"SURPRISING THE DARKNESS": HISTORY, MEMORY, AND REPRESENTATION IN JEROME BADANES' "THE FINAL OPUS OF LEON SOLOMON"

Author(s): Tresa Grauer

Source: *Studies in American Jewish Literature (1981-)*, Vol. 15, A TRAGEDY FULL OF JOY: From Malamud, Ozick and Heller to I.B. Singer and Celia Dropkin (1996), pp. 78-89
Published by: Penn State University Press
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/41205857
Accessed: 19-11-2024 14:56 UTC

Tresa Grauer
University of Michigan

"SURPRISING THE DARKNESS": HISTORY, MEMORY, AND REPRESENTATION IN JEROME BADANES' THE FINAL OPUS OF LEON SOLOMON

Lying in bed night after night, listening to his neighbor crying in the apartment next door, Leon Solomon feels an overwhelming sense of nostalgia. "Yes, a nostalgia," he repeats, as he writes about this experience in retrospect, "[f]or my nights at Auschwitz. I began to formulate an article (which I never wrote) entitled 'Nostalgia for Auschwitz.' (Perhaps I am writing it now)" (28). In the context of Jerome Badanes' novel, *The Final Opus of Leon Solomon*, this juxtaposition of terms is not as disturbingly perverse as it might first appear; rather, it highlights the novel's central tension—the devastating and contradictory impulses that Leon feels both towards and against the memory and the representation of his experiences under the Nazis. Leon Solomon is a Holocaust survivor and Jewish historian who, as the novel opens, has been caught stealing pages of texts from the Judaica collection of the New York Public Library and surreptitiously selling them to Harvard. Disgusted by his own lack of caution and afraid that he will be prohibited from practicing his life's work as a historian, Leon checks himself into a seedy midtown hotel and prepares to end his life. Over the course of three days, he composes the memoir that constitutes the text of this novel.

Written in the mid 1980s by an American Jew, *The Final Opus of Leon Solomon* provides a useful focal point for a discussion of the ethical obligations and the concomitant dangers inherent in historiography and the writing of fiction. By writing a novel about a character who writes both "official" history and personal memoir, Badanes calls attention to the range of authorial positions from which one might approach the memory and the writing of the Holocaust. This novel enters into the ongoing theoretical debates about what Saul Friedlander calls the "limits" of Holocaust representation1 by actually incorporating them into the text; in other words, Badanes confronts the questions of aesthetic boundaries and the legitimacy of artistic expression by making the act of representation the explicit subject of his work.

In the broadest terms, discussions of Holocaust representation revolve around two critical issues: first, the place of the imagination in depicting the horrors of historical reality, and second, the transformation of narrative as traditional systems of thought are called into question. Much has been written to suggest that figurative language is simply not appropriate in any discussion of the Holocaust. "There are no metaphors for Auschwitz," writes Alvin Rosenfeld in *A Double Dying*, "[T]he burnings do not lend themselves to metaphor, simile, or symbol—to likeness or association with anything else. They can only 'be' or 'mean' what they in fact were: the death of the Jews" (180). But while figurative language may be perceived as somehow incompatible with the transmission of factual information, it nevertheless provides

insight otherwise unavailable. There is no way, we come to understand, to represent anything in language without meaning being created—or potentially hidden—by that language.

Despite this critical awareness, the debate about the propriety of representation has only intensified during recent years, as Holocaust texts proliferate unabatedly. As Geoffrey Hartman suggests in his essay, "The Book of Destruction," "[p]reviously in civilized society, the limits of representation were linked to social decorum and to the limitations of a particular art medium"; however, these boundries (if they ever existed) are now being challenged by technological advancements and the capacity "to provide a mimesis of everything" (327). Such a statement moves the terms of the discussion beyond the immediate relationship between the Holocaust and its figurative representation. It also warns against a surfeit of images that, by their very number, distort the unique nature of the Holocaust and, even more significantly, it suggests that contemporary society lacks a certain "decorum" toward what for many has become a sacred text. The concern that aesthetic choice may overshadow or obscure the event only magnifies the difficulties of representing an experience which bears no resemblance to anything known or imaginable.

Currently, the anxieties of Holocaust representation are further compounded by the nihilism so often associated with postmodernism. Difficulty distinguishing between the real and the simulated is only one mark of a critical culture that characterizes itself largely through hermeneutic uncertainty. As empiricist methodology is deemed inadequate and the "master-narratives" that once organized experience are called into question, representation grows more and more suspect. Central to the perceived breakdown of Western philosophical and discursive systems is, for many critics, the argument that *post-histoire* is by definition post-fascism, post-Auschwitz. The Third Reich not only forever transformed the conception of evil, but rendered totalizing narratives difficult to read outside of the context of totalitarianism and genocide. The Final Solution thus serves as a supreme example of the corruption of universalizing principles and stands as an ominous reminder of the dangers of systematized privileged "truths." However, the alternative extreme, characterized by absolute fragmentation and an endless provisionality of meaning is, paradoxically, also antithetical to Holocaust representation. As a result, writers searching for language or archetypes to help elucidate the experience are caught between two equally untenable aesthetic positions. The desire fore realism and the necessity of a belief in human progress and agency is countered by the fear of authoritarian master-narratives. One possible resolution, suggests Hartman, is that "even so estranging an event as the Shoah may have to be estranged again, through art, insofar as its symbols become trite and ritualistic rather than realizing" (Introduction, 19).

The Final Opus of Leon Solomon, then, "estranges" the Holocaust by shifting the "plot" of the narrative away from the events of the war and focusing instead on the imaginative and interpretive questions of literary and historical representation. The metafictional construction of the novel—or, the author telling the story of a survivor telling the story of himself—serves to foreground issues of representation by self-consciously reflecting upon its position as written text, ultimately displacing attention away from the author and onto a character who is himself a writer. Badanes' narrator is a survivor and a historian who comes to understand that writing history is a fictional act that always involves individual interpretation. The notion that no chronicle is unmediated, that the genre boundaries between history and fiction are irrevocably blurred, is a devastating realization for Leon Solomon. Badanes

uses this construct to examine the possibility of fulfilling a public obligation to bear witness without being subsumed by personal memories. The structure also functions to highlight an ongoing desire to order the world conceptually through language despite an intellectualized awareness of the impossibility of such an act.

The metafictional form further provides Badanes with the means to distance himself self-consciously from the position of witness. While Leon Solomon is a survivor, Jerome Badanes is not, and like many other writers raised in the aftermath of the Holocaust, he enters the debate about representation from a position outside of the experience that forms the keystone of his character's life. Not incidentally, the death camp itself is notably absent from this novel; we see it only once, and then for its moment of shared humanity rather than for its signification of evil.[2] Badanes does not attempt to represent the "concentrationary universe"[3]; instead, this novel confronts the difficulty of survival after liberation. Although the period of Nazi rule is still of critical concern, Badanes marks the shift from first-hand experience to second-degree witnessing by choosing to emphasize the position for those years along a larger continuum—in part as a result of the already overwhelming corpus of historical documentation, in part because of his inability to provide "authentic" testimony to the actual death camps. Rather than placing at its center the miracle of physical survival, this novel's principal concern becomes how to live with the consequences of that survival—most notably, how to be a responsible Jewish historian without succumbing to a disabling despair.

Leon's position as a historian raises fundamental questions about epistemology and praxis, as testimony of the past merges with testimony of the present in the form of his memoir. Significant portions of the past reach his audience through the mediating and interpretive filter of personal memory, while the rest of the narrative is ostensibly the unembellished chronicle of the facts and events of the present. But chronicle by virtue of its expression in language is already inflected with narrative meaning, and memory, too, blurs the boundaries between what Hayden White calls the "content" of history and narrative emplotment. The relationship between text and analyst emerges early in the narrative, when Leon explains "I have the urge to write this all down, to write it down shamelessly and leave it for another" (7). Having advanced and discarded various strategies of writing "his-story," he now abdicates the responsibility of making meaning to an unidentified other, an audience who haunts him throughout the course of his memoir. Asking himself frequently, "For whom am I writing this document?" he posits "that ex-student of mine...the university professor" as one of the more unqualified and unworthy readers, and concludes ultimately that the text—and thereby his legacy—belongs rightly to his wife and son (220,7). Charting the tension between the writing of public and personal histories, the novel ultimately determines that they must be joined: as a survivor, Leon Solomon cannot keep them distinct and continue to survive.

But the inevitable question becomes even more pronounced: how does one write anything, either personal or public history, let alone the ineffability of the Holocaust? Badanes is writing in a world that is simultaneously aware of and resistant to what has often been called the postmodern "crisis of meaning," and this is precisely the epistemological crisis that Leon Solomon finds himself in at the beginning of the novel. His memoir begins with an explicit discussion of the arbitrary nature of reality:

> There is a metaphysical law, and you can depend on metaphysical

> laws, that unity is a figment of the imagination. As soon as a unity is slowly, bloodily forged it has already started breaking down—and right in the bitter heart of the breaking down a new unity is already being dreamed up in the darkness. You could say that this law describes my life (3).

The coupling of despair and ironic humor in this realization provides a good example of the contradictions and paradoxes that permeate the novel. The implications of such a potentially nihilistic observation are enormous. As a historian who has spent his life in the pursuit of narratives that provide an intellectualized, comprehensible ordering of experience, Leon begins the record of his own life with the recognition that wholeness is illusory; that no matter what effort goes into its construction, any system is in the process of deconstructing itself even before it is completed. And as a survivor who has made great efforts to interpret and redeem the events of his personal past, the recognition of the impossibility of such a task could lead, quite reasonably, to a sense of hopelessness. Yet the memoir that he begins under these circumstances belies a premature attribution of despair; even while making preparations for suicide, Leon Solomon sits down again to write his way into understanding.

His self-examination is unwavering and poignant as he weaves together the pieces of his past, as ceaseless in its exploration of the moments of brutality and humiliation as it is in its evocation of images of his childhood in Vilna. As the details of his life unfold, we realize that the crisis that has driven him to this Manhattan hotel room is but the culmination of a lifetime of incapacitating memories. He tells of his mother's suicide, of living in constant fear of discovery under false identity "on the Aryan side," of forced fellatio with a Jewish prostitute at the hands of two Nazi officers, and, with excruciating clarity, of his sister's torture and death in a public square in Warsaw (124). But, in spite of the horror of his wartime experiences, some of the most disturbing moments in the narrative reflect his disease with his American present. Leon's disruption of the library collection, his eventual estrangement from his wife and son, and his erotic relationships with both the daughter of a Gestapo officer and an anti-Semitic Black radio host all speak to his absolute inability to escape the psychic consequences of the Nazi regime. Profoundly unable to share his wife Inge's "capacity to live by forgetting," Leon's every act is designed to ensure his position of precariousness and alienation from the world (205).

For Leon Solomon, the real trouble, paradoxically, can be said to begin after the fact, with the difficulty of reconciling the present to the memories of the past. This post-war tension is clearly marked in the transformation of his philosophy of historiography. Leon's work as a historian begins with the exigency of salvaging, at any cost, any remnants of Jewish lives lost to the Nazis. He makes clear the crucial function of his profession, as well as its relationship to the Jewish community, when he says, "It is the supreme irony of my life that my incarceration in Auschwitz saved me, first by putting me back with other Jews, and second, by reawakening in me my sense of purpose as a historian" (133). Having lived in isolation in Warsaw as a Catholic with forged identity papers, unable to continue his work with the Jewish resistance out of fear of discovery, the fellowship of the death camp provided a new mission: "to keep alive in me the beings of others" (16). He goes on to explain:

> We were all the keepers of each other's beings—and I knew that the others knew that—yet we were all disappearing. Or becoming blind.

> Who then, I would ask myself, would be left to rescue all these beings, each one of which was filled with many other beings from his earlier life, from his parents' and grandparents' lives, which he was carrying inside himself? My strength derived from my obligation as an historian...I would write a commentary, I daydreamed, a memorial (16-17).

Acting as an excavator of historical persons and events is an act of defiance in the context of the camps, providing Leon not only with a sense of ordering—or mastering—the current experience, but also according him a future in which he imagines himself participating in a grand historical enterprise. His sense of obligation as a historian grounds him within both a secular and a Jewish historical tradition, reflecting his acceptance of an authority decreed by his presence at the events that he records as well as of the Jewish commandment to bear witness.[4] In the years after the war he talks about himself as "the archivist and savior" of the "precious volumes" that constitute Jewish history, seeing himself as their guardian as well as their interpreter (13).[5] It is still possible, at this early stage of his career, for Leon to believe that he can provide a service to both the Jewish community and to the world by recording history "as it was," conveying reality directly and mimetically into representation.

But the capacity to remember serves a personally redemptive function in the camps as well as a public one; memory thus not only saves others' lives but saves his own as well. Leon describes his regular nighttime activity in the camps as follows:

> I would begin to study the others. I developed the power to bring them into sharp focus....It was my work. I was sitting shiva....I knew that memorizing the faces of the others was keeping me alive....The memory [of home] kept me alive because—if only for a few timeless moments every night—I lived in a time before (and maybe, therefore, after) this universe of excrement we all inhabited. Many didn't understand that. They could not bear to remember or even hope, so they scraped out the eyes of their minds —but most of those perished (15-16).

This statement makes painfully clear that the memories that will later become too difficult for Leon to bear are precisely those that, here, save not only his sanity but his actual life. People become memories become texts—as they are inscribed on the eyes of his mind they become literally embodied: historical landmarks that provide a sense of grounding and the eventual possibility of some form of resurrection. And, ultimately, it is this hope for the future that distinguishes Leon from his bunkmates and allows him to survive. The keeping of history functions not only to rescue <u>others</u> for posterity, but to move <u>him</u> forward as well.

So how does this life-affirming and redemptive act become so emptied of meaning for Leon Solomon? He continues to write history after the war, with the furious energy of compulsion. But after Auschwitz, the need to remember becomes more and more complex, no longer "simply" a question of keeping him alive. As the motivation for writing becomes less tied to a sense of physical survival, its purpose becomes more potentially futile. After the war, Leon constructs himself officially as "the historian of a slaughtered people," ostensibly telling a "public" story, but he writes increasingly to exorcize the demons

of his own personal memories (207). Unable to forgive himself for what he considers his own "lack of defiance against the Nazis, and against God"—specifically for not loving and then poisoning his sister before the Gestapo brutally beat her—he is unable to consider his personal story worthy of telling (130). As such, his work as a historian serves as a means to escape his private memories: to protect him internally from the beings who, she says, "even [after the war]...continued to dance before my eyes, pleading, demanding, punishing, consuming" (17).

What was once for Leon a mission of hope, in which history was a story of redemption and humanization, becomes more and more a project of vengeance as he is unable to resist feelings of rage and the desire for retaliation. But the urge for vengeance terrifies him, suggesting as it does an inverted moral system by which evil is met by evil, and organizing principles of law and order and goodness are proven bankrupt. He searches for what he calls the "spiritual equivalent of vengeance"—that which will provide meaning and consolation without—and these are his words—"turn[ing] us into Christians" (14-15). He explains:

> Remember that vengeance gives us a purpose, a sense of mission, a thing worth dying for—and a concentration on another, on every smallest detail of his person....The pictures we paint in our brains of his excruciating torture are liberating and in that way spiritually uplifting. You might say that this devotion to vengeance brings us closer to God. Certainly it is one of the few available techniques for living through hell. I knew...when we began to perpetrate acts of resistance in Auschwitz, and the taste became quickly insatiable, that this thirst for vengeance might well turn us into Christians. On the other hand, a concentration on the other Jews in Auschwitz nearly unhinged me (14-15).

Again, we have here the sense of contradiction that informs the whole novel. Memory no longer fulfills a primary life function, maintaining mind and body; instead, it now threatens to "unhinge" him. Where his memory once functioned as an act of defiance against the Nazis, it now threatens to transform him into them. The question becomes: How does one keep oneself alive—and a Jew—while still memorializing the past? In a world turned upside down by the Nazis, conventional morality, conventional systems of justice, conventional orderings of history no longer provide any useful explanations of reality. God is not an instrument of mercy in this picture; He is a vengeful God who, paradoxically, if emulated, enables one to "live through hell." And torture becomes liberating as Jews become Christians, or, in Leon's world view, as Jews themselves become Nazis.

There is no "spiritual equivalent of vengeance" in Leon's understanding of God and Judaism, and no way to stay alive and Jewish when so many Jews have died. Although his memories of pre-war Vilna are distinctively and positively Jewish, the Nazi equation of Jew and victim leaves his post-war sense of national and racial identity both categorical and bitter. Refusing to praise a God that seems to him actively and spitefully involved in Jewish deaths, Leon attempts instead to write a history that refigures Jewish involvement, "lay[ing] to rest the ultimate blood libel that like ostriches we ignored the obvious, that like sheep we walked, one behind the other, to our collective slaughter" (162). However, dispelling the myth of victim threatens to equate the Jew and the Nazi—in his mind, turning him into "one of them." He is both afraid of "bec[o]m[ing] the Jew [the arresting officer] thought I was" and,

paradoxically, of "turn[ing] into a German" as a result of the dangerous appeal of vengeance (106,104). "Vengeance is not a proper project," he reminds himself, "Nor is any sort of violence to others—such activities will leave [a man] even more bereft" (108). They can turn "a Jewish historian [into] an executioner," he says, and if so, "he perpetuates the crimes against our people by this act of forgetting how to perform his sacred work" (82).

The narratives of both extremes—victimhood and oppression—construct diametrically opposed categories that are equally unacceptable to Leon. Yet he is unable to see an alternative to these totalities because he is unable to articulate a position for "Jew" that avoids the over-arching Nazi designations. Leon yearns for an explanation for the atrocities—a way out of the abyss, a way to reconstruct his identity, his family, his faith in a logical and moral universe. But his father's traditional conviction that "the Jewish people will live forever," which Leon says "turn[ed] me into a historian" and which has sustained generations of Jews through numerous catastrophes, seems glaringly inadequate to him in the aftermath of the Nazis' systematic policy to destroy the Jews.[6]

When religious faith no longer proves a sufficient organizing principle, Leon places renewed hope in the perceived objectivity of historical pursuits. In this he follows Yosef Yerushalmi's assertion that in modern time, history has become "what it had never been before—the faith of fallen Jews. For the first time history, not a sacred text, becomes the arbiter of Judaism" (86). Actively transmitting the past to the present while maintaining and corroborating collective memory becomes Leon's primary religious imperative, supplanting all other fundamental Jewish tenets. By defining himself primarily as a historian, Leon attempts to accord himself the seemingly neutral position of non-subjectivity—as neither victim nor oppressor. Conceiving of himself as an objective observer and recorder of history allows him, temporarily, to stand outside of his binary opposition Jew/Christian without denying his ties and responsibility to the Jewish community.

But this, too, is clearly impossible: Leon is unable to distance himself from the events of the Holocaust and still consider himself a Jew. Bound to the inescapable personal memories of the Holocaust and the destruction of his family, objectivity is both inconceivable and unethical. The constant presence of the memories of his sister Malka's death leaves him unwilling to move forward in his personal life and unable to pretend authorial distance in his professional writing. There is too much guilt involved in separating from the community of the dead; such an act would be a betrayal of those whom he loved, indeed, of all of Eastern European Jewry. Even loving his living wife endangers the memory of his sister, he believes, because Inge has been able to love, and live, in health, while Malkele was cheated of that opportunity. Thus, Leon concludes, Malkele "needed more than my historical interest in her life. She needed my soul. What choice did I have but to leave Inge...and return totally to my sister?...I would live dangerously again, on the Aryan side, so as never to lose sight of my sister, of my work" (205). Leon is unable to be comfortable in a living community of Jews; any desire to do so strikes him as a sacrilegious act of forgetting. "Better to be dead," he tells himself, "then to live by abandoning my murdered sister" (209).

The force of his memories and his inability to provide them any kind of explanatory context ultimately proves incompatible with Leon's understanding of his own professional mission. As the meta-narratives of history and religion lose their consolatory function for him, Leon begins instead to conceive of his historical project as a spy mission. As such, he determines to

thwart the authorities by making secret forays into the abyss of the past in order to retrieve the seemingly discontinuous "bits and pieces of what is gone" (80). But this abyss becomes less and less part of the public realm as he realizes that the ground to be plundered is that of private memory. He explains his technique as follows:

> To find what has fallen into it, you must be aware that...oblivion is always right behind you—and you must often look over your shoulder, suddenly alert for any opportunity to make a lightening raid into its blackness to rescue a single image...[O]nly when we haven't forgotten how to twist our necks and surprise the blinding darkness perched behind us do we make a significant contribution to our children (81).

That this darkness becomes more and more personal rather than public, comprised of his own family history rather than the shared communal experiences of the death camps, reflects a significant change in his imaginative construction of history. But the belief that history is only to be found in a collection of fragmented memories and "single images" thoroughly undoes Leon's sense of purpose as a historian. Overwhelmed by the recollection of specific moments from his personal past, he abandons his effort to construct a larger narrative of liner and ordered interpretation and begins to see that even his own "objective" historical writing has always clearly reflected his subjective memories.

Having come to the conclusion that historiography itself is an act of writing fiction, Leon pushes this notion to its logical conclusion. If, as he claims, "The commentary goes on as long as history goes on," then what better way to make your personal mark on history than by physically altering the conceptual framework of the documents?(9) By commodifying the physical texts that he steals and selling them for sixty-five dollars a page, Leon creates a whole series of new questions for future generations of scholars. He thinks to himself:

> If a colleague of mine discovered such a shifting of documents from one great library to another one, in the medieval period for example, he would attach historical significance to it. He would think and think about it and if he were smart he would learn something—and then he would write an article that would be stored in a library. What could he possibly learn beyond the facts? He could learn that to be kept from death, documents must be handled by living hands (10).

"If he were smart he would learn something." By cutting and pasting historical documents, Leon reformulates the narratives of the past and underscores their inability to create meaning. Fragmentation reaches its most nihilistic as he abandons the attempt to contextualize historical events in any system of truth or logic. Although theoretically we may understand how traditionally constituted notions of history have lost their value for Leon, we balk particularly when the text that is arbitrarily re-arranged is that of the Holocaust. But this is yet another way for him to make it impossible for the past to be forgotten, which redeems his act of stealing in his own mind.

Leon is caught at his crime, he says, because he temporarily lets down his guard, taking a "small respite from the poisons of twentieth-century European history" through his affair with the daughter of an SS officer (215).

As together they try to absolve themselves of the stories they cannot escape, their lovemaking "obliterate[s] history for precious moment" (215). But it cannot remain so; if history can be so easily discounted, his pilferings have no power. Only if he is alone to his thefts of documents have what he calls "dignity and historical necessity" (231). Leon is left feeling vulnerable, in danger, passive, explaining: "I had begun walking backwards without knowing it—just like the others. All the time I was living with the illusion that I still knew how to look back over my shoulder....Like one of those who had scraped out the eyes of his mind, I stopped thinking....An historian must remain an active agent" (105-07). Convinced that "[t]oo much respectability sedates us," Leon laments his own carelessness and his secret longing to flee the strictured position to which he continues to feel consigned by history. "When you walk backwards toward the past, you see nothing but the illusion of a future always receding," he explains (80). Such a vision is dangerous and blinding, deceptively waiting until "our hearts [are] stuffed with nostalgia, until the oblivion behind us pauses, then closes around us as we back into it unawares" (81).

That the reference is to Walter Benjamin's angel of history seems clear, albeit transposed; rather than backing blindly into the past, Benjamin's angel is propelled, unwillingly, backward into the future.[7] Neither figure faces the point toward which he is driven and thus cannot prepare for the inevitable envelopment by the unknown. Benjamin suggests that it is the past that provides inspiration and hope, as the knowledge of that which has already happened might enable one, as he says, to "make whole what has been smashed." In his scenario, history does not march bravely into the future but is driven forward inexorably by "progress." This seems an inversion of the conventional belief that the future promises continuity, development, and hope—a belief that Leon Solomon would like desperately to maintain, despite his pessimism.[8] Leon sees no alternative to his forays into the past: on the one hand, if his raids are not quick and sudden, he will be caught there and drowned; on the other, steady progress toward the future would amount to an absolute denial of the past.

After spending his post-war years unable to find peace in the present because it would mean abandoning the past, Leon's last efforts to write bring him finally, and paradoxically, into a living community. Having convinced himself that there will be no "later" in which to confront his personal past, he succumbs to his desire to reveal his memories—to himself, and to a still undetermined reader. Long what he calls "a pathological creator of smoke screens," he now realizes that to face the events of the past will not, in fact, subsume him; it is by not remembering that he has become a walking dead man (251). Soon after checking into his last hotel room, Leon looks at his face fully in the mirror, an act which he has not done in the seven years since he separated from Inge. In some surprise, he thinks

> It was my face all right, only hardened, like the skin of an old elephant, or from a dinosaur. No. To be accurate, my face was the face of a prepared corpse waiting in its casket to be viewed....I forced myself—it seemed suddenly a matter of life or death...to begin moving my face. After all I was not dead yet....I began to smile, little by little into a bigger and bigger and bigger smile. I saw tears rolling down my stone cheeks. I am reporting this objectively (20).

Despite the fact that by entering this room he has renounced his claim on life, Leon refuses to accept the implied inaction and utter despair. Instead, he

insists throughout the narrative that he is "fighting for [his] life" (198). He begins his memoir, "objectivity," with the image of himself as a corpse in the mirror, but his body—his physicality, his sexuality—contradicts his ostensible desire to end his life. The picture of Leon smiling into the mirror highlights his fundamental hopefulness and renders the impending suicide all the more painful. After two days of writing and remembering, he studies his face: "No longer did it look like stone. No longer was it filled with scorn. Why was my face filled with confidence now?...How alive my body is, I thought" (257-59).

With this image of the reflected corpse, Badanes invokes and rewrites the ending to Elie Wiesel's quintessential Holocaust memoir, *Night*. Wiesel concludes his autobiographical novel with a similar scene, in this case one that took place soon after his liberation from Buchenwald: "One day I was able to get up, after gathering all my strength. I wanted to see myself in the mirror hanging on the opposite wall. I had not seen myself since the ghetto. From the depths of the mirror, a corpse gazed back at me. The look in his eyes, as they stared into mine, has never left me" (109). Wiesel, having just emerged from the hell of the death camp, reclaims his identity in the mirror in the reflection of his corpse. But the physical body that confronts him seems detached from the self that he has known, providing little comfort or optimism for the future. That life can go on even when the world has been utterly changed seems an irreconcilable disjunction; the despair in the eyes of his reflection suggest this survivor's destiny.

Badanes rewrites this image to allow the potential for an alternative ending; Leon Solomon's mirrored reflection displays a still-vibrant man whose physical self has surmounted the suffering of the war years. But the implicit promise or relief of survival is countered by his inability to escape what Hartman calls the "entanglement of memory and revenge."[9] Physical survival cannot ensure the end of persecution. For Leon, the ongoing legacy of the Nazis is such that Jews remain "strangers" long after the war has ended, their belief systems radically displaced and their sense of belonging to the dominant culture forever altered. There can be no peace, no comfort in assimilation and acceptance, no safety in the elimination of boundaries between native and stranger, oppressor and victim. The hope for redemption through history that once save him now seems naive in the face of subsequent thinking. But the alternative amounts for him to sanctioned forgetting: a collusion marked either by continued victimization or absolution for the perpetrators.

Badanes' novel presents the claim that history must have at its center a fundamental faith that forbids disintegration and despair and allows historians to continue performing what he calls their "sacred work" (82). Such certainty of purpose in Leon's early professional work lies in his need to write the history of "a slaughtered people" and further serves as his act of locating himself within the Jewish community despite his loss of personal religious faith. However, when the notions of linear progress and dispassionate historiography fail him, he loses faith a second time. The writing of his memoir as the last act of his life becomes Leon's final gesture toward communication, ultimately both a means of self-knowledge and an articulation of a community that will keep his story alive. The particularity of his individual story comes to stand in sharp relief against his attempts to record an overarching narrative of Jewish history. There can be no representative Holocaust story, he determines; only by acknowledging his personal history (his memories) can he feel himself part of a community of Jews. As he asks himself near the end of his memoir why it is that he continues to write, Leon concludes, "The answer is simple. It is only when I write that I feel at home. When I am writing I am fully a Jew. Even now I am at home. So long as I keep pen to paper I am a

Jew at home" (220). "Home" designates the essential community of which he is a part and for whom he is writing: simultaneously the Jewish community and his own immediate family. Silence is clearly not an acceptable option because it is tantamount to acknowledging that there is no audience. Herein lies the redemption and the tragedy of the novel: despite Leon's fundamental awareness that there can be no rational explanation or closure to the experience of European Jews, and despite the fact that his suicide ends his own life inconclusively, he still assumes an audience for whom his story will have meaning. Leon does not raise his voice into a void; his final opus, written as the memoir of both a historian and a Jew, provides a necessary link between communal history and personal memory. But to locate himself with a community of Jews through the act of writing means also to confront the individual pain in which he has long been afraid of drowning. Paradoxically, the act which potentially provides the most hope does not have the capacity to save him.

NOTES:

1. Friedlander's collection of essays uses this phrase as its title: Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'Final solution'.

2. The single event that Leon records of life in Auschwitz involves a specific conversation about pigeons that he shares with his bunkmate. As the two of them come to the realization that neither has seen a bird since they entered the camp, they begin to discuss how pigeons feed their young. Upon learning that baby pigeons take nourishment from the regurgitated food of their parents, the man pleads with Leon to promise that they, too, will feed each other mouth-to-mouth when one of them grows too weak to eat (32). Also significant is the fact that this memory comes to Leon as he looks out the window of his hotel room, and is a poignant reminder that even everyday, mundane images have inevitable and inescapable associations. This particular memory carries him simultaneously back into the past and forward into the future, from the camp to the childhood coop of his cousin Samuel to the pigeons on the roof of the present hotel. On a later occasion, Leon comments that these leaps of memory, these "conjunctions are, of course, miraculous. They constitute a kind of fourth dimension that makes the study of history possible" (193).

3. The term *"l'univers concentrationnaire"* was first used by David Rousset in The Other Kingdom.

4. We see this injunction to remember and to bear witness in a number of places in the Torah; see for example: *Leviticus* 5:1, *Deuteronomy* 32:7, *Exodus* 13:3, and *Deuteronomy* 25:17-19.

5. Significantly, the "volumes" that Leon rescues are not only historical texts but, metaphorically, people themselves. When he recalls the barracks of Auschwitz, he describes his bunkmates as the physical repositories (texts) of valuable stories. "[t]he almost uniform shapes of the bodies, one man next to the other, most on their backs on the hard wooden shelves arranged like a warehouse or *an oversized archive"* (15, emphasis mine).

6. For a discussion of traditional Jewish patterns of catastrophe and redemption, see David Roskies, Against the Apocalypse, and Alan Mintz, Hurban.

7. Benjamin describes "an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating...His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise [that] irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress." Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Illuminations, pp. 257-58.

8. Although Hartman argues that "it is impossible to think of Benjamin's incursions in 'the dark backward and abysm' of time as post-genocidal," I think Badanes proves him wrong. "Darkness Visible," p. 12.

9. Hartman, "Introduction," p. 14. According to the hundreds of testimonies taken by Lawrence Langer in Holocaust Testimonies, relief in response to survival is far less substantial than many have assumed. Other emotions figure more prominently.

WORKS CITED:

Badanes, Leon. The Final Opus of Leon Solomon. New York: Simon and Schuster, Fireside, 1988.

Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Illuminations. 1955. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1968. 253-64.

Friedlander, Saul, ed. Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the'Final Solution'. Cambridge USA and London: Harvard University Press, 1992.

Hartman, Geoffrey H. "The Book of the Destruction." Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'Final Solution'. Ed. Saul Friedlander. Cambridge USA and London: Harvard University Press, 1992. 318-34.

——. "Introduction: Darkness Visible." Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory. Ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman, Oxford UK & Cambridge USA: Basil Blackwell, 1994). 1-22.

Langer, Lawrence. Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991.

Mintz, Alan. Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.

Rosenfeld, Alvin. A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature. Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1980.

Roskies, David. Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture. Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1984.

Rousset, David. The Other Kingdom. Trans. Ramon Guthrie. New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947.

White, Hayden. The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.

Yerushalmi, Yosef Hayim. Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory. New York: Schocken Books, 1989.

Wiesel, Elie. Night. Trans. Stella Rodway. Toronto: Bantam Books, 1960.