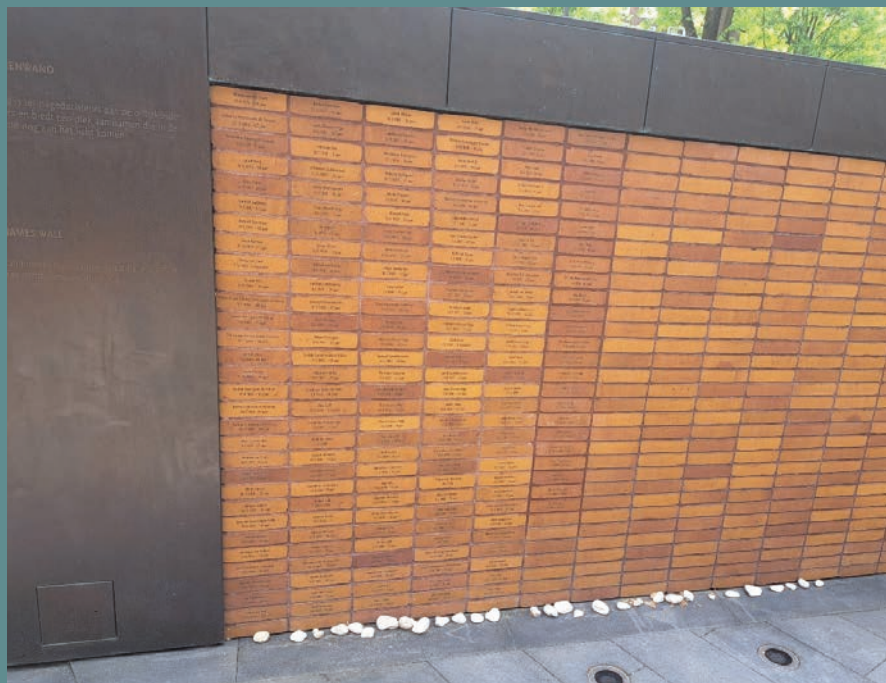


THE BEST OF SCHOLARS AND SCHOLARSHIP IN THE HUMANITIES

4



Dan Stone

THINKING EUROPE'S CATASTROPHE

Essays on Fascism and the Holocaust

vol. 1

ibidem

Dan Stone

Thinking Europe's Catastrophe

Essays on Fascism and the Holocaust

Volume 1

The Best of Scholars and Scholarship in the Humanities

Edited by:

Elliot Y. Neaman, Matthew Feldman, and Karim Mamdani

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Thinking Europe's Catastrophe

R.G. Collingwood, the Oxford philosopher and ancient historian, ended his autobiography, completed in 1938, with a furious and now famous diatribe against his colleagues:

It is not the business of this autobiography to ask how completely the country has in fact been deceived, or how long the present degree of deception will last. I am not writing an account of recent political events in England: I am writing a description of the way in which those events impinged upon myself and broke up my pose of a detached professional thinker. I know now that the minute philosophers of my youth, for all their profession of a purely scientific detachment from practical affairs, were the propagandists of a coming Fascism. I know that Fascism means the end of clear thinking and the triumph of irrationalism. I know that all my life I have been engaged unawares in a political struggle, fighting against these things in the dark. Henceforth, I shall fight in the daylight.¹

It is unsurprising that, as Stephen Toulmin noted in his 1978 introduction to the autobiography, Collingwood's words 'have been slow to be forgiven'. At the same time, Toulmin observes that if some of his comments were harsh, Collingwood stood out for 'his refusal to use the academic life as a refuge from the larger world of politics and international affairs.'²

In 1939, Collingwood was one of a small number of thinkers who foresaw where fascism and Nazism would lead; indeed, he had been saying so for years, making him exceptional in the British context, outside of the small circles of émigré writers who had experienced Hitler's regime at first hand. In 2025, one would have to be quite bold to make similar predictions, especially writing as a historian and not a journalist, political philosopher, or critic of the contemporary

1 R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 167.

2 Stephen Toulmin, 'Introduction' to Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, xi, xviii.

scene. Yet it is hard to escape the sense that what is happening in the world today has an air of familiarity about it. This time around it would be both tragic and farcical, if full-fledged fascism or something like it were to return. We have had enough warnings already, and anyone wanting to understand the present is well advised to read Collingwood, Theodor Adorno, Aurel Kolnai, Sinclair Lewis, Sally Carson, Phyllis Bottome or others who diagnosed the meaning of fascism and Nazism with such keen insight in the 1930s and 1940s.

Perhaps the strange sense of déjà-vu can be explained by Hannah Arendt. In a very striking essay from 1946, one of the preparatory studies for what became *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), she argued that the combination of the elite and the mob, that in her eyes characterised the modern age of imperialism and racism, was by no means at an end. The 'fundamental feeling of insecurity', Arendt argued, 'was the strongest ally Hitler found in Europe at the beginning of the war, and it will not disappear merely with the downfall of Hitler-Germany.'³ It takes us aback today that someone writing in 1946 could refer to the 'mere' disappearance of the Third Reich and its apocalyptic drives, but Arendt understood the causes of Nazism to lie in a state of affairs that reached far beyond 'ideology' and concerned the fundamental structures and characteristics of the modern world. In particular, the continued existence of imperialism, in which the state as protector of human beings gave way to the state as promoter of an 'all or nothing' view in which individuals disappeared into mobs, created the conditions for all-out wars

3 Hannah Arendt, 'Imperialism: Road to Suicide. The Political Origins and Use of Racism', *Commentary*, 1 (1946), 34.

on groups perceived as threatening outsiders and, as the Nazis' war against the Jews had shown, would end in their extermination. Here it is worth citing Arendt at length:

The military defeat of fascism, though a prerequisite for a normalization of politics, cannot prevent new experiments which will hardly differ from fascism in essence or result. They will inevitably take the same course: first, organization of the mob and terrorization of the people; then, mobilization of an 'elite' ready to sacrifice everything to the greatness of events, the efficiency of a system, success 'as such'; and at last all will culminate in extermination and suicide.

The organization of the mob will again find its essential dynamic in the transformation of nations into races, for there is no other unifying bond now available between individuals who have lost all natural connection with their fellow-men. If we should prove to lack the force to escape from the endless process of accumulation of power in which we seem imprisoned, then we will indeed face the real Downfall of the West.⁴

'Cold War liberals', Samuel Moyn tells us, assumed that Hitlerism was dead and therefore that one could look forward to 'the eventual if still highly partial deracialization of world order and an end to hierarchical visions of humanity.' But, he adds, 'the early Cold War liberal theorists did not get the memorandum.' Arendt, as he explains, 'advertised more clearly the neo-imperialist and racist entanglements of the defence of Western freedom in the era that go entirely unnoticed in promotional accounts of Cold War liberalism even today.'⁵

In these references, there is a clear link between British and European history, between European imperialism and fascism, and between the past and the present. These connections have been central to my work over the last 25 years. The essays in this collection span the years 1999-2025, a

4 Arendt, 'Imperialism', 35.

5 Samuel Moyn, *Liberalism Against Itself: Cold War Intellectuals and the Making of Our Times* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023), 117.

quarter of a century in which the historiography of the topics covered here has changed massively. Yet there are some constants: a treatment of ideas in the British context that sees that country as fundamentally tied to European (and wider) patterns of thought; a concern to find connections in the past between Nazism and the widespread ways of thinking which it drew on, radicalised, and combined into such a toxic brew; and a desire to make connections, to investigate different contexts, without losing the specificity of what happened in the Holocaust. When investigating eugenics, for example, I do not assume that the Holocaust was the logical outcome of fantasies about breeding 'better' human beings. And when writing about genocide, I do not assume that all cases of genocide can be reduced to a typological unanimity. Rather, I regard all of these approaches as resources that can be put to work as ways of considering, in Arendt's terms, the 'origins' of the catastrophe, which together 'crystallised' to create the Holocaust. At the same time, I do not forget that the decision-making process for the genocide of the Jews was made by specific people—the Nazi leaders—who were driven by certain ideological notions; they were not 'products' of pre-existing ideas, and nor were they 'fated' to follow this murderous path. Their 'thinking with the blood', as Collingwood put it, was not the only possible consequence of the Great Depression in Germany.⁶ The combination of structures and ideas is what creates 'history', in my view. The idea is not anti-structural, just as the structure does not nullify the idea.⁷

6 R. G. Collingwood, *The New Leviathan, or Man, Society, Civilization and Barbarism*, rev. edn., ed. David Boucher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 377: 'What Nazis call thinking with your blood is a much quicker way of thinking than the old-fashioned way of doing it with your brains.'

7 Here I paraphrase Marshall Sahlins's argument that the combination of structure and event creates history. See Sahlins, 'The Return of the

As the two volumes show, my interests have always been both interpretive and archival. Many of the essays approach a problem through the works of a single writer (Perec, Bataille, Malinowski, Arendt, Monnerot, Gardiner, Lorimer, Salaman, Federman), but always with an eye to their wider intellectual and social contexts. Here, following the Cambridge School of history of ideas, I have sought not just to look for 'ideas in context', but to show how thinkers of different sorts, sometimes seemingly marginal or neglected figures, tell us something about the temper of their times, often in ways that speak more centrally to the era's fundamental concerns than do 'great figures' of thought (although Arendt, at least, is the exception). This is an approach that I set out most fully in my books *Breeding Superman* (2002) and *Responses to Nazism in Britain, 1933-1939* (2003).⁸ Other chapters use the work of specific historians (Friedländer, Mayer, Weinberg, Cesarani) and psychoanalysts (de Wind, Micheels, Cohen) to open up wider vistas on problems in historiography, not just looking at trends and new research questions, but thinking more broadly about what their work tells us about the many ways in which history can be written. The focus on theory of history and historiography also aims to historicise Holocaust historians' work, to show how what we do is timebound, inescapably influenced by contemporary issues, but also shaped by a desire to practice professionally, to research and

Event, Again', in *Culture in Practice: Selected Essays* (New York: Zone Books, 2000), 293-351, e.g. 294 where he says that in the Annales school and others critical of narrative history: 'The event was conceived as antistructural, the structure as nullifying the event.' Or as Sahlins paraphrases Ricoeur (303): 'history unfolds as a synthesis of the heterogeneous.'

8 *Breeding Superman: Nietzsche, Race and Eugenics in Edwardian and Interwar Britain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2002); *Responses to Nazism in Britain, 1933-1939: Before War and Holocaust* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

write according to important disciplinary norms.⁹ Hence chapters that delve deeply into empirical questions (especially on the International Tracing Service): not just with the aim of unearthing 'interesting facts', but with a view to asking epistemological questions about how archives and what they hold shape our access to the past, and control what we can know and the limits to that knowledge.¹⁰ The 'archival turn' in historical studies does not mean that historians have discovered archives; rather, it means that historians understand that historicising archives, which are not neutral repositories of information, is important for understanding what can be written about the past and how it can be written.

The history of the Holocaust is, as I have argued elsewhere, unfinished.¹¹ That is to say: for the survivors, the defeat of the Nazi regime in 1945 did not mean the end of their suffering, which for most remained a lifelong pain.¹² And for everyone else, the aftermath of the Holocaust shaped the postwar world—in terms of postwar human rights architecture or research into trauma, for example)—as it does to this

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- 9 See also: *Constructing the Holocaust: A Study in Historiography* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2003); *Histories of the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); 'Introduction: The Holocaust and Historical Methodology', in *The Holocaust and Historical Methodology*, ed. Dan Stone (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 1-19; 'Excommunicating the Past: Narrativism and Rational Constructivism in the Historiography of the Holocaust', *Rethinking History*, 21:4 (2017), 549-566. See also Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of History* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) and Kuukkanen (ed.), *Philosophy of History: Twenty-First Century Perspectives* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).
- 10 See also *Fate Unknown: Tracing the Missing after World War II and the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), for greater detail about the ITS.
- 11 *The Holocaust: An Unfinished History* (London: Penguin, 2023).
- 12 *The Liberation of the Camps: The End of the Holocaust and Its Aftermath* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015); *Psychoanalysis, Historiography and the Nazi Camps: Accounting for Survival* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

day. Several countries involved in the commission of the Holocaust have yet to recognise the extent of their crimes: Romania exemplifies the issue.¹³ The intersection of the Holocaust and the Cold War—in terms of competing trials in east and west Europe, allegations of harbouring Nazis, or the revival of fascist movements in the postwar decades—are still under-appreciated.¹⁴ The ways in which ‘Holocaust memory’ has been put to use in the post-Cold War years, from framing a cosmopolitan, human rights-oriented conception of human solidarity on the one hand, to an Islamophobic, ethnic exclusivist argument, on the other, reveal that debates about the meaning of this particular past still resonate very deeply. Moscow’s claim that Kyiv is run by Nazis is not merely opportunist, justifying an act of illegal aggression, but brings to light longstanding ideas in nationalist Russian culture and speaks to the significance of the Great Patriotic War in the post-Soviet Russian Federation, even as its memory is turned on its head in the claim that Russia is still fighting fascists.¹⁵ And nothing indicates the extent to which Holocaust memory can be instrumentalised than the Palestinian claim that Gaza is akin to the Warsaw Ghetto, or members of Benjamin Net-

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- 13 See *The Forgotten Holocaust: Romania 1940-1944* (London: Allen Lane, forthcoming 2027).
 - 14 Dan Stone and Johannes-Dieter Steinert (eds.), *Britain and Holocaust Consciousness in the 1960s* (London: Bloomsbury, 2026). See also Anna Koch and Stephan Stach (eds.), *Holocaust Memory and the Cold War: Remembering across the Iron Curtain* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024); Shirli Gilbert and Avril Alba (eds.), *Holocaust Memory and Racism in the Postwar World* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2019); Amos Goldberg and Haim Hazan (eds.), *Marking Evil: Holocaust Memory in the Global Age* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015).
 - 15 See, for example, Evgeny Finkel, ‘In Search of Lost Genocide: Historical Policy and International Politics in Post-1989 Eastern Europe’, *Global Society*, 24:1 (2010), 51-70; Paula Chan, ‘Documents Accuse: The Post-Soviet Memory Politics of Genocide’, *Journal of Illiberalism Studies*, 1:2 (2021), 39-57.

anyahu's cabinet talking of eradicating Nazis in Gaza and using biological metaphors reminiscent of Nazi depictions of Jews to talk about Palestinians and to justify the massive Israeli response to Hamas's October 7 attacks.

History's complex epistemological position as a discipline stems from the need to negotiate a path between radical historicism and unavoidable presentism. The notion of unmitigated immediacy is a positivist fantasy, yet asserting that there is no escape from presentism leads to an unprofessional position that prevents meaningful discourse between past and present. The questions that we ask the past, and about the past, are always changing—writing the history of the Holocaust is a different enterprise now than it was in 2000 or 2010. Historians cannot avoid their own subjectivities intruding on those questions, and this is to the good, for the range of questions that historians ask about the past has become much broader as the demographic makeup of the profession has changed and become less monocultural. At the same time, the affective power of the past means that the historical discipline can be considered not just an intersubjective discussion, but an 'interobjective' one, insofar as historians are acted upon by the past (or by the sources that we have which come to stand in for 'the past'), by each other, and by the wider cultural discussions in which we participate.¹⁶

It is in this context, of history as an intersubjective and interobjective field, walking a delicate tightrope between past and present, staking out arguments that speak to the present, but doing so on the basis of disciplinary norms, that Holocaust Studies continues apace, claims about the field

16 I am indebted to Mario Telo for the idea of 'interobjectivity'; see his discussion with Judith Butler at the Freud Museum, London, 3 November 2025.

being in crisis notwithstanding. Yet there is no doubt, in the wake of the conflict in Gaza, especially amidst claims of Israel committing genocide, that the discipline—if we extend it to cover genocide studies—faces some challenges.¹⁷ At the very least, there is a growing mismatch between scholarly approaches and popular memory, the roots of which are addressed in one of the last chapters in this collection.¹⁸ Scholars should not abandon the field of popular representations to simplifiers and partisans, but should find ways—through exhibitions, public forums and so on—to engage with this problem. Otherwise, the siloing of academic Holocaust Studies will result and the already marginal influence that scholars have on public affairs will be further narrowed. However, in the longer run, it is also likely that scholarly approaches to the Holocaust, however the relationship with the heritage sector or Holocaust-related charities will develop over the coming years, will not just exist but will thrive. There are many reasons why it should do so, not least that the Nazi genocide remains emblematic of the dangers of an over-mighty state in times of crisis—and that is something with which we are becoming increasingly familiar once again. Holocaust Studies is not a 'safe' topic for western elites, but should be engaged in a politics of solidarity with minority and victim groups across the globe. It is with this universalising approach in mind that I have gathered these essays, which

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- 17 See, among many contributions, the *Journal of Genocide Research* forum: 'Gaza and Genocide Studies' (online first, September 2025), and the same journal's ongoing forum: 'Israel-Palestine: Atrocity Crimes and the Crisis of Holocaust and Genocide Studies'; Raz Segal, 'Settler Antisemitism, Israeli Mass Violence, and the Crisis of Holocaust and Genocide Studies', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 53:2 (2024), 50-73.
- 18 See also Doris L. Bergen, 'Never Again Is Now! Holocaust History and Public Memory at a Turning Point', *German Politics and Society*, 43:2 (2025), 14-26.

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aim to show that the Holocaust was, and remains, a defining event of the twentieth century for everyone who cares about the future of humanity.

Perec's Antelme

It is no longer the case, as it was when Georges Perec wrote in 1963, that one does not attack concentration camp literature.¹ With the increasing proliferation of Holocaust studies, whose inevitable competition has engendered some rather shabby examples of academic in-fighting, even survivor testimonies are no longer immune from the critics' bile. One wonders what Perec would have made of the current state of the Holocaust industry, which was just beginning its unfeasible exponential growth on his death in 1982, in the wake of the television series *Holocaust*. Perec's essay on Antelme at the age of 26 not only marked his passage from producing groping juvenilia to a mature writing style, but did so by discreetly recognising that 'the camps'—as one said in France at that time—had changed the nature of expression. Henceforth the camps were to be the structuring function of his *œuvre*, though they were to be so obliquely, more by not referring to them than by exploiting the overwhelming but easily thoughtless emotion to which the mere mention of them could expect to give rise. But Perec's reading of Antelme did not just lead him imaginatively to find a way of structuring his work around a lack or loss; it also allowed him to confront

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- 1 Georges Perec, 'Robert Antelme or the Truth of Literature', in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, ed. and trans. John Sturrock (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), 249-262, here 249; orig: 'Robert Antelme ou la vérité de la littérature', in *L.G. Une aventure des années soixante* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), 87-114, here 87. Henceforth referred in the text as RA with page references to the English translation. Original French text and references to the reprinted essay in *L.G.* are in the notes. Perec's essay was originally published in *Partisans*, 8 (January-February 1963), 121-134. This chapter was inspired by and owes a great deal to David Bellos's superb biography of Perec, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*, rev. ed. (London: The Harvill Press, 1995), henceforth referred to in the text as *GP*.

his loss whilst also avoiding it. The nature of this confrontation-avoidance is what I will examine in this chapter.

Perec's mother, Cyrla Perec (*née* Szulewicz), was deported from Drancy to Auschwitz on 11 February 1943 (GP, 60-61). She is presumed to have been gassed immediately on arrival, but because there was no official record of her death, the French authorities would issue only an *Acte de disparition*, a record of disappearance, noting the date of her deportation and the destination of the convoy. His father, Icek Judko Perec, died on 16 June 1940 as a member of the XII Régiment Étranger d'Infanterie, fighting for the defence of France, though the records reveal that his regiment, composed exclusively of foreigners, was ignominiously abandoned to its fate by its French comrades (GP, 44-46).

The deaths of his Polish-Jewish immigrant parents, but especially that of his mother, were the losses which Perec struggled with all his life. As he said to his friend Eugen Helmle whilst being interviewed for German radio in June 1975—though without knowing that the tape was still running—he wanted his book *W or The Memory of Childhood* 'to help to make people understand how the concentration camp system exists and what a terrible burden it placed on a huge number of people during the war—and long after' (GP, 564). Or, as he said with rather more sadness than intent during an interview in Warsaw one year before his death, 'I have no house, no family, I have no attic, so to speak, no roots, I don't know what they are' (GP, 686).

This claim was not strictly true; Perec had for many years been delving into his family's past, in preparation for writing a large book about his family to be called *L'Arbre* (which he never completed). But it was true in a more fundamental sense, for Perec knew *about*, but did not really *know* his family. The essay on Antelme, one of a series of four written in the year 1962-3 for the journal *Partisans*, a non-PCF

Marxist journal founded at the end of the Algerian War, was Perec's first explicit attempt to confront this heritage of loss².

Robert Antelme was a French political prisoner of Gandersheim, a particularly harsh sub-camp of Buchenwald. Immediately on his return to France he set about writing down his camp experiences in *L'Espèce humaine* (*The Human Race*). As well as making clear the returnees' need to speak he also preoccupied himself with criticising the reception of their testimonies, claiming that 'they have acquired their testimony, they have mystified, shrouded it.'³ His sensitivity to the problems—physical, linguistic, philosophical—of writing testimony meant that the book, when it finally achieved success at the end of the 1950s, was lauded by the French intellectual establishment (to which, thanks to his marriage at the time to Marguerite Duras, Antelme had easy access). It is because of the attention paid by Antelme to the nature of the process of testifying at the same time as he writes his testimony, that, as one critic notes, *L'Espèce humaine* can be and is read as a witness both to the sayable and to the unsayable.⁴ Perec's decision to write on *L'Espèce humaine* was, as I will show, connected to both of these attributes.

Perec's article begins with the statement that one does not attack concentration camp literature, that as soon as a book talks of the camps it is more or less assured of being approached with a certain amount of sympathy. As Perec insinuates, however, such 'sympathy' was double-edged—the

2 On the history of *Partisans*, see GP, 268-283.

3 Robert Antelme, 'Témoignage du camp et poésie', *Le Patriote Résistant*, 53 (15 May 1948), 5, cited in Annette Wieviorka, *Déportation et génocide. Entre la mémoire et l'oubli* (Paris: Plon, 1992), 172. Orig. French: 'on a accaparé leur témoignage, on l'a mystifié, puis enseveli.'

4 Bernd Stiegler, 'Robert Antelme, *Das Menschengeschlecht*. Erinnerung und Erzählung', in *Shoah: Formen der Erinnerung. Geschichte-Philosophie-Literatur-Kunst*, eds. Nicolas Berg, Jess Jochimsen, and Bernd Stiegler (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1996), 145.

aura of 'untouchableness' around French concentration camp literature also served the purpose of dissociating the critic from any possible connection with Nazism. He reminds us that some even believe 'that it's indecent to link the world of the camps with what is called, if need be with a faint note of disdain, "literature"'⁵ (RA, 249), and that, for the most part, despite the fact that testimonies are useful documents, even necessary and precious, 'it's clear that a careful distinction is being drawn between books like these and "real" literature' (RA, 249).⁶

Perec questions this position, which he sees as a turning away from the full impact of the camps: 'Literature is indissolubly bound up with life, it is the necessary prolongation, the obvious culmination, the indispensable complement of experience' (RA, 250).⁷ The difficulty in the case of the camps (as the debates concerning the limits of representation of the last decade have shown⁸) is that the gap between the experience of the camps and the language of testimony or, if one

5 '... qu'il est indécent de mettre en rapport l'univers des camps et ce que l'on appelle, avec, au besoin, une légère pointe de mépris, la "littérature"' (87).

6 '... il est clair que l'on distingue soigneusement ces livres de la "vraie" littérature' (88). As Annette Wieviorka notes, what is striking about the early survivor testimonies produced in France, is 'l'absence de matrice littéraire.' Annette Wieviorka, 'Indicible ou inaudible? La déportation: premiers récits (1944-1947)', *Pardès*, 9-10 (1989), 28.

7 'La littérature est, indissolublement, liée à la vie, le prolongement nécessaire de l'expérience, son aboutissement évident, son complément indispensable' (89)

8 The starting point for the discussion is still Saul Friedlander (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992). See also, among many others, Berel Lang (ed.), *Writing and the Holocaust* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988); Geoffrey Hartman (ed.), *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994); Omer Bartov, *Murder in our Midst: The Holocaust, Industrial Killing, and Representation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Dominick LaCapra, *Repre-*

wants to maintain the difference, literature, appears too wide to be bridged. There is no question of lack of will on the part of the survivors:

For the returning deportee, to speak, to write, is a need as strong and immediate as is his need for calcium, for sugar, sunlight, meat, sleep and silence. It's not the case that he can remain silent and forget. He has first of all to remember. He has to explain, to tell, to dominate that world whose victim he was. [RA, 250]⁹

This passage finds a sad echo in Sarah Kofman's elegiac tribute to her father, a Parisian rabbi killed in Auschwitz: 'To speak—it is necessary to speak—*without power*. ... And how not to speak of it, when the wish of all those who returned—and he did not return—was to recount, to recount without end, as if only an "infinite conversation" could take the measure of an infinite destitution [*pouvait être à la mesure du dénuement infini*]?'¹⁰

The problem then, is not whether, but *how* to write.¹¹ It is too easy to become angry, but not to channel this anger

sending the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Nicolas Berg, Jess Jochimsen, Bernd Stiegler (eds.), *Shoah: Formen der Erinnerung. Geschichte-Philosophie-Literatur-Kunst* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1996); Alvin Rosenfeld (ed.), *Thinking about the Holocaust: After Half a Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Efraim Sicher (ed.), *Breaking Crystal: Writing and Memory after Auschwitz* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998); Dan Stone (ed.), *Theoretical Interpretations of the Holocaust* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001).

- 9 'Parler, écrire, est, pour le déporté qui revient, un besoin aussi immédiat et aussi fort que son besoin de calcium, de sucre, de soleil, de viande, de sommeil, de silence. Il n'est pas vrai qu'il peut se taire et oublier. Il faut d'abord qu'il se souvienne. Il faut qu'il explique, qu'il raconte, qu'il domine ce monde dont il fut la victime' [89]
- 10 Sarah Kofman, *Paroles suffoquées* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), 16.
- 11 Judith Klein claims that survivor testimonies were *written* because spoken words would not come. See 'Schreiben nach Auschwitz. Die französische Debatte', *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift*, 44:2 (1994), 205. Although this might be true for some survivors, the dichotomy between speech and writing is philosophically unsustainable, as

into an attempt to understand more deeply (RA, 250-251). Or else it is too easy to manipulate the reader into 'a facile compassion' whereby horror merely anaesthetizes (RA, 251).¹² In writing concentration camp literature, one needs to be more thoughtful: 'They didn't want to evoke pity, tenderness or revolt. It was a matter of making people understand what they couldn't understand, of expressing what was inexpressible' (RA, 251).¹³ Perec finds this quandary most clearly articulated and worked through in Robert Antelme's *L'Espèce humaine*, first published in France in 1947, and reissued by Gallimard in 1957. And indeed Antelme expressly considers such problems at the very outset: 'As of those first days [of the return], however, we saw that it was impossible to bridge the gap we discovered opening up between the words at our disposal and that experience which, in the case of most of us, was still going forward within our bodies.'¹⁴ In considering such issues openly, Antelme prefigured much that was to dominate Holocaust studies some thirty years later, as the quotation from Kofman indicates.

Perec develops Antelme's problematic, making it the cue for some of the most thoughtful and provocative insights into

Perec implicitly understands when he talks of 'parler, écrire...' This split, however, is the site of some confusion, since writers like Kofman and Blanchot, as we will see, use the terms interchangeably; this is empirically dubious, but philosophically defensible.

12 'une compassion facile' (91).

13 'Nul ne désirait, en écrivant, susciter la pitié, la tendresse ou la révolte. Il s'agissait de faire comprendre ce que l'on ne pouvait pas comprendre; il s'agissait d'exprimer ce qui était inexprimable' (91).

14 Robert Antelme, *The Human Race*, trans. Jeffrey Haight and Annie Mahler (Marlboro, VT: The Marlboro Press, 1992), 3. Henceforth referred to in the text as *HR*. Orig. French: *L'Espèce humaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), 9: 'Et dès les premiers jours cependant, il nous paraissait impossible de combler la distance que nous découvriions entre le langage dont nous disposions et cette expérience que, pour la plupart, nous étions en train de poursuivre dans notre corps.' Henceforth referred to in the notes as *EH*.

the representation of the concentration camps of the 1960s, comparable in importance perhaps to George Steiner's essays in *Language and Silence*. He reminds us that what we know of the camps is not synonymous with the camps themselves: one can visit Dachau, but the barracks are empty and clean.¹⁵ In fact, Perec claims, we understand nothing of the camps; we certainly do not know them (RA, 251-252). When we believe that the facts contained in testimonies are somehow significant, we delude ourselves. They are not significant, not for *us* at any rate: 'We were not involved. We remained strangers to that world, which was a fragment of history that had unfolded somewhere beyond us' (RA, 252).¹⁶

How then should one go about talking of the camps? Perec demands a high degree of honesty, he will not allow the reader to forget the central paradox that he has outlined—the apparent inadequacy of language to describe the camps. He finds this integrity in Antelme, who, Perec says, 'chose to reject any appeal to spectacle or to the immediately emotive, over which it would be too easy for the reader to pause' (RA, 252).¹⁷ Such 'refusal of compassion', by which '[t]he world of the camp is held at a distance' (RA, 253),¹⁸ is a method which, Perec claims, 'goes so far as to *betray* the "reality" in order to

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- 15 Compare Ruth Klüger, *Weiter leben: Eine Jugend* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1995), 77: 'I once visited Dachau, because American friends wanted to. Everything was clean and orderly there, and one already required more imagination than most people have got in order to picture what played out there [*gespielt wurde*] forty years before.'
 - 16 'Nous n'étions pas concernés. Nous restions étrangers à ce monde; c'était un fragment d'histoire qui s'était déroulé au-delà de nous' (93).
 - 17 '... choisit de refuser tout appel au spectaculaire, d'empêcher toute émotion immédiate, à laquelle il serait trop simple, pour le lecteur, de s'arrêter' (94).
 - 18 'refus de l'apitoiement... [l']univers concentrationnaire est distancié' (95).

express it more effectively' (RA, 252).¹⁹ Hence in *L'Espèce humaine* the camp 'is never a given'; rather 'it emerges gradually.' Most importantly for Perec, there are no 'ready-made images, reassuring in their very violence' (RA, 253).²⁰

Important as this lack of sensation or exploitation in Antelme's work is to Perec, it is not what justifies it and the literary devices it employs being lauded as a work which 'to-day constitutes the necessary foundation of all literature', as Perec put it in the essay in *Partisans* which announced his intention to write on Antelme in the coming issue.²¹ What is essential to Perec is, as indicated in Antelme's title, the ultimate triumph of humanity over Nazism.

The triumph of the human is manifested in many ways; one of these is the development, in the camps, of a feeling of solidarity among the inmates:

Solidarity is neither a metaphysical given nor a categorical imperative. It is linked to precise circumstances. It is necessary to the survival of a group because it ensures that group's cohesiveness, and it only has to be outlawed for the world of the camps to appear in all its logic. [RA, 256]²²

In the light of several decades of Holocaust research focused both on the industrial death factories of the extermination camps and the extreme violence of the face-to-face killings

19 '... va jusqu'à *trahir* la "réalité" afin de l'exprimer d'une manière plus efficace' (94).

20 '... n'est jamais donné' ... 'il émerge lentement'. ... 'Il n'est pas images toutes faites, et rassurantes dans leur violence même' (96).

21 Georges Perec, 'Engagement ou crise du langage', in *L.G.*, p. 86, originally published in *Partisans*, 7 (November-December 1962), 171-181. Orig. French: '... constitue aujourd'hui la base nécessaire de toute littérature.'

22 'La solidarité n'est pas une évidente métaphysique, ni un impératif catégorique. Elle est liée à des conditions précises. Nécessaire à la survie du groupe, parce qu'elle en assure la cohésion, il suffit qu'elle soit interdite pour que l'univers concentrationnaire apparaisse dans sa logique la plus pure' (101).

that preceded their erection,²³ such a claim seems rather inappropriate; what relevance does 'solidarity' have to the reality of the Holocaust? Here is one of the vital clues to the role that Antelme plays for Perec. I will examine this point in more detail later, but for now it suffices to note how Perec brushes aside the question of mass-murder so that he can take up what Antelme says about solidarity: 'The world of the camps is defined less by an immediate, massive extermination, by "cullings", than by days, months, years of hunger, cold and terror' (RA, 256).²⁴

From this starting-point, Perec is then able to find some kind of rational explanation for the possibility of survival: 'Survival, naturally, was a matter of luck. But luck in the end explains nothing.' There were situations when Antelme was not in control; under these circumstances '[t]hat he didn't die then was attributable to good fortune, to some purely automatic reaction, or to someone else's unhopd for gesture.' But, Perec reminds us, there were other situations of which 'he remained master and then he triumphed over death. *L'Espèce humaine* is the story of that triumph' (RA, 257).²⁵

23 I am thinking of the immense influence of books like Zygmunt Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989). The situation has finally, in the wake of the debate surrounding Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's book *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (London: Little, Brown and Co., 1996), begun to change, with more emphasis on the face-to-face nature of much of the killing, a return to fashion of the concepts of 'ideology' and 'violence'. See for example Ulrich Herbert (ed.), *Nationalsozialistische Vernichtungspolitik 1939-1945: Neue Forschungen und Kontroversen* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1998); Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

24 'L'extermination immédiate et massive, les sélections définissent moins l'univers concentrationnaire que des années, des mois, des jours de faim, de froid et de terreur' (101-102).

25 'La survie est, bien sûr, une question de chance. Mais la chance n'explique finalement rien. ... C'est à la veine, ou à un automatisme pur et simple, ou au geste inespéré d'un autre, qu'il dut alors de ne pas

The remainder of Perec's essay continues in this vein. Antelme's testimony is proof of the victory of man, of the *idea of man*, over its enemies, over Nazism; the law of the SS ultimately cannot prevail over the desire for life. Despite the obvious imbalance of power in the camps, the SS delude themselves as to the true extent of their power: 'The deportee soon found that he [the SS man] had real power only over him, the deportee; he remained without power over nature, over things. ... He couldn't escape it, couldn't impose his jurisdiction on it' (RA, 257-258).²⁶ The SS man is surrounded by reminders of the limits of his power: he can do nothing against either the east or west wind, he can do nothing about the aeroplanes flying over Germany, and he cannot stop the noise of the guns. Most importantly, the SS man 'can't halt History' (RA, 258)²⁷; that is to say, his powers are only the powers of men. In Antelme's words, which clearly struck a chord with Perec, 'It's because we're men like them that the SS will finally prove powerless before us. It's because they shall have sought to call the unity of this human race into question that they'll finally be crushed' (HR, 219). The SS man 'can kill a man, but he can't change him into something else' (HR, 220, cited in RA, 259).²⁸

It is Antelme's transformation of this experience—simultaneously of the terror of the camp and the knowledge of

mourir. Il y en eut d'autres dont il resta maître. Alors il triompha de la mort. *L'Espèce humaine* est l'histoire de ce triomphe' (103).

26 'Le déporté découvre vite qu'il [the SS man] n'a de pouvoir réel que sur lui, déporté; il reste sans pouvoir sur la nature, sur les choses ... Il ne peut s'y soustraire, il ne peut pas lui imposer sa loi' (105).

27 'Il ne peut pas arrêter l'Histoire' (106).

28 C'est parce que nous sommes des hommes comme eux que les SS seront en définitive impuissants devant nous. C'est parce qu'ils auront tenté de mettre en cause l'unité de cette espèce qu'ils seront finalement écrasés. ... Il peut tuer un homme, mais il ne peut pas le changer en autre chose' (EH, 229, 230, cited in RA, 108).

humanity's triumph—into language that makes *L'Espèce humaine*, according to Perec, 'the most perfect example of what literature is capable of being out of all that is currently being produced in France' (RA, 261)²⁹:

For it is language that throws a bridge between the world and ourselves, language that transcends the world by expressing the inexpressible, and establishes that fundamental relation between the individual and History out of which comes our freedom. [RA, 262]³⁰

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As in Sarah Kofman's better known work, Perec finds in 1963 that not speaking about the camps can be a powerful way of speaking about them. But there is an essential difference: whereas Kofman does this herself—talks about the death of her father and about the Holocaust more generally by pondering the question of how it is possible to do so—Perec talks about the camps through Antelme. It is *Antelme's* non-speech that comes to the fore in the *Partisans* essay. Hence the difference between referring to Kofman and the 'Holocaust', Perec and the 'camps'. Besides, when one reads Antelme, one certainly does not feel as though he is flinching from describing the horror of the camps, though he questions the ability of language to do so adequately; what Antelme does not speak about, and what Perec as a result also does not speak about, is the murder of the Jews.

29 '... l'exemple le plus parfait, dans la production française contemporaine, de ce que peut être la littérature' (111)

30 'Car cette expression de l'inexprimable qui en est le dépassement même, c'est le langage qui, jetant un pont entre le monde et nous, instaure cette relation fondamentale entre l'individu et l'Histoire, d'où naît notre liberté' (114).

When *L'Espèce humaine* was published in 1947, the Nazis' mass extermination of the Jews was still relatively unknown in France. Or rather, it was known, but not widely discussed, and the literature on the subject remained largely confined to the early survivor testimonies, little read outside of Jewish circles (and even, for the most part, within them).³¹ This silence has many reasons common across Europe, but it was the case that in 1944-1945, with France dominated by the *épurations*, and the dominance of communism in intellectual circles (a communism which was famously unwilling to tackle the question of the Nazi persecution of the Jews because it could not comfortably be contained within a Marxist reading of antisemitism as a manipulative tool of monopoly capitalism) people wanted to believe that 'The war's over, it's return to normal, without Nazism. Naturally the Jews can reintegrate themselves into the nations from which the Nazis wanted to separate them.'³² In 1957 when Antelme's book was reissued, this situation had begun to change: Élie Wiesel's *La Nuit (Night)* was published in 1958, and André Schwarz-Bart's *Le Dernier des justes (The Last of the Just)* won the *Prix Goncourt* in 1959. Nevertheless, Perec decided to focus his energies on a book which did not speak about the annihilation of the Jews.

For a 26 year old left bank intellectual in 1963, this was perhaps not a surprising decision. As is well-known, *gauchist* Jews subsumed themselves under the broader 'anti-fascist' struggle to protest against the war in Algeria or the Gaullist accommodation of the military; besides, as already noted, that antisemitism or pure hatred could have motivated the

31 See Wieviorka, *Déportation et génocide*, especially 161-328 on the early testimonies.

32 Wieviorka, 'Indicible ou inaudible?', 42: 'La Guerre est finie, c'est le retour à la normale, sans nazisme. Les Juifs peuvent tout naturellement se réintégrer aux nations dont le nazisme voulait les séparer.'

annihilation of millions was not something of which Marxist theory could easily take cognisance. Perec remained warier than those French Jews born just after the war of exploiting the Holocaust for personal or political gain, those who, in May 1968, marched with the left proclaiming, 'We are all German Jews!'³³ But, apart from his distaste for street marches, this wariness was borne of discomfort at identifying himself as Jewish, not in sharing that identity with those who (apart from prominent exceptions such as Daniel Cohn-Bendit) patently were not Jewish, a discomfort which lasted his whole life.³⁴

Before considering in more detail what lessons Perec drew from Antelme's book, it is interesting to see the difference between how Perec approached Antelme and how two other French writers have done so since. Sarah Kofman makes extensive use of *L'Espèce humaine* throughout her *Paroles suffoquées*, indeed the book is dedicated to Antelme as well as to the memory of her father and to Maurice Blanchot. But rather than with the intention—Perec's intention—of finding a language that does justice to the experience of the camps, Kofman finds in Antelme an early standard-bearer for the school of thought which is less interested in finding a way of adequately representing Auschwitz than in pondering notions of silence, the ineffable, the inexpressible, and the incommensurate, and their relations, if any, to writing.

33 See Alain Finkielkraut, *The Imaginary Jew*, trans. Kevin O'Neill and David Suchoff (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), chapter 2. Originally published as *Le Juif imaginaire* (Paris: Seuil, 1980).

34 See, for example, *GP*, 616, on Perec's reluctance to make a film about Ellis Island because it was 'a nostalgic and explicitly Jewish theme.' Also Marcel Benabou, 'Perec's Jewishness', *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13:1 (1993), 76-87. On Ellis Island see Dan Stone, "'Grasping What Isn't Shown": Georges Perec, Ellis Island, and Jewishness', *Jewish Quarterly*, 178 (2000), 37-40.

Kofman asks, like Perec, how it is possible to relate that which cannot, without delusion, be '*communiqué*'.³⁵ And, like Perec, she finds this ethical exigency to be the guiding spirit of *L'Espèce humaine*: 'To have to speak without being able to speak or to be understood, to have to suffocate...' (PS, 46).³⁶ But whereas Perec sees in this ethical exigency the means of renewing literature, permitting language to respond to the camps, Kofman discovers in Antelme a testimony to the inability of language to do so:

Antelme's book is not beautiful, it is sublime: a book after Auschwitz, it testifies, suffocating, to the Incommensurable, to a number of deaths that exceeds all imaginable size, to the 'millions' of men, women and children reduced to ash: who did not have the right to speak, to have a history, who were not, in death, returned to their mother, because in Auschwitz, 'one killed the mother too' ...[PS, 47]³⁷

Naturally, Kofman recognises that Antelme *uses* language, but for her it is a language that serves only to reinforce the distance between language and the camps, not to break it down.

It is no accident that Kofman's book is dedicated to Blanchot, for he too wrote about Antelme. Blanchot had already—along with many others—been at the receiving end of Perec's criticism in his essay 'Engagement ou crise du langage' for supposedly confusing the 'metaphysical nature' of the crisis of language with the being of literature itself.' Perec questioned the claim, on which the 'new novel' was built, that

35 Kofman, *Paroles suffoquées*, p. 45. Henceforth referred to in the text as PS.

36 'Devoir parler sans pouvoir parler ni être entendu, devoir suffoquer...'

37 'Le livre d'Antelme n'est pas beau, il est sublime: livre d'après Auschwitz, il témoigne en suffoquant pour l'Incommensurable, pour un nombre de morts qui passe toute grandeur imaginable, pour des "millions" d'hommes, de femmes et d'enfants réduits en cendres: qui n'ont pas eu le droit de parler, d'avoir une histoire, qui n'ont pas, en mourant, été remis à la mère, car à Auschwitz "on tue la mère avec" ...'

language could not represent the real, attacking formulations such as this: 'Literary language is born beyond communication; its nature is not to show the world—besides, it is unable to do so—it is to provide access to another world, superior, transcendent, necessary.'³⁸ Hence it comes as no surprise to find that Blanchot, like Kofman, sees Antelme as an advocate of the non-relation between writing and the camps, even as this non-relation is expressed through writing. Most importantly, Blanchot questions Antelme's assertion that the destructibility of man is at the same time his indestructibility; he only retains this claim in order to question the notion of man on which it rests. Blanchot reads Antelme less as straightforward testimony than as articulating a sense of 'otherness' which had been suppressed in the camps, and which is only now able 'to enter into human understanding.'³⁹

What Blanchot receives from Antelme is evidence, in the camps, of the self without a self, a sense of otherness to self. Between such *hommes Autres* no speech is possible. 'All' that speech can hope to achieve, therefore, is 'To speak in refusing, but in reserving speech' (*IC*, 135).⁴⁰ This is why speech was, when it was finally possible after liberation, so painful:

38 Perec, 'Engagement ou crise du langage', 78: 'Le langage littéraire naît au-delà de la communication; sa nature n'est pas d'exprimer le monde—ce que d'ailleurs il ne peut faire—c'est de donner accès à un monde autre, supérieur, transcendant, nécessaire.' This is Perec's summary of Blanchot's thought.

39 Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 198: 'entrer dans l'entente humaine.' Henceforth referred to in the notes as *EL*. English edition: *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). Henceforth referred to in the text as *IC*.

40 'Parler en refusant, mais en réservant de parler' (*EL*, 199).

one had to speak 'from the basis of the impossible, the infinite distance to be "filled" by language itself' (*IC*, 135)⁴¹ Where Perec saw Antelme's speech filling the void, making possible a 'true' literature of the camps, Blanchot sees 'this reserved speech of *autrui*; a speech unheard, inexpressible, nevertheless unceasing, silently affirming that where all relation is lacking there yet subsists, there already begins, the human relation in its primacy' (*IC*, 135).⁴² An unlikely candidate for the fundamental basis of all literature.

Perec's reading of Antelme is beginning to look like a misreading, but if he chose to interpret Antelme's work in a way which flew in the face of his more fashionable contemporaries, it was for a reason. David Bellos notes that

Antelme's book did not speak to Perec about what had happened to his mother, nor did it address what the orphans of the *shoah* still had to cope with, but it was nonetheless about the camps. *L'Espèce humaine* thus offered Perec a sideways approach to his own pain, even as it comforted him by restating his conviction that writing was an appropriate, ethical response. Antelme's book was, so to speak, in the emotional and intellectual middle distance for Perec. [*GP*, 279]

There is little to be added to this passage other than padding. For Perec, the 'camps' were as close to the horror of the Holocaust as he dared get. When he brushed aside the selections and the mass exterminations (see above) there is more than a sense of disingenuousness about his stance. Antelme's book, like David Rousset's 1946 *L'Univers concentrationnaire*, had almost nothing to say about the destruction of the Jews. In fact, Antelme had far less to say on the subject than Rous-

41 '... à partir de l'impossible, la distance infinie à "combler" par le langage même' (*EI*, 199).

42 '... cette parole réservée d'autrui, inentendue, inexprimable, incessant cependant, affirmant silencieusement que là où tout rapport manque, subsiste encore, commence déjà la relation humaine dans sa primauté' (*EI*, 199).

set, who at least mentioned 'camps of Jews and Poles: industrial destruction and torture on a grand scale,' even if his facts were rather skewed, and even if he did end by asserting that 'Between these death camps [*camps de destruction*] and the "normal" camps, there was a difference not of nature but only of degree.'⁴³ Perec had certainly read Rousset (*GP*, 551), so his choice of Antelme as his guide to the camps was deliberate and calculated. What we are faced with in Perec's lionisation of Antelme is a Holocaust without Jews.

Before Perec is condemned for taking such a stance, however, it is necessary to think a little more carefully about why he took it. Clearly there are serious strategies of compensation involved in Perec's decision to choose Antelme. His mother, though killed, may have experienced some moments of solidarity in Auschwitz, just as Antelme describes it at Gandersheim, the sub-camp of Buchenwald. Furthermore, this description of solidarity chimes in with the longstanding French tradition of *amitié*, one which helped Perec to come to terms with his own orphan status. And despite *her* death, others survived, and survival itself was to a large extent a result of the efforts of the deportee. Here Perec directs Antelme's 'refusal of pity' at himself; unlike the young Alain Finkielkraut, for example, he will not '*appropriat[e] the Holocaust as my own*, draping myself with the tortures that others underwent.'⁴⁴ If there are 'visions of terror' inside Perec's mind, his readers are not going to be privy to them.

A bigger irony is that Perec celebrates Antelme for his ability to express the inexpressible. But for Perec, that which

43 David Rousset, *L'Univers concentrationnaire* (Paris: Minuit, 1965), 55 and 57. Originally published in Éditions du Pavois, 1946, and winner of the Prix Renaudot the same year. Strikingly, even German books on the subject, such as Eugen Kogon's *Der SS-Staat* (1946), had more to say about the extermination of the Jews than the typical French book of this period.

44 Finkielkraut, *The Imaginary Jew*, 32 (Finkielkraut's emphasis).

is most difficult to say not only remains unsaid, but also (on an explicit level) unacknowledged. That this is a form of denial is indisputable; that it is also an expression of the pain at the heart of Perec's being is equally undeniable, and an eloquent, silent testimony to what was involved for him in writing on this subject at all.

On a more general level, even more ironies arise. If the story of the concentration camps (and by implication, the death camps too) is one of the victory of the human spirit, what happens if it can be shown that Nazism is itself a humanism? This demonstration is undertaken by the philosopher Jacob Rogozinski. Although Hitler claimed that in exterminating the Jews he was working for the Lord, Nazism's truly frightening aspect comes not from the fact that it sought to complete or radicalise an existing Christian ethic, nor that it fed off a jealousy of the Jews' status as 'chosen people' or favoured children of God. Although Nazism was structurally bound to the western tradition, what made it really radical was the fact that it attempted to overthrow the basis of western society, setting itself up as a replacement for God: 'the ultimate meaning of Nazism is perhaps revealed, as metaphysical revolt, as hatred of God and the Law.'⁴⁵

And what of the question of history? Perec boldly asserts that the SS cannot stop History. Even Antelme does not go as far as this, contenting himself by asserting that Nazism must be 'false and mad [*faux et fou*]' since it seeks to deny the unity of the human race, decreeing who is and who is not fit to bear the cherished epithet 'human' (*HR*, 220 / *EH*, 230). Quite apart from the compensatory strategy that Perec is obviously employing here—concentrating on amorphous notions such as solidarity and 'man' rather than on the horror

45 See Jacob Rogozinski, 'Hell on Earth: Hannah Arendt in the Face of Hitler', *Philosophy Today*, 37:3 (1993), 267.

of what happened—Perec implicitly contradicts his own position, the position on which the whole of his Antelme essay is based. If the camps reveal the need to find a new approach to literature since the old ones appear jaded, even sordid, and Antelme's book is the start of this process, what of historiography? Do new concepts of history need to be found, because the old ones can no longer appear innocent? By appealing to History in the upper case, Perec signals a belief in history as a meaningful schema, unfolding according to pre-determined laws, irrespective of the actions of humans, or, at best, in a dialectic with them. In other words, he answers the question about new concepts of history in the negative. Now this may simply be because it was common currency among his left bank acquaintances, influenced by Kojève and Sartre, to talk of History, but the philosophy of history that this implied was one that was related to the view that the Nazis held of themselves. In decreeing who was and who was not human, in understanding History as the Manichean struggle between Aryans and non-Aryans, and in seeking to direct the stream of history towards its inevitable telos—the final confrontation between these two world-forces—Nazism replaced God or nature as the motor of History with man. Perec's Antelme looks perilously close to undermining its own aspirations. Not only was Nazism a humanism—a metaphysical revolt against the laws of 'God'—but it also subscribed to notions of History which Perec sought to reinscribe into postwar French letters in order to revivify them.⁴⁶

46 In this one is reminded of the attempt by Martin Gilbert to envelop the events of the Holocaust in a philosophy of history which signals a return to normality. After 800 pages of terror, Gilbert ends his book with a more naive celebration of the same sort as Perec's, claiming that 'Simply to survive was a victory of the human spirit.' See Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust - The Jewish Tragedy* (London: Fontana, 1987), 828, and for a critique, Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 162-167.

The biggest irony of all, however, is that these criticisms are, ultimately, academic. Logically correct they may or may not be, but in terms of Perec's work they matter not one jot. Since literature is an extension of life, it is a celebration of life, and of literature, that takes place in Perec. That is not to say, however that his work was to embody unquestioningly this celebration. To some extent it did—Perec's ultrarealism, with its belief that language could and did portray the world in its fullness put him in a separate sphere from most of his peers on the French literary scene. But the true significance of Perec's fixing on to Antelme in order to confront his heritage in the Holocaust lies in the oblique nature of his mature work. Where writing on the camps was a way of talking and yet not talking about the death of his mother, so the constraints that he placed on his later writings—lipograms, heterograms, palindromes, acrostics, bi-squares, and so on—were ways of creating around voids or absences. Even his autobiographical texts, though 'truth' shines through them like Being itself, are consistently factually incorrect, Perec toying with his reader, apparently revealing himself, yet more often actually just improving the disguise of his self-concealment. In Perec, the camps do not just emerge 'slowly', they emerge only with a not inconsiderable amount of detective work.⁴⁷ Blanchot's and Kofman's interpretation of Antelme may have acquired more currency than Perec's swingeing attack on the stars of 1960s French literature—their reading may even be the correct one—but in the light of the works that he went on to construct around the same void that he inadvertently delineated in 1963, who are we to say that he was mistaken? In his own writing, Perec followed the advice that he derived from Antelme, and betrayed reality all the better to express it.

47 This is work that has been exhaustively undertaken by Bellos throughout *GP*, and needs no elaboration here.

Modernity and Violence: Theoretical Reflections on the Einsatzgruppen

'For although even animals have been restrained by civilization—their hooves have been dulled and their cruelty greatly curbed—man has not, but has become a beast. The more highly developed a culture, the more cruel its murderers, the more civilized a society, the greater its barbarians; as development increases, its deeds become more terrible.'

*Zalman Gradowski, member of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando,
written in the gas chamber and crematorium building, 1944.*

The tide is turning in Holocaust studies. For the last twenty years the main explanatory concept has been that of 'modernity' in its various manifestations, from historical studies of the role of the German medical profession to sociological notions of bureaucratic-rational society. A number of recent publications signal, however, that this is no longer the case; instead we are witnessing the rise to predominance of the concept of 'violence'. The most prominent examples of this turn in the literature are: Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1996), and the controversy that the book spawned; Saul Friedländer's *Nazi Germany and the Jews* (1997), with its concept of 'redemptive antisemitism'; accounts of Nazism as a 'political religion'—reviving Eric Voegelin's term of 1938—with their stress on the Holocaust as a kind of sacrifice, particularly Claus E. Bärsch's *Die politische Religion des Nationalsozialismus* (1998); the various local studies of German occupation policy in eastern Europe and its connections with the beginning of the genocide, a representative selection of which has been made available in a collection edited by Ulrich Herbert, *Nationalsozialistische Vernichtungspolitik 1939-1945* (1998); and the increasing

numbers of studies that have finally begun to analyse the rise of radical antisemitism in the Weimar Republic and the early years of Nazi Germany.¹

In principle this development is to be welcomed. The academic discourse on 'modernity', though it has produced some brilliant work (particularly that of Detlev Peukert, Götz Aly, and Zygmunt Bauman²), and asked penetrating questions about the implications of the Holocaust for contemporary societies, has tended to overlook several characteristics of the murders themselves: that they were not carried out in a clean, factory-like manner, and that Nazi ideology preceded the 'rationalised' structures which implemented it.

However, it is also probably true that outside of academia the traditional interpretation of the Holocaust—that which sees it as the logical outcome of antisemitism—predominates as it has always done. One finds out little about

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- 1 Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (London: Little, Brown, 1996); Johannes Heil and Rainer Erb (eds.), *Geschichtswissenschaft und Öffentlichkeit: Der Streit um Daniel J. Goldhagen* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1998); Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews. Volume 1: The Years of Persecution 1933-1939* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997); Michael Ley and Hans-Joachim Schoeps (eds.), *Der Nationalsozialismus als politische Religion* (Bodenheim: Syndikat, 1997); Claus-Ekkehard Bärsch, *Die politische Religion des Nationalsozialismus: Die religiöse Dimension der NS-Ideologie in den Schriften von Dietrich Eckart, Joseph Goebbels, Alfred Rosenberg und Adolf Hitler* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1998); Ulrich Herbert (ed.), *Nationalsozialistische Vernichtungspolitik 1939-1945: Neue Forschungen und Kontroversen* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1998); Dirk Walter, *Antisemitische Kriminalität und Gewalt: Judenfeindschaft in der Weimarer Republik* (Bonn: Verlag J.H.W. Dietz Nachfolger, 1999); Cornelia Hecht, *Deutsche Juden und Antisemitismus in der Weimarer Republik* (Bonn: Verlag J.H.W. Dietz Nachfolger, 2003); Armin Nolzen, 'The Nazi Party and its Violence Against the Jews, 1933-1939: Violence as a Historiographical Concept', *Yad Vashem Studies*, 31 (2003), 245-285.
 - 2 See my *Constructing the Holocaust: A Study in Historiography* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2003), chapter 7.

the ‘dialectic of Enlightenment’ from Holocaust museums or films, and rather a lot about Jew-hatred. Still, this popular narrative of the Holocaust relies on a similar dichotomy to that which supports the ‘modernity’ narrative: a belief in the separation between civilisation and barbarism. In the first instance (‘modernity’) the whole enterprise is founded on a sort of surprise that the modern world, being civilised, can commit such things, which leads to them being seen as the outcome of modernity itself. In the second (‘antisemitism’) the Holocaust is seen as a ‘relapse into barbarism’ since no civilised state can commit genocide. The same dichotomy, then, but with different conclusions drawn from it: one impugning the achievements of modern civilisation, the other seeking to protect them.

In this chapter I want to suggest that there is no *a priori* reason for assuming that civilisation and barbarism cannot go hand in hand, in fact, that the dichotomy is one drawn up by scholars as a heuristic tool—specifically a hangover from nineteenth century notions of societal development—which drapes a veil of wishful thinking over the actual nature of all societies: the fact that they can combine civilisation and barbarism without contradiction. This assertion requires no dialectical juggling in order to discover the ‘underside of modernity’. It is an attempt to show that violence does not go away in any society, an attempt, then, to get away from some of the more abstract theorising about modernity, and to state the obvious: that violence and modernity coexist.

In order to show this in more detail, I will look at the *Einsatzgruppen*, the mobile killing squads that accompanied the Wehrmacht as it invaded the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, and shot some one million people, mostly Jews, but also many non-Jews, such as priests, intellectuals, and local Bolshevik leaders. Their mass-shootings are usually re-

garded as the first step towards the taking of the 'Final Solution of the Jewish Question', that is, the decision to murder all the Jews in Europe. Although their role has been much discussed of late, especially by historians debating the existence or not of an order to murder all the Jews before the start of Operation Barbarossa, I want to think in particular about how their operations can make us reconsider our conception of the Holocaust, and the nature of its continued importance for us. I will argue specifically that the turn towards interpretive ideas such as 'violence' and 'antisemitism' is vital, but that it should not be seen as a replacement for that of 'modernity'. Rather, the two things should be seen *in toto*, not as two sides of the same coin nor even in a dialectical relationship, but as what they are: descriptive and interpretive devices. When one stops thinking in terms of the opposition that they set up, one sees more clearly that violence is as much a part of modern societies as of premodern. There is no cause for surprise, only for thinking about what causes the outbursts of violence at certain moments and not others. Where the confusion arises, it is because of an equation of *modernity* with *modernisation*, that set of social changes that included industrialisation, urbanisation, and bureaucratisation.

The problem with much recent work is that it always defines violence in opposition to modernity. Ulrich Herbert, for example, noting the novelty of his theoretical stance, takes pains to remind us that designating the Holocaust as a 'quasi-anonymous process, as "industrial death", is misleading.' He notes that 'the number of Jews killed by gas in the great death centres made up some 60% of the six million murdered Jews. ... The concept of "clean" death by gas is inapplicable to large proportions of the genocide. An extremely important part of the Holocaust was far more an annihilation in a very traditional, almost archaic form, with a

correspondingly high number of face to face perpetrators [*Direkttätern*].³ This approach is salutary, in that it is of course true to say that the gas chambers were only the culmination of a process of genocide which had indeed seen many people killed face to face by mass-shooting. But the use of terms such as 'traditional' and 'archaic' indicates that Herbert is taking a stance against those theorists who see the Holocaust as the archetypal 'modern' genocide, thanks to the processes of surveillance, registration, bureaucratic control, and technological participation which were involved in carrying it out. It should not be forgotten, however, that for many interpreters, particularly survivors themselves, 'the horrible uniqueness of the National Socialist system—and it remains so until today in memory and history, in the memory of the survivors and in actual history for future generations—consisted in this cold-blooded and systematic, industrial and rationally-taken decision, to want to obliterate a whole people.'⁴

Besides, the dichotomy in interpretation is itself a result of the contradictory aspects of the genocide itself. Herbert is correct to point out that violence characterised the Holocaust, but it is also correct to state that the Nazi project was one of order, and this allows it to be seen as modern, modern in the sense suggested by Alain Touraine when he calls modernity 'an obsession with totality'⁵ or, as Peter Fritzsche puts it, the Nazis 'made the acknowledgement of the radical

3 Ulrich Herbert, 'Vernichtungspolitik: Neue Antworten und Fragen zur Geschichte des "Holocaust"', in *Nationalsozialistische Vernichtungspolitik*, ed. Herbert, 57.

4 Jorge Semprun in Jorge Semprun and Elie Wiesel, *Schweigen ist unmöglich* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), 13. I am not endorsing Semprun's position, merely indicating the importance of continuing to think about the 'death factories'.

5 Alain Touraine, *Critique of Modernity*, trans. David Macey (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 24.

instability of twentieth-century life the premise of relentless experimentation.⁶ In going along with recent research into the violent aspects of the Holocaust which have been overlooked in our fascination with 'technological death', one should not forget that this took place in a modern setting. In other words, in stressing 'violence' as a key to understanding one should not reintroduce concepts such as atavism or 'relapse into barbarism' and thereby exculpate general trends of modern society. Violence is as much part of the modern as it is of other societies. On the one hand talk of 'relapses into barbarism' usually comes at the expense of medieval societies, as though these had no civilised aspects; on the other, talk of 'modernity' as the setting for 'clean', 'industrial' genocide aestheticises the violence involved without even recognising it as such.

Dominick LaCapra has recently set out the problem well, seeing in the Holocaust

the conjunction of a technological framework and all that is associated with it in the Nazi context (including racial "science", eugenics, and medicalization based on purity of blood) with the return of a repressed—seemingly out of place or *unheimlich*—sacrificialism in the attempt to cleanse (or purify) the Volksgemeinschaft and fulfil the leader's will by getting rid of Jews as polluting, dangerous, phobic (or ritually impure) objects. Perhaps only this disconcerting conjunction helps to explain the incredible excesses of brutality, cruelty, and at times carnivalesque or 'sublime' elation in Nazi behaviour toward Jews.⁷

In the light of research-findings about 'ordinary men' it might at first seem inappropriate to talk of the 'sacrificial' nature of the Holocaust. There is, however, an equally large body of literature which reveals the antisemitic context in which the

6 Peter Fritzsche, 'Nazi Modern', *Modernism/Modernity*, 3:1 (1996), 2.

7 Dominick LaCapra, 'Lanzmann's *Shoah*: Here Is No Why', *Critical Inquiry*, 23:2 (1997), 268-269 n. 4.

'ordinary men' operated.⁸ In the case of the *Einsatzgruppen*, these apparently contradictory characteristics—of order and purity *and* sacrifice and violence—coexist in equal measure. What this reveals is neither the 'underside of modernity' nor a 'relapse into barbarism'; rather, it simply means that the Nazi project of order and beauty was to be attained by unleashing an untrammelled violence.

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In one of the most influential recent studies of violence, John Keane has written of the horrors of this century that they are

quintessentially modern, not only because of their implication in the struggle for territorially bound state power, but also because they are illustrations of the rational-calculating use of violence as a technique

8 Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (London: HarperCollins, 1992); Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Ernst Klee, Willi Dressen, and Volker Riess (eds.), *"Those were the Days": The Holocaust as seen by Perpetrators and Bystanders*, trans. Deborah Burnstone (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1993); Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann (eds.), *Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1995); Walter Manoschek (ed.), *Die Wehrmacht im Rasenkrieg: Der Vernichtungskrieg hinter der Front* (Vienna: Picus, 1996). See also Konrad Kwiet, 'From the Diary of a Killing Unit', in *Why Germany? National Socialist Anti-Semitism and the European Context*, ed. John Milfull (Oxford: Berg, 1993), 73-90; Jürgen Matthäus, 'What about the "Ordinary Men"? The German Order Police and the Holocaust in the Occupied Soviet Union', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 10:2 (1996), 134-150; Hannes Heer, 'Killing Fields: The Wehrmacht and the Holocaust in Belorussia, 1941-1942', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 11:1 (1997), 79-101. On *Täterforschung* ('perpetrator history') in general, which has developed rapidly in the last few years, see Jürgen Matthäus, 'Historiography and the Perpetrators of the Holocaust', in *The Historiography of the Holocaust*, ed. Dan Stone (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 197-215.

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of terrorising and demoralising whole populations and preventing them from engaging in organised or premeditated resistance.⁹

But whilst it is true that '[t]hose who enjoy the monopoly of the means of violence can also turn their life-threatening power against their own subject populations,'¹⁰ why should this state of affairs be regarded as modern? Merely because it incorporates Weber's definition of the state? Did not the rulers of ancient and early-modern empires enjoy the same powers, despite the fact that their state apparatuses were not so all-embracing?

When one thinks about Keane's assertion in the light of the evidence from the *Einsatzgruppen*, it becomes clear that the actions of the *Einsatzgruppen* can only be regarded as rationally-organised if one accepts their own claims at face value. For whilst the reports which they sent back to Berlin were couched in the language of 'ordinary' military activity—rooting out partisans, controlling occupied territory—in reality what they were doing was nothing of the sort.

During the Nuremberg Trials, the leader of *Einsatzgruppe D*, Otto Ohlendorf, made a remarkable, counter-intuitive claim, revealing the extent to which those involved in the shooting, and those organising it, resorted to strategies of legitimisation for their actions. Questioned about his striking claim that in the killings he had tried to avoid 'ill-treatment' of the victims, Ohlendorf said that by this he meant:

If, for instance, the manner in which the executions were carried out caused excitement and disobedience among the victims, so that the Kommandos were forced to restore order by means of violence.

Pressed on this point by Colonel Pokrovsky, the deputy chief prosecutor for the USSR, Ohlendorf explained: 'If, as I have

9 John Keane, *Reflections on Violence* (London: Verso, 1996), 30-31.

10 Ibid., 27.

already said, in order to carry out the liquidation in an orderly fashion it was necessary, for example, to resort to beating.' However, he had 'never witnessed it, but I heard of it' from members of other Kommandos.¹¹

These claims are astonishing given the nature of what is being discussed. It may very well be true that Ohlendorf attempted to organise his killings in the most orderly way possible, but that should not blind us to the fact that what he was trying to render orderly was mass slaughter. One can only be swayed by this language of order and reason if one ignores the voices of the victims, as the Kommandos themselves had already done, and as the report writers in their turn also did. When the writer of one such report could state that 'The job was thoroughly and rapidly done, with firm and sure hand,'¹² one can almost overlook what is being discussed, and that was precisely the intention.

Let us see what Ohlendorf was talking about. Seducing themselves as well as later generations of historians, the *Einsatzgruppen* sent daily reports of their operations back to Berlin. As Heinz Höhne points out these were reports 'couched in cold, official language as if recording production figures for refrigerators or numbers of vermin destroyed' But far from testifying to 'the murderers' fanatical zeal', these reports were designed to conceal any sense of fanaticism.¹³ They did not flinch from stating what they had done, the numbers of Jews killed (whether reliable or not) are explicitly given. It is a different type of concealment that we encounter

11 International Military Tribunal, *Trials of the Major War Criminals. Proceedings*, vol. IV: 17 December 1945 - 8 January 1946 (Nuremberg: International Military Tribunal, 1947), 331.

12 Cited in Kwiet, 'From the Diary', 86.

13 Heinz Höhne, *The Order of the Death's Head: The Story of Hitler's SS*, trans. Richard Barry (London: Pan, 1972), 332.

here, one which is hiding the fact that the violence of the Holocaust was an outburst of affect, a transgression from norms of society. But the nature of fascism, with its rigidly steeled warrior men, its severe military trammelling of the body and its emotions, had to conceal this fact from itself.¹⁴ It was not the killing of Jews that was problematic for the murderers, it was acknowledging that the killing might be connected to the desire to transgress that had to be suppressed. So the murders were understood through existing concepts of martial honour, for example:

In the spring of 1942 a gas truck was placed at the disposal of my unit, but I did not use it for executions. In my opinion an execution by shooting is more honourable for both parties than the killing by means of a gas truck. This is the reason why I refused to use the gas truck.¹⁵

Here the mass-murder of the *Einsatzgruppen* is made to sound like a duel, a depiction that would have been well understood by many Germans. But what it actually reveals is the disjunction between material modernisation—industrialisation, urbanisation, medical advance, transport—and the resources that this material change gives to imaginative modernity—dreams of speed and corporeal-technological experimentation, as found in vorticism or Futurism, and in our own time in Cyborg theory. These resources come together under certain conditions and allow dreams of modernity

14 See Georges Bataille, 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism', in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 137-160.

15 Affidavit of Werner Braune, former head of Einsatzkommando 11b, 8 July 1947. Cited in *The Holocaust: Selected Documents in Eighteen Volumes. Volume 10: The Einsatzgruppen or Murder Commandos*, eds. John Mendelsohn and Donald S. Detwiler (New York: Garland Publishing, 1982), 144.