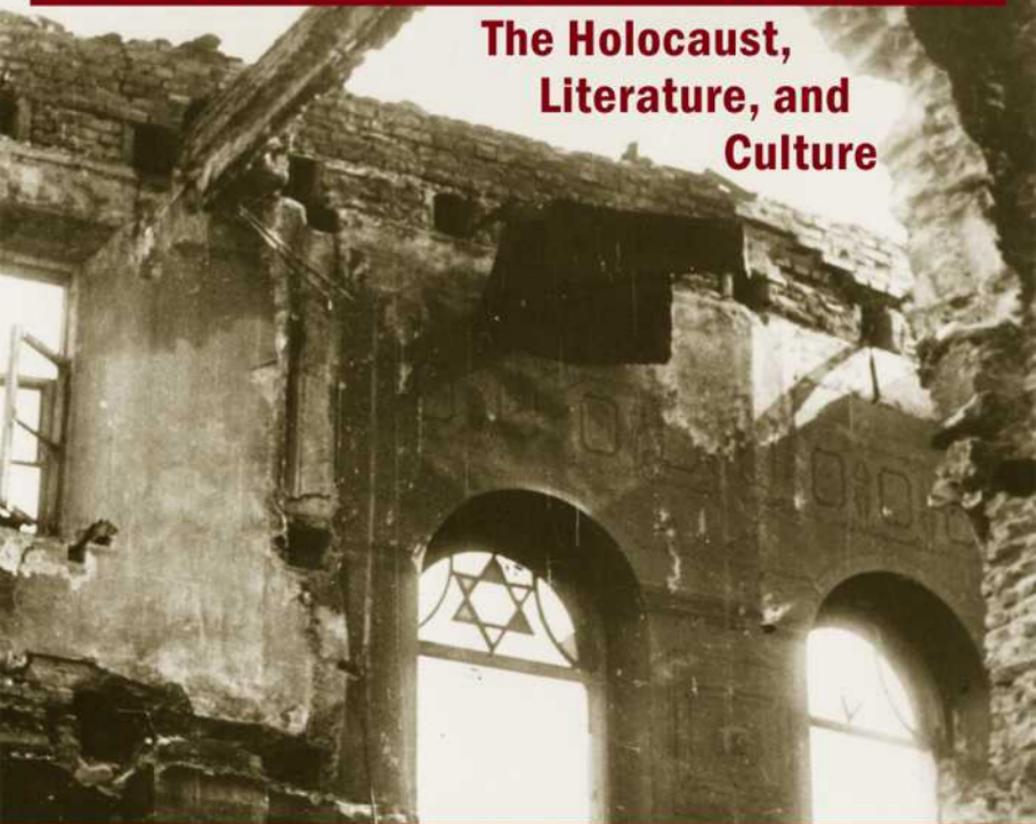


AFTER REPRESENTATION?

**The Holocaust,
Literature, and
Culture**



Edited by R. Clifton Spargo and Robert M. Ehrenreich

After Representation?

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The Holocaust, Literature, and Culture

EDITED BY
R. CLIFTON SPARGO
ROBERT M. EHRENREICH

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For our fathers,
Robert Clifton Spargo, 1941–2005, and Henry Ehrenreich, 1928–2008

And how are we to thank him properly?
who salted our cheerful, selfish tongues with farewell,
and gave us his name to ponder, to pass on, to keep.
–Irving Feldman, “Our Father”

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PREFACE

The generation of scholars who first focused on an emerging canon of Holocaust literature—figures such as George Steiner, Lawrence L. Langer, Alvin H. Rosenfeld, and Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi—were faced with the task of defining what Holocaust literature might be. Although this task was initially accomplished by a process of exclusion, asking a series of questions framed in the negative—When was representation inappropriate, and which sorts of representation might be inappropriate? What was it about the Holocaust that empiricist history-writing or literature or even testimony could not account for? What kinds of text shouldn't count as Holocaust literature? What should imaginative literature not do?—the legacy of these studies was an emergent critical discourse about the literature of witness and the limits of any representation of atrocity, the impact of which was felt across the discipline of literary studies as well as in other fields in the humanities.

These questions are no less urgent today for scholars who have found new ways of talking, for example, about silence, trauma, testimony, and memory—all of which are topics addressed in this collection. If the prevailing suspicion of Holocaust literature had once been focused on whether the literary imagination in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries was adequate to the task of representing atrocity while remaining faithful to the historicity of such devastating, immensely significant events, contemporary authors of Holocaust literature and scholars of their work have concentrated with ever greater concern on the cultural context in which such literature is produced. Moreover, the diversification of media for representing historical and contemporary events has increased the urgency of addressing the intersection between the hypothetically nonrepresentable event and the pervasive, representation-saturated environment. In the postmodern era—which is defined as much by the technologies of representation as by any other single cultural or political factor—it may be that other representational media have taken the lead in conveying the Holocaust to the general public. Amid the American public, both Jewish and non-Jewish alike, young people are increasingly likely to glean their first Holocaust memories from Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, much as a former generation once proved susceptible to *The Diary of Anne Frank*.¹ The space allotted

to Holocaust literature—which used to involve holding the line between, say, the facts of history and the long-term emotional and imaginative resonances of the event—has thus shrunk in recent years under the pressure of cultural accessibility rather than under the burdens of history or difficult memory and has forced us to reframe many of our questions about Holocaust memory.

The genesis of this volume was the 2001 Symposium on Literature and the Holocaust, organized by the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies (CAHS) of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. This symposium and the working sessions held prior to the public presentations were the first major CAHS programs dedicated exclusively to the study of literature on the Holocaust and were intended to provide a foundational sense of the current state of the field (i.e., the major topics, literatures, and issues being examined in our time) as well as to illustrate the increased recognition and importance of interdisciplinary research and literary studies in the previously historian-driven field of Holocaust studies.²

The scope of symposia is naturally limited by time and resources, however, and a great deal more work was thus invested in this volume to produce a fuller portrait of the main questions with which the field is currently grappling. Some of the original presentations were thus omitted; others were substantially reworked. In some cases participants in the symposium submitted largely new work for the volume; and some essays here come from contributors not at the symposium.

This collection addresses the contemporary state of the field by examining the debate in three, often interrelated areas of inquiry. Part One, entitled “Is the Holocaust Still to Be Written?” revisits one of the longstanding questions about “Holocaust writing,” as originally raised by Berel Lang’s seminal edited collection, *Writing and the Holocaust* (1989). Whereas that collection addressed historiographical questions about the uniqueness of the Holocaust as a historical event (e.g., specifically whether fiction and literary humor were appropriate responses to the Holocaust), the essays in Part One focus on how specific kinds of language currently shape the field of Holocaust studies: Geoffrey Hartman on literary versus historical writing and their different effects on collective memory; Sarah Horowitz and Petra Schweitzer on traumatic discourse and what it shows about people’s ability fully to absorb traumatic events such as the Holocaust; and Lang on claims about the possibility of realism and the language of bodily humiliation. All these essays confront the anxiety about the adequacy of conventional language and ordinary representational techniques in light of Holocaust suffering, and also implicitly address the question of whether there is still a lack of vocabulary to portray the disruptions of consciousness and culture that resulted from the Holocaust. These essays explore the competing imperatives operative in Holocaust writing—the pull between a language of radical discontinuity (e.g., the trauma as persistent interruption) and a language

that supposes the necessity of continuity (drawing upon tradition, nostalgic memory, and the resources of communal identity).

Part Two, entitled “A Question for Aesthetics?” asks just how important the medium of textual witness or imaginative documentation is to what it conveys. Even amid a literature characterized by a variety of anti-aesthetical postures, most famously perhaps that of Theodor Adorno, the remarkable persistence—even revisionary influence—of aesthetics continues to loom large. The focus of this section is on the place of aesthetics in Holocaust literature given the prevailing suspicions of representation that traditionally dominate the field. The essays by James E. Young on coming to terms with the concept of a Nazi aesthetics, by Michael Rothberg on the aesthetics of Holocaust and postcolonial fiction, and by Michael Bernard-Donals on the poetry of trauma and exile—all emphasize the inevitability of interpretive, even imaginative, representations of the past as part of the attempt to make sense of catastrophic history even as they measure how the Holocaust has been renewedly and variously interpreted in contemporary contexts.

Part Three, entitled “How Does Culture Influence Memory?” examines the emergent emphasis on the importance of contemporary cultural receptions in Holocaust studies and the sway of the cultural imagination on memories of atrocity, injustice, and suffering. Since culture is built on the functions of present society as well as on historiographical practices, even sometimes to the detriment of the facts of history, culture is also that category by which we must explain—under the interdisciplinary influence of insights imported from fields such as sociology and anthropology—how techniques of memory or popular cultural representations of the Holocaust alter or shape what we remember of the events that collectively constitute it. For example, Sidney Bolkosky discusses how over time changes in perception of the Holocaust have influenced survivor testimonies; Robert Eaglestone examines the influence of the Holocaust on modern interpretation of a pre-Holocaust literature treating the not-yet-named crime of genocide; R. Clifton Spargo investigates the impact of restrictive cultural regimes of memory on representations of the Holocaust, economic oppression, and slavery in American literature; and Erin McGlothlin’s essay examines the attention lately being paid in German literature to the figure of the perpetrator, as the disturbing sign of another historical continuity of culture, the recurring events of genocide and atrocity.

Many people deserve thanks for this volume. We are grateful to Alexander Rossino, Nicole Black, and Dawn Barclift, who helped organize the original 2001 symposium, and Beth Kressel of Rutgers University Press and Benton Aronovitz of Academic Publications at CAHS, who were instrumental in turning this into a published volume. We are also very appreciative to the Resnick family for the year that Spargo was able to spend at CAHS as the 2000–2001 Pearl Resnick Postdoctoral Fellow, during which time we were able to plan and put on the

symposium, and to begin planning this volume. Finally, and most important, the contributors deserve our greatest thanks for the excellent papers they presented and the hard work they invested in turning their presentations into final articles.

NOTES

1. Most critics of a strongly cultural-critical disposition tend to perceive the questions we pose to the Holocaust as measures of contemporary praxis rather than interventions in what we think ought to have occurred. An increased interest in the literary expressiveness of an already established canon of Holocaust literature, including both testimonial and fictional texts, and the increased output of fiction, poetry, and drama about the Holocaust by people who did not suffer it directly, may be a sign that the historical urgency of the events of 1933–1945 coincides with the multiplication of media and representational approaches to the Holocaust; to fail to address these cultural phenomena is to fail to consider what it means—for better or worse—to broad segments of the population. For a concise statement of the critic’s task to respond to inevitably mediating cultural representations, see Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), especially 179–188. For an argument premised on the pervasiveness of cultural memory of the Holocaust and cognizant of representations that stand in for history, which at the same time suggests how Philip Roth’s parodic rehearsal of the layerings of cultural memory reflect for his audience the ways in which the staged elements of memory may, by serving the expectations of contemporary audiences, also stand in the way of history, see R. Clifton Spargo, “To Invent as Presumptuously as Real Life: Parody and the Cultural Memory of Anne Frank in Roth’s *The Ghost Writer*,” *Representations* 76 (Fall 2001): 88–119.
2. The CAHS’s symposia convene senior and junior scholars from around the world and focus on understudied Holocaust subjects, the results of new research, or areas where additional inquiry is needed. The one-day open programs are preceded by three-day working sessions in which the participants discuss, deliberate, and debate the issues raised by their papers and plan potential post-symposium cooperation, such as this volume. Information on past symposia can be found on the museum’s web site at <http://www.ushmm.org/research/center/symposia>.

After Representation?

Introduction

On the Cultural Continuities of Literary Representation

R. CLIFTON SPARGO

... a miserable crust of moldy bread came to contain more truth, more eternity than all the pages of all the books put together. . . . Just as our bodies came to look alike, so our hearts harbored one single wish: bread and soup, thicker, if possible, than yesterday's. We were hungry for nothing else.

—Elie Wiesel, *One Generation After*

A Holocaust literature that took its imperatives from the existential conditions of the camps would begin always as at the end of culture, in a world of dying, degradation, and atrocity wherein all books and learning exist but as a faint memory of what it meant to be human in some other time, some other place. For Elie Wiesel, there is in fact no other condition from which a literature about the Holocaust might begin, which is to say, there is no way of speaking about the Holocaust in books except from within a state of historically conditioned anxiety about the limits placed ahead of time on any knowledge that literature might impart. Of course, to acknowledge the potential futility of literature—whether one speaks of the sacred scrolls of the Torah or the Talmud, or of literary memory from Homer through Virginia Woolf and Philip Roth—is by extension to cast doubt on all the cultural institutions through which ordinary people derive meaning, on synagogues, churches, and mosques, as well as on the countless number of political organizations, parties, and movements attempting to envision the just society. An antithesis between culture and the experience of the camps is a constant in testimonial literature about the Holocaust, in the writings of Wiesel as in those of Primo Levi and Charlotte Delbo, but also in the wide array of ordinary survivor testimony in which Auschwitz is represented as hellish, surreal, or so fantastical as to suggest that

what took place there could only have occurred on another planet. In *None of Us Will Return*, Delbo speaks for the internees of the camps, in a collective voice emptied of identity, describing an experience so antithetical to ordinary reality that those in the camps must imagine themselves “transported to another world” in which they have been exposed to “the breath of another life, a living death.”¹ In one of the lyrics inset within the narrative, Delbo’s fictional persona addresses those of us who stand within culture (“you who know”) in order to tell us about what became possible in that other world of the camps, how one could witness atrocious death without any affective response and could live a day that was more than a year, a minute that was more than a lifetime. Inside that state of being, reality as the rest of the world understood it was suspended. Indeed, all we might think we know of ordinary existence was likened there to an unrealistic memory (“far off in our memories,” Delbo’s persona proclaims, “we see the living”), as those who testified in the name of a dismal collectivity could speak the only truth to be uttered about such extreme suffering—a truth extraneous to all familiar values, alienated from all desire, signifying an endurance as perfectly precarious as it was altogether useless.

Perhaps no scholar has been as faithful in his writings about Holocaust literature to that alien world of the camps as Lawrence L. Langer. In *The Age of Atrocity* (1978), Langer perceived the peculiar challenge faced by a literature that would testify truthfully about atrocity and yet—amid “the inhuman debris of our recent history,” by which phrase he referred not only to the Holocaust but also to Hiroshima, the gulags of Stalinist totalitarianism, the battles at Verdun, the Marne, and Bataan, and even the then-recent history of the Vietnam War—still attempt to detect “traces of the human” in such experience.² In the late twentieth century or the age of atrocity, so Langer contended, any mirror that literature might hold up to life must necessarily display distorted or disfigured images of our humanity. A literature offering images of this sort was likely to prove discouraging, but without them there could be little hope of realistically fostering, in Albert Camus’s phrase, “an art of living in times of catastrophe.” Assuming a burden shared also by psychologists and historians, which was nothing less than the task of describing catastrophe, art had begun to shift its focus from renewal to decay, but the alternative—which lay in choosing “a blind insistence on the continuity of culture that contradicts the rhythm of mutual destruction which history has imposed on our time”—seemed far worse.³

Langer’s strongly stated objections to the “continuity of culture” are worth pausing over. He objects first of all, if only implicitly, to the traditional view of the humanities fostered by the likes of Matthew Arnold, F. R. Leavis, and T. S. Eliot, in which culture would be synonymous with the intellectual, artistic, and broadly civil contributions of a society in a given era, preserving for future generations the best of what has been thought and said. By this traditional view, a perception of continuity between past and present, such that we expect our

ideas and actions in the post-Enlightenment era to be at one with progressive ideology, defines culture itself as that which constantly improves the quality of life within a given society. What the Holocaust forever introduces into the world, for Langer but also for a host of other scholars and writers from Wiesel and Theodor Adorno to Saul Friedländer and Jean-François Lyotard, is the suspicion that the so-called best expressions of thought and creativity, which were supposed for so long to contribute to the present and future formation of society, might have little or no bearing on the sociopolitical institutions presiding over human life in the modern world. If not only Wagner but also Mozart and Bach could be enjoyed by Nazi personnel even as they orchestrated mass murder, there is every reason for us to doubt the improving effects of beauty or truth. No act of culture, so Langer supposes, can possibly bridge the chasm in history brought about by the atrocity and offer us assurances that our present best efforts in thought, art, and political justice might lean reliably on the achievements of the past.

An esteem for continuity is most obvious in the social narratives attaching to high culture, but it is also evident in culture conceived anthropologically or sociologically as the extant set of beliefs and customs operative in a society, or in culture defined as the equipment for survival in everyday life. In the age of science, which has become an age of technology inclining toward technocratic politics, the ideology of progress remains central to the working definition of culture, as science and technology are expected to improve the quality of collective life. But if the Holocaust, as Zygmunt Bauman hypothesizes, was not an aberrant phenomenon but rather an event whose scale and reach were largely consequent on the conditions of modernity, which include great technological capabilities and the thoroughgoing bureaucratization of decision making, then progress itself might seem anything but a self-evident good.⁴ And if we contend, following Langer, that the experience of atrocity measures what life became for many people in the late twentieth century and for still many others into the early twenty-first century, a literature of atrocity must by definition prove detrimental to the progressive ethos, drawing attention to experiences that subtract from rather than add to the edifice of culture. In the wake of such knowledge we can no longer happily perceive culture as that which facilitates the humane conditions of ordinary life, since, by a terrible paradox, culture is also that which facilitates or veils atrocity. Atrocity, according to the mediating norms of culture, is that which must be kept out of sight if those of us who remain within its protective reach are to continue believing in its power to regulate lives for the good, receiving assurance from our existence within culture that the phenomenon of atrocity, even as it does damage to others, is unlikely to reach into our own lives.

As experts in the study of literature and language, all the scholars in this collection examine how writers—whether they write as witnesses to the Holocaust or at an imaginative distance from it—articulate the shadowy borderline

between fact and fiction, between event and expression, between the condition of bare life endured in atrocity and the hope of a meaningful existence. Literature and literary study impart a kind of truth that history tends to overlook, what might be called the affective truth of history, even as they also help us to examine how we come to our knowledge of events, how we discern the cultural dimension of the events' historicity, or how we cope psychologically with the awful facts to which we are witnesses. Additionally, imaginative literature brings to the study of the Holocaust an ability to test the limits of language and its conventions. This is a legacy, I would argue, of literature's longstanding suspicion of itself, of that sense in which working within literary tradition means working through or out from under much of what has preceded us. But even as contemporary poets and writers of all sorts necessarily interrogate past conventions and modes of representation, a degree of continuity persists in their efforts to shape interpretations of the present in light of what Hans-Georg Gadamer called "effective historical consciousness"—the horizon of the past extended forward in being, language, and culture so as to provide ground for our understanding.⁵

Modernity, in its twentieth-century valence, describes an era in which writers grew suspicious of the abuses of history and historical consciousness, developing an awareness of our existential being as precisely that which persists despite lack of understanding and the absence of coherence in society. By such a view, any continuity with the past might be perceived—or inherited—as though it were only a burden. A crisis in the forward trajectory of culture occurs because the conventional, progressive form of historical consciousness has been all too skillful at forsaking evidence that might contradict its mythic mode of truth. Modernity as an era of atrocity fosters a paradox whereby literature's need to account for the detritus of injustice—revolutions of history and historical consciousness, epochal shifts from the feudal to the bourgeois economy as from a religious to a scientific orientation of human existence, or the radically negative experience of sufferings that proceed from religious and racial hatreds as also from colonial and imperialist enterprises—may place the literary text at odds, in some basic sense, with its own conditions of production.

If we have grown accustomed by now to efforts to cast suspicion on contemporary literature and culture, at least a portion of our suspicion would seem to be owing to the Holocaust. So much of the language of literary postness—including the postmodernist turn against the orthodoxy of representation, the deconstructionist perception of language's meanings as arranged along an arbitrary and historically contingent plane (rather than rooted in metaphysical, foundational inheritances), and the array of repeated apocalyptic prognostications about the death of lyric, the novel, or literature itself—had its birth in the era of post-Auschwitz sensibility.⁶ Although it may be too historically schematic to suggest that the Holocaust in and of itself brought about a revolution in literary praxis, the events of 1933–1945 have at the very

least invested with renewed urgency literature's capacity to turn against itself. All of the many cultural and theoretical discourses of demise and their aftermath give privilege to an aesthetics of rupture, in which continuity in culture seems a suspect endeavor, at best archaically bound to unexamined mythic conceptions, at worst actively complicit with an epistemology of totality that softly or even strictly resembles totalitarian ambitions.

This collection is founded on the perception of two reciprocal steps in the cultural history of the suspicion of representation of poetry and literature. The first assumes the form of a rigorous skepticism (inspired by the facts of atrocity) that confronts the massive edifice of traditional culture, which might otherwise seem incapable of being stirred to anxiety over what it had failed to take account of. On this rationale, Langer interprets the conflict between the experience of atrocity and the continuous life of culture as a zero-sum game. Espousing an uncompromising realism informed by his own anti-Hegelian rigor, he describes a literature that adheres to the experiential truth of those who undergo extreme suffering even as he insists that there is no way for the experience of radical negativity, that awful lived reality of the *not-I* endured during atrocity, to be incorporated in the forward flow of time. The truth of abundant atrocity, which realism forces us to admit, brings a heavy burden into the presence of literature, since atrocity is by definition hermetic, which is to say, in Langer's words, "sealed in the moment of its occurrence, resisting efforts to establish it as part of continuous time."⁷ Atrocity is like skepticism itself in its talent for undoing every hypothesis about the future benefits of culture. Attention to the atrocity must bring about a new emphasis in our study of literature and language, but the effects of any new knowledge based in witness to extreme suffering are fraught with contradiction, since the atrocity is defined by its hermetic quality, its inaccessibility and resistance to understanding. Atrocity is quite simply the negative of all that is interpretable and all that might provide the foundation of historical consciousness and present understanding. As an event that is by definition entirely empty of meaning, atrocity resists continuity even in the ordinary sense of living our lives forward in time, and so casts suspicion on all redemptive or therapeutic endeavors to mend it. But, if the extreme experience is realized in its fully hermetic connotation, then Langer must find that even the procedures of realism on which he so depends have been wrested from him, since realism itself evolved as a distinctively historical mode codified by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary practices, and as such becomes entirely contingent on its own commitment to portraying that which is representative—and so also representable—about human experience. In this sense, the atrocity in its radical discontinuity introduces into literature (*contra* Langer) an experiential truth verging on a state of unrealism, even on what we might call a mode of negative idealism. It is an event that, as Lyotard has discerned, might be respected in all its horrific integrity only insofar as we permit of