

**Rethinking “After Auschwitz”:  
Against a Rhetoric of the Unspeakable in Holocaust Writing**

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**1. Just What Part of “Auschwitz” Don’t We Understand?**

When Theodor Adorno situated contemporary culture “after Auschwitz,” he coined a phrase that has been accumulating significance and intensity as this culture moves on into the future and Auschwitz recedes, reluctantly, into the past. In the course of this movement, Auschwitz has come to represent the Holocaust for contemporary imagination. When we say “Auschwitz,” we do not mean the concentration camp in occupied Poland, or we do not mean merely that; we also refer to the vast network of bureaucracy, regional and personal politics, personal and impersonal betrayals and hatreds, German nationalist and racist presumptions that found expression **[End Page 203]** in National Socialism and a leader in Hitler, the scapegoat mentality and delusional ideology produced by a centuries-old anti-Semitism—in short, the immense, cumulative, complex, profound, prosaic, stunning, and disturbingly banal process that produced what is known as the Holocaust.

So when we refer to “Auschwitz,” we mean something else; when we say we exist “after Auschwitz,” we are making a statement about our own relation to history and to an especially uncomfortable past. Just what that relation is, and what that past contains, rises bleakly to mind: a train station, cattle cars, bewildered naked people, some go to the right, some go to the left, gas, ovens, chimney, smoke. A process stunning in its simplicity—the reduction of living people to smoke and ashes—while overwhelming in its implications: the reduction of living people to smoke and ashes. The word “Auschwitz” emblemizes this simplicity—giving the process a specific location and a name—while enacting its complexity: specifying, locating, and naming. Like any word, or any name, “Auschwitz” both signifies and effaces, refers and defers. When we posit ourselves “after Auschwitz,” we situate ourselves in the presence of people who died there, as well as in the accusing presence of those who survived it. Such an enunciation of “we” forces us to confront our own complex subject position of “after Auschwitz,” according to which we stand in some relation to both.

This relation is most often articulated in terms of an inability to perceive it, couched in an emphasis on the limits of thought, language, and representation, and as such is characterized by what I call a *rhetoric of the unspeakable*. Auschwitz, in particular, and the Holocaust, in general, are commonly referred to as unspeakable, unthinkable, inconceivable, incomprehensible, and challenging (or forcing us to reestablish, or to rethink, or to acknowledge, or to probe) the “limits of representation.” The more we speak about Auschwitz, it seems, the more prevalent and compelling our gestures toward the limits of our speech, our knowledge, and our world.

These gestures are familiar. “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” says Adorno. “The world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason” says George Steiner. “Auschwitz negates all systems, destroys all doctrines” says Elie Wiesel.<sup>1</sup> More recently, and most significantly, Jean-François Lyotard posits Auschwitz as a *differend*—the space that cannot **[End Page 204]** (yet) be filled by any single discourse of history, politics, or philosophy. “Auschwitz,” then, stands for the unspeakable: A complex challenge to communication, comprehension, and thought, the word refers to the limit of words, pointing toward a realm inaccessible to knowledge. *Speaking* the unspeakable would extend or efface these limits, diminishing the distance between us and that realm, highlighting the complex relation between what language includes and excludes, and forcing us to confront the implications of such effacement for thinking, writing, and speaking about what has been assumed to be unspeakable.

In addressing a rhetoric of the unspeakable in relation to the Holocaust, I assume that it is not merely an ironic paradox that the most thoroughly documented atrocity in human history is figured as the emblem of this history's incomprehensibility. While we would like to think that the sheer magnitude of the destruction (in Poland alone: 500,000 by mobile operations, 550,000 in the ghettos, 1,950,000 in the camps, three million all together)<sup>2</sup> would require a physical challenge to articulation, these figures slip easily off the tongue, forcing us to address the distinction between what is physically unspeakable, what is socially unspeakable, how these realms are determined, and the extent to which they interact. Further, the prevalence of such gestures toward the unspeakable in Holocaust writing demands that we question their purpose and function in such writing, and, further, in the broader parameters of contemporary culture, so often defined as "After Auschwitz" or "post-Holocaust." In this context, it is worth considering the extent to which the presumed "unspeakable" quality of the Holocaust—a quality usually associated with the sacred, with the ineffable, and with the challenge to ethics and aesthetics posed by scenes of mass suffering and death—is a cultural construct, replete with the interests and assumptions that govern any cultural construct, less a quality of the event itself than an expression of our own motivations and desires.

This essay will address the presence and operation of a rhetoric of the unspeakable in writing after the Holocaust, as well as the implications of this rhetoric for those who use it. The "we" in my essay refers specifically to those who, like the philosophers and historians I discuss, situate themselves in a history and culture defined as "after Auschwitz," a historical moment and cultural stance that is problematized by the limits to knowledge posed by this term. It is the underlying argument of this essay that a rhetoric of **[End Page 205]** the unspeakable, by distancing the Holocaust from contemporary culture, eradicates our responsibility toward, and even our complicity with, what has been deemed beyond the range of human thought.

## 2. Avoiding "Holocaust"

In 1952, Bruno Bettelheim criticized the term "Holocaust," calling it a heuristic that permits us to "manage . . . intellectually" what would "overwhelm us emotionally," hinting that this "linguistic circumlocution"<sup>3</sup> is somehow similar to the Nazi's term, *final solution*, and the technical term, *genocide*, coined at the Nuremberg trials: "Calling the Holocaust a burnt offering is a sacrilege, a profanation of God and man. . . . To call these most wretched victims of a murderous delusion, of destructive drives run rampant, martyrs or a burnt offering is a distortion invented for our comfort, small as it may be . . . it robs them of the last recognition which could be theirs, denies them the last dignity we could accord them: to face and accept what their death was all about, not embellishing it for the small psychological relief this may give us."<sup>4</sup>

By focusing on the motivations of naming, Bettelheim alerts us to the cultural, social, and psychological assumptions that determine the assignation of language to an event. Our choice of such terms as "martyrs" or "burnt offering" reflects our own interests: it reveals a "distortion invented for our comfort," offering "psychological relief," however small, not to the victims or the survivors but to those of us who are doing the naming. At the same time, though, Bettelheim employs terminology of the sacred to critique these terms: "Holocaust" itself is, for Bettelheim, "a sacrilege, a profanation." While ostensibly critiquing the implicit sacralization in "Holocaust," then, Bettelheim simultaneously affirms the Holocaust's heterogeneity to the secular, contingent, "profaning" operations of language. While critiquing one term by which the Holocaust is spoken, he retains the notion of the Holocaust as unspeakable. It is this circumlocution that characterizes the eschewal of the term "Holocaust" in contemporary discussions of the Nazi persecution of Jews in Europe.

When we sacralize the Holocaust—referring to it as a "burnt offering," to its victims and survivors as "martyrs," or situating it in a tradition of ineffability that stems from a centuries-old discussion of the limitations posed **[End Page 206]** to language by the presence or the idea of the divine—we create a series of associations with religious (specifically Judaic and Christian) narratives. These

associations “functionalize” the Holocaust, as Peter Haidu points out in his own brief critique of the term: “*Holocaust* represents not only disaster and catastrophe, but functionalizes them as a burnt offering, a sacrifice willingly offered divinity, a divinity apparently hungry and thirsty for the blood of innocents, a sacrifice which, properly enacted, might allow the victims the possibility of an eventual redemption.”<sup>5</sup>

The reluctance of Holocaust writers to use the term “Holocaust” reflects an attempt to avoid such functionalization. Not only does “Holocaust” evoke “a divinity apparently hungry and thirsty for the blood of innocents,” it constructs humanity as complicit participants in the sacrifice demanded by such a divinity and offers the possibility of “an eventual redemption” for the victims, indicating that their deaths could, somehow, make sense in this narrative. For such writers as Bettelheim and Haidu, “Holocaust” weds an image of humanity’s complicity in the “sacrifice” (it is “willingly offered”) with the victims’ possible “eventual redemption,” and as such should be avoided. By shunning the functionalization posed by the term “Holocaust,” then, these writers shun the potential of complicity—both of God and of man—with this horrific act that, when renamed “sacrifice,” might lend meaning to the victims’ suffering. By avoiding “Holocaust,” we avoid stating our own complicity with an evil God and maintain the incommensurability of the victims’ suffering with the sense-making mechanisms of redemption.

This “functionalization” should be further examined with attention to its object: For whom is the Holocaust functionalized? And can this functionalization, or its impossibility, be limited, directed, or controlled? In a religious narrative, “Holocaust,” as a paradigm of absolute evil, poses a challenge to mankind’s relation to God. As such, what is assumed to be the specifically Jewish character of the Holocaust becomes secondary to what are perceived as the broader implications of the event. Robert McAfee Brown, speaking from an explicitly theological perspective, addresses the Holocaust in this manner. Opening with an apparently rhetorical question—“How can one speak about the unspeakable?”—he concludes that the Holocaust must remain as a warning, an illumination of our moral landscape, to forestall other, similar evils: “There is hope that the Holocaust, unredeemably evil in itself, could be a grotesque beacon, in the light of which we could gird **[End Page 207]** ourselves against its repetition toward any people in any time, in any place. *And I believe that unless we can use it as such a beacon, the Nazis have finally won.*”<sup>6</sup>

Brown, then, functionalizes the Holocaust as a narrative of potential redemption, if not for the victims themselves, perhaps for future victims of future atrocities, and for human culture in general—the Nazis might yet “win” (win what?) if we fail to use the Holocaust as a “beacon.” His discussion is a central example of how speaking about what has been initially posited as unspeakable facilitates a certain mistranslation as a historically, temporally, geographically specific atrocity is turned into a test of faith. For Brown, the faith that is being tested here is, specifically, his own Christian faith—an extremely discomfiting concept for those who think of the Holocaust as something Christians did to Jews.<sup>7</sup>

Once the unspeakable is constructed as a theological narrative of destruction, sacrifice, and potential redemption in the term “Holocaust,” it becomes appropriable—not merely by Brown as a test of his Christian faith but as a generic, almost comfortable appellation for a broad spectrum of disasters: hence the use of “Holocaust” to refer to African American and American Indian histories, the AIDS crisis, and abortion, to limit this appropriation to public discourse in the United States alone. Holocaust writers commonly respond to this appropriation by replacing “Holocaust” with the Hebrew terms *Shoah* or, more rarely, *Churban*, terms that, writes Berel Lang, “are more accurately descriptive than ‘Holocaust,’ because they imply a breach or turning point in history (*and* because they reject the connotations of ‘sacrifice’).” Lang adds, however, that “these references, too, have theological or at least mediating overtones” and chooses to refer to “the Nazi genocide against the Jews” precisely in order to avoid such overtones.<sup>8</sup>

Further, replacing “Holocaust” with Hebrew terms generates an illusion of controlling the referent: A Hebrew word can, one assumes, refer only to a Jewish catastrophe, safeguarding such a

catastrophe from possible appropriation, retaining its specificity (the implementation of the Final Solution [End Page 208] to Nazi Germany's "Jewish Problem" in Europe during the 1930s and 1940s) as well as positing it as a cumulative moment in a Jewish history of persecution, perhaps signifying the end of that history and the beginning of a new one with the establishment of the State of Israel. While *Shoah*, too, has theological connotations, the term is usually used as a paradigm of disaster, specific to the Jewish people, that is located in history rather than in divine will.

Referring to the Holocaust in Hebrew raises issues of translatability between languages and, hence, between cultures, and the use of the Hebrew term *Shoah* to safeguard the specific Jewish identity of the Holocaust poses such translatability as impossible: a disturbing cul-de-sac for those who emphasize "never again!"—for the Jews, perhaps, but not necessarily for the Tutsi. Attempts to ensure the specificity of the Holocaust, then, construct the Holocaust as incommensurable and, therefore, as potentially irrelevant to contemporary history.<sup>9</sup> Finally, emphasizing such untranslatability posits the Holocaust as speakable only by those who have a claim on Hebrew—although the idea that Hebrew-speaking Israeli Arabs might refer to their own histories as containing a *Shoah* demonstrates that a claim on Hebrew does not ensure the specifically Jewish character of the Holocaust.

I employ the term "Holocaust" in light of these issues, not despite them. Expressions of discomfort with "Holocaust" reveal an unwillingness to face the salvationist implications of the narrative evoked by "sacrifice," a discomfort with potential complicity with the evil God who demanded this sacrifice or with the human beings who performed it, and—most crucially—a reluctance to enable or facilitate the appropriation of this narrative by other histories or other cultures. I maintain that complicity and appropriation must be confronted, not avoided: It is our unwillingness, discomfort, and reluctance that need to be examined.

### **3. Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews in Europe: Establishing the Limits of Representation**

That the unspeakable is an inevitable product, or aspect, of language is axiomatic. As language is a human enterprise, the inhuman—in the form of radical evil, infinite good, absolute beauty, or the utter alterity of the divine [End Page 209]—poses a specific challenge to the potential of human conceptualization and hence to language. When we say that what the Nazis did to the Jews is unspeakable, we are implicitly identifying this action as "inhuman" and hence as inaccessible to human understanding, external to the speech communities that form human cultures. Once the Holocaust is perceived as unspeakable, its expression in the contingent structure of language forces it into a representation that is, necessarily, a radical *misrepresentation*—an act that Holocaust writers are, almost uniformly, reluctant to perform.

Thus, despite the discomfort engendered by functionalization and appropriation, "Holocaust" and *Shoah* persist as prominent names for the Nazi genocide of Jews. The main reason for this is the powerful connotation, in both "Holocaust" and *Shoah*, of immensity, of totality: Both terms evoke a *total* destruction, a *complete* annihilation, an *absolute* devastation. This sense of total destruction would seem to indicate that (1) all Jews were destroyed, or (2) the destruction itself was total. Both assumptions are inaccurate: Jews out of the Nazis' reach—in North and South America, South Africa, the Middle and Far East, as well as in countries where Nazi policies were actively resisted, such as Denmark and, to a lesser extent, Bulgaria—were not destroyed; further, the presence of Jewish thought and life in Europe after the Holocaust qualifies any assertion that the Holocaust completely destroyed the European Jews. (Jonathan Boyarin defines *genocide* as "the destruction of an imagined national collective, the loss of a 'people,'" and emphasizes that since such a collective, such a 'people,' is itself a construction, its loss is equally a construction.)<sup>10</sup>

Despite its inaccuracy, though, a rhetoric of total destruction persists, enacted by the connotations of total destruction implicit in "Holocaust" and *Shoah*, and reflected in a

corresponding rhetoric of the challenge that such totality poses to representation. While it is not surprising that the Holocaust is perceived in terms of totality, or that the sheer magnitude of the destruction is considered to pose a specific problem to representation (the Holocaust is, indeed, a vast and violent event), what is surprising is that in the case of the Holocaust, this vastness and violence are assumed to be unique, unprecedented, offering a specific and, apparently, irresolvable problem to experience, imagination, conceptualization, and, finally, representation.

Saul Friedlander, for example, chooses the term *apocalypse* to describe the Holocaust and hence to articulate the difficulty, or impossibility, [End Page 210] of adequate representation. "The total dissonance between the apocalypse that was and the normality that is makes adequate representation elusive, because the human imagination stumbles when faced with the fundamental contradiction of apocalypse within normality," writes Friedlander.<sup>11</sup> But when he concludes that "the representation of the Shoah does not seem to have played any significant role" in Western ideology and culture, and that "the catastrophe of European Jewry has not been incorporated into any compelling framework of meaning in public consciousness, either within the Jewish world or in the Western cultural scene in general,"<sup>12</sup> one wonders: Just what "framework" or "role" would be deemed sufficiently "compelling" or "significant" a repository for such a catastrophe? The implied answer in Friedlander's essay is, of course, "none." Once the Holocaust is posited as an apocalypse, statements such as "the representation of the Shoah does not seem to have played any significant role" are always already qualified by the impossibility of any such role. By posing the Holocaust as total destruction that, necessarily, evades conceptualization, Friedlander constructs it as unspeakable.

This construction of the Holocaust as unspeakable produces, for Friedlander, a strong sense of the limits of representation—limits that, while they are "undefined," are nonetheless "clearly felt." He refers to a "perception of limits . . . the sense of which is compelling,"<sup>13</sup> elsewhere noting that while "one cannot *define* exactly what is wrong with a certain representation of the events . . . one senses when some interpretation or representation is wrong."<sup>14</sup> Such an emphasis on "sense" and "feeling" in response to Holocaust representations establishes the presence of limits without necessitating their definition, since to define the limits of representation would be to establish what is and is not representable, positing the Holocaust within a specific interpretive framework.

As a result of this positioning, the Holocaust becomes a paradigm of representation's limits, in comparison to which representations of other atrocities must necessarily fall short. So Friedlander asks, "Why do we feel that Picasso's 'Guernica' forcefully expresses the horror of the death and destruction brought about by the German attack on this peaceful Spanish town, whereas we do not know of any visual expression, nor can we clearly [End Page 211] think of any, that would adequately express the utter horror of the extermination of the Jews in Europe?"<sup>15</sup> The Holocaust, then, *must* be unspeakable, while "Guernica," presumably, speaks. Significantly, Friedlander's emphasis on the limits of representation rests not on any interpretive analysis of what makes the Holocaust unrepresentable but rather on an appeal to his readers' (unutterable) sensibilities: "we feel, . . . we do not know, . . . nor can we clearly think."

Such assumptions of the limits of representation effect a specific relegation of the Holocaust to the realm of the unspeakable: the realm outside of language, outside of conceptual or interpretive frameworks—structures that may themselves facilitate a certain disturbing reduction, translation, or appropriation. Emphasizing the externality of the Holocaust to these structures establishes the Holocaust's heterogeneity to sense-making mechanisms, while asserting the centrality of our unspoken (and unspeakable) "sense" and "feeling" in establishing this heterogeneity. The question remains, however: What *purpose* does the presumption of the Holocaust's unspeakability serve for Holocaust writers?

#### 4. Trauma and the Unspeakable

In the course of this discussion, I have been assuming that this rhetoric of unspeakability is explicit and deliberate, a conscious decision of Holocaust writers as an expression of their assumptions and agendas. But the unspeakable is also what cannot be physically spoken or pronounced, like an infinite word or an infinite scream. Its dimensions are located in the challenge posed to the psyche by a traumatic experience and the subsequent repetition and deferral that constitute the work of mourning. These psychic dimensions of the unspeakable are echoed in the taboos or injunctions against certain speech acts by the community: our reluctance to shout “Auschwitz” on a crowded street corner, or to force Holocaust survivors to address what they prefer not to speak about. In such cases, the unspeakable takes the form of trauma, not merely for the individual survivors but for a collective post-Holocaust culture, which is perceived to be traumatized by the presence of the Holocaust in its past. In this manner, what is psychically impossible (for the individual survivor) becomes a rhetorical expression of psychic impossibility (contemporary culture’s trauma in the wake of the Holocaust). **[End Page 212]**

This rhetorical expression, like a rhetoric of the unspeakable, should be examined with an eye toward its implicit political or cultural agenda. In their seminal book on testimony, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub introduce a rhetoric of trauma through which to address the presence of the Holocaust in history, its implications for narrative and culture, and our own response to this presence and its implications (which they call “testimony”). They situate their discussion after “the historic trauma of the Second World War,”

a trauma we consider as the watershed of our times and which the book will come to view not as an event encapsulated in the past, but as a history which is essentially *not over*, a history whose repercussions are not simply omnipresent (whether consciously or not) in all our cultural activities, but whose traumatic consequences are still actively *evolving* (Eastern Europe and the Gulf War are two obvious examples) in today’s political, historical, cultural and artistic scene, the scene in which we read and psychoanalyze, and from within whose tumult and whose fluctuations we strive both to educate and write.<sup>16</sup>

Perceiving the Holocaust as trauma does two things: It presumes that group identities and individual identities can be approached in similar fashion (hence Felman and Laub’s “we” can equally refer to the authors or to the imagined community of contemporary culture), and it posits the Holocaust as unspeakable, as the traumatic event that precipitates the psychic mechanisms of repression and the work of mourning in these identities—the “repercussions” and “traumatic consequences” that Felman and Laub mention.<sup>17</sup> In this context, Felman and Laub’s unquestioned assumption of “we” facilitates an unquestionable (because “obvious”) collapse of contemporary political scenarios (“Eastern Europe and the Gulf War”) into a history (pre)determined by the Holocaust, while never addressing the question that such collapsing raises (What do the Gulf War and the Holocaust have **[End Page 213]** in common?) or the ideological implications of any of this question’s many answers.

Texts marked by trauma ask, as Cathy Caruth asks in *Unclaimed Experience*, “what it means to transmit and to theorize around a crisis that is marked, not by a simple knowledge, but by the ways it simultaneously defies and demands our witness.”<sup>18</sup> In this manner, a rhetoric of trauma perpetuates the assumption of the traumatic event’s inherent unspeakability; hence, positing the Holocaust as a “traumatic” event reiterates its presupposed heterogeneity to conceptual structures, subtly emphasizing the assumption that it is unspeakable: Knowledge is, necessarily, too “simple,” a misguided expression of hubris or naïveté, as Caruth concludes, “for history to be a history of trauma means . . . that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence.”<sup>19</sup>

Approaching the Holocaust as a traumatic event, then, fuses an assumption of the Holocaust’s unspeakability to the construction of a collective identity that is presumably traumatized by the presence of the Holocaust in its history. This assumption masks the ideological underpinnings of identifying the Holocaust (which happened in Europe, to people who are, today, perceived as

technically “white”) as a trauma that reverberates through “contemporary culture” (which, one would hope, includes non-European, nonwhite people).<sup>20</sup> In addition, the notion that contemporary culture is “traumatized” by the Holocaust constructs contemporary culture as the (essentially passive) victim of the Holocaust’s impact on its (constructed) collective psyche—effacing the issue of volition and subsequent responsibility raised by the Holocaust’s presence in contemporary history.

Dominick LaCapra, whose writings on the Holocaust are informed by a rhetoric of trauma, defines the relation of the contemporary to history as “muted trauma” that must be “worked through”: “What is necessary,” he writes, “is a discourse of trauma that itself undergoes—and indicates that one undergoes—a process of at least muted trauma insofar as one has tried to understand events and empathize with victims.”<sup>21</sup> Trauma is, for LaCapra, the product of our own empathy and is hence testimony to our attempt [End Page 214] to understand the victims’ experience; thus, a discourse of trauma serves to identify the scholar who produces it as appropriately receptive and sympathetic to the suffering of others. Such a scholar’s ability to be traumatized by the Holocaust is an index of his or her own responsible, empathetic approach to history, while it constructs this history as traumatic, hence unspeakable. For Caruth, Felman and Laub, and LaCapra, a rhetoric of trauma works like a rhetoric of the unspeakable, as the protective psychic mechanisms of trauma operate as rhetorical mechanisms to protect us from the implications of a history that we simultaneously acknowledge and disavow.

### **5. Auschwitz 1270 to the Present: Gesturing toward the Unspeakable**

A responsible enunciation of “after Auschwitz,” then, requires us to speak the unspeakable. If a rhetoric of the unspeakable marks the limits of our knowledge with silence, absence, and impossibility, speaking the unspeakable, breaking this silence, extends or effaces these limits, confronting us with what had henceforth been excluded, foregrounding our own investments and assumptions that have perpetuated a rhetoric of the unspeakable in Holocaust discourse for nearly half a century. In other words, we need to ask, as I asked at the opening of this essay, *Just what part of “Auschwitz” don’t we understand?*

In a recent study, *Auschwitz 1270 to the Present*, Robert Jan Van Pelt and Debórah Dwork address what they describe as the “almost comfortable demonization” that “[distances] us from an all too concrete historical reality, suppressing the local, regional, and national context of the greatest catastrophe western civilization both permitted and endured, and obscuring the responsibility of the thousands of individuals who enacted this atrocity step by step.” They posit their own study as an attempt to close this distance: Their aim is to posit Auschwitz as “just another place which became what it did by ordinary people using standard procedures: requisition forms, transportation vouchers, planning permissions, bills of sale, bills of receipt.”<sup>22</sup> By displaying the concrete, prosaic networks that enabled Auschwitz to become a killing center, Van Pelt and Dwork intend to demythologize the killing, replacing incomprehensibility with knowledge and enabling [End Page 215] a more responsible commemoration of the function the camp served and the suffering it inflicted.

Van Pelt and Dwork’s project is, then, admirable: They claim to dispel the mythologization surrounding what is commonly (and disturbingly) referred to as “planet Auschwitz” and to reestablish Auschwitz’s uncanny closeness and similarity to the culture that produced it, as well as to the culture that remembers it. As a concrete place produced by concrete, prosaic processes, Auschwitz promises to gain significance and relevance—as a result of this study, we should no longer be able to dismiss it as an abstract paradigm of evil, separated from us, as Van Pelt and Dwork put it, by “night” and “fog.”<sup>23</sup>

But in the chapter devoted to the process of killing, titled “The Holocaust,” Van Pelt and Dwork move to foreground the limitations of their study. A bleak recital of the existing facts (who

designed the building, who constructed the furnaces, how the flames were fanned, how the gas chambers were constructed, how and when the system of mass extermination became operational, and the extent of its productivity) leads the authors to this statement: “We *know* all of that. But we *understand* very little about many issues central to this machinery of death. Research into the history of the region, the intended future of the town, the development of the camp, and the changing design of the crematoria has been useful, but *it is not the whole story* about the Holocaust at Auschwitz. It is the questions of the victims and the survivors which loom large” (A, 352; my emphasis).

When the historically specific Auschwitz meets the broader phenomenon of the Holocaust, then, the limits of knowledge must be firmly set. The limits of what we *know* are established and sharply contrasted with the limits of what we can *understand*, as a space of incomprehensibility is created through a gesture toward silence, absence, and impossibility: the unheard, unhearable questions of the victims and the unanswered, unanswerable questions of the survivors. These questions, according to Van Pelt and Dwork, redirect the issue away from *how* the atrocity could happen to *why*. Quoting a survivor’s experience of the selection process, they focus on **[End Page 216]** this statement: “They went to the left, and we went to the right. *And I said, ‘Why?’*” (A, 352).

It is “that process of selection,” declare Van Pelt and Dwork, “that is the core and moral nadir of the horror of the Holocaust—the selection, and not the gas chambers and crematoria. The Germans and their allies had arrogated to themselves the power to decide who would live and who would die” (A, 353). They go on to quote Hannah Arendt’s report on the Eichmann trials: “As though you and your superiors had any right to determine who should and who should not inhabit the world” (A, 353).<sup>24</sup> In this section of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, however, Arendt is not discussing the specific selection of the unfit for the crematoria and the fit for labor that occurred at Auschwitz; rather, Arendt is responding to the principle of “selection” that the Nazis enacted on to certain peoples as opposed to others. Thus Sara’s question “Why?”—when repeated at the end of the chapter (“And Sara’s question remains: ‘*And I said, “Why?”*’” [A, 353])—becomes not “Why selection?” but “Why the Jews?” or even “Why genocide?” These are questions that *Auschwitz 1270 to the Present* never attempts to answer.

*Why?*—Sara’s unanswered, unanswerable question—appears at and marks the limits of our understanding. It confronts our knowledge with the experience of the victims and the survivors, underscoring the inability of the former to access the latter. This evocation of and retreat into the unspeakable reestablishes an “almost comfortable” distance between Auschwitz and ourselves; further, by locating the experience of the survivors beyond our comprehension, Van Pelt and Dwork collapse the experience of the camps—both that of the victims who died there and of the survivors who lived there—into an amorphous space that cannot be accessed by knowledge or expressed by language. In the face of the unspeakable, then, our responsibility toward the memory of Auschwitz becomes deceptively simple: We can only, we need only, foreground the limits of our knowledge and gesture toward what we don’t understand.

## **6. Auschwitz and After: Complicity and the Unspeakable**

A responsible enunciation of “after Auschwitz,” then, demands that we speak the unspeakable, undo this gesture. But when the unspeakable is spoken, what is revealed? I argue here that speaking the unspeakable forces the painful confrontation with a deep-rooted *complicity* that is an almost **[End Page 217]** inevitable aspect of the Holocaust’s presence in contemporary history and in the ethics of *memory* and *responsibility* that such a history entails.

In his introduction to *Auschwitz and After*, “In the Shadows of Auschwitz: Culture, Memories, and Self-Reflection,” Lawrence Kritzman states, “The memory of Auschwitz and the question of Jewish identity have been key critical *topoi* in French political, cultural and intellectual life since



the end of World War II,” adding that “since Auschwitz, every word evoking its dark past either dissimulates guilt or simply denies the reality of the extermination.”<sup>25</sup> One might assume that Vichy, rather than Auschwitz, would be a more appropriate sign for contemporary French life, and indeed Kritzman’s main concern in this essay is Vichy’s complicity with the Nazis and the implications of this complicity for representations of the Holocaust in France. But Kritzman’s gesture toward Auschwitz, rather than Vichy, facilitates a turn away from the complexities of French *complicity* and toward an expansion of “Auschwitz” into a general comment on the responsibilities and ethics of *memory*: “The problem of remembering Auschwitz,” concludes Kritzman, “is how to remember it in order not to forget what happened at Auschwitz, or how to talk about Auschwitz without betraying or trivializing it.”<sup>26</sup>

By naming Auschwitz, rather than Vichy, as a referent for his enunciation of a “we,” Kritzman illustrates the manner in which Auschwitz, wrenched from its specific historical and political context, comes to signify the challenges to communication, comprehension, and thought associated with the Holocaust, while our own situation “after Auschwitz” implies, as Kritzman puts it, a compelling ethical imperative: We must not forget, we must not trivialize, we must not betray. But a rhetoric of the unspeakable (the obscurity and inaccessibility that characterize “Auschwitz,” the emphasis on our inability to understand it) qualifies such an ethical stance: If we cannot “know” Auschwitz, how can we know what not to betray, how not to trivialize, when to remember, why not to forget?

Choosing a concentration camp (particularly one as demonically efficient as the gas chambers and crematoria proved Auschwitz to be) to stand for the Holocaust seems to imply that it is the killing, and the killing alone, that eludes comprehension. One imagines a well-oiled operation by which Jews are unloaded from trains, subjected to a selection process, herded into gas chambers, and cremated—a strangely sterile, abstract proceeding, [End Page 218] perhaps what Martin Heidegger was thinking about when he referred to “the manufacture of corpses.”<sup>27</sup> Shocking as this image may be, it is still a disturbingly reductive account that effaces the more complex and far more disturbing issue of how Jews got to Auschwitz in the first place, while the passivity of the victims, as they are unloaded, selected, herded, gassed, and cremated, elides the complexities of life within, and after, Auschwitz. Further, by giving the horror a specific location and a name, the horror is localized, abstracted, and isolated, as if the Holocaust is (merely) what occurred at the camps. But the fact remains that family members, friends, neighbors, coworkers, students, teachers, employers, employees, religious leaders, municipal and government officials, real and imagined allies were all potential betrayers or murderers, and it is this dissolution of an entire network of human relations, not just the killing, that constitutes the Holocaust. Calling it “Auschwitz,” especially in the context of a discussion of French complicity and collaboration, effaces this fact, makes it too easy to face.

### **7. Rethinking Adorno: “This Is the Drastic Guilt of Him Who Was Spared”**

But we do call the Holocaust “Auschwitz,” and we do posit ourselves “after Auschwitz,” whether or not we agree with Adorno that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” Adorno’s dictum, almost inevitable in discussions of Holocaust literature and aesthetics, is broadly utilized by Holocaust philosophers and historians as evoking and establishing the challenge posed by “Auschwitz” to post-Holocaust culture. Occasionally, this statement is accompanied by a footnote or a parenthetical comment mentioning Adorno’s retraction of this statement in the final chapter of *Negative Dialectics*: “It may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems.”<sup>28</sup> Whether writings about the Holocaust evoke Adorno’s statement or its refutation, however, “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” stands firm, in Holocaust writing, as a marker of unspeakability: Holocaust [End Page 219] writers quote Adorno’s statement to emblemize the challenge the Holocaust poses to meaning, to writing, to civilization.

But these writers fail to recognize that in the context of Adorno's broader concerns about the position of cultural criticism in the wake of the Holocaust, this challenge is described as the result of a radical *complicity*. In "Cultural Criticism and Society," Adorno addresses the role of the critic in society, specifically the extent to which the critic is implicated in, and hence complicit with, the culture he or she examines. "The cultural critic is not happy with civilization, to which alone he owes his discontent," writes Adorno, "he speaks as if he represented either unadulterated nature or a higher historical stage. Yet he is necessarily of the same essence as that to which he fancies himself superior." The guilt of cultural criticism, says Adorno, is that by the act of putting culture to scrutiny, the cultural critic helps to efface culture's disturbing operations. "Even in the accusing gesture, the critic clings to the notion of culture . . . where there is despair and measureless misery, he sees only spiritual phenomena, the state of man's consciousness, the decline of norms" (P, 19). Thus the critic's work "detracts from the true horrors" as cultural critics "help to weave the veil" (P, 28, 20).

Adorno's proposition in the face of this seemingly inevitable complicity is to posit an "immanent criticism." He defines immanent criticism as an "unideological thought" that "does not permit itself to be reduced to 'operational terms' and instead strives solely to help the things themselves to that articulation from which they are otherwise cut off by the prevailing language" (P, 29). Immanent criticism, then, tries to speak the unspeakable, helping that which has been silenced toward articulation. It should avoid transcendence and harmony, focusing on and highlighting, rather than resolving, the contradictions between reality and ideology. But Adorno recognizes that this "immanent method," too, is likely to be "dragged into the abyss by its object," to be incorporated into the "causal dependence of culture" (P, 34). In other words, by speaking the unspeakable, immanent criticism runs the risk of being implicated in, or complicit with, its object.

In offering the idea of immanent criticism, Adorno is not so much posing a solution as describing a crisis. And the crisis is that of culture in the wake of the Holocaust and in light of totalitarian regimes (specifically in Russia). He ends his essay by expressing the paradoxical nature of the mind's attempt to escape the reification imposed on it by dialectical thought: "The more total society becomes, the greater the reification of the mind and the more paradoxical its effort to escape reification on its own. Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter." [End Page 220] It is within the context of this collapse of consciousness of doom into doom, of the mind's reification into its attempt to escape this reification, that Adorno concludes, "Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today" (P, 34).

My recontextualization of this statement in Adorno's essay shows how, for Adorno, poetry after Auschwitz is directly complicit with the culture that produced Auschwitz. And this complicity in culture and in the barbarism that culture has proved itself to be cannot be articulated or even known: the essential barbarism inherent in poetry after Auschwitz "corrodes"—or contaminates—"even the *knowledge of why* it has become impossible to write poetry today." Adorno ends his discussion of cultural criticism and society, then, with a delineation of the widespread complicity of culture with the barbarism it produced, a complicity that subsumes even the knowledge of its manifestations.

While Adorno did retract the statement, "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," it is important to note that Adorno's "retraction" reinforces this complicity rather than effaces it. "Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems," he writes in *Negative Dialectics*. But an existence after Auschwitz is nonetheless defined by complicity and guilt: "It is not wrong," Adorno continues, "to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living—especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living. His mere survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle of

bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz; *this is the drastic guilt of him who was spared*.”<sup>29</sup>

Holocaust writers, as a rule, do not take this “drastic guilt” seriously, and those who do (for example, Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*) are accused of blaming the victims, potentially perpetuating the victimization. In this context, a vehement eschewal of moral judgment reflects an urgent dissociation of Holocaust writers from the implication that they are applying simplistic and, presumably, outdated morality to an event or an experience they consistently maintain is beyond their abilities to comprehend. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi writes compellingly about the “gray [End Page 221] zone” of the concentration camp, in which the distinction between guilty and innocent is deliberately obscured. Addressing the crucial and painful issue of the victims’ forced complicity with their aggressors, a complicity that, Levi argues, only enhances their victimization, he rigorously distances this issue from comprehension, which he identifies as simplification, associating it with a childlike Manichaean tendency to clearly demarcate good from evil. For Levi, then, comprehension, which is inevitably simplistic, equally inevitably judges and accuses. While he notes that “the condition of the offended does not exclude culpability,” he is careful to add, “I know of no human tribunal to which one could delegate the judgement.”<sup>30</sup>

Emphasizing the unspeakability of the Holocaust is a common way in which Holocaust writers make it possible to talk about the Holocaust without confronting the morally questionable implication of seeming to comprehend, to simplify, to judge. But it is this crucial *complicity* of contemporary culture after Auschwitz that lies behind Adorno’s declaration of the Holocaust as unspeakable, and writers who situate themselves in the context of Adorno’s writings ignore this fact. While perpetuating the rhetoric of the unspeakable inherent in “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” they fail to address *why* Adorno thinks this is barbaric: the inevitable guilt and complicity that emerge from the presence of the Holocaust in contemporary history that defines itself as “after Auschwitz.”

In the case of the Holocaust, what makes the unspeakable especially compelling is our sense that applying language to the event involves a certain violation of its victims: To speak their experience would run the risk of understanding that experience, with its concurrent possibilities of trivializing or betraying it. Thus, the unspeakable is imbued with an *ethical imperative*: It frees language from potential complicity in the evil to which it has been fettered, and it serves as a space in which our relation to, and responsibilities toward, the dead are enacted. Peter Hayes describes this investment in the unspeakable as “an intellectual and moral reflex, all the more powerful for being propelled by hope and decency. The strength of these impulses helps explain why references to the unfathomability of Nazi evil have become virtually expected of any civilized commentator on the subject. [End Page 222]”<sup>31</sup>

Adorno recognizes this ethical imperative: “After Auschwitz,” he writes, “our feelings resist any claim of the positivity of existence as sanctimonious, as wronging the victims; they balk at squeezing any kind of sense, however bleached, out of the victims’ fate.”<sup>32</sup> According to the ethical imperative of the unspeakable, the heterogeneity of the Holocaust to “sense” is an expression of our own reluctance to further wrong the victims—ultimately, a valorization of our own morality. But this rhetoric of unspeakability explicitly effaces the “drastic guilt” of post-Holocaust culture, a culture that must confront its identity as the product of the presence of the Holocaust in its history. When this effacement is compounded with an emphasis on the “blindness,” “delusion,” and “elation” of the perpetrators, the construction of the Holocaust as an ultimately guiltless act is completed: The Holocaust becomes (merely) the product of unexplained, incomprehensible, random evil, like an asteroid hitting the earth; as Terrence Des Pres puts it, “Survivors do not bear witness to guilt, neither theirs nor ours, but to *objective conditions of evil*.”<sup>33</sup>

When I say that a rhetoric of the unspeakable effaces the issue of complicity, I am not referring to the specific concern of complicity or guilt that contemporary Germans may feel toward the

presence of the Holocaust in *their* history. Nor am I referring to the problematic issue of the victim's forced complicity in his or her victimization that Levi eloquently discusses in *The Drowned and the Saved*. Rather, I am referring to the most disturbing, because widespread and unspoken, complicity of contemporary culture with its own past and present atrocities. When I say that contemporary culture must "speak the unspeakable," I am taking Adorno's "drastic guilt" seriously: effacing the possibility of guiltlessness and addressing the issue of contemporary culture's complicity with its history. As my discussion of Lyotard's *Le Differend* will demonstrate, it is precisely this rhetoric of the unspeakable that facilitates the effacement of this complicity while maintaining contemporary culture in the presumably ethical position of refusing to further wrong the victims by misrepresenting their suffering through necessarily reductive conceptual and interpretive frameworks. This "ethical position" reflects a [End Page 223] certain self-congratulatory morality by which, under the guise of not wronging the victims, contemporary culture maintains its position as safely distant, conceptually and ethically, from this "unspeakable" event.

## 8. *Le Differend*: The Ethical Imperative of the Unspeakable

In "Rephrasing the Political with Kant and Lyotard," David Carroll clarifies that the "critical-political" goal of *Le Differend* "is not to reverse the injustice and replace the acceptable idiom with the silenced one, thus paving the way for future injustice, but rather to formulate a political strategy and to practice a justice in terms of the nonresolution of *differends*."<sup>34</sup> In the critical-political atmosphere posed by Carroll, then, Lyotard's concept of the *differend* is motivated by the ethical imperative of the unspeakable: a reluctance to translate horror into meaning, as such translation inevitably effaces the victim's traumatic experience, and this effacement runs the risk of perpetuating the wrong done to the victim. Carroll's reading of Lyotard aligns a critical-political agenda with unspeakability: For Carroll, politics and justice are enacted by maintaining a space for the unspeakable, the "nonresolution of *differends*."

A *differend* is, ultimately, a manifestation of the unspeakable. Lyotard defines a *differend* as "the case where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim. . . . A case of *differend* between two parties takes place when the 'regulation' of the conflict that opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties while the wrong suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom."<sup>35</sup> For Lyotard, Auschwitz is a crucial manifestation of the *differend*, the product of the conflict of incommensurate discourses. Auschwitz, says Lyotard, addressing Adorno's use of the term in *Negative Dialectics*, is "the name of something (of a paraexperience, of a paraempiricity) wherein dialectics encounters a nonnegatable negative (*un négatif non niable*), and abides in the impossibility of redoubling that negative into a 'result.'"<sup>36</sup> Lyotard calls Auschwitz an "anonym" and says that "'within Auschwitz' . . . would be found a name 'within' which we cannot think, or not completely . . . it would be a name for the [End Page 224] nameless . . . it would be a name which designates what has no name in speculation, a name for the anonymous."<sup>37</sup> In his choice of Auschwitz as a crucial manifestation of the *differend*, Lyotard is enacting the substitution of "Auschwitz" for "Holocaust" and posing Auschwitz as unspeakable ("a name for the nameless"), with the consequent effacement of Adorno's specific concern with complicity.

Lyotard structures his book as a response to key philosophers— Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Levinas—but it is his reading of Adorno that is of greatest concern for the issue of unspeakability and complicity after the Holocaust. By choosing Auschwitz to exemplify the *differend*, Lyotard is explicitly responding to Adorno's concerns with the state of culture "after Auschwitz." However, the *complicity* that Adorno identified as the situation of culture "after Auschwitz" is silenced when Auschwitz is read as a *differend*: rather than a "corroded"—and hence complicit—knowledge, Auschwitz becomes the paradigm of "what is not presentable under the rules of knowledge."<sup>38</sup> Lyotard, then, translates Auschwitz into the unspeakable, and this translation effaces the complicity that was Adorno's concern. If we agree with Adorno that the rules of knowledge are

corrupt and corroded—an assumption that governs manifestations of the unspeakable and that directs its ethical imperative—the notion of Auschwitz as a *differend*, “that which is not presentable under the rules of knowledge,” enables us to avoid, rather than forces us to confront, the inevitable complicity that this knowledge forces upon us.

## 9. Confronting Complicity

It is this complicity, not absence, nor silence, nor the limits of knowledge, nor any other manifestation of the unspeakable, that needs to be the object and purpose of Holocaust writing and of reading such writing. But what does confronting complicity mean? What are the implications of speaking, or not speaking, the unspeakable?

On 21 December 1997, James C. McKinley Jr. published, in the *New York Times*, an essay titled “Searching in Vain for Rwanda’s Moral High Ground.”<sup>39</sup> The essay addresses the disturbing passivity of the Western world in light of the Rwandan genocide: “Outsiders seeking to find clear villains [End Page 225] and victims in this conflict quickly run into a moral quagmire. The historical roots of the conflict are tangled and fed with blood. No one’s hands are clean. And this yields incredible difficulty in trying to think through what might be done to help this tortured region stop the killing.” The impetus, or reflex, to act only from a “moral high ground,” is not only posited without question by McKinley; he offers the Holocaust as an example of such moral ground from which Rwanda falls short: “For Westerners, whose concept of genocide has been shaped by the moral clarity of the Nazi Holocaust in Europe, the situation in Central Africa is baffling and frustrating.” This “moral clarity of the Nazi Holocaust in Europe,” it should be obvious, is a construct perpetuated by a rhetoric of unspeakability that explicitly effaces the potential of complicity—of the victims with their persecutors, of the Allies with the operation of genocide, of bystanders who claimed ignorance. I am not saying that what happened to the Jews in Europe is analogous to Tutsi and Hutu killing each other in Rwanda. I am saying, however, that holding one moment up as an example of “moral clarity” to explain the passivity in the face of the other is, perhaps, the most clearly immoral act of all.

The illusion of a “high moral ground” perpetuates the assumption that avoiding complicity in atrocity is, ultimately, to remain morally free from implication in this atrocity. This assumption is itself prominent in McKinley’s discussion of why the West does not act in Rwanda: “Those who would diffuse this bomb find themselves in a dilemma: How can one criticize the current Government’s abuses without appearing to condone the genocide of 1994? And how can outsiders encourage a negotiated political solution between the Government and exiled Hutu leaders without being accused of forcing victims of genocide to come to terms with the people who tried to exterminate them?” The “dilemma” that McKinley outlines assumes that it is possible to “criticize . . . without appearing to condone,” and to “encourage . . . without being accused”; global intervention, thinks McKinley, can or should be enacted only from a position in which one cannot be deemed complicit in global politics. According to McKinley’s argument, the West does not interfere in Rwanda in order to avoid potential complicity in the genocide there.

My emphasis on complicity, in light of McKinley’s assumptions in his essay on Rwanda, should indicate the broader parameters of my critique of a rhetoric of the unspeakable, not merely in Holocaust writing but in the far broader context of international political rhetoric and action. Evoked not only as an emblem of the limits of language and of culture, or as a critical presence that necessitates a rethinking of language and culture per se, the Holocaust—and Auschwitz, its synecdochic representation—also functions as a [End Page 226] metaphor of what is by now so tritely known as “man’s inhumanity to man,” and invocations of this metaphor in the context of discussions of global community, inter- and transnational politics, as well as domestic policy “after Auschwitz” have become, sadly, equally trite. What disturbs me is less the possibility that the Holocaust, by virtue of its prominence in such discussions, may have been rendered so emblematic that the details of its specificity no longer command as much of our attention as, perhaps, they ought; what disturbs me, rather, is this: the extent to which the limits of language

invoked by “the unspeakable” are wielded as a foundation of contemporary cultural identity—an identity, problematically enough, defined as “after Auschwitz”—and the corresponding assumption that such a wielding performs some sort of ethics, as if delineating the unspeakability of the Holocaust is an effective, and responsible, rejoinder to the all-pervasive mantra “Never again!”

This wielding occurs in language, or, more precisely, in *rhetoric*: the performance of language in a specific cultural and political context. Such context presupposes the presence and operation of a cultural and political agenda, be it explicit or not. In the case of the Holocaust, a rhetoric of the unspeakable is endowed with a significant ethical clout: As the writers discussed in this essay maintain, to speak the unspeakable is to somehow violate it, whether it desecrates the “sanctity” of the victims’ suffering or (perhaps concurrently) whether it enables an illusion of conceptual mastery, the self-congratulatory assertion of which appears, in the context of such mass suffering, to be painfully inappropriate at best, downright pernicious at worst. But when this rhetoric is employed in a global arena, this ethical clout lends it a significant amount of political power: Phrasing a historical fact in terms generated by the Holocaust (concentration camps, genocide, ethnic cleansing) works to justify political intervention (most recently in Kosovo) while effectively masking the less noble purposes that inform such intervention (evident in the Gulf War). At the same time, this rhetoric is employed to justify an equally self-interested *abstention* from political intervention (as per McKinley’s analysis of the case of Rwanda). For good or ill, both, or neither, the political power inherent in a rhetoric of the unspeakable is justified, ethically, by its strong anchoring in the disquieting presence of the Holocaust in history.

The sad fact remains, however, that the ethical injunction under the aegis of which this rhetoric is evoked is rarely, if ever, borne out in practice. (Need I enumerate the bloody ethnic wars that have marked the second half of the twentieth century? The criminal silencing of AIDS? The still-pervasive **[End Page 227]** racism and sexism that characterize our cultures?) This is not to say, merely, that those who employ what I call a rhetoric of the unspeakable are, themselves, complicit in the perpetuation of the world’s woes. At fault here is the assumption that rhetorical performance (specifically, rhetorical performance that modestly and self-consciously gestures toward its own limits) is ethical practice: an obvious enough fallacy, it is true, but a fallacy that is nonetheless obscured precisely by a rhetoric of the unspeakable, a rhetoric that has, by the end of this century, become so effectively and affectively scripted so as to practically foreclose the possibility of its interrogation.

To conclude, focusing on what has been constructed as “unspeakable” merely reiterates the ethical imperative by which we, as members of post-Holocaust culture, refrain from further wronging the victims of the Holocaust, and, further, avoid the uncomfortable implications of addressing the presence of the Holocaust in a culture that defines itself as the product of the Holocaust in its past. By emphasizing the unspeakability of the victims’ experience, its incommensurability to conceptual structures, we absolve the victims of guilt—as if we, nonsurvivors, had the ability or even the right to do so—and distance ourselves from their experience, as if we could determine which aspects of our own history are constitutive and which are unassimilable. Finally, a rhetoric of the unspeakable facilitates the masquerade of rhetorical performance as ethical practice, as eloquent gestures toward the limits of language replace far less comfortable engagement with a painful and morally ambiguous reality in which there never is, and never has been, a “moral high ground.”

The unspeakable, I urge, must be spoken. Complicity needs to be confronted, not avoided. Unlike language, complicity has no limits; unlike rhetorical performance, ethical practice cannot reasonably gesture toward its own inefficacy. Only by speaking the unspeakable, confronting the fact of complicity and assuming our own, can we effectively delineate the complexity of the victims’ experience, confront the presence of the Holocaust in our past, and, perhaps, reach a more responsible understanding of what “after Auschwitz” really means.

In the course of this essay, “Auschwitz,” “after Auschwitz,” and “Holocaust” will move in and out of quotation marks. I use quotation marks in order to reflect a crucial point of the essay: In the case of “Auschwitz,” the relation between the name of the concentration camp itself and the discourse it is evoked to signify is (I argue, deliberately) blurred. “After Auschwitz” and “Holocaust” refer to similar instances, and one of the purposes of “Rethinking ‘After Auschwitz’” is to address the blurring of these distinctions and to investigate what these significant slippages enable.

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### Notes

Statements that begin each section of this essay are “riffs” that reflect a moment in the life of Miles Davis. For the essay’s opening quotation, see Ian Carr, *Miles Davis: The Definitive Biography*, cited below.

1. Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Sherry Weber (London: Neville Spearman, 1955), 34; George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), 123; and Elie Wiesel, “The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration,” in *Dimensions of the Holocaust* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1977), 7. Hereafter, subsequent references to *Prisms* will be cited parenthetically as *P*.

2. Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1985), 767. These figures refer only to Jews. They exclude Poles, Gypsies, homosexuals, the mentally ill, and other victims of National Socialism in the years 1933–1945.

3. Bruno Bettelheim, “The Holocaust—One Generation After,” in *Thinking the Unthinkable*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (New York: Paulist, 1990), 380–81.

4. Bettelheim, “The Holocaust,” 379.

5. Peter Haidu, “The Dialectics of Unspeakability: Language, Silence, and the Narratives of Desubjectification,” in *Probing the Limits of Representation*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 279.

6. Robert McAfee Brown, “The Holocaust as a Problem in Moral Choice,” in *Dimensions of the Holocaust*, 47, 62.

7. Daniel Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* (New York: Random House, 1996) has been widely, and justly, criticized (see, for example, Raul Hilberg in *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 4 [1995]: 721–28); I am, however, sympathetic to Goldhagen’s contention that the Holocaust is, at least in part, a manifestation of an explicitly Christian anti-Semitism.

8. Berel Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), xxi.

9. Peter Haidu, for example, writes, "Exclusive stress on the uniqueness of the Event, combined with its sacralization, results in its disconnectedness from history" (in *Probing the Limits of Representation*, 291).
10. Jonathan Boyarin, *Storm from Paradise* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1992), 7.
11. Saul Friedlander, *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews in Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 51.
12. Friedlander, *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews*, 51, 43.
13. Friedlander, *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews*, 56.
14. Saul Friedlander, introduction to *Probing the Limits of Representation*, 3–4.
15. Friedlander, *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews*, 58.
16. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), xiv. While Felman and Laub do not refer explicitly to the Holocaust in this passage, their study is structured around the notion that the Holocaust reverberates as a traumatic event in contemporary history.
17. I would extend Yael Feldman's observations about Israeli literature to this rhetoric of trauma. Feldman, writing about contemporary Israeli fiction, notes that in such literature psychoanalysis is appropriated for the purposes of ideology critique and contends that "Freudianism is used only as a metaphor; in the final analysis, it is ideology rather than individual psychology that is the primary force behind these literary representations" (Yael Feldman, "Whose Story Is It, Anyway?" in *Probing the Limits of Representation*, 226).
18. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 5.
19. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 18.
20. Under the Nazis, of course, Jews were considered nonwhite. See Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991), for a more extensive discussion of this issue.
21. Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), 220–21; my emphasis.
22. Robert Jan Van Pelt and Debórah Dwork, *Auschwitz 1270 to the Present* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996), 11. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *A*.
23. Van Pelt and Dwork's reference to Alain Renais's film *Night and Fog* (1955) is telling: Critics have noted that the stylistic mastery of *Night and Fog* aestheticizes the Holocaust to such an extent that, despite its use of documentary material, the film maintains the Holocaust as unrepresentable. See Geoffrey Hartman, "The Cinema Animal," and Omer Bartov, "Spielberg's Oskar: Hollywood Tries Evil," in *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on "Schindler's List,"* ed. Yosefa Loshitzky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 61–76 and 41–60.
24. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin, 1994), 279.



25. Lawrence D. Kritzman, ed., *Auschwitz and After: Race, Culture, and "the Jewish Question" in France* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 1.

26. Kritzman, *Auschwitz and After*, 8.

27. Berel Lang, in *Heidegger's Silence* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), analyzes this phrase and notes that "what is problematic here is . . . the abstraction and generalization by which Heidegger hedges the concepts of death and technology, in effect excluding for either of these the likelihood, perhaps even the possibility, of an interior view—the view of the subject" (18).

28. Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury, 1973), 362.

29. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 362–63; my emphasis.

30. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (1986; reprint, New York: Random House, 1989), 44.

31. Peter Hayes, introduction to *Lessons and Legacies* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 3. He adds: "Although such statements about another subject might be taken as disappointing confessions of (sometimes lengthy) explanatory failure, we crave them in this context as part of a reassuring pact betweenasserter and audience. The former, in effect, avows that 'I cannot understand, since I could not have done or permitted such things,' and the latter, eager to say the same, nods in agreement."

32. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 361.

33. Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 49; my emphasis.

34. David Carroll "Rephrasing the Political with Kant and Lyotard: From Aesthetic to Political Judgements," *Diacritics* 14, no. 4 (1984): 78.

35. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 9.

36. Jean-François Lyotard, "Discussions, or Phrasing 'after Auschwitz,'" in *Auschwitz and After*, 152.

37. Lyotard, "Discussions, or Phrasing 'after Auschwitz,'" 153.

38. Lyotard, *The Differend*, 57.

39. James C. McKinley Jr., "Searching in Vain for Rwanda's Moral High Ground," *New York Times*, 21 December 1997.