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THE GERMAN-JEWISH HOLOCAUST NOVEL OF THE FIRST GENERATION

Kirstin Gwyer

OXFORD MODERN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE MONOGRAPHS

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For Matthew, Zoë and Luke

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Contents

Introduction

Mapping a Blind Spot: The German-Jewish Holocaust Novel of the First Generation

There is no established referential framework for what will be provisionally referred to here as first-generation German-Jewish Holocaust fiction. Very little about this conceptual constellation, in fact, is unproblematic. Concerns of terminological unwieldiness aside, the designations 'Holocaust fiction' and 'German-Jewish' each denote areas of considerable scholarly dispute.[1] The Holocaust novel, with its apparently irreconcilable dual objective of historical testimony and literary fabrication, persistently defies delineation and has been referred to as 'an entangled battlefield, crisscrossed by ideological minefields and rhetorical quagmires'.[2] Much the same can be claimed of the epithet German-Jewish, and maybe never more so than when it is applied to citizens of German-speaking countries who were compelled to identify with Judaism *ex negativo*, after the atrocities committed against them and their families in the name of National Socialism had obliterated their individual identities and appropriated their language.[3] Finally, while both the Holocaust novel and

[1] The use of the term Holocaust, with its connotations of religious sacrifice, to refer to the National Socialist persecution and mass murder of Jews is itself far from uncontested. Indeed, it has become something of a commonplace to denounce, and seek to improve on, existing terminology in this field. However, 'Holocaust' has established itself as the designation commonly employed in anglophone research, and, since none of the other terms in use, including Shoah, Churban, or, synecdochally, Auschwitz, are unassailable, I have, for the most part, followed standard practice. For an elaboration on current nomenclature, see e.g. James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 85–9.

[2] Efraim Sicher, *The Holocaust Novel* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. xiii.

[3] On the virtual impossibility of finding 'an agreed definition of the concept "German-Jewish"', see e.g. Pól O'Dochartaigh, who in consequence proposes a broadly inclusive definition of German-Jewish culture and literature in his 'Introduction: German-Jewish Literature?', in O'Dochartaigh (ed.), *Jews in German Literature Since 1945: German-Jewish Literature?* (= *German Monitor* 53) (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), pp. iii–x (p. iii).

German-Jewish writing independently have received a fair amount of critical attention, their earliest convergence—in post-war texts by German-language nationals who were persecuted as Jews during the Holocaust, survived in captivity, hiding, or exile, and went on to produce works of prose narrative rooted in both imagination and personal experience—marks something of a blind spot in academic research.

Literary scholarship in Germany came late to studying German-Jewish survivor writing in any form and to this day rarely gives consideration to the Holocaust novel (as it has established itself internationally, particularly in the US) as a genre in its own right. As recently as 1992, Dieter Lamping lamented the absence in Germany of an 'Auseinandersetzung mit dem Holocaust, wie er in der Literatur dargestellt wird, [. . .] mit der Literatur angesichts des Holocaust', adding: 'Diese Diskussion zu führen ist längst an der Zeit. In Israel und den USA wird sie auch seit längerem schon geführt. Den Studien [. . .] ist hierzulande jedoch kaum etwas an die Seite zu stellen.'[4] From the outset, there was simply no context in Germany in which to situate such literature. Any form of German-Jewish post-war writing, especially if it was produced abroad, was often not published in Germany until years later, and sometimes not at all. As a result of the pressures of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, a great deal of non-Jewish writing in German engaging with National Socialism and its after-effects on life and literature has been published since the late 1950s and early 1960s, but it has almost exclusively been presented from the perspective of the perpetrators and not the persecuted. The inclusion in the German literary canon of no more than a handful of writers representing the latter viewpoint occasionally had the flavour of a political gesture, a demonstration of the 'Kräfte zur kritischen Selbsteinsicht, die der deutsche literarische Betrieb, stellvertretend für die Deutschen, hatte aufbringen können', as, for example, in the case of the poet Nelly Sachs.[5] More commonly, whenever an author's biographical circumstances, his or her self-perception, or the nature of his or her work appeared to allow for it, as, for instance, in the case of Peter Weiss, such inclusion took the form of a tacit subsumption of the author's work under the general heading of *Nachkriegsliteratur*. Meanwhile, non-Jewish German writing since 1945

[4] 'Nachwort', in Lamping (ed.), *Dein aschenes Haar Sulamith: Dichtung über den Holocaust* (Munich: Piper, 1992), 271–92 (288). Four years later, Lamping's verdict remained tellingly unchanged: 'Die Literatur über den Holocaust ist in der deutschsprachigen Literaturwissenschaft bislang kaum untersucht worden.' In Lamping, *Literatur und Theorie: Über poetologische Probleme der Moderne* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 134.

[5] Stephan Braese, *Die andere Erinnerung: Jüdische Autoren in der westdeutschen Nachkriegsliteratur* (Berlin: Philo, 2001), 10.

that has attempted to identify if not with the survivors' experiences, then with their position has been described as engaging in a 'Verallgemeinerung der Opferperspektive' as a means, conscious or unconscious, of avoiding a 'Beschäftigung mit der Täterperspektive'.[6]

Recent efforts to counter this incorporative or appropriative trend and make space for the viewpoint of the excluded *other* have, paradoxically, often only succeeded in preserving German-Jewish alterity by defining it as what it is not in relation to non-Jewish Germanness. Even progressive studies such as Stephan Braese's compelling *Die andere Erinnerung*, which set out to make German-Jewish literature their focal point, are not entirely free of this impulse. For instance, Braese's definition of the position of German-Jewish authors in German post-war literature relative to their 'Erinnerungs*differenz* zur Majorität der deutschen Schriftsteller und ihres Publikums hinsichtlich der Jahre 1933–1945', resulting from their 'Nicht-Teilhabe an der kollektiven Erfahrung der Mehrheit der Deutschen', puts a definite slant on the study's fundamental contention that the relation between Jewish and non-Jewish authors should be conceived of as an objective '*Gegenüber*' and '*Konkurrenz* der Erinnerungen'.[7] Such a discrepancy may well be rooted in an underlying sentiment that we encounter more explicitly phrased in earlier critical writing, for example in the introduction to a collection of articles written on the occasion of a symposium in Osnabrück in 1991 on Jewish contributions to German literature after 1945: 'Im Hinblick auf den Holocaust liegt der Kontakt mit den Menschen, die sich sowohl der jüdischen als auch der deutschen Geschichte und Kultur verbunden wissen, gerade im deutschen Interesse.'[8] Indeed, Braese cites this very collection in his study as an example of constructive scholarship marked by a 'genuin politisches Ethos'.[9] Born of the tension between the effort to compensate for a cultural and literary neglect and the concurrent attempt to render such compensation somehow sociopolitically productive, and even ethically significant, for the present, such a bias in these volumes conceived by non-Jewish Germans is understandable, and can prove fruitful, but it has so far largely precluded an approach that views first-generation German-Jewish post-war fiction as an autonomous category

[6] Stefan Krankenhagen, *Auschwitz darstellen: Ästhetische Positionen zwischen Adorno, Spielberg und Walser* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2001), 93.

[7] *Die andere Erinnerung*, 11, 30, 29, 11; original emphasis. See also Stephan Braese et al. (eds), *Deutsche Nachkriegsliteratur und der Holocaust* (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus, 1998), 9–16.

[8] Jens Stüben and Winfried Woesler (eds), *'Wir tragen den Zettelkasten mit den Steckbriefen unserer Freunde': Beiträge jüdischer Autoren zur deutschen Literatur seit 1945* (Darmstadt: Häusser, 1993), 15.

[9] *Die andere Erinnerung*, 26.

and aspires to an independent analysis of its literary features. This holds true even for the few German-language publications that have recently sought to promote the study of Holocaust representation in Germany, such as *Shoah—Formen der Erinnerung* or *Shoah in der deutschsprachigen Literatur*.[10] Drawing heavily on international research and introducing articles by non-German scholars, both collections examine texts by assorted German-Jewish authors not just in comparison with, and in contrast to, non-Jewish German writing, but also independently as well as in an international context. However, not least because their compilational form does not lend itself to the development of an overarching argument, the individual authors presented in them are not considered in conjunction, and a comprehensive view of a possible corpus of (first-generation) German-Jewish Holocaust writing and its characteristics fails to emerge. In Germany, literary representations of the past and its effects on the present from a 'Jewish' perspective become an exclusively and exhaustively explored subject matter only where the focus is on texts by non-Germans and/or authors of a generation born too late to have personal memories of the Holocaust.[11]

Internationally, the study of Holocaust literature was also slow to take off, though this is easily forgotten in the face of the sheer volume of recent scholarship devoted to the subject. Earliest efforts to establish the literature of the Holocaust as a distinct genre date back only to the 1970s and early 1980s, and were for the most part undertaken by Jewish scholars such as Lawrence Langer, Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, Alvin Rosenfeld, Alan Mintz, or David Roskies.[12] Since then, Holocaust fiction has become a

[10] Nicolas Berg, Jess Jochimsen, and Bernd Stiegler (eds), *Shoah—Formen der Erinnerung: Geschichte, Philosophie, Literatur, Kunst* (Munich: Fink, 1996), and Norbert Otto Eke and Hartmut Steinecke (eds), *Shoah in der deutschsprachigen Literatur* (Berlin: Schmidt, 2006), with the latter acknowledging its debt to the former. See also the bilingual Walter Schmitz (ed.), *Erinnerte Shoah: Die Literatur der Überlebenden/The Shoah Remembered: Literature of the Survivors* (Dresden: Thelem, 2003).

[11] See e.g. Thomas Nolden, *Junge jüdische Literatur: Konzentrisches Schreiben in der Gegenwart* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1995); or Hartmut Steinecke, *Literatur als Gedächtnis der Shoah: Deutschsprachige jüdische Schriftstellerinnen und Schriftsteller der 'zweiten Generation'* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2005) on second-generation German-Jewish literature. See e.g. Beate Wolfsteiner, *Untersuchungen zum französisch-jüdischen Roman nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2003); Susanne Düwell, *'Fiktion aus dem Wirklichen': Strategien autobiographischen Erzählens im Kontext der Shoah* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2004); or Birgit Schlachter, *Schreibweisen der Abwesenheit: Jüdisch-französische Literatur nach der Shoah* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2006) for analyses of writing in languages other than German.

[12] Lawrence L. Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975); Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980); Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (New York: Columbia

rather well-ploughed field of literary studies, especially in the US. Yet of all the many internationally published studies whose focus is the Holocaust as literary inspiration very few consider novels by the first generation in any language.[13] Even fewer include German-language texts in their considerations.[14] This again holds true especially where works of the first generation are concerned, but even contemporary German-Jewish writing remains a marginal area of anglophone research.[15] In part, the neglect of the first generation can be put down to the fact that very few of its texts have been translated into English. This, in turn, is symptomatic of the particular place, or, rather, non-place, that those authors have come to occupy who, by choice, or through lack of choice, continued to write in German even after the language had apparently been irreversibly corrupted, and after any notion of a productive German-Jewish cultural and societal symbiosis had been rendered at least temporarily absurd by the events of history. They represent a point of view that is too Jewish for the German literary canon but at the same time too German for any international canon of Holocaust fiction, even though both the trigger for, and the conditions of, their writing would absolutely warrant inclusion in the latter. Or as Norbert Eke puts it:

> Einerseits kann die deutschsprachige Shoah-Literatur nur schwerlich in ihrer Entwicklung aus dieser weltliterarischen Erscheinung herausgelöst werden

University Press, 1984); David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

[13] Though recent efforts in related disciplines to refute the widely held fallacy of the absence of Holocaust representations before the 1960s, such as David Cesarani and Eric Sundquist (eds), *After the Holocaust: Challenging the Myth of Silence* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), will hopefully contribute towards paving the way for further such explorations.

[14] Though see Dagmar C. G. Lorenz, *Verfolgung bis zum Massenmord: Holocaust-Diskurse in deutscher Sprache aus der Sicht der Verfolgten* (New York: Lang, 1992), published in German in the United States, for a comprehensive overview of German-Jewish writing since 1933, including a number of first-generation works of fiction on pp. 153–231, and Pascale R. Bos, *German-Jewish Literature in the Wake of the Holocaust: Grete Weil, Ruth Klüger, and the Politics of Address* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

[15] Among the few exceptions to this are Leslie Morris and Karen Remmler (eds), *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Germany: An Anthology* (Lincoln, NB and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), a collection of excerpts from primary texts in translation, and the volumes Leslie Morris and Jack Zipes (eds), *Unlikely History: The Changing German-Jewish Symbiosis, 1945–2000* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002); Hillary Hope Herzog, Todd Herzog, and Benjamin Lapp (eds), *Rebirth of a Culture: Jewish Identity and Jewish Writing in Germany and Austria Today* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2008); and Vivian Liska and Thomas Nolden (eds), *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Europe: A Guide* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), which set out to situate contemporary German-Jewish culture and writing in relation to its countries of origin.

> (insofern stellt sich beispielsweise die Frage nach Verflechtungen und Wechselwirkungen zwischen den Literaturen [...]). Andererseits nimmt sie im internationalen Rahmen aufgrund der Rolle Deutschlands (und Österreichs) in der Geschichte eine Sonderstellung ein: das gilt für nichtjüdische Schriftsteller, insbesondere aber für jüdische Autoren, weil sie als deutschsprachige Autoren in der 'Sprache der Täter' schreiben.[16]

This unexplored area—where considerations of identity and idiom, of memory, imagination, and history converge, and where disciplines intersect yet have a hard time coming together—is where this book will venture. In considering these authors writing without addressees during the approximately thirty-year period from 1945 to 1975, between the end of the war and the beginnings of Holocaust literary studies, as a category unto themselves, it is not my intention to gloss over their marginalized social, cultural, or even geographical position relative to their former and their adopted countries. However, I do want to avoid situating their work in a primarily relational way, for instance in terms of a continuing 'negative symbiosis', as defined by Dan Diner, between German Jews and non-Jews, or indeed as a minority literature viewed from a Germanocentric perspective.[17] To consider their writing as peripheral in this way both segregates it and renders it definitionally dependent on the centre from which it is excluded. What I intend to put forward instead is a reading of a number of texts from within first-generation German-Jewish Holocaust fiction that defines these texts first and foremost in respect of their own literary traits and techniques, as a corpus in their own right as well as a potential constituent of a supranational and transgenerational canon. This reading will draw on texts by H. G. Adler, Elisabeth Augustin, Jenny Aloni, Erich Fried, and Wolfgang Hildesheimer. These authors have never been treated as a set before and, for reasons that will become clear further on, many of them might not be included in a category of Holocaust fiction even if one existed for German-language literature. What they have in common, aside from their native language, is the experience of persecution and exile in adulthood, and a more fundamental feeling of displacement brought on by the sense of not having ended up at their supposed destination, of having survived 'Auschwitz' despite it being, as Peter Weiss puts it, 'eine Ortschaft, für die ich bestimmt war',

[16] 'Shoah in der deutschsprachigen Literatur – Zur Einführung', in Eke and Steinecke (eds), *Shoah in der deutschsprachigen Literatur*, 7–18 (15).

[17] 'Negative Symbiose: Deutsche und Juden nach Auschwitz', in Micha Brumlik et al. (eds), *Jüdisches Leben in Deutschland seit 1945* (Frankfurt a.M.: Athenäum, 1986), 243–57.

and despite their names having been 'auf den Listen derer, die dorthin für immer übersiedelt werden sollten'.[18]

Yet the assumption that these correspondences would have produced enough literary parallels in their texts to warrant consideration of them as a corpus seems, at first glance, no less problematic than the terminology I use to refer to them. Where German-Jewish fiction produced after 1945, and especially that written outside Germany, is concerned, it stands to reason that since its authors hailed from different backgrounds, had experienced the events of the past in very different ways, and, even after the war, continued to live and work in vastly diverse environments, exposed to distinct political, religious, social, cultural, and literary influences, their creative responses to the Holocaust would be reflective above all of these dissimilarities. This study, however, is predicated on the premise that the quest for adequate representational approaches to the trauma of the past, and its aftermath in the present, has, against all the odds and notwithstanding the authors' contrasting circumstances, resulted in the adoption of verifiably similar literary strategies across a thus far under-researched segment of German-Jewish post-war fiction. Given the situational absence of almost any direct form of contact or exchange among the authors under discussion, proving this will involve demonstrating that in the case of at least some of first-generation Holocaust fiction, the theme of the writing has come to shape its form.

Moreover, I contend that the very isolation of most of these German-Jewish writers not only from the literary establishment but also from one another, the very fact that they have 'kaum eine gemeinsame Disposition—*außer* der der jüdischen Verfolgungserfahrung', makes them a perfect test case by which to assess the validity of this premise for Holocaust fiction more generally.[19] In thus regarding them as both a set unto themselves and, as it were, a potential control group in the study of Holocaust fiction internationally, I aim not only to draw attention to a neglected area of German literary studies, but also to suggest how conceptions of the Holocaust novel as it is studied internationally might be constructively reconfigured by the inclusion of these German-Jewish authors.

To this end, Chapter 1 outlines the theoretical context from which the proposed category is absent. It shows that the first-generation Holocaust novel is an under-researched area in Holocaust representation studies not only where Jewish writing in German is concerned but more generally.

[18] 'Meine Ortschaft', in Weiss, *Rapporte* (Frankfurt a.M: Suhrkamp, 1968), 113–24 (114).

[19] Braese, *Die andere Erinnerung*, 31; original emphasis.

Focusing on either documentary writing by eyewitnesses, which as testimony is commonly regarded as unassailable, or on fictional recreations by authors born after the Holocaust, which tend to be problematized on account of their lack of historical accuracy and authenticity, literary scholarship has largely ignored the convergence of the testimonial and the literary in first-generation survivor writing. One reason for this may be that, unlike Holocaust 'faction' or fictions of the Holocaust, the first-generation prose narratives in question are not straightforwardly descriptive; they do not write 'about' the past, as a result of which they are not necessarily even recognized as Holocaust writing. It will be shown that this refusal of direct representation is the consequence of the authors' attempt to do justice to a paradox that affects not just the survivors' but also cultural and scholarly perceptions and representations of the Holocaust: the fact that while the Holocaust is conceived of as an empirical historical reality and an atrocious, but relatable, succession of past events on a chronological timeline, it at the same time makes itself felt as trauma, with lastingly disruptive effects on the present, and as such resists being consigned to the past but keeps returning to haunt us in the present. The authors discussed here attempted to convey in, or rather through, their writing that the 'truth' of the Holocaust consists not only in the atrocious facts we know about it but also in the way that the experience of these facts, and their enduring effects, challenges straightforward understanding and representation. This manifests itself by the fact that the texts in question do not try to explain or describe the events of the past but, as it were, enact them structurally, by mimicking their continuing disruptive impact in the present on time, space, and self through the form of the narrative. Indeed, it will be shown that, in their effort to convey that which simultaneously demands testimony yet defies description, this set of authors was employing what we would today think of as (post)modernist and trauma-theoretical representational strategies, before either of the corresponding theories had been established, and before the National Socialist persecution and mass murder had attained their discursive and conceptual status as 'the Holocaust'.

In thus framing the analysis of narrative strategies adopted by these individuals in the broader debate on the ethics and aesthetics of Holocaust writing, as well as setting it against the backdrop of the (post)modern, this chapter also outlines to what extent treating these writers as a set, and their body of work as a hitherto unacknowledged category of Holocaust fiction, has implications that go well beyond simply drawing attention to a number of important but critically neglected authors. In revealing how certain kinds of testimony have been privileged above others in international Holocaust studies, this book raises questions of a more general

nature concerning canon formation and our theoretical responses to the Holocaust. In considering foremost among these responses (those informed by) the theory of deconstruction and trauma theory, it invites a re-examination of the relationship between the (post)modern and trauma. In reading the first-generation texts under discussion as Holocaust novels *avant la lettre*, it finally suggests that they proleptically anticipate a preoccupation with afterwardsness and belatedness that will become a main characteristic of the times in which they are (still not being) received, as well as the very thing precluding them from entering any contemporary literary canon.

In Chapters 2 to 4, I proceed to a close text-based reading of four of these first-generation authors: Adler, Augustin, Aloni, and Fried. In the course of this analysis, it will become clear that even though they were drawing not only on the experience of persecution but on other, earlier or contemporaneous, personal crises—many of which, triggered by questions of identity, gender, or migration, were generally prevalent at the time—it was only after 1945, and in the effort to respond to the events of the Holocaust, that the aesthetic forms (not just the themes) of their writing were altered to reflect the experience of crisis and trauma. The analyses presented in these chapters will demonstrate that in these early Holocaust novels the theme of the writing not only came to shape its form but was in fact expressed through the form: that the upheaval of the Holocaust came to be encrypted in the fabric of the text. At the same time, these works are already imbued with a sense that they are responding not just to a personal crisis but to a hyper-crisis of modernity.

Chapter 5 is devoted to the fifth author, Hildesheimer. Though he is a member of the outlined category on the basis of the representational strategies employed in his works, Hildesheimer's writing approaches the Holocaust from a greater remove than that of the other authors discussed here. In consequence of his having been exposed to the atrocities of the Holocaust in a less immediate way, and having embarked on his writing career at a slightly later stage, his work comes to mark the point where individual and personal trauma crosses over into collectively transmittable (non-)'memory'.

Out of this observation arises my Conclusion, which glances forward to where, depending on one's point of view, literary scholarship either finally removes, or emphatically cements, the parenthesis bracketing the German-Jewish Holocaust novel. It does so by attempting to catch up to the first-generation German-Jewish perspective and literary response through later, non-Jewish attempts to view the past through their eyes: most notably, perhaps, in and through the works of W. G. Sebald. Our response to Sebald's response exemplifies that, as suggested in Chapter 1,

the most important single cause for the neglect experienced by the first-generation Holocaust novel, especially but by no means exclusively in German, may well be the way in which it clashes with our self-understanding as guardians of the past and keepers of the Holocaust legacy, a self-understanding that has left little room for considering the (literary) contributions of the first generation.

1

An Absence in Context

Holocaust Representation in Testimony, Scholarship, and Literature

> It is necessary to speak, to write, and keep on speaking and writing (lest we forget) about the Jewish Holocaust during the Nazi period even if words cannot express this monstrous event.
>
> It is impossible to speak or write about the Holocaust because words cannot express this monstrous event.
>
> (Raymond Federman, *The Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jewish Writer*)

I have indicated that the term 'Holocaust novel' denotes a contentious area and alluded to why this may have been exacerbated in the case of Holocaust survivors writing in German, who, because of their uniquely marginalized positions in politically or culturally unreceptive climates, often had a particularly hard time getting their work acknowledged, let alone appreciated. What I have not addressed is what may have caused the Holocaust novel to become 'an entangled battlefield' to begin with.[1] Because in what follows I suggest that the especially difficult standing of representations of the Holocaust that aspire to be literary first, and documentary only indirectly, is indissociable from the already problematic reception of Holocaust representation more generally, it will be necessary first to give a brief overview of this contested greater field in which questions of facticity, authenticity, and legitimacy are foregrounded, yet which is at the same time haunted by the figures of the unknowable, the unspeakable, and the unimaginable. As will be shown, the discussion of primary texts has from the outset risked being displaced in our study of Holocaust representation by an uneasy negotiation between views of the Holocaust as irrecoverable cataclysm (which cannot or must not be

[1] Efraim Sicher, *The Holocaust Novel* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. xiii.

recreated through the imagination) and the past as inescapable legacy (which we can, should, or cannot help but, keep re(-)presenting). This chapter will propose that the particular blind spot we have where the first-generation Holocaust novel not only in German but in any language is concerned is a product of this displacement itself, as well as of the fact that, especially in the past two decades, there has been a strong tendency, both at a critical and a cultural level, towards privileging the legacy that can be known over the event that is felt to elude understanding.

SPEAKING THE UNSPEAKABLE: HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR TESTIMONY

The question of the fundamental representability of the Holocaust, of whether it can be, and should be, spoken, or not, is as old as the earliest witness testimonies by its now largely deceased survivors. It is in these that the essential paradox afflicting any attempts at a narrative representation of the Holocaust first manifests itself: the apparent irreconcilability, as summed up in the epigraph to this chapter by Raymond Federman, of the imperative to preserve the events of the past in memory and transmit what we know about them, lest the facts be forgotten, and the no-less-urgent sense that there is something beyond these facts that falls outside language, and that no words can therefore do justice to the full extent of the atrocity—the simultaneous 'necessity and impossibility' of representing the Holocaust.[2]

Insight into the presence of these contradictory concerns in oral witness testimony, and into the consequences this has for the witnesses' accounts, goes back to Holocaust scholar and literary critic Lawrence L. Langer. Drawing on videotaped witness statements collected in the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, which was established at Yale in 1982, Langer has identified what he refers to as a struggle between 'two contending voices', each of which 'competes for control of the narrative', in these spoken representations of the Holocaust.[3] The first voice, born of the necessity to transmit, speaks in what Langer calls 'chronicle mode'.[4] This mode treats the Holocaust 'as an event sandwiched between prewar and postwar periods' and seeks to order the events of the past into a sequential, chronological narrative and to provide a 'detached portrait',

[2] 'The Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jewish Writer' (2001), <http://www.federman.com/rfsrcr0.htm> [accessed 23 Apr. 2008] (para. 1 of 30).
[3] *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 65.
[4] *Holocaust Testimonies*, 65.

offered 'from the vantage point of today'.[5] Not least, this mode ultimately aims 'to reconstruct a semblance of continuity in a life that began as, and now resumes what we would consider, a normal existence'.[6] However, this first voice is continually drowned out by a second, which, in its struggle 'to detach "the way it was" from how we think it was', resorts to 'a lexicon of disruption, absence, and irreversible loss', and reveals 'a break [. . .] that telling cannot mend'.[7] In this second mode of witnessing, survivors 'do not search for the historicity of experience' or 'try to recapture the dynamic flow of events', for they are 'concerned less with the past than with a sense of that past in the present'.[8] Elsewhere, Langer has therefore also referred to these modes as the 'chronological current', which can be channelled into 'historical narrative', and the 'durational persistence' of 'Holocaust time', 'which cannot overflow the blocked reservoir of its own moment and hence never enters what we call the stream of time'.[9]

Torn between these two narrative voices that 'vie for primacy', 'each honest, each incomplete', the survivors' testimony comes to be marked by a sense of 'cotemporality': it is 'trapped between the realities of then and now'.[10] This, in turn, reflects the nature of the survivors' experience of their 'post'-Holocaust existence, in which, as one witness puts it, they go about the business of 'daily living' as best they can, but 'what happened' is 'always there' and risks becoming 'so overwhelming that it will make so-called normal life unable to function'.[11] In other words, they are constantly threatened by the resurgence of what Langer terms 'deep memory', in analogy to Charlotte Delbo's distinction between the unpredictably and uncontrollably resurfacing *mémoire profonde* of the Holocaust and the *mémoire ordinaire* of everyday life, which attempts to re-establish linearity and chronology and into which the *mémoire profonde* irrupts.[12] As both they and their testimony remain torn between 'the revelations of deep memory and the consolations of common memory', the survivors have the impression that they are inhabiting two worlds at once: the present and the past-in-the-present, or as Langer puts it, a 'life after "death" called survival', and a 'life within death for which we have no name'.[13] Finally, this 'coalescing' of 'time-and-place frames', with 'neither one negating or affirming the other', also threatens the survivors' identity and fractures their sense of self.[14]

[5] *Holocaust Testimonies*, 66, 6. [6] *Holocaust Testimonies*, 2–3.
[7] *Holocaust Testimonies*, pp. 65, xi, 50. [8] *Holocaust Testimonies*, 40.
[9] Lawrence L. Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 15–16.
[10] *Holocaust Testimonies*, 3, 30. [11] *Holocaust Testimonies*, 30, 61.
[12] *Holocaust Testimonies*, 5. [13] *Holocaust Testimonies*, 23, 35.
[14] *Holocaust Testimonies*, 25.

Though the content of the survivors' accounts is harrowing, it is through their form that the competing demands of 'common memory' and 'deep memory', the experience of leading an existence both 'after "death"' and 'within death', and the resultant 'necessity and impossibility' of testifying adequately to a past-that-is-not-past, are expressed most clearly: in their fragmented speech patterns, disarticulated structures, and abortive attempts to impose narrative sequence and order. What Langer says with regard to one witness seems to hold true across the board: 'The witness does not *tell* the story; he reenacts it.'[15] Yet what is being re-enacted through the formal breakdown of the witnesses' testimonies is not the story of the event itself but that of its aftermath, not the experience as it was then but the experience of reliving the past in the present.

SPEAKING OF SPEAKING THE UNSPEAKABLE: THE STUDY OF HOLOCAUST REPRESENTATION

As narratives that 'do not function in time like other narratives' are 'doomed on one level to remain disrupted' and, 'instead of leading to further chapters in the autobiography of the witnesses', simply 'exhaust themselves in the telling', oral Holocaust testimonies could not be further removed from the metanarratives of scientific detachment we might expect to find in scholarly studies of the Holocaust and its literature or literary history.[16] Yet the patterns and structures we encounter in the discourse of these academic disciplines may appear in many respects strikingly similar to those that characterize these fragmentary and sequentially and structurally disrupted tales of testimony.

Apparently, the Holocaust has come to lead a dual existence not only in survivors' accounts of it but also in our collective cultural and academic awareness. We study it as an empirical historical reality, speak of it as an atrocious but relatable succession of past events on a chronological timeline, situate representations of it within literary historical developments, yet at the same time we may feel that it resists being consigned to the past and haunts us in the present as a spectral figure that has fallen outside history and memory and is perceived not by the shape it took but by the shadow it still casts and the absence it has left: as an 'anwesende Abwesenheit'.[17] Unlike its historical aspect, this spectral persistence of the

[15] *Holocaust Testimonies*, 27; original emphasis. [16] *Holocaust Testimonies*, p. xi.
[17] Daniel Libeskind, 'trauma/void', in Elisabeth Bronfen et al. (eds), *Trauma: Zwischen Psychoanalyse und kulturellem Deutungsmuster* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1999), 3–26 (18).

Holocaust 'refuses to be bounded by two dates' and defies notions of historical continuity and coherent narration.[18] Saul Friedlander hints at this split perception of the Holocaust in contemporary scholarship when, in his search for a definition of the 'intangible but nonetheless perceived boundaries' that affect its representation, he speaks of the Holocaust as being 'as accessible to both representation and interpretation as any other historical event', yet concedes that while 'we feel the obligation of keeping the record of this past through some sort of "master-narrative"', we may struggle to establish 'the elements of such a master-narrative' because we are hampered by 'the impression that this event, perceived in its totality, may signify more than the sum of its components'.[19]

Not unlike witness testimony, the entire field of Holocaust representation has consequently come to be marked by a contention between two 'voices', one reminding us of the necessity to keep speaking of the Holocaust, the other suggesting that such representation may not be straightforwardly possible. At one end of the spectrum, Berel Lang, for instance, has denounced claims of the unrepresentability of the Holocaust as a rhetorical device: a means for scholarship to draw attention, by indirection and praeterition, to the enormity of its task:

> Virtually all [such] claims [...]—in those variations on the unspeakable which encompass the indescribable, the unthinkable, the unimaginable, the incredible—come embedded in yards of writing which attempt to overcome the inadequacy of language in representing moral enormity at the same time that they assert it.[20]

Worse still, the 'unsayability' argument has been accused of being an avoidance strategy, of serving as a pretext for the lazy or a refuge for the cowardly, or as Jorge Semprún puts it: 'On peut toujours tout dire, en somme. L'ineffable dont on nous rebattra les oreilles n'est qu'alibi. Ou signe de paresse.'[21] In fact, Lang states: 'the Holocaust *is* speakable, *has* been spoken, *will* be spoken [...], and, most of all, *ought* to be'.[22]

Yet at the opposite end of the spectrum, there are those who insist, with George Steiner, that: 'It is by no means clear that there can be, or that there ought to be, any form, style, or code of articulate, intelligible expression

[18] Andrew Leak and George Paizis, 'Introduction', in Leak and Paizis (eds), *The Holocaust and the Text: Speaking the Unspeakable* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 1–16 (1).
[19] 'Introduction', in Friedlander (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'Final Solution'* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 1–21 (2–3).
[20] 'Holocaust Genres and the Turn to History', in Leak and Paizis (eds), *The Holocaust and the Text*, 17–31 (18).
[21] *L'Écriture ou la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 26.
[22] 'Holocaust Genres', 18; original emphasis.