of a Europe free of Jews. Although unforeseen, the Holocaust was made possible by the complicity of countless administrators and functionaries. "When in the early days of 1933 the first civil servant wrote the first definition of a 'non-Aryan' into a civil service ordinance," the historian Raul Hilberg claims, "the fate of European Jewry was sealed."<sup>41</sup> Once the process of destruction had begun, many ordinary Germans were in a position to know what was happening. Primo Levi is able to illustrate this from personal experience. In the final winter at Auschwitz his background as a chemist helped him to secure a post in the laboratory of the Buna factory (which had been set up by the industrial conglomerate I.G. Farben to produce synthetic rubber). This stroke of good fortune not only increased Levi's chances of survival, it also brought him into contact with German civilians. In If This Is a Man he relates how the young women in the laboratory would discuss their home lives and their plans for



Christmas in front of him and his two fellow prisoners, oblivious to the camp regime.<sup>42</sup>

More significantly, Levi devotes a chapter of The Periodic Table - under the heading of "Vanadium" - to a portrait of a manager at the rubber factory, Dr. Müller, whom Levi was to encounter again some years later. This Dr. Müller had spoken to him only three times: the first time was about the work, the second to ask him why he had so long a beard, and the third to ask him why he looked so perturbed (having given him a note to authorize an extra shave each week and the supply of some leather shoes). "I, who at that time thought in German," Levi recalls, "had said to myself, 'Der Mann hat keine Ahnung' (This fellow hasn't got an inkling)."<sup>43</sup>

On discovering in 1967 that he has been corresponding with the same Dr. Müller over the matter of a defective shipment of resin (Levi is by now working as the manager of a paint factory), Levi sends him a copy of If This Is a Man. Müller reads the book and is moved to reply, albeit somewhat evasively. Levi writes back with a few searching questions, the upshot of which is a long letter of self-exculpation. "Just as at the time of our meeting in the lab," Levi decides, "so now as he wrote, Müller apparently continued not to have an inkling - 'keine Ahnung'." It is this almost deliberate obtuseness which seems to have caused Levi the greatest anguish. Müller had spoken of "overcoming the past" - "Bewältigung der Vergangenheit". But Levi saw things more clearly:

I later found out that this is a stereotyped phrase, a euphemism in today's Germany, where it is universally understood as "redemption from Nazism"; but the root walt that it contains also appears in the words that express "domination", "violence", and "rape", and I believe that translating the expression with "distortion of the past" or "violence done to the past" would not stray very far from its profound meaning.<sup>44</sup>

The use of euphemisms by the Nazis to deceive their victims and keep as secret as possible the mass destruction, is well known. Perhaps a crime so vast

was by its very nature beyond the realm of a common language - "unspeakable" in both senses of the word. "No one can boast of understanding the Germans," Levi exclaims in If This Is a Man.<sup>45</sup> But in a letter to the translator of its German edition he reveals a need to understand them as the pre-condition for judging them. He makes it quite plain that he does not believe in the attribution of collective guilt, if he also expresses once more his incomprehension:

But I cannot say I understand the Germans: now, something one cannot understand constitutes a painful void, a permanent stimulus that insists on being satisfied. I hope that this book will have some echo in Germany, not only out of ambition, but also because the nature of this echo will perhaps make it possible for me to better understand the Germans, placate this stimulus.<sup>46</sup>

Of the forty-odd letters Levi was to receive from German readers of If This Is a Man during the next few years (1961-64), only one in particular could be said to do violence to the past in the way mentioned above; the others, however, as Levi himself points out, hardly represent a cross-section of his German readership, let alone of the German people as a whole.<sup>47</sup>

His first letter from Mrs. Hety S. of Wiesbaden, out of which grew an extensive correspondence, suggests that Levi is engaged in a fruitless task as far as understanding goes:

You will certainly never be able to understand "the Germans": even we are unable to do so, because at that time there happened things that, under no circumstances, should have happened.<sup>48</sup>

Hety's own father was imprisoned at Dachau for his political affiliation to the Social Democrats. She herself had been expelled from school for refusing to become a member of the Hitler Youth Organization. Not all Germans marched to the beat of the Nazi drum.

But in the Lager only the sick could avoid the march that began each day of debilitating labour, while a band of prisoner-musicians played a medley of popular German tunes:

The tunes are a few, a dozen, the same ones every day, morning and evening: marches and popular songs dear to every German. They lie engraven on our minds and will be the last thing in the Lager that we shall forget: they are the voice of the Lager, the perceptible expression of its geometrical madness, of the resolution of others to annihilate us first as men in order to kill us more slowly afterwards.<sup>49</sup>

Slave labour under the Nazis was not, in essence, an economic phenomenon. The lowest-ranking prisoners were worked to death, an endless stream of replacements available in the form of captive populations. Jews bore the brunt of this, but homosexuals, too, in particular camps would be singled out for the most brutal treatment.<sup>50</sup> Bruno Bettelheim draws our attention to the sheer wastefulness of this kind of cruelty:

The new slave labor and extermination policy did away with all considerations for the value of a life, even in terms of a slave society. In earlier societies of an analogous character, slaves were rarely less than investments. To be sure their labor was exploited without much thought for their humanity. But in the Hitler state slaves lost even their investment value. That was the great difference between exploitation by private capitalists and exploitation by a state answering only to itself.<sup>51</sup>

Primo Levi refers to the Lager as "a gigantic biological and social experiment".<sup>52</sup> The day-to-day running of the camp was left to the prisoners themselves. A hierarchy was established which ensured that those in the most privileged positions - the "prominents" - would be ruthless towards those in their charge, especially when most of the "prominents" were convicted criminals. Levi discusses this anomaly in a chapter of The Drowned and the Saved called "The Grey Zone". "It is naive, absurd, and historically false," he claims, "to believe that an infernal system such as National Socialism was, sanctifies its victims: on the contrary, it degrades them, it makes them similar to itself, and this all the more when they are available, blank, and lack a political or moral armature."<sup>53</sup> At the same time, he is anxious to maintain the distinction between victim and executioner.<sup>54</sup> By highlighting the complexity of social behaviour within the camp itself, though, he reminds us again that we should suspend judgement until we have understood.

"Survival without renunciation of any part of one's own moral world," Levi writes in If This Is a Man, "apart from powerful and direct interventions by fortune, was conceded only to very few superior individuals, made of the stuff of martyrs and saints."<sup>55</sup> Levi eschewed the idea that he belonged to such a category. His own survival, we may nevertheless affirm, was due in part to a friendship with another prisoner, Alberto. Their decision to share equally what each was able to "organize" represented a social contract of enormous value in an environment designed to isolate and break all bonds. Alberto became a victim of the death marches, however. Levi was left behind because he was too ill to walk, stricken with scarlet fever.

Another factor in his survival was the charity of an Italian builder called Lorenzo who worked outside the camp, and again it was the human encounter that provided the most strength:

I believe that it was really due to Lorenzo that I am alive today; and not so much for his material aid, as for his having constantly reminded me by his presence, by his natural and plain manner of being good, that there still existed a just world outside our own, something and someone still pure and whole, not corrupt, not savage, extraneous to hatred and terror; something difficult to define, a remote possibility of good, but for which it was worth surviving.<sup>56</sup>

The story of Lorenzo's sad decline after the war was over, which forms one of the tales in Moments of Reprieve,<sup>57</sup> simply reinforces the impression that here was one human being, at least, who questioned the fitness of the new order.

Other stories in Moments of Reprieve testify to the resilience of some of the prisoners. These well-defined individuals are a foil to the Muselmänner whose image Levi sought to preserve in If This Is a Man. But it is that image, finally, which continues to disturb the reader of Levi's work, even as one takes pleasure in his anecdotal wit. A Jewish prisoner was by definition an Untermensch, subhuman. "Coming out of the darkness," Levi observes in The Drowned and the Saved, "one suffered because of the reacquired consciousness

of having been diminished." It was the logic of the regime to humiliate. "The useless cruelty of violated modesty conditioned the existence of all Lagers," we read:

The women of Birkenau tell how once, having acquired a precious receptacle (a large bowl of enamelled metal), they had to employ it for three distinct uses: draw their soup; evacuate into it at night when access to the latrines was forbidden; and wash themselves when there was water at the troughs.<sup>58</sup>

Much of If This Is a Man, in fact, is concerned with the inadequacy of language to convey this experience of violation. There will always be a gulf between what was suffered and the words available to describe it:

Just as our hunger is not that feeling of missing a meal, so our way of being cold has need of a new word. We say "hunger", we say "tiredness", "fear", "pain", we say "winter" and they are different things. They are free words, created and used by free men who lived in comfort and suffering in their homes. If the Lager had lasted longer, a new, harsh language would have been born....

The Lager had already produced its own vernacular. "Never", for example, was expressed as "Morgen früh" - "tomorrow morning".<sup>59</sup>

The stories of those transported to Auschwitz, Levi suggests, are the stories of a new Bible.<sup>60</sup> And yet in an article on his work by Fernanda Eberstadt, published in Commentary in October 1985, he is taken to task for his apparent failure to re-create something of the flavour (sic) of Jewish life under duress. According to Eberstadt, "Levi is simply cursed with a tin ear for religion."<sup>61</sup> Well, he made no bones about his unbelief. One of the few occasions when he gives way to anger in If This Is a Man is the result of witnessing the obduracy of a believer who regards being spared after a "selection" as a token of God's mercy:

Kuhn is out of his senses. Does he not see Beppo the Greek in the bunk next to him, Beppo who is twenty years old and is going to the gas chamber the day after tomorrow and knows it and lies there looking fixedly at the light without saying anything and without even thinking any more? Can Kuhn fail to realize that next time it will be his turn? Does Kuhn not understand that what has happened today is an abomination, which no propitiatory prayer, no pardon, no expiation by the guilty, which nothing at all in the power of man can ever clean again?

"If I was God," Levi concludes in exasperation, "I would spit at Kuhn's prayer."<sup>62</sup>

Levi himself was tempted to pray only once, a temptation to which he confesses with the kind of honesty that made him such an authoritative writer. It was in October 1944, as he relates in The Drowned and the Saved, at the time of another selection:

Naked and compressed among my naked companions with my personal index card in hand, I was waiting to file past the "commission" that with one glance would decide whether I should immediately go into the gas chamber or was instead strong enough to go on working. For one instant I felt the need to ask for help and asylum; then, despite my anguish, equanimity prevailed: you do not change the rules of the game at the end of the match, nor when you are losing. A prayer under these conditions would have been not only absurd (what rights could I claim? and from whom?) but blasphemous, obscene, laden with the greatest impiety of which a non-believer is capable. I rejected that temptation: I knew that otherwise were I to survive, I would have to be ashamed of it.<sup>63</sup>

As much as he opposed the notion of Providence, he was sensitive to the integrity of religious values. To shun blasphemy might itself be seen as a religious act.

The point is that Levi was an assimilated Italian Jew, part of a different tradition altogether from that of the East European Jews who formed the bulk of the camp's population. It was only later, when he began to research the material for his novel If Not Now, When? (1982), that he learned the Yiddish that would have made it easier for him to communicate with them. Indeed, If Not Now, When? commemorates the Jewish civilization that Nazism destroyed. Inspired by the history of Jews from Poland and Russia who escaped from the mass slaughter by becoming partisans, the novel is more than just the correction of a stereotype; it is an act of reclamation. Levi's Jewish partisans are first and foremost Jews. His own experience of being a partisan was short-lived and, as he describes it in The Periodic Table, almost farcical,<sup>64</sup> but these imaginary partisans from the other side of Europe have better luck, being better prepared.

If they are better prepared, they are hardly better equipped, relying on the grace of the Red Army for most of their supplies. Jews who have all lost

their families in the wake of the German invasion, they are fighting the just war that Levi was denied. Their goal is to reach Palestine by way of an Italian port, their more immediate objective being to help defeat Hitler's armies with acts of sabotage behind enemy lines. Levi provides us with glimpses of the Holocaust itself but is wary of pandering to the curious. His discretion in this respect is exemplary.

His portrait of the Gedalists, as his partisans are called (in honour of their quixotic leader Gedaleh), is an idealized one: they are symbols of Jewish humanity (human not in spite of their Jewishness but because of it) and as such more representative than individual:

Each of them, man or woman, had a different story behind him, but searing and heavy as molten lead; if the war and three terrible winters had left them the time and breath, each should have mourned a hundred dead. They were tired, poor, and dirty, but not defeated: children of merchants, tailors, rabbis, and cantors; they had armed themselves with weapons taken from Germans, they had earned the right to wear those tattered uniforms, without chevrons, and they had tasted several times the bitter food of killing.<sup>65</sup>

Mendel the watchmender is perhaps the only fully realized character; much of the story is seen through his eyes. A moralist, like Levi himself, Mendel prompts us to reflect on the meaning behind the Gedalists' adventures.

Their liberation of a small concentration camp near Chmielnik is a reminder that there were few survivors of such camps - most of the inmates of this one have already been murdered - and that the hour of liberation, so movingly evoked at the start of The Truce,<sup>66</sup> was experienced with pain rather than joy. Here, there are ten survivors, kept alive like the Sonderkommando at Auschwitz to cremate the dead bodies of their fellow Jews. "We're not like you," one tells the liberators; "we don't feel right with other people." Only one survivor feels able to set off with the partisans, and he doesn't get very far:

But after half an hour, the boy collapsed and sat down on a stone. He said he would rather go back with the other nine.<sup>67</sup>

The Gedalists later encounter a survivor of Auschwitz, a Frenchwoman called Francine. She speaks of the shame that has driven some survivors to commit suicide after liberation. Her interlocutors are puzzled. What is there to be ashamed of? "It's the impression that others died in your place," Francine explains, "that you're alive gratis, thanks to a privilege you haven't earned, a trick you've played on the dead. Being alive isn't a crime, but we feel it like a crime." Gedaleh spoke truer than he knew when he told the mayor of a Polish village, "The only ones of us who are saved are those who have chosen our way."<sup>68</sup>

The Russian commanding officer who tells Mendel that he envies him and the other Gedalists because their choice wasn't imposed on them, might equally have been the author himself. The same officer (possibly a Jew in disguise, his identity remains obscure) makes a present to the Gedalists of weapons and money to help them reach their destination. It is as though Levi were invoking the spirit of justice to see the story through to its necessary conclusion. One thinks of Mendel's response to the band's first definitive act of sabotage, the wrecking of a workshop for railway engines: he hears a voice in his head repeat the words of the miracles blessing ("Blessed be Thou, O Lord our God, king of the Universe, who hast made for us a miracle in this place") - incongruous but apt. And Gedaleh is moved to recite this very same blessing after Mendel has successfully carried out the theft of a truck. "The other blessing would be better," Mendel tells him drily, "the one for escape from danger."<sup>69</sup>

Miraculously, most of the Gedalists do escape from danger, at least as far as Milan where the novel ends. The novel ends with a birth, and with the news that the first atomic bomb has been dropped on Hiroshima. Mendel sees the headline but does not understand its significance, being unable to read Italian. The story, then, has a hopeful outcome that is qualified by the facts of history.



Levi returns us to the world as it is, but not before convincing us that the Gedalists are a redeeming part of that world, if only in the imagination. Their triumph is a minor one alongside the defeats signalled by Auschwitz and Hiroshima, and it is only obliquely historical: it is still a victory to be cherished.

### Fiction or Testimony?

"Extremity makes bad art," Terrence Des Pres claims in The Survivor, "because events are too obviously 'symbolic'." At the same time, he confuses the workings of his own imagination with something inherent in the camps themselves:

The concentration camps have done what art always does: they have brought us face to face with archetypes ... they have given visible embodiment to man's spiritual universe, so that the primary states of good and evil are resident in the look and sound and smell of things.<sup>70</sup>

But decorating the camps with an aura of cosmic significance does a disservice to the victims. The reason that survivors have tried to tell their story through the medium of fiction as well as in the more straightforward fashion of a memoir, is because the events they have witnessed are not so much symbolic as beyond belief. By devoting himself exclusively to eyewitness testimony, Des Pres assumes he is getting closer to the experience itself, as if such testimony were free of all artifice when, on the contrary, it is often more powerful for borrowing fictional techniques. One critic has referred to Elie Wiesel's Night, for example, which is probably the best known eyewitness account of Auschwitz, as "a nonfictional novel".<sup>71</sup>

Elie Wiesel was only fifteen when he and his family were deported to Auschwitz in April 1944. They were among over 400,000 Hungarian Jews to be deported there during the spring and summer of that year. His two older sisters also survived, but his parents and younger sister all perished. He has reported that he took a ten-year vow of silence in 1945 in order to be sure of writing the truth.<sup>72</sup> His memoir was originally published in Yiddish and ran

to some eight hundred pages, before being pared down considerably for a French version - the language in which he has written ever since - two years later in 1958. Night is an anguished lament, full of reproach against both God and the human race for keeping silent while the destruction of the Jews took place (its Yiddish title meant "And the World Was Silent"):

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.

Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.

Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.<sup>73</sup>

The sight of children being thrown alive into burning ditches is perhaps impossible to convey without becoming rhetorical. Wiesel has since tried to confront the experience less directly - in fiction; and fiction, moreover, that addresses the problems of being a survivor rather than seeking to rehearse the atrocities that took place. Wiesel's own explanation of this is characteristically enigmatic:

In truth, I think I have never spoken about the Holocaust except in one book, Night - the very first - where I tried to tell a tale directly, as though face to face with the experience. All my subsequent books are built around it. I tried to communicate a secret, a kind of an eclipse, and in the Kafka tradition even the eclipse is eclipsed. The secret itself is a secret.<sup>74</sup>

These words are from a speech delivered to a conference in 1970. Wiesel's presence has been a sine qua non of conferences on the Holocaust, at which his constant theme has been the central mystery of the event. "The event seems unreal," he has said, "as if it occurred on a different planet."<sup>75</sup>

Hidden inside the mystery, however, is a moral imperative:

Did it really happen? Maybe not. I often wonder. Yet, it can be still experienced - even now. Any Jew born before, during or after the Holocaust must enter it again in order to take it upon himself.<sup>76</sup>

But how does one "re-enter" the Holocaust if one was spared the original ordeal?

At another conference, this time in 1974, Wiesel appears to contradict himself:

Auschwitz negates all systems, opposes all doctrines. They cannot but diminish the experience which lies beyond our reach. Ask any survivor, he will tell you; he who has not lived the event will never know it. And he who went through it, will not reveal it - not really, not entirely. Between his memory and its reflection there is a wall - and it cannot be pierced. The past belongs to the dead, and the survivor does not recognize himself in the words linking him to them. A novel about Treblinka is either not a novel or not about Treblinka: a novel about Treblinka is about blasphemy - is blasphemy. For Treblinka means death - absolute death - death of language and of the imagination. Its mystery is doomed to remain intact.<sup>77</sup>

This doctrinaire position, if allowed to go unchallenged, would silence even the greatest of writers. Treblinka means death only for those who died there: for the rest of us it means the struggle to understand its reality. Whereas Primo Levi can be said to narrow the gap between the survivor and those who only know of the camps at one remove, Wiesel seems intent on separating the survivor from the rest of humanity. According to him, "It is simple: one cannot write about the Holocaust - not if you are a writer."<sup>78</sup> But you can, as I hope to make clear, write about the human experience of it.

Wiesel returns to his own experience of the event in Legends of Our Time (1968). The wretchedness of his father's death in a barracks-hut at Buchenwald is again recalled, along with the fate of the whole Jewish community from Sighet, his home town in Transylvania. "For me writing is a matzeva," he explains, "an invisible tombstone, erected to the memory of the dead unburied. Each word corresponds to a face, a prayer, the one needing the other so as not to sink into oblivion." His preoccupation throughout these stories is the debt he owes for having survived - less a debt, in fact, than a curse. "It is by a strange irony of fate," he claims, "that the only ones who were, who still are, fully conscious of their responsibility for the dead are those who were saved, the ghosts who returned from the dead."<sup>79</sup>

This sense of responsibility spills over into his fiction. I should say from the start, however, that I find Wiesel's novels extremely frustrating to read. That they are highly thought of in academic circles is apparent from the volume of research they have generated.<sup>80</sup> Theologians, as we shall see in chapters to come, seem especially drawn to the gnomic ambiguity of these books. It would be disingenuous of me to be baffled by Wiesel's success, though it should be pointed out that few of his novels are in print in the United Kingdom - Wiesel's fame is largely an American phenomenon. For many he is the voice of the survivors as a whole, their spiritual leader, and he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986 in recognition of this. But he is often regarded with a reverence which, to my mind, borders on idolatory. To be told, "His books are of the kind that save souls,"<sup>81</sup> for example, leads one to suspect that they are not being read as fiction at all.

The idea of madness as a sign of spiritual health is what troubles me most about Wiesel's work. In *Sighet* there was a character known as Moshe the Madman, whom Wiesel depicts as a holy fool, exemplary in his nonconformity. He is a recurring figure in the novels, but we are given no reason to believe that his abnormality is really a sign of wisdom. Wiesel's portrait of him in Legends of Our Time tells us more about the author's own penchant for mystification than it does about Moshe's personality:

Rather than reject his madness, Moshe evoked it. It served him as refuge, as homeland, and when on a rare occasion I visit an asylum, I experience in the presence of each patient, the same respectful fear that Moshe inspired in me long ago. The prophet winking at me: it is he. The persecuted one, who spurns me: him again. The young woman serenely rocking an invisible infant: it is Moshe she is trying to calm. All of them have his look.<sup>82</sup>

To be fair, Wiesel's style owes much to his Hasidic background, and doubtless he intends us to read the novels as parables rather than as character studies. His use of Hasidic legends to frame his own plots, however, has the unfortunate

effect of exposing the weakness of the latter. As Sidra Ezrahi points out, "Wiesel's narratives are constantly in danger of being subverted by either too much or too little realism."<sup>83</sup> Even in a later novel like The Fifth Son (1985), which focusses on the experience of being the child of survivors, there is an absence of credible detail.<sup>84</sup> Irving Halperin comes to Wiesel's defence by arguing that he is an important writer "not by the rules of contemporary fiction but because his books excite us to intense reflection",<sup>85</sup> and he may in the end be right. But Wiesel is too ghost-ridden to be an effective communicator. "To live is to betray the dead," claims Gregor, the protagonist of The Gates of the Forest (1964). "We hasten to bury and forget them because we are ashamed; we feel guilty towards them." This sense of guilt seeps through everything Wiesel writes, coupled with a vision of damnation. The victims were abandoned to their fate. Nothing can atone for the world's indifference. "He who is not among the victims," Gregor says, "is with the executioners."<sup>86</sup>

This latter judgement is the underlying theme of The Town beyond the Wall (1962), a novel which may serve to illustrate, perhaps, the awkwardness - at least for a reader not steeped in the Jewish mystical tradition - of Wiesel's style. The Town beyond the Wall tells the story of a survivor called Michael who returns to the town in Eastern Europe where he used to live. At first he is not sure why he has returned, but he comes to realize that he is searching for the face behind the window, the silent onlooker who witnessed the deportation of the Jews with indifference. When Michael finally tracks him down, the stranger reports him to the police, and he is arrested on suspicion of being a spy.

The emphasis on madness is ever present. His friend Pedro accuses him of trying to drive God mad. He also tells him, "You want to eliminate suffering by pushing it to its extreme: to madness." After his imprisonment, which unlike, say, that of Yakov Bok in Bernard Malamud's The Fixer (1966) seems more meta-

physical than actual, Michael befriends a catatonic boy, about whom nothing is known until Michael gets him to reveal his name: Eliezer, which means, we are told, "God has granted my prayer".<sup>87</sup>

Eliezer is, of course, Wiesel's own name, and it does not take a lot of reflection to work out the autobiographical significance of this ending, or indeed of the whole quest.<sup>88</sup> The question is how much we need to know about Wiesel himself before we can make sense of his fiction. According to Robert McAfee Brown, "Wiesel the man and Wiesel the author are one,"<sup>89</sup> as if this somehow solved the problem of how to read his work. Terrence Des Pres makes a similar claim:

Some of my literary friends have remarked to me that Wiesel is not an especially fine writer. By comparison, they argue, other writers handle language better. They mean differently, of course; but comparison of this sort is suspect in general, and in this special case that kind of judgement can be made only if Wiesel's unique position - the "place" from which he speaks - is ignored. To read a book by Elie Wiesel is one thing; to read it with knowledge of the man as a survivor and a witness, and further to read it with at least some knowledge of the ghettos, the cattle cars, and the killing centers, is another, very different experience, even from the perspective of a purely aesthetic response. This is at once the weakness (from a critical point of view) and the strength (from a human and artistic point of view) of Wiesel's art. Much of the time the full impact of his prose depends on knowing who is speaking and what he is speaking of, while neither is actually clarified.<sup>90</sup>

This last sentence might well be how I would choose to express my complaint. It is difficult to understand in what sense Wiesel's obscurity is a strength. And if writers merely handle language differently from each other, how on earth are we to make any qualitative distinctions when it comes to assessing a work of literature? In the end one comes up against an impasse when trying to assess a novel by Elie Wiesel: his audience stands in the way.

The stories of Tadeusz Borowski, to risk a comparison, possess in full measure that ironic detachment which Wiesel's writing seems to lack. They are, moreover, about the experience of being in a camp, in spite of Wiesel's proscriptions against such fiction. First published in Poland in the immediate post-war years and translated into English in 1967 as This Way for the Gas,

Ladies and Gentlemen, these terrifyingly plausible sketches bring to life the inhabitants of the "grey zone" discussed by Primo Levi in The Drowned and the Saved<sup>91</sup> - those victims who became, to a greater or lesser extent, accomplices to the executioners. Borowski was himself sent to Auschwitz at the end of April 1943, but as a Pole had a better chance to survive than a Jew. His survival was short-lived, however; in 1951 he committed suicide.

Borowski saw it as the duty of the survivor to be as truthful as possible about the compromises that were necessary in order to stay alive:

Tell, then, how you bought places in the hospital, easy posts, how you shoved Moslems into the oven, how you bought women, men, what you did in the barracks, unloading the transports, at the gypsy camp; tell about the daily life of the camp, about the hierarchy of fear, about the loneliness of every man. But write that you, you were the ones who did this. That a portion of the sad fame of Auschwitz belongs to you as well.<sup>92</sup>

It would be a mistake, though, to read his stories as straight autobiography. The identification of author with narrator is not as clear-cut as it seems. "The truth about his behaviour in Auschwitz, according to his fellow-prisoners," Czeslaw Milosz reveals in The Captive Mind (1953), "is utterly different from what his stories would lead one to suppose; he acted heroically, and was a model of comradeship." Borowski was more concerned to encapsulate the degrading nature of the camp regime than relate his own trials. "As narrator," to quote Milosz again, "he endows himself with the qualities which pass as assets in a concentration camp: cleverness and enterprise."<sup>93</sup>

"We are not evoking evil irresponsibly or in vain," the correspondent of "Auschwitz, Our Home (A Letter)" asserts, "for we have now become a part of it."<sup>94</sup> The world described in these stories is one where prisoners play football, for example, in the shadow of the gas chambers:

Between two throw-ins in a soccer game, right behind my back, three thousand people had been put to death.<sup>95</sup>

The matter-of-factness is chilling. In the title story Borowski details the routine of the prisoners assigned to unload the human cargo on the station platform at Birkenau. There is no room for compassion in this task:

Brutally we tear suitcases from their hands, impatiently pull off their coats. Go on, go on, vanish! They go, they vanish. Men, women, children. Some of them know.

The narrator is less hardened than his companions. He tells one of them, a Frenchman called Henri, that he can take no more. "After only two transports?" Henri replies. "Just look at me, I ... since Christmas, at least a million people have passed through my hands. The worst of all are the transports from around Paris - one is always bumping into friends."<sup>96</sup>

Any comment on my part would be superfluous. No wonder survivors are often driven to question their own testimony. According to Aharon Appelfeld, for example, who spent most of the war hiding in forests in the Ukraine after escaping from a Nazi work camp at the age of eight, "The Holocaust belongs to the type of enormous experience which reduces one to silence."<sup>97</sup> Now one of Israel's foremost novelists, Appelfeld is as oblique as Wiesel in his approach to the event; so oblique, in fact, that Philip Roth has discerned a more universal theme pervading his work:

His literary subject is not the Holocaust ... or even Jewish persecution. Nor, to my mind, is what he writes simply Jewish fiction or, for that matter, Israeli fiction. Nor, since he is Jewish citizen of a Jewish state composed largely of immigrants, is his an exile's fiction. And, despite the European locale of many of his novels and the echoes of Kafka, these books written in the Hebrew language certainly aren't European fiction. Indeed, all that Appelfeld is not adds up to what he is, and that is a dislocated writer, a dispossessed and uprooted writer. Appelfeld is a displaced writer of displaced fiction, who has made of displacement and disorientation a subject uniquely his own.<sup>98</sup>

This is impressively confusing, but what does it mean? That Appelfeld is an existentialist at heart?

But not all existentialists have experienced the degree of alienation suffered by Appelfeld as a consequence of the Holocaust, as he himself explains:



My real world was far beyond the power of imagination, and my task as an artist was not to develop my imagination but to restrain it, and even then it seemed impossible to me, because everything was so unbelievable that one seemed oneself to be fictional.<sup>99</sup>

In Badenheim 1939 (1980) and The Age of Wonders (1981) he returns to the world in the days leading up to the war, drawing a grotesque picture of assimilated middle-class Jews, offering an indictment, it would seem, of their failure to anticipate the impending catastrophe.<sup>100</sup> Appelfeld is especially unforgiving towards their own brand of antisemitism - contempt for the Ostjuden, Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe (these novels are set in Austria). It need hardly be said that were Appelfeld himself not Jewish, one might get the impression that the author sought to blame the victims for the crimes that were committed against them. Some Jews may well have deceived themselves as to the intentions of the Nazis and their supporters, but it makes little sense to hold them responsible for a policy not of their making. In The Age of Wonders a rabbi is tortured by his fellow Jews on the eve of the first deportation.<sup>101</sup> The real criminals are nowhere in sight.

For a survivor the sense of unreality can be overwhelming. We learn as much about the Holocaust from reading Kafka himself, perhaps, whose death pre-dates the catastrophe by some fifteen years, as we do from reading fiction by survivors that so clearly bears his mark. Yet the story they seek to tell demands to be heard. They are the witnesses. A generation hence and who, apart from their children, will remember them? If I am predisposed in favour of Primo Levi's testimony because it is pellucid rather than esoteric, I am also inclined to believe that his words will still be read long after the Holocaust has ceased to be a talking point in the media. His suicide notwithstanding, Levi has bequeathed to us the only wisdom we dare hope for from such an annihilating event:

The aims of life are the best defence against death: and not only in the Lager.<sup>102</sup>

## Notes

- (1) See Martin Gilbert, The Holocaust (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1987), p.811.
- (2) Ibid., pp.809, 817.
- (3) Terrence Des Pres, The Survivor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p.208.
- (4) Ibid., pp.60, 66, 177.
- (5) Ibid., p.38.
- (6) Theodor W. Adorno, Negative Dialectics (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p.362.
- (7) Des Pres, The Survivor, pp.156, 161.
- (8) Bruno Bettelheim, "Surviving", in Surviving the Holocaust (London: Fontana/Collins, 1986), pp.161-175.
- (9) Bettelheim, "Owners of Their Faces", in Surviving the Holocaust, p.100.
- (10) See "The Ultimate Limit" and "Trauma and Reintegration", both in Surviving the Holocaust, pp.15-30 and 31-48 respectively.
- (11) Bettelheim, "Trauma and Reintegration", p.38.
- (12) Ibid., p.47.
- (13) Bettelheim, "Surviving", pp.161-162.
- (14) Bruno Bettelheim, The Informed Heart (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1960), p.158. Viktor Frankl, a psychiatrist who endured several years in Auschwitz, shares the same conviction. See Viktor E. Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1964), p.65.
- (15) Bettelheim, The Informed Heart, p.251.
- (16) See Benjamin Ferencz, Less than Slaves (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), p.18.
- (17) Bettelheim, "Surviving", p.169.
- (18) Isabella Leitner, Fragments of Isabella (London: New English Library, 1980).
- (19) Primo Levi, The Drowned and the Saved, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London: Michael Joseph, 1988), p.18.
- (20) The unsold copies were lost to a flood in Florence in 1969.
- (21) Primo Levi, If This Is a Man/The Truce, trans. Stuart Woolf (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p.15.
- (22) Ibid., pp.177-178, 26, 33.

- (23) Ibid., p.96.
- (24) Levi, The Drowned and the Saved, p.72.
- (25) Ibid., pp.6, 62-63.
- (26) "We, the survivors, are not the true witnesses." (Ibid., p.63.)
- (27) See, for example, Gill Pyrah's article on "The Survivor Syndrome" in The Listener, 16 August 1979, pp.200-1.
- (28) Levi, If This Is a Man/The Truce, pp.379-380.
- (29) Levi, The Drowned and the Saved, pp.65-66.
- (30) Cited by Benjamin Ferencz in Less than Slaves, p.155.
- (31) Ibid., p.170.
- (32) Levi, The Drowned and the Saved, pp.168-169.
- (33) Levi, If This Is a Man, p.35.
- (34) Levi, The Drowned and the Saved, p.115.
- (35) Levi, If This Is a Man, p.109.
- (36) Primo Levi, Moments of Reprieve, trans. Ruth Feldman (London: Abacus/Sphere, 1987), p.11.
- (37) See Chapter 1 of The Drowned and the Saved, pp.11-21.
- (38) Primo Levi, The Periodic Table, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus/Sphere, 1986), p.151.
- (39) Levi, If This Is a Man, p.66.
- (40) Levi, The Drowned and the Saved, p.167.
- (41) Raul Hilberg, The Destruction of the European Jews (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961), p.669.
- (42) Levi, If This Is a Man, pp.149-150.
- (43) Levi, The Periodic Table, p.214.
- (44) Ibid., pp.221-222.
- (45) Levi, If This Is a Man, p.145.
- (46) Levi, The Drowned and the Saved, p.143.
- (47) Ibid., pp.144-158.
- (48) Ibid., p.159.
- (49) Levi, If This Is a Man, p. 57.

- (50) The "death-pit" of the Klinker brickworks at Sachsenhausen, for example, was reserved exclusively for homosexual prisoners. See Heinz Heger, The Men with the Pink Triangle (London: GMP, 1986), p.38.
- (51) Bettelheim, The Informed Heart, p.243.
- (52) Levi, If This Is a Man, p.93.
- (53) Levi, The Drowned and the Saved, p.25.
- (54) Ibid., pp.32-33.
- (55) Levi, If This Is a Man, p.98.
- (56) Ibid., p.127.
- (57) Levi, Moments of Reprieve, pp.149-160 ("Lorenzo's Return").
- (58) Levi, The Drowned and the Saved, pp.56, 89.
- (59) Levi, If This Is a Man, pp.129, 139.
- (60) Ibid., p.72.
- (61) Fernanda Eberstadt, "Reading Primo Levi", Commentary 80 (October 1985), p.45.
- (62) Levi, If This Is a Man, pp.135-136.
- (63) Levi, The Drowned and the Saved, p.118.
- (64) Levi, The Periodic Table, pp.130-131.
- (65) Primo Levi, If Not Now, When?, trans. William Weaver (London: Abacus/Sphere, 1987), pp.110-111.
- (66) Levi, If This Is a Man/The Truce, pp.187-189.
- (67) Levi, If Not Now, When?, p.176.
- (68) Ibid., pp.234, 165.
- (69) Ibid., pp.237-238, 136, 226.
- (70) Des Pres, The Survivor, pp.175-176.
- (71) Edward Alexander, The Resonance of Dust (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1979), p.18.
- (72) Elie Wiesel, "Talking and Writing and Keeping Silent", in The German Church Struggle and the Holocaust, ed. Franklin H. Littell and Hubert G. Locke (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1974), p.274.
- (73) Elie Wiesel, Night, trans. Stella Rodway (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1972), p.45.
- (74) Wiesel, "Talking and Writing and Keeping Silent", p.269.

- (75) See "Jewish Values in the Post-Holocaust Future: A symposium", Judaism 16 (Summer 1967), p.285.
- (76) Ibid.
- (77) Elie Wiesel, "Art and Culture after the Holocaust", in Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era? ed. Eva Fleischner (New York: Ktav, 1977), p.405.
- (78) Ibid., p.412.
- (79) Elie Wiesel, Legends of Our Time (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968), pp.8, 171.
- (80) See, for example, Alvin H. Rosenfeld and Irving Greenberg, eds., Confronting the Holocaust: The Impact of Elie Wiesel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979); Michael Berenbaum, The Vision of the Void: Theological Reflections on the Works of Elie Wiesel (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1979); Ellen S. Fine, Legacy of Night: The Literary Universe of Elie Wiesel. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982); Robert McAfee Brown, Elie Wiesel: Messenger to All Humanity (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).
- (81) Terrence Des Pres, Foreword to Ellen Fine's Legacy of Night, p.xv.
- (82) Wiesel, Legends of Our Time, p.75.
- (83) Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, By Words Alone (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p.119.
- (84) Elie Wiesel, The Fifth Son, trans. Marion Wiesel (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987).
- (85) Irving Halperin, Messengers from the Dead (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), p.69.
- (86) Elie Wiesel, The Gates of the Forest, trans. Frances Frenaye (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966), pp.172, 166.
- (87) Elie Wiesel, The Town beyond the Wall, trans. Stephen Becker (London: Robson Books, 1975), pp.94, 118, 178.
- (88) Wiesel has described elsewhere making a return visit to Sighet twenty years after the war (and several years after writing this novel). See Legends of Our Time, pp.110-30 ("The Last Return").
- (89) Brown, Elie Wiesel, p.12.
- (90) Terrence Des Pres, "The Authority of Silence in Elie Wiesel's Art", in Confronting the Holocaust, ed. Rosenfeld and Greenberg, p.55.
- (91) Levi, The Drowned and the Saved, pp.22-51. See also the section on Levi in this chapter.
- (92) Cited by Jan Kott in his Introduction to Tadeusz Borowski, This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen, trans. Barbara Vedder (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p.22.

- (93) Czeslaw Milosz, The Captive Mind, trans. Jane Zielonko (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), p.123. Milosz refers to Borowski as "Beta, the disappointed lover", but it is quite obvious that Borowski is the person in question.
- (94) Borowski, This Way for the Gas, p.113 (from "Auschwitz, Our Home (A Letter)").
- (95) Ibid., p.84 (from "The People Who Walked On").
- (96) Ibid., pp.43, 46 (from the title story).
- (97) "Philip Roth talks to the Israeli writer Aharon Appelfeld", London Review of Books, 17 March 1988, p.16.
- (98) Ibid., p.14.
- (99) Ibid.
- (100) Aharon Appelfeld, Badenheim 1939 (London: J.M. Dent, 1984); The Age of Wonders (Boston: David R. Godine, 1981). Both are translated by Dalya Bilu.
- (101) Appelfeld, Age of Wonders, p.174.
- (102) Levi, The Drowned and the Saved, p.120.

## CHAPTER 2

### HISTORY ON TRIAL

What recommends itself ... is the idea that art may be the only remaining medium of truth in an age of incomprehensible terror and suffering.

Theodor Adorno, Aesthetic Theory

Few novels have exercised greater influence over the imagination in its relation to suffering than Dostoevsky's Brothers Karamazov, first published more than a hundred years ago. One of the central chapters, in which Ivan tells Alyosha that he rejects Providence on the ground of the suffering of the innocent, has been cited so often in discussions of the problem of evil as to seem almost hackneyed; and yet the examples Ivan gives of deliberate cruelty continue to appal. "We cannot contemplate without terror," wrote Simone Weil, "the extent of the evil which man can do and endure."<sup>1</sup> As Ivan himself observes, "People talk sometimes of bestial cruelty, but that's a great injustice and insult to the beasts; a beast can never be so cruel as a man, so artistically cruel."<sup>2</sup>

After Auschwitz, Ivan's strictures on human depravity contain an additional urgency. A five-year-old girl is abused by her parents. A general sets his dogs on an eight-year-old boy, who is promptly torn to pieces (and the boy's mother is forced to watch). Ivan longs to believe in a future paradise, but finds the idea of it unacceptable:

It's not worth the tears of that one tortured child who beat itself on the breast with its little fist and prayed in its stinking outhouse, with its unexpiated tears to "dear, kind God"! It's not worth it, because those tears are unatoned for. They must be atoned for, or there can be no harmony. But how? How are you going to atone for them? Is it possible? By their being avenged? But what do I care for avenging them? What do I care for a

hell for oppressors? What good can hell do, since those children have already been tortured? And what becomes of harmony, if there is hell? I want to forgive. I want to embrace. I don't want more suffering. And if the sufferings of children go to swell the sum of sufferings which was necessary to pay for truth, then I protest that the truth is not worth such a price.<sup>3</sup>

Faced with the Holocaust, a similar protest might seem the only appropriate form of response.

Moreover, the scale of destruction makes it extremely difficult to register its toll in human terms. As early as January 1944, Arthur Koestler was warning of the failure to assimilate the information:

Distance in space and time degrades intensity of awareness. So does magnitude. Seventeen is a figure which I know intimately like a friend; fifty billions is just a sound. A dog run over by a car upsets our emotional balance and digestion; three million Jews killed in Poland cause but a moderate uneasiness. Statistics don't bleed; it is the detail which counts. We are unable to embrace the total process with our awareness; we can only focus on little lumps of reality.<sup>4</sup>

As the eponymous hero of Saul Bellow's Herzog (1964) puts it, "We are on a more brutal standard now, a new terminal standard, indifferent to persons." But Herzog is forced to confront the human dimension of suffering during a visit to New York's courtrooms. He sits in on the trial of a young couple for the murder of the woman's three-year-old son. The child had always been mistreated. Herzog is overwhelmed by a sense of helplessness:

With all his might - mind and heart - he tried to obtain something for the murdered child. But what? How? He pressed himself with intensity, but "all his might" could get nothing for the buried boy. Herzog experienced nothing but his own human feelings, in which he found nothing of use. What if he felt moved to cry? Or pray? He pressed hand to hand. And what did he feel? Why he felt himself - his own trembling hands, and eyes that stung. And what was there in modern, post ... post-Christian America to pray for? Justice - justice and mercy? And pray away the monstrousness of life, the wicked dream it was? He opened his mouth to relieve the pressure he felt. He was wrung, and wrung again, and wrung again, again.

The child screamed, clung, but with both arms the girl hurled it against the wall. On her legs was ruddy hair. And her lover, too, with long jaws and zooty sideburns, watching on the bed. Lying down to copulate, and standing up to kill. Some kill, then cry. Others, not even that.<sup>5</sup>



Saul Bellow's attempts to engage with the monstrousness of life represent some of the finest examples of contemporary fiction. It is only with his seventh novel, Mr Sammler's Planet (1970), however, that we find him addressing the subject of the Holocaust explicitly. A much earlier novel, The Victim (1947), explores the nature of antisemitism in an American context (namely, post-war New York), and has been hailed by Sidra Ezrahi as "a probing allegory of the Holocaust as a process whereby prejudice and delusion take possession of the psyche".<sup>6</sup> But, as the title of the novel suggests, The Victim is more about the identity of the persecuted than of the persecutor. It is, moreover, too specific in its location to support a very symbolic interpretation. Asa Levanthal's painful lesson in self-knowledge is only conceivable as the product of an encounter between two free individuals. Levanthal is a victim of his own personality as well as Allbee's manipulative behaviour, and Allbee is no Nazi, more an old-fashioned conman. If the latter's name is supposed to imply that he is something of an archetype, an antisemitic Everyman, it is Levanthal's own naivety that gives him scope for action. "It's almost a sin to be so innocent," another character says to Levanthal.<sup>7</sup>

### The Exemplary Survivor

A number of American Jewish novelists have approached the Holocaust by inventing a fictional survivor.<sup>8</sup> Edward Lewis Wallant might perhaps take the credit for suggesting the route with The Pawnbroker (1961), the story of a survivor from a camp (where it appears, from flashbacks, that he belonged to a Sonderkommando, burning the dead bodies) who now lives in New York, employed by a mafioso to run a pawnshop for laundering money earned illegally from prostitution. The moral of this tale, however, is unrelated to past suffering, except insofar as Sol Nazerman, the pawnbroker, is implicitly rebuked for living in the past. His black assistant, Jesus Ortiz, is killed saving his life in a hold-

up; it is only then that Sol recovers the capacity to feel for others and is able to lay the ghosts of his wife and children (who all died in the camp).<sup>9</sup> The Pawnbroker is essentially a sermon to American Jews not to ignore the oppressed in their midst. It is liberal propaganda rather than fiction in any deeper sense.

Propaganda is also a feature of Mr Sammler's Planet, but it must be said that Saul Bellow carries it off with considerably more aplomb, even if he takes the less fashionable line of attacking the progressive values that Edward Lewis Wallant espouses. Also set in New York, Bellow's novel is an examination of contemporary (that is, late sixties) America from the point of view of a survivor, an Anglophile Polish Jew whose intellectual pedigree combined with his experience is clearly meant to qualify him as some kind of authority. The age of moonshot, student revolt, and sexual permissiveness (but no mention of the civil rights movement), is refracted through the lens of Mr Sammler's remaining good eye, as he contemplates the forms of decadence and recalls his earlier ordeals.

Jennifer Bailey describes Mr Sammler's Planet as Bellow's "most disappointing work"; Mas'ud Zavarzadeh comments on its "aesthetic and ideational thinness"; and David Galloway, somewhat rashly, perhaps, in retrospect, pronounces it to be "a work which, despite its distinctive touches of genius, ultimately shows the bankruptcy of Bellow's novelistic imagination".<sup>10</sup> But if the novel is transparently flawed - and I shall try to suggest why I, too, think that it is - it nevertheless repays careful reading. Mr Sammler was brought to the United States with his daughter after the war by an American nephew (who is only a few years younger than Sammler himself). He has had plenty of time to accustom himself to this new environment, but it remains forever strange to him. In fact, he is introduced to us as a bookish man of seventy-plus (who suspects that the books he has read are the wrong books), intent on observing a majestic black pickpocket ply his trade on the bus Sammler regularly catches outside the Forty-second Street Library, his second home.

Mr Sammler goes to phone the police and finds the phone booth has been vandalized. This prompts the first of many meditations on New York as the new Sodom:

New York was getting worse than Naples or Salonika. It was like an Asian, an African town, from this standpoint. The opulent sections of the city were not immune. You opened a jewelled door into degradation, from hypercivilized Byzantine luxury straight into the state of nature, the barbarous world of colour erupting from beneath. It might well be barbarous on either side of the jewelled door. Sexually, for example. The thing evidently, as Mr Sammler was beginning to grasp, consisted in obtaining the privileges, and the free ways of barbarism, under the protection of civilized order, property rights, refined technological organization, and so on. Yes, that must be it.

Much of the novel is written in this vein. "It was distinguishing, not explanation, that mattered," we are told; but Mr Sammler's distinctions are so pedantic that the insight loses its value. He is not simply testy with White Protestant America for failing to keep better order,<sup>11</sup> he is testy with the whole modern world. The Enlightenment is berated as a licence for excess, and the whiff of disaster in the air affects Mr Sammler (who has already seen the world destroyed once) to an exceptional degree.

But is the character of Mr Sammler convincing? Bellow's own regard for his fictional creation would seem to have made him oblivious to the unintended irony of certain passages. "Sammler denied himself the privilege of the high-principled intellectual," we read, for example, "who must always be applying the purest standards and thumping the rest of the species on the head."<sup>12</sup> Critics have been quick to spot the anomaly. "It is obviously Bellow's intention that Sammler's judgements should be taken as axiomatically right," Jennifer Bailey complains. "But it is doubtful whether a standard of implicit value can be asserted in this way without the suggestion of parody. It has certainly crept in unawares in Mr Sammler's Planet."<sup>13</sup> And Alfred Kazin makes the connection between the character's sense of superiority and over-refined sense of smell:

There is a brilliantly immediate, unsparing knowledge of other people's appearance and limitations which in its moral haughtiness becomes as audible to the reader as sniffing, and is indeed that. There is so strong a sense of physical disgust with all one's distended, mad-eyed, pushing neighbors on the West Side that there seems nothing in the book to love but one's opinions.<sup>14</sup>

Mr Sammler, it need hardly be said, is not short of opinions. Whether it is the belief that Hannah Arendt's thesis on the banality of evil is reprehensible or that females are "naturally more prone to grossness",<sup>15</sup> these opinions are the motor of the narrative. The plot itself, however, which stretches over several days, is driven more by the dynamics of farce: a lecture Sammler gives on "The British Scene in the Thirties" (of which he was himself a part) is disrupted by an offensive student; the pickpocket exposes himself to Sammler in a bizarre gesture of intimidation; Sammler's eccentric daughter Shula steals a manuscript on colonizing the moon; his nephew's son Wallace floods the family home (interrupting a lengthy exposition of his views to Dr Lal, the Hindu scientist and author of The Future of the Moon); and Eisen, Shula's estranged husband, attacks the pickpocket with a bag of metal sculptures. The only sane character in the novel, apart from Mr Sammler himself, is his nephew Elya Gruner, and he lies in hospital with an aneurism in the brain. His death, which brings the story to a close, is paradoxically a reprieve from all this madness.

Madness, in Mr Sammler's opinion, "is the attempted liberty of people who feel themselves overwhelmed by giant forces of organized control. Seeking the magic of extremes. Madness is a base form of the religious life." He himself aspires to a higher form of the religious life. His reading these days is confined to Meister Eckhart and the Bible. This leads to a preoccupation with creatureliness. Sammler has seen the creature in its worst aspect, but continues all the same to have what he calls "God adumbrations". The journey back from the grave - the mass grave that he and his wife Antonina, along with other Polish Jews, had been forced to dig (Sammler having been struck in the eye with a

rifle butt), and from which he had clawed his way out, the only survivor - has been an arduous and costly one. "Too many inside things were ruptured," he reflects. And he expresses to Dr Lal the conviction that his recovery has been incomplete:

Sometimes I wonder whether I have any place here, among other people. I assume I am one of you. But also I am not. I suspect my own judgements because my lot has been extreme. I was a studious young person, not meant for action. Suddenly, it was all action - blood, guns, graves, famine. Very harsh surgery. One cannot come out intact.<sup>16</sup>

One cannot come out intact, perhaps, but Mr Sammler's attachment to life shows through in his restored sensibility, which is matched by the lyricism of Bellow's prose:

Through Fifteenth Street ran a warm spring current. Lilacs and sewage. There were as yet no lilacs, but an element of the sewage gas was velvety and sweet, reminiscent of blooming lilac. All about was a softness of perhaps dissolved soot, or of air passed through many human breasts, or metabolized in multitudinous brains, or released from as many intestines, and it got to one - oh, deeply, too! Now and then there came an appreciative or fanciful pleasure, apparently inconsequent, suggested by the ruddy dun of sandstone, by cool corners of the warmth. Bliss from his surroundings! For a certain period Mr Sammler had resisted such physical impressions - being wooed almost comically by momentary and fortuitous sweetness. For quite a long time he had felt that he was not necessarily human. Had no great use, during that time, for most creatures. Very little interest in himself. Cold even to the thought of recovery. What was there to recover? Little regard for earlier forms of himself. Disaffected. His judgement almost blank. But then, ten or twelve years after the war, he became aware that this too was changing. In the human setting, along with everyone else, among particulars of ordinary life he was human - and, in short, creatureliness crept in again. Its low tricks, its doggish hind-sniffing charm. So that now, really, Sammler didn't know how to take himself. He wanted, with God, to be free from the bondage of the ordinary and the finite. A soul released from Nature, from impressions and from everyday life. For this to happen God Himself must be waiting, surely. And a man who has been killed and buried should have no other interest. He should be perfectly disinterested. Eckhart said in so many words that God loved disinterested purity and unity. God Himself was drawn towards the disinterested soul. What besides the spirit should a man care for who has come back from the grave? However, and mysteriously enough, it happened, as Sammler observed, that one was always, and so powerfully, so persuasively drawn back to human conditions. So that these flecks within one's substance would always stipple with their reflections all that a man turns towards, all that flows about him. The shadow of his nerves would always cast stripes, like trees on grass, like water over sand, the light-made network. It was a second encounter of the disinterested spirit with fated biological necessities, a return match with the persistent creature.<sup>17</sup>

A tension between disinterestedness and the business of being human is sustained throughout the novel. "The best, I have found," Mr Sammler tells Govinda Lal, "is to be disinterested. Not as misanthropes dissociate themselves, by judging, but by not judging. By willing as God wills." But we know Mr Sammler too well by this stage not to find a touch of hypocrisy in that. Besides casting his quizzical eye over the contemporary scene, he is tempted by the thought that his survival has a purpose. "Mr Sammler had a symbolic character," we read. "He, personally, was a symbol." And it is disingenuous of him to be puzzled by the fact that his family and friends have made him a judge and a priest. He has assumed these roles for himself. He hasn't simply lasted, as he likes to put it, he has a definite sense of waiting for something, the significance of which comes to occupy him more and more:

Assigned to figure out certain things, to condense, in short views, some essence of experience, and because of this having a certain wizardry ascribed to him. There was, in fact, unfinished business. But how did business finish? We entered in the middle of the thing and somehow became convinced that we must conclude it. How? And since he had lasted - survived - with a sick headache - he would not quibble over words - was there an assignment implicit? Was he meant to do something?<sup>18</sup>

Mr Sammler's lot has been extreme, but he has recovered from it sufficiently to want to understand it. He knows from personal experience what it is like to be less than human. As a partisan in Zamosht Forest he discovered that the taking of life could be a form of luxury, that under brutal conditions human beings tend to behave brutally:

Mr Sammler himself was able to add, to basic wisdom, that to kill the man he ambushed in the snow had given him pleasure. Was it only pleasure? It was more. It was joy. You would call it a dark action? On the contrary, it was also a bright one. It was mainly bright. When he fired his gun, Sammler, himself nearly a corpse, burst into life. Freezing in Zamosht Forest, he had often dreamed of being near a fire. Well, this was more sumptuous than fire. His heart felt lined with brilliant, rapturous satin. To kill the man and to kill him without pity, for he was dispensed from pity. There was a flash, a blot of fiery white. When he shot again, it was less to make sure of the man than to try again for that bliss. To drink more flames. He would have thanked God for this opportunity. If he had had any God. At that time, he did not. For many years, in his own mind, there was no judge but himself.<sup>19</sup>

Towards the end of the end of the war, the Polish partisans turned on their Jewish comrades. Sammler escaped and found refuge in a cemetery. The Polish caretaker hid him in a mausoleum during that final summer.

It is difficult to reconcile the image of a man beyond appeal with the fastidious intellectual whose consciousness we inhabit. Mr Sammler is now pre-eminently an observer, an island of sanity in a world gone mad, "a meditative island on the island of Manhattan". Apart, that is, from a brief derangement brought on by the crisis in the Middle East. On the eve of the Six-Day War, in spite of his age, Mr Sammler felt impelled to get himself credentials as a reporter and head for Israel. No Zionist, we are told, but he was alarmed by the prospect of another attempt to destroy the Jews. "Perhaps it was the madness of things that affected Sammler most deeply," we read.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps. Perhaps, too, the author is thinking of his own response to the crisis. Bellow himself became a correspondent for the Six-Day War. What we read as Sammler's experience is essentially his own.<sup>21</sup> This makes it authentic in one sense but problematic in another. Would a survivor of the Holocaust have felt the same obligation to share in his people's fate a second time, unless, that is, he had retained a strong sense of his own Jewishness? In an article on "Imagining the Holocaust" Edward Alexander offers an explanation of this:

This reaction by Sammler, who is no Zionist and has not been much of a Jew either, will remind readers of the novel of the reaction of many Jews at the time of the June war who felt that here, at last, was their opportunity to atone for having sipped tea in Manhattan while a third of their bretheren were being murdered at Auschwitz, Belsen, and Buchenwald.<sup>22</sup>

Are we any the wiser, however, as to what Bellow is up to in his novel? Mr Sammler has nothing to atone for. According to Alexander, the author is "trying to appropriate his Jewish hero's credentials, and doing so in a severe and conscientious way".<sup>23</sup> But this further evidence of Bellow's over-identification with Mr Sammler must lead us to question the integrity of the fictional character. Returning to the theme of his article in The Resonance

of Dust, Alexander reveals a change of heart. We now read, "This reaction by Sammler, who is no Zionist and has not been much of a Jew either, can be explained only by what he has learned from the Holocaust."<sup>24</sup> But this begs another question. What has Mr Sammler learned from the Holocaust? That death is the one subject the soul is sure to take seriously?<sup>25</sup> If Sammler was returning to a war zone to remind himself of certain basic realities, why did he have to wait for this particular conflict? Bellow is making a polemical connection, and it behoves us to ask whether it is appropriate to do so through the mouthpiece of a survivor.

If Mr Sammler has learned anything at all from his experiences, it is that such catastrophes are irreversible. "And I know now that humankind marks certain people for death," he says to Dr Lal. "Against them there shuts a door. Shula and I have been in this written-off category. If you chance nevertheless to live, having been out leaves you with idiosyncracies."<sup>26</sup> These idiosyncracies are more apparent in his relatives: Walter Bruch, for instance, who enjoys mock funerals and Nazi rallies, and reminisces about his time in Buchenwald with a perverse kind of nostalgia. Sammler's daughter and son-in-law are both crazy. Only Sammler himself still has his wits, and he hankers to be released from human bondage, or at least to be left alone with his Meister Eckhart.

Eckhart exhorts us to renounce the things of this world: to be poor in spirit and stripped of all creatures. But life, it seems, teaches differently. To be poor in spirit is less a condition of blessedness than a nightmare, as Sammler discovers in his dependence on Eisen, his maniacal son-in-law, to break up the fight between the pickpocket and Feiffer:

It was a feeling of horror and grew in strength, grew and grew. What was it? How was it to be put? He was a man who had come back. He had rejoined life. He was near to others. But in some essential way he was also companionless. He was old. He lacked physical force. He knew what to do, but had no power to execute it. He had to turn to someone else - to an Eisen! A man himself very far out on another track, orbiting a very different foreign centre. Sammler was powerless. To be powerless was death.



And suddenly he saw himself not so much standing as strangely leaning, as reclining, and peculiarly in profile, as a past person. That was not himself. It was someone - and this struck him - poor in spirit. Someone between the human and not-human states, between content and emptiness, between full and void, meaning and not-meaning, between this world and no world. Flying, freed from gravitation, light with release and dread, doubting his destination, fearing there was nothing to receive him.

No beatific vision for Mr Sammler, then. His worst fears are confirmed when Eisen's idea of intervention is to smash the pickpocket's face with his bag of home-made medallions. Eisen mocks his father-in-law's delicacy. "You can't hit a man like this just once," he exclaims. "When you hit him you must really hit him. Otherwise he'll kill you. You know. We both fought in the war. You were a Partisan. You had a gun. So don't you know?" Even though the parallel is inexact, it has the ring of truth. "If in - in. No?" Eisen continues. "If out - out. Yes? No? So answer." But Sammler is defeated by this. It has awakened too many memories. "It was the reasoning that sank Sammler's heart completely," we read.<sup>27</sup>

Questions of justice are pushed to one side by the more pressing event of Elya Gruner's death. The episode with Eisen and the others has cost Sammler his chance to reach Elya while the latter was still conscious. Waiting in the hospital, he gets into an argument with Angela, Elya's daughter, about her lack of filial respect. Any occasion, for Mr Sammler, is an occasion for moralizing. "I don't like the opinion I think you have of me," Angela tells him. His reply is circumlocutory, to say the least. He launches into a discussion of apocalyptic beliefs, concluding with an emphatic defence of humanism. "We are an animal of genius," he proclaims,<sup>28</sup> as if this were somehow relevant to the point he is trying to make: namely, that Angela has been insufficiently affectionate towards her father, as well as lax in her sexual etiquette.

Elya himself, a retired gynaecologist and property speculator, appears to have performed clandestine abortions for the Mafia, but this does not compromise his essential virtue as far as Mr Sammler is concerned. It never

occurs to Sammler that the young might take their cue from the older generation's lapses. To see Elya as the model of a good man and yet condemn his children for their waywardness, is to be blind to the connection between the two. Elya's "goodness" is that of an American patriarch: authoritarian, sentimental and humourless. He expresses his love for his children by spoiling them and then continually finding fault with them. A man who can refer to his own daughter as "Sloppy cunt!"<sup>29</sup> lacks something as a role-model.

I do not doubt the sincerity of Mr Sammler's grief. It is, to be sure, a sad time:

Well, this famous truth for which he was so keen, he had it now, or it had him. He felt that he was being destroyed, what was left of him. He wept to himself.... He felt that he was breaking up, that irregular big fragments inside were melting, sparkling with pain, floating off. Well, Elya was gone. He was deprived of one more thing, stripped of one more creature. One more reason to live trickled out.<sup>30</sup>

But Bellow fudges the ending of the novel by withdrawing into pietism. The prayer which Sammler recites over his benefactor's corpse is neither illuminating nor true. To say that we know in our inmost hearts the terms of our contract,<sup>31</sup> lays claim to a theological certainty which fiction contradicts. All a novel can hope to achieve by way of instruction is to make real in some way the complexity of moral judgements. Mr Sammler's didacticism counteracts this.

Mr Sammler's Planet is a peculiarly distorted portrait of a survivor, too cerebral, perhaps, to convince us that it has anything new to say about the experience of suffering, and yet, for all that, a moving portrait too. It was reading this novel that led me to embark on the present thesis. If little I have read since matches it for imaginative energy, I cannot help being disappointed, reading it again, by a certain meanness of spirit. Its querulous tone threatens to stifle its more human voice. "Perhaps the best is to have some order within oneself," Mr Sammler advises Govinda Lal. "Better than what many call love. Perhaps it is love."<sup>32</sup> But as Bellow himself pointed out in an essay published

a few years earlier, a writer may affirm principles we all approve of and write bad novels. Mr Sammler's Planet is not a bad novel, but it certainly fails to satisfy Bellow's own condition for a novel of ideas to become art:

It becomes art when the views most opposite to the author's own are allowed to exist in full strength. Without this a novel of ideas is mere self-indulgence, and didacticism is simply axe-grinding. The opposites must be free to range themselves against each other, and they must be passionately expressed on both sides.<sup>33</sup>

### "Death is the Messiah"

Another American Jewish writer who has sought to confront the Holocaust in fiction, often by means of imaginary survivors, is Isaac Bashevis Singer. Singer was born in Poland in 1904 but emigrated to the United States in 1935.<sup>34</sup> He has continued to write in Yiddish as part of an attempt to preserve something of the culture that the Nazis destroyed. One of his characters expresses a belief that the aim of literature is to prevent time from vanishing,<sup>35</sup> and this assumes a particular significance after the Holocaust. The twelve-year span of the millennial Third Reich shattered all sense of continuity. The pressure on the writer, especially the Jewish writer, to restore one is as enormous as it is inhibiting.

Singer's first, and perhaps most durable, response to the annihilation of his world can be found in The Family Moskat (1950), which chronicles the fortunes of a Jewish family in Warsaw from the beginning of the century until the German invasion of Poland in 1939. This novel represents both a piece of fictional social history and a memorial to the victims of the approaching terror. Hope for the Messiah becomes an ironic refrain. As Warsaw crumbles, the narrative grinds to a halt. "The Messiah will come soon," Hertz Yanovar claims. His companion, Asa Heshel Bannet, is astonished, and asks him what he means. "Death is the Messiah," he replies. "That's the real truth."<sup>36</sup>

Real truth or not, it is the epitaph for an entire civilization. Don Cupitt imagines its theological import is universal. In The World to Come (1982) he contends that Singer's novel (all six hundred odd pages of it) was written "for the sake of four words in the last line". But this suggests a curious attitude to fiction, as if novels were merely vehicles for ideas rather than a testing-ground for them. Cupitt invokes Singer to endorse his own belief that "everyone must eventually come to terms with his own transience and the Void that encircles him".<sup>37</sup> The Jews of Warsaw were encircled not by the Void but by the German army. The reason for all that prefatory narrative in The Family Moskat is to help us realize that those doomed human beings were indeed human. There is more protest in the novel's closing line than there is resignation, whatever the character who speaks it may intend.

Such protest is already apparent from the way the situation of Jews between the wars is described.<sup>38</sup> Widespread antisemitism in Poland would make it easier for the Nazis to isolate the Jews from the rest of the population. Asa Heshel Bannet, who embodies much of the novel's moral force, has no illusions about what is in store. "They'll destroy all of us," he predicts. And when Abram objects that the end of the world hasn't come yet, Asa Heshel retorts, "The end of our world has come." In spite of this clear-sightedness, however, he remains in Warsaw. Members of the family return from Palestine and the United States for a reunion. Only Adele tries to get out - on a ship bound illegally to Palestine that is eventually turned back. People are reluctant to leave, anyway, because they feel bound by a common fate. As Hertz Yanovar tells the chief of police, "If the peoples of the world want us to live, then they have to discover the way."<sup>39</sup>

The Jewish community is seen to be in turmoil. Singer does not offer a sentimental image of the Warsaw Jews; neither does he seek to blame those whose response to the crisis was to wait for it to pass. Even the extreme fatalism

of the Dead Hasidim, the followers of Rabbi Nachman Bratslaver, is shown to have its basis in an awareness of the gravity of the situation. It is the lack of awareness elsewhere that is implicitly condemned. Witness Asa Heshel's reflections on the outbreak of war:

There were countries where there was still peace. In America people were going to the theatre, eating in restaurants, dancing, listening to music. He heard the wailing of cats outside; the animal world did not know there was a Hitler; in this way human beings, too, fail to perceive other realities.<sup>40</sup>

If I would argue that it is only human to carry on with normal life when barbarism has put an end to normality for others, I do not mean to condone it. But is it necessary to evolve a concept of different orders of time, as George Steiner thinks it is,<sup>41</sup> in order to account for the fact that one person will be enjoying life while another is being beaten to death? As long as there is suffering in the world, all our pleasures are inevitably tainted. Auden's poem "Musée des Beaux Arts" expresses it well. Suffering always takes place while someone else "is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along".<sup>42</sup>

Surely it is more important to address the causes of suffering than to worry about whether one is personally suffering enough. For a survivor, of course, the everyday world may well seem strange. Herman Broder, the protagonist of Enemies, A Love Story (1966), is confounded by the ability of American Jews to shut the Holocaust out of their thoughts. "Half of his people had been tortured and murdered," we read, "and the other half were giving parties."<sup>43</sup> Enemies, in fact, reflects Singer's growing concern with the trauma of survival, and especially with the problems associated with being a refugee. A number of his later short stories portray survivors who have settled in America,<sup>44</sup> but Enemies is more ambitious in its attempt to convey the psychological impact of the ordeal that they have been through.

Set in New York a few years after the war, this novel is a disconcerting account of the fragmented world inhabited by a group of survivors. It is Herman,

however, who spent the war hidden in a hayloft, rather than his wife Tamara, who witnessed their children being shot and endured the hardship of a Soviet labour camp, or his mistress Masha, who experienced the full weight of the Holocaust - it is Herman who is most loath to start life again. He is the type of Singer's deracinated philosopher, for whom suffering is a vocation. His women (he also has a second wife, Yadviga, the Polish woman who risked her life to hide him) indulge him in this, but they, ultimately, must bear the cost. Masha ends up committing suicide, in spite of the fact that she "had retained the normal instincts" and wanted "a husband, children, a household". And although Yadviga becomes a convert after Herman has told her "If we don't want to become like the Nazis, we must be Jews,"<sup>45</sup> this does not prevent Herman from abandoning her and the child she is about to bear. It is left to Tamara, perpetually in mourning for her own children (whom Herman seems never to have missed), to give them a home.

The difference between Herman and the others is that the Holocaust simply confirmed him in his pessimism. "He was not a victim of Hitler," we are told. "He had been a victim long before Hitler's day." This allows him - and the author, too, perhaps - to regard the universe as unchanged, even if he now has a different metaphor for the hellishness of earthly existence:

His pondering always brought him to the same conclusion: God (or whatever He may be) was certainly wise, but there was no sign of His mercy. If a God of mercy did exist in the heavenly hierarchy, then he was only a helpless godlet, a kind of heavenly Jew among the heavenly Nazis. As long as one does not have the courage to leave this world, one can only hide and try to get by, with the help of alcohol, opium, a hayloft in Lipsk, or a small room at Shifrah Puah's.

So, once more, Herman goes into hiding. No one knows where he has gone. How we are meant to judge this is uncertain. The novel has an attenuated quality that reflects the lives it describes, and its ending is akin to evaporation. The question of Jewish identity after the Holocaust - "What is my Jewishness?" Herman asks himself at one point<sup>46</sup> - hangs in the air.

A return to the Old World with Shosha (1974), reinforces the impression that Singer is more at home in pre-war Poland, even when contemplating the destructive course of events. Characters take on life from their surroundings. A community is summoned into being. Aaron Greidinger, the narrator, is one of the few to survive: it is the memory of a lost community that we in fact encounter. Aaron is another modern Jew, the child of a strictly Orthodox home (his father, like Singer's, a Hasidic rabbi) who has ambitions as a writer. Unable to accept the restrictions of traditional piety, he nevertheless feels out of place in the wider world. Like Asa Heshel Bannet he foresees the catastrophe, but twice refuses to leave Warsaw when he has the chance of a visa to the United States.<sup>47</sup>

Perhaps the most remarkable achievement in the novel is the character of Shosha herself. Her profound innocence, based on the fact that she has the mind and appearance of a child, is never cloying, and her death, not from starvation or gassing but from a loss of the will to live, is as haunting in its way as any more violent fate. It is described in retrospect by Aaron to his friend Haiml, during the course of a reunion between them in Israel (where Haiml has settled) seven years after the war. The intervening years, from after the fall of Warsaw, that is, have been left blank. The other characters are revealed to have perished. Haiml is moved by the establishment of the new state to believe that miracles are still possible, speculating that the Messiah may come after all if the Jews have a country of their own again. Aaron is more sceptical. He has given up waiting for an answer. "There can't be any answer for suffering - not for the sufferer," he says.<sup>48</sup>

The Jewish longing for redemption is a central theme in Singer's work. According to Aaron, "From the day they were exiled from their land, Jews had lived in anticipation of death or the coming of the Messiah." Aaron's brother, a rabbi, interprets the Nazi threat as the birth pangs of the Messiah. "There

have been many Hamans, and they all came to a bad end," he assures his mother. "Before they came to their bad end," she points out, "they killed off plenty of Jews." To be chosen is an ambiguous privilege. It is impossible to be a Jew; it is impossible not to be one. "We are running away and Mount Sinai runs after us," Aaron tells his mistress. "This chase has made us sick and mad."<sup>49</sup>

### American Jewish Fiction at Large

Other leading American Jewish writers have been more tentative in their responses to the Holocaust, with the exception of two writers of popular fiction, Leon Uris and Gerald Green, whose work I shall discuss at the end of this section. Bernard Malamud might be said to share a similar pessimism to Isaac Bashevis Singer, but his stories are located, on the whole, in the immigrant Jewish communities of America. Two of his short stories broach the subject of the Holocaust directly, but the emphasis in both is on the need to preserve a Jewish identity rather than on the experience of suffering.<sup>50</sup> It is possible to read The Fixer (1966) as an allegory of the Holocaust, and both Robert Alter and Alvin Rosenfeld have done so.<sup>51</sup> The narrative as such, however, is based on the trial of Mendel Beiliss, a Jewish artisan from Kiev, on a trumped-up charge of ritual murder in 1911. Malamud's version reflects his despairing equation of Jewishness with suffering which elsewhere - in The Assistant (1957), for example - leads him to imply that suffering is a Jewish virtue. "Being born a Jew meant being vulnerable to history," we read in The Fixer, "including its worst errors."<sup>52</sup>

In his study of American Jewish fiction that relates to the Holocaust, Crisis and Covenant (1985), Alan Berger has sought to evaluate it in terms of its "covenantal awareness": in other words, how well does it accord with traditional Jewish teaching on the relationship between God and the chosen people? The Fixer, on this model, is the product of a culture which no longer



recognizes the authority of the Covenant. Being Jewish has become a puzzle rather than a religious calling. "Malamud's pre-Holocaust novel should be read," in Berger's view, "as an evocation of the central fact of Jewish modernism; the disruption of the covenant-history dialectic. Yakov Bok refuses his Jewish religious and ritual inheritance."<sup>53</sup> And this is what leaves him at the mercy of history. But Malamud himself, one feels, is hardly on the side of modernism. His questioning of tradition does not amount to a rejection of it so much as an anxiety that the powers of this world are stronger than God.

Philip Roth, on the other hand, is less ambiguously a secular writer, for whom being Jewish is largely an accident of birth. It is the state of his own continent rather than that of Europe which has challenged him as an artist, as he explains in an essay on "Writing American Fiction":

The American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make credible much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination.<sup>54</sup>

The Holocaust does find its way into one novel, The Ghost Writer (1979), in the form of a fantasy about Anne Frank as a survivor who feels compelled to keep her identity hidden. "I was the incarnation of the millions of unlived years robbed from the murdered Jews," she says. "It was too late to be alive now. I was a saint."<sup>53</sup> But any serious point being made here is swept aside by Nathan Zuckerman's real motive for imagining this in the first place. He needs to appease his family for making stories out of their foibles. What better way to prove that he remains loyal to his Jewish background than by marrying Anne Frank? Roth is an adept comic and doubtless intends this joke to be in poor taste. As satire, however, The Ghost Writer never really identifies its target.

A more conventional narrative defines the scope of Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's Anya (1974), which purports to be the autobiography of a Jewish woman who escaped from a concentration camp and found her way to America

with her daughter in tow.<sup>56</sup> The lengthy reconstruction of life in Poland before and during the war is so fussy and laboured that the fate of its characters would be of little interest, were it not for the appeal to historical reality. Sidra Ezrahi is more charitable. "The novel is a good example of impressive erudition and a sensitive exploration of brutal experience," she claims, "as well as of the lapses which are probably inevitable in the vicarious reconstruction of cataclysmic history."<sup>57</sup> But scholarship in fiction seems a poor substitute for style. Anya avoids the charge of being sensational only at the expense of being tedious. "The tension between internal accountability to the imagination," Ezrahi goes on to argue, "and external accountability to the victims expresses the heart of the dilemma of Holocaust literature in America."<sup>58</sup> Why, though, should this tension be seen as a dilemma? Anya is no less fictional for being thoroughly researched, but a good deal less convincing for lacking imagination.

This failure of imagination, however understandable in the face of real human suffering, is not to be justified by a spurious appeal to scruples. The scrupulous course of action would be to write nothing at all. For a novelist to be in thrall to the facts is an admission of defeat. It is a licence for pseudo-factual novels like Leon Uris's QBVII (1970) and Gerald Green's Holocaust (1978) which mistake blood-and-thunder reportage for historical realism. Leon Uris has been extremely successful as an epic storyteller who models his plots on large-scale historical events. The plot for Mila 18 (1961), however, his tale of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, is similar in construction to a novel published some years before - The Wall (1950) by John Hersey.<sup>59</sup> It is therefore all the more remarkable that, in spite of its sensational treatment, QBVII should have what appears to be an original plot: the story of a libel action brought by a Polish doctor, now a London-based GP, against an American novelist for a reference in his latest bestseller to the doctor's involvement in medical experiments in a concentration camp.<sup>60</sup>

Too good to be true, in fact - or, to be more precise, too good not to be true. There is no mention in the blurb for QBVII that Leon Uris and his British publishers were themselves defendants in a libel action in 1964, brought against them by a Polish doctor and former inmate of Auschwitz, Wladislaw Dering, for an offending line in Exodus (1958), Uris's blockbuster about the emergence of the State of Israel. A record of the original trial was published the following year, under the title of Auschwitz in England, and created enough interest to merit a paperback edition soon after.<sup>61</sup> Its authors, Mavis Hill and Norman Williams, were both trained lawyers. Uris had referred in Exodus to a Dr Dehring, in the company of two notorious Nazi doctors, and accused him of performing "seventeen thousand 'experiments' in surgery without anaesthetic".<sup>62</sup>

Abraham Cady, Uris's fictional alter ego, has written more or less the same thing about Dr Kelno.<sup>63</sup> Wladislaw Dering, O.B.E., is thus transformed into Sir Adam Kelno (a little exaggeration goes a long way). The imaginary trial takes place in 1967, by which time the real-life plaintiff has died of lung cancer.<sup>64</sup> The second half of QBVII is the story of this trial and its dramatic climax, while the first half traces the lives of the two court-room opponents. Kelno, like Dering, is held in Brixton jail after the war on suspicion of war crimes, then released for lack of evidence. And again like his prototype, he spends a number of years in the Colonial Medical Service before settling in London as a GP. The author allows us a few brief glimpses of the man's conscience as a foretaste of the trial to come,<sup>65</sup> but most of the narrative is in the form of a chronicle.

Abraham Cady, of course, is the archetypal American hero: a hardbitten womanizer with a heart of gold. Some of his own relatives died in the camp (which Uris calls Jadwiga) where Kelno was a prisoner-doctor, which gives him an additional glow of righteousness, as if it were somehow to his credit that

they should have suffered thus. His elder brother, whom he idolized, was killed in Spain, having enlisted as a pilot to serve the republican cause. Cady himself enlists as a fighter pilot in the Second World War. Brought down by enemy planes, he loses an eye but gains a beautiful English wife. They have a son who grows up to be a volunteer in the Israeli air force, and the news of his death in the Six-Day War is the novel's parting shot.

One does not have to be a pacifist, however, to find Uris's glorification of combat objectionable. The subtext of all this - that Jews are now a people to be reckoned with - ignores the forms of resistance that were available to, and used by, the Jews of occupied Europe,<sup>66</sup> preferring instead to lend credence to the myth that they went "like lambs to the slaughter" if it saves the reader the trouble of probing how the murder of six million human beings was possible. Uris has a simple answer: they didn't have guns. The martyrdom of Cady junior is both a reminder that the enemies of Israel are legion and an example of swagger. Ben Cady may have died, but the Arab air forces have been destroyed by the Israeli strike.<sup>67</sup>

Sir Adam Kelno is eventually exposed as a rabid antisemite, indistinguishable in essence from his German masters. Once again, Uris prefers the cliché to the complex truth. Wladislaw Dering, a qualified surgeon, was certainly guilty of carrying out operations which had no medical basis, as a result of which a number of Jewish prisoners were rendered sterile and at least one seems to have died soon after from internal bleeding. It is more than likely that he was antisemitic to some degree; as a Polish nationalist (the reason why he was in Auschwitz to begin with) he would have had little sympathy with Jews as such. All the same, he had belonged to the underground resistance movement at Auschwitz for several years, enjoyed a good reputation as the Senior Prisoner in charge of the camp hospital, and, it needs to be stressed, was not, however compromised, among the executioners: at any time his own life might have been forfeit.<sup>68</sup>

The jury awarded Dering damages of one halfpenny ("the smallest coin of the realm"). He had been ill-advised to bring the action and, it might be thought, was simply getting his just deserts. But I fail to see how those of us who have never experienced the degrading and frightening conditions of the Lager can sit in judgement on a man who opted to save his skin without due regard for others from a civilized point of view. There was nothing civilized about Auschwitz. Three fellow doctors, all women, testified against Dering because they had had the courage to refuse to participate in these bogus operations.<sup>69</sup> The fact that none of them had been severely punished for this would seem to be an indictment of Dering's cowardice, but not evidence of his inhumanity.

Uris, however, reduces the story to a confrontation between good and evil, generating the requisite suspense by employing the register of surgical operations from the camp as a deus ex machina, the final proof of Sir Adam Kelno's complicity. At the original trial, this register was central to the case for the defence from the very beginning. It contained no unexpected revelations. Dering had taken part in ninety "experimental" operations on his own admission.<sup>70</sup> Survivors did indeed accuse him of compounding his responsibility with callousness, and this surely moved the jury to award him such a derisory sum, but Uris gets his revenge on the man who took him to court (and who, being dead, is in no position to do so again) by painting him in even darker colours, a man who ends up physically attacking his own protégé for siding with the Jews.<sup>71</sup>

QBVII, then, is a scandal of distortion, a good yarn spun from the thread of a tragic reality. Gerald Green's Holocaust takes similar liberties with the truth to satisfy the market for popular fiction. We find ourselves on a sightseeing tour of the worst atrocities, stopping off here and there to meet a leading Nazi, and then invited to cheer as the narrator, a German Jew called Rudi Weiss,

fighters his way to safety. Fighting Jews get a special mention in Green's Dedication,<sup>72</sup> and militancy is clearly as vital to this plot as it was to Uris's. When his father is ordered to return to Poland, Rudi vows to resist:

They would not humiliate me, force me to do their bidding, the way they had forced so many others. Jews were supposed to agree, be polite, obey, listen, accept. But I had never understood this. I did not look for fights in the street, but I never ran away. And when I played soccer I played to win. And if the other fellow played dirty, I could trip and shove, and if need be, throw a punch.

"What will you do?" Anne asked, still weeping.

"I'll fight."<sup>73</sup>

Interspersed with Rudi's story are extracts from the diary of a fictional SS major called Erik Dorf, who seems to have had contact with most high-ranking Nazis and taken an active role himself in determining the fate of the Jews. Dorf is the antithesis of our hero: he is cowardly, overintellectual, and dominated by his wife. He becomes an accomplice to mass murder, initially, not because he is antisemitic but because he has no will of his own. Under the tutelage of his idol, Reinhard Heydrich, he learns to believe in the necessity of the Final Solution, emerging as a fanatical servant of the Third Reich. It is Dorf, apparently, who must take the credit for Kristallnacht, who was one of those present at the Wannsee Conference in January 1942 when it was officially decided to implement the Final Solution, and who was inspired to coin euphemisms like "resettlement"<sup>74</sup> - all of which helps to improve his flagging sex drive.

In short, Holocaust would be hilarious if it were not the trivialization of a real catastrophe. Just as I can no longer watch a western without thinking of the thousands of North American Indians who were massacred that such travesties might exist, so I cannot believe that this kind of novel does anything more than provide the most questionable form of entertainment, whatever the intentions of its author. Gerald Green is also responsible for the screenplay of the televised version, which reached an audience of even greater proportions. In an essay called "What Shall We Tell Our Children?" written in 1979, Günter

Grass describes the impact of this in West Germany. According to him, the very success of the television series is an indication of its inability to illuminate the complexity of the subject:

The success of "popular" enlightenment has never been more than skin-deep. Demonstrably as television series (as shown by public-opinion polls) shatter, touch, or horrify the masses, much as they move them to pity or even shame - and this was the effect of Holocaust - they are quite incapable of disclosing the complex "modernity" of genocide and the many-layered responsibilities at the root of it. Basically, Auschwitz was not a manifestation of common human bestiality; it was a repeatable consequence of a network of human responsibilities so organized and so subdivided that the individual was conscious of no responsibility at all.<sup>75</sup>

In other words, a collective emotional catharsis is no substitute for the serious reflection demanded by Auschwitz itself, without orchestration and without caricature.

#### The View from Within

"It's time that makes terror habitual: time is what we must write against," claims the narrator of From the Diary of a Snail (1972), Günter Grass's novel that attempts to tell his children in a roundabout way certain facts of German history. "A writer, children," we read shortly afterwards, "is someone who writes against the passage of time."<sup>76</sup> If Günter Grass and Isaac Bashevis Singer have this much in common,<sup>77</sup> they also share a profound commitment to the imagination as an instrument of truth. Historical events are invoked, not in order to obtain a spurious authenticity for one's fiction but, rather, because the fiction is itself the product of a need to understand those events.

Grass tells the story of his efforts on behalf of Willy Brandt and the Social Democrats during the 1969 election campaign in West Germany, as a way into the story of a time of indifference, when the Jews of Danzig (where Grass was born in 1927 and grew up) were deprived of their livelihoods, forced to emigrate or imprisoned in the concentration camp at Stutthof. Progress, he says, in a telling metaphor that dominates the book, is a snail. "I am the civilian snail,"

Grass-the-narrator confesses, "the snail made man. With my forward, inward drive, with my tendency to dwell, hesitate, and cling, with my restlessness and emotional haste, I am snail-like."<sup>78</sup>

It is too late to save the Jews of Danzig, but it is not too late to challenge official prevarication. Grass's conviction that responsibility begins at home imbues this curious novel with urgency, its didacticism justified by the parental role he is assuming. A fictional character, Hermann Ott, is called on to play the part of Doubt - Grass's guiding principle - and for helping Jews is himself forced to hide in a cellar during the war. In 1947 he is committed to an asylum, where for twelve years he suffers from extreme depression. Grass defines a tension between melancholy and utopia as the prerequisite for social order. Willy Brandt's gesture of kneeling at the site of the Warsaw ghetto is offered as an image of what this entails for Germany today:

Auschwitz has become a museum, "incapacity for mourning" a much-banded phrase. This ability to get used to genocide has its parallel in a premature readiness to shrug off the crimes of the National Socialists as momentary insanity, as an irrational aberration, as something incomprehensible and therefore forgivable. Perhaps the wordless action of a statesman, who shouldered the burden and knelt at the site of the Warsaw ghetto, has given belated expression to a people's awareness of undiminished guilt. Repentance as a social state of mind would then be the corresponding utopia; it presupposes melancholy rooted in insight.<sup>79</sup>

Repentance as a social state of mind has been Grass's obsession throughout his writings. If his masterpiece The Tin Drum (1959) is more about the supporters of National Socialism than its victims, the extraordinary section called "Faith, Hope, Love"<sup>80</sup> is surely among the most unsettling responses to the Holocaust that we have. The occasion for it in the narrative is the eve of Kristallnacht in Danzig. Sigismund Markus, the Jewish owner of a toyshop, has committed suicide before storm-troopers destroy his premises. The famous triumvirate of virtues (the last one, of course, is rendered as "charity" in the Authorized Version) from 1 Corinthians 13, is measured against the dissolution of Christian culture into the secular Messianism of Nazi ideology - and found



wanting. The fugue-like quality of Grass's prose cannot be reproduced in extract, but its relentless weaving of grotesque fantasy with heightened observation, as the destruction of Europe's Jews gets its dress rehearsal, is impossible to forget.

Grass was only seventeen at the end of the war, called up with the last draft - "too young to acquire guilt", as he puts it in "What Shall We Tell Our Children?". But he does not wear his innocence lightly:

The belated anti-Nazism of my generation was never subjected to the danger test. I could not swear that, if I had been six or seven years older, I would not have participated in the great crime. My doubts were such that I was plagued (more and more often as time passed) by nightmares in which I felt myself to be guilty. The dividing line between real and potential action was blurred.<sup>81</sup>

Fellow German novelist Heinrich Böll was less fortunate in his date of birth (1917) and served in the German army throughout the war, if only as a private. Wounded several times while fighting on the Eastern front, he managed to spend the final year of the war evading combat duty (though this in itself might have cost him his life). A devout Catholic, he explains in a memoir of his adolescence - What's to Become of the Boy? (1981) - the personal nature of his opposition to the regime:

My unconquerable (and still unconquered) aversion to the Nazis was not revolt: they revolted me, repelled me on every level of my existence: conscious and instinctive, aesthetic and political.<sup>82</sup>

This rather aristocratic stance may account for the absence of any compulsion to investigate "the great crime" in his fiction. An early novel, And Where Were You, Adam? (1951), includes a Jewish convert to Catholicism in its roster of victims, and this woman's death in an obscure concentration camp (along with all the other Jewish inmates) is certainly given dramatic expression,<sup>83</sup> but Böll seems more concerned ultimately with the conflict between Nazi fanaticism and religious (that is, Catholic) integrity than with the fate of the Jews. And this concern informs the structure of Billiards at Half Past Nine

(1959), which tackles the subject of German guilt from the point of view of German innocence. The novel tells the story of a family for whom, as for Böll's own family, Nazism was anathema. The action takes place in Cologne during one day in 1958, allowing Böll to offer retrospective impressions of the war and, at the same time, comment on how little has changed. Many of those who held office as Nazis are still in office now. The virtuous are destined to suffer, and none more virtuous than Johanna Faehmel, put away for trying to leave with the Jews as they were loaded into cattle-trucks.<sup>84</sup> Her madness represents the most complete form of internal exile.

### Virtue and Sacrifice

One is tempted to conclude that history has had the last word, but Saul Bellow, Isaac Bashevis Singer and Günter Grass, at least, have all shown that the imagination remains a vital force in resisting a defeat so absolute. And Elsa Morante's aptly-titled History: A Novel (1974), while clearly owing much of its inspiration to The Tin Drum, offers further evidence of fiction's capacity to test the assumptions of a belligerent culture. In his "Theses on the Philosophy of History", completed shortly before his suicide in 1940, Walter Benjamin addressed the world that was collapsing around him with a prophetic voice. "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism," he asserted.<sup>85</sup> Elsa Morante's highly stylized novel recalls some of the darkest years in Italian history, from the beginning of Mussolini's dictatorship to the chaos at the war's end.

"The tradition of the oppressed," to quote Benjamin again, "teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule."<sup>86</sup> This nicely summarizes the drift of History, which centres on the experiences of a half-Jewish Italian woman called Ida Mancuso and her constant terror that she and her infant son Useppe, conceived after she had been raped by a German

soldier in 1941, will be deported. Although Ida survives the war without being punished for her identity, she does witness the Jews of Rome being taken away by train, soon after the Nazis have occupied Northern Italy at the end of 1943.<sup>87</sup> The returning survivors - fifteen out of 1,056 - are later described: broken, shadowy figures whose stories nobody wants to hear. "People wanted to censor them from their days," we read, "as normal families remove the mad or the dead."<sup>88</sup>

The connection between such extreme suffering and other forms of oppression is made by juxtaposing this homecoming with that of an Italian conscript who had been left behind in the retreat from Russia, mutilated by frostbite, imprisoned in Siberia. Other soldiers, like Giovannino whose last hours are reconstructed here,<sup>89</sup> simply perished in the snow, defeated by the elements before they could give themselves up. And while we are still taking all this in, Davide Segre, the rest of whose family were deported to Auschwitz and killed, recalls the dehumanizing conditions of a factory he worked in during the war. The thought that occurred to him then, before he succumbed to sheer exhaustion - "As long as men, or even a single man on the earth, is forced to live such an existence, all talk of freedom and beauty and revolution is a fraud"<sup>90</sup> - parallels an observation by the narrator of one of Tadeusz Borowski's Auschwitz stories. "There can be no beauty if it is paid for by human injustice," we read in "Auschwitz, Our Home (A Letter)", "nor truth that passes over injustice in silence, nor moral virtue that condones it."<sup>91</sup>

The point is not to see the whole of industrial society as a concentration camp, so much as to recognize that concentration camps were made possible by the dehumanization that already existed and still exists today. Davide Segre, who in addition to his other afflictions has been tortured by the SS for distributing subversive literature, dies of a drug overdose in the summer of 1947, shortly before the death of Useppe himself. Useppe is less than six years old when

ill health, aggravated by malnutrition, puts an end to his life. He is the model of innocent suffering, a child whose precocious sensitivity affords him no armour against the world he has been born into. His half-brother Nino, by contrast, is a light-hearted rogue, a young Fascist turned partisan, instinctively rebellious. The preternatural bond between the two is severed by Nino's death in a road accident (while fleeing from the police with a gang of black marketeers), and although Useppe is never told that Nino has been killed, it is about this time he has his first attack of grand mal.

The companionship between Useppe and Nino's dog Bella, which is the focus of the novel's final chapters, marks a shift towards more emphatic symbolism, as the pair explore the ruins of the human domain. Bella becomes Useppe's protector - and is shot in the end because she will not let anyone disturb the boy's corpse. "And so she kept her word," we are told, "given Useppe the day of her return home: 'They'll never be able to separate us, in this world.'"<sup>92</sup> If this seems unnecessarily sentimental, the novel's overall impact is still quite desolating. At the close Ida is rendered cataleptic by her losses, doomed to live out the last nine years of her life in a mental hospital.

As if to drive the point home, Morante continues the narrative with a sketch of major historical events since. History is unrelenting. Useppe is no redeemer (if he is a Christ-figure, then like Dostoevsky's Prince Myshkin, a fellow epileptic, he is an attenuated one), and his goodness is a form of powerlessness (which, as we have seen with Mr Sammler, does not amount to being blessed). Yet for all its sentimentalizing of animals and children, History does persuade us that virtue is real. We may still feel that there is no answer for suffering, that the world is beyond redemption, but Useppe is a fictional consummation of our deepest needs. His death brings us back to ourselves. It is in this sense that I would argue the best fiction leaves us inconsolable. It reminds us of what we lack.

The theme of innocent sacrifice is even more striking in The Last of the Just (1959) by André Schwarz-Bart, one of the most eloquent contributions by a French author to our grim pantheon, and one of the first, too. Although written from a traditional Jewish perspective, it is essentially a secular response, adapting the tradition to provide an ironic commentary on Europe's failure to tolerate the continued existence of the Jews. The story begins with a massacre of Jews in York in 1185 and ends in the gas chambers at Auschwitz in 1943. In an essay on "The Tradition of the Thirty-six Hidden Just Men" Gershom Scholem has pointed out how Schwarz-Bart transforms the legend,<sup>93</sup> the main alteration being the notion that one might be one of the just men hereditarily. These thirty-six just men on whom the preservation of the world is said to depend are strictly anonymous in the original teaching.<sup>94</sup> Schwarz-Bart is chiefly concerned, however, to impress upon his readers the centuries of persecution that has been the lot of Jews since the advent of Christianity. By following the line of a particular family, the Levys of Zemyock, he is able to illustrate a general history.

At times the narrative threatens to break down under the weight of its subject-matter - quite self-consciously towards the end: "I am so weary that my pen can no longer write"<sup>95</sup> - and is not entirely free from excess: the episode where Ernie indulges in an orgy of insect-squashing, for example, is crudely done.<sup>96</sup> Overall, however, The Last of the Just performs what Alvin Rosenfeld has described as a major function of literary responses to the Holocaust: "to register and record the enormity of human loss".<sup>97</sup> The finality of Ernie Levy's martyrdom - he volunteers to be deported to Auschwitz from Drancy, and volunteers again to be sent to the gas chamber (in order to stay with his fiancée and a group of orphans deported at the same time) - is reinforced by a fragmented prayer for the dead, into which the names of various camps are inserted. The narrator, who claims at the start to have been a friend of Ernie's, allows himself

to speculate that his friend, "dead six million times",<sup>98</sup> might still exist as a presence. One can only assume that Schwarz-Bart intends this to be read ironically.

### But Is It Art?

A different kind of virtue is explored in Schindler's Ark (1982) by Australian writer Thomas Keneally, though it is open to question whether or not we should call this book a novel (even if it did win the Booker Prize for fiction). Michael Hulse is pleased to call it "imaginative historical journalism",<sup>99</sup> and Ken Worpole fits it into a genre called "documentary literature" where the author collaborates with eye-witnesses to reconstruct a historical event.<sup>100</sup> Schindler's Ark is by no means the first example of this in relation to the Holocaust, and Keneally argues from precedent for the validity of his approach:

To use the texture and devices of a novel to tell a true story is a course which has frequently been followed in modern writing. It is the one I have chosen to follow here; both because the craft of the novelist is the only craft to which I can lay claim, and because the novel's techniques seem suited for a character of such ambiguity and magnitude as Oskar. I have attempted to avoid all fiction, though, since fiction would debase the record, and to distinguish between reality and the myths which are likely to attach themselves to a man of Oskar's stature.<sup>101</sup>

There is a semantic confusion here which suggests that Keneally is either not being straight or is simply unaware that the story as he tells it takes considerable liberties with the record. Dialogues are invented, and scenes reconstructed with scant regard for their literal accuracy.<sup>102</sup>

However, the story itself is utterly compelling. Schindler was clearly a remarkable man. His place in the Avenue of the Righteous at Yad Vashem for saving the lives of eleven hundred Jews attached to his factory in Cracow, as well as helping to rescue other Jews caught up in the infernal system, was earned at some risk. The force of Keneally's narrative, though, is to canonize the man, in spite of an assertion to the contrary.<sup>103</sup> The Talmudic moral of

Schindler's Ark is that if you save a life, you save the whole world. But we have to ask whether this is an appropriate response to a history in which individual heroism played such a small part. The Holocaust was not a setting for great escapes, as Keneally appears at times to acknowledge,<sup>104</sup> and yet Schindler is presented as the mastermind of one, a man who kept his word to provide deliverance.

A further moral is detected by Michael Hulse. "Only because he was a man of vice," claims Hulse, "could Schindler accomplish his pragmatic virtue.... The virtue of the virtueless, the pragmatic strength of the philosophic innocent, may be the only salvation in dark times."<sup>105</sup> The only salvation in dark times, ultimately, is a liberating army; even Schindler could not have saved his workforce without the German defeat. And Schindler was less a philosophic innocent, whatever that means,<sup>106</sup> than a gambler who perceived that the stakes were human lives (his own included) and felt impelled to play the best hand he could. The anecdote about his playing cards with the camp commandant to win the right to include the latter's Jewish maid on his list, may well be apocryphal (though Keneally treats it as fact), but it does illustrate Schindler's brand of courage. There is no need to mystify this with elaborate psychologizing. We might invert Hannah Arendt's famous phrase and refer to the banality of virtue. Schindler's sensuality (which made him an irresponsible husband but hardly a man of vice) was in itself at odds with the Teutonic discipline of the ruling elite. He was, moreover, a Sudeten German, something of an outsider:

"You have to remember," said a boy whom Oskar would later save, "that Oskar had a German side but a Czech side too. He was the good soldier Schweik. He loved to foul up the system."<sup>107</sup>

Perhaps, in the face of so much antisemitism, it seems extraordinary that a man should care about the murder of the whole Jewish population, but Schindler was a witness to cruelty that only the fanatic or the sadist could have

sanctioned. What is more extraordinary is that others witnessed similar cruelty and were moved to do nothing to prevent it. Schindler's Ark is a powerful reminder that more could have been done to obstruct the Final Solution, as well as the record of one man's tenacious resistance. But we are certainly in no position to conclude from the testimony of those he rescued that Schindler was the saviour of the world. His achievement must be reckoned more soberly than that.

By making Schindler larger than life, Keneally risks losing sight of the millions for whom no saviour came. The story lacks a sense of proportion in the end. Schindler's own hardship after the war deserves our sympathy, but not if it means neglecting the real victims of National Socialism. His death in 1974 was mourned "in every continent", the author observes by way of conclusion - unable to see how this comforting thought obscures the deaths that went unregarded, those anonymous deaths for which no amount of retrospective mourning can atone. That Schindler's Ark is more fictional than historical is borne out by a gratuitous reference to William Styron's Sophie's Choice,<sup>108</sup> one of the prurient versions of the Holocaust to be considered in the following chapter. Styron's portrait of Rudolf Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz, reflects the assumption that a work of fiction can be authenticated merely by appeal to historical sources. But a true story does not become truer for being told as a romance.



## Notes

- (1) Simone Weil, Gravity and Grace, trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), p.68.
- (2) Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, trans. Constance Garnett (London: Heinemann, 1912), Book V, Chapter IV ("Rebellion"), p.244.
- (3) *Ibid.*, p.251.
- (4) Arthur Koestler, "On Disbelieving Atrocities", in The Yogi and the Commissar (London: Jonathan Cape, 1964), p.97. (Originally published in New York Times Magazine, January 1944.)
- (5) Saul Bellow, Herzog (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), pp.155, 247.
- (6) Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, By Words Alone (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p.195.
- (7) Saul Bellow, The Victim (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p.76.
- (8) One of the more interesting versions in recent years is Cynthia Ozick's The Cannibal Galaxy (London: Secker & Warburg, 1984).
- (9) Edward Lewis Wallant, The Pawnbroker (London: Pan, 1964).
- (10) Jennifer M. Bailey, "The Qualified Affirmation of Saul Bellow's Recent Work", Journal of American Studies 7 (1973), p.67; Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, "The Apocalyptic Fact and the Eclipse of Fiction in Recent American Prose Narratives", Journal of American Studies 9 (1975), p.77; David Galloway, "Mr Sammler's Planet: Bellow's Failure of Nerve", Modern Fiction Studies 19 (Spring 1973), p.19.
- (11) Saul Bellow, Mr Sammler's Planet (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp.8, 52, 85.
- (12) *Ibid.*, p.62.
- (13) Bailey, "Qualified Affirmation", pp.72-73.
- (14) Alfred Kazin, Bright Book of Life (London: Secker & Warburg, 1974), p.138.
- (15) Bellow, Mr Sammler's Planet, pp.17-18, 31.
- (16) *Ibid.*, pp.118, 190, 114, 184.
- (17) *Ibid.*, pp.94-95.
- (18) *Ibid.*, pp.189, 75, 220.
- (19) *Ibid.*, pp.113-114.
- (20) *Ibid.*, pp.62, 115.

- (21) Bellow covered the Six-Day War for Newsday. His account of it can be found in the Jewish Heritage Quarterly 10 (Winter 1967-8), pp.31-43.
- (22) Edward Alexander, "Imagining the Holocaust: Mr Sammler's Planet, and Others", Judaism 22 (1973), p.295.
- (23) Ibid., p.296.
- (24) Edward Alexander, The Resonance of Dust (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1979), p.184.
- (25) This is Mr Sammler's response to the sight of Egyptian corpses. See Bellow, Mr Sammler's Planet, p.202.
- (26) Ibid., pp.184-185.
- (27) Ibid., pp.203, 232, 234.
- (28) Ibid., pp.244-245.
- (29) Ibid., p.64.
- (30) Ibid., p.251.
- (31) "He was aware that he must meet, and he did meet ... the terms of his contract," Sammler prays. "The terms which, in his inmost heart, each Man knows." (Ibid., p.252.)
- (32) Ibid., p.183.
- (33) Saul Bellow, "Where Do We Go from Here: The Future in Fiction", in Saul Bellow and the Critics, ed. Irving Malin (New York: New York University Press, 1967), p.220.
- (34) Singer has published a memoir of his early years, including an account of his own difficulties in adjusting to life in the United States, under the heading of Love and Exile (London: Jonathan Cape, 1985).
- (35) See Isaac Bashevis Singer, Shosha (London: Jonathan Cape, 1979), p.16.
- (36) Isaac Bashevis Singer, The Family Moskat, trans. A.H. Gross (London: Secker & Warburg, 1966), p.611.
- (37) Don Cupitt, The World to Come (London: SCM Press, 1982), p.154.
- (38) For a factual account of the same, see Celia S. Heller, On the Edge of Destruction: Jews of Poland between the Two World Wars (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).
- (39) Singer, The Family Moskat, pp.535, 518.
- (40) Ibid., pp.601-2.
- (41) George Steiner, "Postscript", in Language and Silence (London: Faber & Faber, 1967), pp.181-182.

- (42) W.H. Auden, "Musée des Beaux Arts". (Selected Poems, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber & Faber, 1979), p.79.)
- (43) Isaac Bashevis Singer, Enemies, A Love Story, trans. Aliza Shevrin and Elizabeth Shub (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972), p.214.
- (44) See, for example, "The Seance", "The Lecture", and "The Letter Writer", in The Seance (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970); "The Cafeteria" and "The Mentor", in A Friend of Kafka (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972).
- (45) Singer, Enemies, pp.121, 171.
- (46) *Ibid.*, pp.121, 123, 114.
- (47) Singer, Shosha, p.131. ("The Jews in Poland are trapped," he says.)
- (48) *Ibid.*, pp.269, 277.
- (49) *Ibid.*, pp.232, 188, 255.
- (50) Bernard Malamud, "The Lady of the Lake", in The Magic Barrel (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968); "The German Refugee", in Idiots First (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966).
- (51) Robert Alter, After the Tradition (New York: G.P. Dutton, 1969), pp.125-126; Alvin H. Rosenfeld, A Double Dying (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), pp.67-68.
- (52) Bernard Malamud, The Fixer (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p.141.
- (53) Alan L. Berger, Crisis and Covenant (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), pp.13, 183.
- (54) Philip Roth, "Writing American Fiction", in Reading Myself and Others (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975), p.120.
- (55) Philip Roth, The Ghost Writer (London: Jonathan Cape, 1979), p.150.
- (56) Susan Fromberg Schaeffer, Anya (London: Pavanne/Pan, 1986).
- (57) Ezrahi, By Words Alone, p.215.
- (58) *Ibid.*, p.216.
- (59) Hersey is anyway a more accomplished writer than Uris. See John Hersey, The Wall (London: Panther/Granada, 1979).
- (60) Leon Uris, QBVII (London: Corgi, 1971).
- (61) Mavis M. Hill and L. Norman Williams, Auschwitz in England (London: Panther, 1966).
- (62) Cited by Hill and Williams, p.14.
- (63) Uris, QBVII, p.86.

- (64) Dering's death is noted in Jozef Garlinski, Fighting Auschwitz: The Resistance Movement in the Concentration Camp (London: Julian Friedmann, 1975), p.274. Garlinski devotes Item 6 of Appendix II to the story of Dering's post-war fate (pp.273-275), but wrongly dates the year of the libel action as 1965. (Dering died the following year, he claims.)
- (65) Uris, QBVII, p.66, for example.
- (66) For an analysis of Jewish resistance that steers clear of stereotypes, see Lucy S. Dawidowicz, The War against the Jews 1933-45 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), especially Chapters 15 and 16.
- (67) Uris, QBVII, p.447.
- (68) Garlinski does his best to exonerate Dering. "Those who attack Dr Dering accuse him of saving Poles first and foremost and of doing this at the expense of Jews," he complains (Fighting Auschwitz, p.275), but provides no evidence to refute such a charge.
- (69) Hill and Williams, Auschwitz in England, pp.179-216.
- (70) *Ibid.*, p.242.
- (71) Uris, QBVII, pp.442-443.
- (72) Gerald Green, Holocaust (London: Corgi, 1978): "To the Memory of the Six Million, the Survivors, and Those Who Fought Back" is the wording of the Dedication.
- (73) *Ibid.*, p.62.
- (74) *Ibid.*, p.39, pp.219-226.
- (75) Günter Grass, "What Shall We Tell Our Children?", in On Writing and Politics: 1967-1983, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Secker & Warburg, 1985), p.88.
- (76) Günter Grass, From the Diary of a Snail, trans. Ralph Manheim (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), pp.123-124.
- (77) See Singer, Shosha, p.16; cited above, p.61
- (78) Grass, Diary of a Snail, pp.9, 59.
- (79) *Ibid.*, p.265.
- (80) Günter Grass, The Tin Drum, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Secker & Warburg, 1962), pp.196-206.
- (81) Grass, "What Shall We Tell Our Children?", p.86.
- (82) Heinrich Böll, What's to Become of the Boy? trans. Leila Vennewitz (London: Secker & Warburg, 1985), p.4.
- (83) Heinrich Böll, And Where Were You, Adam? trans. Leila Vennewitz (London: Secker & Warburg, 1973), Chapter 7.

- (84) Heinrich Böll, Billiards at Half Past Nine, trans. Patrick Bowles (London: Calder & Boyars, 1976), p.24.
- (85) Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in Illuminations, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), p.258.
- (86) *Ibid.*, p.259.
- (87) Elsa Morante, History: A Novel, trans. William Weaver (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), pp.267-279.
- (88) *Ibid.*, p.422. This reminds one of the experience of Primo Levi and other survivors. (See Chapter 1.)
- (89) *Ibid.*, pp.428-432.
- (90) *Ibid.*, p.466.
- (91) Tadeusz Borowski, "Auschwitz, Our Home (A Letter)", in This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen, trans. Barbara Vedder (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p.132.
- (92) Morante, History, p.714.
- (93) Gershom Scholem, "The Tradition of the Thirty-six Hidden Just Men", in The Messianic Idea in Judaism (New York: Schocken, 1971), pp.251-256.
- (94) *Ibid.*, p.256. ("The hidden just man - if he is anything at all - is your neighbor and mine whose true nature we can never fathom; the conception cautions us against passing any moral judgement on him.")
- (95) André Schwarz-Bart, The Last of the Just, trans. Stephen Becker (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p.379.
- (96) *Ibid.*, pp.246-248. The symbolic value of this momentary aberration seems less compelling than its grotesquerie.
- (97) Rosenfeld, A Double Dying, p.27.
- (98) Schwarz-Bart, Last of the Just, p.383.
- (99) Michael Hulse, "Virtue and the Philosophic Innocent: The British Reception of Schindler's Ark", Critical Quarterly 25 (Winter 1983), p.47.
- (100) Ken Worpole, Reading by Numbers (London: Comedia, 1984), pp.12-13.
- (101) Thomas Keneally, Schindler's Ark (London: Coronet, 1983), Author's Note. For an earlier example see A. Anatoli (Kuznetsov), Babi Yar, trans. David Floyd (Cambridge, Mass.: Robert Bentley, 1979), first published in a censored form in Russia in 1966 and subtitled "A Document in the Form of a Novel".
- (102) Keneally is constantly adding glosses of his own. When a Jewish woman with forged papers comes to see Schindler to plead for her parents' safety, for example, the author speculates on how Klonowska, Schindler's secretary-cum-lover, would have reacted:

"Klonowska took it calmly. The girl could mean anything - black market or currency business. She could even be a chic partisan. Love might be the least of motivations. In any case, a worldly girl such as Klonowska didn't expect to own Oskar, or to be owned in return." (Keneally, Schindler's Ark, p.201.)

(103) Ibid., p.351.

(104) The Talmudic verse is cited twice in the text itself (pp.39, 371), the second time in connection with a ring that Schindler's Jewish protégés gave to him with this verse inscribed on it. Early on Keneally points out that "when murder is as scheduled, habitual, industrial as it was here in Cracow you could scarcely, with tentative heroism, redirect the overriding energy of the system" (p.136). And he also points out that Amon Goeth, the commandant of the labour camp at Plaszow, was able in a single day to condemn as many prisoners to death as Schindler was protecting in his enamel works (p.256).

(105) Hulse, "Virtue and the Philosophic Innocent", p.51.

(106) The phrase originates with Keneally. See Schindler's Ark, p.116.

(107) Ibid., pp.275-277, 229.

(108) Ibid., pp.401, 316.

## CHAPTER 3

### GAZING INTO THE ABYSS: THREE AMBIVALENT TEXTS

He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you.

Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil

In his study of popular literature, Dockers and Detectives, Ken Worpole includes a brief section on "The Literature of the Holocaust" and refers to the way in which women's accounts of the concentration camps were marketed as if contributions to the pornography of sadism.<sup>1</sup> I have my own example of this: a copy of I Shall Fear No Evil, the story of a female doctor imprisoned in Auschwitz, which has on its cover a voluptuous and scantily-clad woman prostrate before a Gestapo officer who carries a whip.<sup>2</sup> Such crass misrepresentation of extreme suffering is no longer so prevalent as a selling point, thank goodness, but it has not vanished from our culture altogether. The three novels I propose to examine here - The Painted Bird (1965) by Jerzy Kosinski, Sophie's Choice (1979) by William Styron, and The White Hotel (1981) by D.M. Thomas - are examples of a kind of voyeurism that attaches itself to the (female) victims of atrocity while at the same time claiming to be a sympathetic response. It is not simply a question of how these novels are written (though it is largely that) but also of how they will be read. The naturalistic description of cruelty that involves sexual degradation invites prurience whether it is intended to or not.

The Painted Bird, Sophie's Choice and The White Hotel have all enjoyed a measure of critical acclaim and been bestsellers too. Even if Kosinski's novel is currently out of print in this country, it is nevertheless useful to assess its impact as a response to the same catastrophe that has inspired the two more recent novels. Kosinski, himself a Polish Jew who survived the Nazi occupation and emigrated to the United States after the war, was among the first writers to challenge the taboos that surrounded the Holocaust,<sup>3</sup> though he chose not to describe the camps themselves. The Painted Bird is instead full of detailed descriptions of rape, brutal murder and bestiality. A boy has his eyes gouged out by a jealous husband; a woman makes love with a goat; a young Jewish girl dies after being raped by a peasant: these are only a few of the terrible scenes we are forced to witness. According to Alvin Rosenfeld in A Double Dying, "Kosinski may be the strongest example among the fabulists of the Holocaust"<sup>4</sup> - but to dignify The Painted Bird as a fable is to ignore its cumulative effect.

It is certainly true that The Painted Bird is not a historical novel, even though the author takes pains to leave us in no doubt as to the time and place of its setting. We are told in a prologue that a six-year-old boy was sent by his parents in the autumn of 1939 from a large city in Eastern Europe to the shelter of a distant village, and that this same boy found himself wandering from one village to another, suspected of being a Gypsy or a Jew because of his olive complexion and dark features. Since we are also told that this is the country of the death camps, we are clearly in Poland. The story itself is narrated in the past tense by its own protagonist. Our first glimpse of the war as such, however, is not until about a quarter of the way through, when the boy stumbles on a German military outpost. Some time later, he also witnesses trains passing that are carrying Jews crammed into cattle-trucks. Some peasants who have been employed in the construction of a camp divulge all that they have seen. The calendar is not mentioned at all until we learn that the boy is now ten and



it is the spring of 1943.<sup>5</sup> History returns in the form of the liberating Soviet army at the end of the summer of 1944.

The chief difficulty in accepting The Painted Bird as any kind of fable is that the narrator lacks all authority. He may be an unnatural child because he is caught up in unnatural circumstances, but leaving aside the question of how plausible his own sexual experiences are, the pornographic lyricism that characterizes his description of them only underlines his role throughout the rest of the novel as voyeur:

I recalled the moments I had passed with Ewka.... My touch was gentle; my hands, my mouth, my tongue, hovered consciously over her skin, soft and delicate like gossamer floating in windless warm air. I continually sought out new sensitive places unknown even to her, bringing them to life with my touch, as rays of sunshine revive a butterfly chilled by the cool air of the autumn night. I remembered my elaborate efforts and how they released within the girl's body some yearnings and tremors that otherwise would have been imprisoned there forever. I freed them, wanting her only to find pleasure in herself.<sup>6</sup>

As an image of tenderness to contrast with the violence that attends other sexual acts in the story, this is laughable. And I do not believe that a ten-year-old boy, however precocious, would be so knowing, so proud of his sensitivity as a lover.

The peasants that dominate the pages of The Painted Bird are anything but sensitive; they are cruel, lewd and superstitious to the point of insanity. Women no less than men are slaves to the libido and equally capable of savage revenge. We are in the kingdom of the beasts, continually reminded that nature is red in tooth and claw. The first violent image is that of a hawk swooping on a pigeon. The story of the painted bird itself, doomed to be attacked by its own kind on returning to the flock, is obviously a metaphor for the fate of the individual in the oppressive communities that comprise the human sphere, especially as far as the boy is concerned. We are in the nightmare world of King Lear, a play that springs to mind as soon as we read the episode of the miller blinding the ploughboy. Unlike the blinding of Gloucester, however, this

has no relation to anything else in the plot, except as yet another illustration of barbarism. But Kosinski wants to claim more for it than that. In an interview given in 1968, he describes it as a way of disclosing the reality of the camps:

The concentration camp as such is a symbol you can live with very well. We do. It doesn't really perform any specific function. It's not as close to us as the eyesight is. When you describe the atrocity of the concentration camp you are immediately reminding the reader that this is not his reality. It happened, you say, it happened in such and such a time.... But when you describe the eyes being gouged out, you don't make it easier for the reader, he cannot help feeling his own eyes disappearing somehow, becoming blind.<sup>7</sup>

And how is the reader supposed to feel when he is confronted by lurid accounts of rape? Especially if it is implied that a woman is enjoying her ordeal, as it is in the case of Stupid Ludmila, a woman raped by a gang of peasants in her youth and now subjected to the same experience again. The trauma of the first experience had addled her mind, to use the narrator's own words, and left her with an insatiable sexual appetite. The suspicion that there is an element of male fantasy at work here is surely confirmed by the final ingredient of female submission:

A tall shepherd attacked the woman while she writhed below him, howling at his every move. The man struck open-handed blows at her breasts, leaned over and bit her nipples, and kneaded her rounded belly. When he finished and rose, another man took his place. Stupid Ludmila moaned and shuddered drawing the man to her with her arms and legs.<sup>8</sup>

Soon afterwards Stupid Ludmila is dead, but not at the hands of these men. She is set on by women from the village who have long resented the anarchy of her sexual behaviour. They beat her nearly to death, then ram a bottle full of manure between her legs and kick it till it shatters inside her. Kosinski spares us none of the horror; why should he? - this is what human beings do to one another. Yes, but is it appropriate to describe it so literally in fiction? Any moral impulse on the author's part is obscured by the apparent relish with which he depicts the most abject cruelty.

Amid so much carnage it becomes arbitrary to single out specific examples: almost every page contains a new one. However, the destruction wreaked by

the Kalmuks (Cossacks?) before the arrival of the Soviet army (and with it the notion of order) represents the apotheosis of lawlessness. Again Kosinski lays it on with a trowel. We are numbed by a seemingly endless catalogue of rapes, murders and torture, none of it perpetrated by the Nazis who, it must be noted, barely feature in this particular vision of hell, in spite of Kosinski's own insistence that the novel should be read as a response to the Holocaust. The drunken Kalmuks, performing sadistic rites with abandon, are almost heroic in their evil, so that one is tempted to regard the intervention of the disciplined Soviet army as emanating from the author's superego. The description verges on the rhapsodic at times. "The younger and more desirable girls were nearly torn apart," we are told. Raping women on horseback merits being called a feat. And sentences like "A woman moaned softly from time to time"<sup>9</sup> have an unfortunate erotic resonance.

The facts of rape are as appalling as anything Kosinski may care to invent. They are related to the Holocaust not simply because countless Jewish women were raped by Nazis,<sup>10</sup> but also because, as Kosinski unsuccessfully tries to suggest, rape is an extreme form of assault, designed to humiliate the victim, and thus has something in common with the dehumanization that took place in the camps. Any comparison, however, any attempt to make one a symbol for the other, is fraught with difficulty. Violent acts make poor metaphors for the reason that they are in themselves too significant to signify something else. If the Holocaust resists fictional treatment so, too, does rape. Styron and Thomas also make the mistake, as we shall see, of assuming that the outrage of the former can be expressed through close attention to the latter.<sup>11</sup>

Kosinski eschews the oblique approach, favouring instead a kind of apocalyptic intensity. There is no use of irony, no change of perspective to give the horror some relief. The passing of trainloads of Jews is almost incidental to the local nightmare. The fate of the Jewish girl who escapes from one of

these trains is just as terrible as if she had ended up in Auschwitz.<sup>12</sup> Why does Kosinski make peasants the ciphers of absolute evil? The Holocaust was engineered by men of culture, which is a far more disturbing proposition to consider. Witness George Steiner's discomfort in his Preface to Language and Silence:

We know now that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day's work at Auschwitz in the morning. To say that he has read them without understanding or that his ear is gross, is cant. In what way does this knowledge bear on literature and society, on the hope, grown almost axiomatic from the time of Plato to that of Matthew Arnold, that culture is a humanizing force, that the energies of spirit are transferrable to those of conduct?<sup>13</sup>

To attempt to answer that question would produce a very different novel indeed from The Painted Bird.

Kosinski's fictional jungle misses the point entirely. The glamorous SS officer whom the boy encounters is no more convincing than the hordes of illiterates who butcher their way through the countryside. To compare the beauty of his face with one painted on a church wall, "bathed in organ music, and touched only by light from the stained-glass windows" is just straining for effect (the Antichrist in the image of Christ?). This is fantasy divorced from any historical reality:

Nonchalantly the officer approached me, beating a swagger stick against the seam of his freshly pressed breeches. The instant I saw him I could not tear my gaze from him. His entire person seemed to have something utterly superhuman about it. Against the background of bland colours he projected an unfadable blackness. In the world of men with harrowed faces, with smashed eyes, bloody, bruised and disfigured limbs, among the fetid, broken human bodies, of which I had already seen so many, he seemed an example of neat perfection that could not be sullied: the smooth, polished skin of his face, the bright golden hair showing under his peaked cap, his pure metal eyes. Every movement of his body seemed propelled by some tremendous internal force. The granite sound of his language was ideally suited to order death of inferior, forlorn creatures.

Here we have the stereotype of a blond-haired blue-eyed Nazi. The boy is overwhelmed by a feeling of unworthiness. "In the presence of such a resplendent being, armed in all the symbols of might and majesty, I was genuinely ashamed of my appearance," he confesses. "I had nothing against his killing me."<sup>14</sup> To

the boy the officer is a symbol of power. To us he is merely a character in a B-movie.

Having lost his voice as the result of one ordeal, the boy becomes a silent witness. But before he is reunited with his parents, he will himself learn what it is to be an executioner: while staying at the orphanage for displaced children (whose own lawlessness rivals that of the adults in the book) he is an accomplice in the derailment of a train carrying peasants on their way to market. The parallel with the organization of the Final Solution is made explicit - the power to decide the fate of other human beings.<sup>15</sup> The boy's initiation into the mystery of evil is completed by the discovery that the peasant he and his companion had sought to avenge themselves on was not among the dead. What we are to infer from this is unclear. Equally unclear is the novel's conclusion, in which the boy regains the use of his voice after a skiing accident during the spring of the following year (a year after the war has ended):

The voice lost in a faraway village church had found me again and filled the whole room. I spoke loudly and incessantly like the peasants and then like the city folk, as fast as I could, enraptured by the sounds that were heavy with meaning, as wet snow is heavy with water, confirming to myself again and again that speech was now mine and that it did not intend to escape through the door which opened onto the balcony.<sup>16</sup>

If this conclusion is intended to be optimistic, it is hardly warranted by what has preceded it. Kosinski's morbid preoccupation with the body's vulnerability prevents him from reflecting on the far greater vulnerability of human identity. For all the shock value of describing physical abuse in detail, there is little to be learnt from such information, which is anyway available in a myriad news stories. People are driven out of their minds by the experience of torture. Even those who survive are doomed to relive the agony in nightmares (as we saw in Chapter 1). According to Kosinski, "The inability to see the trauma of daily life as such breeds future victims."<sup>17</sup> But trauma is precisely what the author fails to convey. Even the fact that the boy loses his voice makes

no material difference to the narrative, since what we read is in the form of a report. At no point are we privileged to recognize the suffering that Kosinski purports to uncover. The novel places us in the fatuous position of spectators at a disaster, with the pretext that we are going to find out something about the ambiguity of good and evil. The gesture of making a German soldier one of the few humane characters in the story - the soldier who is given orders to shoot the boy but who lets him escape instead<sup>18</sup> - seems finally gratuitous, a way of reinforcing the dominant thesis of The Painted Bird; namely, that most human beings are depraved, peasants more so than others.

### The Erotic Sacrifice

The author of Sophie's Choice, William Styron, first wrote about Auschwitz in an article for the New York Times, 25 June 1974, which was based on a visit to the camp itself.<sup>19</sup> In this article Styron alludes to a survivor, "the once devoutly Catholic Polish girl I knew many years ago, the memory of whom impelled my visit to Auschwitz".<sup>20</sup> Anyone who has read Sophie's Choice will be aware that the prototype for the novel's heroine was this same survivor. Unlike Sophie, however, the girl in question, or rather, woman, saw both her children taken to the gas chamber and was therefore not forced to make the choice on which Styron hinges his novel.<sup>21</sup> Be that as it may, Styron's chief reason for discussing his visit to Auschwitz in the pages of the New York Times is to state his belief that the Holocaust was not a specifically Jewish catastrophe, to point out that "at Auschwitz perished not only the Jews but at least one million souls who were not Jews":

Of many origins but mainly Slavs - Poles, Slovaks, other - they came from a despised people who almost certainly were fated to be butchered with the same genocidal ruthlessness as were the Jews had Hitler won the war, and they contained among them hundreds of thousands of Christians who went to their despairing deaths in the belief that their God, the Prince of Peace, was as dead as the God of Abraham and Moses.<sup>22</sup>

Styron claims not to be a Christian himself and invokes the fact that his four children have a Jewish mother to endorse his credentials as a fair-minded spokesman, but his obsession with the non-Jewish victims of the death camps leads him to overstate his case. "I am speaking as a writer whose work has often been harshly critical of Christian pretensions, hypocrisies and delusions," he assures us, only to undermine that assurance by seeking to exonerate the Church of ultimate responsibility for antisemitism. Styron wants us to see antisemitism in terms of "dark and mysterious discord", referring to it as "this ancient animosity". All of which is grist to his mill where the meaning of the Holocaust is at stake, for the Jews simply bore the brunt of a more universal conflict. Styron chastises those who would argue that Hitler's war was primarily a war against the Jews:

To take such a narrow view of the evil of Nazi totalitarianism is also to ignore the ecumenical nature of that evil. For although the unparalleled tragedy of the Jews may have been its most terrible single handiwork, its threat to humanity transcended even this. If it was anti-Semitic, it was also anti-Christian. And it attempted to be more final than that, for its ultimate depravity lay in the fact that it was anti-human. Anti-life.<sup>23</sup>

Styron's position is not so much false as ill-advised. I am devoting space to challenging it here because Sophie's Choice is the fruit of such a position - a didactic novel that must be judged in the end by its own pretensions. What Styron appears to ignore is that antisemitism was the cornerstone of Nazi ideology; without it there would have been no Final Solution, no death camps. Other so-called inferior races were used chiefly as slave labour and not designated as such for extermination, though it is true that many were killed anyway. I have no wish to deny that extreme suffering was the lot of virtually all those who found themselves prisoners in the camps, even if there were opportunities for non-Jews to rise through the prison hierarchy and thus escape the worst deprivation. But I do believe that a distinction still has to be made between the fate of the Jews and the fate of everyone else in Europe. By blurring this

distinction, Styron fails to acknowledge that Nazi totalitarianism was anti-human because it was anti-Jewish, and not because it threatened other people too.

Styron's choice of a Polish Catholic to represent the victims of the Holocaust, then, is polemical in origin. I find it almost impossible to write about his novel dispassionately, for reasons which I hope will become clear. Styron takes some seven hundred pages to relate the story of Sophie's experience of Auschwitz and its sequel in her doomed love affair with a brilliant but psychotic New York Jew, and barely a page goes by without the narrator, an established writer called Stingo recalling the early days of his career, letting us know how horny (if I may be permitted to use the appropriate argot) he was at the time. Sophie's Choice - I will argue - is a paean to the (American) male ego and its dream of total sexual gratification, with Auschwitz merely serving as a glamorous backdrop.

The author's intention, as revealed in an interview published in 1985, was to bring the story into the American grain:

Sophie's Choice is Stingo's tale. This is why Stingo is so utterly essential to the whole story. If I had told it any other way the book would not have made any ripples at all. It had to be told through the eyes of this young man - this young American.... Perhaps it's a story not so much of Auschwitz but of discovering evil. It's a time-honored technique to have the young man revealed through a reminiscence by the older man of his youthful experience. This was a measure of my distance from Auschwitz. Had I gotten any closer, even if I had tried to tell it totally from Sophie's point of view, it would have lacked resonance and would have had no conviction whatsoever.

But the character of Stingo is a contributory factor in destroying what conviction the story might have had. When asked why Auschwitz should figure at all in Stingo's rite of passage, Styron can only reply "Because Stingo the elder, I, the alter ego, felt an absolute fascination with Auschwitz."<sup>24</sup>

This identification of author and narrator might explain why Stingo's career path bears an uncanny resemblance to Styron's own, but it does not begin to justify the vanity of the twenty-two-year-old fledgling writer as he is presented



to us by his older self. We could forgive Stingo for being naive, gauche and obtuse, perhaps, since immaturity is not a capital offence, if only we could forget that his story is being told in retrospect. The youthful Stingo is cherished and indulged like a puppy. The narrator takes great pride in his earlier concupiscence, more or less boasting, in fact, as if we should applaud the vigour of his hormones.

Not surprisingly, Stingo's first impression of Sophie is entirely physical. If we are seriously to believe that he falls in love with her almost at once, partly on the grounds that she resembles an old flame who has recently killed herself (no occasion for melodrama is passed over), we must also accept that this love is emphatically carnal. With only a glimpse of the tattoo on her forearm to go by, Stingo is able to visualize the emaciated camp detainee inside the beautiful woman:

As she went slowly up the stairs I took a good look at her body in its clinging silk summer dress. While it was a beautiful body, with all the right prominences, curves, continuities and symmetries, there was something a little strange about it - nothing visibly missing and not so much deficient as reassembled. And that was precisely it, I could see. The odd quality proclaimed itself through the skin. It possessed the sickish plasticity (at the back of her arms it was especially noticeable) of one who has suffered severe emaciation and whose flesh is even now in the last stages of being restored. Also, I felt that underneath that healthy suntan there lingered the sallowness of a body not wholly rescued from a terrible crisis. But none of these at all diminished a kind of wonderfully negligent sexuality having to do at that moment, at least, with the casual but forthright way her pelvis moved and with her truly sumptuous rear end. Despite past famine, her behind was as perfectly formed as some fantastic prize-winning pear; it vibrated with magical eloquence, and from this angle it so stirred my depths that I mentally pledged to the Presbyterian orphanages of Virginia a quarter of my future earnings as a writer in exchange for that bare ass's brief lodging - thirty seconds would do - within the compass of my cupped, supplicant palms.<sup>25</sup>

There may be room for debate (at this stage, anyway) about what constitutes pornography, but Alvin Rosenfeld is surely right, in commenting on this passage, to identify Sophie as a new type of sex object - "the Mutilated Woman".<sup>26</sup> Sophie is an amalgam of suffering and eroticism, a siren who is herself cursed by the stain of Auschwitz. Stingo finds the combination irresistible.

Lest we lose sight of the author's overall objective, let us return briefly to his own appraisal:

I think it is a book in which the Holocaust is overwhelmingly present, but which is more than that - a metaphor for something else. The metaphor lay in the title of the book - choice, Sophie's choice. The metaphor lay in the epigraph I use in the book from Malraux: "I seek that essential region in the soul where absolute evil confronts brotherhood." What is absolute evil? Absolute evil, to my mind, as a metaphor, is, or can be, or must be, an act in which a woman is forced to murder her own child, whether she be Jewish, Gypsy, Pole, Russian, French, or whatever. This seized me as being a metaphor for absolute evil as represented by Nazism. That is what impelled me more than anything else to write about the Holocaust. Not, God forbid, to write it from the vantage point of Elie Wiesel, the point of view of the barracks, the tortures, the beatings, the terrible deprivation.<sup>27</sup>

Does Styron's claim for the significance of the choice that Sophie is forced to make stand up to investigation, though? - leaving aside the question of its relation to the rest of the novel for the time being. In what sense is it a metaphor for absolute evil as represented by Nazism? There is no evidence to suggest that the Nazis were in the habit of forcing mothers to choose between their children on the ramp at Auschwitz. It would be more pertinent to show how the Nazis were systematic in their cruelty rather than wantonly sadistic. Sophie's choice is a dramatic device calculated to shock the reader rather than an appropriate metaphor for totalitarianism. The crime to be addressed is the wholesale destruction of human beings - Jews in particular - not the imposition of outrageous dilemmas.

As a postscript to the revelation of Sophie's choice, Stingo confesses to us that he has often brooded since upon "the enigma of Dr Jemand von Niemand"<sup>28</sup> - his clumsily invented name for the Nazi doctor responsible. A more tenuous explanation for the man's behaviour would be hard to imagine:

At the very least he was a maverick, a sport.... The doctor must have waited a long time to come face to face with Sophie and her children, hoping to perpetrate his ingenious deed. And what, in the private misery of his heart, I think he most intensely lusted to do was to inflict upon Sophie, or someone like her - some tender and perishable Christian - a totally unpardonable sin. It is precisely because he had yearned with such passion to commit this terrible sin that I believe that the doctor was exceptional, perhaps unique, among his fellow SS automata: if he was not a good man or a bad man, he still retained a potential capacity for goodness, as well as evil, and his strivings were essentially religious.<sup>29</sup>

Let me point out straightaway that to describe members of the SS as automata is pernicious nonsense. They may not have accepted responsibility for what they were doing; in some complex way they may even, as Hannah Arendt and Günter Grass both suggest,<sup>30</sup> have been ignorant that they were responsible for what they were doing; what is beyond doubt, however, is that they were human beings - with a capacity for reason and a highly-developed self-consciousness. They, too, had a choice. If they chose to offer complete obedience to the Führer's will, they were no more automata than monks are.

Alvin Rosenfeld has already condemned this passage in A Double Dying,<sup>31</sup> but he omits to mention the most disturbing anomaly of all. Thousands of Jews, many of them religious, would have had their fate decided by Dr Jemand von Niemand, and we are asked to believe that all along he had been waiting for "some tender and perishable Christian" like Sophie, who unwittingly revealed herself to be a devout Catholic, so that he could commit an unpardonable sin. Perhaps in his eyes the Jews didn't count, but in our eyes they must. "Some tender and perishable Christian" is Stingo's expression, no one else's (except, of course, the author's), just as the whole analysis is a product of his own imagination, based solely on Sophie's revelation that the doctor, contrary to SS regulations, was drunk and unkempt. "I have always assumed," Stingo goes on to confide, "that when he encountered Sophie, Dr Jemand von Niemand was undergoing the crisis of his life: cracking apart like bamboo, disintegrating at the very moment that he was reaching out for salvation."<sup>32</sup>

As the author/narrator warms to his theme, the poor doctor becomes an object of pity: a man unable to live without God and driven to extreme measures by the need to experience a sense of sin. Kenneth Surin, an Anglican theologian, has praised Styron for the astuteness of this insight. "Styron's novel," he tells us in an article called "Atonement and Moral Apocalypticism: William

Styron's Sophie's Choice", "is a remarkable study in the psychology of morals."<sup>33</sup>

Surin is more than happy to endorse Stingo's view of the matter, is quite prepared to improve on it even:

Hope is a modality of love, and where there is no love there can be no hope. And where there is no hope there can be no faith in the God of the future; and where there is no faith in the God of the future there can be no surrendering of our own future into the hands of God, no trust in the mystery of God. This is perhaps why von Niemand snatched so desperately at the chance to engineer his own salvation. His faith - for he is a religious man - lacks an eschatological dimension, and hence resides in the "already" of the God who is instead of the "not yet" of the God who is to come.<sup>34</sup>

It might seem churlish to remind Surin that all Sophie in fact tells the narrator is that von Niemand was arrestingly handsome, possibly aristocratic, almost certainly drunk, and had a sprinkling of boiled-rice grains on the lapel of his tunic. From this it is quite ludicrous to infer so emphatically that he must have been a religious man simply because he also proved capable of being a sadist.

More importantly, this raises the question of how we are to read Sophie's testimony. Stingo lets us know that her earlier confessions contain a number of untruths but is himself guilty of embellishing much of what we are meant to accept as authentic revelation, especially if it has anything to do with Sophie's sexuality. Rosenfeld is critical of the introduction of Rudolf Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz, as a fictional character, largely on the grounds that he is portrayed in an overly sympathetic light,<sup>35</sup> and it is certainly true that the author's characterization of him lacks any depth. The essential problem, however, is that Auschwitz itself in this novel lacks depth. Stingo is too proud of his gifts as a storyteller to let Sophie's experiences speak for themselves. He has to smother everything she tells him with the thick sauce of what he takes to be realism. Not only is it indigestible, it is also stretching our credulity. Would Sophie conceivably have described being raped by Höss's lesbian housekeeper so minutely, for example? Here is an extract from Stingo's version:

Having made her decision moments before, Sophie was not about to resist or protest - in a kind of headlong autohypnosis she had placed herself beyond revulsion, realizing in any case that she was as helpless as a crippled moth - and let her thighs, submissively, be spread apart as the brutish muzzle and the bullethead of a tongue probed into what, with some dull distant satisfaction, she realized was her obdurate dryness, as parched and without juice as desert sand.<sup>36</sup>

"I long to have intercourse with you," Höss confesses to Sophie, though he is unwilling to take the risk. Sophie's misfortune is that everyone longs to have intercourse with her, no one more so than Stingo himself. Her experience of sexual assault begins when a female Kapo tries to rape her. The implication that Sophie is fated to be an erotic sacrifice is reinforced by our knowledge that soon after her arrival in New York she was subjected to what the narrator refers to as digital rape while travelling on the subway. Naturally this assault has been described to us in lurid detail. The real climax of the novel is reached when Stingo finally gets what he has been waiting for - not the truth about what happened at Auschwitz but a night in bed with Sophie. His failure hitherto to get laid has provided the story with its moments of comic relief, even if I, for one, do not find them funny. This failure has taken the form of two disastrous encounters: one with the stereotype of a Jewish princess called Leslie Lapidus, whose analyst has taught her to talk dirty but not yet cured her fear of the sexual act itself, and the other with a Southern belle called Mary Alice, whom Stingo describes in his journal at the time as "a Whack-off artist".<sup>37</sup> At no point does Stingo regard his own behaviour as in any way wrong-headed. As he sees it, these women are frigid and he is their victim. Stingo the elder does nothing to revise this view. The relation between affection and sex remains invisible. Women exist, it would appear, in order to satisfy the rampant desires of men.

Hot-blooded Stingo proves his manhood in the space of a single night with Sophie. His first sexual experience with her had also been a flop - the day they spent on the beach together - but he now redeems himself with flying colours.

Sophie initiates him into the mysteries of sex with the gusto of a prima donna, and we are all invited to attend. "The varieties of sexual experience are, I suppose, so multifarious that it is an exaggeration to say that Sophie and I did that night everything it is possible to do," the narrator reminisces. "But I'll swear we came close, and one thing forever imprinted on my brain was our mutual inexhaustibility."<sup>38</sup>

The next day Sophie is dead, having returned to Brooklyn to fulfil her destiny with Nathan. The note she leaves Stingo in their hotel room reads like a parody of what someone with a poor command of English might write. Sophie has made her choice: death rather than life, Nathan rather than Stingo. But Stingo at least has the assurance that he is a great lover. His future is not after all to be shared with Sophie on a peanut farm in the South, but the future beckons nonetheless. "This was not judgement day - only morning," the novel ends. "Morning: excellent and fair."<sup>39</sup> It is the morning after the funeral. Stingo has shed his tears, fallen into a drunken sleep, and awoken to a new day. Soon his first novel will be published to considerable acclaim. Stingo, in fact, has got it made - he is the true survivor, living proof that the American Dream is there for anyone who stays the course. Against a background of sublime music, each masterpiece named for the benefit of the reader ("the ravishing sweet heartbeat of the slow movement of Beethoven's Fourth Symphony",<sup>40</sup> for example), Sophie and Nathan have acted out the tragedy of doomed lovers, the theme of great art since time immemorial. Stingo's choric voice forbids us to mourn beyond the proper span. Life must go on.

And so must I. Up until now I have merely complained about the intrusiveness of the narrator's sordid and priapic lust. There is worse to come. The character of Nathan represents the nadir of Sophie's Choice for several reasons, chief of which is linked to the way in which Stingo chooses to describe Nathan's relationship with Sophie, sensationalizing its alternation of violence

and tenderness in order to arouse our curiosity, if not to titillate. The revelation towards the end of the novel that Nathan is a paranoid schizophrenic who has spent much of his adult life in institutional care is the stuff of melodrama.<sup>44</sup> Up until then we are under the impression, along with Stingo and Sophie (though, of course, Stingo the narrator knows the truth), that Nathan is a high-powered research scientist on the verge of making some important new discovery. His fits of inexplicable rage are to be explained in terms of his drug abuse (amphetamines and cocaine), if they are to be explained at all.

Nathan is cast as Sophie's saviour-cum-destroyer, rescuing her from the abyss of her camp experiences only to plunge her into a hell of his own. Even those who have sought to defend the novel against its detractors are obliged to concede that there is something seriously wrong here, unless, like Allen Shepherd in an article on "The Psychopath as Moral Agent in William Styron's Sophie's Choice", they try to convince us that Nathan's suffering is the equal of Sophie's. "Styron's concern is neither evasion nor exoneration," Shepherd claims; "it is rather to render a true account of American initiation, even of the American attempt to democratize evil."<sup>42</sup> I have no idea what Shepherd means by this, but if Nathan is a psychopath he is also a Jew. It is puzzling that the author should have given Sophie's nemesis a Jewish identity. That Sophie sought to ingratiate herself with Rudolf Höss by posing as an antisemite, may have compounded her sense of guilt but hardly justifies Nathan's obsession with how she survived. It is her suffering, her suffering as a non-Jew, moreover, that is impressed upon us. "Although she was not Jewish," Stingo writes, "she had suffered as much as any Jew who had survived the same afflictions, and - as I think will be made plain - had in certain profound ways suffered more than most."<sup>43</sup>

Jewish suffering, then, does not fail within the domain of this novel. We are more alert to Nathan's cruelty than any mental torture he might have to

endure. The only positive interpretation of Styron's decision to make Nathan a Jew which seems plausible is that offered by the Anglo-Jewish writer Arnold Wesker - in a review article on Sophie's Choice published in Encounter (January 1980). "The tragedy of a race locked in seemingly endless conflict with the world," he suggests, "is played out here through two people locked in mortal combat with one another." But, as Wesker himself acknowledges, this does not square with the novel's dénouement:

But so preoccupied is Styron with sustaining narrative suspense that he invents twists and turns of plot at the cost of a diminished metaphor: the clinically mad Jew rather than the Jew driven mad. I know that whom the Gods destroy they first make mad, but the Gods are fate in the form of worldly misfortune, not chemistry gone wrong in the genes.<sup>44</sup>

Wesker is nevertheless a great admirer of the novel as a whole. His most lavish praise is reserved for Styron's courage in seeking to counter the Holocaust with an uninhibited celebration of the lust for life:

His courage lies in his attempt to reach some "bearable" perspective of that grotesque time of carnage by recording the life force that clings on after, and his achievement is to have coupled respect with juicy enthusiasms for life, sex and art, each inextricably linked with the other. He seems to be saying through his novel: "I pussyfoot with none of these - I fuck with zest, live voraciously, and have been prepared to take twelve years writing my book, nor will I pussyfoot with this outrageous episode that has taken place in my life's time. I need to know and understand just as Sophie needed me to know and understand and so she revealed all...."<sup>45</sup>

But this is not courage at all; it is braggadocio. Styron could have used the twelve years he is alleged to have taken over Sophie's Choice more wisely. His narrator is too preoccupied with the mechanics of sex to have any inkling of what someone like Sophie must have endured, and expects us to share his obsession. The novel has the corrosive effect of pornography, all the more disturbing for its use of Auschwitz as a means to gain respectability.

If there remains any doubt concerning how pernicious Sophie's Choice really is, let me draw attention to the subject of fellatio as it is treated in the novel. It is first introduced in the form of a dream - a dream Stingo has after moving in to the pink rooming house in Flatbush.<sup>46</sup> It also features in one of



Sophie's dreams in Auschwitz, which is a dream about the devil, relayed to us by Stingo with vivid eloquence.<sup>47</sup> By this time we are aware that Nathan has taught Sophie not to feel guilty about her own penchant for fellatio. But we are also aware that he has used it to humiliate her in the course of one of his psychotic moods, and it is this episode, given the narrator's full coverage, which confirms for me the real identity of the book. For here an event of sickening depravity is made even more obscene in the telling. Sophie has been relating to Stingo how she and Nathan had driven to New England in the autumn of 1946 (the previous year), at a time when Nathan's paranoia was in full flood. It was his intention that they should commit suicide together then. Due to a juggling of time-sequences to heighten the impact, we already know that Nathan is going to kick Sophie repeatedly in the ribs and try to urinate in her mouth. He calls her Irma Griese as a vicious taunt - a woman found guilty of murdering Jews at Auschwitz and hanged for it only days before:

... Even with his crazy whispered rhyme repeated again and again - "Don't be a teaser, Irma Griese" - even with his hand remorselessly twisting her hair as if from its roots, even with his other hand at her shoulder clamped down with sickening pain and force, even with the pervasive sense he transmits, lying there, shuddering, of a man far over the brink and prowling his own demented underworld - even with the feverish fright engulfing her she cannot help but feel the old delectable pleasure as she sucks him. And sucks and sucks and sucks. And endlessly loving sucks. Her fingers claw the loamy earth of the wooded hillside upon which he lies underneath her, she feels the earth impacting itself beneath her fingernails. The ground is damp and chill, she smells woodsmoke, and through her eyelids' translucency is filtered the incredible radiance of the foliage afire. And she sucks and sucks. Beneath her knees fragments of shale gouge and hurt, but she makes no move to ease the pain. "Oh Jesus Christ, oh fuck, suck me Irma, suck the Jew-boys." She cups his firm balls in her palm, strokes the delicate spider-web hair. As always she envisions within the hollow of her mouth the slippery surface of a marble palmtree, the soft spongy head, its fronds swelling and blossoming in the darkness of her brain. "This relationship, this unique thing we have, this ecstatic symbiosis," she remembers, "could only result from the meeting of a large stiff lonely Semitic schlong, which has been successfully circumvented by an army of terrified Jewish princesses, and a set of beautiful Slavic mandibles starved for fellatio." And she thinks even now in her discomfort, in her fear: Yes, yes, he even gave me that, laughing, he took away that guilt anyway when he said how absurd it was for me to feel shame about longing so madly to suck a cock, it wasn't my fault that my husband was frigid and didn't want me to and my lover in Warsaw wouldn't suggest it and I couldn't begin the thing - I was merely, he said, the victim of two thousand years of anti-sucking Judeo-Christian conditioning. That lousy myth, he said, that only faggots love sucking. Suck me, he always said, enjoy, enjoy! So even now with the cloud of fear around her, while he taunts her and abuses her - even now her pleasure is not mere mild

enjoyment but the perennially re-created bliss, and chill waves shiver down her back as she sucks and sucks and sucks.<sup>48</sup>

I could go on, but I think my point has been made. Stingo continues in much the same vein. (Sophie told him all this?)

Earlier in the novel, Stingo catches Sophie in an unguarded moment without her teeth in and is stunned to behold "an old hag whose entire lower face had crumpled in upon itself, leaving a mouth like a crumpled gash and an expression of doddering senescence". But the casualty of Auschwitz has been put back together again by American technology. Her false teeth are the handiwork of "one of New York's classiest practitioners of prosthodontia". "Those teeth were hard to forget," Stingo tells us. "They had to be the dental equivalent of Benvenuto Cellini."<sup>49</sup> And put back together again - "reassembled" - is how Stingo sees her. Nathan gets the credit for repairing her sexually, even as we watch him tear her apart psychologically. Stingo's fantasy of marrying Sophie and making her into a good American housewife reflects a similar disregard for her state of mind. He expects her to forget Nathan at once, as if her feelings were as synthetic as her teeth. Nathan was no more than a warm-up man for Stingo - the tender, the true - who is simply dying to experience fellatio for himself. "I would lie there and let her suck me until my hair grew thin and gray," he boasts when his night of ecstasy begins.<sup>50</sup> Stingo helps to destroy Sophie as surely as mad Nathan does, though the author would not have us think so. Stingo's crass philosophy of wholesome living must have reinforced Sophie (who could never be made whole) in her conviction that she had nothing to live for.

Need it be added that the references to George Steiner and others, the snippets of historical detail, are all irrelevant, except in so far as they lend Sophie's Choice a superficial air of gravity? The narrator rejects Steiner's proposal that silence may be the most appropriate response to the horror of the camps. "I have thought it might be possible to make a stab at understanding

Auschwitz," he contends, "by trying to understand Sophie, who to say the least was a cluster of contradictions."<sup>51</sup> Since no understanding of the fictional Sophie is to be gleaned from the novel, it follows that Auschwitz itself remains as distant as ever.

In his summing up, as it were, Stingo retrieves some lines from his old journal. "Let your love flow out on all living things" is one of them. Stingo meditates upon this sentence with utter seriousness, oblivious of its banality, conceding only that it "may be a little too facile". For him it is "a reminder of some fragile yet perdurable hope".<sup>52</sup> Sophie's Choice is an unutterably fatuous book - sentimental, pornographic kitsch. "Having understood, absorbed, and digested the Holocaust (in so far as the worst nightmare in our experience can be grasped)," one eminent reviewer wrote, "Styron recycles and distills his immense reading into scenes (always the crucial unit in his fiction) of awesome power."<sup>53</sup> It is indicative of how far our culture lacks a coherent moral framework within which to make sense of Auschwitz that anyone could mistake this trash for the genuine article.

### Poetic Licence

D.M. Thomas's The White Hotel is perhaps a more difficult novel to assess. It has widely been regarded as a tour de force, partly, I suspect, because of the boldness with which the author adopts his various disguises - hysterical woman, Sigmund Freud, paternalistic narrator, eyewitness to atrocity, visionary - but also because of the sheer density of symbolism which defies anyone to say that it signifies nothing. Written in seven sections, the novel shifts from one style to another, very much after the fashion of postmodernist fiction. Nabokov's Pale Fire (1962), for example, which also begins with a long poem, may well have been a source of inspiration. "For the first half of the novel," one critic has been moved to observe, "The White Hotel seems nothing so much

as a piece of surfictionist formalist adventurism."<sup>54</sup> All is not what it seems, however.

Crudely stated, The White Hotel tells the story of how an ex-patient of Freud's came to be a victim of the massacre at Babi Yar (a ravine on the outskirts of Kiev) in September 1941, when over 33,000 Jews were murdered by an Einsatzkommando in the space of two days.<sup>55</sup> As a novel it is an absorbing exercise. What concerns me here, though, is the attempt to relate a pornographic fantasy (allegedly imagined or dreamt by the novel's protagonist, Lisa Erdman) to the Holocaust through the medium of a fictional character endowed with second sight.

After the Prologue, in which Lisa is first introduced to us via some correspondence between Freud and his colleagues, this fantasy is presented to us in its original form as a poem. "I think of myself as a poet who writes novels as well as poems," Thomas has said,<sup>56</sup> and what better way to get a wider audience for your poetry than to incorporate it into a novel? The poem, I might add, came first, then the idea for the novel (after Thomas had read Anatoli Kuznetsov's Babi Yar), even though Lisa is its putative author. Thomas provides a disclaimer for its subject matter by getting Freud in the Prologue to stress that the author of the poem was suffering from "a severe sexual hysteria" at the time.<sup>58</sup>

Lisa imagines an orgasmic encounter with Freud's son in a white lakeside hotel, and Thomas clearly enjoys the licence it gives him to be as sexually explicit as possible. However, Frank Conroy, commenting on the novel in Partisan Review (Winter 1982), points out that the eroticism has a distinctly masculine tone.<sup>59</sup> "Beneath our rug your son's right hand was jammed/ up to the wrist inside me, laced in skin," for example, is less than convincing as a description of the woman's sensations. Or again: "I leaned upon the rail, he came behind/ and rammed up into me, he got so far/ up into me, my still half-wintery heart/ burst into

sudden flower, I couldn't tell/ which hole it was."<sup>60</sup> She couldn't tell which hole it was? Her lover's virility is the thing: with constant reference to his erect penis.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, the structure of the poem is anachronistic, given that it was apparently written in 1920, and surely too stylized to be the work of someone versifying at whim.

Conveniently for the imaginary Freud, the fantasy combines Eros and Thanatos, the libido and the death instinct, in equal measure. It is repeated in a prose version of some fifty pages (for the benefit of those readers who might have skipped the poem, perhaps), under the heading of "The Gastein Journal", so that a third of the novel is over before the explanations - initially in the form of a case study - begin. Thomas invites us to take on Freud at his own game, as it were, and guess the meaning of the various symbols, but to accept the invitation is to credit the fantasy with a plausibility it almost certainly lacks. We have an unfair advantage over the great man, anyway, in knowing something of what lies ahead. The severe pains in Lisa's left breast and pelvic region that Freud treats as symptoms of hysteria are warning signs from the future.

Indeed, what Thomas is trying to do at Freud's expense is to make a case for precognition. Jumbled up with the erotomania is a prophetic vision of Babi Yar. Lisa herself will survive the shooting only to suffer a more agonizing death. An SS man will swing his boot into her left breast as she lies among the corpses, and also into her pelvis. A Ukrainian accomplice will rape her with a bayonet. Thomas's matter-of-fact description of this heightens its impact, reminding us at the same time that the rest of the novel has no bearing on its reality.<sup>62</sup> Lisa's second sight is unable to save her from history. The point is that the massacre at Babi Yar happened, not that Lisa unwittingly foresaw it.

As for the authenticity of Thomas's report, he freely acknowledges his debt to the eyewitness testimony of Dina Pronicheva, possibly the only survivor,

whose account of the massacre is retold by Anatoli Kuznetsov in Babi Yar.<sup>63</sup>

"I agree with the people who say that you shouldn't fictionalize it," Thomas claims, referring to the Holocaust as a whole and providing himself with an alibi for having reproduced parts of Kuznetsov's text as his own:

It's too real and still too painful for people who lost parents and so on. Simply, my imagination failed before it. So what I did was to bring my fictional heroine closer and closer to Dina Pronicheva, the actual survivor, and to make it clear in the text and also in acknowledgments that I was doing so. My heroine was in the same group, the last group of Babi Yar, and what Dina saw, my heroine saw. For a while, therefore, they move step by step with each other, and fiction becomes dissolved for a few moments in history. That was the only way I could deal with it. Lisa's thoughts are her own but what she saw could only be the historical reality.<sup>64</sup>

If this provides an effective defence against the charge of plagiarism, it also reveals certain anomalies in Thomas's approach. Lisa's death is an imagined death. Doubtless many atrocities like raping a woman with a bayonet did take place, but Dina's testimony does not include that specific one. It is anyway disingenuous to side with those who argue against the fictional treatment of the Holocaust, when you are the author of a novel that would be regarded by them as an example of what they deplore. Thomas's version of Babi Yar is rendered fictional by its context.

Immediately after Thomas has described Lisa's death he tries to tie up the loose ends of the fiction. "The soul of man is a far country, which cannot be approached or explored," he intones, recalling the saying by Heraclitus that Freud quotes in one of his letters to Lisa. We are then given a homily on the victims of the massacre:

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 Podol slum, their lives 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.<sup>65</sup>

This is a spurious way of making the earlier pornography seem part of the story.

We are no closer to the real Lisa for having been taken inside her

white hotel. If her life was rich and complex, we only have the author's word for it. We know that she was an opera singer, that she was afraid to have children, that she became a step-mother to her second husband's son, Kolya, and that she died with Kolya at Babi Yar. The patronizing suggestion by Thomas that slum-dwellers are no less human than the educated middle class obscures the fact that Lisa is barely revealed to us as a person at all.

A more serious flaw in the novel's construction is the importance Thomas attaches to Lisa's premonitions (which include foreseeing the death of Freud's grandson). If the physical pain that begins to afflict Lisa in 1915 is an intimation of what she will endure in 1941, it is hard to resist the conclusion that the Holocaust was preordained. This is reinforced by what would appear to be an instance of ESP on Freud's part, when he faints because of Jung's continued reference to corpses (albeit peat-bog ones) during a conversation in 1909.<sup>66</sup> A central mystification at work in The White Hotel is that Jews knew at a subconscious level what was coming. They were doomed, Thomas appears to be saying, as if history possessed the inevitability of tragic fate. But historical events are inevitable only in retrospect, and while it is true to suggest that antisemitism was rife in Europe before Hitler's rise to power, Jews had no more reason than anyone else to anticipate the unprecedented totality of the Nazi campaign.

Lisa concealed from Freud the fact that her own father, a grain merchant, was a Jew, and with it the story of how she had been sexually assaulted by a group of sailors working on one of his ships in Odessa. These men had forced her to commit acts of oral sex with them at the same time as they reviled her for being Jewish. Lisa reveals all this in a letter to Freud in 1931 - in reply to his request to publish his case study of her - and by so doing undermines our faith in the psychoanalyst's skill as a detective. Her first marriage was a failure, moreover, because her husband was a thoroughgoing antisemite who knew nothing

of her background. "He said he loved me," Lisa writes; "but if he had known I had Jewish blood he would have hated me. Whenever he said 'I love you' I understood it as 'I hate you'."<sup>67</sup>

A few years after writing this letter, despite confessing to Freud that she had been made to feel ashamed of her Jewishness, Lisa in fact marries a Jew - Victor Berenstein. And by assuming responsibility when Victor dies (a victim of Stalin's purges) for the welfare of his son Kolya, she ensures that her fate will be to accompany the boy, along with all the other Jews of Kiev, to the ravine at Babi Yar. Lisa's own diagnosis of her condition proves closer to the truth than Freud's elaborate case study:

I cannot explain my pains either. (They have recurred from time to time.) I still think they're organic, in some peculiar way; and I keep expecting, every time I visit a doctor, for him to say I've been suffering from some outlandish disease in my breast and ovary for the past fifteen years! The "asthma" at fifteen may have been hysterical, I grant you that; but I don't think the rest is. Let's try to look at it afresh. I lost my mother when I was five. That was terrible; but as you say, there are orphans everywhere. She died in dreadfully immoral circumstances - and very painfully. Yes, but I could come to terms with it. Is there any family without a skeleton in the cupboard? Frankly I didn't always wish to talk about the past; I was more interested in what was happening to me then, and what might happen in the future. In a way you made me become fascinated by my mother's sin, and I am forever grateful to you for giving me the opportunity to delve into it. But I don't believe for one moment that had anything to do with my being crippled with pain.<sup>68</sup>

Poor old Freud! He was too preoccupied with the past to see into the future. Lisa saw but could not understand, even saw into a future not her own: it is Dina Pronicheva who hears Motya say "Don't be scared, lady! I'm alive too," even though the boy in Lisa's fantasy says more or less the same thing. Thomas takes the trouble to draw our attention to this:

Lisa had once dreamt those words, when she was taking the thermal springs at Gastein with Aunt Magda. But it is not really surprising, for she had clairvoyant gifts and naturally a part of her went on living with these survivors: Dina, and the little boy who trembled and shivered all over.<sup>69</sup>

Naturally? The author is intent on hoodwinking us into believing that he is some kind of authority on the paranormal. It's as if he wanted to put his own searing description of the massacre behind him with a jolly little puzzle about the nature of human perception.



"Nor can the living speak for the dead," Thomas goes on to assert. What exactly has he been doing then? And still doing now: "The thirty thousand became a quarter of a million," we read. "A quarter of a million white hotels in Babi Yar. (Each of them had a Vogel, a Madame Cottin, a priest, a prostitute, a honeymoon couple, a soldier poet, a baker, a chef, a gypsy band.)"<sup>70</sup> By the end of October 1941, some quarter of a million Jews had indeed been slaughtered by the Einsatzgruppen (killing squads), if not all of them at Babi Yar.<sup>71</sup> Surely we are not to measure the value of human lives, though, in terms of a capacity to fantasize about sex? Thomas concludes this section with references to the grotesque industry that the pit of corpses was to generate, as well as the refusal of the Russians after the war to honour the dead with any kind of memorial, unable to see how self-indulgent his commentary must seem by comparison. "But all this," he ends, "had nothing to do with the guest, the soul, the lovesick bride, the daughter of Jerusalem."<sup>72</sup> He might as well have been referring to the novel itself.

The final section, called "The Camp", represents Thomas's bid for a happy ending. It is an optimistic vision of purgatory modelled on the emigration of survivors to Palestine. The author has been careful when interviewed, however, to deny that this has any political significance. "Perhaps it says that, faced with an experience like the Holocaust," he explains, "there is no salvation within history, that if there is healing, it is somewhere beyond history."<sup>73</sup> As an image of redemption it has certain parallels with Lisa's fantasy about the white hotel, not least of which is a woman's capacity to breastfeed at will.<sup>74</sup> Thomas wants us to make the connection. "Despite their weariness the passengers exclaimed with pleasure, seeing an oasis - green grass, palm trees, sparkling water," we read, as Lisa and Kolya arrive in this new world. "And the building itself looked more like a hotel than a transit camp." When Lisa tells her mother "I think wherever there is love, of any kind, there is hope of salvation" and then corrects herself, remembering the bayonet, with the words "Wherever there is love in

the heart" - we are being offered the same wisdom as before: "The spirit of the white hotel was against selfishness."<sup>75</sup> The only evil, ultimately, is death itself, and those who have obeyed the spirit of the white hotel are assured of a gradual recovery from their mortal sickness.

However cloying Thomas's idyll may be, it does at least have a sort of dream-logic. Which is not the case with the glimpse of the life to come revealed to us by Christian theologians Roy and Alice Eckardt at the end of Long Night's Journey into Day (a meditation on faith after the Holocaust). "There is the assurance of the fully eschatological character of the Resurrection," they proclaim:

Redemption comes, redemption is coming... That young Jewish prophet from the Gailee sleeps now. He sleeps with the other Jewish dead, with all the disconsolate and scattered ones of the murder camps, and with the unnumbered dead of the human and the nonhuman family. But Jesus of Nazareth shall be raised. So too shall the small Hungarian children of Auschwitz. Once upon a time, they shall again play and they shall laugh. The little one of Terezin shall see another butterfly. We shall all sing and we shall all dance. And we shall love one another....<sup>76</sup>

If there is a hint of desperation underlying such faith ("Once upon a time..."), it is nevertheless faith being affirmed here rather than the consolations of storytelling. "There are things so far beyond belief that it ought to be possible to awake from them," Thomas writes, as the nightmare of Babi Yar is brought into focus.<sup>77</sup> His fantasy ending is a tacit acknowledgment that it's not possible.

"Everything will come right," the Eckardts reassure us,<sup>78</sup> as if the small Hungarian children of Auschwitz could be restored to health with some new toys and an eternity of play-time. Even the idea of purgatory seems wanting when we are confronted by the victims of atrocity. Lisa's physical pains are beginning to abate, but what of her trauma? Memory plays an important part in Thomas's narrative, and yet only amnesia could alleviate the mental anguish - which may explain why The White Hotel ends with the suggestion that memory, too, can be healed:

She smelt the scent of a pine tree. She couldn't place it.... It troubled her in some mysterious way, yet also made her happy.<sup>79</sup>

This is comforting. The horrible image of Babi Yar is now safely contained. Thomas has seduced us with the illusion of a world in which nothing is irreparable.

For all his virtuosity, Thomas is unable to make this ending stick. The sections of the novel are too disparate; the cracks show through. The White Hotel is most convincing in its obsession with a female victim. Lisa is both the author's muse and fetish. To witness the vulnerability of the woman becomes a pleasurable experience for him. Thomas confesses to being turned on by the act of writing itself,<sup>80</sup> so that to write about any form of cruelty, let alone the destruction of thousands of lives, would seem to be perverse. His auto-eroticism is the key to the novel. Not only Lisa but other female characters, too, function as symbols of sexual plenitude. We learn, for example, that Lisa had once stumbled upon her mother, aunt and uncle all making love together. This is the kind of detail which Thomas regards as authentic. "It's always hard for us women to admit it's mainly sexual desire," Lisa's resurrected mother says.<sup>81</sup>

The White Hotel, like Sophie's Choice and The Painted Bird before it, is a fraud. The bigger the catastrophe, the better the story. No matter that Kosinski lived through part of it, or that Styron once knew a survivor, or that Thomas felt he had to bow to eyewitness testimony: the Holocaust is merely a vehicle for some private apocalypse. The images are ready-made and guaranteed to shock. Thomas narrowly missed winning the 1981 Booker Prize for fiction with his contribution to the genre. The winner a year later, as we have already noted, was Schindler's Ark. There is evidently a cultural demand for narratives that broach the subject, if no corresponding sense of what can or should be said - or left unsaid.

## Notes

- (1) Ken Worpole, Dockers and Detectives (London: Verso, 1983), pp.62-66.
- (2) R.J. Minney, I Shall Fear No Evil (London: Corgi, 1967).
- (3) Piotr Rawicz's Blood from the Sky (1961) and Jakov Lind's Landscape in Concrete (1963) also use shocking images to convey the enormity of the Holocaust, but with a surreal cutting-edge that Kosinski's novel lacks.
- (4) Alvin H. Rosenfeld, A Double Dying (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), pp.75-76.
- (5) Jerzy Kosinski, The Painted Bird (London: Corgi, 1976), pp.93-94, 130.
- (6) *Ibid.*, p.158.
- (7) Cited by Lawrence L. Langer in The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination (New Haven: Yale University Press), p.175.
- (8) Kosinski, Painted Bird, p.55.
- (9) *Ibid.*, pp.169,172.
- (10) See Susan Brownmiller, Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), pp.49-54.
- (11) A more sensitive fictional treatment of rape, by way of contrast with these three novels, can be found in Grace Paley's short story "The Little Girl" - in Enormous Changes at the Last Minute (London: Virago, 1979) - written as a dramatic monologue all the more harrowing in its detachment from the event being recalled.
- (12) Kosinski, Painted Bird, pp.100-104.
- (13) George Steiner, Language and Silence (London: Faber & Faber, 1967), p.15.
- (14) Kosinski, Painted Bird, pp.109-110.
- (15) *Ibid.*, p.210. ("I recalled the trains carrying people to the gas chambers and crematoriums. The men who had ordered and organized all that probably enjoyed a similar feeling of complete power over their uncomprehending victims.... They had the power to decide whether the points of thousands of railway spurs would be switched to tracks leading to life or to death.")
- (16) *Ibid.*, p.222.
- (17) In Langer, The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination, p.175.
- (18) Kosinski, Painted Bird, p.75.
- (19) Reprinted as "Auschwitz" in William Styron, This Quiet Dust and Other Writings (London: Jonathan Cape, 1983), pp.302-305.
- (20) *Ibid.*, p.304.

- (21) Elsewhere Styron claims that the idea of the choice came largely from an example Hannah Arendt gave in Eichmann in Jerusalem of a Gypsy woman who was forced to choose between her two children. See Gideon Telpaz, "An Interview with William Styron", Partisan Review 52 (Summer 1985), p.255.
- (22) Styron, "Auschwitz", p.304.
- (23) Ibid.
- (24) Telpaz, "An Interview with William Styron", pp.259, 263.
- (25) William Styron, Sophie's Choice (London: Corgi, 1980), pp.73-74.
- (26) Rosenfeld, A Double Dying, p.164. Rosenfeld provides a thorough critique of Sophie's Choice in his chapter on "Exploiting Atrocity", but there is still a need to make clear the extent to which Styron and others like him are using the Holocaust to justify their own morbid obsessions. Rosenfeld never quite establishes just how bad a novel Sophie's Choice is.
- (27) Telpaz, "An Interview with William Styron", p.254.
- (28) Styron, Sophie's Choice, p.643. ("Anybody from Nobody" would be a literal translation.)
- (29) Ibid., pp.643-644.
- (30) Hannah Arendt argues in Eichmann in Jerusalem (London: Faber & Faber, 1963) that Eichmann and his ilk represent a new kind of criminal "who commits his crimes under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong" (p.253). Günter Grass makes a similar point in his essay called "What Shall We Tell Our Children?" - cited above, Chapter 2, p.73.
- (31) Rosenfeld, A Double Dying, p.162.
- (32) Styron, Sophie's Choice, p.645.
- (33) Kenneth Surin, "Atonement and Moral Apocalypticism: William Styron's Sophie's Choice", New Blackfriars 64 (July/August 1983), p.303. Surin's basic theme is that the only people with hope in places like Auschwitz were the prisoners, that the administrators and guards led arid and loveless lives. But it is doubtful whether such a generalization is based on any careful reading of the history of the camps. To assert that the oppressors were spiritually desolate is surely to mistake a premiss for a conclusion. It is naive, if not dangerous, to be guided by Styron's view of the matter.
- (34) Ibid., p.311.
- (35) Rosenfeld, A Double Dying, p.161.
- (36) Styron, Sophie's Choice, p.352.
- (37) Ibid., pp.377, 125-127, 575.
- (38) Ibid., p.657.
- (39) Ibid., pp.662, 684.

- (40) Ibid., p.55.
- (41) Ibid., p.565.
- (42) Allen Shepherd, "The Psychopath as Moral Agent in William Styron's Sophie's Choice", Modern Fiction Studies 28 (Winter 1982/83), p.606.
- (43) Styron, Sophie's Choice, p.293.
- (44) Arnold Wesker, "Art between Truth and Fiction", Encounter 54 (January 1980), p.56.
- (45) Ibid.
- (46) Styron, Sophie's Choice, p.65. Stingo is woken up by the noise of more lovemaking in the room above. "Fucking Jewish rabbits!" he swears, not yet realizing that only Nathan is a Jew.
- (47) Ibid., pp.535-536.
- (48) Ibid., pp.451-452.
- (49) Ibid., pp.178, 417. (He continues: "They were fabulous teeth, with a kind of icy, mother-of-pearl sparkle; every time she opened her mouth really wide I was reminded of Jean Harlow in smoochy close-ups, and on one or two memorably sunny days when Sophie burst into laughter those teeth lit up an entire room like a flashbulb.")
- (50) Ibid., p.657.
- (51) Ibid., p.293.
- (52) Ibid., pp.680-681.
- (53) David Caute, New Statesman, 7 September 1979, p.344. For a more recent celebration of the virtues of Sophie's Choice - one I shall deal with in my Conclusion - see Richard L. Rubenstein and John K. Roth, Approaches to Auschwitz (London: SCM Press, 1987), Chapter 9, pp. 279-83.
- (54) Mary F. Robertson, "Hystery, Herstory, History: 'Imagining the Real' in Thomas's The White Hotel", Contemporary Literature 25 (Winter 1984), p.460.
- (55) See Martin Gilbert, The Holocaust (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1987), p.206.
- (56) See David Wingrove, "Different Voices: an Interview with D.M. Thomas", London Magazine 21 (February 1982), p.37.
- (57) Ibid., p.33.
- (58) D.M. Thomas, The White Hotel, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p.15.
- (59) Frank Conroy, Partisan Review 49 (Winter 1982), p.143.
- (60) Thomas, White Hotel, pp.22, 24.

- (61) For example: "I was split open/ by your son, Professor" (p.20); "your son impaled me" (p.23); "I think something inside me had been torn" (p.23); "We had to rush upstairs. His prick was up/ me and my cunt began to flood/ even before we reached the top" (p.26); "I think he penetrated to her womb" (p.27); "Your son/ crashed through my modesty, a stag in rut" (p.29); "... and my rump/ taking his thrusts was coming in a flood" (p.29).
- (62) Thomas, White Hotel, pp.218-220.
- (63) See Stephen Lewis, Art out of Agony (Toronto: CBC Enterprises, 1984), p.73. Anatoli Kuznetsov's Babi Yar was first published in a censored form in Russia in 1966. An uncensored and expanded English version was published in 1970, and is now available under the author's first name: A. Anatoli, Babi Yar, trans. David Floyd (Cambridge, Mass.: Robert Bentley, 1979). For Dina Pronicheva's testimony see pp.99-120.
- (64) Lewis, Art out of Agony, p.79.
- (65) Thomas, White Hotel, p.220 (also p.174).
- (66) *Ibid.*, p.10.
- (67) *Ibid.*, pp.167-168, 170.
- (68) *Ibid.*, p.171.
- (69) *Ibid.*, p.220; cf. p.33.
- (70) *Ibid.*, p.221.
- (71) See Lucy S. Dawidowicz, The War Against The Jews 1933-45 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), pp.477-478.
- (72) Thomas, White Hotel, p.222.
- (73) Lewis, Art out of Agony, p.88.
- (74) Thomas, White Hotel, p.235, cf. pp.25-26.
- (75) *Ibid.*, pp.226-227, 237, 80.
- (76) A. Roy Eckardt with Alice L. Eckardt, Long Night's Journey into Day (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1982), p.150.
- (77) Thomas, White Hotel, p.215.
- (78) Eckardt and Eckardt, Long Night's Journey, p.150.
- (79) Thomas, White Hotel, p.240.
- (80) David Wingrove refers to the candidness of his work, perceiving a tenderness in it absent from writers like Henry Miller. Thomas responds thus: "I don't think there's any Henry Miller in the background. I suppose in terms of the descriptive effect I would feel closest to Joyce in Ulysses, who I think also has a very sensual but tender approach to women.... But writing

is also a surrogate sexual pleasure, a sublimation of the sexual instinct. And what does happen is that you find yourself writing something which you're enjoying sexually. Then you look back on it and say 'I enjoyed that, but it doesn't work in terms of the book' - and you find that the signs of your own sexual enjoyment are much too great, so then you have to alter it." (Wingrove, "Different Voices", p.31.)

(81) White Hotel, pp.171, 236.



**PART II**

**THEOLOGICAL RESPONSES**

**TO THE HOLOCAUST**

## CHAPTER 4

### JEWISH PERSPECTIVES

Those who would enquire what it means to be a Jew today must ask not only, or even primarily, vague and unformed questions about Jewish identity and the relation of Judaism and modernity and Judaism and secularity, but must rather articulate the much more precise and focused question through which all the other dimensions of our post-Holocaust identity are refracted and defined: "What does it mean to be a Jew after Auschwitz?"

Steven T. Katz, Post-Holocaust Dialogues

What do we need a God for if not to deter the wholesale slaughter of the innocent?

A Holocaust survivor (cited by Reeve Robert Brenner)

Israel's victory in the Six-Day War marked a watershed in Jewish self-understanding. A lot of rash theological claims were made, as we shall see, but it is difficult for a non-Jew to appreciate the significance of this event, which surpasses the founding of the State itself, even, in restoring a sense of religious purpose to a traumatized community. After June 1967 Jewish theologians have, on the whole, been more prepared to consider the implications of the Holocaust for their faith. This may simply reflect the passage of time, but I believe it also reflects a renewed confidence in the meaning of history. Without such confidence Auschwitz was too terrible a catastrophe for most Jews to contemplate. At any rate, a symposium on "The State of Jewish Belief" published in Commentary, August 1966, whilst reaffirming traditional religious values, made little mention of the Holocaust, though several of the contributors have produced book-length responses to it since.<sup>1</sup>

One contributor was a notable exception, however. "I believe the greatest single challenge to modern Judaism arises out of the question of God and the death camps," he wrote:

I am amazed at the silence of contemporary Jewish theologians on this most crucial and agonizing of all issues. How can Jews believe in an omnipotent, beneficent God after Auschwitz? Traditional Jewish theology maintains that God is the ultimate, omnipotent actor in the historical drama. It has interpreted every major catastrophe in Jewish history as God's punishment of a sinful Israel. I fail to see how this position can be maintained without regarding Hitler and the SS as instruments of God's will. The agony of European Jewry cannot be likened to the testing of Job. To see any purpose in the death camps, the traditional believer is forced to regard the most demonic, anti-human explosion in all history as a meaningful expression of God's purposes. The idea is simply too obscene for me to accept.<sup>2</sup>

The author of these words, Richard Rubenstein, a Conservative rabbi in the United States, published a more detailed exposition of his views during that same year, under the title of After Auschwitz. Now regarded as something of an authority on the Holocaust, Rubenstein has also written in sociological vein about the potential for totalitarianism within all modern societies.<sup>3</sup>

Rubenstein's moral rejection of the traditional Jewish God has not attracted much support from other observant Jews; and his belief in God the Holy Nothingness, "known to mystics of all ages, out of which we have come and to which we shall ultimately return", is surely too idiosyncratic to convince those who have abandoned the Torah of the necessity of religion as an existential commitment. His argument in After Auschwitz is that the only meaningful option remaining to Jews is a revitalized paganism which makes use of the forms of traditional Jewish religion - a return, as it were, to primal origins (which encompasses a return to the land of Israel). Unwilling to assert that God is dead - "How can we know that?" - Rubenstein says rather that we are living in the time of the death of God. "When I say we live in the time of the death of God," he explains, "I mean that the thread uniting God and man, heaven and earth, has been broken."<sup>4</sup>

What Rubenstein offers, in effect, is his own personal defence of traditional Jewish practice. Having expressed a sympathy with the Reconstructionist

movement, which stresses the centrality of the peoplehood of Israel, Rubenstein discovers a vocation in belonging to a community. That community owes its identity to a set of shared rituals:

I did not choose to be Jewish. It has been one of the givens of my nature, but no religious institution other than the synagogue is psychologically and culturally appropriate for my need to celebrate and share the decisive moments of existence. These moments include birth, puberty, marriage, temporary or permanent infirmity, the marking of time irretrievably past, the rearing of children, the need to express and find catharsis for feelings of guilt, the need for personal renewal, and the feeling of awe and wonder which overcomes me when I think about God's nothingness as the ultimate source and final end.<sup>5</sup>

Missing from this list is the need for a communal response to the Holocaust, though Rubenstein probably regards the founding of a Jewish state as fulfilling it. The needs he describes are essentially individual. Rejecting the God of the Covenant, he is left with the idea of religion as a kind of therapy. Religion confers a sense of well-being on its adherents. It reminds them, too, of their social obligations. But what it cannot do is hallow the victims of Auschwitz by appealing to a God who cares about their fate.

#### The 614th Commandment

The year following the publication of After Auschwitz, a symposium was organized by Judaism expressly to discuss "Jewish Values in the Post-Holocaust Future", albeit outside a purely theological context<sup>6</sup> - though it gained added significance by being held on Purim day (26 March 1967). With an invited audience of notable scholars and rabbis, the chief participants were Emil Fackenheim, Richard Popkin, George Steiner and Elie Wiesel. The starting-point for discussion, according to Steven Schwarzschild, the editor of Judaism and chair, is that with Auschwitz a new age has begun. As he puts it, "The unity of history is different from what we may previously have thought it to be." Or more explicitly: "The post-Holocaust world is fundamentally different from the previous world." Schwarzschild applauds those sensitive writers who have borne witness to this, and berates religious thinkers for failing to do so.<sup>7</sup>

It is a religious thinker at the symposium, nevertheless, who addresses the issue most directly. Emil Fackenheim asserts that the cornerstone of Jewish values is a commitment to Jewish survival. As an addition to the 613 commandments in traditional Judaism, he formulates what he terms the 614th commandment:

The authentic Jew of today is forbidden to hand Hitler yet another, posthumous victory.<sup>8</sup>

And this commandment has been the predominate theme of his work ever since.

In Quest for Past and Future (1968), for example, it is expressed thus:

I believe that whereas no redeeming voice is heard at Auschwitz a commanding voice is heard, and that it is being heard with increasing clarity. Jews are not permitted to hand Hitler posthumous victories. They are commanded to survive as Jews, lest their people perish. They are commanded to remember the victims of Auschwitz, lest their memory perish. They are forbidden to despair of God, lest Judaism perish. They are forbidden to despair of the world as the domain of God, lest the world be handed over to the forces of Auschwitz. For a Jew to break this commandment would be to do the unthinkable - to respond to Hitler by doing his work.<sup>9</sup>

Fackenheim, who trained for the rabbinate in Germany and was imprisoned in the concentration camp at Sachsenhausen for several months in 1938, has described himself as neo-Orthodox.<sup>10</sup> He is married to a Christian, however, so it is not entirely clear how rigid the 614th commandment is supposed to be. In God's Presence in History (1970) he appears to endorse any affirmation of Jewishness as an authentic response. "For a Jew today merely to affirm his Jewish existence," he claims, "is to accept his singled-out condition; it is to oppose the demons of Auschwitz: and it is to oppose them in the only way in which they can be opposed - with an absolute opposition." Religious and secular Jews are united in their witness against the devil.<sup>11</sup>

But Fackenheim goes on to assert the need for a theological perspective:

Jewish opposition to Auschwitz cannot be grasped in terms of humanly created ideals but only as an imposed commandment. And the Jewish secularist, no less than the believer, is absolutely singled out by a Voice as truly other than man-made ideals - an imperative as truly given - as was the Voice of Sinai.<sup>12</sup>

It need hardly be said that Jewish secularists may not choose to see their position in these terms. For them, the value of the tradition is entirely cultural. The

notion of a Commanding Voice would probably strike them as absurd, an unwarranted resort to metaphysics. Fackenheim is concerned to find a basis for Jewish unity but at the same time unwilling to concede that Jews might continue to regard themselves as Jewish in spite of, rather than because of, Auschwitz.<sup>13</sup>

At the beginning of God's Presence in History Fackenheim defines Judaism in terms of "root experiences". These are events in Jewish history that have a revelatory significance, events like the Exodus that continue to be re-enacted as a present reality. He also makes use of the idea of "epoch-making events" to account for those historical moments when the root experiences have been put to the test, in the wake of catastrophes like the destruction of the First and Second Temples, the expulsion from Spain, and now, of course, the Holocaust.<sup>14</sup> The Commanding Voice of Auschwitz represents Fackenheim's attempt to salvage the root experiences after the most shattering epoch-making event of all. Israel is to remain a witness unto the nations, but with the emphasis on survival rather than martyrdom:

The Jew after Auschwitz is a witness to endurance. He is singled out by contradictions which, in our post-holocaust world, are worldwide contradictions. He bears witness that without endurance we shall all perish. He bears witness that we can endure because we must endure; and that we must endure because we are commanded to endure.<sup>15</sup>

Inextricably linked with Jewish survival in Fackenheim's eyes is the State of Israel. At an international symposium on the Holocaust in 1974, he asserted: "The heart of every authentic response to the Holocaust ... is a commitment to the autonomy and security of the State of Israel."<sup>16</sup> In The Jewish Return into History (1978) he elaborates on this point:

Israel is collectively what every survivor is individually: A No to the demons of Auschwitz, a yes to Jewish survival and security - and thus a testimony to life against death on behalf of all mankind.<sup>17</sup>

But Fackenheim retains his conviction that to seek a religious response is inescapable, which leads him to re-examine the Midrashic framework of Jewish belief. The traditional Midrash helped to make sense of the apparent

contradictions in God's universe. Can it still do so? Fackenheim is unsure:

The religious Word ... seems no longer possible within Jewish existence. Yet, prior to Buchenwald, some Jews have always found it possible to hold fast to God, hold fast to the world, and affirm a bond between them with their lips and, indeed, with their very lives. The most authentic Word expressing this bond is Midrash, and a life witnessing to it may be called midrashic existence.

Midrashic existence embodies a recognition of the gulf between the world as it is and the world as it ought to be. "Midrashic existence," we read, "acts as though all depended on man and prays as though all depended on God."<sup>18</sup>

Fackenheim cites the work of Elie Wiesel as a new Midrash, a mad Midrash in which the Holocaust and Jewish tradition are locked together. Wiesel's writing offers plenty of scope for theological interpretation since it frequently addresses the question of faith after the Holocaust and is self-consciously paradoxical. "After what happened to us, how can you believe in God?" a survivor asks a Hasidic rabbi in The Gates of the Forest. "How can you not believe in God after what has happened?" he replies.<sup>19</sup> Fackenheim underlines the ambiguities of this new Midrash:

Midrashic madness is the Word spoken in the anti-world which ought not to be but is. The existence it points to acts to restore a world which ought to be but is not, committed to the faith that what ought to be must and will be, and this is its madness. After Planet Auschwitz, there can be no health without this madness, no joy, no life. Without this madness a Jew cannot do - with God or without him - what a Voice from Sinai bids him do: choose life.<sup>20</sup>

Wiesel's own religious position incorporates reproaching the divine for allowing the Holocaust to take place. "The Jew, in my view," he has said, "may rise against God, provided he remains within God." What this entails is a kind of holy defiance:

You, God, do not want me to be Jewish; well, Jewish we shall be nevertheless, despite Your will.<sup>21</sup>

Fackenheim is a professor of philosophy, and philosophical questions are to the fore in To Mend the World (1982), his most recent work on Jewish identity after Auschwitz. The Holocaust is now seen as an epoch-making event that challenges the very concept "epoch-making event". The Commanding Voice

of Auschwitz can no longer be taken for granted. Fackenheim is able to recover his faith in that Voice only by attending to the responses of the victims themselves and discerning in some a principle of resistance. "Resistance in that extremity was a way of being," he writes. "For our thought now, it is an ontological category."<sup>22</sup> The Holocaust is a total rupture. Fackenheim is inspired by his reading of the Jewish mystical tradition, the Kabbalah, to speak of a Tikkun - or "mending" - made possible by the example of those, whether German or Jewish, who did not succumb to what he calls the Nazi logic of destruction. Any such Tikkun, however, will be fragmentary in nature. The world will never be completely repaired.

Fackenheim reiterates his commitment to Zionism as the surest guarantee of Jewish survival. "After the Holocaust," he writes, "the Jewish people owe the whole world the duty of not encouraging its vices - in the case of the wicked, murderous instincts, in the case of the good people, indifference mixed with hypocrisy - by continuing to tolerate powerlessness."<sup>23</sup> Jewish identity is preserved through fidelity to the past, both the past of a holy tradition and the more immediate past of being singled out for death. Fackenheim proposes a Tikkun made up of three elements: a recovery of Jewish tradition, a recovery as in recuperation from illness, and the recognition that both these recoveries will always be incomplete. The State of Israel, it turns out, is the fulfillment of this Tikkun. God is brought to book but still regarded as the God of the Jewish people. In fact, God's own survival is bound up with the survival of the Jews:

The Jewish people has persevered at a singled-out post through the centuries. All too understandably, this people today may be tired of the post; leaving the task of witnessing to others, it may create the prospect of a world without Jews. This, of course, is not a new prospect. Throughout history many have predicted such a world. Not a few have wanted it. A generation ago, an unprecedented attempt was made to make an end to Jews, and some in this generation regret that it failed of complete success. However, whether or not the world today realizes it, it cannot do without Jews - the accidental remnant that, heir to the holy ones, is itself bidden to be holy. Neither, in our time, can God Himself.<sup>24</sup>



## Prophetic Judaism

In Beyond Survival (1982) Dow Marmur, a Reform rabbi, takes up the challenge of Fackenheim's 614th commandment. Although, like Fackenheim, a Zionist, Marmur believes that contemporary Judaism "is the victim of a survival syndrome, i.e. that it seems unable to offer a positive reason for staying Jewish but at the same time is neurotically preoccupied with the danger of ceasing to be Jewish". According to Marmur, this danger is largely illusory since being Jewish is not primarily about keeping the Torah: Judaism is "both peoplehood and religion, civilization and belief".<sup>25</sup> A secular Jew like George Steiner would argue along the same lines, defining what it means to be Jewish in terms of a supra-national culture. "The value of being a Jew," Steiner claims, "is to try to make truth one's locale and free inquiry one's native tongue."<sup>26</sup> But such aims, however noble, are insufficient as far as the survival of Judaism as a distinct tradition is concerned.

Marmur contends that the problem of Jewish survival is in the end God's problem. The task for a religious Jew is to serve God through serving one's fellow human beings. "Only a return to an authentically Prophetic approach to Jewish existence," Marmur writes, "the approach reflected in Scripture and manifest in Jewish Messianic aspirations throughout the ages, will enable us to make sense of our history, improve things as we find them today and work towards a better future." This is bold stuff, but is it anything more than rhetoric? Marmur's preoccupation with the relevance of faith to contemporary social concerns seems to blind him to the question of its relevance to the Holocaust. "To seek to comprehend something of the mystery of the presence of God in Auschwitz," we are told, "is to react Prophetically to the Holocaust."<sup>27</sup> One starts from a position of faith and works backward, confident that God's presence can in fact be traced.

And what does Marmur find? He finds that not all prisoners in concentration camps were destroyed by the experience. Some were able to survive

psychologically as well as physically and, having survived, able to use their own suffering to alleviate the suffering of others. Marmur draws particular attention to the work of Victor Frankl, the founder of logotherapy, and of Eugene Heimler, a psychiatric social worker, both of whom are survivors of Auschwitz.<sup>28</sup> Can we really conclude from such examples, however, that God was present at Auschwitz? Was it necessary to sacrifice so many Jews to help create a more caring society? If a spirit of amelioration is the driving force of prophetic Judaism, it is hardly equal to the spirit of the age. But perhaps that has always been the case. After Auschwitz, however, any belief in progress is severely tested. To place a value on survival alone is regarded by Marmur as a form of idolatry, and yet his conclusion that each generation must experience God in its own way, seems to underestimate the nature of the catastrophe that gave rise to the neurosis about Jewish survival in the first place.

The call for a return to prophetic faith is also sounded in one of the first theological responses, Ignaz Maybaum's The Face of God after Auschwitz (1965). Here we find a prophet defined as "a man ready to meet God in the tempest of changing history". Maybaum, a German Reform rabbi who came to England in 1939, offers his own prophetic interpretation of the Holocaust, using the Exodus story to represent the pattern of redemption. God the Redeemer is vindicated by the victory over tyranny. Prophetic interpretation, in other words, is an attempt to see things from God's point of view:

It does not begin with history but begins with God who is the Redeemer of man in his deadly predicament. Man either as survivor himself or as offspring of survivors, in short, to use the biblical term, as Remnant, sees a historic event as sign, as portent, as event full of wonders. Auschwitz does not contradict the biblical prophets' approach to history, but contradicts philosophies which trust history as producing progress out of itself. No historic institution by itself, no historic event by itself guarantees progress. Progress, Redemption is not immanent in history.<sup>29</sup>

The identification of redemption with progress is a revealing one. Progress, for Maybaum, is an end to the persecution suffered by Jews in the Middle Ages. The Holocaust was simply an extreme consequence of medieval prejudices.<sup>30</sup>

The Holocaust itself is described as the third Churban or destruction of

the Temple, a cataclysmic event out of which comes progress. The murdered East European Jews are celebrated as pioneers of an enlightened and, hence, exemplary religious outlook. In this way they assume the significance of martyrs:

The West is founded on the belief in progress. In his heart, in his thinking, in his hope the East European Jew was Western Man turning away from the Middle Ages. The East European Jews perished, murdered by Hitler. We are the loyal executors of their will when we teach and preach a progressive Judaism which is able to renew the Judaism of our prophets and classical rabbis.<sup>31</sup>

Given that Maybaum's own mother and sisters were among those who died, it would seem indelicate to condemn this argument as wishful thinking but that is what it is. We are not in a position to ascribe a collective will to the victims of the Holocaust. The Jews in Eastern Europe held a variety of beliefs; there was no such thing as a homogeneous Jewish community until the Nazis created one by force.<sup>32</sup>

### The Suffering Servant

In the past, Jews have sought an explanation for disasters in terms of their covenant with God. Catastrophe has been regarded as the punishment of a sinful Israel, as a test of faith, as a reminder to keep the Commandments. The good Jew, like Job, must learn obedience to God's will. Jewish tradition also teaches the role of the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53), which has been called upon especially to give meaning to the experience of being singled out for persecution. Maybaum offers a classic formulation of this:

With the blood of their martyrs Jews are the uncontradictable witnesses who verify the truth of their faith, revive their mission and progress hopefully into the future. The Jews themselves are the historical proof for the truth that God is the Redeemer of man and the Creator of the world. "Ye are My witnesses, saith the Lord."<sup>33</sup>

On the one hand Maybaum wants his readers to recognize the radical extremity of Auschwitz - "After Auschwitz the human imagination is not what it was before"<sup>34</sup> - but on the other he continues to employ the kind of religious language which glosses over that extremity. To talk of martyrdom and sacrifice in the face of mass graves and gas chambers begs more questions than it answers.

The dehumanized victims were stripped, along with everything else, of the consolation of a purposeful death. Maybaum even goes so far as to say, though he does point out that he only thinks it appropriate to say this in sermons, that in Auschwitz Jews suffered vicarious death for the sins of humankind. The parallel with the crucifixion is quite explicit.<sup>35</sup>

It is not surprising, therefore, that one comes across the same argument in a work of Christian theology - Franklin Littell's transparently titled The Crucifixion of the Jews - where another Jewish scholar, Robert Wolfe, is quoted for his insight into "one profound truth about the redemptive work of the sacrificed Jews":

Had the Nazis not been racist, they would still have been evil - and infinitely more dangerous, for then they would have found their natural fascist allies among all races of men. So in order to bring them low - "Whom God would destroy he first makes mad" - the genocidal but self-defeating madness of racism was an indispensable ingredient of Nazism. The Jews, God's perpetually willing instrument, paid the terrible price, serving as the racist target in order to save mankind from the Nazi scourge; the reward to the remnants, three years later, was the return to Zion.<sup>36</sup>

I find nothing profound or true in this at all. (Nazism was lethal because it was racist - Italian Fascism being less racist was, in fact, less bent on murder. "God's perpetually willing instrument"? But of course the Jews so ruthlessly destroyed can give no answer. Had there been no Holocaust they might have lived to participate in the return to Zion, not as a reward for pain endured but as a shared blessing.)

Maybaum classes the murdered Jews, together with the soldiers who lost their lives in the war to defeat Hitler, as martyrs in the cause of world peace. "The death of the martyrs," he claims, "sanctifies and purifies the new generation which can hope that with the existence of the bomb a third world war is impossible."<sup>37</sup> Twenty years later that seems a foolish kind of hope: the proliferation of nuclear weapons increases the likelihood of their eventual use. The existence of the Bomb, moreover, has done nothing to curb the loss of life in conventional wars elsewhere. The civilian death toll is probably higher than ever, the distinction between combatant and non-combatant having finally broken

down in the bombing raids on densely-populated cities during World War Two. It should perhaps be pointed out that the Jews were casualties of a different war: when Adolf Eichmann diverted trains that were needed on the Eastern front in 1944 in order to transport Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz, he was simply recognizing which war, at least in Nazi ideology, took priority.

If, as Maybaum suggests, a Jew cannot help being chosen - "God chooses"<sup>38</sup> - then a Jew is at the mercy of the divine plan. The traditional belief in election diminishes the impact of the Holocaust by making a virtue out of Jewish endurance. The Suffering Servant is a long-suffering servant. According to Eliezer Berkovits in Faith after the Holocaust (1973), "There is no other witness that God is present in history but the history of the Jewish people." No theodicy is necessary:

The question after the holocaust ought not to be, how could God tolerate so much evil? The proper question is whether, after Auschwitz, the Jewish people may still be witnesses to God's elusive presence in history as we understand the concept.

But to readers of Berkovits's book this is no longer a question as such, for we already know the answer. "At this very moment in history," Berkovits has written earlier, "divine providence has placed into the hands of the Jew, in the form of the state of Israel, the secular city of man - for us to turn it into a City of God on this earth. Quite clearly, we have been called."<sup>39</sup>

### The Return to Zion

Berkovits is not alone in appealing to the State of Israel as some kind of answer to the Holocaust, but he is less tentative than most.<sup>40</sup> Not only does the ingathering of the exiles - itself a Messianic concept applied uncritically to the founding of a political state - proclaim "God's holy presence at the very heart of his inscrutable hiddenness", but Israel's victory in the Six-Day War is seen as a Messianic moment that vindicates the return to Zion as a new beginning. "For the Jew," Berkovits asserts, "this is a renewal of biblical times."<sup>41</sup> In Reeve Robert Brenner's survey of the beliefs held by Jews who had lived

through the ordeal in Europe, however - called simply The Faith and Doubt of Holocaust Survivors (1980) - we are told that the majority of those questioned (all of them survivors living in Israel) felt the State of Israel was not worth the cost of six million lives, and many took the view it would have come about anyway, if a little later. One survivor remarked tersely, "It is forbidden for us to offer human sacrifices."<sup>42</sup>

In The Natural and the Supernatural Jew (1962) Arthur A. Cohen develops the notion of the Exile as an eschatological principle. Not until the world is redeemed will the Exile be ended. In support of this, he points out that Zionism is now triumphant and yet millions of Jews are unwilling either to go to Israel or to become assimilated.<sup>43</sup> For Berkovits, though, the hour of redemption is at hand. "The Torah is not fully applicable outside of the land of Israel," he declares. He is incensed by the suggestion that Judaism has any other home:

In a sense, every generation is the guardian of all generations, seeking and acknowledging only salvation of a kind that would redeem all Jewish history from the curse of a senseless martyrdom. Jews who desire to believe that the return to Zion and Jerusalem is not vital for Judaism have broken the continuity of Jewish history; they have given up Jewish messianism, and thus allowed the awesome drama of redemption to sink to the level of meaningless misery. The prophets, the martyrs, the numberless millions of simple people who perished believing and hoping, were all mistaken; the blood and the tears were all in vain: the Messiah has changed his destination and landed at New Amsterdam.<sup>44</sup>

The fury of this polemic allows Berkovits to deflect attention away from the weakness of his own position, which relies heavily on an uncritical acceptance of election as the abiding determinant of Jewish history. Jewish history is defined as "faith history", in contrast to the history of the gentiles - "power history" - which has brought the world to the edge of annihilation.<sup>45</sup> And because faith history is the ultimate cause to fight for, "To fight for Jewish survival is being in the forefront of man's struggle for human dignity, freedom, and peace." This struggle does not appear to include the rights of Palestinians or, indeed, any realistic assessment of Israel's role in international politics. "Even as a state," Berkovits claims, "Israel lives in faith history." One does not have to be anti-Zionist to question the wisdom of such a claim. "It is a form of Jewish

tragedy," Berkovits laments, "that in order to maintain itself Israel has to use instruments of power history." Any present-day observer of Israeli policies would be hard put to make sense of the boast which immediately follows. "It is its glory," we read, "that it is striving conscientiously and with considerable success to do it by applying the spirit and the methods of faith history."<sup>46</sup>

In the wake of theology of this kind, it seems strange that Saul Bellow, the American Jewish novelist, should find fault with non-Jews for expecting too much of Israel. "The putative friends of Israel," he complains, "are always urging that it set the world a moral example: We have to demand more from this state. Not all states are exposed to this demand."<sup>47</sup> But not all states are saddled with theological significance. The emotional-cum-psychological links between the Holocaust and the State of Israel must of course be recognized, but the cause of Jewish survival is not served by mythologizing the way in which the latter was established. A belief in miracles after Auschwitz must be weighed against the reality of Auschwitz itself. The Red Sea would not part to let the Jews of Europe through. No Esther was on hand to put a stop to Haman's murderous plot.

Few theologians would rush to support the view that God had had a hand in the construction of the death camps, and yet some are only too eager to credit God with the power to alter the course of history since. Eugene Borowitz, for example, in How Can a Jew Speak of Faith Today? (1969), is united with Berkovits in the conviction that the Six-Day War marks a return to biblical times. An American Liberal rabbi, Borowitz has no qualms about adopting a more traditional position when it comes to interpreting such recent historical events. By saving the Jewish people from a second holocaust, God is let off the hook for not preventing the first. "Jews saw him once again as he who remembers his Covenant," we are told.<sup>48</sup> Leaving aside the question of whether or not another holocaust was in fact imminent, what is the sense of this observation? That we should forgive God his sins of omission? That the past

ceases to matter when things go well in the present? The victory of the Israeli armies may well have been a remarkable one, but even if its soldiers found their courage in the desire to avenge the annihilation of the Jews in Europe, are we really entitled to infer from this that God was working through them?

Victory certainly brought with it the assurance that Jews were now in a position to defend themselves, and one should not underestimate the importance of such assurance. Nevertheless, fostering the belief that God was in some way responsible for a military triumph may also help to foster the dangerous illusion that Israel cannot be defeated by its enemies. The need for a political settlement will then lose its urgency. I do not question the sincerity of rabbis like Berkovits and Borowitz, but one surely has to look for other ways of making the divine mystery relevant.

#### The Miracle of Faith

Berkovits does take a different approach in a later work called With God in Hell (1979), subtitled "Judaism in the Ghettos and Deathcamps" and dedicated to the memory of his mother, brother and two sisters who were all killed in 1944. By drawing attention to the religious behaviour of the victims themselves, he is able to provide a more coherent rationale for continuing to uphold the Jewish tradition. The authentic Jew, for Berkovits, is the one who embraces the most rigorous faith, and in the context of the ghettos and camps this essentially means the Hasidic Jew. Just as Fackenheim finds comfort in Maimonides' alleged ruling that any Jew murdered solely for being a Jew is to be considered holy,<sup>49</sup> so Berkovits is reassured by the conviction that those who died as believing Jews qualify for the status of martyrs, even though the possibility of martyrdom in its traditional sense was denied them:

In those long and dark years, when mankind was silently standing by as the most barbarous crime in all human history was wilfully perpetrated by one of the technologically most advanced nations of the world, it was in the ghettos and the concentration camps that the dignity of man was safeguarded,



where the faith of man reached its highest manifestation, commensurate in its greatness to the abysmal depths of the moral bankruptcy of Western civilization.<sup>50</sup>

It might be thought that Berkovits overstates his case. After all, communists and Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, were also able to sustain their faith in the face of extreme adversity; the latter group with an unequivocal claim to martyrdom, since they only had to renounce their beliefs to be set free. And we must remember that many prisoners succumbed to the dehumanizing conditions imposed upon them. They became, in the jargon of the concentration camp, Muselmänner ("Muslims") or, as Primo Levi calls them, "the drowned". It is worth reiterating Levi's account of how this happened:

On their entry into the camp, through basic incapacity, or by misfortune, or through some banal incident, they are overcome before they can adapt themselves; they are beaten by time, they do not begin to learn German, to disentangle the infernal knot of laws and prohibitions until their body is already in decay, and nothing can save them from selections or from death by exhaustion. Their life is short, but their number is endless; they, the Muselmänner, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand.<sup>51</sup>

Emil Fackenheim cites this same passage in To Mend the World. "The Nazi state had no higher aim than to murder souls while bodies were still alive," he comments. "The Muselmann was its most characteristic, most original product."<sup>52</sup>

Nevertheless, Berkovits does bear witness to the widespread religious life of Jews under Nazi rule (when any form of Jewish observance was illegal). Even in the harshest circumstances the continuity of worship was maintained. Rabbis were able to find precedents in the tradition to help them make judgments where lives were at stake. The Kiddush haShem, the sanctification of God's name, was performed whenever Jews held fast to their communal identity. Of the numerous examples Berkovits gives of what he believes is "the authentic Jewish attitude",<sup>53</sup> perhaps none better illustrates both the courage and - from a secular point of view - the hopelessness of uncompromising piety than the

story of Devorah Tuchnuntz-Halberstadt:

Shortly before the war, she had come with her husband and child to visit her parents in Siedlce. Overtaken by events, they went into the ghetto and when that had been "liquidated" they went into hiding. Soon afterwards her time came to give birth, an unforgivable crime in those proud days of German domination. It became impossible for her to remain in her hiding place and endanger the life of others. She left and took refuge in the fields among some trees and bushes. When some gentiles heard her moanings in labor, they assumed from her still quite healthy physical condition that she was one of them, a homeless Christian woman and they took her to the city hospital in Mariansk. Several days after she gave birth, a priest arrived to perform the baptismal ceremony over the child. As he was about to begin his prayers, the mother jumped up and said to him: "Please don't do it. I am a Jewish woman and my child is a Jewish child. Let us be what we are." The priest departed without a word. Soon afterwards police arrived and took away both mother and child to be "liquidated".

Berkovits commends this woman for knowing instinctively the halakhah (rabbinic law) in such a situation. The aim of the authentic Jew, he later argues, was not survival at any cost.<sup>54</sup>

The price of authenticity, then, was almost certain death. Spiritual resistance to the Nazis may have been a way of preserving the divine image, but it could not preserve the religious community itself. "The authentic Jew did not escape into spirituality," Berkovits wants us to understand, "but simply lived the life of the Jew in the circumstances in which he found himself." Lest we object that these circumstances were annihilating, Berkovits qualifies his observation by adding, "Nevertheless, most Jews fully realized that this war was a confrontation unto death between the Jewish people and what it represents in world history and Nazified Germany and its spirit." Nazism was a spiritual movement rather than a political one, we read, dedicated to the cult of the demonic, and therefore Jews were right to oppose it spiritually. (The use of arms as well was precluded by their unavailability rather than by the Jewish tradition of non-violence per se.) The world remained indifferent to the fate of the Jews because Nazism "was only a manifestation of a spiritually bankrupt civilization".<sup>55</sup>

What Berkovits is moving towards is a celebration of the Jewish people as a witness to the truth of the spiritual domain. The material power of great nations is of naught by comparison:

That the Jewish people has withstood all the barbarous attacks upon it, that it has been able to maintain itself in the midst of deadly enemies, bespeaks the presence of another kind of power, invisibly playing its part in the history of men. The survival of the Jew, his capacity for revival after catastrophes such as had eliminated mighty nations and empires, indicate the mysterious intrusion of a spiritual dimension into the history of man.

The Final Solution, on this model, was intrinsically a rebellion against God.

The number of Jews murdered has no significant bearing on the destiny of the Jewish people so long as the people itself survives:

The Nazis were quite correct in believing that if they did not succeed in the elimination of the "Jewish influence" upon world history, they would also fail in their plans for world conquest. No matter what they said in their official propaganda, they sensed the mysterious nature of that influence, the presence of a hiding God in history.<sup>56</sup>

### The Covenant

It would appear that the relationship between God and Israel is unchanged. Berkovits refers to the Akedah, the story of Abraham and Isaac, as the paradigm of faith. You trust even where you do not understand. The authentic Jew is defined by the Covenant - and continues to hear the divine call "in the midst of God's exasperating silences". The Jewish tradition of non-violence, however, has been found wanting, in spite of its moral superiority to the glorification in Western culture of the military hero. The faith of those who died in the Holocaust remains exemplary, but not their dependence on spiritual forms of resistance. "It is ... quite obvious that the Jewish people can no longer continue as before," Berkovits concludes. "The God of history Himself has acknowledged this fundamental truth of the problematics of Jewish existence by guiding the Jews back to the land of their fathers, in His own mysterious way."<sup>57</sup>

Not all Jewish theologians are as confident as Berkovits in their interpretation of God's will, but most would agree that the Covenant is in some sense intact. Irving Greenberg argues that Jews now live in the age of a voluntary covenant. "From a conceptual viewpoint," he asserts, "the divine right to command is forfeit in the Holocaust." But, again, God's presence is discerned in the rebirth of Israel as a nation. "Israel," Greenberg declares, "is the great

statement of life and redemption of the Jewish people - a response to an unprecedented act of destruction - a statement of hope and abiding faith that there is still a future for redeeming the world."<sup>58</sup> Since, however, we have already read that after the Holocaust "holy secularity becomes the preferred religious mode",<sup>59</sup> it is clear that, for Greenberg at least, God's presence is not to be taken too literally.

Greenberg describes the Holocaust as "an orienting event"<sup>60</sup> for both Jews and Christians. The Christian covenant must change too, in recognition that redemption lies ahead, thereby creating the possibility of Jews and Christians working together towards the same end. This kind of pluralism makes sense in the United States, perhaps, but historical relations between the two faiths are unlikely to be so quickly forgotten elsewhere. Greenberg's optimism is also apparent in his willingness to see having children as "the counter-testimony to Auschwitz",<sup>61</sup> as he once referred to it.

### Warning Signs?

Greenberg takes the view that the Holocaust has a lesson in it for the whole of humankind:

The Holocaust was an advance warning of the demonic potential in modern culture. If one could conceive of Hitler coming to power not in 1933 but in 1963, after the invention of nuclear and hydrogen bombs, then the Holocaust would have been truly universal. It is a kind of last warning that if man will perceive and overcome the demonism unleashed in modern culture, the world may survive. Otherwise, the next Holocaust will embrace the whole world.<sup>62</sup>

This is echoed by Eliezer Berkovits in Faith after the Holocaust, where he writes "Auschwitz is like a final warning to the human race."<sup>63</sup> One thinks, too, of Ignaz Maybaum's description of it as mophet or awful portent.<sup>64</sup> Such apocalyptic interpretations are largely unhelpful, though, not least because they imply that the Holocaust has some kind of retrospective meaning. I find it anyway hard to believe that the lessons of history can be so readily assimilated by those who need to learn them most.

According to Eugene Borowitz, "History is the laboratory of Jewish theology." But in contrast to those cited above, he sees no reason to regard the Holocaust as a revelatory event:

It was not the Sinai of our time. It burned us, tortured us, scarred us, and does so yet today. Nonetheless, its obscene brutality did not become our paradigm for future history. I have never been able to cease wondering, in the technical, Biblical sense, that after the Holocaust there was no mass desertion of Judaism. If anything, there arose in the community as a whole a conscious desire to reclaim and reestablish Jewish existence. It was no more than that. Yet, considering what Jewishness had just entailed, that spontaneous, inner reassertion was uncanny. It testified to that which is more than man's wisdom and courage, which yet sustains and carries him through the terrors of personal and social history.<sup>65</sup>

If I might be permitted to wonder, in the more modest, everyday sense, how anyone can use figuratively verbs that describe literal experiences of suffering - burn, torture, etc. - I nevertheless sympathize with Borowitz's desire to contain the theological impact of the Holocaust within a practical faith-centred response. "We are God's hostages in history," he preaches in a sermon, placing a responsibility on Jews to preserve their tradition come what may:

Each time we do a Jewish act, perform a Jewish command, participate in a Jewish endeavor, affirm such Jewish faith as we can muster, we signify that we shall not let God die in history. He may be withdrawn, but we shall remain here to affirm his being; he may be absent, but we shall stand here for his presence; he may be eclipsed, but we shall stiff-neckedly wait here for his emergence. We shall not let him go. For the sake of our fathers, for the sake of our children, for the sake of our martyrs - we shall not let him go.<sup>66</sup>

This view of Jewish tenacity has much in common with the idea of the Suffering Servant already encountered. What distinguishes Borowitz's position is the emphasis on holding fast to God in spite of his apparent withdrawal from the world. There is a note of desperation underlying the ostensibly affirmative response.

As How Can a Jew Speak of Faith Today? progresses, however, the affirmation becomes louder and clearer. "God may try Israel, even turn away from it," we read further on, "but he does not entirely abandon or forget it. Neither individual existence nor social destiny escapes his saving power. In

such a world as ours that is a lot to know."<sup>67</sup> It is indeed a lot to know. It is, in fact, a good deal more than we can possibly know. We live in a world without such guarantees. How do we begin to reconcile God's saving power with the individual lives destroyed so utterly or with the Jewish communities in Eastern Europe obliterated within the space of a few years? It is one thing to resist the temptation to make Auschwitz into a symbol of all that is wrong with Western civilization, but quite another to ignore its message altogether.

### Silence

"Whether or not the Messiah comes doesn't matter," says the protagonist of Elie Wiesel's The Gates of the Forest; "we'll manage without him. It is because it is too late that we are commanded to hope."<sup>68</sup> Perhaps no one has made more significant theological use of Wiesel's paradoxes than his friend André Neher, a French Jewish scholar now living in Israel and the author of The Exile of the Word: From the Silence of the Bible to the Silence of Auschwitz (1970). If God's absence has also been described as God's silence, Neher takes this a stage further and argues that the relationship between God and the world is built on silence. Exploring the theme of silence in the Bible, he interprets the last few verses of Ezekiel 3 to mean that the divine-human encounter must always be uncertain:

God has withdrawn into silence, not in order to avoid man but, on the contrary, in order to encounter him; but it is an encounter of silence with silence. Two beings, one of whom attempted to elude the other in the luminous face-to-face, find one another in the silent reverse of the hidden face. That is the price of an SOS situation of liberty. The dialectical relationship between God and man is no longer positive, convex, proceeding from above; it is concave, arising from below.<sup>69</sup>

The question Neher seeks to address is whether this silence can still be regarded as meaningful in the wake of the silence represented by Auschwitz. It is Elie Wiesel, in Neher's view, who has given voice to the latter. "Ploughed, sown, and reaped within the Kingdom of Silence," we read, "the work of Elie Wiesel is permeated with silence as a fruit is imbued with the soil which nurtured

it." Wiesel's memoir of Auschwitz and Buchenwald, Night, is described as the Akedah in reverse. (Unable to prevent his father's death in the camp at Buchenwald, Wiesel was left with the feeling that he had somehow been responsible for it, as if he, Isaac, had been made to sacrifice his father Abraham.) According to Neher, "It is an exorcism of the Bible through the challenge of the real."<sup>70</sup> Or as Wiesel himself puts it in The Gates of the Forest, "He who is not among the victims is with the executioners. This was the meaning of the holocaust: it implicated not only Abraham or his son, but their God as well."<sup>71</sup>

Not that Neher wishes to jettison the Bible altogether, but rather to show how it must be read anew. He cites passages which reveal the hope that arises out of complete abandonment, hope against all hope, and relates such hope to Wiesel's distinction between it and salvation. No Messiah comes, yet everything is possible. We shall manage without him. "Judaism is aware, first of all," Neher contends, "that the messianic event is not crucial: it is not the event par excellence." He invokes the teaching of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai:

If you are planting an olive tree and you are told of the coming of the Messiah ... first finish planting your olive tree and only then go and greet the Messiah.<sup>72</sup>

Neher moved to Jerusalem in 1967 in order, perhaps, to plant his own olive tree. At any rate, the State of Israel has replaced the Messiah in his thinking as the cornerstone of a revitalized faith. He subscribes, like Ignaz Maybaum, to what might be called the phoenix model of history - attributed here to the Maharal of Prague:

In the sixteenth century, the Maharal of Prague showed how history copies nature: there is no construction without ruin, no rise without a fall, no development toward a higher condition without a previous erosion within. The First Temple had to fall so that a Second Temple, more glorious, could arise from its ruins; and the Second Temple had to fall to make way for the still greater glory of the Third.

The martyr's victory over death is signalled by the triumph to come. "The gathering around the Wall in Jerusalem and the resurgence of the State of Israel

can, in this dialectical sense," Neher concludes, "be seen as the fruits of the Night of Auschwitz."<sup>73</sup>

A dialectic of failure and hope is the inspiration for a mystical vision of the universe as the sum of all possibilities. "The universe is the infinite field of the possible," we read, "a forge in which any kind of spark may rise up at any moment, in which any industry may produce some kind of atomic sword, but in which, on the other hand, some exercise of will may turn that sword into a ploughshare."<sup>74</sup> It is going to take more than an exercise of will, I fear, to fulfil Isaiah's prophecy. Nevertheless, Neher's vision - which is more that of a poet than a conventional scholar - highlights the need to move beyond the traditional boundaries of discourse in order to find an appropriate form of response.

### The Tremendum

Another singular interpretation of the Holocaust is to be found in Arthur Cohen's The Tremendum (1981). A novelist as well as theologian, Cohen's first major contribution to Jewish theology, The Natural and the Supernatural Jew (1962), made almost no mention of the Holocaust, except for a brief reference to "the immolation of European Jewry".<sup>75</sup> In The Tremendum, however, he is concerned exclusively with that event, calling it the tremendum (literally, "immensity") after Rudolf Otto's phrase, mysterium tremendum, which was used to signify - according to Cohen - "the terror-mystery of God". Its application here is to something entirely human but just as terrifying:

I call the death camps the tremendum, for it is the monument of a meaningless inversion of life to an orgiastic celebration of death, to a psychosexual and pathological degeneracy unparalleled and unfathomable to any person bounded to life.<sup>76</sup>

This passage sets the tone for much of what is to follow. Cohen believes that Jews were singled out for their very attachment to life. "The Jew may well be the ideal victim," he claims, "because his mere persistence, his sheer



endurance, his refusal to die throughout four millennia until the tremendum, was a celebration of the tenacity of life." What Cohen seems concerned to provide is a metaphysical framework for the uniqueness of the Holocaust and then a new theodicy that takes this into account. "The death camps are unthinkable, but not unfelt," he begins. "It is simply not adequate to feel this enormous event," he asserts soon after. "One must live with it." And living with it means making the effort to understand it. The old language of theodicy seems "weary and insignificant" and rational analysis inappropriate. Rejecting the use of the word "Auschwitz" to symbolize the tremendum, on the grounds that it was only one of many sites of death, Cohen is moved to comment that the argument over whether or not the Jews are a chosen people has been settled once and for all by the death camps: "They are chosen, unmistakably, extremely, utterly."<sup>77</sup>

Buber's notion of "the eclipse of God" gets short shrift. Likewise "the death of God". Cohen is after a conceptual language that preserves the reality of God at the same time as it discloses a fundamental rift in human history. He challenges Buber's remark that there is no caesura in the history of the Jews (meaning that the Messiah comes at the end of time, not before) by arguing that from the perspective of negation - as opposed to redemption - there has been more than one. "For the Holy there may be no caesura," Cohen writes, "but for the unholy its name is caesura." In a passage notable for its lucidity, he summarizes the Jewish experience of this:

The Jews, for reasons no longer curious, have looked into the abyss several times in their long history. Tradition accounts the destruction of the temple and the obliteration of the Jewish settlement in Palestine as one abyss. There was a caesura. The abyss opened and the Jews closed the abyss by affirming their guilt, denying the abyss, and taking upon themselves responsibility for the demonic. Not "beyond reason", but "within providence" became the satisfactory explanation. The expulsion of the Jews from Spain is accounted another. There was a caesura. The abyss opened and the Jews closed the abyss once again not only by reaffirming their guilt, but more by transforming the event into an end-time of ordinary history and the beginning-time of mystic gnosis in which a new heaven was limned and the unseen order became transparent to mystical understanding. The death camps of the modern world is a third. There was another caesura of the demonic. This time the abyss opened and one-third of the Jewish people fell in.<sup>78</sup>

Of course, it doesn't end there. "It begins with the Jews," Cohen argues, "and it may end with the habitable world." This is a gloomy prognosis, to be sure, but one in keeping with the facts. And if the Holocaust represents a caesura for Jews, it has barely been acknowledged by the majority of non-Jews, who are content, it would seem, to regard it as another example of the kind of brutality that characterizes every war. Even so, Cohen creates an artificial barrier by claiming that the Holocaust has a unique significance for Jews today, that they re-live the event in the same way as, on the authority of the Passover Haggadah, they relive the earlier decisive moments of their history: Egypt and Sinai. In referring to the "real presence of all Israel in the death camps",<sup>79</sup> he glosses over the distinction between those who were there and those who identify with them now.

According to Cohen, "Theology is the discipline that enables an unrelaxed time to compress its questions within the historical maelstrom." The danger is that you will compress your questions too far or be too confident of finding solutions. Cohen is cautious but suffers from no false modesty. He defines the theologian as a hero struggling to articulate the mystery of God:

Historical catastrophe ends certain intellectual options as surely and powerfully as it ends lives. The inadequacy of theology - the fact that its object can be formulated but never grasped, that its language approaches its object but can never exhaust it, that beyond every formulation of theological language the mystery of the living God remains - is warrant, however, for the theological heroism, that the theologian is given what he breaks himself to understand and what he comes to understand is only the shadow of the substance.<sup>80</sup>

Cohen's own heroic endeavour in the final chapter of The Tremendum is to undertake not only "a redefinition of the reality of God and his relations to the world and man", but also "a reinvestment of the passive receptiveness of the world and the active freedom of man with significant meaning". His argument is not always easy to follow. He criticizes the varieties of neo-Orthodoxy (including his own earlier work) for situating the tremendum

"as the dialectic counter of an absent or hidden God", and lists the prerequisites for a new constructive theology:

Any constructive theology after the tremendum must be marked by the following characteristics: first, the God who is affirmed must abide in a universe whose human history is scarred by genuine evil without making the evil empty or illusory nor disallowing the real presence of God before, even if not within, history; second, the relation of God to creation and its creatures, including, as both now include, demonic structure and unredeemable events, must be seen, nonetheless, as meaningful and valuable despite the fact that the justification that God's presence renders to the worthwhileness of life and struggle is now intensified and anguished by the contrast and opposition that evil supplies; third, the reality of God in his selfhood and person can no longer be isolated, other than as a strategy of clarification, from God's real involvement with the life of creation.<sup>81</sup>

The agenda has been set. All that remains is to make sense of it.

Cohen constructs a bridge over the abyss - with the help of the Kabbalah and the theological ideas of Schelling and Rosenzweig. We are presented with a "revisionist theism" which starts from a seemingly traditional view of creation:

As God's being is full and plenteous, creation is an overflowing - the cosmogonic reading. As God's nature is abundant, what is plenitude for God is seen by his creatures as love - a religio-ethical reading. As the whole of divine nature is enlarged by the presence of nonbeing, by the depths of the divine made manifest, so creation is necessity within God and free act to man.

I am not sure why the whole of divine nature is enlarged by the presence of nonbeing, nor is it clear what Cohen means by this latter term. "It is freedom ... and the linguistic imagination that marks the attraction of nonbeing for the rationality of man," we read. Is nonbeing, then, what used to be called "evil"? "Man is a creature whose freedom tempts his reason," Cohen is inspired to point out;<sup>82</sup> but as aphorisms go it is less than illuminating.

A dialectic of freedom and reason would appear to be the upshot of being created in the image of God. "The bridge that I have ... cast over the abyss," Cohen affirms, "is one that sinks its pylons into the deep soil of human freedom and rationality, recognizing no less candidly now than before that freedom without the containment of reason returns to caprice and reason without the imagination of freedom is supineness and passivity." We are God's speech, the syntax of his dipolar nature:

The word of God is God's flesh.... Human grammar is divine, but divine speech is human.<sup>83</sup>

How does what Cohen is saying differ from earlier theodicies? "The most penetrating of post-tremendum assaults upon God," he acknowledges, "has been the attack on divine silence." But he counters this with the assertion that what we take to be God's communication is always our interpretation of it. God, in fact, is none other than "the mystery of our futurity", and that means, apparently, we alone are responsible for what happens here and now. Cohen elaborates:

If we can begin to see God less as the interferer whose insertion is welcome (when it accords with our needs) and more as the immensity whose reality is our prefiguration, whose speech and silence are metaphors for our language and distortion, whose plenitude and unfolding are the hope of our futurity, we shall have won a sense of God whom we may love and honor, but whom we no longer fear and from whom we no longer demand.<sup>84</sup>

Divine life is decried as a filament within the historical, so that we have an obligation to keep it alight. God has clearly risked everything in the creation. "There is, in the dialectic of man and God and history," according to Cohen, "the indispensable recognition that man can obscure, eclipse, burn out the divine filament, grounding its natural movement of transcendence by a sufficient and oppository chthonic subscension. It is this which is meant by the abyss of the historical, the demonic, the tremendum." Eschatological considerations are not to be ruled out, however. The Jewish people is an eternal people. Yet Rosenzweig was wrong, Cohen believes, to centre his faith on the end-time. Cohen's own solution is to draw a distinction between salvation and redemption, the latter defined as a Jewish phenomenon. Salvation is for individuals; redemption for a community. It is the people which is eternal, holy:

Adam is the stem of the race, but Israel is the stem of mankind.<sup>85</sup>

From this it follows that to be a Jew is to cherish the idea of the holy. The Jews are the manifestation of God's reality. The tremendum is attributable to human destructiveness (which Cohen calls the demonic, but "demonic" smacks of the supernatural to me). And God is justified because the people lives. Even

the Jewish State, of which Cohen is by no means an uncritical supporter, bears witness to the divine nature of Jewish ontology:

The being of the Jewish people is always behind the becoming of the nations, its reformulation as State coming at a moment when the states of the nations are weary and declining, but this is the way of Being - imponderable slowness, because its renewals and conservations are outside life and death, but always changes rung on eternal scales.<sup>86</sup>

Cohen writes as if nationalism were a thing of the past, when all the signs are to the contrary. Moreover, the State of Israel is not the only state to be established in the past forty years.

All will be explained in the end. The meaning of God's "self-narration" will become apparent when it is over and done with "or else completed in the last minute of redemption".<sup>87</sup> Is this dichotomy to suggest that human freedom may yet destroy the redemptive process? It is a puzzling conclusion to a puzzling book. Cohen's assortment of metaphors - tremendum, caesura, abyss, volcano - fail to elucidate the overwhelming fact of mass murder; if anything, they allow him to neglect the historical detail altogether. Faith is preserved at the expense of clarity. In attempting to replace the hidden God with a more intimate but less powerful divinity, Cohen seems unable to find a corresponding language to express this change. God remains as hidden as ever in the thicket of Cohen's prose.

### Theodicy Revisited

A more accessible "revisionist theism" is to be found in an article by Hans Jonas called "The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice", published in January 1987. Jonas champions the ideas of a suffering God and a becoming God, ideas more readily associated, perhaps, with contemporary Christian theology. A God who cares but cannot intervene is no longer an omnipotent God, but does at least escape the net of the problem of evil. "Only a completely unintelligible God," Jonas argues, "can be said to be absolutely good and absolutely powerful, yet tolerate the world as it is." The silence of God at Auschwitz

is explained through a particular understanding of the meaning of history:

For reasons decisively prompted by contemporary experience, I entertain the idea of a God who for a time - the time of the ongoing world process - has divested himself of any power to interfere with the physical course of things; and who responds to the impact on his being by worldly events, not "with a mighty hand and outstretched arm", as we Jews on every Passover recite in remembering the exodus from Egypt, but with the mutely insistent appeal of his unfulfilled goal.<sup>88</sup>

If one objects that such a God is no closer than the Deus absconditus, already dismissed by Jonas, to the God of Jewish tradition, then Jonas recognizes this but at the same time, like Fackenheim and Cohen, looks to the Kabbalah for his authority. There is more than one Jewish tradition. The nub of Jonas's argument is that we can expect no help from God. God has brought the world into being: it is now up to us to make something of it. Is God exonerated from responsibility, though, for becoming helpless? The fault lies in creation as much as in the failure of human beings to heed God's appeal.

Dan Cohn-Sherbok has sought to avoid this impasse by calling for a return to traditional Jewish eschatology, according to which Jews will be compensated for their earthly travail in the hereafter.<sup>89</sup> Eliezer Berkovits takes a similar line. "There must be a dimension beyond history in which all suffering finds its redemption through God," he argues. "This is essential to the faith of a Jew."<sup>90</sup> I find myself at a loss to conceive what it would mean to compensate the victims of Auschwitz for their suffering. When asked to comment on the possibility of redemption in the world to come, one camp survivor responded as follows:

Most people simply do not believe in Heaven and Hell any more - if they ever did. Surely except for the extremely religious no Jew I ever met during the war believed in it or that there is any kind of life after death even if we were all rather vague about it.... Jews live in this world. And the next world, if there is any, will take care of itself. Besides, nothing, no possible reward however great which we may be entitled to and which we may receive in a world-to-come can ever compensate for the suffering which we endured in this world. Ten more wives and a hundred more children will never replace the one beloved wife and the two precious children I lost to the Nazis.<sup>91</sup>

## Notes

- (1) "The State of Jewish Belief", Commentary 42 (August 1966), pp.71-160. The contributors included Eliezer Berkovits, Eugene Borowitz, Emil Fackenheim, and Richard Rubenstein - all of whom are considered below.
- (2) Ibid., p.134 (Richard Rubenstein).
- (3) Richard L. Rubenstein, The Cunning of History: Mass Death and the American Future (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).
- (4) Richard L. Rubenstein, After Auschwitz (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), pp.154, 131, 152.
- (5) Ibid., p.222.
- (6) "Jewish Values in the Post-Holocaust Future", Judaism 16 (Summer 1967), pp.266-299.
- (7) Ibid., pp.267-268.
- (8) Ibid., p.272.
- (9) Emil L. Fackenheim, Quest for Past and Future (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), p.20.
- (10) Emil L. Fackenheim, The Jewish Return into History (New York: Schocken, 1978), p.45.
- (11) Emil L. Fackenheim, God's Presence in History (New York: New York University Press, 1970), pp.81-82.
- (12) Ibid., p.83.
- (13) In a review essay on Fackenheim's book, a religious Jew, Michael Wyschogrod, also finds this argument unconvincing:  
"I do not think that a voice can be extracted from the Holocaust which will speak to believer and non-believer alike. I do not think that the question of faith can be circumvented by means of Auschwitz. Finally, I do not think that Judaism can be given a new hold on life by means of Auschwitz. For me, the Holocaust was a totally destructive event which makes my remaining a Jew infinitely more difficult than it has ever been." ("Faith and the Holocaust", Judaism 20 (Summer 1971), p.288.)
- (14) Fackenheim, God's Presence, pp.8-11. In a footnote, Fackenheim quotes from the Passover Haggadah - "It was not one only who rose against us to annihilate us, but in every generation there are those who rise against us to annihilate us. But the Holy One, blessed be He, saves us from their hand" - and comments: "It is only a small exaggeration for me to say that whether, and if so how, the contemporary religious Jew can still include this sentence in the Passover Seder liturgy is the paramount question behind my entire investigation in this book." (p.32)
- (15) Ibid., p.95.
- (16) See Emil L. Fackenheim, "The Holocaust and the State of Israel: Their Relation", in Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era? ed. Eva Fleischner (New York: Ktav, 1977), p.212.

- (17) Fackenheim, Jewish Return, p.54.
- (18) *Ibid.*, pp.262-264.
- (19) Elie Wiesel, The Gates of the Forest, trans. Frances Frenaye (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966), p.194. For my own reservations about the merit of Wiesel's fiction, see Chapter 1, pp.38-40.
- (20) Fackenheim, Jewish Return, p.269.
- (21) "Jewish Values in the Post-Holocaust Future", p.299. This response has also been expressed in fiction by Zvi Kolitz. See "Yossel Rakover's Appeal to God", in Out of the Whirlwind, ed. Albert H. Friedlander (New York: Schocken, 1976), pp.390-399.
- (22) Emil L. Fackenheim, To Mend the World: Foundations of Future Jewish Thought (New York: Schocken, 1982), p.249.
- (23) *Ibid.*, p.304.
- (24) *Ibid.*, p.330.
- (25) Dow Marmur, Beyond Survival: Reflections on the Future of Judaism (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1982), pp.29, 7.
- (26) "Jewish Values in the Post-Holocaust Future", p.280.
- (27) Marmur, Beyond Survival, pp.70, 84.
- (28) Eugene Heimler explains how he has been able to use his concentration camp experience in Chapter 7 of Mental Illness and Social Work (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), pp.107-129.
- (29) Ignaz Maybaum, The Face of God after Auschwitz (Amsterdam: Polak & Van Gennep, 1965), pp.221, 178.
- (30) "With Auschwitz as indictment against the Middle Ages," Maybaum writes, "the medieval chapter of Europe is closed, and the democratic age is established." (*Ibid.*, p.193.)
- (31) *Ibid.*, p.251.
- (32) For an account of the diversity of the Jewish community, see Celia S. Heller, On the Edge of Destruction: Jews of Poland Between the Two World Wars (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).
- (33) Maybaum, Face of God, p.181.
- (34) *Ibid.*, p.38.
- (35) "The Gologotha of modern mankind is Auschwitz." (*Ibid.*, p.36.)
- (36) Franklin H. Littell, The Crucifixion of the Jews (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), pp.114-115. The quotation is from Wolfe's personal correspondence with Littell.
- (37) Maybaum, Face of God, p.255.
- (38) *Ibid.*, p.26.



- (39) Eliezer Berkovits, Faith after the Holocaust (New York: Ktav, 1973), pp.114, 131, 66.
- (40) Rabbi Abraham Heschel springs to mind as someone with an equally confident outlook. In Israel: An Echo of Eternity he writes that the State of Israel is "God's answer to Auschwitz". (Cited by Kenneth Cragg in This Year in Jerusalem (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1982), p.130.)
- (41) Berkovits, Faith after the Holocaust, pp.134, 154.
- (42) Reeve Robert Brenner, The Faith and Doubt of Holocaust Survivors (New York: The Free Press, 1980), pp.244-245.
- (43) Arthur A. Cohen, The Natural and the Supernatural Jew (London: Vallentine, Mitchell & Co., 1967), pp.291-292.
- (44) Berkovits, Faith after the Holocaust, pp.150, 152.
- (45) Ibid., p.112 (also p.141).
- (46) Ibid., pp.164-165. (For his lack of sympathy with Palestinian refugees, see p.162.)
- (47) Saul Bellow, To Jerusalem and Back (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p.127.
- (48) Eugene Borowitz, How Can a Jew Speak of Faith Today? (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), p.55.
- (49) Fackenheim, To Mend the World, p.309.
- (50) Eliezer Berkovits, With God in Hell (New York: Sanhedrin Press, 1979), p.25. Another work that covers much the same ground has recently come to my attention: Irving J. Rosenbaum's The Holocaust and Halakhah (New York: Ktav, 1976).
- (51) Primo Levi, If This is a Man/The Truce, trans. Stuart Woolf (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p.96.
- (52) Fackenheim, To Mend the World, p.100.
- (53) Berkovits, With God in Hell, p.51. For more about the relevance of Kiddush haShem to the Holocaust, see Pesach Schindler, "The Holocaust and Kiddush Hashem in Hassidic Thought", Tradition 13/14 (Spring-Summer 1973), pp.88-104.
- (54) Berkovits, With God in Hell, pp.46-47, 52.
- (55) Ibid., pp.79, 82.
- (56) Ibid., p.83.
- (57) Ibid., pp.122-125, 154.
- (58) Irving Greenberg, "Religious Values after the Holocaust: A Jewish View", in Jews and Christians after the Holocaust, ed. Abraham J. Peck (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), p.83. Elie Wiesel, though not strictly

a theologian, has suggested that the Covenant was indeed broken by God during the Holocaust. See "Jewish Values in the Post-Holocaust Future", p.281.

- (59) Greenberg, "Religious Values", p.77.
- (60) Ibid., p.86.
- (61) Irving Greenberg, "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire", in Auschwitz, ed. Fleischner, p.41.
- (62) Ibid., p.37.
- (63) Berkovits, Faith after the Holocaust, p.36.
- (64) Maybaum, Face of God, p.200.
- (65) Borowitz, How Can a Jew?, pp.25, 52-53.
- (66) Ibid., p.34.
- (67) Ibid., p.57.
- (68) Wiesel, Gates of the Forest, p.225.
- (69) André Neher, The Exile of the Word, trans. David Maisel (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981), p.167.
- (70) Ibid., pp.210, 216.
- (71) Wiesel, Gates of the Forest, p.166.
- (72) Neher, Exile of the Word, pp.232-233.
- (73) Ibid., p.234.
- (74) Ibid., p.238.
- (75) Cohen, Natural and Supernatural Jew, p.312.
- (76) Arthur A. Cohen, The Tremendum (New York: Crossroad, 1981), pp.17, 19.
- (77) Ibid., pp.19, 1, 3-4, 8, 11.
- (78) Ibid., pp.20-21.
- (79) Ibid., pp.22-23.
- (80) Ibid., pp.24, 61.
- (81) Ibid., pp.84, 86.
- (82) Ibid., pp.90, 92.
- (83) Ibid., p.94.
- (84) Ibid., pp.96-97.
- (85) Ibid., pp.98, 101, 107.

- (86) Ibid., p.109.
- (87) Ibid., p.110.
- (88) Hans Jonas, "The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice", Journal of Religion 67 (January 1987), pp.9-11.
- (89) Dan Cohn-Sherbok, "Jewish Theology and the Holocaust", Theology 86 (March 1983), p.89.
- (90) Berkovits, Faith after the Holocaust, p.136.
- (91) Brenner, Faith and Doubt, p.207.

## CHAPTER 5

### CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES (I): SUFFERING

They crowd my memory with their faceless presences, and if I could enclose all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of a thought is to be seen.

Primo Levi, If This Is a Man

To live is to suffer. But not all suffering is perdition. What Auschwitz demands of the theologian is an honest recognition of the difference between suffering that can be healed, that is in itself part of being human, and suffering that simply lays waste. To recognize the difference is to dispense with former notions of suffering as a mark of God's justice or due penance for sin. Simone Weil was perhaps the first theologian to make clear the nature of suffering at its most extreme, suffering that attacks the very core of a person's identity; she gave it the name of "malheur", translated into English as "affliction".<sup>1</sup> Affliction, as Weil describes it in her essay on "The Love of God and Affliction", involves social alienation and psychological distress as well as physical pain.

Although Simone Weil died in 1943 - before, that is, Hitler's war against the Jews had run its course - her analysis of affliction highlights the need for theological reflection in the face of atrocity. God's love is called into question by the extent of human vulnerability. Affliction rather than suffering as such, according to Weil, is life's great enigma:

It is not surprising that the innocent are killed, tortured, driven from their country, made destitute or reduced to slavery, imprisoned in camps or cells, since there are criminals to perform such actions. It is not surprising either that disease is the cause of long sufferings, which paralyse life and

make it into an image of death, since nature is at the mercy of the blind play of mechanical necessities. But it is surprising that God should have given affliction the power to seize the very souls of the innocent and to take possession of them as their sovereign lord. At the very best, he who is branded by affliction will only keep half his soul.<sup>2</sup>

Pain which is physical, once over is forgotten. Those who have suffered affliction continue to suffer long after the event itself. Only God, Weil argues, can set them free from the past. "And even the grace of God," she adds, "cannot cure irremediably wounded nature here below. The glorified body of Christ bore the marks of the nails and spear." God is bound by the blind necessity he has willed into being. But why has he willed it into being? On the one hand Weil considers it to be part of his Providence, and yet on the other believes it to be the root of affliction. Affliction robs human beings of their sense of worth precisely because there is no reason for it:

Affliction is anonymous before all things, it deprives its victims of their personality and makes them into things. It is indifferent; and it is the coldness of this indifference - a metallic coldness - which freezes all those it touches right to the depths of their souls. They will never find warmth again. They will never believe any more that they are anyone.<sup>3</sup>

We are urged to think of affliction as a distance: God created beings capable of love from all possible distances but not, it appears, from the greatest possible distance, "the infinite distance". God alone is capable of this, which is revealed in the crucifixion ("this supreme tearing apart, this agony beyond all others, this marvel of love"). The afflicted are at the foot of the cross, "almost at the greatest possible distance from God".<sup>4</sup> It is unclear why God's suffering should be considered greater than theirs. As Ulrich Simon says of Auschwitz, "Here the cross is elongated in time, by days, weeks, months."<sup>5</sup>

It is important for Weil that Christ was afflicted. She distinguishes him from martyrs who go willingly to their deaths. Martyrdom is a privileged form of suffering. And Christ - even if divine? - must be seen to have shared the desolation of those who suffer without purpose:

Those who are persecuted for their faith and are aware of the fact are not afflicted, although they have to suffer. They only fall into a state of affliction if suffering or fear fills the soul to the point of making it

forget the cause of the persecution. The martyrs who entered the arena, singing as they went to face the wild beasts, were not afflicted. Christ was afflicted. He did not die like a martyr. He died like a common criminal, confused with thieves, only a little more ridiculous. For affliction is ridiculous.<sup>6</sup>

But affliction does seem to have a purpose after all, in spite of being ridiculous:

God can never be perfectly present to us here below on account of our flesh. But he can be almost perfectly absent from us in extreme affliction. This is the only possibility of perfection for us on earth. That is why the Cross is our only hope.

What hope, though, does the cross represent without its implicit assurance of resurrection? Weil leaves aside questions of eschatology. What matters to her is the present moment, the opportunity for loving God at a distance. Christ was exemplary in his affliction:

The unity of God, wherein all plurality disappears, and the abandonment, wherein Christ believes he is left while never ceasing to love his Father perfectly, these are two forms expressing the divine virtue of the same Love, the Love which is God himself.

This amplifies Weil's poetic vision of the universe as the locus of God's pain, the tearing apart of Father and Son which "echoes perpetually across the universe in the midst of the silence, like two notes, separate yet melting into one, like pure and heart-rending harmony". According to Weil, "Those who persevere in love hear this note from the lowest depths into which affliction has thrust them. From that moment they can no longer have any doubt."<sup>7</sup>

As a consequence of original sin we are not free to move towards God; neither are we free to move away from him. We are free only to choose in which direction we turn our gaze. Sin is merely turning our gaze in the wrong direction. From the perspective of eternity, necessity is really obedience. By obeying the laws of nature, matter is seen to be doing God's will:

Matter is entirely passive, and in consequence entirely obedient to God's will. It is a perfect model for us. There cannot be any being other than God and that which obeys God.

Are we, then, to become entirely passive? Or is obedience to God something different for human beings? After all, it is the man who turns away from God

who, according to Weil, "gives himself up to the law of gravity". By God's grace we are able to transcend the blind mechanism that governs matter - "to walk on the water without violating any of the laws of nature".<sup>8</sup>

In defining evil as necessity and necessity as obedience, Weil is able to remove evil from the picture altogether. The world is transformed at one stroke into a paradise:

The sea is not less beautiful in our eyes because we know that sometimes ships are wrecked. On the contrary this adds to its beauty. If it altered the movement of its waves to spare a boat, it would be a creature gifted with discernment and choice and not this fluid, perfectly obedient to every external press. It is this perfect obedience which constitutes the sea's beauty.

Should we be left in any doubt about the implications of this, Weil adds: "All the horrors which come about in this world are like the folds imposed on the waves by gravity. That is why they contain an element of beauty."<sup>9</sup> And at the end of "Additional Pages on the Love of God and Affliction", Weil loses sight altogether of what affliction means because she is so attached to the idea of beauty. "To pay no attention to the world's beauty," she writes, "is, perhaps, so great a crime of ingratitude that it deserves the punishment of affliction. To be sure, it does not always get it; but then the alternative punishment is a mediocre life, and in what way is a mediocre life preferable to affliction?"<sup>10</sup>

What has happened to the recognition that affliction obliterates souls? By a sleight-of-hand Weil is able to champion affliction as the ultimate proof of God's love. To return to her original essay, this reversal is achieved in three further stages. First, we can never escape from obedience to God. "The only choice given to men, as intelligent and free creatures," Weil argues, "is to desire obedience or not to desire it." Second - and this stage is developed more fully - by desiring obedience we open ourselves to the experience of grace. Contemplation of the natural world and its moral of obedience is the key to salvation. "For us, this obedience of things in relation to God," we are told, "is what the transparency of a window pane is in relation to light. As soon as

we feel this obedience with our whole being, we see God."<sup>11</sup>

To be saved we must first become apprentices, learning "to feel in all things, first and almost solely, the obedience of the universe to God". Weil uses the analogy of someone learning to read. When someone knows how to read, what matters is the meaning of a sentence, not its physical appearance:

Whoever has finished his apprenticeship recognizes things and events, everywhere and always, as vibrations of the same divine and infinitely sweet word. This does not mean that he will not suffer. Pain is the colour of certain events. When a man who can and a man who cannot read look at a sentence written in red ink, they both see the same red colour, but this colour is not so important for the one as for the other.

If the analogy works it does so only because Weil applies it to suffering rather than to affliction. She appears to digress. Joy and suffering are presented as complementary aspects of the human lot. "Through joy, the beauty of the world penetrates our soul," Weil asserts. "Through suffering it penetrates our body." She cuts her own digression short, however:

Affliction is something quite distinct from a method of God's teaching.<sup>12</sup>

Would that Weil had ended her essay there. Instead she offers, as the final stage of her argument, an account of God's triumph over human autonomy. We are at his mercy. He seeks to possess us with his love. We may refuse to receive him but are damned, eventually, if we do. Even if we consent he goes away again, having planted a seed in us that will cause pain as it grows. The sexual imagery is quite explicit - "We have only not to regret the consent we gave him, the nuptial yes" - but offers little assurance of God's constancy. Moreover, if the soul, once fully grown, returns to God and discards its human image, one wonders what the point of being human in the first place is. For Weil, the point is clearly to negate oneself:

A day comes when the soul belongs to God, when it not only consents to love but when truly and effectively it loves. Then in its turn it must cross the universe to go to God. The soul does not love like a creature with created love. The love within it is divine, uncreated; for it is the love of God for God which is passing through it. God alone is capable of loving God. We can only consent to give up our own feelings so as to allow free passage in our soul for this love. That is the meaning of denying oneself. We are created for this consent, and for this alone.<sup>13</sup>



This is all very well, but one must recall that affliction consumes the divine seed within us. Or does it? The soul finds its way back to God, we now learn, through the very thing which seemed most inimical to it. "When the seed of divine love placed in us has grown and become a tree, how can we, we who bear it," Weil asks, "take it back to its origin?" The answer lies in "the most beautiful of all trees", as yet unnamed but unambiguous. "Something still a little more frightful than a gibbet," Weil calls it. Our consent means becoming a human sacrifice. Affliction, it turns out, is "a marvel of divine technique".<sup>14</sup> It pierces the soul, no longer to destroy it but to save it, to rescue it from its mortal prison. Affliction is the soul's vehicle across the infinite distance to God.

As in the crucifixion, the experience of powerlessness is central to affliction. The person who suffers it is like a butterfly on the end of a pin. "But through all the horror he can continue to want to love," Weil states emphatically:

There is nothing impossible in that, no obstacle, one might almost say no difficulty. For the greatest suffering, so long as it does not cause fainting, does not touch the part of the soul which consents to a right direction.

This seems patently absurd, a caricature of affliction (which, remember, is not martyrdom). What does it mean to want to love? How is that distinguished from loving itself? We do not have privileged access to the souls of survivors. All we can do is grant some measure of authority to what they have suffered. The confidence which Weil expresses here is seldom apparent in their testimony. "It is only necessary to know that love is a direction and not a state of the soul," Weil claims,<sup>15</sup> as if she were addressing an audience of the afflicted themselves and this knowledge could lessen their anguish.

Weil's conclusion is so remote from her initial insight into the radical difference between suffering and affliction, it is difficult to believe it is written by the same woman. If she retains any sense of that difference now, it is solely to impress on us the ecstasy of affliction:

He whose soul remains ever turned in the direction of God while the nail pierces it, finds himself nailed on to the very centre of the universe. It is the true centre, it is not in the middle, it is beyond space and time, it is God. In a dimension which does not belong to space, which is not time, which is indeed quite a different dimension, this nail has pierced a hole through all creation, through the thickness of the screen which separates the soul from God.<sup>16</sup>

Weil never once suggests that the soul can return to God by any other means. Only the afflicted, it would seem, have the chance of salvation, unless death marks the passage of souls not blessed with affliction.

In "Additional Pages on the Love of God and Affliction", after briefly explaining why we all deserve affliction for sins of omission, Weil reiterates her belief that it is anyway something to be welcomed, though only if one is a disciple of Christ. This has a fairly broad definition. "Any man, whatever his beliefs may be," she claims, "has his part in the Cross of Christ if he loves truth to the point of facing affliction rather than escape into the depths of falsehood." Nonetheless, many are doomed to perish in ignorance:

Often one could weep tears of blood to think how many unfortunates are crushed by affliction without knowing how to make use of it. But, coolly considered, this is not a more pitiful waste than the squandering of the world's beauty.<sup>17</sup>

Coolly considered indeed. What began as an exercise in compassion is now tinged with contempt. Simone Weil bore witness to the intensity of her convictions in the manner of her own death. "They alone will see God who prefer to recognize the truth and die," she wrote, "instead of living a long and happy existence in a state of illusion."<sup>18</sup> What she could not finally accept was that few have the courage or the strength to renounce everything for the sake of an idea. The afflicted suffer the way they do precisely because they have no such certainty to sustain them. Their suffering is bewildering; it cannot possibly make sense. It would be utterly wrong to blame them for this. Either one believes that God is in control or one doesn't. It is not a question of being able to recognize the truth. The truth, unfortunately, is irrelevant. In the face of affliction it is better to be silent than claim a spurious authority to explain it.

## Powerlessness

Simone Weil has given us a remarkably lucid definition of affliction, in spite of her own use of it. But there has been little in the way of response from later theologians. An exception is Dorothee Soelle, who makes Weil's insight the starting-point for her own work on Suffering (1973). The men, it would seem, have more serious matters to attend to - the so-called problem of evil, for example, which demands intellectual rigour rather than any empathy with the victims of atrocity.<sup>19</sup> Of course, I am not suggesting that one should dispense with hard-headed analysis; but one must learn to feel too, and theodicy becomes a pointless exercise if it is merely the abstract solution to an abstract problem. "Theologians," Soelle writes, "have an intolerable passion for explaining and speaking when silence would be appropriate."<sup>20</sup>

Soelle herself emphasizes the sense of powerlessness that overwhelms the afflicted. Christianity has tended to view such powerlessness as a vindication of divine power: God almighty reveals himself through a show of strength. This has led to a tradition of what Soelle calls Christian masochism, in which a willingness to suffer is paramount, submission the supreme virtue. Soelle denounces Calvin's God as a sadist for using suffering to punish the human race. She continues:

Both sadistic and masochistic theologies of suffering can be criticized because of their first proposition, the omnipotence of a heavenly being who decrees suffering. Perhaps it is possible to conceive of a combination of omnipotence with righteousness, viewed as absolute and perfectionistic, making demands that by definition cannot be fulfilled. There is, on the other hand, no way to combine omnipotence with love.<sup>21</sup>

Soelle's own theology is an attempt to give credence to the idea of a loving God who is not all powerful, to counter the post-Christian apathy she defines as "a social condition in which people are so dominated by the goal of avoiding suffering that it becomes a goal to avoid human relationships and contacts altogether". Suffering is not always meaningless. The point is to

distinguish between suffering that is meaningless and suffering that can make us more human. The goal of human solidarity allows one to make a virtue of suffering without also making it one's pleasure. "Only that pain is good," Soelle claims, "which furthers the process of its abolition."<sup>22</sup>

But affliction must be recognized as something distinct. "It would be sheer cynicism to develop a theology about such suffering," Soelle concedes, "for theology presupposes at least a certain amount of common experience.... Respect for those who suffer in extremis imposes silence." However, the urge to bear witness may be apparent even in the afflicted, and this is what Soelle identifies as the second phase of suffering, that of lament or communication, which takes the sufferer out of isolation and paves the way for the third phase - solidarity - and the possibility of change. The experience of affliction itself, though, is beyond words. As Soelle later observes, "Affliction defiles everything a person is."<sup>23</sup>

If a theology of affliction as such is unacceptable, this does not prevent Soelle from finding relevant images for it in the Gospel. Jesus' hour of need in the Garden of Gethsemane and his agony on the cross are taken to represent something common to all those whose suffering sets them apart. Jesus' suffering is not unique. "All extreme suffering," according to Soelle, "evokes the experience of being forsaken by God." In order to use the passion narrative in this way, Soelle is forced to portray Jesus as purely human.<sup>24</sup> We might be tempted to ask why his fate should be any more representative than that of other thwarted idealists. Soelle relates it to the martyrdom of those condemned to death for their resistance to Hitler and asserts, "Jesus' passion is the quintessence of such freely chosen suffering." This amounts to a declaration of faith; as an argument it carries no weight. Soelle's conclusion is equally unconvincing:

Wherever people suffer Christ stands with them. To put it in less mythological terms, as long as Christ lives and is remembered his friends

will be with those who suffer. Where no help is possible he appears not as the superior helper but only as the one who walks with those beyond help.<sup>25</sup>

Soelle speaks of the superiority of those who die for a just cause. "But the attempt that Christian faith makes to assert that by his death Jesus became the Son of God means nothing else," she adds. On the one hand Soelle wants to claim some special significance for the role of Jesus in the world - "He suffers wherever people are tormented" - and on the other she is continually diminishing its uniqueness. She cites the words of a German communist, written on the eve of his execution: "I am dying and I shall live."<sup>26</sup> But this only underlines how tenuous it is to centre one's theology on a human being. Without some notion of the divinity of Christ we have no reason to find the story about Jesus as compelling as Soelle intends us to. There are many stories just as deserving of our attention.

Soelle devotes much of the book to showing how love for God, as love for everything that exists, can lead one to a positive acceptance of suffering, even though the senselessness of affliction remains an acknowledged stumbling-block:

Nevertheless there remains the question about those who suffer senselessly and are destroyed. It can only be attacked - not finally answered - by those who learn in suffering. They will not give up the attempt at change. Nor will they stop at the boundaries of this attempt. Where nothing can be done, they will join in the suffering.

"Suffering makes one more sensitive to the pain in the world," she writes (without irony). It is incumbent on us to learn from our own suffering; we must be open to it in the way that mystics are. Suffering is then a discipleship. By dying to the self we prepare ourselves to meet God. This is much the same as Simone Weil's position, though Soelle does point out that "love of the cross" in its distorted form leads to masochism - mistaking the way for the goal. The specifically Christian aspect of Soelle's thought is expressed here:

The Christian idea of the acceptance of suffering means something more than and different from what is expressed in the words "put up with, tolerate, bear". With these words the object, the suffering itself, remains unchanged.... The word "take", also in its combination with "on, up, over",

means that the person doing the accepting is himself changed. What I "take" belongs to me in a different sense from something I only bear. I receive a guest, agree to a proposal, take on an assignment; I say yes, I consent, I assent, I agree with.<sup>27</sup>

The upshot of such acceptance of suffering is that one suffers for the sake of the oppressed and not purely for oneself. "To attain the image of Christ means to live in revolt against the great Pharaoh," we are told, "and to remain with the oppressed and disadvantaged. It means to make their lot one's own." But the oppressed themselves are the devil's martyrs, in Thomas Müntzer's phrase, insofar as they tolerate the status quo. Implicit in Soelle's argument is an exhortation to the powerless to refuse their bondage:

By nature suffering hits us in such a way that it makes us "the devil's martyrs". Fear, speechlessness, aggression, and blind hate are confirmed and spread through suffering. In Christ, that is, in humanity's true possibility, which is by no means self-evident, suffering summons our self-confidence, our boldness, our strength. Our oneness with love is indissoluble. To learn to suffer without becoming the devil's martyrs means to live conscious of our oneness with the whole of life. Those who suffer in this way are indestructible. Nothing can separate them from the love of God.<sup>28</sup>

It is not Soelle's intention to accuse the Jews of going like lambs to the slaughter. Her mind is above such clichés. Nevertheless, there is an inevitable tension between claiming that people can become indestructible through freely chosen suffering and recognizing that few people do. In theory, most victims could have chosen to suffer in a spirit of solidarity before they were made to suffer senselessly. It is a question of timing as well as of chance. "The suffering of one thrust unconsciously into the role of victim excludes every attempt to give meaning," Soelle observes.<sup>29</sup> But who has the right to be a victim once there is a just cause to suffer and die for? As long as there are people who do not share Soelle's faith in life as a whole being meaningful or who do not have the strength to sustain that faith in the cruellest circumstances, there will also be affliction.

Soelle's attempt to renovate an exhausted religious language reaches its apotheosis in her analysis of the "gallows episode" from Elie Wiesel's Night.

Yet here if anywhere, surely, is the moment for silence rather than explanation. "How can hope be expressed in the face of senseless suffering?" Soelle asks,<sup>30</sup> before quoting the story of the boy hanged in Auschwitz - which I shall reproduce here from the original translation:

"Long live liberty!" cried the two adults.  
But the child was silent.  
"Where is God? Where is He?" someone behind me asked.  
At a sign from the head of the camp, the three chairs tipped over.  
Total silence throughout the camp. On the horizon, the sun was setting.  
"Bare your heads!" yelled the head of the camp. His voice was raucous.  
We were weeping.  
"Cover your heads!"  
Then the march past began. The two adults were no longer alive. Their tongues hung swollen, blue-tinged. But the third rope was still moving; being so light the child was still alive....  
For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes were not yet glazed.  
Behind me, I heard the same man asking:  
"Where is God now?"  
And I heard a voice within me answer him:  
"Where is He? Here He is - He is hanging here on this gallows...."  
That night the soup tasted of corpses.<sup>31</sup>

Soelle finds a parallel between the idea of God hanging on the gallows and the Jewish tradition of the Shekinah or "indwelling presence of God in the world". God shares the suffering of his people and himself awaits redemption through them. The story has a meaning for Christians too. "It is Christ who suffers and dies here," Soelle alleges, insofar, that is, as the boy really does become God:

In Jesus' passion history a decisive change occurs, the change from the prayer to be spared to the dreadfully clear awareness that that would not happen. The way from Gethsemane to Golgotha is a taking leave of (narcissistic) hope. It is the same change that occurs in the story from Auschwitz: the eye is directed away from the almighty Father to the sufferer himself. But not in such a way that this sufferer now has to endure everything alone. The essence of Jesus' passion history is the assertion that this one whom God forsook himself becomes God.<sup>32</sup>

What follows is a quite spurious exercise in making the Auschwitz story fit the details of "the mythical story of the death and resurrection of Christ", so that the boy's death itself appears to be mythical and not a senseless atrocity. Soelle is right to question the traditional Christian doctrine of salvation, but

her alternative is hardly more coherent:

Precisely those who in suffering experience the strength of the weak, who incorporate the suffering into their lives, for whom coming through free of suffering is no longer the highest goal, precisely they are there for the others who, with no choice in the matter, are crucified in lives of senseless suffering. A different salvation, as the language of metaphysics could promise it, is no longer possible. The God who causes suffering is not to be justified even by lifting the suffering later. No heaven can rectify Auschwitz. But the God who is not a greater Pharaoh has justified himself: in sharing the suffering, in sharing the death on the cross.<sup>33</sup>

Why speak of salvation at all? What difference can a suffering God make to those who suffer without hope? According to Soelle, "God has no other hands than ours." This is the moral force of her theology: it is up to us to act on behalf of others. But unless one accepts Soelle's belief in the ultimate value of martyrdom, there is still no answer for those whose suffering is meaningless:

If there were no one who said, "I die, but I shall live," no one who said, "I and the Father are one," then there would be no hope for those who suffer mute and devoid of hoping.... There is a history of resurrections, which has vicarious significance. A person's resurrection is no personal privilege for himself alone - even if he is called Jesus of Nazareth. It contains within itself hope for all, for everything.<sup>34</sup>

In The Crucified God (1973) Jürgen Moltmann has also sought to reveal the theological message of Wiesel's narrative. He, too, refers to the Shekinah of Jewish tradition and interprets the story from a Christian point of view. The rabbinic concept of God's self-humiliation is considered as the forerunner of Moltmann's own theologia crucis. Moltmann assumes that the inner voice which says God is hanging on the gallows has been inspired by reflection on theodicy rather than simply by despair:

Any other answer would be blasphemy. There cannot be any other Christian answer to the question of this torment. To speak here of a God who could not suffer would make God a demon. To speak here of an absolute God would make God an annihilating nothingness. To speak here of an indifferent God would condemn men to indifference.<sup>35</sup>

Writing on "The Impassibility of God and the Problem of Evil", Kenneth Surin supports this endeavour to identify God in the suffering of human beings, but takes the view that Soelle and Moltmann fall short of a fully Christian response to atrocity. Surin is more traditional in his understanding of the meaning of Christ's sacrifice:



It is not enough to suggest that God, in identifying with the victims of Auschwitz, himself becomes a powerless victim of the place. For the Christian message, in addition to showing us that God himself, in the person of his Son, was a helpless victim on the cross, also assures us of the victory of goodness over evil, of life over death. In the Christian faith, the cross is inextricably bound up with the resurrection.<sup>36</sup>

This seems like a convenient strategy to have it both ways: a suffering God and an almighty God. Nevertheless, Surin does highlight the difficulties entailed by justifying God through his own capacity to suffer. Unless God can also redeem the suffering of human beings, the suggestion that he suffers with them is of no more value to the afflicted than the awareness that others are also starving, humiliated and in pain.

More recently, Surin appears to have recognized the challenge to faith that the Holocaust represents. "It is not, and indeed it cannot be, Christianity's primary concern to 'make sense' of what happened at Auschwitz," he writes in Theology and the Problem of Evil (1986). "If anything is Christianity's primary concern with regard to what took place at Auschwitz," he continues, "(apart from taking responsibility, in shame and penitence, for the centuries of Christian anti-semitism which made it possible for Auschwitz to become a reality), it is, rather, to allow itself to be reinterpreted, to be 'ruptured', by the pattern of events at Auschwitz."<sup>37</sup> Moreover, Surin agrees with Johann-Baptist Metz that the story of the boy hanged on the gallows is not to be appropriated by Christian theologians.

Metz's censure of Moltmann and Soelle (all three, it might be noted, are German) is based on the recognition that the majority of the victims at Auschwitz were Jews, who were there for being Jewish and for no other reason:

Who really has the right to give the answer to the God-question - "Where is God? Here he is - he hangs on the gallows"? Who, if anyone at all, has the right to give it? As far as I am concerned, only the Jew threatened by death with all the children in Auschwitz has the right to say it - only he alone. There is no other "identification" of God - neither as sublime as for instance in J. Moltmann nor as reserved and modest as in the case of D. Soelle - here, as far as I am concerned, no Christian-theological identification of God is possible.<sup>38</sup>

## Liberation

Metz and Moltmann do have something in common, however. They both believe you can draw a positive inference from the fact that some kept their faith even in Auschwitz itself. In The Emergent Church (1980) Metz claims "We can pray after Auschwitz, because people prayed in Auschwitz."<sup>39</sup> Moltmann makes the same point, if at somewhat greater length:

A "theology after Auschwitz" may seem an impossibility or blasphemy to those who allowed themselves to be satisfied with theism or their childhood beliefs and then lost them. And there would be no "theology after Auschwitz" in retrospective sorrow and the recognition of guilt, had there been no "theology in Auschwitz". Anyone who later comes up against insoluble problems and despair must remember that the Shema of Israel and the Lord's Prayer were prayed in Auschwitz.<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, The Crucified God as a whole could be said to reflect Moltmann's awareness of the need to incorporate the reality of Auschwitz into theological thinking. Whether or not it is lucid enough to convince any but the most patient, it is nevertheless one of the few works of Christian theology to confront Auschwitz directly. "God in Auschwitz and Auschwitz in the crucified God - that is the basis for a real hope," claims Moltmann, "which both embraces and overcomes the world, and the ground for a love which is stronger than death and can sustain death."<sup>41</sup>

A fashion for abstruse argument creates problems for the reader. In her contribution to Concilium 175 (The Holocaust as Interruption), for example, Rebecca Chopp appears to out-Moltmann Moltmann:

Central to the history of suffering is the realisation of the dialectic of non-identity in these events which necessitates the retrieval of witness as a basic category of Christianity. For the dialectic of non-identity - the inability of these events to be contained in theories of interpretation or action and the inability to be corrected and cured in history - is represented best through the witnesses themselves.<sup>42</sup>

The point seems valid enough, if I understand it correctly, but why make it in such a convoluted way?

Having already compared the task of liberation theologians with that of Holocaust writers - to point, that is, to "massive public events of suffering"

- Chopp is untroubled by the thought that these events might be obscured by rhetoric. "Christianity must now stand with those who suffer," she asserts, "not because suffering is itself privileged but because within the events of suffering the contemporary historical subject is revealed."<sup>43</sup> One wonders within what events the historical subject was previously revealed.

According to David Tracy, "The Holocaust is the classic negative event of our age."<sup>44</sup> John Pawlikowski endorses this, but unlike Tracy finds an explanation for it in terms of original sin:

With a proper understanding of the meaning of the Christ Event men and women can be healed, they can finally overcome the primal sin of pride, the desire to supplant the Creator in power and status that was at the heart of the Holocaust.<sup>45</sup>

Inadequate as this kind of response is, it does at least allow Christians to believe that the Holocaust is our problem and not God's. However, it hints at the kind of triumphalism Metz has condemned as "messianic weakness". "Does there not exist something like a typically Christian incapacity for dismay in the face of disasters?" he asks.<sup>46</sup> According to him, Auschwitz should compel Christians to undertake a radical self-interrogation. The messianic idea of salvation has been cut off from its social roots and distorted into the privilege of an elite.

Metz regards the history of suffering undergone by the Jews as closer to what Jesus foretold for his disciples than the Christian tradition itself is. It is now incumbent on Christian theologians to acknowledge Auschwitz as a turning-point in their own religion:

What Christian theologians can do for the murdered of Auschwitz and thereby for a true Christian-Jewish ecumenism is, in every case, this: Never again to do theology in such a way that its construction remains unaffected, or could remain unaffected, by Auschwitz.<sup>47</sup>

One theologian who seems to satisfy this condition is Ulrich Simon. Simon is something of a special case. Himself a Jewish refugee from Germany in the thirties, he was received into the Church of England soon after and ordained. His father, a composer, died at Auschwitz. A Theology of Auschwitz (1967) is unique as a systematic attempt to interpret the death camps in the

light of traditional Christian motifs. It goes beyond Soelle's assertion that "Every single one of the six million was God's beloved son"<sup>48</sup> to a vision of Auschwitz as the Incarnation writ large:

The radical nature of modern experience almost despairs of a verbal definition of Deity. At Auschwitz the wholly Otherness of God, hidden and immense, no longer clashes with the disclosure of the one as near, loving, and afflicted in the afflictions of man. The science of the Cross gives a new edge to the infinite qualitative distinction between God and man in its acclamation of the Creator of the Universe as the Lamb of sacrifice.<sup>49</sup>

Auschwitz is described in terms of Christ's passion. This leads at times to analogies that cannot possibly work. Simon relates how the camp officers committed a whole range of atrocities on children. "We take this to be the totalitarian equivalent," he declares, "to the spitting at, and the beating of, the Son of Man." But he later concedes that what people suffered in the camps is beyond comparison:

To be selected to labour service after arrival is to be face to face with the human condition which, under diabolical direction, is entirely devised to crush humanity. To arrive for death, and then for death to be kept at arm's length, so as to squeeze the last ounce out of the imprisoned human condition, is a torture which Jesus could not know.<sup>50</sup>

It is almost impossible to assess A Theology of Auschwitz. A strange hybrid of lament and exultation, it challenges us to sound the depth of our own response to the catastrophe. "A theology of Auschwitz cannot be written unless its findings issue in prayer," Simon writes, "for we can face the horror only by coming to terms with it liturgically." For Simon this means, in fact, transforming the horror into an occasion for rejoicing:

This prayer is an existentialist decision for the faith which links freedom with God. It releases in us the spirit which yearns to crown innocence with freedom. It articulates the need for an eternal reality of freedom and acknowledges God as the champion on the way to, and as the goal of, freedom.

Unfortunately Simon fails to clarify what this freedom is. In spite of an earlier commitment to examine "transcendental terms" afresh,<sup>51</sup> he habitually assumes that their meanings are self-evident. Grace and redemption, for example, are alluded to throughout as axiomatic truths.

One consequence of such theological certainty is that the dead of Auschwitz take on the role of sacrificial victims. "It is not man at Auschwitz, but God," we are told, "who incorporates the terror into the pattern of meaningful sacrifice." We might wish to know on what authority Simon can make this claim, but he forestalls us:

This meaning, however, is perceptible only to faith. It is grounded in the belief that God has himself entered human history in the sacrifice of Jesus.

Which precludes further discussion. Except to underline the connection between the Atonement and the murdered Jews:

Christ died to save mankind from its pagan madness. The victims of Auschwitz died because pagan madness wished to extirpate the light and to rule the world in dark, ecstatic nihilism.<sup>52</sup>

If the Jews died to create a new type of corporate martyrdom, as Simon suggests, what significance does that have for us today? On the one hand Simon states quite emphatically, "Even Auschwitz held and holds the secret of redemption," while on the other he does seem prepared to express some doubts: "The resurrection from Auschwitz," he writes, "is ... still more a demand than a given fact." We cannot expect God, then, to do all the work:

The legacy of Auschwitz for theology is the return to the rock of action against which hollow verbiage disintegrates.<sup>53</sup>

But what should we do? Simon clearly regards Edith Stein's voluntary walk to the gas chamber as exemplary, and also calls for a willingness to carry out unpleasant duties (like delousing neglected children) in a spirit of asceticism.<sup>54</sup>

Simon's theology is liberation theology of a kind - more devotional than political:

The liturgical petition "Libera nos ..." sums up, in all languages, whether formally intoned or ejaculated as a cry from the heart, the re-enactment of God's transcendent will in the world.<sup>55</sup>

The redemptive process is inexorable. Only the wholly evil will suffer the retribution of the annihilating nothingness of death. For the rest, death is merely the fulfilment of this life.<sup>56</sup> Christ is "the eternal mediator" who assures us of the life to come. And Christ alone makes it possible to contemplate Auschwitz

without despair. "Without the God-Man," Simon writes, "Auschwitz would stand as a nightmare, the culmination of unreason and malice."<sup>57</sup>

The assumption, of course, is that Christianity is better equipped than Judaism to assimilate the catastrophe. In the next, and final, chapter I shall be considering the extent to which Christians helped prepare the way for the Final Solution by their refusal to tolerate the reality of a Jewish people, and I shall also consider the extent to which some still refuse to tolerate it now. Simon's glorification of Christ as the Redeemer skirts over the fact that most of those who suffered believed, if they believed at all, in a Messiah who was yet to come. Christian theologians would be more qualified to discern the meaning of Auschwitz if the Final Solution had been directed against Christians rather than Jews. It was not the Church but the Jewish people that was threatened with destruction.

It seems to me that Christ is smuggled into Auschwitz mainly as a way of distancing oneself from the suffering it represents. Let me conclude with a striking example of this. Franz Mussner, a German Catholic New Testament scholar, is the author of an ambitious attempt to provide the basis for a revised Christian understanding of Judaism. Written in the wake of Vatican II and the increased awareness of the Church's responsibility for antisemitism, Tractate on the Jews (1979) is concerned essentially with making theological reparations. And yet its author is unable to relinquish the supremacy of his own faith. Citing Jewish thinkers who regard the murder of the Jews as some form of vicarious atonement for the sins of the world, Mussner translates this into Christian terms. The crucified Christ is thus held up as an inclusive image of Jewish suffering - to the exclusion of the real victims:

The Christian must, in the face of the "total sacrifice" of the Jews in Auschwitz, openly confess his complicity in anti-Semitism. However, he cannot grasp the meaning of this sacrifice without the crucified Christ, who took up the sacrifice of Auschwitz into his glorified crucified body.<sup>58</sup>

## Notes

- (1) The two essays by Simone Weil that I shall be considering here are "The Love of God and Affliction", in Waiting on God, trans. Emma Craufurd (Glasgow: Fount/Collins, 1977), pp.76-94, and "Additional Pages on the Love of God and Affliction", in Gateway to God (Glasgow: Fount/Collins, 1974), pp.87-102.
- (2) Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction", p.79.
- (3) *Ibid.*, pp.82, 84.
- (4) *Ibid.*, pp.82-83.
- (5) Ulrich Simon, A Theology of Auschwitz (London: Victor Gollancz, 1967), p.59.
- (6) Weil, "Love of God", p.84.
- (7) *Ibid.*, pp.86, 85, 83.
- (8) *Ibid.*, pp.87, 86.
- (9) *Ibid.*, pp.87-88.
- (10) Weil, "Additional Pages", p.102.
- (11) Weil, "Love of God", pp.88-89.
- (12) *Ibid.*, pp.89-91.
- (13) *Ibid.*, pp.91-92.
- (14) *Ibid.*, pp.92-93.
- (15) *Ibid.*, p.93.
- (16) *Ibid.*, pp.93-94.
- (17) Weil, "Additional Pages", pp.98, 102.
- (18) *Ibid.*, p.98.
- (19) Which is not to say that these theologians are unaware of affliction. John Hick, for instance, in Evil and the God of Love (London: Macmillan, 1985 (1966) ), acknowledges "dysteleological suffering" (as he prefers to call it) as a baffling problem and appeals to "the positive value of mystery" (p.335) to account for it. "Such suffering remains unjust and inexplicable, haphazard and cruelly excessive," he grants (p.335). His examples of dysteleological suffering, however, tend to relate to physical ills rather than to affliction as Weil has defined it (that is, something inflicted by other human beings), and Auschwitz is not even mentioned. Hick thus feels justified in his thesis that the world is a vale of soul-making, mystery notwithstanding:  
"The mystery of dysteleological suffering is a real mystery, impenetrable to the rationalizing human mind. It challenges Christian faith with its utterly baffling, alien, destructive meaninglessness. And yet at the same time, detached theological reflection can note

that this very irrationality and this lack of ethical meaning contribute to the character of the world as a place in which true human goodness can occur and in which loving sympathy and compassionate self-sacrifice can take place." (pp.335-336)

- (20) Dorothee Soelle, Suffering, trans. Everett R. Kalin (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1975), p.19.
- (21) Ibid., pp.24-25. Jürgen Moltmann makes a similar attack on the concept of omnipotence in The Crucified God (London: SCM Press, 1974):  
"A God who is only omnipotent is in himself an incomplete being, for he cannot experience helplessness and powerlessness. Omnipotence can indeed be longed for and worshipped by helpless men, but omnipotence is never loved; it is only feared. What sort of being, then, would be a God who was only 'almighty'? He would be a being without experience, a being without destiny and a being who is loved by no one. A man who experiences helplessness, a man who suffers because he loves, a man who can die, is therefore a richer being than an omnipotent God who cannot suffer, cannot love and cannot die." (p.223) (trans. R.A. Wilson and John Bowden)
- (22) Soelle, Suffering, pp.36, 45.
- (23) Ibid., pp.69, 73, 115.
- (24) Ibid., p.85. "The story of Jesus' passion ... is the story of a man whose goal is shattered," Soelle writes earlier. "But this despair over his own cause would be incomplete - and below the level of other human suffering - without the physical and social experience the story describes. Without blood, sweat, and tears, without the threat and experience of torture, it would remain on a purely spiritual level. And the disintegration of his company of followers is part of this experience of suffering, for Jesus is denied, betrayed, and abandoned by his friends." (p.16)
- (25) Ibid., pp.140, 177.
- (26) Ibid., pp.138, 140, 138.
- (27) Ibid., pp.171, 125, 103.
- (28) Ibid., pp.132, 140-141.
- (29) Ibid., p.141.
- (30) Ibid., p.145.
- (31) Elie Wiesel, Night, trans. Stella Rodway (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1972), pp.76-77.
- (32) Soelle, Suffering, pp.145-147.
- (33) Ibid., pp.147-149.
- (34) Ibid., pp.149-50.
- (35) Moltmann, Crucified God, p.274. Jewish theologian Emil Fackenheim anticipates this kind of response in his own commentary on Wiesel's narrative. "To stake all on divine powerlessness today ... would be to take it both radically and literally," he writes. "God suffers literal and



radical powerlessness, i.e., actual death; and any resurrected divine power will be manifest, not so much within history as beyond it. A Jew, in short, would have to become a Christian." (Emil L. Fackenheim, God's Presence in History (New York: New York University Press, 1970), p.77.)

- (36) Kenneth Surin, "The Impassibility of God and the Problem of Evil", Scottish Journal of Theology 35 (April 1982), p.115.
- (37) Kenneth Surin, Theology and the Problem of Evil (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp.123-124.
- (38) Johann-Baptist Metz, "Facing the Jews: Christian Theology after Auschwitz", in Concilium 175 (October 1984): The Holocaust as Interruption, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and David Tracy, pp.29-30.
- (39) Johann-Baptist Metz, The Emergent Church, trans. Peter Mann (London: SCM Press, 1981), p.19.
- (40) Moltmann, Crucified God, pp.277-278.
- (41) Ibid., p.278.
- (42) Rebecca Chopp, "The Interruption of the Forgotten", in Concilium 175, p.22.
- (43) Ibid., pp.19, 22.
- (44) David Tracy, "Religious Values after the Holocaust: A Catholic View", in Jews and Christians after the Holocaust, ed. Abraham J. Peck (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), p.93.
- (45) John Pawlikowski, "The Holocaust and Contemporary Christology", in Concilium 175, p.48.
- (46) Metz, Emergent Church, pp.24-25.
- (47) Ibid., p.28.
- (48) Soelle, Suffering, p.148.
- (49) Simon, Theology of Auschwitz, p.158.
- (50) Ibid., pp.55, 59-60.
- (51) Ibid., pp.47, 38.
- (52) Ibid., pp.84, 88.
- (53) Ibid., pp.90, 83, 100, 139.
- (54) Ibid., pp.149-154.
- (55) Ibid., p.154.
- (56) Ibid., pp.74, 78-79. "Death as fulfilment," Simon writes, "is the paradox which Christ authorizes and which the dead of Auschwitz articulate." (p.78)

(57) Ibid., p.109.

(58) Franz Mussner, Tractate on the Jews, trans. Leonard Swidler (London: SPCK, 1984), p.44.

## CHAPTER 6

### CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES (II): ANTISEMITISM

It cannot be said too often or too strongly that antisemitism is a Gentile, and pre-eminently a Christian, problem.

James Parkes, Judaism and Christianity

Without anti-Semitism, Nazism would have been inconceivable, both as an ideology and as a catalyst of the emotions.

Richard Grunberger, A Social History of the Third Reich

The values that informed nearly two thousand years of Christian civilization continue to inform our post-Christian culture. Antisemitism is not a thing of the past, even if Auschwitz has made it less fashionable as a political weapon. Other kinds of hatred, it is found, will do just as well. The main thing is to have an enemy you can identify. Jews were identified as the enemy by the Church Fathers. Does this mean that the latter paved the way for their destruction in twentieth-century Europe? Various Christian theologians - from the Anglican James Parkes to the American Catholic Rosemary Ruether and her critics - have sought to unravel the thread of responsibility, essentially as an act of contrition for the Church's teaching in the past, but also in recognition of the failure of the churches in Germany and elsewhere to speak out against Hitler when it was incumbent on them to do so. There were Christian martyrs, to be sure, and historians debate the contribution of the Confessing Church to the resistance,<sup>1</sup> but Christendom as a whole was a mortuary not a refuge for the Jews.

It comes as some surprise, therefore, to read one theologian, John

Pawlikowski, a Catholic priest of the Order of the Servants of Mary, in his pamphlet on The Challenge of the Holocaust for Christian Theology (1978), seeking to pin the blame for the catastrophe on Western liberalism:

At least indirectly, Western liberal thought was responsible for the Holocaust. By breaking the tight hold the God-concept had on previous generations, it paved the way for greater human freedom and self-sufficiency without realistically assessing the potential of the destructive forces within mankind to pervert this freedom into the cruelty revealed by the Nazi experiment. Thus, the Holocaust shattered much of the grandeur of Western liberal thought. In some ways it represents the ultimate achievement of the person totally "liberated" from God.<sup>2</sup>

Are we, then, to believe that all the anti-Jewish rhetoric of the Christian era is of less significance in the singling out of the Jews for destruction than the absence of God as a restraining factor? Is Pawlikowski not aware that an appeal to God's authority has been the pretext (indeed Hitler himself used it) for massacres since time immemorial?

However, I have not cited Pawlikowski merely to berate him. There is a problem here of context, or lack of one. The history of religiously-inspired Jew-hatred and the history of antisemitism (an ideology that gets its name from political movements in the late nineteenth century) do not necessarily coincide. Pawlikowski is able to exploit this ambiguity and regard the two histories as more or less distinct. Before considering other Christian perspectives, therefore, it might be helpful to trace the apparent inspiration for the Final Solution in the myth of a Jewish world-conspiracy, and ask what bearing this has on our understanding of the links between the Church's teaching of contempt, as a French Jewish historian has called it,<sup>3</sup> and the virulent antisemitism that formed the basis of Hitler's political campaign.

### The Myth of a Jewish World-Conspiracy

In her Preface to Part One of The Origins of Totalitarianism, written in 1967 (sixteen years after the work was first published), Hannah Arendt questions the notion that antisemitism is pre-eminently a Christian problem:

The notion of an unbroken continuity of persecutions, expulsions, and

massacres from the end of the Roman Empire to the Middle Ages, the modern era, and down to our own time, frequently embellished by the idea that modern antisemitism is no more than a secularized version of popular medieval superstitions, is no less fallacious (though of course less mischievous) than the corresponding antisemitic notion of a Jewish secret society that has ruled, or aspired to rule, the world since antiquity.<sup>4</sup>

For Arendt, modern antisemitism is related solely to the development of the nation-state, and its source can be found in the economic role of Jews during the previous centuries. What she omits to explain, in spite of citing numerous instances of it, is the marriage of the old religious hatred to this new political dogma. In her detailed account of the Dreyfus Affair, for example, she highlights the part played by the clergy in stirring up anti-Jewish feeling, and draws attention to the fact that the Catholic press throughout the world was against Dreyfus.<sup>5</sup> The Church, it seems, continued to regard Jews as reprobate.

Norman Cohn helps to substantiate this in Warrant for Genocide (1967). Dreyfus, a Jewish officer in the French army, was accused and convicted of spying at the end of 1894. (He was pardoned five years later and eventually acquitted of all charges in 1906.) Edouard Drumont, whose antisemitic daily newspaper Libre Parole enjoyed considerable Catholic support and was one of the most successful papers in the country by the time of the Dreyfus Affair, had already written an influential book called La France juive (1886) that popularized the arguments of various theological tracts claiming to have uncovered a Jewish world-conspiracy.<sup>6</sup> And in 1893, the year before the trial, a work was published in Paris that appears to have been one of the more likely sources for the notorious "Protocols of the Elders of Zion". Written by a Catholic Archbishop, it expressed the conviction that the whole of human history was the result of a Jewish conspiracy which had now reached the point of fulfilment, and called upon the rulers of Europe to unite against this. In spite of their allegedly demonic strength, the Jews were going to be defeated:

Do not hope, O Jews, to be able to escape the calamity that once more threatens you.... The day when you are crushed will see the Church, your victim, enjoying a vital expansion such as has never been seen.<sup>7</sup>

The "Protocols" themselves were first disseminated in Russia early this

century by a fervent adherent of the Orthodox Church called Sergey Nilus. He inserted them into the third edition of his mystical book The Great in the Small - published in 1905 - to convince Tsar Nicholas II of the need for antisemitic legislation. According to Norman Cohn, they had been fabricated some time between 1894 and 1899, probably after the first Zionist Congress at Basel in 1897 (which was interpreted by antisemites as incontrovertible evidence of the Jewish world-conspiracy), and the country of origin was undoubtedly France<sup>8</sup> - at the height of the Dreyfus Affair, therefore. The forgery is nevertheless considered to be the work of a Russian, so it is unsurprising that Russia should be the country where it surfaced. The Metropolitan of Moscow, no less, ordered a sermon quoting Nilus' version of the "Protocols" to be read in all 368 churches of Moscow, while the text itself was still in manuscript.<sup>9</sup>

It was not until 1917, however, that the "Protocols" became a force in world history, used by the Black Hundreds to rationalize the success of the Bolshevik revolution and justify retributive programs against thousands of innocent Jews. It is sobering to recall that as late as 1920 the Times was prepared to lend credence to the authenticity of these "Protocols".<sup>10</sup> The Nazis, of course, used them to strengthen their own ideology of a Jewish world-conspiracy. And even though Hannah Arendt takes issue with Cohn over his historical understanding of antisemitism, she shares his estimation of the importance of the "Protocols" as an instrument of propaganda. Thus:

The point for the historian is that the Jews, before becoming the main victims of modern terror, were the center of Nazi ideology. And an ideology which has to persuade and mobilize people cannot choose its victim arbitrarily. In other words, if a patent forgery like the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" is believed by so many people that it can become the text of a whole political movement, the task of the historian is no longer to discover a forgery. Certainly it is not to invent explanations which dismiss the chief political and historical fact of the matter: that the forgery is being believed. This fact is more important than the (historically speaking, secondary) circumstance that it is forgery.<sup>11</sup>

As Cohn has pointed out, the Berne trial of 1934-5 established once and for all that the "Protocols" were a forgery, but this did not stop the Nazis from continuing to affirm their authenticity. The myth of a Jewish world-conspiracy

was exploited to the full. In 1936, for example, one could read in Der Stürmer, "The mobilization of the German people's will to destroy the bacillus lodged in its body is a declaration of war on all Jews throughout the world. Its final result will decide the problem whether the world is to be redeemed by German virtues or to perish by the Jewish poison."<sup>12</sup> The continued repetition of such propaganda helped to sanction the idea that Jews somehow brought trouble upon themselves, encouraging indifference to their fate if not actual hostility.

Antisemitism is not simply a generalized dislike of Jews. It is always tending towards something more extreme. Pace Hannah Arendt and her strictures on "the thesis of eternal antisemitism",<sup>13</sup> I would nevertheless argue that antisemitism is distinct from other types of prejudice insofar as it is rooted in a refusal to acknowledge the right of Jews to exist at all as Jews. The choice between conversion and death (which is at least a choice: the Nazis abrogated even this) articulates the real meaning of the Church's caricature of the Jewish people as reprobate. Violence against Jews has always been sanctioned by shifting the blame onto the victims. The revival of the medieval superstition about the ritual murder of Christian children has proved a convenient alibi for pogroms over the last hundred years. As Cohn observes, "Myths do not necessarily disappear with the circumstances that first produced them."<sup>14</sup> In fact, there were almost more cases of ritual-murder accusation in Central and Eastern Europe between 1880 and 1945 than during the whole of the Middle Ages.<sup>15</sup>

As soon as one begins to reflect on the insidiousness of antisemitic ideas, it is hard to resist the plausibility of explanations drawn from the realm of psychoanalysis. Whether these are grounded in any empirical research is another matter. Hence, Norman Cohn, confronted by the persistence of the Jewish world-conspiracy myth, is driven to conclude, "This surely suggests that it answers to deep and enduring unconscious needs." He goes on to define fanatical antisemites in similar terms:

Fanatical antisemites are in fact people whose own deepest emotional needs compel them to see life as a struggle against just such a conspiracy

as is portrayed in the Protocols. For them belief springs from an inner necessity; and this gives them an air of absolute conviction, which in turn gives the criminals and opportunists the reassurance and encouragement they need.<sup>16</sup>

### "The Blackmail of Transcendence"

George Steiner has provided a more elaborate interpretation of these deep unconscious needs, taking his cue from a remark of Hitler's: "Conscience is a Jewish invention."<sup>17</sup> First formulated as part of In Bluebeard's Castle (1971), his thesis has since been refined, appearing most recently in an article called "The Long Life of Metaphor: An Approach to 'the Shoah'" (in Encounter, February 1987). Steiner also incorporated it into his novella The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H. (1979), allowing no less an authority than Hitler himself - imagined to be living into old age somewhere in the South American jungle - to put his case for him.<sup>18</sup> In its earliest form the argument went something like this: the Jews were responsible for the moral thrust of Western civilization; they had given the world the idea of a single, all-powerful deity, which had then been translated into the absolute demands of Christian ethics and, ultimately, the vision of messianic socialism:

Monotheism at Sinai, primitive Christianity, messianic socialism: these are the three supreme moments in which Western culture is presented with what Ibsen termed "the claims of the ideal". These are the three stages, profoundly interrelated, through which Western consciousness is forced to experience the blackmail of transcendence.<sup>19</sup>

The Holocaust, or the Shoah, as Steiner now prefers to call it, was thus a backlash against the demands imposed on the pagan world by an alien God. Steiner refers to it as "a reflex, the more complete for being long-inhibited, of natural sensory consciousness, of instinctual polytheistic and animist needs". But this is pure speculation. The Nazis may have believed in the restoration of Teutonic culture, but to what extent there was an instinctual basis for this (rather than, say, a sentimental one) is open to question. Also open to question is the view that Western civilization only started to break down in the twentieth century. A closer analysis of the past would reveal considerable barbarism



in the rational order that Steiner is nostalgic for. "To most intelligent men and women of the nineteenth century," he claims, "a prediction that torture and massacre were soon to be endemic again in 'civilized' Europe would have seemed a nightmarish joke." But only because "civilized" Europeans were able to torture and massacre elsewhere. "There is nothing natural about our present condition," Steiner complains.<sup>20</sup> There was nothing natural about the slave trade either, or the slaughter of indigenous populations. Of course we must recognize the appalling scale of this century's atrocities, but don't let's blind ourselves to the pattern of diplomacy that was the model for them.

I have no reason to suppose that Steiner's diagnosis of a suicidal impulse in Western civilization is wrong. Perhaps the Holocaust really does mark "a second Fall". For Steiner, anyway, the explanation for twentieth-century mayhem is to be found in "the malignant energies released by the decay of natural religious forms". He compares the camps to the image of hell as it has appeared to writers like Dante. "The concentration and death camps of the twentieth century," Steiner argues, "wherever they exist, under whatever regime, are Hell made immanent. They are the transference of Hell from below the earth to its surface." More explicitly:

In the camps the millenary pornography of fear and vengeance cultivated in the Western mind by Christian doctrines of damnation, was realized.<sup>21</sup>

By ceasing to believe in hell, he claims, we have had to construct it for ourselves. Fascinating as an insight into the link between real and imagined horrors, this nevertheless leads us away from the problem of antisemitism, except insofar as it reminds us that Jews were often associated with the devil in medieval theology.

More significantly, in "The Long Life of Metaphor" Steiner alludes directly to the Christian temper regarding Jewish existence. In an examination of Paul's Epistle to the Romans 9-12, he uncovers two equally ominous scenarios. The first decrees that since Christ is the Messiah foretold by the prophets and the Jews had him crucified, the latter have placed themselves beyond God's

mercy. The second scenario decrees that by refusing to recognize Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah, the Jews have put off the day of salvation; and this, according to Steiner, can lead to one of two logical consequences: either the elimination of Israel altogether (whether by forced conversion or murder) or what Steiner calls "Christian patience and self-questioning" - by which he means the view, more common since Auschwitz, that Christ's mission is incomplete until the Jews have chosen freely to recognize him as Messiah. Even this view, attributed to Karl Barth among others, appears fraught with ambiguity.<sup>22</sup>

Steiner reiterates his own theory of "the blackmail of transcendence" (expressed now as "the blackmail of perfection"):

Nothing is more cruel than the blackmail of perfection. We come to hate, to fear most those who demand of us a self-transcendence, a surpassing of our natural and common limits of being. Our hate and fear are the more intense precisely because we know the absolute rightness, the ultimate desirability of the demand. In failing to respond adequately, we fail ourselves. And it is of deep-lying self-hatreds that hatreds spring.

Jews are hated because they invented God. "The force, the obsessive depth of a doctrine," Steiner asserts, "become greater as this doctrine passes into the individual and collective unconscious in the guise of symbol and metaphor." And these symbols become malignant at the point when the doctrine they represent is no longer believed in. Thus, the repressed antipathy to monotheism, combined with the theology of Jew-hatred, prove most lethal as the influence of Christianity itself begins to decline. Steiner discerns "a clear pattern in the fact that the Auschwitz-world erupts out of the subconscious, collective obsessions of an increasingly agnostic, even anti- or post-Christian society".<sup>23</sup>

Acknowledging that his hypothesis is not susceptible of proof, Steiner is nevertheless convinced it provides a framework of reference for asking the right questions:

Only a theological-metaphysical scale of values, only an acute awareness of the life-force of theological-metaphysical metaphor and symbolism (even vestigial) in Western collective consciousness and subconsciousness, can hope to throw some light - I do not lay claim to more - on the aetiology, on the causal dynamics of Jew-hatred and of the Auschwitz

experience as these arose from inside the core of European history and culture.<sup>24</sup>

Jewish theologian Richard Rubenstein appears to endorse Steiner's perspective. "The murder of God," he writes, "is an immensely potent symbol of man's primal desire to do away with his impediments to instinctual gratification."<sup>25</sup> Certainly one cannot hope to comprehend the single-minded devotion shown by so many to the cause of a Europe without Jews, unless one recognizes that a shared belief may also be a shared mania.

### The Church and the Devil

Christian theologian A. Roy Eckardt, a Protestant but by no means a fundamentalist, adds a new slant to this perspective by invoking the supernatural. In a chapter of Your People, My People (1974) called "Enter the Devil", he tries to persuade us that Satan is ultimately responsible for the virulence of antisemitism. "Antisemitism is the special way we murder God," he claims, in much the same vein as Steiner and Rubenstein. And initially his argument seems no different:

Generically speaking, the war against the Jews is a war of pagans against the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, whom Jews represent. More delimitedly, antisemitism is the war we Christians wage against Jesus the Jew; it is the symbolic re-enactment of the crucifixion of Jesus, who confronts Christians with God; the rejection of the Jew Jesus, turned against his own people.... We have fought for almost two thousand years to get Jesus off our backs. We cannot put our hands on him directly, but we can easily put our hands on his people. A more qualified scapegoat is simply unimaginable. When we Christians accuse "the Jews" of spurning and crucifying the Christ, the charge represents our below-conscious wish to kill Christ and to dispose of him once and for all.<sup>26</sup>

In what way are gentiles worse equipped to cope with the summons to righteousness than Jews? This question is raised implicitly by Steiner and Eckardt, but it is obviously a dangerous one to ask. To explain antisemitism in terms of a desire to murder God mystifies the central issue - that Jews were vilified for refusing to be Christians before they were vilified for anything else. Such prejudice as existed in the pre-Christian world was more to do with hostility to foreigners than with what we would recognize as antisemitism.<sup>27</sup> Pagans

had their own morality; they did not need to feel inadequate. To say that their values are the inspiration for Christian antisemitism is an evasion of responsibility.

Eckardt's thesis doesn't stop there, however. Christian antisemitism is to be explained in terms of "the primordial conspiracy of Christendom with the demonic powers". This is an inversion of the antisemite's own belief that the Jews are in league with the devil. Which is to say that Eckardt is speaking the same language. In the end it hardly matters who is part of the conspiracy as long as you are able to detect one. Jews, Freemasons, Bolsheviks, and now (other) Christians. "I hypothesize that a major field of operations for Satan is our collective unconscious," Eckardt continues,<sup>28</sup> warming to his theme.

The devil, it appears, wants us to think he is dead. But he hasn't fooled A. Roy Eckardt. What is more, antisemitism may have a special place in the fiend's scheme of things:

Is antisemitism simply one more of the devil's unnumbered stratagems, just another species within the genus of prejudice-persecution-annihilation? Or is it of the very essence of the devil, the special malignancy that suffuses and destroys the entire divine-human creation? The assertion is sometimes dared that the very imperium of the societal libido is, at least in the West, somehow relatable to antisemitism. To David Polish, for example, "the truth of every cause is validated or found fraudulent in the way in which it confronts the Jewish people".

It hardly needs to be said that there is no reason why every cause should have to confront the Jewish people in the first place. To universalize antisemitism is to deny its historical context. According to Eckardt, "Jews are hated without limitations of date or boundaries of place."<sup>29</sup> This is simply not true. One has only to consider the difference in behaviour of the various nationalities under German occupation to realize how unhelpful such generalizations are. Why did the Danes, for example, not only refuse to enact any anti-Jewish legislation but also, in a gesture of supreme defiance, ferry nearly all the Jews of Denmark across to Sweden on the eve of a major round-up?<sup>30</sup>

By calling antisemites the devil's chosen people, Eckardt sets the scene

for a Manichean drama - God and the devil leading their respective armies, their elect, into battle. His logic in ascribing antisemitism to the powers of darkness is tortuous indeed:

The identifying of the Jews, only the Jews, with the devil is the devil's unique work, for only the devil himself could uncover the devil in the Jews. Only the devil can fabricate devilish accusations.<sup>31</sup>

Eckardt's determination to see Christian antisemitism as the work of the devil is a measure of his own sense of guilt. He devotes the opening chapter of Your People, My People to a discussion of this, expressing the need for a repentant faith. In Anti-Semitism and the Christian Mind (1969) Alan Davies, a fellow American Protestant, calls for an adequate confession of guilt from the Church as a whole:

Only through such a confession - a confession unafraid to feel the pain of Christian guilt with the classical remorse of an Orestes, when conscience entailed inner terror and agony - is the church likely to experience the measure of healing that would make it a suitable catalyst for breathing new power into the consciences of its members.<sup>32</sup>

Does it make sense, though, to speak of an institution feeling anything, let alone "the classical remorse of an Orestes"? What the Church can do to acknowledge its heritage of antisemitism is to change its liturgy and teaching where these continue to denigrate Jews.

### The Christian Heritage

As for the teaching of contempt, how far back does it go? Eckardt and others hold that even the New Testament has traces of antisemitism in it. The pioneer of this position was James Parkes, an Anglican theologian whose own concern with antisemitism dates from 1925.<sup>33</sup> In Judaism and Christianity (1948) he makes it quite clear that he regards the Church from its inception as culpable for later developments:

In our own day and within our own civilization, more than six million deliberate murders are the consequence of teaching about Jews for which the Christian Church is ultimately responsible, and of an attitude to Judaism which is not only maintained by all the Christian Churches, but has its ultimate resting place in the teaching of the New Testament itself.<sup>34</sup>

Eckardt puts it even more starkly, alleging that "the line from the New Testament through the centuries of Christian contempt for Jews to the gas ovens and crematoria is unbroken".<sup>35</sup>

The trouble with such pronouncements is that they can easily be dismissed as rhetorical by those who wish to ignore their import. If antisemitism has an unbroken history, the forms in which it has been expressed must nevertheless be identified. No Christian theologian has done more in this area than Rosemary Ruether, whose Faith and Fratricide (1974) has provided the focus for debate about the theological roots of antisemitism ever since.<sup>36</sup> Her argument, more recently summarized in a pamphlet on The Bible, Racism and Anti-Semitism produced by the Church of England, is that theological anti-Judaism developed as "the left hand of Christology".<sup>37</sup> In other words, a consequence of affirming Jesus as the Messiah was to denigrate the tradition which continued to await his coming. In the same pamphlet John Pawlikowski considers specifically the question of whether or not the New Testament is antisemitic, countering Ruether's thesis that it is (at least in embryo) with the views of various apologists. "The word Jews, in the Gospels, Acts, and Paul," Ruether has pointed out, "means the Jewish religious community. It is in this sense that the word Jews becomes a hostile symbol for all that resists and rejects the gospel."<sup>38</sup> Neither the counter-assertion that John, for example, was merely condemning opposition to Jesus rather than a particular people nor the attempt to argue that "the Jews" is anyhow a mistranslation,<sup>39</sup> are sufficient to explain away the sustained polemic against the Jewish community for its alleged apostasy and the use which has been made of this in succeeding generations.

Ruether locates the source of Christian anti-Judaism in "an alienated and angry Jewish sectarianism which believed it had the true midrash on the Scriptures and was founded on the true cornerstone of God's people, but found itself rebuffed and rejected at every stage by the Synagogue". Once this anti-Judaism had taken root in a predominantly gentile Church, however, it ceased

to be related to any personal disappointment. The adversos Judaeos tradition in the Church Fathers marks the shift from sibling rivalry to the teaching of contempt. The Jews were regarded as having forfeited their election to the new Israel, the Church. Ruether notes that there was little attempt to convert them; the emphasis was on the eternal reprobation of Jews as Jews.<sup>40</sup>

In Thy Brother's Blood (1950) Malcom Hay, a Scottish lay Roman Catholic, offers one of the first comprehensive indictments of the Church's obsessional hostility, and draws attention to the acts of violence that often resulted from the preaching of the Early Fathers. After the burning of a synagogue, St Ambrose declared that he, in principle, had set fire to it, and that it had been burnt as the judgement of God.<sup>41</sup> As for what these divines had to say about Jews themselves, perhaps the example of St Gregory of Nyssa will suffice:

Slayers of the Lord, murderers of the prophets, adversaries of God, haters of God, men who show contempt for the law, foes of grace, enemies of their father's faith, advocates of the devil, brood of vipers, slanderers, scoffers, men whose minds are in darkness, leaven of the Pharisees, assembly of demons, sinners, wicked men, stoners, and haters of righteousness.<sup>42</sup>

The apotheosis of such enmity is to be found in the sermons of St John Chrysostom. His homilies against the Jews, preached in Antioch at the end of the fourth century, are a model of intemperance and gall. Even allowing for their context - Chrysostom was anxious to enlighten the Judaizing Christians who combined membership of the Church with observance of Jewish rituals - there is no way to excuse the sentiments they express. "Your situation, O Jewish people," Chrysostom preached, "becomes more and more disastrous, and one cannot see showing on your foreheads the slightest ray of hope." To argue as he did that their misfortunes were brought about by their own turpitude, and with God's blessing, is to set the tone for centuries of persecution.<sup>43</sup> It is hardly surprising that there were outbreaks of violence against the Jewish community in Antioch early in the fifth century. Synagogues were destroyed. Simon Stylites, the famous pillar saint, intervened to prevent the governor from making reparations to the Jews. In the sixth century they were expelled from

Antioch altogether.<sup>44</sup>

Systematic discrimination against Jews was seemingly inevitable once Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. According to Rosemary Ruether, the laws enacted by the Christian emperors to restrict the rights of Jews contain a language of "clerical vituperation".<sup>45</sup> But, unlike pagans and heretics, Jews were at least allowed to practise their beliefs. In retrospect this was a golden age. As Malcom Hay puts it, "The Dark Ages of Jewish history in Western Europe date from the First Crusade (1096), which began and ended with a massacre."<sup>46</sup> As many as ten thousand Jews were killed on the first day.

The Crusades were essentially a reign of terror, during which fanatics like the monk Ralph took the opportunity to instigate atrocities against the "enemy within". St Bernard, Ralph's abbot, repressed the latter's zeal but continued himself to preach against the Jews. His friend Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny - "a model of Christian charity", according to one commentator cited by Hay - was given to doubt "whether a Jew can be really human". "I lead out from its den a monstrous animal," he continued, "and show it as a laughing stock in the amphitheatre of the world, in the sight of all the people. I bring thee forward, thou Jew, thou brute beast, in the sight of all men." He also preached that it was a duty to hate Jews but not to kill them.<sup>47</sup> Ruether suggests that the subtlety of such distinctions was apt to get lost in translation:

The fine point of the Church's theory that the Jews, though damnable, are to be physically preserved to the end of time, although in a state of "misery", to witness the triumph of the Church, eluded the comprehension of the mobs. The Church, in turn, proved incapable of understanding that the mobs merely acted out, in practice, a hatred which the Church taught in theory and enforced in social degradation wherever possible.<sup>48</sup>

Peter Abelard was one of the few Christians in the Middle Ages prepared to question the anti-Jewishness of the Church's teaching. This teaching was given new impetus by Innocent III at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. His plan to establish a Christian commonwealth entailed further degradation for



Jews, including the wearing of a special badge (a yellow circle - the Nazis enforced the wearing of a yellow Star of David). The Councils of Breslau (1266) and Vienna (1267) both decreed, moreover, that Jews should be segregated.<sup>49</sup> The theological rationale behind all this was that the Jewish people are condemned to servitude for their refusal to believe in Christ. Right up to 1948, Catholic congregations were urged on Good Friday to pray for "the perfidious Jews" (Oremus et pro perfidis Judaeis) - and to pray standing rather than on their knees. A nineteenth-century French priest had an explanation for this:

When praying for the perfidious Jews, the faithful do not kneel, as they do for other prayers, because of the perfidious and derisory genuflections with which they insulted the Saviour.<sup>50</sup>

"Perfidious", as Hay points out, is more pejorative than the Latin (which is closer to "unbelieving" in sense), but that is the epithet which stuck.

It was only too easy to hold Jews responsible for outbreaks of the plague. Throughout the Middle Ages they were suspected of demonic activities. Ignorance combined with superstition to brand the Jew as the member of an evil cult. On a number of occasions Hebrew books were burnt. The Talmud itself was regarded with horror, a misconception revived during the last century in France - when one would have been able to read the following, given the tenacity to wade through thirty volumes on the history of the Catholic Church:

The Talmud not only permits the Jew, but recommends, nay commends him to cheat and to kill a Christian whenever he can get the opportunity. This is a fact beyond doubt, which deserves the attention of nations and kings.<sup>51</sup>

Ritual-murder accusations became a pretext for looting and massacre. "When the anti-Semite accuses the Jew of ritual murder," Richard Rubenstein has observed, "he accuses him of the very crime which he himself intends to commit."<sup>52</sup> In 1247 a papal bull was published that disputed the myth behind these accusations, but eight years later the Jews of Lincoln were successfully prosecuted for the alleged sacrifice of a Christian child.<sup>53</sup> Little Saint Hugh, whose body was found in a well, is still commemorated in Lincoln Cathedral. The nineteen Jews who were hanged have no such memorial.

Jews were also accused of desecrating the host. There was, after all, profit to be made from any retribution that followed. In this way the confiscation of Jewish property was made to seem legitimate. In 1290 Jews in England found themselves faced with expulsion, permitted to take only as much personal property as they could carry. Sixteen years later, a similar expulsion took place in France. Ironically, Jews fared best in the Papal States, where they were protected from such extreme measures, if not from degradation. Pope Paul IV, however, was to announce in 1555 that there should be no amelioration of their condition. The Jews were condemned by God to eternal slavery and must therefore live apart from Christian society.<sup>54</sup>

The repercussions of segregation were still felt after the ghetto walls came down. As Rosemary Ruether writes, "The ghetto Jews of Christian mythology remained the screen through which western Europe continued to view the emancipated Jew."<sup>55</sup> Jews were now held responsible for the decline of the Church's authority, for secular values in general, for the evils of capitalism. We should hardly be astonished, then, to discover that the only part of Nazi ideology "which carried real passionate conviction was ... the hatred of the Jews".<sup>56</sup> According to Ruether, "Nazism arose as the final repository of all this heritage of religious and secular anti-Semitism, making Jews responsible for capitalism and communism simultaneously! The racial theory was new, but the stereotypes of hatred were old." Even the racial theory was not completely new: Ruether herself points out that the Nuremberg laws were foreshadowed four hundred years earlier in Spain by the "laws of purity of blood".<sup>57</sup>

The Reformation brought about no fundamental change in theological attitudes to the Jewish people. We may be puzzled by the fury of Martin Luther's invective, but we are sadly aware of its consequences. "Verily a hopeless, wicked, venomous and devilish thing is the existence of these Jews," he wrote, "who for fourteen hundred years have been, and still are, our pest, torment and misfortune. They are just devils and nothing more."<sup>58</sup> Some of his later

references to Jews are extremely scatological, reinforcing the link with the devil.<sup>59</sup> One would like to believe that his mind was unbalanced when he wrote such things. In 1938 the Nazi party honoured the anniversary of his birth with Kristallnacht (November 10).

Protestants continued to uphold the view that Jews had forfeited their right to be Jews. Even Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose involvement in the plot to kill Hitler would cost him his life, was not exempt from this theological weakness. In a response to the Aryan Clauses of 1933 he argued thus:

The church of Christ has never lost sight of the thought that the "chosen people", who nailed the redeemer of the world to the cross, must bear the curse of its action through a long history of suffering.... But the history of the suffering of this people, loved and punished by God, stands under the sign of the final home-coming of the people of Israel to its God. And this home-coming happens in the conversion of Israel to Christ.<sup>60</sup>

Bonhoeffer was therefore compelled, theologically, to show more concern for Jewish converts to Christianity than for Jews who remained Jews. Theologians parted company with Hitler over his failure to distinguish between the two. The racial myth allowed for no exceptions: all Jews were condemned by birth.

In Your People, My People Roy Eckardt has sought to prove that the Jews were not in fact responsible for having Jesus put to death.<sup>61</sup> This is a well-intentioned line of argument, but the issue of who ultimately bears responsibility for the crucifixion is a red herring. It may be comforting to know that the Romans and not the Jews were to blame, since no one is likely to set fire to the Vatican as a result; the problem, however, stems from the charge of deicide itself, which is inherently antisemitic. One has only to consider that most of the Jews alive at the time of the crucifixion would have been unaware that a man called Jesus of Nazareth had ever existed, to realize that the imputation of collective guilt is a calumny. The Augustinian view that God punishes the Jews for refusing to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah, albeit they are to be preserved as negative witnesses to the truth of Christianity, is hardly less pernicious, even if it has the distinction of greater subtlety.

## Christian Antisemitism Today

Do these prejudices have any currency after Auschwitz? Alas, yes. Charlotte Klein's Anti-Judaism in Christian Theology highlights numerous instances of contemporary hostility. Sometimes a prejudice is modified in such a way as to seem respectable. This is the most heinous kind of self-deception, if not downright sham. Georg Fohrer, for example, a German Old Testament scholar, had this to say in 1969:

What then is the deeper reason for the terrible sufferings which have constantly afflicted Jewry? They are not simply - as Christians frequently thought - the consequence of rejecting Jesus, still less a punishment for this.... These sufferings can be understood at most as the result of the failure of Judaism to perform its task - or of its denial of this task - which itself includes the rejection of Jesus. Nor are the sufferings of Jewry - as Jews frequently think - the consequence of the fulfilment of Israel's divine task, through which it has become the object of mankind's hatred; for Judaism has not in fact fulfilled its task. It suffers indeed on account of that task which still faces it, by which ... it is marked, which makes it seem like a foreign body in the world: the world for which it was intended to be an example and model, sign and pointer to an existence founded in God, and - by fulfilling its task - a permanent call to decision for God. But Jewry suffers also because it has always failed to seize this task, by understanding it wrongly, refusing to fulfil it, or rejecting it outright, and seeking security instead in the world in its own way.<sup>62</sup>

It is revealing that Christian error merits the past tense ("as Christians frequently thought") while Jewish error merits the present ("as Jews frequently think") - even though the Christian error in question, that Jewish suffering is a punishment for the rejection of Jesus, persists today.<sup>63</sup>

By holding Jews responsible for their own affliction, Fohrer absolves the real criminals of their guilt. He also sanctions that indifference to the suffering of others which says, in effect, "They've only themselves to blame." Had Christians been sent by the train-load to the gas chambers, would Fohrer have then rebuked them for failing to perform their divine task? Or would he have hailed them as martyrs, witnesses to the truth, and so on? For a Christian to accuse Jews of spiritual failure is rubbing salt into the wound. The insinuation that Jews are preoccupied with the acquisition of wealth ("seeking security instead in the world in its own way") is, of course, a standard antisemitic jibe. I don't think we have to dignify it with the name of anti-Judaism.

The obduracy of some modern theologians is beyond belief. At least two German Catholics are prepared to ride roughshod over recent history. "Only because God cannot forget his people ... he chastises it harshly and often," Michael Schmaus has written. And according to Heinrich Schlier, "On every Jew the mark of God's wrath is imprinted." There is support for these ideas outside Germany too. Pierre Benoit in France, for example, asserts that "every member of the Jewish race bears the penalty of the crime of Calvary in that he receives from his race a religion deprived of that messianic flowering which its God offered to it and which the responsible leaders of this religion did not want at the decisive moment".<sup>64</sup> Benoit's choice of the word "race" is surely significant. Like Fohrer, he regards "Israel's failure in its mission" as a cause of antisemitism rather than a pretext for it.

Unfortunately, even sympathetic Catholic theologians have failed to see the connection between conservative dogmatics and popular antisemitism. Alan Davies makes this point forcefully in Anti-Semitism and the Christian Mind.<sup>65</sup> The Second Vatican Council appeared to offer the promise of reform, but its "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" (1965) stopped short of radical change. Roy Eckardt reveals how a reference that exonerated the Jews of deicide, approved a year earlier, was replaced in the official Declaration with the more cautious statement that "the Jews should not be presented as rejected by God or accursed, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures".<sup>66</sup> Augustin Cardinal Bea later defended the decision not to repeal the charge of deicide on the grounds that it would have called into question the divinity of Christ! According to the Declaration, "Jerusalem did not recognize the time of her visitation, nor did the Jews, in large number, accept the Gospel; indeed, not a few opposed its spreading."<sup>67</sup> Michael McGarry takes issue with Eckardt over the latter's negative interpretation of this final draft. In an attempt to show it in a kinder light, he cites the statement that "the Jews still remain most dear to God because of their fathers", only to concede

that the qualification is "unfortunate".<sup>68</sup>

The Protestant churches have also been slow to change. Eckardt provides a critical analysis of the statement on "Israel: People, Land and State" adopted by the General Synod of the Reformed Church of Holland in 1970, pointing out how its various errors stem from an over-literal reading of the New Testament.<sup>69</sup> The dangers of an unquestioning belief in scriptural authority are all too plain. James Daane makes them even plainer:

According to the New Testament records, Jews desired, plotted, and promoted the execution of Jesus.... No rewriting of history by those interested in freeing the Jews from responsibility for the crucifixion, or by script writers of modern movies, dispels these claims of the New Testament historical records.<sup>70</sup>

Such blithe assurance is terrifying. Another Protestant theologian, by contrast, attacks the inhumanity of this outlook. "The Christians have no one to condemn but themselves," he writes, "that the cross remains a sign of boundless human cruelty rather than an arrow of hope pointing to the final victory of the Kingdom of God."<sup>71</sup>

### Christian-Jewish Relations

In The Crucifixion of the Jews (1975) this particular theologian - Church historian Franklin Littell - looks to the State of Israel as a sign of God's continuing fidelity to his people, and makes support for it the basis of a revitalized Christianity:

The crucifixion and resurrection of the Jewish people is a sign that God is not mocked, that pride brings the biggest battalions low in the end, that the Author and the Judge of history blesses the Suffering Servant and brings the human hero low.<sup>72</sup>

The equation of theological truth with the founding of a political state is a tenuous one, as I argued in Chapter 4, especially where justifying Auschwitz is concerned. In Your People, My People Roy Eckardt gets round this by appealing to two levels of perception. "We may celebrate the resurrection of the State of Israel," he claims, "yet never justify the crucifixion of Auschwitz as any kind of exchange for Israel." It is the eye of faith, apparently, which discerns

"an ultimate correlation of Auschwitz-Israel".<sup>73</sup> In Jews and Christians (1986)

he goes further, making the role of witness to the State of Israel the new cornerstone of Christian redemption:

The state of Israel may be construed as a liberating, divine-historical event, which, in addition to being an end in itself for the sake of the Jewish people and human freedom everywhere, acts to heal the history that has profaned the Resurrection of Jesus into a weapon of victimization.<sup>74</sup>

The State of Israel, then, is seen as the proof that the Jews are not cursed by God for rejecting Christ, as well as a test for the sincerity of Christian penitence. Eckardt's commitment to uprooting antisemitism leads him at times to assume an authority he doesn't really possess. He champions Jewish autonomy even in the sight of God, when this is something Jews must decide for themselves:

How is the past to be redeemed? How is the Final Solution finally to be annihilated? There is no way, save through the radical transformation of the covenant. The covenant of demand means divine consent to Jewish oppression. The elect were informed that they were going to have to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod. 19:6). There is no theological or moral way to give answer to the Endlösung unless we arrange a decent and fitting burial for this entire idea. There is no way to give answer until we beat into the dust the myth of the Jew as "suffering servant". The gestalt beyond all convenantal demands, the forming of full Jewish humanity, is the birth of the epoch F.S., after the Final Solution.<sup>75</sup>

Christian theologians must let go of the conviction that they know what is best for Jews. Dialogue and didacticism are not synonymous.

While much has been done to improve Christian-Jewish relations, the problem in the end is a theological one, as Rosemary Ruether underlines:

There is no way to rid Christianity of its anti-Judaism, which constantly takes social expression in anti-Semitism, without grappling finally with its Christological hermeneutic itself.<sup>74</sup>

Various attempts have been made to do just that. In "A Statement to our Fellow Christians", released in the summer of 1973 by a group of Christian theologians who had worked for four years on the topic of Israel in its several dimensions, the third clause dealt specifically with Christology:

The singular grace of Jesus Christ does not abrogate the convenantal relationship of God with Israel (Rom. 11:1-2). In Christ the Church shares in Israel's election without superseding it. By baptism and faith the Christian, as the Roman liturgy says, passes over to the sonship of Abraham and shares in the dignity of Israel.<sup>77</sup>

This is doubtless an improvement on the traditional claim that salvation comes through Christ and Christ alone, and addressed to other Christians it may have some value; Jews themselves, however, have no reason to suppose that the Church shares in Israel's election.

The clause continues by interpreting the survival of the Jewish people ("despite the barbaric persecutions and the cruel circumstances under which they were forced to live") as a sign that the Covenant remains intact, and concludes with a vote of thanks:

For our spiritual legacy and for all that the Jews have done for the whole human race we Christians are grateful to God and to the people whom God has chosen as a special instrument of his kindness.

This in itself is hardly an adequate response to the history of antisemitism. To be fair, the fifth clause of the Statement does broach the teaching of contempt (though plays down the role of the New Testament in this), and the Statement as a whole is directed against theological anti-Judaism. But rediscovering the Jewish roots of Christianity, which is advocated at the start, is an unlikely antidote to antisemitism. In saying that Jesus himself was a Jew I am merely stating the obvious, and yet this has never inhibited religiously-inspired Jew-hatred. With reference to the crisis in the Middle East, the Church is urged "to attend to its role as agent of reconciliation", as if the Church had fulfilled this role in the past. And the final clause is an appeal to enlightened self-interest. "The pain of the past," it begins, "has taught us that antisemitism is a Pandora's box from which spring not only atrocities against Jews but also contempt for Christ."<sup>78</sup>

Rosemary Ruether takes up this last point in her contribution to Antisemitism and the Foundations of Christianity. "The modern racial antisemite from Voltaire to Hitler," she argues, "hates the Jews as a way of hating the Jewishness in Christianity. He wants to remake his identity on a non-Christian basis, by nostalgically calling up some heroic pagan self which he imagines existed before the Western 'soul' was corrupted by this debilitating Jewish faith via Christianity."<sup>79</sup> It is a view shared by a Jewish theologian:



The ancient Jewish-Christian quarrel over the true Israel led to the utilization of the original Israel as a surrogate victim for the presumed sins of the New Israel in effecting the alienation of the German people from their native traditions.<sup>80</sup>

I can only suppose that the racial antisemite has been unable to hate Christians directly as a matter of expediency. But whatever the grounds for believing that the Jewishness of Christianity is the real target of modern antisemitism, we must remember it is Jews who have had to suffer for it.

Ruether describes Nazism as "the demonic anti-Christianity of ex-Christians",<sup>81</sup> an insight that allows us to make a more explicit connection between Christian antisemitism or anti-Judaism (the distinction is frequently meaningless in practice) and its secular counterpart. For Christian antisemitism is also a kind of anti-Christianity, a rejection of things Jewish without which there would be no Christianity in the first place. That so many Christians, both in Germany and in Eastern Europe where the killing centres were established, were gulled into complicity with the enemies of their faith must surely reflect this. The ascendancy of anti-Christianity throughout Christendom is a measure of the Church's blindness to its own self-negation. Obsessed by the retention of temporal power, it has sought to consolidate its authority with Jewish blood instead of Jewish spirituality. Only as the edifice begins to crumble do the truly prophetic voices get a hearing.

I do not think it is an exaggeration to describe Rosemary Ruether as a latter-day prophet. Other theologians have found fault with the historical accuracy of her work - even the venerable James Parkes has criticized Faith and Fratricide for being too slipshod, while at the same time commending Ruether for the courage of her challenge<sup>82</sup> - but on the whole this has been done in a spirit of defensiveness and does not affect her central thesis. "Without twenty centuries of Christian vilification of the Jews," she reminds us, "it would be impossible to understand why it was the Jews, rather than some other group, that became the particular sacrificial victim of Nazi nationalism." But she also takes pains to stress that the Christian "final solution" was conversion

rather than mass murder.<sup>83</sup>

### Is Jesus the Messiah?

Not that Ruether is inclined to let her co-religionists off the hook. She detects a reluctance on their part to learn about the darker side of the Church's history. Her own motivation for reversing this trend is not based purely on the need to come to terms with the past, but also on the desire to give Christianity a new impetus:

Nothing touches so near to the roots of Christian identity than its relation to Judaism. The very meaning of Jesus as a historical person and as a bearer of christological identity for us, the entire patterning of our theological systems, is profoundly linked with our ways of identifying ourselves over against the rejected parent religion. To reconsider that relation is, at the same time, to enter into deep transformations of our own theological identities. Reflection on our anti-Judaism is both searing judgment and grace to begin anew.<sup>84</sup>

This provides an additional rationale, then, for the modified Christology put forward at the end of Faith and Fratricide, part and parcel of which was the recognition that the Messiah of Jewish expectation has yet to come, a Messiah, that is, who will redeem history. "Is it possible to purge Christianity of anti-Judaism without at the same time pulling up Christian faith?" Ruether had asked. "Is it possible to say 'Jesus is Messiah' without, implicitly or explicitly, saying at the same time 'and the Jews be damned'?"<sup>85</sup>

Ruether has held back from becoming a Jew herself. That would nevertheless be a logical outcome of her argument:

In practice, Christianity tends to boil down to a religion of grace and good deeds structurally identical to Judaism in its assumptions about the unredeemed nature of man and history, except that it is far less sure what good deeds are commanded and is impenetrably obscurantist about the meaning of the word "Christ".

Instead, she chooses to look to Judaism to validate her belief in Christ. The historical Jesus was a faithful Jew, according to Ruether, with no thoughts of replacing Judaism by another religion, who lived "in lively expectation of the coming of God's Kingdom and judged his society in its light". This expectation drove him to his death. "The messianic meaning of Jesus' life, then," Ruether

concludes, "is paradigmatic and proleptic in nature, not final and fulfilled."<sup>86</sup>

Acknowledging that there are other authentic paradigms, Ruether reaffirms her own commitment to Christianity:

The vision which drove Christians into separation from the parental faith, however unrealized, still determines our religious consciousness and the way we appropriate the older stories. However much we may repent of having pursued this vision falsely, we cannot forget our own story. The messianic encounter which originally inspired us continues to be our foundational paradigm, through which we appropriate the earlier stories and out of which our history flows.<sup>87</sup>

The Messianic encounter she alludes to here is the crucifixion rather than the resurrection. The substance of Ruether's faith is inevitably attenuated. In order to preserve Easter yet purge it of its triumphal overtones, she reduces the resurrection to a symbol of hope. "Easter gives no license to vilify those who cannot 'see it'," she claims in Antisemitism and the Foundations of Christianity:

Indeed, we must see that Easter does not cancel the crucifixion at all. There is no triumph in history. Easter is hope against what remains the continuing reality of the cross. The crucified messiah is the paradigm of messianic hope under the conditions of unredeemed human history.<sup>88</sup>

As for the meaning of "the crucified messiah" (which in the Jewish tradition would be a contradiction in terms), Ruether explains that "In unredeemed times the messiah can only appear as the Victim." The crucifixion then becomes the Christian equivalent of the Holocaust as a lesson in divine powerlessness. Does this mean that the crucifixion should be regarded as a catastrophe on a par with the Holocaust? I am sure Ruether does not intend us to draw this conclusion, but her argument is ambiguous. "Jews do not need the cross of Jesus to know about destruction and divine abandonment," she asserts. "The Holocaust needs no interpretation by the cross for them. It is unmediated reality."<sup>89</sup> We could also say that Jews had no need of the cross before the Holocaust to know about such things, though it was the indirect source of that knowledge.

The point is that there are grave difficulties about centring one's faith

on the crucifixion. As a symbol of destruction it can be used to destroy as much as to enlighten. What it teaches us about divine abandonment is only significant if Jesus of Nazareth really were the Son of God, which means placing it in the context of the resurrection. The difference between the crucifixion and the Holocaust as events should be clear: the one is primarily a religious event, the other completely historical. The importance of the crucifixion is not that it happened but, rather, that it is believed to have happened, just as most Christians continue to believe that the resurrection also happened. The importance of the Holocaust is that it did happen, whether we believe it or not.

Christianity, for Ruether, is like the prodigal son.<sup>90</sup> In Jews and Christians Roy Eckardt makes the same analogy.<sup>91</sup> An earlier book by him was called Elder and Younger Brothers. Malcom Hay suggests a different sibling relationship in the final title of his pioneering study of Christian antisemitism: Thy Brother's Blood. But whether Christians are seen as prodigal sons or Cains, their family ties remain ambivalent. Eckardt has diagnosed the heart of the problem:

We say that we hear God's voice through the "Old Testament", but we are unable to authenticate our central proclamations in a manner consistent with that Testament: here is the heart of the Christian problem. There is just no way to speak of God's "fulfillment of his purpose in Christ" without implying that this means "fulfillment" for Jews. But the centuries-old obstacle remains that the Hebrew Bible, Holy Scripture, gives no unequivocal support to the contention that Jesus was the consummation of Israelite hopes.<sup>92</sup>

Like Ruether, Eckardt is forced to recognize the impasse of belief in a Messiah who is not regarded as such by the very people who await him. Unlike Ruether, his proposed solution is to abandon Christianity altogether, to deny God for God's sake. This proposal is rhetorical. Eckardt salvages his vocation by resorting to paradox:

Certain paradoxical demands appear inescapable: to deplore Christianity, in the name of Christian faith; to announce the death of the Christian God, in the name of the living God; to proclaim the death of the resurrected Christ, in the name of the Christ who may one day come.<sup>93</sup>

## Making Amends

Eckardt is more intelligible when he appeals to the need for practical atonement. He points to the example of the German Reconciliation Movement (Aktion Sühnezeichen), started in 1958 as a way of enabling German young people to do voluntary work among Jews and other so-called enemies of the Third Reich. "Love penetrates with the light of redemption into the dark world of human depravity," Eckardt is moved to announce. "Through deeds of vicarious suffering - necessarily cleansed and sustained at every moment by the forgiving grace of God - the fateful power of guilt is at last broken."<sup>94</sup> But is it? The criminal gets off scot-free while someone else takes the rap. In Eichmann in Jerusalem, in a parenthetical response to a remark made by Martin Buber after Eichmann's execution, Hannah Arendt argues that only the guilty can atone for their guilt:

It is quite gratifying to feel guilty if you haven't done anything wrong: how noble! Whereas it is rather hard and certainly depressing to admit guilt and repent. The youth of Germany is surrounded, on all sides and in all walks of life, by men in positions of authority and in public office who are very guilty indeed but who feel nothing of the sort. The normal reaction to this state of affairs should be indignation.<sup>95</sup>

This has implications for the question of Christian responsibility in relation to Auschwitz. I make no apologies for repeating myself: calls for the confession of guilt are far less pertinent than Ruether's insistence on tackling the doctrinal bias that gives rise to antisemitism within the Church. The donning of hair shirts is no substitute for honest self-criticism. Even the famous Stuttgart Declaration by the Council of the German Evangelical Church (the Confessing Church) in October 1945 was largely misplaced - it said too little too late. Its signatories were anyway men who had least to reproach themselves with, and, in spite of its penitential tone, there was no explicit reference to the destruction of the Jews. Thus:

With great pain we say: Unending suffering has been brought by us to many peoples and countries.<sup>96</sup>

The shift to an optimistic view of the future - "Now a new beginning is to be made in our churches" - may be understood as an attempt to move beyond

contrition, even if, according to one scholar at least, the Confessing Church was to abandon its oppositional role in the freer circumstances of the post-war world.<sup>97</sup>

Are there any grounds for optimism today? Even if we accept Michael McGarry's resolution of the Christological dilemma - that there are two complementary covenants - it does not follow that relations between Christians and Jews will improve, although McGarry hopes they will:

A theological pluralism, fleshed out by a logos-Christology which would grant and account for a Christ who is Messiah for Christians and for the abiding validity of the Jewish tradition for Jews, may, in the end, bring about a new rapprochement between Jew and Christian.<sup>98</sup>

Alan Davies emphasizes throughout Anti-Semitism and the Christian Mind that Christians must learn to understand Judaism on its own terms, but seems to endorse the Liberal Protestant notion that Jews and Christians, as custodians of an essentially identical revelation, need each other. His prescription for dialogue to help eliminate mutual misconceptions, by way of a prelude to deeper dialogue based on mutual respect, is backed up by an appeal from the Christian side for a diaconate to the Jews that would shoulder responsibility towards eliminating antisemitism. He is aware all the same of a fundamental tension between the two faiths. God will resolve who is right at the end of time, he assures us. "In the meantime, each faith has its own distinctive witness to bear."<sup>99</sup>

Davies bases his ecumenism on an interpretation of the life of Jesus:

Jesus was unconcerned with converting people to a religion, but deeply concerned with serving them through his personal enactment of the role of a servant. His ministry provides the church with its true pattern of mission.<sup>100</sup>

This enables Davies to skirt the vexed question of the divinity of Christ. Roy Eckardt follows suit. "Jesus was a specialist in celebrating the image of God," he claims. "The integrity and the irreplaceableness of Christianity," he continues, "center in Christian people and what they do rather than in an exclusivist dogma. John Hick identifies the peculiarity of Christianity as the response of discipleship to Jesus of Nazareth."<sup>101</sup> But large numbers of Christian people would be unable

to accept that Jesus is not the Messiah in an exclusive sense.

For evangelical Christians, the only true soteriology is faith in the Atonement. An illustration of what this means in practice is provided by the front-page story of the Evangelical Times, May 1985. Essentially a review article on The Cross and the Swastika by F.T. Grossmith, it recounts the conversion to Christianity of some of the Nazi war criminals awaiting sentence at Nuremberg. The American army chaplain given credit for this, Henry Gerecke, had no doubts as to the authenticity of these conversions, at least not as the article describes it:

Perhaps the most remarkable conversion was the melting of Ribbentrop, a cold, harsh man, disposed to argue and berate, and at first giving no sign of penitence. One of those condemned to die, he did in fact speak of the Lamb of God at the time of his death. "Then he turned to me and said - and my heart still warms to think of it - 'I'll see you again.'" That was the comment of the one who stood by him to the end.<sup>102</sup>

The thrust of the article seems to be that the greater the sinner saved, the greater the saviour (Jesus Christ, that is). The conversion of von Ribbentrop would therefore represent a real coup. This was the man who in September 1942 issued instructions to the effect that the evacuation of Jews from the various countries of Europe should be done with speed; the man who complained to Mussolini that "Italian military circles, and sometimes the German army itself, lacked a proper understanding of the Jewish question".<sup>103</sup> The Jews themselves, excepting those who had been baptized, were damned by their unbelief. First, hell on earth, then hell. If we concur with this model of salvation, Ribbentrop the mass murderer is in heaven while his victims endure eternal torment. The very least we can do for them is to let their ashes rest.

"After Auschwitz the Christian churches no longer wish to convert the Jews." Thus spoke Gregory Baum at an international symposium on the Holocaust in 1974.<sup>104</sup> If only it were true. Scholars often live in ignorance of the gulf between the enlightened exchanges that take place at prestigious conferences and the unreconstructed prejudices in society at large. It's almost as if these

scholars were too busy attending such conferences to notice how far the rest of the world lags behind. In Long Night's Journey into Day Roy and Alice Eckardt hold up a monograph on Die Judenfrage ("The Jewish Question") as an example of what might be called unrepentant Christianity.<sup>105</sup> Published in 1970 as part of a series devoted to "the strengthening of biblical faith and Christian life" and designed to reach large audiences in the churches, Die Judenfrage moves from a call for the reconciliation of Jews and Christians to an attack on the Jewish faith, the conclusion of which is that there can be no reconciliation until the Jews conquer their sins and turn to Christ (at which point antisemitism will cease to be a problem, it is claimed). The Eckardts refer to the debate within some German church circles over the tendency towards "a spiritual Final Solution". They quote Rudolf Pfisterer as saying that the Christian attempt to convert Jews is "nothing more than the continuing work of the Holocaust".<sup>106</sup> This is clearly an exaggeration - conversion is qualitatively different from genocide (as the Nazis themselves demonstrated in their contempt for anyone deemed to have Jewish blood) - but not without point.

The churches have no reason to be complacent. The vitality as well as the integrity of the Christian tradition are dependent on a thorough reappraisal of its attitude to Jews. Theologians like James Parkes, Malcom Hay, Roy Eckardt, Franklin Littell, Alan Davies, and, above all, Rosemary Ruether, have provided the necessary groundwork for institutional change. What matters finally, though, is the content of official pronouncements and the sermons being preached every Sunday. There is little evidence that popular beliefs have been seriously affected by the Holocaust. Jews are still thought to be responsible for the death of Christ.<sup>107</sup> Christian responsibility for Jewish deaths is not discussed.



## Notes

- (1) See, for example, Franklin H. Littell and Hubert G. Locke, eds., The German Church Struggle and the Holocaust (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1974).
- (2) John T. Pawlikowski, The Challenge of the Holocaust for Christian Theology (New York: Center for Studies on the Holocaust/Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 1978), p.11.
- (3) The phrase is attributed to Jules Isaac, the author of Jésus et Israël (1948), which was written in hiding during the war. See also his Christian Roots of Antisemitism, trans. Dorothy and James Parkes (London: Council of Christians and Jews, 1960).
- (4) Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism (London: André Deutsch, 1986), p.xi.
- (5) *Ibid.*, pp.11-53, 89-120 (especially 102).
- (6) Norman Cohn, Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World-Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1967), pp.41-51.
- (7) Cited by Cohn, p.50. (From La Franc-Maçonnerie, Synagogue de Satan by Mgr Meurin, Archbishop of Port-Louis, Mauritius.)
- (8) Cohn, p.103.
- (9) *Ibid.*, p.67.
- (10) In May 1920 the Times devoted a long article to the recent English translation of the "Protocols", speculating thus:  
"What are these 'Protocols'? Are they authentic? If so, what malevolent assembly concocted these plans, and gloated over their exposition? Are they a forgery? If so, whence comes the uncanny note of prophecy, prophecy in parts fulfilled, in parts far gone in the way of fulfilment? Have we been struggling these tragic years to blow up and extirpate the secret organization of German world dominion only to find beneath it another, more dangerous because more secret? Have we, by straining every fibre of our national body, escaped a 'Pax Germanica' only to fall into a 'Pax Judaica'? The 'Elders of Zion', as represented in their 'Protocols', are by no means kinder taskmasters than William II and his henchmen would have been." (Cited by Cohn, pp.152-153.)
- (11) Arendt, Origins, pp.6-7.
- (12) Cited by Cohn, p.204.
- (13) Arendt, Origins, p.8.
- (14) Cohn, Warrant for Genocide, p.254.
- (15) According to James Parkes in Judaism and Christianity (London: Victor Gollancz, 1948), p.139. Bernard Malamud's novel The Fixer (1966), as we saw in Chapter 2, is based on one such case.
- (16) Cohn, Warrant for Genocide, pp.256, 265.

- (17) George Steiner, In Bluebeard's Castle (London: Faber & Faber, 1971), p.36.
- (18) George Steiner, The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H. (London: Faber & Faber, 1981), pp.120-124.
- (19) Steiner, In Bluebeard's Castle, p.40.
- (20) *Ibid.*, pp.38, 43.
- (21) *Ibid.*, pp.42, 46-48.
- (22) George Steiner, "The Long Life of Metaphor: An Approach to 'the Shoah'", Encounter 68 (February 1987), p.58.
- (23) *Ibid.*, p.59.
- (24) *Ibid.*
- (25) Richard L. Rubenstein, After Auschwitz (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), p.12.
- (26) A. Roy Eckardt, Your People, My People (New York: Quadrangle, 1974), pp.86, 79-80. Franklin Littell argues the same point:  
 "We return to the crisis of Christendom: that behind the facade of official religion and state-churches there is a baptized heathenism proved capable of the most wicked rebellion against God and most murderous action against those whose very existence reminds the rebellious gentiles of him." (Franklin H. Littell, The Crucifixion of the Jews (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p.87.)
- (27) This, at least, is the line taken by Rosemary Ruether. See "The Faith and Fratricide Discussion: Old Problems and New Dimensions", in Antisemitism and the Foundations of Christianity, ed. Alan T. Davies (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), p.233.
- (28) Eckardt, Your People, pp.80-81.
- (29) *Ibid.*, pp.83, 87.
- (30) See Lucy S. Dawidowicz, The War against the Jews 1933-45 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p.446.
- (31) Eckardt, Your People, pp.87, 89-90.
- (32) Alan T. Davies, Anti-Semitism and the Christian Mind (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969), p.50.
- (33) See his Preface to Antisemitism and the Foundations, ed. Davies, p.vii.
- (34) Parkes, Judaism and Christianity, p.167.
- (35) Eckardt, Your People, p.13.
- (36) Rosemary Radford Ruether, Faith and Fratricide: The Christian Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism (New York: Seabury Press, 1974). Antisemitism and the Foundations of Christianity (see above) is devoted explicitly to responses to this work.

- (37) Rosemary Ruether, "The Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism", in Theology and Racism 1: The Bible, Racism and Anti-Semitism, ed. Kenneth Leech (London: Race, Pluralism and Community Group of the Board for Social Responsibility of the Church of England, 1985), p.15.
- (38) Ruether, Faith and Fratricide, p.89.
- (39) See John T. Pawlikowski, "New Testament Anti-Semitism: Fact or Fable?" in Theology and Racism, pp.31, 42-43.
- (40) Ruether, Faith and Fratricide, pp.94, 148.
- (41) See Malcom Hay, Thy Brother's Blood: The Roots of Christian Anti-Semitism (New York: Hart Publishing Co., 1975), p.25. (Hay's book was originally published as The Foot of Pride. A paperback edition (1960) was given the name Europe and the Jews.)
- (42) Cited by Hay, p.26.
- (43) Ibid., pp.30-31.
- (44) See Ruether, Faith and Fratricide, p.180.
- (45) Ibid., p.194.
- (46) Hay, Thy Brother's Blood, p.37.
- (47) Cited by Hay, pp.57, 91.
- (48) Ruether, Faith and Fratricide, pp.205-206.
- (49) See Hay, Thy Brother's Blood, pp.67, 87, 107; Ruether, Faith and Fratricide, p.209.
- (50) Cited by Hay, p.89.
- (51) Ibid., p.108.
- (52) Rubenstein, After Auschwitz, p.18.
- (53) See Hay, Thy Brother's Blood, p.124.
- (54) Ibid., pp.141-142, 162, 164-165.
- (55) Ruether, Faith and Fratricide, p.221.
- (56) Mary Midgley makes this assertion in her philosophical essay on Wickedness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p.61.
- (57) Ruether, Faith and Fratricide, pp.222, 203.
- (58) Cited by Hay, p.167.
- (59) For example: "The Devil has eased himself and emptied his belly again - that is a real halidom for Jews and would-be Jews, to kiss, batten on, swill and adore; and then the Devil in his turn also devours and swills what these good pupils spue and eject from above and below." (Cited by Hay, p.168.)
- (60) Dietrich Bonhoeffer, No Rusty Swords, trans. Edwin H. Robertson and

- John Bowden (London: Collins, 1965), p.226.
- (61) Eckardt, Your People, Chapter 3 (pp.29-41).
- (62) Cited by Charlotte Klein in Anti-Judaism in Christian Theology, trans. Edward Quinn (London: SPCK, 1978), pp.95-96.
- (63) See the survey of Christian beliefs and antisemitism in Harold E. Quinley and Charles Y. Glock, Anti-Semitism in America (New York: The Free Press, 1979), Chapter 6, especially pp.102-105.
- (64) Cited by Klein, pp.107, 110, 123.
- (65) See Davies, Anti-Semitism and the Christian Mind, p.81.
- (66) Cited by Eckardt in Your People, p.44.
- (67) Ibid., p.45. Cardinal Bea's defence of the final Declaration is referred to by Alan Davies in Anti-Semitism and the Christian Mind, p.86.
- (68) Michael B. McGarry, Christology after Auschwitz (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), p.24.
- (69) Eckardt, Your People, pp.56-67.
- (70) Cited by Davies in Anti-Semitism and the Christian Mind, p.112.
- (71) Littell, Crucifixion of the Jews, p.130.
- (72) Ibid., pp.98-99.
- (73) Eckardt, Your People, p.230.
- (74) A. Roy Eckardt, Jews and Christians (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p.156.
- (75) A. Roy Eckardt with Alice L. Eckardt, Long Night's Journey into Day: Life and Faith after the Holocaust (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1982), p.79. This forthright declaration hardly squares with an acknowledgement later in the same book; viz., "Insofar as the Jewish people, or some among them, desire to perpetuate a special calling or task, that is their business, or at least it is their right. For Christians to deny that right out of hand is to fail to honour Jewish integrity." (p.106) Having criticized Jürgen Moltmann for making demands upon Jews, the Eckardts are forced to question their own position:  
 "The poignant fact is that Christian opposition to Jewish martyrdom may itself be invaded by Christian imperialism. A great deal depends on the intent and content. Is the message from the Christian side the counsel of friends, or is it a fresh, if inverted, form of yet another demand upon Jews?" (p.120)  
 They go on to claim that their point is that extreme Jewish suffering, after Auschwitz, "is opposed and indeed repented of by God himself", and that this imposes certain obligations on human beings, especially those who are also Christians. "Unavoidably, we are trespassing upon an intra-Jewish conflict," they confess (p.121). But if Jews want the counsel of friends, they are quite capable of seeking it for themselves. The Eckardts give it to them anyway. "We must conclude", they insist, "that as a Jewish option the theology of victimization, that terrible but natural child of the covenant of demand, was put to death in the murder camps." (p.125)

- (76) Ruether, Faith and Fratricide, p.116.
- (77) Cited by Littell in Crucifixion of the Jews, Appendix A, p.135. A more sophisticated version of this argument is to be found in Paul Van Buren's Discerning the Way: A Theology of the Jewish Christian Reality (New York: Seabury Press, 1980). Van Buren suggests that Christianity is the God of Israel's means of reaching out to the gentiles (p.142). This may provide an alternative to the "theology of displacement" which has sought to abrogate salvation for the Jews, but instead it leaves one asking what the status of other religions is. Is Christianity the only way for the gentiles?
- (78) Littell, Crucifixion of the Jews, pp.135, 137-8.
- (79) Ruether, "The Faith and Fratricide Discussion", p.247.
- (80) Rubenstein, After Auschwitz, p.9.
- (81) Ruether, "The Faith and Fratricide Discussion", p.247.
- (82) See his Preface to Antisemitism and the Foundations, ed. Davies, p.xi.
- (83) Ruether, "The Faith and Fratricide Discussion", pp.248, 250.
- (84) Ibid., p.231.
- (85) Ruether, Faith and Fratricide, p.246.
- (86) Ibid., pp.244-245, 249.
- (87) Ibid., p.255.
- (88) Ruether, "The Faith and Fratricide Discussion", p.251.
- (89) Ibid., p.253. ("The crucifixion, the Holocaust, are for each of us our intimate knowledge of divine powerlessness before the evils of history.")
- (90) Ruether, Faith and Fratricide, pp.254-255.
- (91) Eckardt, Jews and Christians, pp.88-89.
- (92) Eckardt, Your People, My People, p.76.
- (93) Ibid., pp.98, 248.
- (94) Ibid., p.255.
- (95) Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), p.229.
- (96) Cited by Franklin H. Littell in The German Phoenix (New York: Doubleday, 1960), Appendix C, p.189.
- (97) See J.S. Conway, "The German Church Struggle and Its Aftermath", in Jews and Christians after the Holocaust, ed. Abraham J. Peck (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), p.43.
- (98) McGarry, Christology after Auschwitz, p.103.

- (99) Davies, Anti-Semitism and the Christian Mind, pp.138, 172.
- (100) Ibid., p.188.
- (101) Eckardt, Jews and Christians, p.153.
- (102) "Nuremberg: Nazis' Turning Point" (by Victor Budgen), Evangelical Times, May 1985, pp.1-3 (p.3).
- (103) See Martin Gilbert, The Holocaust (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1987) pp.466, 543.
- (104) See Eva Fleischner, ed., Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era? (New York: Ktav, 1977), p.113.
- (105) Rosemary Ruether has given us a definition of its obverse - repentant Christianity:  
 "A repentant Christianity is a Christianity which has turned from the theology of Messianic triumphalism to the theology of hope. This is possible only if we recognize that Messianic hope is not primarily behind us, as a fait accompli, but is ahead of us, as a horizon of redemption that still eludes us both, Christian and Jew." (In Auschwitz, ed. Fleischner, p.92.)  
 For the Eckardts' discussion of Die Judenfrage, see Long Night's Journey into Day, pp.83-85.
- (106) Eckardt and Eckardt, Long Night's Journey, p.85.
- (107) See Quinley and Glock, Anti-Semitism in America, p.102.

## CONCLUSION

I fail to understand! thought Herzog, as this good man, jowls silently moving, got off the stand. I fail to ... but this is the difficulty with people who spend their lives in humane studies and therefore imagine once cruelty has been described in books it is ended. Of course he really knew better - understood that human beings would not live so as to be understood by the Herzogs. Why should they?

Saul Bellow, Herzog

It is now just over a month since I attended an international conference on the Holocaust in Oxford.<sup>1</sup> Emblazoned with the title "Remembering for the Future", this conference brought home to me how much has already been forgotten. Survivors present complained of being treated as invalids or as objects of curiosity. They resented what they felt to be the implications of research into the effect of the trauma on their children.<sup>2</sup> "It's not a genetic disease," one pleaded. All the same, being a survivor has taken its toll. Those like Primo Levi who felt it incumbent on themselves to bear witness, have often paid a high price for their loss of privacy. Those who, on the contrary, drew a veil over the past have sometimes paid an even higher price for keeping silent. We are anxious to commemorate the suffering but unable as yet to confront it. It is only proper that survivors should insist on reminding us of their humanity. This is what the Nazis sought to deprive them of.

But we must not lose sight of the destruction either. Lucy Dawidowicz estimates that sixty-seven percent of Europe's Jewish population was annihilated in the Final Solution.<sup>3</sup> This staggering fact - the murder of nearly six million Jews for being Jewish - where it has evoked a response at all from non-Jews,

has led to a form of cultural necrophilia which it has been one of my chief concerns to question here. The confusion as to what is appropriate and what is not, however, still remains. In a recently published textbook on Approaches to Auschwitz (1987), written by a Jewish and a Christian theologian (Richard Rubenstein and John Roth respectively), William Styron's Sophie's Choice is one of the half dozen or so literary responses to the Holocaust put forward as seminal works of art.

My own thoughts on Sophie's Choice were made clear in Chapter 3. Let me reiterate my conviction that it is an execrable travesty of the experience of being a victim. Rubenstein and Roth begin their defence of it thus:

The novel's importance stems from its sustained reflection on the significance of choosing in a context of human domination. For if some Holocaust literature disillusion us about what is possible, Styron's story shows how victims themselves can be put in a position of participating, not willingly but still actively, in their own demise. This they do by making choices, a reality that subverts the optimistic assumption that choice makes life worth living and substitutes instead the realization that choices may make life unbearable. Under Nazi pressure, Jews and other victims still had to decide what to do. If those choices rarely permitted more than opting only between evils, which were not even clearly differentiated between "lesser" or "greater", the choices were no less real, and the Nazi scheme of destruction entailed that their victims had to make them.<sup>4</sup>

I can only assume that we have been reading different novels. Sophie Zawistowska is primarily a sexual victim, an erotic sacrifice, as I put it. This has very little to do with choosing and a great deal to do with the author's erotomania.

For most Jewish victims, moreover, choice-making was irrelevant once they reached Auschwitz. Dr Mengele and his assistants chose: one line for immediate gassing, the other for a more prolonged death from starvation, beatings, and exposure. Even Sophie's so-called choice, exceptional and therefore of no general significance, is not really a choice. When we speak of choosing, we imply a context of responsibility. If someone forces you to choose which of your two children to send to the gas chambers, you are no longer responsible for what happens. It is ridiculous to dignify this kind of torture with the notion of a choice.



"Although criticized for being preoccupied with sex, unscrupulously mixing fact and fiction, and substituting caricatures for characters," Rubenstein and Roth contend, "suffice it to say here that Sophie's Choice rises far above such objections." Suffice it not, gentlemen. This fails to take into account the passage I cited in which Sophie is subjected to sexual humiliation by her Jewish lover Nathan. "The merits of Styron's work are sufficiently obvious," the authors assume. "Most Americans who approach Auschwitz," they go on to claim, "especially but not exclusively non-Jews, will find much of Stingo in themselves."<sup>5</sup> But only if they are men. This is either a gross exaggeration, anyway, or a terrible indictment of American culture. I do not understand why anyone should want to ignore the obvious defects of Styron's work. Are some men so at ease with the colonization of female sexuality that they can embrace such prurient versions of the Holocaust without reflecting on the violence at the heart of them?

But if the argument over the worth of Sophie's Choice is destined to continue, one hopes that the book itself (and others like it) will have transient appeal. New disasters create new fashions, which is hardly reassuring but does at least prevent us from regarding the age's voyeurism as specific to the death camps. Rather, the trivialization of the Holocaust may be seen as symptomatic of a larger failure to impede the dynamic of atrocity in the world at large.

Another aspect of this trivialization that needs to be addressed, however, is the tendency, deplored by Primo Levi among others, to sanctify the victims. As Etty Hillesum wrote in her diary in July 1942, barely a year before she herself would perish in Auschwitz, "Many who are indignant about injustices are only indignant because the injustices are being inflicted on them. Their indignation is skin-deep."<sup>6</sup> The victims, after all, were human, which is the whole reason for protesting against their destruction. If they were guilty of no crime, neither were they preternaturally innocent. It seems crass to imagine that their sacrifice has any redeeming value: it was involuntary and without purpose. Suffering so extreme - call it affliction - is neither ennobling nor exemplary.

I believe that the quest for signs of God's presence in the midst of such desolation is inappropriate. It is simply unforgivable when this becomes a way of denying the catastrophe that Auschwitz represents. The canonization of Maksymilian Kolbe is a case in point. Were one to take Diana Dewar's hagiography of this Polish priest at face value - and the title Saint of Auschwitz makes it quite plain what that would entail - one might easily overlook the irrelevance of Kolbe's martyrdom to the fate of the Jews. Leaving aside the question of whether or not Kolbe was himself an antisemite, except to note in passing Dewar's glib response to this question,<sup>7</sup> the fact is he gave up his life for a fellow Pole. He had been deported to Auschwitz in the first place not for helping Jews, but because he was the founder of the Militia of the Immaculate, an order that combined devotion to the Virgin Mary with Polish nationalism.

The man whom Kolbe volunteered to replace (one of ten condemned to die in reprisal for someone's escape) had cried out that he had a wife and family, as Dewar tells it, so it is disingenuous of Dewar to then suggest that his identity was immaterial:

Kolbe died a lonely and seemingly anonymous death. He could not rely on the subject of his sacrifice to talk about it, and the identity of that man was immaterial; a stranger, he could have been an atheist, heretic, Jew or Freemason.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps it was a coincidence that Franciszek Gajowniczek turned out to be a devout Catholic, but his Polish identity would have been no secret. Which is not to belittle Kolbe's sacrifice, only to question the use that has been made of it. Kolbe died on 14 August 1941. It was not until the following month that the first gassings were carried out in Auschwitz - on an "experimental" basis in Block 11 (the gas chambers at Birkenau had yet to be constructed) - and not until the Wannsee Conference held on 20 January 1942 that the Final Solution was formally put into effect.<sup>9</sup> Dewar's lament for "the crucifixion of Poland" and insistence that "priests came second to Jews in Hitler's hate-list",<sup>10</sup> lead one to suspect that she wishes to appropriate Auschwitz as a symbol of Christian suffering. Kolbe was canonized by Pope John Paul II in October 1982, but to

call him "saint of Auschwitz" is wilfully misleading.

We may discern a similar disregard for historical accuracy in Thomas Keneally's transformation of Oskar Schindler into a kind of secular saint.<sup>11</sup> The emphasis on the individual's noble and courageous deeds reduces the context of near-total destruction to a dark backcloth against which these deeds shine brighter by contrast. Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who helped to save thousands of Jewish lives in Budapest, is another name that springs to mind. John Bierman's account of his exploits and later disappearance into the Soviet prison system, Righteous Gentile (1981), may even have provided a model for Schindler's Ark. The very idea of a Righteous Gentile appears to have inspired the unwarranted conclusion that the heroic behaviour of a few is sufficient to expiate the complicity of the many.

Less dramatic, and therefore largely ignored, are the daily acts of kindness that allow us to perceive a glimmer of humanity in the most inhuman circumstances. These anonymous demonstrations of virtue, just as heroic in their own way, always involved the risk of severe punishment. Emmanuel Ringelblum, the archivist of the Warsaw ghetto (himself killed with his wife and son on 7 March 1944), records in his journal entry for 19 November 1941, for example, that a Christian had been killed that day for throwing a sack of bread over the ghetto wall.<sup>12</sup> There is your true martyr, if martyrs are what you seek.

Rubenstein and Roth devote a chapter of Approaches to Auschwitz to a study of relations between Christians and Jews during the Holocaust (Chapter 7), highlighting the part played by Righteous Gentiles but bemoaning, too, the failure of the churches to offer more resistance to the Nazi regime. They also provide a chapter on "The Silence of God" (Chapter 10) that ends with a curious response to the tension between being unable to affirm traditional beliefs after the Holocaust and yet electing to continue with Jewish observance. "As the

horror of the Holocaust recedes in time," we are told, "religious Jews, although greatly reduced in number, may once again find themselves reducing the dissonance by declaring with the traditional Prayer Book that 'because of our sins all this has come upon us'. That time has not yet come, but it may be on its way."<sup>13</sup> But of the various attempts to incorporate the suffering into a pattern of redemption, this is the least tenable. Not only does it entail regarding Hitler and the SS as instruments of God's will, as Rubenstein himself pointed out in After Auschwitz,<sup>14</sup> it also makes light of the suffering of others.

What is forgotten is that the criminals themselves, even when brought to justice, have shown little sign of remorse. As time passes, the scale of the crime will inevitably appear to diminish. Other atrocities vie for our attention. But the crime remains unchanged. It is the world that is no longer the same. As Hannah Arendt has observed, "It is in the very nature of things human that every act that has once made its appearance and has been recorded in the history of mankind stays with mankind as a potentiality long after its actuality has become a thing of the past."<sup>15</sup> It happened, it can happen again.

Such a conclusion lacks originality, perhaps, but that does not make it less true. The difficulty is to establish what else can be said that isn't simply an evasion or an invitation to despair. As time passes, the unspeakable becomes the unspoken. The witnesses decrease in number. Their erstwhile persecutors grow old and die. A different enemy is abroad. The watchword is reconciliation. A few years ago, however, the Times published a thoughtful editorial on the question of Christian responsibility in relation to the Holocaust, at the end of which it stated:

The real problem of evil is how it is to be forgiven, and by whom.<sup>16</sup>

This became the theme of a couple of articles to follow.

The first of these articles, "The Holocaust Must Not Be Forgotten", by Rabbi Albert Friedlander, was published in the Times on 4 May 1985, on the eve of President Reagan's ill-advised visit to the cemetery at Bitburg (where

members of the SS are buried). Friedlander's central premise is that forgiveness comes from God and not by proxy. The living can only forgive the wrongs done to them; they cannot forgive on behalf of the dead.<sup>17</sup> Anthony Phillips, Chaplain of St John's College, Oxford, and respected by Jews for his involvement in interfaith dialogue, wrote an article in reply, published on June 8, under the heading "Why the Jews Should Forgive". "Without forgiveness there can be no healing within the community," he argued, "no wholeness, holiness." He went further, asserting that failure to forgive "adds to the sum total of evil in the world and dehumanizes the victims in a way the oppressors could never on their own achieve". But none of this prepared the reader for the extraordinarily careless remark with which Phillips ended his homily:

In remembering the Holocaust, Jews hope to prevent its recurrence: by declining to forgive, I fear that they unwittingly invite it.<sup>18</sup>

This strikes me as a continuation of antisemitism by other means. The Jews remain a "problem", we are led to believe, even if Hitler's uncompromising solution is viewed with horror. It is not that Phillips hates the Jews. Far from it. They are God's chosen people. But the logic of his conclusion is that they bring trouble on themselves. This is the logic of genocide: the victims are to blame. Moreover, when Phillips calls on Jews to exercise forgiveness, which he clearly regards as the Christian thing to do, he ignores the fact that those who need to be forgiven have rarely acknowledged that what they did (and what they did was murder Jewish men, women and children on a scale hitherto unknown) was wrong. His prescription for wholeness is anodyne, unrelated to the guilt of the perpetrators.

Phillips and others like him refuse to accept that something irreparable has taken place. Rather than confront the reality of Auschwitz, they invoke a concept of forgiveness that is tantamount to forgetting. Their amorphous love allows of no distinction between victim and executioner, as if the lamb were already lying down with the lion. This is not love but a denial of injustice. To forgive the unrepentant is to condone their offence.

Jews do not need instruction from Christians in the practice of virtue, however kindly it is meant. There is nothing kind about theological imperialism. Let me refer once more to the chance encounter, some years after the war, between Primo Levi and the Dr Müller who had been his overseer in the chemical laboratory at Auschwitz. As we saw in Chapter 1, Levi's record of their correspondence shows how Müller failed utterly to grasp the enormity of what had happened. He did at least read the copy of If This Is a Man Levi sent him, but wrote back to the author that he perceived in it "an overcoming of Judaism, a fulfillment of the Christian precept to love one's enemies". It seems fitting that Primo Levi should have the last word:

I declared myself ready to forgive my enemies, and perhaps even to love them, but only when they showed certain signs of repentance, that is, when they ceased being enemies. In the opposite case, that of the enemy who remains an enemy, who perseveres in his desire to inflict suffering, it is certain that one must not forgive him: one can try to salvage him, one can (one must!) discuss with him, but it is our duty to judge him, not to forgive him.<sup>19</sup>

## Notes

- (1) The agenda for the conference, which took place between 10-13 July 1988, was the impact of the Holocaust on Jews and Christians. This was divided into two basic themes: "Jews and Christians during and after the Holocaust" and "The Impact of the Holocaust on the Contemporary World". Some 600 people attended, I believe.
- (2) An example of such research is Generations of the Holocaust, ed. Martin S. Bergmann and Milton E. Jucovy (New York: Basic Books, 1982). In an Epilogue the editors offer a gloomy prognosis:  
"We realise that such a pessimistic view will evoke criticism; but so far as our own experience goes, it is not possible for a child to grow up, without becoming scarred, in a world where the Holocaust is the dominant psychic reality. With few exceptions, the mental health of children of survivors is in jeopardy; and our community owes them the second chance of recovery through psychological treatment." (p.312)
- (3) Lucy S. Dawidowicz, The War against the Jews 1933-45 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p.480. In countries like Poland the figure is much higher. Three million Polish Jews (out of a total of 3.3 million) were killed.
- (4) Richard L. Rubenstein and John K. Roth, Approaches to Auschwitz: The Legacy of the Holocaust (London: SCM Press, 1987), p.279.
- (5) *Ibid.*, pp.281-282. For the passage from Sophie's Choice and its ramifications, see Chapter 3 above, pp.107-108.
- (6) ETTY HILLESUM, ETTY: A DIARY 1941-43, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (London: Jonathan Cape, 1983), p.135.
- (7) Diana Dewar, Saint of Auschwitz: The Story of Maksymilian Kolbe (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1982), pp.8-10.
- (8) *Ibid.*, p.15.
- (9) See Dawidowicz, War against the Jews, pp.175-180.
- (10) Dewar, Saint, pp.79, 95.
- (11) My discussion of Schindler's Ark can be found at the end of Chapter 2.
- (12) Emmanuel Ringelblum, Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto, trans. Jacob Sloan (New York: Schocken, 1974), p.89.
- (13) Rubenstein and Roth, Approaches to Auschwitz, p.336.
- (14) Richard L. Rubenstein, After Auschwitz (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), p.153.
- (15) Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), p.250.
- (16) Reprinted as part of "Forgetting and Forgiving: The Post-Bitburg Controversy in Great Britain", in European Judaism 19 (Spring 1985), pp.3-17 (p.4).
- (17) *Ibid.*, pp.5-6.

- (18) Ibid., pp.6-8.
- (19) Primo Levi, The Periodic Table, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus/Sphere, 1986), pp.221-223.



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This bibliography is divided into eight sections, the first four of which comprise the various responses that have been the focus of my argument, and the rest a selection of other works consulted. Where a translation or a later edition has been used, the original date of publication is given in parentheses.

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