

try to understand them empathetically . . ."¹⁷ Certainly, the writing of my history of Reserve Police Battalion 101 requires a rejection of demonization. The men who carried out these massacres, like those who refused or evaded, were human beings. I must recognize that in such a situation I could have been either a killer or an evader—both were human—if I want to understand and explain the behavior of both as best I can. This recognition does indeed mean an attempt to empathize. What I do not accept, however, are the old clichés that to explain is to excuse, that to understand is to forgive. Explaining is not excusing; understanding is not forgiving. The notion that one must simply reject the acts of the perpetrators and not try to understand them would make impossible not only my history but any perpetrator history that sought to go beyond one-dimensional caricature.¹⁸

Even if the empathy necessary to writing perpetrator history is desirable, is it possible? Elie Wiesel has argued that the core of the Holocaust is beyond the human comprehension of anyone but the survivors. These survivors suffered an experience within the universe of the camps that is beyond communicability even by the "messengers," and certainly cannot be re-created, represented, or understood by those who were not there. Is an understanding, representation, and communicability of the perpetrators' experience as impossible as Wiesel thinks it is of the survivors' experience? Saul Friedlander suggested as much at a 1990 conference at Northwestern University, when he argued that the historian's attempt to find a "psychological common denominator" with the perpetrators resulted in an "intractable unease." An "intuitive *Verstehen*" of the perpetrator was not possible in the face of an "immorality beyond evil" that had been brought forth in an ethos of *Führer-Bindung* and "elation."¹⁹

If I understand him correctly, the terms of Friedlander's eloquent argument were addressed to the top Nazi leadership. I do not see how they can apply to the reserve policemen who carried out the massacre at Jozefów. I find no *Führer-Bindung* in a situation in which the commanding officer, openly before his men, disassociated himself from the orders he had received from above. I find no "elation" in a situation in which the overwhelmingly predominant reaction of the men—both those who killed all day and those who refused, evaded, or stopped—was sheer horror and physical revulsion at what they had been asked to do. Eventually, of course, they got used to the killing. But in that too, they were all too human.

Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth

HAYDEN WHITE

There is an inextinguishable relativity in every representation of historical phenomena. The relativity of the representation is a function of the language used to describe and thereby constitute past events as possible objects of explanation and understanding. This is obvious when, as in the social sciences, a technical language is so used. Scientific explanations openly purport to bear upon only those aspects of events—for example, quantitative and therefore measurable aspects—which can be denoted by the linguistic protocols used to describe them. It is less obvious in traditional narrative accounts of historical phenomena: first, narrative is regarded as a neutral "container" of historical fact, a mode of discourse "naturally" suited to representing historical events directly; second, narrative histories usually employ so-called natural or ordinary, rather than technical, languages, both to describe their subjects and to tell their story; and third, historical events are supposed to consist of or manifest a congeries of "real" or "lived" stories, which have only to be uncovered or extracted from the evidence and displayed before the reader to have their truth recognized immediately and intuitively.

Obviously I regard this view of the relation between historical storytelling and historical reality as mistaken or at best misconceived. Stories, like factual statements, are linguistic entities and belong to the order of discourse.

The question that arises with respect to "historical emplotments" in a study of Nazism and the Final Solution is this: Are there any limits on the *kind* of story that can responsibly be told about these phenomena? Can these events be responsibly emplotted in *any* of the modes, symbols, plot types, and genres our culture provides for "making sense" of such extreme events in our past? Or do Nazism and the Final Solution belong to a special class of events, such that, unlike even the

French Revolution, the American Civil War, the Russian Revolution, or the Chinese Great Leap Forward, they must be viewed as manifesting only one story, as being emplottable in one way only, and as signifying only one kind of meaning? In a word, do the natures of Nazism and the Final Solution set absolute limits on what can be truthfully said about them? Do they set limits on the uses that can be made of them by writers of fiction or poetry? Do they lend themselves to emplotment in a set number of ways, or is their specific meaning, like that of other historical events, infinitely interpretable and ultimately undecidable?

Saul Friedlander has elsewhere distinguished between two kinds of questions that might arise in the consideration of historical emplotments and the problem of "truth": epistemological questions raised by the fact of "competing narratives about the Nazi epoch and the 'Final Solution'" and ethical questions raised by the rise of "representations of Nazism . . . based on what used to be [regarded as] unacceptable modes of emplotment." Obviously, considered as accounts of events already established as facts, "competing narratives" can be assessed, criticized, and ranked on the basis of their fidelity to the factual record, their comprehensiveness, and the coherence of whatever arguments they may contain. But narrative accounts do not consist only of factual statements (singular existential propositions) and arguments; they consist as well of poetic and rhetorical elements by which what would otherwise be a list of facts is transformed into a story.¹ Among these elements are those generic story patterns we recognize as providing the "plots." Thus, one narrative account may represent a set of events as having the form and meaning of an epic or tragic story, and another may represent the same set of events—with equal plausibility and without doing any violence to the factual record—as describing a farce.² Here the conflict between "competing narratives" has less to do with the facts of the matter in question than with the different story-meanings with which the facts can be endowed by emplotment. This raises the question of the relation of the various generic plot types that can be used to endow events with different kinds of meaning—tragic, epic, comic, romance, pastoral, farcical, and the like—to the events themselves. Is this relationship between a given story told about a given set of events the same as that obtaining between a factual statement and its referent? Can it be said that sets of real events *are* intrinsically tragic, comic, or epic, such that the representation of those

events as a tragic, comic, or epic story can be assessed as to its *factual* accuracy? Or does it all have to do with the perspective from which the events are viewed?

Of course, most theorists of narrative history take the view that emplotment produces not so much another, more comprehensive and synthetic factual statement as, rather, an *interpretation* of the facts. But the distinction between factual statements (considered as a product of object-language) and interpretations of them (considered as a product of one or more metalanguages) does not help us when it is a matter of interpretations produced by the modes of emplotment used to represent the facts as displaying the form and meaning of different kinds of stories. We are not helped by the suggestion that "competing narratives" are a result of "the facts" having been *interpreted* by one historian as a "tragedy" and *interpreted* by another as a "farce."³ This is especially the case in traditional historical discourse in which "the facts" are always given precedence over any "interpretation" of them.

Thus for traditional historical discourse there is presumed to be a crucial difference between an "interpretation" of "the facts" and a "story" told about them. This difference is indicated by the currency of the notions of a "real" (as against an "imaginary") story and a "true" (as against a "false") story. Whereas interpretations are typically thought of as commentaries on "the facts," the stories told in narrative histories are presumed to inhere either in the events themselves (whence the notion of a "real story") or in the facts derived from the critical study of evidence bearing upon those events (which yields the notion of the "true" story).

Considerations such as these provide some insight into the problems both of competing narratives and of unacceptable modes of emplotment in considering a period such as the Nazi epoch and events such as the Final Solution. We can confidently presume that the facts of the matter set limits on the *kinds* of stories that can be *properly* (in the sense of both veraciously and appropriately) told about them only if we believe that the events themselves possess a "story" kind of form and a "plot" kind of meaning. We may then dismiss a "comic" or "pastoral" story, with an upbeat "tone" and a humorous "point of view," from the ranks of competing narratives as manifestly false to the facts—or at least to the facts that *matter*—of the Nazi era. But we could dismiss such a story from the ranks of competing narratives only if (1) it were presented as a *literal* (rather than *figurative*) representation of

the events and (2) the plot type used to transform the facts into a specific kind of story were presented as inherent in (rather than imposed upon) the facts. For unless a historical story is presented as a literal representation of real events, we cannot criticize it as being either true or untrue to the facts of the matter. If it were presented as a figurative representation of real events, then the question of its truthfulness would fall under the principles governing our assessment of the truth of fictions. And if it did not suggest that the plot type chosen to render the facts into a story of a specific kind had been found to inhere in the facts themselves, then we would have no basis for comparing this particular account to other kinds of narrative accounts, informed by other kinds of plot types, and for assessing their relative adequacy to the representation, not so much of the facts as of what the facts *mean*.

For the differences among competing *narratives* are differences among the "modes of emplotment" which predominate in them. It is because narratives are always emplotted that they are meaningfully comparable; it is because narratives are differently emplotted that discriminations among the kinds of plot types can be made. In the case of an emplotment of the events of the Third Reich in a "comic" or "pastoral" mode, we would be eminently justified in appealing to "the facts" in order to dismiss it from the lists of "competing narratives" of the Third Reich. But what if a story of this kind had been set forth in a pointedly ironic way and in the interest of making a metacritical comment, not so much on the facts as on versions of the facts emplotted in a comic or pastoral way? Surely it would be beside the point to dismiss *this* kind of narrative from the competition on the basis of its infidelity to the facts. For even if it were not positively faithful to the facts, it would at least be negatively so—in the fun it poked at narratives of the Third Reich emplotted in the mode of comedy or pastoral.

On the other hand, we might wish to regard such an ironic emplotment as "unacceptable" in the manner suggested by Friedlander in his indictment of histories, novels, and films which, under the guise of seeming to portray faithfully the most horrible facts of life in Hitler's Germany, actually aestheticize the whole scene and translate its contents into fetish objects and the stuff of sadomasochistic fantasies.⁴ As Friedlander has pointed out, such "glamorizing" representations of the phenomena of the Third Reich used to be "unacceptable," whatever the accuracy or veracity of their factual contents, because they of-

fended against morality or taste. The fact that such representations have become increasingly common and therefore obviously more "acceptable" over the last twenty years or so indicates profound changes in socially sanctioned standards of morality and taste. But what does *this* circumstance suggest about the grounds on which we might wish to judge a narrative account of the Third Reich and the Final Solution to be "unacceptable" even though its factual content is both accurate and ample?

It seems to be a matter of distinguishing between a specific body of factual "contents" and a specific "form" of narrative and of applying the kind of rule which stipulates that a serious theme—such as mass murder or genocide—demands a noble genre—such as epic or tragedy—for its proper representation. This is the kind of issue posed by Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*,⁵ which presents the events of the Holocaust in the medium of the (black-and-white) comic book and in a mode of bitter satire, with Germans portrayed as cats, Jews as mice, and Poles as pigs. The manifest content of Spiegelman's comic book is the story of the artist's effort to extract from his father the story of his parents' experience of the events of the Holocaust. Thus, the story of the Holocaust that is told in the book is framed by a story of how this story came to be told. But the manifest contents of both the frame story and the framed story are, as it were, compromised as fact by their allegorization as a game of cat-and-mouse-and-pig in which everyone—perpetrators, victims, and bystanders in the story of the Holocaust and both Spiegelman and his father in the story of *their* relationship—comes out looking more like a beast than like a human being. *Maus* presents a particularly ironic and bewildered view of the Holocaust, but it is at the same time one of the most moving narrative accounts of it that I know, and not least because it makes the difficulty of discovering and telling the whole truth about even a small part of it as much a part of the story as the events whose meaning it is seeking to discover.

To be sure, *Maus* is not a conventional history, but it is a representation of past real events or at least of events that are represented as having actually occurred. There is nothing of that aestheticization of which Friedlander complains in his assessments of many recent filmic and novelistic treatments of the Nazi epoch and the Final Solution. At the same time, this comic book is a masterpiece of stylization, figura-

tion, and allegorization. It assimilates the events of the Holocaust to the conventions of comic book representation, and in this absurd mixture of a "low" genre with events of the most momentous significance, *Maus* manages to raise all of the crucial issues regarding the "limits of representation" in general.

Indeed, *Maus* is much more critically self-conscious than Andreas Hillgruber's *Zweierlei Untergang: Die Zerschlagung des Deutschen Reiches und das Ende des europäischen Judentums* (Two kinds of ruin: the shattering of the German Reich and the end of European Jewry).⁶ In the first of the two essays included in the book, Hillgruber suggests that, even though the Third Reich lacked the nobility of purpose to permit its "shattering" to be called a "tragedy," the defense of the eastern front by the Wehrmacht in 1944–45 could appropriately be emplotted—and without any violence to the facts—as a "tragic" story. Hillgruber's manifest purpose was to salvage the moral dignity of a part of the Nazi epoch in German history by splitting the whole of it into two discrete stories and emplotting them differently—the one as a tragedy, the other as an incomprehensible enigma.⁷

Critics of Hillgruber immediately pointed out: (1) that even to cast the account in the mode of a narrative was to subordinate any analysis of the events to their aestheticization; (2) that one could confer the morally ennobling epithet *tragic* on these events only at the cost of ignoring the extent to which the "heroic" actions of the Wehrmacht had made possible the destruction of many Jews who might have been saved had the army surrendered earlier; and (3) that the attempt to ennoble one part of the history of the "German Empire" by dissociating it from the Final Solution was as morally offensive as it was scientifically untenable.⁸ Yet Hillgruber's suggestion for emplotting the story of the defense of the eastern front did not violate any of the conventions governing the writing of professionally respectable narrative history. He simply suggested narrowing the focus to a particular domain of the historical continuum, casting the agents and agencies occupying that scene as characters in a dramatic conflict, and emplotting this drama in terms of the familiar conventions of the genre of tragedy.

Hillgruber's suggestion for the emplotment of the history of the eastern front during the winter of 1944–45 indicates the ways in which a specific plot type (tragedy) can simultaneously determine the kinds of events to be featured in any story that can be told about them and

provide a pattern for the assignment of the roles that can possibly be played by the agents and agencies inhabiting the scene thus constituted.⁹ At the same time, Hillgruber's suggestion also indicates how the choice of a mode of emplotment can justify ignoring certain kinds of events, agents, actions, agencies, and patients that may inhabit a given historical scene or its context. There is no place for any form of low or ignoble life in a tragedy; in tragedies even villains are noble or, rather, villainy can be shown to have its noble incarnations. Asked once why he had not included a treatment of Joan of Arc in his *Waning of the Middle Ages*, Huizinga is said to have replied: "Because I did not want my story to have a heroine." Hillgruber's recommendation to emplot the story of the Wehrmacht's defense of the eastern front as a tragedy indicates that he wants the story told about it to have a hero, to be heroic, and thereby to redeem at least a remnant of the Nazi epoch in the history of Germany.

Hillgruber may not have considered the fact that his division of one epoch of German history into two stories—one of the shattering of an empire, the other of the end of a people—sets up an oppositional structure constitutive of a semantic field in which the naming of the plot type of one story determines the semantic domain within which the name of the plot type of the other is to be found. Hillgruber does not name the plot type which might provide the meaning of the story of "the end of European Jewry." But if the plot type of the tragedy is reserved for the telling of the story of the Wehrmacht on the eastern front in 1944–45, it follows that *some other* plot type must be used for the end of European Jewry.

In forgoing the impulse to name the kind of story that should be told about the Jews in Hitler's Reich, Hillgruber approaches the position of a number of scholars and writers who view the Holocaust as virtually unrepresentable in language. The most extreme version of this idea takes the form of the commonplace that this event ("Auschwitz," "the Final Solution," and so on) is of such a nature as to escape the grasp of any language to describe it or any medium to represent it. Thus, for example, George Steiner's famous remark: "The world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason."¹⁰ Or Alice and A. R. Eckhardt's question: "How is the unspeakable to be spoken about? Certainly, we ought to speak about it, but how can we ever do so?"¹¹ Berel Lang suggests that expressions such as these must be understood figu-

ratively, as indicating the difficulty of writing about the Holocaust and the extent to which any representation of it must be judged against the criterion of respectful silence that should be our first response to it.¹²

Nonetheless, Lang himself argues against any use of the genocide as a subject of fictional or poetic writing. According to him, only the most literalist *chronicle* of the facts of the genocide comes close to passing the test of "authenticity and truthfulness" by which both literary and scientific accounts of this event must be judged. *Only the facts* must be recounted, because otherwise one lapses into figurative speech and stylization (aestheticism). And *only a chronicle* of the facts is warranted, because otherwise one opens up oneself to the dangers of narrativization and the relativization of emplotment.

Lang's analysis of the limitations of *any* literary representation of the genocide and its *moral* inferiority to a sparse or denarrativized historical account is worth considering in detail, because it raises the question of the limits of representation in the matter of the Holocaust in the most extreme terms. The analysis hinges on a radical opposition between literal and figurative speech, the identification of literary language with figurative language, a particular view of the peculiar effects produced by any figurative characterization of real events, and a notion of "morally extreme" events of which the Holocaust is considered to be a rare, if not historically unique, instantiation. Lang argues that the genocide, quite apart from being a *real* event, an event that really happened, is also a *literal* event, that is, an event the nature of which permits it to serve as a paradigm of the kind of event about which we can be permitted to speak only in a "literal" manner.

Lang holds that figurative language not only turns or swerves away from literalness of expression, but also deflects attention from the states of affairs about which it pretends to speak. Any figurative expression, he argues, *adds* to the representation of the object to which it refers. First, it adds itself (that is, the specific figure used) and the decision it presupposes (that is, the choice to use one figure rather than another). Figuration produces stylization, which directs attention to the author and his or her creative talent. Next, figuration produces a "perspective" on the referent of the utterance, but in featuring one particular perspective it necessarily closes off others. Thus it reduces or obscures certain aspects of events.¹³ Third, the kind of figuration needed to transform what would otherwise be only a chronicle of real events into a story at once personalizes (humanizes) and generalizes

the agents and agencies involved in those events. Such figuration personalizes by transforming those agents into the kind of intending, feeling, and thinking subjects with whom the reader can identify and empathize, in the way one does with characters in fictional stories. It generalizes them by representing them as instantiations of the types of agents, agencies, events, and so on met with in the genres of literature and myth.

On this view of the matter the impropriety of any literary representation of the genocide derives from the distortions of the facts of the matter effected by the use of figurative language. Over against any merely literary representation of the events comprising the genocide Lang sets the ideal of what a literalist representation of the facts of the matter reveals to be their *true* nature. And it is worth quoting a longish passage from Lang's book in which he sets up this opposition between figurative and literalist speech as being homologous with the opposition between false and truthful discourse:

If . . . the act of genocide is directed against individuals who do not motivate that act *as* individuals; and if the evil represented by genocide also reflects a deliberate intent for evil in principle, in conceptualizing [a] group and in the decision to annihilate it, then the intrinsic limitations of figurative discourse for the representation of genocide come into view. On the account given, imaginative representation would personalize even events that are impersonal and corporate; it would dehistoricize and generalize events that occur specifically and contingently.

And the unavoidable dissonance here is evident. For a subject which historically combines the feature of impersonality with a challenge to the conception of moral boundaries, the attempt to personalize it—or, for that matter, only to *add* to it—appears at once gratuitous and inconsistent: gratuitous because it individualizes where the subject by its nature is corporate; inconsistent because it sets limits when the subject itself has denied them. The effect of the additions is then to *misrepresent* the subject and thus—where the aspects misrepresented are essential—to *diminish* it. In asserting the possibility of alternate figurative perspectives, furthermore, the writer asserts the process of representation and his own persona as parts of the representation—a further diminution of what (for a subject like the Nazi genocide) is its essential core; beside this, an "individual" perspective is at most irrelevant. For certain subjects, it seems, their significance may be too broad or deep to be chanced by

an individual point of view, [and the significance may be] morally more compelling—and actual—than the concept of possibility can sustain. Under this pressure, the presumption of illumination, usually conceded *prima facie* to the act of writing (*any* writing), begins to lose its force.¹⁴

But literary writing and the kind of historical writing that aspires to the status of literary writing are especially objectionable to Lang, because in them the figure of the author obtrudes itself between the thing to be represented and the representation of it. The figure of the author must obtrude itself into the discourse as the agent of that act of figuration without which the subject of the discourse would remain unpersonalized. Since literary writing unfolds under the delusion that it is only by figuration that individuals can be personalized, “the implication is unavoidable,” Lang says, that “a subject . . . could be represented in many different ways and as having no *necessary* and perhaps not even an *actual* basis. The assertion of alternate possibilities [of figuration] . . . suggests a denial of limitation: *no* possibilities are excluded,” neither the possibility of figuring a real person as an imaginary or nonperson nor that of figuring a real event as a nonevent.¹⁵

It is considerations such as these that lead Lang to advance the notion that the events of the Nazi genocide are intrinsically “anti-representational,” by which he apparently means, not that they cannot be represented, but that they are paradigmatic of the kind of event that can be spoken about only in a factual and literalist manner. Indeed, the genocide consists of occurrences in which the very distinction between “event” and “fact” is dissolved.¹⁶ Lang writes, “If there ever was a ‘literal’ fact, beyond the possibility of alternate formulations among which reversal or denial must always be one, it is here in the act of the Nazi genocide; and if the moral implication of the role of facts needed proof, it is also to be found here, again in the phenomena of the Nazi genocide.”¹⁷ It is the overriding actuality and literalness of this event which, in Lang’s view, *warrant* the effort on the part of historians to represent real events “direct[ly] . . . immediately and unaltered” in a language purged of all metaphor, trope, and figuration. Indeed, it is the literalness of this event which indexes the difference between “historical discourse” on the one hand and “imaginative representation and its figurative space” on the other: “However it may be conceived beyond [the distinction between history and fiction] the *fact* of the Nazi genocide is a crux that separates historical discourse from

the process of imaginative representation, perhaps not uniquely, but as certainly as any fact might be required or is able to do.”¹⁸

I have lingered on Lang’s argument because I think that it carries us to the crux of many current discussions regarding both the possibility of representing the Holocaust and the relative value of different ways of representing it. His objection to the use of this event as an occasion for a *merely* literary performance is directed at novels and poetry, and it can easily be extended to cover both the kind of belletristic historiography which features literary flourish and what the book clubs identify as “fine writing.” But it must, by implication, be extended also to include any kind of narrative history, which is to say, any attempt to represent the Holocaust *as a story*. And this is because, if *every* story must be said to have a plot, and if every emplotment is a kind of figuration, then it follows that every narrative account of the Holocaust, whatever its mode of emplotment, stands condemned on the same grounds that any merely literary representation of it must be condemned.

To be sure, Lang argues that, although historical representation may “make use of narrative and figurative means,” it is not “essentially dependent on those means.” Indeed, in his view, historical discourse is posited on “the possibility of representation that stands in direct relation to its object—in effect, if not in principle, immediate and unaltered.”¹⁹ This is not to suggest that historians can or should try to occupy the position of the naive realist or mere seeker after information. The matter is more complex than that. For Lang indicates that what is needed for anyone writing about the Holocaust is an attitude, position, or posture which is neither subjective nor objective, neither that of the social scientist with a methodology and a theory nor that of the poet intent upon expressing a “personal” reaction.²⁰ Indeed, in the introduction to *Act and Idea*, Lang invokes Roland Barthes’s notion of “intransitive writing” as a model of the kind of discourse appropriate to discussion of the philosophical and theoretical issues raised by reflection on the Holocaust. Unlike the kind of writing that is intended to be “read *through*, . . . designed to enable readers to see what they would otherwise see differently or perhaps not at all,” *intransitive writing* “denies the distances among the writer, text, what is written about, and, finally, the reader.” In intransitive writing “an author does not write to provide access to something independent of both author and reader, but ‘writes himself’ . . . In the traditional account [of writing], the writer is conceived as first looking at an object with eyes already

expectant, patterned, and then, having seen, as representing it in his own writing. For the writer who writes-himself, writing becomes itself the means of vision or comprehension, not a mirror of something independent, but an act and commitment—a doing or making rather than a reflection or description.”²¹ Lang explicitly commends intransitive writing (and speech) as appropriate to individual Jews who, as in the recounting of the story of the Exodus at Passover, “should tell the story of the genocide as though he or she had passed through it” and in an exercise of self-identification specifically Jewish in nature.²² But the further suggestion is that the product of intransitive writing, which is to say a distance-denying discourse, might serve as a model for *any* representation of the Holocaust, historical or fictional. And it is with a consideration of the ways in which the notion of intransitive writing might serve as a way of resolving many of the issues raised by the representation of the Holocaust that I would like to conclude.

First, I would note that Berel Lang invokes the idea of intransitive writing without remarking that Barthes himself used it to characterize the differences between the dominant style of modernist writing and that of classical realism. In the essay entitled “To Write: An Intransitive Verb?” Barthes asks if and when the verb “to write” became an intransitive verb. The question is asked within the context of a discussion of “diathesis” (“voice”) in order to focus attention on the different kinds of relationship that an agent can be represented as bearing to an action. He points out that although modern Indo-European languages offer two possibilities for expressing this relationship, the active and the passive voices, other languages have offered a third possibility, that expressed, for example, in the ancient Greek “middle voice.” Whereas in the active and passive voices the subject of the verb is presumed to be external to the action, as either agent or patient, in the middle voice the subject is presumed to be *interior* to the action.²³ He then goes on to conclude that, in literary modernism, the verb “to write” connotes neither an active nor a passive relationship, but rather a middle one. “Thus,” Barthes says,

in the middle voice of *to write*, the distance between scriptor and language diminishes asymptotically. We could even say that it is the writings of subjectivity, such as romantic writing, which are active, for in them the agent is not interior but *anterior* to the process of writing: here the one who writes does not write for himself, but as if by proxy, for an exterior and antecedent person (even if both bear

the same name), while, in the modern verb of middle voice *to write*, the subject is constituted as immediately contemporary with the writing, being effected and affected by it: this is the exemplary case of the Proustean narrator, who exists only by writing, despite the references to a pseudo-memory.²⁴

This is, of course, only one of the many differences that distinguish modernist writing from its nineteenth-century realist counterpart. But this difference indicates a new and distinctive way of imagining, describing, and conceptualizing the relationships obtaining between agents and acts, subjects and objects, a statement and its referent—between the literal and figurative levels of speech and, indeed, therefore, between factual and fictional discourse. What modernism envisions, in Barthes’ account, is nothing less than an order of experience beyond (or prior to) that expressible in the kinds of *oppositions* we are forced to draw (between agency and patiency, subjectivity and objectivity, literalness and figurativeness, fact and fiction, history and myth, and so forth) in any version of realism. This does not imply that such oppositions cannot be used to represent some real relationships, only that the relationships between the entities designated by the polar terms may not be oppositional ones in some experiences of the world.

What I am getting at is expressed very well in Jacques Derrida’s explication of his notion of *différance*, which also uses the idea of the middle voice to express what he means to convey. Derrida writes:

Différance is not simply active (any more than it is a subjective accomplishment); it rather indicates the middle voice, it precedes and sets up the opposition between passivity and activity . . . And we shall see why what is designated by *différance* is neither simply active nor simply passive, that it announces or rather recalls something like the middle voice, that it speaks of an operation that is not an operation, which cannot be thought of either as a passion or as an action of a subject on an object, as starting from an agent or a patient, or on the basis of, or in view of, any of these *terms*. And philosophy has perhaps commenced by distributing the middle voice, expressing a certain intransitiveness, into the active and the passive voice, and has itself been constituted by this repression.²⁵

I cite Derrida as representing a modernist conception of the project of philosophy, founded on the recognition of the differences between a distinctively modernist experience of the world (or is it the experience of a distinctively modernist world?) and the notions of representation,

6 knowledge, and meaning prevailing in the inherited "realist" cultural endowment. And I do so in order to suggest that the kind of anomalies, enigmas, and dead ends met with in discussions of the representation of the Holocaust are the result of a conception of discourse that owes too much to a realism that is inadequate to the representation of events, such as the Holocaust, which are themselves "modernist" in nature.²⁶ The concept of cultural modernism is relevant to the discussion inasmuch as it reflects a reaction to (if not a rejection of) the great efforts of nineteenth-century writers—both historians and fictioneers—to represent reality "realistically"—where *reality* is understood to mean *history* and *realistically* to mean the treatment, not only of the past but also of the present, as history. Thus, for example, in *Mimesis*, a study of the history of the idea of realistic representation in Western culture, Erich Auerbach characterizes "the foundations of modern realism" in the following terms: "The serious treatment of everyday reality, the rise of more extensive and socially inferior human groups to the position of subject matter for problematic-existential representation, on the one hand; on the other, the embedding of random persons and events in the general course of contemporary history, the fluid background—these, we believe, are the foundations of modern realism."²⁷

On this view, the modernist version of the realist project could be seen as consisting of a radical rejection of *history*, of *reality as history*, and of *historical consciousness* itself. But Auerbach was concerned to show the continuities as well as the differences between realism and modernism. Thus, in a famous exegesis of a passage from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Auerbach identifies among the "distinguishing stylistic characteristics" of that "modernism" which the passage has been chosen to exemplify:

1. The disappearance of the "writer as narrator of objective facts; almost everything stated appears by way of reflection in the consciousness of the *dramatis personae*";
2. The dissolution of any "viewpoint . . . outside the novel from which the people and events within it are observed . . .";
3. The predominance of a "tone of doubt and questioning" in the narrator's interpretation of those events seemingly described in an "objective" manner;
4. The employment of such devices as "*erlebte Rede*, stream of con-

sciousness, *monologue interieur*" for "aesthetic purposes" that "obscure and obliterate the impression of an objective reality completely known to the author . . .";

5. The use of new techniques for the representation of the experience of time and temporality, e.g., use of the "chance occasion" to release "processes of consciousness" which remain unconnected to a "specific subject of thought"; obliteration of the distinction between "exterior" and "interior" time; and representation of "events," not as "successive episodes of [a] story," but as random occurrences.²⁸

This is as good a characterization as any we might find of what Barthes and Derrida might have called the style of "middle voicedness." Auerbach's characterization of literary modernism indicates, not that history is no longer represented realistically, but rather that the conceptions of both history and realism have changed. Modernism is still concerned to represent reality "realistically," and it still identifies reality with history. But the history which modernism confronts is not the history envisaged by nineteenth-century realism. And this is because the social order which is the subject of this history has undergone a radical transformation—a change which permitted the crystallization of the totalitarian form that Western society assumed in the twentieth century.

As thus envisaged, cultural modernism must be seen as both a reflection of and a response to this new actuality. Accordingly the affinities of form and content between literary modernism and social totalitarianism can be granted—but without necessarily implying that modernism is a cultural expression of the fascist form of social totalitarianism.²⁹ Indeed, another view of the relation between modernism and fascism is possible: literary modernism was a product of an effort to represent a historical reality for which the older, classical realist modes of representation were inadequate, based as they were on different experiences of history or, rather, on experiences of a different "history."

Modernism was no doubt immanent in classical realism—in the way in which Nazism and the Final Solution were immanent in the structures and practices of the nineteenth-century nation-state and the social relations of production of which it was a political expression. Looked at in this way, however, modernism appears, less as a rejection

of the realist project and a denial of history, than as an anticipation of a new form of historical reality, a reality that included, among its supposedly unimaginable, unthinkable, and unspeakable aspects, the phenomena of Hitlerism, the Final Solution, total war, nuclear contamination, mass starvation, and ecological suicide; a profound sense of the incapacity of our sciences to *explain*, let alone control or contain these; and a growing awareness of the incapacity of our traditional modes of representation even to *describe* them adequately.

What all this suggests is that modernist modes of representation may offer possibilities of representing the reality of both the Holocaust and the experience of it that no other version of realism could do. Indeed, we can follow out Lang's suggestion that the best way to represent the Holocaust and the experience of it may well be by a kind of "intransitive writing" which lays no claim to the kind of realism aspired to by nineteenth-century historians and writers. But we may want to consider that by intransitive writing we must intend something like the relationship to that event expressed in the middle voice. This is not to suggest that we will give up the effort to represent the Holocaust realistically, but rather that our notion of what constitutes realistic representation must be revised to take account of experiences that are unique to our century and for which older modes of representation have proven inadequate.

In point of fact I do not think that the Holocaust, Final Solution, Shoah, Churban, or German genocide of the Jews is any more unrepresentable than any other event in human history. It is only that its representation, whether in history or in fiction, requires the kind of style, the modernist style, that was developed in order to represent the kind of experiences which social modernism made possible, the kind of style met with in any number of modernist writers but of which Primo Levi must be invoked as an example.

In *Il Sistema periodico* (The periodic table), Levi begins the chapter entitled "Carbon" by writing:

The reader, at this point, will have realized for some time now that this is not a chemical treatise: my presumption does not reach so far—"ma voix est faible, et même un peu profane." Nor is it an autobiography, save in the partial and symbolic limits in which every piece of writing is autobiographical, indeed every human work; but it is in some fashion a history.

It is—or would have liked to be—a micro-history, the history of a

trade and its defects, victories, and miseries, such as everyone wants to tell when he feels close to concluding the arc of his career and art ceases to be long.

Levi then goes on to tell the story of a "particular" atom of "carbon" which becomes an allegory (what he calls "this completely arbitrary story" that is "nonetheless true"). "I will tell just one more story," he says, "the most secret, and I will tell it with the humility and restraint of him who knows from the start that this theme is desperate, the means feeble, and the trade of clothing facts in words is bound by its very nature to fail."

The story he tells is of how an atom of carbon that turns up in a glass of milk which he, Levi, drinks, migrates into a cell in his own brain—"the brain of *me* who is writing, and [how] the cell in question, and within it the atom in question, is in charge of my writing, in a gigantic minuscule game which nobody has yet described." This "game" he then proceeds to describe in the following terms: "It is that which at this instant, issuing out of a labyrinthine tangle of yeses and nos, makes my hand run along a certain path on a paper, marks it with these volutes that are signs: a double snap, up and down, between two levels of energy, guides this hand of mine to impress on this paper this dot, here, this one."