Probing the Limits of Representation

NAZISM AND THE "FINAL SOLUTION"

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Saul Friedlander
try to understand them empathetically..." 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 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.

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 "intratable unease." An "intuitive Vershehen" 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." 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 inexpungeable 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. 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. 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." 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 "impossible") 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 the 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. As Friedlander has pointed out, such "glorifying" 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 Zweiterlei 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). 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.

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 aesthetization; (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. 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. 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." 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?" Berel Lang suggests that expressions such as these must be understood figu-
Hayden White

< 44 >

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 belles-lettres 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 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
Hayden White

< 48 >

epectant, 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 calls 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 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

Historical Employment and the Problem of Truth

< 49 >

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 passivity, 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 différence, which also uses the idea of the middle voice to express what he means to convey. Derrida writes:

 différence 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 différence 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 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,
knowledge, and meaning prevailing in the inherited "realist" cultural
domnment. 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. The concept of cultural modernism is relevant to the discus-
sion inasmuch as it reflects a reaction to (if not a rejection of) the great
efforts of nineteenth-century writers—both historians and fiction-
eers—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 real-
ism" in the following terms: "The serious treatment of everyday rea-
ality, the rise of more extensive and socially inferior human groups to
the position of subject matter for problematic-existential representa-
ton, 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 real-
ism." 87

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 "distin-
guishing stylistic characteristics" of that "modernism" which the pas-
sage 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 con-
   sciousness 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-
sciouness, monologue intérieur" 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 experi-
   ence of time and temporality, e.g., use of the "chance occasion"
   to release "processes of consciousness" which remain uncon-
   nected to a "specific subject of thought"; obliteration of the dis-
   tinction between "exterior" and "interior" time; and representa-
   tion of "events," not as "successive episodes of [a] story," but as
   random occurrences. 88

This is as good a characterization as any we might find of what
Barthes and Derrida might have called the style of "middle voice-
ness." 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 be-
cause the social order which is the subject of this history has under-
gone a radical transformation—a change which permitted the crystal-
zation of the totalitarian form that Western society assumed in the
twentieth century.

As thus envisaged, cultural modernism must be seen as both a re-
fection of and a response to this new actuality. Accordingly the affini-
ties of form and content between literary modernism and social totali-
tarianism can be granted—but without necessarily implying that
modernism is a cultural expression of the fascist form of social totalitar-
ianism. 89 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 dif-
frent 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 struc-
tures and practices of the nineteenth-century nation-state and the so-
cial 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 suppos-
edly unimaginable, unthinkable, and unspeakable aspects, the phe-
nomena of Hitlerism, the Final Solution, total war, nuclear contami-
nation, 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. In-
deed, we can follow out Lang's suggestion that the best way to repre-
sent 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 re-
presentation 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 unrepre-
sentable 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 auto-
biography, 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

Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth

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 vo-
lutes 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."
For Primo Levi

On 16 May 1348, the Jewish community of La Baume, a small Provencal village, was exterminated. This event was only a link in a long chain of violence which had started in southern France with the first eruption of the Black Death just one month before. The hostilities against the Jews, who were widely believed to have spread the plague by poisoning wells, fountains, and rivers, had first crystallized in Toulon during Holy Week. The local ghetto had been assaulted; men, women, and children had been killed. In the following weeks similar violence had taken place in other Provencal towns like Riez, Digne, Manosque, and Forcalquier. In La Baume there were no survivors except one—a man who ten days before had left for Avignon, summoned by Queen Jeanne. He left a painful memory of the episode in a few lines inscribed on a Torah, now preserved at the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek in Vienna. In a very fine essay Joseph Shatzmiller has succeeded, by combining a new reading of the lines inscribed on the Torah with a document extracted from a fiscal register, in identifying the survivor’s name: Dayas Quonini. In 1349 Quonini was settled in Aix, where he received his Torah. We do not know whether he ever came back to La Baume after the massacre.

Let us now briefly discuss a different, though not unrelated, case. The accusations that the Jews had spread the plague in 1348 closely followed a pattern which had already been established a generation before. In 1321, during Holy Week, a rumor suddenly spread throughout France and some neighboring regions (western Switzerland, northern Spain). According to the different versions, lepers, or lepers inspired by Jews, or lepers inspired by Jews inspired by the Muslim kings of Tunis and Granada, had built up a conspiracy to poison sane Christians. The Muslim kings were obviously out of reach, but for two years lepers and

Jews became the targets of a series of violent acts performed by mobs and by religious and political authorities as well. I have tried elsewhere to disentangle this complex series of events. Here I would like to analyze a passage from a Latin chronicle written in the early fourteenth century by the so-called continuator of William of Nangis, an anonymous monk who, like his predecessor, lived in the abbey of Saint-Denis.

After the discovery of the alleged conspiracy many Jews, mostly in northern France, were killed. Near Vitry-le-François, the chronicler says, approximately forty Jews were jailed in a tower. In order to avoid being put to death by the Christians they decided, after some discussion, to kill one another. The deed was performed by an old, highly respected man, with the help of a young man. The older man then asked the younger man to kill him. The young man reluctantly accepted. But instead of committing suicide, he grabbed some gold and silver from the corpses on the ground. He then tried to escape from the tower using a rope made of sheets tied together. But the rope was not long enough. The young man fell to the ground, breaking his leg, and was then put to death.

The episode is not implausible. However, it presents some undeniable affinities with two passages from Flavius Josephus’ Jewish War: (1) the hiding of forty people in a grotto near Jotapata, in Galilee, in c.e. 67, followed by the collective suicide of all of them, with only two exceptions—Josephus himself and a fellow soldier who accepted his proposal not to kill him (III, 8); and (2) the siege of Masada, the desperate resistance of the Jews assembled within the fortress, followed by a collective suicide with two exceptions, both women (VII, 8—9). How should we interpret the analogies between Josephus’ texts and the already mentioned passage in the chronicle written by the continuator of William of Nangis? Should we assume a factual convergence or rather the presence of a historiographical topos (including, in this version, an additional element—the allusion to Jewish greed)? We must recall in this context that the latter suggestion has already been raised, at least as a possibility, in order to explain Josephus’ account of the events of Masada. Flavius Josephus’ work, either in Greek or in the famous Latin version prepared under Cassiodorus’ direction, was widely circulated in the Middle Ages, especially in northern France and Flanders (as far as we can judge from the extant manuscripts). Although we know that Flavius Josephus was mandatory reading dur-
ing Lent at the monastery of Corbie around 1050, Josephus’ works are not included in a fourteenth-century list of readings for the monks of Saint-Denis—among whom, as has been recalled before, was the continuator of William of Nangis. Moreover, we have no direct proof that manuscripts of Josephus’ *Jewish War* existed in the library of Saint-Denis. Still, they would have been easily available to the anonymous chronicler. The Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris owns many of them, including one (a twelfth-century copy) from the library of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. We can conclude that the continuator of William of Nangis may have been familiar with Flavius Josephus’ *Jewish War* (or with the late fourth-century adaptation of it, known as “Hegesippus”). This does not necessarily imply, however, that the collective suicide near Vitry-le-François never took place. More work is needed on this issue, although a clear-cut conclusion is perhaps unattainable.

A multiple relationship connects these stories from a distant, half-forgotten past to the topic of this book. A poignant awareness of this connection can be detected in Pierre Vidal-Naquet’s decision to republish in the same volume (Les Juifs, la mémoire et le présent, Paris, 1981) his essay on “Flavius Josephus and Masada” and “A Paper Eichmann,” a long piece on the so-called revisionist school which claims that Nazi extermination camps were just a hoax. I believe, however, that the similarity of content—the persecution of Jews in the Middle Ages, the extermination of Jews in the twentieth century—is less important than the similarity of the theoretical issues involved in both cases. Let me explain why.

The analogies between the two passages from Josephus, describing the Jotapata and Masada episodes, include, in addition to the collective suicide, the survival of two people: Josephus and his fellow soldier in the first case, two women in the second. We may say that the survival of at least one person was logically required by the necessity to provide an account of each episode, but why two? I think that the well-known rejection of a single witness in court, shared by the Jewish and Latin juridical traditions, explains the choice of two witnesses. Both traditions were familiar, of course, to Flavius Josephus, a Jew who became a Roman citizen. Later on, Constantine, the Roman emperor, made the exclusion of a single witness a formal law, which was subsequently included in the Justinian Code. In the Middle Ages the im-

licit reference to Deuteronomy 19, verse 15 (*Non stabit testis unus contra aliquem*) became *testis unus, testis nullus* (one witness, no witness): a maxim referred to, either implicitly or explicitly, in trials and legal literature.

Let us now imagine for a moment what would happen if such a criterion were applied to the field of historical research. Our knowledge of the events which took place in La Baume in May 1348, near Vitry-le-François sometime during the summer of 1321, and in the grotto near Jotapata in July C.E. 67, is based, in each case, on a single, more or less direct witness. That is, respectively, the person (identified as Dayas Quinon) who wrote the lines on the Torah now in the Nationalbibliothek in Vienna; the continuator of William of Nangis; and Flavius Josephus. No sensible historian would dismiss this evidence as intrinsically unacceptable. According to normal historiographical practice, the value of each document will be tested by way of comparison—that is, by constructing a series including at least two documents. But let us assume for a moment that the continuator of William of Nangis, in his account of the collective suicide near Vitry-le-François, was merely echoing Josephus’ *Jewish War*. Even if the supposed collective suicide would finally evaporate as a fact, the account itself would still give us a valuable piece of evidence about the reception of Josephus’ work (which is also, except for hard-nosed positivists, a “fact”) in early fourteenth-century Ile-de-France.

Law and history, it seems, have different rules and different epistemological foundations. This is the reason why legal principles cannot be safely transferred into historical research. Such a conclusion would contradict the close contiguity stressed by sixteenth-century scholars like François Baudouin, the legal historian who solemnly declared that “historical studies must be placed upon a solid foundation of law, and jurisprudence must be joined to history.” In a different perspective, related to antiquarian research, the Jesuit Henri Griffet, in his *Traité des différentes sortes de preuves qui servent à établir la vérité de l’histoire* (Treatise on the various types of proofs by which it is possible to obtain historical truth) (1769) compared the historian to a judge in court, testing the reliability of different witnesses.

Such an analogy today has a definitely unfashionable ring. Many contemporary historians would probably react with a certain embarrassment to the crucial word *preuves* (proofs). But some recent discus-
sions show that the connection among proofs, truth, and history emphasized by Griffet cannot be easily dismissed.

I have already mentioned “A Paper Eichmann,” the essay written by Pierre Vidal-Naquet to refute the notorious thesis advanced by Robert Faurisson and others, according to which Nazi extermination camps never existed.19 The same essay has recently been republished in a small volume, Les assassins de la mémoire (The killers of memory), which Vidal-Naquet has dedicated to his mother, who died at Auschwitz in 1944. We can easily imagine the moral and political motives which urged Vidal-Naquet to engage himself in a detailed discussion, involving among other things a punctilious analysis of the evidence (witnesses, technological possibilities, and so on) concerning the existence of gas chambers. Other, more theoretical implications have been spelled out by Vidal-Naquet in a letter to Luce Giard, which was published a few years ago in a memorial for Michel de Certeau. Vidal-Naquet writes that the collection of essays L’écriture de l’histoire (The writing of history) published by de Certeau in 1975 was an important book which contributed to the dismantling of the historians’ proud innocence. “Since then, we have become aware that the historian writes; that he produces space and time, being himself intrinsically embedded into a specific space and time.” But we should not dismiss, Vidal-Naquet goes on, that old notion of “reality,” meaning “precisely what happened,” as evoked by Ranke one century ago.

I became very conscious of all this when the affaire Faurisson—which unfortunately is still going on—began. Faurisson’s attitude is, of course, totally different from de Certeau’s. The former is a crude materialist, who, in the name of the most tangible reality, transforms everything he deals with—pain, death, the instruments of death—into something unreal. De Certeau was deeply affected by this perverse folly, and wrote me a letter about it . . . I was convinced that there was an ongoing discourse on gas chambers; that everything should necessarily go through to a discourse [mon sentiment était qu’il y avait un discours sur les chambres à gaz, que tout devait passer par le dire]; but beyond this, or before this, there was something irreducible which, for better or worse, I would still call reality. Without this reality, how could we make a difference between fiction and history?20

— Carlo Ginzburg

On this side of the ocean this question about the difference between fiction and history is usually associated with (or elicited by) the work of Hayden White. Notwithstanding the difference between White’s and de Certeau’s historiographical practice, some convergence between, let us say, Metahistory (1973) and L’écriture de l’histoire (1975, but including essays published some years earlier) is undeniable. I will try to show, however, that White’s contribution can be fully understood only in the framework of his intellectual development.21

In 1959, introducing the American edition of Dall’storicoismo alla sociologia (From historicism to sociology) by Carlo Antoni (one of Benedetto Croce’s closest followers), Hayden White labeled Croce’s youthful essay La storia ridotta sotto il concetto generale dell’arte (History subsumed under a general concept of the arts) as “revolutionary.”22 The relevance of this essay, published by Croce in 1893 when he was twenty-seven years old, had already been emphasized by Croce himself in his intellectual autobiography (Contributo alla critica di me stesso), as well as later on by R. G. Collingwood (The Idea of History).23 Not surprisingly, the chapter on Croce in Metahistory includes a detailed discussion of La storia ridotta.24 But White’s appreciation of this essay had become, after sixteen years, remarkably colder. He still shared some relevant points, such as the sharp distinction between historical research (regarded as merely propaedeutic work) and proper history, and the identification between the latter and historical narrative. But then he concluded:

It is difficult not to think of Croce’s “revolution” in historical sensibility as a retrogression, since its effect was to sever historiography from any participation in the effort—just beginning to make some headway as sociology at the time—to construct a general science of society. But it had even more deleterious implications for historians’ thinking about the artistic side of their work. For, while Croce was correct in his perception that art is a way of knowing the world, and not merely a physical response to it or an immediate experience of it, his conception of art as literal representation of the real effectively isolated the historian as artist from the most recent—and increasingly dominant—advances made in representing the different levels of consciousness by the Symbolists and Post-Impressionists all over Europe.25
This passage already points to some elements of Hayden White’s later work. Since *Metahistory* he has become less and less interested in the construction of a “general science of society,” and more and more in “the artistic side of the historian’s work,” a shift not remote from Croce’s long battle against positivism, which inspired, among other things, his scornful attitude toward social sciences. But by the time of *Metahistory* Croce had already ceased to be the crucial influence he had been in the early stages of White’s intellectual career. Undoubtedly Croce still scored some very high points: on the one hand, he is labeled “the most talented historian of all the philosophers of history of the century,” and on the other, his allegedly “ironical” attitude is warmly praised in the very last page of the book. But the global evaluation quoted above reveals also a significant disagreement with Croce’s theoretical perspective.

White’s dissatisfaction with Croce’s thought focuses, as we have seen, on “his conception of art as a literal representation of the real”: in other words, on his “realistic” attitude. Such a word, which in this context has a cognitive, not purely aesthetic meaning, may sound a bit paradoxical, when referring to a neoidalist philosopher like Croce. But Croce’s idealism was rather peculiar: a label like “critical positivism,” suggested by one of his most intelligent critics, seems more appropriate. The most definitely idealistic stage in Croce’s thought was related to the strong impact exerted on him, especially in the crucial years 1897–1900, by Giovanni Gentile, who for two decades was his closest intellectual associate. In a note added to the second edition of his *Logica come scienza del concetto puro* (1909) Croce provided a retrospective reconstruction of his own intellectual development, starting from *La storia ridotta*, in which he had put history within the larger category of art, to the recent recognition, made under the impact of Giovanni Gentile (“my dearest friend . . . whose work had been so influential on my own”), of the identity between history and philosophy. Some years later, however, the intrinsic ambiguities of this identity (as well as, on a general level, of the alleged theoretical convergence between Croce and Gentile) fully emerged. Croce, by interpreting philosophy as the “methodology of history,” seemed to dissolve the former within the latter. Gentile went in the opposite direction. “Ideas without facts,” he wrote, “are empty; philosophy which is not history is the vainest abstraction. But facts are simply the life of the objective side of self-consciousness, outside which there is no real constructive thought.” He emphasized that historical facts [*res gestae*] “are not presupposed by history [*historia rerum gestarum*].” He strongly rejected, therefore, “the metaphysical theory of history (that is, historicism) based directly on the idea that historical writing presupposes historical fact, an idea as absurd as those of other metaphysics, and pregnant with worse consequences; for no enemy is so dangerous as one who has managed to creep into your house and hide there.”

By identifying that unnamed “metaphysical theory of history” with historicism Gentile was reacting to a polemical antifascist essay by Croce, “Antistoricismo,” which had just been published. The theoretical core of Gentile’s essay went back to his *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro* (1918), a response to Croce’s *Teoria e storia della storiografia* (1915). But by 1924 the philosophical dispute between the two former friends had transformed itself into a bitter political and personal feud.

This apparent digression was required in order to make the following points.

1. Hayden White’s intellectual development can be understood only by taking into account his exposure, at an early stage of his career, to Italian philosophical neoidealism.

2. White’s “tropological” approach, suggested in *Tropics of Discourse*, his collection of essays first published in 1978, still showed the impact of Croce’s thought. “Croce,” he wrote in 1972, “moved from his study of the epistemological bases of historical knowledge to a position in which he sought to subsume history under a general concept of art. His theory of art, in turn, was construed as a ‘science of expression and general linguistics’ (the subtitle of his *Aesthetics*). In his analysis of the bases of speech of all possible modes of comprehending reality, he came closest to grasping the essentially tropological nature of interpretation in general. He was kept from formulating this near perception, most probably, by his own ‘ironic’ suspicion of system in any human science.”

Such an approach starts with Croce but goes beyond him. When we read that “tropics is the process by which all discourse constitutes [my italics] the objects which it pretends only to describe realistically and to analyze objectively” (a passage from the introduction to *Tropics of Discourse* [1978]), we recognize the aforementioned criticism addressed to Croce’s “realism.”
3. This subjectivist stand was emphasized by the encounter with the work of Foucault. But it is significant that White tried to "decode" Foucault through Vico, the alleged founding father of Italian philosophical neoidealism. In fact, White’s statement about discourse creating its own objects seems to be echoing—with a major difference to be discussed soon—Croce’s emphasis on expression and general linguistics combined with Gentile’s extreme subjectivism implying that historiography (historia rerum gestarum) creates its own object: history (res gestae). "Le fait n’a jamais qu’une existence linguistique": these words by Barthes, used as a motto for The Content of the Form (1987), could be ascribed to this imaginary combination of Croce and Gentile. Even White’s reading of Barthes in the early eighties (he was still barely mentioned in Tropics of Discourse) reinforced a preexisting pattern.

The most questionable element in this reconstruction is Gentile’s role. As far as I know, White has never discussed his writings or even mentioned him (with one relevant exception, as we shall see). But familiarity with Gentile’s work can be safely assumed in a scholar who, through Antoni, became deeply involved in the philosophical tradition initiated by Croce and Gentile. (On the other hand, a direct knowledge of Gentile’s work must be ruled out for Barthes. The crucial role played by Barthes in de Certeau’s work can explain—but only in part—the partial convergence between the latter and Hayden White.)

Gentile’s close association with fascism, through his life and his violent death, has somewhat obscured, at least outside Italy, the first stage of his philosophical career. His adherence to Hegelian idealism came through an original reading of Marx’s early philosophical writings (La filosofia di Marx, 1899). In his analysis of Marx’s Theses on Feuerbach, Gentile interpreted Marxian praxis through Vico’s famous dictum ipsum factum, or rather through the idealistic interpretation of it. Praxis, therefore, was regarded as a concept implying the identity between subject and object, insofar as the Spirit (the transcendental subject) creates reality. Even Gentile’s late statement on historiography creating history was just a corollary of this principle. This presentation of Marx as a fundamentally idealistic philosopher had a lasting impact on Italian intellectual and political life. For instance, there is no doubt that Antonio Gramsci, by using in his Prison Notebooks an expression like “philosophy of praxis” instead of “historical materialism,” was obviously trying to fool fascist censorship. But he was also echoing the title of Gentile’s second essay on Marx (“La filosofia della praxis”) as well as, more significantly, Gentile’s emphasis on “praxis” as a concept which diminished (not to say rejected altogether) materialism as a crucial element in Marxian thought. Echoes of Gentile’s interpretation of Marx have been detected in Gramsci’s early idealistic Marxism. It has even been suggested that the well-known passage in Prison Notebooks, on Gentile’s philosophy of being closer than Croce’s to the futurist movement, implies a favorable evaluation of Gentile: had not futurism been regarded by Gramsci in 1921 as a revolutionary movement which had been able to respond to a need for “new forms of art, of philosophy, of behavior, of language”? A similar closeness between Gentile’s philosophy and futurism, as negative examples of “antihistoricism,” was implicitly suggested by Croce in a liberal-conservative antifascist perspective.

In light of a left-wing reading of Gentile’s work (or at least part of it) the quasi-Gentilian flavor detectable in Hayden White’s writings since The Burden of History—his 1966 plea for a new historiography written in a modernist key—sounds less paradoxical. One can easily understand the impact (as well as the intrinsic weakness) of this attack launched against liberal and Marxist orthodoxies. In the late sixties and early seventies subjectivism, even extreme subjectivism, had a definitely radical flavor. But if one regarded desire as a left-wing slogan, then reality (including the emphasis on “real facts”) would have looked definitely right-wing. Such a simplistic, not to say self-defeating, view has been largely superseded—in the sense that attitudes implying a basic flight from reality are certainly not restricted today to some factions of the left. This fact should be taken into account by any attempt to explain today’s rather extraordinary appeal of skeptical ideologies, even outside the academic world. In the meantime Hayden White has declared that he is “against revolutions, whether launched from ‘above’ or ‘below’ in the social hierarchy.” This statement was elicited, he explains in a footnote, by the fact that “the relativism with which I am usually charged is conceived by many theorists to imply the kind of nihilism which invites revolutionary activism of a particularly irresponsible sort. In my view, relativism is the moral equivalent of epistemological skepticism; moreover, I conceive relativism to be the basis of social tolerance, not a license to ‘do as you please.’” [47] Skepticism, relativism, tolerance: At first sight the distance between this self-presentation of White’s thought and Gentile’s theoreti-
cal perspective could not be wider. Gentile’s attacks against positivist historians (“Historical science, priding itself on the ‘facts’, the positive and solid realities, which it contrasts with mere ideas or theories without objective validity, is living in a childish world of illusion”) have no skeptical implications, insofar as the theoretical reality he was concerned with implied one transcendental Spirit, not a multiplicity of empirical subjects. Therefore he never was a relativist; on the contrary, he strongly advocated a religious, intransigent commitment in both theoretical and political matters. And of course he never theorized tolerance, as his support of fascism—including quadristismo, the most violent aspect of it—shows. The notorious statement describing the quadristi’s blackjack as a “moral force” comparable to preaching—a remark made by Gentile during a speech for the 1924 electoral campaign—was consistent with his strictly monistic theory: in a reality created by Spirit there is no place for a real distinction between facts and values.

These are not minor theoretical divergences. Any argument suggesting a theoretical contiguity between Gentile’s and White’s perspectives must take these major differences into account. So we may wonder on what ground does White stress, in his article “The Politics of Historical Interpretation,” that his own historical perspective shares something with “the kind of perspective on history . . . conventionally associated with the ideologies of fascist regimes,” whose “social and political policies” he simultaneously rejects as “undeniably horrible.”

This contradiction, so clearly perceived, leads us to the moral dilemma involved in White’s approach. “We must guard,” he says, “against a sentimentalism that would lead us to write off such a conception of history simply because it has been associated with fascist ideologies. One must face the fact that when it comes to apprehending the historical record, there are no grounds to be found in the historical record itself for preferring one way of construing its meaning over another.”

No grounds? In fact, in discussing Faurisson’s interpretation of the extermination of Jews, White does suggest a criterion according to which we must judge the validity of different historical interpretations. Let us follow his argument.

White’s aforementioned statement is based (1) on the distinction (better to say disjunction) between “positive” historical inquiry and “proper history,” that is, narrative, advocated by Croce in La storia
ences are not ultimately related to truth, there is nothing to tolerate.65 In fact, White's argument connecting truth and effectiveness inevitably reminds us not of tolerance but of its opposite—Gentile's evaluation of blackjack as a moral force. In the same essay, as we have seen, White invites us to consider without "sentimentalism" the association between a conception of history which he has implicitly praised and the "ideologies of fascist regimes." He calls this association "conventional." But the mention of Gentile's name (with Heidegger's) in this context does not seem to be conventional.66

Since the late sixties the skeptical attitudes we are speaking about have become more and more influential in the humanities and social sciences. This pervasive diffusion is only partially related to their alleged novelty. Only eulogy could suggest to Pierre Vidal-Naquet that "since then [the publication of Michel de Certeau's L'écriture de l'histoire in 1975] we have become aware that the historian writes; that he produces space and time, being himself intrinsically embedded in a specific space and time." As Vidal-Naquet knows perfectly well, the same point (leading sometimes to skeptical conclusions) was strongly emphasized, for instance, in a not particularly bold methodological 1961 essay by E. H. Carr (What Is History?)—as well as, at a much earlier date, by Croce.

By looking at these issues in historical perspective, we can have a better grasp of their theoretical implications. As a starting point I would suggest a short piece written by Renato Serra in 1912 but published only in 1927, after his untimely death (1915). The piece's title—Partenza di un gruppo di soldati per la Libia (A soldiers group leaving for Libya)—gives only a vague idea of its content. It starts with a description, written in a dazzling experimental style reminiscent of Boccioni's futurist paintings from the same era, of a railway station full of departing soldiers surrounded by a huge crowd; then there are some antisocialist remarks; then a reflection on history and historical writing, which ends abruptly in a solemn metaphysical tone, full of Nietzschean echoes. This unfinished essay, which certainly deserves a longer and deeper analysis, reflects the complex personality of a man who, besides being the best Italian critic of his generation, was a person of erudition with strong philosophical interests. In his correspondence with Croce (to whom he was personally very close, without ever being a follower) he first explained the genesis of the pages we are speaking about. They had been elicited by Storia, cronaca e false storie (1912), an essay by Croce which later on was included, in a revised form, in the latter's Teoria e storia della storiografia. Croce had mentioned the gap, emphasized by Tolstoy in War and Peace, between a real event, like a battle, and the fragmentary and distorted recollections of it on which historical accounts are based. Tolstoy's view is well known: the gap could be overcome only by collecting the memories of every individual (even the humblest soldier) who had been directly or indirectly involved in the battle. Croce dismissed this suggestion and the agnosticism which it seemed to involve as absurd: "At every moment we know all the history we need," therefore the history we don't know is identical with the "eternal ghost of the thing in itself."67 Serra, ironically defining himself as "a slave of the thing in itself," wrote to Croce that he felt much closer to Tolstoy; however, he added, "the difficulties I am confronted with are—or at least seem to be—much more complicated."68 They were indeed.

There are some naive people, Serra observed, who believe that "a document can express reality ... But a document can express only itself ... A document is a fact. The battle is another fact (a myriad of other facts). Those two entities cannot become a unity. They cannot be identical, they cannot mirror each other ... The individual who acts is a fact. The individual who tells a story is another fact ... Every testimony is only a testimony of itself; of its immediate context (momento), of its origin, of its purpose—that's all."69

These were not reflections by a pure theoretician. Serra knew what erudition was. His cutting criticism did not artificially oppose historical narratives to the stuff they are made of. He mentioned all kinds of narrative: clumsy letters sent by soldiers to their families, newspaper articles written to please a distant audience, reports of war actions scribbled in haste by an impatient captain, historians' accounts full of superstitious deference toward all these documents. Serra was deeply aware that these narratives, regardless of the directness of their character, have always a highly problematic relationship with reality. But reality ("the things in themselves") exists.64

Serra explicitly rejected simple positivist attitudes. But his remarks help us to reject also a perspective which piles up positivism and relativism: "positive" historical inquiry based on a literal reading of the evidence, on the one hand, and "historical narratives" based on figurative, incomparable and unrefutable interpretations, on the other.63
In fact, the narratives based on one witness that are discussed earlier in this chapter can be regarded as experimental cases which deny such a clear-cut distinction: a different reading of the available evidence immediately affects the resulting narrative. A similar although usually less visible relationship can be assumed on a general level. An unlimited skeptical attitude toward historical narratives is therefore groundless.

On Auschwitz, Jean-François Lyotard has written:

Suppose that an earthquake destroys not only lives, buildings, and objects but also the instruments used to measure earthquakes, directly and indirectly. The impossibility of quantitatively measuring it does not prohibit, but rather inspires in the minds of the survivors the idea of a very great seismic force... With Auschwitz, something new has happened in history (which can only be a sign and not a fact), which is that the facts, the testimonies which bore the traces of here's and now's, the documents which indicated the sense or senses of the facts, and the names, finally the possibility of various kinds of phrases whose conjunction makes reality, all this has been destroyed as much as possible. Is it up to the historian to take into account not only the damages, but also the wrong? Not only the reality, but also the meta-reality that is the destruction of reality?... Its name marks the confines wherein historical knowledge sees its competence impugned.86

Is this last remark true? I am not fully convinced. Memory and the destruction of memory are recurrent elements in history. "The need to tell our story to 'the rest,' to make 'the rest' participate in it," the late Primo Levi wrote, "had taken on for us, before our liberation and after, the character of an immediate and violent impulse, to the point of competing with our other elementary needs."87 As Benveniste has shown, among the Latin words which mean "witness" there is superstit — survivor.88

Hayden White has so often scandalized his fellow historians that I hope he will find it refreshing to be reproached for not being scandalous enough in "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth." That is, in his anxiety to avoid inclusion in the ranks of those who argue for a kind of relativistic "anything goes," which might provide ammunition for revisionist skeptics about the existence of the Holocaust, he undercuts what is most powerful in his celebrated critique of naive historical realism. His chapter offers two distinct and not fully integrated arguments about the relation between the past and its representation as narrated history. The first will be well known to readers of his path-breaking analyses of the forms of historical emplotment, Metahistory, Tropics of Discourse, and The Content of the Form. The second, although less familiar, draws on his well-known injunction to jettison realist modes of historical writing in favor of modernist alternatives, a directive he made as early as his 1966 essay, "The Burden of History." Let me take the two arguments in order.

White’s contention that written history is inevitably beholden to formal reconstructions that cannot be perfectly mapped onto the historical reality they purport to represent is based on a tripartite division of the process of history writing. Although this is a division he construes only to deny, it remains operative in the position he defends, at least in the initial portion of his chapter. First, he posits facts or events, which he identifies with the "content" of history as it happened. These are understood to be prelinguistic phenomena, which include, to repeat his list, wars, revolutions, earthquakes, and tidal waves. He then suggests these become the stuff of stories, which are emplotted narrations about their significance. Finally, he suggests that interpretations about the meaning of these stories is a higher level of historical analysis, at least for traditional historians.

White, of course, wants to subvert tradition by collapsing the sec-


18. I am reminded by a colleague that shortly before his death at the hands of the Nazis, Marc Bloch wrote: "When all is said and done, a single word, 'understanding,' is the beacon light of our studies." The Historian's Craft (New York, 1964), p. 143.


2. Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth

1. Historical discourses consist also, obviously, of explanations cast in the form of arguments more or less formalizable. I do not address the issue of the relation between explanations cast in the mode of formal arguments and what I would call the "explanation-effects" produced by the narrativization of events. It is the felicitous combination of arguments with narrative representations which accounts for the appeal of a specifically "historical" representation of reality. But the precise nature of the relation between arguments and narrativizations in histories is unclear.

2. I have in mind here the farcical version of the events of 1848–1851 in France composed by Marx in open competition with the tragic and comic versions of those same events set forth by Hugo and Proudhon respectively.

3. Unless, that is, we are prepared to entertain the idea that any given body of facts is infinitely variously interpretable and that one aim of historical discourse is to multiply the number of interpretations we have of any given set of events rather than to work toward the production of a "best" interpretation. Cf. work by Paul Veyne, C. Behan McCullagh, Peter Münz, and F. R. Ankersmit.


7. Thus Hillgruber writes: "Das sind Dimensionen, die ins Anthropologische, ins Sozialpsychologische und ins Individualpsychologische gehen und die Frageiner möglichen Wiederholung unter anderem ideologisch zu Vorzeichen an tatsächlich oder vermeintlich wiederum extremen Situationen und Konstellationen aufwerfen. Das geht über jenes Wach-


8. Most of the relevant documents can be found in "Historikerstreit": Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung (Munich: Piper, 1989). See also "Special Issue on the Historikerstreit," New German Critique, 44 (Spring/Summer 1988).

9. The plot type is a crucial element in the constitution of what Bakhtin calls the "chronotope," a socially structured domain of the natural world that defines the horizon of possible events, actions, agents, agencies, social roles, and so forth of all imaginative fictions—and all real stories, too. A dominant plot type determines the classes of things perceivable, the modes of their relationships, the periodicities of their development, and the possible meanings they can reveal. Every generic plot type presupposes a chronotope, and every chronotope presumes a limited number of the kinds of stories that can be told about events happening within its horizon.


13. Ibid., p. 43.


15. Ibid., p. 146.

16. Ibid., pp. 146–147.

17. Ibid., pp. 157–158.

18. Ibid., pp. 158–159.

19. Ibid., p. 156.

from pretending to come to grips with the Holocaust, . . . emphasize their authors’ necessary aloofness. Indeed,” she says, “since subjectivity and obliqueness are the only approaches possible,” the best essays in the collection are those which “make a virtue of being subjective and oblique.”

21. Lang, Act and Idea, p. xii.
22. Ibid., p. xiii.
23. As in, for example, such “performative” actions as those of promising or swearing an oath. In actions such as these in which the agent seems to act upon itself, the use of the middle voice permits avoidance of the notion that the subject is split in two, that is, into an agent who administers the oath and a patient who “takes” it. Thus, Attic Greek expresses the action of composing an oath in the active voice (logou poiein) and that of swearing an oath, not in the passive, but in the middle voice (logou poieithai). Barthes gives the example of theven, to offer a sacrifice for another (active), versus thuesthai, to offer a sacrifice for oneself (middle). Roland Barthes, “To Write: An Intransitive Verb?” in The Rustle of Language, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 18.
24. Ibid., p. 19.
26. Cf. Saul Friedlander’s introduction to Gerald Fleming, Hitler and the Final Solution (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), where he writes: “On the limited level of the analysis of Nazi policies, an answer to the debate between the various groups appears to be possible. On the level of global interpretation, however, the real difficulties remain. The historian who is not encumbered with ideological or conceptual blinkers easily recognizes that it is Nazi anti-Semitism and the anti-Jewish policy of the Third Reich that gives Nazism its sui generis character. By virtue of this fact, inquiries into the nature of Nazism take on a new dimension that renders it unclassifiable . . . . If [however] one admits that the Jewish problem was at the center, was the very essence of the system, many studies of the Final Solution lose their coherence, and historiography is confronted with an enigma that defies normal interpretative categories . . . . We know in detail what occurred, we know the sequence of the events and their probable interaction, but the profound dynamics of the phenomena escapes us” (my italics).

28. Ibid., pp. 534–539.
29. This is the view held by Fredric Jameson and most explicitly argued in Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979). It is a commonplace of leftist interpretations of modernism.

3. On Emplotment
1. Andreas Hillgruber, Zwielei Untergang: Die Zerschlagung des Deutschen Reiches und das Ende des europäischen Judentums (Berlin, 1986). The original version of the first essay was published in 1983; that of the second essay was written in 1984.
2. Quintilian, Institutio Oratoria, 5.11.23, 8.3.77.
3. Hayden White, Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe (Baltimore, 1973), p. 427: "A given historian will be inclined to choose one or another of the different modes of explanation, on the level of argument, emplotment, or ideological implication, in response to the imperatives of the trope which informs the linguistic protocol he has used to prefigure the field of historical occurrence singled out by him for investigation."
4. Hillgruber, Zwielei Untergang, p. 64.
6. Hillgruber, Zwielei Untergang, p. 98 ("historische Einmaligkeit").
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., p. 67.
15. Ibid., pp. 23–25. Note the subject specification: "Dies ist das geaffen zusammengefasste und mit einigen deutlichen Akzenten versehene Geschichten des Zusammenbruchs im Osten 1944/1945, wie es sich aus deutscher Sicht darstellt" (p. 42).
16. See the commentaries of each in Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Entsorgung der
self-consciousness as a through-and-through social phenomenon. The "I," or the sum res cogitans of Descartes, was not only a substance, but also a
lonely one; its self-evidence needed no other self; its ideas were innate.
Kant's "transcendental unity of the apperception"—the "I that "accomp-
ies all of my representations"—though not a substance anymore
(Kant's position was very similar to Ryle's), was still a lonely affair. Hegel
was the first to argue that self-consciousness, by definition, needs for its
own constitution another self-consciousness to "recognize" (anerkennen)
it. It identifies itself through the other.

5. Just One Witness

Acknowledgment: Many thanks to Nadine Tanio for her stylistic revision.


2. See Storia notturna. Una decifrazione del sabb (Turin: Einaudi, 1989),
pp. 5–35.

3. See Bouquet, Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France (Paris,
1840), XX, 629–630.

Smallwood (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985). A subtle analysis of
the parallels between the two passages has been given by P. Vidal-
Naquet, "Flavius Josèphe et Masada," in Les Juifs, la mémoire, le présent


1, 15–16. See also G. N. Deutsch, Iconographie et illustration de Flavius

7. See P. Schmitz, "Les lectures de table à l'abbaye de Saint-Denis à la fin
du Moyen Age," Revue bénédictine, 42 (1930), 163–167; A. Wilmart,
"Le couvent et la bibliothèque de Cluny vers le milieu du XIIe siècle," 
Revue Mabillon, 11 (1921), 89–124, esp. 93, 113.

8. See D. Nebbiai-Dalla Guarda, La bibliothèque de l'abbaye de Saint-Denis
en France du IXe au XVIIIe siècle (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1985), on a
request sent from Reichenuau to Saint-Denis in order to get a copy of
Josephus' Antiquitiae Judaicae (p. 61; see also ibid., p. 294).


10. Hegesippi qui dicitur historiarum libri V, ed. V. Ussani (Corpus Scriptor-
orum Ecclesiastícorum Latinorum, 66), Vindobonae, 1932, 1960, pref.
K. Mras (on Masada's siege see 5, nos. 52–53, 407–417). The Bibliothèque
Nationale in Paris owns twelve manuscripts of "Hegesippus," written be-
tween the tenth and the fifteenth centuries; see Deutsch, Iconographie,
p. 15.

11. A translation of the latter essay has been published as "A Paper Eich-
mann?" (note the addition of a question mark to the original French title),

12. Maria Daraki's suggestion, mentioned by P. Vidal-Naquet (Les Juifs, p.
59, n. 49), that in the former case the parallel should be referred to the
woman who denounced Josephus and his fellows seems to me less con-
vincing.

13. See H. Van Vliet, No Single Testimony, Studia Theologica Rhe-
Traciaetina, 4 (Utrecht, 1958). See also, from a general (that is, logical)
point of view, Vidal-Naquet, Les Juifs, p. 51. "More than one witness is
necessary, because, so long as one affirms and another denies, nothing is
proved, and the right which everyone has of being held innocent pre-
vails," Beccaria wrote in 1764 in Dei delitti e delle pene (trans. J. A.
Today, at the very moment I am writing (2 May 1990), a totally opposite
attitude prevails in Italian courts.


15. Cf. A. Libois, "A propos des modes de preuve et plus spécialement de la
preuve par témoins dans la juridiction de Léau au XVIe siècle," in Hom-
532–546, esp. 539–542.

16. On this topic see the rather cursory remarks of P. Peeters, "Les aphor-
ismes du droit dans la critique historique," Académie Royale de Belgique,
Bulletin de la classe des lettres, 32 (1946), 82 ff. (pp. 95–96 on testis unus,
testis nullus).

17. F. Baudouin, De institutione historiae universae et ejus cum jurispruden-
tia conjunctione, prolégonomenon libri II, quoted by D. R. Kelley, 
Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship (New York: Columbia 

18. I consulted the second edition (Liége, 1770). The importance of this trea-
tise was perceptively stressed by A. Johnson, The Historian and Histori-
ical Evidence (New York, 1934; 1st ed. 1926), p. 114, who called it "the
most significant book on method after Mabillon's De re diplomatia." See
also A. Momigliano, Ancient History and the Antiquarian (Contributo alla
81.

19. See R. Faurisson, Mémoire en défense. Contre ceux qui m'accusent de
falsifier l'histoire. La question des chambres à gaz, preface by Noam 
Chomsky (Paris: La Vieille Taupe, 1980).

21. The following pages are based on White’s previously published work. His chapter in this volume suggests a milder (although somewhat self-contradictory) form of skepticism.

22. See C. Antoni, From Historicism to Sociology (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1959), translator’s preface (“On History and Historicism”), pp. xxv–xxvi; see also the review by B. Mazlish in History and Theory, 1 (1960), 219–227.


25. See White, Metahistory, p. 385.

26. Ibid., pp. 378, 434.

27. Ibid., p. 407.


33. See G. Gentile, “Il superamento del tempo nella storia,” in Memorie italiane e problemi della filosofia e della vita (Rome, 1936), p. 308: “la metafisica storica (o storicismo) . . .”; the essay had been previously published in “Rendiconti della R. Accademia nazionale dei Lincei,” classe di scienze morali, ser. 6, 11 (1935), 752–769. The words in parentheses, (“that is, historicism,”) which are missing in the aforementioned English translation (Philosophy and History, the editors’ preface is dated February 1936) were presumably added after the appearance of Croce’s essay “Antistoricismo,” first delivered at Oxford in 1930, but published only in Ultimi saggi (Bari: Laterza, 1935), pp. 246–258. Gentile delivered his lecture at the Accademia dei Lincei on 17 November 1933; he sent back the corrected proofs on 2 April 1936 (see Rendiconti cit., pp. 752, 769). For Croce’s reaction to the essays collected in Philosophy and History see La storia come pensiero e come azione (Bari: Laterza, 1943 [1938]), pp. 319–327 (the entire section is missing from the English translation, History as the Story of Liberty [London, 1941]); on page 322 there is a polemical allusion to Gentile ("una torbida tendenza misticheggianti . . ."). See also in the same volume the pages on “Historiography as Liberation from History” (History, pp. 43–45 = La storia cit., pp. 30–32): “We are products of the past and we live immersed in the past, which encompasses us etc.” In his much more radical and consistent idealism Gentile had emphasized that past, and time as well, are purely abstract notions, which are overcome in concrete spiritual life (The Transcending of Time, pp. 95–97). The relevance of Gentile’s Il superamento del tempo nella storia has been emphasized by C. Garboli, Scritti servili (Turin, 1989), p. 205.


35. I am not suggesting here a simple, unilinear causal relationship. White has undoubtedly reacted to Italian neoidealism through a distinctly American filter. But even White’s pragmatism, implicitly pointed out by Perry Anderson at the end of his chapter, was presumably reinforced by the well-known pragmatist strain (through Giovanni Vailati’s mediation) detectable in Croce’s work, particularly in his Logic.


37. Ibid., p. 2.


39. The index has only one entry under his name; but see also p. 24, n. 2,
where Barthes is listed with other scholars working on rhetorics, such as
Kenneth Burke, Genette, Eco, Todorov.
(Pisa, 1899), pp. 51–157 (the book was dedicated to Croce).
41. Ibid., pp. 62–63.
42. See G. Bergami, Il giovane Gramsci e il marxismo, 1911–1918 (Milan:
Feltrinelli, 1977); A. Del Noce, Il suicidio della rivoluzione (Milan: Rus-
coni, 1978).
43. See S. Natoli, Giovanni Gentile filosofo europeo (Turin: Bollati-
Boringhieri, 1989), pp. 94ff. (rather superficial). For Gramsci’s judgment
on futurism see Socialismo e fascismo. L’Ordine Nuovo 1919–1922 (Turin:
44. See B. Croce, Antistoricismo, in Ultimi saggi, pp. 246–258.
45. See H. White, The Content of the Form (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Uni-
46. Ibid., p. 227 n. 12.
49. Cf. G. Gentile, “Caratteri religiosi della presente lotta politica,” in Che
cosa e’ il fascismo. Discorsi e polemiche (Florence: Vallecchi, 1924
[1925]), pp. 143–151.
50. Cf. the section entitled “La violenza fascista” in ibid., pp. 29–32.
51. “State and individual . . . are one and the same; and the art of governing
is the art of reconciling and identifying these two terms so that the maxi-
mum of liberty agrees with the maximum of public order . . . For always
the maximum of liberty agrees with the maximum of public force of the
state. Which force? Distinctions in this field are dear to those who do not
welcome this concept of force, which is nevertheless essential to the state,
and hence to liberty. And they distinguish moral from material force: the
force of law freely voted and accepted from the force of violence which is
rigidly opposed to the will of the citizen. Ingenious distinctions, if made
in good faith! Every force is a moral force, for it is always an expression
of will; and whatever be the argument used—preaching or black-jacking—
its efficacy can be none other than its ability finally to receive the inner
support of a man and to persuade him to agree.” I quote from the transla-
tion provided by H. W. Schneider in Making the Fascist State (New York:
Oxford University Press, 1928, p. 347). The speech, delivered in Palermo
on 31 March 1924, was first published in journals such as La nuova politi-
cale liberale, II, 2 (April 1924). In republishing it one year later, after the
Matteotti crisis and its violent solution, Gentile, who had been dubbed
“the blackjack philosopher,” added a visibly embarrassed footnote in
which he made a distinction between private force and state force (the
latter having been taken over, in a situation of vacancy, by the squadrists);
see G. Gentile, “Il fascismo e la Sicilia,” in Che cosa e’ il fascismo, pp. 50–
51. Text and footnote are strangely confused in H. W. Schneider’s trans-
lation. Gentile’s argument was not particularly original: see for instance
B. Mussolini, Forza e consenso, in “Gerarchia,” 1923 (= Opera omnia, ed.
E. and D. Susmel, XIX, Florence: La Fenice, 1956, pp. 195–196; the article
was translated by Schneider, Making the Fascist State, pp. 341–
342).
52. “The Politics of Historical Interpretation” (1982), in The Content of the
Form, pp. 74–75.
53. Ibid., p. 77. Italics are missing in the French text.
54. Ibid., p. 80. My italics.
55. Ibid., p. 227 n. 12.
56. On this latter point I am indebted to Stefano Levi Della Torre for some
enlightening remarks.
57. See H. White, The Content of the Form, p. 74.
58. See R. Serra, Scritti letterari, morali e politici, ed. M. Isnenghi (Turin:
Einaudi, 1974), pp. 278–288. A reading of this essay similar to the one I
am suggesting here has been proposed by C. Garboli, Falbalas (Milan:
59. Cf. (but not exclusively) the well-known trittico Gli addii (Quelli che
vanno, etc.) (1911), now at the Metropolitan Museum in New York.
60. Cf. R. Serra, Epistolario, ed. L. Ambrosini, G. De Robertis, A. Grilli
(Florence: Le Monnier, 1953), pp. 454ff.
44–45.
with Croce has been emphasized by E. Garin, “Serra e Croce,” in Scritti
in onore di Renato Serra per il cinquantenario della morte (Florence: Le
64. Ibid., p. 287.
65. See Hayden White’s passage quoted above as well as his chapter.
66. Cf. J.-F. Lyotard, The Differend: Phrases in Dispute (Minneapolis: Uni-
1961), pp. 5–6 (= Se questo e’ un uomo [Turin: Einaudi, 1958], pp. 9–10).
68. Cf. E. Benveniste, Indo-European Language and Society (London: Fa-
ber, 1973 [1969]), pp. 522ff. (the difference between testis and superstes
is discussed on p. 526).
Notes to Pages 103–109
< 356 >

6. Of Plots, Witnesses, and Judgments


2. Perhaps the issue concerns the contradiction between two types of experience, which in German is expressed in the distinction between the raw shocks of Erlebnis and the meaningful coherence of Erfahrung. Whereas the victims experienced their fate largely in the former sense, historians tend to interpret it in the latter. Another way to make this point is to say that while the disaster of the Exodus from Egypt could be turned by the Jews into Haggadic truth, that of the Holocaust cannot. For more on the implications of the split in experience and the Holocaust, see my "Songs of Experience: Reflections on the Debate over Alltagsgeschichte," Salmagundi, 81 (Winter 1989), 29–41.

7. Representing the Holocaust

1. Ernst Nolte, "Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will," Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 6 June 1986. References to this article as "Vergangenheit" will be included in the text. Contributions to the "Historikerstreit" have been collected in Ernst Reinhard Piper, ed., "Historikerstreit": Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzugsart der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung (Munich: Piper Verlag, 1987). See also the special issue of the New German Critique, 44 (Spring/Summer 1988).


3. Charles Maier, The Unmasterable Past (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 1. See also Richard J. Evans’ well-informed and lucid account, In Hitler’s Shadow: West German Historians and the Attempt to Escape the Nazi Past (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), which appeared after this text was largely completed. Evans’ book is perhaps best read as a complement to Maier’s, for it fills in background that Maier’s more pointed and conceptualized analysis often takes for granted, and it devotes relatively little attention to facets of the Historikerstreit (such as Habermas’ role) that Maier elaborates. Evans, however, often seems to proceed on the assumption that an argument may be effectively countered by adding and evaluating the evidence germane to its discrete claims. This approach, while obviously necessary, is not sufficient to address less rational aspects of certain “arguments” that are focused on in my analysis.

4. The term Holocaust is of course problematic. But one is in an area where there are no easy, uninvolved, or purely objective choices. Perhaps it is best not to become fixated on any one term but to use various terms with a continual indication of their limitations. In addressing limiting phenomena, one inevitably risks repeating the tendency to veer in the directions of either sacrificial elevation or bureaucratic reduction. Nonetheless, there are, I think, at least three reasons for using the term Holocaust even if one is aware of its problematic nature and resists giving it a privileged status: (1) Given the unavailability of innocent terms, Holocaust may be one of the better choices in an impossible, tension-ridden linguistic field. There is even the possibility that resorting to terms like annihilation or final solution will inadvertently repeat Nazi terminology. Holocaust is both less bureaucratic and less banal than some of the alternatives. (2) The term for various reasons has had a role in the discourse of the victims themselves, and there are ritual and ethical grounds for honoring their choice. (3) The rather prevalent use of the term, including its use by non-victims, has to some extent routinized it and helped to counteract its sacrificial connotations without entirely reducing it to cliché, although one must beware of its role in what Alvin H. Rosenfeld has termed “a pornography of the Holocaust,” promoted especially by popularization and commercialization in the mass media. See "Another Revisionism: Popular Culture and the Changing Image of the Holocaust" in Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective, ed. Geoffrey Hartman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 90–102. See also Saul Friedlander, Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death, trans. Thomas Weyr (New York: Harper & Row, 1984).

5. A fruitful beginning in addressing this problem is made by Theodor W. Adorno in "What Does Coming to Terms with [Aufarbeitung] the Past Mean?" trans. Timothy Bahti and Geoffrey Hartman in Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective, ed. Hartman, pp. 114–129. As Adorno notes, "Enlightenment about what happened in the past must work, above all, against a forgetfulness that too easily goes along with and justifies what is forgotten" (p. 125). It should be noted that the concept of transference employed in my argument is not based on a simple analogy with the analytic situation but on the much stronger claim that the latter is a condensed version of a general transferential process characterizing relation-