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Author(s): Robert Braun
Source: *History and Theory*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (May, 1994), pp. 172-197
Published by: Wiley for Wesleyan University
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/2505383
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THE HOLOCAUST AND PROBLEMS OF HISTORICAL REPRESENTATION

ROBERT BRAUN

ABSTRACT

This essay examines different viewpoints taken by historians and theorists in three important debates about the Holocaust and the Nazi past in Germany. Analysis shows that the content and form of historical judgment, the limits of historical narratives, and the referential connections between "facts," "representation," and "truth" are more problematic than historians and social theorists taking part in these debates would like to believe. Examples show that attempts to represent past "reality" are closely related to the politically and socially significant interplay between individual and communal search for legitimation, and the legitimation of the past by the authority of the present. A hidden similarity—the fundamental belief in the ability of representation to capture past "reality" and thus its universal validity—appears amid the seemingly antithetical opinions and theoretical assumptions in these debates. Even in cases of historical phenomena as morally, politically, and intellectually challenging as the Holocaust, understanding historical representation in the framework of the self-referentiality of historical texts, and accepting the propositional nature of historical writing, is crucial.

I. INTRODUCTION

Historiography is bound up with notions of "objectivity," "reality," and "truth." Representations of the past should offer, so historians say, a direct and close link to past "reality" on the basis of "facts." The realism of historical representation may be contextualized, extratextualized, detextualized but, in the end, the factual reality of the past is not questioned. Evidence and proof is used to establish the "truth" of historical representation.[1] Thus, historiography displays an inexpungible realism.

On the other hand, in conveying "historical reality" historical representation employs narrative form as a mode of emplotment, thereby weakening the direct connection between factual statements and the means of representation.[2] The "transferentiality" of categories such as "experience" in historical representa-

1. Carlo Ginzburg, "Checking the Evidence," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Autumn, 1991), 79–92; Wulf Kansteiner, "Hayden White's Critique of the Writing of History," *History and Theory* 32 (1993), 287.

2. Hayden White, "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth," in *Probing the Limits of Representation*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Berkeley, 1992), 37–53.

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tion, which point to the ambivalence of the relationship between historians' frameworks of analysis and the objects of their study, make the direct relationship between representation and "reality" even more problematic.[3] Moreover, theories about the "narrative construction of reality," as an instrument of mind in the creation of present as well as past reality, show that the psychological bases of the connection between perception and reality are less unequivocal than more traditional interpretations would suggest.[4] All this seems to question the traditional understanding of the relationship between "facts," "representation," and "reality." "Facts" may be constructions of "reality" rather than mirrors of it; "representation" a mode of meaning production rather than a reenactment of the past; and historical "reality" a web of constructions of distant minds and representations themselves. In this way, historical representation displays an ineradicable element of relativism.

In a 1966 publication Hayden White wrote about historiography's internal contradictions and emphasized the need to leave behind the nineteenth-century "burden of history."[5] He analyzes the conflict between the nineteenth-century conception of historiography-as-science and modernity. According to White, the former is based on two points of reference: positivist science and realist art. The core of the problem is that while both art and science found new ideals, time passed over historiography unnoticed and the discipline continued to view itself in the original framework. White marks the broader context signified by modern reservedness towards history as follows:

> . . . when historians claim that history is a combination of science and art, they generally mean that it is a combination of *late nineteenth-century* social science and *mid-nineteenth century* art. That is to say, they seem to be aspiring to little more than a synthesis of modes of analysis and expression that have their antiquity alone to commend them. . . . Many historians continue to treat their "facts" as though they were "given" and refuse to recognize, unlike most scientists, that they are not so much "found" as "constructed" by the kind of questions which the investigator asks of the phenomena before him. It is the same notion of objectivity that binds historians to an uncritical use of the chronological framework for their narratives.[6]

White calls on historiography to employ the achievements of modern scientific theory and artistic representation in order to find appropriate forms of representation for different aspects of the historical past. White concludes that acceptance of this formula is the only way historiography can avoid radical relativism and propagandistic application.[7]

3. Joan W. Scott, "Experience as Evidence," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Summer, 1991), 773-797; cf. Dominick LaCapra, *History & Criticism* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985), 71-94.

4. Jerome Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Autumn, 1991), 1-21.

5. Hayden White, "The Burden of History," *History and Theory* 5 (1966), 111-134.

6. *Ibid.*, 127.

7. Hayden White modified his view about relativism and found—to my mind, correctly—epistemological skepticism and relativism as important intellectual forces of social inquiry; cf. White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore, 1973) and *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore, 1987), esp. 227, n.12. In a manner which could be understood as a retreat, his recent articles qualify his relativism in connection with the representation of the Holocaust. Cf. White, "Historical Emplotment and

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Ever since the end of World War II, numerous scholars have sought appropriate forms of representation for that singular, spectacular operation known as the Holocaust. Primo Levi wrote several books in which he attempted to depict the experience of the Holocaust with documentary-literary-biographical methods. In addition, there is Paul Celan's famous poem which, according to legend, provoked T. W. Adorno's famous dictum about the barbarity of post-Holocaust poetry.[8] In 1990, almost half a century after the events took place, the Hungarian writer and Holocaust survivor Imre Kertész wrote that "we may form a realistic view of the Holocaust, this incomprehensible and confusing reality, only with the help of our aesthetic imagination."[9] The faith of Levi and Celan however, both of whom attempt to represent the "reality" of the Holocaust with the help of aesthetic imagination, bears witness to the conflict between the various possibilities of representation and reality. Those living reality often find its representation inadequate; nor do they see an escape from this situation. It seems to me that there is an unresolvable conflict, often apparent to the narrator/witness him or herself, between the experience of an event and his or her narration of it. Sometimes historians writing on the Holocaust claim that research did not facilitate their understanding of the event.[10] This should be taken as a sign that similar conflicts may exist between the acquired knowledge of the researcher—whose methods are based on modern rationality—and the form chosen for the task. The question is further complicated by the interplay between the researcher's "experience" as present condition and "experience" as evidence employed in the representation of the past. This is marked by the different levels of and claims for referentiality with "reality" contained in the "experience" of both those in the present and those in the past.[11]

Turning to historical problems posed by the Holocaust might be fruitful for a number of reasons. Forty-five years after the event, we are at the moment in which past "reality" turns into "history"; the "experience" of the former is to be preserved as those who nurtured its memory give way to a new generation. There are few events in history better documented than the Holocaust; historians and archivists have collected an incomparable quantity of documents and relics. At the same time, the event in which a "nation with the authority of its leader decided and announced that it would kill off as completely as possible a particular group of humans, including old people, women, children and infants, and actually put this decision in practice, using all the means of governmental power at its disposal" confronts anyone thinking about it with a moral challenge

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the Problem of Truth." For the development White's work from *Metahistory* to the present see Kansteiner, "Hayden White's Critique of the Writing of History."

8. Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, "The Grave in the Air," in Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits*, 259–260.

9. I. Kertész, *A holocaust mint kultúra* [Holocaust as Culture] (Budapest, 1993), 22.

10. Cf. Arno Mayer, *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken?* (New York, 1989).

11. Scott, "Experience as Evidence," 776–777.

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unparalleled in history.[12] Notwithstanding that questions posed by and answers gained from the Holocaust might be extended to the whole of history, special care must be taken that moral outrage not be intermingled with rational judgments.

Historiographical debates centering on the Holocaust bring us to a core problem of the theory of history: the conflict between the "meaning" of past "reality" as knowledge (*episteme*), the formation of representations of the past as opinion (*doxa*), and the relationship between past "reality" as construction of mind in the present *and* in the past. In the final analysis, it seems futile to speak about the "reality" of the past as an object of study. Not only do interpretations in the form of historical narratives serve as legitimation of present political, moral, or aesthetic judgments about the past, but the referentiality between "facts," "representation," and "truth" in the past seems to be less unequivocal than some historians would like to believe. Thus, past "reality" does not exist; in its place are an endless number of realities tantamount to the various judgments and viewpoints one can find in the present. There is a continuous interplay between a web of reality-constructions *both* in the present and the past. Since present judgments are constantly changing, they are in need of continuous legitimization—as is the "reality" of the past.

The three parts of this essay revolve around political, moral, and historiographical debates about the Holocaust. Problems of the content and form of historical judgment, as well as the limits of historical narratives, will be analyzed. This essay will not offer a new approach to the Holocaust, let alone history in general. Taking debates about representations of a politically, morally, and intellectually challenging sequence of events in the past as examples, it will try to show that assumptions about historical representation which are generally taken for granted may be more problematic than they seem.

II. "BITBURG HISTORY": BETWEEN MEMORY AND HISTORY

In 1985, with a generation already passed away, the moment of transition between the existence of actual Holocaust memories and the Holocaust as a historical event was explicitly marked at Bitburg. The trauma of the Holocaust and the call for the preservation of its memory gave the problem a special emphasis. The feeling of "I was there" established a special kind of identity and moral challenge for the survivors.[13] The possibility of qualitatively transforming memory encouraged different groups to seek an active role in influencing the process. Frances Yates, in her important book on the art of personal memory, describes how its preservation is dependent on physical spaces and visual images.[14] Maurice Halbwachs reveals that personal memory is socially mediated,

12. Eberhard Jackel, "The Impoverished Practice of Insinuation: The Singular Aspect of National-Socialist Crimes Cannot Be Denied," in *Forever in the Shadow of Hitler? The Original Documents of the Historikerstreit* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1993), 76.

13. Cf. *Bitburg in Political and Moral Perspective*, ed. Geoffrey Hartmann (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), 1–2.

14. Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago, 1966).

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that is, bound to the social framework established by the individual's own group.[15] Thus, personal and collective memory are hardly separable.

It may be frightening to see that during the transformation of memory into history it becomes empty, losing sacredness, milieu, and life. As history overtakes memory, the latter is conquered and eradicated. Such a situation has warranted the preservation of memory by special spaces and events. These sites, which Pierre Nora calls "*lieux de mémoire*," serve to preserve the liveliness, ever-presentness, and socially bound uniqueness of personal memoires while at the same time allowing them to become, in a special way, part of "history."[16]

Monuments and memorials are special *lieux de mémoire*. As iconographic symbols they possess a special relation to past "reality." Their point of reference is an abstraction, the living memory of the individual as well as the social discourse in which "experience" is constructed and memory is mediated. As this memory is in constant flux, however, so is the meaning of the *lieux de mémoire*. The discourse of history, contained in *lieux de mémoire* and memory embedded in the social network of individuals, involves a complicated web of interaction between past and present social and cultural practices. Acts of commemoration in the form of memorials and ceremonies, as can be seen from recent studies on war memorials in France after World War I, are less the unproblematic reflections of collective memory than socially constructed discourses.[17] Understood this way, the relationship between collective memory, *lieux de mémoire*, and historical "reality" is transfigured by the cultural and social discourse not only of the past but the present as well. The perceived stability and permanence of collective memory represented in monuments and other acts of commemoration at once serves as the basis for a collective identity while also establishing the temporal and spatial continuity of a community. As immaterial conceptual images of the "art of memory," these sites become important property in the transmission of collective memory.[18] As representations they reflect the collective memory enacted in the practices of representation in the past as well as the social and cultural discourse that takes place in the present about the past.

As in the case of individuals who lose their memory or suppress certain elements of the past because of some kind of trauma or pathological deformation, similar sociopsychological disorders may be attributed to societies.[19] In a personal crisis, the world as known by the individual may fall apart. Because

15. Maurice Halbwachs, *Collective Memory* (New York, 1950); Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago, 1992), 182.

16. Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* 26 (Spring, 1989), 8–9.

17. Daniel J. Sherman, "Art, Commerce, and the Production of Memory in France after World War II," in *Commemorations*, ed. John Gillis (Princeton, 1994), 186–211.

18. *Memory: History, Culture and the Mind*, ed. Thomas Butler (Oxford, 1989).

19. Alexander and Margaret Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior* (New York, 1975).

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of the resulting complete or partial loss of memory, the personal life-story cannot be reconstructed since the "original narrative" is missing.[20]

In social memory, "commemorative ceremonies" serve as events that bring the "original narrative" of the community into focus.[21] These rituals attempt to establish the continuity of collective memory for a given community. (When speaking of rituals, we are referring to a "rule-governed activity of symbolic character which draws the attention of its participants to objects of thought and feeling which they hold to be of special significance."[22]) Rituals are ceremonial performative acts which address the community. By such acts the community as a temporally continuous entity is able to transcend the ever-changing uniqueness of its individual members by ensuring the preservation of collective memory. The community has no life, no beginning or end independent of the memory of its members; through the transformation of collective memory, the community gains a continuously changing identity fixed in the metaphysical present. Commemorative ceremonies perform a narrative of the past in the form of ritual. This narrative represents historical events transfigured into permanent structures and placed in the metaphysical present of historical constants: struggle, sacrifice, and victory.[23]

Those who imagine communities as anthropomorphic phenomena may view social disorders as analogous to cases of personal crises when the "original narrative" of the individual falls apart. According to theories which rank communities formed by the value choices of individual identities, collective memory serves as the most important identity-forming element. In the case of that entity described as "the nation," seen by many as perched on top of a hierarchy of communities, the "original narrative" is the embodiment of its life-history; such history serves as the key element in the preservation of the community's coherence ("greatness"). Loss of the "original narrative" threatens the existence of the community and beckons the re-establishment of unified collective memory. In such cases, "commemorial ceremonies" gain special importance because they are able to re-create the "original narrative" and thus re-establish the lost source of identity. Rituals draw their force from the authority of the community as well as that of the past. If either the coherence of the community or the desired continuity of the past are damaged, authority must be drawn from a different source.

Feelings about the National Socialist past in Germany immediately after the war became the center of debate in the early 1980s. The controversy was initiated by the neoconservative philosopher Hermann Lübbe who stated that "a certain silence was the social-psychological and politically necessary medium for the transformation of our post-war citizenry of the Federal Republic of Germany"

20. B. Shorter, "Memory," in Butler, ed., *Memory*, 66.
21. P. Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge, Eng., 1989), 35.
22. S. Lukes, "Political Ritual and Social Integration," *Sociology* 9 (1975), 291, quoted by P. Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 44.
23. Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 42–43.

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and that a "continuity of personnel" was necessary if the country was to break with its political past. Lübbe went on to insist that instead of an "explanatory and analytic overcoming of National Socialism . . . asymmetric discretion" was required.[24]

In his famous 1959 essay, T. W. Adorno forecast several of the conflicts which were to reappear under different political, social, and historical circumstances in the late 1970s and 1980s.[25] His oft-quoted statement in which he considers "the continued existence of National Socialism within democracy potentially more threatening than the continued existence of fascist tendencies against democracy" clearly demonstrates the problems of German collective consciousness from Nuremberg to Bitburg.[26] For Adorno, *Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit* did not take place; instead, the tragic past "degenerated into its distorted image."[27] The lack of an open psychological confrontation with the unhealed traumas of the past caused "pathological" damage to German collective consciousness resulting in the "inability to mourn."[28] This, in Adorno's opinion, leads to the weakening of personal autonomy and the estrangement of the individual from society. Such "pathological" degeneration causes the re-emergence of anti-Semitism, nationalism, and Nazism, a dangerous return to "empty, cold forgetting." For Adorno these are "the tropes of the new democratic and anti-fascist consensus that emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s."[29]

The conservative shift which began in the late 1970s laid the political groundwork for a new consensus regarding *Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit*. The basic contradiction of the Adenauer era—the substitution of the "German Question" for the "Jewish question"—lost its social importance. With the change of generation, the "Nazi question" faded away. It seemed that the problem was no longer politically relevant; its presence could be felt only on the level of personal memory and individual identity. The ensuing social conflict which appeared was due to the strain of transmitting memory between generations; differing personal and "official" memories raised questions for which the new generation received but few answers. Problems were marked by silence, superficial feelings of guilt, or aggressive attacks on "them."[30]

At this point, the German political elite understood the time had come to apply long-term solutions to these social problems; they capitalized on a cold-war stability which allowed for political solutions.[31] In Germany, the transition

24. H. Lübbe, "Der Nationalsozialismus im Deutschen Nachkriegsbewusstsein," *Historische Zeitschrift* 236 (1983), 584–587, quoted by Anson Rabinbach, "The Jewish Question in the German Question," in *Reworking the Past: Hitler, the Holocaust and the Historians' Debate*, ed. Peter Baldwin (Boston, 1990), 46–47.

25. T. W. Adorno, "What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?" in Hartmann, ed., *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective*, 114–129.

26. *Ibid.*, 115.

27. *Ibid.*, 124.

28. Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn*, xvi-xxv.

29. Rabinbach, "The Jewish Question," 54.

30. Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn*, 189–221, esp. 216ff.

31. S. Borckmann, "Bitburg Deconstruction," *Philosophical Forum* 17 (Spring, 1986), 159–173.

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from collective memory to "history" allowed the temporary political consensus of the Adenauer era—without problematic political reminiscences and legitimized by the stable relations of foreign policy—to become an unquestionable historical "fact." A new interpretation in the form of a new narrative was required to achieve this new historical understanding. A careful balance had to be established between the "public use of history" and the "historization of politics," between narrative interpretation and political force. The politics of interpretation is both remote from political concerns and at the same time related to politics through the authority claimed by interpreters via their society's established political authorities. The choice emerges either to repress any impulse to appeal to political authority or to transform the appeal itself into an instrument of interpretation.[32] The form—commemorative ceremony as a historical narrative within the sphere of politics—makes it possible to sublimate this appeal in an ideologically motivated interpretation of the historical content.

By no means a political *faux pas*, the Bitburg ceremony—the visit of President Ronald Reagan and Chancellor Helmut Kohl to the German military cemetery—was rather the culmination of a series of well-rehearsed political moves. It can be described as an attempt to use the political capital of German *Tendenzwende* (with the image of a clear ideological enemy in sight), as well as the ideological unity of the Western world, in order to re-establish harmony between the realities of postwar political compromise and German collective memory.

Bitburg was planned as a media event since the media alone were equipped to broadcast its symbolic meaning to the whole of the German community.[33] As with ceremonial acts in the Middle Ages such as crownings, punishments, and executions, Bitburg drew its power from publicity. With the help of visual preservation and reproducibility, however, presentation by the modern media could avoid problems posed by the singularity of events.

The ritual of commemorative ceremony creates a narrative which not only tells a story, but enacts a cult. Events are recited not in the past tense, but placed in a mythical framework via the metaphysical present.[34] The cemetery at Bitburg, where more than two thousand German soldiers are buried, served as the sacred site. Cemeteries, like special cultural spaces Foucault calls heterotopias, establish a special relationship to "reality." They are "mirror utopias," real sites transfigured into an unreal relationship to time and space through cultural construction.[35] The sacredness of the locale reminded everyone that the soldiers committed acts which have been executed countless times in history. The infantrymen of the Wehrmach were represented as ordinary soldiers, men whose faith forced them to do what has been done by countless thousands on the battlefields from Marathon to Verdun. Ronald Reagan understood Bitburg's sacredness when he spoke about old enemies turned into new allies.[36] Nothing

32. White, *The Content of the Form*, 59.
33. Borckmann, "Bitburg Deconstruction," 160.
34. Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 43.
35. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16 (Spring, 1986), 24–25.
36. Ronald Reagan, "Speech at Bitburg," in Hartmann, ed., *Bitburg*, 240.

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reveals the historical constancy of war better than the fact that at any time a former enemy can become an ally against a new enemy. Alliances change but *struggle* is constant. Reagan went even further at Bitburg, stating that the soldiers were not only ordinary young men but *victims* of an inhuman system, "victims of nazism."[37] This was referred to more explicitly by Alfred Dregger, floor leader of the governing CDU-CSU coalition, in a letter to an American senator in which he asked for honor to the dead soldier who gave his life for "our" common goals and universal human ideals.[38]

Since in 1985 the Federal Republic was the military and political ally of the United States in another struggle that had "already" motivated the Wehrmach soldiers on the Eastern front, the war defeat became post facto a common effort, even a victory, against the eternal evil.[39] In Bitburg, historical "reality" is represented as myth: infinite struggle, sacrifice, and victory form the framework into which unquestionable historical "facts" are placed.

Commemorative ceremonies are a distinctive kind of ritual. In addition to supplying continuity with the past, they have an explicitly backward-looking character.[40] These rites not only enact a plot, but become ritual by employing a formalized language of their own: an invariant sequence of speech acts canonized by previous rituals. The remarks most commonly encountered are curses intended to bring the listener under the sway of power, blessings allocating fortunes and gifts, and oaths placing the swearer above right or wrong.[41] The speeches at the concentration camp in Bergen-Belsen and the Bitburg cemetery followed this pattern. Both Chancellor Kohl and President Reagan employed curses, blessings, and oaths.[42] Moreover, during the ceremonies, both politicians avoided the first person singular, instead using the plural to emphasize alliances bound in the past, reinforced in the present, and intended for eternity. Chancellor Kohl's oft-quoted phrase, "We bow in sorrow in front of the victims of murder and genocide," pledged the alliance of the "victors" and transformed, in the form of a caricature of Willy Brandt kneeling in Warsaw, the symbolic act of sorrow into a performative speech act.

Commemorative ceremonies differ from all other rituals since they explicitly refer to prototypical persons and events. This ritual re-enactment is of cardinal importance in the shaping of communal memory, for here past "reality" is replaced by the image of the past as seen from the mythical, continuous present.[43] Bitburg offered a unique possibility for Chancellor Kohl to substitute for German "collective guilt" the idealized ideological struggle of the German army. Extending the myth of a small Nazi minority repressing the German majority in the Third

37. *Ibid.*

38. Alfred Dregger, "Letter to the US Senate," in *Bitburg and Beyond: Encounters in American, German, and Jewish History*, ed. Ilia Levkov (New York, 1987), 95.

39. *Ibid.*

40. Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 45.

41. *Ibid.*, 58.

42. Hartmann, ed., *Bitburg*, 252–255.

43. Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 61.

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Reich, the idealized image of the Wehrmacht appeared to cover the full spectrum of past difficulties; Wehrmacht soldiers fighting for the common good obscured "bad" Nazis—the ones who committed the crimes—behind the ideological curtain of the present.[44]

In Bitburg, the narration of past "reality" was emplotted as a story complete with beginning, middle, and end; "facts" of the narrative were displayed as "found" rather than "invented." Still, the past played a relatively minor role in the commemorative ceremony. Instead of utilizing the authority of past "reality" to re-establish the "original narrative," communal memory was shaped with ritual using political authority as the instrument of interpretation. The process may not be called distortion as rules of interpretation were observed. It seems fair to say that if the interpretation of the past in the form of historical narrative presented in Bitburg is considered to be fair—and there is no epistemological reason to doubt this—the realism of historical representation itself may be questioned.

III. THE PROBLEM OF MORAL JUDGMENT IN HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

Following World War II—and the mind-numbing horror of the Holocaust—public discussion centered around moral questions. For the many people pronouncing judgment on the Holocaust, personal, historical, and philosophical issues combined to produce new categories for dealing with problems posed by Nazi genocide. Tracts on victim, perpetrator, and bystander history were produced, and moral elements seem to have played an overwhelming role in these historical interpretations.[45]

Modern historical writing sublimates moral judgment into the narrative form it employs. Historical "reality," by "wearing the mask of meaning," is transformed into objects of desire created by narrators based on their moral authority. Historical narrative represents a world possessing completeness and fullness, a formal coherence past "reality" never had. While morality plays an important role in modern historical writing, it seems to be inherent in the interpretational process as an element of the drama of the historical narrative rather than in the sequence of past events.[46] In the case of phenomena with such moral magnitude as the Holocaust, however, this formal argument is said to be misplaced. Survivors and humanists alike argue that the Holocaust possesses an explicit moral meaning that should be represented in all historical narratives. On the other hand, Adorno's famous dictum, Raul Hilberg's paraphrase about the "barbarity of footnotes to the Holocaust,"[47] and the tragic personal faith of authors and survivors such as Jean Amery, Paul Celan, and

44. Hartmann, ed., *Bitburg*, 240.

45. Cf. Raul Hilberg, *Victims, Perpetrators, and Bystanders* (New York, 1991).

46. White, *The Content of the Form*, 21.

47. Adorno, *Prisms* (London, 1967), 34; Raul Hilberg, "I Was Not There," in *Writing and the Holocaust*, ed. Berel Lang (New York, 1991), 7.

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Primo Levi question the possibility of appropriate moral representation of the Holocaust in narrative form. It seems fair to speak about the Holocaust in terms of the limits of representation.[48]

In the case of those historical narratives involving direct or indirect moral judgments about events related to the Holocaust—as, less explicitly, in all other cases of historical representation—there seems to be a conflict between the moral authority of the narrator and the supposed moral authority of the past "itself." Historical narratives do not necessarily emplot past events in the form of tragedy and this form of emplotment is not the only mode of narration for tragic events.[49] If historical narratives cannot avoid moralization—that is, if the moral authority of the narrator overshadows the past—how can the past's moral content be explored and represented?[50]

In her report on the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, Hannah Arendt made an effort to examine moral problems related to the Holocaust through the person and trial of Adolf Eichmann. Criminal judgments on participants in the Holocaust have been criticized on moral, legal, political, and philosophical grounds since the Nuremberg trials.[51] In a letter to the Heidelberg philosopher Karl Jaspers, Hannah Arendt held the opinion that crimes committed in the Nazi past are beyond justice, that legal means cannot possibly be adequate to mete out punishment equal to the horrors of Auschwitz.[52] This opinion, shared by many, clearly reveals the problems of pronouncing legal judgment on perpetrators of the Holocaust.

As with Jaspers in his attempt to deal with moral consequences related to the Nazi past, personal motives played an important role for Hannah Arendt in her visit to Jerusalem to see Adolf Eichmann.[53] She was interested in problems previously dealt with in her *Origins of Totalitarianism*. She wanted to know whether the perpetrators had really been inhumanly evil (that is inhumanly criminal), and the victims inhumanly innocent to an extent which would surpass the limits of human (im)morality.[54] In the postscript of her book on the Eichmann trial (added to the book after the controversy following its publication),

48. Cf. Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits*, esp. 300-317.

49. Cf. White, *Metahistory*, 133-265.

50. White, *The Content of the Form*, 25.

51. For general legal problems related to the Nazi past see H. Wechsler, *Principles, Politics and Fundamental Law* (Cambridge, Mass., 1961) and Barrie Paskins and Michael L. Dockrill, *The Ethics of War* (Minneapolis, 1979); for a critique of the Nuremberg trials see W. Bosch, *Judgment on Nuremberg: American Attitudes toward the Major German War-Crime Trials* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1970); for an analysis of the postwar West German legal system and trials related to the Holocaust see I. Muller, *Hitler's Justice* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992); for an important and problematic post-Eichmann trial in Israel see Tom Teicholz, *The Trial of Ivan the Terrible* (New York, 1990).

52. *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers Correspondence: 1926-1969* (New York, 1992), 54.

53. Karl Jaspers, *Die Schuldfrage* (Zurich, 1946). As Jaspers wrote to Arendt after the war the moral necessity of dealing with questions of the past may be phrased in the question: "What does it mean to be German after 1945?" *Arendt/Jaspers Correspondence*, 94; Arendt wanted to face her own past through facing the "evil" directly. For Arendt: *Ibid.*, 329.

54. *Arendt/Jaspers Correspondence*, 54.

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Arendt defines the task of the Jerusalem court—and her report—as follows:

> The question of individual guilt or innocence, the act of meting out justice to both the defendant and the victim, are the only things at stake in a criminal court. The Eichmann trial was no exception, even though the court here was confronted with a crime it would not find in the lawbooks and with a criminal whose like was unknown in any court, at least prior to the Nuremberg Trials. The present report deals with nothing but the extent to which the court in Jerusalem succeeded in fulfilling the demands of justice.[55]

As it turned out, neither the criminal court in Jeruselem nor the learned reporter could satisfy these requirements.

Israeli prime minister David Ben-Gurion's announcement of Adolf Eichmann's capture on May 23, 1960 foreshadowed the planned politico-historical role of the forthcoming trial.[56] Both Ben-Gurion and the chief prosecutor transgressed well-defined limits of the legal process with the announcement that "it is not an individual that is in the dock at this historical trial, and not the Nazi regime alone, but anti-Semitism throughout history."[57] In Ben-Gurion's own words, one of the implicit tasks of the trial had been

> for the Israeli court, during a public trial [to make] a detailed representation of the tragedy of the Holocaust . . . possible and [to give] the generation that was born and educated after the Holocaust in Israel . . . an opportunity to get acquainted with the details of this tragedy about which they knew so little. . . . The details of this tragedy, [he continues], will have a major effect on the public opinion of the world.[58]

The Israeli government later stated during the legal proceedings that "the historical and educational purpose of the trial should be emphasised, that the historical consciousness in connection with the Holocaust of the European Jewry find its full meaning."[59] The Eichmann trial offered a unique possibility for Israel to place the existence of the Jewish state—as opposed to the liberal tradition of the Galut or Diaspora—into either a transcendental or political heroic mythology originating from the Zionist tradition and thereby to draw legitimation from the Holocaust. The "educational and historical" possibilities offered by the trial strengthened the established, monolithic, religio-Zionist viewpoint in the 1960s.[60]

The historical legitimation of the state of Israel—which came into political existence as a result of the 1948 war of liberation—was based on a strange mixture of secular, nineteenth-century nation-state ideology as well as the continuity of an ancient, religio-mythic Jewish tradition. After the war, however, this legitimation could not expect to receive uniform acceptance from the com-

55. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York, 1965), 298.

56. M. Perlman, *The Capture and Trial of Adolf Eichmann* (New York, 1963), 60.

57. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 19.

58. Letter by Ben-Gurion to MP Israel Galili, quoted by Akiva Deutsch, *The Eichmann Trial in the Eyes of Israeli Youngsters* (Ramat-Gan, 1974), 17.

59. *Ibid.*, 18–19.

60. O. Bartov, "Intellectuals on Auschwitz: Memory, History, Truth," *History and Memory* (1993), 17–18.

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munity of European states. The best Israel could hope for was politico-social sympathy and temporary solidarity based on feelings of trauma and guilt generated by the Holocaust. The historical-political message of the Eichmann trial made it possible to substitute for this obscure tradition a morally legitimized, transnational metanarrative of the age-old, continuous tradition of anti-Semitism ending in the Holocaust. This placed moral responsibility on the community of states to guarantee that such a horror should not happen again, and offered, indirectly, a new, post-national legitimation for the state of Israel: some postwar states were victors, others went down to defeat, but none could claim to be the victim of a tragic history like Israel.

The opening statement of the chief prosecutor supported this view.[61] Such legal strategy, strongly criticized by Arendt, not only ridiculed the judicial proceedings, but attempted to establish a politically and ideologically motivated historical narrative. Formally, the Eichmann trial—as a ceremony commemorating the tragedy of the Holocaust—was similar to the ceremony at Bitburg. In the latter case, however, political authority established narrative authority, whereas in the case of the Eichmann trial it was the moral authority of the historical narrative that was used for establishing political legitimation.[62]

In Jerusalem, Hannah Arendt was interested in the emanation of evil. She wanted to face the "pater familias," the "ordinary family man," different from criminals like Göbbels, Streicher, Hitler, or Göring.[63] Arendt wanted to contrast the depth of Nazi crimes, the radical nature of evil, with the mediocrity of the perpetrators, the banality of everyday life. Arendt's thesis on the "banality of evil" has stood in the center of heated debates ever since the book was published.[64] The idea perhaps came in a letter from Jaspers in which he wrote about the unacceptability of the "demonic" crimes committed by the Nazis. As he wrote, "the events should be looked at in all their banality, everyday triviality, because this is what determines them."[65] She owed the expression to her husband, Heinrich Blücher[66]; changing her opinion about the substance of evil during the trial, she found Eichmann's malevolence void of radicalism, superficial, and banal.[67]

Few philosophers have analyzed the general moral relevance of the Holocaust.[68] The first to explore systematically the moral qualities of the acts committed during the Holocaust was New York philosopher Berel Lang.[69] Lang's

61. G. Hausner, *Justice in Jerusalem* (New York, 1966), 345.

62. Arendt, *Eichmann*, 206–219; Hausner, *Justice*, 69–83, 384–387.

63. Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah*, ed. Ron H. Feldman (New York, 1978), 232–233.

64. For the debates in Germany that arose after the publication of the book, see *Die Kontroverse, Hannah Arendt, Eichmann und Die Juden*, ed. F. A. Krumacher (Munich, 1964).

65. *Arendt/Jaspers Correspondence*, 62.

66. *Ibid.*, 542; Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven, 1982), 330.

67. For her original opinion on evil see Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, 1951); Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah*, 245–250; Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 367–368.

68. Cf. *Echoes from the Holocaust: Philosophical Reflections on a Dark Time*, ed. Alan Rosenberg and Gerald E. Myers (Philadelphia, 1988), esp. ix-x, 91.

69. Berel Lang, *Act and Idea in Nazi Genocide* (Chicago, 1992).

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view of Nazi genocide as the emanation of absolute evil is based on the Kantian idea of "radical evil." Dismissing the Platonic argument about the impossibility of committing consciously evil acts, his argument is based on the idea that Nazis executed their deeds knowing of the iniquity involved. Historical circumstances, the form of the act, lies, verbal taboos, unnecessary violence, and the obliteration of *corpi delicti* prove that Nazi genocide is of such demonic depth that it is incomprehensible and unrepresentable, singular in the history of mankind.[70] This argument, attractive to our everyday moral sense and in accordance with the postwar historical consensus, views act and idea in Nazi genocide *en masse*, leaving the most important question unanswered: who was the Nazi? Moreover Lang's argument leaves no room for the individual's choice between good and evil.

This was exactly what interested Arendt: can one willingly choose evil? Can evil be chosen? Is evil of demonic depth the opposite of good? Is Satan a fallen Angel, a moral absolute?[71] Does this absolute come to the surface in the deeds of the perpetrators of the Holocaust? Is Eichmann, and were his named and unnamed likes in the Third Reich, the "evilest" mixture of Iago, Macbeth, and Richard III? In the case of Eichmann, these questions run astray. He had no motivation but an extraordinary diligence in hope of rising in the ranks. He was no criminal; he would never have dared to threaten the life of a superior, nor have cheated or lied in order to get what was dearest to him: more stripes. He did not hate Jews or enjoy killing: he avoided going to see to where the road he paved led; and, when he did go, he couldn't stand the sight. As Arendt put it, "it was sheer thoughtlessness—something by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period."[72] Recent historical research seems to confirm these ideas. The horrifying story of Reserve Police Battalion 101 reveals how "ordinary men," under neither military nor any other pressure, refused the offered possibility of non-action, and due to general ideological indoctrination but exempt of sadist inclination, without personal interest or hate, in 1942 murdered thousands of Jews in Poland—old and young, women and infants—with their own hands. This seems to be only one of the events of the past not yet brought to the fore.[73] The "banality of evil" does not answer our questions about the substance of the human soul but shows us the potential of "thoughtless" acts. It shows what humans are *capable of*, not what humans are *like*. It does not reveal absolute evil; indeed it argues against the existence of evil as an absolute. As in the case of Eichmann, it seems that in moral terms there is no borderline between the "demonic" and the "normal"; morally speaking, all acts are relative and this is what gives them moral value. To choose between good and evil is not dependent on the individual's relationship to a moral absolute; every decision is unique

70. *Ibid.*, 22–61, 117–161.
71. Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 373-375.
72. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 287.
73. Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men* (New York, 1993).

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and pragmatic, a matter of individual choice relative to the temporary consensus of the community. This is one of the most important guarantees of individual liberty.

In the center of debate about the book stood Arendt's opinion about the role of the Jewish Councils in Europe during the execution of the Final Solution. Her analysis concentrated on the general moral conflict confronting members of the councils and not, as many of her opponents argued, on Jewish compliance with the murderous acts of the Nazis and their resulting common guilt. For Arendt, council members' actions were tragic not because they facilitated the misery of European Jewry, or because they were motivated by personal lust for power, by misjudgment of the situation, or by inappropriate moral decisions, but because they revealed that, morally speaking, the borderline between victims and perpetrators was not as clear-cut as had been argued for earlier.[74]

The argument presented by Lang, based on a religious-moral-philosophical line of argumentation in the form of "decide not to decide," supports Arendt's thesis in this respect.[75] For Arendt to be able to form moral judgments about the Holocaust, it was important to establish the relative guilt of the perpetrators as well as the relative innocence of the victims. If the perpetrators are regarded as the emanation of radical evil and the victims as completely innocent, moral judgment is not possible.[76] For Arendt, just as the guilt of the perpetrators shattered the limits of legal judgment, the total innocence of the victims in light of the gas-chambers transcended the limits of human morality.[77] In order to re-establish lines of communication after the Holocaust, images of the perpetrators as the embodiment of Satanic evil had to be destroyed along with the pure innocence of the victims.

The "grey zone" of the concentration camps can be found in the writings of Primo Levi among others.[78] The unresolvable antagonism between victims and non-victims (in this case perpetrators and bystanders fall into the same group, since in the face of the gas-chambers non-action is morally equivalent to committing wrong) leads to a morally predetermined post-Holocaust identity not only for the actual victims themselves but for all humans as well. Because of the scope of Nazi genocide, Jewish personal identity was only imaginable as a victim since there was no existential difference between those who died and those who did not: sheer luck was the deciding factor. In the face of the totality of the Holocaust, Jewish identity was either equal to being dead, or being marked for death. Luck, since it accepts no human choice, cannot be a source of identity. Death, and only death, determined the Jewishness of the individual.

74. R. Braham, "The Jewish Councils: An Overview," in *Unanswered Questions*, ed. F. Furet (New York, 1989), 252–275.

75. Lang, *Act and Idea*, 62–77.

76. In the formulation of Arendt: "Where all are guilty, nobody in the last analysis can be judged." We may suppose that in the case in which all are innocent, the reverse is true as well. Cf. Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah*, 230.

77. *Arendt/Jaspers Correspondence*, 54.

78. P. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York, 1988).

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In this inverted logic, the innocent victims—those who died—bear the burden of unquestionable truth; death makes victimhood eternal, out of human reach. Post-Holocaust discourse about the "experience" of camp inmates transfigured the "experience" of survivors. The "experience" of those who died is void of this transfiguration and therefore it becomes untouchable, unchangeable, eternal: an absolute of human suffering. Survivors are forced to face this unbearable legacy: those who died are the real victims, since those who did not had to do something for survival and thus their innocence is questioned.[79] The absolute, inhuman innocence of the victims who died lays an unbearable moral burden on post-Holocaust individuals since no one—Jews or non-Jews—can be as innocent as the victims of genocide. Their innocence, and therefore the moral absolute it offers, can only be accepted as transcendental, mythological; it cannot be understood, imagined, or explained. There is no narrative, not even the narrative of those who shared the "experience," to carry this moral burden, since such an absolute cannot wear the "mask of meaning." In this way historical narrative can reveal neither the innocence of the victims nor the guilt of the perpetrators. The absolute guilt of the perpetrators and the absolute innocence of the victims suggest that though the Holocaust was "real," it cannot be realistically represented in the form of historical narrative.

In this respect, the debate about Eichmann in Jerusalem is not without historiographic interest. Hannah Arendt watched puzzled as her thoughts were misunderstood by friends and foes alike.[80] Let us examine one of her earlier methodological arguments which, *mutatis mutandis*, may be instructive in this case as well. In *Origins of Totalitarianism* she writes,

> [if a text] is believed by so many that it can become the text of a whole political movement, the task of the historian is no longer to discover a forgery. Certainly it is not to invent explanations which dismiss the chief political and historical fact of the matter: that the forgery is being believed. This fact is more important than the (historically speaking, secondary) circumstance that it is a forgery.[81]

In the case of her own work—and the interpretations, beliefs, and misconceptions about it—she seemed to have forgotten her earlier opinion.[82] Friendships broke apart because of the reception of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, though the book contained no "facts" that had not been known before.[83] Why was the "image" of her report on the Eichmann trial—that she claimed Eichmann not to be a villain and that Jews were accomplices to their own tragedy—believed and rejected by so many?

According to the author, the book "deals with nothing but the extent to which the court in Jerusalem succeeded in fulfilling the demands of justice."[84]

79. Cf. *ibid.*, chapter 3.
80. *Arendt/Jaspers Correspondence*, 526–535.
81. Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, Part One: *Antisemitism* [1951] (New York, 1985), 7.
82. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 284–285.
83. *Arendt/Jaspers Correspondence*, 695, n.16.
84. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 298.

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Arendt's report, however, created a historical narrative of those Holocaust events related to Adolf Eichmann. Arendt used accounts of witnesses, evidence presented to the court, and other available documents as sources exactly in the same manner as historians use documents to give a new historical interpretation to past "reality." She wanted to deal with moral issues related to legal problems posed by the trial, to avoid interpreting the psyche of Eichmann as the embodiment of radical evil. Her report was not an "explanation of the phenomenon nor a theory about" the banality of evil. It was rather an attempt to publicize the story of Adolf Eichmann with a different moral meaning than the one which the Israeli court had produced. Instead of focusing on the victims, as did the Jerusalem court, she turned to perpetrators and bystanders. Her story was different in content but not in form.

Arendt wanted to preserve the authority of the past in the form of "realistic" historical representation and to arrive at a moral meaning that sublimates the moral authority of the narrator. Her "facts" were ordered in a different sequence, causal relations were established differently than in other narratives of the same events. She claimed to find *the* moral meaning in the Holocaust *vis-à-vis* the person and story of Eichmann, a meaning legitimized by the "reality" of the flow of events. Her version of moral meaning was embedded in the historical "truth" of the narrative representation, just as other versions are presented in other narratives with other "truths." Using the form of historical narrative, but hiding behind the mask of a trial report, her attempt to present an exclusive, historically legitimized, moral meaning in the past was doomed to failure precisely because it failed to take account of the inherent relativism of all historical representation.

IV. THE "HISTORICIZATION" OF THE HOLOCAUST: THE APORIA OF THE *HISTORIKERSTREIT*

Postwar West German historiography has been filled with emotionally heated debates on the history of National Socialism. To paraphrase Ralf Dahrendorf's introductory remarks to the Wheatland Conference on the *Historikerstreit*, these debates provide an insight into the "historian's" psyche.[85] While debates from the mid-1960s until Bitburg were confined to scholarly circles, ensuing controversies were concerned with "the public use of history" and therefore stepped out of the shadow of scholarly journals and academic auditoria.[86] Some have argued that the Historian's Debate that ran mainly in two leading German

85. *The Unresolved Past*, ed. Ralf Dahrendorf (Oxford, 1991).

86. For the "Fischer debate" see John A. Moses, *The Politics of Illusion* (New York, 1975); for the "Sonderweg debate" see H.-U. Wehler, *The German Empire, 1871–1918* (Leamington Spa, Eng., 1985) and D. Blackbourn and G. Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History* (Oxford, 1984); for a general overview of positions and arguments see M. Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (New York, 1982).

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newspapers, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and the *Zeit* in 1986–1987,[87] was a heated political debate without scholarly interest that made "no contribution to historical understanding."[88] However, placed in the context of current debates about the role and function of modern historiography, the opposite seems to be true.

A major historiographical problem, which later became one of the key issues in the debate, had already been introduced in a 1985 essay by the renowned German historian Martin Broszat.[89] The essay was answered by Saul Friedlander during the *Historikerstreit* in 1986. A year later, in the German scholarly journal *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, the historians expressed their views in three exchanges of letters.[90] Broszat, well known for his research on everyday life in Bavaria during the National Socialist years,[91] argued for the need to break with the "complete moral quarantine" forced upon the Hitler period by a postwar ideological-moral-historical consensus bent on re-establishing continuity in German history. He argued against the unbreachable periodization imposed on German history which kept the Hitler regime "inaccessible to historical understanding"; he called for a more detailed analysis of the National Socialist years instead of the complete "black and white picture" of that era. In his critique, Friedlander, besides his general opposition to results of *Alltagsgeschichte* and Broszat's approach to *Resistenz*, concentrated on the theoretical-historical problems in Broszat's methodological call for "distancing" and "new objectivity" as key elements in the "historicization" of the Hitler years. He argued that the memory of the Holocaust—morally and ideologically—is still too present to form an "objective" view while the call for a general historical understanding may lead to moral relativism. The Holocaust cannot be dealt with as any other age in history. "Writing about Nazism is not like writing about sixteenth-century France," he says, since the indeterminability of the criminality of the system, the intertwining of normalcy and criminality, contradict the possibility of a unified historical judgment in the form of an "objective" historical narrative.[92] The exchange of letters, meant to resolve the conflict, actually deepened the theoretical differences between the authors regarding the issues in question and pointed out basic problems regarding historical representation in general. According to Broszat, since the "true and genuine means of communication em-

87. For full documentation of the debate see *Forever in the Shadow of Hitler?* On the debate see Charles Maier, *The Unmasterable Past* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988); Richard J. Evans, *In Hitler's Shadow* (New York, 1989); Baldwin, ed., *Reworking the Past*. A full bibliography until the publication of that book can be found in Baldwin, ed., 295–304.

88. Evans, *In Hitler's Shadow*, 118.

89. M. Broszat, "A Plea for the Historization of National Socialism," in Baldwin, ed., *Reworking the Past*, 77–87, originally published as "Plädoyer für eine Historisierung des Nationalsozialismus," *Merkur* 435 (May, 1985).

90. "A Controversy about the Historization of National Socialism," in Baldwin, ed., *Reworking the Past*, 88–133.

91. Cf. M. Broszat *et al.*, *Bayern in der NS-Zeit*, 6 vols. (Munich, 1977–1983).

92. S. Friedlander, "Some Reflections on the Historicization of National Socialism," in Baldwin, ed., *Reworking the Past*, 98.

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ployed by historical representation" – narrative discourse – is avoided in historical representations of National Socialism for moral and political motives, the "total image of the period . . . has remained strangely shadowy and insubstantial." This has led to a black and white image of types and stereotypes displayed in moral-didactic commentary and formulated in an emotional or abstract-academic language instead of a plastic, multidimensional historical narrative "founded on the principle of critical, enlightened historical understanding" (*Verstehen*) and "historical insight" (*Einsicht*) to arrive at "a distancing explanation and an objectification to be achieved analytically" as well as "a comprehending, subjective appropriation and empathetic reliving" (*Nachvollzug*) of past achievements, sensations, concerns, and mistakes."[93] But as Friedlander points out, the morally unified picture of a historical narrative, though it may formally represent historical actors and events "plastically," can only be employed, as viewed by Broszat, under conditions of "normalcy." When the narrator's moral authority influences the representation of the criminal dimensions of the system, not only does the "plasticity of description" become impossible, but narrative discourse itself becomes objectionable. "One may wish merely to produce the documentation: more would be untenable or obscene," writes Friedlander.[94]

When attempting to represent the criminality of National Socialism, the narrator's moral awareness is based on a moral consensus of the present which does not permit employment of the narrative form as a representation of "reality." In cases involving the representation of past "reality" in the form of historical narrative, the narrator's authority – both morally and politically – originates in the present. From a representational point of view, there is no difference between criminal and non-criminal segments of the National Socialist totality: both are elements of the same intertwining historical "reality" found in the past. The criminal dimensions of the Hitler regime transcend the limits of present-day consensual moral awareness. The problem may be resolved through a more detailed examination of the past with the aim of separating normal and criminal elements. Such an attempt would strive to "understand" the past via the form of historicization; that is, to pacify the disturbed moral sense by returning to the narrative form with its "completeness and fullness," its idealized moral picture in which criminal and non-criminal elements can be separated and the "meaning" of the past rescued. In such an attempt, not only are elements of the past separated from each other, but parts of the moral drama fall neatly into their place through the chain of causal connections informed by the moral authority of the present. On the other hand, pacification of the moral sense is also possible via the substitution of the negative moral absolute of a "boundary event" like the Holocaust, in which the deepest layer of human existence is threatened, for present-day moral authority. But such an "event" lies outside the scope of human morality, rendering it unrepresentable and open only to

93. "A Controversy," in Baldwin, ed., *Reworking the Past*, 104, 112.
94. *Ibid.*, 132.

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"scientific-scholarly" research but closed to a morally informed historical consciousness. In the call for the mere production of documents to avoid the "obscenity" of representation, the working of an uncontested belief in historical "reality" can be seen. As Carlo Ginzburg wrote elsewhere, documents serve as an "open window that gives us direct access to reality."[95] But in the call for "a thorough analysis" of the document as historical evidence, that is "the codes according to which it has been constructed," it is not hard to find elements of an approach that would like to save the "obscenity" of representation.[96] In this case historical representation is understood not as "empathetic reliving" but as unrelenting textual criticism. The unmediated production of documentation, if it were possible at all, would forget about the simple truth of historical inquiry: that documents are representational constructions themselves.

It appears that past "reality" is not what matters for either of the authors, but rather the moral state of the present based on conceptual usage of the means of representation. Broszat's longing for the employment of narrative language threatens not to fall into moral relativism, but rather attempts to rescue the past, in the name of the realist project of historical representation, from dissolving in the political-moral drama of the present. Friedlander's insistence on the impossibility of unified historical representation of the National Socialist past signifies not the moral limitation of scholarly interest but the manifestation of doubts in cognitive historical understanding of the past in the face of what is seen as morally unprecedented tragedy. Theoretical implications of both interpretations seem to question the epistemological legitimation of a "real" past able to be represented with fidelity to the historical "facts" independent of the representer's moral and political authority. The source of the narrator's authority—a subject explicitly dealt with in a book published by Andreas Hillgruber in 1986—has also been the focus of much debate.[97] The task of the historian according to Hillgruber, revolves around the following:

> he must identify himself with the actual fate of the German population in the East and with the desperate and richly self-sacrificing exertions on the Eastern Front of the German Army and Navy, which sought to save the German East's population from the Red Army's orgy of revenge, mass rape, random killings, and countless deportations, and in the very last phase to secure an escape route to the West by land or sea for East Germans.[98]

This methodological approach, calling for identification with the actual historical agents, seems in a formal sense to be close to Broszat's arguments for a "subjective appropriation and empathetic reliving" of the past.

Critiques of Hillgruber claim that not only did he choose an inappropriate mode of emplotment to represent events on the Eastern Front, but that for

95. Ginzburg, "Checking the Evidence," 83.

96. *Ibid.*, 84.

97. Andreas Hillgruber, *Zweierlei Untergang: Die Zerschlagung des Deutsches Reiches und das Ende des europeischen Judentums* (Berlin, 1986).

98. *Ibid.*, 24–25. Translated by Philip Pomper.

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ideological and political reasons he gave up a retrospective point of view.[99] But one cannot find fault with the tragic emplotment of Hillgruber's story as far as its form is concerned. Tragedy is a legitimate mode of emplotment for a historical narrative.[100] Formal criticism of Hillgruber's narrative has focused on the difference in the two essays' modes of emplotment: the emotional, tragic narration of events on the Eastern front suggest a loss of value, while the dry, descriptive narration of the Holocaust is devoid of feeling; the representation of the first *Untergang* is plastic and empathetic while the second employs the traditional language of bureaucracy.[101] Hillgruber's representation of the past cannot be criticized from a historical point of view; elements of the narrative are presented as "found," as opposed to being the result of imaginative power: the historical "facts," murders, rapes, and deportations carried out by the Red Army, are "real." Emplotting the story as tragedy endows the "facts" with "meaning": events are placed in a causal chain which appears as a "reality" different from the "reality" of other stories emplotted in a different mode. So Habermas's critique of the loss of a retrospective point of view seems to be misplaced; Hillgruber's narrative is informed by the moral awareness and authority of the narrator in the present which, according to "fusion horizon theory," can reveal that of the past.[102] Historical explanations, events ordered into a causal chain in a narrative form, may be different. Such narratives emplot stories based on "facts," but the legitimization of the story is only formally based on the indisputable authority of "reality": the real source is the moral and political authority of the narrator as well as the realistic form of representation, that is the narrativity of historical discourse itself.

It is precisely such an understanding of historical representation that makes arguments of the *Historikerstreit* theoretically interesting. Erlangen historian Michael Stürmer set the politico-historical framework of the debate—into which Hillgruber's book may be placed—in an article published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.[103] The piece's dramatic beginning, "in a land without history anything is possible," sets the tone for the theoretical assumptions suggested by the author. The irony of the argument cannot be mistaken. It is absurd that all the inhabitants of a particular country are amnesiacs; therefore, the statement refers to the country itself, seen as an anthropomorphic entity, longing for a single memory to guarantee the presence of a unified life-story and the avoidance of psychological crisis. The article suggests a program, the re-establishment of the "life-story." The political rationale for this seems to be clear, since "in a

99. J. Habermas, "A Kind of Settlement of Damages: The Apologetic Tendencies in German History Writing," in *Forever in the Shadow?*, 35.

100. Cf. H. White, "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth," in Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits*, 42–43.

101. O. Bartov, "Historians on the Eastern Front," *Tel Aviver Jahrbuch für deutsche Geschichte* 16 (1987), 342–343.

102. H. G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen, 1975); Maier, *The Unmasterable Past*, 42.

103. Michael Stürmer, "History in a Land without History," in *Forever in the Shadow?*, 16–17.

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land without history, the future is controlled by those who determine the content of memory, who coin concepts and interpret the past."[104] This argument, once again, comes close to Bitburg's implicit message, though authority relations seem to be different. With Stürmer, displacement of political authority is aimed at the present in order to set the "morally legitimate and politically necessary" starting point for interpretation of the past. He claims that in Germany the *Tendenzwende* of the 1970s led to a social-cultural transformation that "became the name for a new consciousness," the motivation and legitimization of historical studies. This shift of political authority is legitimized by the political and economic responsibilities of the Federal Republic as the "centerpiece of European defence within the Atlantic system." In Stürmer's view of history, things seem to fall neatly into place: political authority establishes the "new consciousness" of moral authority on the bases of which the past can be re-interpreted; and the authority of the new past "reality" legitimizes future political control.

The conservative historian of ideas Ernst Nolte tried to fill this program and schema of interpretation with "historical meaning." His explanation of the war—and specifically the Holocaust—did not contradict the rules of scholarly, historical study.[105] He selected significant "facts" from the mass of past events, placed them in chronological order in the form of a narrative and arrived at a causal chain of historical events.[106] The temporal difference between *Gulag Archipelago* and Nazi concentration camps turns the Bolshevik sites into *precedents* for Auschwitz; Chaim Weizmann's proclamation for a fight against the Germans *justifies* the Final Solution; "Asiatic" deeds in the Soviet Union *forced* Germans to commit equal horrors. Nolte is more careful than his colleagues in general; he articulates assumptions to prove that "a causal nexus is probable." If such assumptions did not clash with the moral consensus of the present (that is, had Nolte not questioned existing consensual moral authority), no scholarly objections could be sustained.

Jürgen Habermas's essay attacking Hillgruber, Stürmer, and Nolte marked the beginning of open debate on the content and form of the "public use of history."[107] Habermas recognized the schema of interpretation offered by Stürmer and rejected it on political grounds. The "pluralism of modes of understanding" meant the "end of a closed understanding of history"; the focus of the debate was shifted to the realm of politics as the problems in question revolved around historical consciousness and identity.

The Nolte-Hillgruber attack on the singularity of Auschwitz questioned Habermas's identity concept. The methodological and political problems of the singularity debate seem to be of little theoretical relevance. From a methodolog-

104. *Ibid.*, 16.

105. Ernst Nolte, "Between Myth and Revisionism: The Third Reich in the Perspective of the 1980s," in *Aspects of the Third Reich*, ed. H. Koch (New York, 1985), 17–38; E. Nolte, "The Past That Will Not Pass Away," in *Forever in the Shadow?*, 18–23.

106. Jackel, "The Impoverished Practice of Insinuation," 78.

107. Habermas, "A Kind of Settlement of Damages," 34–44.

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ical point of view, the question of comparability is trivial;[108] from a political angle, Jackel's already quoted description seems to be acceptable.[109] Morally speaking, the singularity of the Holocaust is closely related to the debate over the "radical" or "banal" nature of Nazi evil. Extending the notion of the Holocaust as radical evil, Nazi genocide is seen as the moral precedent to omnicide.[110] The opinion of Hannah Arendt on the "banality of evil" has already been discussed. Habermas, as heir to the Kantian Enlightenment, does not question the notion of radical evil and views Auschwitz, in the tradition of Adorno, as the negative moral absolute. In the form of "post-traditional identity," based on the individualist orientation of Kierkegaardian existential moral philosophy, he operationalizes the historical *modus* of "constitutional patriotism" through the moral absolute of Auschwitz.[111] Thus, for Habermas, present-day historical consciousness is based not on political but on moral legitimation. His notion of past "reality" from an epistemological point of view is no different from that of Nolte or Hillgruber: both find authority for the interpretation of the past in the present. Habermas's call for "constitutional patriotism" is formally the antithesis of Hillgruber's call for "identification," but substantively there is little difference. Both are based on a politically and morally informed authority in the present. While neoconservative historians try to sublimate the politico-moral authority of the present in references to historical "facts," Habermas is concerned with the "public use of history" in the form of historical consciousness and identity related to a moral absolute. Neither is concerned with historical "reality" as such.

V. CONCLUSION

This essay has not attempted to deal with historical literature on the Holocaust. As far as debates on problems of historical consciousness, historical judgment, and interpretation of the National Socialist past in Germany are concerned, the essay has attempted to show that the representation of past "reality" is closely connected to problems that lie outside the sphere of purely scholarly activity. Problems of historical representation are politically and socially significant in the individual and communal search for legitimation—the past, it seems, is granted its own legitimation by the authority of the present.

When employing narrative strategies to make sense of a historical past as morally, politically, and intellectually disturbing as the Holocaust, fundamental problems of historical representation can be seen. Theories that view historical representations as "narrative substances," and therefore speak about an exclu-

108. H. Mommsen, "The New Historical Consciousness," in *Forever in the Shadow?*, 117.

109. Jackel, "The Impoverished Practice of Insinuation," 76.

110. B. Lang, "Genocide and Omnicide: Technology at the Limits," in *Nuclear Weapons and the Future of Humanity*, ed. A. Cohen and S. Lee (Totowa, N.J., 1986), 115–130.

111. J. Habermas, "Historical Consciousness and Post-Traditional Identity: The Federal Republic's Orientation to the West," in J. Habermas, *The New Conservatism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 249–267.

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sive self-referentiality of such texts, face an extreme challenge.[112] Discussions about meaning, truth, and reference in connection with such narrative substances, both as names ("the Holocaust") and as a set of statements, are influenced by questions posed by twentieth-century philosophical discourse from Wittgenstein to Rorty. This understanding of historical representation works in the context of representation being a "language game," an entity that is not a medium for determining relations to unities such as the self or reality, but stands on its own.

In connection with historical representations of the Holocaust the self-referentiality of the historical text and its propositional nature seem to conflict with fundamentally held notions about the "reality" of the events and thus the correspondence of their representation to this "reality."[113] It is not surprising that critics of the realist project in historical writing, such as Hayden White, have to face accusations by historians that their ideas come close to ideologies commonly connected to fascist regimes.[114] It is then not so peculiar that White revised his thesis about the inexpungible relativism in historical representation in a way that gives him ground to counter such accusations (though his new position weakens his overall relativist arguments).[115] What passed unnoticed is that his approach to the limits of representation in connection to the Holocaust comes close to opinions held by theorists who subscribe to the absolute evil nature, and thus argue for the implicit moral contents, of the events.[116]

Droysen's insight in his *Historik* reveals how the realism of historical representation is not based on the criterion of truth, but, with reference to the social reality of the historian's own time, on a criterion of *plausibility* which is different from the *possible* (aimed at by science) and the *imaginary* (represented by art). The criterion of plausibility may be considered as the social *modus vivendi* of the present, as the consensus between different interests, morals, and "objective" perceptions of the world by individuals and groups.[117]

112. F. R. Ankersmit, "Reply to Professor Zagorin," *History and Theory* 29 (1990), 278–284.

113. It is at this point that a note on the so-called "Holocaust Revisionists" must be included. It seems to me theoretically unsatisfactory to state, as Hayden White did, that their claims are "as morally offensive as [they are] intellectually bewildering," and settle the problem with claiming that "an interpretation falls into the category of a lie when it denies the reality of the events of which it treats, and into the category of an untruth when it draws false conclusions from reflection on events whose rationality remains attestable on the level of 'positive' historical inquiry." Not only do "revisionists" hold a more detailed view which enables them to counter such statements, by questioning the number of victims and the purpose of gas chambers thus leaving the "reality" of events intact, but White's approach leaves problems related to the "reality" of historical representation unnoticed. In my opinion, it is exactly this problematic relation to the referentiality of historical representation that makes such views, their bewildering moral and intellectual claims notwithstanding, difficult to deal with. For White's position see *The Content of the Form*, 76–78.

114. Carlo Ginzburg, "Just One Witness," in Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits*, 82-96; cf. White, *The Content of the Form*, 74–75.

115. Kansteiner, "Hayden White's Critique," 293.

116. Cf. Lang, *Act and Idea*, 117-161.

117. J. G. Droysen, *Historik: Vorlesungen über Enzyklopedie und Methodologie der Geschichte* (Munich, 1937). Cf. White, *The Content of the Form*, 93–94.

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This is of great significance with respect to problems of representation of the Holocaust. In the case of those who have experienced the Holocaust as a "boundary event," this lived reality is mediated through a moral, political, and intellectual perception of the world in which the differentiation between the possible, imaginary, and plausible cannot take place. In the social reality of the Holocaust, brought to us by the documents and testimonies of survivors, the "facts" are equal to the politically possible and the morally imaginary. History, seen as an "objective" representation of past "reality," must be based on the criterion of the "possible" only; as the mediation of past "reality" through legitimation of the moral or political authority of the present on the criterion of "plausible" only; and as scholarship, on the criterion of the "factual" only. "Objectivity" of representation is questioned by theorists of science as well as philosophers of language. "Plausibility" as moral and political authority becomes problematic when the politics of interpretation is discussed. "Factuality" as an unproblematic use of evidence and proof is less unequivocal once questions related to the construction of evidence are raised. Seen in this way, historical representation of the Holocaust that is true to the traditional understanding of the criteria of objectivity, legitimacy, and factuality is not possible. The problem is evident in Gershom Scholem's critique of Hannah Arendt on the Eichmann trial. Scholem mentions the lack of balanced judgment in Arendt's narrative, and implicitly questions the possibility of any historical judgment on the Holocaust, claiming that the judge "was not there."[118]

Considering these insights into the broader perspective of history, we may conclude that in our perception of past social reality *vis-à-vis* documents and other "facts," there is no difference between the politically possible, the socially plausible, and the morally imaginary—nor do we know with which we are dealing. The narrator of past "reality" orders "facts" into the form of a story emplotted as desired, and at times names the politically possible as "reality" in order to establish mythic continuity with the past. At other times, the morally imaginary is called "reality" in order to establish continuity with the past through a moral imperative. Occasionally, the socially plausible is referred to as "reality," but in order to separate it from the possible and imaginary, identification with the past is sought. It seems to me that historiography which looks at past reality as a substance to be epistemologically revealed has to be given up.

To paraphrase Adorno's maxim, it seems that after Auschwitz poetry can be written, but history, as the "realistic" interpretation of the past, cannot. It seems to me, remembering Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, that in order to save some value from the debris of history a more pragmatist view of our past has to be taken.[119] It has to be accepted that scholars are concerned with the "public use of history," that is with substituting the absent past with a

118. "Letter of Gershom Scholem to Hannah Arendt," in Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah*, 243.

119. Cf. Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis, 1982), 160–175; Rorty, "Science as Solidarity," in *Dismantling Truth: Reality in the Post-Modern World*, ed. H. Lawson and L. Appignanesi (New York, 1989), 6–22.

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historical text. In the realm of politics, this means attending to questions of identity, communal and individual searches for legitimation, and culture understood as power. In the realm of aesthetics this means questions related to the form of representation, the propositional nature and self-referentiality of texts. A more pragmatist view of our past would then be that of accepting historical representation as a tool, as are language games in general, that work better for certain purposes than other tools.[120] They serve our understanding of identity, community, and culture better than other means. They do not take us closer to hidden truths behind these notions, nor do they offer a picture of how things really were or really happened. The purpose of using these tools is to establish a human solidarity that is not dependent on universal validity appealing to reason to reveal "reality," but is understood as a temporary consensus arrived at in the course of free and open encounters.[121] This may be the case even with phenomena as morally, politically, and intellectually challenging as the Holocaust. In the final analysis, traditional criteria of truth and falsity do not apply to historical representations of the past.[122] I believe that in order to satisfy Hayden White's call for a new historiography, a new theory of history is needed, one that is free of the burden of the past seen as "reality."

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120. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, Eng., 1989), 19.
121. *Ibid.*, 68.
122. Ankersmit, "Reply," 295-296.

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