**Exploration, Americanization, Experimentation:**

*Remembering the Holocaust in American Literature*

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Abstract

Combining the critical perspectives of cultural memory and new historicism, this study approaches American Holocaust literature in the context of American cultural memories of the Holocaust. Rather than considering the Holocaust as an event with inherent and timeless significance, it argues that the Holocaust is an assemblage of changing meanings, constructed through texts (including literature) by people with contemporary interests. It identifies roughly three important changes or developments in the literary representation of the Holocaust. First, the 1960s and early seventies witnessed a still very tentative attempt to incorporate the events of the Holocaust in the American literary perspective. These writers were influenced by a traumatic conception of the Holocaust then prevalent, while at the same time, they also gave shape to this “cultural trauma.” In the course of the seventies, however, when the cultural trauma of the Holocaust had been more widely established as a literary theme, the presence of the Holocaust spread more broadly across American literature and was taken up more often by non-Jewish, goyishe authors. In this second period, a definitive “Americanization” of the Holocaust took place. In the third phase (roughly from 1990 up till the present), the traumatic memory of the Holocaust became increasingly widespread, attributing the historic events with universal humanistic significance. Consequently, this memory became more and more solidified in institutions and sites of memory. However, the institutionalization and the passing of time gave rise to a “dialectic of distance,” a process in which the more the Holocaust was remembered in a – by now almost inevitably – institutional context, the more the urgency and profundity of the memory was subjected to a certain inflation. In this context, novelists are searching for radically new ways of approaching and representing the Holocaust.
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Introduction:

Holocaust, Memory, and the United States

It is an often expressed idea that the Holocaust has been the most decisive and influential event of the twentieth century, an event that changed our thinking about everything that came before it, and everything that came after it. As Robert Eaglestone eloquently puts it, “postmodernism in the West begins with thinking about the Holocaust” (2).

Indeed, the Holocaust – an historic event which took place on European soil, executed by a European people (the Germans) against European peoples (first and foremost the Jews) – has entered American culture and thought just as much as it has entered those of Europe. In America, there have been numerous Holocaust blockbuster movies from Hollywood, an endless stream of Holocaust-related newspaper articles, documentaries, TV programs (Elie Wiesel on Oprah) and history books. It is one of the important world history events taught in American high schools and an endlessly popular topic for courses in universities, which are offered by special Holocaust research centers with their own professors of “Holocaust Studies.” Then there are the countless Holocaust memorials in American cities across the continent, and the expanding number of Holocaust museums, of which the U.S. Holocaust Museum, comfortably situated on the Nation Mall in Washington D.C., is the most notable one.1 Furthermore, the Holocaust has been an overwhelming influence in American literature. Even though John Hersey, Elie Wiesel, Leon Uris, Saul Bellow, Chaim Potok, William Styron, Cynthia Ozick, Art Spiegelman and Jonathan Safran Foer may at first glance seem a motley crew of post-war American novelists, they share the attribute that they all have at least one novel about the Holocaust to their names, indeed in some cases their entire oeuvres. Eaglestone comments that “[o]ne might even be tempted [to] ask the [question] what it means when a novel or poem written after 1945 in Europe or America did not engage with the issue” (106, italics in original).

As far as Europe and its literature go, Eaglestone may very well be correct. In the case of America, however, it would be just as valid to ask the question what it means that so much of its literature did engage with the Holocaust. Peter Novick argues that “[t]here is nothing surprising about the Holocaust’s playing a central role in the consciousness of Germany, the

1 I wonder when the first (National) Museum of American Slavery and Racial Segregation will be constructed. There is none in America yet, but maybe the Germans would like one on their Museum Insel in Berlin.
country of the criminals and their descendants. The same might be said of Israel, a country whose population – or much of it – has a special relationship to the victims of the crime” (2). But the situation in America is somewhat different: “[t]he Holocaust took place thousands of miles from America’s shores. Holocaust survivors or their descendants are a small fraction of 1 percent of the American population, and a small fraction of American Jewry as well. […] The United States was simply not connected to the Holocaust in the ways in which these other countries are” (2).

All the same, even when only looking at its literature, it is obvious that the Holocaust has entered American minds and culture; in short, that it has rooted itself in the cultural memory of America. This did not happen overnight, however. In fact there is relatively little “Holocaust literature” in – roughly – the first fifteen years after the war. Just four books are worth mentioning, of which only two are actual novels: John Hersey’s *The Wall* (1950), Leon Uris’ *Mila 18* (1961), Anne Frank’s *Diary* (1952) and Elie Wiesel’s memoir *Night* (1958). It was only since the (late) 1970s that Holocaust literature really took off and became an established literary genre (Sicher xv). There has been quite a development in literary representations of the Holocaust since the early novels up till today. It will be the aim of this study to place these changing literary representations in the context of changing cultural memories of the Holocaust.

Novick points out that “[w]e embrace a memory because it speaks to our condition; to the extent that we embrace it, we establish a framework for interpreting that condition” (170). In relation to this, Alvin Rosenfeld speaks of how this “age marked by narcissistic indulgences” has produced a certain Americanization of the Holocaust, which not only celebrates a “cult of victimhood,” but also shows “the American tendency to downplay or deny the dark and brutal sides of life and to place a preponderant emphasis on the saving power of individual moral conduct and collective deeds of redemption” (37). Norman Finkelstein even argues that America is threatened by an almost mafia-like movement which he calls the Holocaust Industry. In a way, Rosenfeld and Finkelstein are right: as I will continue to illustrate shortly, the Holocaust has been Americanized, sometimes in ways that could be labeled narcissistically indulgent. There is a survivor cult and there is often a tendency to put a positive, uplifting turn to Holocaust stories. Also, there are definitely people who have made a lot of money because of the Holocaust. But it is too easy to be merely condescending about these matters. “Every generation frames the Holocaust, represents the Holocaust in ways that suit its mood,” Novick argues (120); the challenge, then, is not merely
in signaling “Americanization,” but in understanding and describing the processes that cause it.

Even though Finkelstein writes in a polemically charged manner, his claim that “‘The Holocaust’ is an ideological representation of the Nazi holocaust” (3) is a useful one. Indeed, the fact that the Nazi genocide has come to be known as “The Holocaust” and that this “Holocaust” has subsequently been “Americanized” are both results of ideology, in its epistemological sense of meaning production as well as in its more sociological sense of people (in this case, Americans) experiencing the world (in this case, the Holocaust) through certain (imaginary) constructs or frameworks. As Terry Eagleton argues in *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, literary works “are forms of perception, particular ways of seeing the world; and as such they have a relation to that dominant way of seeing the world which is the ‘social mentality’ or ideology of an age” (6). Representations of the Holocaust in (American) literature are therefore inherently ideological.

I emphasize this point, since the ideological dimension of the concept of “Holocaust” in general and of Holocaust literature more specifically has been something that the field of Holocaust Studies has been relatively insensitive to. Although highly valuable work has been done here, “there have always been impulses that negate the representability of the Holocaust and have extracted a ban on representation from that” (Aleida Assmann 235-236, my translation).² Heavily influenced by postmodern language theory (and, to a lesser extent, by postmodern trauma theory), a great amount of Holocaust-related scholarship, from Adorno to Derrida and from Agamben to LaCapra, has concerned itself with what Saul Friedländer has called “the limits of representation,” and related issues of principally philosophical, epistemological and often ethical nature. Though I by no means wish to suggest that Holocaust representation is an easy matter, it is my conviction that insistence on the inherently problematic nature of Holocaust representation (or even its unrepresentability) is a position based not so much on fact, but on ideology. The problem with this position is that framing the Holocaust as an unknowable “sacred-evil” or “an event out of time” (Alexander, “Social Construction” 226) de-historicizes the Holocaust and attributes a fixed meaning (or lack of meaning) to it. The consequence is that this view can only approve of art which also problematizes representation of the Holocaust, dismissing other forms of Holocaust art as

² One of the most outspoken examples of this would be a statement by Claude Lanzmann, producer of the acclaimed documentary *Shoah*: “The Holocaust is particularly unique in as far as it surrounds itself with a circle of flames, a boundary that may not be passed, since a definite, absolute degree of horror is unbearable: they who do pass make themselves guilty of the worst offence” (qtd. in Aleida Assmann 236, my translation).
profane and inappropriate. By the same token, it cannot account either for the processes by which the Holocaust becomes Americanized, or for the ways in which memory of the Holocaust changes. In fact, it is blind to these very developments.

The theme of changing memories of the Holocaust may be studied more fruitfully from the perspective of cultural (or collective) memory studies, which concerns itself with questions of how people remember the past, how the past is given meaning in the present, and how these meanings change over time. Since the 1980s, memory studies have gained immensely in popularity and it seems to be one of the academic fashions of the moment. Over the years, different notions of memory have been held, ranging from collective memory (a phrase coined by sociologist Maurice Halbwachs long before World War II), social memory, and public memory and attracting researchers from disciplines as varied as psychology, (ancient) history and sociology. In this study, however, I will concern myself with that form of memory known as cultural memory, which seems to be the strongest development in the field, gradually supplanting older concepts of memory. The term cultural memory has been championed especially by the work of the Egyptologists and cultural critics Jan and Aleida Assmann. Following Halbwachs, Jan Assmann has argued how “the concept of ‘cultural memory’ relates to one of the outer-dimensions of human memory” (19, my translation). Even though memory is often considered as a pure “inner-phenomenon,” as Jan Assmann puts it, “that which this memory […] stores in terms of content, how it organizes this content, how long it may remember something, is first and foremost a question not of inner capacity and control, but of external conditions, that is, of communal and cultural frames” (19-20, my translation). Cultural memory, then, is about the ways in which people collectively remember the past in the present through public acts of commemoration, and for that matter, cultural memory is a socially constructed phenomenon. As Ann Rigney puts it, cultural memory “focuses attention […] on the multiple ways in which images of the past are communicated and shared among members of a community through public acts of remembrance and through publicly accessible media which are sometimes commercially driven” (“Portable Monuments” 366). It is important to stress that cultural memory (being an “outer-dimension” of memory) can only be created and function in mediated forms, i.e. through acts of remembrance, or “texts” in a very broad sense. Cultural memory, therefore, “is cultural, since it can only institutionally, artificially be realized [i.e. through mediation, JK], and it is a memory, since it – in relation to communal communication – functions exactly so as does the individual memory in relation to consciousness” (Jan Assmann 24, my translation). And so, the idea of cultural memory is based on what Rigney calls “a social-constructivist model that takes as its
starting point the idea that memories of a shared past are collectively constructed and reconstructed in the present rather than resurrected from the past” (“Plenitude” 11).

For this study, the fact that cultural memory cannot exist without mediation is of central importance. On the one hand, this means that the constructivist nature of cultural memory makes it possible for a shared (cultural) memory of the Holocaust to exist in the United States at all, rather than the memory being restricted to the small number of concentration camp survivors who moved to the U.S. or the military men who witnessed the liberation of the camps. At the same time, the memory of the Holocaust in the United States, which did not witness the events of World War II on its own territory, is solely dependent on mediated, socially constructed forms of memory. It depends, in other words, on the testimony of survivors, works of history, public acts of remembrance, education, art, and indeed, as Ann Rigney argues at length in her article “Portable Monuments,” on literature. In fact, it seems very plausible to suggest that the memory of the Holocaust the world all over is for a considerable part shaped by the writings of people like Anne Frank, Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi, and bestseller novels like Styron’s *Sophie’s Choice* and Keneally’s *Schindler’s List* (for convenience’s sake not mentioning the highly successful film adaptations of the two novels and of Anne Frank’s diary).

At this point, it seems useful to discuss in some more detail how memory of the Holocaust developed, featured and functioned in American culture and society. In what follows, I will be relying principally on Peter Novick’s acclaimed social history *The Holocaust and Collective Memory* (originally published in 1999 in the U.S. as *The Holocaust in American Life*), but whereas Novick is interested in the Holocaust in American life both *during* and after the war, I will be focusing only on the years following the war.

In the late 1940s and the 1950s, there was no such a thing as “the Holocaust.” Of course, Americans were aware of the mass-murder of the European Jews, of its enormous and unprecedented scale, of its cold-blooded brutality, but these events were not singled out yet and framed as what we now refer to as the Holocaust (Novick 64). It is all too easy to condemn this attitude as disinterestedness on behalf of the western nations, but it anachronistically misinterprets the way in which Americans would have perceived these shocking events. Novick notes how in 1945, the public was faced with more shocking news in

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3 Even though the Holocaust features very prominently in American society and discourse, in *The Holocaust and Collective Memory*, Peter Novick notes that “it’s not clear that the Holocaust is an American collective memory in any worthwhile sense” (278). Of course, whether the Holocaust is really an American cultural memory depends to a large extent on one’s definition of the term.
rapid succession. The first images of the concentration camps were seen in America when Buchenwald was liberated on April 11; but then on the 12th, President Roosevelt died suddenly and “plunged the nation into mourning” (66). The day before Dachau was liberated (April 29), Mussolini was executed and the day after, Hitler committed suicide. Mauthausen was liberated on May 6 and the next day witnessed the unconditional surrender of Germany. When the war in Europe had ended,

the war in the Pacific – always of greater interest to Americans – heated up, producing the bloodiest battles in which Americans would be engaged, on Iwo Jima and Okinawa. Then came Hiroshima, Nagasaki and V-J Day. The impact of the ghastly photographs from Dachau and Buchenwald was real and substantial […]. But by singling out that encounter, ignoring all the other headlines that often overshadowed it, its enduring impact is often exaggerated. (Novick 66)

In his article “On the Construction of Moral Universals,” Jeffrey Alexander notes how since the late 1930s, the antagonism between the allies and Nazi Germany was framed as a great battle of the allied (western) nations against the universal evil of Nazism. Alexander characterizes this framework as a progressive narrative, which, ultimately, “offered the promise of salvation and triggered actions that generated confidence and hope” (209). Under this progressive narrative, the fate of the Jews (and other oppressed groups) “would be understood only in relation to the German horror that threatened democratic civilization” (208). Thus, the Nazi atrocities committed against the Jews were not in itself seen as historically unique and unprecedented instances of depravity, as they often are today, but they functioned “as emblems and iconic representations of the evil that the progressive narrative promised to leave behind” (212). Paradoxically, it is also in this emblematic and iconic representation that the first seeds of universalization that will happen in the future are sown (212). What is important, however, is that the “force of the progressive narrative meant that, while the 1945 revelations confirmed the Jewish mass murder, they did not create a trauma for the postwar audience. Victory and the Nuremberg trials would put an end to Nazism and alleviate its evil effects” (213). It was important now to move on into the future; no need for looking back, no need for concepts such as the Holocaust.

The progressive narrative kept its power right throughout the 1950s, preventing the Holocaust from becoming a prominent topic in public discourse. The post-war years
witnessed what Novick calls “a dramatic reversal of alliances” (86). The Cold War had begun and America’s great ally of World War II, the Soviet Republic, became its great foe, whereas the former enemy Germany turned into one of America’s most important allies. In order to smoothen this radical change, the idea of totalitarianism was invoked, which enabled arguing that Nazism and Communism were “essentially alike” (Novick 86); as such, the Cold War became a continuation of the war against Nazism. In several ways, the theory of totalitarianism marginalized the Holocaust. It obscured the ethnic dimension of the Holocaust in favor of defining the victims of totalitarianism in political terms and it alleviated the problem of collective German guilt, as “opposition within the totalitarian state was impossible” (Novick 87). In short, the U.S. had to make Germany an acceptable ally and for that reason, it was politically unwise to linger on the crimes of the Holocaust. There are also other reasons that explain the absence of the Holocaust in post-war America. Novick notes how Jewish survivors in the U.S. would have little opportunity to bring the Holocaust to the foreground, while still busy setting up their new lives and often not yet in full command of English (109). Furthermore, the “lesson” of the atomic bomb had a much greater impact on America than that of the Holocaust: “[i]f the Holocaust was emblematic of the era that had just come to an end, Hiroshima, as the emblem of nuclear devastation, defined the present and future” (Novick 110). Also, the “upbeat and universalist postwar mood not only muted discussion of the Holocaust, it colored what discussion there was” (Novick 114). It was in this period that the Diary of Anne Frank with its hopeful and humanist overtones enjoyed immense popularity (both the actual diary as well as the subsequent stage adaptation) and that the Warsaw ghetto uprising was turned into the symbol of the Holocaust, making “the event most atypical of the Holocaust […] emblematic of it” (Novick 138). Of course, the framework of the progressive narrative favored these representations, rather than darker ones that would come later.

Although it was only in the 1970s that the Holocaust moved into the center of American culture (Novick 112), there were some key-events in the 1960s which raised American “Holocaust awareness,” paving the way for its later centrality. First and foremost of these events was the capture of Adolf Eichmann in 1960 and the subsequent trial in Jerusalem in 1961. The trial became a media spectacle of a heretofore unknown scale, attracting worldwide attention. But “the most important thing about the Eichmann trial was that it was the first

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4 I will get back to this latter issue in my discussion of Leon Uris’s Mila 18 (1961), a novel about the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.
time that what we now call the Holocaust was presented to the American public as an entity in its own right, distinct from Nazi barbarism in general” (Novick 133). The next important Holocaust-related event of the 1960s came as a direct result of the Eichmann trial. Hannah Arendt’s book on the trial, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* caused quite a controversy after it was published in 1963. Arendt shocked the nation by refuting the long held central idea of the progressive narrative, namely that Nazis were some universal or transcendent evil. In fact, she did not notice any inhuman monstrosity in Eichmann, but what struck her, rather, was “his terrifying ordinariness” (Novick 135). Another important discussion of the sixties concerned “the ‘silence of Pope Pius XII’ – his failure to publicly denounce the Holocaust during the war” (Novick 142). The controversy surrounding the role of the Catholic Church and that of the pope in particular during World War II is an issue still not resolved today.

Another central tendency that forwarded the Holocaust is the fact that in “the late sixties and early seventies, Israel became much more important to American Jews, and, in a set of spiraling interactions, concern with Israel was expressed in ways that evoked the Holocaust, and vice versa” (Novick 146). In the fifties and early sixties, neither Israel nor the Holocaust had been at the forefront of the minds of American Jews. This changed dramatically with Israel’s Six Day War in 1967. The idea that Israel was seriously threatened “suddenly transformed [the Holocaust] from ‘mere,’ albeit tragic history to imminent and terrifying prospect” (Novick 148). The fact that the Yom Kippur War of 1973 followed so soon after the Six Days War proved to American Jews that Israel, and by extension, international Jewry, was always and constantly threatened. The Holocaust became emblematic of this ever looming threat and thus, “it came to define an enduring, perhaps permanent, Jewish condition” (Novick 151). Often, the Holocaust and Israel were collapsed together to drive home a powerful Zionist message. As Novick explains, the “Holocaust

Incidentally, it may be interesting to note that in “the United States, the word ‘Holocaust’ first became firmly attached to the murder of European Jewry as a result of the trial” (Novick 133). Also, there have been discussions going for some time about the perceived impropriety of the word holocaust, as the original Greek meaning of the word is completely (holos) burnt (kaustos), that is, “a religious sacrifice consumed by fire,” and thus, it supposedly “represents a pernicious Christianization of Jewish suffering” (Novick 133). The Hebrew word *shoah*, meaning catastrophe, would be more appropriate then. However, Novick observes that “‘Holocaust’ began to be widely used in connection with the Nazi murder program in the 1960s, not as the result of a gentile plot, but as an import from Israel. Large numbers of American journalists, covering the Eichmann trial, learned to use the word that Israelis had for many years chosen to translate ‘*shoah*’ into English (133, italics in original).
framework allowed one to put aside as irrelevant any legitimate grounds for criticizing Israel” (155); in his furious polemic *The Holocaust Industry*, Norman Finkelstein even speaks of the Holocaust as “Israel’s prize alibi” (48). Nonetheless, during the 1970s and 80s, Israel’s aggressive anti-Arab, almost neo-colonial politics proved to the world that Israel was no longer under threat and that the Holocaust framework was unsuitable to describe Israel’s Palestinian and Arab conflicts. The consequence of this, however, “was an even greater centering of the Holocaust for American Jews. […] The Holocaust offered a substitute symbol of infinitely greater moral clarity” (Novick 168-169, italics in original).

In the seventies, then, the Holocaust became a dominant theme in American cultural discourse. It did so in slightly different ways for both Jews as well as for non-Jews. Whereas in the post-war years, Jews had tried to integrate into American culture and not to stand out, Novick describes how in the late sixties and in the seventies, American Jewry underwent an inward turn and started to focus “on what made Jews unlike other Americans” (171). Probably influenced by Israel’s wars, American Jewry believed itself to be threatened from the outside, both by assimilation and anti-Semitism, though quite unjustly, according to Novick (171-172). These feelings of unease stimulated thinking about the Holocaust, and at the same time, the Holocaust was transferred from the realms of history into those of myth (177-178): “it became a bearer of ‘eternal truths,’” and anyone doubting the reality of American anti-Semitism “hadn’t learned ‘the lesson of the Holocaust’” (178). The idea of the survival of a distinct Jewish identity became linked to the Holocaust as it appeared to be “the one item in stock with consumer appeal,” able to “pull in Jews with an otherwise marginal Jewish identity” (187-188). The focus on Jewish survival coincided with “the growth in American Society of ‘the new ethnicity’ and ‘identity politics’” (188). In the 1970s the post-war progressive narrative had disintegrated entirely: Americans were disillusioned, because of catastrophic events such as the Vietnam War, Kennedy’s assassination, and Watergate (188). Rather than clinging to an all-American identity, there was a trend to look for community identities, like the black, feminist, gay and Jewish communities, which were all based on a victim identity (189). For Jews, this meant embracing the Holocaust. It was also as a result of this that the Holocaust became mythologized and sacralized and that survivors became “the American equivalent of saints and relics” (qtd. in Novick 201).

However, the Holocaust also became a powerful feature in non-Jewish American culture. According to Novick, “[a] good part of the answer is the fact – not less of a fact because anti-Semites turn it into a grievance – that Jews play an important and influential role in Hollywood, the television industry, and the newspaper, magazine, and book publishing
Novick mentions the 1978 mini-series *Holocaust* as one of the most important events responsible for impressing the Holocaust in American memory (209). But the Holocaust was on the front pages throughout the 1970s: “in various ways, for various purposes, the Holocaust had entered the American cultural mainstream; it had become part of the language; it had become, except for the hermits, inescapable” (231). One of the reasons is that the Holocaust constituted “an appropriate symbol of contemporary consciousness. American social morale was at a low ebb, where it has stayed ever since” (112). After the assassinations of the Kennedys and Martin Luther King, the shattered hopes of the different black and civil rights movements, the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, the Holocaust had “become an aptly bleak emblem for an age of diminished expectations” (112). Also, important representations of the Holocaust, like the 1978 mini-series, made it easy to identify with the victims of the Holocaust: they were often portrayed as “not unlike Americans.” Furthermore, Novick notes how the story of the Holocaust is often represented in terms of suffering and redemption which have a strong Christian significance. All of these aspects make the Holocaust a profoundly significant memory for non-Jewish Americans as well, a memory that functions as “a moral compass” (Novick 234), or, as a journalist said of the National Holocaust Museum in Washington, “a basic moral foundation on which to build: a negative surety from which to begin” (qtd. in Novick 234).

If the Holocaust – once again, an historical event that took place in Europe with European participants (which, however, is not to say that the Holocaust is something essentially European) – functions as a moral compass or moral foundation for Americans, the question arises to what extent the Holocaust has been “appropriated.” Or phrased alternatively, the question is as to what purpose does the memory of the Holocaust serve America? In his article on the Americanization of the Holocaust, Alvin Rosenfeld argues that “[t]here are obvious benefits to such a way [an Americanized way, JK] of remembering the Holocaust,” but he also fears that it “may well serve to foster a great complacency about the most harrowing history of this century” (40). Rosenfeld’s suspicion is supported by Novick, who notes that “in the United States the Holocaust is explicitly used for the purpose of national self-congratulation: the ‘Americanization’ of the Holocaust has involved using it to demonstrate the difference between the Old and the New, and to celebrate, by showing its negation, the American way of life” (12). Apparently, the Holocaust functions as a negative image which, by conversion, highlights and advances American ideals and values. Ultimately, you could say that the memory of the Holocaust reconfirms American identity. For John Gillis, it is a “fact that the notion of identity depends on the idea of memory, and vice versa.
The core meaning of any individual or group identity, namely, a sense of sameness over time and space, is sustained by remembering; and what is remembered is defined by the assumed identity” (3). Therefore, and because what is “remembered” is often not historically true, the relationship between identity and memory is a circular one, which means that the Holocaust can only be useful for American identity when it is remembered on America’s own (cultural and ideological) terms. The process of Americanization is therefore inherent to American memory of the Holocaust. It is important to realize this, since it is so easy – particularly from a non-American perspective – to be predisposed or even condescending to certain forms of American ways of remembering the Holocaust. In that respect, it may be useful to recall the words of Jean Baudrillard, who wrote in a somewhat different context that “[i]f it is the lack of culture that is original, then it is the lack of culture one should embrace. If the term taste has any meaning, then it commands us not to export our aesthetic demands to places where they do not belong. […] Let us not make the same mistake by transferring our cultural values to America” (101).

One way of understanding the dynamic and changing relationship between Holocaust memory and American identity would be to approach the memory of the Holocaust as a cultural trauma. Advanced in Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity (2004), cultural trauma theory is one of the latest developments in the vast field of trauma theory, but it differs from conventional trauma theory (often influenced by psycho-analysis) in a crucial way. Contrary to conventional trauma theory, or what Jeffrey Alexander, co-editor of the volume, calls lay trauma theory, “trauma is not something naturally existing; it is something constructed by society” (2). In fact, “[c]ultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group

6 Alexander distinguishes between two forms of “lay trauma theory”: those characterized by Enlightenment thinking and those characterized by psychoanalytic thinking. Lay trauma theory characterized by Enlightenment thinking “suggests that trauma is a kind of rational response to abrupt change, whether at the individual or the social level. The object or events that trigger trauma are perceived clearly by actors, their responses are lucid, and the effects of these responses are problem solving and progressive” (3). For this kind of trauma theory, it is no more than logical and natural that “[w]hen bad things happen to good people, they become shocked, outraged, indignant” (3). Such “realist thinking,” Alexander continues, has more and more “come to be filtered through a psychoanalytic perspective” (5). This psychoanalytically influenced form of lay trauma theory “places a model of unconscious emotional fears and cognitively distorting mechanisms of psychological defense between the external shattering event and the actor’s internal traumatic response. When bad things happen to good people, according to this version of lay theory, they can become so frightened that they can actually repress the experience of trauma itself” (5).
consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (Alexander 1, italics mine). The conventional approaches of trauma are all infected by what Alexander calls the naturalistic fallacy, i.e. the idea that trauma is a rationally or psychologically natural reaction to devastating and shattering events, and it is exactly upon the rejection of this idea that cultural trauma theory is based (8). “First and foremost, we maintain that events do not, in and of themselves, create collective trauma. Events are not inherently traumatic. Trauma is a socially mediated attribution” (Alexander 8). In other words, trauma is a social construction, a process of signification: “[i]t is the meanings that provide the sense of shock and fear, not the events in themselves” (Alexander 8).

Although Alexander does not mention it, cultural trauma is very closely related to cultural memory, in the sense that it is also based on what Rigney calls a social-constructivist model, in which the meaning of past events are not simply to be reclaimed, but constructed in the present. I would venture to claim, in fact, that cultural trauma can be seen as a highly distinct and particularly complex form of cultural memory. Like cultural memory, cultural trauma affects not individuals, but collectivities, and that in a mediated and vicarious manner. For example, even though none of the black population of the American South alive today has witnessed personally the days of slavery, still this past is for them a shared memory and a traumatic one at that. Because the construction of cultural memories and traumas enable people to identify with memories not their own, they will be able to “define their solidarity relationships in ways that, in principle, allow them to share the sufferings of others” (Alexander 1). Cultural memory, but cultural trauma even more so, then, depend on identification. As Alexander explains: “[f]or traumas to emerge at the level of the collectivity, social crises must become cultural crises. Events are one thing, representations of events quite another. Trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity’s sense of its own identity” (10). It is cultural trauma’s ability to create cultural crises and to affect cultural identity more significantly and strongly than “ordinary” cultural memory that make it a useful concept in studying the meaning of the Holocaust in American culture.

The Holocaust has often been characterized as the greatest trauma of the twentieth century. But the exact nature of the trauma will be different for survivors and witnesses, for older and younger generations, and for Europeans and Americans. The prevalence of the Holocaust in American culture may lead one to ask if the Holocaust is or has been one of America’s cultural traumas. Especially psychoanalytically-based trauma theory would be insufficient in explaining this presence in American life. How could America be traumatized
(supposing it is) by events that did not take place on American soil nor on American subjects? Because of its social-constructivist assumptions, cultural trauma theory may provide much more satisfying insights to these issues.

It is with this context and these ideas in mind that I will focus in this study on how the Americanization of Holocaust memory manifests itself in literature, and, at the same time, on how literature itself produces Americanized memories of the Holocaust (I will come back to the circularity of this relation between literature and context of memory below). Through a combination of both contextualization and close literary analysis of a number of important, best-selling Holocaust novels, I will argue how post-war literary representations of the Holocaust change (sometimes rapidly) in a dynamic relationship with changing cultural memories of the Holocaust. Within this process, three central developments can be distinguished. The first one of these is the rapidly expanding presence of the Holocaust as a theme in literature during the late 1960s and seventies. Not only does the Holocaust become a more prominent theme, also does the nature of its thematic functioning change dramatically (as I will point out, it is in fact possible to speak of a paradigm change). Whereas early literary representations of the Holocaust tended to foreground humanity’s victory over evil, and, generally, to sound positive notes in face of the destruction of war, Holocaust literature of the late sixties and seventies focused more and more on the aspects of unimaginable, inhuman suffering, and allowed much stronger identification with the Holocaust and its victims. This could be characterized as a first phase of Americanization, and I will illustrate this development with a discussion of Leon Uris’s *Mila 18* and *In the Beginning* by Chaim Potok in Chapter 2. The second development witnesses an even stronger Americanization of the Holocaust. Using William Styron’s *Sophie’s Choice* as an example, I will argue in Chapter 3 how in the period of the late 1970s and eighties, the Holocaust increasingly becomes or establishes itself as an American history, with direct significance for the lives of ordinary post-war Americans. In Chapter 4, I will address the third development which set in during the 1990s and continues up till today. The Holocaust has become an institutionalized American memory, both in the literal as in the literary sense. In the realm of literature, this means that authors of the “third generation,” whose grandparents witnessed World War II but

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7 It is perhaps useful to specify what I mean by Americanization of the Holocaust. I use the word not so much in a narrow, vulgar sense (connoting only things like neon-lights, fast-food, Hollywood and sex), but intend a complex cultural and ideological process by which the Nazi genocide is transformed from an overseas war episode into “The Holocaust” – an historical event posing existential questions immediately relevant to (ordinary) Americans.
themselves do not have these close connections, have a different relationship towards the Holocaust than their literary predecessors, which is reflected in their representations of the Holocaust. In what I will identify as a dialectic of distance, the Holocaust as a literary theme has on the one hand become almost common-place, having lost its traumatic and emotional edge; on the other, this normalization allows literature to explore the Holocaust in new ways. I will illustrate this dialectic with a discussion of Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated*.

As I consider literary works as both products of a specific socio-historical and ideological context, as well as producers of and actors in extra-literary processes (specifically, the process of memory formation), my approach to these works can best be described as a new historicist approach. The kind of historical literary criticism associated most notably with the American Shakespeare scholar Stephen Greenblatt, new historicism considers the relationship between literature and historical context as a highly complex and dynamic one. Instead of imagining the relationship between text and context as one of foreground and background, new historicism supposes literature to be inherently and irrevocably embedded in much broader discursive practices. As was once written rather famously by Louis Montrose, new historicism is concerned with “the historicity of texts and the textuality of history” (20); literary texts, according to new historicism, cannot be considered in isolation, since they are created by and in an historical context, and at the same time, once they have been created, they become part of an historical context. New historicism, then, takes as its objective “the study of the collective production of particular cultural practices and the study of the relations between these practices” and it “investigates the mixture [Gemenge] of cultural and social practices, in order to accentuate the forces that are still vibrating today in a literary work” (Kaes 256-257, my translation). Though there are some considerable methodological problems attached to this form of criticism, new historicism nonetheless is a highly useful way of approaching literature from a thoroughly literary perspective while at the same time taking into account the broader contextual concerns associated with cultural memory.⁸

However, concerned as I am with the Americanization of memory, there is also a distinct ideological component to bear in mind. As I already noted above, literature is an inherently ideological expression of culture. However, literature does not flatly reproduce a

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⁸ This is not the occasion to elaborate fully on the methodological problems attached to a new historicist literary criticism dealing with issues of cultural memory. For a more detailed analysis, see my essay “Towards a New Historicism of Memory: A Methodological Inquiry” (unpublished).
culture’s ideology. As Eagleton points out, a “literary text is not the ‘expression’ of ideology, nor is ideology the ‘expression’ of social class. The text, rather, is a certain production of ideology” (“Towards a Science” 297, italics in original). It is in this sense that literary representations of the Holocaust are at bottom ideological products. “The text takes as its object, not the real, but certain significations by which the real lives itself […] The text, we may say, gives us certain socially determined representations of the real cut loose from any particular real conditions to which those representations refer” (“Towards a Science” 303-305, italics mine). It is the task of the (Marxist) literary critic to lay bare the “layers of mediation” by which the real is represented through the text, since only through this awareness, literary texts can be “fully” understood. Accepting that texts give us not the real, but ideological representations of the real, I also will be analyzing to what extent literary representations of the Holocaust are socially determined (incidentally, it is exactly in their neglect of this that postmodern Holocaust studies fail). However, Eagleton seems to suggest that a “complete understanding” (Marxism 15), and a scientifically “valid” analysis can be achieved relatively unproblematically by the laborious and conscientious critic. Supporting the idea of the ultimate ambiguity of language and literature, I, on the other hand, feel that it is preferable not to assume a valueless meta-position and to aim for a “complete” and definite understanding, but to conduct a criticism that is aware of its own historically and ideologically determined position, in what Greenblatt and Jürgen Pieters even more outspokenly so call a dialogical criticism.

Borrowing the term from the Russian philosopher of language Michael Bachtin, Greenblatt and Pieters consider language, literature and new historicism as inherently dialogical. And this certainly goes for the relationship between the researcher and the text. Greenblatt in fact has characterized his work as a conversation with the dead. This means that rather than assuming an extra-historical meta-position, “the New Historicist is not only aware of his own historicity (of his personal position in the historical present, to put it that way), but he also relates that position actively to the research” (Pieters 254, my translation). “If language […]” as Pieters (following Bachtin) explains, “belongs to society and to the individual who uses it, and if, as a result, the meaning of a text cannot be fixed upon the intentions of the individual who produced that text, then texts can no longer be read as expressions to be understood unequivocally” (256). New historicism is in the business of analyzing the “polyfonous structure” of texts (Pieters 255, my translation): when Shakespeare makes an allusion to a theological dispute in Hamlet, “that one little allusion contains a whole dialogical field of views and opinions, a tangle of voices and anti-voices that make his
allusion – and our reading of it – endlessly much richer when we do not reduce it to an at first glance self-evident reference or a (similarly self-evident) building-block of an easily reconstructable ‘worldview’” (Pieters 255, my translation). It is not possible nor desirable for new historicists to claim an ideologically neutral or objective position with regard to their research, then. Rather, new historicist work will be characterized by a certain ideological and methodological self-consciousness and modesty in its claims to “truth.” It will also be my intention to read the primary works of literature in a dialogical way, attempting to untie the dialogical “tangle of voices and anti-voices” about the memory of the Holocaust in these works. Of course, my project, too, will be historically and ideologically determined; I will stake no claim to objectivity.

Finally, I would like to make a couple of comments on the choice of novels discussed in this study. As a general rule, I have selected novels that could all be classified as bestsellers, or if not exactly that, novels which have had a large readership. The reason for this is that popular novels, more obviously so than avant-garde or high-brow literature, have a closer relationship to the hegemonic culture of a given society, and as such, to that society’s cultural memories. At the same time, those novels would have been more influential in shaping that society’s cultural memory than less popular ones. It therefore makes the most sense to study the relationship between literature, memory and historical context using novels that have had a considerable and demonstrable readership. Leon Uris’s *Mila 18* and William Styron’s *Sophie’s Choice* fall immediately into this category, as both feature prominently in Publisher’s Weekly’s list of the year’s bestselling novels. Chaim Potok’s *In the Beginning* does not figure in these lists, but since he was an immensely popular novelist at that time (a lot of his other novels published in the same decade as *In the Beginning* are present in the bestseller lists), I found it fair to assume that *In the Beginning*, too, would have had a sizeable audience. The selection of Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything Is Illuminated* cannot be supported by pointing at the bestseller lists. At the same time, this is hardly surprising, because since roughly the 1990s, serious novels have been a decreasing presence on the bestseller lists, in favor of thrillers and other popular genres. However, Foer’s novel has seen multiple reprints over the past five years and has also inspired the production of a Hollywood movie of the same title in 2005. All of this seems enough evidence to support the idea that his novel, too, could be seen as a considerable popular success. Of course, I must also admit that personal taste has been a considerable factor in selecting the corpus of primary texts.
Works Consulted


Chapter 1

From Progressive to Tragic Narratives:
Leon Uris’s Mila 18 and Chaim Potok’s In the Beginning

In the first decade and a half after the end of World War II, there was a relative silence about the Holocaust in American discourse, including literature. In fact, the entire concept of “Holocaust” as we know it today did not yet exist. Following Peter Novick, I have argued that this absence of the Holocaust had nothing to do with disinterestedness about, or repression of the subject; quite simply, the force of what Jeffrey Alexander calls the progressive narrative, which dominated American discourse, meant that the Holocaust did not become an issue. It was only in the course of the 1960s and especially in the 1970s that the Holocaust gradually became a “hot topic.” This change of awareness can be measured quantitatively, i.e. by looking at the increasing number of publications etc., but also qualitatively, by looking at the content of Holocaust discourse. In the area of literature, with which I am concerned here, the (limited number of) representations of the Holocaust published in the first decade and a half after the war are very different from those published in the period of rising or already established Holocaust-awareness, and they bespeak radically and dramatically different ways of thinking about the Holocaust. I will illustrate these differences by juxtaposing the representations of the Holocaust in Leon Uris’s Mila 18, published in 1961, and Chaim Potok’s In the Beginning of 1975. Because this chapter is primarily intended as an illustration of the paradigm change in the memory and literature of the Holocaust, this chapter relies more heavily on literary analysis than the following ones, which feature a more strongly developed theoretical component. All the same, this chapter is theoretically grounded in Jeffrey Alexander’s insights on the changing memory of the Holocaust in relation to the transition from a progressive to a traumatic narrative in the course of the 1960s and 70s, which I discussed in the previous chapter and will elaborate upon in this.
In June 1961, Leon Uris (1924-2003), the author of a number of highly successful and popular novels, published Mila 18, a book about the Warsaw ghetto uprising, action-packed, full of romance and adventure. The timing was good: three years after the publication of his runaway bestseller Exodus, Uris was at the height of his fame and moreover, with the Eichmann trial going on in Jerusalem, the Holocaust was suddenly very much a current affair. Like Exodus previously, Mila 18 became another bestselling novel, finishing fourth on the Publishers Weekly’s list of 1961 bestselling novels, just under Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird (Korda 135). It was the first Holocaust-related work to appear on this list since John Hersey’s The Wall in 1950 and in terms of best-selling Holocaust literature, its success can only be compared to Hersey’s novel, some of Chaim Potok’s and, most notably, William Styron’s Sophie’s Choice. Even though Mila 18 has been largely neglected by serious literary scholarship and Holocaust studies (Uris is notably absent in Lilian Kremer’s massive Holocaust Literature: An Encyclopedia of Holocaust Writers and their Work), it seems fair to assume that Mila 18 has had a considerable readership, and therefore, it is requisite for anyone interested in the relationship between literature and cultural memory of the Holocaust in the United States to pay some attention to this work.

Mila 18 is what Barbara Foley calls a pseudo-factual novel, combining pseudo-historic documents such as diary entries, press reports and official (military) documents with fictional

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9 I have encountered some – so far unresolved – difficulties establishing whether Uris is Jewish. The question arises, since the name of both his (Polish) father and his mother (Blumberg) sound Jewish, but even more so because Uris’s work often engages strongly with Jewish and Israeli issues. However, since Uris is not considered a canonical author, serious critical sources about Uris are scarce. Kathleen Shine Cain wrote a book called Leon Uris: A Critical Companion (1998), but it is unavailable in any of the libraries I have access to. I have been able to find some biographical information in literary encyclopedias, but none of them explicitly mention whether he is Jewish. Even if Uris is Jewish – and the thought seems not unjustified, it is an interesting statistic that he is never identified with Jewish-American writing, which of course has been such an important voice in post-war American literature.

10 The question may arise why I am not discussing Hersey’s The Wall in this study, which in purely literary terms I would say has better merits than Mila 18 (Foley calls it “a vastly underrated work” [351]). I have had to be selective in choosing the novels to be discussed in this dissertation and there are two aspects about Mila 18 that make it particularly interesting from the perspective of cultural memory of the Holocaust in the U.S. The first of these is its outspokenly melodramatic representation of the Holocaust which would not be seen in literature anymore ever since. Second, there is the fact that only so shortly after the publication of Mila 18 literary representation of the Holocaust was to change dramatically so that, in this chapter, the stark contrast between Holocaust representation in Mila 18 and In the Beginning and the relatively brief time span between their dates of publication is, to me at least, particularly fascinating.
narrative. The novel tells the interrelated stories of a fairly large group of Jewish characters, living in what in the course of the novel becomes the Warsaw ghetto, and with a focus especially on the period of the preparations for the ghetto uprising against the Germans and the time of the uprising itself. Their stories are unified to a large extent by the perspective of Christopher de Monti, an American journalist, acquainted both with a number of Jewish characters as well as some Germans, who ultimately escapes from the ghetto to report to the free world what happened to the people of the ghetto under the German occupation. Ultimately, if *Mila 18* is a reflection of it, Chris’s report will tell (as the back-cover blurb of the edition I am using puts it) “the soaring story of the uprising which defied Nazi tyranny and Wehrmacht tanks with homemade weapons and bare fists in the most heroic struggle of modern times…”, rather than being about “man’s inhumanity to man,” that is to say, the type of narrative commonly associated with the Holocaust nowadays.

Although the cover blurb captures the general atmosphere of the novel rather well, it is important not to raise the suggestion that Uris reduces or covers up the horror of the Holocaust in order to tell an exciting story. As a pseudo-factual novel, it presents a well-researched narrative in which there is ample space for historical detail and “facts.” The character Alexander Brandel writes in his diary that he has “placed the most urgent priority in getting Chris out of Poland, for he alone is our greatest hope of bringing the world attention to the holocaust which has befallen us” (395, italics in original). I would suggest that the novel itself also functions as a source of information, rather than just entertainment, providing the reader, for example, with a five-page “COMBINED JEWISH ORGANIZATIONS’ REPORT ON EXTERMINATION CENTERS IN OPERATION WITHIN THE GENERAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF POLAND (351). Uris does not spare his readers the image of thieving children, driven mad by hunger and who “often […] have been beaten half to death while cramming the bread into their bellies” (291, italics in original), nor of the violent scene of a round-up when “a man attempted to break through the cordon of Ukrainians to reach his wife and was bloodily clubbed to the pavement for his efforts. He lay groaning and twitching, drenched in his own blood” (334). So in no way does *Mila 18* shun representing the atrocities of the Holocaust, nor does it attempt to cover them up in any way, but all the same, they do not constitute anything more than incidents, illustrations; ultimately, these atrocities are not what the novel is about.

Rather, *Mila 18* is a story of adventure, sentimental love and heroism in the Warsaw ghetto, and especially during the ghetto uprising. It is a story of bravery, like Wolf Brandel’s, who, when his father is unwilling to let him go outside the ghetto as a courier, swears that
“I’ll never talk to you again” (248). Or, when the Germans send in tanks into the ghetto after a couple of days of fighting, Uris focuses on “a lone figure [that] darted into the street so quickly that the German gunners could not train their guns on it. The figure ran directly in front of the lead tank. […] The fighter’s cap fell off, revealing a long head of flaming red hair. It was a girl!” (501). Also, it is a novel of cinematic action, as when “Andrei stepped into the intersection and blasted at the row of flanking guards. A wild melee. The Nazis broke and scattered. ‘Run, you sons of bitches! Run! Run! Run!’ Rat-a-tat! Rat-a-tat!” (420). Furthermore, the heroism described is specifically a Jewish heroism, that is, with heavy Zionist overtones. SS Oberführer Funk, for example, is not so much upset that his special Reinhard Corps got routed in battle, but more about who routed it: “Jews? Jews threw the Reinhard Corps from the ghetto? Jews?” (500). And inside the ghetto, the military victories against the Germans inspire Zionist sentiments, as with Alexander Brandel, who writes in his diary that “[t]he Star of David flies over the Warsaw ghetto! […] A Jewish army controls the first autonomous piece of Jewish land in nearly two thousand years” (449, italics in original); and even when the Germans have almost crushed the rising, Brandel “[h]as never been so proud to be a Jew” (510, italics in original). Apart from these action-filled scenes, however, the novel is carried also by the intense romantic relationships between some of the characters. And so, the deeds of war are alternated by deeds of passion, like a “first kiss” (184), or an implied erotic scene between the Jewish leader Andrei and his Gentile girlfriend Gabriela, after a fight about Gabriela’s resistance work. The episode ends in a way that needs no clarification: “Oh, Gabriela… Gabriela… Gabriela…” ‘Love… Love… Love… Love…’ (307). Near the end, war and passion can hardly be separated anymore, for instance when Chris, having to flee the ghetto, must part from his mistress Deborah: “[t]hey felt a closeness of each other and were softly holding each other. ‘Thanks for everything,’ Chris said. ‘Thanks for… life,’ she whispered” (532). Love among the ruins.

As I have attempted to illustrate, Mila 18 combines melodrama with the Holocaust, which in the context of the post-war’s progressive narrative would hardly have raised an eyebrow, although that may be hard for us to imagine today. Indeed, with its optimistic celebration of Jewish heroism and its really quite blatant sentimentalism, Mila 18 exemplifies how the “upbeat and universalist post-war mood not only muted discussion of the Holocaust, it colored what discussion there was” (Novick 114). Characteristic of the progressive narrative, according to Alexander, is that it prevents the American audience from identifying with the suffering of the victims of the Holocaust, disenabling a trauma to be created for or by this audience (213). Mila 18, however, does not at all impede identification of an American
Thus, not only does the novel give no opportunity for the audience to construct a trauma, but it does not give this opportunity to Jewish victims of the Holocaust (or, for that matter, the Warsaw ghetto uprising) either: Uris’s Jews are not victims, they are heroes and martyrs. In a way, to call *Mila 18* a Holocaust novel is a retrospective label: it is not about the Holocaust – a term associated with unimaginable suffering and which became popular shortly after the publication of *Mila 18* – but about a (moral) victory. Tellingly, Uris ends his novel, once more in the words of Alexander Brandel, with “we Jews have avenged our honour as a people” (563). Memory of the Holocaust, and its representation in literature, however, was to change dramatically in the years following the success of *Mila 18*.

As I already observed in the previous chapter, the Holocaust moved from the margin towards the center of discourse in the 1960s and 70s. This newly achieved centrality of the Holocaust also meant that the Holocaust was given a significance that it did not have previously. The progressive narrative dominant in the thirties, forties and fifties did not frame the Holocaust as an event particularly meaningful by itself: the fate of the Jews “would be understood only in relation to the German horror that threatened democratic civilization in America and Europe” (Alexander 208). In other words, it constituted a single episode in the full history of the war and it functioned as one of the (many) illustrations of Nazi evil. Therefore, it also did not need to be approached in isolation. In the 1960s and 70s however, the coding of the Jewish mass killings as evil remained, but its weighting substantially changed. It became burdened with extraordinary gravitas. The symbolization of the Jewish mass killings became generalized and reified, and, in the process, the evil done to the Jews became separated from the profanation of Nazism per se. [...] They came to be understood as a unique, historically unprecedented event, as evil on a scale that had never occurred before. (222)

This new weighting of the Holocaust as a historically unique event radically changes its meaning, and it seems in fact justified to characterize this process in terms of a paradigm change. Now that in the socio-political situation of the 60s and 70s the progressive narrative had lost its grip on the Holocaust, a tragic framing or tragic narrative of the Holocaust developed instead (Alexander 226). Within this tragic narrative, the Holocaust became a
“sacred-evil,” “an archetype, an event out-of-time” with “transcendental status” (226). As such, it is “inexplicable in ordinary, rational terms” (222).

In contrast with the progressive narrative, which approached the Holocaust as a defeated evil and a new beginning for democratic progression and liberty, the tragic narrative focuses not on the defeat of evil as a new beginning, but constantly returns to the suffering. In the tragic narrative, Alexander argues, the Holocaust “became a ‘trauma drama’ that the ‘audience’ returned to time and again,” by which it developed an archetypical and mythical status (227). Crucially, the tragic representation of the Holocaust depends on an identification being made with the Holocaust’s victims and this identification was made possible exactly through universalizing and mythologizing the Holocaust: in the tragic narrative, representations of the Holocaust “no longer referred to events that took place at a particular time and place but to a trauma that had become emblematic, and iconic, of human suffering as such. The horrific trauma of the Jews became the trauma of all mankind” (231). And thus, the Holocaust became a cultural trauma, which, it is important to emphasize once more, is not an ontological category, but a matter of construction and representation (Alexander 202). Situated within this new framework, the Holocaust became an increasingly important theme in American literature as a traumatic historical event with direct significance for the lives and identities of Americans. Melodramatic and positive representations of the Holocaust such as that of Uris now became inappropriate. Instead, the Holocaust and its (literary) representation itself became something problematic and permanently unsettling, as I will attempt to illustrate in my reading of Potok’s In the Beginning.

Chaim Potok (1929-2002) was born in New York to Polish-Jewish immigrant parents and was raised within a profoundly Jewish orthodox environment. He received a thorough religious as well as secular education, and apart from being a scholar and a rabbi, he is best known as a novelist. His best known work, like The Chosen (1967), The Promise (1969) and My Name is Asher Lev (1972), chronicles life in Jewish New York between the 1920s and the fifties. The novel that I will be discussing here, In the Beginning, Potok’s fourth novel, is also in this tradition. It therefore needs to be explained in what sense the work of Potok and in particular In the Beginning can also be seen as Holocaust literature.

In doing so, it is first of all important to stress the centrality of the Holocaust in Potok’s own thinking. In the concluding paragraphs of Wanderings, his history of the Jews, Potok writes in an oft-quoted passage that the “Jew sees all his contemporary history refracted through the ocean of blood that is the Holocaust” (524). He even went further in a 1984 interview with Lilian Kremer when he said that “for thinking people, Jew or non-Jew, I don’t
think it is possible to think the world anymore in this century without thinking Holocaust” (qtd. in Witness 309). With that in mind, it comes as no surprise that “the Shoah is always in the background of [Potok’s] fictional universe,” but “[r]ather than treating the Holocaust directly, Potok generally introduces the topic indirectly and focuses instead on Holocaust restoration through renewal of Judaism and Jewry in America and Israel” (Kremer, Witness 300). Holocaust literature is not only a kind of literature that is exclusively about the concentration camps. Taking a more theoretical angle, Robert Eaglestone argues that the label of Holocaust fiction is not limited to works that explicitly forward the Holocaust “as a ‘positive content,’” but suggests that there is also “a category of ‘negative content’: where the events are there, are a ‘complement’ which call ‘on the reader to supply information from his or her own experience,’ but are not mentioned” (102-103). Eaglestone mentions Singer, Malamud, Roth, and indeed, Chaim Potok as examples of writers in whose work the Holocaust functions as a “negative content”: “[t]hat these works, and others, are ‘about the Holocaust’ and could be ‘Holocaust fiction’ is clear, even if they lack delineation” (103).

Since the Holocaust is not the salient “positive content” of Potok’s novels, his work has quite understandably not been studied so much as Holocaust literature. But then again, Eaglestone suggests that “Holocaust fiction is a temporal, not a content, label, and it names not only texts, but a way of reading” (107). It is in such a way that I wish to read In the Beginning; that is, “with a specific range of questions, responses, demands, and issues in mind” (Eaglestone 107). From this perspective, I will argue that the Holocaust is a leitmotif and catalyst of the narrative in In the Beginning.

In the Beginning tells the story of David Lurie, a fragile, intelligent Jewish boy growing up in the Bronx of the late twenties, the Depression years and the Second World War. His life is overshadowed by frequent illnesses and the socio-political troubles of his time. Among those latter, it is particularly anti-Semitism that shapes David’s consciousness: through the stories of his immigrant parents (victims of rabid Polish anti-Semitism all their lives before moving to the United States), through the news of Hitler’s war-mongering and anti-Jewish measures in Germany, and through being bullied for being a Jew by Eddie Kulanski, a boy of immigrant Polish parents. Troubled by these stories and experiences, David devotes himself to his religious studies, at which he excels. When David is in the last year at his orthodox yeshiva in 1945, the news and photographs of the liberated camps Bergen Belsen and Buchenwald reach America. It turns out that David’s entire family died at Bergen Belsen. Shocked to the core of his being by this news, David decides that the only thing he can do as a reaction to the Holocaust is the scientific and historical study of the Bible at
university, thus alienating himself from his orthodox Jewish community, including his parents. Years later, he travels to Germany on a research grant and there, he forces himself to visit Bergen Belsen in order to return to his beginnings.

Taking place for a large part in pre-war New York, the events recounted in *In the Beginning* and the Holocaust are to a considerable extent separated from each other both spatially and temporally. Nevertheless, they are connected thematically: the pre-war, New York-set events of *In the Beginning* are significant only from a post-war, in particular a post-Holocaust perspective (which, naturally, any reader of this novel has). For the greater part of the novel, however, the Holocaust is only an implied presence, not a direct one. The Holocaust is almost like a continually hovering specter only visible to the reader: as a “negative content,” the Holocaust functions like a gap to be filled in by the reader.

This implied presence of the Holocaust is evident in Potok’s treatment of the theme of anti-Semitism. As one of the central themes of the novel, anti-Semitism manifests itself not only on the small-scale local level, but also on a much wider level as a contemporary international force, as well as on the level of Jewish history. All these instances of anti-Semitism are interconnected and find their ultimate manifestation the Holocaust. The taunts of Eddie Kulanski (a Polish boy living on David’s block) and his cousin fit immediately into a long tradition. When Eddie says to David “[y]ou fucking kike. My father says you stink up the world” (104), he is parroting the prejudices of his fathers. As David observes, Eddie “was only six years old, but his hatred bore the breeding of a thousand years” (5). Similarly, the anti-Semitic bands, followers of the fascist leader Father Charles Coughlin that harassed Jews in the New York of the 1930s are directly related to the anti-Semitic activities of the Nazis in Germany: “[t]hey brought the poison with them to America and that German maniac now gives them the courage to spread it. They will destroy America like he is destroying Europe,” David’s father says (304). Shaped by the stories of how his parents and their families were prosecuted by Cossacks and Poles before emigrating to America, by the history of the Tulchin massacre of 1648, and the news of the Hebron massacre of 1929, David’s mind – like the news – is more and more drawn toward the events in Germany, and the Holocaust being prepared and executed there. Or as Kremer argues, “[i]ntroduction of the Holocaust in this novel is an organic outgrowth of Potok’s focus on Polish and Arab anti-Semitism (Witness 316). But at the same time, the Nazi threat is hardly ever named directly, underlining the deeply unsettling and the totally unimaginable character of the (impending) Holocaust. David mentions “the man whose name I heard often in the news now” (231) and his father prefers to speak of the “German maniaec” (249), but the name of Hitler and the consequences of his
politics are avoided; instead, the “silences deepened and grew lengthier as the Nazi darkness spread itself across Europe” (335).

Through David’s strong identification with his family, Holocaust victims, his personal life and identity become also related to the Holocaust. In particular, David is connected to his father’s brother David, after whom he was named. Uncle David was young David’s mother’s first fiancé but was killed in a pogrom, and David’s family members constantly liken him to his uncle, both in appearance and in character. The identification with Uncle David weighs heavily on David:

What would it have been like if my father had not married my mother? If my Uncle David had not been killed, then I would not be David and someone else would be my mother’s first son. It’s because my Uncle David was killed by a goy in a pogrom that I am David. He died and I am David. I am David. Everyone has a different picture of me or wants me to be another Uncle David. But I want to be my own David. […] I could not grasp the idea that I was alive because my Uncle David was dead. […] I was alive because goyim had killed my uncle. (324)

David’s musings echo a feeling widespread in the post-Holocaust Jewish community of America, that is, the question of what it means to be alive today when, and in the case of survivors sometimes because, others have died. Thus, David’s sense of self and identity, his very existence as one of the last remaining branches of his family is constituted by the Holocaust. In contrast with Mila 18, however, David’s – and in consequence, the reader’s – identification with the Holocaust means a focus not on heroics or martyrdom, but on the problematic and traumatic nature of survivorship or life after the Holocaust.

At the same time, and somewhat paradoxically, anti-Semitism and the Holocaust also give shape and direction to David’s personal, and ultimately, professional development. Against the dark reality of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, David devotes himself to Judaism as a form of resistance. When David is old enough to go to school, he also starts the study of Torah with Mr. Bader, a private teacher. David turns out to be a brilliant student but when he gets more advanced in his studies, David more and more finds the answers given by the ancient Jewish bible commentators unsatisfactory. He takes up studying historical bible scholarship, using texts of secular, German scholars, to the great annoyance of his entire social environment. When David is confronted with his “heresy” by his mother, he tells her
that “I’m reading them to fight them, Mama. […] It’s our Torah they’re destroying. Why shouldn’t Jews defend it?” (392). To David, aware of the war in Europe and the role of the Jews in it, his studies constitute his share in the fight against the enemies of the Jews: “I felt myself a lone combatant on a torn field of battle advancing fearfully and without support against a dark and powerful foe” (394). However, when in April 1945 Bergen Belsen and Buchenwald are liberated and the photos – David’s metaphor for true and fixed knowledge – arrive, David’s worldview collapses.

I saw a photograph of dead children, eyes and mouths open, bodies twisted and frozen with dead and I tried to enter it and could not. I bought the papers and magazines and saw the photographs of the chimneys and the furnaces and the death trains and tried to penetrate the borders of the cruel rectangles – and I could not do it. They lay beyond the grasp of my mind, those malevolent rectangles of spectral horror. They would not let me into them. (419)

Bergen Belsen, where David’s entire family was killed, turns out to be impossible to incorporate within David’s existing frame of reference: it is incompatible, unimaginable, an impassable limit. At the same time, David’s reaction, composed by Potok in (I will assume) the 1970s also reflects an awareness of and changed attitude towards the horrors of the Holocaust, which became widely held in this period.

Even though David is not a direct victim of the Nazis, the Holocaust has such an unsettling, identity-changing effect on him that the knowledge of it can be called traumatic. Characteristic of the work of Potok, however, and in contrast with other important Holocaust authors like Wiesel or Ozick, the Holocaust does not merely pose a break-down of existing frames of reference, but, for David, it also inspires new beginnings. Before seeing the photos of the camps, David was finally persuaded to give up secular Bible criticism and to return to the orthodox Jewish tradition. He is happy with this decision: “the paths were clear; they had been trod by prior generations. There was comfort in that and only terror in the thought of striking out alone beyond the boundaries of the past” (403). The news of the camps changes all those feelings of comfort, however, and he is confused further by Rav Sharfman, his famous Talmud teacher, who somewhat equivocally hints to David that he must take his own course in his religious studies: “[d]on’t tell me what everyone else says! Tell me what you say! Can’t you think?” (420). After another Talmud class with Sharfman, David goes for a walk in a park and decides that “I would enter those photographs. Somehow I would enter
those photographs” (429). Then he leaves the park and enters a steep and rocky path straight down to the Hudson. In a number of deeply symbolic passages, David stumbles down the rocks, and has a nightmarish vision, from which I will quote at some length.

The path was gone. [...] I could not see the school. [...] I looked and saw the river running red, and I closed my eyes. But the redness would not leave. I opened my eyes and all the world was red. Across the river a train moved slowly upon the bed of rails and I saw it was a freight train. [...] It had been an ordinary freight train but I had seen through its sealed doors a multitude of writhing human beings packed together riding in filth and terror. [...] I shivered and looked again at the shantytown and saw in its depths huddled beings waiting for death. I looked down the river at the lumberyard and saw rows of barracks between electrified fences. I looked farther down the river and saw the factory and the chimneys pouring smoke from burning flesh. I closed my eyes again and saw the photographs. I lowered my head and trembled and knew now I could never have entered those photographs; instead they had entered me. (431-432)

Next, David hears the voice of his dead uncle David: “These are the roots, my David. Who will water the roots? he murmured. Who will give them new life? The leaves are already dead. [...] David, he said softly. David. Will you start again?” (433). David confesses he is afraid, but ultimately, nods his head in approval, at which the voice of Uncle David concludes “[y]ou are making your own beginning” (433). At last, David breaks the news to his family that he will study Bible at a secular institute. Shortly afterwards, he leaves home in order to study at university: “[t]hat was my first long journey into ancient beginnings, a train ride to Albany and Cleveland and then on to Chicago” (451). David’s identification with the suffering and the victims of the Holocaust is so strong that the Holocaust becomes a traumatic “memory” even for him, an American, who was not “there.” This way, the novel illustrates how a traumatic conception of the Holocaust can actually exert direct influence on the lives of Americans.

In its last three pages, the novel reaches a sense of closure, when years later – around 1970 – David travels to Germany on a research trip and forces himself to visit Bergen Belsen. “Finally, I set out on my journey into the final beginnings of my family” (451). When David at last physically approaches the campsite, he is struck with paralysis and fear and is unable to
go forward. Suddenly, he sees the image of Rav Sharfman, who, once again, urges him to continue. “You must enter, he said. You have nothing to apologize for. You have only to give thanks and remember” (452). Still, David cannot move on, until he hears the voice of his uncle David. “Uncle David? I said. Is that you? The dead can journey too, he murmured. I sleep in Lemberg but all my beginnings lie here. Come” (452), at the same time confirming how Uncle David’s death – though not at the hand of the Nazis – must be seen from a post-Holocaust perspective. At his uncle’s exhortation, “I put on my skullcap and entered Bergen Belsen” (452). He walks around, and the voice of his uncle had gone. It appears to David that the day had darkened and when he calls for his father and his uncle, there is no response: “[t]here was only the silence. They were all here, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins. Who lies beneath my feet? I am walking on the dead of my family’s beginnings” (453). Then he sees his father and Uncle David appear and the latter addresses him. “Here is the past, he murmured. Never forget the past as you nourish the present. […] He turned to my father. Thank you, he murmured. Our David is giving new life to my name” (453–454). David closes his eyes and when he opens them he is alone again. He recites the Mourner’s Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead and leaves, with which the novel ends.

With David’s visit to Bergen Belsen, described at some length in the previous paragraph, the treatment of the Holocaust-theme in the novel reaches a climax: only in these final pages is David, while walking along the mass graves, directly confronted with the physical reality of the Holocaust. The confrontation marks the terrible importance of the Holocaust for (international) Jewish history and identity. For David, an American Jew, Bergen Belsen is a lieu de mémoire charged with such traumatic significance that he is almost unable to enter. Significantly, when he does enter, the day darkens and there is only silence and desolation. The peaceful park that it is today is also a place of suffering, death and the mass grave of an entire family. In that sense, as a lieu de mémoire, Potok’s Bergen Belsen is diametrically opposed to Uris’s Warsaw Ghetto, battleground of heroes. Even for

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11 I feel it may not be inappropriate to contribute a personal anecdote on the experience of visiting the Bergen Belsen memorial park. On an overcast, but swelteringly hot day in August 2006, my father and I visited Bergen Belsen. With a group of about ten tourists, we went on a guided tour along the park. Having left the memorial center not even ten minutes ago, and now standing on what had once been the Appellplatz, it all of a sudden darkened and a thunderstorm with heavy rain broke out. After unsuccessfully trying to take cover under a couple of trees, the group decided to race back to the memorial center. Only my father and I stayed behind. Close by us was a grave mound, saying Hier ruhen 1000 Tote, April 1945. Standing there together, all alone on the Appellplatz, we got soaked to the skin.
Uncle David, who died in a pogrom before World War II, his beginnings lie in Bergen Belsen, and so, in a way, the Holocaust constitutes the anti-climax of Jewish history: it is the final beginnings that put all of Jewish history in perspective. In as far as Potok frames the Holocaust as an inescapable, traumatic and ever to return to event with universal significance, his Holocaust discourse can be characterized as a tragic narrative in the sense of Jeffrey Alexander. However, and this is where the oxymoron in “final beginnings” reaches its full significance, the Holocaust also marks the occasion for new beginnings (not continuity, or progression): it seems as if Potok suggests that only in the confrontation with the full horror of the Holocaust, a future is possible. “Never forget the past as you nourish the present,” as Uncle David puts it (453). Indeed, for David memory and mourning are at the basis of the new beginnings. Significantly, after David has uttered the Mourner’s Kaddish, he does not linger in Belsen, but “walked back between the graves to the car and drove away” (454).

As these close readings illustrate, the representations of the Holocaust in Mila 18 and In the Beginning contrast radically. These differences, however, are not incidental or haphazard ones, but are emblematic of a more structural change in the literary representation of the Holocaust, which can be characterized briefly as a development from heroics to tragedy. This change in literary representation, moreover, is rooted in a much broader social change in the conception and memory of the Holocaust in American society. In fact, it is only in the 1970s with novels like those of Potok and many other that Holocaust literature really takes shape in forms such as we know today, addressing the issue of what happened to the European Jew in World War II within the ideological framework of “The Holocaust.” It is also important to note, however, that Potok’s novel is also very much an American novel, engaging with what the Holocaust may mean for Americans. With the development of the genre of the “Holocaust novel” in the 1970s, this American dimension or interest is increasingly brought to the foreground. It is this “Americanization” of the Holocaust that I want to address in more detail in the next chapter.
Works Consulted


Chapter 2

Erotics of Auschwitz or Americanized Holocaust?

William Styron’s Sophie’s Choice

When in 1979 the acclaimed Pulitzer Prize winning writer William Styron (1925-2006) published his Holocaust novel Sophie’s Choice, it marked a new phase in American Holocaust literature and memory. Whereas Chaim Potok wrote very much from a Jewish-American perspective on the Holocaust and Leon Uris had perhaps not a Jewish, but in any case a Zionist perspective, Styron does not have these “obvious” links to the Holocaust. He is not Jewish, and though he was in the Marine Corps in World War II, he did not see action either in Europe or in the Pacific. In fact, born and raised in Virginia, Styron is a Southern WASP writer, whose work can be shared more easily under the tradition of Thomas Wolfe and William Faulkner than that it can be associated with that of his prominent (Jewish) contemporaries Bellow, Roth and Malamud. Very much a gentile Holocaust novel, then, Sophie’s Choice is one of the prime examples of how the Holocaust has developed into an important American theme. As such, its reception has been mixed. On the one hand, Sophie’s Choice is a popular favorite and often called Styron’s greatest achievement. In 1979, it became the year’s second best-selling novel, just under Robert Ludlum’s thriller The Matarese Circle on Publishers Weekly’s list of best-selling novels (Korda 163). Due in part also to the highly successful film adaptation starring Meryl Streep (who, incidentally, won an Oscar for her part as Sophie), Sophie’s Choice is internationally one of the best known Holocaust novels. On the other hand, it has received heavy criticism from both reviewers and academics, who have argued in particular against Styron’s universalization of the Holocaust, and who have accused him of turning the Holocaust into melodrama, or, at worst, of presenting an “Erotics of Auschwitz” (Rosenfeld 164).

Sophie’s Choice is the partly autobiographical story of Styron’s much younger alter-ego nicknamed Stingo, who, in New York City of 1947, is struggling with many things, becoming a writer and sexual frustration being the most central concerns. The story is narrated by a much older first person narrator, who emphasizes, however, that he no longer is the Stingo of his youth; the nickname and identity has worn off in time. After moving to the
Jewish section of Brooklyn, Stingo meets Nathan Landau and Sophie Zawistowska, a couple that live in the same boarding house as Stingo. Nathan is an exuberant and brilliant (Jewish) man, though plagued by a violent temper, and Sophie is a Polish refugee (a non-Jewish survivor of Auschwitz as it turns out), with whom Stingo falls desperately in love. Though puzzled by Sophie and Nathan’s acts of intense love-making, alternated with bursts of violence, Stingo is fascinated by Sophie and Nathan, and is quickly pulled into a rollercoaster friendship with them. Gradually, he learns more about Sophie’s past, as she tells him the story of her life. In a series of (often drunken) confessions, Sophie tells Stingo about her relationship with Nathan and his occasional bursts of murderous rage and violence against her, about her anti-Semitic father and one-time husband in Poland, about the time she spent in Auschwitz, about the horrors of the camp, as well as the short time she worked in the house of camp commandant Rudolf Höss. At a certain point, Nathan is in one of his rages (which Stingo fails to see is caused by paranoid schizophrenia) and suspects Sophie of having cheated on him with Stingo. Nathan threatens to kill them both and consequently, Sophie and Stingo flee New York for Stingo’s home in Virginia. In a Washington hotel, Sophie makes her final confession to Stingo, about the choice between one of her two children she was forced to make on her arrival in Auschwitz. After that, they go to bed with each other after all, but the next morning when Stingo wakes up, Sophie has left. Though at first continuing his journey south, Stingo then decides to follow Sophie back to Brooklyn, where he finds out that Sophie went back to Nathan and that they killed themselves in a suicide pact.

Alvin Rosenfeld, one of Styron’s fiercest critics, is bothered most with the way *Sophie’s Choice* universalizes the Holocaust, or, the way in which it “abstracts the crime against the Jews as ‘a menace to the entire human family’” (159). According to Rosenfeld, this obscures the fact that the Holocaust was perpetrated first and foremost against the Jews and he concludes that “[t]o generalize or universalize the victims of the Holocaust is not only to profane their memories but to exonerate their executioners” (160). Moreover, Rosenfeld objects to the manner in which *Sophie’s Choice*, as he sees it, is “dedicated to developing an Erotics of Auschwitz” (164): “[b]y reducing the war against the Jews to sexual combat, he has misappropriated Auschwitz and used it as little more than the erotic centerpiece of a new Southern Gothic Novel” (165). Even though Rosenfeld’s critique is severe and some of his arguments might very well be countered with others, his position is at least well-considered. However, there has also been a definite trend to dismiss *Sophie’s Choice* out of hand with little argumentation, often based on presumptions on what Holocaust literature “obviously” should be like. Daniel Schwarz notes in his entry on Styron in *Holocaust Literature*, an
authoritative encyclopedia, that “[a]t times, discriminating readers feel Styron’s moral blindness. The lives of by far the largest group of Holocaust victims should not be consigned to background anonymity” (1232). The claim that Styron does so is in itself debatable, but the label of moral blindness seems strangely incongruous with a writer of literature, that is to say, a master of ambiguity. Likewise, in her otherwise outstanding and important article “Fact, Fiction, Fascism” Barbara Foley fails in her reading of Sophie’s Choice, claiming that it “promotes a distorted – indeed, racist – perspective on the Holocaust. […] Styron’s exploration of Sophie’s suffering is in effect anti-Semitic, because it promotes sympathy for a Gentile [Sophie, JK] at the expense of a Jew [Nathan, JK]” (357). The analysis is not only far-fetched, but – in my view – also highly unsympathetic towards the novel. In a contribution to the National Review, David Evanier observes tartly, after quoting some of young Stingo’s narcissistic musings: “[r]emember – this is a ‘novel’ about the Holocaust” (1103). But, Irving Saposnik suggests, “[p]erhaps that is the real surprise of Sophie’s Choice, that a novel that seems to be about the Holocaust is only partially so, that the struggle which is at its center is rather an essential conflict of American cultural history. Certainly that part of the Holocaust that does figure prominently in the novel is its meaning for the non-Jewish world” (330, my emphasis). Saposnik seems to be on the right track. Sophie’s Choice treats the Holocaust in a way that in the memory culture of the 1980s was often considered as an inappropriate transgression. What Styron does, in effect, is that in the middle of this period in which the Holocaust was an established cultural trauma, he radically shifts traditional focuses. Unlike writers before him, who had concentrated primarily on the Holocaust per se – on the lives of concentration camp inmates, on survivors or on their (Jewish) relatives – Styron is interested just as much (perhaps even more so) in the confrontation of non-Jewish Americans with the Holocaust; as Gavin Cologne-Brookes argues, “the subject of Sophie’s Choice is not directly the Holocaust, but Stingo’s marginal connection with that atrocity” (198). Styron explores the issue of what significance the Holocaust has for America as a whole, including those for whom the Holocaust has no direct consequences. In order to do so, Sophie’s Choice turns the Holocaust into an American theme through the process of universalization and Americanization.

However, Styron’s Americanization of the Holocaust does not mean, simply, that he uses the Holocaust in order to tell a terribly exciting, Hollywood-like, melodramatic story, as does Leon Uris in some aspects. The gravity and aura that was increasingly attached to the Holocaust from the 1960s onward is also present in Styron’s treatment of the theme. This is especially evident in his representation of Sophie, who despite her beautiful appearance and
breezy nature is obviously a damaged person who, for example, breaks out in tears when on their first meeting. Nathan puts on some music. When Nathan tries to find out why she is so moved, she snaps at him that “I can’t talk about that” (149). Suffering from what we would now call post-traumatic stress syndrome, Sophie is a traumatized victim-survivor whose very being and personality has been changed by her experiences. For example, Sophie “detested New York subway trains for their grime and their noise, but even more for the claustrophobic nearness of so many human bodies, the rush-hour jam and jostle of flesh” (98). Though Sophie is aware that this particular dislike seems curious after all she has been through, but still “she could not get rid of the feeling; it was part of her new and transformed identity” (98). Despite Sophie’s beauty, Auschwitz has left its marks on Sophie’s body too. Stingo repeatedly makes mention of Sophie’s tattoo (“I will always remember Sophie’s tattoo” [412]), but he is also aware of the fact that Sophie’s body is still recovering from hardship and hunger. At one time, Stingo sees her accidentally without her dentals and then, he “beheld – for a mercifully fleeting instant – an old hag whose entire lower face had crumpled in upon itself, leaving a mouth like a wrinkled gash and an expression of doddering senescence. It was a mask, withered and pitiable” (142). It is only later in the novel, however, when Stingo (and with him, the reader) finds out in detail what exactly caused Sophie’s troubled existence. And then, he can only whisper “‘Oh God, oh my God.’ But I did seem to be aware […] that those words which had commenced in pious Presbyterian entreaty finally became meaningless […], as empty as any idiot’s dream of God, or the idea that there could be such a Thing” (509). Here, once again, the Holocaust is represented as something which transcends all human categories of comprehension.

For one thing, Sophie’s Choice Americanizes the Holocaust in the sense that Stingo – both the 1947 character and the narrator – tries to understand the Holocaust and Sophie’s account of it in particular on his own personal terms. Or as Cologne-Brookes puts it, the “narrator’s subject is not merely Stingo and Sophie but the connections between their lives, and between Brooklyn and Auschwitz” (165). One of the connections that has captivated Stingo’s thoughts is the idea of incompatible time relations, that is to say, the almost unfathomable thought that as the horrors of the concentration camps were taking place, people all over the world were leading relatively ordinary lives (at least in the U.S. – the situation in other parts of the world was often quite extraordinary too), unaware of what was going on at that same time. And so, Stingo
had become obsessed about the time relation – to the extent, for example, that I had attempted more or less successfully to pinpoint my own activities on the first day of April, 1943, the day when Sophie, entering Auschwitz, fell into the ‘slow hands of the living damnation.’ […] I was able to come up with the absurd fact that on that afternoon, as Sophie first set foot on the railroad platform in Auschwitz, it was a lovely spring morning in Raleigh, North Carolina, where I was gorging myself on bananas. (235)

If linking his personal memories of the 1940s with the events in Auschwitz proves problematic in understanding the impregnable history of the Holocaust, making a connection with Southern history – with which he is familiar – does help Stingo. Stingo feels that “Poland is a beautiful, heart-wrenching, soul-split country which in many ways […] resembles or conjures up images of the American South” (268). After describing some similarities such as the “spirit of the nation,” a history of defeat and strong feeling of national pride (268), Stingo notes that “[f]inally there is a sinister zone of likeness” between the two places concerning the matter of race, which both in Poland and in the South “has created at the same instant cruelty and compassion, bigotry and understanding, enmity and fellowship, exploitation and sacrifice, searing hatred and endless love” (269). Considering the system of the concentration camps as “evolving directly from the institution of slavery as it was practiced by the great nations of the West” (255), it is the knowledge of certain similarities between Poland and the South that Stingo uses “in order to interpret the happenings at Auschwitz…” (269) – though one might in fact question the historical validity of Stingo’s analogy. In any case, for anyone who has not personally seen the camps, like Stingo, it is practically impossible to imagine this universe concentrationnaire, a phrase Styron borrows from David Rousset. But then, the narrator notes, the “nexus between these ‘different orders of time’ is – of course – for those who were not there – someone who was there, and this brings me back to Sophie” (236, italics in original). Ultimately then, it is through Stingo’s relationship with Sophie, both in 1947 and in the following years of thinking about this relationship, that the Holocaust manifests itself in Stingo’s life as an immediate and tangible presence, and not as a distant European history. And so, the narrator notes, “I have thought that it might be possible to make a stab at understanding Auschwitz by trying to understand Sophie” (237).

If Sophie is to be a nexus between Auschwitz and America and if she is to be a central force in understanding the Holocaust, it is useful to consider in some more detail how the
character of Sophie functions in the novel. As others have noted, young Stingo’s interest in Sophie is at bottom a romantic, or perhaps somewhat more accurately – though perhaps less sympathetically, a sexual interest. Coming from a flatmate of Sophie and Stingo’s, one of the first things that the reader learns about Sophie is that “she’s some dish, that Sophie” (44), and already on the first occasion that Stingo meets Sophie, he “felt that underneath that suntan there lingered the sallowness of a body not wholly rescued from a terrible crisis. But none of these at all diminished a kind of wonderfully negligent sexuality” (55). Stingo has numerous grandiloquent musings on Sophie’s beautiful body and one time in his sleep, “with desire that was hopeless and tumultuous like ocean breakers of grief I found myself making ravenous love to Sophie” (325). In a way, Stingo’s confrontation with the Holocaust is incidental: his primary interest is Sophie, and the entry of the Holocaust in their relationship and in the novel is embedded in their 1947 American friendship annex love affair. It seems that to Stingo, in fact, Sophie’s survivorhood adds to her aura of mysterious sensuality, and so, when he sees her tattoo from Auschwitz for the first time, “[t]o the melting love in my stomach was added a sudden ache” (54), or when Stingo finds out that Sophie is not Jewish, “there was something vaguely negative and self-preoccupied in my reaction” (69). Much later too, when Stingo has just had his first sexual encounter with Sophie, his “eyes fixed themselves on her tattoo,” and he himself realizes that “it seemed profoundly incongruous at this moment” (392). It has often been suggested that it is this kind of passages that illustrate best how Styron misappropriates the Holocaust and how Sophie’s Choice is a “bad” Holocaust novel. To this, Richard Rubenstein responded that “Sophie’s Choice can be seen as less a novel about the Holocaust than a novel about how the Holocaust affected a highly gifted young Southern writer” (441). This perspective puts Stingo’s relationship with Sophie in a very different light: “[f]ar from weakening the novel, Stingo’s sexual struggles are integral to his unique voyage from innocence to experience” (Rubenstein 441). Once more, the novel’s primary narrative concerns Stingo’s relationship with Sophie and indeed, Stingo’s sexual struggles constitute a central and authentic element of this narrative. The title of Rubenstein’s article “The South Encounters the Holocaust” is therefore a rather apt description of Sophie’s Choice, since the novel is not so much concerned with reporting or reconstructing what happened in the camps, as does a Wiesel or a Levi, but rather, with what it means for an American to be confronted with the Holocaust. This (extra) level of significance and reflection can be illustrated by considering the disjunction between Stingo and the narrator, who emphatically distances himself from his younger self.
Through the disjunction between Stingo and the narrator, *Sophie’s Choice* both addresses an American’s encounter with the Holocaust (i.e. Stingo’s), as well as on another level, it reflects self-consciously on the specific meanings of this encounter and on the Holocaust in general. It is in fact by pausing the actual narrative, that is to say, Stingo’s narrative, ventriloquized by the narrator, that the narrator creates this space for conscious reflection. On the second page of the novel, the narrator recounts how “[s]ometime during my thirties the nickname [i.e. Stingo, JK] and I mysteriously parted company, Stingo merely evaporating like a wan ghost out of my existence, leaving me indifferent to the loss” (4). It seems to be the suggestion, then, that the two cannot (in any case, should not) be conflated. Moreover, they have quite different concerns in the narrative: “[w]hile Stingo struggles to make sense of his feelings, the narrator is making connections between the supposedly disparate worlds of Brooklyn and Auschwitz” (Cologne-Brookes 172). It is because of the interest that Stingo takes in Sophie (according to Cologne-Brookes, this is an artistic, as well as a sexual interest [173]) that she tells him the story of her life, and especially the story of her life during the war and in Auschwitz. Even though Stingo promises himself that “[s]omeday I will understand Auschwitz,” it is only later in life that the narrator is able to commit himself to his central concern, which is writing about Auschwitz, realizing that his earlier promise “was a brave statement but innocently absurd” (560, italics in original). The narrator is well aware of the problematic nature of writing about the Holocaust, and so “the preparation I went through at that time required that I torture myself by absorbing as much as I could find of the literature of l’univers concentrationnaire” (234, italics in original).12

In a way, *Sophie’s Choice* signals an evolution of the representation of the Holocaust by carefully positioning itself in relation to other Holocaust writers, and especially, by disagreeing with and deviating from them. For the narrator, much of their writing is ultimately insufficient, and so he searched for alternative ways of approaching the Holocaust. Thus, he carefully positions his narrative in relation to other writing about the Holocaust; for example,  

12 This is an infamous and one of the most heavily criticized passages in the novel. Numerous critics have found the idea that the narrator (or Styron) felt he “tortured himself” with – merely – reading remarkably insensitive and distasteful in a novel about the Holocaust. As William Heath comments in an article criticizing the egotism of Stingo, “[o]nce again Stingo’s ego gets in the way, comparing the sufferings of the Jews with his own torturous reading of George Steiner” (534). At the same time, you might wonder how justified this critique really is. Any new generation will have to come to terms with terrible historical events in their own way. There is no alternative, except perhaps silence and forgetting (my acknowledgments to W.M. Verhoeven for providing me with this insight).
he explicitly mentions Tadeusz Borowski, Jean-François Steiner, Olga Lengyel, Eugen Kogon, André Schwarz-Bart, Elie Wiesel and Bruno Bettelheim (236). In particular, he mentions George Steiner, whom he repeatedly quotes and takes position with. “I cannot accept Steiner’s suggestion that silence is the answer, that it is best ‘not to add to 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’” (237, italics in original). As an alternative, the narrator “thought that it might be possible to make a stab at understanding Auschwitz by trying to understand Sophie” (237), as I quoted once before. In fact, the novel is interspersed with these kind of essayistic passages, in which the narrator’s voice resembles that of a historian or cultural critic more than that of a novelist, for example when he decides “for a moment to examine the nature and function of Auschwitz in general, but especially during the six months after [Sophie’s] arrival in early April of that year 1943” (254).

The narrator’s evocation and exploration of Auschwitz in Sophie’s Choice functions as a way to understand not so much (or not only) the horror of the Holocaust itself, but how evil in general is universally present in human life; or in the narrator’s own words: “I will write about Sophie’s life and death, and thereby help demonstrate how absolute evil is never extinguished from the world” (560; italics in original). By seeking connections between Auschwitz and Brooklyn, Styron subverts the idea that the boundaries between good and evil are obvious and easy to determine. Sophie’s Choice seems to show that is too easy to categorize the Nazis and Auschwitz as the evil opposite of, for example, the Nazi’s victims and post-war Brooklyn, which would then, according to such binary logic, be “good.” For example, Styron makes Rudolf Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz for whom Sophie worked for a short time not a monster, but – doubtlessly influenced by Hannah Arendt – simply a man, though filled with paradoxes: banally evil, but ultimately human, and a person with whom Sophie desired some kind of human contact.13 Sophie’s status as a survivor is not

13 Styron’s portrayal of Höss has received severe criticism as well. Barbara Foley, embarrassingly confusing Höss’s name with that of Rudolf Hess, quite someone else, writes the following: “Nathan takes shape as a grotesque counterpart of the historical Rudolph Hess [sic], administrator of Auschwitz, who appears as a character in the novel. Hess is if anything more of a gentleman, since he never abuses Sophie personally and treats her with a kind of melancholy respect. Such portraiture would be highly questionable even in a straightforward historical novel […]. But these ‘historical’ elements are especially pernicious in a text that carries the ring of truth” (357). In a similar vein, Alvin Rosenfeld argues that “Styron responded to [Höss’s autobiography] charitably and at considerable length and has given us a fictionalized portrait of Höss that would have satisfied many of the latter’s own wishes, showing us that he was a mass murderer, yes, but not an intentionally cruel one. Besides, as the novel goes on to show, he was capable of the tenderest feelings for
straightforward either, as she moved in the ethical indeterminacy of the “grey zone,” as Primo Levi would say. At Auschwitz, Stingo finds out gradually, Sophie “had been a victim, yes, but both victim and accomplice, accessory […] to the mass slaughter” (237-238). She had tried – unsuccessfully – to win Höss’s sympathy by seduction and by playing the role of the anti-Semitic. At Höss’s house, furthermore, she had been unable to fulfill some of the small tasks set to her by resistance workers inside the camp, and had failed in trying to get Höss to put her surviving son in a privileged section of the camp, as she was paralyzed by fear. These things, and of course the choice she made between her two children have left her with an intense, irrational and ever returning sense of guilt. Even though Sophie realizes that she is a victim, she wonders why “I should feel so much guilt over all the things I done there. And over just being alive. This guilt is something I cannot get rid of and I think I never will” (311).

It is from the ethical grey zone of Auschwitz, in particular Sophie’s shady conduct there and her guilty feelings over that conduct that the connections with Brooklyn can be made. Sophie’s feeling of guilt is something Stingo can readily identify with. Upset by Sophie’s confessions and dramatic developments with Nathan, Stingo suddenly turns his thoughts to his own guilty conscience about the death of his mother – and his feelings are not dissimilar to Sophie’s. “Guilt. Hateful guilt. Guilt, corrosive as brine. Like typhoid, one can harbor for a lifetime the toxin of guilt. Even as I writhed on the McAlpin’s damp and lumpy mattress, grief drove like a spear of ice through my chest” (323). Directly connected to

animals, loved his horse, and could approach a loving woman. Could such a man have been all bad?” (161). What Foley and Rosenfeld seem to hold against Styron is that he makes Höss too kind, that is to say, too much of a man and too little of a monster. It would indeed be easy to explain Auschwitz if we could say that the Nazis were monsters. The fact of the matter, Styron seems to say, is that they were not monsters, but humans, and that is the true mystery. Though Rosenfeld catches the irony in Höss being a mass murderer and lover of animals at the same time, he misinterprets it: the question is not whether a man who loved animals and was attracted to women could be all bad, but that such a man could have such a dark side to him at the same time. Very useful in understanding Styron’s portrayal of Höss is Hannah Arendt’s seminal study of Adolf Eichmann (which in all likelihood influenced Styron). Arendt notes that the “trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal” (276); also, Eichmann “merely, to put the matter colloquially, never realized what he was doing. […] He was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness – something by no means identical with stupidity – that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period” (287-288, italics in original). Very relevant also in regard to the paradox or “mystery” of Styron’s Höss is Arendt’s conclusion about Eichmann: “[t]hat such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together which, perhaps, are inherent in man – that was, in fact, the lesson one could learn in Jerusalem” (288).
Sophie’s guilt are Stingo’s feelings of guilt when he realizes he should not have lingered when, on their way to Virginia, Sophie suddenly returned to Nathan, and so he wonders, “[t]o the guilt which was murdering her just as surely as her children were murdered must there now be added my own guilt for committing the sin of blind omission that might help seal her doom as certainly as Nathan’s own hands?” (551). It is in the paranoid schizophrenic Nathan, in fact, that the world’s greatest goodness and evil are united. At once Sophie’s passionate lover and Stingo’s best friend, Nathan is also the raging demon who molests Sophie, and, if he is present, insults Stingo. During one of these violent outbursts, Nathan’s voice “had come down through the ceiling, booming, with the ponderous, measured cadence of booted footfalls” (83), invoking the association with the boots of SS soldiers. At another occasion, his voice was “not so much loud as incredibly assertive and it cut through the music like a hacksaw. It was filled with trouble, […] chillingly domineering, scathing, irruptive” (216). Whereas Stingo initially thinks that when Nathan is in one of his erratic and violent moods, “he was merely being a colossal prick” (220), Sophie realizes that Nathan is a perfect variation of the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde character; she tells Stingo that Nathan “always had this demon, this demon which appeared when he was in his tempêtes. It was the demon in control, Stingo” (335). It is, in fact, this paradoxical mix of the good with the evil that Styron seems to want to lay bare in this novel. In this respect, Nathan’s speech about the cyanide pill with which he and Sophie ultimately kill themselves, seemingly copying – of all people – Hermann Göring’s suicide in Nuremberg, is particularly significant:

“Consider, Sophielove,” he was saying now, caressing the two capsules, “consider how intimately life and death are intertwined in Nature, which contains everywhere the seeds of our beatitude and our dissolution. This, for instance, HCN, is spread throughout Mother Nature in smothering abundance in the form of glycosides, which is to say, combined with sugars. Sweet, sweet sugar. In bitter almonds, in peach pits, in certain species of the autumn leaves, in the common pear, the arbutus. Imagine, then, when those perfect white porcelain teeth of yours bite down upon the delectable macaroon the taste you experience is only a molecule’s organic distance removed from that of this…” (361-362)

The intimate connection between life and death, between good and evil, between the bitter and the sweet is a central theme in the novel and nowhere is it expressed more eloquently than
in this passage by the schizophrenic Nathan. In a sense, it seems to constitute the essence of what Styron wishes to illustrate with his exploration of Auschwitz.

Since *Sophie’s Choice* emphasizes repeatedly that it aims to achieve a certain understanding or knowledge of Auschwitz, it is interesting from the perspective of ideological criticism to ask the question of what kind of knowledge the novel intends to achieve, and in particular, how does that “content” relate to the form of the novel? Barbara Foley argues how some literary forms are more suitable for conveying Holocaust-narratives than others and suggests that unlike, for example, the realistic novel,

nonteleological forms as the diary and the pseudofactual novel more readily penetrate to the core of Holocaust experience, if only because they do not impose idealist philosophical schemes upon their material. The greater appropriateness of these nontotalizing narrative forms indicates not that the Holocaust is unknowable but that its full dimensions are inaccessible to the ideological frameworks that we have inherited from the liberal era. (333)

*Sophie’s Choice* is indeed a kind of pseudofactual novel, but the question is to what extent its aim is to “penetrate to the core of the Holocaust experience,” without being hampered by traditional ideological frameworks. Styron’s universalization of the Holocaust, that is to say, his exploration of the universal presence of evil in human life as prompted by the Holocaust, “has the effect, and no doubt also the intention, of removing the Holocaust from its place within Jewish and Christian history and placing it within a generalized history of evil, for which no one in particular need be held accountable” (Rosenfeld 159). Though some comments could be placed with Rosenfeld’s criticism (especially with the last subordinate clause), his analysis is essentially correct: Styron wishes to understand the Holocaust in a personal philosophy of universal evil, which, in a way, is to historicize the Holocaust, or in any case, to understand it in a certain ideological framework (which, ultimately, is inevitable anyway). On a more formal level, the narrator assumes a certain critical distance and objectivity in his essayistic fragments about the Holocaust, which already implies a certain ideology about the possibility of knowledge. The personal distance that he has to the events of the Holocaust as an American has made him unable to shake off Enlightenment ideas of epistemology, the exact ideas that the Holocaust had proven to be inadequate and obsolete, according to the postmodernists. Illustrative of the narrator’s epistemological position towards the Holocaust is his wish to understand Auschwitz by trying to understand Sophie. But
Sophie, of course, is the fictional creation of William Styron, as is the novel’s narrator. Ultimately, understanding Sophie – an American invention – will primarily offer the opportunity of self-understanding, or, she will help Americans understand how Americans already understand the Holocaust. Whether that is good or bad is quite another matter, but it does explain why much criticism, influenced by postmodern (or rather, politically correct) and European theory have accused Styron of (mis-)appropriating the Holocaust.

Within the canon of international Holocaust literature, Styron’s *Sophie’s Choice* is a relatively unconventional novel that goes right against a number of eternal (and of sacred) truths of this literature, and of thinking about the Holocaust in general. To a large extent, the unconventionality of *Sophie’s Choice* can be explained by the fact that its author – a Southern American WASP – has a very different background and very different concerns from the “traditional” Holocaust novelist. However, the fact that such an author came to write about the Holocaust in the first place can be related to the fact that in the course of the 1970s, the Holocaust had become so much a central concern of mainstream American culture, so that writing or speaking about it was no longer restricted to American (or émigré) Jews, who, supposedly, would be more obviously concerned with the Holocaust. In short, the dimensions of the cultural memories of the Holocaust had changed in this period, and *Sophie’s Choice* as an expression of cultural memory itself illustrates how these memories are adapted (through universalization and Americanization) to meet wider concerns and interests. A lot of the discussion that was caused by *Sophie’s Choice* concerned this particular issue, whether or not it is morally acceptable to remember the Holocaust in terms other than those dictated by a traumatic, sacralized conception of the Holocaust, for example in specifically American or universal terms. Even though I think it is possible to defend the notion that Americanization and universalization is morally quite acceptable (within certain bounds), ultimately, the issue is perhaps not even that important. What is important for a good understanding, and if desired, a balanced evaluation of the novel or any work of art, and which is something that has often gone wrong in the critical reception of *Sophie Choice*, is to attempt “to understand the author’s experience in its own terms. […] The Holocaust could not have affected Styron the way it did a Jewish writer. This does not mean that Styron’s story is necessarily more or less significant that that of any other writer on the subject. Of necessity, Styron’s story is different” (Rubenstein 441). The point of this discussion has been to offer some insight into how and why Styron’s story is “different” and to suggest terms of understanding *Sophie’s Choice* other than those of “traditional” Holocaust studies.
Works Consulted


Chapter 3

The Dialectic of Distance:
Jonathon Safran Foer’s Everything Is Illuminated

The Holocaust in the 1990s and early twenty-first century has taken a prominent position in all forms of American socio-cultural discourse as an established, fully-fledged and even morally prestigious historical theme. Its lieux de mémoire – national and international ones – have been fully adapted to the needs of its (American) visitors: former concentration camps have become memorial and research centers, fitted with libraries, cinemas, multi-language tours, meditation rooms, education materials and restaurants. The United States Holocaust Museum, situated on the National Mall in Washington D.C., opened its doors in 1993. In that same year, the film “Schindler’s List” of Hollywood director Steven Spielberg hit the U.S. box office and became an enormously popular and critical success, winning seven Academy Awards. In fact, “Schindler’s List” is only the most salient example of Hollywood’s general embrace of the Holocaust as a popular and commercially interesting theme, as successful films like “Sophie’s Choice” (1982), “Escape from Sobibor” (1987), and more recently, “The Pianist” (2002), all seem to testify. Also noteworthy in this respect is the success in America of the Italian film “Life is Beautiful” (“La Vita è Bella”), winner of three Academy Awards and nominated for four others as well. “Life is Beautiful” is an interesting point in case, because, as a tragicomic Holocaust fairy tale, its alternative treatment of the Holocaust contrasts heavily with the gravity attached to the Holocaust in more traditional productions.

The point of films like “Schindler’s List” and “Life is Beautiful” and institutions like the U.S. Holocaust Museum and the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles (which has, reportedly, replicated a gas chamber, so that visitors can identify with the Holocaust’s victims more easily) is not just that all of these are committed to bringing history to a wide and contemporary audience. Their enormous popular and commercial success also indicates that the Holocaust is well-established in the cultural memory of the United States. At the same

14 Elements of this chapter rely heavily on my essay “‘What does it Remember Like?’ Jonathan Safran Foer’s Everything Is Illuminated as Meta-Memory” (unpublished), which was written in the context of a tutorial course on cultural memory and was supervised by Prof. W.M. Verhoeven.
time, however, they also illustrate how gradually the cultural trauma that was constructed around the Holocaust – that mythical and delicate aura of sanctity – has itself turned into a convention. According to Jeffrey Alexander this is a natural result in the process of trauma construction: in due course, the “spiral of signification flattens out, affect and emotion become less inflamed, preoccupation with sacrality and pollution fades” (22). Thus, the cultural trauma that was the Holocaust has turned into a broadly institutionalized memory, of which academic, educational, commercial, tourist, and artistic dimensions have been developed to the maximum.\(^{15}\) Here is a strange dialectic: the immediacy of the cultural trauma of the Holocaust, as it was initially conceived with slogans like “never again” and “never forget,” ensured that the memory Holocaust was institutionalized, ingraining it deeply into American culture and consciousness. At the same time, however, institutionalization changed that originally driving sentiment from something urgent and alive into something less immediate and more pre-conceived.\(^{16}\) In such a way, an interplay of forces arose in which the more memory was fixed (in institutes, history books and art, to name a few examples) the more it was subjected to a kind of “erosion” as well (e.g. the effects of the “Holocaust Industry”). This process I would like to characterize in this chapter as a “dialectic of distance.”

In these past few decades that have been affected by this dialectic of distance, “a medial, representation-based Holocaust memory has developed, which has become a self-evident part of our social and cultural surroundings” (Assmann 237, my translation). In the field of literature, this means that the Holocaust is no longer the sole domain of (auto)biography or Jewish fiction, but that its boundaries have been widened, as William Styron was perhaps the first to realize. But at the same time, “the full truth of history remains

\(^{15}\) One might in fact make the comparison with other tragic events in U.S. history such as the Civil War or the Titanic disaster which have reached a similar status of highly developed (culturally, politically and commercially) cultural memories.

\(^{16}\) Interesting in this respect is an anecdote told to me by my mother. She visited the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam in 1963, when the museum had only been established for three years. She remembers how the Museum was at that time still very much an “ordinary house”: visitors were even allowed to climb the ladder to the loft, were Anne spent many hours with Peter, her boyfriend in hiding. Comparing that visit to another one in the 1990s, my mother notes how the House had turned into a “real museum” by then, with Anne’s film clippings in her bedroom covered by glass, the loft out of bounds, and an enormous modern visitor center next to the actual “Achterhuis.” To illustrate the story with some facts: when the Anne Frank House opened in 1960, it welcomed 9,000 visitors. Ten years later, 180,000 people went to the house on the Prinsengracht and as many as 936,000 in 2004 (Anne Frank Museum).
inaccessible, and therefore, it forces us rather to ever look for new entrances” (Assmann 238, my translation), and that is why with the passing of time new forms of Holocaust art and literature have been developed, in which there has been more and more space for (postmodern) experimentation. A recent and very successful example of this is Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel *Everything Is Illuminated*.17

Hailed as one of America’s most promising literary talents, Jonathan Safran Foer (born 1977) published his first novel *Everything Is Illuminated* in 2002. Apart from becoming an immediate bestseller, the novel was received with international acclaim from both the critics as well as the public, culminating in Foer winning the National Jewish Book Award for fiction in 2002. In addition, the movie “Everything Is Illuminated,” starring The Lord of the Rings’ Elijah Wood, came out in 2005. The novel *Everything Is Illuminated* combines three storylines, written by two different “authors.” Very briefly, the first of these storylines is about the character Jonathan Safran Foer, a Jewish-American young man who travels to the Ukraine in the late 1990s to find Trachimbrod, the village (or shtetl) where his grandfather grew up, and especially, to find Augustine, the woman who helped his grandfather escape from the Nazis. On this trip, he travels together with Alex (the Ukrainian translator), Alex’s grandfather (the blind driver) and Sammy Davis Jr. Jr. (Grandfather’s mad guide dog, usually referred to as “the bitch”). This story is written by Alex in a bizarre and flamboyant kind of English. The second story is the fiddler on the roof type of history of Trachimbrod, starting in 1791 and ending in 1942, when the Nazis killed the entire population of the shtetl. It is told by the character Jonathan. The third storyline is Alex’s contribution to a correspondence between Jonathan and himself in which they comment on each other’s writing and reflect on what their trip and their writing mean to them.

Foer’s novel, a twenty-first century postmodern narrative about a young American’s search for meaning and identity in the history of the Holocaust, can be read in the context of the dialectic of distance that has affected the memory of the Holocaust in recent years. One of the points that stands out in this respect is the relationship between institutionalization and

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17 Besides Foer’s novel, one of the most interesting examples would be the comic strip artist Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986-1991). An (auto)biographical two-volume work, it tells of how Art Spiegelman interviewed his traumatized father about his wartime experiences as a Jew in Poland and prisoner of Auschwitz. The Jewish protagonists, however, are not people, but they are drawn as mice, whereas the Germans are cats (the SS men big, evil-looking tomcats), and the Poles are drawn as pigs. One of the most shocking scenes in the book is when Spiegelman represents his writer’s block by drawing himself as a human with a mouse-faced mask, sitting at a drawing table on top of an enormous pile of emaciated bodies of dead humanoid mice.
commerce. The institutionalization of memory carries some dangers, John Gillis argues: “[t]oday packaged forms of both memory and history have proven so profitable that we must be wary of the results of commodification and commercialization as much as the consequences of political manipulation” (19-20). In a way, Everything Is Illuminated is both a parody of American Holocaust tourism and the “Holocaust Industry” that feeds the desire, as it is itself a part of the “packaged forms of memory.” The main character Jonathan has booked his trip with “Heritage Touring,” the travel agency of Alex’s father, which, as Alex explains, “scores a translator, guide and driver for the Jews, who try to unearth places where their families once existed” (3). With the character of Jonathan, Foer caricaturizes the wealthy American foreign traveler, unable to understand local custom, let alone adapt to it. Thus, Jonathan offers some locals a packet of Marlboro cigarettes as a tip, does not want to share the backseat of the car with Sammy Davis Jr. Jr., because he is afraid of dogs, and he tells Alex and grandfather that he is a vegetarian, all of which is to the utter amazement and non-comprehension of the latter two. Clearly, Jonathan’s trip to Trachimbrod with Alex and Grandfather is not a kind of sacred Holocaust pilgrimage, but more profanely, it is a (badly) organized tour in which Heritage Touring provide a commercial service. Jonathan employs this service and as a paying customer, he does not hide his wish for comfort and luxury. Furthermore, a meaningful incident occurs when the excursion reaches what was once Trachimbrod: “[t]he hero was several meters apart, placing dirt in a plastic bag, which is called a Ziploc” (187). Jonathan collects a souvenir, betraying his status as a consumer-tourist. As Foer illustrates in more ways than one, the Holocaust is a commodity that can both be marketed and consumed, the very thing that John Gillis warned against. Of course, the irony is that Foer’s novel not only unmasks this practice, but tapping into this thematic source of (almost) guaranteed success, is itself part of it.

At the same time, however, the commercially “contaminated” processes by which the Holocaust is remembered are the result of what for want of better words I would describe as a “sincere,” “authentic” desire to remember a past that is still very much alive and relevant to people of various sorts. Jonathan, for example, is not traveling to Trachimbrod for coarse excitement; he genuinely wishes to learn about the Holocaust, about what happened to his family, and, ultimately, about himself and his own identity in relation to the history of the Holocaust. In recent years, Gillis notes, “memory has simultaneously become more global and more local. Events and places with international meaning such as Hiroshima, Chernobyl, Auschwitz, and Nanjing capture the world’s attention even when the nations responsible may wish to forget them. At the same time, people now prefer to devote more time to local, ethnic,
and family memory” (14). And so, aware of the internationally significant story of Auschwitz, Jonathan travels to a tiny forgotten place in the Ukraine to find out what this big story means for him personally. “‘I want to travel to Trachimbrod,’ the hero said. ‘To see what it’s like, how my grandfather grew up, where I would be now if it weren’t for the war’” (59). And as it turns out during the trip, history is far from dead and gone, but still affects people’s lives. For example, among the local Ukrainians, “[n]ot one of them knew where Trachimbrod was, and not one of them had ever heard of it, but all of them became angry or silent when I inquired” (114). Or, when Alex tells Lista, the last remaining survivor of the Trachimbrod massacre, that they are searching for Trachimbrod, she responds “[y]ou are here. I am it” (118), at a later point adding that “I think about it everyday. […] I think about Trachimbrod, and when we were all so young” (155). Ultimately, Jonathan’s trip to the Ukraine functions in two ways. First, it allows him to find his “roots,” to reconstruct the history of his family and how it was uprooted by the Holocaust. As Robert Eaglestone points out in his discussion of the novel, the “significance of this is, on the one hand, to create a sense of community and continuity over time, lost because of the Holocaust, between ‘Jonathan Safran Foer’ (the character) and the Jewish shtetl” (129). Second, the physical encounter with a locus delicti of the Holocaust and with the possessions and stories of massacred people forces all of the main characters of the novel, as well as the reader, to consider the meaning of the Holocaust in relation to their own lives. When Alex in his report of the trip comes to Lista’s story of the Trachimbrod massacre, he asks Jonathan (and again, by extension, the reader) to consider if he really wants to read this, and if so, for what reason: “Jonathan, if you still do not want to know the rest, do not read this. But if you do persevere, do not do so for curiosity. That is not a good enough reason” (186). Further on, after having described how Grandfather betrayed his best friend Herschel to the Germans, Alex addresses even profounder questions about the Holocaust: “the truth is that I also pointedatHerschel and I also said heisaJew and I will tell you that you also pointedateachother so what is it he should have done hewouldhavebeenafooltodoanythingelse but is it forgivable” (252). Thus, Jonathan and Alex’s writings constitute a personalization of the Holocaust, which enables them to explore in which ways the huge historical tragedy that is the Holocaust is of significance to them individually. By extension, the novel does the same thing for the reader as well, asking universal questions about the Holocaust and raising existentially and ethically significant issues, unconnected to either any specific time or space.
However, as was also seen in the previous chapter, universalization of the Holocaust changes the face of the event in the sense that it puts the Holocaust into broader historical and ideological frameworks. The traumatic conception of the Holocaust, characterized especially by the claims of uniqueness and “unspeakability,” loses its power to unsettle with the passing of time. As Alexander writes in this regard:

Charisma becomes routinized, effervescence evaporates, and liminality gives way to reaggregation. As the heightened and powerfully affecting discourse of trauma disappears, the “lessons” of the trauma become objectified in monuments, museums and collections of historical artifacts. The new collective identity will be rooted in sacred places and structured in ritual routines. (22-23)

With the passing of time, then, the memory of the Holocaust becomes more and more a normalized, established memory, that is remembered almost routinely in the established institutes and sites of memory. Moreover, this memory is a discursive and highly mediated product as well, and as such, it is dependent on representations. In part also because of the passing away of witnesses, the Holocaust and its “being” have become accessible only through texts and discourse, which creates a distance and an indirectness.

*Everything Is Illuminated* extensively thematizes the role of mediation of memory and experience. Rather than giving the illusion of direct access to the Holocaust, the novel emphasizes the distance caused by representation, as well as its own role in this process, being a representation itself. When Jonathan, Alex and Grandfather find Lista, the only remaining survivor of Trachimbrod, they find her house stacked with clothes and trinkets belonging to many people, as well as a room filled with storing boxes. When Jonathan asks Lista if she could show her Trachimbrod, Lista tells him “[t]here is nothing, […] I already told you. Nothing. It used to be four kilometers distance from here, but everything that still exists from Trachimbrod is in this house. […] There is no Trachimbrod anymore. It ended fifty years ago. […] There is nothing to see. It is only a field. I could exhibit you any field and it would be the same as exhibiting Trachimbrod” (154-155). However, the three men insist and Lista agrees to take them where Trachimbrod once was. Not wanting to take a seat in the car, she walks in front while the three men follow in the car. She walks so slowly that they fear they will not get to Trachimbrod before dark and that there will be nothing to see. Quite suddenly, Lista halts and at that point, it was “too dark to witness almost anything” (184). Lista says that they have arrived, but the men are confused. Lista answers, “this is all you would see. It is always
like this, always dark” (184). Alex ventures to provide a description of the place, which it will be useful to quote entirely:

I implore myself to paint Trachimbrod, so you will know why we were so overawed. There was nothing. When I utter ‘nothing’ I do not mean there was nothing except for two houses, and some wood on the ground, and pieces of glass, and children’s toys, and photographs. When I utter that there was nothing, what I intend is that there was not any of these things or any other things. (184)

The problem that Alex is faced with in describing Trachimbrod is quite bluntly that there is no Trachimbrod to describe. All that once was has disappeared without trace: there is only a void, only a darkness left. One might argue that this void creates a discursive space, to be filled by memory and re-representations by each new generation. At the same time, however, the image also powerfully expresses the insurmountable problem of representation: the singularity of the event itself – of any event – can not be represented or copied in writing/discourse, and, self-reflectively, not by this novel either. And so, Lee Behlman comments, writing about Everything Is Illuminated and another novel by Nathan Englander, “[w]hat stands out about the recent fictions under discussion here is the degree to which they emphasize the now vast temporal and cultural distance between late twentieth and twenty-first century America and the Holocaust, as well as the gap between our time and the American experience of the Holocaust for previous generations” (60-61). The dialectic of distance reveals how the relationship between writing and the distance between the present and the past is a Janus-faced one. On the one hand, Holocaust writing is suspect, for as Alex is keen to point out to Jonathan, “[w]ith writing we have second chances” (144) and further on, he notes how in their writing, “[w]e are being nomadic with the truth, yes?,” continuing to wonder whether “this is acceptable when we are writing about things that occurred” (179). On the other hand, however, the medialized and institionalized sphere of established Holocaust memory offers the opportunity of finding new ways of writing and remembering the Holocaust. In a way, one could argue that Foer is a charlatan just as well as that he is an explorer of new ways: for a considerable part, the conclusion depends on what side one prefers in approaching the dilemma of writing about the Holocaust.

Since Foer’s biography and personal relationship to the Holocaust is somewhat different from, say, Elie Wiesel’s or Primo Levi’s, it comes as no surprise that his Holocaust
writing diverges radically from the more or less established styles and tropes developed by the older generation of Holocaust writers and novelists. Unconventionally, *Everything Is Illuminated* combines magical realism, absurd humor and postmodern meta-fiction to approach the Holocaust with. Though Foer certainly adds light and at times even wildly hilarious touches to his novel, his writing – in my view – does not constitute a profanation of the memory of the Holocaust: like the survivor-writers before him, Foer approaches the Holocaust with the respect and seriousness that is demanded by the subject. However, taking up this particular topic in which a long and venerable tradition already exists, he must find and claim his own, distinctive voice and perspective (like Styron did earlier). In fact, I would argue that Foer’s perhaps somewhat experimental writing is a form of what Aleida Assmann calls the forced searching for “new entrances,” which was quoted earlier in this chapter. And it is this unconventional approach, which can be summed up in “the apparent clash between the familiar characters, conventions, and storylines of Jewish folklore and the dreadful events that would destroy the culture that produced them” that causes a “sense of shock or surprise” on behalf of the reader, as Behlman argues (58). Not only is the reader served, then, with Alex’s bizarre broken-English narrative, and with the magical realist history of the shtetl of Trachimbrod. But in addition to the humor and the enchanting history, there is in fact always the knowledge of how the town and its people would be destroyed by the Holocaust, as the effects of that destruction are constantly hinted at, even before the story of the Trachimbrod massacre is recounted later in the novel.

As Alex writes on translating Lista’s story of the Trachimbrod massacre, how “[y]ou cannot know how it felt to have to hear these things and then repeat them, because when I repeated them, I felt like I was making them new again” (185), thus is Foer’s experimental novel an attempt to make the memory “new” again. In a similar vein, Assmann writes that “[t]he future of the memory depends considerably on whether the impulse remains to [find new entrances]. [...] [T]he meaning of the imperative to remember, which we have given ourselves, consists ‘more in the search than in the possibility of the ultimate finding of the truth’” (238, my translation). A related point also seems to be made by the novel itself in one of the anecdotes it relates. When Brod and the Kolker, two of Jonathan’s distant Ukrainian forebears can no longer live and sleep together in the same room because of the Kolker’s violent spells (caused by a saw blade stuck in his head), they love each other through a hole between their separate bedrooms. After the Kolker’s death, Brod “cut around the hole that had separated her from the Kolker for those last months, and put the pine loop on her necklace,” reminding her of her husband “and of the hole that she was learning is not the exception in
life, but the rule. The hole is no void, the void exists around it” (139). As a kind of parable, the anecdote can be used to explain that Holocaust literature is not about finding, recovering and fixing the past as an ultimate quiddity, but that the act of memory itself (in forms suited to the contemporary situation) is what keeps the past alive in the present.

As in all dialectics, there are two sides to the medal of the dialectic of distance. Somewhat unfortunately, the term “Holocaust Industry” is associated mostly with Norman Finkelstein’s provocative and rather narrow use of the term as to mean a kind of ideological warfare by the pro-Israeli lobby. Leaving aside the question of whether that use of the term is quite justified, it certainly makes sense to argue that one of the effects of the continuing institutionalization of the Holocaust is that an industry has developed which has vulgarized and commodified the Holocaust as a kind of marketable history. The prize-winning and bestselling novel *Everything Is Illuminated* is part of that industry, but at the same time it also parodies it. The industrial or commercial side of institutionalization can perhaps be called inappropriate or morbid, but on the other side, the passing of time has also normalized and desensitized an extremely charged and delicate topic. Of course, this begs the question of whether such normalization is in fact desirable. In response to this, it is useful to turn to Jeffrey Alexander, who argues that

The inevitability of such routinization processes by no means neutralizes the extraordinary social significance of cultural traumas. Their creation and routinization have, to the contrary, the most profound normative implications for the conduct of social life. By allowing members of wider publics to participate in the pain of others, cultural trauma broadens the realm of social understanding and sympathy. (23-24)

By investigating the meanings of the Holocaust for later generations, and by its subtle (though slight) attempts to take in the perspective of the Holocaust’s perpetrators and bystanders, *Everything Is Illuminated* is precisely in the business of broadening the realm of understanding. Especially the perspective of the perpetrator (or even the bystander) is one path in Holocaust literature that has rarely been taken. The most serious attempt would in fact be Jonathan Littell’s massive work *Les Bienveillantes*, winner of the French Prix Goncourt, which came out only in 2006. As Hannah Arendt’s banality of evil thesis in the 1960s and also later controversies negatively illustrated, there are certain aspects in the history of the Holocaust that can be addressed usefully only in a normalized and desensitized climate of
discourse, which has only started to develop since the 1990s. Though with the passing away of the remaining eyewitnesses, the temporal distance from the events of the Holocaust is increasingly felt, it is at the same time this greater distance that allows present and future generations to address some of the most difficult questions surrounding the Holocaust, including some hitherto unbroachable topics, like “who pointed at Herschel” in a meaningful (though non-definitive) manner.
Works Consulted


Conclusion:

Remembering the Holocaust, American Literature, and Beyond

In her short story “The Third Generation” (2000), a preparatory study for her 2007 novel My Holocaust, the American author Tova Reich presents a satire of the – in her view – deeply perverse and offensive American commercial exploitation of the Holocaust. Her two protagonists, father and son Maurice and Norman Messer, run a company called Holocaust Connections, Inc., which carries the slogan “Make Your Cause a Holocaust” (92). All the Messers do, “steeped as they were in such nearly mythic tragic history, a history that set them apart from ordinary people” (87), concerns the work of remembering the Holocaust by selling it; “to keep the flame going – not for [their] own health, obviously, but for the moral and ethical health of humankind” (89).

The “Americanization” – that is to say, the commercialization, commodification, and vulgarization – of the Holocaust is something that has increasingly been addressed and criticized over the past years, both in Europe, as well as in the United States itself, as Reich’s story illustrates. Of course, there has been plenty of occasion for debate on this topic: the way Hollywood has exploited the theme, the occasional moral appeals made with reference to the Holocaust by some Zionists, the American appropriation of Anne Frank (for example, the recent attempts to grant Anne Frank posthumous American citizenship) are just a few examples among a larger range of issues that deserve to be subjected to serious critical scrutiny. My own approach in this study of American Holocaust literature has also been characterized, I hope, by such a critical glance, and I also have been wary of any unwarranted vulgarization of the memory of the Holocaust. In fact, the original working title of this project was “Exploration, Appropriation and Americanization of the Holocaust in U.S. Literature.”

This working title soon had to be abandoned, however. Though perhaps Leon Uris employs a somewhat vulgar, “Americanized” way of dealing with the Holocaust in his popular novel Mila 18, even that description reduces some of the complexities of this novel in the context of Holocaust memory in the early 1960s. Moreover, as this study has shown, the more “literary” American authors (who discovered the Holocaust as a literary theme only in the 1970s) portrayed the Holocaust in endlessly more subtle and ambivalent ways than can be
captured in terms like appropriation and Americanization in the common, somewhat
derogatory sense.

From the perspective of literary history, my approach to American Holocaust literature in the context of American cultural memories of the Holocaust has been able to identify roughly three important changes or developments in the literary representation of the Holocaust. With only a limited number of attempts to address the Holocaust in literature in the first decade and a half after the war, the 1960s and early seventies witnessed a still very tentative attempt to incorporate the events of the Holocaust in the American literary perspective. American authors, primarily Jewish writers like Chaim Potok, quietly awoke to the horrors of the Holocaust and tried to find ways of expressing how those tragic events in Europe could be meaningful to Americans. These writers, working on tenterhooks, were influenced by a traumatic conception of the Holocaust then prevalent, while at the same time, they also gave shape to this “cultural trauma.”

When in the course of the seventies the cultural trauma of the Holocaust had been more widely established as a literary theme by (primarily) Jewish-American writing, the presence of the Holocaust spread more broadly across American literature and was taken up more often by non-Jewish, goyishe authors. In this period, a definitive “Americanization” of the Holocaust took place, as writers like William Styron, a proverbial WASP author, investigated some of the universal implications and meanings that the Holocaust could have, in particular for an all-American public, in his novel Sophie’s Choice (1979). All the same, this “Americanization” should not automatically be considered as a derogatory predicate, as I have addressed in chapter 2.

As the traumatic memory of the Holocaust became increasingly widespread, attributing the historic events with universal humanistic significance, this memory became more and more solidified (and “Americanized”) in institutions and sites of memory. However, the institutionalization and the passing of time gave rise to a “dialectic of distance,” a process in which the more the Holocaust was remembered in a – by now almost inevitably – institutional context, the more the urgency and profundity of the memory was subjected to a certain inflation. Whereas the traumatic conception of the Holocaust in the sixties and seventies had forwarded the problematic nature of Holocaust representation, memory and discourse, by the 1980s and nineties, the public was overwhelmed with Holocaust discourse and representations. With the rise of a “Holocaust Industry,” it seemed no longer problematic to remember the Holocaust at all. In this context, as my discussion of Jonathan Safran Foer’s Everything Is Illuminated has illustrated, literary authors writing about the Holocaust must
search for new ways of approaching and representing the Holocaust, if they wish to add something to the by now enormous quantities of existing literature on the topic. Amongst other things, this means that they may have to work from a poetical position previously not associated with the Holocaust, or even deemed inappropriate for approaching it with. At the same time, they have to avoid reducing the Holocaust to a mere field of frivolous literary experimentation, or to a shortcut to fame and success.

Obviously, some questions still remain. Especially with regard to the latter development I described, it will be interesting to see what the future years will bring in terms of the Holocaust in literature. Will literature continue to pore over the unsolvable questions the Holocaust seems to offer humanity, and if it does, will it be able to do so with the amount of respect and reverence that seems due to the murder of six million people? There are both positive and negative signals. As an example of the last one, David Margolick of the New York Times writes of the abovementioned novel My Holocaust that “[Tova] Reich’s obsessions are not just unseemly but picayune, and My Holocaust is far more likely to infuriate or distract than to cleanse.” At the same time, a work like Daniel Mendelsohn’s recent written documentary The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million (2006) suggests that there are still plenty of ways to approach the Holocaust in a manner that is both significant and marked by great integrity.

Another unresolved issue, one that is easier to approach than the future of American Holocaust literature, but nonetheless has fallen outside of the scope of this study, concerns the way developments and changes in American Holocaust literature relate to literatures abroad, for example European literatures (especially German literature, and literature from the formerly occupied countries), and Israeli literature. Though numerous studies about national and international Holocaust literatures are in existence, the specific relationship between national contexts of memory and national Holocaust literature has been scarcely considered, while comparative studies on this relationship are lacking entirely.

Though there seems to be a general consensus in the Western World that the Holocaust is of great importance now and in the future, and must therefore be remembered, the ways in which it should be remembered are very much contested. In the theoretical domain of Holocaust Studies, there is no consensus at all, but rather, there are strongly opposed views combating each other. On the one hand, there is the oldest and, traditionally, the strongest “politically correct” approach. Steeped in postmodernist thought, it maintains that the Holocaust is an inherently traumatic event, impossible to penetrate, represent, and ultimately, impossible to understand. The “true nature” of the Holocaust is a trace, a
blackness, that cannot be approached, is in fact unethical to approach: they who have gotten to know it are those who can no longer tell the tale, as Giorgio Agamben has argued in *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999). This kind of thinking, which has also strongly defended the idea of the uniqueness of the Holocaust, is still very influential, as the awarding of the *Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels* to Saul Friedländer for his *Nazi Germany and the Jews* in 2007 testifies. However, its seems that many of its central dogmas are being dismantled and replaced, both by time and the rise of cultural memory studies.

Cultural memory studies, the theoretical framework of which underlies this study, has a constructivist approach towards the memory of the Holocaust. That is to say that the way we remember the Holocaust is at bottom a culturally created assemblage or construction of meanings. In its most radical form, it argues that the fact that we remember the Holocaust at all has nothing to do with its intrinsic memorable qualities, as is held by the politically correct approach. We remember the Holocaust because we care about it, not because it is unforgettable, and so, the act of remembering ultimately maintains a generally appreciated moral order. One of the key insights cultural memory studies provide is that there is no definitive, or proper way to remember the Holocaust, and that makes precisely Holocaust literature so interesting as a form of memory, because, as Aleida Assmann points out, “[t]hese questions of representation and their related artistic and ethical choices [Entscheidungen] pose themselves differently for each generation” (237, my translation). Indeed, as a verbal art form, a form of “soft memory” (a term used by Alexandr Etkind), literature is one of the most inventive, changing, and flexible media of memory.

The challenge for future theoretical work would be in finding means of uniting (some of) the positions of postmodern Holocaust scholarship with that of the constructivist thinking of cultural memory studies. Especially in the field of literature, the contributions of postmodern Holocaust scholarship are immensely powerful and perceptive (see for example Derrida’s readings of Paul Celan’s poetry or Agamben on Primo Levi), even though they have focused on specific kinds of postmodern writing, thereby limiting their scope. It has been the merit of cultural memory, however, to approach different forms of Holocaust remembrance (so not only the “high brow” literary works) from an unmistakably historical and cultural perspective, allowing for differences to be interpreted in terms of socio-cultural changes and variation, rather than dismissing them as profane or unethical if they do not correspond to norms currently held. In this study, I have studied four novels of the very popular as well as the more “literary” kind that have had considerable influence in shaping American memory of the Holocaust. In reading them, I have tried to imitate or come as close to the analytical
perceptiveness and skill that characterizes the postmodern approach as I possibly could, while at the same time trying to interpret each novel on its own terms; that is to say, within a context of memory specific to each. If there is any merit in my approach, the best of both theoretical positions could be combined more systematically and comprehensively than I have been able to do in this study, creating a whole new range of paths into the dark forest that is the Holocaust that cry out to be explored.


