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More Than Murderers: Confronting Perpetrators in Holocaust Fiction

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MORE THAN MURDERERS:
CONFRONTING PERPETRATORS IN HOLOCAUST FICTION

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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Title: More than Murderers: Confronting Perpetrators in Holocaust Fiction

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Each of the primary texts I examine—*The Deputy* by Rolf Hochhuth (1964), *The Sunflower* by Simon Wiesenthal (1969), *The Portage to San Cristóbal of A.H.* by George Steiner (1979), *Sophie's Choice* by William Styron (1979), *Europe Central* by William T. Vollmann (2005), *The Kindly Ones* by Jonathan Littell (2006), and *Either/Or* by Thomas Keneally (2007)—offers narrative depictions of Holocaust perpetrators that resist monolithic or absolutist presentations of evil. By deliberately frustrating our expectations and emphasizing the perpetrators' ambiguity, these texts serve to defamiliarize Holocaust perpetrators, paradoxically, by refamiliarizing them—in other words, by foregrounding banal aspects of the perpetrators' character and depicting them as more than one dimensional murderers. While efforts to “humanize” Holocaust perpetrators have traditionally been condemned as transgressive acts on the behalf of *authors*, I argue that such depictions may serve instead as a catalyst for an ethical reevaluation on behalf of *readers*. Through their complex depictions of perpetrator subjectivity, these texts prompt in readers the discomfiting acknowledgement of the perpetrators' position as a *part of*—rather than an *aberrant divergence from*—modern history. This acknowledgement, I suggest, is capable of eliciting a renewed ethical awareness of our collective past, present, and future.

In addition to negotiating critical treatments of each of the novels I've chosen, my analyses draw heavily upon the work of political theorist Hannah Arendt. The shift in Arendt's characterization of Nazi crimes from "an appearance of radical evil" in 1951 to "the banality of evil" in 1963 provides an interpretive framework through which I examine these depictions of Holocaust perpetrators. Additionally, I argue that the outrage sparked by the 1963 appearance of Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*—the text for which, in large part due to this very outrage, Arendt is best remembered today—carried implications for the reception of Holocaust fiction, and more specifically its considerations of perpetrator subjectivity, whose reverberations continue to resound even now, more than half a century after its initial publication.

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bringing your magical daughters into the world. I love you all so, so much, and I hope you know I brought this one home for all of us.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Evidence mounts, and explanatory accounts grow. Yet the more one knows, the less acceptable the Holocaust becomes.

—John Roth, *Holocaust Politics*

Given the abundance of memoirs, testimonies, and other published eyewitness accounts, the enterprise of Holocaust fiction has always been viewed with substantial critical suspicion. Prompted by a proliferation of Holocaust-themed novels, television programs, and films throughout the 1980s, Elie Wiesel published “Art and the Holocaust: Trivializing Memory” in 1989, an essay that functions as a re-articulation of Theodor Adorno’s oft-quoted admonishment against writing poetry after Auschwitz, but with a focus on novels and cinematic dramatization. “Not even the killers,” writes Wiesel, “ever imagined that there could come a time when the merchants of images and the brokers of language would set themselves up to speak for the victims” (H1). Wiesel, arguably the world’s most influential author of Holocaust literature, offered an apparently simple solution: to study only the texts composed by survivors, eyewitnesses, and historians, to view only documentary films, “and stop insulting the dead” (H38).

The impulse to protect the Holocaust from dramatization and aestheticization has nonetheless given rise to its own set of problems, problems which only augment with the passage of time. As Susan Gubar writes, “No matter how well-intentioned, the first generation of Holocaust scholars threatened to eradicate the Shoah by stipulating that the bankruptcy of analogizing or generalizing meant only those personally victimized could speak for or about the event” (5). If the only authors permitted to treat this topic literarily are survivors themselves, as Wiesel and others suggest, then a point would inevitably be

reached when literary and cultural production pertaining to the Holocaust would cease; the canon of Holocaust literature would be wholly fixed and stagnant. Ruth Franklin identifies a subtler symptom of the exclusionary impulses surrounding Holocaust fiction, one exclusive to literary production. Citing Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments*—an almost universally lauded 1995 Holocaust “memoir” that was later revealed to be purely imaginative—Franklin writes, “the pathetic fraud perpetrated by Wilkomirski was the inevitable consequence of the way Holocaust literature has been read, discussed, and understood ... over the last sixty years” (2). Franklin traces a connection between critics’ tendency to judge Holocaust literature primarily on grounds of autobiographical authenticity and the burgeoning tendency of authors to bolster Holocaust texts with exaggerated—or even wholly fraudulent— autobiographical claims. In the case of *Fragments* (which is only one of several such instances), readers and scholars are left with a text that could have been a landmark *novel* about the Holocaust, if only its author had offered it as a novel. Instead of a landmark novel, readers are left with a text indelibly marred by shame and disgrace.

Thus, the need for an open, sustained engagement with Holocaust fiction, one whose critical impulses extend beyond condemnation and accepts these texts on their own terms, becomes more urgent as we approach the point at which no eyewitnesses remain. In spite of the repeated injunctions against the production of Holocaust fiction, authors continue to employ novelistic conventions as a means to interrogate and explore the Holocaust, both in its historical singularity and its universal implications. I contend that this endeavor may aid in ensuring the preservation of Holocaust memory for future generations of Jews and non-Jews alike. Establishing and examining a canon of

Holocaust fiction will augment our understanding not of the Holocaust experience *itself*—for this we must turn to the witnesses—but rather of the ever-evolving cultural struggle to confront the manifold implications of the Nazi genocide for those born into its aftermaths.

The publication of numerous monographs and critical studies— among them Daniel Schwarz’s *Imagining the Holocaust* (1999), Sue Vice’s *Holocaust Fiction* (2000), Ruth Franklin’s *A Thousand Darknesses: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction* (2011), Jakob Lothe, Susan Suleiman, and James Phelan’s *After Testimony* (2012), and Aurélie Barjonet and Liran Razinsky’s *Writing the Holocaust Today: Critical Perspectives on Jonathan Littell’s The Kindly Ones* (2012)—suggests that contemporary literary criticism is already trending toward acknowledging the importance of fiction to the broader field of Holocaust studies. As Vice asserts,

Any new literary perspectives on the Holocaust after the middle of the third millennium can only be written by descendents of survivors or by novelists with no connection to the event. Given that this is the case, it makes more sense to attempt to construct a typology of Holocaust fiction than to consign the genre as a whole to the status of a failed supplement. (8)

However, the corpus of Holocaust fiction—which spans texts composed during the war years to 21st Century works—is too varied and voluminous to treat in any single analysis.

In treating only six novels in detail, then, Vice’s book in some ways fails to deliver on the promise of its title, *Holocaust Fiction*. Moreover, of the six novels she presents as representative of Holocaust fiction’s various typologies, four are deeply, perhaps irredeemably, problematic. Indeed, Vice focuses almost exclusively on the

genre's most divisive offerings, and she courts controversy, albeit subtly, in the very subtitle of her study: "From William Styron to Binjamin Wilkomirski." Though Styron's *Sophie's Choice* has aroused many sharp critiques in the decades since its publication, it was offered from the outset *as a work of fiction*, and thus cannot be equated with a fraudulent memoir. Martin Amis's 1991 *Time's Arrow*, which *Vice* unequivocally proclaims as "work[ing] much better than William Styron's construction of a fictional autobiography in which the novel's protagonist both reads and use historical sources" (2), could easily be consigned to a species of superficial fiction which, rather than employing novelistic methods to expand our awareness of the Holocaust, *uses the Holocaust* to lend an air of seeming profundity to a text that might otherwise be viewed as a hackneyed, derivative experiment in backwards narration. Similarly, even if the allegations of plagiarism that tarnish D.M. Thomas's *The White Hotel* were left aside, the text itself appears more concerned with psycho-sexual voyeurism than with the ethical, political, or historical implications of the Holocaust. While the events of the Holocaust are not so sacrosanct as to be rendered wholly untouchable *by* writers of fiction, they are sufficiently sacrosanct to demand exceptional care and responsibility *from* writers of fiction.

In spite of repeated injunctions against its very existence, Holocaust fiction has, as a genre, become too voluminous to be given fair treatment in any single analysis. Rather than attempt to treat the category of "Holocaust fiction" in its sprawling entirety, then, this project emphasizes specifically the narrative effects of moral ambiguity in fictional depictions of Holocaust perpetrators. Even as contemporary criticism takes a more welcoming approach to the enterprise of Holocaust fiction, perpetrator representations

remain largely unexamined. Highlighting the avoidance of Holocaust perpetrators in literary analyses, Erin McGlothlin points out that

Little extensive analysis has been written addressing the questions of ... how existing representations of perpetrators function. In contrast to the literary treatment and critical analysis of the voice of the victims, which abounds in both autobiographical survival accounts and in fictional literature, the perspective of the perpetrators— in particular the *narrative* perspective of the perpetrators, meaning their subjectivity, motivations, thoughts, and desires—has been all but ignored. (qtd. in Adams, Vice 2)

The void in criticism McGlothlin identifies—the very void this dissertation seeks, at least in part, to fill—raises a number of questions. What are the dangers of representing Holocaust perpetrators as active subjects in fiction? Is it possible to render them in a realistically complex mode without eliciting an ethically problematic identification or sympathy, or depicting perpetrators as victims themselves? Does fiction have a productive role to play in augmenting our understanding of these figures, or should we rather heed Karl Jaspers suggestion to Hannah Arendt that “Nazi crime is properly a subject for psychology and sociology, for psychopathology and jurisprudence only” (Arendt, Jaspers 62)?

In lieu of representing their subjectivity, popular depictions of Nazi perpetrators in fiction and film have tended toward stereotyping them as agents of a monolithic, psychopathic, or almost supernatural evil, an evil dislodged from its own origins in political and material reality. This tendency has served to reify Nazism itself into an aesthetic function, one that mythologizes Holocaust perpetrators into abstract symbols of

universal oppression. As we move further away in historical time from the events of the Holocaust, we face an increasing danger not of forgetting, but of *misremembering* them, and in some ways, misremembering the particular circumstances that led to the Holocaust may prove more pernicious. “The greatest danger of recognizing totalitarianism as the curse of the century,” Hannah Arendt once warned, “would be an obsession with it to the extent of becoming blind to the numerous small and not so small evils with which the road to Hell is paved” (*Essays in Understanding* 272). The more susceptible popular opinion becomes to the notion that the Holocaust—its causes and effects, its victims and perpetrators—can be easily grasped through simplifying mediums, the closer Western Civilization comes to flirting with the same hubristic cruelty that allowed the Third Reich to flourish. Moreover, the comforting notion that its perpetrators bear nothing in common with “us” is among the most hubristic myths accompanying popular Holocaust awareness.

Yet, works of fiction that offer ambiguous depictions of Holocaust perpetrators—depictions that emphasize aspects of their character *apart from* their status as racially-motivated mass murderers—tend to be either ignored or met with critical outrage, manifested in accusations of perversity, anti-Semitism, or “historical revisionism” on the behalf, in some cases, even of Jewish authors. A precedent of sharply condemnatory criticism, situated within broader claims of Holocaust fiction’s intrinsic moral obscenity, seems to have discouraged writers of fiction from exploring Arendt’s astute point, articulated as early as 1946, that “there is a difference between a man who sets out to murder his old aunt and people who without considering the economic usefulness of their actions at all ... built factories to produce corpses” (Arendt, Jaspers 69). However, more

recent offerings in Holocaust fiction and scholarship suggest that as we move further away from the events of the Holocaust in time, not only are novelists more willing to explore the grim, ambiguous terrain of depicting Holocaust perpetrators as active subjects in fiction, but critics and scholars are similarly more willing to engage with these depictions in a manner that extends beyond instinctual condemnation.

Each of the primary texts examined here offers narrative and dramatic depictions of Nazi perpetrators—some historical, some invented—that resist monolithic, essentialist, or absolutist presentations of evil. Contrary to some of the harshest criticisms these works aroused, I suggest that such complex depictions of Holocaust perpetrators, far from detracting from our view of Nazism as evil, serve instead to nuance our awareness of “evil” in the sense that Hannah Arendt famously employed the term: as a human capacity and political reality, rather than an abstract religious, supernatural, essential, or metaphysical phenomenon. As a result, these texts diverge from the mainstream of Holocaust literature, much of which encourages readers’ identification with victims, and in so doing “may impede consideration of one’s potential to occupy the position of perpetrator or bystander” (Weissman 211). I argue for the ethical necessity of confronting this very consideration, in spite of the profoundly discomfiting position in which it places readers.

Perpetrator Memoirs: Blind Spots in a Grey Zone

In her insightful study *Reading the Holocaust*, Australian historian Inga Clendinnen points out that “the newcomer to Holocaust studies is impressed by a curious field. The overwhelming mass of scholarly writings bears not on the few who planned the actions or the thousands who carried them out, but the millions who suffered them”

(82). “Perversely,” she continues, “when scholars turn to more general questions provoked by the Holocaust, questions to do with the nature of humankind, it is the conduct of the victims, not the perpetrators, which is placed in the moral frame and subjected to rigorous scrutiny” (83). Though Clendinnen focuses primarily on historical accounts, her judgment holds true for imaginative works as well, for even as we see a contemporary upsurge in morally ambiguous Holocaust texts, a great many focus on the decisions and actions of Jewish prisoners, relegating the perpetrators themselves to background roles.

An exemplar of this trend can be found in Tim Blake Nelson’s 2002 film *The Grey Zone*, based on the memoirs of Miklos Nyiszli, an Auschwitz prisoner who served as assistant to the notorious Dr. Josef Mengele. Nelson’s film, which borrows its title from a chapter in Primo Levi’s *The Drowned and the Saved*, depicts Auschwitz-Birkenau at its destructive zenith: autumn 1944, at the height of the Hungarian deportations. The film’s principal cast is comprised of Nyiszli (Allan Corduner) and members of the 12th sonderkommando; its plot is largely dedicated to dramatizing the sonderkommando’s “choiceless choices” in the days leading up to October 7th, 1944, when they wage the only successful revolt in Auschwitz, destroying one of Birkenau’s main crematorium facilities and damaging another. Immediately after the revolt, historically and in *The Grey Zone*’s concluding sequence, all of the participating insurgents were executed by gunshot.

The film’s unrelentingly bleak tone sealed its fate as a box office failure—ticket sales totaled but a fraction of the production costs—but it was hailed by critics as a sea change in Holocaust representation. Lawrence Langer commended the film’s “raw

reality” (qtd. in Gewen), and, situating *The Grey Zone* at the forefront of Holocaust representations for a post-9/11 era, Janet Ward declared, “We are witnessing the *reparticularization*, or even urgent repoliticization, of the Holocaust to fit the needs of these contemporary transnational times” (36). Ward goes on to locate the film’s significance in its juxtaposition “of the machinic universality of Auschwitz that coexists alongside the individuals’ fight to stay human as long as they are still alive” (36). But Ward’s reference to “the machinic universality of Auschwitz” inadvertently calls attention to the film’s most glaring oversight: the complexity—indeed the *humanity*—of the perpetrators of Auschwitz, who in Nelson’s film are largely reduced to stereotypes, barking orders in affected German accents and whimsically murdering prisoners. Excepting a few brief scenes which establish SS-*Oberscharfuhrer* Erich Muhsfeld’s (Harvey Keitel) chronic headaches and alcoholism, the SS in Nelson’s Birkenau function as merely another component of the Auschwitz “machine,” not entirely dissimilar from the crematorium apparatuses manned by the film’s principal characters.

To be sure, *The Grey Zone*’s depiction of Muhsfeld as a gruff, inarticulate simpleton marks a divergence from more traditional Hollywood conventions of depicting the SS as pathological sadists; Keitel’s performance lacks even a suggestion, for instance, of the villainous grandeur Ralph Fiennes exuded as Amon Goeth a decade earlier in *Schindler’s List*. Given its foreground focus on the forced collaboration of Nyiszli and the sonderkommandos in the extermination process, however, the film appears considerably more concerned with challenging filmic tropes of one-dimensional victims than of one-dimensional perpetrators. Nowhere is this clearer than in one of the film’s most shocking sequences, set in the anteroom of Crematorium IV, as the

sonderkommandos offer false reassurances to a throng of prisoners condemned to death. When sonderkommando Hoffman (David Arquette) meets resistance from a prisoner—an impeccably dressed Jewish man who calls Hoffman, a Jewish prisoner himself, a Nazi—he responds by savagely beating the man to death, and the camera remains trained on Hoffman throughout the entire ordeal. It is among the most violent scenes in a film set against a backdrop of unending violence, and tellingly, each fatal blow is delivered by a prisoner’s hand; the attendant SS guards look over the incident in detached amusement. Hoffman’s collaboration is concretized when a leering SS peels a wristwatch off the dead man’s wrist and hands it to Hoffman, flashing an approving and conspiratorial grin.

Contrasted with the runaway success of life-affirming Holocaust films such as *Schindler’s List* or Roberto Benigni’s *Life is Beautiful*, *The Grey Zone*’s commercial failure testifies to American audiences’ tendency simply to turn away from Holocaust representations unadorned by redemptive storytelling conventions. Nelson’s commitment, in his words, “to show everything” (qtd. in Boswell 164), resulted not only in a film whose *mise en scene* includes nude corpses dragged along the floor of a gas chamber, but also a narrative in which none of the principal characters—the heroes, as it were—survives. Excepting Nyiszli, a profoundly compromised and traumatized Ishmael who lives to tell the tale, each of the film’s focal characters is suddenly and unceremoniously murdered. Thus, viewers are confronted with the awful truth that, contrary to many popular representations, the vast majority of stories arising from this epoch are sadly and decidedly not narratives of survival. In this respect, critics were right to hail the film as a sea change. Nevertheless, looming large in considerations of a film committed “to show[ing] everything” is *The Grey Zone*’s most evident blind spot, the

aspect of Birkenau that even a film such as this one dare not show: the complexity and humanity of the perpetrators.

The film's opening credits announce that it was "based in part on the eyewitness account of Dr. Miklos Nyiszli, the Hungarian Jew assigned by Josef Mengele to assist in medical experiments on inmates." Nelson reportedly ensured that each member of the cast had read not only Nyiszli's account, but also Primo Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved* and Filip Muller's *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, along with other sonderkommando testimonies. In contrast to the meticulous examination of the prisoners' actions, though, the film presents no corollary regarding Muhsfeld—or any of the SS, for that matter—despite explicit considerations of the perpetrators' ambiguity in the film's source texts. Contrasting his supervisor with SS *Oberscharfuhrer* Otto Molle, whom Nyiszli designates "the Third Reich's most abject, diabolic and hardened assassin," Nyiszli goes out of his way to point out that "even Dr. Mengele showed from time to time that he was human" (Nyiszli 70). Primo Levi, in the very essay from which the film takes its title, offers a more protracted consideration of Erich Mushfeld. Levi writes,

Now, this Muhsfeld was not a compassionate person; his daily ration of slaughter was studded with arbitrary and capricious acts, marked by his inventions of refined cruelty. He was tried in 1947, sentenced to death and hung in Krakow and this was right, but not even he was a monolith. Had he lived in a different environment and epoch, he probably would have behaved like any other common man. (57)

Significantly, Levi reaches this conclusion after considering an incident that occupies a prominent place in both Nyiszli's testimony and Nelson's film: the sonderkommandos'

discovery of a young Hungarian girl who, because of her position when the mass of bodies fell, survived the gas chamber at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The most obvious artistic license taken in *The Grey Zone* is the rearrangement of events that allows the discovery of this young girl to occur almost simultaneously with the sonderkommando uprising in October 1944; in reality, months separated one event from the other. Quoting from Nelson's own remarks, Matthew Boswell writes, "By allowing the discovery of the girl to take place immediately before the rising, Nelson knowingly conflates 'two actual events into one another for dramatic tension'" (163). But there is another significant variance between the events as they occurred and the events as Nelson depicts them. After describing the sonderkommandos' frantic reaction upon discovering a living girl among the dead ("Everybody wanted to help, as if she were his own child" [Nyzli 89]), Nyzli recounts the girl's fate in his characteristically spare and straightforward prose. "Half an hour later," he writes, "the young girl was led, or rather carried, into the furnace room hallway, and there *Mussfeld* [sic] *sent another in his place to do the job*. A bullet in the back of the neck" (92: italics added).

Faced with a coughing, whimpering child, even a murderer as prolific as Muhsfeld cowered, summoning a subordinate to pull the trigger and undermining his own boast to Nyzli that "It doesn't bother me any more to kill 100 men than it does to kill five" (qtd. in Nyzli 97). It is this very hesitation, Muhsfeld's apparent inability to kill *one* in this instance, that prompts Levi to consider Muhsfeld as an inhabitant of what he termed "the gray zone," a space of such physical and psychological extremity that long-held, traditional distinctions between right and wrong—and, indeed, between perpetrator and victim—are blurred to a point of near-eradication. In *The Drowned and the Saved*,

Levi concludes his discussion of Erich Muhsfeld by pointing out that, “That single, immediately erased instant of pity is certainly not enough to absolve Muhsfeld. It is enough, however, to place him too, although at its extreme boundary, within the gray band, that zone of ambiguity which radiates out from regimes based on terror and obsequiousness” (58). Of course, Levi was in absolutely no way *equating* the experiences of the SS and their prisoners, and when he writes that the gray zone “possesses an incredibly complicated internal structure and contains within itself enough to confuse our ability to judge” (42), it is an attempt to forestall our judgments of prisoners who were forced to collaborate with the Nazis, not our judgments of the Nazis themselves. As Christopher Browning states in his landmark historical study *Ordinary Men*,

The perpetrators and victims in the gray zone were not mirror images of one another. Perpetrators did not become fellow victims (as many of them later claimed to be) in the way some victims became accomplices of perpetrators. The relationship between perpetrator and victim was not symmetrical. The range of choice each faced was totally different. (187)

Nevertheless, critics, scholars, authors, and filmmakers often overlook the fact that Levi’s oft-cited concept of the moral gray zone established at Auschwitz and other camps encompassed, at least to some degree, ambiguity in certain actions of perpetrators as well as victims.

Prisoners sometimes had—through no choices of their own, to be sure—to collaborate with the murderers, and any student of Holocaust scholarship should find this ethically confounding. Likewise, the “machinic” Nazi perpetrators—who differ from the

victims, it must be noted, in that they *chose* to occupy such a position in the first place—experienced moments of human complexity, as when Erich Muhsfeld, who had committed murder literally hundreds of times, had to delegate the execution of a young Jewish girl to an underling; this is equally confounding. But in one of *The Grey Zone*'s final scenes, Muhsfeld pulls the trigger himself, and he does it casually, without a moment's hesitation. In the film, this occurs immediately after the uprising, in a puzzling moment of Nelson's invention when, after surviving the gas chamber and spending hours in hiding, the young Hungarian girl attempts to escape in full view of Muhsfeld and several other SS. Nelson's commitment to realism was sufficiently staunch to depict the savage murder of one Jewish prisoner by another, one point at which "the two camps of masters and servants ... converge" (Levi 42), but it shied away from exploring the complexity of another such point: when a sliver of the sonderkommandos' empathy, catalyzed by the discovery of a still-living Hungarian girl, rendered a hardened SS-*Oberscharführer* incapable of doing his grisly duty. In this instance, Nelson alters history to reinforce a premise explicitly countered in film's own source texts, assuring viewers that Muhsfeld was indeed "machinic," a monolith after all.

Nelson's reasons for depicting Muhsfeld this way may be more practical than ideological, though; for, like a great many other imaginative Holocaust texts, *The Grey Zone* relies heavily on eyewitness accounts to assure its fidelity to history, and the vast majority of extant eyewitness accounts were composed by individuals who suffered under the Nazis, not by Nazis themselves. In contrast to the innumerable testimonies written by survivors—which comprise a body of literature so vast that no single scholar could hope to master it in a lifetime—the number of eyewitness accounts composed by

Holocaust perpetrators, particularly members of the SS, is relatively scant. No account of the incident from Muhsfeld's perspective, an account that would trace his reasoning through in detail, exists, and even if it did, its truth value would be severely compromised by virtue of Muhsfeld's position as a perpetrator. Of the few book length testimonies composed by members of the SS—Rudolf Höss's gallows memoir and Albert Speer's *Inside the Third Reich* are likely the two most widely read examples—not a single one can be taken at face value.

Unlike traditional Holocaust testimonies such as Wiesel's *Night*, Levi's *If This is a Man*, or Charlotte Delbo's *Auschwitz and After*, which elicit profound emotional sympathies and a faith in the authors so deep it borders on genuine awe, our engagement with perpetrator testimonies is characterized by an inverse reaction; the same ethical comportment that compels our trust in the fidelity of survivor accounts arouses an instinctual revulsion and mistrust toward the comparatively few extant perpetrator accounts. "I do not understand how a man of at least average intelligence ... could fail to see the lacunae in his tranquilly expressed ideas, or the gross misrepresentations which blot his narrative," writes Inga Clendinnen on the memoir Rudolf Höss. "His text is here in front of me – and I can do nothing with it" (107). Even a reader as perceptive and insightful as Clendinnen declares Höss's testimony altogether opaque.

Whether diluted by conscious motives as simple as the author's public rehabilitation or by an unconscious phenomenon as profound as an "inability to *think*, namely, to think from the standpoint of someone else" (Arendt, *Eichmann* 49), autobiographical perpetrator accounts serve foremost to problematize our understanding of perpetrator behavior in its manifold and sometimes contradictory complexities. As

Robert Eaglestone points out, “Perpetrator testimony has several complex characteristics. For example, they have complex forms of authorship: indeed, they are often constructed by other people interviewing or questioning the perpetrator ... or they are extremely tendentious and self-serving ... and so have to be read very suspiciously” (15). Examples of “tendentious and self-serving” perpetrator accounts would include the published memoirs of Höss or Speer, each of which in its own way arouses profound suspicions from readers, even as we acknowledge its importance to the historical record. Eaglestone specifically cites Gitta Sereny’s books on Franz Stangl and Albert Speer—both products of the hours Sereny spent interviewing the perpetrators themselves— as exemplars of “complex forms of authorship,” but Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* could be similarly categorized. Of course, Arendt never met or questioned Eichmann personally, as Sereny had the chance to do with Speer and Stangl, but the book reads at times like a confrontation between Arendt and Eichmann, leading up to a climactic moment in which the author addresses Eichmann directly, pronouncing her own justification for his execution by hanging.

In the case of both Sereny’s and Arendt’s texts, the most valuable insights come not from the perpetrators themselves, but from the author’s juxtaposition of perpetrator testimony with other eyewitness accounts, historical analyses, objective historical facts, and, most significantly, from the author’s own role as the text’s moral center and controlling intelligence. The monumental importance of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* comes not from Eichmann himself (for, as Arendt persuasively argues, Eichmann himself is largely a non-entity), but from the manner in which Arendt constructs Eichmann and situates him within the limited context of a narrative—maneuvers akin to those employed

by a novelist. It is safe to assume that Eichmann's memoir alone, which has yet to be published in its entirety, let alone translated from the original German, would not yield any such long-lasting insights. Thus, it would seem that the same autobiographical authenticity that bolsters and privileges eyewitness accounts from victims' perspectives serves to undermine accounts composed by perpetrators, and it is here that we may locate a rich function for complex perpetrator representations in fiction.

More than Murderers: Confronting Perpetrators in Holocaust Fiction

In a discussion of *The Kindly Ones*, Jonathan Littell's mammoth 2006 novel narrated by a fictional SS officer, Eaglestone writes, "There has been a 'boom' in the last ten years or so of what might be called 'perpetrator fiction': work that deals with or focuses on the perpetrators" (14). Rather than deal exclusively with the contemporary wave of perpetrator fiction—a wave that would include Littell's *The Kindly Ones* (2006), Laurent Binet's *HHhH* (2012), and Patrick Hicks's masterful *The Commandant of Lubizec* (2015)—this project begins by revisiting perpetrator depictions in a number of older texts, texts which, in some cases, were roundly and harshly condemned upon their publications before being laid aside. Returning to a novel like William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*—specifically its disorienting, ambiguous depiction of Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss—we find that "perpetrator fiction" may not be as recent a development as Eaglestone suggests. Complex, morally ambiguous depictions of Holocaust perpetrators have been appearing in literary texts for decades; the more recent development seems rather to be a willingness to engage with them. To be sure, a number of contemporary texts are examined herein—namely, three 21st Century texts depicting an SS officer named Kurt Gerstein—but this project's chronology begins in the 1960's.

My analyses throughout the following chapters largely eschew traditional narrative or literary theory, relying instead on the ideas of political theorist Hannah Arendt. Arendt, who famously disclaimed the label “philosopher,” was among the first thinkers to grapple at length and in detail with the Nazi genocide’s ethical and political implications. Her first major work, 1951’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, labored to reach beyond the diametrically opposed ideological content of the Nazi and Stalinist totalitarian states, focusing instead on the cultural and systematic elements they had in common. Comparisons of Nazism and Stalinism have since become commonplace, but Arendt’s sustained consideration in *Origins* appeared as a radical breakthrough in 1951, earning her global renown as one of the world’s foremost social theorists. Public enthusiasm for Arendt’s work soured, however, upon the 1963 publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, the book for which, due in large part to the acrimonious debates it engendered, Arendt is best known today.

My first chapter performs a close reading of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, measuring its content against the most damning critiques the text aroused. *Eichmann in Jerusalem* marks a shift in Arendt’s own thinking, away from what she named “radical evil” in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to what she termed “the banality of evil,” which she saw embodied by the “terrifyingly normal” (*Eichmann* 276) Adolf Eichmann. For Arendt, Eichmann and others like him represented “a new type of criminal” (*Last Interview* 43), a type of criminal who, though not driven by typically criminal motivations, proved himself capable of committing crimes heretofore unprecedented, both in their monstrousness and their magnitude. Though she insists upon the unique horror and suffering sewn by the Nazi genocide, Arendt simultaneously emphasizes the uncanny

normality of the individuals who devised it and carried it out; her argument stood in stark contradistinction to the case Eichmann's prosecutors—who sought to depict him as an embodiment of monolithic, absolute evil—put forth. Immediately upon the book's publication, Arendt's most vocal detractors accused her, essentially, of being a Nazi sympathizer: "Eichmann," claims Lionel Abel, "comes off so much better in [Arendt's] book than do his victims" (qtd. in Berkowitz, "Misreading"). In hindsight, though, it seems rather that the gravest sin Arendt committed in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was teasing ethical complexities—a gray zone, as it were—out of a history that many preferred to view as stark, simple, and drawn in black and white.

"The attacks on Hannah Arendt's Eichmann book," suggests literary critic Sigurd Burkhardt in 1964, "were full of anger at seeing an absolute subjected to analysis, drawn into the morass of ambiguity from which it was to save us" (316). *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and its attending controversies exemplify a scholarly debate, one that carries on to this day, with regard to fictional texts. Novelists who emulate Arendt's "insistence on stressing complexity and ambiguity" (Novick 141) in their depictions of Nazi perpetrators are, as was Arendt herself, frequently accused of garnering sympathy for them or of exhibiting anti-Semitic tendencies; critiques of literary texts, in these cases, swiftly devolve into attacks on the authors of these texts. Thus, I will consider two novels in my first chapter alongside *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: George Steiner's *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.* and William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*. Both texts were published within a year of each other, nearly two decades after the appearance of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, and both catalyzed emotionally charged attacks on their authors and presumptions of bad faith on the authors' behalf. In some instances, these critiques

resurrected the very same accusations leveled at Arendt in 1963. It would seem, then, that what Steiner termed “the Arendt case” set a precedent for the reception of ambiguous perpetrator depictions, one that would be replayed through the 1980’s and beyond.

I devote my second chapter to a comparative examination of Simon Wiesenthal’s memoir *The Sunflower* (1969) and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1898), both of which offer complex depictions of genocide perpetrators. *The Sunflower* differs remarkably from Wiesenthal’s other memoirs in its ambiguous depiction of “Karl,” a confessed SS war criminal who begs Wiesenthal’s forgiveness. As *Heart of Darkness* did at the turn of the 20th Century, *The Sunflower* blurs the line between fiction and history by adopting certain structural qualities of a fable to communicate the broader implications of the historical atrocities it recounts. In the case of *The Sunflower*, such a structure also provides Wiesenthal an authorial vantage from which he can speculate about aspects of an SS officer’s character that a strict adherence to fact would have precluded. My comparison of these two works is not intended to suggest *The Sunflower*’s literary indebtedness to *Heart of Darkness*; rather, I position *The Sunflower* as a text that updates and further modernizes the central themes of Conrad’s masterpiece.

Moreover, a recent biography of Wiesenthal reveals the acclaimed “Nazi-hunter’s” affinity for Hannah Arendt, specifically her assessment of Eichmann, a fugitive war criminal whom Wiesenthal assisted in tracking down and capturing. Like Arendt, Wiesenthal commits to depicting genocidal evil in all its confounding ambiguity. In *The Sunflower*, Wiesenthal writes of his own persecutors, “Few of them were born murderers. They had been mostly peasants, manual laborers, clerks, or officials, such as one meets in normal everyday life ... Yet they became murderers, expert murders by conviction” (96).

Noted Holocaust scholar Lawrence Langer views this as *The Sunflower*'s chief weakness, lamenting that "we are left with a feeble excuse, offered not by the SS man but by Wiesenthal's narrator, that an ideology rather than individual men was responsible for the slaughter of European Jewry" (*Preempting* 167). In contrast to Langer, I draw from Arendt—who cites *Heart of Darkness* repeatedly throughout *The Origins of Totalitarianism*—to argue that the relationship between ideology and individual responsibility need not be situated in an "either/or" paradigm, and that the emphasis Wiesenthal places on Nazi ideology does not function to exonerate Karl from responsibility or guilt in readers' estimation. Rather, it functions to diminish the grandeur of more traditional depictions of evil, like Conrad's Mr. Kurtz, prompting in readers an uneasy recognition of Karl as an ordinary person, despite the monstrous deeds he proves himself capable of committing.

My third chapter examines the numerous literary renderings of SS *Obersturmführer* Kurt Gerstein. After being arrested twice on counts of seditious acts against the Nazi state, Gerstein volunteered for the Waffen-SS, serving in its Department of Hygiene from 1942-1945. "After having twice been put into prison and into a concentration camp," Gerstein wrote from a postwar prison cell in France, "I joined the SS ... acting as an agent of the Confessional Church. It was a very dangerous situation" (qtd. in Friedlander, *Ambiguity* 215). In 1942, Gerstein was summoned to the Belzec extermination facility to evaluate the efficiency of carbon monoxide as a chemical agent for mass executions. Horrified by what he witnessed there, Gerstein made several attempts to notify outside authorities of Nazi crimes, but his repeated pleas to Swedish government representatives, Vatican officials, and Dutch resistance fighters went either

disbelieved, unaddressed, or both. In the meantime, Gerstein maintained his position in the SS, attempting to sabotage deliveries of prussic acid to the extermination centers. He turned himself in and composed a thorough eyewitness report after the Third Reich's collapse in 1945, but was nonetheless charged with complicity in war crimes. Kurt Gerstein was found dead in his cell, apparently by suicide, in July 1945, but he was posthumously vindicated when his written account (now known as "the Gerstein Report") was introduced as evidence in numerous postwar trials.

The earliest fictionalized depiction of Gerstein occurs in Rolf Hochhuth's 1963 play *The Deputy*, a text primarily recognized for its indictment of the eponymous character, Pope Pius XII; historically, *The Deputy* was instrumental in exonerating Gerstein, who died an accused war criminal, but criticism of the play rarely addresses his role. Even Hannah Arendt's review, published within a year of the play's debut, overlooks Gerstein entirely. In 2002, *The Deputy* was adapted by the expatriate Greek filmmaker Costa-Gavras and released as *Amen*. More a revision than a direct adaptation, *Amen* strips Hochhuth's play down to only its principal points, affording Costa-Gavras license to reposition Gerstein as the central protagonist. William T. Volmann's sprawling 2005 novel *Europe Central* also offers a fictionalized narrative of Gerstein's life and actions, in a novella-length chapter entitled *Clean Hands*. Finally, in 2007, Theatre J in Washington, D.C. hosted the premiere of *Either/Or*, a dramatic depiction of Gerstein's life and actions composed by Thomas Keneally, author of the widely acclaimed *Schindler's List*.

There is as yet no comprehensive critical work examining Gerstein's function in these literary texts, or its evolution from one text to the next, despite the fact that their

chronology suggests a renewed interest in this beguiling and underrepresented figure at the turn of the 21st Century. While literary analyses of texts depicting Gerstein are virtually nonexistent, critical treatments of Keneally's *Schindler's List* exist in abundance; furthermore, despite its widespread success and popularity, many scholars single it out as a problematic text. Given both Gerstein's and Schindler's historical statuses as Germans directly affiliated with Nazism, but who nonetheless take action on behalf of the Nazis' victims, a connection between these two individuals—and the texts which depict them—may be established.

Alvin Rosenfeld, summarizing the chief issue a number of scholars have taken with *Schindler's List*, writes, “by projecting ‘rescuers’ as central figures in narrative accounts of the Holocaust . . . one changes the core of Holocaust remembrance in ways that will almost certainly vitiate any sober understanding of the deeds of the murderers and the sufferings of their victims” (*The End* 91). Considering that Gerstein's efforts, however courageous, could not be proven to have “rescued” anyone, one wonders if this critique would hold true of the literary texts depicting him. *The Deputy*, *Amen*, *Clean Hands*, and *Either/Or* each, in its own way, denies readers and audiences the comfort of an uplifting final note, another quality for which *Schindler's List* has been faulted. For, in order to retain a modicum of fidelity to Gerstein's history, any text depicting his plight must testify to the existence of individual conscience in the Third Reich, even as the narrative reveals individual conscience's insufficiency for affecting meaningful change in an epoch of widespread banal evil.

Disappointment, frustration, and disorientation lie at the heart of every primary text examined here, for, as readers, we bring to them both a sense of Nazism's inherent

evil, as well as an expectation of what that evil should look like when it appears. We would prefer to see history's greatest evil perpetrated by individuals who resemble literature's greatest villains: twisted, irredeemable sadists who embrace and revel in the depths of their own opprobrium. But as Arendt writes, "Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III 'to prove a villain'" (*Eichmann* 287). Innumerable historical accounts—including some penned by SS perpetrators themselves—suggest that this assessment holds true not only for Eichmann, but for a sizable number of Holocaust perpetrators. The instinctual desire for perpetrators in Holocaust fiction to meet our traditional expectations of villainy is understandable, as such depictions would come with the comforting assurance that the perpetrators have nothing in common with us.

These texts arouse our disappointment by denying us this comfort, presenting us with individuals who, apart from the unspeakably heinous enterprise in which they participate, appear "terribly and terrifyingly normal" (Arendt, *Eichmann* 276). Outlining the need for Arendt's ideas on evil in our contemporary moment, Richard Bernstein writes,

The evil ones are demonic and satanic, but the good guys are innocent and virtuous. In this quasi-Manichean world, the great battle of good and evil is fought. It is 'quasi' Manichean because unlike the Manicheans who thought that Good and Evil were equi-primordial and engaged in an eternal struggle, in our mythology—so pervasive in our Hollywood movies, popular culture, and political rhetoric—we 'know' that Good will ultimately triumph over Evil. Understanding

evil in this way obscures and mystifies the new face of evil in a post-totalitarian world. (75)

The texts considered in this dissertation resist retreating into an illusory quasi-Manichean paradigm, insisting instead upon uncomfortable confrontations with ordinary individuals' capacities to commit extraordinary atrocities, to treat systematic genocide as simply a matter of course, and, finally, to retain an unfaltering belief in their own intrinsic decency, even as they do so.

By deliberately frustrating our expectations and emphasizing the perpetrators' ambiguity, each of the texts examined here serves to *defamiliarize* Holocaust perpetrators, paradoxically, by *refamiliarizing* them—in other words, by foregrounding banal aspects of the perpetrators' personas and depicting them as fathers, sons, husbands, frustrated laborers, or, in Kurt Gerstein's case, an unlikely source of ineffectual resistance. While efforts to “humanize” Holocaust perpetrators have traditionally been condemned as transgressive acts on the behalf of *authors*, I argue that such depictions may serve instead to catalyze an ethical reevaluation on behalf of *readers*. Through their complex depictions of perpetrators as subjects, these texts prompt in readers the discomfiting acknowledgement of the perpetrators' position as a *part of*—rather than an *aberrant divergence from*—modern history. Most importantly, each of these texts prompts a consideration of the Holocaust not as a historical inevitability, but rather as the result of discrete choices made by discrete individuals. These acknowledgements, I suggest, are capable of eliciting a renewed ethical awareness of our collective past, present, and future.

CHAPTER 2

“SCANDAL OVER THE BOOKS”: HANNAH ARENDT AND THE RECEPTION OF PERPETRATOR FICTION

The best *now*, after so much has been set forth, is, perhaps,
to be silent; not to add the trivia of literary debate,
sociological debate to the unspeakable ... The next best is,
I believe, to try and understand.

—George Steiner, *Language and Silence*

“Holocaust fictions are scandalous,” writes Sue Vice in the inaugural lines of *Holocaust Fiction*, “that is, they invariably provoke controversy by inspiring repulsion and acclaim in equal measure” (1). Vice goes on to suggest that fictional Holocaust texts written in English “provoke the most extreme responses” (2), by virtue of having likely been authored by individuals who are not Holocaust survivors themselves. These statements could be further amended by adding that English-language fictions depicting Holocaust perpetrators with any degree of ambiguity arouse greater ire than their more traditional counterparts, which directly emphasize the experiences of victims and survivors. But the one such text to provoke a controversy more passionately heated than any other, the text sufficiently conflict-ridden to have, in the words of Irving Howe, “provoked divisions that would never entirely be healed” (qtd. in Rabinbach 97) was not a work of fiction at all; rather, it was humbly categorized by its author as “a trial report.” Nonetheless, upon its publication, Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* catalyzed a scandal against which all subsequent Holocaust literary scandals would be measured; even decades after its appearance, debates over Arendt’s text have yet to be settled.

Debates—even quarrelsome or incendiary debates—over the meaning, value, and content of a text are the hallmark of scholarship and intellectual engagement; the mere

fact that a debate attends the appearance of a text hardly warrants remark. But the debates over *Eichmann in Jerusalem* took on a unique dimension, as a number of the text's detractors seemed to take greater issue not with its specific content, but with its very right to exist; furthermore, some of the harshest detractions were reserved for Arendt herself, rather than the book she authored. In *The Holocaust in American Life*, historian Peter Novick writes,

The Holocaust had not, at this point, become as sacralized as it was subsequently to become. But there was already a great deal of visceral resistance to its being discussed in terms other than the confrontation of pure evil and pure virtue.

Arendt's failure to abide by these norms—her insistence on stressing complexity and ambiguity—was clearly, and understandably, one of the things that gave the greatest offense. (141)

At the time of Adolf Eichmann's trial, neither the scholarly nor the popular community was prepared to confront the manifold complexities of what would eventually be termed the Holocaust. And foremost among these complexities was the fact that its perpetrators, who numbered in the hundreds of thousands, were neither demons nor monsters, but rather mere human beings, with whom all other human beings—disconcertingly—share a common history. When Arendt dared to articulate and explore this uncomfortable truth, she was branded a Nazi sympathizer.

“Recognizing a common history with the perpetrator,” writes literary critic Lindsey Stonebridge on the charges leveled against Arendt, “does not entail an identification with him” (102). Arendt's most vocal critics refused to acknowledge this crucial distinction, and instead equated recognition not only with identification, but with

sympathy. Addressing the scandal in a 1963 letter to Mary McCarthy, Arendt writes, “The criticism has been directed at an ‘image,’ and this image has been substituted for the book I wrote” (Brightman 151). Arendt composed a text that sought to think beyond anti-Semitism as the sole catalyst for the Nazi genocide, a text that examined the broader societal factors underpinning the Nazis’ very anti-Semitism; this endeavor was reduced to “an ‘image’” of a text in which Arendt, a German-born Jew who fled Europe at the onset of the Nazi terror, offered excuses and apologies for Adolf Eichmann. The unending scandal accompanying discussions of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* crystallizes the instinctual resistance with which ambiguous depictions of Holocaust perpetrators continue to be met.

Novelists who emulate Arendt’s “insistence on stressing complexity and ambiguity” (Novick 141) in their depictions of Nazi characters are, as was Arendt herself, frequently accused of garnering sympathy for them or of endorsing anti-Semitism; in such cases, textual criticism swiftly devolves into personal attacks on authors. As with *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, critics manufacture starkly and selectively drawn images of complex, ambiguous novels, and substitute these simplified images for the novels themselves. Thus, in addition to its thesis and substance providing an illuminating theoretical frame through which perpetrator representations may be examined, the emotionally charged reception *Eichmann in Jerusalem* received also carries implications for the uneven, at times outright condemnatory reception of certain Holocaust novels in subsequent decades. George Steiner’s *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.* and William Styron’s *Sophie’s Choice*, both published in 1979, resulted in accusations leveled at the authors that uncannily mirror the accusations leveled at Arendt in 1963. The ambiguity explored in these novels, specifically in their respective depictions of Adolf Hitler and

Rudolf Höss, was condemned as commiseration extended from the author to the perpetrator. Thus, it would seem that texts depicting Holocaust perpetrators with significant measures of nuance or ambiguity offer occasions for scandals not unlike Arendt's to play out again and again.

“A Conscious Desire to Support Eichmann’s Defense”: Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*

In 1963, when Hannah Arendt’s now-famous phrase “the banality of evil” first appeared, Arendt did not intend to shock anyone any more than she had been shocked herself. “I am half toying with the idea to get some magazine to send me to cover the Eichmann trial,” Arendt confided in her close friend, Mary McCarthy, in 1960. “Am very tempted. He used to be one of the most intelligent of the lot” (Brightman 82-3). Arendt spent the immediate postwar years considering the moral and political implications of Nazi concentration camps: extreme deprivation, unending torture, gas chambers and the mountains of corpses they produced. In examining these unparalleled phenomena, Arendt was, to put it simply, examining the *effects* of totalitarianism. In 1951, she labeled them: “the appearance of some radical evil” (*Origins* 443). Arendt’s shock came in the following decade, when she attended the trial of SS *Obersturmbannführer* Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem. After considering at length the effects of Nazism—in all their spectacular horror—Arendt endeavored to confront the cause. On the possibility of attending the trial, Arendt speculated, “It could be interesting—apart from being horrible” (Brightman 83).

As the Third Reich’s deportation specialist, Adolf Eichmann played an indispensable role in the murder of millions of men, women, and children. In 1961,

Hannah Arendt traveled halfway around the world to look this villain, this monster, in the face. Only, what she saw was neither a villain nor a monster. Rather, she saw only a man—a distinctly unremarkable man, for whom even the label “villain” would be an undeserved compliment. Villains and monsters, after all, tend to distinguish themselves. In stark contrast to her presumption of Eichmann’s intelligence in 1960, Arendt writes in 1963 that “[e]verybody could see that this man was not a ‘monster¹,’ but it was difficult indeed not to suspect that he was a clown” (*Eichmann* 54). Thus, Hannah Arendt registers her shock: that although the effect of Nazism was to engender extreme, unparalleled and unprecedented evil in the world, it had no direct cause to equal its enormity. Barring relatively few exceptions, the perpetrators of the Nazi genocide were, by and large, neither pathological nor diabolical; rather, a great many of them were, in Arendt’s words, “terribly and terrifyingly normal” (276). As Barbara Sukova, depicting Arendt, proclaims in the 2013 biopic *Hannah Arendt*, “The greatest evil in the world is the evil committed by nobodies.”

This led to Arendt’s oft-misunderstood formulation: “the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil” (*Eichmann* 252). Arendt was struck by Eichmann’s inability to speak without employing prefabricated clichés, and for Arendt, this was symptomatic of a broader inability to think, particularly to imagine any perspective other than his own. Eichmann embodied a kind of evil that even the legal system was unprepared to deal with, an evil largely devoid of direct malicious intent whose opposite was not virtue, but instead was *thinking*. Her encounter with Eichmann led Arendt to pose questions with which she would grapple for the rest of her life, questions she

¹ Arendt’s quotation marks here indicate that she’s borrowing the word “monster” from Gideon Hausner, the chief prosecutor in Eichmann’s trial.

articulates most succinctly in *Life of the Mind, Vol. I: Thinking*, a book which would not be published until after her death:

Might the problem of good and evil, our faculty for telling right from wrong, be connected with our faculty of thought? ... Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass or attract attention, regardless of results and specific contents, could this activity be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or actually ‘condition’ them against it? (5)

In Arendt’s estimation, Eichmann’s most distinguishing motivation was neither exterminationist hatred nor even fanatical anti-Semitism; rather, he was motivated foremost by his willingness to be, as Roger Berkowitz writes, “a joiner,” someone who could escape the responsibilities of living in an infinitely complicated world by adopting a system of ideas that had already been devised for him. Nazism, a system of ideas to which anti-Semitism was central, was for Eichmann an easy path for a “nobody” to become “somebody”; it came with the added benefit of offering an escape from the onerous responsibilities of thinking. That it came also at the cost of millions of lives did not preclude his participation—Arendt might say that it never even crossed his mind.

As Margarethe von Trotta’s 2013 film *Hannah Arendt* ably depicts, this was an explosive suggestion in 1963, and it touched off an international controversy. Arendt’s assessment of Eichmann remains controversial to this day, with her most vociferous detractors still claiming that she absolves Eichmann of personal guilt and responsibility, despite Arendt’s explicit and vocal support for his execution by hanging. To an extent, von Trotta’s film reignited the debate over “the banality of evil” in 2013. But what

remains so inspiring about Arendt is precisely what von Trotta's film strives to depict: not the "the banality of evil" itself, a phrase whose pithiness has for decades led critics astray from the complexity of the point Arendt was trying to make, but the process of Arendt's very formulation of the concept. In 1961, Arendt flew to Israel in search of a monster, but found vacuity where she had expected to find viciousness. Subsequently—and at a significant risk to her own reputation as a thinker—she articulated a response to this vacuity. Faced with a bizarre and terrifying thoughtlessness, Hannah Arendt responded by thinking. She *tried to understand*, and as Margarethe von Trotta's biopic emphasizes, "Trying to understand is not the same as forgiveness."

Eichmann in Jerusalem appeared both serially and in book form in 1963, though the now-notorious offending phrase "banality of evil" appears only in the latter's subtitle, and only once in the body of the text itself, in its conclusion. The project allowed Arendt to perform a sustained ethical inquiry into the motivations of SS perpetrators (exemplified, in this case, by Adolf Eichmann), a task performed to a less emphatic extent in her earlier text, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Perhaps the most notable difference in Arendt's respective approaches in both books is the primacy of Eichmann's own perspective in her 1963 text; repeatedly throughout, Arendt takes Eichmann at his word on certain points, a concession she appears unwilling to make in her earlier consideration of Nazi perpetrators. In fact, the Preface to the second edition of *Origins*, published in 1958, overtly disclaims the utility of perpetrator accounts in attempting to understand the phenomenon of totalitarianism. Arendt writes,

I left out of account, without regret, the rather voluminous literature of memoirs published by Nazi and other German functionaries after the end of the war. The

dishonesty of this kind of apologetics is obvious and embarrassing but understandable, whereas the lack of comprehension they display of what actually happened, as well as the roles the authors themselves played in the course of events, is truly astonishing. (xii)

By the time Arendt set about writing her report of the Eichmann trial, she realized that this “astonishing” lack of comprehension on the perpetrators’ behalf, far from unilaterally discounting their accounts, may indeed be crucial to understanding how thousands of otherwise ordinary individuals could participate in the unprecedented horrors of Nazism. Arendt even takes the prosecutors and judges at Eichmann’s trial to task for missing this, writing, “They preferred to conclude from occasional lies that [Eichmann] was a liar, and missed the greatest moral and even legal challenge to the whole case” (26).

Eichmann in Jerusalem was met with a virulent backlash upon its appearance, as Arendt’s critics interpreted the book as an endeavor to depict Eichmann as a mindless bureaucrat, exculpating him from personal responsibility. The book’s detractors maintain this interpretation even today, despite Arendt’s insistence in the epilogue, framed as a direct address to Eichmann himself, that “politics is not like the nursery; in politics obedience and support are the same” (279). In the years since its initial publication, the rancorous disputes over *Eichmann in Jerusalem* have come to overshadow the very substance of her argument. The outsized debate sparked by *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which according to Mary McCarthy was “assuming the proportions of pogrom” (Brightman 149) in 1963, is remembered and well-documented today. The image of Eichmann as a robotic automaton unquestioningly following orders—which Arendt supposedly sketched and endorsed—has similarly endured; to this day, books and films

annually appear which promise to shatter Arendt's claims once and for all.² But absent from many of these texts is a fair and judicious recounting of what Arendt actually said; many focus instead on the "image" of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* held up by its most vocal detractors.

This controversy and its effects on Arendt's personal and professional life are the central focus of Margarethe von Trotta's film. Excepting a few flashback scenes depicting Arendt's brief affair with Martin Heidegger, the film deals exclusively with Arendt's life during and immediately after Eichmann's trial, a period which saw her not only rebutted, but mocked, vilified, and threatened. The film crystallizes the vehemence of Arendt's detractors in a scene depicting her reception of a handwritten letter sent, according to the postman, "from the friendly old man upstairs;" it reads, "GO TO HELL DU NAZIHUR." However, even in its sympathetic depiction of Arendt, von Trotta's film at certain points misrepresents the substance of her argument. This occurs most radically during a dispute between Arendt and Kurt Blumenfeld, the Zionist leader who severed his longtime friendship with Arendt upon *Eichmann in Jerusalem*'s publication. Arendt, in this scene, appears to suggest that Eichmann was "not an anti-Semite" and emphasizes Eichmann's position as "a bureaucrat" as a reason for his stunning moral deficiency. Such confusion may be unavoidable when complex ideas are condensed into a screenplay; just as likely, though, is the possibility that just as Arendt's critics fabricated an "image" of her text to excoriate, the screenwriters manufactured an "image" of her text to endorse. Reflecting on the uproar she had inadvertently catalyzed, Arendt describes being struck by the fact that "especially in the later stages, there were more and

² A small sampling would include David Cesarani's *Becoming Eichmann*, Deborah Lipstadt's *The Eichmann Trial*, Claude Lantzman's *Last of the Unjust*, and Bettina Stangneth's *Eichmann Before Jerusalem*.

more voices who not only attacked me for what I never said but, on the contrary, began to defend me for it” (“Personal Responsibility” 17).

In an unfavorable review of von Trotta’s *Hannah Arendt*, Richard Brody suggests, “The best and most enduringly valuable aspect of ‘Eichmann in Jerusalem’ is its account of the Holocaust as its events accrete around Eichmann . . . At its best, ‘Eichmann in Jerusalem’ is a modernistic nonfiction novel.” Brody even goes so far as to state that “From her philosophical, historical, and journalistic failures, Arendt created an accidental literary masterwork despite itself.” Contrary to Brody’s assessment, Arendt’s unorthodox approach to history, reportage, and moral philosophy in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* might be viewed as one of its greatest strengths; at its best, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is an incisive and significant work of both Holocaust scholarship and moral philosophy, but it relies on certain conventions of the novel to become one. No one familiar with Arendt’s broader *oeuvre* would find such a claim surprising, as throughout her career she emphasized a value in storytelling—in literature—that transcends aesthetic or artistic concerns. For Arendt, all works of art are public, and therefore *political*, acts, and no form of art was more finally inextricable from human existence and understanding than that of literary storytelling.

Tracing the spread of anti-Semitism throughout Europe in the first section of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt holds practitioners of the literary arts in even higher esteem than she does historians. She writes, “Societal factors . . . hidden under the surface of events, never perceived by the historian and recorded only by the more penetrating and passionate force of poets or novelists . . . changed the course that mere political antisemitism would have taken if left to itself” (87). Examining the centrality of Joseph

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to the second section of the same book, titled "Imperialism," Shiraz Dossa points out that "in [Arendt's] hands a literary tale becomes the vehicle for making a serious philosophical argument" (319). Speculating on the influences of *Origins*, Arendt's first and arguably most significant philosophical work, Stephen Whitfield locates its most evident predecessors not in philosophy, history, or political science, but in literary fiction, suggesting, "In a sense, *The Trial*, *Darkness at Noon*, and *1984* were the most significant precedents for *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, for all four works exhibited an eerie authority in tracking the subterranean passions, paranoid obsessions and grisly extremism of the totalitarian mentality" (114). Though Brody surely intended to demean *Eichmann in Jerusalem* by labeling it "a modernistic nonfiction novel," one wonders if Arendt would not have interpreted the remark as high praise. Gleaning the substance of Arendt's arguments, though, requires readers to approach the text with a more literary frame of mind, one that pays careful attention to ambiguities in prose and tone more characteristic of fiction than of history or philosophy.

Drawing from Mikhail Bakhtin's *Discourse in the Novel*, Sue Vice identifies a "double-voiced" structure in Arendt's prose throughout *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, in which "the discourse of ordinary social interaction ... is often mixed with an unstated discourse of genocide" (*Holocaust Fiction* 106). Put simply, the prose style and narrative maneuvers exhibited through *Eichmann in Jerusalem* mimic those of modern novels, rendering the text unique even among Arendt's other works. Vice also points to phrases of Arendt's that rely on synthesizing quotations of Eichmann's into her own prose, setting them off with quotation marks. As an example, Vice highlights a section where Arendt describes Eichmann's establishment of an assembly-line deportation center in

Austria: “Once Eichmann understood how the whole thing worked, or, rather, did not work, he ‘took counsel with himself’ and ‘gave birth to an idea which I thought would do justice to both parties’” (Arendt, *Eichmann* 45). Clearly, the “I” in these statements represents Eichmann referring to himself, and Arendt’s purpose for quoting rather than paraphrasing is to reinforce a point to which she repeatedly calls attention: Eichmann’s penchant not only to speak in prefabricated clichés (“gave birth to an idea,” “do justice to both parties”), but to utter them with airs of profundity. For Arendt, this tendency made Eichmann a figure more ridiculous than menacing, and her disdain for this ridiculous figure comes through clearly throughout the book.

Moreover, Arendt’s free indirect discourse, her repurposing of Eichmann’s words to support her claims, is not always signaled with quotation marks. Earlier in the same section, narrating the genesis of Eichmann’s career as a deportation specialist, Arendt describes Eichmann’s encounter with Theodor Herzl’s *Der Judenstaat*, “the famous Zionist classic, which converted Eichmann promptly and forever to Zionism. This seems to have been the first serious book he ever read and it made a lasting impression on him” (40). Arendt’s jab at Eichmann’s unlettered life signals the sarcasm of her claim that Eichmann “converted” to Zionism, a claim which itself manifested a high-handed mockery of Eichmann’s assurance that he was motivated solely by a desire to “put ... firm ground under the feet of the Jews” (qtd. in Arendt, *Eichmann* 76). The excerpt, however, was not read this way in 1963. Indeed, several critics assumed—and were quite scandalized to hear—that Arendt was straight-facedly asserting that Eichmann was, in fact, a Zionist. A public debate on this very point played out in the editorial pages of *The New York Times*, between Arendt and Michael Musmanno.

Musmanno, who sat as judge in the postwar trials in Nuremberg and testified at Eichmann's trial in 1961, chastised Arendt for proclaiming Eichmann a friend of the Jewish people and for painting Eichmann in a sympathetic light more generally; however, nearly all of the offending phrases Musmanno marshals as "evidence" of Arendt's sympathies are marked with free indirect discourse. Amidst a volley of editorials, Musmanno writes, "She says in her book that Eichmann 'personally' never had anything against the Jews.' Commenting on this she said: 'Alas, nobody believed him.' Is that not sympathizing? She says that Eichmann was misjudged, misrepresented, misunderstood, that he was a victim of 'hard luck.' Is that not sympathizing?" (Musmanno 212). Arendt's haughty sarcasm (e.g. "Alas ..."), frequently expressed through indirect discourse, offers critics a wealth of low-hanging fruit to remove from its context and "expose," but no judicious assessment of the text could conclude that Arendt—who had been imprisoned briefly for subversive Zionist activities before fleeing to the United States—was genuinely sympathizing with a Nazi war criminal. After all, the epilogue's concluding words, addressed to Eichmann directly, are "you must hang" (Arendt, *Eichmann* 279).

The phrase "hard luck story"—a cliché, though only a cliché in the English language, so not a phrase Eichmann would have used himself—appears precisely three times throughout *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. It first appears when she describes reading transcripts of Eichmann's pretrial interrogation by Israeli police: "What makes these pages of the examination so funny is that all this was told in the tone of someone who was sure of finding 'normal, human' sympathy for a hard luck story" (50). Its final appearance is in the Epilogue, when Arendt addresses Eichmann: "You told your story in

terms of a hard luck story” (278). It is inarguably clear in these instances that *Arendt herself* does not view Eichmann’s circumstances this way, but rather that *Eichmann does*. Arendt’s analysis differs from others’, however, in that she takes Eichmann at his word on this point; she resists interpreting Eichmann’s woebegone demeanor as a performance contrived solely for the trial, and instead grants that from Eichmann’s vantage—Eichmann’s *thoughtless* vantage, from which the perspective of others remains inaccessible—his story truly appears as one in which Eichmann occupies the role of the victim.

Furthermore, Arendt does not limit her consideration of Eichmann to his demeanor at the trial, making frequent comparisons to Eichmann’s behavior during his postwar years living in exile in Argentina as well as during his years in uniform. This is a crucial point often overlooked by critics who assert that Arendt was simply taken in by a Machiavellian performance Eichmann contrived for the trial itself. “*Whether writing his memoirs in Argentina or in Jerusalem,*” Arendt writes, “whether speaking to the police examiner or to the court, what he said was always the same, expressed in the same words” (48: italics added). These words, as already noted, are hollow clichés, clichés which carry no meaning in themselves but serve the purpose of arousing a feeling of “elation” as Eichmann repeats them. Eichmann’s boast in Argentina that he would “jump into my grave laughing, because the fact that I have the death of five million Jews . . . on my conscience gives me extraordinary satisfaction” (qtd. in Arendt, *Eichmann* 46) is every bit as meaningless as his contrite suggestion in Jerusalem “to hang myself in public as a warning example to all anti-Semites on this earth” (qtd. in Arendt, *Eichmann* 24). As Arendt tells it in her report’s chilling final chapter, Eichmann goes on uttering

clichés—“Long live Germany, long live Argentina, long live Austria. I shall never forget them” (qtd. in Arendt, *Eichmann* 252)—even as he climbs the gallows.

Arendt notes Eichmann’s curious speech habits early in her narrative, but connects them immediately to a more profound notion of *thoughtlessness*, writing,

The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to *think*, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else. No communication with him was possible, not because he lied but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all safeguards against the words and the presence of others, and hence against all reality as such. (49)

Arendt’s notion of “thoughtlessness” as it applies to Eichmann was, and remains, misconstrued as *ignorance*; numerous critics have faulted Arendt for claiming that Eichmann genuinely did not know, as he performed his duties, that they amounted to mass murder. It was precisely such a misreading that prompted Stanley Milgram to invoke Arendt in the conclusion of his famous experiments at Yale, in which unwitting subjects were asked to “shock” anonymous “victims” to points of extreme agony or even death. Of course, no harm was actually being done to the “victims,” who in reality were actors, and the experiments’ purpose was to ascertain just how much suffering ordinary individuals were willing to inflict upon others at a trusted authority figure’s behest.

“After witnessing hundreds of people submit to authority in our own experiments,” Milgram writes, “I must conclude that Arendt’s conception of the banality of evil comes closer to the truth than one might dare imagine ... ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a

terrible and destructive process” (qtd. in Berkowitz, “Did Eichmann Think?” 195). As Arendt’s critics manufactured an “image” of her text to excoriate, so did Milgram concoct an “image” to endorse. But Arendt never asserted pure ignorance on Eichmann’s—or any Nazi’s—behalf as he abetted the Holocaust; nowhere does she suggest that Eichmann was “simply doing [his] job.” Rather, in her unorthodox appraisal of Eichmann, she was characterizing the way Nazi perpetrators presented their acts to themselves, and she summons numerous examples of Eichmann’s behavior *before* the trial, some even reaching back to his glory days in the SS, to illustrate her point.

It was what Arendt labeled “thoughtlessness” that compelled Eichmann to tell his pretrial interrogator—Avner Less, an Israeli police officer and German-born Jew whose family had perished in the camps—that he had once hoped and asked for a position in the *Einsatzgruppen* (a mobile killing unit), as it would hasten his promotion. This was a part of his “hard luck story”; Eichmann never got the appointment, but more to the point, he genuinely seemed to believe Less, another man in uniform, would sympathize with his failed endeavor at promotion. By Eichmann’s own account, in another anecdote he freely shared to illustrate his well-intentioned civility, he once traveled to Auschwitz during the war to visit a Jewish functionary from Austria named Storfer. Eichmann recalled working with Storfer during the Austrian deportations and was aghast to hear that after attempting to flee the country, Storfer had been captured and sent to Auschwitz. Upon finding Storfer in the camp and hearing his story, Eichmann claims to have clapped him on the shoulder, saying, “Well, my dear old friend, we certainly got it! What rotten luck!” (qtd. in Arendt, *Eichmann* 51). His thoughtlessness on full display, Eichmann tells of how he arranged for Storfer to be assigned light duty, sweeping gravel from the

camp's walking paths. Eichmann explained, "It was a great inner joy to me that I could at least see the man with whom I had worked for so many long years, and that we could speak to each other" (qtd. in *Eichmann* 51). Six weeks after this visit, a visit Eichmann relays as a testament to his amicability, Storfer was executed by gunshot. The significance of these incidents as described by Eichmann lies not just in the events themselves, but also in Eichmann's very recounting; he genuinely, if outrageously, seems to believe that they illustrate commendable aspects of his character, and that they will curry favor with his Israeli captors, the trial's judges, and the world at large.

Eichmann's most staggering illustration of thoughtlessness, his total inability to consider events from a perspective other than his own, comes when he expresses a sentiment that was by no means unique to him: his desire "to find peace with [his] former enemies" (qtd. in Arendt, *Eichmann* 53). As Arendt reminds us, no less prominent a figure than *Reichsführer* SS Heinrich Himmler shared this ludicrous desire and expressed it months before the end of World War II, when the Nazis' defeat appeared inevitable. Similarly, prior to his suicide at Nuremberg, Nazi Labor Front leader Robert Ley suggested—in earnest—the establishment of a "conciliation committee" that would be comprised of Nazis who planned and perpetrated mass executions and the few Jews who survived them. By highlighting these instances, Arendt illustrates the degree to which even the individuals most responsible for the Holocaust genuinely failed to grasp the enormity of their own actions, even after the Reich had fallen and the reckoning had begun. Arendt points out that suggestions of "reconciliation" or "finding peace with ... former enemies" were not exclusive to Nazi leaders, but were shared "unbelievably, with many ordinary Germans, who were heard to express themselves in exactly the same terms

at the end of the war. This outrageous cliché was no longer issued to them from above, it was a self-fabricated stock-phrase, as devoid of reality as those clichés by which the people had lived for twelve years” (53). Even in their attempts to renounce Nazi ideology, Nazi leaders and many ordinary German citizens could only do so in the terms supplied *by* that very ideology, clinging to an idea of Jews as “former enemies” rather than *victims*.

Through the lens of Nazism’s totalitarian ideology, all of human existence was viewed as a struggle between races for global supremacy; Jews, according to this paradigm, were the Aryans’ adversaries. Thus we locate an irreconcilable contradiction that pulses throughout the voluminous body of Nazi propaganda: that Jews were a “subhuman,” “lesser” race, but one that somehow threatened to undermine all national powers and dominate the world themselves, asserting their own supremacy. The Nazis’ strain of anti-Semitism differed considerably from the more colloquial forms of racial or religious prejudice that continue to plague modern societies today, though Nazism surely exploited these colloquial prejudices. But by melding a centuries-long tradition of colloquial prejudice with both the pseudo-science of eugenics and the mechanisms of a modern totalitarian state, Nazism created a new breed of anti-Semite, individuals for whom “anti-Semitism” transcended the boundaries of personal prejudice and manifested itself rather as a comprehensive and all-encompassing *worldview*. As Arendt writes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, “Nazi propaganda was ingenious enough to transform anti-Semitism into a principle of self-definition, and thus to eliminate it from the fluctuations of mere opinion” (356). Many Germans—Adolf Eichmann apparently among them—thoughtlessly took for granted that Hitler’s notions of perpetual racial

struggle were facts of life with which they had to contend, and with which they had to live in accordance. In the decades since *Eichmann in Jerusalem*'s first appearance, though, numerous scholars and critics have pointed to Eichmann's expressed belief in this worldview as evidence that Arendt wholly misread him.

A recent example can be found in Deborah Lipstadt's 2011 *The Eichmann Trial*, when Lipstadt claims that Eichmann's own writing "reveals the degree to which Arendt was wrong about Eichmann. It is permeated with expressions of support for and full comprehension of Nazi ideology. He was no clerk" (169). Earlier in the same text, Lipstadt summarizes Arendt's argument by asserting that Arendt saw in Eichmann "an automaton who was just passing on information and who failed to understand that what he had done was wrong" (115). But Arendt neither disclaimed Eichmann's support for Nazi ideology nor characterized him as a "clerk." Rather, Arendt's chief point regarding Eichmann and the Nazi worldview was that his subscription to this worldview—his participation in the Nazi movement—led him to anti-Semitism, rather than the other way around. As Roger Berkowitz explains,

Arendt argues that modern systems of administratively organized murder and criminality depend upon the collaboration and work of many people who are normal. But these collaborators are not simply bureaucrats and they do not simply take orders. They are thoughtless ideological warriors who believe less in their ideology than in their need to believe some ideology. (204)

What motivated Eichmann in Arendt's telling was less the *content* of Nazi ideology than the apparent self-contained logic of the ideology itself; Eichmann's "thoughtlessness" is

made manifest when he first commits to and sustains his allegiance to Nazi ideology, not when he merely obeys given orders by superiors.

“What distinguishes National Socialism from other forms of fascism,” writes Victor Klemperer, “is a concept of race reduced solely to anti-Semitism and also fired exclusively by it” (126). Conversely, such a concept would distinguish the Nazis’ particular strain of anti-Semitism as well, producing a ridiculous figure such as Eichmann, who disclaimed any personal ill will toward Jews and met with distaste the vulgar expressions of anti-Semitism promulgated by Julius Streicher’s infamous newspaper *Der Sturmer*. The key point for Arendt here is that hatred for Jews was not at the *forefront* of Eichmann’s mind during the years of extermination; rather, racial enmity with Jews functioned more as a context *underpinning* his actions, a contextual rationale for genocidal murder which Eichmann (and other perpetrators) took for granted. It was the elevation of anti-Semitism from emotional prejudice to the foundational principle organizing all of existence that would allow Eichmann to claim, with apparent sincerity, that “he had plenty of ‘private reasons’ for not being a Jew-hater” (Arendt, *Eichmann* 26). For Eichmann, both he and his Jewish “enemies” were caught in a grand struggle over which they were helpless to exert significant change. Just as British and German troops could lay down their arms and cross enemy lines during the first World War to wish one another a Merry Christmas, so too could SS-*Obersturmbannfuhrer* Adolf Eichmann commiserate with a Jewish prisoner in Auschwitz over the “rotten luck” that found them both in this “conflict” to begin with. It goes without saying, of course, that in reality there was no conflict; Nazi ideology assigned the role of antagonists in a war to a population of unarmed civilians, including children. Moreover, even apparently contrite

Nazis proved unable or unwilling to confront this fact, even decades after the Third Reich's collapse.

Arendt locates the clearest expression of this tendency in a notorious speech given by Heinrich Himmler to SS and Nazi Party leaders in 1943. Delivered in the Polish city of Poznan, this speech marks one of the few—perhaps one of the *only*—recorded instances in which a member of Nazi leadership frankly and explicitly names the mass murder of Jews for what it was, unadorned by bureaucratic or euphemistic obfuscation. “Exterminating,” Himmler proclaims at one point, before clarifying the verb, “*meaning to kill or order to have killed*” (qtd. in Sereny, *Albert Speer* 391: italics added). Nowhere else in the massive body of official Nazi documents are the regime's crimes described so starkly, and innumerable scholars point to this occasion as evidence of the perpetrators' complete cognizance of their actions; any claims of ignorance or naïveté cannot stand against Himmler's bold and public proclamation. Indeed, the perceived guilt or innocence of Albert Speer, who was spared execution after the Nuremberg trials and whose memoirs deny any direct knowledge of mass murder, rests largely on whether or not Speer was in audience on this occasion.³ For Arendt, though, the significance of Himmler's Poznan address lies not in the frank admission of murder, but in the way the murders Himmler describes are characterized as acts of selflessness, as a necessary sacrifice *on the murderers' behalf*.

“‘The Jews must be exterminated’ is easy to pronounce,” proclaimed Himmler in 1943, “but the demands on those who have put it into practice are the hardest and most difficult in the world” (qtd. in Sereny, *Albert Speer* 390). In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*,

³ Speer himself claims to have left the conference prior to Himmler's address, but his claim is complicated by what appears to be a direct address from Himmler to Speer in the recording of the speech.

Arendt cites a number of other quotations from this speech, including perhaps its most frequently cited utterance: “To have stuck it out and, apart from exceptions caused by human weakness, to have remained decent, that is what has made us hard. This is a page of glory in our history which has never been written and is never to be written” (qtd. in Arendt, *Eichmann* 105). Arendt’s citation of the speech is hardly unique, but the same cannot be said of her analysis of its importance, particularly her assertion that “it is noteworthy ... that Himmler hardly ever attempted to justify in ideological terms” (105). The absence of fanatical, ideological anti-Semitism in this most-infamous of Himmler’s speeches leads Arendt to an illuminating conclusion: “What stuck in the minds of these men who were to become murderers was simply the notion of being involved in something grandiose, historic, unique ... which therefore must be difficult to bear” (105). In Arendt’s appraisal, SS perpetrators were equally galvanized by the genocide’s perceived historic significance—what she elsewhere terms “extermination *per se*”—as they were by a fanatical hatred for the genocide’s targets.

For Arendt, this characterization of mass murder as an act of selflessness was among the chief distinctions between the historically unparalleled crimes of totalitarian regimes and the historical atrocities that preceded them, what distinguished modern genocide from politically motivated mass murder in other places and times. Arendt explains,

[T]he problem was how to overcome not so much their conscience as the animal pity by which all normal men are affected in the presence of physical suffering. The trick used by Himmler ... was very simple and probably very effective; it consisted in turning these instincts around, as it were, in directing them toward the

self. So instead of saying: What horrible things I did to people!, the murderers would be able to say: What horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties, how heavily the task weighed upon my shoulders! (*Eichmann* 106)

Arendt cites this speech in conjunction with Eichmann to illustrate the way in which “thoughtlessness” was sewn inextricably into SS practices long before Eichmann stood before a Jerusalem courtroom; additionally, her discussion of this speech suggests that thoughtlessness was not unique to so-called “desk-murderers” like Eichmann. Rather, in Arendt’s assessment, it was “an inability to *think*, namely to think from the standpoint of somebody else” (49) that enabled members of the SS—from the deskbound administrators to the gun wielding foot soldiers—to see their crimes through from the start. It was thoughtlessness—which Arendt clearly differentiates from ignorance or stupidity—that enabled Nazi perpetrators to view the murders they were committing and abetting as *hardships they themselves had to endure*.

Of course, simply acknowledging that Nazi murderers viewed their crimes this way is not an endorsement of their viewpoint, but Arendt’s detractors viewed her assertions as expressions of sympathy. A line of criticism maintained among a number of individuals can be summed up in historian Barbara Tuchman’s claim that *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was motivated by Arendt’s “conscious desire to support Eichmann’s defense” (qtd. in Novick 135). But Arendt’s insight here—that although the crimes of these murderers were extraordinary, the murderers themselves and their individual motivations largely were not—is crucial if we are ever to come to terms with the horrors of Nazism. For Arendt, “only the choice of victims, not the nature of the crime, could be derived from the long history of Jew-hatred and anti-Semitism” (269). The nature of the crime

was rooted in the modern, unprecedented phenomenon of totalitarianism, which she labeled “the burden of our times⁴.” Thus, when Arendt concludes her text with a pronouncement of “the banality of evil,” she is not referring to Eichmann alone; rather, she employs the phrase to connote the astonishing gulf between the genocidal acts being committed—which she does not hesitate to label as evil—and the mundane motivations that compelled individuals to take the first steps toward committing them. Her only employment of the phrase, in the book’s final chapter, bears careful examination in its original context. After recounting Eichmann’s last words—ludicrous, meaningless clichés—in the moments before he is executed, Arendt writes, “It was as though in those last minutes he was summing up the lesson that this long course in human wickedness had taught us—the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil*” (252: italics in original).

The “lesson” Eichmann “sums up” as he awaits execution lies not in the words themselves, but in the profound lack of understanding Eichmann displays even at his trial’s conclusion, as he literally stands before the gallows. After hours of harrowing testimony from witnesses and survivors, survivors who made terrifyingly clear the depths of suffering Eichmann’s actions brought on, he seems genuinely not to understand. “After a short while, gentlemen,” Eichmann absurdly proclaims, after disavowing belief in any notions of an afterlife, “*we shall all meet again*” (qtd. in 252: italics in original). Arendt offers her own analysis, “In the face of death, he had found the cliché used in funeral oratory. Under the gallows, his memory played him the last trick; he was ‘elated’ and he forgot that this was his own funeral” (252). Though the situations and contexts

⁴ This was the title Arendt had chosen for her first book, which her publisher later changed to *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

change, the myopic thoughtlessness of Eichmann's sentiments, Eichmann's total failure to grasp and confront the implications of his own actions—a failure which itself is an outgrowth of his inability to acknowledge the perspective of others—remains a constant. It remains as evident at Eichmann's execution as it was when he visited a former Jewish acquaintance in Auschwitz and commiserated over their shared “rotten luck,” and when, years after Nazism's defeat, Eichmann “dreamed of returning to Germany and putting himself on trial, even drafting an open letter to the West German chancellor Konrad Adenauer to propose just that. His hope was that the royalties from his book ... would support his family for what he imagined would be a short stay in jail” (Berkowitz, “Misreading”). We could speculate that even Heinrich Himmler displayed such a lack of understanding when, in 1944, as German defeat appeared inevitable, he earnestly expressed a desire “to bury the hatchet between us and the Jews” (qtd. in Rees 291), as though such pat and simple reconciliation lay in the realm of possibility.

Hannah Arendt's notions of “thoughtlessness” and “the banality of evil” were never intended to serve as apologias for the crimes of Nazism, and they are not merely terms she employed to characterize Eichmann as a fastidious “clerk” who, in Stanley Milgram's words, was “simply” following orders and doing his job, unaware that his job amounted to mass murder. This was Eichmann's—as well as the Nuremberg defendants'—own defense, and neither the judges nor Arendt found it sufficient. “Let us assume, for the sake of argument,” Arendt writes in her direct address to the accused, “that it was nothing more than misfortune that made you a willing instrument in the organization of mass murder” (279). Arendt's very concession to “assume, for the sake of argument” signals her disbelief in such a claim. Furthermore, even granting Eichmann

his defense, that he was but a small “cog” in an enormous machine, would not have mitigated his guilt in Arendt’s judgment, for “there still remains the fact that [Eichmann had] carried out, and therefore actively supported, a policy of mass murder” (279). Even if Eichmann had “merely” obeyed orders, Arendt allows no distinction between obeying and supporting. Nevertheless, even today, the widely held consensus on *Eichmann in Jerusalem* maintains that Eichmann’s defense and Arendt’s argument are identical. This is made evident, among innumerable other sources, in a brief *New York Times* article reporting the January 2016 publication of Eichmann’s written plea for clemency, which he sent to Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion after receiving his death sentence. With journalistic objectivity, the article makes a passing reference to “Hannah Arendt’s famous appraisal of [Eichmann] as a banal bureaucrat who simply followed orders” (Kershner). While this appraisal of Eichmann is indeed famous, it is decidedly *not* the one formulated and expressed by Hannah Arendt.

“Eichmann is a new type of criminal,” Arendt explained in a 1964 interview with Jurgen Fest, at the height of the scandal. She continues,

When we think of a criminal, we imagine someone with criminal motives. And when we look at Eichmann, he doesn’t actually have any criminal motives. Not what is usually understood by ‘criminal motives.’ He wanted to go along with the others. He wanted to say ‘we’, and going-along with the rest and wanting-to-say-we like this were quite enough to make the greatest of all crimes possible. (*The Last Interview* 43)

Herein resides both the simplicity and profundity of the “thoughtlessness” and “banality” Arendt explores in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: that the commonplace desire to be a part of

something far greater than oneself, to participate in something “grandiose” and “historic,” could prove a sufficient motivation for the unending catalogue of horrors that would come to be labeled the Holocaust. To locate passages among Eichmann’s writings or interviews in which he expresses commitment to Nazi ideology in no way disproves Arendt’s deceptively simple assessment, for her assessment endeavors to identify just what would prompt someone to give himself over to such a movement in the first place.

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman concludes *Modernity and the Holocaust* by pointing out, “Nothing has happened . . . to invalidate Arendt’s verdict [in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*], while the monumental memoirs of Primo Levi, the monumental historical research of Raul Hilberg and the monumental documentary of Claude Lanzmann, to mention but a few landmarks, did a lot to confirm and reinforce it” (249). Bauman calls attention to a curious dichotomy in criticism and scholarship here: namely, that while the manifold controversies attending *Eichmann in Jerusalem* have rendered it a problematic entry in the realm of Holocaust Studies, a number of unassailable, canonical Holocaust texts published in subsequent decades appear to verify Arendt’s claims. It is not unreasonable to suggest that had *Eichmann in Jerusalem* adhered to either the strictures of objectivity demanded by conventional reporting or the abstract detachment characteristic of conventional philosophy, Arendt’s valuable insights into what she termed “the banality of evil” would never have been reached. While we should not expect such groundbreaking insight from every text offered as a novel, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* provides a crystalline example of how novelistic methods and literary conventions can increase our understanding of Holocaust perpetrators, and how a

nuanced understanding of Holocaust perpetrators can in turn contribute suggestions for more ethical ways of thinking, acting, and living.

“A Sideshow Distraction from the Serious Business”: George Steiner’s *The Portage to San Cristóbal of A.H.*

Assessing the outrage aroused by Jean-Francois Steiner’s documentary novel *Treblinka*, George Steiner wrote in 1967, “The recriminations have been ugly, as they were in the Arendt case. And this, though humiliating and subversive to intelligence, is proper. For it is by no means . . . clear that those who were not themselves fully involved should touch upon these agonies unscathed” (*Language* 164). Notably, before the dust kicked up by *Eichmann in Jerusalem* even had a chance to settle, Steiner points to “the Arendt case” as the standard of Holocaust literary scandals against which all others, even offerings in fiction, would be measured; “Silence during the murder,” Steiner bombastically remarks, “but scandal over the books” (164). A little over a decade later, George Steiner would face similarly “ugly” recriminations himself, aroused by his short novel *The Portage to San Cristóbal of A.H.*, a work of fiction in which Adolf Hitler survives the war and goes into hiding in the jungles of South America. Throughout the text, Steiner self-consciously mimics the genre conventions of a sensationalized strain of Holocaust fiction prominent in the 1970’s, exhibited in Nazi-hunting thrillers such as Ira Levin’s *The Boys from Brazil* and Frederick Forsyth’s *The Odessa File*. Unlike these texts, though, *The Portage* is no mere page-turner; Steiner uses a pulp-fiction premise as a setting to interrogate the Holocaust’s place in contemporary popular consciousness.

By presenting an alternate history in which Adolf Hitler survives World War II and is discovered in South America, Steiner’s 1979 novella allows for a dramatic

exploration of the various turns Holocaust awareness took over the course of the late 20th Century. The aging body of “A.H.,” carried out of the Amazon by four Israeli Nazi hunters, functions as a poignant metaphor for the weight of historical memory on our collective understanding of history and culture. By turns, the novella explores varying translations of Holocaust consciousness: from Western Europe, where it evokes guilt, spite, and even an abhorrent nostalgia for the glory days of the Third Reich, to the United States, where it arouses a prurient and sensationalistic voyeurism. Taken together, these translations enact a warning on the dangers of relegating the Holocaust to “a school syllabus and television past. Totally unreal. Categorized for examination purposes or entertainment” (Steiner, *Portage* 143). The climax comes when Steiner’s Hitler delivers a defense of his actions and legacy, equating Nazi racial ideology to the doctrines of Judaism, claiming responsibility for the founding of Israel, and, most shockingly, suggesting himself to be the Jewish messiah. Hitler’s lengthy speech comprises the novel’s entire final chapter, and Steiner presents it with virtually no authorial or narrative comment.

As a result, Steiner’s *Portage*, which came to be known colloquially as his “Hitler novel,” was not well received upon its initial appearance. Holocaust scholars’ reactions bordered on wonderment over how a mind as shrewd, careful, and erudite as George Steiner’s could produce a novel whose very premise seemed better suited for vulgar dime store fiction than for serious engagement with history’s most incomprehensible atrocities. One year after the publication of *The Portage*, Saul Friedlander placed the novel alongside Hans-Jurgen Syberberg’s *Hitler, A Film from Germany*, Liliana Cavani’s overtly transgressive film *The Night Porter*, and Albert Speer’s bestselling memoirs in an

analysis of what he termed “the new discourse on Nazism,” a trend in cultural production that reduced engagements with the Holocaust to kitschy fascination and threatened the foundations of Holocaust awareness. “Assuming the basic idea that George Steiner wanted to convey was that of the necessary link ... between Good and Evil,” asked Friedlander, “...then why did [he] feel it compelling to prove his point in such a way?” (*Reflections* 114). In 1985, Alvin Rosenfeld would critique the conclusion of Steiner’s *Portage* even more damningly, writing, “While one is no longer surprised to see such a grotesque development in the writing of [Holocaust] revisionists, one winces to hear the ghost of Hitler cackle triumphantly in a novel by George Steiner” (*Imagining* 98). The accusation is so severe that Rosenfeld’s praise for the novel earlier in the same piece does little to temper its effect.

However, Rosenfeld’s 2011 *The End of the Holocaust* brings to light several immediately contemporary issues that prompt careful reconsideration of Steiner’s controversial “Hitler novel.” Surveying a cultural landscape that spans geopolitical tensions, academic scholarship, literary fiction, popular film, and even the basest forms of internet obscenity, Rosenfeld augurs a fast-approaching point in time at which meaningful engagement with the Holocaust—both in its historical dimensions and its manifold ethical and political implications—will cease. “To be sure,” Rosenfeld clarifies,

books, films, television programs, popular plays, commemorative services, and the like will continue to keep stories and images of the Nazi crimes before a vast and receptive public, but this wide exposure itself hardly guarantees the perpetuation of a historical memory of the Holocaust that will be faithful to the

past ... It is more likely, in fact, that the steady domestication ... will blunt the horrors of this history and ... render them less outrageous, and, ultimately, less knowable. (*The End* 12)

Thus, in Rosenfeld's more recent work, we find an echo and expansion of a terse admonishment delivered by a principal character in Steiner's "Hitler novel" three decades earlier. Immediately after Steiner's four Israeli Nazi hunters apprehend the aged Hitler, their leader, Emmanuel Lieber, radios in to say, "You will not forget. Oh I know you will never forget ... but the memory will turn alien and cold" (*Portage* 45).

Beginning with *Language and Silence*, a collection of essays whose composition dates range from 1956-1966, Steiner's contributions to the field of Holocaust Studies occupy a position of remarkable significance. The mechanized, meaningless violence of the Holocaust—which Steiner himself only narrowly escaped when, as a child, he emigrated with his family to the United States—are central to Steiner's conceptions of language, humanity, and the Western literary tradition; furthermore, these very conceptions have, over the duration of Steiner's career in letters, been subject to numerous revisits and revisions by the author himself. Steiner's extensive philosophical engagement with what he broadly labels "the inhuman" abounds with dialectical negations, paradoxes, and contradictions which, taken in sum, leave us finally with more questions than answers. How are we to take, for instance, Steiner's admonishment in an essay entitled "Postscript," when he claims, "The best *now*, after so much has been set forth, is, perhaps, to be silent; not to add the trivia of literary debate, sociological debate to the unspeakable ... The next best is, I believe, to try and understand" (Steiner, *Language* 163)? Far from hindering the effectiveness of Steiner's criticism, such

signature duality considerably enhances it; for, in the tradition of Socratic humanism, Steiner leaves the responsibility of reconciling these dialectics to readers. As Bryan Cheyette writes, “Steiner, always the self-translator, writes philosophical essays as if they were poetry and fiction as though it were philosophy” (70). Steiner the essayist displays a masterful touch for *presenting* these contradictions; Steiner the novelist *enacts* them.

Unsurprisingly, then, even the critical treatments of *The Portage* exhibit similar dichotomies, perhaps none more clearly pronounced than in Rosenfeld’s *Imagining Hitler*. As stated heretofore, Rosenfeld likens Steiner’s depiction of Hitler to the work of a Holocaust “revisionist,” but mere pages before pronouncing this startling condemnation, Rosenfeld declares that “in the entire corpus of Holocaust literature one would be hard put to identify a passage of poetry or prose that surpasses the strength of Emmanuel Lieber’s speech in the sixth chapter of this novel” (*Imagining* 88).

Rosenfeld’s treatment moves from a favorable comparison of Lieber’s speech to a text no less prominent than Paul Celan’s “Death Fugue” to an unfavorable comparison of A.H.’s speech to a trend no less abhorrent than Holocaust revisionism. My intention here is not to dispute Rosenfeld’s assessment entirely; rather, I suggest this duality to be a deliberate aesthetic choice on Steiner’s behalf, one that achieves a performative effect while simultaneously pronouncing a condemnation of contemporary trends in Holocaust discourse. At the time of its publication, the harshest criticism of Steiner’s novel placed its depiction of Hitler *within* a burgeoning trend of degraded Holocaust representations; however, the novel could just as easily be read as a *condemnation of* this very tendency.

The scandals attending *The Portage* focus invariably on the climactic defense Hitler delivers at its conclusion, but Emmanuel Lieber’s address to his Israeli

commandos, delivered midway through the text, serves as a poignant counterweight to Hitler's seductive harangue. As Catherine Chatterley suggests in *Disenchantment*, a monograph considering the entirety of Steiner's work, "It seems that one's reaction to *The Portage* often depends on which monologue, that of Lieber or Hitler, one places at the center of the novel" (86). Enduring the litany of horrors recounted by Lieber prepares readers to engage with A.H. later on. Emmanuel Lieber's speech, radioed in to his commandos, at once depicts the atrocities committed under the Third Reich while calling attention to language's ultimate inability to convey them. Steiner renders the speech in a single sentence that sprawls over five pages; syntax crumbles under its aggregating weight. Moreover, each horrific instance Lieber recounts gets cut off just short of complete description. A brief excerpt from the passage will illustrate:

... the Hoofstraat in Arnhem where they took Leah Burstein and made her watch while her father; the two lime trees where the road to Montrouge turns south, 8th November 1942, on which they hung the meathooks; the pantry on the third floor ... where Jakov Kaplan ... had to dance over the body of; in White Springs, Ohio, Rahel Nadelmann who wakes each night, sweat in her mouth because thirty-one years earlier in ... Hanover three louts drifting home from an SS recruitment spree had tied her legs and with a truncheon; the latrine in the police station in Worgel which Doktor Ruth Levin and her niece had to clean with their hair.

(Steiner, *Portage* 46)

Lieber's truncated clauses force readers into an active, profoundly discomforting dialogue, demanding that we complete each picture. By engaging readers in this way, Lieber's speech manages to stir up and defamiliarize the knowledge of history readers

bring to it, insuring against the ethical and intellectual complacency upon which degraded forms of Holocaust representation rely. Furthermore, we find in the address an explicitly self-referential gesture when, in the midst of Lieber's elegiac litany, we find a lament for "Nathaniel Steiner who was taken to America in time but goes maimed nevertheless for not having been at the role call" (49).

The indigestibility of Lieber's address, in both form and content, starkly contrasts with Hitler's defense at the novel's conclusion, when his captors hold a citizen's trial just off the tarmac of San Cristóbal. "Hear me out," he says, "Consider my third point. Which is that you have exaggerated. Grossly. Hysterically ... I was, in truth, only a man of my time" (167). A.H. goes on,

And it was ... an ugly time. But I did not create its ugliness, and I was not the worst. Far from it. How many wretched little men of the forests did your Belgian friends murder outright or leave to starvation and syphilis when they raped the Congo? Answer me that, gentlemen. Or must I remind you? Some *twenty* million. What was Rotterdam or Coventry compared with Dresden and Hiroshima? ... Did I invent the camps? Ask the Boers. But let us be serious. Who was it that broke the *Reich*? To whom did you hand over ... tens of millions of men and women from Prague to the Baltic? ... Our terrors were a village carnival compared with [Stalin's]. Our camps covered absurd acres; he had strung wire and death pits around a continent. (168)

Unlike Lieber's precise, inassimilable recounting of discrete, individuated instances of violence and suffering, the "brazen pulse" (170) of Hitler's syntax comes off as rather *too* palatable, conveying a translation of history that renders the Holocaust—along with

several other historical atrocities—in numerically quantifiable terms. Steiner’s A.H. employs an icy, deliberate logic to divest the Holocaust of its historical uniqueness, assimilate its events into an “inevitable” progression of history, and impart upon its violence a redemptive purpose. Significantly, by depicting the violence of these histories solely as *mass* phenomena, Hitler’s speech obscures entirely the choices and actions of individual perpetrators, including himself. By pushing this logic to such extremity and placing it in the mouth of A.H., Steiner presents an aged, postwar Hitler who embodies the analysis of totalitarianism Hannah Arendt began putting forth in 1951.

“Totalitarian propaganda,” writes Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, “thrives on ... escape from reality into fiction, from coincidence into consistency” (352). This remark comes in Arendt’s discussion of the “eternal”—but ultimately illusory—racial enmity that galvanized the Third Reich’s program of genocide; Steiner’s aged, fictionalized Hitler offers a glimpse of how this “escape from reality into fiction” may have accounted for the Reich’s defeat. “Perhaps I *am* the Messiah,” Hitler declares near the end of his defense, “the true Messiah, the new Sabbatai whose infamous deeds were allowed by God in order to bring His people home” (Steiner, *Portage* 169).

Underpinning each of the points Hitler marshals in his self-defense is a suggestion of historical necessity and inevitability, as though individual choices and actions were guided by forces greater than humankind, as though no other course for the 20th Century were possible, and as though even as late as the 1970’s, all global affairs were a symptom of the eternal struggle between Aryans and Jews. Hitler’s concluding argument that “The Reich begat Israel” (170) can only be sustained by ignoring the Nazi state’s professed goal of eliminating Jews entirely. More precisely, a declaration of independence and

official recognitions of statehood by democratic Western powers “begat Israel,” and these steps were taken in the wake of the Third Reich’s apocalyptic collapse. “Escap[ing] from reality into fiction” (Arendt, *Origins* 352), Steiner’s aged Hitler—who, in the novel, lived long enough to witness these developments—overlooks his own stated goals as a means to revise his failure into a triumph.

As in Arendt’s assessment of totalitarian ideology and propaganda, the *content* of Hitler’s defense, which evoked the strongest condemnations of both the novel and its author, is of secondary importance to the apparent *consistency* it evinces. “Totalitarian movements,” writes Arendt, “conjure up a lying world of consistency which is more adequate to the needs of the human mind than reality itself” (*Origins* 353). Unwittingly echoing Arendt’s descriptions of totalitarian Nazi ideology, Catherine Chatterley calls Hitler’s speech in *The Portage* “a clear depiction of language resisting reality through falsification” (85). Though many of Hitler’s claims in *The Portage* rely on factual assertions—the Belgian occupation of the Congo did, for instance, leave some twenty million casualties in its wake—these assertions appear under the auspice of an ultimately illusory conceit: that they can all be assimilated into the inevitable forward march of history. In his depiction of postwar history, Steiner’s Hitler—as opposed to *Steiner himself*—entices contemporary readers with a temptation not entirely unlike the one that, for Arendt, made totalitarian ideologies so appealing to their adherents: “Ideologies pretend to know the mysteries of the whole historical process—the secrets of the past, the intricacies of the present, the uncertainties of the future—because of the logic inherent in their respective ideas” (*Origins* 469).

The greatest danger of such ideological thinking, which totalitarian movements push to a grotesque extreme, lies in its suggestion that individual human beings—or even *humankind* considered in sum—serve only as a means for the progression of history, rather than as ends in and of themselves. As Arendt writes, “Totalitarian government can be safe only to the extent that it can mobilize man’s own will power in order to force him into that gigantic movement of History or Nature which supposedly uses mankind as its material” (473). Steiner offers a safeguard against this kind of thinking midway through *The Portage*, in Emmanuel Lieber’s speech; the safeguard lies not in Lieber’s shocking descriptions of violent persecution, but rather in his seemingly endless recounting of *individual names*. Steiner had articulated the importance of Lieber’s elegy—not only to this slim novel, but to his sustained engagement with the Holocaust—as early as 1966: “The only completely decent ‘review’ of ... Elie Wiesel’s *Night* would be to re-copy the book, line by line, pausing at the names of the dead and the names of the children as the orthodox scribe pauses ... at the hallowed name of God” (*Language* 168). “At the heart of Lieber’s speech,” writes Alvin Rosenfeld, “is history, chronicled rather than imagined, hypostatized rather than ignored” (*Imagining* 88). The former speech inures readers against the seduction of the latter, but the condemnations of both the novel and its author treated Hitler’s climactic defense as the final negation of the text that preceded it.

In *Imagining Hitler*, Alvin Rosenfeld argues that Steiner’s chief concern in *The Portage* “is, until the very end of the narrative, less with Hitler than with the unsettling place he has assumed in consciousness, a place Steiner aims to clear via a Conradian descent into the heart of darkness” (85). On the whole, the assessment is a sound one; indeed, Steiner’s setting for the novel—an uninhabited, undeveloped swatch of the

Amazon jungle—seems directly indebted to Joseph Conrad’s evocative employment of the Congolese wilderness as a backdrop for exploring genocide’s ethical implications nearly a century before. Rosenfeld’s interpretation errs, though, in its assumption that Hitler’s climactic self-defense stands fundamentally apart from the rest of the text—some sections of which he praises. Additionally, Rosenfeld imposes an ultimate goal upon the novel by claiming that Steiner “aims to clear” the thorny space Hitler occupies in popular consciousness. Steiner’s own expressed intentions, to say nothing of the novel’s unrelenting ambiguity, suggest otherwise. The author remained quiet as the scandals attending the novel’s publication raged, but in a 1999 reissue of *The Portage*, Steiner at last offered his own take on the novel’s befuddling conclusion: “When one tries to think through these unthinkable paradoxes, when barbarism mouths statistics beyond our imaginings, let alone reasoned explanations, the mind sickens and grows numb. This, I venture, is the point” (174). Hitler’s climactic speech in *The Portage*, for all its confidently asserted bombast, was never intended by its author to function as the last word on any topic; rather, it was intended to function as a provocation, not to instigate outrage and condemnation, but to an actual answer.

“And I *want* it to be answered,” Steiner proclaimed in an interview with Ron Rosenbaum, more than a decade after the novel’s publication. “Where *is* the answer? Not just saying you’re being an outrageous cretin for asserting such things. I’m still waiting for answers” (Rosenbaum 312: italics in original). But reactions to *The Portage* tended more toward conflating Steiner with his fictionalized Hitler, laying the character’s sins at the author’s feet. Writing in *The New Republic* in 1982, Stefan Kafner labels Hitler “Steiner’s surrogate” before declaring *The Portage* a “febrile, twisted work” (35-

36). “Let us charitably assume,” Kafner writes, “that [Steiner] is a man obsessed, that he must continue to flog his theories at any cost, even if A. H. has to become the mouthpiece of G. S. To do otherwise is to impute the very worst kind of motives and to assume that ... his prose has become collaborationist” (36). Kafner pushes Rosenfeld’s critique even further, signaling his conflation of Steiner and Hitler by rendering both names as initials and labeling Steiner “collaborationist” rather than merely “revisionist.”

Moreover, a striking, and more than likely coincidental, homology exists between Kafner’s review of *The Portage* and Norman Podhoretz’s famous takedown of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, published in the September 1963 issue of *Commentary* magazine.

Podhoretz famously declared Arendt’s text a product of “the intellectual perversity that can result from the pursuit of brilliance by a mind infatuated with its own agility and bent on generating dazzle.” The allegations are nearly identical: both authors found themselves accused of exploiting the Holocaust as a theoretical playground for narcissistic displays of intellectual gymnastics. The very titles of Podhoretz’s and Kafner’s critiques even mirror each other: “Hannah Arendt on Eichmann: A Study in the Perversity of Brilliance” and the pithier, more concise “The Perversity of G.S.”; both reviews sculpt their titles in mockery of the texts under consideration, and both level accusations of individual “perversity” in lieu of a judicious account of the text in question.

Neither critic considers, even in passing, that both Arendt’s and Steiner’s lives had been literally uprooted by Nazi persecution, as both managed to emigrate to the U.S. before the Third Reich engulfed them: Steiner as a child with his family, Arendt in her twenties, after being imprisoned herself. But even the authors’ direct biographical link to

the catastrophe proved an insufficient stalwart against instinctual presumptions of bad faith. Rather engaging with, or even *disputing*, the content of his novel, Steiner's most adamant critics—apparently taking cues from Arendt's—preferred simply to condemn Steiner himself for having authored the content in the first place. An image of the novel, one in which the author imbued Hitler's self-defense with unquestionable finality, became a substitute for the text Steiner actually authored, a text in which Hitler's speech stands as one deeply compromised interpretation of history amongst numerous other interpretations.

Surveying the critiques of Steiner's *Portage*, one wonders whether the indignation aroused by the novel might not have been averted had Steiner simply reversed the placement of Lieber's and Hitler's speeches, as the novel's detractors object not only to the content of Hitler's defense, but also to its location, near the novel's conclusion. "Why give Hitler the last word," asks Alvin Rosenfeld in his 1985 *Imagining Hitler*, "one that sets forth not only to explain Nazism ... but to vindicate the genocide of the Jews as the necessary historical spur to the establishment of the Jewish state?" (99) Rosenfeld's son, Gavriel, would resurrect this line of critique in his 2005 *The World Hitler Never Made*, a comprehensive analytical survey of alternate history novels dealing with the Third Reich. "The ex-dictator is given the last word in the novel," the younger Rosenfeld asserts, "for immediately after he rests his defense, the arrival of helicopters prevents any rebuttal from the prosecution" (229). And both of these critiques rest on a charge famously made by British historian Martin Gilbert, who took sharp exception to Steiner's insistence on allowing Hitler's speech to go "unanswered" (qtd. in G. Rosenfeld 244). The critique, though, is only half-true: the shocking self-defense Hitler espouses in *The*

Portage may go “unanswered” *in the text*, but the bizarre fashion in which Steiner concludes the novel demands an answer *from the reader*.

Gavriel Rosenfeld correctly points out that “the arrival of helicopters”—specifically, British and American helicopters arriving to rob the Nazi-hunters of their quarry—precludes a rebuttal from “the prosecution.” Within the text, “the prosecution” would be comprised of the Nazi-hunters themselves, who stage the impromptu citizens’ trial upon learning that state forces would soon claim the aged Hitler as their own. But the narration’s description of this development, which occurs just after Hitler’s speech and marks the novel’s closing words, bears careful examination: “The first helicopter was hovering above the clearing. The second” (Steiner, *Portage* 170). Mirroring the truncated, incomplete clauses that comprise Emmanuel Lieber’s elegy, the novel’s concluding sentence abruptly breaks off, not even punctuated with ellipses. Steiner’s novel burdens readers with the responsibility not merely to draw our own conclusions or to complete the story for ourselves, but to articulate the rebuttal A.H.’s prosecution never has the chance to deliver. If Hitler was wrong to declare the crimes of the Third Reich inconsequential in contrast to other atrocities, then *why* was he wrong? If Hitler was wrong to claim that “the *Reich* begat Israel” (170), then *why* was he wrong?

Contrary to the novel’s most ungenerous critics, Steiner placed his faith in readers’ ability to consider the text *as a whole*, rather than be seduced into granting Hitler the final word. Responding to Gilbert’s accusation that *The Portage* allows Hitler to emerge “unanswered,” Steiner writes, “The answers to ‘A.H.’⁵ *must* come from the audience, from the readers, from each and every one of those whose moral being is

⁵ It is worth noting that in this usage, Steiner’s employment of the initials—in quotation marks, no less—could just as easily be interpreted to stand for “alternate history,” a genre which his novel fits comfortably into, and a version of history articulated by its eponymous character.

implicated in the continuing bestialities of the twentieth century” (qtd. in Friedlander, *Reflections* 114). The text of *The Portage* offers no easy answers; furthermore, Steiner’s remarks in the afterward to the novel’s 1999 reissue assert that even the author himself has yet to formulate a definitive one. “At times,” he writes,

intuition tells one that there *is* an ontological distinction, a difference in essence between certain death in the gas-ovens of Auschwitz and almost-certain death in the mines of Kolyna. At other times, and in one’s own bewilderment, the argument is not conclusive. I have no answer and have grown to distrust those who confidently and eloquently do. (174)

The instinctual revulsion with which *The Portage* was met upon its appearance precluded considering, even momentarily, that the text was—at the very least—composed for a serious purpose, by a sensitive author, with a somber intention; rather, the novel was widely regarded, in the words of Morris Dickstein, as “a sideshow distraction from the serious business of thinking through the unspeakable horrors of the Nazi era” (qtd. in G. Rosenfeld 244).

But as Alvin Rosenfeld—who praised and damned the text in equal measure—writes in 2011, “far from being fixed, the memory of the Holocaust is beset by an array of cultural pressures that challenge its place as a pivotal event in European and Jewish history” (*The End* 329). Thus, as meta-commentary, *The Portage to San Cristóbal of A.H* may have gained poignancy in the decades since its appearance, given its function as a text that presents readers with a spectrum of the forms Holocaust awareness may take and demands that *we*, in the silence of individual contemplation, discern the meaningful from the debased, voyeuristic, and obscene. “First and foremost,” Steiner writes of *The*

Portage, “this fable engages the pain of remembrance, the imperative but unendurable pain of recall” (*Portage* 175). And to make the author’s intention plain, we need only to reclassify it as Steiner’s “Lieber novel,” rather than his “Hitler novel.”

“Seemingly Endless Pages of Understanding Lavished on the Nazis”: William Styron’s *Sophie’s Choice*

Upon the publication of *Sophie’s Choice*, William Styron faced a strain of criticism with which neither Arendt nor Steiner had to contend: as a non-Jewish, American novelist, Styron’s very right to deal with the Holocaust in literature was immediately called into question. It was, in fact, a consideration of *Sophie’s Choice* and its film adaptation that prompted Elie Wiesel to compose “Does the Holocaust Lie Beyond the Reach of Art?,” the *New York Times* editorial in which Wiesel first declared, “A novel on Majdanek is either not a novel or not about Majdanek. Between the dead and the rest of us there exists an abyss that no talent can comprehend.” Wiesel’s editorial, it should be noted, appears to deal more directly with the film, an adaptation which—due in large part to Meryl Streep’s legendary performance as the eponymous Sophie Zawistowka—came quickly to overshadow the novel itself. Among the most significant losses in the translation of *Sophie’s Choice* from page to screen was the novel’s complex metafictional narrative structure; more overtly than the film, Styron’s novel emphasizes the function of its protagonist, Stingo, as not merely a character or a narrator, but the *author* of the novel in which he appears.

By filtering the entire narrative through Stingo, an author-construct whom Daniel Schwarz describes as “a semi-autobiographical Conradian narrator” (197), Styron insures his narrative against the presumption of attempting to represent atrocity in fiction;

retaining Wiesel's phrasing, *Sophie's Choice* would be categorized as a novel that is "not about Auschwitz." Rather, the novel is "about" the attempt of an outsider (an American gentile, like Styron himself, with no biographical connection to Holocaust history) to assimilate the Holocaust's ethical implications into his own understanding, national identity, and self-perception. The metafictional construct of Stingo, by appearing in the novel he authors (*Sophie's Choice*), negates the possibility of genuine mimesis or verisimilitude from the outset. The novel's chief concern, then, is the very distance, geographical and biographical, between the author and the story whose telling he undertakes. Styron himself admitted precisely this, years after the publication of *Sophie's Choice*: "In my own case ... it came down chiefly to the problem of *distance*. I knew it would be presumptuous of me to try to duplicate the brutal atmosphere of the camps already described in the narratives of Bruno Bettelheim and Eugen Kogon and Raul Hilberg and Primo Levi" ("A Wheel of Evil" 397: italics in original). In addition to the distancing device of an author-construct, Styron studiously avoids depicting the camp's interior, instead setting the two prominent Auschwitz scenes at the camp's periphery: the commandant's villa and—later in the text, earlier in its chronology—on the selections ramp.

Midway through the novel, Stingo even reflects upon the prohibition—championed by Wiesel, among others—against treating the Holocaust in fiction. "I cannot accept," explains the elder Stingo, composing a novel about his younger self,

[George] Steiner's suggestion that *silence* is the answer, that it is best 'not to add the trivia of literary, sociological debate to the unspeakable.' Nor do I agree with the idea that 'in the presence of certain realities art is trivial or impertinent.' I

find a touch of piety in this, especially inasmuch as Steiner has not remained silent. And surely, almost cosmic in its incomprehensibility as it may appear, the embodiment of evil which Auschwitz has become remains impenetrable only so long as we shrink from trying to penetrate it, however inadequately; and Steiner himself adds immediately that the *next* best is ‘to try and understand’ (Styron, *Sophie’s Choice* 265: italics in original).

Anticipating the resistance that would meet *Sophie’s Choice*, Styron musters a preemptive defense by naming and addressing the nature of that resistance and placing it among the novel’s chief themes. The narrative abounds with intertextual references and citations—Stingo’s engagement with George Steiner’s *Language and Silence* is but one among many—which function, paradoxically, to undermine the narrator’s authority rather than bolster it. As his novel progresses, Stingo, an American author several times removed from his subject, becomes increasingly uncertain as to how he should proceed, and when his own intuitions fail him, he defers to the work of others.

Styron’s interest in the Nazi genocide was first pronounced years before the appearance of *Sophie’s Choice*, in a 1974 *New York Times* column entitled “Auschwitz’s Message.” The brief column, occasioned by the author’s visit to the camp that same year, suggests that the destructive force of Nazi totalitarianism posed a threat to all of humankind, and that a singular focus on religiously motivated anti-Semitism was insufficient for fully addressing the nature of that threat. Styron offers two chief points in support of this claim, the first of which refers to a Polish immigrant he encountered decades before. Styron describes,

the once devoutly Catholic Polish girl I knew many years ago, the memory of whom impelled my visit to Auschwitz. It was she who, having lost father, husband, and two children to the gas chambers, paid no longer any attention to religion since she was certain, she told me, that Christ had turned His face away from her, as He had from all mankind. (37)

Styron's acquaintance provided the foundation for Sophie Zawistowska, a Polish Catholic who, in the novel, loses her children in Auschwitz. The number of non-Jewish Slavic victims—like the Polish woman described above—coupled with the uncomfortable fact that violent anti-Semitism was very much alive in secular societies like the USSR, lead Styron to conclude that religiously grounded anti-Semitism alone could not account for Auschwitz. “Although the unparalleled tragedy of the Jews may have been [Auschwitz's] most terrible single handiwork,” Styron writes, “its threat to humanity transcended even this ... for its ultimate depravity lay in the fact that it was anti-human. Anti-life” (37).

“Auschwitz's Message” was immediately interpreted as a polemic; thus, the scandal accompanying *Sophie's Choice* commenced before the novel even appeared, and not unlike the uproar over *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, its pivotal turns played out on the editorial pages of popular publications. Styron's column was at once politicized and rebuffed by Cynthia Ozick in *Commentary*; Ozick's “A Liberal's Auschwitz,” which garnered the Pushcart prize in 1974, is a tour-de-force of rhetorical vehemence which, in its most grandiose moments, stops just short of calling Styron a murderer. “The liberal is a humanist,” Ozick proclaims, “his god is called *humanity*. And because he is a humanist, the liberal is also an egalitarian—which is to say, he is a leveler: like death”

(72); she goes on to allege that “in the name of not-killing ... the liberal does what he damns” (73). Ozick’s rebuttal even strikes an uncomfortably intimate note, when she reminds Styron that his two daughters “would have come, not by virtue of their ‘humanity’ but through their Jewish mother, to join the other Jews in that so terrible, and so unmetaphorical, a place” (75). The core of Ozick’s argument—that by exploring what Styron terms “the ecumenical nature” of Nazi totalitarianism, he “divest[s] the Jews of Europe of their specifically Jewish martyrdom” (75)—has since ossified into a consensus among scholars regarding *Sophie’s Choice*. “The case made by Styron ... entails a historical error,” writes D. G. Meyers in 2001, “a naïve hearkening back to ideology that has been put forever in question by the Holocaust. I shall call this ideology liberal anti-Judaism” (502).

The most vehement accusations leveled at Styron tend not to explore Hannah Arendt’s influence on his perspective on Auschwitz, which could never be overstated. Arendt is counted among the many authors Stingo names and engages with throughout the course of *Sophie’s Choice*, but more directly, it was Arendt herself, a personal friend of Styron’s, who urged the author to overcome his own paralyzing timorousness and explore the implications of Auschwitz in fiction. Recalling one of several evenings spent sipping scotch and conversing with Arendt, Styron writes,

I told her that someday I hoped to write about Auschwitz—I had in mind, specifically, a Polish Catholic survivor of that camp, a young woman named Sophie I had known in Brooklyn after the war—but I was troubled by how authentic my rendition might be ... She scoffed lightly at this, countering with this question: What, before writing [*The Confessions of*] *Nat Turner*, had I known

about slavery? An artist creates his own authenticity; what matters is imaginative conviction and boldness, a passion to invade alien territory and render an account of one's discoveries. That was the task of a writer, she said, and I was heartened, though still doubtful. (Styron, "A Wheel of Evil" 397)

Styron's meetings with Arendt occurred in the late 1960's, in the aftermath of the *Eichmann in Jerusalem* scandal. According to Styron, whose 1967 novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner* had elicited even more ferocious condemnations than *Sophie's Choice* would, he and Arendt bonded over the scorn they both faced as a result of their publications. "We drank our scotch," writes Styron, "in a glow of rueful sympathy and mutual martyrdom" (395), two pariahs exiled for their perceived literary transgressions.

But Arendt offered considerably more than heartening encouragement to Styron; indeed, her evolving thoughts on the nature of totalitarian evil provided the theoretical bedrock upon which he would build *Sophie's Choice*. "I regarded *The Origins of Totalitarianism* as a great illumination," he confesses, "and had made *Eichmann in Jerusalem* a kind of handbook" (395). Uneasy with the prospect of depicting "the confines of Auschwitz, where as a narrator I dare not tread" (398), Styron had to isolate a single offense so profound in its cruelty that it might convey the staggering moral collapse embodied by the camp itself. Adapting only slightly Olga Lengyel's experience, described in her 1946 memoir *Five Chimneys*, Styron famously distilled the horror of Auschwitz in the image of a woman who, within minutes of arriving at the camp, was forced to choose which of her two young children would be murdered immediately. As Styron explains, "Here, it seemed to me, was the ultimate expression of totalitarian evil: a system that could force a mother to become her child's murderer was one that had refined

the infliction of human suffering to a point at which all other cruelties ... were an infernal background” (398). In interviews and published commentary, Styron describes his novel’s best known and most harrowing moment as a synthesis of Lengyel’s memoir with what little he knew of the real-life Sophie’s Auschwitz experience. Interestingly, though, in the concluding pages of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt writes, “Totalitarian terror achieved its most terrible triumph when it succeeded in ... making the decisions of conscience absolutely questionable and equivocal ... Who could solve the dilemma of the Greek mother, who was allowed by the Nazis to choose which of her three children should be killed?” (452) Decades prior to the appearance of *Sophie’s Choice*, Arendt employed a nearly identical scenario to exemplify the ethical nightmare catalyzed by Nazi terror.

“*Someday I will understand Auschwitz,*” young Stingo records in his notebook, near the conclusion of *Sophie’s Choice*, just before the elder Stingo records in the novel,

This was a brave statement but innocently absurd. No one will ever understand Auschwitz. What I might have set down with more accuracy would have been: *Someday I will write about Sophie’s life and death, and thereby help demonstrate how absolute evil is never extinguished from the world.* Auschwitz itself remains inexplicable. The most profound statement yet made about Auschwitz was not a statement at all, but a response.

The query: ‘At Auschwitz, tell me, where was God?’

And the answer: ‘Where was man?’ (623: italics in original)

In addition to the structural complexities of Styron’s narrative maneuver here, compounded throughout the novel’s entirety as the older Stingo repeatedly interjects to

remark upon his own youthful naïveté, Styron's consideration of "absolute evil" bears careful examination. Literary scholar Daniel Schwarz characterizes this passage as "an attempt at eloquence and profundity which has also a bathetic, somewhat tedious note" (206). But considering Styron's own admission that he "had made *Eichmann in Jerusalem* a kind of handbook" ("A Wheel of Evil" 395) during the time he was drafting *Sophie's Choice*, we might assume that in Stingo's ruminations on "evil," he invokes the term in a specifically Arendtian sense; in other words, Stingo settles upon a word used heretofore to signify religious or metaphysical phenomena ("evil") to describe a human capacity not fully realized until the Nazis' construction of extermination facilities such as Auschwitz-Birkenau. "What radical evil really is I don't know," mused Arendt in 1951, a decade before she attended the Eichmann trial, "but it seems to me it somehow has to do with the following phenomenon: making human beings as human beings superfluous ... This happens as soon as all unpredictability ... is eliminated" (Arendt, Jaspers 166).

Arendt's speculation on the nature of "radical evil," explored more fully in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, complicates Ozick's allegations, for it suggests that Styron's emphasis on the threat Auschwitz posed to "humanity" cannot be attributed to his simply "find[ing] the word 'humanity' more palatable than 'Jew'" (Ozick 75). Rather, it was the mass murder of Jews in Auschwitz, and furthermore the dispassionate, systematic manner in which it was perpetrated, that manifested, for Arendt, a threat to *humanity*⁶—and Styron, to be sure, explicitly names the destruction of European Jews as such repeatedly throughout the novel. "Perhaps," Arendt speculates as early as 1946, "what is behind it is

⁶ "At no point, either in the proceedings or in the judgment, did the Jerusalem trial ever mention even the possibility that extermination of whole ethnic groups—the Jews, the Poles, or the Gypsies—might be more than a crime against the Jewish or the Polish or the Gypsy people, that the international order, and mankind in its entirety, might have been grievously hurt and endangered" (*Eichmann in Jerusalem* 276).

only that individual human beings did not kill other individual human beings for human reasons, but that an organized attempt was made to eradicate *the concept of the human being*” (Arendt, Jaspers 68: italics added). Thus, the novel’s recurrent explorations of *evil* are tied inextricably to its explorations of Nazism’s implications for *humanity*—and moreover, given what appears to be Styron’s grounding in specifically Arendtian definitions of these terms, in a manner considerably more complex than its most vociferous critics acknowledge.

Placing Arendt’s emphases on notions of “evil” and “humanity” at the center of an interpretation of *Sophie’s Choice* prompts a careful reconsideration of Styron’s depictions of Holocaust perpetrators—or, more specifically, his depictions of perpetrators *as Stingo imagines them*. A number of critics fault Styron, harshly, for his portrayal of Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss, alleging that the novel presents Höss in a favorable, sympathetic light. “The Nazi criminal and mass murderer,” writes Polish-American critic Jerzy Krzyzanowski,

emerges as the only truly sympathetic, gentlemen-like character in the novel. No Pole, no Jew, not even a single American is given such a fair and approving image as Rudolf Höss. This should speak for itself, but to make the point even more poignant one might ask a simple question: on whose side does Styron place his authorial preference, is he with the oppressed or the oppressor? With the victim or the executioner? (70)

As Hannah Arendt had supposedly written a “defense” of Adolf Eichmann, as George Steiner had supposedly employed Adolf Hitler as his “surrogate,” so, too, does William Styron supposedly offer an “approving” depiction of Rudolf Höss, who, it should be

noted, occupies a relatively brief section of a dense and lengthy novel. Midway through the text, Sophie recalls the time she spent in Auschwitz as a “privileged” prisoner, working as a housekeeper in the commandant’s villa.

It should go without saying that Styron’s portrayal of Höss—while assuredly vexing and ambiguous—falls considerably short of “approving.” Rather, the vignette set in Höss’s villa functions to frustrate readers’ expectations of what “absolute evil” *ought to* look like when it appears. Styron’s decision to place Sophie within the commandant’s villa serves a dual function, at once preserving narrative distance from the camp’s interior, with all its attending horrors, and confronting readers with the paradoxical existence of an idyllic family household within sight of those horrors. *Sophie’s Choice* presumes, at the very least, readers’ general awareness of Auschwitz in its capacity as an extermination center; the novel endeavors to expand that awareness by emphasizing its oft-overlooked capacity as a functioning slave society. As theologian Richard Rubenstein writes in his 1975 *The Cunning of History*, and as Styron/Stingo quotes in *Sophie’s Choice*, “Most of the literature on the camps has tended to stress the role of the camps as places of execution ... Regrettably, few ethical theorists or religious thinkers have paid attention to the highly significant political fact that the camps were in reality a new form of human society” (qtd. in Styron, *Sophie’s Choice* 286). Stingo goes on to credit *The Cunning of History* with “extending Arendt’s thesis” by characterizing Auschwitz as “a society of total domination,” one that differed from previous slave societies in that it was founded “on the simple but absolute *expendability* of human life” (286). The novel makes clear its intention to forgo protracted consideration of *death* in

Auschwitz—which Styron himself has repeatedly expressed grave misgivings about depicting—and present instead a vignette that foregrounds aspects of *life* in Auschwitz.

Stingo, as author and narrator, articulates this intention midway through *Sophie's Choice*, immediately preceding Auschwitz's first appearance in the text; curiously, he introduces the camp by cataloging the aspects of it he does not dare to narrate. As Stingo explains, Sophie herself exhibits a “firm and generally unyielding silence” (264) about her experience in Auschwitz, and he can only share with readers what Sophie shares with him. “Thus,” Stingo writes,

the jaded reader surfeited with our century's perdurable feast of atrocities will be spared here a detailed chronicle of the killings, gassings, beatings, tortures, criminal medical experiments, slow deprivations, excremental outrages, screaming madresses and other entries into the historical account which have already been made by Tadeusz Borowski, Jean-Francois Steiner, Olga Lengyel, Eugen Kogon, Andre Schwarz-Bart, Elie Wiesel, and Bruno Bettelheim, to name but a few of the most eloquent who have tried to limn the totally infernal in their heart's blood. (264-265)

D.G. Meyers—a literary critic who roundly condemns the novel as “a polemic against ... Jewish hegemony” (501)—interprets these references as a high-handed, arrogant display of “authority of the narrator, investing Stingo/Styron with learning and distinguishing him from those for whom Auschwitz is merely a catchword” (507). Equally, though, they may be read as a gesture of humility; Styron/Stingo knows, accepts, and confesses his own limitations as an author, invoking literary forbears better suited for confronting those aspects of the Auschwitz experience.

Similarly, the narrative's brief portrayal of Rudolf Höss foregrounds aspects of his character *apart from* his function history's most prolific mass murderer; insofar as Styron/Stingo touches upon the horrors of Auschwitz under Höss's leadership, he relies on the Auschwitz commandant himself to narrate them, lacing entire pages from Höss's published memoir, presented in quotation marks, throughout his own prose. "I had to appear cold and indifferent to events that must have wrung the heart of anyone possessed of human feelings," writes Höss as he awaits execution, "I had to watch coldly, while the mothers with laughing or crying children went into the gas chambers" (qtd. in Styron, *Sophie's Choice* 184). The significance of these passages lies not only in their narration of the gassing process; additionally, the selections highlight Höss's "inability to *think*, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else" (Arendt, *Eichmann* 49). As in Arendt's assessment of Adolf Eichmann, Höss displays this inability both in the instances he recounts and in his very recounting of them; he genuinely, if outrageously, seems to have composed his autobiography in order to curry posthumous favor and sympathy from readers. "The emotion of hatred is foreign to my nature," Höss explains. "But I know what hate is, and what it looks like. I have seen it and suffered it myself" (Höss 56).

Any perceptive reader of Höss's memoir comes away struck by an excess of humane sensitivity as he recounts *his own* travails, no matter how menial, juxtaposed with the total absence of such sensitivity as he recounts the unimaginable terrors endured by his prisoners. Throughout his strange memoir, Höss appears most affected not by the horrors he oversaw, but *the fact that he had to see them*: "I had to see everything. I had to watch hour after hour, by day and by night, the removal and burning of the bodies, the extraction of the teeth, the cutting of the hair, the whole grisly, interminable business"

(qtd. in Styron, *Sophie's Choice* 185). And to ensure that this puzzling ethical opacity is clear to readers of *Sophie's Choice*, Styron/Stingo interstices a key quotation from *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in the midst of Höss's recollections: "instead of saying: What horrible things I did to people!, the murderers would be able to say: What horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties, how heavily the task weighed upon my shoulders!" (qtd. in Styron, *Sophie's Choice* 185).

Thus, by the time we confront the "truly sympathetic, gentlemen-like" (Krzyzanowski 70) Höss in the novel, the narrative has prepared us for it, having already lain bare both his capacity for mass murder and his breathtaking incapacity for interpersonal empathy—what Arendt would have termed his "thoughtlessness," the banality of his evil. After dense thickets of historically-sourced preamble, Stingo renders a comparatively brief vignette set in Höss's study, where Sophie—among the few Polish prisoners fluent in German—has been consigned to work as his typist, taking dictation. Upon hearing a rumor that Höss will soon be transferred from Auschwitz to Oranienburg, Sophie devises a desperate plan to spring herself and her son from the camp: earn Höss's favor by credentialing herself as a thoroughgoing Aryan anti-Semite, a claim bolstered by evidence of her father's National Socialist sympathies, and be granted a pardon from the commandant himself as a result. From his initial appearance, Styron's Höss appears designed to frustrate readers' expectations; he bursts into his study raging over a delay in the construction of new crematoria and almost immediately lies down on a cot, overcome with a migraine that renders him "oddly helpless-looking" (329).

In this vulnerable moment, Sophie puts her plan into action, proclaiming her family's standing "in the vanguards of those countless lovers of the Third Reich who

admire National Socialism and the principles of the Führer. My father was to the depths of his soul *Judenfeindlich*” (331). But Höss’s reaction strikes a disappointing note both with Sophie, whose hopes of being granted a pardon are swiftly dashed, and with readers, for whom frenzied racist hatred would provide an immediately comprehensible explanation for Höss’s commitment to Nazism. “*Judenfeindlich*,” Höss drowsily repeats, “When will I cease hearing that word ‘anti-Semitic’? My God, I’m tired of that ... Jews. *Jews*. Will I ever be done with Jews!” (331: italics in original). Höss’s outburst is elicited not by impassioned hatred, but by the commonplace stress of being overworked and underappreciated; as their dialogue continues, Höss reserves his most fervid angst for his own superiors:

Those people in Berlin, they’re impossible. They ask the superhuman from a mere human who has only done the best he has known how for three years. They’re unreasonable! They don’t know what it’s like to put up with contractors who can’t fulfill their schedules, lazy middlemen, suppliers who fall behind or simply never deliver ... If they just understood the *magnitude*, the *complexity*! They seem to have no knowledge of the incredible *numbers* involved in these Special Actions. The endless multitudes! These Jews, they come on and on from all the countries of Europe, countless thousands, millions ... (334-335).

Ironically, the clearest expressions of colloquial racism in this scene come not from the Nazi commandant, but from Sophie herself, as she continues to embellish her own anti-Semitic inclinations in a misguided attempt to win Höss’s affinity.

Upon praising “Julius Streicher’s understanding of what atrocities Jews are capable of” (338), Sophie’s—and the reader’s—expectations are frustrated again, as Höss

exhibits an immediate disdain for Streicher's lowbrow anti-Jewish newspaper *Der Stürmer*, proclaiming it "pornographic garbage" (339). The intention here is not to exonerate Höss from charges of anti-Semitism, but rather to highlight the way anti-Semitism functioned, in Arendt's words, as "a principle of self-definition," removed from "the fluctuations of mere opinion" (*Origins* 356). The historical Höss emphasizes the distinction in his autobiography, writing that "serious anti-Semitism" was "ill-served by such frenzied persecution, as was provided by *Der Stürmer*" (55). As in *Eichmann in Jerusalem, Sophie's Choice* depicts anti-Semitism as a context underpinning Höss's actions, rather than a longstanding, passionate obsession. As Yehuda Bauer, arguably the world's preeminent Holocaust historian, would write in 1993, "The Germans did not have to hate the Jews in order to kill them ... One suspects that, had they received instructions to murder all the Poles, or all the Frenchmen, they would have performed equally well" (qtd. in Novick 137). The brief portrayal of Höss in *Sophie's Choice* functions to engineer in readers a sense of disillusionment not unlike Arendt's disillusionment upon confronting Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, disappointing our expectations of viciousness with an image of thoughtless vacuity. The Höss vignette's concluding lines even gesture ironically toward this very function. After Sophie's attempt to secure a pardon fails, she begs Höss at least to let her visit her son in the camp. Höss assures her that he will arrange it, a promise he never fulfills, before asking Sophie, and readers, by extension, "Do you think I am some kind of monster?" (*Sophie's Choice* 350)

The novel's only other protracted consideration of an Auschwitz SS officer comes at its conclusion, during Sophie's final, ghastly revelation: that she had, in fact, two children accompanying her upon arriving at the camp. At the selections ramp, an SS

doctor forces Sophie herself to identify which of her children will be executed immediately, and which will be allowed to live, however precariously, in the children's camp. Despite this incident's lasting impact and centrality to the story—it is unquestionably the scene for which Styron's novel and its film adaptation are best remembered—the pages it comprises number in the single digits; the textual space devoted to the incident, and its perpetrator, appears remarkably small even compared to the Rudolf Höss vignette. Considering the brevity of both scenes, Thomas Napeirkowski's 1983 claim that *Sophie's Choice* is “undermined by seemingly endless pages of understanding lavished on the Nazis whom Styron wants us to understand as human beings” (84-85) becomes somewhat puzzling, if not starkly untenable. However concise, though, the novel's two portrayals of SS perpetrators—and more precisely the contrast between these portrayals—distill the text's dual concerns about the banality of evil and the ways in which it diverges from traditional literary villainy.

Whereas Stingo precedes the Höss vignette with a lengthy recounting of historical and theoretical sources, he explicitly admits to relying on his own imagination in his climactic depiction of a Nazi doctor, who is even given a name of Stingo's own devising: “I have christened him Fritz Jemand von Niemand because it seems as good a name as any for an SS doctor” (586). Stingo openly speculates in detail about the motivations of Jemand von Niemand (trans.: *someone from no one*), the SS doctor who whimsically forces Sophie to surrender her daughter to the gas chamber; moreover, he does so in terms that suggest von Niemand to be a spiritual reprobate whose actions—in the doctor's own eyes, at least—take on a cosmic significance. After relenting that in the decades since Sophie's terrible confession, he has “brooded often upon the enigma of Dr.

Jemand von Niemand” (590), Stingo writes, “I have always assumed that when he encountered Sophie, Dr. Jemand von Niemand was undergoing the crisis of his life: cracking apart like bamboo, disintegrating at the very moment that he was reaching out for salvation” (592). Stingo suspects that the horror von Niemand visits upon Sophie and her daughter was motivated by a theological desire to glean the heights of Heaven from the deepest depths of sin. “It had to do with the matter of sin,” Stingo speculates,

Or rather, it had to do with the absence of sin, and his own realization that the absence of sin and the absence of god were inseparably intertwined. No sin! He had suffered boredom and anxiety, and even revulsion, but no sense of sin from the bestial crimes he had been party to ... All of his depravity had been enacted in a vacuum of sinless and businesslike godlessness, while his soul thirsted for beatitude. Was it not supremely simple, then, to restore his belief in God, and at the same time affirm his human capacity for evil, by committing the most intolerable sin he was able to conceive? (593)

In his novel’s climactic sequence, Stingo conflates the grandiosity of the *act*—forcing a mother to identify which of her children will be murdered—with an assumed grandiosity on the part of the individual perpetrating it.

Like the novel’s Höss vignette, its climactic depiction of Jemand von Niemand is to this day roundly condemned by numerous critics, though for slightly different reasons. In the Höss vignette, Styron was alleged to have been seduced by Höss’s own self-exonerating autobiography; in his three pages of speculation on Dr. Jemand von Niemand, he is alleged to have been seduced by the greatest anti-heroes of the Western literary canon. Literary scholar Robert Franciosi sees in the Nazi doctor traces of

“Milton’s Satan, Goethe’s Mephistopheles, Byron’s Manfred, even Dostoyevsky’s Raskolnikov” (qtd. in Vice 130). More recently, Sylvia Mathé alleges that, “By heightening his Nazi fictional construct to a kind of Faustian hero, Styron means to reabsorb inhumanity into humanity and to make of his tale an allegory of evil. The promiscuity he allows himself with the executioner is a treacherous route, implying connivance and complicity” (464). Even 21st Century critics, it seems, have yet to retire the rhetorical device, perfected in the myriad attacks against *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, of equating authors with the SS perpetrators they depict; aesthetic critiques seamlessly give way to the supreme allegation of “complicity” with the perpetrators themselves.

The more measured critical consensus on Styron’s *Jemand von Niemand* maintains that—questions of “complicity” aside—the Nazi doctor manifests an aesthetic failure; Franciosi sums up the depiction’s chief faults when he writes, “Styron abets our deep-seated need to obscure such evil acts as the product of passionate insanity, rather than dispassionate banality” (qtd. in Vice 130). However, this critique can only be sustained by ignoring the novel’s metafictional narrative mode; the narrating “I” signifies Stingo, a fictional author-construct, not Styron himself. Like the Höss vignette, the concluding sentiments of the von Niemand sequence distill its textual function; moreover, these sentiments come from Stingo, not the perpetrator, highlighting the contrast between these dual depictions. After tracing out his assumptions about the Nazi doctor—soaring and romantic assumptions, to be sure, obviously indebted to traditional literary villainy—Stingo plaintively confesses, “This is the only way *I have been able to explain* what Dr. Jemand von Niemand did to Sophie when she appeared with her two little children on April Fools’ Day” (*Sophie’s Choice* 593; italics added). The contrast between the two

perpetrator depictions is heightened further by the narrative maneuvers Stingo employs to introduce them: for Höss, Stingo offers an intertextual recounting of numerous historical sources, including Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and Höss's own memoir, the latter of which Stingo quotes directly and at significant length. For Dr. von Niemand, Stingo explicitly admits to relying exclusively on pure imaginary construction.

While many of Styron's critics point to the melodramatic depiction of Dr. Jemand von Niemand as an unconscious fault, they fail to consider the way it strengthens the impact of the novel's earlier emphasis on banal evil—in its depiction of Höss—while at the same time highlighting the insufficiency of traditional literary conceptions of evil for grasping an ethical calamity of Auschwitz's magnitude. Just as Lieber's speech prepares readers not to take A.H.'s defense at face value in Steiner's *The Portage to San Cristóbal of A.H.*, so, too, does Styron/Stingo's historically-sourced depiction of Höss prepare us to question the limits of Stingo's imaginative ability as he attempts to limn the motivations of an SS doctor at the selections ramp. "We really have no acquaintance with true evil," the elder, narrating Stingo explains as he considers Höss's historical autobiography, "the evil portrayed in most novels and plays and movies is mediocre if not spurious, a shoddy concoction generally made up of violence, fantasy, neurotic terror, and melodrama" (179). Stingo's authorial guesswork on von Niemand's motivations—qualified repeatedly with such phrases as "I think," "I suspect," "I would risk speculating further," and "I have always assumed" (590, 591, 592)—manifests a metafictional *enactment* of the novel's penultimate sentiments: "No one will ever understand Auschwitz ... Auschwitz itself remains inexplicable" (623).

In a tandem dismissal of both *Sophie's Choice* and *The Portage to San Cristóbal of A.H.*, Lawrence Langer writes, "Styron's boldness in characterizing Hoess matches Steiner's in uncovering Hitler 'alive' after all these years, but what fresh understanding of Nazi mentality emerges from their imaginative forays?" (*Admitting* 80) But Langer misinterprets the function of these perpetrator depictions. For, despite the severe accusations aroused by both novels, each appears motivated less by an aspiration to "boldness" or impiety than by an impulse to delineate a historical instance of what can only be termed "evil" from its romanticized counterpart in literature. "When I wrote my *Eichmann in Jerusalem*," Arendt explained in a 1973 interview, "one of my main intentions was to destroy the legend of the greatness of evil, of the demonic force, to take away from people the admiration they have for the great evildoers like Richard III or et cetera" (*The Last Interview* 130). The "fresh understanding" of Nazi mentality was pioneered by Hannah Arendt, first in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and later in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. By offering a vision of Hitler whose "grammar of Hell" (Steiner, *Portage* 45)—though thoroughly mendacious—is not without a certain seductive logic, and a vision of Höss who appears more common man than mythological monster, *The Portage to San Cristóbal of A.H.* and *Sophie's Choice* offer literary reiterations of Arendt's insights—vital insights which, even today, continue to be met with resistance.

CHAPTER 3

PERPETRATOR PARABLES: SIMON WIESENTHAL'S *THE SUNFLOWER* AND

JOSEPH CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS*

Compassion and brutality can coexist in the same individual and in the same moment despite all logic; and for all that, compassion itself eludes logic. There is no proportion between the pity we feel and the extent of pain by which the pity is aroused.

Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*

In the corpus of Holocaust literature, the predominant genre is—for quite obvious reasons—the survivor's memoir. Memoirs tend to be privileged over novels for their ability to transmit firsthand experience of the horrors of the Holocaust. When Sue Vice admonishes us not to “consign [Holocaust fiction] as a whole to the status of a failed supplement” (*Holocaust Fiction*, 8), she leaves unsaid that fiction is considered a failed supplement to its superior, more truthful counterpart, the Holocaust memoir. But the demarcating line between these two genres—memoirs as “true,” novels as “invented”—is neither stark nor wholly impermeable. Tadeusz Borowski and Imre Kertesz, to give but two examples, both produced texts offered as fiction (*This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* and *Fateless*, respectively), but it should go without saying that these “fictional” texts were drawn from and informed by the authors' all-too-real experiences in Auschwitz. The raw material from which they sculpted their stories and characters—as may be said of any writer in any genre of fiction—was their firsthand experience.

Likewise, memoirs—though generally held to be purer and truer than any text offered as a novel—undergo editorial and aestheticizing processes not entirely dissimilar from the way a fiction writer prepares a novel. Even the two best known and widely read Holocaust memoirs, Elie Wiesel's *Night* and Primo Levi's *If This is a Man*, bear

significant traces of literary artifice. Ruth Franklin points out that, “In Italy *If This is a Man* is read as an autobiographical novel, which seems absurd to American readers accustomed to our culture’s stringent attempts to separate fact and fiction” (59). The version of Wiesel’s *Night* with which American readers are familiar was translated from the French publication, which itself was a significantly condensed and edited reworking of Wiesel’s original, much longer Yiddish text *And the World Was Silent*. Both Levi and Wiesel were driven to bear witness to Auschwitz, but each author molded his testimony to serve other purposes as well: Levi, a chemist, to analyze the camp as “predominantly a gigantic biological and social experiment” (*If This is A Man* 93), and Wiesel, in a more religious vein, to shake readers out of complacency with his righteous outrage over the greatest obscenity ever to appear in the world.

Memoirs, then, can be put to purposes other than the sole recording of autobiographical facts and reminiscences. If one can be offered as an analytical tract or an outraged cry, might not another be offered didactically, even as a parable? And if so, where would the lines demarcating the genre be drawn? Is there a limit to the amount of sculpting a narrative can undergo before it must be reclassified from a memoir to a work of fiction, autobiographical or otherwise? For Franklin, such questions are redundant. In *A Thousand Darknesses*, she writes, “The problem is that these categories are perpetually fluid. *Night*—like the stories of Tadeusz Borowski, the autobiographical works of Primo Levi, and *virtually every other important work of literature about the Holocaust*—has been understood, at different times, as *both* a novel and a memoir” (9: italics in original). Yet, some authors and texts seem to be privileged over others; the presence of literary

artifice in one memoir may garner praise, while its presence in another may garner condemnation.

Such is the case with Simon Wiesenthal's *The Sunflower*, a memoir which, due in part to questions raised about its factuality, has not reached Wiesel's or Levi's level of canonicity. Some readers, including German novelist Heinrich Boll, casted doubt on the story upon its earliest appearance. Wiesenthal himself was unequivocal on the story's veracity: "Yes, of course it really happened . . . It happened to me" (qtd. in Segev 239). Furthermore, it has little in common with any other Holocaust memoir, many of which understandably follow a similar narrative trajectory: deportation, imprisonment, liberation. Wiesenthal's *Sunflower* leaves out even the sequence of events that led him to the labor camp where the narrative is set, and at fewer than one hundred pages, the text appears brief when contrasted to the testimonies of other survivors. As a result, *The Sunflower* receives little attention from scholars today. But a close reading of its pivotal scenes, one that leaves aside questions of factuality and instead uses Hannah Arendt's notion of thoughtlessness to interpret its depiction of an SS foot soldier, reveals the text to be a great deal richer and more ambiguous than it was hitherto thought to be. Moreover, considering the fluidity between fiction and memoirs, examining Wiesenthal's text alongside a novel—particularly, a novel dealing with the nature of genocidal evil, like Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*—may be equally productive as situating it among other Holocaust memoirs and eyewitness accounts.

In *Preempting the Holocaust*, Langer acknowledges that "Unlike Elie Wiesel's *Night*, it is not designed to describe Wiesenthal's personal ordeal in the various labor and concentration camps he experienced. We are given few dates and place names; indeed,

Wiesenthal never mentions most of the stops on his arduous journey from Lemberg to Mauthausen” (*Preempting* 166). Instead of recounting his own experiences of profound degradation in the camps, Wiesenthal devotes much of his narrative to constructing the complex subjectivity of an SS perpetrator, suggesting not only a structural or generic divergence from more traditional Holocaust memoirs (a genre which, at the time of *The Sunflower*’s publication, was less established and codified than it would become by the time of Langer’s writing), but also a difference in the book’s purpose and function whose significance is augmented by the timeliness of its appearance.

The Sunflower reconstructs a single incident from Wiesenthal’s imprisonment in Janowska when he was summoned to the bedside of “Karl,” an SS infantryman who lay dying from wounds inflicted on the Eastern front. Karl confesses his participation in an SS *aktion* which entailed corralling approximately three hundred Jews—men, women, and children—into a house, setting the house alight, and gunning down any who attempted escape. Karl personally fired upon a family of three as they leapt from a window, and their faces continue to haunt him now, as his own death approaches. He summons Wiesenthal to beg his forgiveness, explaining, “I have longed to talk about it to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him, only I didn’t know whether there were any Jews left” (54). Wiesenthal endures hearing the SS man’s story in full, but he leaves the room finally in silence, neither granting nor overtly refusing Karl’s request. After his liberation, Wiesenthal travels to Stuttgart to meet Karl’s mother, “Maria S—,” a woman whose postwar life remains shrouded in compounding veils of grief and denial. “I can well believe what people said,” Frau Maria explains to Wiesenthal, “so many dreadful things happened. But one thing is certain, Karl never did any wrong. He was always a

decent young man” (94). As he did at Karl’s bedside in the labor camp, Wiesenthal again remains silent, refusing either to affirm or disavow the illusions Frau Maria maintains of her good son.

When Wiesenthal composed *The Sunflower* in 1969, he never intended the story to stand solely on its own merits. Prior to its first publication, Wiesenthal mailed out dozens of drafts, soliciting responses to the text’s concluding question—“What would I have done?” (98)—from writers, intellectuals, and religious leaders around the world. Israeli historian Tom Segev, Wiesenthal’s most recent (and arguably most even-handed) biographer, asserts that “Wiesenthal was a frustrated writer ... his literary talent was meager, and deep down he must have known it” (229). “Several dozen [writers] agreed to allow him to publish their remarks together with his tale,” Segev reports, “Thus, [Wiesenthal] placed himself alongside them, and them alongside himself; one of them, or perhaps not” (229). In Segev’s account, Wiesenthal’s *Sunflower* project manifested an endeavor to allow other writers to provide Wiesenthal a crutch for his own authorial insufficiencies, a means to enter the parlor of Holocaust literary discourse, still nascent in the late 1960’s, through the backdoor. Segev fails to note, though, the significant innovation of *The Sunflower*, the way in which it diverges sharply from other Holocaust memoirs: most of the space in Wiesenthal’s brief text is devoted not to his own experiences, but to those of an SS perpetrator.

The Sunflower’s most recent incarnation, occasioned by the twentieth anniversary of its American debut, appeared in 1997. Each reissue preserves Wiesenthal’s story and updates the Symposium section, soliciting fresh perspectives on the text’s central questions and further solidifying the Symposium as an integral component of *The*

Sunflower itself. The plurality of viewpoints housed in the Symposium testifies to the ethical, political, and theological ambiguities encapsulated within Wiesenthal's brief tale; no two responses are identical, and no single response can confidently be labeled definitive. Edward H. Flannery, for instance, condemns Wiesenthal's actions so sharply in his 1976 response that he offered a tempered revision for later editions. Placing Wiesenthal's refusal to express forgiveness on a continuum with the very hate that led to the Nazi slaughter, Flannery ends his original essay by articulating another question: "while conscious of the vast differences in the respective situations and culpabilities involved, we may ask whether Simon and his advisors did not themselves participate in Karl's sin" (*Sunflower* 1976, 115).⁷ Cynthia Ozick's response, presented in sharp opposition to Flannery's, challenges the efficacy of forgiveness itself in such a context, outlining the ways it may in fact function to brutalize the Nazis' victims even further by "cultivat[ing] sensitiveness toward the murderer at the price of insensitiveness toward the victim" (216). Ozick's penultimate lines remain unchanged in both editions: "Let the SS man die unshriven. Let him go to Hell" (220). These two responses exemplify the furthest polarities of *The Sunflower's* Symposium; other respondents mediate the nuanced space between the poles.

Of all the respondents to answer either Wiesenthal's or the publisher's request, only Lawrence Langer, appearing for the first time in the 1997 edition, begins with a dismissal of the project itself: "I have no idea what I might have done in Simon Wiesenthal's place," Langer begins, "nor do I believe that the question is a legitimate one. Role-playing about Holocaust reality trivializes the serious issues of judgment and

⁷ This is the only instance in which I cite the 1976 edition of *The Sunflower*. Given Flannery's excision of this sentiment from his 1997 Symposium response, it would appear that the answer is *no*, Wiesenthal and his fellow inmates at Janowska did not "participate in Karl's sin."

forgiveness that *The Sunflower* raises” (186). From here, Langer suggests that by making his own actions the fulcrum point on which the narrative pivots, Wiesenthal diverts attention from the more pertinent questions lingering in *The Sunflower*’s subtext. Langer’s shift in focus from Wiesenthal’s actions to Karl’s inarguably provides a productive framework through which we may approach this deceptively straightforward text; indeed, the questions he outlines—questions about Karl’s own motivations for joining the SS and committing mass murder—reside at the center of my own interpretation. Before examining Wiesenthal’s text in detail, though, I’ll return to Langer, who concludes his Symposium response with the following sentiment: “Such are the questions, only implicit in Wiesenthal’s narrative, that should challenge our imagination. Simon Wiesenthal himself was and remains innocent of any wrong” (190).

In 1998, Langer’s Symposium response reappeared as part of a chapter in *Preempting the Holocaust*, a book which, as Langer explains in his introduction, arose from “a restless discontent with the lingering habit of shifting the focus of Holocaust discussion from the central issue of mass murder to any number of auxiliary matters that skirt the question of how it was done, and why” (*Preempting* xi). In his characteristically vigorous mode, Langer takes to task such texts as Tzvetan Todorov’s *Facing the Extreme* and Judy Chicago’s *Holocaust Project* for imposing an air of redemption onto Holocaust atrocity and “using mass murder as a text for furthering personal agendas about humanity’s capacity for goodness or its ability to resist oppression” (xvii). The ambition is by no means an ignoble, and Langer is by no means the first to take issue with texts—historical, philosophical, theological, or literary—that distort the events of the Holocaust into a wellspring for hope or a source for renewing a narcissistic confidence in humanity.

But it is rather confounding that among all the texts Langer examines, as Morris Dickstein boasts in a glowing *New York Times* review of *Preempting the Holocaust*, “The full blast of Langer’s righteous indignation is reserved for Simon Wiesenthal’s little parable, ‘The Sunflower’” (Dickstein). Langer condemns *The Sunflower*, a project in which he participated only a year before, more harshly than any of the other offending texts he interrogates.

“Curiously,” Langer writes in “Wiesenthal’s *Sunflower* Dilemma: A Response,” “of the eleven contributors who appear in both Symposiums, only one felt the need to revise the earlier submission” (*Preempting* 178). Langer refers to Flannery here, who after twenty years revised his original Symposium response to temper his condemnation of Wiesenthal’s actions. Langer himself, conversely, revised and expanded his own response to include a *sharper* condemnation of Wiesenthal, publishing it a year later with the assurance, stated in the acknowledgements, that it “appears in this volume [*Preempting the Holocaust*] for the first time” (x). His Symposium response’s concluding line, “Simon Wiesenthal was and remains innocent of any wrong,” gets excised from the later version, and we get the sense that Langer takes umbrage not with Wiesenthal’s actions as depicted in the story, but with Wiesenthal’s having written the story in the first place. “It is one thing to ask whether an Adolf Eichmann or a Klaus Barbie, after publicly professing what sounds like genuine contrition, deserves spiritual pardon for his deeds. It is another *to create* an anonymous SS man who . . . asks forgiveness so that he may die in peace” (168: italics added). In his original Symposium response, Langer raises concerns about the narrative authority of *The Sunflower*, treating it as a memoir which, in the interest of historical fidelity, ought to be approached with

some qualifications. By the time his Symposium response evolved into a book chapter, Langer approaches the text as a work of fiction.

The chapter's first lines assert confidently that "Simon Wiesenthal's *The Sunflower* need not be read as a personal memoir. It can just as easily be seen as a moral fable *invented* to illustrate a universal dilemma" (166: italics added). It is this immediate establishment of *The Sunflower* as, possibly, a purely imaginary construction that affords Langer license to unleash "the full blast" of his "righteous indignation." Nowhere is this shift in Langer's approach to the tale more evident than in the following revision: "All we have is Wiesenthal's remembered account, a reproduced voice, not an authentic one. The long monologues of the dying SS man cannot be verbatim, only approximate" (Wiesenthal 187, *Preempting* 182). These lines appear in both versions of the piece, but in the later one, appended with a semicolon, Langer adds, "indeed, as I have suggested, they may not reflect an actual event" (182).

Langer's abrupt turnaround regarding *The Sunflower* might be viewed as a microcosmic enactment of a broader turnaround, decades in the making, regarding its author's reputation and legacy. In the immediate shadow of Adolf Eichmann's trial in 1961, through the late 1960's and 1970's, Simon Wiesenthal enjoyed the unassailable stature of a international hero, that of a Holocaust survivor whose efforts to bring atrocity perpetrators to justice were motivated by an unfaltering loyalty to his memory of the victims. "When we come to the other world and meet the millions of Jews who died in the camps and they ask us, 'what have you done?'," Wiesenthal famously explained, "there will be many answers. You will say, 'I became a jeweler.' ... Another will say, 'I built houses.' But I will say, 'I didn't forget you'" (qtd. in Farnsworth). A "sleuth with

six million clients,” as a 1964 *New York Times* profile describes him, Wiesenthal was generally recognized in his “Nazi-hunter” capacity as a man whose intractable commitment to remembering an atrocious past imbued him with an equally intractable faith both in the principles of justice and in humankind’s ability to repair itself.

Paraphrasing the remarks of an official at the Los Angeles Museum of Tolerance bearing Wiesenthal’s name, Segev writes, “If he had not existed, Wiesenthal would have had to be invented, because people all over the world, both Jews and Gentiles, needed him as an emblem of hope” (7). This hope was derived not only from Wiesenthal’s efforts to rouse Nazi criminals from their obscure postwar lives and see them brought before courts of law, but also from his continued belief in the courts’—and thus the *law’s*—efficacy, even in a world that had given rise to torture centers like Plaszow and Mauthausen, where he had once been imprisoned. International media outlets spun a heroic myth about Wiesenthal, one to which he never hesitated to contribute, and the mythology eventually outsized the man.

Over time, though, the impeccability of the Wiesenthal legend met considerable challenges. Perhaps the most significant of these came during the 1980’s, in the acrimonious public dispute between Wiesenthal and the World Jewish Congress over the military career of Austrian president Kurt Waldheim.⁸ Around the time of his election, it was revealed that Waldheim had served in an SS corps during the war, and proven moreover that he had lied about his service for decades. Eli Rosenbaum, the U.S. Department of Justice attorney who led the investigation into Waldheim’s past, published

⁸ The details of this dispute are too voluminous to be recounted here in full. Wiesenthal’s own account can be found in his 1989 memoir, *Justice Not Vengeance*. See also Hella Pick’s biography *Simon Wiesenthal: A Life in Search of Justice* (Boston: North Eastern UP, 1996); Eli Rosenbaum and William Hoffer’s *Betrayal: The Untold Story of the Kurt Waldheim Investigation and Cover-Up* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1993); and Tom Segev’s *Simon Wiesenthal: The Life and Legends* (New York: Doubleday, 2010).

an account called *Betrayal* in 1993; the title refers, in part, to Wiesenthal, whom Rosenbaum characterized as “the moat that surrounded Castle Waldheim” (298).

Rosenbaum concludes his account of the Waldheim investigation alleging that Wiesenthal

had used his ‘mandate’ to help elect to Austria’s presidency an accused war criminal . . . He had given aid and comfort to some of the vilest hate-mongers in Austria, even adopting some of their code words in attacking the World Jewish Congress . . . Worst of all, he had resorted to the basest tactic of all: denying undeniable facts about the Holocaust and other Nazi barbarities. This act of utter indecency—the ultimate betrayal of Hitler’s victims—is one that none of us, even those who knew the truth about Wiesenthal’s Nazi-hunting ‘record,’ could ever have imagined him capable of committing. (463)

In 1993, *Schindler’s List*’s runaway success and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s opening brought the Holocaust to the forefront of American public consciousness. That same year also saw Simon Wiesenthal accused, because of his refusal to join the chorus of voices condemning Waldheim, of abetting the very perpetrators he strove so long to see prosecuted. *Betrayal* displayed an endorsement on its cover from Elie Wiesel, praising it as “Expert and eloquent . . . a well-documented, important book.” Wiesenthal’s defense of his decision not to join the U.S. Department of Justice’s campaign against Waldheim rested on a fact that even Rosenbaum’s *Betrayal* could not evade: Waldheim was—and remains—an *accused*, as opposed to a *proven*, war criminal. Wiesenthal maintained that he was only concerned with the latter.

Today, discussions of Wiesenthal's legacy remain disputatious. British historian Guy Walters's *Hunting Evil*, a 2009 study of postwar efforts to track down escaped Nazi perpetrators, depicts Wiesenthal in a categorically unfavorable manner, proclaiming him "a liar, and a bad one at that" (Walters 99). *Hunting Evil* devotes more space to Wiesenthal than any other single figure, and throughout the book Walters raises suspicions about which camps Wiesenthal experienced, the role he played in the capture of Adolf Eichmann, and even the veracity of Wiesenthal's university education. For Walters, the various inconsistencies between Wiesenthal's autobiographical writings, which Walters devotes an inordinate amount of space to "exposing," provide sufficient evidence to discredit the entirety of Wiesenthal's career. "Wiesenthal's scant regard for truth," Walters claims, "makes it possible to doubt *everything* he ever wrote or said" (78: italics in original). Given the apparent enthusiasm Walters displays for dismantling Wiesenthal's reputation throughout *Hunting Evil*, his relenting suggestion near the book's conclusion that "It is partly thanks to Wiesenthal that the Holocaust has been remembered and properly recorded, and this is perhaps his greatest legacy" (406) appears hollow, and Walters's later remarks bear out its insincerity. In an online column for *The Daily Mail* that appeared shortly after the publication of *Hunting Evil*, he proclaims, "In my view, Simon Wiesenthal was a liar and a fraud. In fact, I'd go so far as to say he was one of the biggest conmen of the 20th century ... Any man who utters so many untruths does not deserve to be revered."

Where, then, does this leave *The Sunflower*? For Walters—whose fervent takedown of Wiesenthal in *Hunting Evil*, it should be noted, makes no mention of the book—it would seem to manifest "just one more of Simon Wiesenthal's many lies"

(100); furthermore, such a claim could be bolstered by no less an authority than Lawrence Langer, who suggests that the memoir “may not reflect an actual event” (*Preempting* 182). Elie Wiesel, whose remarks on *The Sunflower* were published in 2000, appears unconcerned even with the story’s truth-value: “It is the story of a dying SS officer who, inside a concentration camp, begs him, Wiesenthal, to forgive him. It sounds preposterous to me, but how do I know? I haven’t read it yet” (*And the Sea* 122). Given Wiesel’s and Langer’s stature as two of the most prominent voices in contemporary Holocaust discourse—Gary Weissman identifies them as the survivor-writer and literary scholar “most influential in shaping how non-witnesses and the broader public understand the Holocaust in the United States” (210)—we could reasonably deduce that inasmuch as a canon of Holocaust literature exists, *The Sunflower* has been summarily dismissed from it.

Concerning *The Sunflower*’s fidelity to “an actual event,” we should recall the sentiments Wiesel expresses in the introduction to *Legends of Our Time*, published only a year before *The Sunflower* first appeared. Wiesel describes an instance from his childhood when a Rebbe happened upon him writing stories which “were invented from almost the beginning to almost the end” (viii)—in a word, *fiction*. The Rebbe scolds young Elie for writing “lies,” prompting Wiesel to explain, “Things are not that simple, Rebbe. Some events do take place but are not true; others are—although they never occurred” (viii). A similar paradox introduces Charlotte Delbo’s “None of Us Will Return,” the first section of what would eventually be published in English as *Auschwitz and After*. “Today,” Delbo expresses in her epigram, “*I am not sure that what I wrote is true. I am certain it is truthful*” (1: italics in original). Ruth Franklin, whose critical

monograph *A Thousand Darknesses* lucidly explores the umbilicus connecting memoirs and novels, addresses this paradoxical strain in Holocaust literature by dismissing the possibility of wholly unadulterated written testimony at the outset of her argument. Franklin writes, “To consider any text ‘pure testimony,’ completely free from aestheticizing influences and narrative conventions, is naïve” (11). She suggests also that the tendency to condemn memoirs—of Holocaust experiences or any other kind—that do not adhere to a nearly impossible standard of factuality is itself a relatively new trend, manifesting a reaction to the “modern ‘memoir boom’” (Franklin 10) of the 1990’s.

More importantly, though, there is a valuable literary dimension to Wiesenthal’s text—namely, its complex and ambiguous depiction of evil—that gets overlooked when the dialogue surrounding it focuses solely or even primarily on the degree to which it depicts “actual events.” Indeed, in its exhortation to judge Wiesenthal’s actions rather than Karl’s, *The Sunflower*’s concluding question, “What would I have done?” (98), appears to deflect attention from the text’s protracted, profound meditation on modern, political evil. “The vital question to ask about this text,” writes Langer in both his Symposium response and his subsequent essay, “is not whether Wiesenthal should have forgiven the SS man” (in Wiesenthal 190, *Preempting* 185), but rather why Karl gave himself over to National Socialism, volunteered for the SS, obeyed an order to murder Jewish civilians, including children; in short, the most crucial questions for Langer pertain to Karl’s actions rather than Wiesenthal’s. But is it possible to consider the actions of either figure without carefully examining the other’s? Considering the specific action that Wiesenthal invites readers to judge—*his own judgment of Karl*—we could say that Wiesenthal’s question encapsulates all of Langer’s within it, for it is impossible to

reflect upon Wiesenthal's silence at Karl's bedside without reflecting carefully upon *The Sunflower's* ambiguous depiction of evil as a phenomenon more political than metaphysical, more banal than extraordinary.

In *The Holocaust in American Life*, Peter Novick ascribes much of the controversy over *Eichmann in Jerusalem* to Hannah Arendt's refusal to view the Holocaust through a bifurcated lens of unassailable good and irredeemable evil. Describing the tenor of Holocaust discourse in the 1960's Novick writes, "there was already a great deal of visceral resistance to its being discussed in terms other than the confrontation of pure evil and pure virtue. Arendt's failure to abide by these norms—her insistence on stressing complexity and ambiguity—was clearly, and understandably, one of the things that gave the greatest offense" (141). Into a discursive environment still reeling from Arendt's perceived transgressions, Wiesenthal introduced a depiction of an SS murderer that stresses "complexity and ambiguity" so fully that Karl appears almost sympathetic at times. And no one was less likely to offer such a depiction at the time than the world's most renowned Nazi-hunter.

Arendt herself was among the initial recipients of Wiesenthal's *Sunflower* manuscript, but she—along with Gunter Grass, David Ben-Gurion, Arthur Miller, and Charlie Chaplin, among others—never composed a response (Segev 236). We can only speculate as to how Arendt would have responded to Wiesenthal's narrative; as it stands, Arendt's only overt appearance in the Symposium occurs in Cynthia Ozick's response, when Ozick dislodges a quotation on forgiveness from *The Human Condition*, inserting it into a context Arendt would have never endorsed. Near the end of her response, Ozick writes, "I discover a quotation attributed to Hannah Arendt: 'The only antidote to the

irreversibility of history is the faculty of forgiveness.’ Jabberwocky at last. She is the greatest moral philosopher of our age, but even she cannot make a Lazarus of history” (220). Ozick neglects to mention that in *The Human Condition*, Arendt’s discussion of forgiveness is less concerned with absolving wrongdoers of guilt than with empowering victims of wrongdoing not to *remain* victims; “forgiveness,” in this quotation’s original context, is offered as a means to break historical cycles of violence and vengeance, which begets retributive violence. The faculty of forgiveness Arendt explores in *The Human Condition* would not be automatically extended to genocide perpetrators; Arendt confirms as much in the conclusion of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, during her direct address to the accused: “just as you supported and carried out a policy of not wanting to share the earth with the Jewish people . . . no one, that is, no member of the human race, can be expected to want to share the earth with you” (279). For Arendt, participation in a crime *against* humanity means abdicating—*by choice*—one’s association with the community of humanity.

Nevertheless, Arendt’s concept of forgiveness as a means of empowering victims of wrongdoing—rather than a means of absolving wrongdoers—finds a champion today in the person of Eva Mozes Kor, a child survivor of Auschwitz who, along with her twin sister Miriam, suffered under the torturous experiments of Dr. Josef Mengele. Kor aroused controversy in 1995 by declaring publicly—on the grounds of Auschwitz, no less—that she has forgiven her Nazi persecutors. This declaration, as well as the gamut of reactions it aroused from scholars and other Holocaust survivors, is the subject of the 2006 documentary *Forgiving Dr. Mengele*, and Kor’s most ardent critics seem not to acknowledge the idiosyncratic character of Kor’s employment of forgiveness as a means

to *self*-empowerment; like Ozick, Kor's critics interpret "forgiveness"—ostensibly the central issue presented in *The Sunflower*—solely as a means to absolve perpetrators of wrongdoing.

Kor clarified her definition of forgiveness in a 2015 interview, explaining, I discovered that I had the power to forgive ... And the whole idea that I had the power to forgive the Angel of Death, that *I* had any power over *him*, was very interesting. And I realized that he cannot change that. What I do in the present, and even if *he* was present in that room, there was nothing he could do to change it. That was my ultimate reaction to him. And that felt somehow extremely empowering. Because that's really what forgiveness is: tremendously empowering. Because up to that time, I was always reacting to what other people did to me.⁹

For Eva Kor, "forgiveness itself a selfish act. The forgiveness is not given as a gift to somebody; it's given as a gift to oneself. Because it heals *you*, not because it helps somebody else heal." Furthermore, her concept of forgiveness is decidedly not reliant upon a perpetrator's expression of remorse or repentance. When I introduced Kor to Arendt's aphoristic quotation—"The only antidote to the irreversibility of history is the faculty of forgiveness"—her response was curt and unequivocal: "Amen. Because this is when the victim has power over the perpetrator."

However, the issue of forgiveness in *The Sunflower*, which receives exhaustive treatment in the memoir's Symposium, is by no means the only issue in the text that Arendt's ideas might aid in illuminating; her ideas speak also—and perhaps more directly

⁹ I have included the entirety of this interview, which I conducted with Eva Mozes Kor in Krakow, Poland on June 25th, 2015, as an appendix to this dissertation.

—to the text’s ambiguous depiction of evil. Despite Arendt’s choice not to participate in Wiesenthal’s Symposium on whether or not he should—or *could*—have forgiven a dying SS murderer, we find a subtle trace of her imprint in Wiesenthal’s depiction of Karl and the sort of evil he embodies. In his biography of Wiesenthal, Segev explains, “The more he listened to Eichmann, Wiesenthal’s impression grew that here was a hollow man, totally banal. He thus tended to accept the opinion that was later expressed by Hannah Arendt in her book on the trial, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*” (154). As a man who played a role in Eichmann’s capture, Wiesenthal would have surely taken great interest in the manifold discussions and debates about Eichmann that occurred through the 1960’s and beyond.

Like many commentators before him, Segev betrays his own confusion about Arendt’s argument here; it was not Eichmann himself she described as “banal,” but rather the novel brand of horrific evil in which Eichmann had participated. Contrary to Segev’s assertions, Arendt never characterized Eichmann’s crimes as the result of “merely mechanical obedience” (Segev 154). “As a man who identified with the principles of humanistic ethics,” writes Segev, “Wiesenthal ... preferred Arendt’s thesis. She too refused to see in Eichmann a thinking person; she therefore erred in her assessment of him, as did Wiesenthal” (155). But it may indeed be Segev who errs here in his own assessment of Arendt, for whom “thoughtlessness” was far from synonymous with the colloquial concept of “unthinking.” Indeed, many—if not *most*—of the condemnations of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* stem from a misinterpretation of precisely what Arendt meant when she discussed “thinking.” In a 1964 essay titled “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship,” Arendt endeavored to clarify, in the midst of the uproar aroused by

Eichmann in Jerusalem, precisely what she meant when she isolated “thoughtlessness” as one of the defining characteristics of Nazi perpetrators. Arendt exercises care in this piece not to offer a point-by-point refutation of the various accusations leveled against her trial report, for, as she puts it, “a large part of the controversy was devoted to a book that was never written” (17). But in her 1964 essay, Arendt explicitly traces out a process left in the subtext of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, driving home her argument that what she termed “thoughtlessness” encompassed a phenomenon much broader and more wide-reaching than unquestioning obedience. For Arendt, “thoughtlessness” did not denote an individual’s deference to superiors, but rather an unwillingness or inability to hold a meaningful dialogue *with oneself*.

Aghast at the vitriol aroused by *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt attempted to clarify this point a year after its publication by turning her attention to the minority of Germans who, unlike Adolf Eichmann, worked *not to* participate, in any way, with the Nazi regime’s policies. Dismissing the notion that their nonparticipation stemmed from a commitment to any particular moral or religious code, Arendt instead suggests that “they refused to murder, not so much because they still held fast to the command ‘Thou shalt not kill,’ but because they were unwilling to live together with a murderer—themselves” (“Personal Responsibility” 44). She continues,

The precondition for this kind of judging is not a highly developed intelligence or sophistication in moral matters, but rather the disposition to live together explicitly with oneself, to have intercourse with oneself, that is, to be engaged in that silent dialogue between me and myself which, since Socrates and Plato, we usually call thinking. This kind of thinking, though at the root of all philosophical

thought, is not technical and does not concern theoretical problems. The dividing line between those who want to think and therefore have to judge by themselves, and those who do not, strikes across all social and cultural or educational differences. (44-45)

Thus, for Arendt, the act of thinking and the perpetual demands it places upon individuals takes on an ethical dimension unrelated to any particular moral or religious code. Rather, for Arendt, the real danger of thoughtlessness lies in the way it leaves individuals susceptible to exchanging any set of ethical mores for another, no matter how abhorrent.

Arendt's emphasis on the ethical dimensions of thinking—though an outgrowth of her consideration of Adolf Eichmann, who went thoughtlessly even to his execution—may offer a helpful lens through which to view Karl as he appears in *The Sunflower*. Wiesenthal's text in large part manifests a chronicle of Karl's realization that he is "unwilling to live with a murderer—[himself]" (Arendt, "Personal Responsibility" 44), but Karl experiences this epiphany only *after* he becomes a murderer, and, moreover, has been mortally wounded. He *thinks*, but not—to employ a colloquial metaphor Arendt favored—when the chips are down. Using Arendt's notion of thoughtlessness as a critical lens to interpret *The Sunflower* may serve to counterbalance the ungenerous analysis Langer offers in *Preempting the Holocaust*. Furthermore, *The Sunflower*'s complexity and literary sophistication, which both Langer and Segev dismiss as nonexistent, becomes clearer when the text is examined alongside a mainstay of the Western literary canon, a novel whose historical significance for Arendt could never be overstated: Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

A Case for Comparison

In *King Leopold's Ghost*, an historical account of the mass violence perpetrated in the Congo Free State, Adam Hochschild laments that with regard to Joseph Conrad's canonical modernist novella, "European and American readers, not comfortable acknowledging the genocidal scale of the killing in Africa at the turn of the century, have cast *Heart of Darkness* loose from its moorings" (143). Hochschild remarks specifically on the manner in which *Heart of Darkness* is taught and discussed, listing the array of theoretical lenses with which scholars and professors "tend to" approach the novel. As a result, "We read [*Heart of Darkness*] as a parable for all times and places, not as a book about one time and place" (143). Curiously, though, a tendency similar to the one Hochschild critiques is exhibited throughout *King Leopold's Ghost* with regard to events in European history: namely, the systematic extermination of Europe's Jews by the German Nazi regime. Hochschild's account strips the Holocaust of its historical specificity and deploys it instead as a universal touchstone against which other genocidal acts are to be measured.

At several points, Hochschild draws from eyewitness accounts of the Holocaust to illustrate the scale and severity of violence perpetrated against the Congolese. Hochschild presents quotations from Primo Levi, as well as from Treblinka commandant Franz Stangl, as a means to offer insight into the motivations of King Leopold's murderous emissaries to Africa. Sarah De Mul points out that "Although these two political catastrophes are set in different moments in history and dissimilar geographic locations, *King Leopold's Ghost* brings them together and, in so doing, separates them considerably from their historically specific circumstances" (590-91). Just as Hochschild

claims of imperial history in interpretations of *Heart of Darkness*, then, Holocaust history in *King Leopold's Ghost* is—at least to some degree—cast loose from its moorings.

These points are not raised to fault Hochschild's study (which is excellent), but to call attention to the complexities of approaching literary texts as historical documents and, conversely, treating history as we would treat a literary text. Just as Hochschild critiques literary approaches to *Heart of Darkness* that, in his view, evade a confrontation with the history that informs it, some of Hochschild's critics hold that his comparison of the Congo Free State with Nazi extermination facilities manifests "an insult to the truth" (qtd. in De Mul 591). But the comparison itself, which need not be read as ahistorical, does not originate with Hochschild; Arendt elucidated the analogues between imperial and totalitarian violence in as early as 1951, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Assessing the structure of imperial rule, which substituted race for nation and bureaucracy for government, Arendt writes, "Lying under anybody's nose were many of the elements which gathered together could create a totalitarian government on the basis of racism" (*Origins* 221). Though she takes care not to suggest a direct causal relationship, Arendt argues that imperialist ideologies of racial supremacy and limitless expansion would eventually crystallize on the European continent in an unprecedented political manifestation: totalitarianism, of which the German Nazi regime was an exemplar.

To be sure, numerous commentators have highlighted the problems intrinsic not only to Arendt's analysis of imperialism, but to her reliance on *Heart of Darkness* throughout that analysis. Arendt's treatment of the novella as an unadulterated representation of imperialism imbues the second book of *Origins* with a Eurocentric cultural chauvinism, depicting native Africans as "human beings ... living without the

future of a purpose and the past of an accomplishment” (Arendt 190). Thus, we locate in Arendt some of the same troublesome tendencies Chinua Achebe famously located in Conrad: “the desire—one might say the need—in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe’s own state of spiritual grace will be manifest” (251-252). When Arendt writes about the trauma engendered by imperial encounters, she locates it exclusively in the minds of European imperialist perpetrators, whose humanity she identifies, rather than the native inhabitants of the areas they occupy, whose humanity she does not.

Recently, though, Michael Rothberg has returned to Arendt’s analysis of imperialism to assist in formulating his concept of “multidirectional memory,” a paradigm for acknowledging violent histories that resists placing them in competition with one another. Fully aware of the problems inherent in Arendt’s conception of Africa as “an untouched, overwhelmingly hostile nature that nobody had ever taken the trouble to change into a human landscape” (*Origins* 191), Rothberg asserts that the continuities Arendt traces between nineteenth century imperialism and twentieth century totalitarianism remain, for all their faults, crucial to our understanding of violent legacies today. As Rothberg points out, “Arendt . . . situate[s] the core of her argument [in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*] not in the first section on anti-Semitism, but rather in the second part on imperialism” (41), suggesting the extremities of Nazism to be an expression of societal factors more varied and complex than anti-Semitism alone could account for.

Thus, as early as 1951, “Arendt ... bring[s] us to the brink of a multidirectional dialectic that holds together the universal and the particular and the objective and the subjective sides of colonial and genocidal history. It has taken scholars half a century to catch up to these early insights” (Rothberg 101). It is precisely such a dialectic, one that “holds together the universal and particular,” to which I defer as a starting point for examining Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Wiesenthal’s *The Sunflower*, an admittedly unlikely pairing of authors and texts. Though separated by over half a century in composition and publication, though widely divergent in terms of genre, reception, and stylistics, both texts prompt in readers an ethical consideration of our own relationship, in the present, to an atrocious and genocidal past. Despite their manifold differences, both authors achieve this by staging, via sophisticated narrative maneuvers, confrontations between readers and ambiguous perpetrators of racially motivated mass murder. Moreover, both texts conclude by carrying their narratives beyond the killing field and concentration camp, highlighting the difficulties of confronting violent histories, particularly from the perpetrator’s perspective. Finally, for as striking as the similarities between these texts are, tracing out their dissimilarities yields profound insights as well.

The process of considering these books in tandem offers a potential not only for a richer understanding of the texts themselves and the respective experiences that shaped them, but also for a sharper awareness of literature’s ability to assert the relevance of the past into our contemporary present. We may read both *Heart of Darkness* and *The Sunflower*, to borrow Hochschild’s terms, both as books about one time and place *and* parables for all times and places. For if Rothberg is correct in asserting that “we need to be open to thinking about how the Nazi genocide turns around our understanding of what

came before it” (106), then we ought also to consider the ways that literary texts about the Nazi genocide may generate new readings of texts that precede them. Similarly, loosening the strictures of exclusivity that permeate considerations of Holocaust texts—and situating those texts within a broader literary tradition—could yield insights into both human history’s darkest episodes and the degree to which literary texts can preserve, transmit, and illuminate them.

An Unremarkable Man

Despite the striking homology between these texts—namely, their exploration of the difficulties intrinsic to confronting violent histories—*Heart of Darkness* and *The Sunflower* exhibit a remarkable dissimilarity in their respective depictions of genocidal evil. Conrad’s atmospheric prose and penchant for *literary*, as opposed to *moral*, ambiguity imbue his depiction of Mr. Kurtz with an air of supernatural grandiosity; Marlow reminds us repeatedly that Kurtz was “a remarkable man” (61,69, 73). Indeed, Kurtz embodies many of the qualities that Arendt, a half-century after *Heart of Darkness*’s publication, would note were distinctly absent from a significant contingent of Nazi perpetrators. As early as 1946, as she began to formulate ideas she would articulate more fully in years to come, Arendt wrote to Karl Jaspers, “One thing is certain: we have to combat all impulses to mythologize the horrible, and to the extent that I can’t avoid such formulations, I haven’t understood what actually went on” (Arendt, Jaspers166). Surely, descriptions of Kurtz as “an initiated wraith from the back of Nowhere” (50) whose gaze “was wide enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness” (69) seem to privilege supernatural symbolism—if not outright mythologization—over historical fidelity or verisimilitude.

Critiquing these very aspects of *Heart of Darkness*, Birgit and Daniel Maier-Katkin point out that “the narrative’s excessive fascination with the primitive manifestation of evil, as is represented in the encounter with the antihero Kurtz, detracts attention from more significant representations of ordinary evil that make abusive regimes possible” (587). Ironically, Arendt herself—who would famously coin the phrase “banality of evil” in 1963—appears to have been so seduced by Conrad’s poetical descriptions of Kurtz that her early analysis of imperialism in *Origins* makes no mention of the less spectacular agents of atrocity Conrad depicts, despite the fact that these unnamed characters (the Manager, for example, or the Chief Accountant) exhibit precisely the sort of thoughtless detachment Arendt would later term “the banality of evil.” “The trouble with Eichmann,” Arendt writes in 1963, “was precisely that so many were like him, and that many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal” (276). Arendt’s characterization of Eichmann, which provided a foundation for broader insights into the unique moral and juridical problems posed by Holocaust perpetrators, emphasizes Eichmann’s diametric opposition to a figure like Kurtz; for Arendt, Eichmann’s significance derives from her view of him as a distinctly *unremarkable* man, in spite of the horrors he engendered.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt draws directly from Conrad to describe imperialist perpetrators, writing, “Like Mr. Kurtz in ‘Heart of Darkness,’ they were ‘hollow to the core,’ ‘reckless without hardihood, greedy without audacity and cruel without courage’” (*Origins* 189). She would go on, both later in *Origins* as well as in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, to discuss the subjects of totalitarian regimes in similar terms, and though references to Kurtz here are rhetorically effective in the context of her

broader argument, they are also somewhat misleading. Though Marlow indeed describes Kurtz numerous times as “hollow”—the very character trait T.S. Eliot would employ intertextually in “The Hollow Men”—the remainder of Arendt’s quotation refers not to Kurtz, but to the Eldorado Exploring Expedition, a band of doomed adventurers who cross Marlow’s path early on. “There was not an atom of foresight or of serious intention in the whole batch of them” (32), Marlow explains. The distinction is significant, for Marlow’s strange fascination with Kurtz, the reason he “remained loyal to Kurtz to the last” (70), lies precisely in the aspects of Kurtz’s character that set him apart from Conrad’s “representations of ordinary evil” (Maier-Katkin 587).

Unlike the other imperialist functionaries Conrad depicts, Kurtz traces the “civilizing mission” of imperialism through to its logical extremity, reaching an insight that establishes in a mere four words the very analogues between imperialism and totalitarianism Arendt would trace out half a century later: “Exterminate all the brutes!” (Conrad 51). “Hollow core” notwithstanding, Kurtz’s ability to recognize and admit the Belgian imperial project’s genocidal character absolves him of the charge Arendt levied at Adolf Eichmann in 1963: “He *merely*, to put the matter colloquially, *never realized what he was doing*” (287). Kurtz’s exclamatory directive to *exterminate* the Congolese suggests that although awareness dawns on him late in his career, Mr. Kurtz, unlike his colleagues, realizes precisely what he is doing; as Marlow explains, “He had summed up. He had judged. ‘The horror!’ He was a remarkable man” (Conrad 69).

In grafting these two descriptions together—one of the “universal genius” (30) Kurtz, the other of the buffoonish, unthinking expedition team—Arendt unwittingly highlights the disparity between her 1951 assessment of “radical evil” and her revision of

it a decade later in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. “If it is true,” Arendt writes in the preface to *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, “that in the final stages of totalitarianism an absolute evil appears ... it is also true that without it we might never have known the truly radical nature of evil” (ix). Arendt’s confrontation with the shockingly mediocre Adolf Eichmann a decade later would prompt her to reassess her own ideas on the role of ideology in the formation of mass murderers, and to question the very viability of “radical evil.” In a 1963 letter to Gershom Scholem occasioned by the uproar over *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt explains,

You are quite right: I changed my mind and do no longer speak of radical evil ...

It is indeed my opinion now that evil is never ‘radical,’ that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface. It is ‘thought-defying,’ as I said, because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is its ‘banality’ ... Eichmann may very well remain the concrete model of what I have to say. (*Portable Arendt* 396)

If Eichmann did, in fact, remain the model for Arendt’s notion of “evil” as a human capacity and political reality—defined not by an absence of good but an “inability to think”—then her emphasis on the radically evil Kurtz in *Origins* may have been misplaced.

Given the manifold contradictions with which Conrad imbues his depiction of Kurtz, however, we cannot easily claim that Arendt simply misread him. Jeremy Hawthorne points out that Kurtz’s “significance is surely so unspecific and flexible as to

be capable of becoming anything the reader wants it to be” (57). While this may stand as a testament to the masterful *artistry* of Conrad’s novella, it complicates attempts to interpret Kurtz as a political being; Kurtz functions so richly as a literary conceit that his relation to the human world remains finally unclear. Conrad himself suggests as much, writing in 1902, “What I distinctly admit is the fault of having made Kurtz too symbolic or rather symbolic at all ... I gave rein to my mental laziness and took the line of least resistance” (qtd. in Maier-Katkin 590). In 1969, Simon Wiesenthal would ardently resist any urge to make of Karl a symbolic personification of political or ideological tendencies, and the result would be a depiction of a mass murderer who presents considerably greater challenges to traditional notions of evil. Neither sadism nor selfishness motivates Karl; he even recounts being chastised by a commanding officer for behaving charitably toward Jewish prisoners and sharing his food rations with them.

Wiesenthal’s encounter with Karl exhibits similarities to Marlow’s encounter with Kurtz, but unlike the narrators’ concluding meetings with Frau Maria and Kurtz’s Intended, these similarities are more superficial than substantive. By the time Karl summons Wiesenthal to his bedside, he has been bed-bound and blinded for an unspecified duration, with naught but his guilt for company. “I lie here waiting for death” (Wiesenthal, *Sunflower* 53) Karl tells Wiesenthal, his words a near-verbatim echo of Kurtz’s, who tells a fascinated Marlow, “I am lying here in the dark waiting for death” (Conrad 68). However, whereas Kurtz is paradoxical, entertaining psychotic delusions of omniscience even as his body expires, Karl is merely pathetic, pronouncing the sort of deathbed repentance which, under less extraordinary circumstances, might be viewed as a Catholic cliché. Standing over Kurtz at the moment of his death, in one of the best

known scenes in all of modern literature, Marlow wonders, “Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision—he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath: ‘The horror! The horror!’” (68). Wiesenhal need not ponder any such questions regarding Karl’s moment of epiphany, for, unlike Kurtz, the wounded SS man lucidly recounts his life for Wiesenhal, from his decision to join the SS through his participation in mass murder. Filtered through Marlow’s subjectivity, and presented at a further level of remove considering *Heart of Darkness*’s framing narrative, the mental image that elicits Kurtz’s final dying cry remains inaccessible to readers. Wiesenhal’s Karl, conversely, details his horror for us: “the burning house and the family that jumped from the window” (*Sunflower* 53).

Still more divergent are the respective biographical paths that lead Karl and Kurtz to the deathbeds where the narrators—and by extension, *we*—encounter them. After his return from the Congo, Marlow learns of Kurtz’s life from a number of sources: a cousin of Kurtz’s, a journalist who worked with him, and finally, Kurtz’s Intended. Each testifies to Kurtz’s “universal genius” (Conrad 71), expounding for Marlow upon Kurtz’s achievements in music, the visual arts, journalism, and even politics. “He electrified large meetings,” Kurtz’s newspaper colleague explains, “he would have been a splendid leader of an extreme party” (71). Kurtz proved exceptional—“remarkable,” as Marlow never hesitates to remind us—before he set out from the continent. Even Kurtz’s Intended, in the midst of her grief, speaks of Kurtz with an admiration that seems more befitting of hero worship than romantic love, and she emphasizes Kurtz’s virtues as a leader: “Men looked up to him—his goodness shone in every act. His example...” (75).

Thus, the exceptional cruelty displayed at Kurtz's Inner Station—"those heads on the stakes" (57)—may be read as an inversion of the exceptional talents Kurtz exhibited in his "civilized" life. Cumulatively, these qualities of Conrad's novel function to keep its most sustained depiction of genocidal evil at a safe remove from readers; Kurtz's extraordinary qualities long predate his descent into violent depravity. He at no point exhibits banality, even before he turns to evil, and with Kurtz's spectacular exceptionality comes a tacit assurance for readers that, as an individual, he bears little identifiable resemblance to us.

Wiesenthal, on the other hand, sketches out a shockingly ordinary individual in his depiction of Karl. As Peter Michael Lingens explains in his introduction to Wiesenthal's 1989 memoir, *Justice Not Vengeance*,

The concept of the SS man with satanic eyes, a cynical smile, black jackboots and a menacing Alsatian dog was itself a cliché. It represented the extreme, not the average. Indeed, they were sometimes the less dangerous ones: sadists who might have an orgy of beating, emptying their revolvers and stringing people up—and quite often then stopping. More dangerous—because it was they who kept the system going—were the seemingly average men. The ones who looked like everybody else. Whose emotional life seemed normal. (14)

If we search *Heart of Darkness* for imperialist analogues to Lingens's "seemingly average" SS men, we may find them—in the Manager, perhaps, or the Chief Accountant—but certainly not in the novel's protracted ruminations on Mr. Kurtz, which overshadow the narrative's depictions of banal perpetrators. By offering Karl as *The Sunflower's* only sustained depiction of a perpetrator, Wiesenthal's text adopts what

might be termed an Arendtian stance toward the sort of evil he exemplifies, a depiction that deemphasizes fanatical hatred as Karl's primary motivation and, in lieu of isolating any discernible *causes* for his murderous actions, offers instead a multifaceted network of intangible *reasons*.

Here There is No Why

Conrad's suggestion that the *cause* for Kurtz's madness lay in his encounter with "the wilderness" prompted some of the most poignant and well known critiques of the novel. "[T]he wilderness had found him out early," Marlow cryptically explains of Kurtz, "and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with his great solitude—and the whisper proved irresistibly fascinating" (Conrad 56). It is not unreasonable, then, to conclude, as Chinua Achebe famously did, that the lesson to be gleaned from *Heart of Darkness* is simply to "Keep away from Africa, or else! Mr. Kurtz from *Heart of Darkness* should have heeded that warning and the prowling horror in his heart would have kept its place, chained to its lair. But he foolishly exposed himself to the wild irresistible allure of the jungle and lo! the darkness found him out" (261).

Wiesenthal's narrator, in a humbler, more searching mode than Conrad's, appears reluctant to ascribe any definite causes for Karl's actions, instead juxtaposing two accounts of Karl's life: one of Karl's experiences with the SS, related on his deathbed by Karl himself, and the other an account of Karl's life outside the SS, as told later by his mother. "The two episodes are parallel monologues in *The Sunflower*," writes Langer, "fashioned to establish contrasting portraits of the SS man, forcing us to ask how this

child could possibly have been father to that man” (*Preempting* 167). The disparity between these two accounts, though, is considerably narrower than that which separates the accounts of Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*—the artist and intellectual on one hand, the whimsical sadist on the other—and thus the questions prompted by *The Sunflower* prove all the more difficult to answer. Amending Langer’s assessment only slightly, we might say that *The Sunflower*’s parallel monologues force us to ask how this child, who would eventually be father to that man, could have perpetrated *these acts*.

In both his Symposium response and his longer analysis of *The Sunflower*, Langer proposes that by making his own actions the fulcrum point on which the narrative pivots, Wiesenthal misguidedly directs our attention away from the more pertinent questions left lingering in *The Sunflower*’s subtext. “The vital question to ask about this text,” writes Langer, “is not whether Wiesenthal should have forgiven the SS man” (185). He continues,

It is rather why the SS man, as a young boy, against his father’s wishes, joined enthusiastically in the activities of the Hitler Youth; why, again presumably against his father’s wishes, he *volunteered* for the SS (as free a choice as a man could make at the time); why he then pursued a career in that murderous league of killers without protest, including the episode he tells of on his deathbed; and most important, why he had to wait until he was dying to feel the time had come for repentance and forgiveness. On these issues the SS man is deftly silent.

(*Preempting* 185)

Considering, however, the enormity of the murderous enterprise in which Karl participated, as well as the unfathomable abhorrence of the individual act he confesses—

the murder of a defenseless child and his parents—Langer’s questions prompt yet another: What answers *could* Wiesenthal’s Karl have offered that would appear as anything but obscenely insufficient justifications?

While Langer’s impulse to shift our attention away from Wiesenthal’s choices to Karl’s is sound, his declaration that *The Sunflower* leaves us empty handed once we do so may be premature. Or, more precisely, perhaps the empty-handed state in which *The Sunflower* leaves us is a testament to its richness and efficacy. “Thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots,” Arendt explained in her 1963 letter to Gershom Sholem, “and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is its ‘banality’” (*Portable Arendt* 396). Karl’s—or Wiesenthal’s—silence on these matters in *The Sunflower* may thus be read as one of the narrative’s virtues, rather than as its chief fault. For, by refusing to suggest any discernible cause for Karl’s transformation from a “decent young man” (Wiesenthal, *Sunflower* 94) into a murderer, the narrative *enacts* the very unthinking shallowness which, for Arendt, “can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface” (*Portable Arendt* 396).

“I was not born a murderer” (Wiesenthal, *Sunflower* 31), Karl explains at the outset of his narrative. From here, he describes a relatively ordinary bourgeois upbringing; his parents, as Langer points out, were even pointedly unsympathetic to Nazi ideology. Karl describes his father, a factory manager, as “a convinced Social Democrat” (31) who all but disowned his son as Karl became increasingly involved with the Nazi movement, first as a member of the *Hitlerjugend* and later as an SS volunteer. Already, Karl’s story presents challenges to the comforting stereotype of Nazism as a system of

inescapable, irresistible indoctrination, for even Karl's membership in the *Hitlerjugend*—which, as he states, was not compulsory—was a source of discord in his home. Upon Karl's enrollment in the SS, his father declares, "They are taking our son away from us. No good will come of it" (32). Frau Maria, who had envisioned for her son a career in the church, expresses a similar, if somewhat less pronounced, disapproval: "I joined the Hitler Youth," Karl explains, "and that of course was the end of the church for me. My mother was very sad, but finally stopped reproaching me. I was her only child" (31). Karl's participation in the Nazi movement became a substitute for religion, and camaraderie with peers a substitute for family.

Of particular interest here is Karl's seamless oscillation from one fixed set of values—Catholicism—to the fixed set of values embodied in Nazism. At a glance, Karl's swift transition from Catholicism to Nazism would appear wholly incongruous, but Arendt would reconcile this apparent incongruity by de-emphasizing the *content* of either ideological structure and emphasizing the significance of *structure itself*. "We now know," she writes, "that moral standards can be replaced overnight, and that all that then will be left is the mere habit of holding fast to something" ("Personal Responsibility 45). Thoughtlessness plays an indispensable role not in carrying out a particular order—for instance, the order to annihilate an entire population of defenseless civilians—but in the very substitution of one ideological structure for another, irrespective of its content. And for Karl, a lapsed Catholic who in Wiesenthal's narrative literally substitutes the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" for the directive "Thou shalt kill" (Arendt, "Personal Responsibility" 42), this exchange of moral codes is particularly pronounced. Citing a remark made by Dr. Robert Servatius, Eichmann's defense counsel, who was never Nazi

party member but who nonetheless characterized the gassings at Auschwitz as “a medical matter” during the trial, Arendt speculates,

It was as though morality, at the very moment of its total collapse within an old and highly civilized nation, stood revealed in the original meaning of the word, as a set of mores, of customs and manners, which could be exchanged for another set with no more trouble than it would take to change the table manners of a whole people. (43)

Stunningly, despite his legal education and his refusal to join the party even during the regime’s reign, Servatius still appears to have adopted the Nazis’ reclassification of mass murder from a supreme ethical and legal violation to a matter of procedural necessity. For Arendt, this exemplifies the ease with which even the longest-standing moral codes may be transformed—even wholly inverted—on a mass scale.

As Wiesenthal depicts him, Karl claims to have joined the Nazi movement motivated not by an insatiable hatred for Jews, but rather by a more prosaic yearning to imbue his life with a sense of purpose, excitement, and accomplishment which, for reasons he never articulates, neither family nor religious faith could provide; the social institutions offering such opportunities was first the *Hitlerjugend*, then the SS. “I was longing for experience,” Karl explains, “to see the world, to be able to recount my adventures . . . I wanted to play my part in that sort of thing” (33). Karl recalls with envy his uncle’s tales of martial heroism in battles with the Russian army, and reveals his own thoughtlessness by not immediately recognizing the difference between facing armed military opponents and murdering defenseless civilians. Not unlike Eichmann in Arendt’s account of his trial, Karl disclaims any personal enmity toward Jews and seems

to view both his own and his “enemies” respective positions as an unfortunate historical circumstance over which he can exert no control.

Furthermore, evidence of the very thoughtlessness Arendt saw embodied in Eichmann’s words can be traced out of Karl’s confession to Wiesenthal. Before Wiesenthal even arrives to serve as Karl’s confessor, Karl exhibits such thoughtlessness in his very request to speak with “a Jew.” As several writers in the Symposium point out, this request suggests that even as Karl lay wracked with mental anguish over his crimes against Jews, his view of the world—and specifically his view of other people—remains one constructed out of Nazi racial clichés. Even in his attempt to renounce the Nazi worldview, Karl can only do so in the terms supplied by that very worldview. “I do not know who you are,” he explains to Wiesenthal, “I only know that you are a Jew and that is enough” (54), and, “I have longed to talk about it [Karl’s crime] to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him” (54). Though this instance lacks the morbid comedy of Arendt’s depiction of Eichmann, Karl exhibits a similar desire “to find peace with my former enemies” (qtd. in Arendt, *Eichmann* 53). And as with Eichmann, Karl’s “inability to think, namely to think from the standpoint of somebody else” (49) precludes his awareness that murderous enmity came solely from his side of the imagined racial divide.

Nowhere does Karl’s blindness to the perspective of others shine through more clearly than when he laments, “those Jews died quickly, they did not suffer as I do—though they were not *as guilty as I am*” (52: italics added). Though Karl participated in a mass extermination *aktion*, crowding hundreds of Jews into a house and setting it afire, he admits to being particularly troubled by the vision of a family (father, mother, and young son) leaping from a window. The child’s murder causes him particular stress:

“that one family I shall never forget—least of all the child” (43). The family he murders—mother, father, only son—bears an uncanny resemblance to his own; this may account for why the dying child haunts Karl most of all. Unwittingly, though, Karl reveals a belief even in the child’s guilt: he never says his victims were innocent, only that their guilt was lesser than his own. By Karl’s account, even the murdered child was “guilty” of *something*. Though indisputably capable of *expressing pity*, Karl falls far short of *experiencing empathy*, and though capable of *expressing remorse*, he falls similarly short of *enacting repentance*.

Karl’s subtle and unwitting revelation of his subscription to Nazi race doctrine becomes all the more confounding when we consider his disavowal of overt anti-Semitic propaganda. In the process of unburdening his conscience, Karl outlines the his comrades’ indoctrination as they set out for their campaign in the east: “We were given piles of literature about the Jews and the Bolsheviks, we devoured the ‘Sturmer,’ and many cut caricatures from it and pinned them above our beds. *But that was not the sort of thing I cared for*” (Wiesenthal 36: italics added). Like Rudolf Höss as he appears in *Sophie’s Choice*, who scoffs at the pamphlet Sophie produces in her attempt to establish anti-Semitic credentials, Karl dismisses the vulgar, passionate racism typically assumed to be a necessary precursor of SS membership; yet, he still accepts racial enmity with Jews as a given. Commenting on the historical Rudolf Höss’s memoirs in *The Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi notes that Höss “does not realize he is confirming his coarse anti-Semitism by the very act in which he abjures and denies it” (30). A similar assessment could be made of Karl’s confession in *The Sunflower*, which subtly laces an

anti-Semitic worldview throughout what appears to be a genuine acknowledgment of guilt and expression of remorse.

Unlike Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, who transforms from an exemplar of civilization to an exemplar of savagery, Wiesenthal's Karl merely exchanges one shallow commitment for another, motivated by impulses he never bothered to examine until it was too late. Were his commitment to Catholicism anything more than an empty gesture, it would have precluded his involvement in the SS, and if his loyalty to Nazi race doctrine were not as shallow as his religious faith, he would have died a proud, unrepentant martyr. But the moral or ideological content of either the church or the SS appear less important to Karl than the mere act of being committed to *something*. As Arendt says of Eichmann, Karl "wanted to go along with the others. He wanted to say 'we'." And as Karl's abhorrent actions prove, "going-along with the rest and wanting-to-say-we like this were quite enough to make the greatest of all crimes possible" (*Last Interview* 43).

Many Kinds of Silence

The central question of whether Wiesenthal could have forgiven the dying murderer receives extensive consideration from a range of respondents in *The Sunflower's* "Symposium" section, published with the book's first edition and expanded and updated in subsequent decades. Conversely, Wiesenthal's silence before Frau Maria in Stuttgart garners less attention in the Symposium, and in contrast to the multitude of opinions regarding Wiesenthal's silence at Karl's bedside, the majority of Symposium respondents who address Wiesenthal's visit to Stuttgart express approval of Wiesenthal's silence before Frau Maria. In what might be read as an exemplar of heinous irony, Albert

Speer—whose response, absent from the first edition, was included in later publications of *The Sunflower*—commends Wiesenthal for “show[ing] compassion by not telling the mother of her son’s crimes” (246).

However, as only one respondent, Andre Stein, reminds us, the Stuttgart episode raises issues not only of compassion or forgiveness, but also of *admission* and *complicity*. “By keeping the truth under cover,” Stein writes, “Simon enabled Karl’s mother to live a nasty lie. As a child survivor of the Holocaust who lost sixty-two relatives to ‘nice boys who wouldn’t hurt a fly,’ I feel indignant about this version of the conspiracy of silence” (255). Unlike the episode at Karl’s bedside, Wiesenthal’s meeting with Frau Maria poses more cultural and political questions than moral or theological ones; much like the episode at Karl’s bedside, though, these questions may as well prove resistant to any definitive answers. Wiesenthal, a witness to the genocidal depravity into which a “civilized” culture can devolve, chooses here to remain a bearer of secrets; he neglects to show the noble facade of German culture, signified by Frau Maria, its monstrous hidden counterpart. The echoes of Marlow with Kurtz’s “Intended” are uncanny.

As with nearly every scene in *Heart of Darkness*, interpretative criticism has extensively treated the novel’s concluding episode, which depicts Marlow visiting Kurtz’s unnamed fiancée. It is worth noting here the significance Conrad himself placed on this episode, read for decades as merely a coda to the central story. For Conrad, Marlow’s visit to the Intended “locks in ...the whole 30000 words of narrative description into one suggestive view of a whole phase of life, and makes of that story something quite on another plane than an anecdote of a man who went mad in the centre of Africa” (qtd. in Stewart 371). Marlow’s brief encounter with the Intended, set in

Kurtz's home, affords readers a glimpse of Kurtz before he became—albeit through methods deemed “unsound”—the Company's most promising agent. Here we learn that Kurtz, a monomaniacal cannibal who decorates his Inner Station with the severed heads of “rebels,” was also a painter, a writer, and “a great musician” (Conrad 71). “Of all this,” the Intended laments to Marlow, “of all his promise and of all his greatness, of his generous mind, of his noble heart nothing remains—nothing but a memory. You and I ...” (74). Our vantage as readers infuses the Intended's elliptical utterance with dramatic irony, for we know the gulf that stretches between the remarkable man who set out from Europe and the remarkable man Marlow encountered in the Congo. Yet, when the Intended begs Marlow to repeat Kurtz's dying words—“The horror!” (72)—he replies instead with an ambiguous lie: “The last word he pronounced was—your name” (75).

Wiesenthal's visit to Frau Maria in Stuttgart plays out similarly in *The Sunflower*. When Maria, a mother in mourning, asks Wiesenthal to recount the circumstances under which he met Karl, he concocts a story about a passing train full of wounded soldiers. “One of them handed me a note with your address on it,” he explains, “and asked me to convey to you greetings from one of his comrades” (Wiesenthal, *Sunflower* 87). He leaves out the actual location of his encounter with Karl (a slave labor camp), as well as the nature of their relationship (that of an SS killer and a Jewish *untermensch* slated to be killed); Wiesenthal even claims to Frau Maria that he and Karl never even actually met. Most significantly, Wiesenthal makes no mention of the story Karl told on his deathbed, a narrative confession that might be read as a less enigmatic iteration of the “whispered cry” (Conrad 72) pronounced by Mr. Kurtz. As near to death from shrapnel wounds as Kurtz was from malaria, the bed-bound SS explained to Wiesenthal, “The pains in my

body are terrible, but worse still is my conscience. It never ceases to remind me of the burning house and the family that jumped from the window” (Wiesenthal 53). Horror indeed, but like Conrad’s Marlow, Wiesenthal chooses not to shatter the image to which this grieving mother so desperately cleaves. “I took my leave without diminishing in any way the poor woman’s last surviving consolation,” Wiesenthal explains, “faith in the goodness of her son” (94). We are reminded here of Marlow’s self-deprecating pronouncement: “I laid the ghost of his gifts at last with a lie” (Conrad 49).

Given Marlow’s claim midway through *Heart of Darkness* that “There is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies” (29), critics have tended to read the novel’s final scene symbolically; Garrett Stewart’s suggestion that it signals Marlow’s figurative death is but one example. More recently, Birgit and Daniel Maier-Katkin have offered a literal reading, claiming rather that the scene solidifies Marlow’s position as an accomplice, rather than a mere bystander, to political atrocity. “Residing inside of Marlow’s lie,” they write, “is knowledge of exploitation, mass murder, barbaric cruelties, and the hypocrisy of civilization. Marlow’s silence, unlike Conrad’s publication of the story, allows corrupt regimes to prosper unopposed, and denies succeeding generations access to cultural memory of the past” (598). Such a neat distinction between author and character cannot be made with regard to *The Sunflower*, as Wiesenthal depicts *himself* in the scene rather than a literary surrogate.

Despite this glaring difference, and despite the obvious variance regarding Marlow’s and Wiesenthal’s relation to the horrors they encounter (Wiesenthal has been *victimized* by them; Marlow has not), Lawrence Langer offers a similar critique of Wiesenthal’s silence before Frau Maria in *Preempting the Holocaust*, characterizing it as

“the single gesture for which I would censure Wiesenthal myself” (185). Langer continues,

If all survivors, and the Allied forces, had done the same thing, then practically the entire female population of the defeated Third Reich would have been able to preserve an untainted memory of their men, hundreds of thousands of whom had taken part in the persecution and murder of helpless victims—Jews, Gypsies, hostages, other prisoners of war, and the long list of other groups tormented, often to death, by the Nazi regime. I find it impossible to understand why shielding a person from the evil her nation, including her own son, spread across the face of Europe should be considered an act of *charity*—surely helping her to acknowledge that past and to sort out her own passive role in her nation’s guilt would have embodied a greater good. (*Preempting*185)

Langer relents, though, that Wiesenthal, in the voice of the narrator, questions his own choice not to tell Frau Maria that her son was a confessed murderer of Jewish children. “I . . . kept silent,” Wiesenthal writes, “rather than shatter her illusions about her dead son’s inherent goodness. And how many bystanders kept silent as they watched Jewish men, women, and children being led to the slaughterhouses of Europe?” (Wiesenthal, *Sunflower* 97) Wiesenthal, in his own recounting of the scene, emphasizes the incident’s ambiguity, employing a subtle juxtaposition of his own silence before Frau Maria with that of an ineffectual bystander to raise concerns similar to Langer’s, and to those raised by the Maier-Katkins with regard to Marlow.

Comparing the individual ethics of Marlow’s and Wiesenthal’s decision to lie in each climactic scene can only lead to a troublesome place, for to hold the actions of a

concentration camp survivor to the same standard as a Congo riverboat captain—even one as sensitive and ruminative as Marlow appears to be—would border on indecency. No matter the similarities between Marlow’s experiences in *Heart of Darkness* (or *Youth*, or *Lord Jim*) and Conrad’s biography, Marlow remains a fictional construct; by definition, his actions invite, at times even demand, our judgments. Conversely, Simon Wiesenthal as he appears in *The Sunflower* remains Simon Wiesenthal, the historical survivor of Lemberg, Plaszow, Buchenwald, Gross-Rosen, and Mauthausen who devoted his postwar life to preserving Holocaust memory and pursuing justice for crimes against humanity. Readers are therefore inclined to shrink away from definitively answering Wiesenthal’s exhortation to “mentally change places with me and ask yourself the crucial question, ‘What would I have done?’” (Wiesenthal, *Sunflower* 98) As several of *The Sunflower*’s Symposium respondents express, the ability to “mentally change places” with anyone in such an extraordinary circumstance may lie beyond the reach of human imagination. Moreover, the disparity between the texts’ respective genres—one a novel, the other a memoir—would complicate an effort of comparison even further.

Nevertheless, Langer assures us early in his essay that “Simon Wiesenthal’s *The Sunflower* need not be read as a personal memoir. It can just as easily be read as a moral fable invented to illustrate a universal dilemma . . . even as a version of the parable of the prodigal son” (166). Not a memoir but a *parable* (one that Langer characterizes as “invented”)—these remarks loosely echo Adam Hochschild’s disapproval of approaching *Heart of Darkness* “as a parable for all times and places” (143). Hochschild expresses dissatisfaction with our tendency to approach *Heart of Darkness* foremost as a literary artifact, rather than as a historical document or an eyewitness account. “The moral

landscape of *Heart of Darkness*,” he reminds us, “and the shadowy figure at its center are the creations not just of a novelist but of an open-eyed observer who caught the spirit of a time and place with piercing accuracy” (149). We find a nearly perfect inversion of these sentiments in Langer’s apparent dissatisfaction with *The Sunflower*, which he finds too ostensibly contrived and imprecise to be read as an eyewitness account. “Certainly,” Langer writes, “most of the book’s incidents do not flow naturally from setting and character but are transparently manipulated by the author” (183). Hochschild, a historian, appears frustrated that a novel gets interpreted *as a novel*; Langer, a literary scholar, appears frustrated with the evidence of literary artifice he locates in *The Sunflower*—a text whose author was not, we’ll recall, primarily a writer by trade. Both critiques overlook the fluidity between the fields of history and literature; aspects of each field seep into the other more often than Hochschild or Langer seem willing to admit.

The didacticism intrinsic to parables sets them apart from historical narratives and even other modes of literary storytelling; they are inhabited by types as opposed to fully drawn characters, and by design, they exist *to teach*. And though neither text offers readers much in the way of definitive answers, a careful examination of the uncannily similar scenes which conclude each of these perpetrator parables might offer some insight into just what we, as twenty-first century readers, may infer from them. According to Wiesenthal, his central concern in *The Sunflower* is whether or not his decision to remain silent at Karl’s bedside was just; I humbly suggest that *The Sunflower* additionally raises enormous political concerns, the significance of which perhaps even Wiesenthal himself was unaware. For just as Marlow’s interview with the Intended places the whole of Conrad’s novel “on another plane than an anecdote of a man who went mad in the centre

of Africa” (qtd. in Stewart 371), so, too, does *The Sunflower’s* Stuttgart episode make more of that text than a story of an SS murderer’s deathbed contrition and a Jewish prisoner’s refusal to offer forgiveness. The Stuttgart episode makes explicit *The Sunflower’s* chief concern, which reaches beyond testifying to the horrors *of the past* and raises questions about the necessity of engaging with those horrors *in the present*.

Both Marlow’s and Wiesenthal’s silence in these concluding scenes illustrates the moral complexities of silence itself in relation to atrocity perpetrators. Examining the perpetrators’ motivations, acknowledging the severity of their crimes, and, perhaps most of all, recognizing that one need not be a monster to commit monstrous acts will not make for particularly cathartic or ennobling conversation—hence Marlow’s and Wiesenthal’s silence when given a chance to have this conversation. At the same time, both in *Heart of Darkness* and *The Sunflower*, the author’s presentation and publication of these scenes paradoxically breaks the silence thematized within them, tasking readers—we who come after—with the responsibility to sustain this conversation, in spite of the profoundly discomfiting position in which, invariably, it will leave us.

Noted philosopher Berel Lang, however, experienced profound discomfiture of a different kind while sustaining this conversation in an undergraduate philosophy seminar titled “The Concept of Evil,” an experience he recounts at the conclusion of *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide*. His syllabus for the course paired Wiesenthal’s *The Sunflower* with Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, the only entries on the syllabus that dealt with the Holocaust; in a decision he openly questions, Lang placed these texts alongside “the worlds of *King Lear*, Dostoevski, *Job*, the Marquis de Sade, Plato; to talk about the varieties of wrongdoing as one might talk about the varieties of an art form: are these not

also to affirm the ideal of moral neutrality, to ignore the necessary constraints of the individual moral decision?" (239) Describing his intentions of working through the Holocaust texts, Lang writes,

Anticipating the discussion of these issues with a group of students which was itself diverse, I felt secure at least of a common starting point: that for the texts considered and the roles in them of evil and wrongdoing, we—students and instructor, together with the authors—would share a common recognition at least of the *appearance* of evil, the phenomenon which we would then be attempting to understand. (235)

Lang's augury of a shared recognition of the appearance of evil in these texts, though, proved far from the mark.

The students' response to Wiesenthal's moral dilemma was rife with "tolerance" and "openmindedness," (Lang 236), but not for Wiesenthal, any of his fellow prisoners, or the murdered family of three; rather, their tolerance was extended toward Karl. Lang paraphrases the general tenor of his students' *Sunflower* discussion: "The SS man had acted as a soldier; his education and training had shaped his behavior, and there should be no issue *either* of forgiving him or of not doing so. As there could be no claim for responsibility, there could also be none of guilt" (235: italics in original). Lang also brusquely summarizes his own reaction, as an instructor, to such "open-mindedness": "I did shout—but not much. Mainly I sweated" (236). One cannot help but wonder—Lang never specifies—whether his students extended such "open-mindedness" to Regan and Goneril in their discussions of *King Lear*, or if, had *Heart of Darkness* been included on the reading list, their "tolerance" would have enveloped the raving and remarkable Mr.

Kurtz, surrounded by the severed heads of Congolese natives. Likely, his students would have roundly condemned these overtly villainous figures, as they conform to a traditional notion of evil as a presence that announces itself as such. Lear's daughters reinforced the students' preconceived notions of what evil *ought* to look like, while Karl—who shared his food ration with Jewish prisoners, who wept upon reflection of what he had done—did not. They failed to grasp the paradox, elucidated by Primo Levi in his consideration of Erich Muhsfeld, that “compassion and brutality can coexist in the same individual and in the same moment despite all logic” (*The Drowned* 56).

In Lang's retelling, his “intelligent and ‘good’ students who read conscientiously” (236) came away from *Eichmann in Jerusalem* reserving their most forceful condemnations not for Eichmann, but for the Israeli state that captured, tried, and executed him, in addition to the human race that produced them all; they seemed to view Eichmann as a sympathetic Everyman. Lang summarizes, “Where, with Eichmann, the moral enormity was more difficult to avoid, let it at least be shared with those who brought him to trial, perhaps with mankind in general: was Eichmann, after all, so different?” (237) Arendt constructs her depiction of Eichmann in stark contradistinction to the one espoused by Eichmann's prosecutor, Gideon Hausner, who labored to personify in Eichmann's “terrifying eyes” and “predatory hands” (qtd. in Segev 151) not just the sprawling enormity of the Holocaust, but a tradition of anti-Semitism reaching back to Old Testament times. Hausner, to Arendt's chagrin, labored to depict Eichmann in a way that conformed to traditional concepts of monstrous, demonic evildoers. Conversely, Arendt emphasized Eichmann's apparent mediocrity, painting the prosecutor's poetic rhetoric as absurd hyperbole. Lang's students seemed to favor

Arendt's appraisal of Eichmann, but they overlooked the one place where her argument intersects with Hausner's. Although Arendt and Hausner offered irreconcilably opposed descriptions of the same man, neither of them hesitated to label Eichmann "evil."

Lang recounts this anecdote in a sub-chapter titled "Teaching the Holocaust," and his purpose for doing so is to raise important questions about the very efficacy of academic analyses—which privilege detachment, impartiality, open-mindedness, and tolerance—in discussions of the Nazi genocide, a historical instance in which the bare facts speak, "if facts ever did—for themselves: one-sided, partial, not at all tolerant" (Lang 236). And yet, Lang and his students diverged on what he terms "the *appearance* of evil" (235) in Arendt's and Wiesenthal's texts. In this instance, due presumably to Lang's choosing of two deeply unorthodox and ambiguous Holocaust texts, the facts—not those of the crime, but of the motives and demeanors of the criminals—did not speak for themselves. Rather, they seemed to have caused more confusion than clarification. "Even when the facts speak for themselves," Lang explains, "their audience must be in a position to listen—and a training in generality affords little preparation for a grasp of particulars or the decisions which they require" (239). At the outset of Lang's course, his students would have likely identified the Nazi genocide as an appearance of evil in the modern world, perhaps even as evil's greatest worldly manifestation in all of human history; indeed, characterizing Nazis as "evil" would hardly be a controversial position. Faced with ambiguous depictions of discrete individuals who perpetrated this evil, though, Lang's students were hesitant to judge—let alone *condemn*—them.

"In an era of moral relativity, the holocaust museum serves as a lodestone," writes John Aloysius Farrell in 1994, one year after the United States Holocaust Memorial

Museum opened in the United States' capitol. "Here there is no rationalization . . . Here is an absolute. And in that absolute of Evil, maybe, the prospect of an absolute Good" (qtd. in Novick 234). Complications arise, though, when we examine nuanced depictions of the *individuals* who facilitated this "absolute of Evil" and are met not with symbolic monsters like Conrad's Kurtz, but rather with—as Christopher Browning famously termed them—ordinary men. Inga Clendinnen succinctly articulates the crucial point that Lang's students, in his brief anecdote of teaching *The Sunflower* alongside *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, seem to have missed: "If these men were ordinary after all, that does nothing to diminish the horror of their actions. It increases it" (132). Encountering such ambiguous depictions in literature should not lead us first to "identify" or "sympathize" with murderers who, notwithstanding the undeniable evil of their crimes, appear "ordinary," "banal," or even "decent." Rather, we should be prompted to reassess our collective understanding of ordinariness, banality, and decency, acknowledging that these qualities alone do not preclude participation in genocidal violence. "*The most frightening news brought about the Holocaust and by what we learned of its perpetrators,*" writes Zygmund Bauman, "*was not the likelihood that 'this' could be done to us, but the idea that we could do it*" (152: italics in original). It is this very point—discomfiting, unpleasant, and too often left unsaid—that ambiguous depictions of Holocaust perpetrators in literature prompt us to confront.

In the introduction to *Ordinary Men*, which assiduously documents the progress of a single Reserve Battalion on a genocidal trek across Poland, Christopher Browning writes with remarkable candor, "I must recognize that in the same 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” (xx). Browning’s now-canonical study established new trends in historical examinations of Holocaust perpetrators upon its publication in 1992. “Here at last,” writes Clendinnen, another historian, “were recognizably human men in the process of executing horrifying orders” (82). For Clendinnen, the uniqueness and importance of *Ordinary Men* lies in the way it forces readers “to be attentive to clear indications of uncertainty or revulsion in the behavior of men it would be easier and more comfortable to dismiss as brutes” (121). It would be difficult to articulate a clearer description of the importance of *The Sunflower* and its ambiguous depiction of genocidal evil, which predates Browning’s study by more than two decades. Wiesenthal, in his *Sunflower* parable, takes enormous care to deny readers the comfort of dismissing Karl as a monster, a brute, or “an initiated wraith from the back of Nowhere” (Conrad 50); instead, he forces us to confront Karl’s disconcertingly resemblance to ourselves. Whatever the discrepancies between Wiesenthal’s several memoirs, however “meager” his “talent” as a writer (Segev 229), the ethical complexities explored in *The Sunflower*—which Wiesenthal himself regarded as “his best book” (Segev 240)—should earn him a place among significant authors of Holocaust literature.

CHAPTER 4

SS OBERSTURMFÜHRER KURT GERSTEIN ON STAGE, PAGE, AND SCREEN

Outsiders simply cannot understand that there was not a single SS officer who would disobey an order from the *Reichsführer SS*.

—Rudolf Höss, Commandant of Auschwitz

Whenever I received orders, I not only didn't follow them, but made sure they were disobeyed.

—SS *Obersturmführer* Kurt Gerstein

In all the decades since Nazism's defeat, perhaps no single text has done as much to shape and to inform American perceptions of the Holocaust as Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*. While taking pains not to discredit the achievement Spielberg reached with the film, namely bringing Holocaust awareness to the forefront of American cultural consciousness, Alvin Rosenfeld suggests in his 2011 *The End of the Holocaust* that this achievement was not without certain significant costs. He writes, "If, as claimed by some, Spielberg's film ... may actually do more to educate vast numbers of people about the history of the Holocaust than all the academic books on the subject combined, one has to recognize that it has achieved these ends as the result of a paradigm shift of major proportions" (81). This paradigm shift pulls viewers away from the most horrific realities of the genocide by eschewing the more traditional method of depicting the Holocaust through a story of its victims. Instead, *Schindler's List* places a historically rare and marginal figure—a German who saved Jews—at the center of the Holocaust story.

By foregrounding the redemptive narrative of its historical protagonist, the film invites viewers to identify with Schindler and tacitly view themselves as potential heroes. While watching the film, audiences can take comfort in reassuring themselves that they, too, would have acted as Schindler did, and would have saved rather than killed, or would

have acted rather than disavowing responsibility. Thus, for Rosenfeld (and others), Spielberg's film offers "a version of the Holocaust that originates in long-standing American preferences for 'heroes' and 'happy endings'" (*The End* 81). Claude Lanzmann, director of *Shoah*, offers a more direct critique: "To tell the story of the Holocaust through a German who saved Jews can only lead to a distortion of the truth, because for the overwhelming majority of Jews things like this did not happen" (qtd. in Rosenfeld, *The End* 83). For these critics, the unwitting deception of Spielberg's film lay in its unspoken suggestion that rescuers—woefully rare and exceptional figures—occupy a central place in Holocaust history.

The cultural phenomenon of *Schindler's List* prompts consideration of another historical persona—one much more deeply ambiguous—who, unlike Schindler, has been relegated to the margins and practically erased from cultural memory: namely, the confounding figure of SS *Obersturmführer* Kurt Gerstein. Like Oskar Schindler, Gerstein, too, suffered a troubled conscience upon learning the true nature of the Third Reich's "Final Solution to the Jewish Question." And like Schindler, Gerstein acted clandestinely and at great risk to his own personal safety to thwart, in whatever way he could, the Nazis' program of genocide. But whereas Schindler—a self-interested industrialist and party member who moved in Nazi social circles—was himself somewhat tangential to the workings of the regime, Kurt Gerstein was entrenched; he donned an SS uniform, complete with the death's head emblem on his cap, until the very last days of the war. Historian Raul Hilberg, in his 1992 study *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders*, devotes a brief section to Gerstein, classifying his role as that of a "messenger": "people who brought the dire news of annihilation to the outside world" (217). "Of all the

messengers,” Hilberg notes, “Gerstein was closest to the scene, and probably of all of them he was the least believed” (219). Herein lay the paradox of Gerstein’s story: as a trained chemical engineer working in the Waffen-SS Institute of Hygiene, Gerstein’s very prominence within the Nazi system made his attempts at resistance possible. After the war, this same prominence sealed his unfortunate fate.

For reasons as ghastly as they are obvious, the Nazi regime had a need in 1942 for experts in chemicals, and Gerstein played a pivotal, if reluctant, role in the introduction of Zyklon B to the Nazis’ extermination facilities. At the same time, according to numerous historical eyewitness accounts, Gerstein worked to ensure that shipments of the chemical never reached their destinations, and he attempted feverishly to expose the secret extermination program underway in eastern Poland. Nevertheless, Gerstein’s entreaties to Swiss and Vatican officials went ignored, and while he may have halted some shipments of Zyklon B from reaching the camps, it was never enough to stop their gas chambers from functioning. As Florent Bayard, a French historian, notes, “Whatever the truth, Gerstein’s purported destruction of his stock of Zyklon B did not prevent the Jews from dying in their hundreds of thousands” (72). Unlike the story of Oskar Schindler, no assurance that Gerstein’s efforts resulted in anyone’s survival was ever found, and after surrendering to French authorities at the end of the war, he was condemned as a war criminal, charged with abetting genocide.

Gerstein composed a detailed account of his career while in captivity—including one of the only extant eyewitness testimonies to the earliest gassing operations at Belzec and Treblinka—which came later to be known as the Gerstein Report. On July 25, 1945, before he could face trial, Gerstein was found dead in his cell, apparently by suicide; it

should be noted, though, that a significant contingent of scholars and commentators believe he was murdered by other SS officers. Thus, three quarters of a century after the heroics of both of these “good Germans,” we find perhaps the greatest divergence of their respective stories: while Oskar Schindler’s name is regularly celebrated—in the U.S. among many other nations—Kurt Gerstein’s remains relatively obscure. The two earliest and most authoritative biographies on Gerstein, both published in the 1960’s by Saul Friedlander and Pierre Joffroy, have gone out of print. The contrast between the respective receptions of Schindler’s and Gerstein’s acts of resistance becomes a study not of heroism itself or what constitutes it, but rather one of what *kind* of hero can be comfortably celebrated, and why. For, while *Schindler’s List* invites audiences to share in its protagonist’s success, the most faithful depictions of Kurt Gerstein conclude by implicating audiences in his failure.

Superficially, it might seem that texts which emphasize Kurt Gerstein’s exceptional behavior would reiterate the tendency that so troubled Lanzmann in the face of *Schindler’s List*: Gerstein, a German Protestant youth leader, was compelled by conscience to thwart the Nazi regime’s mass murder policy, and in an overwhelming majority of cases, “things like this did not happen” (qtd. in Rosenfeld, *The End* 83). But to label Gerstein “a German who saved Jews” would fall short of accuracy; his endeavors to notify powerful figures outside of Germany fell on deaf ears, and it would be impossible to ascertain whether or not Gerstein’s redirection of Zyklon B shipments actually prevented anyone from being murdered. Whereas Oskar Schindler’s immortalized list *proactively* rescued over a thousand individuals from certain death in Auschwitz, the eyewitness report Gerstein composed in the weeks between his arrest and

his suicide in 1945 served only *retroactively* to authenticate the Nazis' most unthinkable atrocities in postwar courtrooms. Adding to the chorus of Spielberg's detractors, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman writes,

According to the *Schindler's List* version of the Holocaust experience, the sole stake of the tragedy was to remain alive—while the quality of life, and particularly its *dignity and ethical value*, was at best of secondary importance and above all of no consequence; it was never allowed to interfere with the principal goal. The goal of staying alive took care of moral concerns and dwarfed and pushed out of sight such moral concerns as could not be consumed. (233-234: italics in original)

Absenting even the tangible guarantee of aiding in anyone's survival, Gerstein's story foregrounds the complex moral concerns which, in Bauman's estimation, get "pushed out of sight" by *Schindler's List*. Most prominently, the story of Kurt Gerstein prompts the question of whether or not the apparent ineffectiveness of Gerstein's actions detracts from our perception of them as moral or good. If so, then what might this suggest about common perceptions of morality?

Thus, the literary treatments of Gerstein's life—and there are several, spanning numerous genres—exhibit a profoundly uneasy, ambiguous, and un-redemptive character. Even the first and most authoritative historical biography of Gerstein, written by Saul Friedlander and published in 1967, highlights this characteristic uncertainty in its title: *Kurt Gerstein: The Ambiguity of Good*. Though Friedlander makes no explicit mention of Hannah Arendt, his title is conversant with the subtitle of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which had appeared only five years prior: *A Report on the Banality of Evil*.

Friedlander's meticulous documentation complicates Gerstein's own account of volunteering for the SS; according to Gerstein, he enlisted only after his sister-in-law, a diagnosed "incurable," was murdered in the Hadamar sanitarium. "I volunteered as SS," Gerstein explains in his report, "I was helped in doing so by the fact that my own sister in law, Bertha EBELING, had been murdered at HADAMAR" (Joffroy 281). The Nazi state informed Gerstein's family that Ebeling had died of natural causes, but as she had been admitted to Hadamar in good physical health mere months before, Gerstein's grief was overtaken by suspicion.

Friedlander, though, unearths Waffen-SS application documents dated before Ebeling's death, suggesting a disparity between the events as they occurred and the events as Gerstein recounted them. Despite this incongruity, Friedlander concludes,

If resistance within the body of a totalitarian system is ambiguous by its very nature, one criterion nonetheless remains essential for defining it: that of the danger incurred. There were many Germans who put forward the argument that they had resisted inside the system to explain away their participation in Nazi activities. Yet how many of them demonstrated their will to resist by committing acts which, had they been discovered, would have cost the perpetrators their lives? Kurt Gerstein was one of these people. (227)

Friedlander's conclusion remains a scholarly consensus among historians to this day. Gitta Sereny echoes it *Albert Speer: His Battle with Truth*, writing, "Gerstein's life is perhaps the most significant testimonial to the presence of moral convictions and heroism in the midst of the Nazi monstrosities" (356). And in his mammoth biography of Adolf Hitler, John Toland writes, "A modern Ancient Mariner, [Gerstein] began spreading the

truth to incredulous colleagues. As a rock thrown into a pond creates ever widening ripples, so did the tale of Kurt Gerstein” (714). Toland, though, may be overstating his case; in Coleridge’s poem, the wedding guest who hears the Mariner’s tale in full leaves the encounter “stunn’d” and irrevocably changed, for “A sadder and a wiser man / He rose the morrow morn.” Though Gerstein shared his tale with anyone willing to listen, the most astonishing quality of his story is the minimal effect it had—eliciting neither shock nor wisdom—particularly with regard to his colleagues and contemporaries.

In the decades since the war’s end, however, Gerstein’s tale—the one about him, rather than the one he told—did seem to create ever widening ripples in the literary arts, and although none of the texts depicting Gerstein achieved the cultural primacy of *Schindler’s List*, they nonetheless demand careful examination. Their apparent insignificance in popular culture and memory, when compared to *Schindler’s List’s* indisputable significance, suggests much about how contemporary audiences *prefer* to encounter the Holocaust. Moreover, of the four literary texts that feature Gerstein—two stage plays, a film, and a novel—three were composed in the 21st Century, suggesting a recent upsurge of interest in this beguiling figure. Gerstein’s earliest appearance in literature appears in Rolf Hochhuth’s 1963 play *The Deputy*, a polemical text more concerned with the wartime actions of Pope Pius XII than with any individual SS officer. Describing Gerstein in *The Deputy’s* introduction, Hochhuth writes, “So uncanny, divided, and mysterious a personality seems more like a fictional creation than an historical personage” (14). In 2002, *The Deputy* was adapted for the screen by expatriate Greek filmmaker Costa-Gavras as *Amen*; in an overt departure from the adaptation’s source text, *Amen* significantly highlights and expands Gerstein’s role. American

novelist William T. Vollman's 2005 *Europe Central*, a sprawling, postmodern epic composed of narrative vignettes set at the height of World War II, contains a novella-length section entitled *Clean Hands* that deals exclusively with Gerstein's plight. Finally, in 2007, Theatre J in Washington, D.C. hosted the premiere of *Either/Or*, a dramatic depiction of Gerstein's life and actions composed by Thomas Keneally, author of *Schindler's List*.

These depictions, spanning page, stage, and screen, considerably downplay the Manichean good/evil paradigm for which Spielberg's *Schindler's List* has been criticized, but which also may have contributed to the film's phenomenal success. "Does Schindler need to spend so much time drinking with this psychotic scoundrel," wonders Daniel Schwarz in *Imagining the Holocaust*, "or is there an attraction to Goeth, his darker self? We think of how Conrad's Marlow is drawn to those with soft spots and places of decay" (213). Gerstein has no Amon Goeth to play the Kurtz to his Marlow, so these depictions of Gerstein address, albeit indirectly and unintentionally, a number of the concerns scholars voiced in response to Spielberg's film. In place of a singular manifestation of individual psychopathy and monolithic evil, these texts foreground the systemic, procedural elements of Nazi violence, pitting Gerstein against a pervasive campaign of institutionalized passivity. Thus, whereas Spielberg's film provides a traditional Hollywood villain for viewers to revel in loathing, the Gerstein texts deny audiences such satisfaction. In Arendtian terms, the literary renderings of Gerstein's story—though Hochhuth's and Costa-Gavras's rely less on the historical record than Vollman's and Keneally's—dramatize a doomed effort of radical good in the face of widespread banal evil.

Kurt Gerstein on Stage and on Screen: Rolf Hochhuth's *The Deputy* and Costa-Gavras's *Amen*

Upon its debut in 1963, Rolf Hochhuth's *The Deputy: A Christian Tragedy* found itself at the center of a controversy whose magnitude rivaled even the uproar catalyzed by Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Arendt herself sensed a kinship with Hochhuth, whose play she viewed as being unjustly maligned and, like *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, accused of promoting exaggerated, incendiary sentiments that could not be found within the text itself. Citing critiques of the play in her own 1964 review, "The Deputy: Guilt by Silence?" Arendt rightly points out that "nowhere does Hochhuth claim that 'Pope Pius was responsible for Auschwitz' or that he was the 'arch-culprit' of this period" (215). Certainly, as was the case with *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, the play's most strident critics seemed to direct their critiques at "an image" of the play that came to substitute the play itself. A careful reading, however, reveals a number of crucial missteps Hochhuth makes throughout *The Deputy*; though his most ardent detractors may have overstated their case against the play, hindsight reveals numerous instances in which Hochhuth's polemical concerns obfuscate the play's commentary on Nazism. Just as the play's critics overstated their case against Hochhuth, so, too, did Hochhuth overstate his own case against the Vatican.

Moreover, it was not only *The Deputy*'s detractors who were seduced by an image of the play, as even its defenders—including Arendt herself—tended to exhibit too much faith in its historical fidelity. In her review, Arendt claims that "Hochhuth's play might as well be called the most factual literary work of this generation as 'the most controversial'" (214). Arendt was not alone in her celebration of *The Deputy*'s factuality;

also in 1964, Susan Sontag would compare it to the Eichmann trial as a vehicle for public enlightenment. In “Reflections on *The Deputy*,” Sontag writes,

Here we have a work of art as we ordinarily understand it—a work for the familiar theater of 8:30 curtains and intermissions, rather than for the austere public stage of the courtroom. Here there are actors, rather than real murderers and real survivors from hell. Yet it is not false to compare it with the Eichmann trial, because *The Deputy* is first most of all a documentary work. Eichmann himself and many other real persons of the period are represented in the play. The speeches of the characters are drawn from historical records. (127)

Both Arendt and Sontag cite the playwright’s “Sidelights on History,” which appends the published version of the play and traces out the historical sources Hochhuth employed in its composition. However, its inclusion does not counteract the numerous explicit instances in which historical facts are transparently distorted in the service of Hochhuth’s polemic and plot mechanics.

To be fair, Hochhuth himself never denied these manipulations. In his “Sidelights on History,” he confesses, “I have endeavored throughout this work to *underplay* the already almost incredible events of Hitler’s war and the number of its victims ... I have endeavored to palliate and adjust events to fit the human capacity for imagination” (293: italics in original). But even a cursory comparison of *The Deputy*’s plot with its historical sources reveals it to be quite a far cry from “the most factual literary work of its generation,” especially when we consider that its debut preceded that of Peter Weiss’s *The Investigation* by only three years. The text of Weiss’s play, in stark contrast to Hochhuth’s, is *wholly* factual, comprised entirely of transcriptions from the Auschwitz

trial. Conversely, Hochhuth's drama, composed in verse, manifests an attempt to fit the Holocaust's chaotic profusion of terror, suffering, and death—in all its undignified senselessness—into a traditional five-act tragic structure.

The Deputy's unwieldy length—an unexpurgated production would take roughly seven hours—makes offering a summary of it a difficult task. Its two chief protagonists are Kurt Gerstein, a figure transplanted directly from history, and father Riccardo Fontana, a fictionalized amalgamation of the two historical figures to whom Hochhuth dedicates the text: Provost Bernhard Lichtenberg and Father Maximilian Kolbe. In a dark period for Christendom, when a great many European churches espoused state-sponsored anti-Semitism from their pulpits, these two leaders of the faith chose martyrdom. Lichtenberg expressed publicly—in Berlin, no less—his desire to die alongside Europe's Jews in eastern Poland. The Nazi state denied him this symbolic gesture, imprisoning Lichtenberg in Dachau instead; he died in transit before he could arrive at the camp. Kolbe, a Polish priest imprisoned in Auschwitz, famously volunteered to die in a starvation cell in the place of another prisoner, a married man with children. The Catholic Church has since beatified Kolbe, but Hochhuth's play takes pains to suggest that such gestures were not endorsed by Vatican leaders at the time.

Gerstein and Father Fontana meet in *The Deputy*'s opening scene, which depicts a frantic Gerstein, costumed in full SS regalia, begging for an audience with the papal nuncio in Berlin. The scene occurs shortly after Gerstein's return from a fateful assignment in eastern Poland: Gerstein, a chemical engineer, was given the task of assessing the efficiency of the gas chambers in Belzec and Treblinka. Both in the play and in factual history, the horrors he witnessed there catalyzed Gerstein's desperate

attempts to bring awareness of Nazi atrocities to the outside world; historically, the first such attempt occurred on his train ride home from Poland, upon Gerstein's encounter with Goran von Otter, a secretary to the Swedish Legation. "He gave me full details, names of the people carrying out the operation, and those higher up who were responsible," von Otter recalled long after Gerstein's death. Von Otter continues,

I think he may also have told me about the consignment of gas he delivered and his attempts at sabotage ... He told me how he came to be involved. His sister, or some other close relative, had died in a mental home, in circumstances that seemed to him so suspicious that he resolved to investigate further. Hence his entry into the SS. (qtd. in Joffroy 16)

Hochhuth's retelling in *The Deputy* commences after this occurrence; at the play's outset, Gerstein has already returned to Berlin to deliver his report to Cesare Orsenigo, Germany's papal representative. The nuncio himself turns Gerstein forcefully away: "Tell that to Herr Hitler, not to me. / Leave this place. / In the German Government's view / I am not authorized / to say a word about these ... / these conditions in Poland" (23). Father Fontana, however, overhears Gerstein's entreaties, and the two forge an unlikely alliance, unified in their endeavor to elicit a forceful condemnation of Nazi atrocities from Vatican leaders.

The plot of *The Deputy* derives much of its momentum from Gerstein's and Fontana's shared endeavor; unfortunately, though, it is in the depiction of this very endeavor that historical accuracy becomes wholly obscured in the service of plot mechanics and polemical politics. In his "Sidelights on History," Hochhuth confesses his uncertainty as to whether Gerstein's face-to-face meeting with Orsenigo even occurred,

taking as a matter of faith that given Gerstein's "courage and adroitness ... it appears unlikely that he would have allowed a subordinate priest to show him the door" (292-3).¹⁰ As the play progresses, fact-based assumptions give way to transparent inventions, as Gerstein converses with Adolf Eichmann, hides a Jewish student in his apartment, and makes an improbable visit to Vatican City, just in time to witness the deportation of Italian Jews from the windows of the papal palace. At this point, the martyrdom of Father Fontana—"freely drawn after the acts and aims of Provost Bernhard Lichtenberg of Berlin Cathedral" (Hochhuth 14)—is made manifest: he dramatically reveals the yellow star pinned to cassock and boards a train headed for Auschwitz, where the fifth and final act of *The Deputy* is set.

Hochhuth, throughout *The Deputy*'s lengthy duration, offers a confused depiction of Nazi perpetrators. On one hand, in the verbose stage direction preceding each act (which curiously offers more in the way of philosophical rumination than concrete instructions for an actor or director), we are reminded that, "Unfortunately we cannot reassure ourselves with the thought that a camp like Auschwitz was run by madmen or pathological criminals. Ordinary human beings regarded this as their 'place of work.' To remind ourselves of that, let's begin with a detailed picture of Helga" (228). Pointedly, the audience's introduction to the Auschwitz staff comes in the form of a spirited, young, fresh-faced clerical assistant who, the stage direction informs us, "unconsciously demonstrates, simply by her warmth and physical attractiveness, how human even professional murderers remain. She proves, indeed, that 'human' is far too equivocal a word to be useful any longer" (229). Helga, whom we encounter in an earlier scene,

¹⁰ On this matter, Hochhuth's speculations appear to have been sound. In 1968, Horst Dickten, a friend of Gerstein's, recalled Gerstein telling him, "People are all swine. I gave some underling a hefty bribe, and he got me an audience at once. Yes, I saw Orsenigo..." (qtd. in Joffroy 172).

represents just one of several instances in which Hochhuth explicitly directs the actors depicting Holocaust perpetrators to play against type and frustrate audience expectations. At *The Deputy*'s midpoint, depicting the forced deportations of Italian Jews, Hochhuth takes care to describe one of the chief arresting officers as “no racist fanatic” who “worked with as little passion as a guillotine” (166). In attempting to reintroduce Nazis as “ordinary human beings,” Hochhuth may have been ahead of his time, and audiences and critics, particularly in Germany, may not have been prepared to celebrate such an approach.

Among the play's chief concerns—and it must be noted that in 1963, such an approach was far from common—is to confront audiences forcefully with the procedural elements of Nazi violence, that Nazism represented not merely brutality, but *rationalized*, *modernized*, and *institutionalized* brutality. Describing other Auschwitz functionaries, Hochhuth reminds us that “we are acquainted with them not only from the scene in the first act. We have known them a long time, for we see them daily either on the roller coaster of the German *Wirtschaftswunder*¹¹ or in our own bathroom mirror” (230). This “stage direction” distills *The Deputy*'s most progressive and forward-thinking aspects: namely, that the play's design impedes audience identification with the Nazis' victims and, through its depiction of the perpetrators' thoughtlessness and the bystanders' passive indifference, implicates the audience in the crime. These aspects of *The Deputy* would have appeared even more barbed at the play's debut, which occurred in West Germany under a government comprised of judges, civil servants, and bureaucrats who, less than two decades prior, were card-carrying Nazi party members.

¹¹ *Wirtschaftswunder* translates literally to “economic wonder”; the term was coined to refer to the swift economic recovery the newly-democratic nation of West Germany experienced in the aftermath of the war.

On the other hand, Hochhuth's fascinating (if occasionally heavy handed) depictions of "ordinary" individuals facilitating genocide get overshadowed by the gross melodrama of "The Doctor," an anonymous villainous figure based obviously on Josef Mengele. Excepting Gerstein, The Doctor is given more scenes, lines, and stage time than any other Nazi—historical, invented, or amalgamated—depicted in the play; whether it was intended or not, The Doctor becomes the play's most forceful dramatic pronouncement on the nature of Nazism, and the pronouncement is wholly aesthetic and ahistorical. "He has the stature of Absolute Evil," writes Hochhuth in the stage direction, "far more unequivocally so than Hitler, whom he no longer even bothers to despise" (31). In his depiction of The Doctor, Hochhuth freely reveals that he "deliberately deviated from historical portrayals of this mysterious 'master'" (31). In the stage direction preceding the character's initial appearance in Act I, Hochhuth writes,

Because this 'doctor' stands in such sharp contrast not only to his fellows of the SS, but to all human beings, and so far as I know, to anything that has been learned about human beings, it seemed permissible to me at least to suggest the possibility that, with this character, an ancient figure in the theater and in Christian mystery plays is once more appearing on the stage. Since this uncanny visitant from another world was obviously only playing the part of a human being, I have refrained from any further effort to plumb its human features—for these could contribute nothing to our understanding of so incomprehensible a being or its deeds. (32)

Granted, innumerable historical accounts and survivor testimonies attest to the unique horror Josef Mengele sowed during his tenure at Auschwitz. Moreover, Mengele's

prominence as the camp's chief physician put him in direct contact with more individual prisoners than any other functionary, including the Auschwitz commandant; thus, he appears in more survivor testimony than perhaps any other individual perpetrator. But does this afford Hochhuth the right, as an author, to elevate Mengele to the stature of a metaphysical being, an "uncanny visitant from another world" (32)? Questions of artistic license aside, how deleterious to the play's historical concerns is its obsessive focus on a character imbued with such self-conscious, histrionic malevolence?

In his depiction of *The Doctor*, Hochhuth commits an aesthetic error that authors, endeavoring to represent Holocaust perpetrators in fiction, would repeat for decades to come: imbuing individual perpetrators with the grandiosity of the acts they perpetrated. As early as 1945, reviewing Denis de Rougemont's *The Devil's Share*, Hannah Arendt had stressed the point that "the Nazis are men like ourselves"; the nightmare is that they have shown, have proven beyond doubt what man is capable of" (*Essays* 134). The Nazi killing fields, concentration camps, and extermination facilities, as Arendt repeatedly elucidated, made even the most graphic imaginings of Hell appear facile by comparison, and the pure horror of their implications for a post-Holocaust world was that supernatural diabolism played no part in their creation. Rather, Nazism proved beyond any doubt that human beings could achieve this all on our own. The policies and conditions of the Nazi state may have imbued a person like Mengele with a license and authority approaching godhood, but policies and conditions did not make him a god.

Thirty years after *The Deputy*'s appearance, scholars would raise similar concerns about Stephen Spielberg's depiction of Amon Goeth in *Schindler's List*. In the film, Goeth (played by Ralph Fiennes) appears larger than life; Spielberg's Goeth exemplifies

traditional conceptions of filmic villainy every bit as much as Spielberg's *Schindler* embodies a stylized redemptive hero. The result is a vision of Nazism made palatable for mainstream moviegoers, Nazism as a massive outgrowth of widespread inclinations toward personal malice and sadism, and moreover easily accounted for by a traditional understanding of evil. In short, *Schindler's List* depicts Nazism in a way that runs almost perfectly counter to the insights Hannah Arendt elucidated in previous decades. As Stephen Whitfield asserts, "to [Arendt] totalitarianism was more than incomparable cruelty, terror and decimation of human life. It meant that the Western tradition had been broken, and would not recover. It signified 'the ruin of our categories of thought and standards of judgment'" (102). Spielberg's—and Hochhuth's—symbolic crystallization of Nazism into such traditional embodiments of filmic and dramatic villainy manifests, at least to some degree, an abdication of responsibility; faced with a profoundly complex phenomenon, their dramatizations ultimately retreat into the very standards of judgment which, for Arendt, the Third Reich and its attending horrors had irrevocably broken.

In relation to Goeth—as well as any other SS perpetrator—we should consider a point articulated by Primo Levi In *The Drowned and the Saved*:

More often and more insistently as time recedes, we are asked by the young who our 'torturers' were, of what cloth they were made. The term *torturers* alludes to our ex-guardians, the SS, and is in my opinion inappropriate: it brings to mind twisted individuals, ill-born, sadists, afflicted by an original flaw. Instead, they were made of the same cloth as we, they were average human beings, averagely intelligent, averagely wicked: save the exceptions, they were not monsters, they had our faces, but they had been reared badly. (202)

If we take Levi at his word, and I humbly suggest that we should, then the extremity of Goeth's cruelty appears exceptional even among his colleagues in the SS. Furthermore, we find in Levi's estimation the suggestion that under different social circumstances, even the worst among the SS could have lived perfectly ordinary, unremarkable, or even commendable lives. While Keneally's text—a book so obsessively documented that it resists being labeled “fiction”—makes gestures to remind us of this, Spielberg's film deliberately downplays it. For instance, the film leaves out scenes from the novel that show Goeth's arrest for corruption—by the very organization he served—long before the Third Reich's collapse. In the film, Goeth simply drops out of sight for its third act, reappearing in a concluding montage that shows his execution and affecting the overall tone of the film profoundly. As Bryan Cheyette suggests, “that Goeth is left pointedly unseen in his relatively powerless state reinforces the film's Manichaeic narrative” (235). Cheyette is far from the only critic to fault the film's depiction of Goeth “as the evil embodiment of absolute power” (Cheyette 229). Alvin Rosenfeld, writing in 2011, claims that “the political dimensions of Nazi behavior go altogether unexplored in *Schindler's List*, and in their stead one encounters raw sadism of an extremely personal rather than systemic kind” (*The End* 85).

Hochhuth's depiction of The Doctor errs on an even greater scale, depicting sadism of an eternal, metaphysical kind. Sigurd Burkhardt, in a considerate and approving 1964 review of the play's initial appearance in English, faults this characterization, writing, “The Doctor sounds at times like the devil incarnate” (320). That Arendt glosses over Hochhuth's quasi-supernatural depiction of the Doctor in her own review is somewhat puzzling, considering the degree to which she faults

Rougemont's *The Devil's Share* in 1945. Still, her critique of *The Devil's Share* holds equally true for *The Deputy*: "Instead of facing the music of man's genuine capacity for evil and analyzing the nature of man," she writes, "[Rougemont] in turn ventures into a flight from reality and writes on the nature of the Devil, thereby ... evading the responsibility of man for his deeds" (*Essays* 134). The Doctor's oversized diabolism casts an obfuscating shadow over the play's own stated concerns about acknowledging both the dispassionate, routinized nature of Nazi atrocities and the terrifying normalcy of the individuals who carried them out. *The Deputy's* final act, set in Auschwitz, depicts The Doctor self-consciously reveling in his own villainy in a manner that recalls the "motiveless malignity" ascribed to Shakespeare's greatest villains. As though The Doctor's participation in genocidal atrocities were not sufficiently villainous, the play's fifth act treats audiences to a protracted seduction scene between The Doctor and Helga. The play gestures at their affair earlier, but only in the final act does it devolve into a lurid, unintentional comedy which, given the setting, reads as wholly gratuitous and out of place.

Throughout the play, Helga cites her engagement to a low level SS officer named Gunther in her protestations to The Doctor's advances, but here she professes, "I don't want to know whether I love you. / All I know is that I'm helpless to resist you. / I must be with you. Please, let's get married ..." (237). The Doctor rejects her offer, but takes a baffling opportunity at this moment to expound upon his absurdly nihilistic philosophy of life, proclaiming, "I cremate life / I create life / and always I create suffering. / Some suffer when I steer them into the gas / others because I turn them back to life. / But Uncle Doctor, my puss, is far too fond / of his own children to expose them to / history's tender

mercies ... don't worry, in our tumbles / I'll see to it you do not get knocked up" (237). Later, speaking to Father Fontana—who by this point dons the striped uniform of a common Auschwitz prisoner—The Doctor will again align his refusal to father children with his work at Auschwitz, explaining, “From this point of view only one crime remains: / cursed be he who creates life / I cremate life ... Out of pity, I have always buried my own children right away—in condoms” (248). Apart from offending Catholic sensibilities, The Doctor's repeated fixation on sex without procreation contributes nothing to the play's progression or its commentary on Nazism; rather, it renders the Doctor a prankish figure, deriving pleasure from base mischief in addition to crimes against humanity.

More damaging to the play as whole, though, is the irresistible seductiveness displayed in The Doctor's scenes with Helga, a quality made all the more obscene when Helga jealously chides him for initiating a sexual affair with a Jewish prisoner, even after sending her children to be gassed. “If you're the same to her as—as to me,” says Helga, “then she simply can't help loving you / even if she curses you—and herself / to all eternity” (238). The pains taken in *The Deputy* to establish The Doctor as preternaturally seductive have the effect—though perhaps unintended—of absolving the lower level Nazi functionaries of individual responsibility for their choices. The play offers us the condolence of believing “the devil” (245), which The Doctor eventually proclaims himself to be, held them under the sway of some dark magic. If, after all, “this uncanny visitant from another world” (31) can woo a woman whose family he murdered, then it stands to reason that manipulating others to commit mass murder would fall well within the realm of his—or, to use Hochhuth's pronoun, “its”—powers. And as Arendt states in

a 1964 interview, “If you succumb to the power of a beast from the depths, you’re naturally much less guilty than if you succumb to a completely average man” (*Last Interview* 44).

Despite Kurt Gerstein’s importance to the plot, *The Deputy*’s final act relegates him to a tertiary role; he briefly appears with a forged document demanding Fontana’s release, which The Doctor scoffs at before ordering Gerstein’s arrest. Gerstein’s swift and counterfactual dismissal from the play makes clear that the puzzling actions of a conscience-stricken, rogue SS man are not the text’s chief concern. Rather, most of *The Deputy*’s ultimate lines get spent on more polemic, as Father Fontana, by this point assigned to work in a *sonderkommando*, attempts to engage in a theological debate with the Doctor’s histrionic nihilism. Here the Doctor confesses that, like Fontana, he “once wore the iron collar for a while” (247); an obvious and overt deviation from Mengele’s biography, this admission serves only to add one more aesthetic layer to the character, while simultaneously affording Hochhuth yet another jab at the Catholic Church. Inarguably, the historical Mengele possessed an impressive intellect, earning doctorates in both anthropology and medicine in his twenties. But rather than explore the acutely troubling ease with which academics lent their efforts to the regime, Hochhuth instead turns his Doctor into Dr. Faust: an intellect who self consciously embraces evil after achieving mastery in all fields of study, including theology.

Thus, in the end, *The Deputy*’s most prominent depiction of Nazism obfuscates not only a key component of Nazi ideology, but also a crucial warning to the generations who come after: that far from an overt, explicit embrace of “Absolute Evil,” the atrocities committed by the Nazi state were an outgrowth of utilitarian calculations. The horrors

sown by the SS would be immediately comprehensible had their creed merely been a total rejection of ethics and morality. The truth of the matter is immeasurably more complex, as philosopher John K. Roth explains. “True though the judgment would be,” writes Roth,

it remains too soothing to say only that the Nazi ethic was really no ethic at all but a deadly perversion of what is truly moral. Most people are unlikely to serve a cause unless that cause makes convincing moral appeals about what is good and worthy of loyalty. Those appeals, of course, can be blind, false, even sinful, and the Nazis’ were. Nevertheless, the perceived and persuasive ‘goodness’ of the beliefs that constituted the Nazi ethic—the dedicated SS man embodied them most thoroughly—is essential to acknowledge if we are to understand why so many Germans willfully followed Hitler into genocidal warfare. (233)

“To have stuck it out,” proclaimed Himmler in 1943, “and ... to have remained decent, that is what has made us hard. This is a page of glory in our history which has never been written and is never to be written” (qtd. in Arendt, *Eichmann* 105). For the individuals who designed the camp system and set it into motion, industrialized mass murder was viewed neither as good nor as evil; rather, it manifested a difficult and unpleasant—and hence *heroic*—undertaking of a necessary duty. Far from basking in the glories of their own atrocious odium, Nazi leaders rather praised the SS man’s capacity to remain “decent,” even as he committed atrocities on a scale unseen heretofore.

For all these faults, though, *The Deputy* played an indispensable role in rehabilitating Kurt Gerstein’s reputation and, at the very least, introducing him to an international community. Gerstein stood accused as a war criminal when he died, and not

until two years after the play's debut did the Denazification court rescind its ruling, allowing his widow to collect his military pension. The play was closely followed by both Friedlander's and Joffroy's seminal biographies, and the noted theologian Karl Barth took a great interest in Gerstein only after encountering him on Hochhuth's stage. Writing on Barth's behalf, Eberhard Busch recalls, "So far as he can remember, it was reading and seeing Hochhuth's play . . . that first drew the professor's attention to Gerstein" (qtd. in Joffroy 301). Furthermore, it must be noted that the thematic faults which appear most apparent today—namely The Doctor's self-conscious revelry in his own malignity, the play's repeated flights into sentimental melodrama, and its privileging of plot mechanics over fidelity—only appear so off-key in contrast to more contemporary Holocaust texts; Holocaust literature, a virtually non-existent genre at the time of the play's debut, has undergone transformative evolutions in the decades since. In 1963, the very year Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem pierced a decades-long conspiracy of silence, *The Deputy* arrived as a devastating thunderbolt, forcefully confronting a global audience with the dangers of its own passivity. Finally, with no voluminous body of research or literature to draw on, the young Rolf Hochhuth had to rely on his own archival research, sculpting his play with an historian's toolkit. Although the text's historical and political significance may in some ways surpass its literary value, *The Deputy* nonetheless marks a distinguished place in the canon, and any subsequent literary rendering of Gerstein's plight has, in some sense, to live in its shadow.

Forty years after the play's debut, expatriate Greek filmmaker Costa-Gavras adapted *The Deputy* for the screen as *Amen*, a film that updates the play, bringing its chief concerns into starker, more poignant focus by repositioning Gerstein at the narrative's

center. In addition to trimming down *The Deputy*'s cumbersome length, the film adds a number of scenes with no correlation to its source text, broadening the play's's condemnation of passivity in the face of atrocity. By softening Hochhuth's obsessive, singular focus on the Catholic Church, Costa-Gavras's adaptation makes a more wide-reaching commentary on the global community's indifference, as the film's opening scene makes clear. Whereas *The Deputy* commences in the papal nuncio's living quarters circa 1942, *Amen* begins in 1936, at the League of Nations in Geneva. The introductory credits overlay a sequence depicting a frantic man barging into the general assembly, littering the auditorium with fliers, and abruptly committing suicide by gunshot, in full view of the delegation. "Stefan Lux," Costa-Gavras explains of the shocking scene, "was a German Jewish journalist who committed his violent protest in 1936. My idea was to show that people were already protesting before the war, trying to inform the outside world, in this case the League of Nations, but nobody paid attention" (16). From the film's outset, Costa-Gavras makes clear his intention to situate *The Deputy*'s core story—and the stern admonishment at its core—in a broader political context.

Remarkably, Stefan Lux's suicide marks one of the only instances of overt violence depicted onscreen throughout *Amen*. Considered alongside Tim Blake Nelson's *The Grey Zone*, which debuted only a year prior to *Amen* and was also adapted from a stage play, Costa-Gavras's restrained approach appears as a radical departure from contemporary trends in Holocaust filmmaking. Both *Amen* and *The Grey Zone* may be viewed as reactions to the previous decade's dominant trend, established by *Schindler's List* and pushed to an extreme by *Life is Beautiful*, of imbuing Holocaust films with a measure of hope and optimism. Despite both films' focus on acts of resistance under

Nazi oppression, neither Costa-Gavras's nor Nelson's provides the audience with an uplifting final note. Nevertheless, the filmmakers' respective approaches could not be more divergent. Nelson's self-confessed approach in *The Grey Zone* was "to show everything" (qtd. in Boswell 164); in adapting his own stage play for the screen, Nelson augmented the story's depiction of violence, using special effects and cinematography to recreate atrocities in a way that no stage production could accommodate.

Costa-Gavras, conversely, imposes limitations akin to a stage play's onto his film, keeping his camera at a clinical distance and, in a gesture reminiscent of ancient tragedy, relegating acts of violence to a place off screen. As the director explains in an interview, "You cannot treat this film, which has such a strong link to history, like you would a thriller. It was necessary to use a completely different style—very simple, very sober" (Crowdus, Georgakas 16). In stark contrast to *The Grey Zone*'s unending tableaux of graphic body-horror, *Amen* relies on the poignant repeated motif of a locomotive in transit, moving left to right with its car doors closed at some points, and right to left with its doors open and cars empty at others. This offers the audience a persistent reminder of the source of Kurt Gerstein's urgency: that as each hour passes—as politicians and church leaders debate the most tactful response, as Gerstein himself frantically devises a course of action—mass murder occurs at an industrial rate. "By using the repeated image of the trains," explains Costa-Gavras, "I wanted to emphasize the idea that this machine was continually working" (16). Moreover, by depicting this idea with such cinematic restraint, *Amen* manages to convey it without ever devolving into prurience or gratuity.

The film's tactful approach crystallizes in the scene depicting Gerstein's fateful inspection of a functioning gas chamber. A camera lens following prisoners *into* a gas

chamber has proven to be a metaphorical third rail in Holocaust filmmaking; indeed, Spielberg's decision in *Schindler's List* to include precisely such a scene elicited some of the film's harshest critical condemnations—despite its concluding revelation that in this case, the prisoners have, in fact, been herded into an actual shower. The scene's effectiveness within the context of Spielberg's film relies on the camera work and imagery immediately preceding it: onscreen text announces "Auschwitz-Birkenau" upon the arrival of a train carrying Schindler's female employees, the camera following from behind as the women are herded and pushed forward through the camp. The landscape of Auschwitz blurs past viewers in the periphery, as the camera—and thus the viewer—assumes a place in line with the herded female prisoners. They soon reach their stopping point: a cavernous chamber, entered through a single doorway. The camera halts as the steel door closes, and the door's spy-hole occupies the center of the shot. By this point, viewers have been led to share the prisoners' certainty of their impending execution, and to our horror, the camera zooms *through* the spy-hole and into the chamber, where we see a mass of nude women clutching one another in terror. Their terror of being gassed becomes our terror of being forced to see it.

Despite Spielberg's last-minute reprieve—the revelation of water rather than poison gas—some critics found the scene unforgivable. Omer Bartov sums up the problems a number of critics had with the scene, writing,

Most troubling of all ... is the shower scene, since that mass of attractive, frightened, naked women, finally relieved from their anxiety by jets of water rather than gas, would be more appropriate to a soft-porn sadomasochistic film than to its context ... The fact that this 'actually' happened is, of course, wholly

beside the point, since in most cases it did not, and even when it did, the only eyes which might have derived any sexual pleasure from watching such scenes belonged to the SS. Hence, by including this scene, Spielberg makes the viewers complicit with the SS, both in sharing their voyeurism and in blocking out the reality of the gas chambers. (49)

Bartov's allegation of complicity manifests more ethical condemnation than aesthetic criticism, and, to be sure, equating viewing a film with participating in Nazi atrocities verges on gross overstatement of the kind Hannah Arendt faced upon *Eichmann in Jerusalem's* publication. Still, Bartov calls attention to perhaps the greatest dilemma for any filmmaker attempting to take on the Holocaust: namely, that the historical obscenity was so severe that any attempt to recreate it onscreen risks recalling the most exploitative genre conventions of horror or pornography.

Years before the appearance of *Schindler's List*, Elie Wiesel raised the issue in a *New York Times* editorial, asking,

Why this sudden explosion of nudity as a backdrop for the Holocaust? What by any rule of decency ought to remain unexposed is exposed to shock the television viewer. Naked men. Naked women. Naked children. And all of them made up with ketchup and paid to "fall" into "mass graves." How can one explain such obscenity? How can anyone justify such insensitivity? ("Art and the Holocaust" H38)

Bartov's critique appeared in the 1990's, occasioned by Spielberg's film; Wiesel's appeared in the 1980's, specifically referencing a television adaptation of Herman Wouk's *War and Remembrance*. By 2003, Tim Blake Nelson would push the tendency

that so disturbed Wiesel and Bartov to its final conclusion: in *The Grey Zone*, the camera captures individuals choking on Zyklon B in the Auschwitz gas chambers; it remains trained on them as their nude bodies are dragged across the floor and, eventually, fed into furnaces.

Costa-Gavras's 2002 film wholly rejects this trajectory of increasingly graphic nudity and violence; the director insisted on such an approach at the film's earliest stages. "I personally don't feel," he explains, "that I'm able visually to reconstruct, to reproduce, the horror of the concentration camps. Some directors can do it, but I can't, so I tried to find solutions to suggest it, to have the viewer visualize images I cannot show them" (Crowdus, Georgakas 16). Hochhuth avoided recreating the most pivotal moment of Gerstein's career onstage—his inspection of the Belzec gas chamber—by commencing *The Deputy*'s plot in its immediate wake. Early in the first act, Gerstein simply recalls what he witnessed: "Like marble columns the naked corpses stand. / You can tell the families, even after death / convulsed in locked embrace—with hooks / they're pulled apart. Jews have to do that job. / Ukrainians lash them on with whips" (25). For Costa-Gavras, this evasion was not an option; not only did he choose to begin his film much earlier, but he was also working in a medium which, unlike the stage, puts a considerable premium on *showing* over *telling*. Yet, *Amen* manages to depict Gerstein's inspection effectively without resorting to the gratuitous voyeuristic or pornographic tendencies that so troubled Bartov and Wiesel. Certain liberties are taken with the incident's history—in the film, Gerstein witnesses a gassing performed with Zyklon B, not carbon monoxide—but the scene's composition seems to respond almost directly to *Schindler's List*'s controversial gas chamber scene.

Upon their arrival at the camp, Gerstein (Ulrich Tukur), the Doctor (Ulrich Muhe), and two other SS guards take a car to the gas chamber. At this point, Gerstein appears unsure of what to expect. Throughout the film, Costa-Gavras remains faithful to the Nazis' cryptic euphemisms; The Doctor informs Gerstein that "400 units [are] to be treated." The gas chamber is already full when they arrive, and through the scene's duration, the camera remains outside the hermetically-sealed door, its lens trained on the two spy-holes. One by one, each of the SS men takes a turn peering in; no dialogue is spoken as this transpires, and none of the men takes any delight in what he sees. After a tense silence, underpinned by screams muffled to near-inaudibility, the Doctor—of all characters—breaks the silence to declare, "It's rather horrible." Gerstein peers in last; his glance is the briefest of all four, and his face wears a pale mask of terror and panic as he pulls away. As Janet Ward points out, "While the others just stroll away, only Gerstein takes the conceptual step from seeing into the machinery of death to acknowledging that the machinery must stop" (31). Costra-Gavras's approach runs counter to the one taken by Nelson in *The Grey Zone* and Spielberg in *Schindler's List*, an approach that, through painstaking attempts to recreate Nazi violence onscreen, seeks to position the audience as "secondary witnesses¹²" to the Holocaust itself. *Amen*, rather, puts the audience in the position of *witnessing a witness*; Costa-Gavras's camera never shows the individuals inside the gas chamber, only the horror-stricken look on Gerstein's face. And, to be sure, the scene is no less affecting as a result.

The scene depicting Gerstein's inspection cuts to his fateful—yet ultimately fruitless—meeting with Baron von Otter, and this scene, in turn, cuts directly to

¹² I am borrowing this term from literary scholar Gary Weissman, who explores its implications in great detail in his 2004 *Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust*.

Gerstein's entreaty to Cardinal Orsenigo: the exchange with which *The Deputy* commences. In *Amen*, Gerstein's visit to the papal legation occurs nearly a quarter of the way through the film. Costa-Gavras dedicates *Amen*'s opening sequences to establishing a broader historical context for the plot, and he achieves this by repositioning Gerstein as the central protagonist. By *The Deputy*'s conclusion, the fictional Father Fontana emerges as the drama's focal point and tragic hero; Kurt Gerstein, a persona taken directly from history, spends much of the play's latter acts on the sidelines, overshadowed by the oversized, idealized depictions of both Fontana and The Doctor. Positioning Gerstein at the story's center affords Costa-Gavras a vehicle to explore a number of significant historical instances onscreen that *The Deputy* only references in passing. A scene set in the Hadamar asylum follows Stefan Lux's suicide, depicting a mass execution of "incurables" in a rudimentary gas chamber; later, we learn that Berthe Ebeling, Gerstein's sister-in-law, was among the victims.

Rather than simply denying Gerstein the traditionally malevolent characteristics an audience may expect from an SS officer, or depicting a Schindler-esque transformation of conscience, *Amen* introduces its protagonist with a gesture of deliberate misdirection. Immediately following the mass gassing at Hadamar, the camera cuts to Gerstein in his professorial role, delivering a lecture to an auditorium packed with uniformed SS. His speech includes a number of terms which, by 2003, had assumed terrifying connotations in this context: "eliminating parasites," "clothes, blankets, sheets," "hermetically-sealed room." "From the exterior opening," Gerstein, also attired in full SS regalia, explains, "you introduce crystals of hydrocyanic acid." In this introductory scene, the film invites viewers to judge Gerstein solely by his SS uniform,

discounting the possibility of a tortured conscience inhabiting it. The shock for viewers comes with the dawning awareness that Gerstein is *not* employing SS euphemisms here: a trained chemical engineer lecturing at the Institute of Hygiene, Gerstein is issuing instructions for disinfecting garments, but in doing so, he employs the same terminology the Nazis repurposed for their genocidal enterprise. *Amen* presumes the audience's familiarity with the latter context, acquired from other films' predictably sinister depictions of Nazis, and engineers a moment of disorientation when an SS lieutenant returns this specialized vocabulary to its literal, denotative meaning.

"Another decision we made," explains Costa-Gavras, "was ... not to show the Germans like we've seen them in so many movies—goose-stepping, heel-clicking, shouting 'Heil Hitler,' and all that—but to show them as human beings like everybody else" (Crowdus, Georgakas 16). Thus, in addition to adapting—or perhaps more precisely, *revising*—*The Deputy*, the director appears equally concerned with offering a commentary on the way Holocaust perpetrators have been depicted in previous films. Throughout *Amen*'s duration, Costa-Gavras resists what appears to be a hitherto irresistible temptation: the unilateral alignment of the SS with an otherworldly and all-encompassing evil. Contemporary film history provides an abundance of menacing Nazi characters, from *The Night Porter*'s Maximilian Theo Aldorfer (1974), whose sadism manifests in a perverse sexual dalliance with a former camp prisoner, to the fugitive Nazi war criminal Kurt Dussander in *Apt Pupil* (1998), who attempts to live a quiet life after fleeing Germany, but still satisfies his bloodlust with random acts of violence.

In *Rethinking the Holocaust*, Yehuda Bauer asserts, "The warning contained in the Holocaust is surely that the acts of the perpetrators might be repeated, under certain

conditions, by anyone” (19). Apart from being a tired cinematic trope, imbuing Nazi characters with exaggerated psychopathy misdirects our attention from the uncomfortable truth that by and large, the Third Reich’s crimes were carried out by individuals who would likely not have become murderers under different circumstances. Whereas past filmmakers have taken pains to ignore Bauer’s “warning,” starkly differentiating Nazi characters from “human beings like everybody else” and instead presenting pathological serial killers in uniform, Costa-Gavras emphasizes more banal aspects of their character.

Costa-Gavras’s restraint is most evident in his revision of Hochhuth’s Doctor; Ulrich Muhe’s subdued performance in *Amen* lacks the slightest suggestion of “an uncanny visitant from another world” (Hochhuth 32). Even the film’s concluding sequence—set in Auschwitz, like its antecedent in *The Deputy*—begins with an overtly demystifying gesture. Hochhuth’s drama only ever shows the Doctor in uniform, acting in his professional capacity: a self-appointed deity lording over his kingdom, wooing fair women and dispensing death sentences at a whim. Consequently, like Goeth in *Schindler’s List*, the Doctor can only be seen “as the evil embodiment of absolute power” (Cheyette 229). In an overt divergence from its source text, the final act of *Amen* commences with a low-level SS functionary awakening the Doctor to inform him of Father Fontana’s arrival. Dressed in a baggy nightshirt, his eyes fatigued and his hair disheveled as he hurriedly applies shaving soap to his face, the Doctor’s appearance unquestionably asserts that beneath his finely-tailored SS uniform stands a mere mortal man. Thematically, the gesture perfectly inverts his first appearance in Act V of *The Deputy*, which strains to depict him as preternaturally seductive.

The Doctor's confrontation with Father Fontana (Matthieu Kossovitz) is similarly downsized: his bombastic, self-consciously nihilistic monologues are replaced with cynical self-interest. "In six months to a year," the Doctor explains to Fontana, "we are going to lose this war. It will be our turn to hide in the catacombs. Find me a comfortable one in Rome, and I'll get you out of here." Unlike the final act's corollary in *The Deputy*, *Amen* shows the Doctor dismissing Fontana first, casually dispatching him to the gas chamber. The final Auschwitz scenes belong to the Doctor and Gerstein, whom the Doctor does not even deign to place under arrest in Costa-Gavras's reimagining. The two are driven out of Auschwitz together in the middle of the night, flaming pyres of corpses illuminating both sides of the thoroughfare. "They'll hang us, Kurt," the Doctor, certain of his Reich's impending defeat, explains, "You before me. Your name is on all those Zyklon B invoices." The film's coda, which has no antecedent in *The Deputy*, proves this prediction at least partially correct.

A brief montage depicts a postwar Gerstein in prison, chain-smoking as he composes his report. "He claims he resisted," one prison guard says to another, "but he was in it." Two quick scenes conclude the montage: one of Gerstein reading the Denazification court's condemnation, another of Gerstein hanging, dead in his cell. The film's concluding sequence depicts the Doctor, alive and well, being greeted in Vatican City by Bishop Alois Hudal, who historically aided in the escape of a number of Nazi war criminals, including Josef Mengele. Hudal explains, "Your friends mentioned the United States to me, but they are only taking specialists in chemistry, aviation, biology ... It will have to be Argentina. There's a boat leaving in six days." *Amen* concludes on a profoundly unsettling note, reminding 21st Century audiences not only of at least one

Vatican official proven by history to be a Nazi collaborator, but also that the postwar United States showed the SS—provided those SS had the right training—a warmer welcome than they showed Jewish refugees at the height of their persecution.

For all its improvements on its source text, though, it must be acknowledged that Costa-Gavras's film exhibits some of the same flaws found in *The Deputy*. *Amen* strips *The Deputy* down to only its core plot points, but even those few points leave the film vacillating too frequently between historical dramatization and outright fabrication. While any work of fiction—even historical fiction—requires a measure of invention and speculation, both *The Deputy* and *Amen* cross a line not merely by manufacturing entire sequences of events, but by making these fabricated events key pivot points for the narrative. However strange and spectacular Gerstein's experiences, he never appeared in Auschwitz at daybreak, brandishing a forged order from Himmler in an attempt to free a rogue Jesuit priest. Ironically, Costa-Gavras's labors to historicize the drama heighten the confusion here: as one scene jumps to the next, it is never clear where stringent fidelity ends and fanciful fiction begins. Such a mode encounters unique pitfalls when it attempts to depict an experience as bizarre as Gerstein's. Juxtaposed with an admittedly fictional Jesuit—who dramatically throws his cassock aside to reveal a yellow star and voluntarily boards a train headed for Auschwitz—even a stringently historicized Gerstein begins to feel fundamentally *unreal*. Hochhuth was right, in 1963, to say of Kurt Gerstein that “so uncanny, divided, and mysterious a personality seems more like a fictional creation than an historical personage” (14); somehow, though, both he and Costa-Gavras failed to grasp that these qualities negated the necessity for overt fabrication.

Even Costa-Gavras's considerable efforts thus proved ultimately insufficient to the task of refocusing popular attention on Gerstein; the film garnered scant attention, popular or critical, upon its release. *Amen*'s lack of popular and critical success stands in stark contrast to another Holocaust film released in 2002: Roman Polanski's biographical drama *The Pianist*. Polanski won the Academy Award for Best Director, and the film garnered the prizes for Best Adapted Screenplay (Ronald Harwood) and Best Actor (Adrien Brody). Does Gerstein's story, then, need even more overt heroics than those Hochhuth manufactured and Costa-Gavras retained? Or does it need a more traditional, Hollywood-style treatment in order to rescue its protagonist from obscurity? A shrewder—but ultimately more disconcerting—question would ask whether or not mainstream audiences would ever be comfortable allowing Gerstein to achieve hero status, even *tragic* hero status, if it comes at the expense of Christendom, Western officials, and the Allied forces. *The Pianist*, operating in a more traditional vein, depicts the Holocaust through a narrative of its victims, eliciting deep sympathies from the audience and profound relief upon seeing its protagonist survive. *Amen* addresses the Holocaust through a narrative of its perpetrators and passive bystanders, functioning more as a discomfiting admonishment and provocation. Of its three key characters—Gerstein, Fontana, and the Doctor—only the most abhorrent and undeserving survives. The film thus leaves us only with the discomfiting suggestion that evil, be it “radical,” “absolute,” or “banal,” can—and sometimes *does*—prevail in the end.

Kurt Gerstein on the Written Page: William T. Vollmann's *Europe Central*

Clean Hands, a novella-length section of William T. Vollmann's massive novel *Europe Central*, retells Gerstein's story with the benefit of a literary device inaccessible

to playwrights and filmmakers: a narrator, which affords Vollmann a vehicle for speculation about Gerstein's own inner cogitation. Unlike Hochhuth and Costa-Gavras, Vollmann explores Gerstein's solitary thoughts in addition to his actions, emphasizing at once the dangerous position Gerstein occupied as he carried out his acts of resistance and the maddening paranoia brought on by occupying such a position. "If they could have seen within his soul," Vollmann's narrator explains, as Gerstein salutes his SS compatriots at a checkpoint in eastern Poland, "they would have shot him, shot him, *shot him!*" (454: italics in original). Throughout the story, the narrator repeatedly emphasizes the gulf between Gerstein's perception of ethics and that of nearly everyone around him, resulting, by the narrative's conclusion, in a depiction of an individual verging on complete mental breakdown.

But this is far from the only function of Vollmann's third-person narrator, who slips at times into the voice of a strident Nazi ideologue. "Until *we* coordinated all groups, clubs, and affiliations into a single expression of *our* Fuhrer's will," the narrator explains early on, "Gerstein served on the national council of the Young Men's Christian Association" (416: italics added). Gerstein is later described as "the perfect picture of *our* Aryan race"; the narrator references "the Eastern territories *we* still controlled" (469: italics added); and finally, recounting an instance in 1949 when the French courts rejected a plea for Gerstein's posthumous exoneration, the narrator assures readers, "He was no comrade to *us*" (471: italics added). The subtle revelation that Vollmann's narrating voice—at least at some points—is that of an unquestioning, loyal SS officer renders Gerstein's empathetic impulse toward the murdered Jews all the more radical. Vollmann weaves an unquestioning adherence to Nazi ideology into the very vehicle through which

he relays Gerstein's story, and furthermore, the text gives no assurance that the narrator's first-person plural pronouns do not include readers as well. Rather, in its repeated employment of "we," "us," and "our," the narration appears to presume readers' sympathies.

In this way, Vollmann's Gerstein narrative enacts Hannah Arendt's insight into ethics in a totalitarian society. Her concept of the banality of evil, contrary to popular misconceptions, has less to do with obedience to authority figures than with a widespread and near-perfect inversion of traditional ethics and legality. "Evil in the Third Reich," writes Arendt, "had lost the quality by which many recognize it—the quality of temptation. Many Germans and many Nazis, probably an overwhelming majority of them, must have been tempted *not* to murder ... But God knows, they had learned how to resist temptation" (*Eichmann* 150). The key point here—the very point that gets obscured by many popular depictions of Holocaust perpetrators—is that even acts as abhorrent as systematized mass murder can be *normalized*, as long as such acts are endorsed by a modern legal system and social structure. Arendt was invoking this very inversion when she articulated, to the outrage of her critics, that Eichmann committed his crimes "under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong" (*Eichmann* 276).

Arendt was not offering this point as exculpation for Eichmann; rather, she situated his crimes, factually, in a context where traditional criminality was not merely legalized, but had become *the law*. In 1975, Rabbi Richard Rubenstein would reinforce this point in *The Cunning of History*, writing,

Until ethical theorists and theologians are prepared to face without sentimentality the kind of action it is possible freely to perpetrate under conditions of utter respectability in an advanced, civilized society, none of their assertions about the existence of moral norms will have much credibility. To repeat, no laws were broken and no crimes were committed at Auschwitz. (67)

Of course, Eichmann served only as one concrete example, a point from which Arendt could begin her ruminations on the role played by “the law”—as an abstraction and as an ideal—in the Nazis’ “Final Solution”; she broadened her commentary to include masses of perpetrators, collaborators, and bystanders, motivated by the imperative to live as “law-abiding citizens.”

Gerstein’s story—in both its historical and fictionalized presentations—uncannily personifies this legal and ethical upheaval in the figure of Kurt’s father, Ludwig, a professional jurist. In the regime’s nascent days, before the brown-shirted SA was disbanded, Kurt Gerstein was arrested and briefly imprisoned for seditious acts against the state; the beating he received after disrupting an anti-Christian SA demonstration gave Kurt, as the introductory lines of “Clean Hands” describe, “a smile which lacked three teeth” (416). In addition to the beating, Gerstein was sentenced to six weeks of imprisonment in the Welzheim concentration camp, an experience that nearly drove him to suicide. A 1938 letter from Gerstein, unearthed and translated in 2006 by Canadian historian Valerie Hebert, reads, “This was the most terrible time in my life. I cannot describe the humiliations, the abuse, the hunger, forced labor and indescribable treatment ... Many times I was only a hair’s breadth away from hanging myself” (qtd. in Hebert 6).

Upon his release, it was Kurt's father, the "honorable" Ludwig Gerstein—a retired judge—who petitioned Nazi Party leaders to have his rebellious son's membership reinstated, and Kurt's successful application for the *Waffen-SS* would soon follow. Excepting *The Deputy*, in which Kurt Gerstein is ultimately relegated to a supporting role, all the literary renderings of Gerstein's story touch upon Kurt's tense relationship with his father; only *Clean Hands*, though, employs this relationship to crystallize the text's most poignant themes. On the surface, their dynamic appears familiar to the point of being well-worn: a fractious and idealistic son working to break away from the dictates of a conservative, traditionalist father. This dynamic gets complicated, though, by the legal and ethical inversions instituted by the regime.

Describing the seamless transition with which German judges and prosecutors transitioned from upholding law to enforcing criminality, historian Richard J. Evans writes, "That the law itself had been perverted by Nazism did not occur to them. They had unthinkingly adapted to the Third Reich because it had taken over the management of the state; they continued to work for it to the end because they felt it was their job to do so" (346). Paradoxically, the elder Gerstein's "conservative" commitment to "respectability" leads him to become—by any reasonable standard of judgment—a revolutionary; Ludwig Gerstein's determination to live as a "law-abiding citizen" catalyzes his unwavering support for a revolutionarily criminal regime. Thus, early in the narrative, Vollmann's narrator explains, "Ever since [Kurt] was a child, he'd been afflicted by what his father called *evil thoughts*, meaning an introspection of the melancholy, isolating sort" (426: italics in original). Ironically, the very "isolating" thoughts characterized as "evil"—simply labeled "thinking" decades later by Arendt—

spurred Kurt Gerstein's radical empathy and the acts of resistance he carried out as an SS *Obersturmführer*.

"If only he had not had those thoughts!" the narrator continues. "Then he would not have been obliged to cause himself and others so much pain" (426). Here the irony thickens to a point of near paradox, as the narrator addresses the genuine ambiguity with which Gerstein viewed his own actions. "Pain," in this usage, could refer to his early arrest and imprisonment, which brought shame and ignominy to his "respectable" family name. More significantly, in order to act as "a spy for God"—as Gerstein characterized himself—he had to assume a position in a cadre of mass murderers, wreaking unimaginable pain upon millions of helpless civilians. Finally, his acts of resistance, which inarguably constituted acts of treason, jeopardized not only his own life, but the lives of his family as well, up to and including his father.

The narrating voice of "Clean Hands" complicates this moment even further with a swift shift in tone and content, immediately following Gerstein's meditation on pain with a dry statement of fact: "The working capacity of Belzec was fifteen thousand murders a day" (426). *The Deputy* commences shortly after Gerstein's inspection of Belzec and Treblinka; *Amen* depicts the inspection, but strips the incident of specificity: Gerstein visits an unnamed camp, and in the service of filmic continuity, The Doctor—who appears in all of the film's critical junctures, including its climax in Auschwitz—accompanies him. Vollman's narrative moves this crucial moment significantly closer to its historical antecedent by painstakingly reconstructing Gerstein's own account of the inspection, going so far as to include even the errors Gerstein made in his report: Vollmann's "fifteen thousand" is Gerstein's estimate, one he calculated himself based on

the number of victims at the gassing he witnessed, the duration of the process, and the number of hours in a working day. Vollmann appends his novel with a lengthy compendium of sources, an inclusion not unlike Hochhuth's "Sidelights on History." Moreover, like Hochhuth, Vollmann offers candid justifications for any point where his narrative deviates from the factual record. "Given the statistics which have since been more or less agreed upon for the number of people murdered in the Holocaust," writes Vollmann, "Gerstein's count is far too high" (785).

Indeed, Holocaust deniers have for decades pointed to the Gerstein Report as "evidence" of deliberate falsification.¹³ Vollmann nonetheless relies on Gerstein's erroneous estimate "in order to better respect and re-create Gerstein's thought process" (785). This admission makes clear that unlike Hochhuth and even Costa-Gavras, Vollmann's narrative is concerned primarily with Gerstein as an historical persona; the grim historical moment he was born into provides a backdrop and context to what could be reasonably classified as work of biographical fiction, unadorned by fabricated ideations like Hochhuth's Father Fontana. In contrast to both *The Deputy* and *Amen*, Vollmann endeavors to present Gerstein not as a symbolic embodiment of moral indignation, but as a complex, limited, and fallible human being. And considering the shock Gerstein's mind endured after witnessing "what not 10 people alive ... have seen, or will see" (424),¹⁴ a few errors in calculation appear perfectly understandable.

¹³ The most detailed repurposing of Gerstein's testimony for Holocaust denial can be found in Henri Roques' *The "Confessions" of Kurt Gerstein*, published in 1989 by the ethically opprobrious and widely discredited Institute for Historical Review.

¹⁴ This sentiment, uttered to Gerstein by Christian Wirth, appears in Vollmann's text amended only slightly from the quotation as Gerstein presents it in the Gerstein Report: "There are not 10 living people who have seen or who will see as much as you did; the foreign auxiliary personnel will be executed at the end." (qtd. in Joffroy 287).

Vollmann's adherence to Gerstein's own account also affords *Clean Hands* a unique vehicle for exploring the Nazis' continuous refinement of their murder methods. Few are the novels, plays, or imaginative films that depict, in any way, the gradual evolution that began with mass shootings, experimented with carbon monoxide inhalation, and settled finally on Zyklon B as the most efficient agent of genocide. Any reasonably accurate depiction of Gerstein's story, however, demands it; the regime's very reason for dispatching Gerstein to Belzec was to assess the *efficiency* of the camp's rudimentary gassing installation, which pumped exhaust from a diesel engine, positioned outside, into the chambers. Neither Hochhuth nor Costa-Gavras, in their texts, explore the macabre and truly bizarre position in which Gerstein found himself as a result of the assignment, caught between the "hands on" murderers who ran the camp system and the so called "desk murderers" who devised it. Taking his cues from Gerstein's own account, Vollmann depicts this conflict in all its horrific strangeness.

Contrary to Costa-Gavras' recreation of the incident, which depicts a mass execution carried out with machine-like perfection, Gerstein had actually witnessed—and was summarily aghast to see—what happens when the machinery of genocide breaks down. Gerstein visited Belzec on a day when, coincidentally, the diesel engine malfunctioned after hundreds of Jews had been corralled into the gas chamber. As Gerstein describes in his report,

WIRTH was approaching. He was worried that this happened the very day I was there. I was observing and listening. My watch registered everything: 50-70 minutes. The Diesel always did not work and people in the rooms were always waiting, in vain. They were heard moaning and sobbing, 'like at a Synagogue'

said Pr. PFANNENSTEIL who had put his ear against the wooden door ... After 2 hours and 49 minutes the Diesel started to work. After 25 more minutes, many people were dead. (Joffroy 288)

Gerstein's conscience rebelled not just at the act of mass murder, but at the protracted, torturous psychological trauma that preceded it. As his stopwatch clocks the passing hours, Gerstein's thoughts turn again toward suicide: "I should have willingly entered these death rooms, I should have liked to die there with them" (287). But though a self-confessed idealist, Gerstein was no fool; he intuited the futility of such self-sacrifice, predicting that even if his death were reported, it would have been repurposed for propaganda: "My death would have been regarded as an accident and my epitaph would have been: 'Dead for his dearest Fuhrer, while on duty'" (Joffroy 287).

The fumbling, disorganized mass execution was a source of abject horror and moral outrage for Gerstein; it was merely a source of mild embarrassment for Wirth. Drawing again from Gerstein's account, Vollmann depicts the absurd exchange between these two in the incident's wake. SS administration—specifically Rolf Gunther, Eichmann's adjutant in the resettlement office—had ordered Gerstein's inspection to evaluate the current gassing method's efficiency, a method which was itself devised as a more efficient alternative to shooting. As Vollmann depicts, Wirth was aware that his methods were being questioned in the upper echelons of the Nazi hierarchy, and he had a vested interest in ensuring that Gerstein keep the embarrassing malfunction quiet. During a celebratory banquet at Treblinka, Wirth pulls Gerstein aside to explain, "You'll appreciate my motives in putting this to you: Heckenholt and all the others depend on me for their livelihood ... none of us want to be sidelined here, Gerstein" (428).

Wirth appears less concerned with the regime's ideological goals than he is simply with staying employed and averting the headaches which would no doubt accompany a complete operational overhaul. He continues,

I want you to tell those people in Berlin that we don't need any modifications, at least not at Belzec (about Treblinka I don't give a shit). Thanks to their interference, we've already been made to give up bottled gas, which worked perfectly well, believe me, back at the start of all this. They can complain all they like about supply problems. Well, in this life we all have supply problems. Bottled gas is what we used to carry out T-4, after all the bleeding hearts decided that shooting wasn't good enough for Germans. Well, they can all go to hell. Tell those assholes in Berlin that based on your technical expertise, diesel is more sensible than prussic acid—more rapid or more safe or whatever. Get those bureaucrats to leave us in peace. (428)

Wirth's discussion of these operations runs perfectly counter to the megalomaniacal pronouncements of Hochhuth's Doctor. Wholly untroubled by theological or metaphysical quandaries, not possessed of a depth of mind sufficient to celebrate self-conscious sadism or villainy, Vollmann's Christian Wirth—overseer of the death camps in Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka—appears to be a character more aligned with Hochhuth's Helga, a lowly secretary, than with the overt diabolism of the Doctor. "A job's a job" replies Helga upon being asked if she "enjoys" her new position at Auschwitz (Hochhuth 257). It is easy to imagine Vollmann's Wirth uttering something similar; his job's a job, and his foremost concern is keeping it. Such a depiction blurs the demarcating line between "desk murderers," as Adolf Eichmann is frequently labeled,

and their counterparts in the camps, doing their gruesome work up close. In Vollmann's retelling, both the SS running the death camps *and* the SS occupying administrative positions are engaged in a method of killing defined more by ruthless efficiency than by individual brutality, and their motivations have more to do with commonplace *self-interests* than deriving pleasure from inflicting suffering upon others.

The exaggerated melodrama of Hochhuth's *Doctor*—and even the slightly tempered melodrama of Spielberg's *Amon Goeth*—are wholly absent from “Clean Hands.” Rather, Vollmann sets his retelling against a backdrop in which even systematic mass murder gets routinized, normalized, and taken for granted by the individuals committing it, assumed simply to be the way the world works. Vollmann makes this overt through the dialogue uttered by SS functionaries like Wirth and Pfannenstiel, most of which traces back to historical documentation, but he also makes symbolic and figurative gestures to the same effect. Early on, traversing the Polish countryside, Gerstein notes “the sky turning Prussian blue in the train windows” (418). Later, he reflects upon “the lethality of his sky-blue prussic acid crystals” (428). By subtly aligning the Nazis' program of genocide with the natural landscape in which it occurs, Vollmann's story offers subtextual assent to Arendt's notions of banal evil. As the sky adopts a darker shade during sunset hours, so, too, will thoughtless individuals, ensconced within the all-encompassing dictates of a totalitarian state, adopt new systems of values and beliefs, no matter how antithetical to prior notions of “right” and “wrong.”

In a similar vein, Vollmann's narrator repeatedly employs Holocaust signifiers as referents in similes: Gerstein's application for SS membership “went as smoothly as rounding up the nearest Jew” (416); the skin of a woman Gerstein sees on a train “was as

perfect as a political idea” (418); his “professional life became as pretty as the mountains one sees to the south of Auschwitz” (431); pens and pencils on Gerstein’s desk are “crammed in the holder like Jews in a gas chamber” (432). On one hand, this device signals Gerstein’s ever-augmenting obsession with the horrors surrounding him, and on the other hand, it signals both the veritable omnipresence of totalitarian Nazi ideology and the self-evident manner with which its adherents came to view it; Nazism and its signifiers become the standard against which all facets of experience get measured. These figurative gestures have the cumulative effect of making Gerstein, who remains committed to his own assessment of ethics, appear all the more radical and strange. When banal evil spreads across the surface of all social identities and relationships, individuals of conscience—even the most rudimentary level of conscience, which is all it would take to rebel at the mass slaughter of civilians—become pariahs. Ethical inclinations, even at their most basic, are characterized as “evil thoughts” (Vollmann 426).

Literary critic Bryan Santin traces out a more overt connection between Vollmann’s “Clean Hands” and Arendt’s notion of the banality of evil. In “Kurt Gerstein and the Tragic Parable of *Clean Hands*,” he posits that Vollmann’s Gerstein functions as a dramatic foil to Arendt’s famously infamous characterization of Adolf Eichmann. To support this, Santin recalls that for Arendt, Eichmann’s chief ethical deficiency was not on overt will to commit evil or even criminal deeds, but rather “an inability to *think*, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else. No communication with him was possible, not because he lied but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all safeguards against the words and the presence of others, and hence against all reality as

such” (Arendt, *Eichmann* 49). One of the more speculative moves Vollmann makes is to depict Gerstein literally communing with his conscience, which appears as an ethereal, but anthropomorphized, entity. Whereas Arendt described “thinking,” in its ethical dimensions, as “the disposition to live together explicitly with oneself, to have intercourse with oneself, that is, to be engaged in that silent dialogue between me and myself (“Personal Responsibility” 44), Vollmann’s text pushes the concept further by depicting Gerstein’s conscience *as an Other*.

En route to Belzec in Vollmann’s story, Gerstein suffers a brief hallucinatory episode in which an unidentified female’s face morphs into that of Berthe Ebeling, his murdered sister-in-law. In “a voice that only [Gerstein] can hear,” Berthe says, “Be brave, Kurt Gerstein. I am your conscience. When you walk the dark way, remember me, and always do your best” (Vollmann 419). The episode prompts Gerstein to remember dreams he’s experienced periodically since adolescence, dreams of “a pale face, neither male nor female, which hung over his and kissed him all night. Sometimes it had seemed more than a dream” (419). For Santin, this is no mere flight of fanciful symbolism, but rather the locus of the text’s ethical thesis, a thesis pointedly influenced by Arendt. “Gerstein,” observes Santin, “engages not in a dialogue between the nominative *I* and the objective *me* who hears that thinking as the imagined Other; instead, in the story world, he engages in an actual internal dialogue between self and other” (155). By imbuing Gerstein with a personified conscience, Vollmann at once offers a subtle nod to Arendt’s thesis on the banality of evil as well as a speculative reason as to what made this particular SS man so vastly divergent from all the others.

“Arendt,” writes Santin, “took Eichmann’s ostensible normalcy as proof that the Nazis had corrupted the all-too-human proclivity for empathy with others, thereby inverting traditional definitions of right and wrong” (150). For Arendt, the ethical upheaval catalyzed by the Third Reich—which would ultimately result in the industrialized murder of millions—traced back to the limits totalitarian ideology placed on the faculty of empathy, limits drawn along racial and nationalistic lines. The designation of Jews as “subhuman,” which Nazi race laws legally codified years before the Holocaust properly began, marked the first step toward deportation, incarceration, mass shooting, and, finally, the gas chambers; each successive step would be unthinkable had European Jews not first be legally stripped of juridical personhood. This exclusion denied Europe’s Jews, in Arendt’s famous phrase, of “the right to have rights, or the right of every individual to belong to humanity” (*Origins* 298). Arendt continues, “The conception of human rights, based upon the assumed existence of a human being as such, broke down at the very moment when those who professed to believe in it were for the first time confronted with people who had indeed lost all other qualities and specific relationships—except that they were still human” (299). Both historically and in *Clean Hands*, Kurt Gerstein’s “deficiency” as an SS man was his apparent inability to limit his empathetic capacity.

Vollman’s narrator explores this inability, but, in keeping with the moral inversion permeating the narrative, Gerstein’s empathy is characterized as a failing. “In short,” explains the narrator, “he’d fallen prey to the dangerous capability of the *Untermensch* to mask itself behind a human face (his sister-in-law’s, for instance), and thereby excite pity” (Vollmann 425). Gerstein’s gaze fell upon the prisoners of Belzec,

Treblinka, and Auschwitz—starved, beaten, and ravaged individuals he was instructed to revile—but he never divested his capacity to see himself in them, and them in himself. Kurt Gerstein viewed the Nazis’ victims as human, despite the fact that they “had indeed lost all other qualities and specific relationships—except that they were human.” Their humanity alone was sufficient to outrage his conscience and catalyze his doomed mission to work toward their rescue, even at significant risk to his life.

Santin also highlights Vollmann’s repeated and multilayered use of “geheim,” the German word for “secret.” The adjective appears at numerous points throughout the narrative, in German each time, both in descriptions of Gerstein’s assignments and in the free indirect discourse of Vollmann’s narration, which seamlessly vacillates between the voice of an unquestioning Nazi ideologue and that of a studied contemporary observer, casting a cynical eye over the outrages of the past. In a postmodern vein, Vollmann makes an extra effort to draw attention to “geheim” by rendering it either boxed and in all caps, as an official state stamp would appear, or in a bold-faced, runic script reminiscent of the SS insignia. But Vollmann does not employ the word solely in references to state secrets; immediately following Gerstein’s inspection of Belzec, the narrator leaps forward to the contemporary present, offering an assessment of Gerstein’s position in history. “There is a roster of good souls” (424), the narrator announces, going on to describe a list of Europeans who offered succor to Jews during the Nazis’ reign. The narrator continues, “On one of the loose sheets we find ... Dr. Hermann Maas of Heidelberg, who helped many Jews get safely to England and Switzerland ... Pastor Erik Myrgren of Berlin, whom the Israelis have designated one of the Righteous Among Nations; and Dr. Elisabeth Abegg ... who sold her jewelry in order to finance the escapes

of Jews” (424). The paragraph describing this “roster of good souls” concludes by abruptly declaring, “The name of Kurt Gerstein is not here” (424). Gerstein, it seems, was too deeply embedded in the Nazi state to be counted among the righteous.

The subsequent paragraph describes “another register,” an inversion of the first: the “much more voluminous” list of Nazi war criminals (424). “In its pages,” the narrator describes, “have been written forever the names of Captain Gunther, Dr. Pfannenstiel (whose indictment got dismissed), Captain Wirth, Brigade Chief Globocnik, and ever so many others” (424). Significantly, Vollmann lists almost exclusively the names of individual perpetrators with whom the historical Gerstein colluded directly: Rolf Gunther, deputy to Adolf Eichmann, gave Gerstein his initial assignment to travel from Berlin to eastern Poland; on that assignment, Pfannenstiel and Wirth accompanied Gerstein to Belzec and Treblinka; and Odilo Globocnik, according to Gerstein’s report, performed a similar inspection of the facility a week before Gerstein arrived. But as the narrator informs us, “Gerstein’s name is not here, either” (424). Gerstein, the narrator suggests, can be classified neither among the just nor the unjust; rather, he occupies an ambiguous moral gray zone between these polarities. “Wherein,” asks the contemporary narrator, “should he be inscribed? – **Geheim**” (425). Thus, Vollmann’s text highlights not only Gerstein’s tortured conscience and the ambiguity of his position during his lifetime, but also his relative obscurity in historical and popular consciousness. Gerstein’s acts of resistance bore no tangible results, and his biography ends with an apparent suicide. His story, unlike Oskar Schindler’s, offers little in the way of comfort or assurance; instead, its dismal conclusion leaves us stranded in a gray zone.

Santin identifies a wider-reaching, more contemporary critique in this passage, writing that it “shows how the contemporary cultural narrative disseminates images of generically evil Nazis while keeping secret another kind of Nazi character: one like Kurt Gerstein who struggles with immense moral doubt” (154). While Santin’s critique of the “generically evil Nazis” that inhabit many popular Holocaust texts appears sound, the latter half of his remark curiously overlooks the prominence of Oskar Schindler, who served in the *Abwehr* before the German invasion of Poland and who remained a Nazi party member in good standing through the war’s duration—surely, no one could rightly accuse contemporary culture of keeping *him* secret. More importantly, though, by characterizing Gerstein as “another kind of Nazi character,” Santin ignores the most vital aspect of the story: namely, that Gerstein’s desperate cries were met with no echo or assent. As Saul Friedlander notes in *The Ambiguity of Good*, “So much of Gerstein’s tragedy lay in the loneliness of his action. The silence and passivity of the Germans, the absence of any notable reaction among the Allies and the neutrals, indeed, in the Christian West as a whole, in the face of the extermination of the Jews, invests the role of Gerstein with its true significance” (228). Were Gerstein “another kind of Nazi character,” his biography would include at least one German compatriot who aided his resistance efforts. Alas, it does not.

The remainder of Vollmann’s narrative unfolds in a manner wholly predictable to anyone familiar with Gerstein’s story, as his mission unspools in a succession of failures: Baron von Otter passes Gerstein’s testimony on to the Swedish government, and there it remains for the war’s duration. Vatican leaders in Berlin turn him away. His meager efforts to sabotage Zyklon B deliveries, even when successful, prove futile in the end.

The narrator relates an incident when Gerstein, “*a specialist in cyanide disinfectants*” (Vollman 465: italics in original), must advise on the practicality of eliminating the remaining Jews in Thereisenstadt by forcing them into trenches and simply sprinkling Zyklon B crystals over them in the open air. Gerstein unequivocally declares the method unfit, and as the narrator explains: “That was the last time he succeeded in saving anybody. As it turned out, those Jews got murdered anyway, by shooting” (463). When his tangible machinations to thwart the regime all prove unsuccessful, a despondent Gerstein resorts to illegally tuning his radio to BBC news broadcasts, blaring them at a volume he hopes his neighbors will hear. And in the midst of his horror and increasing despair, he returns again and again “to what his father had always called his evil thoughts; he scribbled additions to his indictments” (463).

Whereas *The Deputy* and *Amen* employ a manufactured climax at the drama’s conclusion—Gerstein’s failed attempt at Auschwitz to free Father Fontana—Vollmann’s *Clean Hands* more closely follows the trajectory of Gerstein’s dismal history, resulting in an unsettling narrative trajectory that seems to move in reverse. The story’s climax occurs early on, with Gerstein’s inspection of Belzec; from there, both in *Clean Hands* and, sadly, in Gerstein’s short-lived historical tenure as an SS whistle-blower, very little action occurs. The narrative of *Clean Hands* derives its momentum from augmenting intimacy rather than action or tension, as the text’s penultimate scenes crystallize its historical concerns into the final severing of a fractious son from his stalwart father. Throughout the narrative, Ludwig Gerstein functions as a foil to his son Kurt, meeting the latter’s increasing uncertainty with confident exhortations on an SS officer’s duty: “Hard times demand hard measures” (464), he explains, imbuing a well-worn Nazi cliché with

artificial profundity. Kurt's increasing despondency disturbs his father, who confesses, "Seriously, my boy. I'm worried about you. You seem as though you've lost your way" (464). Considering the ethical inversions which permeate the narrative, Kurt has indeed lost his way by the conclusion, by adhering to the dictates of *his own* conscience in place of the one fabricated for him by the Nazi state.

The younger Gerstein gets the final word in *Clean Hands*, in the form of excerpted letter Kurt wrote to his father in August 1944. "*You are wrong about one thing,*" it reads, "*I never participated in any of this. Whenever I received orders, I not only didn't follow them, but made sure they were disobeyed. For my part, I leave all this with clean hands and a clear conscience*" (470: italics in original). Vollmann presents these words largely unaltered from their historical source—English translation notwithstanding—and as though the appearance of the story's title was not sufficient to signal the author's endorsement, the quotation is followed by a comment from the narrator. "At terrible risk," the narrator explains, "[Gerstein] had misdirected a few more shipments of Zyklon B. He also modified the formula to make the deaths less excruciating. Why not call him as heroic as SS-Obersturmführer Michael Wittmann, who won the Knight's Cross for destroying sixty-six Soviet tanks singlehanded?" (470) However, Gerstein's apparent suicide, which occurred less than a year after he expressed these sentiments, prompts serious questions about his own belief in them. Given the proximity of Gerstein's self-exculpation to his self-inflicted demise, it seems rather that his "clean hands and ... clear conscience" manifested yet another idealistic delusion, not entirely dissimilar from his dream of a Nazi Germany brought down from within.

Thus, if one were pressed to identify a fault in Vollmann's retelling, it could be found in the overtly hagiographic aspects of *Clean Hands*. Though indisputably closer to history than *The Deputy* or *Amen*—and, one could add, richer and more compelling as a result—Vollmann's narrative takes Gerstein's purity for granted, and for his part, the author freely admits this. In the bibliographic notes that append *Europe Central*, Vollmann gently chides Friedlander's seminal biography, writing, "I firmly believe that there was nothing ambiguous about Gerstein's good, unavailing though it proved to be. He is one of my heroes" (784). One could do worse choosing heroes, to be sure, but Vollmann's unabashed admiration inadvertently leads him to overlook perhaps the greatest—and certainly the most paradoxical—sacrifice Gerstein made for the sake of his conscience: the sacrifice of his clear conscience. German actor Ulrich Tukur, whose performance as Gerstein is one of the highlights of *Amen*, raises this point in a manner uncannily conversant with Vollmann's title. For Tukur, Gerstein "was someone who took responsibility where anyone else would have evaded it. In a time and under circumstances where he knew he'd made his hands dirty beyond description" (qtd. in Crowds, Georgakas 15). Notes in Vollmann's appendix acknowledge the recreation of Gerstein's errors with regard to number of victims at Belzec; no such acknowledgement appears regarding Gerstein's self-absolution.

Years prior to the publication of Vollmann's novel, critics faulted *Schindler's List* for treating its subject with a similarly unquestioning admiration. Ruth Franklin, in her masterful study *A Thousand Darknenses*, differs from *Schindler's List*'s detractors by defending this aspect of the text, but even she must admit just how unusual a road it is for

a novelist to take. Contrasting Keneally's novelistic treatment of history with Truman Capote's in *In Cold Blood*, Franklin writes,

Capote's book takes a strong position regarding capital punishment, but the argument arises out of the narrative, not the other way around. The moral to be extracted from the work is secondary to the main business: the author's imaginative realization of his characters and his desire to tell a good story. The opposite is true of *Schindler's Ark*.¹⁵ Keneally is convinced of Schindler's heroism from the start—naturally, otherwise why would he have written the book? ... His aim was not to fictionalize Schindler; it was to memorialize him. (150).

Vollmann's *Clean Hands* operates in similar vein, confidently proclaiming its protagonist's heroism, rather than speculatively exploring the possibility of it. It is richly ironic, then, that Kurt Gerstein's most recent—and most deeply ambiguous—literary incarnation appeared in 2007, and was penned by none other than Keneally himself.

Kurt Gerstein Returns to the Stage: Thomas Keneally's *Either/Or*

Thomas Keneally first discovered Gerstein's history in the 1970's. As the author explains in a 2007 interview, "I read [Gerstein's] story while I was researching Schindler, and I always wanted to go back to it." *Schindler's List* even includes a passing, often-overlooked reference to Gerstein in its latter pages. During the introduction of "planet Auschwitz" (Keneally, *Schindler* 317), when a train bearing Schindler's female employees mistakenly arrives there, Keneally's narrator explains, "There had been an awful day at Belzec, which the SS chemical officer Kurt Gerstein had witnessed, when

¹⁵ *Schindler's Ark* is the original title of Keneally's text, altered to *Schindler's List* by its American publisher. Franklin employs the original title to differentiate the book from its film adaptation.

Kommissar Wirth's method [of using carbon monoxide] took three hours to finish a party of Jewish males packed into the chamber" (317). Ironically, the genesis of *Either/Or*, Keneally's unpublished—and largely unknown—dramatization of Gerstein's story can be traced back to a single line in *Schindler's List*, indisputably Keneally's best known text.

Most critical treatments of *Schindler's List* ignore the Gerstein reference entirely; Sue Vice, a rare critic who engages with it in her 2001 *Holocaust Fiction*, inadvertently testifies to Gerstein's near-total disappearance from historical and cultural awareness. Attempting to locate "double-voiced discourse" in Keneally's narrating voice, Vice writes of the reference to Gerstein, "This is narrated from Gerstein's viewpoint; his words ... resound with dehumanizing officialese and include an adjective—'awful'—more expressive of inconvenience to himself than empathy with the victims" (107). On the surface, Vice's error merely manifests an embarrassing oversight on her part, revealing the degree to which her enthusiasm for literary theory outweighs her interest in Holocaust history. More significant, though, is what her oversight reveals about scholarly interpretations of the SS in literature. For Vice, the descriptive epithet "SS chemical officer" becomes a substitute for the name that succeeds it: Kurt Gerstein. Her interpretation of this brief passage in 2001 recreates the Denazification Court's error in 1945; Vice instinctually condemns the uniform, giving not a moment's consideration to the individual wearing it.

Keneally's drama begins with a comment on this very error, commencing in Gerstein's prison cell circa 1945. "I confused my jailors," Gerstein, alone onstage, explains in an opening soliloquy, "but not as much as I confused myself" (Keneally,

Either/Or I:i).¹⁶ Departing radically from the other Gerstein texts, *Either/Or*'s action commences with its protagonist's death; in an overtly surreal gesture, the play even dramatizes the mystery surrounding it. The opening scene first depicts Gerstein hanging himself as he pedantically narrates his actions: "I am said to have taken this strip of torn blanket ... You see the idea. But ... I was a Christian. Though suicide was an option under Hitler, Hitler is now dead" (I:i). Gerstein climbs down from a chair before recounting the second most prevalent account of his demise: "I confused the authorities to such an extent that they let two of my brother officers into my cell" (I:i). Upon this utterance, two unnamed SS appear onstage, beating and haranguing Gerstein before forcibly stringing him up. Keneally's drama favors neither account at this juncture, treating both as equally plausible; of greater importance is the Allied prison guards' reaction upon discovering Gerstein's corpse. After briefly discussing "some disturbed letters" Gerstein left behind, an unnamed French warder declares, "He *should* be hanging for what he did. Or do you think that documents would exonerate this monster?" (I:i). The French warder's question casts a shadow over the play's duration, a shadow rendered tangible by the stage lights, which go dark as the warders cut Gerstein down.

Of all the texts depicting Gerstein, only *Either/Or* gives extended consideration to his life prior to enlisting in the SS, resulting in a depiction considerably less pristine than the others. Though the play commences in 1945, its chronology after the opening scene lurches back to 1933, and much of the first act depicts a near-universal celebration of Hitler's ascent. Gerstein's initial enthusiasm for the Nazi state presents a problem other texts depicting him willfully ignore; in *The Deputy*, *Amen*, and *Clean Hands*, Gerstein

¹⁶ All citations from *Either/Or*, which remains unpublished, are taken from a production draft obtained from Theater J in Washington, DC, where the play premiered. In lieu of page numbers, quotations are cited by act and scene.

appears as a rogue agent from the start. Keneally's play, on the contrary, confronts Gerstein's initial support for Nazism directly and immediately. Even the historical note preceding the first act introduces Gerstein as "A Protestant youth leader and engineer who initially greeted the accession of Adolf Hitler to the German Chancellorship in 1933." Indeed, the young Gerstein's early embrace of Nazism could be an outgrowth of the same characteristic naïveté he would display as an SS whistleblower. Just as an older Gerstein earnestly believes the Jews' suffering will be allayed once the German people learn its extent, so does the young Gerstein, in Keneally's retelling, express his conviction that, "That nightmare of surrender, poverty, degradation and aimless vice ... will end now in a Germany suddenly transformed. Transformed by the people themselves under their new leader" (I:ii). Even as the state's stranglehold tightens, as SA storm troopers murder political dissidents in the streets and the state codifies anti-Semitism into law, Gerstein consoles himself by believing "the decent elements in the Party will soon curb all these excesses" (I:vii). Gerstein's failure in the regime's nascent days, the play's early scenes suggest, was his inability to foresee the ways it would pervert the very concept of human decency; just as he would later, when he envisioned Allied leaflets turning German public opinion against Hitler, Gerstein naively presumed his own concept of decency to be universal.

Substantially more so than even *The Deputy*, which bears the subtitle "A Christian Tragedy," the first act of *Either/Or* foregrounds Gerstein's position as a youth leader in German biblical circles. As Ari Roth, the artistic director of *Either/Or*'s premiere, explains, Gerstein truly believed "that the state and the Church could join, and create a Germany full of promise and full of possibility" (Baker). Keneally's first act chronicles

Gerstein's gradual disillusionment with the regime, catalyzed only when the Nazi state bears down on Christian churches. In her Symposium response to Simon Wiesenthal's *The Sunflower*, Cynthia Ozick raises a provocative question about Karl's Catholic upbringing: "Does the habit, inculcated in infancy, of worshiping a Master—a Master depicted in human form yet seen to be omnipotent—make it easy to accept a Fuhrer?" (213). Keneally's play, though it depicts an evangelical Protestant, responds to Ozick's query in the affirmative, at least in Gerstein's case; in an interview, Keneally even relents that "it is hard to excuse Kurt's folly in joining the SS, and his naïveté and his messiah complex" (Baker). As the play progresses, Gerstein's "messiah complex" runs in two directions, first as he welcomes Hitler as Germany's national savior, then, upon Gerstein's disenchantment with the regime, in his attempt to assume the role himself.

Whereas *The Deputy*, *Amen*, and *Clean Hands* all depict Gerstein as nearly-fanatical in his commitment to human rights from the outset, *Either/Or* establishes that in the regime's early days, Gerstein excused away a number of violations. When Gerstein's pastor, the famed Martin Niemöller, tries to temper Kurt's enthusiasm with a reminder of a man and woman fatally beaten by the SA, Kurt's instinctual response is to offer justification: "They were Reds" (I:iv). It was not legislated anti-Semitism or even extrajudicial acts of state violence that initially aroused Gerstein's ire, but rather "the pagan aspects of the Hitlerjugend ritual" (I: xiii). Gerstein's public outbursts against the regime—on behalf of the church, not the Nazi state's earliest victims—lead to his arrest and imprisonment, but his disenchantment with Nazism apotheosizes upon the murder of his sister-in-law in Hadamar sanitarium. Unlike Vollmann's *Clean Hands*, which

dissolves Bertha Ebeling into a symbolic manifestation of Gerstein's conscience, *Either/Or* presents her as a living character.

Moreover, the Gerstein family's discussion of her mental illness positions Ebeling as a stand-in for the victims of Nazi race policy. Kurt's empathy for her condition foreshadows his later empathy for the persecuted Jews; he rebels at the very suggestion of having Bertha committed, even offering to care for her himself. Upon his father's declaration that "Bertha is one of nature's mistakes," Kurt responds immediately and unequivocally: "In God's plan there is no such thing" (I: xvii). Ebeling's function as a vehicle to explore Nazi race policy is concretized when an old family friend named Zerrer, now a Gestapo agent, arrives to inform the Gersteins of Ebeling's death. After reporting the "official" cause of death to the family *en masse*—a typhus epidemic—Zerrer reveals the truth to Kurt in private: "Your sister-in-law was, I'm afraid, one of a number of sacrifices to the task of making a better race. One free of curses and disordered minds" (I: xix). At Kurt's insistence, Zerrer even details the method of execution: gassing by carbon monoxide. The first of *Either/Or*'s two acts concludes with Gerstein resolving to infiltrate the SS. "It is my revelation and my task," Gerstein explains to his horrified wife, Friedl, "These crimes exist, I must combat them" (I: xx). Notably, this occurs midway through the play; in all the other renderings of Gerstein's story, this commitment has already been made by the time the narrative commences.

Whereas Act I of *Either/Or* chronicles Gerstein's religiously motivated disenchantment with Nazism, Act II chronicles the dissolution of his religious faith in the wake of Nazism's crimes. By setting its introductory scene in the postwar timeline, the second act structurally mimics the first; the stage lights illuminate, revealing Gerstein's

interrogation by Major Evans and Captain Haught, the two Allied jailors who—earlier in the play, later in historical timeline—discover his corpse. “And you’d have us believe that that’s the reason you joined the Waffen SS?” (II:i) Evans asks in the scene’s opening line. Haught chimes in, “Because you were outraged?” (II:i). The guards’ incredulity onstage becomes a substitute for the audience’s in the theater; *Either/Or*’s postwar timeline, operating as a framing narrative, situates the play’s entirety within the context of Gerstein’s confession—a confession made, historically, to an unendingly skeptical audience. “You wore the skull and crossbones like any predator,” Major Evans continues, rife with suspicion, “it seems far fetched. ‘To bear witness.’ All over the Western Front there are chaps like you turning up. And none of them have done anything nasty either. Someone must have done it. But not them” (II:i).

By collecting the plot under the auspice of Gerstein’s confession, *Either/Or* functions, in a sense, as the trial its protagonist never had. This recalls Susan Sontag’s comparison of *The Deputy* with Adolf Eichmann’s 1963 trial in Jerusalem: “Here we have a work of art as we ordinarily understand it—a work for the familiar theater of 8:30 curtains and intermissions, rather than for the austere public stage of the courtroom” (127). However, whereas *The Deputy* places Pius XII “on trial,” using a selectively modified presentation of Gerstein’s story to bolster its indictment of the pontiff, *Either/Or* posits Gerstein himself as the defendant, inviting audiences to judge his actions. Had Keneally approached his play with a mindset similar to Vollmann’s, asserting Gerstein’s “clean hands” from the outset, such an effect would prove unachievable. In its unrelenting ambiguity, *Either/Or* rather functions as a text, in the words of Ari Roth, “that’s subversive to an audience that has already made up its mind

about good and evil” (Baker) The dramatist’s idiosyncratic perspective on the play’s subject is absent from the play itself, burdening audiences with the responsibility to form our own judgments.

Thus, the second act of *Either/Or* replays all the major points explored in *The Deputy*, *Amen*, and *Clean Hands*: Gerstein’s rise to prominence in the SS Department of Hygiene, his dispatch to Belzec, his appalling revelation to Baron von Otter of the gassing he witnessed there, his swift dismissal from the papal nuncio’s headquarters in Berlin, his covert disposal of Zyklon B shipments, and, most significantly, the minimal tangible impact any of these efforts had. Keneally’s text differs from the others, though, in the dual emphasis it places on Gerstein’s pivotal role *within* the SS, and, more specifically, the integral—if reluctant—role he played in the Nazis’ refinement of their murder methods. No embodiment of “Absolute Evil” (Hochhuth 31) appears on Keneally’s stage; likewise, neither does an embodiment of Absolute Good. “I’ve become ... an abomination” (II: xiii), Gerstein confesses to his pastor, Martin Niemoller. Even Niemoller himself—charged with sedition and sentenced to a concentration camp by the play’s second act—does not appear unsullied. Upon Gerstein’s recounting of his Belzec inspection, Niemoller responds, “I never had much time for Jews. But gassing them?” (II: xiii).

Either/Or’s stringent disavowal of a Manichaen “good/evil” dichotomy puts the play on a continuum with Hannah Arendt’s controversial notion of “terrifyingly normal” SS men. Keneally’s stage directions at times echo Rolf Hochhuth’s in *The Deputy*; though lacking Hochhuth’s excess verbosity, they explicitly instruct directors at numerous points not to depict Gerstein’s SS and Nazi Party cohorts as outwardly

villainous. Gestapo Agent Zerrer's reappearance in the second act, for instance, comes with the parenthetical acknowledgement that "We should probably avoid the temptation to dress him as the stereotypical, leather-coated Gestapo man" (II: xiv). At this point, justifying his anxiety over Gerstein's redirections of Zyklon B shipments, Zerrer explains, "I don't want to lose this posting [in the Gestapo]. I have diabetes, you see" (II: xiv); at the forefront of Zerrer's concerns is a mundane fear of losing access to healthcare. A later scene, set "atop an Auschwitz killing chamber," instructs that during an execution, Gerstein's superior "may trim his nails or engage in a similar banal activity" (II: xvi). The play's depiction of SS perpetrators manifests Keneally's own chief fear regarding the Third Reich, articulated in an interview shortly after the play's debut: "What I'm scared of is that those people weren't mad—that the SS weren't mad. That they weren't inhuman. They were all-too-human." Indeed, as the play's second half progresses, it is rather Gerstein—unique among his colleagues in his discomfiture with mass murder—who appears increasingly "mad."

Notably, any explicit mention of Gerstein is absent from voluminous *oeuvre* of Hannah Arendt; she makes no mention of him in her review of *The Deputy*, and his name does not appear in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, despite his report being introduced as evidence in Eichmann's trial. Keneally's play isolates a possible reason why: Arendt stressed the virtues of *nonparticipation*, which Gerstein—historically and on Keneally's stage—viewed as a sin greater than compliance. "I never expected challenges on this scale," Gerstein confesses to Niemoller, "So I can recommend Zyklon B, very fast acting on all warm-blooded animals ... or I can recommend carbon monoxide. Or – *and this may be worst of all* – I can shuffle papers and keep out of it altogether" (II: xii: italics

added). Of all the texts depicting Gerstein, only Keneally's explicitly confronts the guilt he had to incur in order to become the SS's only whistleblower. Praising "nonparticipants," Germans who simply withdrew from political affairs once the regime seized power, Arendt writes,

They asked themselves to what extent they would still be able to live with themselves after having committed certain deeds; and they decided that it would be better to do nothing, not because the world would then be changed for the better, but simply because only on this condition could they go on living with themselves at all. Hence, they also chose to die when forced to participate. To put it crudely, they refused to murder, not so much because they still held fast to the command 'Thou shalt not kill,' but because they were unwilling to live together with a murderer—themselves" ("Personal Responsibility" 44).

Gerstein's story poses a unique problem for Arendt's argument, as he indeed "held fast to the command 'Thou shalt not kill'"; additionally, though, he proved himself "unwilling to live together" *with a nonparticipant*—himself. As Friedlander writes, Gerstein's position was one of "a man who was obliged in some degree to accommodate to the crime in order to resist it" (227). Paradoxically, in order to go on living with himself, Gerstein had to become an accomplice to mass murder.

Thus, of all the texts depicting Gerstein, *Either/Or* stands alone in its dual emphasis on his complicity *as well as* his ultimately futile acts of resistance. Between his inspection of Belzec and his expulsion from the papal nuncio's quarters, Gerstein attends a procedural meeting, accompanied by Eichmann's adjutant Rolf Gunter, SS Brigade Chief Odilo Globocnik, and Dr. Wilhem Pfannensteil, the latter of whom visited Belzec

with Gerstein a mere few weeks prior. “Kurt,” Pfannenstiel advises, “just concentrate on the issue. Don’t you prefer Zyklon B to the cruelty of carbon monoxide?” (II: xiv) Concretizing his collaboration, Gerstein raises a hand in favor of making the gas chambers more efficient; his vote makes the decision unanimous. A later scene, set in Auschwitz, depicts Gerstein attending another mass execution, and unlike the botched carbon monoxide incident at Belzec, the Auschwitz SS, employing Zyklon B, carry it out seamlessly. Furthermore, they do not hesitate to thank and congratulate chemical expert Kurt Gerstein. His contributions to Reich’s mission even earn him a promotion, also depicted onstage, to SS *Obersturmführer*.

Either/Or’s penultimate scenes depict Gerstein in a state of near insanity, catalyzed not just by the failure of his whistle-blowing attempts, but also by the terrible success of his contributions to the genocide. Shouting incoherencies as he wanders the streets, the protagonist’s madness in Act II mirrors the madness exhibited by Bertha, his murdered sister-in-law, in Act I. Gerstein even encounters an apparition of Bertha Ebeling—later revealed to be a hallucination—and replays the consolation he offered before her execution at Hadamar. “When I go into the dark,” Bertha confesses in Act I, “the room’s full of shadows I can’t see through. My nurse says I start punching her then” (I: iii). A younger, more naïve Kurt Gerstein once assured her, “God is there at the core of the darkness. Reach for him and he is beside you” (I: iii). By the play’s concluding moments, Gerstein’s eyes have beheld a darkness, as Christian Wirth boasts outside the Belzec gas chamber, that “not 10 people alive . . . have seen, or will see” (Vollmann 424), and it proved sufficient to shatter his once-unshakable faith. Gerstein throws a challenge to the sky: “If you are still a living God, show me now. What are you waiting for? Come

on, you bloody criminal, shatter me! Tear me apart! (II: xviii). The skies illuminate with Allied artillery, but the blasphemous prayer of a now-faithless Kurt Gerstein goes unanswered.

In a manner similar to Vollmann's *Clean Hands*, *Either/Or* reserves its concluding gestures for an intimate exploration of Gerstein's family life, and not unlike *Clean Hands*, one of the play's final scenes depicts a confrontation between Kurt and his father. "His father," Keneally explains in an interview, "thought [Kurt] an unsatisfactory son, he thought he was unrealistic." Both texts present a similarly stodgy Ludwig Gerstein; *Either/Or* even depicts Kurt's father trafficking in Nazi clichés nearly identical to the ones he espouses in *Clean Hands*: "Hard times demand hard methods," Ludwig admonishes, "And these are the hardest of times" (II: xix). Curiously, though, the same context in which Kurt proclaims his innocence in Vollmann's text—his final estrangement from his father—becomes in *Either/Or* a setting for Kurt's most damning admission of the guilt he incurred. Anticipating the defense employed by innumerable Nazi war criminals in postwar trials, Ludwig consoles his son by explaining, "The person who has the responsibility is the person who gives the order, not the one who carries it out" (II: xix). In stark contradistinction to Vollmann's depiction, Kurt replies, "I *have* obeyed the man who gives the orders. I have carried his orders out. So I may be under a death sentence—Himmler's, God's, Bertha's. Remember Bertha, father. There've been millions and millions of her" (II: xix). The play's final lines mirror its commencing lines, as a deceased Gerstein addresses the audience in soliloquy: "How my voice failed the innocent," he explains, clutching his report, "how the guilty failed my voice. But it is still all there in the papers. The whole horror is there. Read it. Weigh it. Do the guilty

still rage on the earth? Do the people know?” (II: xxi). Of all the texts depicting the plight of this flawed, conflicted, and ambiguous figure, only Keneally’s concludes—both literally and in all its wide-reaching implications—with a question mark.

Since *Schindler’s List* and *Either/Or* share a common author, comparisons between Oskar Schindler and Kurt Gerstein—particularly as he appears in this play—are inevitable; Keneally himself even traces one out in an interview. “I wanted to write about a fallible man,” Keneally explains,

in a different sense from the sense in which Schindler was fallible. Schindler was a sort of force of nature. He was non self-reflecting, he just did things, whether it was employing Jews or saving Jews. And Gerstein was acutely self-reflecting. He was to an extent, a neurotic, and on those grounds ... I find him easy to identify with. (Kohn)

Indeed, Oskar Schindler, historically, was a man of such immediate action that the discrete motivation behind his acts of rescue remains finally inscrutable even to the novelist who immortalized him. The whole of *Schindler’s List* depicts no identifiable epiphany that transforms the protagonist’s opportunism into compassion. Rather, Schindler acts as a war profiteer at the narrative’s outset, exploiting Jewish slave labor, and acts as a rescuer by its conclusion, outwitting the Nazi power structure and keeping his employees alive until the war’s end; readers are left to ponder how and why he makes this radical transformation. Gerstein, Keneally points out in another interview, “was not an *operator* like Oskar”; thus, his doomed acts of resistance relied predominantly on calling upon *others* in hopes of spurring *them* into action, be they neutral governments, Allied states, or Vatican leaders. Gerstein’s failure lay in the faith he placed in them.

The entities in whom Gerstein placed his faith never answered his calls, and were never spurred into action.

In a lukewarm review of *Either/Or*, published contemporaneously with the play's debut, Peter Marks characterizes Gerstein, overtly and explicitly, as a failed Schindler. "Unlike Oskar Schindler," Marks writes, "Gerstein's role is limited to that of impotent bystander. He has no direct role in the saving of prisoners' lives and, for all intents, has only a tortured conscience to contend with." Marks measures Gerstein's significance only by its lack of tangible results; inadvertently, his review affirms Zygmunt Bauman's qualm with *Schindler's List*, namely that "the sole stake of the tragedy was to remain alive" (233). If Gerstein cannot be proved to have physically, tangibly saved anyone, Marks's argument suggests, then he seems undeserving of commemoration. The Denazification Court that charged Gerstein with war crimes exhibited a similar mentality; as Friedländer points out, "The Tübingen court did not deny that Gerstein had carried out acts of resistance; it condemned him, *in effect*, for *the uselessness of his efforts*" (*Ambiguity* 227: italics in original). Marks's line of thinking leads his review to a vexing conclusion, when he writes, "[Paul] Morella gives a performance of impressive control. As his Gerstein beseeches us at the evening's end ... you feel a tiny, tiny flicker of sympathy. But you can't help wondering whether his tragedy is a minor one, and that he would be more deserving if he'd been able to do something that really mattered." Marks praises the "admirable gravity" of the production itself, credited to director Daniel DeRaey, as well as the "impressive control" of the actor who plays Gerstein; curiously, he reserves his harshest condemnation not for any of the production's theatrical aspects, but rather for its subject, Gerstein himself.

The utter absence of tangible results or discernible triumph notwithstanding, Kurt Gerstein *was*, unquestionably, able to do “something that really mattered,” and the significance of his achievement underpins each of the texts depicting him. Although she never considered Gerstein’s predicament explicitly, Hannah Arendt articulates his importance in a discussion of another “good German”: Anton Schmidt, a *Wehrmacht* sergeant who, while on active duty, provided forged passports and equipment to Jewish resistance groups, and who, moreover, refused financial recompense for his assistance. Upon the Nazi state’s discovery of Schmidt’s actions in 1942, he was executed; his name was introduced to the Eichmann trial when Abba Kovner, a witness for the prosecution, testified that he first heard Eichmann’s name from Schmidt, a German army officer with whom he had an amicable rapport. For Arendt, the brief retelling of Schmidt’s story stood out as an incomparable moment during the trial: “in those two minutes,” she writes, “which were like a sudden burst of light in the midst of impenetrable, unfathomable darkness, a single thought stood out clearly, irrefutably, beyond question—how utterly different everything would be today in this courtroom ... if only more such stories could have been told” (*Eichmann* 231). The importance of Schmidt’s—and Gerstein’s—actions, however commendable, lies not in the actions themselves or the degree to which they succeeded, but rather in their very rarity, in the contrast of their actions with the actions of others. If Anton Schmidt could choose to act as he did, if Kurt Gerstein could choose to act as he did, then undeniably, Adolf Eichmann, Rudolf Höss, or Christian Wirth—to offer but three of many, many examples—*could have chosen to act* as they did, too. But Eichmann, along with innumerable others both within and outside of Germany itself, walked a different path.

In her discussion of Schmidt, Arendt makes an oblique, passing reference to “an Army officer” who “had helped indirectly by sabotaging certain police orders” (231). Considering the prominence of Gerstein’s Report in the trial itself—the prosecution formally introduced it as evidence—Arendt could very well be referencing Gerstein here. And notably, this section contains her most dramatic revision of the theory of totalitarianism she put forth in 1951, a revision that has no bearing on the contrast between “radical” and “banal” evil. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* concludes with a discussion of what Arendt terms “holes of oblivion” (233), a hideous, negative social space engendered by the mendacious logic of totalitarian ideology and the atrocious conditions that are realized when such an ideology remakes the material world. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt declares, “The holes of oblivion do not exist” (232). She continues, in perhaps the humblest passage she ever penned,

Nothing human is that perfect, and there are simply too many people in the world to make oblivion possible. One man will always be left alive to tell the story. Hence, nothing can ever be ‘practically useless,’ at least, not in the long run ... For the lesson of such stories is simple and within everybody’s grasp. Politically speaking, it is that under conditions of terror most people will comply but *some people will not*, just as the lesson of the countries to which the Final Solution was proposed is that ‘it could happen’ in most places but *it did not happen everywhere*. Humanly speaking, no more is required, and no more can reasonably be asked, for this planet to remain a place fit for human habitation. (232-33)

Thus, despite the absence of any tangible triumph, the significance of Kurt Gerstein’s plight—his futile actions as well as the degree to which suffered as he carried them out—

lies in the legacy that succeeds it, a legacy that continues to evolve with each literary adaptation of his strange and troubled history. For, Gerstein lived long enough, in Arendt's words, "to tell the story"—and in so doing, he offered a final and lasting refutation of totalitarianism's illusory totality.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The Holocaust has become a civil religion in the United States, with Auschwitz as the anti-city of the American political community.

—Gillian Rose

More than any European nation, American perceptions of the Holocaust tend to be heavily *mediated*; excepting survivors who emigrated to the U.S. and their descendants, American perceptions of the Holocaust rely heavily, often solely, upon texts. With no historical sites to visit on U.S. soil, Americans since the war's end have had to rely largely on screens to view, films to watch, and books to read. Nonetheless, the Holocaust—foremost a Jewish and secondly a European tragedy—has for decades occupied a prominent place in American cultural consciousness; no other foreign history, for instance, has a museum exclusively dedicated to it in the nation's capitol. As Peter Novick asserts, “Since the 1970's, the Holocaust has come to be presented—come to be thought of—as not just a Jewish memory but an American memory ... Over the past twenty years every president has urged Americans to preserve the memory of the Holocaust” (207). Novick articulated this point in 1999; all three presidential administrations to have served since his writing, irrespective of political leanings or party affiliation, have kept this tradition.

To be perfectly clear, preserving the memory of the Holocaust is a pressing and vital ambition, a duty owed not only to past generations, but to present and future generations as well. But as Novick goes on to point out, it is crucial to examine precisely *what* is being remembered. “If there *are* lessons to be extracted from encountering the past,” he writes, “that encounter has to be with the past in all its messiness; they're not

likely to come from an encounter with a past that's been shaped and shaded so that inspiring lessons will emerge" (261: italics in original). In *The Holocaust in American Life*, Novick argues that the Holocaust functions in the U.S. as "a moral and ideological Rorschach test" (12), "a screen on which people projected a variety of values and anxieties" (234). Thus, the most well-received American encounters with this dismal history tend to be those which allow readers and audiences to emerge shaken, but with a characteristically American optimism still intact. For evidence, we need look no further than the stateside success of Roberto Begnini's disconcertingly upbeat 1998 Holocaust film *Life is Beautiful*, the only non-English film in history to garner the Academy Award for Best Actor.¹⁷ The most recent Holocaust Remembrance Day commemoration, issued officially from the Office of the President in January 2017, manifested a more disturbing instance of history both functioning as "a Rorschach test" and being "shaped and shaded," as it contained no explicit references to anti-Semitism or even European Jews, but offered instead the assurance that "in the darkest hours of humanity, light shines brightest."

With the exception of military personnel who traveled to Europe and aided in defeating the Third Reich, Americans first encountered the horrors of Nazism on newsreel screens in the Second World War's immediate aftermath, and subsequently, most watershed moments in American Holocaust awareness also occurred onscreen. One of the earliest such moments was in 1963, when footage from the Eichmann trial in Israel was broadcast daily on American television. By 1979, fictional narrative and dramatization overtook historical documentation, and millions of Americans encountered

¹⁷ The award went to Begnini himself, who starred in the film in addition to directing it. *Life is Beautiful* was also awarded the prize for Best Foreign Language Film and Best Original Score.

Holocaust history through the contrivance of the television miniseries *Holocaust: A Story of the Family Weiss*, written by Gerald Greene. And the Holocaust's primacy in American cultural consciousness was forcefully reasserted upon the release of Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, which coincided United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's opening, after more than a decade of preparation, in Washington, D.C. Both events were cited on an ABC *Nightline* newscast that proclaimed 1993, in a stupendously poor choice of words, "The Year of the Holocaust" (qtd. in Shandler 194). Though the Holocaust—or, at least, certain aspects of the Holocaust—have not received such constant, focused, and widespread attention in the U.S. at any point in the decades since, "Schindler" nonetheless remains an immediately identifiable name. To a population for whom the Holocaust is at once so culturally central yet so historically and geographically distant, questions of textual representation take on a unique significance.

Gillian Rose's *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation*—published in 1996, three years after "The Year of the Holocaust" and one year after Rose's death—explores the British philosopher's mistrust of the turns Holocaust awareness has taken, particularly amidst the phenomenal success of *Schindler's List*. Her retort to the film's rapturous American acclaim—and even to the film's detractors—was a searching interrogation of what Rose termed "Holocaust piety," a discourse surrounding the Holocaust that had assumed near-religious totality and had mandated reverent silence in the face of historical atrocity. "The search for a decent response to those brutally destroyed," writes Rose, "is conflated with the quite different response called for in the face of the 'inhuman' capacity for such destruction" (43). The quotation marks bracketing the adjective "inhuman" distill the essence of her argument, for Rose sharply

critiques the predominantly American tendency to keep the Nazi genocide's most appalling aspects—including the essential humanity of its perpetrators—at a safe remove from our own self-awareness and understanding. She continues, “To argue for silence ... is to *mystify something we dare not understand*, because we fear that it may be all too understandable, all too continuous with what we are—human, all too human.” (43: italics in original). For Rose, dogmatic adherence to “the witness of ‘ineffability,’ that is, non-representability” (43)—particularly when the stance is endorsed by non-witnesses and non-survivors—is motivated less by reverence for Holocaust *victims* than by a deep-seated, fundamental uneasiness with what Holocaust *perpetrators* may reveal to us about ourselves.

From here, Rose traces out the relationship between artistic representations of fascism and what she terms “the fascism of representation” (50), a set of postwar ideological strictures so deeply ingrained as to censor literary or artistic *expression* at the point of its very *inception*; put simply, Rose’s “fascism of representation” attempts to gather under its auspice all the aspects of the Nazi genocide that authors dare not even *think* to depict, and with which audiences dare not even *think* to engage—and foremost among these aspects is perpetrator subjectivity. Rose conjures a hypothetical thought experiment to illustrate her point:

Let us make a film in which the representation of fascism would engage with the fascism of representation. A film, shall we say, which follows the life story of a member of the SS in all its pathos, so that we empathise with him, identify with his hopes and fears, disappointments and rage, so that when it comes to killing, we put our hands on the trigger with him, wanting him to get what he wants. We

do this in all innocent enthusiasm in films where the vicarious enjoyment of violence may presuppose that the border between fantasy and reality is secure. Put starkly like this, this fantasy of a Nazi *Bildungsfilm* seems all too resistible, for the identity of the protagonist has been revealed in advance. (50)

Thus, for Rose, “the fascism of representation” censors audience engagement in addition to artistic expression, as it encompasses a set of values so deeply ingrained in readers and audiences as to predetermine the terms of our engagement, overriding our very ability to form judgments of our own.

Curiously, though, only thirteen years prior to Rose’s musings, renowned historian Saul Friedländer raised a markedly different question. In *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*, Friedländer examines numerous representations of Nazism across several genres and mediums, wondering, “Is such attention fixed on the past only a gratuitous reverie, the attraction of spectacle, exorcism, or the result of a need to understand; *or is it, again and still, an expression of profound fears and, on the part of some, mute yearnings as well?*” (19: italics added). Among Friedländer’s chief concerns in this slim yet incisive volume of criticism—which includes a forceful condemnation of George Steiner’s *The Portage to San Cristóbal of A.H.*—is whether Nazism could ever be represented in cultural productions such as novels and films without recreating, at least to some degree, the same mystifying aesthetic phenomena that aided the historical rise of Nazism in significant ways. One senses a similar apprehension underpinning the most ferocious condemnations of the texts examined in this dissertation, beginning with Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Instinctual accusations of authors’ and readers’ posthumous “complicity” (Bartov 49) or “collaboration” (Kafner 36) with the Nazis seem

at least partially informed by what literary critic Jenni Adams terms “an unspoken anxiety regarding contagion: the fear that the reader, disarmed by the illusory understanding offered by the text, is susceptible to infection by Nazi ideas” (26).

Friedlander’s analysis—one shared by others, to be sure—suggests the impossibility of representing Nazism without unwittingly recreating, at least for some, the aesthetic and psychological attractions of actual Nazism. Rose’s, conversely, proclaims the impossibility of representing Nazism as anything other than abhorrent, as readers and audiences would have been interpellated to revile the perpetrators long before their engagement with any particular text has even commenced. Between these two diametrically opposed methods of engagement, as I hope will have been demonstrated by my analyses throughout this project, there exists a more complex mode of reading perpetrator fiction, one that, while resisting traditional tendencies such as sympathy or identification, also falls short of the instinctual condemnation that may impede critical reflection and self-examination. What shocked Hannah Arendt upon confronting Adolf Eichmann in 1963 was not her identification *with* Eichmann, but her recognition *of* Eichmann and the type of man he appeared to be: “terribly and terrifyingly normal” (*Eichmann* 276). The texts examined in this dissertation manufacture a similar shock in readers, defamiliarizing Holocaust perpetrators by depicting them as more than “inhuman” murderers, and confronting readers with terrifyingly familiar aspects of their character—from Karl’s callow naïveté in *The Sunflower*, to Rudolf Höss’s workaholic impatience in *Sophie’s Choice*, to the craven self-interest of Christian Wirth in *Europe Central*, or to Kurt Gerstein’s augmenting moral claustrophobia in *Either/Or*.

Sadly, Gillian Rose did not live to see her hypothetical Nazi *Bildungs*-story in the form of a literary offering. In 2006, expatriate American novelist Jonathan Littell published *The Kindly Ones*,¹⁸ a novel that depicts the Holocaust from a perspective which, by its nature, has been impossible to capture in any memoir: that of a perpetrator who, in addition to fully grasping the implications of his actions, stands to gain nothing from either occluding violence or affecting remorse in his narrative. Echoing Rose's thought experiment, the fictional SS officer Maximilian Aue asks early on, "Why couldn't an SS-Obersturmbannführer have an inner life, desires, passions, just like any other man?" (Littell 23) Littell has stated part of that his motivation for devising Aue was his own dissatisfaction with extant perpetrator accounts. "The more I read the perpetrators' texts," the author explains in an interview, the more I realized they were empty." Littell continues,

The issue of the perpetrator is the main issue the historians of the Shoah have been exploring for the last 15 years. The only remaining question is the motivation of the killers. Having read the works of the great researchers, it seems to me that they have hit a brick wall. This is very clear with Christopher Browning. He has created a list of potential motivations and has no way of arbitrating between them. Some prioritize anti-Semitism, others ideology. But in the end, they don't know. The reason is simple. The historian works from documents, and so from the words of the perpetrators, which are themselves an aporia. And where can one go from there? (Uni)

¹⁸ The novel, which was written in French, was originally titled *Les Bienvillantes*; *The Kindly Ones* is the title of its English translation.

In a broad sense, then, Littell's claim about his authorship of *The Kindly Ones* supports one of this dissertation's central arguments: that the autobiographical authenticity strengthening Holocaust testimonies from victims' perspectives becomes a hindrance in perpetrator accounts, and that narrative techniques exclusive to fiction may serve—however partially—to fill the void left by the intrinsic vacuity of perpetrator voices.

The “memoir” of Dr. Maximilian Aue, which comprises the nearly 1,000 pages of *The Kindly Ones*, moves in several directions at once: Aue's meticulous historical reportage of his dealings as a functionary in what Raul Hilberg terms the Nazis' “machinery of death” (which follows him to a mass shooting at Babi Yar, the battle of Stalingrad, Himmler's infamous Pozen speech, an inspection of the labor conditions at Auschwitz, and a summons to the Führerbunker just before the fall of Berlin); Aue's recounting of a family history that mirrors the Greek myth of Orestes (from which the novel derives its title); and Aue's revolting, hallucinatory bouts of self-examination, relayed in a series of surrealist waking dreams that render his recounting of the other two story threads increasingly unreliable. The result fuses elements of both literary, symbolic evil with the thoughtlessness that Hannah Arendt labeled “the banality of evil.” Throughout the novel's entirety, Aue inhabits the impossible position of being at once monstrous *and* a critical witness to monstrousness, the teller *and* the tale, Marlow and Kurtz fused into a single and singularly unnerving narrating intelligence. *The Kindly Ones* does not merely render a Holocaust perpetrator in a fictional text, but closes the distance established in the other texts I examine by presenting these divergent narrative threads *in a perpetrator's voice*.

These competing narrative threads have presented perhaps the biggest interpretive difficulty for scholars and critics. For Robert Eaglestone, Aue's bizarre individualized perversions (his incestuous obsession with his twin sister, Una, and the revolting details of the excremental fantasies it elicits; Aue's brutal murder of his mother and stepfather) manifest an instance of *The Kindly Ones*' failing to deliver on its promise, a narrative "swerve" from confronting the nature of genocide. "If we assume," Eaglestone writes, "that Aue has been, as it were, driven mad by complex incestuous and oedipal rage, we can assume he is a psychopath, and his evil as a genocide perpetrator is not that of an 'ordinary man' (or even a 'willing executioner') but rather an expression of this pathology" (22). In a sharply condemnatory review published in *The New Republic*, Ruth Franklin offers a similar critique, even echoing Eaglestone's references to the opposing historical studies by Christopher Browning and Daniel Goldhagen: "Obviously a man who has sex with his sister, strangles his mother, and ax-murders his stepfather cannot be called an 'ordinary' man or an 'ordinary German.' He is not 'just like us.' This evil is not banal" ("Night and Cog" 40).

Both Franklin's and Eaglestone's critiques reference the novel's introductory section, entitled "Toccatà" (all seven sections are titled to mirror a Bach suite), in which Aue assures readers, "I am a man like other men, I am a man like you. I tell you I am just like you!" (Littell 24); moreover, both critics are right to point out that much of what follows, as the novel takes increasingly surreal and fantastical turns, functions to undermine Aue's enthusiastic claims of being "just like you!" (24) Nonetheless, Aue's repeated direct addresses to readers, and more specifically his repeated assurances of solidarity *with* readers, function as a confrontational device contrived to situate us in

positions that demand ethical responses to each of the narrative's horrific turns. By forcibly situating readers in a commiserating position, but also anticipating and articulating readers' resistance to occupying that position, the narrative mode of *The Kindly Ones* manages simultaneously to dare and undermine our recognition of its narrator. The complexities of this narrative structure, sustained throughout the 900-plus pages of *The Kindly Ones*, are established by the inaugural lines of its "Toccata": "O my human brothers, let me tell you how it happened. I am not your brother, you'll retort, and I don't want to know" (3). As Aue's fictional memoir progresses, exploring the implications of mass violence in ever more excruciating detail, the challenges Aue presents to our understanding of evil at once augment and accumulate, both through Aue's own ruminations and through the spectrum of perpetrators with whom he interacts.

Among the most striking of these interactions is Aue's brief conversation with a Nazi functionary named Döll; the two have a drink together in occupied Poland after Aue's visit to Majdanek. Döll outlines the trajectory of his career, which began in Hitler's chancellery and, over a period of years, saw Döll participating in "Special Operations" during the T-4 "euthanasia" program; his experience with lethal gases eventually finds him operating the gas chambers at Sobibor. Regarding his current post, Döll laconically intones, "Sobibor? It's like everything, you get used to it" (589). In a moment of macabre irony, Aue realizes that he and Döll had both been stationed in Kharkov in 1941, and that for all intents and purposes, they should have crossed paths then. "We carried out special operations," Döll explains, "with gas trucks" (588). This confuses Aue, who recalls his own unit being responsible for murdering the Jews of Kharkov: "You say you had the gas trucks, but how could you be carrying out the same

tasks as us without our knowing it?” (588) Döll’s response is sufficiently startling to catalyze a rare moment of genuine vexation in the supremely cynical Aue: “We weren’t carrying out the same tasks. The Jews or the Bolsheviks, over there, we didn’t touch them ... We took care of the wounded ... Our own wounded. The ones who were too messed up to have a useful life were sent to us” (588). As far as Aue knew, he and his SS unit had been the *Gehiemnistäger*s, the “bearers of secrets” with regard to the “Special Operations” near the Eastern Front; Döll confronts Aue with the uncomfortable truth that the Nazi state had kept secrets even from them.

In a narrative mode not unlike Styron’s in *Sophie’s Choice*, the elder Aue—the Aue narrating the story, as opposed to the younger Aue inhabiting it—steps in to offer a protracted rumination on Döll, beginning with another echo of Gillian Rose: “There was a lot of talk, after the war, in trying to explain what had happened, about inhumanity. But I’m sorry, there is no inhumanity. There is only humanity and more humanity” (589). The operator of a gas chamber, Döll arguably occupies the most “inhuman” position within an unfathomably “inhuman” enterprise, but his expressed motivations for doing so are neither monstrous nor inhuman: “On one hand, it wasn’t very pleasant,” Döll explains, “But on the other hand, it wasn’t the front, and the pay was good, my wife was happy. So I didn’t say anything” (589). For Aue, who has had decades to mull these ethical quandaries over by the time he writes his “memoir,” the moral gulf between Döll’s motives and his actions renders the very notion of evil inconsequential, leading Aue to pose a profoundly discomfiting question to readers: “Döll killed people or had them killed, so he’s Evil; but within himself, he was a good man to those close to him, indifferent to all others, and, what’s more, one who respected the law. *What more do we*

ask of the individual in our civilized, democratic societies?" (591: italics added). Aue's exculpatory sentiments are objectionable by design, but they indirectly prompt readers to measure their own ethics against those of the state, to imagine the point at which disobeying state edicts and breaking laws becomes a moral necessity.

Since even these ruminations come from, in the narrator's own flippant description, "a barely half-repentant former fascist" (17), readers are not intended simply to take them at face value. Commenting on the scant body of testimonies from historical Holocaust perpetrators, Robert Eaglestone points out that "they are extremely tendentious and self-serving ... and so have to be read very suspiciously" (15). *The Kindly Ones* capitalizes on the instinctual suspicion we bring to perpetrator testimony, as Aue's reflections on good and evil, or guilt and responsibility, almost always serve an exculpatory end. Aue relays Döll's story—that of "a good family man who wanted to feed his children, and who obeyed his government" (589)—as a hard luck story, one in which Döll ultimately found himself at the mercy of chance. "If he had been born in France or America, he'd have been called a pillar of society and a patriot," Aue explains, "but he was born in Germany, and so he is a criminal" (589). Despite our instinctual suspicions of Aue and his justifications, though, his queries prove more challenging than we would prefer.

Not unlike Steiner's A.H., Aue approaches exculpation by way of comparing Nazi atrocities to other instances of mass violence. Reflecting on the "excesses" perpetrated during the German occupation of Poland, which he characterizes as "colonialism," Aue asks us to recall "the American policy, precursor of and model for our own, of the creation of living space through murder and forced displacement ... but the Americans

succeeded where we failed, which makes all the difference” (590). As in the passage concerning Döll, designations of right or wrong, of good or evil, are determined by the victors of any given conflict. Aue’s subscription to this belief is made clear very early on, after he chirpily offers a mathematical calculation of German, Jewish, and Soviet casualties between 1941 and 1945: “Thus for the overall total in my field of activities we have an average of 572,043 dead per month, 131,140 dead per week, 18,772 dead per day, 782 dead per hour, and 13.04 dead per minute” (15). The effect of the passage is deliberately stultifying; as George Steiner remarked about his fictionalized Hitler, “when barbarism mouths statistics beyond our imaginings, let alone reasoned explanations, the mind sickens and grows numb” (*Portage* 115). But Aue then puts these unimaginable figures into perspective by inviting American readers to measure them against “your little Vietnam adventure” (16), which claimed the lives of some 50,000 American troops over a period of roughly 10 years; by Aue’s morbid equation, “that’s the equivalent a little less than 3 days and 2 hours’ worth of dead on the Eastern Front, or of 13 days, 21 hours, and 25 minutes worth of dead Jews” (16). Maintaining his chatty tone, Aue reminds readers that he merely keeps with American tradition by neglecting to mention the Vietnamese dead, who outnumbered American casualties 40 to 1. “A fine effort,” the unrepentant former SS officer assures us, “even compared to our own, and one that certainly speaks for the value of technical progress” (16).¹⁹

As Liran Razinsky points out, “*The Kindly Ones* marks a shift in Holocaust literature, for although attempting to recount the Holocaust in its entirety, in intricate

¹⁹ The original French version cites France’s occupation of Algeria rather than the American war in Vietnam. That Littell would make such distinctions suggests strongly that in addition to a meticulous recounting of Germany’s violent history, his intention with *The Kindly Ones* was to engineer revaluations of mass violence more generally, irrespective of the countries from which those histories originate.

detail, the author cannot claim the same legitimacy as a victim or a victim's family" (Barjonet, Razinsky 8). Although the author is further away from the events of the Holocaust in geographical and biographical proximity than many of the other authors considered in this dissertation, his novel dares to bring us closer—in terms of *narrative* proximity—to a perpetrator than any of the others. Though Jewish, Littell has no direct biographical or familial connection to the Holocaust; he has even stated that he does not self-identify as Jewish, viewing his heritage “more as a historical background.” In one of the rare interviews he granted following the publication of *The Kindly Ones*, Littell suggests that although the novel was an outgrowth of fear he experienced as a child, it was not a fear of being persecuted; rather, it was the fear of being turned *into a persecutor*. “I am from a generation that was very marked by Vietnam,” Littell explains,

I was a very small boy but it was in the living room every goddamned day—much more than the Holocaust and Israel or anything else. We saw it on TV every day for my entire childhood. My childhood terror was that I would be drafted and sent to Vietnam and made to kill women and children who hadn't done anything to me. As a child there was always the possibility of being a potential perpetrator. (Uni)

Despite the extensive and meticulous historical research informing *The Kindly Ones*—which Littell conducted over a period of five years and which even Claude Lanzmann would eventually praise²⁰—the author himself appears equally concerned with the outrages of the present as he is with those of the past. Littell's biography and subsequent

²⁰ Lanzmann initially labeled the novel “a poisonous flower of evil,” but a lengthy face-to-face meeting with Littell swayed Lanzmann join the ranks of its admirers. “I am familiar with his subject,” Lanzmann has said, “and above all I was astounded by the absolute accuracy of the novel. Everything is correct. The names of the people and the names of the places. I told myself that the only two people capable of understanding the book from beginning to end are Raul Hilberg and me.” (qtd. in Uni)

bibliography bear this out; before writing *The Kindly Ones*, he spent ten years working with working with a humanitarian agency to combat hunger. His bibliography since the novel appeared includes the nonfiction entries *The Invisible Enemy* (2011), a documentary film about child soldiers in the Congo, and *Syrian Notebooks: Inside the Homs Uprising* (2015).

Many of the texts examined in this dissertation were met with complicated, if not outright scandalized, receptions; unsurprisingly, *The Kindly Ones* had its share of enthusiastic detractors as well. The most vigorous detraction came in the form of *Le Complaisantes*,²¹ a book condemning the novel on moral as well as historical grounds; authored by Edouard Husson and Michel Terestchenko, it even called for Littell's text to be banned outright. But unlike the American uproar over *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in the 1960's, the 2006 scandal in France was soon extinguished by the novel's runaway success. Gallimard, Littell's French publisher, ran into difficulties publishing copies at a rate sufficient to keep up with consumer demand, and it became the second novel in history to garner both the *Prix Goncourt* and the *Prix de l'Academie francaise*, two of the country's most distinguished literary prizes. To date, *Les Bienveillantes* has sold close to a million copies in France alone; its 2008 translation into German was met with similar commercial success, in the very country whose blood-soaked history it overtly explores (Golsan 174). In 2009, the Hebrew University in Israel hosted "Writing the Holocaust and WWII Today: On Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes*," an interdisciplinary conference dedicated exclusively to Littell's text, suggesting a heretofore unseen willingness on behalf of Holocaust scholars to engage with perpetrator fiction on its own

²¹ Trans: "The Complacent Ones"

terms, in full acknowledgement of its significance to the broader, unending endeavor to “try and understand” (Steiner, *Language* 163).

But in the United States, *The Kindly Ones* occasioned neither the rapturous appreciation of a *Schindler’s List* nor the impassioned outrage of an *Eichmann in Jerusalem*; rather, and perhaps most disconcertingly, the novel was ignored almost entirely. Tracing its publication history, Richard J. Goslan reports in 2010 that

HarperCollins reportedly paid upwards of one million dollars for the American rights, and in March of 2009, *The Kindly Ones*, translated into English by Charlotte Mandell, appeared in US bookstores ... They hoped to replicate the novel’s European track record as a commercial success, if not its record as a *succès de scandale* ... To date, *The Kindly Ones* has not achieved best-seller status in the US. As of early May, 2009 copies of the book were already heavily discounted on *amazon.com*. (174)

The novel’s failure to garner any attention—positive or negative—in the U.S. appears all the more curious in light of both its phenomenal success across Europe and its author’s American heritage. *Les Bienvillantes* was one of only two novels in history to garner both of France’s most prestigious literary prizes; it is the only novel written by an American-born author to have garnered either one.

In a discussion of Littell’s novel, Robert Eaglestone points out that “There has been a ‘boom’ in the last ten years or so of what might be called ‘perpetrator fiction’: work that deals with or focuses on the perpetrators” (14). In addition to *The Kindly Ones*, this “boom” would include Laurent Binet’s *HHhH*, which was awarded France’s Prix Goncourt in 2012, Martin Amis’s *The Zone of Interest* (2015), and American novelist

Patrick Hicks's *The Commandant of Lubizec* (2015), along with some of the more contemporary texts examined here—namely Vollmann's *Europe Central* and Keneally's *Either/Or*. Apart from an insular group of American literary scholars, though, American audiences appear to have opted out of engaging with the recent “boom” of morally ambiguous perpetrator fiction. Eaglestone ascribes the source of this “boom” to “the developing role of the Holocaust as a cultural metaphor for other events and as a ‘proxy’ for different, perhaps more recent, atrocities, especially those in which the Anglophone world is more inescapably involved” (14). I would suggest, however, that the interplay between past and present in works of perpetrator fiction—both in recent texts like *The Kindly Ones* and in older texts such as *The Sunflower*, *Sophie's Choice*, and *The Portage to San Cristóbal of A.H.*—functions in a manner considerably more complex than “metaphor” or “proxy.” Rather, the most effective works of perpetrator fiction strive to situate the mass violence of the Holocaust firmly and specifically in its own historical context; however, by resisting the urge to mythologize or demonize the SS, they do so in a way that prompts a sustained ethical reevaluation of persecution and mass violence more generally, irrespective of the nations or cultures from which the violence originates. And, indeed, such a reevaluation would inevitably lead to a heightened awareness of contemporary atrocities, and a more nuanced understanding of individual and national culpability.

Herein lay the aspect of perpetrator fiction from which American audiences are most likely to turn away, the aspect that, in Gillian Rose's words, would lead us to “discover and confront our own fascism” (48): seemingly commonplace cultural ideals and practices—*accepted thoughtlessly*—which result, either directly or indirectly, in

persecution, predation, or violence. The most effective works of perpetrator fiction presume readers' awareness of the Holocaust as, in the words of John Aloysius Farrell, "an absolute of evil" (qtd. in Novick 234); these texts disrupt our commonplace understanding of the Holocaust by refamiliarizing its perpetrators, confronting readers and audiences with recognizable, *all-too-human* individuals who nevertheless participate in a genocidal enterprise. As Yehuda Bauer writes, "If Himmler was human—and he was—then his motives were human. Can we find in ourselves elements of Himmler's motivations that would build enough of a bridge between us and him that would enable us to understand him? I would claim that we can" (21). Of course, no one would undertake such an exercise for Himmler's sake, or for the sake of any SS whose subjectivity we endeavor to limn; rather, we undertake the task to gain a sharper ethical understanding of ourselves, of the culture in whose midst we live, and of those individual and societal tendencies which, when left unchecked, contain the potential to "make the greatest of all crimes possible" (Arendt, *Last Interview* 43).

"What's important," explains Jonathan Littell in an interview published in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, "is to reach a certain level of understanding and apply it to what is happening now ... Sitting around talking with historians about what happened 60 years ago is not very interesting if you don't apply it to what's happening today" (Uni). The absence of any notable stateside response to Littell's path-breaking novel signals American audiences' marked indifference to such an undertaking; for, *The Kindly Ones*, along with other effective offerings in perpetrator fiction, resists functioning "as a moral and ideological Rorschach test" (Novick 12) in which caricatured SS men become symbolic, ahistorical surrogates for anything or anyone a reader finds distasteful. In *The*

End of the Holocaust, Alvin Rosenfeld concretizes Novick's "Rorschach test" by illustrating just how frequently American perceptions of Nazism shift and transform.

Rosenfeld writes,

Listen often enough to Rush Limbaugh's verbal attacks on 'feminazis,' and before long the term "Nazi" gets redefined to mean whatever Limbaugh and others like him intend it to mean when they get angry. Or, in a similar rhetorical register, the language of the Third Reich becomes a part of a political invective, as when a United States congressman from Pennsylvania denounces the Environmental Protection Agency as an 'environmental Gestapo.' Or two New York Congressmen decry Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America" as a political instrument that will do to American blacks and other minorities what was done to the Jews in Hitler's Germany. Or in the latest American debate about health care reform, President Obama is routinely denounced by his opponents as a new version of Hitler. The Nazi metaphor also gets recycled for use in special lobbying efforts, as when the National Rifle Association attacks the United States law-enforcement agents as 'jack-booted government thugs' who wear 'Nazi bucket helmets and black storm-trooper uniforms.' (37)

Holocaust awareness in the United States, which Gillian Rose once characterized as "a civil religion" (30) appears unique in its stalwart refusal to grant the Nazis a human dimension; in mainstream American consciousness, Holocaust perpetrators always-already occupy the role of *the Other*, of "them" and never "us."

Of course, even the cruelest excesses of the American government's foreign and domestic policies fail to reach the horrific scope of Nazi atrocities, and my intention here

is not to suggest equivalence between Nazi Germany and the contemporary United States; the Nazi state sanctioned acts of mass violence unprecedented in the times that preceded it and unparalleled in the decades that followed. But the warning pronounced by these depictions of “terribly and terrifyingly normal” (Arendt, *Eichmann* 276) Holocaust perpetrators speaks not just to the scope and severity of Nazi atrocities, but to the terrifying ease with which unfathomable atrocities became normalized and routinized by the individuals committing them. No student of Holocaust literature would find unfamiliar Theodor Adorno’s oft-cited admonishment, articulated in 1951, about the barbarism of poetry after Auschwitz. Less familiar, though, is Adorno’s later pronouncement, in a 1966 radio interview entitled “Education after Auschwitz,” that “The premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again” (19).

Adorno continues,

I also do not believe that enlightenment about the positive qualities possessed by persecuted minorities would be of much use. *The roots must be sought in the persecutors*, not in the victims who are murdered under the paltriest of pretenses. What is necessary is what I once in this respect called the turn to the subject. One must come to know the mechanisms that render people capable of such deeds, must reveal these mechanisms to them, and strive, by awakening a general awareness of those mechanisms, to prevent people from becoming so again. (2: italics added)

Each of the texts examined in this dissertation—be it a trial report, a memoir, a film, a novel, or a stage play—insists upon confronting audiences with perpetrators *as* subjects, persecutors *as* people, thereby revealing and examining, by extension, the complex social

mechanisms capable of transforming ordinary human beings into murderers. Each of these texts assumes an uncanny dimension by simultaneously exploring the uncomfortable truth that in their own self-assessment, the SS were *more* than murderers: they were laborers, managers, husbands, sons, “decent” and “respectable” pillars of their society; they were “somebodies” rather than “nobodies”; in their own eyes, they were noble, selfless catalysts of historical transformation, willing to bear the burden of perpetrating mass execution in order to induct an ultimately imaginary racial utopia.

This project originated with my own questions regarding depictions of perpetrators in Holocaust literature and the vehement critical rejection with which they tend to be met. At the outset of my research, I never would have guessed that its conclusion would be written in a United States whose political processes had grown replete with classical fascist iconography. A presidential campaign ignited by a personality cult led to the inauguration of an overtly authoritarian leader. Expressions of colloquial racism become increasingly normalized, aided by the anonymity of digital communication and the escape from responsibility it facilitates. Ku Klux Klan, Neo-Nazi, and ethnic nationalist demonstrations—whose attendance even only a decade ago might have numbered in the dozens—have swollen their ranks to number in the hundreds, with armed, torch-bearing attendees attired in paramilitary garb as they chant “Blood and Soil,” a slogan taken verbatim from the German SS. A dissertation that began as an interrogation of Germany’s past has, over the course of its writing, assumed a disturbing urgency for the present day United States.

“Should we be confident,” asks historian Timothy Snyder in his 2015 *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning*, “now that a Holocaust is behind us, that a

recognizable future awaits? We share a world with the forgotten perpetrators as well as the memorialized victims ... The history of the Holocaust is not over. Its precedents are eternal, and its lessons have not yet been learned” (xiv). One crucial step toward grasping these lessons is sustained, serious engagement—rather than instinctual rejection and vilification—with texts that confront us with the complexity, ambiguity, and humanity of the Holocaust’s “forgotten” perpetrators. Contrary to the most vehement accusations aroused by some of the authors I treat here, such texts are not the product of willful—or even unwitting—“complicity” or “collaboration” with the Third Reich, and none were intended as apologias or justifications for Nazism’s crimes. Rather, depictions of “humanized” Holocaust perpetrators enact a warning against present day complacency, against the hubristic self-certainty that “we” have nothing in common with “them.” It took the Third Reich less than a decade to transform sporadic outbursts of racially motivated violence into a rationalized system of appalling degradation and mass murder, perpetrated with the endorsement of a modern state’s legal apparatuses. It is unclear at this moment whether the U.S. will take any further steps down so cold a road, but as the torches flare and the rallying cries echo both through city streets and cyberspace, as physical violence becomes an increasingly acceptable form of political expression, as both our elected officials and our neighbors thoughtlessly capitulate to authoritarian pathologies once deemed antithetical to our national character, it is decidedly clear that we ignore the warning pronounced in these texts only at our own peril.

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Appendix A

Interview with Eva Mozes Kor

Conducted by Adam Wassel,

at the Radisson Hotel in Krakow, Poland on June 25, 2015

So, to begin, I'm writing a dissertation about Holocaust literature; I'm an English student, and anybody writing a dissertation draws very much upon the viewpoints of experts. And my dissertation director, who is the daughter of two Auschwitz survivors, has told me that ten words from a witness are worth a thousand pages from a scholar.

I don't know, sometimes.

*But just so you know, I'm hoping to get some insight from you on certain issues raised in this text, Simon Wiesenthal's *The Sunflower*, and because it's a dissertation, I might be quoting your words directly in the chapter. Is that okay?*

Oh, sure.

And I'll be quoting as an admirer of yours, so...

Well, you don't have to admire me, but that's okay.

So you are familiar with this book?

Somewhat. What I remember from it, from many, many years ago, was that Wiesenthal was approached, when he was still in the camp, by a Nazi who asked him to forgive him. And he was dying.

Yes, a dying Nazi. A young man, 22 years old.

And he could not forgive him.

Wiesenthal leaves the room in silence, yes.

Really that whole story is not as possible ... I don't know if it happened or not.

You're not the only person to raise that concern.

In my opinion, that the Nazi would ask a survivor in the camp to forgive him ... maybe? But that he, as a survivor, could not forgive a Nazi? After analyzing that idea, it is 100 percent correct. As a survivor he was not able to really focus on the problems of the Nazi. He was trying to survive one more day. And the ability ... even though I am a forgiver, I think that when you are in the battlefield of life, you cannot focus on somebody else's problem. Survival takes precedent for every single survivor. Every single one of us wants to live one more day. In order for a person to be able to forgive, I think that the issue of survival must be removed from one's life – that you are alive and well, and survival is not a question that you have to deal with. And you have to almost

reach a level of higher understanding of what is possible and why forgiveness is important for the victim. But I also believe there is a mistake in that. I could not forgive somebody because *they ask*; I could forgive somebody because *I want* to give them forgiveness.

That's a very interesting distinction.

A very *important* distinction, because forgiveness is not for the perpetrator, but is for the forgiver. It helps the forgiver heal themselves, and it cannot be given as a gift to somebody else. That is my opinion.

So would you say that in this instance the Nazi's request for forgiveness might be a selfish act?

It is a selfish act, but so is forgiveness itself a selfish act. The forgiveness is not given as a gift to somebody; it's given as a gift to oneself. Because it heals you, not because it helps somebody else heal. It's impossible; it only works—and the reason in my case it worked with Dr. Munch—because he was ready to accept responsibility for his actions.

I'm glad that you mention Dr. Munch; I have some questions regarding your meeting with him. Was it in 1995 that you met him?

No, I met him in 1993, after my sister died. Unrelated to my sister's death, I was asked to appear at a conference in Boston and to bring along a Nazi doctor. Of course, I jokingly said, "Where do you think I can find one of those guys? They are not exactly advertising in the Yellow Pages." And my friend who wanted me to invite a doctor told me to really think about it—don't give me these smart-aleck jokes. And I remembered that my sister and I met—or at least knew of the existence of—a Nazi doctor, because he happened to appear in a documentary that my sister and I did together in 1992. But he was interviewed somewhere else. I didn't actually meet him; I only knew that he existed.

So then I proceeded to write to the German television station and ask them to please give me Dr. Munch's telephone number in memory of my sister. That is the way I got the telephone number. They refused to give it to me while my sister was alive, because they said they did not give out telephone numbers. Then, once I had his telephone number, I invited him to come to Boston, but he refused to come. He said instead of that, he wanted me to come to Germany and meet with him at his house, which I did. I did not at the time plan to ask him about ultimately what I asked; I wanted to ask him about the experiments. Since he was a friend of Mengele's, I was very interested in the experiments. But he told me unfortunately he knew nothing about the experiments, because Mengele always said they were top secret and he would not share any details.

So, out of the blue, I heard myself ask—I did not plan to ask this question—if Dr. Munch knew anything about the operation of the gas chambers at Auschwitz. And I didn't know if he did or not; that was not planned. It just popped into my head, so there it was. And

he said that was a big problem for him. It was a nightmare that he lived with. And he went on describing the operation of the gas chamber. He was stationed outside looking through a peephole as people were dying. And the shower room was clean, polished, people were told they were going to take a shower, and many of them of course were looking forward to a shower after the long journey. And once they entered the shower room and the shower room was packed, the doors would close hermetically. And the gas—as I understood it up to that time—did not come from the showerheads. The showerheads were there strictly as a camouflage. Zyklon B looks like pellets of white gravel. They were stored in canisters. The canisters were opened outside the roof, and through an opening in the roof, the pellets were dropped to the floor. They fell to the floor and they operated like dry ice, so the gas was actually rising from the floor. And people—as the gas was rising—people started to suffocate and gasp for air. And they were trying to get away from the rising gas, climbing on top of each other. The last moment of gasping for life. They ended up forming a little mountain of intermingled bodies, all of them dying as they were trying to live one more minute. And the strongest people ended up on the top of the pile.

And Dr. Munch, as he was looking through his peephole, he realized that when the people on the top of the pile stopped moving that everybody was dead. And he signed, then he signed one death certificate, no names...

For everyone, just one certificate?

For everyone, correct. Never any names, just the number of people murdered in that session. Anywhere from 500 to 3,000. And I immediately realized I had never, ever heard about that. So I told him this is very important information, I am going to Auschwitz in 1995, would you please come with me? We are going to observe the fifty year anniversary of the liberation of the camp and I want you to sign a document at the ruins of the gas chambers in the company of witnesses—because people won't believe later on that you signed it. And he immediately told me, "I would love to."

Well, I didn't realize that it was going to be that easy, but I was glad. I got back to Terre Haute, Indiana, and I wanted to thank this Nazi doctor. Now I cannot personally understand or explain why I had such a strong desire to thank him, and I did not want to tell anybody about it, because it sounded, even to me, strange. And I knew that people would try to discourage me from it, and I didn't want anyone to discourage me. So I didn't know where to look for a gift for a Nazi. How do I thank a Nazi? I went to the local Hallmark shop in Terre Haute, and I went to the "Thank You" section to look for a thank you card. I didn't quite know what I was going to give him, but I thought that maybe if I read all these thank you cards I would have a better idea.

I read those cards for two and a half hours, at which time two ladies came to me and said, "You've been reading those cards for a long time. Are you finding what you're looking for?" I said, "Not really." "And what are you looking for? Maybe we can help you find it." And I said, "No, no, no," and I left the card shop. But I could not give up the idea of finding a meaningful gift for this Nazi doctor.

I went back to my own life lesson number one, which I give when I lecture. My life lesson number one is never, ever give up on yourself or on your dreams. And so, with that in mind, I was searching for an answer while I was cooking, cleaning, doing the laundry or even driving the car; when my mind wasn't too busy, I did a lot of brainstorming on my own. Ten months later, a simple idea popped into my head: how about a letter of forgiveness from me to Dr. Munch?

And was this the first time forgiveness ever suggested itself?

Yes.

Then this was the beginning of much longer mission for you.

Right. And I immediately realized that Dr. Munch would find it a meaningful gift. But what I discovered for myself was life-changing. I discovered that I had the power to forgive.

Power?

Right—and no one could give that power, no one could take it away, it was mine to use in any way I wished. That was interesting, because I think up to that time, I always reacted to what other people did to me. And this means being in a subordinate position, really. To realize that I had any power over my life was an amazing and big discovery.

I didn't know how to write a letter of forgiveness to a Nazi, so I worked on it for four months before I came up with a version that I liked. And then it occurred to me that somebody might read my letter. My spelling in English is atrocious, and I didn't want to be embarrassed, so I called my former English professor to correct my spelling. We met about three times, and the last time we met, she said to me, "Now Eva, it's very nice that you're forgiving this Dr. Munch, but your problem is not with Dr. Munch. Your problem's with Dr. Mengele."

I tried to debate that issue, because I don't know if I really quite realized what I was doing. I just wanted to give him a nice gesture of my thanks. So she said to me, "When you go home tonight, pretend that you're talking to Mengele. Pretend that you're talking to him and telling him that you forgive him and see how it makes you feel."

That was an interesting idea. And I tried it. Actually what I did—I was fascinated with that whole idea: how does one really feel, talking to somebody like Mengele? And I looked up a lot of nasty words in the dictionary, so I could call him all these nasty words. I wrote them down, closed the bedroom door, and *loud*, I said all of these words. And at the end I said, "In spite of all that, I forgive you."

And the whole idea that I had the power to forgive the Angel of Death, that I had any power over him, was very interesting. And I realized that he cannot change that. What I do in the present, and even if *he* was present in that room, there was nothing he could do to change it. That was my ultimate reaction to him. And that felt somehow extremely

empowering. Because that's really what forgiveness is: tremendously empowering. Because up to that time, I was always reacting to what other people did to me.

And this forgiveness was acting, rather than reacting.

Yes. Exactly. There is a very big difference.

*Thank you so much for that. To come back to *The Sunflower*, there's Wiesenthal's memoir, but the second half of the book is full of different responses and reactions to the questions he asks. And if it's okay with you, I was wondering if I could share with you some of the ideas presented here and get your response, given the very specific definition of forgiveness that you have.*

Sure.

One writer says, "Granting the murderer forgiveness would have been the final victory of Nazism."

Ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous. He doesn't have the first understanding of forgiveness. You cannot change what happened—murder or no murder, whatever happened, you cannot change it. What I find, today, so sad, 70 years after the liberation of Auschwitz, most of the survivors are still angry, still victims. They are acting as victims. And I find it appalling, personally, and this is the reason I'll be meeting with

Rabbi Paula (Winnig) in December, with a group of rabbis from Indiana. Because as I was talking to survivors, I realized that they are pretty much listening to the words of Jewish leaders, rabbis, and the Jewish tradition says that the perpetrator must repent and ask for forgiveness. I met with a Holocaust scholar in Washington—a big shot—and he came up to me and gave me a hug and a kiss two years ago and I was stunned. Why on earth is this guy hugging and kissing me? Oh, I thought, he must like my forgiveness. And he said, “Absolutely not. Don’t you know that in the Jewish tradition the perpetrator must repent and ask for forgiveness?”

I said, “That’s interesting. Let’s say that Hitler, Mengele, Höss, Himmler—any of these big shots—are alive today. Do you think they would repent and ask for forgiveness?”

He said, “Absolutely not.”

I said, “Then what happens to me, if absolutely not? What happens to me? If they don’t repent and ask for forgiveness, I cannot forgive. Does that mean that I must remain a victim for the rest of my days?”

He didn’t answer.

So I find it absurd that the victim still is under the control of the perpetrator, and that’s what’s happening right now. Most of the Jews are still victims because the Nazis have not repented and asked for forgiveness. Now why on Earth are we giving them that

power, and why does the Jewish religion keep perpetuating the pain of the victims? To me, it's unbelievable that we are doing that, and I want to change it.

Hearing what you say reminds me of another entry in the book—judging from that answer, one that you're not going like very much. But I'd still like to get your sense of it, so here's another quotation: "Forgiveness is pitiless ..."

Pitiless?

Yes, "...pitiless. It forgets the victim. It negates the right of the victim to his own life."

Who on earth came up with this cockamamie idea?

This is from an American author named Cynthia Ozick.

Well, somebody, some crazy human being—I don't know when, in the last hundred years or maybe before that—came up with a statement that needs to be eradicated from the face of this Earth: "forgive and forget." Now, let's analyze that. How can anybody *forget* something that murdered their whole family and changed their life forever? That is a false statement.

Specifically, this statement says "it forgets the victim."

By who it forgets the victim?

Forgiveness itself.

That is incorrect because it is based on a false statement that became popular: forgive and forget. My statement, and I write it in all the books that I sign, is “forgive and *heal*,” because what forgiveness does is give power to the victim and heals the victim. Therefore, it’s exactly the opposite of what she is saying.

And just to finish this quotation, “Forgiveness,” she says, “cultivates sensitiveness toward the murderer at the price of insensitiveness toward the victim.”

Exactly the opposite. I will tell you that this is the reason that the world is in such a big mess. Because people keep wanting to wait for the perpetrator to repent and ask for forgiveness, and that doesn’t ever happen. Almost never—I’ve never heard of that in history. Because the perpetrators never really had the sensitivity to realize they did something wrong, given the power they had over the victims. And that power is being perpetuated by these stupid statements, being taught and re-taught, generation after generation—it is *false*. I would like to meet one single victim who could forget what happened, even if they forgive. It is not correct, and that lie is being taught universally as truth, and I am appalled by it.

If I hear you correctly, you’re saying it might be time to break this cycle of...

I am trying to, and I'm doing everything in my power – and I know why I'm having a tough time. People believe this cockamamie statement, “forgive and forget,” but the reality is different.

Here's another quotation, then, from a philosopher named Hannah Arendt. She says, “The only antidote to the irreversibility of history is the faculty of forgiveness.”

Thoughts?

Amen. Because this is when the victim has power over the perpetrator.

And this is how we may finally get out of...

Get it out of our system. I have forgiven 20 years ago, and I have not forgotten one single word. I am doing more than any survivor in teaching and continuing to teach what happened. *But not for the purpose of revenge*, which is *reaction*, but for the purpose of healing. Forgiveness heals victims, and therefore they are no longer victims, and they no longer want revenge, no longer teach their children revenge, no longer teach hatred. Usually what happens—and I can give you examples: In 1985, when I took Dr. Munch with me to Auschwitz, I had a press conference there. There were maybe ten reporters; one of them was a German reporter for *Der Spiegel* magazine—*Der Spiegel* is like *Time* magazine in the United States.

Yes, I'm familiar with it.

Yes, well the reporter contacted me; he was going to write an article. And in 1997, he wrote a front cover story. And in the cover story, this idiot put in the home address of Dr. Munch, talking about his crimes. Well if you see in *Time* magazine the home address of a perpetrator, what do you think would happen? His house was firebombed three times. The police had to watch his house, and I was ... I never... I called him, Bruno Schirra. I said, "Mr. Schirra, I have never ... First of all you made quite a few mistakes in your article about me, but that's okay. But why on Earth would you put Dr. Munch's address, his home address, in the article?"

He said he has finally "gotten even" for his grandfather, who is a survivor of Auschwitz. I said, "You know what? You make me sick in my stomach. The only Nazi who was willing to come forward and testify to the documentation of the gas chambers, the only Nazi who saved, to the best of my knowledge, 30 inmates from sure death, and you are getting even by putting his address in the article? Getting *even*?"

He said yes. And he felt very proud about it. I had already forgiven the Nazis, but that the grandson wanted to carry on the battle and get even for the suffering of his grandfather—this was very foreign to me because it accomplished nothing. It became what I am calling an endless, vicious cycle. Children get even for crimes against their grandparents, and then maybe the grandchildren of Dr. Munch will try to get even for

what was done to him ... where on Earth does it end up? And then, you see in how the world functions today that there is no end to it.

It seems to me that the importance of bringing Dr. Munch to Auschwitz in the first place was to certify what the process was...

Correct, correct. And nobody ever gave me or Dr. Munch any credit for it. They were completely ... you will find no literature, no story, no coverage of the fact that an old Nazi was willing to come and *document* the operation of the gas chambers, or that I found it important to *document* that. That is never appearing in any statement; no survivor has ever thanked me for *documenting*. “Oh, we knew that.” Well, I had never seen any documentation before that. It was for me a big surprise, the way it was done. Not that I deserve the Nobel Peace Prize for it—I wouldn’t mind it, of course, that would help the museum—but the point is that they are very eager to condemn me, and give no credit for what I was trying to do. And they can condemn me if they don’t understand it, but they should also give credit to me and Dr. Munch for documenting an important piece of that history.

An important piece of history that—the fact is we have nowhere but to the perpetrators to turn for this knowledge ...

For the information, exactly.

...and I've been profoundly moved by our trips through Birkenau and through Auschwitz over the last few days, but one of the things I was struck by was the many photographs—in Birkenau especially—and almost every one is credited to a perpetrator who had taken the photograph. And if not for them, we wouldn't have the photographs. I guess what I'm getting at is that ...

That is also a very interesting question, and I really have never even dealt with it. But they wanted in some way to document how many people they killed or who they killed, because it was somehow their glorification ...

But like in April, when I was meeting with Oskar Groenig, who is on trial now in Luneburg—I was going to go back there from here, but now I am not, he is in very poor health—he wanted to get out of Auschwitz. He asked for three transfers, and was denied every time. He said, “I did not sign up for the Nazi party to murder.” And actually, the reason he signed up, as many did, was that he couldn't get a job without it. Think about it: we don't condemn all the people who become Union members because some professions require you to be a member of the Union in order to get the job... it's similar.

*Since our time is running out here, maybe we'll close with a final quotation. This last remark is from Bishop Desmond Tutu; this is his reaction to *The Sunflower*. Desmond Tutu says, “it is clear that if we look only to retributive justice, then we could just as well close up shop. Forgiveness is not some nebulous thing. It is practical politics. Without forgiveness ...*

... there is no future.” He is absolutely, one hundred percent correct. But, I met Desmond Tutu. I was a speaker at a conference in Cape Town about Truth and Reconciliation. I was one of the keynote speakers; there were two. I was very disappointed in the way the process of forgiveness is working in South Africa. There were three women whose sons were murdered, and they appeared on a panel with Desmond Tutu. They were yelling onstage, screaming at him, “You promised us the perpetrators would come and apologize to us.” And the apology in the days of the Bible was washing the feet of the victim; you can read somewhere in the Bible that the angels came and washed feet. But at the reception, the mothers were there, and I said to them, “You don’t need the perpetrator in order to forgive.” It was so foreign to them, like I was speaking Chinese. “But he promised!” Well, I talked to Tutu’s associate—and to Desmond Tutu, he was little surrounded but I had my picture taken with him, and he wrote an endorsement for the back of my book—and I said to them, “You can forgive because it heals *you*, not because anyone asked for it.”

I would say that you need to have a certain level of intelligence, so the primitive “a tooth for a tooth, and eye for an eye” is no longer valid in *your* eyes, and you understand that there is no merit to it. But to them it made no sense. And knowing why Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela did what they did—I met a professor at a reconciliation conference in Germany, I can’t remember her name—but she said that Nelson Mandela, after he was released, he realized that the when the white supremacist Apartheid government in South Africa fell, there was great interest in revenge and bloodshed. He and Tutu had the intelligence and the insight to see that it would create a bloodbath, so Nelson Mandela

and Desmond Tutu went from village to village, from hut to hut, to convince the South African people not to do it, and they promised the perpetrators would ask forgiveness. That was a way to stop the bloodshed. Of course, the believers in old fashioned justice did not understand that not all perpetrators would come—there might only be one or two. Why that was significant to them at all I do not understand; the only reason I can see is that they didn't understand the power they had in forgiving.

And that they didn't need to look to anyone else for that power.

Yes.

Eva, I can't thank you enough for taking the time to speak with me.

You're welcome.

I just have one final question: would you be so kind as to inscribe my copy of Surviving the Angel of Death?

Of course. And this inscription should be the new slogan in the world to replace “forgive and forget.” My statement in all the books I have been signing for at least the last five years. I used to sign my books “Never ever give up,” which is my first life lesson. But I thought it was not really the signature idea that I have, which is “forgive.” And the reason forgiveness is important is that it heals the victim. And therefore, it is the best

revenge. As long as you no longer feel that you are under the power of the perpetrator, you have the power. So, *To Adam Wassel: Forgive and Heal. Forgiveness is the Best Revenge.*

Thank you so very much, and not just for the inscription or the interview, but for everything: for bringing us all here, for cultivating so much awareness...

If we can do that ... I only would like to add to the interview that I call anger—and look at the world—all wars, all atrocities are created by people who are *angry*. Therefore, I call anger a seed for war. People who forgive are at peace with themselves and the world. Therefore, forgiveness—this is a secret—is a seed for peace. People have been looking in the wrong place, and each person has to do it for themselves. You cannot do it in the name of anybody else. It's a very personal act, and it's free, it doesn't cost anything, it works, and if you don't like it, you can always go and take back your pain. No one will stop you.

Truer words have rarely been spoken. I can't thank you enough.

You're welcome.